

ROME 1564

Blood... I've been wounded in the struggle? Get up Lucha, run the Papist pig down. Lose sight of him now and he is gone forever.

The cloaked man was getting away, the sound of his flight fading.

For the love of God, Lucha, get up... get up.

It was hopeless, the wall the only reason Lucha could still stand as seeped ran unchecked by his fingers.

The mission... get up. For the love of Christ, give chase before it's too late.

It was too late. All he could do was watch helpless as the blurred figure melted into the darkness.

Breathe, Lucha, breathe. There is no pain that faith cannot ascend. Capture the Papal bitch, slice his throat. Send him to God with spit in his eyes.

If only his legs could respond with the same zeal that burned in his gut. The world listed violently. Weakness was accompanied by unwelcome euphoria. A downward motion until his knees

would bend no more, and then a lurch too far until his face found the floor.

Am I drunk? Not possible; he had long since taken an oath. *Am I dying then?*

Half Lucha's blood was on the cobbles, the other half being pumped toward the wound. He knew his time was ending; it was over, he had failed. A fumbling grasp tugged at the ruffle to open his doublet. *Wheeze*. Breathing was harder, breaths short and becoming more rapid. The air getting thick and heavy. The stink of Rome far stronger than he'd ever found it before. *Wheeze*. Lucha was dying. But it wasn't meant to be like this. And why here? Why in this accursed city of Papists?

Cry out, wheeze, call out for help.

The words lodged in his throat and refused to come out. So many windows above but no movement to see. The cramped doorways below filled with dark and shadows. He'd never been frightened of shadows, until now.

Air... can't breathe, help me...

The bastard's blade had penetrated deep into Lucha's hauberk, his shirt soaking the blood and sweat. The wound a spring that refused to be dammed as the warm sticky fluid breached his

fingers. He knew the summer evening was warm and yet he felt a pronounced chill.

I'm dying. Lord, don't let me die without confession.

'Lord?'

Silence.

I'm sorry. Wheeze. I've failed you..

Failure was unacceptable. 'Lord?.' What was the point in trying to live if God had forsaken him. 'I'm sorry.' He'd let it come. Let it take him away. He had failed to stop the Papist Monk and Lucha knew what failure meant. He deserved whatever came next. There would be no absolution, no last rites, not for failure. Lucha was going to Purgatory; he would never see the light again.

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'God forgive me, I had no choice.' *God forgive me... God forgive me.*

The assassin's blood still covered Giani's hands. The man he'd left dying had intended to kill him. He had no choice. And there were others in the streets searching for him.

In the darkness Rome's streets seemed slender and tight. Tall buildings stifled the light from the moon as it broke the night clouds. He was lost in a maze with blind fear fuelling his flight

Stop Giani... stop. Be led by panic now and they will find you.

Only luck had seen him escape the assassin's blade. And there were too many dark places for his enemies to hide.

Stop, rest. Take breath and pause. Help me Lord, give me strength. Show your humble servant the way? Each panting breath too short to fill his lungs, every gasp shallower than the last. *What is this pain I feel?* If he stretched out the cramp, it would help. *No, pain stop. It hurts. What is this... Blood? No, I stabbed him; I can't have been wounded?*

There was no pain until he had stopped. How could he not have felt the trauma? How could so much blood flow from such a small wound? *This is bad, very bad.* Why wouldn't his palm stem the flow? A sudden realisation helped cauterise the pain. Several men, running, not too far distant. *Have they found me? No, it cannot be, not whilst I still have the box. Mother of Saints, Giani. The box?*

Bloodied hands grasped inside the pocket sown deep in his cloak. *It's still here. Thank God, I thought...*

The sign of the cross, twice to be sure. A short prayer for deliverance as Giani revealed the strange object; as the moonlight filled the street.

It was no larger than a baker's bun. It's surface inscribed with ancient symbols that Giani could not read or understand. A lifetime of studying language and the words meant nothing. Inside was the Relic. The most precious artefact in the whole of Christendom. Legend dictated that this was God's box. Entrusted to St Peter, and passed down to each Pope in turn. Pope Pius IV had entrusted him, Giani, with its long journey back to Rome. His holiness had written in person to instruct his journey to begin. A letter that had promised absolution for acts necessary to protect the Relic. Yet despite every precaution, *they* had still managed to find him. Agents of evil, they were everywhere.

Giani crossed himself again as the moon slid behind heavy clouds. The heavy silver box replaced in his cloak.

God be praised, is it a sign?

Raised voices; close by and getting closer. He could hear the anger in the poor Latin dialogue less than a street distant. They had found the bearded man, the agent of the Devil that he had left for dead.

Ignoring the pain he pushed himself on. One dark doorway to the next. No time for concealment... just run. Stay ahead of his own footsteps. Stumbling on in the dark streets until the creaking sign of an apothecary caused him to take fright and hide. A board that swung again in a sudden breeze.

I know this place?

The sign that hung above the butchers shop opposite. And the painted shutters of the flower seller, he recognised the name, 'the Blooming Orchid'. After all these years they were still here. And the freshening breeze brought something else, a new and fresh scent.

Water?

It was the river Tiber he could smell. Joy. Giani realised where he was. Smarting pain reminded him he was wounded. *Stop the bleeding, prevent the flow of blood.* A fistful of the silken blouse procured in Genoa en-route was ripped away. An expensive rag now forced into the wound. A curse on the man for inflicting such pain. Sudden tears from tired eyes to replace a wail that stayed absent from his lips. Time was short; too much blood had drained. Giani's mind was becoming confused. The faster he moved, the more pain he was forced to endure, and the quicker

the blood ran. But it had to be that way, what other choice was there?

A maze of streets threatened to strip away what little sense of direction Giani maintained. But he was sure, certain that he compassed well. He wondered again why His Holiness had chosen a scholar for such an important task. Why not a warrior and a sword? His books in the Abbey on Stornoway seemed such a distance away. The other end of the world, and a lifetime ago.

Fear took hold again as he ran headlong into the wide open space of a piazza. He was exposed. A massive open space with light and windows. If they came now, there was nowhere to hide.

Which way Giani... which way?

Getting difficult to concentrate. *Stay vigilant.* Somewhere there is familiarity. *Nothing.* Scour the vast arena. Three grand fountains surrounded by the tall terraced homes of Rome's elite. *Listen Giani, listen.* No sounds of the night, no hint of the scum that pursued him. *I've been here before. Yes... I remember.*

As a child he had made the pilgrimage to the Eternal City; who hadn't. Father had brought him and his sister, Salise. She was too young for the journey which had taken months. They had rested here he was sure. Eaten cheese and an apple, before going on to see the wonder of the Basilica. *Yes, the closest fountain;*

the statue of the Moor who wrestles the dolphin. Blessed is the Virgin Mother, Blessed is our Lord. I know where I am.

The memory was another sign.

Tears welled with the realisation that he was close; surely nothing could stop. Quicker now, like a man possessed, fingers clammy with blood as precious fluid pumped and fell in spots to the ground.

I recognise you all now.

The Roman God, Neptune. The great statue that marked the northern end, of the Piazza, called... Navona. He was sure of it. He knew exactly where he was now. Past Neptune and out of the Piazza, heading for the river.

God is glorious.

Minutes later the Tiber's surface glistened like glass below the the moonlight. And there was the bridge, where the marble Angels stood in triumph. The mouth of the Ponte Sant'Angelo beckoned.

Strength Lord, give me the strength to bring the Relic home.

So close now, the Castel Sant'Angelo. The ancient ossuary was a blur. Giani was shutting down, his time running short. The blood no longer flowed; its rampant discharge petered to a miserly dribble. He was running on Faith and pride, limited fuel

to drive him across the river. On, he must go on, follow the torches that line the Ponte's walls. Flames that rasped encouragement as the wind rose high with powerful gusts.

Blessed mother, I see it. I see the light.

A single lantern hung upon the Castel's lower wall. *On Giani... On.* A few more yards. *Just a few more steps.* And it would be over. The heretics had a different idea. Footsteps of men running toward the bridge behind. *They've found me.* Terror as hazy outlines ran free from the buildings. Armed men in pursuit.

Run, Giani, run. Save the Relic... nothing else matters... They must not be allowed to intervene.

A dogged desire, absolute faith, the need to serve his God. All were as strong as each other as tired legs stumbled across the bridge. Behind him the Devil's agents closed fast; their boots trampled the flagstones, the sound of cloven hooves stampeding. He wasn't going to make it. The bridge was crossed, but Giani had lost too much blood. He was done, down onto one knee, and then both. *Up, get up, just a few more yards.* A stagger and a stumble, and then another, it was momentum enough to find the servants' gate at the foot of the castle wall. The last of his strength hammered his fist against the door.

'Open the hatch.'

Again, fist driven hard against wood. Relief as the view hole opened and a young woman's eyes gazed down at him. The nun was horrified by the sweat and blood the monk had shed.

Holy Father be praised, she is as beautiful now as she was before taking her vows.

'Giani. Oh, God be praised. I had all but given you up. Sainted Mother, you are hurt?'

'No... yes. It doesn't matter.'

Why, why are you retracting the bolts on the gate?

'Stop... do not open the gate.' He lunged with his blood stained hand. 'Take it. Only the Holy Father can keep it safe now..' It had never felt so heavy. 'Take it, quickly. Return it to the Holy Father. Only he can protect it now. Keep it hidden for another five hundred years.'

'Giani?' She'd spotted them now. The assassins who crossed the bridge made no attempt at disguise. The sound of leather and buckles above hard striding boots.

Blessed is the Virgin Mother, look at her face. Is she not an Angel in the eyes of God?

'Close the hole, Salise. Close it now or I have died for nothing.'

'Giani, no. I can still help you. I will call for the guards.'

‘No. Call no-one. The secret must die with me. Open this gate and the future is damned. Go Salise. Close the hole and find the Holy Father. Do it now, Salise... do it... do as your brother commands.’

‘Brother?’

She’s crying

‘Go, with my blessing. There is nothing you can do for me. My soul is in God’s hands.’ *My hand is in yours. Just to touch her is enough.* Memories of a Tuscan childhood, of sunshine and spring water, of a sweet, feisty, and somewhat annoying little girl returned. As did his smile. For the first time in weeks Giani smiled. Salise was safe; the box had been returned. Giani wasn’t afraid any more.

‘Close it, I beg you. Pray for me, sister.’

‘Yes. Yes, Giani... I’m so sorry. I love you.’

I know, I feel the same. ‘Do it.’

Salise’ heart tore open as she slammed the portal closed. Rammed shut as if trying to block out the End of Days.

Giani slumped unable to bear his own weight. It was a strange calm, an acceptance of the time that had finally come, as he knew it would. He was a priest of the Entity. The Brotherhood that had protected the Relic for over a thousand years. He’d

taken the vow, accepted it willingly. His life was forfeit and given to God. Now was *his* time.

‘You are too late.’ *Wheeze*. ‘The Relic is gone; you cannot stop the will of God. The world is not ready, not yet. You have failed.’

Giani didn’t want to cry out, why would he? Death was the end of one life and the beginning of another, more glorious. He didn’t want to; he just couldn’t help himself as the blade pierced him, thrust so hard it passed through his gut and was stopped by the gate. The glaring eyes of the assassin cursing at him.

‘I don’t fear you,’ Giani gasped, ‘I forgive you.’

More searing pain as more cold stabbed into his chest and stomach. Too many to count. Giani’s flesh tore open and his bones cracked.

‘I, forgive, you...’

AD 2064
(Post Apocalypse)

OASIS
'RULE OF THE SAINTS'

HERETICS

The breeze was gentle and scented with wild flowers. This high up it all looked so fresh and vibrant, so peaceful.

Shame on you... shame on you all.

Oasis was surrounded by arrogance, and by temptation. But who wouldn't want to live up here. Kat would. Why wouldn't she? To live the dream; but at what price. One that Kat could never afford to pay.

She understood, that sometimes it was necessary to remove the city from your senses, scrape it out from under your skin. Up here you'd feel clean, important, with a sense of achievement. The opportunity to look down upon others. So yes, she'd do it, live up here. If she could. It would make her normal, corrupted, just like the city below that she despised.

Maybe if she closed her eyes really tight it would all go away? She tried. No, the image still glared back up at her.

Look at you. Look how bright you burn.

Like a tiny star the Reliquary glowed at its centre. The beauty of the church beguiling, the spectacle seen for miles. So beautiful and yet so disgusting; the power required to light its

domes, the cost to the people who basked in its artificial zeal.

Only the river that ran through the city was clean.

No, not a star; you're a black hole. You suck the life from the people. Fucking Reliquary, burn it down.

The farther out she looked from the Domes the darker the landscape became. The city was down there you just couldn't see it, not really. The outer city was cold, the fires too distant and barely warm enough, not bright enough to be seen. She'd never seen it like this before, the two sides of the infamous Line that divided those that had too much, from the rest that needed more.

Listen to them. Listen to the dirge of the Legates song as it rises from the Reliquary's dome. It can't be escaped, not even up here. Don't you ever stop? Isn't it enough that you preach all day? Do you have to sing about it all night too?

They sang about Oasis, the city, the Prophets and the Saints who underpin its glory. Songs that tell how the domes became a beacon, and how the bells tolled aloud all day and night. How the people came and survived a world that had been cursed. Only Oasis remained. It was a refuge, sanctuary, life... for those that submitted to the Rule of the Saints. Knowledge of life before Oasis is forbidden, by law.

They sing too much.

Kat preferred the Story Tellers. History whispered in corners and snugs so the Legates wouldn't overhear. Tales of the Earth. How it twisted and yawned, then spewed its disasters on an unimaginable scale. How the plague followed, the pandemic that hated everyone. There was nothing left when the squabbling was done, except Oasis. That city down there. Her city. It was a drug... it was a cage. She loved it.

She hated it too.

I despise you. Silent resentment directed toward the Reliquary. Toward the Patron himself. Toward his puppet council, the Commission. *I hate you all. See me, I hate you. You can't touch me, I'm a ghost. I'm a spectre. I'm a shaft of decency in a land of Prophets that lie.*

Okay, so she borrowed words; the Trinity Elder had used them as he'd blessed her before she had left. She could still smell the incense and hear the Brother's chant. "*Blasphemers.*" He had cried out, damning them all. And who was she to argue? Hers *was* the true faith after all. No others would ever be put before it, or before her God. The Commission called her kind, heretics. What a joke. It was them, the Legates, and their Patron... the one who calls himself, Illuminai. *The Bastard Prophet. You are the*

true Blasphemers. They were the ones that must be brought to heel.

There, that feels much better. Though she wasn't sure just when she had become such a moral icon. It wasn't that she didn't believe, she did, honestly. She just liked the money that they gave her more.

Clouds are rolling over, it's time to go.

The boundary wall was taller than the plans had suggested. Some three feet thick its masonry old but impressive. A short run up and her forward motion carried into two quick vertical steps that ascended the wall. Gloved hands found moss covered copings and with a single fluid movement Kat hauled herself up, and with more a roll than a jump, she dropped down to the other side. Ten quick paces found the cover of trees where she hunkered down and waited... listened.

Nothing.

Only the wind as it stirred the trees. No whistles, and no barking dogs, a good start. Who'd notice a black silhouette in a wood, the soft dirt soaked by heavy rain earlier in the day. She was a shadow blending with the dark. Passing like a breeze amongst the ferns.

This is fun

Until the hairs on her neck bristled.

Find cover.

Someone was coming. Two men talking; walking as if they owned the place.

Shit... dogs.

She could hear the canines sniffing at the path.

Stay low, be invisible; hope the breeze doesn't alter direction.

Closer now, two armed men, ten yards, maybe less. As yet completely unaware of her presence. *Be still, not a movement, not a breath.* Or this was over before it had begun.

Impressive looking specimens, the dogs. The men were tall, mean looking, dressed in sharp clothing. Suited and booted and doing the rounds. They were typical Duma thugs. Henchman employed by organised crime. Both men carried a pistol strapped and shouldered, hung out for show. Automatic weapons slung across their back.

Aww, don't stop? Go away, go... go on.

Now was not a good time for the dog to take a hot steaming piss on the undergrowth. The wiry hound grimaced through sharp teeth.

Is it smiling? Keep moving guys, don't stop, nothing to see here.

Amused murmurings underlined with a cold streaming vapour. She couldn't hear the conversation; it was just the mechanics of the lips, the gestures. Hey, the one on the right was cute. All blonde and kiss curls. The square glasses did it for her; he had that stern school teacher look about him. Another day and another profession, and who knows she might have given him the time. But not when she saw Teacher flick his cigarette into the undergrowth. Didn't he understand the importance of recycling? The dog hopped several times, clearly his business unfinished as his handler pulled him on.

Good boys; tell each other how diligent, how watchful you are. No-one's going to get past you tonight.

The conversation faded and Kat stepped out. She reached down and took the smoking butt from the leaves. Soldier pay was good if he could afford to throw away a stub that long. It's not like she wanted to pretend kiss the guy as her lips drew the fetid smog deep into her lungs. It isn't. It's just helpful to smell like the residents, especially when there are dogs on the prowl.

One last draw and the butt was pulled gently against her tight black leggings. A last look confirmed they weren't doubling back,

and Kat followed the path in the opposite direction. Soft shoes trod the dirt and stones until a small flint wall ended the path. A few steps away stood the boathouse. A pretty building that shouldered a slate covered roof, its walls long since gone native below the local vines. The thickest tendrils helped Kat climb up to a gully in its centre, where she settled herself out of sight. Dusk had rolled on into the full pitch of night as she closed her eyes. This part, the waiting, it was always the hardest thing.

Patience was the only virtue necessary as the temperature began to plummet. She made tiny, barely noticeable movements, enough to keep her joints warm and supple. *Not long now.* Soon the guard would change. *Every three hours, punctual and efficient.* They were Duma, of course they were efficient... brutally so. There was no place in the city more dangerous than up here. For Kat it was the ultimate challenge, to show her skills. She was here for a very special reason, not the money. To take something special from the man they called, The Preacher.

Movement by the house, it had begun. The cold bit her joints as she lowered to the ground. Six seconds to cross the lawn, open space between the boat house and the rose garden. Six seconds,

the elapsed time between the city grid shutting down for the night and the house's generator kicking in.

Patience Kat. Tick tock, nearly there.

The house was as stunning as the pictures she'd studied. An opulent facade that screamed, "Look at me, I am wealth beyond imagination." It was elegant the way the roof pitched one way and then another, a tall clock tower protruded through its centre, its hand ready to strike the hour.

How would it be to sit on the inside of the house, and gaze out onto such lovely gardens every morning?

She was being hypocritical, the Elders kept her in comfort, she wanted for nothing. But still, this much space, privacy... and wealth. It was too much for one man when so many others had so little. Other feelings took hold, far deeper, more primal. The Preacher was a bad man. A dangerous man who profited from the misery of others. It would be a pleasure to take something precious from him.

Dogs at the main door.

Any second now...

Kat checked her watch; she looked up to the tower.

She closed her eyes and covered them with her hands.

Darkness, she needed the black of night. Then it happened, the

power went down. Brilliant lights from the house's exterior faded like stage bulbs.

Now... Do it now.

Eyes open, she could see in the darkness where others would be blind. The numbers counting in her head.

One. Quick motion across the lawn.

Two. Her hand sprays a small aerosol.

Three. She sprayed the air in front of her as she ran.

Four. *Hmm, apricots.*

Five. For some reason the dogs were offended by the smell, it would mask her own, just in case.

Six. Man and beast are able to see again. It didn't matter; she was in the garden, hidden amongst roses. The sounds of men as they talked, made checks, reassured each other that all was well. Kat brushed between the flowers and stems and headed toward the lights of the house. Across the patio toward the French doors where she hunkered down; a small container slid from her tunic. Practised hands clicked several joints and the item was adhered to the glass. The scoring wheel turned and the glass was plucked away. Kat ran slips of foil inside the door jamb, one top and one bottom, between the tiny sensors. To fool electronics that were supposedly outlawed. One hand through the hole and the door

swung outward. Kat entered. She was a thief, a bloody good one.

This was going to be easier than she'd expected.

OASIS

‘Sebastian.’ The door was thumped heavily, someone outside was keen to get in. ‘Sebastian, you open door.’

Go away, It’s early. Really, a key, you’re using your key?

Scout retreated below the blanket as the door was flung open. No need to look, he knew who the intruder was. She was short, Asian, mid fifties, and not a pretty woman by anyone’s standards.

‘Sebastian,’ and her voice rasped, ‘wake up you asshole.’

‘Eurgh, get that finger out of my ear, Tass. I’m up, look, okay? There are other ways to wake someone up.’

‘But not so funny, eh? Me give wet willy, you wake up. I not happy, get complaints. Sebastian disturb other tenants.’

He was fast recognising the symptoms. Rapid breathing and a violent heartbeat, his entire body covered in sweat. He’d been dreaming again. No, not a dream, it was another spiteful nightmare. The same one he was cursed to relive forever.

‘You shout in sleep again.’ Her hands were tightly fisted. ‘You really freak me out when you do this. I got other tenants that not want to hear.’

‘Tass, please... don’t call me Sebastian.’ If I stick my fingers in my ears and go lah lah lah? Nope, she’s still here. And here comes the cough?

‘Sebastian your name, *cough*, so that what I call you.’

Shouting always set her off, chesty spasms laced with a gravely wheeze.

‘Time you let her go. That woman gone now and she not come back. Maybe you see doctor, maybe not? Don’t know why I waste breath. Here, take tea, and before you ask. No, I got no sweetener.’

‘Just give me the damn drink.’

The letters Di..n.. y were badly faded. A strange bearded creature holding tools. He had no idea what it meant.

‘Tass, the drink?’

‘You four weeks late with rent.’

What?

‘It’s only three weeks.’ *Give me the tea.* ‘Come on, my mouth’s as dry as your humour.’

‘I not laughing, you four weeks, two days, and eight hours... late.’

‘Fine, I’ll sort it.’

‘When you sort?’

‘A couple of days, maybe three.’ *Are you still here?* ‘I’ll pay what I owe by the weekend.’ Okay that’s a lie. *Did you say tea?*

‘You better had. Oh, I forget. Men call earlier. I told them I no see you.’ *Cough wheeze cough.* ‘They sit outside in car and wait. *Cough.* They better get used to waiting, it been four fricking weeks.’

Did I wake up with this headache or is it you?

It was difficult to be sure. Certainly not unusual. Ever since his friend, Dok, had found him this rat hole. He’d left prison just to enter a Sanatorium. And his sheets were wet again, the mattress too.

Tass is right, this is getting worse. I’ve been in the scream factory again. Maybe the lack of memory was a self defence; he hoped so. It was always the same after a rough night spent inside his head. He needed to write it down before he forgot.

Pencil, where’s my pencil.

Things were still a haze as he snatched the tea, grabbed his journal. It fell open 11/09/2012. The wrong day, and it sure as hell wasn’t the right year. *Write it all down.* Dok had told him it was good to write things down. *Maybe it does help.* He began to scrawl.

Hi Chia. Last night was the first time in a while that I saw you. He had to get this down, get it out of his head. Maybe I'm finally letting go? I hope so... no I don't. Why can I never remember what really happened. Maybe I don't want to? Maybe I don't have a choice? The dreams have gotten pretty messed up again. All I know for sure is that each time I go there, I lose more of myself. More of what isn't there, what can't be replaced.

The pencil hovered.

I want to see you again. I'm tired of being alone.

He'd felt stupid the first time he'd done this, but the truth was he felt like she was listening, and maybe that was the point.

Each time the dream is different, but always the same. Sometimes I see flashes of it all in the waking world too. Stop start images that are difficult to see. A jigsaw about that night, I think it's burned into my brain forever. So many pieces of the puzzle, I can't put them together. It's not that I don't want to remember what happened. I just don't want to forget. The only thing that is constant, that is always there, those same four words repeated over and over.

"You've got sinner's eyes."

He'd never forget. It was the last thing he remembered with any certainty. The rest were shards of recollection. Flashes of

light and noise. What he did remember, and with frightening clarity, the moment that he regained consciousness; his first clear memory was seen through smoke sautéed eyes. A crowd had circled about him. His neighbours gawked down as he lay there. One of them had been kind enough to drag him from the fire.

They should have let me burn.

Gormless, panic struck faces every one of them. *They all saw it, they all heard it clang to the ground like a ship's bell. I dropped it. I just don't remember ever picking it up.* All eyes fell toward the ground; his own gaze slow to follow. The bloodied blade had fallen from blood soaked fingers... his hand.

But it wasn't my hand, how could it be... how could it not.

Anger couldn't punch a hole in the haze between the memories. Focus and desire were ineffectual. Impotent tools with which to search. Maybe he would never learn the truth.

Learning to meditate in prison helped, as if serenity could ever unlock *his* past. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't straighten out the curves. Just couldn't put the sounds and the pictures in the order he craved. Only those words remained.

"You've got sinner's eyes."

Maybe that was why the visions were different each time. He always fought to save her in his dreams. The one thing he hadn't

been able to do in the real world. Save his wife, and save his unborn child. The pencil scrawled on paper again.

This is fucked up. I don't know why I bother. I do know I want to feel you again; I want to hold you in my arms. I want to touch your skin and hear your voice, feel your warmth as I wake beside you.

Why was it so difficult to write down when it banged around in his head so much?

This is pointless. Nothing will ever come of these words. Maybe that's the point, maybe I just can't let go. Maybe there's a reason, and maybe not. But I cling to one single thought, one single word.

The pen dug hard into the paper.

REVENGE.

It was a beautiful word, and a more intoxicating feeling. It had the power of a star and was the fuel that kept him alive through the years of hell that had followed. *Deep breath.*

I owe four weeks rent, apparently. Tass is pissing her pants about it. She's on the war path again. It gives me a kick just listening to her. But she'll wait. She always waits. Something will turn up. She'll get her money.

Chia... I miss you. XX

‘Ass... who’s doing what in a car?.’

Curiosity overcame tired eyes to take a look out of the window; the curtain fingered carefully to one side. There *was* a car outside. Only one person he knew could afford a car, and that wasn’t Dok sitting out there. Besides, he’d have let himself in.

‘Shit’... *nice one Scout, he’s seen you.*

Two bulky frames exited the saloon. *Is that Carlos?* The curtain fell closed. *Why would he come here? Do I need to go out the back door?* He had no recollection of pissing the Duma off, not recently at least.

Think, Scout... think.

It could be a job?

Yeah, why else would he be here? Doubt crept back in. *Why would Carlos come here in person?* The well dressed gorilla who walked up the steps was the Preacher’s right hand man. *What have I done to warrant that thug knocking on my front door?*

Think... have you upset anyone lately... no? Then why are you still considering bailing out the back door?

Conversation had been limited, downright frigid, not that it mattered. Scout knew they were listening. Every time Carlos gave *that look* in the rear view, he knew they were listening. *Yap yap yap*, it was human nature, the more irritable you make someone the less guarded they become. The more information they reveal. The big fella was getting tetchy up there but staying silent. Interesting. Some-one had put them both on their best behaviour.

Ah well, sit back, enjoy the ride. A Mercedes 600 in bad guy black, impressive, and all the comforts of home as the mini fridge opened again.

‘Cheers.’

That look again.

‘You’re a little uneven when you slow. Carbon deposits on the valves, you should watch that. I could adjust the injection pumps, have it purring like a kitten. Is this Scotch? I prefer a longer blend, I know a man who knows a man? And these seats, big big... can’t stop sliding, or maybe I need a bigger arse? Am I losing weight? I am aren’t I. It’s these trousers, they always

made my arse look big? Any thoughts on that? Can I get you a drink, there's lots back here.'

Carlos was hardly renowned for his patience, far from it, yet still he remained tight lipped. That information was golden, told Scout something important, that they wanted something from him. Bad enough to play nice to get it.

'Not here to fix the motor, then?' Probably not if they were being this polite. 'Sure I can't get you a drink? Mind if I have another, don't mind if I do. These really are beautifully cut tumblers. Hmm, cheers.'

Driver's looking real nervy, I see you, tiny glances towards the boss. He feels it. What do I have that you want?

It took an hour to reach their destination. An impressive conclusion to a comfortable ride as tall gates opened allowing them entry. Several faces peered in to check the interior, then waved them on. Another good sign that the car entered through the front gate and not the rear. Straight up the impressive drive toward an eighteenth century Bastille. Impressive the way its circular turrets shouldered a waterfall of dark slated roofs. They pitched and sloped behind medieval style merlons. He especially liked the looming clock tower that graced its centre. Everyone

should have an erect phallus sticking out of their roof. The grounds were as big as a public park.

Maybe they need a gardener?

‘Nice place, I used to live in one just like it. Housework got too much.’ He’d seen this place once before, from a distance, and that was closer than he ever wanted to be again. So it was the Preacher?

Sure, he’d heard all the stories as a kid. Nasty ones. About the infamous crypt below the house, about the Preacher’s ‘hands on’ approach to anyone who crossed him. *He must be well old by now. Preferably dead.* Best not to dwell, his chaperones were in need of more conversation.

‘It looks old?’ He said.

‘Old enough.’ Growled Carlos.

‘Think you could find me a room here? It’s nice where I am but, you know, nice to have a change. And I’m never late with my rent. Okay, just asking.’

The tyres ceased their relentless crunch over the gravel drive. Two armed men and a mean looking dog came out to greet them.

‘Get out.’

Really? No chance we could rewind, start again... I don’t open the door.

Door was open, a hand already assisting. The big black hound sniffed eagerly and violated his privacy, forced its nose where it would never have been invited.

‘He’s good.’ Welcome words from the rock of a guard who yanked the creature back.

Nice doggy. Better the nose than the teeth. Maybe he wouldn’t pat the animal on the head.

Carlos beckoned, his size fifteens crunching a path across the shingle. More watchful eyes from the main door got to the house.

Okay, best behaviour. No smart mouth. Keep it buttoned tight.

‘Hey, I know you.’

Familiar faces, he’d seen them at the Odyssey. Dok’s club. A popular haunt for a lot of Duma thugs. Loud music, good alcohol, and friendly women helped ensure a sell out crowd. A pleasure palace for those that could afford it.

Yeah, you know me. Fine, that’s how it’s going to be. Enjoy your drinks next time I’m behind the bar.

One of the few perks of his miserable existence was counting Dok as a close friend. He’d practically grown up at the Odyssey, which reminded him. Get the Heavies to drop him back at the club, maybe Dok would lend him enough to cover the rent. Get

Tass off his back before she got permanently attached. Another IOU he could work off later.

How big is this place? He just kept following Carlos. This has to be a job, right? Why else would they bring me here?

Two huge rooms led to a long carpeted gallery. High vaulted windows on one side held a spectacular view of the gardens. The ornate stucco that covered the ceiling, not so nice. The opposing wall was interesting. Covered with paintings.

‘I’ve never seen pictures like this.’

Sure, he’d seen prints of the Prophets, a hundred odd Saints; they were common-place in most homes. He was sick of looking at them over the years. No, these were different. These were vibrant. Painted with rich and vivid colours their brush strokes laid boldly onto a textured surface. Each image individually mounted within a sumptuously golden frame.

‘Don’t touch. The Preacher don’t allow anyone to touch.’

Scout retracted his hand..

Look at them. Is that what it’s like?

The water was fierce in this painting, its anger obvious. A sailed ship tossed by a swell below a mean and loathsome sky. The gallery was lined with a dozen similar snapshots. Yeah, he liked their mood, shared their sentiment.

Is this what the sea looks like?

He'd scavenged in the north as a child; a dry and barren place. He'd seen firsthand the deserted towns. He'd risked arrest for opportunity, for the rare finds and strange objects, they had value to some. But never south... no-one ever goes south, and returns. They say the sea is south. He'd always wanted to look upon the sea. Watch waves do their thing.

'Is that what it looks like,' he asked, 'the sea?'

'How would I know?' A firm hand took his shoulder. 'This way, the Preacher don't like to be kept waiting.'

'Sure, fine, lead on.'

Stairs were ascended, more doors passed until they entered a room filled with portraits. Serious gloomy looking faces. Two more were attached to the guards who were sat making conversation, until Carlos walked in, and then a mild panic set in. One man stood instantly, the other, fatter, rose with more effort.

'Nice furniture.' A mirror the size of a couch hung above a fireplace as big as a door. 'Reminds me of home.' The Lemon fresh paint on the walls was easy on the eye.

'Arms up.' The slimmer of the two men was gesturing with his hands in case Scout didn't understand. The same hands turned

him toward the wall. This was okay, expected, irritating. They frisked his body, patted and squeezed, violated into every recess of his clothing. They touched him, invading his personal space. *It's okay, let it go. They're just doing their job.* It didn't stop the temperature in the room jumping past a hundred and one, or the first bead of perspiration break out onto his skin.

He didn't like this; it was going on too long, and why was Mr Slim laughing as an elbow dug into his back, as his face felt the texture of the wall. This needed to stop. This low life needed to keep his filthy hands to himself.

Easy boy, easy. Another elbow, a rough hand. *Stop it... you need to stop.*

Slim's face touched his.

'Everyone hides something, down here is it?'

Son of a... fists clenched, teeth ground hard. *Easy Scout, he wants a reaction.* He was going to get one.

The past was fast catching up with the present. Ancient history that refused to lie down... it just hung around, still attached to all the sensitive areas. *Breathe, Scout. Don't give them the satisfaction.* He growled out loud as the first flashback jerked his head, neck and shoulders began to tense.

‘Hey he’s got a few knots up here. You need to get someone to work these out.’

Images, sweat... anger.

Roping, it was popular with the guards at Galfstram. A coarse rope draped around a man’s neck, a pole attached to drag him out of his cell. Hot fists on a cold floor waited outside. They beat on you just for saying the wrong thing. Physical abuse for giving the wrong face. He’d fought back at first. Most did. It just made things worse. Defending yourself only brought out the chains. Clamped at the wrists and the neck they’d throw you into the Hole. Any kind of dissent, the mere hint of trouble, and they put you into the Hole. Forced onto your knees the chains stretching your arms, clamped around your neck. The only thing you saw was the ceiling six inches from your face. They left you there in the heat, it was unbearable, a choking stifling heat in which men drowned.

It’s all in your head... your head. It’s all in your head.

Tell that to the beads of sweat that rolled unchecked down his back as rough hands pinched, probed and prodded, each touch an abuse. This was deliberate, intimidating, but why?

‘Nothing,’ Mr Slim announced.

The second man was much shorter, more rounded, a heavyweight. He turned Scout about and lifted his chin.

‘Open your mouth, wider, say ahhhh. Nah, he’s clean.’ The two men backed off.

About time.

‘Take your clothes off.’ Carlos instructed.

‘What?’

‘Take them off. All of them.’

That’s a joke, right?

‘The boys want to be sure they haven’t missed anything.’

Mr Round moved to Scout’s left, eyes daring him to refuse.

He was being stared down by three yard dogs ready to pounce.

Mr Slim raised his foot to the chair his gun barrel rising suggestively. Mr Round, he just looked fat.

Fuck you. There were limits to his compliance. *No fucking way.* He’d tear them a new one before he went down. *Fucking Duma fags.*

Silence as four men readied, steadied, a silent prelude to the gunfight.

Carlos broke the tension with a roar of laughter. How lovely, it infected Mister’s Slim and Round too.

‘That’s a joke. Ha ha. What, you have nothing to say? You hear that boys, the Mouth has nothing to say.’

Son of a bitch.

‘Hey, Scout, why aren’t you laughing?’

‘Ha ha, funny, you’re a funny man. Hey guys, Carlos is a funny man.’ *That’s right, you have a good laugh.* Smug grins all around as the room expanded, imminent death averted. *I can be funny. Fucking hilarious.* ‘Oops, sorry, bad feet.’ A gun in a shoulder holster, two magazines in his jacket. Something more interesting in the tree trunk’s trouser pocket. ‘Clumsy, I was born clumsy. Ask my mum. Maybe not, she’s dead.’

‘Take a seat, clown. I’ll let you know when the Boss is ready for you.’

Sure, whatever. ‘Can I freshen up?’

‘Why, you piss your pants?’

‘Sure, just keep it off the seat.’

‘Well you know little boys. Difficult to tinkle, more of a sprinkle. This way, follow your finger shall I?’

He did. He was out. *Take a breath.* The air suddenly infused with a flowery scent. *Why the hell have they brought me here? This is not a place I want to be.* No point in going out the window, the Duma always got their man. *This is a really nice*

room. Normal people lived in rooms smaller than where he was about to pee .

‘Hey, Mouth, you okay in there. Need help pointing it?’

‘Lifting it can be a problem, I’ll manage.’ *Look at this room. The suburbs get public latrines. The Line use buckets or a hole in the ground. I have to share a bathroom with six other people... and Tass. Urgh, Tass. Highly questionable hygiene.*

‘Okay Mr Funny. ‘ He whispered to himself. ‘Let’s see what you keep in here.’ Carlos’ wallet came out from his shirt. ‘Leather? This is from the old world?’

Anything from the old world was valuable; he should know, he’d been out there; it was a dangerous place to be. The past held curiosity, it held the promise of something gone that could never return. That was its allure. Why so many parted with so much just to own a piece.

Scout flicked through its contents to find mostly currency and small bits of paper. One name attracted his attention. *I know you.* Odette, a girl who frequented the Odyssey. She was an escort who provided, a little extra. Appointments made under the bar.

So Carlos isn’t a fag. Just a regular pervert like the rest of us.

‘What was that you said, Carlos? You want to donate to my rent fund? I want to cry that means so much. What’s that; take a little extra and buy myself something nice... such a generous man.’

He considered taking everything, flush the wallet. But better to take a third ish, leave some doubt. Not being sure would really piss Carlos off.

Hey, is that toilet roll hanging from the wall? It is. Shit, it’s soft... and quilted too. ‘I should have worn a bigger coat.’

‘Hey, don’t take all day in there. The Boss wants to see you.’

The flush on the cistern had a silky smooth action.

‘All done.’ He announced as he exited. ‘I washed my hands.’

‘Your dead mother would be proud.’ Carlos opened one of two large doors but remained in the doorway. ‘In here, the Boss will see you now.’

It was a tight squeeze, all very intimidating, easy to return what he’d borrowed. The big fat grin Scout offered clearly irked the taller man.

‘Come, please... take a seat.’

The Preacher wasn't what he'd expected. A tall lean man with grey thinning hair, that beckoned him. Six foot two, maybe three, and dressed in a sharp edged suit tailored in grey. The white shirt below exposed at both collar and wrists. He looked more like the town clerk than an evil warlord. But maybe that was the point.

‘So you are Mr Sebastian.’

‘Please, my friends call me Scout.’

‘Then I'm pleased to meet you both. And I'm very grateful that you accepted my invitation at such short notice.’ He made it sound as if Scout had a choice. ‘Can I offer you a beverage?’

‘Sure, thank you.’ *Is he really the Preacher?* He'd only ever heard rumours about the man, urban myths. Something hot and steamy was being poured.

‘Business is good.’ Scout winced as he said it. *Poor men don't live in castles. Try not to look too impressed.* It was difficult, the office was bigger than his apartment. Cleaner too; he didn't really know why that annoyed him. The room was obviously a private work place. Books and papers on a leather topped desk, a

barred window behind. He supposed that running a criminal empire would involve paperwork, and pens, three of them; they caught his eye. Scout liked pens. The silver fountain pen with a shiny blue clip, dare he? The rest of the room was filled with curiosities, mostly from the Old World. Illegal objects, all of them, the man wasn't afraid to put them on show. And why so many books, he had shelves full of them. Leather bindings that offered titles written in languages Scout didn't understand.

Okay, it wasn't as if he could ignore them, the knives. Daggers of all shapes and lengths displayed with pride. Fine steel, most had decorative handles, some didn't, and looked used, recently. He knew well the man's reputation, his passion for the use of sharp blades. He clenched his fist but not in anger. Just counting the number of fingers. He wanted to be sure each hand had the same number attached when he left.

'Thank you.' *This smells good.* 'Is this Coffee? Hmm, is it real?'

'Everything in my home is authentic, Mr Sebastian.'

Of course it is. What a stupid thing to say.

A beverage like this takes food stamps and cash, lots of both. Neither of which would be in short supply for the Preacher. He was probably their source in the first place.

Oh, it tastes as good as it smells.

‘Mr Sebastian.’

‘Hmm?’

‘I would like to retain your services. You have come highly recommended.’

‘I have? May I ask by who?’

‘By whom... And it was a friend of yours.’

So it is a job then.

Another sip of the bitter blend confirmed he wasn’t dreaming.

‘I’m flattered you think that I can succeed where your own people have failed.’

‘Don’t be glib, Mr Sebastian. My time is valuable. I have asked you here because you need to see certain things for yourself. You like to be called, Scout. I understand that was your gang alias. You’re the product of a proxy family, one that gave you a violent upbringing. Not too unlike the Duma with who you have a shared history. I am told that you are a dogged and tenacious man who does not like to fail. How did my source put it, ah yes, “he likes to piss in the cracks to see what comes out.” You are a man who does not indulge in sentiment and will use any and all means necessary to succeed. I am also told that you can be trusted.’

‘You’ve been talking to my mum.’

‘Very droll, Mr Sebastian. You’re mother was murdered some years ago, as was your father.’

So he’d learned one thing about the Preacher already. He was well informed, and had little sense of humour.

‘I understand they named you Scout because you have a gift for sniffing out trouble. Amusing really, as your personal history continually sets you in its midst.’ He paused, sipped, like a gentleman misplaced in time. ‘It must have been distressing when the gangs were broken by the Commission. The JAG is a particularly efficient organisation.’

‘You could say that.’ *Sons of bitches went in with a kill order. Anyone who didn’t repent, got cleansed.*

‘You were wise to move on before the JAG was ordered in.’

‘I have friends.’

Don’t look like that; I do... Okay, I have one friend.

‘Yes, Titus Dok, an interesting individual. A man hardly given to sentiment, so I have to ask myself why he would take in a stray like you.’

‘You’d have to ask him that.’

Scout’s life was an open book, he wasn’t impressed by the Preacher’s recital.

‘I need your skills, Mr Sebastian. You’ve had relations with the Duma since childhood, but you are *not* Duma. You can tread lightly where we cannot. You can approach people who would undoubtedly try to avoid *our* attention.’

I’m impressed with anyone who can avoid Duma attention. You’ve obviously tried, and failed. This was getting interesting.
Sip.

‘I want you to find something that was stolen from this house three nights ago.’ The Preacher pulled down on one of the larger volumes nestling on the fourth shelf down. A false front, nice job, Scout hadn’t noticed. The Preacher produced a key.

‘I assure you that this is the *only* key.’

It was inserted into the lock and turned. An electronic tone beeped repetitively as the Preacher tapped a five digit code onto the numbered pad. The tone ceased and the door clicked open. The Preacher stepped back.

When the hairs on your body stand erect, you can hope for one of two outcomes. Clean underwear, or fast feet. Neither seemed applicable as Scout stared at the safe. Its internal workings leaped across the line of legality. Anything operating binary code was the Devil's work. Zeros and ones set the Commission's teeth on edge, the rules were very clear. Technology was heresy, an infection from the past. It had to be cleansed.

One particular poster came to mind that had been abundantly pasted onto walls when he was a child.

Science is dead.

Technology is dead.

God... Is dead.

Too much emphasis on the word, *dead*.

'It's quite all right, Mr Sebastian. I have a licence from the Commission for the safe. What I don't have is an explanation for how it was opened without this key.'

Licence... what licence?

Scout doubted any such permission existed and he couldn't shake off the image of the poster. The design may have changed over the years but the message was the same. The punishment was severe. Technology was heresy.

'Ahh, I believe I have neglected to offer terms.'

Terms?

A drawer was opened and an envelope placed out onto the desk.

'Five books of food stamps and five hundred dollars.'

Sorry, say that again... five hundred?

'The same again when you return my property, and of course final payment will be accompanied by my gratitude... *if* you accept.'

If?

The Preacher's eyes seemed more fearsome than the wolf that had sniffed his genitals outside. Both parties seemed intent on biting hard if he did, *or said*, the wrong thing. Shit, he'd landed on his feet but was now standing in quicksand. The two things in life you don't get involved with. A Duma Boss looking for retribution and the Heresy Laws of the Commission. It was the proverbial rock and a hard place.

‘A thousand down, another thousand on receipt of your property. You can keep the stamps.’ *I’m sick of soya and onions.* A few ounces of meat substitute and vegetable matter only left you wanting for more. And *more* only came from the black market. If you had the cash and the right connections. The Duma controlled the food trade as vehemently as the Commission controlled the city’s soul.

‘One more thing.’ Scout added. ‘Throw in a pound of that coffee and I’ll piss in more cracks than you find on a broken mirror.’

Tass will go crazy for this; maybe forget the rent... probably not. He was thinking more about Baldy from the club. A few harsh words had been spoken, a reckoning was brewing that he would rather avoid.

‘Agreed.’ Said the Preacher.

What... no threats, no barter?

No choice then. Not that he’d really had one. From the moment Carlos had knocked on his door he was working for the Preacher. He moved closer to the safe, intimidated by what he might see.

‘How is your sister?’ The Preacher asked.

My sister?

‘I haven’t seen her in a very long time.’ Truth was he hadn’t spared her a thought in days. ‘I’m not even sure if she’s still alive.’ That was a lie. Jorja had found him some years ago.

They’d been parted when their parents had died... when they were murdered. She came when she could, when it was safe. It had been nearly a month now. He hoped she was safe.

‘She is very much alive, Mr Sebastian.’

Scout didn’t have to look to see the smugness on the bastard’s face. Information was power with these people and now the Preacher thought he had leverage. Or was it just another carrot being dangled? The Preacher had him with the cash; any veiled threats would just cement the relationship.

‘Why bother her now? The Commission took her a long time ago. I doubt she even remembers me.’

The Preacher was fishing and Scout wasn’t about to chew on the bait. Wards of the Commission, once accepted, were denied contact with anyone from their former life. It was dangerous for her, and for him.

‘I understand. Families can be troublesome, spouses in particular. I cannot begin to imagine the emotional ramifications of being married to a whore?’

They say that sounds and smells can prompt dramatic response. Memories and feelings can be ignited. That one single sentence flicked Scout's safety to 'off'; it put everything onto a hair trigger.

You called her a whore. You filthy murdering bastard, you call Chia, a whore? How dare you... she was pure and precious. She was my light, my warmth, my soul mate... my wife. Who the fuck are you to pass judgement, Duma scumbag? You're filthy, shit, not worthy to sully her shoes.

A corkscrew twisted in his gut. Instant rage but no flicker of sentiment betrayed on his face. Now he understood why the asshole kept calling him, Mr Sebastian. Why the boys outside had been so *hands on*. The Preacher was pushing buttons, searching for weakness. In less than three seconds the black handled dagger on the bookshelf would be stuck in his neck.

'Please don't take offence, Mr Sebastian. I only say it how it is. After all, you were found holding the knife whilst covered in your wife's blood. It was the State that deduced her former employment as motive for her death.'

He took a moment to let the sentence sink in.

'The State found you guilty of her murder and sentenced you to twenty five years detention in Galfstram. I understand it to be a

rather penal establishment. An institution normally reserved for heretics and political undesirables.

Penal... is that a joke? Galfstram is a death sentence for its inmates. A place where no-one hears you scream.

Memories he had buried began to seep through barriers he'd taken years to erect. The sudden seepage threatened to burst the dam. His hand trembled one eye fixed on the knife. The Preacher had just been warming up. Now he was pushing for the main event.

'Enter Titus Dok, again.' The Preacher's cup lifted as if to salute the name. 'He managed to get you a reprieve from Galfstram. That is a *remarkable* achievement, from a very resourceful man. He has fingers in many pies, as they say.'

Fingers again. The Preacher was working him over far worse than Carlos could ever do with his fists.

One more push... just one more.

He inadvertently took a step toward the Preacher. Hairs bristled; heart pulsing like a windmill's sails.

'You've got a camera hidden in the bookshelf.' He growled. 'That's borderline deviancy. Only the State and the Commission are supposed to have access to digital technology. I need to see

what *it* saw at the time of the theft. I want to know exactly what was taken. And I'll need my expenses, up front.'

Scout was already removing the contents of the safe before being invited to do so. Documents and papers were in hand. Of no interest if the thief had left them behind, so they were dropped onto the floor. It took his breath away the large piles of cash that he pulled out, and discarded to the ground.

What sort of thief leaves cash behind?

A glass weight emerged, the object big enough to fill his palm, it had the image of a sailing ship cleverly etched inside.

How is that possible? Probably best not to drop this.

Besides, it was pretty. His fingers went in again and settled on a small figurine of Peter the Walker. Not a relic he would normally associate with a man like the Preacher. Peter was the Saint of redemption through good deeds. *Good deeds... is this a joke?* The figure had been crafted from pure silver. Was the Preacher trying to buy his future by praying for redemption from his past?

Scout doubted it, but it showed the Preacher had a weakness, *Relics*. Why should this man be any different? Most Duma were hard core Relic worshippers. A piece of bone was the usual keepsake. Kept close to one's person, it was comforting, an

object of prayer. Sometimes of full blown worship. He had one himself, but for different reasons. It had belonged to Chia. He felt a strong urge to reach to his chest where the relic hung from a chain.

‘You have keen eyes, Mr Sebastian, even if your hands are a little more careless. Carlos will attend to your first and last request. As for the second...’ he seemed to considered his words, ‘I want you to understand that I will take any lack of discretion on your part, very personally.’

‘What was taken from the safe?’

‘You’re very direct, I like that.’

‘Get to the point.’

It’s interesting that the thought of sharing the information is so difficult. Professional distrust, or emotional attachment?

‘It was a box, Mr Sebastian. A very old box... it contains a Relic. This Relic has immeasurable value to me and must be found. It must be returned to me. To me, is that understood?’

So there are others looking for this box?

‘What’s in the box?’

‘Something more beautiful than you can imagine, Mr Sebastian. It has great value to me. I am yet to see any value in you.’

Well here's my most reassuring face. It probably came over as smug, but that was okay. 'The safe requires an electronic key to work a digital tumbler system. Insert the key and press the buttons. If you hit the right notes the keypad lights up, the door opens. Six digit key pad with a lock down timing device. And if I'm not mistaken it has a flash imbedded in the roof.' He smiled. 'Charming. Incinerate the contents and most of the thief's face. I can tell you he didn't get in through the window, too much security outside. And not the same way as I just came, the tourist route. You like to confuse your visitors, it suggests a healthy paranoia. I like that. Your thief came in through the garden, probably from the building I saw driving in. He's patient, careful, and this was personal. I imagine you have a lot of disgruntled, associates.'

'Your knowledge of the safe is impressive.'

'You learn a thing or two in prison. The flash didn't work, why? I assume that the box is resistant to heat?'

'It is impervious to a great many things, Mr Sebastian. Curiosity included.'

Is that a warning not to peek? Or did he just admit that he didn't know what was in the box? This was getting more interesting by the moment.

‘The fact that the thief didn’t set it off gives me a good place to start. I know people.’ He handed Peter to The Preacher. ‘It’s beautiful.’ He lied.

Truth was he found the audacity of this thief far more impressive than the theft itself. Whatever the intruder had stolen, it was priceless; its disappearance was giving the Preacher sleepless nights. For that fact alone he couldn’t wait to get started.

The church the body lay in was long since abandoned by the Old Faith. Its roof picked clean of slates. Its walls were crumbled; the arched windows closed and boarded up forever. Only the rampant spread of ivy and vine softened the chilled and bloody scene.

The corpse was a man, his arms tied outstretched. The knots in the chord were tied neatly around each wrist and pulled taut through rusted rings embedded in a stone floor. Awkward would best describe the angle of the body's legs, they had violently scratched at the ground before death. The man had been tortured; he had screamed and pleaded for his life. The spit and tears that clung to his cheeks and chin were testament to the volume he'd achieved. But no-one had come; only one man had heard him scream.

The first question Liam had asked the man had been followed by silence. Silence was good. It was where all sounds strive to begin. Liam understood the man's silence; he knew that he was brave, that he was a fool. Liam was pleased that the man was

stubborn for secrets should never be divulged without sufficient encouragement.

Liam began by cutting a finger tip away. Slow pressure by a sharp blade as it sliced through the flesh and bone. The resulting screams were followed by a second question.

It was answered with sharp breaths and spluttering words that formed a frantic reply. This was good. The man was responding.

Next Liam sliced the man's ear. Not fully, just enough to let it dangle on more desperate pleas. It was a pleasing cut, sharp and precise, but still the man refused to yield. *Good, this would take effort.* Liam was pleased as he stepped around the squirming figure bound to the rings. He knelt and whispered into the good ear another question, this time followed by a stream of expletives and insults. Liam stabbed his blade into the man's eye and plucked out the ocular flesh.

More screams, and he was crying. Salty tears just added to the pain for the thin, gaunt looking man, it probably the blood loss. His body wrenched and jerked, his lungs sang for mercy as Liam sat and stared at the eyeball stuck on the tip of his blade.

'Stop, stop, pleeease, I beg you to stop. I'll speak, anything, anything... just stop. Stop.'

Another question was whispered. The answer was short, repetitive, bawled out in a ceaseless flow of information. Liam listened; he recognised the rhythm of pain and despair. The man was telling him the truth.

A different question followed.

More truth, delivered within a panting repetition as Liam wrote with a pencil, the answers jotted on a small piece of paper. The man couldn't share the answers quickly enough.

'Shhh... slower, I cannot write that quickly. Shhh, yes yes, that's better.'

The man dispensed answers to questions that Liam had not asked. He was keen to talk now. *Talk talk talk, they always talk.* The pencil stopped writing, Liam had what he'd come for.

He was too easily broken. Liam's work was done much quicker than he had anticipated, than he had desired. This man was a disappointment. Weren't all Duma men supposed to spit in your eye before you killed them?

'One final question.'

It had been a thoughtless oversight. How rude to abuse a person without first making proper introductions. For the first time Liam showed his face, and it did nothing to calm the

tortured man. He screamed as if the Furies themselves stared into his eyes.

Liam knew that he was different. It was his eyes apparently, they made others feel uncomfortable. They had been born too round and too intense. What trick of nature would set a child's eyes so deep in his face? The pale pigmentation of his skin only served to heighten the effect. Straw like hair that was grey from birth only added to the image and had convinced others that he was somehow, unnatural.

But the Saints had countered the humour of Mother Nature by giving Liam a sharp intelligence, and a strong belief in his own worth. They had given Liam talents, and the strong resolve to hone and perfect these skills on deviants like the one now chained before him.

‘My name is Liam.’ He said, his voice a whisper.

The deviant was panting again. Sobbing like a child. He kept swinging his head from side to side. His neck muscles swollen the flesh blue and red.

‘Tell me your name.’ Of course he already knew the answer.

‘E, Emilio...’ More tears and squirming. ‘My, name, is Emilio.’

‘You’re going into shock now Emilio. Please try to announce more clearly. What I require from you now is a performance.’

‘A, a, wh... What?’

‘I want to hear your music, Emilio.’ Liam ran the tip of the knife slowly across the man’s face.’

‘No, pleee, pleeease. I’ll tell you anything... anything you want. I’ll tell you anything... Please stop, please stop.’

‘You’ve already told me everything I need to know. Speech will no longer be necessary. What I desire now is the intensity of your death to reach a fevered pitch. I have a particular gift for orchestrating perfect pitch from a deviant’s lungs. Please, stop crying Mr Emilio. It will ruin the performance.’

He placed a thick towel over Emilio’s face.

‘Now I would like you to scream.’

‘No. Please no, for God’s sake somebody help meeee.’

The knife cut into Emilio’s body and began removing the nipples one at a time. In seconds the blood was awash on the flesh and seeping in all directions. Emilio coughed spluttered and squealed. He squirmed though his body ached. A grown man cried for his mother, his screams resounded through the old pulpit and up into the rafters. Each tone encouraged by the precise movements of the conductor’s baton. One angled cut after another as the blood ran in narrow streams down onto the flagstones.

It was invigorating, accentuating, and magnificent. It was over too soon. Emilio was close to death. He no longer sang, the effort was too much. Liam dispatched the man with a slow thrust of his knife. The skin breached by its tip between the ribs, practised hands pausing the blade before it was allowed to reach the heart; threatening at the soft organ with its talon sharp tip. He waited for the fading pulse to become a tremor, for its final gasping moments to be conveyed down the steel. Only then had did he enact the Coup de gras. Just enough pressure for the razor sharp tool to slide unhindered into the fading organ, just as the life of the man ebbed out through the steel.

The finale was intoxicating.

Euphoria, euphoria, euphoria.

It lifted Liam to the stars. He rose above all others and felt he could reach the stars. His orbit was all too brief. The high raced too far ahead and it left him suspended, reaching... coveting, but denied. Liam began to fall, slowly at first. Then quicker, and quicker until he came crashing down. Liam staggered to the pulpit and puked, his insides thrown out on the ground to mix with his victim's blood.

It wasn't so much a physical distress, more a spiritual one; the wailing of a tortured soul. If he bit any harder on his hand he'd

be likely to draw blood again. And maybe he should. Sometimes the pain helped to subdue the bad feelings inside, but not this time.

Pain stabbed at his innards and curled his intestines tight to strangle his gut. The high was gone, now all he wanted was the bad feelings, the burning guilt, the pain in his stomach to go away.

I am a good and loyal servant.

The words clashed around his head like cymbals. What he really wanted was to shout them aloud, to spew them into the silent night. But that would show weakness, and Liam wasn't weak. No, he was strong; he repeated the phrase over in his head and began to sway.

I am a good and loyal servant.

'I am a good and loyal servant.'

'I am a good and loyal servant. I am a good and loyal servant. Stop... Stop it. Make it stop.'

Always after the euphoria came the dreaded remorse. The stomach cramps and sweats. Violent pangs of regret. It was a curse to be a man and to have the feelings of men. But he could no more deny them than he could his dark and carnal nature.

'Yes, I hear you.'

Finally, they were here at last.

‘Yes. I understand.’

It was joyous relief when The Whispers came. He just wished they would come sooner. During the thrill, before he crashed, before he burned.

‘Enough.’ Liam scolded himself. It should be enough that they were here at all. They always came; they had never deserted him.

‘Yes... I understand. No, I just hoped... that he would be the last. I just... My hands are yours to guide. Blessed are the Prophets. Blessed are their words. Forgive me, for I am weak. *You* make me strong.’

The bad feelings began to fade, of course they did. It was always the same when The Whispers entered his body. Their energy seethed and charged, thrust out through every orifice. He couldn’t deny them. Why would he want to? The Whispers were sustenance, they were a gift, they were divine. It was the same tingling spark that tickled his groin when he enacted the coupe de gras. It infected his entire body. Liam was reborn as blood soaked fingers opened; it was still there. The Heretic’s eyes were blue.

‘I understand.’ He said.

The ritual of transference would be conducted away from the Heretic corpse. He would ingest the flesh to absorb the sins of the man. The sins of this particular Heretic were his to endure now and his alone. One eye for the flesh the other for the fire. All sin was witnessed by the sinner's eyes.

Liam saw sinners everywhere.

Carlos extended the brown envelope.

‘The clearest photos we have. Other cameras in the house run on a separate circuit. When the power went down... none of them reconnected to the generator.’

‘An inside job?’

Carlos seemed unhappy at being told to cooperate with Scout. He liked that.

‘We do have a man missing.’

‘His name?’

‘Emilio. I will know more when I find him.’

‘You shouldn’t have lost him in the first place.’ *Are you growling at me?* ‘Hey, I work for the Boss now. That makes us... brothers in arms.’

‘You are a transient, nothing more.’ Scout was tall but the intimidation directed down from Carlos was real. ‘I don’t like your kind. You’re a rat from the wrong side of the Line. Just do your job. You *can* do your job *Mr Sebastian?*’

Poor Carlos, you got lemons in your mouth.

He had invited this verbal gunfight.

‘You’re ex military,’ Scout said, ‘coaxed away from the State. I expect they don’t pay as well.’ A step closer. ‘Or was it a question of loyalty, no, you’re a sinner aren’t you. Something to do with women I’d say?’ *Ah, you don’t like the truth do you.* ‘You’re of Ukrainian descent. You lost both your parents at a young age. You have brothers, both of them younger.’

It wasn’t difficult to surmise. Carlos had an old family photo in his wallet. The three of them sat below stern looking parents. He still had a peasant accent, hiding in the background.

‘And you’ve never married.’ That was a guess. Who’d have a Neanderthal like Carlos without cash or favours to sweeten the attraction? ‘There’s something else.’ He loved to make the sympathy look genuine. ‘Your mother; she left you in a lot of pain. Couldn’t take it any more, did she fly the coop. Yes, but she promised to come back for you. Not the others... just you.’

No more pretence at empathy. Carlos kept the letter she’d left him in his wallet. A note written in haste, she probably penned the same words to all three of them.

‘She didn’t come back did she?’

A wry smirk from Mr Slim, he was impressed. Carlos gunned him with the eyes of an attack dog, unhappy at being tethered. Mr Round withdrew to a safe distance.

‘You’re leaving.’ Ordered Carlos.

‘But I’m right.’ Scout rebuffed.

‘Get him out of here.’

Had he overstepped the mark? Maybe he hadn’t gone far enough. Mr Round frowned and showed him the way.

‘One last observation.’ *Fuck it, push him all the way.* He just couldn’t resist.

‘Your eyes, the lower rims, they’re a little pale. That’s a deficiency in folic acid. Did you know that?’ Scout had heard a diagnosis or two as a child. Mother was a doctor after all, and a damn good one.

He didn’t stare but kept his gaze fluid, scrutinising every inch of the larger man’s face.

‘You’ve got red spots in your eyes, but you’re already wondering about those. They feel tired don’t they, dry as well. Your shirts are getting tight from recent weight gain.’ He shook his head, slow and deliberate. ‘It could be high blood pressure. It could be the onset of diabetes.’ For theatre he bit his lip. ‘Or it could be early signs of an intracranial neoplasm.’

It was obvious that they all needed help with that particular diagnosis.

‘A brain tumour... I recommend that you see a doctor, and make it a good one.’

And up yours you smug little shit.

‘Was it this way out?’

The ride back was quiet. Carlos sat up front with Mr Slim who drove; the hulk was discreet but checked his eyes in the rear view. They said nothing. Scout watched. He nested in the soft and cosy back seat.

Mr Slim took the shortcut across the City, out through the parks. Whichever way you drove from here, you crossed the Line. Out toward the northern suburbs and across one of the bridges into the bulge that followed the river as it split the northern edge of the City. The bridges were gated and guarded, the JAG vigilant night and day. He doubted the Duma captain would encounter a problem in crossing sides.

Scout might. He had strong emotions whenever he crossed the Line. He understood the contempt from others toward him. After all, he was a son of the City that had been cast out. They didn't usually return. When they did they were always tainted. He was a bad apple and considered damaged goods, by both sides. The Work district passed them by, the official edge of the City; geographically it went on for miles. The cities cheapest seats. Endless rows of distressed housing, most of the buildings held up by string and spit. He watched with little empathy as they

passed on by, only lifting his gaze when Mr Slim slowed the car. Two shadowy figures approached from a doorway.

Both men smoked, neither man smiled. Business then, as the window was rolled down and a hushed conversation took place. Scout neither heard nor cared what was said. He sat eyes pinned to the window, he watched the locals who watched them. The nights were still long at this time of year and the fires were beginning to burn. Everything about the Line was sad, nothing was attractive. No-one outside looked directly at the car, but they watched. He was a fish sat in a bowl.

The tail end of a procession caught his eye through the back window. He recognised the orange banners of St Cuthbert, the humble and obedient Saint. Two streets up they passed somewhere between the old market buildings. They sang and rattled tins for donations as they thumped on cheap drums. They signed up the unclean they tried to redeem them, another nuisance cult that hunted the streets in packs. The JAG had passed through recently too. He noticed fresh posters were up on the bricks, new aesthetics for the broken walls. State Security loved to change the décor. This one was new.

Be wary

Be vigilant

Be a good citizen

That all depended on your definition of being *a good citizen*.
Everybody here was just trying to get by on the wrong side of the
river.

It hadn't always been like this.

People still told the stories of Origin. Tales told about how
Oasis had been a place of hope. The World's population had been
decimated; outsiders were eagerly sought, actively encouraged as
the City bells rang daily. Poses were sent from the City, as far
as the coast would allow, anywhere that might herald survivors.

Times had changed. Crossing the mountains to the north was
forbidden. Going south was Heresy. Beyond the Wheat Fields to
the east was forbidden. No-one travelled to the coast anymore.
People, life, all that remained lived here in Oasis. Everything out
there was gone, it was desolation... it was radiation. That's what
the Commission told them. The Commission said a lot of things.

The JAG were recruited to protect the city, to keep its citizen's safe. He'd been out there; he'd foraged for the past. The thought of leaving the City now gave him a chill.

But what is it like, the sea?

Packages changed hands in the front seat; he pretended not to notice. The window rolled up and Mr Slim eased on the power, the car moved on in no discernible hurry. That was fine, Scout was comfortable; outside it was late afternoon, still daylight, still safe to be out. Even the Duma were wary of crossing the Line after dark. The river was a dangerous place when the sun went down. He began to doze, to fall into a light sleep, He began to remember.

The Line hadn't always been like this.

When the population grew too large, that's when the selection committees were formed. The City needed fixers and tinkerers to keep it running. Engineers and mechanics were specified category A. Doctors and healers, anyone with a craft or practical skill was fast tracked to the front of the queue. The rest fell into the category of 'Labour.' They were moved across the river.

The Line was drawn.

That was when the posters first started to appear.

Feed your family
Work in the fields
Labour will help you cross the river

A rich variety of messages but the underlying theme was the same.

If you can fix it
You can use it
Property of the State

As a kid he saw the words emblazoned above powerful images, a picture of a wrench, a car, a soldier. He'd wanted to be a mechanic to fix things; he was always good with his hands. Not what his parents wanted for him though. From the time he could talk they had decided that Scout would be a doctor, just like his mother.

An older poster caught his eye. Someone had tried to scratch it off a long time ago but the words could still be seen.

Life, Death, Salvation
All roads lead to

The RELIQUARY

Such a nice message from the Commission, an epistle found all over the Line, as well as in the City. He often saw the Legates paste them onto walls. Sticking their propaganda with holier than thou strokes of the brush. A Legate always came with JAG troopers in tow. A Legate never crossed the Line without the guns. *They* were the purveyors of state religion, the earthly voice of the Saints. “All roads lead to the Reliquary,” that’s what they said. And it was true.

He got it, he did, the need for people to have faith, to believe in something that was bigger than themselves. That’s why the Saints became big box office, new material arrived every week.

Saints and Prophets were the new Gods. Men and women, who were worshipped because they acted for the good of others, for the good of the State. Idols that led by example. He didn’t know anyone who lived without the crutch of a Relic. Some even had drawers that were full of them, one for each day of the week. The more you revered the more the Commission approved. It had risen on the back of Relics. The poorer the citizen the better, the more saving they required. Relics were big business.

After the Wars, those that were left wanted to believe in something again. It's in the brain apparently, 'The God spot.' Only God has gone now, he no longer exists. In the early days the Legates would dig up dead bodies for their raw materials, at least that was what he heard as a child. The Legates would say words, hallow the old bones, they made it was official. The dead had become useful tools, their bodies broken and sold as trinkets. Set in a ring or in a pendant, maybe a charm for a bracelet. It was business, big business. It was also a fierce departure from the Old Religion.

The Commission rose high on the backs of the dead. They gave new life, new hope, and a sense of belonging. They fuelled demand for a new kind of faith. It was the Commission's faith. It was the Patron's faith, *he* was the man who rose highest of all.

The Commission rules and anyone that says different is a Heretic.

Scout sat up. He didn't like to sleep; the mind runs rampant when you lose control. It was just a moment maybe more. As he watched the city pass by he was reminded of how things could have been, should have been, without Dok's intervention. When you are seven years old and no-one gives a shit, the city pushes you out like a rotten splinter.

As a child Scout had fended for himself. He'd been a runner for the local Duma. Skipping school any chance he got to packages across the city. He'd run anything that would fit in his pockets or a small bag. Why not, the perks were good. They paid in cash and food. Real food, not the stamps issued by the State. Soya and Onions, potatoes and beans, State food trucked in from the Productivity Fields south of the City. If it could be grown the State had made a field for it.

He'd networked the lower echelons of the Duma like a Windows navigator. It was exciting and adventurous. Definitely not what his parents desired. Not what Url and Greisha had wanted for their child. They would have been stunned if they'd realised half of his activities. It's difficult to be a good child when your parents are such pillars of the community; good

people, role models, both parents elevated by the Commission. When your parents are so esteemed its easy to find a reason to rebel.

Url was a mechanic; his mother, Greisha, was a third generation doctor, a sanctioned healer of the sick, a gentle woman with a gift and a smile. He could see her reflection in the glass and was tempted to reach out to touch her.

Stop it.

He didn't want to go there. That was all in the past. Best not resurrect the past, not when you bury it deep. But he could still see her face, see her smile. She always had a smile.

Don't remember, leave it buried.

Too late.

He hated the past flying through his head space. Nothing good was in there to recall. Just bad shit cut away at the roots, soft shoots that waited for the chance to spread, to flourish and grow again. *Freeking memories, they always opened the sluice for every other crappy little thing in the past to flood out alongside.*

Here we go.

He couldn't help himself, the purr of the engine, the silence in the cab, it all helped. A bitch of a bad night, a lack of sleep, it was all about to be resurrected.

Sebastian was at home with his older sister when the door had knocked and a neighbour had come timidly inside to tell them that their world would never be the same again. That their parents had been gunned down by persons, and for reasons unknown.

That's what believing in Prophets and Saints get you.

Url and Gresia had believed. They believed with all their hearts what the Legates had taught them. How the good would be interned within the Ossuary of the Great Reliquary. They'd spoken about it often, decisions were made with that in mind. A bone or trinket from each of their bodies was to be donated to the Greater Good.

"How bright a Relic shined in death was indictment of productivity during life." The Legates preached it daily. "A few will shine and eclipse the stars, their names forever spoken and never forgotten." For the rest their relics were to be included amongst the pile erected toward the Greater Good outside the city. An inspiration for all that followed.

“Those that deny the words of the Saints or shy and refuse to toil, their spirits will be damnation. Theirs will be thrown out on the winds and left to scream in purgatory. Forever damned and left to linger, unheard and unseen by the living.” His parents had been keen to avoid that fate. They were adamant that Jorga and he should believe in their Saints too. That *he* should receive the Prophets teachings from the mouths of the Legates themselves.

Well, all that belief hadn't protected them. The Prophets hadn't provided a shield for the bullets that had ended their lives. And they sure as shit didn't pay the rent to keep the children left behind. Orphaned kids get three choices. They can be adopted by relatives. Not an option when there are no relatives to be found. They can go into service with the Commission and become a ward of the State. The third option was harshest of all. They can cross the Line. Take to the streets and hope to affiliate with one of the city gangs. Hope that one of them will take you in before you starve on the streets. The Commission didn't want Scout, too much trouble, but they took his sister, Jorja. It was a long time until he saw her again.

A wry smile as he remembered Jorga as a child. As he watched Carlo check his eyes in the mirror again. Maybe it hadn't all been bad.

The Line was in his blood. From the earliest age he'd shown he had inherited his father's eye for detail and the man's dexterity for his craft. Everywhere you looked things needed fixing. It was the same on both sides of the Line. Scout had been an eager student with all things mechanical, all things legal. But across the river where the Legates influence waned, there were other skills in which to dabble. When his parents had been alive they had fascinated him, even frightened him. When they were gone these dark arts began to entice.

There was a secret and dangerous trade in illicit books. Valuable and rare copies smuggled about the city. Old writings once printed in their thousands were rarities now. Papers saved from the fires that had tried to burn them out of existence. Books filled with learning. He smiled. Or spiteful letters imbued with Witchcraft and Sorcery. It depended on your point of view.

They were skills that could be learnt and applied if handled with care.

The car was coming up on the Well. Scout sat forward and allowed the past a moment longer to reflect. Not the first time

he'd been here. The Well itself was a massive fountain, its basin dry since the Wars. He hadn't been here for years. There were battered statues of fish around the extremities. He'd always assumed they were fish. In the centre only the feet of someone tall remained; a sandal on each foot and half a leg. Across the road rose tall arches of brick, ten in number and then the beginning of another park. The parks had gone feral. Untended they had become a wilderness.

Nothing seemed as big as it was back then. His mind toured the memories of another life. It walked him down the tarmac paths, most lost to the flourishing undergrowth, even back then.

This Well had been a meeting place for the elder's, that's what they called them. No more than teenagers nearly passed into manhood. They ran the gangs. 'Fagan's,' he had once heard them called. He still didn't know what that meant either. Just kids that had somehow managed to find union and grow their surrogate family into a powerful structure that quietly rivalled the Duma. They'd taken him in when no-one wanted him, when no-one else gave a damn. That was all that mattered. For six years as a child he'd walked the Line. He crossed it often, but they'd never let him stay on the other side. That was the Duma for you. The gangs, the kids, were always good enough to run

their packages deep into the Suburbs, but they were never good enough to be allowed to stay.

Movement caught his eye as the Well passed by. A group of figures huddled within one of the arches. Faces turned instinctively toward the car as it approached. Faces hung with drawn and blank expressions; bodies bent and tired as they shuffled away from the oncoming car.

They were Ghosts.

The end of the line for a human being.

No way back.

‘Scum suckers.’ Said Mr Bald. He leaned on his horn and mimicked a spit toward them. ‘Filthy Stems.’

Carlos grunted his support. A bit rich coming from men directly involved in the drugs distribution. Not his problem. Scout settled back into the seat.

Stem use was rife, especially the wrong side of the Line. Not pure Stem. Only the rich could afford that luxury. The hack the Ghosts were using was Beta Stems, powdered and impure. It was a product made out of human stem cells and stolen mostly from the recently dead. Some even before they died. He cringed. It was big business. Stems healed the body and sometimes the

mind. But for all the good it promised, it always came with a death sentence attached.

He'd seen it a thousand times before.

Pure Stem was a different animal. It was a rich man's commodity. Dangerous circles to become involve with. Scout had been around long enough to know that even the Duma Bosses weren't privy to its source. That could only mean one thing. Wherever the well spring flowed, it was protected by very powerful people.

Just as they moved out of sight he saw a child amongst the group. Scout looked away.

RULE of the SAINTS

Liam kept to the shelf, his feet keen to avoid the flow of water in the sewer that would overrun his boots. Years of rotting filth had placed a heavy burden on the sewer's walls; its mortar was failing, and algae slimed across shelling brickwork. He'd become used to the ghostly sound of the water and its terrible stench a long time ago.

He accepted his Patrons' insistence for discretion. He understood the need to stay hidden from the prying eyes of others. It was nothing personal, of course it wasn't. Liam could hardly attend his benefactor by the front door. What bastard child could?

Not that it was his fault. You don't ask to be the product of a deviant, a witch and a temptress. A father's guilty secret, the offspring of heretics. Maybe that was why he had become the person that he was? He was so unlike the normal people. Whatever the reason, it suited him to be concealed this way. And he would be forever grateful to Patron. The great man that employed him, and who was prepared to overlook his shame.

Liam stopped and checked behind for movement, any unfamiliar sound. There was none. The slightest pressure on a particular brick was enough for the mechanism beyond to open the wall. From here the passage went upward, it opened to a staircase and the warm light of oil dipped torches. They were always lit when he was expected. Candles left in the window to guide him home.

Sixteen steps led upward to a gallery and a steel hinged door. Liam pushed it open and entered, closed the door and slid the timber brace back through iron retainers. Home now and the ritual could begin. He breathed deeply the odours inside.

Quercus Petraea. The Sessile Oak that had fashioned the barrels. The scent of wine came next as it evaporated from the casks. Caramel cream and cinnamon was his favourite, but just one of many. A montage of flavours present in the air. The complexity and character of the wines a mere breathe across his tongue. It was the sense of smell that always ended the bedlam he was forced to endure whilst working in the city outside. He turned with a sense of relief. Feelings of pleasure ensued. This was home.

The cellar was huge and built on three separate levels. On the first, the ground floor, kegs and barrels stood in long rows

like fat little soldiers awaiting inspection. On the second floor was an amazing array of bottles racked and shelved, thousands of glass containers that slumbered under blankets of dust. The entire cellar housed beneath a groin vaulted ceiling, its bricked ribs raised by long tapered columns set deep into the cellar floor. A thin staircase rose to a small gallery and an exit. The light to see by was moody at best. It was good to be home as Liam walked stepped into the darkness between two walls and disappeared.

The semi light was pierced by the flare of a match igniting. The sweet luxurious odour of burning phosphorous followed as the flame was shared between four small candles. This was nice, just as things should be. The candles brought an ambience that electric light would never replace.

Liam removed his jacket and sat on a small wooden bench. Beside him was a plain metal tin which he carefully picked up and placed on his lap, fingers perched on either side. Liam didn't like to slouch; it was bad for his posture. There were enough bad things outside in the City; here, there was a return to order.

Dexterous fingers slid the tin open to reveal a freshly cut sandwich wrapped in crisp brown paper. It was Tuesday and that meant a treat from Patron. The Soya would have a deliciously thin coating of dried honey, to prove his master was pleased.

What is this? There was something else in the tin. *Is this an apple, how extraordinarily thoughtful.* Though he doubted that it came from his master, no, someone else had left the fruit for him. He could smell her hand on the fruit as he let it touch his lips. The first bite was small, enough to savour its juicy flesh.

Succulent and fresh... just like her. Liam, are you smiling?

He hoped that she would come later, and visit.

Liam sat forward and placed his foot on the small camp bed he used for sleep and stared at the quilt neatly tucked at both sides and folded short of the pillow. The only thing he had preserved from his childhood. Silly really, but the quilt was a comfort to retain, a keepsake of the past. The only memory worth retaining was his mother wrapping it tightly around his body. Sometimes he could hear her voice if he listened. Only in his head, he understood that she was gone now. He still loved her, and if it took the rest of his life he'd wipe the stain of Heresy from her memory.

Listen, Liam. Yes, I can hear you mother.

"Stay in the cupboard my love. Be still and quiet until I come for you." The quilt was warm as always, and he would try to sleep. But he didn't like the dark much, didn't like to be alone. Sometimes he would cry whilst he waited for her to return. It always took too long.

Liam sat back, apple poised but undelivered to his mouth. Memories were cruel. Never as sweet as the past would have you believe. They hide within a mist of lies and falsehoods. That was why he tried not to sleep more than a few hours each night as the

dreams could be erratic, nonsensical, and even a little frightening. His lips moved slowly and when firmly closed he chewed. It didn't hurt to have good manners.

Perhaps if he read a little, the time would pass more quickly. His attention moved to the shelves where he kept his books, above the bed. The Patron brought him books; the gift of knowledge was a true sign of his master's affection. Liam turned to the book besides the bed and opened its cover. The tale was about a man whose only desire was to kill a whale. He understood the man's intimate desires and couldn't wait to read on, to discover how it ended. He suspected that it would probably be bad for the whale, it would have to wait for now. The cover was closed and a small bite taken from the sandwich, the honey was wonderfully sweet.

Half eaten Liam carefully put the bread back inside the tin beside remains of the apple. He reached into his waist coat and removed a transparent plastic bag, its insides smeared with blood. Holding it to the candle helped.

The Heretic's eyes were the darkest he had ever seen. He wondered if they could see him through the plastic. Such a foolish thought as he placed them, with great care, into the tin beside the sandwich and pressed the lid tightly shut. Patron

would arrive soon to seek confirmation and detail. Always he required the detail. Details were important. But Patron must never know about the eyes, he would not understand. It wasn't really lying, just omission of the one small detail. He slid the tin under the bench and out of sight.

Now was a time for patience. Choose a special bottle from the racks tonight with which to finish the meal. A Quart de Chaumes or a Bonnezaux would complement the remains of the apple. A fine wine poured for a just desert.

Liam didn't have to wait long to hear the footsteps descending the staircase. He checked his wrist watch and then brushed at his waist coat. Patron was early, that was good. There was enthusiasm to learn of his success. Sitting extra upright he placed his palms on his thighs. There was a light coloured fibre stuck to his trouser leg, just below the knee. He hadn't noticed. Perhaps it was from the body of the deviant. Finger and thumb picked it off.

Where to dispose of the thread? He placed it in his pocket and returned palms to thighs, shoulders back.

'You were successful?'

This is good, Patron's voice is eager.

Liam always felt a little giddy, almost childish when Patron visited. He attempted a smile, no; his work was far too serious for frivolity.

'The man was at the appointed place,' Liam replied, 'just as you instructed. I took him to the old church under a ruse. He suspected nothing. I *encouraged* him to answer the questions.'

'Thank you Liam. It is important to me that I have someone in my service that I can trust to get things done.'

Those were kind words. He would never disappoint Patron. It was Patron that had found Liam in a very dark place. It was Patron that had brought him here to find sanctuary. It was Patron who gave him the order that existed in his life today.

Eyes down. Never look Patron in the eyes. The mouth or the chin was high enough. He felt any contact between their eyes to be disrespectful and he would never show disrespect. Liam was always happy when they talked.

‘I wrote the answers down.’ He said. Thumb and forefinger reached into the waist coat pocket. ‘I wrote word for word. The Duma man, Emilio, became very cooperative.’

Liam leant forward and placed the paper on the table then sat back. ‘The world is a better place without him, I think.’

‘What did you do with the body?’

‘Disposed of. It will not be found.’

‘You have done well.’ Patron’s shoes clicked below his crimson robe as he stepped fully into the light of the candles.

The robe’s cloth was heavy but bright. It oozed authority and left no doubt as to the man’s importance. *Eyes down, Liam.* It was Patron. He was Illuminai, head of the Legate Prime, Assembly. He was older than the City itself, that’s what the

legend said. And Liam believed it with all his heart. It was difficult not to flinch as Patron stooped close to take the paper.

‘It has taken many years to procure this information. There were times when I thought I may never succeed.’ He said.

Is that relief in Patron’s voice? And there was something else, a subtle hesitance in the tone. Look up. No higher. Patron seemed weary, his hair greyer than normal. The usually stern face of the man had softened. He appeared less self assured. *Is Patron ill?*

‘There is something else, Patron. The Duma man had already sold the same information to another person.’

‘Who?.’

‘A woman, he did not know her name. He has supplied information to her in the past.’

‘Do we know who she is?’

‘No. But I understand that they both work for the Trinity.’

Liam tensed. Patron had a fearful temper whenever the Trinity were mentioned in his presence. The Heretic cult had been outlawed half a century ago by both the State and the Commission. The Trinity were seditious heretics, supporters of an Old World Religion that was spreading like a cancer through the population. Patron was strangely calm.

‘You understand the importance of our work, Liam?’

‘Yes,’ he truly did.

‘The Trinity are devious, Liam. They would resurrect their God and religion. Have us all kneel to its false Prophet and phantom Spirit. It is a triumvirate of deceit that demands blind and unquestioning faith. Where was their God when the world burned? Pray with me Liam. Pray to the Saints. For they are real, they are flesh and blood. They have lived and breathed, they have walked amongst us. In death they demand nothing. In spirit they bind us all. Blessed be the Saints.’

Silence.

‘Tell me, Liam. How is it possible that they knew of the boxes existence before us?’

Liam had more bad news.

‘The Duma man told me that he helped in the theft of the item three days ago.’

‘Stolen?.’

‘Yes.’

‘By whom?’

Wasn't that obvious?

‘By the heretic woman,’ he said, ‘but I am confident that I can find her. He told me that she always initiates contact in the

same way. He would visit a café in the centre of the city called the Golden Promise. She would leave a card on the board behind the bar. It had a salacious title. ‘Contact Kitty, your Feline Friend.’ I don’t understand what that means yet, but a number would be left on the card, for a different hard line each time. The last time he contacted her they met in the Old Quarter of the City, south side of the river.’

‘And this helps us how?’

Liam had thought that obvious too.

‘Because,’ he answered, ‘the woman does not know that he is dead. She may try to contact him again. Apparently she is fond of changing her appearance, but someone may remember her. At the very least it is a place to start.’ *Eyes down.* ‘There is one other thing. The Preacher has engaged the services of a private contractor to look for the Relic.’

‘Who? What do we know of him?’

‘Who he is, is not clear to me yet. I will find out and he will be watched.’

‘Good, do what has to be done. Find her, Liam. Use every means at our disposal.’

Liam took the hand that Patron offered. The meeting was at and end so he knelt on the floor. 'I am your servant.' He said, and kissed the ring on Patron's finger.

'The Saints watch over you, Liam.' He turned and walked back out into the cellar.

A blessing always got Liam's heart racing. The touch of the Patron almost brought him to tears. Perhaps later the Patron would return and sit longer with him. Share a glass of wine and discuss books.

He was a busy man.

Patron closed the heavy door to the cellar. He had much to think on. Liam had done well. Liam always did well.

‘May I bring you a drink, Illuminai?’

Radan, a dark eyed officious looking man had waited dutifully outside the cellar.

“Illuminai.” The word expressed everything Patron wanted to hear from a title. Affection, inspiration, veneration, all wrapped up in one precious descriptive word. Patron had offered it himself to the Prime Legates, as an alternative. It was less officious than Patriarch of the High Commission or High Dean of the Holy Reliquary. There were so many designations he couldn’t actually remember them all. Top Dog had always seemed a little too vulgar.

‘Bring it to my chambers. I will read for a while. And Radan...’

‘Yes, Illuminai?’

‘Why are you wearing your service robes?’

He wore the stylish black cassock, its hood tasselled, above simple black slippers on his feet.

‘I am prepared for Midday Service. Will you be joining us for prayer?’

‘Midday? But that was hours ago. Should you not be preparing for Evening Chapter?’

‘It is not yet noon, Illuminai. The Legate Primes are arriving for Assembly as we speak. I believe that it was your intention to conclude the meeting before Midday Service.’

‘It was?... Yes, yes of course. Tell them I may be delayed. They can start without me, if necessary.’

‘Yes, Illuminai.’

‘And Radan. I have much to do. Send Isabella to me. She can bring me my evening drink.’

‘But Illuminai it is not...’

‘Not what?’

‘Apologies, I will instruct her accordingly.’ The man bowed and retired, his footsteps clicked in perfect time down the long corridor.

The conversation had been muddled. Something was wrong. Why had... *What was his name?* He had just been speaking to the man. It was his personal secretary; he’d known him for years. Why then couldn’t he remember his name?

It was happening again, gaps opening up in his memory. An inability to recall names was often the first sign. He remembered that much. Recent memories were always the first to go. Subjects that he knew, even ones dear to him would be blocked. No recollection.

Where's Wally, head fuck edition.

Patron felt the cold pinch of fatigue and a sudden frailness. His blood sugar fell like a bucket down a well, another telling symptom requiring the steadying influence of the wall.

Why is this happening? Instinct forced his legs to move. I must not be seen like this. Why is the remission from the treatments getting shorter? Where is Radon? He should be here in attendance. Concentrate, remember the way.

Walking through water would be easier, down one deserted passage after another like a drunkard. Each step helped, became a little easier than the last until the sounds of others reminded him that he wasn't alone. Caution was required. Care not to be seen as voices rose in volume and spirit. There were dozen's, no, hundreds of voices so far unseen. A tirade of sound and it was getting ever closer and threatened to block his way.

Perspiration rose from his exertion. He knew where he was now. On the other side of the wall the next generation of Legates

flocked like geese in an open field. It was no wonder the corridors had been empty as the entire population of the Reliquary was congregating for Midday Service. Panic sparked. There was no way round. Patron forced his back to the wall hoping his weakened state would pass. It didn't. Fear rose, the fear of discovery in this foul and weakened state. To be seen as a feeble old man. No alternative. No other way for him but to set out and cross the Hall.

Hundreds of Prospects mingled across the vast mosaic floor. The Great Hall positively burbled with excited chatter. A hundred voices blended seamlessly into a single accord. Patron risked a look. His reddened eyes were greeted by the grand staircase rising four floors. Twin statues of the Ancient Greek Deity Atlas bore its tremendous weight. His eyes fled about the dozens of Corinth columns searching for an easy path. They glanced about the hefty stucco façade and the alabaster garlands.

How many times had he walked this vast rotunda in virtual silence? Not this time. The stairs were blocked with bodies from balustrade to wall. A carnival of Prospects milling between classes in the time honoured fashion. The entire staircase was barred. His blood pressure rose and the Hall retracted and began to spin. No, he must regain control. Forge ahead. Find chambers

before his mind was completely lost. No choice. Brazen it out.
Find the will to go forward.

I am Patron.

He stepped out into the Great Hall, out into the prisms of light spewed from a dozen stained glass windows. Fierce light that ricocheted from the waterfall chandeliers throwing needles of light that hurt his eyes. Patron was forced to avert his gaze, no choice but to stare hard at the congregation as it cawed and bleated, yapped aloud in a senseless bicker that nipped and bitched at his senses. But he overcame an overwhelming desire to withdraw. He forged on. With no way around there was no path but the way ahead. No choice but to endure. *I must endure.* Patron advanced across the hall tentatively acknowledging the respect of his subordinates as they bowed... as they stared. *Why do they stare, what do they see?* Too much talk around him that he couldn't understand. What was it they muttered beneath hushed greetings and lowered heads?

Keep going, do not allow yourself to stop. Chambers were just a short walk up the staircase. *Like the pure Saints I must shoulder the pain, tolerate and suffer the torment of my mind. Follow in the footsteps of the Prophets.*

Bullshit, he was more likely to puke *before* he made the stairs.

He didn't, but wasn't sure that he wouldn't. Climbing the stairs just aggravated the ordeal. Lactose built quickly in his thighs. Phlegm rose high in his throat. He was harangued by a hundred laughing monsters banging on drums. Half way up the stairs Patron snapped.

'SIIIIIEEEENCE.'

Now it was done. The chaos was checked by muted surprise and shifting murmurs. No chance for anonymity now.

'Not another sound.' He demanded. 'From any of you.'

Accusation by pointed finger swept across them all. Heads lowered by the dozen. Prospects on the stairs stepped back in fear and others knelt in total obedience.

Kneel to your Patriarch you cockroaches. Kneel. Where the fuck was Isabella?

At least no-one dared to look at him now. Or conspire at his passing. Not so much as a whisper from the rodents in the hall. *He* was the Master of this house. *He* would not tolerate being treated in this way. Heavy legs lifted below his robe but no-one could see how he trembled with every step.

Those few minutes felt like an hour before Patron entered into the safety of his chambers. Finally, he had found sanctuary from the rabble as he dropped heavily into the soft padding of the chair already warmed by the soft glow of coal on the fire. The hammer of fatigue and emotional relief was quickly replaced by a feeling of safety.

Where was Isabella?

Where was his book?

It should have been on the table close to hand. Where had he put it? His eyes lifted to the numerous bookshelves at the far end each one crammed with manuscripts and tomes. The bindings were a blur. Maybe it was on the dresser next to the bed. What bed? He couldn't even make out the Emperor sized mattress or the heavy scrolled detail of the footboard. His visual acuity was failing him beyond the fireplace and the other chairs that warmed in its glow.

Radan... He remembered. That was his secretary's name. The recollection helped him calm. A sentiment not shared by the fire as the crackling flames sucked hungrily up into the flue.

Flames?

Patron could remember similar flames that had scorched his past. It was a past where the fires had raged out of control. A sudden urge to vomit reared as the stench of burning wood overcame his senses. It wasn't the coal. It was something far darker and more foul, the odour of something more sinister wilting on pyres. His synapses fired like artillery shells and memories that had been locked away for half a life time began to return.

He remembered how it was back then. He was much younger, a fine and fit young man with his whole life stretching before him. His name was different then. *Greg. Gregor... that was it... Gregor.* Not a name that he had used or heard since before the Wars. Or was it during? No, definitely before. It was all becoming much clearer as the pain and discomfort eased into leaving a light unconscious state.

*

Gregor was twenty four years old, a Captain in the armed forces and keen for active service. There was a lot to prove to his celebrated father General Alexi Rhizov. The most highly decorated officer in the Afghanistan War and recipient of the

‘Hero of Russia’ honour for his leadership in Chechnya. The man was also a celebrated novelist and Historian, a notorious gambler, and a womaniser with *alleged* links to the highest echelons of Russia’s organised crime.

A Great man, unless he was your father. He was a hero that had little time for his children as they grew up, and even less time for his son when he came of age.

The General had placed Gregor in the Leningrad Theological academy. For Alexis there was only room for one military hero in the Rhizov household. No argument, no discussion, just an order to leave his mother and sisters and enter the academy. That was how his father, the Alpha Male, dealt with the inconvenience of a male offspring.

Put him somewhere out of sight and out of mind.

It was such a waste of his younger years, and for what? He was bullied and provoked by the other students and tutors alike. He never doubted the abuse came with the official blessing of his father.

Regardless, he attained a first class degree with honours in theology. No problem with the academics. It was the spiritual enigma that he found more difficult. The more that he learnt the more confused he became about the paradox surrounding Man

and God. It was the inconsistency of their relationship. Man's need to listen to God's teachings, but to never actually learn. The reality was that his children didn't really listen. They certainly didn't learn. The two just weren't compatible. God's *children* were incapable of change and the Father was impotent to teach them without the use of Brimstone and fire. Well, what did he expect? Mankind had some serious issues and God did not have the skills to address them. It was an impasse.

Or was it?

Gregor had always wondered why God had given Man such enquiring minds coupled with the ability to reason. Hadn't he given Man the tools with which to doubt his own Divine existence? At best it proved that God was fallible. No, theology was obviously for men with far more faith than Gregor could ever lay claim too.

The General and the college had tried desperately to terrorise him into accepting the Faith. The harder they pushed the more he wanted to distance himself from them and their religion, and ultimately from God. His eighteenth birthday brought the freedom he desired. Manhood in the eyes of the law finally forced the General's order to become invalid.

No more theology, no more toy soldiers. Now Gregor wanted the real deal.

*

The fire was already too hot. Movement was increasingly difficult; so hard to concentrate. Patron's hand trembled as it loosened the neck of his robe. *Where was Isabella?*

He didn't want to sleep but the choice was no longer his. He was tripping in and out of consciousness, or was it sleep? Was it just the final dreams of an old man before facing his time to pass on?

That was a bitter and chilling thought.

Patron's hand slipped to rest on his lap and his mind drifted on a free flowing tide of memories.

*

How proud his mother had been when, on leave, he had announced to her that he had been accepted into the Spetznas. His transfer to the elite Russian Special Forces had finally been approved. Promotion too, he was now major Gregor Rhizov.

Champagne was uncorked... Mother insisted. The servants brought strawberries from the kitchen. Mother filled his glass herself and kissed him on the lips. She was so proud.

‘It was good.’ She said. ‘My son must forge his own steel in the furnace of life. He must swim ahead of his own tide and not get caught in the shallow wake of another’s.’

She knew. How could she not having lived with the General for over thirty years?

There was a gift too. A ring she had commissioned. A band made of silver and scribed with the name of her favourite Saint, Mikael. She loved him, prayed to him daily. She would readily inflict his deeds on anyone prepared to listen over meals. How Mother loved to pedal her Saints. To her they were sacrosanct. They were the wisest and purest of human kind. Their noble deeds nothing less than a blessing of inspiration toward others.

Mother pressed the ring into his palm and made a fist with his hand.

‘Angels are just men who cast no shadows.’ She said. She *was* a little tipsy. ‘Mikael will watch over you. He will protect you when your family cannot.’

Men with no shadows? He thought that was Vampires.

In reality Mikael was a charismatic warrior monk who wielded a sword in one hand and a Bible in the other. He had fought against the Mongol hordes in the 13th century. Been captured on three occasions and escaped, proving that he was at least a lucky sod. He'd eventually returned to the Motherland and in his old age had founded a monastery somewhere in what was now the Ukraine.

Family lineage was all important to his mother. She had a family tree that charted the Rhizovs back for a thousand years. She even claimed ancestral genes from the Scythians, the original pure blooded Russians from the Steppes. So she claimed. Mother insisted that he learnt everything about his ancestors, about the Great Rhizov name, its Warlords and politicians. Great men steeped who made history; From the Christian princes of the eleventh Century to the Knights who fought in the Holy Crusades and Nobles who had defeated Napoleon. In her proud mind her family had helped to forge the entire Russian Empire. And maybe some of it was true. Maybe. Mikael was definitely a reality, though considered to be a more conservative figure from their past. He was a bit of a lucky charm.

She insisted that he wore the ring always.

It couldn't hurt. It made her happy.

Good times on that beautifully warm summers evening when the champagne had flowed. He got drunk, played games and laughed with his Mother and sisters. He always enjoyed the wonderful house and gardens that had helped to nurture him as a child. Happy times for them all.

A week later mother was diagnosed with cancer. Three weeks after that she was dead. She was only fifty one. His father was too busy to come to the funeral.

Within a month Gregor was attached to the security programme protecting the Russian ambassador to the Vatican. What from, he couldn't imagine at the time. It certainly wasn't the posting he desired. But then things don't always turn out the way that you expect them to.

THE BOX

September 2017

From the balcony of the Consulate Gregor could see nothing but people. The street below and the roads for miles about the Vatican had been filling with them for weeks now. Estimates put the numbers of refugees close to two million, and still rising.

Poor sods, they saw the Eternal City as their last and final hope. Escaping one dying city to reach another that was about ready to implode. Europe was ravaged by debt. No-one traded any more. Everyone hoarded, governments included. The rich tried to keep what they had and the rulers tried to keep control.

Fat chance.

Just ask all the faces below that had walked, cycled and bartered passage by boat; pilgrims from all across Europe. The Ancient City was turning into an enormous rally of despair.

Men and woman, entire families had come to pray with the Holy Father. To plead for Divine intervention and for an end to the turmoil that afflicted the world. Gregor shook his head. What did they think the Holy Father could do that he hadn't done already? They had come frightened and sheepish, these

Catholics, desperate for a comforting word. Each day they devolved into an ever more agitated mob that slept under moonlit streets.

The Polizia had little control and the Carabinieri were now on full standby with no intention of hiding their guns. Fat lot of good they would be if the mob really turned nasty. And it would. Gregor was sure of that. The mood was seething and bubbling nicely in the streets of Rome, despite the efforts of the Holy Father and the Church.

‘Benedictus qui venit.’ Blessed is he who comes. The Pope opened with the same salvo at the start of each sermon. ‘Christ crux est mea lux.’ The cross of Christ is my light.

Fine words to comfort his ever increasing flock. Only the flock was restless and beyond comfort. It was hurting and scared. Rome was a refugee camp of people living in the streets. They lived and slept in doorways and on paths and in the promenades. Squares and piazzas bulged from the numbers of the faithful, of Christians all hiding from the wrath of God. The hills above Rome were full of them.

There was no more room at the Inn.

Gregor managed a smile as the cheap speakers whined into service. They were prompt at least. That was the limit of the

Papal voice as it carried from speakers quick fixed to the red shingled rooftops. Pious words and prayers now emptied into the streets and courtyards falling upon increasingly doubtful ears. The Pope prayed aloud, yet still his congregation fell, and in ever increasing numbers. For every one body that succumbed to the heat or starvation. Ten more would fall victim to the Plague. Hour by hour the terrible toll rose. Even the Polizia were deserting the city now, leaving their posts at night to save themselves and be with their families.

Who could blame them?

The people down there were stupid. He could feel their changing mood hour by hour. They were ignorant as well as stupid. They failed to understand that religion could no longer make a difference. The Holy Father was impotent to intercede. He was just incapable of exorcising the badness from the world.

He closed the window to block out the prayer and went back inside. It was time to convince the Ambassador. Get him to order the delegation out of Rome. It was madness to stay.

Stepping down toward the vast granite fireplace he had to swallow his guilt at the opulence of his residence. Here they didn't go without. Inside this building they were protected and provided for, removed from the poverty of the streets. It wasn't

his fault; he had a job to do. And if that meant enduring the sumptuous plaster work, the murals on the ceilings and the fabulously inlaid panels on the walls, then so be it. After all, it had been this way for centuries.

Gregor moved into the sitting room. A far more modern design in furniture was distributed across a marble floor. Fine Italian leather framed in stainless steel, the pillows hand sown by Versace. Hi Tech state of the art electronics were everywhere all hardwired into the walls. In another time and place this beautiful room would herald the epitome of achievement and success.

But not now. It was as much a prison to him as it had been to the owners who had endured the last plague. Built in 1593 it had overlooked death on the streets of Rome before.

The Black Death.

More than four hundred years of science and technology and something you couldn't see was still smarter than man. XV41 was death Noire in the twenty first century.

Gregor's sombre mood was interrupted by the Ambassadors attaché entering.

'Major. The Pope has sent for the remaining Ambassadors to attend the Holy See.'

‘Why? What for? Are they invited to have tea and cake?’

Dimitri shrugged. ‘The Ambassador has accepted. The British and German Ambassadors will be attending.’

‘And the rest?’

‘Most of them have left. Gone home.’

‘The ones with sense. Okay. Get Ingar and Sergei. I want them fully loaded in case we find trouble out there. Tell them we’ll use the sewer again, it’s the quickest and safest route.’

‘I heard you caused quite a commotion in the Hall.’ The voice belonged to a woman and woke Patron from his daze. ‘Your little outburst on the stairs is quite the talk of the Reliquary.’

‘Where have you been? Something’s wrong with me.’

Isabella removed her coat. The woman was in her early thirties. Her body lean but not thin. Well toned and slightly muscled. She wore a smart black sequinned dress that hugged at her slick curves. She looked dressed for a dinner party.

‘I came as soon as Radan found me. He’s worried about you.’

‘You said nothing to him?’

‘Of course not.’ She said tying back her long dark hair. Nimble hands opened the silk bag she had brought with her. Practised fingers assembled the three pieces of the hypodermic she now placed on the arm of the chair.

Patron noticed that her cheeks were a little flushed from having hurried to be at his side. She had the most gorgeous brown eyes that glistened in the fire light. Her skin was flawless, perfectly tanned, airbrushed to perfection. The only hint of

accessory was the varnish on her nails. Isabella was a triumph of nature.

‘You need a chair with a more comfortable arm.’ Isabella crossed one slender leg over the other and took his wrist.

‘Are you in pain?’ She asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Describe the pain.’

‘Fire... in my veins.’ His breathing quickened. ‘Getting more difficult to move and breathe.’

‘Is it worse than last time?’

‘Yes.’

She sighed. ‘Your body has definitely begun to reject the treatment. I can double the dosage, but the side effects will increase.’

Her voice was drifting, the words more difficult to understand as she rolled up his sleeve. Patron turned his head away as the hypo touched his arm. A slight hiss and he felt the serum inject into his arm. Wet and warm best described the feeling as it traversed the vein. There had been a time when he had marvelled at its healing powers; at the miracle of pure Stems. Now, he was a slave to the dark side of the elixir that had kept him alive and healthy since before the Wars..

‘Lift your head back and open your eyes wide.’

He responded to her fingers raising his chin. Two silver drops fell from a tiny dispenser held in her hand and settled momentarily onto the iris before being sucked deep down into the pupil.

‘The Relic, it’s back. My pocket, the paper.’

Patron was insistent, he sounded delirious. Isabella eased his hand away from her wrist.

‘We can talk afterwards. The activator will take a few seconds. Here, let me clean you up.’ Isabella dabbed at Patron’s forehead with a tissue. ‘Illuminai, I must move you away from the fire.’

‘Illuminai... can you hear me?’

He was gone again. Deep into the past where he could no longer hear her voice.

‘This way Ambassador.’ Gregor ushered his charge down the narrow vaulted passages. ‘I must apologise for the stench, sir.’

Several pairs of feet splashed in the wash over from the main sewer channel.

‘Do we have any idea why the Holy Father wants to see us, major?’

‘No sir.’

Gregor ignored the man’s awkwardness and unease at traipsing through the murky water. “The baby faced politician,” that was his nickname. He was the youngest Ambassador to be appointed by Moscow in over a hundred years.

What were they thinking?

The man knew he was coming where shit logs float in a river of piss, yet he still wore expensive suede shoes and a hand made suit. And who gave him that awful purple tie?

‘How long will this take?’ The Ambassador always spoke in English. Born in Gori, Georgia he hid from the terrible accent he had when speaking Russian. All thick and woody, it obviously embarrassed him.

Gregor gave the bodyguards smile. *About thirty seconds less than the last time you asked.* ‘Another two minutes, Ambassador. Then we enter the Holy See. Bishop Juliane will be waiting to greet you. You met him at the Cardinals summit last week. He’s the Pope’s secretary.’

‘Da. He seemed a pleasant man. Good.’ The Ambassador stopped.

Gregor held up a hand and the two men of the detail halted. All eyes fell on the Ambassador who was covering his mouth and looked at each of them in turn.

‘Does anyone have a tissue,’ he said, ‘something to cover my mouth?’

‘Ingar. Give the Ambassador your handkerchief.’

Do it quickly before he throws up all over us.

Three minutes later saw them climbing metal steps below the Vatican. They emerged through a large grate in the ground into a courtyard flanked by stone walls. Sergei went up first his weapon shouldered. He did what all good soldiers do for their political masters. He offered himself as a target and warning in the case of an ambush.

‘Is this necessary?’ Asked the Ambassador. ‘We’re in the Vatican not the middle east?’

‘With respect Ambassador. Everywhere is the middle east at the moment.’

Sergei peered back down the hole. ‘It’s clear, nothing up here but empty space and fresh air.’

Gregor went up next and helped the Ambassador out into the sunlight. A man in a black cassock hitched up to his knees came running across the courtyard. Sergei tracked his eager approach as did Gregor, though the major doubted that any assassin would strike with such a whimsical prelude. It was straight out of a scene from Sister Act.

‘Ambassador, thank you for coming.’ Bishop Juliane greeted the Ambassador but not the hired help.

‘Ahh, Bishop Juliane. I am pleased to meet you again.’ Said the Ambassador. ‘Oh, excuse me.’ The hand he offered still held Ingar’s handkerchief. He dropped it down the hole.

‘Please, you must follow me.’ The Bishop instructed. His English was faultless. ‘The Holy Father is waiting.’

He could hardly get the Russian diplomat out of the courtyard quick enough with his long hem hitched up like a skirt, fearful that he may trip in such haste.

‘Major. Why is the priest wearing hiking boots and chinos below his cassock? I don’t think that’s ecclesiastical attire.’

Gregor agreed with Sergei. He had been wondering the same thing as they double timed it across the yard. Was the Pope's private secretary getting ready to fly the coop?

Entering into one of the Vatican's many chapels found walls covered in gold and frescos, every square inch from ceiling to floor a triumph of excess over beauty.

'Please, follow me.' Bishop Juliane quick stepped down the aisle. He paused briefly as he passed the altar. Enough time to genuflect and point the sign of the cross on his chest. 'Please, we must hurry.'

Ingar took point. He was the younger of the two bodyguards. His youthful body fully immersed under the same full camouflage outfit as his comrades. Half pack strapped to his back. Sergei hung back to cover the rear. Twenty years older his experience watched keenly at their tail. Gregor kept eyes on the Ambassador at all times. He didn't expect trouble. But in these uneasy times you would be a fool to blindly trust in anyone.

Outside, the building opened into a long corridor and more than a sense of urgency from their guide. A flowing staircase of oak lowered down to two antechambers, quickly traversed. Gregor had never seen so many statues and figurines, so much opulence and splendour. The Embassy was obviously where they put the poorer relatives.

That's when it happened. Strangers waiting in the next room, all of them armed. Four men who raised their weapons at Gregor's party as they entered, all of them shouting out in English.

'Guns down. On the floor.' They demanded.

Ingar and Sergei spread out muzzles raised, fingers on hair trigger alert. Gregor shielded the Ambassador. No shots fired yet.

'Weapons down. Bodies on the floor, now.'

Gregor had no intention of doing either as he shielded the Ambassador.

'Stop, Stop. Not in the house of the Lord.' Juliane placed himself between the two sides, hands held outstretched and begging for calm. 'For God's sake put up your guns. This is the Russian Ambassador.' Panic. 'Please, lower your guns. Lower your guns.'

'Well well, if it aint Gregor Rhizov.' A brutish looking man chewing gum stepped forward. 'Its all right boys, you can put your gun's away. I know this one.'

'Sergei... Ingar. Lower your weapons.' Ordered Gregor. 'It's the British. They have come to save us.'

‘Mi6.co.uk... at your service.’ The introduction was followed by a slight bow which eased the tension. A nod from Gregor and both Ingar and Sergei stood down. They lowered their weapons but remained cautious of the well armed newcomers.

‘Deo Gratias.’ Thanks be to God. The Bishop crossed himself. ‘Please, Ambassador. Time is short. The Holy Father is waiting. Please, in here.’ Juliane offered the way through the two doors.

‘Wait here for me, major.’

‘Are you sure you want to go alone, sir?’

‘Do as you’re told, major.’

The eyes of wary men studied each other. Guns pointing at the floor, they needed only a twitch to start a fire fight.

‘You’re lucky we didn’t shoot you James.’ Said Gregor.

‘I’m bullet proof mate, unless you got armour piercing rounds in that pop gun of yours?’ He took two steps forward.

‘Cigarette anyone?’

‘Sorry.’ Said Sergei. ‘We are Russians, we don’t indulge in bad habits.’

‘I wasn’t offering mate. I was asking for one. We ran out a couple of days ago and can’t get the bloody things anywhere.’ He

glanced toward Ingar and then back to Sergei. Both of whom looked to Gregor, who kept his gaze fixed on the Englishman.

They'd met several times before and although neither man had shot at the other, there was little trust between them.

'What's going on James? Why are you here?'

'Same reason as you, mate. Its tits up time for the Chief Cardinal. The old bastard wants someone to take him in. You may have noticed that the congregation out there is getting ugly. There are a couple million angry punters out there looking for someone to blame for the bad performance of the Church.'

'Blame?'

'You are joking. That feller in there is supposed to talk to God. You know, on our behalf? Only, it looks like God aint listening.' He pointed toward the large arched windows. That's a lynching mob out there, least it will be pretty soon.'

He was right.

'Will your people take him?' Asked Gregor.

'Maybe? Always good to weigh the options. He's a hot potato right now, and he knows it. The Germans didn't even bother to come. I don't think God's representative on Earth is trending too well at the minute. Religions not a popular past time to be

involved in, know what I mean?’ He popped some more gum into his mouth. ‘What about your lot? You want him?’

Gregor shrugged, gave nothing but a stony stare. He didn’t know. Truth was he didn’t care. He had asked himself the same question that everyone in Rome was asking. Who was he kidding? It was the question that the entire planet was asking.

“Where was God, and what was he playing at?”

Gregor cradled the HK as James beckoned him over. He seemed keen for the others not to eavesdrop. What the hell, he followed. Maybe the Brit knew more than he did and was willing to share.

‘James.’ He said. ‘You look like... Johnny English.’

‘You like it. Gotta be suited and booted for this job mate. I see you still prefer the all terrain look.’ A wry grin. ‘Cammo’s are out. So is your pop gun. You should trade the HK for one of these.’ He lifted the barrel of the Ares Shrike and stroked it like a kitten. ‘This baby’s dope. Straight out of Stargate.’

‘It’s very nice.’ Gregor agreed. The rail interface below the barrel jutted forward of the vertical fore grip and was intimidating. So was the belt feed rising to the chamber from a pouch that had replaced the standard magazine. It was more Star Wars than Stargate. ‘What do you want James?.’ He asked.

‘The three I’s mate. Interaction, Information, and Intercourse.’ He winked. ‘Look, the whole world’s gone fucked. Sooner or later it’s gonna come down to people like you and me, it always does. The Politicians have lost control. I say that we’re going down shit creek and no fuckers got a paddle.’

James went all Lady Gaga, his best poker face levied. Shall he throw ‘all in’ or keep what he knew to himself? At least while he was thinking his mouth was still. Why did the English have to swear so much? Was it compensation for their language being the least romantic in Europe? No, that was the Germans. James seemed to have reached a decision.

‘Why don’t you guys throw in with us?’ he suggested. ‘We can always use a few more good guns.’

‘Gun’s are not your problem, James. Tell me what you want?’

‘To the point. I always liked that about you. Here’s the thing. We knew you was coming, so I’m under instruction to get some good intel from you. Chat you up a bit. The boys at Mi6 wanna know what your dad’s up to?’ Now it was the gunman stare, small chewing movements of the jaw. ‘We know there’s gonna be a coupe in the Kremlin. It’s just a matter of time. Your

old man's got his own private army and *we* want to know which way he'll jump.'

That would usually be his own way. Thought Gregor.

'We?' He asked.

'My man in there, he's a top notch feller, fingers in lots of pies. He asked me to check you out for the spooks. Frisk you for info so to speak. He wants to look good when we get back, you know how it works. No harm, no foul. There's gonna be tin pot dictators popping up everywhere. Pretty soon it's gonna be every man for himself. You got eyes and ears we can use; it's already starting to happen out there. Christ, even his Holiness is looking for a little island he can call his own. Well, another one, and as far away from this one as he can get. What's a feller to do?'

James sighed. It was all true. 'Look. Borders will close and hard men are gonna start making hard decisions. I'm just saying it makes good sense to get on with the guy who's pissing in the pool next door.'

Eloquently put. Gregor had to agree. He knew exactly what James was saying. His father had been saying it for a long time. Social structures everywhere were breaking down. Military camps had sprung up all over Europe.

“In the public’s interest and defence.” That was how it was being represented.

More like a game of chess between the military and the Politicians. Even organised crime was vying for a place at the table. Aid and assistance had become a euphemism for good old land grabbing.

‘Look.’ James put his hand firmly on Gregor’s shoulder. ‘It’s the butterfly effect. The rest of the world is getting a hammering and it’s affecting us. And then there’s this fucking disease.’ That was the first time he’d looked uncomfortable, his fingers stroked at a chin that hadn’t seen a razor in days.

‘Food is getting scarce, mate. Rivers and lakes are dry. They say in another five years all the oil will be gone. Oh, and I can’t get a smoke which really pisses me off. I’m saying that it’s time to choose your friends, Gregor.’

The timing was perfect as gunfire echoed from outside. Both men reacted. Hunkered down and skirting the walls as hands went to ears to press mikes, listening for information. Both Gregor and James looked for a better vantage. They found it at the windows.

None of what they saw looked good, as tens turned into hundreds down below in the square. The mob had arrived.

Within seconds the square seethed with bodies racing for the buildings. Papal Swiss Guard came out to meet them. The glorious colourful fools, pikes at the ready, what were they doing? Vatican security joined them and opened fire. A dozen shots were discharged above their heads in an effort to steer the stampede away. Too late. The mob was on them. It was difficult to watch brave men overrun and smashed without mercy.

‘Un fucking believable. You just can’t keep a secret anymore.

Words probably out that his Holiness is doing a bunk. Sorry Greg mate, but I gotta get my man out.’

Gregor nodded. He wondered just *who* had leaked the meeting. Not that it really mattered, not now.

Behind them the doors opened and Juliane came out with both the Ambassadors close behind. A single gunshot from the room got every weapon raised toward the open doors. Bishop Juliane began ranting in Latin, his hands expressed in disbelief.

‘Gun’s down.’ James moved in front of everyone hands raised. ‘Guns down.’

What did he know that Gregor didn’t?

Two men in black and red robes exited the room wearing sunglasses, both men holding briefcases. A sweet fragrance

followed, more a girly scent than a manly musk. It was the Papal version of the Blues Brothers that walked casually by. Was Gregor being paranoid or was the lead man giving him the eye. A lingered stare from behind darkened lenses hooked over a Billy goat nose. He oozed attitude, the look stating more firmly than words. "What the fuck are you looking at?"

Gregor eased back the charging handle on his weapon. Neither man was willing to disengage from the other.

'Easy Gregor.' The Englishman took a step toward him. 'None of our business.'

Gregor finally looked away, back to his Ambassador for direction. Nothing doing, the man just bit tentatively at his lip. The English delegate looked a mite calmer. He gave an instructive nod to James.

'Saddle up gentlemen, were moving out.' The Brit ordered. 'Last chance Gregor.'

'You know a way out?'

'I always know the way out sunshine. On me.' He ordered, and his men moved ahead sweeping the area weapons raised. More gunfire echoed from outside the building, sustained automatic bursts from multiple weapons.

The shit had finally hit the proverbial fan.

‘There, you have the pulse of a forty something again.’ Isabella guided Patron’s hand back to his lap. ‘You drifted off again. Try to get some sleep when I leave. Now, we’ll have to do something about these.’ She touched his cheek. ‘Can’t have Illuminai show so many wrinkles, folk will notice. I’ll give you another shot when your temperature is down and your immune system has kicked back in. You’ll feel better in no time.’

‘Why isn’t it working? What’s wrong?’

‘Patron, that hurts. Please, let go of hand.’

‘Answer me.’

There was something she wasn’t telling him. He was Illuminai. No-one kept secrets from Illuminai.

Isabella pulled free.

He saw the fear on her face momentarily as his empty fingers remained frozen in a claw like state. There was vicious pain in the joints and a sharp stabbing twinge that grew harsher with each heart beat in his chest. Was he having a stroke, a coronary?

‘What’s happening to me?’

Isabella hesitated.

‘Please, tell me Isabella.’ He didn’t recognise his own voice.

‘I have to administer another shot.’ Her voice was calm but tinged with urgency. The glass phial attached to the hypo was ejected and exchanged with a full dose.

‘Tell me, what’s happening. Why is, the treatment, taking so long to work?’ Another, more desperate consideration screeched into full view. *Will it work at all?*

Isabella answered with some reluctance. Hypo steady in her hands. She lifted his arm.

‘The Stems have reached critical elevation, Illuminai. They can no longer fuel your remission long term. They are being rejected.

‘That’s not possible.’

‘It was inevitable.’ She said. ‘They cannot sustain you forever.’

She was focused but concerned. No, it was more than that. Isabella was a woman that had ice in her veins. Patron had recognised the steel in her eyes the first time he had ever seen her.

It seemed the visions were not just limited to before the War. He was personally inspecting a building project in the Work Sector. The Jag had cleared a section of the City of its

occupants. Its buildings were being requisitioned for State use. All unwanted occupants had their citizenships revoked. There had been *unfortunate* fatalities. That was the first time he had seen young Isabella.

Central City expansion was of keen interest to him at the time and he had accompanied the Commission's representative. *Legate Jochim was his name.* Ironic, he could remember the Legate's name from that far back but not the name of his own secretary five minutes since.

There had been a group of children about to be sent across the river. That was when he first saw her, a small child standing on the entrance to the bridge hateful of the world. It was anger she projected toward the Jag, not fear like the rest of them. He liked that. It stood her out to him and he responded. An order was given to the Legate to remove her from the refugees. Find a place for her as a Ward of the Commission. From there he took a personal interest in Isabella's education and indoctrination. Patron needed people around him that would show strength and obedience. Followers that he could trust. Isabella had been a good decision, a good investment of his time and affection.

'I can increase the dose.' Isabella said. 'Give small boosters on a daily basis. We can manage the side effects.'

‘You have never lied to me Isabella. Why are you lying to me now?’

She looked away to the fire.

Silence.

‘Isabella?’

‘You’re dying, Illuminai.’

She may as well have stabbed his heart with an icicle. He already knew, deep down. But to hear the words spoken out loud, it took his breath away. He watched as Isabella knelt and rested her face on his hand.

‘When the Stems are introduced to the patient,’ she said, ‘they attach themselves to the damaged areas, encourage other cells to clone, to re-grow. But there are side effects. Each time the foreign Stems attach themselves they leave a microscopic residue. A build up is unavoidable with such long term use. The enzyme in the accelerant is struggling to deceive your immune system.’

Her voice was drifting again. Patron reached out for her, as much for comfort as to chastise the woman.

Concentrate. Do not pass out again like a weak old man.

‘I will raise the doses, she said, ‘but the effects of the Stems will have increasingly shortened effects. Recovery time will be

longer between each treatment and harder on your body. I'm sorry.'

Patron felt the hypo sting again, just barely. The words barely registered.

Where is Isabella, why doesn't she come? Why am I so tired... Why?...

‘Back... Back.’ Gregor put his boot through the lock of the door and pushed Juliane through. Three, four round bursts from Ingar’s Heckler, and a long burst from James spat bullets across the garden. Both men slid through the opening and James slammed the heavy door shut.

‘Find something to...’ Gregor had already anticipated and was heaving a heavy bookcase against the door. Countless aged books crashed to the floor. ‘We need a way out, back into the City. Bishop?. Stop mumbling prayers and help.’

‘Just shoot the bastard and have done with it.’

‘Then what, James? We raise the Union Jack and sing Rule Britannia?’

Ingar threw a chair onto the rapidly rising pile of furniture. ‘This won’t hold them for long, major.’

‘This will.’ James smashed the window nearest and let rip with the Shrike.

Gregor knew that if they didn’t get out of here soon they’d sink fast with the Vatican ship. And it was going all the way to the bottom.

‘The Reliquary.’

‘The what?’ Gregor squeezed off another burst, toward the garden outside.

‘The Reliquary.’ Juliane repeated. ‘It... it’s almost below us.’ He pointed toward the doors in the far wall. ‘It has a secret exit into an underground passage from the Apostolic Palace. It’s our only way out of the Vatican.’

‘Are there any girls there?’ James had to shout above the bullets that zipped and pounded at the door as he emptied his own magazine before dropping to re-load. ‘I’d like the last of my I’s now, if you don’t mind.’

Another short burst preceded a hardened look toward Juliane.

‘Intercourse, you retard. It was a joke.’ The window frame splintered from more accurate gunfire. ‘Shit.’ Three more controlled bursts. ‘I don’t know whose outside, Gregor. But they know how to shoot.’

Then the shooting stopped.

‘Maybe they’ve gone to loot somewhere that doesn’t shoot back.’ Ingar looked hopeful.

‘Looters my arse.’ James grabbed the Bishop. ‘Those guys out there are professionals. They want into this building and we’re in the way. What’s going on Bishop?’

‘He’s right major.’ Sergei slapped another clip into his weapon. ‘We’re being hunted.’

‘Easy with the cloth, James.’ Gregor prised the Englishman’s hand from the Priest’s robes. ‘I think the Bishop is playing us. He’s brought us this way for a reason. Is it for the same reason as the guns outside?’

‘The Reliquary. They must want the Reliquary. We *must* get there first. From there we can access the Passetto di Borgo. Don’t you understand? Only then can we can get out and back into Rome.’

‘What’s he talking about, Gregor.’ Asked James.

‘He’s talking about the old prison. It has an escape tunnel built by the Popes. Dan Brown? No? James, you should learn to read, you might learn something.’

‘Fuck off comrade.’ James joined Ingar by the window.

It had gone eerily quiet outside.

‘What’s the major doing?’ Whispered Ingar.

Gregor had pulled the Sig Saur from his paddle holster. He was leant against the wall, hands either side of Juliane, the pistol flat against the brickwork next to the Bishop's head.

'Interrogation technique 101 mate. Scare the bugger shitless, or shoot him.'

'Why?'

James shrugged. 'Dunno, but I hope he shoots him.'

All eyes fell on the major.

'The first thing I'm going to tell you,' said Gregor, 'is that the Passetto di Borgo is on the other side of the Vatican. So I know you're a liar.' He tapped the gun twice against the wall assuring he had Juliane's attention. 'The second thing I know is that you brought us here deliberately, and that the shooters out there are now looking for another way to get in. I should imagine they're pretty pissed with us right now for getting in their way.' He slapped the pistol hard against the wall. 'What's in the Reliquary, Bishop?'

'No. I cannot tell you. I took a vow.'

The hammer of the Beretta cocked. Ghe trigger squeezed and a deafening shot rang out.

A wispy acrid smelling smoke left the barrel.

‘No. Stop... please. Please.’ Juliane slapped at his head in a primal monkey fashion. It was pure panic to remove the hot bullet that had dropped from the wall onto his head.

‘They want the Relic. Oh, dear God forgive me. They’re after the Relic.’

‘Relic?’

‘Yes, the Relic.’

Gregor cocked the sig again. ‘Explain it so that I can understand it.’ He said.

‘Only the Holy Father and two others know of its existence. Please, I beg you, I cannot tell you more.’

‘That’s it. I’m gonna kill the little shit.’

‘James... wait. Come on Bishop, what’s the plan? You wouldn’t have led us here if you didn’t have a way to get this Relic out.’

‘Tick tock, answer the man. The major’s not the only one with a gun aimed at you.’

‘I didn’t lie to you.’ Juliane crossed his chest and cupped his hands.

‘No more prayers, Bishop. Out with it.’

‘Holy Father forgive me, I have no choice.’ The man was crying. ‘The Reliquary, he said, ‘is the heart of the Holy See. Its existence is kept from everyone. It is a Papal secret. Please, help me to get the Relic and I will get us all out of the Vatican.’

‘Explain.’

‘There is a tunnel that runs below us, directly beneath the Vatican. It runs the opposite direction to the Passetto di Borgo.

‘There are two tunnels? Dan Brown missed out on that one.’

‘It’s much older. It wasn’t built for escape... not really.’

‘Do tell.’ The Englishman left the window for Ingar to cover alone.

‘I cannot.’

‘Please, Gregor, just let me shoot him.’

‘No. Come on Bishop, out with it. If not for escape, then what?’

‘The passage was built for the more... *immoral* pursuits of the Papal residence. Mistresses were frowned upon, but largely ignored. Some of the previous Popes had a more *salacious* appetite for women.’

‘Are you talking about what I think your talking about?’

‘Yes... the more sociable women in society. I assure you that the tunnel has not been used for over a hundred years.’

‘Get that, Gregor, he assures us. Just tell where the fucking tunnel is?’

‘There is a problem.’

‘No problems Bishop. Show us the way out or so help me...’

‘It has a gate. I don’t have the key. Only the Pope has... had the key.’

‘You call that a problem.’ James reached his hand into his jacket and yanked the lining. What looked like a thin strip of plasticine dangled from his underside of the cloth. ‘I’ve a key to open any lock.’

‘You brought C4 into the Vatican?’

‘Didn’t you, major?’

‘I obviously go to the wrong tailor. Ingar, keep your eyes on the courtyard.’

‘Yes major.’

Ingar’s eyes peered sharply from one side of the portal to the other careful not to expose himself. He shrugged. ‘I can’t see anyone but that doesn’t mean they’re not out there.’

‘Bishop, you’ve got point.’ Gregor pushed the man. ‘That means *we’ll* follow you. Sergei... ten seconds and then you follow. Now everybody move.’

‘You must understand, major. Only the Holy Father and two other people ever know about the Reliquary at any one time. I shouldn’t have told you. I took a vow.’

Gregor wasn’t listening. What interest did he have in such things? This was all too bizarre to be actually happening. A Bishop of Rome skipped ahead of him, skirt hitched above boots designed for heavy hiking. The man couldn’t stop talking and in three different languages. English for Gregor so he could understand him. Mostly to assure himself that he wasn’t alone. Then there were Latin prayers and apologies to God. Small bites of Italian were mixed in. Ingar had taken point again, Sergei was to the rear. The Englishman was uncomfortably quiet.

Gregor didn’t like it when the Englishman was quiet.

Four doors split the walkway and Juliane hesitated.

‘This way.’ He said.

The third door from the left opened into a grand reception area, its walls and ceiling painted, a la Sistine Chapel. Frivolous elegance set between spiral columns. Three more double doors, one in each wall.

‘I feel like a mouse in a maze.’

‘We are nearly there, major. I’ve spent most of my adult life here.’ Juliane’s gait faltered. His legs lost their purpose and the man slowed. He stopped. ‘I can’t believe he’s gone.’

‘Bishop, we have to keep moving.’

‘What am I doing?’ He looked up for guidance. ‘No, this is wrong. Where am I going? I must stay. My first duty is to the Church. I must stay here in the house of our Lord.’

‘For fucks sake, is he gonna pray again. We don’t have time for this, Gregor. Get him moving.’

Sergei caught them up and shut the door. ‘No-ones following us, major.’

‘All right. Ingar, James. Check out what’s ahead. Which way Bishop? I don’t want any surprises.’

He pointed. ‘The door with the louis XVI chairs. Follow the corridor. I cannot go with you.’

‘We don’t have time for this, Gregor.’ James spun on his heels. ‘Fine. I’ll check the frigging door.’

Tears erupted from Juliane’s eyes.

‘He’s gone. The Pope has gone. I can’t believe it?’

With fingers interlocked Julianne dropped to his knees and the Latin verses came again. Gregor recognised them as a Catholic prayer for the dead. This was a bad scene from a low

budget movie. It was just plain embarrassing. The familiar rattat of gunfire sounded somewhere in the distance.

‘Look, Bishop. I don’t know why the world’s gone tits up. Or why half the Catholics in Europe are about to torch Vatican City. I don’t know why the Pope got stuck with a nine millimetre lodged in his forehead, and frankly I don’t care. Not now. We can try to understand later, when we’re out of here. Maybe it was just God’s will?’

That was a tried and trusted cop out that any Churchman should understand. Juliane just shook his head.

‘The Holy Father, he kissed me on the lips.’ He said. ‘He had never done that before. He told me “The Americans failed. And now I have failed too.” Minutes later he was dead... Why?’

Now was not the time for ecclesiastical debate. He’d make one last attempt to reason with the man.

‘The world has moved on Bishop. It’s seen fit to remove our need for Kings and Princes. Perhaps it was time to relieve us of a Pope?’

‘No.’ Juliane rebuffed. ‘Not like that. Pope Benedict was a good man. He was God’s representative on Earth.’ He crossed himself for the hundredth time. ‘How can God turn a blind eye to

something like that? *Crux mihi ancora.*' He said. 'The cross is my anchor.'

What was wrong this priest. He didn't have time to give therapy. Others were trying to get to the Reliquary. If they got there first it was going to be a bloody scene from *Gears of War*.

Gregor wasn't going out like that. He needed a reason to put it all on the line. The Priest was going to get one last chance.

'Have you looked out of the window lately?' He said whispered harshly. 'Man down, Priest. Half the population is down. Every city on the planet is in crisis. They're either mushed out or under marshal law, and you sit there crying for a man who claimed he could talk to God?'

'He was a good man. This was a good life *here* in God's house.'

'Wake up Bishop. Your Pope did. It's last of the Mohicans time. Mankind under siege... Remember the Alamo.'

The ground shuddered taking both men by surprise. Another tremor quickly followed. Juliane flinched, eyes down and weeping, muttering more Latin. Hoe Gregor hated Latin but he understood perfectly the Bishop's analogy with Jonah. He thought the Vatican was about to be swallowed by the Earth.

More gunfire tat tatted, closer and more sustained. They'd found another way in, probably shooting looters. The ground shake was demolition, an explosive charge taking down a wall, and not too far from their position. Time was up.

What the hell was the priest doing?

'Get off my trouser legs and stand up, you idiot.'

'Why has God forsaken us?'

Gregor drew the Sig a second time. Arms extended and both hands on the grip he pressed the stainless steel barrel firmly against Juliane's skull.

'I'm absolutely sure that it is God's will you get your shit together. You must save the Relic.' *Screw the Relic.* 'Help me out here Father, or so help me you'll be joining the Papal Spirit.'

Puppy dog eyes stared back up at him.

'Amen.' Juliane said, and closed his eyes.

Oh shit, the fucker wants to die?

Gregor firmed his finger on the trigger. Was he really going to cap an unarmed member of the clergy? Maybe not as the Bishop got to his feet.

'Help me to save the Relic, and I swear I will get you back into Rome.'

The little fucker was definitely playing him. Teo could play that game.

‘You got a deal.’

‘Then the Reliquary is this way.’

‘Where are we?’ Asked Gregor.

‘We are in the Pauline Chapel.’ Juliane was already knelt before the altar. ‘It is... was, his holiness’ private chapel. He would receive the Eucharist here, in private.’

‘That’s the taking of Christ’s blood and body.’ Gregor could see James was ignorant of the rite. ‘It’s the part of the mass where they eat the bread and drink the wine. Remember Jesus and his Disciples eating the Last Supper. That’s you, Flash, Hulk and the Fantastic Four having a farewell meal down at McDonalds.’

‘Yeah, I got it. Nice analogy. Who’s the guy they’ve painted hanging upside down on the cross?’

‘*The guy* is Saint Peter.’ Growled the Bishop. ‘This entire chapel is a dedication to the Saints, Peter and Paul. *The Paintings*, are Michelangelo’s final two fresco’s. Are all English so ignorant? After this he refused to paint again? He decided to dedicate himself to sculpture and architecture. This was the last painting before he died.’

‘No need to get fucking arsy. They didn’t cover this shit at the school I went to.’

‘You went to school, James?’ Gregor was surprised. He turned to Ingar. Gave him two fingers on the eyes and then pointed to the door. ‘If only you had learnt something whilst you were there. Keep the procession moving Bishop, we’re on the clock, remember?’

‘Yes, this way.’ He led them through a small door hidden behind a heavy drape into a room that was barely bigger than a squash court. A small altar stood against the far wall, a colourful mat laid at its base. No way out but the way in.

‘It’s a dead end. Okay, here’s where I’m confused. What part of “get us the fuck out of here” didn’t he understand?’

‘Shut up James. The Bishop’s got a plan, right? You do have a plan?’

Juliane walked to the farthest point of the room. Took the brass candle holder on the wall in his hand and turned it anticlockwise. Nothing happened. The Bishop’s hand pushed the wall mounted holder back up.

‘Gregor?’ James pulled the charging handle of the Shrike and let it snap back impatiently. ‘What’s he... whoa, the floors moving?’

Not a sound from the hidden mechanism opened the floor. Juliane was already disappearing down the opening before it had fully opened.

‘What is this place?’ Asked Gregor, as he descended steps carved from the stone.

‘Silurian caverns.’ James sounded awed. ‘This is heavy Dr Who shit.’

‘*This*, is the resting place for Saint Peter’s remains. Blessed is the Saint.’ He had already lit a candle and was muttering to a small wooden cross on a ledge.

‘I thought he was buried under the Basilica?’

‘No, he rests here with many other Relics’

‘What’s with the Peter Pan lighting?’ Asked Ingar.

‘It’s a form of Algae. It grows naturally on the rock surface and reacts with the light from the candles.’

‘It’s beautiful.’ Said Sergei.’

‘This way. Please, don’t touch anything.’ It was dark and chilly. A single pathway that led deep down into the Ossuary.

‘You shouldn’t be here.’ He said. ‘I took a vow.’

‘If I hear about one more vow.’ James raised the Shrike its laser sight moved over the bare rock and settled on the back of the Bishop’s head. The bright dot was eased away by Gregor’s hand but continued across a throng of stone coffins.

‘These are the bones of the Saints.’ Juliane continued. Pointing from one niche carved in the rock to another. ‘The Repository of Christianity.’

‘All I see are jars, crosses, and rosaries. Where’s all the good stuff?’

‘Please tell the Englishman that there are more important things in life than gold and silver.’

‘Name one.’

‘The Holy Father told me that the bones from five of the Apostles are laid to rest here. Isn’t that enough?’

Gregor wasn’t fooled. The Priest had that ‘kid in a sweet shop’ face. He’d be a liability in a poker game; his eyes screamed “Full House” held in a pair of shaky hands.

‘You’ve never been down here before have you?’

‘No. His Holiness never allowed me to leave the steps. The Reliquary is a secret built by the early Christians, by the order of Peter himself.’

‘Are you telling me that Peter and a shovel did all of this?’

‘Oh yes. Our first Bishop of Rome was quite clear. He started the excavation personally. Only the trusted few even knew that he was in Rome.’

‘I couldn’t think of a more appropriate place to die.’ Ingar interjected. ‘Rome is such a special place.’

Gregor felt a nudge from Sergei. He followed the direction of his gaze. Juliane had taken a large silver pendant off a chain hung around his neck hidden below his cassock.

‘What is that? What’s he doing?’ Ingar was meerkatting to see what was happening.

‘Watch the steps Ingar. Not the Bishop.’

‘Yes major.’ He was trying to watch them both.

‘It’s a key.’ The Bishop answered as he inserted the pendant into a hole in the side of a stone sarcophagus. Its heavy lid held an inscription. A poem regaling the deeds of the Crusader Knight buried within.

‘It was under Peter’s instruction that this chamber was begun. The Christians dug whilst Rome burnt. You see Peter knew he was going to be martyred. Our Lord sent him a vision. He also sent help from the Blessed Realm. Aids sent by God. He called them the Entity.’

‘I’ve heard of them.’ James interjected. ‘They’re like the medieval Avengers.’

‘Hardly.’ Said Gregor. ‘Do you have a level of reading that rises above comics?’

‘Fuck you. Marvel is awesome.’

‘What’s the Entity got to do with this?’

‘The Entity has always been here, working for the Holy Fathers. They are the eyes and ears of the Church, and are sworn to protect Christianity from its enemies. Their most sacred duties are to collect the divine relics from the Martyrs and Saints after they have passed on to find God. Every Bishop of Rome has had a part of himself enshrined within the Reliquary. The greatest relics of our faith are hidden down here, concealed in absolute secrecy by the Entity. Only three people other than the Entity know the secret at any one time. The Secret is passed before death.’

‘You know about it?’

‘I am the papal secretary. It is my responsibility to entrust the words to each subsequent Pope.’

‘Who’s the third person?’

‘My successor before I die.’

‘Why the secrecy?’

Gregor could see the conflict playing out inside the Priest. A vow of silence given to God set against the loss of everything from the Christian vault. The man was an open book each page written across his face.

‘The Relic,’ he said. ‘is laid here in Holy rest, waiting for the word of God. I told you, Peter had a vision from our Lord. God told Peter to begin the preparations for the *Cleansing*.’ He was becoming animated. ‘That is why Peter built the Reliquary *here* where we stand. The Relics collected are a beacon to guide our Lord. God told Peter to prepare for the future, to prepare for the End of Days.’

More Latin, more crossing of the chest.

‘Peter wrote the vision down. Instructions for the Bishops of Rome that he knew would succeed him.’

‘Wait just a minute.’ James pounced. ‘Are you saying that God sent a memo to Peter that he never?’

A pause.

‘Life is so simple to you, isn’t it?’

James circled his finger next to his temple. Careful that Juliane couldn’t see, but that Gregor would.

‘The Faithful will be led from the apocalypse. Mankind will be brought back from the brink. End of Days will be preceded by three devastating plagues. The unworthy will be called to account. It was written so in Peter’s own hand.’

‘Gregor, you’re not buying into this shit? We need to bust a gut and get out of Dodge right now.’

‘It’s done.’

All eyes reverted to Juliane. He had inserted and turned the pendant. Secret Scholar, Mr Marvel and Meer cat all waited for the ossuary lid to spring open.

Nothing happened.

Juliane leaned on the coffin lid and pushed. Still nothing. Gregor leant his shoulder to the effort and hundreds of years of dust groaned defiantly to set everyone’s teeth on edge.

‘It’s, a hidden, release.’ The coffin slid back. ‘That allows the ossuary... to be moved.’

‘Clever bastards.’ James was impressed. ‘Hide your valuables under a three ton bed. Thieves find nothing but bones between the sheets. Nice one.’

The Ossuary slid away to reveal a niche cut neatly in the bare stone below. A small cache lay inside fitting the hollow perfectly.

‘You see. I told you. Dio Gratius’ He repeated several times. ‘Thanks be to God.’

‘What’s in the box?’ The two soldiers asked in unison.

Juliane reached out gingerly toward the casket. He seemed hesitant that it may cause him harm, wary that he was unworthy of the task. The man’s hands trembled as they reached out and

traced over the beautifully engraved lid. The box was scooped from the hole and embraced like a child's toy to his chest.

'What's in the box?' James asked again. More than keen to know what treasures the Bishop had unearthed.

'The most Holy of Relics. It is a gift from Heaven. In my hands I hold the ultimate power of God on Earth.'

Gregor knew then that the Bishop had absolutely no idea what it was, or what lay inside.

'The box was interned. Pope Benedict said that the Entity took it away for safe keeping, and then brought it back over four hundred years ago. He did not know why, only that it could not to be opened until mankind had need of it most.'

'I'm guessing *that time* is now.' Gregor didn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to work that one out.

'Yes. I have dreamed of it often. About what is inside. I saw the heart of Peter, still fresh and beating inside. I thought it was a vision.'

'Open it up, let's take a look see.' James seemed insistent.

'I cannot.'

'I said open it.'

Juliane clutched the casket.

‘Open the fucking box, Priest.’ James pointed the Shrike straight at the kneeling man’s head.

‘I tell you I cannot.’

‘He doesn’t know how, James’ Gregor stepped between the two men. ‘He’s not supposed to. I’m guessing that’s strictly Papal knowledge?’ He didn’t wait for an answer. ‘Did you steal the key or did the Pope entrust it to you before he died?’

Silence.

‘Who did you share the secret with?’ He tapped the barrel of the HK on his palm. ‘It was convenient that the mob decided to ransack the Vatican just at the same time our friends out there start to shoot the place up.’

‘No.’ Juliane wiped the tears from his face. ‘I was given the key by the Papal Father. I am to take the box...’

‘Take it where? And to do what?’ James was losing patience.

‘*He* knows what to do.’

‘*He?* Who’s *He?*’

No answer.

A short burst of gunfire from up above ended the conversation.

‘MAJOR.’ Ingar backed down the steps letting rip a few bursts of his own, his weapon held above his head. ‘Sergei’s

down.’ He tried to pull Sergei down the steps but the older man was already dead. ‘Shit, shit, shit. Half a dozen armed men in the chapel and coming fast.’ He loosed more rounds out through the entrance and then jumped down to the ground.

‘Bishop, we need out and now.’

‘Yes, yes, major.’ He stumbled to his feet box clutched hard to his chest. ‘This is the only way now, but the exit?’

‘Don’t worry about that.’ James was grinning from ear to ear. ‘I told you, I’ll make us a hole.’

Something metal chinked several times as it rolled down the steps grabbing everyone’s attention.

‘GRENADE.’

The flash bang was deafening as hell as it exploded. A growl of thunder and a flash of lightning that stabbed behind closed eyes. A weekend rave was instantly uncorked.

Down they came, guns blazing. No attempt to find a target. Bullets strafed indiscriminately, zinging of walls making multiple impacts.

‘FUCK YOU.’ James opened up with the Shrike.

The weapon’s magazine pumped bullets into the chamber and discharged then through the barrel at a sadistic rate. ‘Gregor.’ He screamed. ‘Don’t be dead you bastard.’

He wasn’t. His HK burst into life toward the steps. One mag empty as another was slapped home. Full auto now as flashes of fire spat imminent death and added to the din. Gregor’s head pounded from the explosion, his eyes were blurred but he was pretty sure he was shooting in the right direction. Rage for rage, bullet for bullet, he had to let it out. This was Custer’s last stand. Ride of the fucking Valkyries. They’d started this and *he* was going to finish it.

A hand grabbed him by the collar and physically dragged him behind more substantial cover, the HK click clicking, another magazine empty.

James reloaded the Shrike. Took a mag from Gregor's jacket and slapped it into the Heckler Koch for him.

'You okay mate?'

'No.' Wild eyes resented the intervention. But his head *was* starting to clear.

'Hang in their feller. At least they've stopped shooting.'

They had. Gregor hadn't noticed the silence. At least it gave the dust a chance to clear. A chance for them to see what they were up against.

'This is why I never leave home without packing some serious cake in my lunch box.'

James pulled two small blue cylinders from his tattered jacket pocket and placed them on the ground. He was clearly furious as he fingered the jacket's distress.

'Stylish and brash was what the tailor said. "Your Armani suit will remain elegant and stylish for life. David Beckham swears by them."' He peeked over the ossuary he'd dragged Gregor behind. 'But Dave doesn't have to roll around in the shit having some tosser trying to shoot his ARSE UP.'

He fired a short burst. Just to let them know he was pissed.

The coffin shook to the incoming volley, rock and dust raining down on their heads. ‘Mother fu....’ James took one of the cylinders, stuck his finger through the ring and was just about to pull when Gregor stopped him. Calm was returning to his mind, at least enough to see the flaw in James’ plan.

‘High explosives in a confined space? You’ll kill us all.’

‘They started it.’

‘And that will definitely finish it.’ He tried to take stock of their situation. *Where is Ingar?* Juliane was huddled against the wall, seized into a foetal position.

‘Where’s Ingar?’

James looked away.

‘Sergei?’

No response.

‘Bastards.’ Gregor had to think. He needed to know what these men wanted. Why they were here. How they could get out of this alive? He gripped Mikael’s ring, perhaps hoping it really was a lucky charm. *Think man, think.*

‘Bishop.’ He called in a loud whisper. ‘Bishop.’

The man responded with wild and feral eyes.

‘Do they want the box?’

He squeezed it even tighter to his chest.

‘Are they the Entity? Have they come for the box?’

Juliane shook his head.

Then who the hell were they?

‘Heads up Gregor, they’re moving.’

So was Gregor, trying to widen their firing position.

Their assailants tried to move quietly but the gravelly crunch of hands and boots was amplified by the walls. Gregor peeked around the side of the coffin and indicated with his fingers that he had eye contact. Two fingers waved to the left and then toward his own chest. *They* were his. The same fingers pointed right and then at James, an invited to deal with the others. He took another look at the grenades. Not a lot of choice. They were sitting ducks. Gregor raise a single finger. *Just the one*, he mouthed. The instruction followed by a puff of the cheeks and two fingers raised; only this time they were crossed for good luck. It was time to go Wild Billy on the bastards.

James grabbed the slim blue metal explosive and ripped the ring away. ‘This baby’s gonna burn. Hey, you wanna be Butch or Sundance?’ He said.

‘Just throw it.’

‘Okay. Jeesh, you can be a cranky little fucker.’

The blue lever flipped away and the cylinder was tossed silently through the air. A soft chink of metal against stone was followed by a moment of realisation and then boots scrambling for safety.

Too late.

The crypt went nuclear. The explosion burned through the air followed a nano second later by the roar of an angry dragon. The ossuary jarred back and Gregor's teeth rattled in his mouth. Seconds later both men leapt screaming from their cover with guns blazing.

Deafened and disorientated the two soldiers moved on pure instinct and adrenaline. A Barmy Banzai through the hot swirling dust. No point in trying to distinguish who shot at who as the automatic rifles spat unholy rage. It was a turkey shoot and all over in an instant.

Six men lay awkward in the rubble not all of the bodies intact. Big bangs in small spaces left body parts unaccounted.

'Got a live one.' James was sure he was shouting but could barely hear himself.

The explosion had ripped into the shooters from behind with much of its violence flying out through the open entrance above.

If someone had closed the door Gregor doubted that any of them would have survived. He stumbled over the debris barely hearing the words just church bells in his ears but he understood the body language of James. That's when he saw Ingar. He had several holes in his chest. He hadn't stood a chance. At least it had been quick. Sergei was gone.

Gregor dropped the rifle and pulled the Sig from its holster. This was personal now. Eyes down and best foot forward, he wanted a chat with the bastard who'd just had the misfortune to survive.

All the pain that Gregor felt was channelled into a single finger that burned to squeeze the trigger of the Sig.

Below him the wounded man groaned. He was spaced out, non compos mentis and barely in his twenties. Mercenaries came in all size and shapes, Gregor knew that, but this one obviously loved the gym. At six foot two he had a stocky build and was well bulked below the grey slacks and tight fitting tee shirt. Even with the buzz cut this guy looked more at home chasing girls around college than he did getting involved in this kind of shit. That close to the blast, he was lucky to be alive. Maybe not. He groaned again and tried to sit up.

Two minutes ago he'd held the upper hand. Now he was floating in jelly and two of the men he'd just tried to kill stood over him with guns pointing down at his face.

'Who the fuck are you?' Gregor demanded, trying to read the young man's eyes. Even in shock they screamed, *up yours*. As the glaze faded a hard stare took its place, more a grimace as he becoming aware of the leaking hole in his side.

‘Answer the question.’ Gregor pulled the chamber of the Sig and released. A nine mil hard nose was slammed into the chamber.

‘What are you going to do?’ Juliane clambered over the rubble, the box still clutched firmly against his chest. ‘Not here, not in cold blood, I beg you.’

‘Do one Priest.’ Spat Gregor.

‘But we can leave him here. Someone will find him and tend to his wounds. The police will know what to do. We should go.’ He tried to grab Gregor’s arm but James pulled him away.

‘Easy Bishop. Take the man’s advice. Cover your eyes and stick your fingers in your ears.’

‘No, we’re not barbarians. This is the Reliquary; we are on Holy ground. For Christ’s sake...’

‘Is that it?’ Gregor followed the man’s eyes. ‘The box? Is that what you want?’

No answer.

Gregor’s boot came down on the man’s abdomen and ground hard on the bloody shirt. He screamed.

‘For God’s sake think about what you are doing. Stop this, I beg you.’

‘Back off Bishop.’ James took the Priest by the scruff. ‘The major’s getting personal.’

‘Stop this. That man needs medical attention.’

‘Can you believe this shit Gregor? These guys try to burn our arse and the Bishop wants you to play nicely.’ He smacked Juliane on the forehead with his palm. ‘Fuck off.’

Gregor didn’t hear either of them. He stepped on the wound again and forced his heel slowly against the hole. The prisoner squealed like a stuck pig.

‘Is it the box?’

‘Yes, yes... Stop. It’s the box.’

‘What’s in it?’

‘I don’t know. I swear... I don’t know.’ His breathing was erratic. Tears of pain streamed all over his face. ‘We... were hired to get, get the Priest... the key. You just got in the way, you fucking asshole.’

‘Is he laughing at you Gregor?’

‘He’s hysterical.’

‘Still, he’s laughing and that’s rude.’

‘What’s in the box?’ The heel ground down on the shattered ribs for a third time.

‘Aaaarghh. I don’t know. I swear, I don’t... know. I’m just part of a team.’

‘You believe him Gregor?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Gregor placed the barrel against the soldiers head.

Afraid and alone the soldier tightened his face in anticipation. He closed his eyes and roared like a lion with defiance.

‘Major, you can’t do this. He’s unarmed and injured. Show mercy, I beg you. For the love of God.’

‘There is no God. Bishop. If there was we wouldn’t be living like this.’

A single shot rang out and the mercenary’s brain plastered the ground. Fizzy coke erupting from a shaken can.

The Bishop then threw up. In between vomits he cast harsh words shouted in Latin. There was serious finger pointing and accusations about the desecration of Saints. About God being everywhere. Stuff like that.

He should have been more grateful to still be alive.

Patron was living the dream. It was probably the Stems that made it so real and so vivid, so here and now. Maybe it was just the years of guilt and isolation taking their toll? What he remembered next was the catalyst that had changed everything for him. Put the wheels into motion that had led him to found the Commission. The building blocks that elevated him to such an exulted position. The first steps toward being sat here beside the fire as Illuminai, so many years later.

Where was Isabella?

He reached for her and felt the comforting touch of her hand.

The City should have been more difficult but Juliane was a walking sat nav. His intimate knowledge of the back alleys of Rome had been an indispensable tool. All the time the Priest muttered in Latin and then in Italian. It was whispered prayers spoken by a man that had seen and done too much and was all the worse for the experience. James cussed none stop about the state of his suit, the expense, and about its lack of durability. How he was going to, “shove it somewhere dark next time he was in Savile Row.”

Gregor had insisted on breaking into a Coin department mall, just to shut James up. They weren't the first ones in as looters had ransacked half the shops inside. All the best stuff had gone. The Englishman's cussing only got worse when he realised the best to be had was a pair of Dockers jeans and a Luca D'altieri shirt.

“It looks like a bloody tea towel.” He had snapped.

Not a happy bunny.

He wanted a hat but couldn't find one and settled for a smart leather holdall from a sports department to properly hide the Shrike.

Gregor found Levis. Old man's jeans but the t-shirt was Diesel and, kinda cool. Even Juliane had seen the sense in dumping his cassock for the Chinos and polo shirt he wore hidden below. The box was tucked discreetly into a denim rucksack with Skater logos sewn onto every pocket. Tony Hawks ruled, apparently.

One good thing about riots is it's not too difficult to blend in. And right now Rome was a seething mass of chaos. The fires of the Vatican had spread and now the population of the city centre was either pro riot or trying to get out of the way. More than once they were forced to pull pistols just to encourage looters to walk the other way.

As they reached the Quirinal hill Gregor took one last look at the city below. The fires were wide spread, sirens and gunshots like bird song. Another great city was devolving like so many others in recent months. It was happening all over the world. But to see the Eternal City like this with both sides of the Tiber burning.

This time nobody was fiddling whilst Rome went up in flames.

Stars and a half moon lit a rolling countryside that seemed to have no end. There was no way of knowing exactly how far they had come or where they were in the Italian countryside. There had been no point in staying on the major routes; they were blocked by refugees, by the sick and dying. Gregor knew they'd been lucky, but that could all change with a cough or a sneeze.

'Gregor, camp fires, just below the rising ground.'

James was right. Three fires in the distance that glowed about a mile or so to their north. He doubted whether heading toward them was the wisest thing to do.

'Surely it is a sign from God.' Juliane pleaded.

Gregor knew the Bishop was hungry so he questioned the validity of the revelation. Still, the smell of hot sweet cooking was a powerful incentive. And it was in the air for them all to smell. Maybe they *should* head toward the lights.

'Gregor.' James whispered. 'It could be an opportunity to get some useful intel. They might even have a radio.'

He couldn't argue with the logic.

'Okay, but we regard them as hostile until we know different.' He turned to the Bishop. 'That means *you* keep your

mouth shut about who we are, and where we've come from. I'll do all the talking.'

'Si, yes.'

Yeah right. He doubted that the Bishop was capable of keeping his mouth shut. He did note the sudden spring in the Bishop's step at the promise of hot food. It was probably only pride, thought Gregor, which stopped him cart wheeling across the landscape and whoop whooping at the thought of a full belly. He was surprised to see a muted keenness in James too, but he was guessing not for food. The man was a top notch pro and that meant he could crawl for miles on his stomach and survive on rabbit shit and grass if he needed to. No, there was the promise of a cigarette. Cool nicotine vapours. Maybe even a sip or two of the local vino. He was guessing that food was not foremost in James' mind.

The closer the camp got the more voices Gregor could hear. They were gypsies, as many as a hundred in number, at least those that he could see. Woman dressed in long skirts. Lots of headscarves covered with bling. Some Fifty yards to their left was an opening in the hillside, an entrance to a cave big enough for a large truck to enter. It was far too dark to see any further

than the entrance. No time to check it out now. He moved on toward the camp itself.

It had a deeply traditional Romany look. The count was thirteen caravans; mostly rounded tops and painted panels. Little metal chimneys poked out through the roofs, very quaint, though one or two them were of a more modern design. They'd parked them in two concentric circles, one formed inside of the other, like preparation for an injun attack? The more he noticed the surer he became that something was wrong. Then it hit him. There were virtually no men? He could see maybe half a dozen stood with the women, but they were old, and Gregor noticed a lack of children. Alarm bells started to ring in his head. And what the hell were they all staring at? All eyes were on the far side of the main fire where one man was speaking for the others. He was old and unshaven, hoops in his ears a raspy voice projected. Now Gregor was closer he could see a collective fear in their eyes.

'We need to find a better vantage, James. You... Stay put.' He ordered Juliane. And then both men moved off for a better view.

Another man now spoke for the others. He was tall with dark hair that curled across his brow, in his late sixties or more. He

wore a waistcoat and a shirt that looked like he too had shopped at Coin. The man was animated; shouting and gesticulating wildly as only an Italian could. He expressed himself vividly to another group half hidden by the flames of the main fire. He looked angry, but scared.

Expressive dissent turned into screams of shock as the sharp crack of a gunshot silenced him. It triggered a herd reaction from the gathering.

Had *he* been seen? Was someone shooting at *him*?

Gregor found cover in the recess between the wheels of the nearest caravan. The man in the waistcoat clutched at his chest; blood spilled from his fingers, a disbelieving look on his aged face. His head dropped and he collapsed to the ground. A puppet cut from its strings. It triggered another reaction, a trumpet of high pitched wails and sobbing from the women several of whom went to the man's aid.

A tall man stepped into view, a Beretta waved in his hand toward the crowd.

What you want to do? James mouthed.

Gregor shook his head. This wasn't their fight. He was considering pulling out and moving on when two more men

stepped into view both armed with Kalashnikovs. The way they held the weapons screamed military training.

What the hell had they stumbled into?

The man that waved the pistol with such intimidating presence walked clearly into view.

Well, well. It's a small world.

The face highlighted by the tall flames of the fire belonged to one of the mystery priests that had left the Papal office. He'd recognise that face... that nose, anywhere.

His memory flashed back to the rabbit hole in the Vatican. It was the son of a bitch that had ambushed them killing both ambassadors as well as James' men.

James? Where the hell was James? Son of a bitch.

The Englishman was moving quickly, circling the centre of the camp. He'd seen the bastard and was out for revenge. No calling him back now. Gregor made himself small in the darkness, all elbows and knees as he crept for a better position. Just a few seconds and the outside ring of wagons were passed. He dragged himself up against the wheels of one and poked the HK through the spindles. This was ideal. From here there was a clear line of sight and a great view of the camp. All he could do was sit and wait.

James? He called in the loudest hush he dared. *James.*

James turned with rage in his eyes. A fire burnt behind them as torrid as any of the flames that leapt from the fires in the camp. He signalled *eyes on the captors* to Gregor, before indicated his plan of assault by circling his hand. He would go around and establish a line of crossfire. Then James slashed across his throat with his fingers and pointed toward his nose.

No prizes for the interpretation. Alice was his. No rabbit holes for the man to go down this time.

No way he stop this now, he'd lost control. He pulled and released the charging handle on his own weapon, settled his eyes down the sight, and prepared to engage.

It took a long minute for James to circle the encampment but now they had them nicely cross haired.

What the hell... No chance to react, Gregor raised the HK but not at Alice. At another man who shouted his unexpected arrival with hands raised high in the air. Bishop Julianne had walked into the kill zone and was shouting something in Italian as the AK 47s were levelled at him, and two more armed men appeared from nowhere to sweep the surrounding caravans.

What was he doing? Gregor went heads down. James had already melted back into the darkness. *The Bishop was going to get a bullet up his arse for this.*

More shouts in Italian. Gregor's linguistic skills weren't good but he knew enough to understand the threat being issued to the Gypsies. Alice ordered his gunmen to start a search. Where there was one intruder there were likely to be others.

He'd got that right. *Oh crap, they were coming head on. Fuck this.* He stood up and let rip. A short controlled burst took the first man down, three copper jackets to his chest. The second was quicker than expected and returned fire as bullets ripped into the caravan wall, multiple hits forcing him to take cover,

fast. The Shrike opened up from the other side creating a perfect distraction shooting at the soldiers from the rear. Gregor threw himself forward and with one roll was up on his feet, the HK capping off.

Two down.

He moved in toward the fire, perfect kill poise, body hunkered and alert. Heckler and Koch moved like a Dalek's eye stalk to cover the ground

Tat tat tat. Another man went down.

The Shrike was pumping the air with loud zipping sounds that disappeared into the distance. You knew when they found a target. Soft flesh makes a squelch; the harsh thud is the bullets smashing through bone.

Sudden silence.

Was that it? Had they got them all? Good feelings until embers from the fire exploded and rushed past his face. It was instinct, natural impulse to shy away. Too late he saw a big guy with a Remington charging toward him at ten o'clock. Pump action already sprung, the shotgun gearing up to discharge again. HK moved like lightning toward the threat, but it wasn't going to be quick enough. Big guy had the drop on him. Remington discharged, and Gregor waited for the hit that never

came. The shotgun had flinched upward to the violent arching of its owners back. Buckhammer shot burst its explosive power safely into the air as the man's face contorted with pain. James had put him down to Gregor's relief.

Both men swept the area and then the perimeter. Gregor watched as James, weapon still raised and ready, padded himself down. Just because you can't feel it doesn't mean you it didn't get you. Adrenaline is a powerful painkiller, until the supply runs dry.

'Clear.' Shouted James.

Gregor half nodded. Something wasn't right. He did a visual check on the bodies from a distance. There were five in total. One was missing.

'Where's Alice?' Gregor shouted.

'Who?'

'Big nose.'

James moved to each body in turn. He shot each one in the head. Not wanting any zombie attacks.

Where is Alice?

The major turned his weapon toward the Gypsies. There was nowhere else. As he did he heard the familiar *tink* of a pin discharging from a grenade's lever.

He'd found Alice. The asshole had jammed in himself amongst the women. He had one young girl, late teens, by the neck. His free hand was held aloft with a high explosive grenade clutched in its palm.

He shouted out in Italian. Neither man understood what he said.

'You got a shot James?'

'Not one that involves the girl living.'

'Take it easy.' Gregor shouted out to Alice. 'No-one has to get hurt.' Alice's held an old RGD-5 grenade. Russian made. A hundred and ten grams of tnt wrapped in a baby pineapple. Probably had a three second fuse. If Alice released the lever it would do a lot of damage to the crowd. They were frightened. Who wouldn't be with a psycho waving a grenade.

Alice shouted to them.

'He wants you to drop your weapons and leave the camp.' Juliane lay curled in a classic foetal position. 'He's very insistent that you comply.'

'Is that right?' James edged forward, Shrike raised and steady, eyes only for Alice. 'Fucking Priest, I thought they'd shot you. Probably best if you stay very still. Stay where I can shoot you when we've finished with this tosser.'

‘Juliane?’ Alice called out. ‘E che voi Juliane?’ Is that you Juliane?

‘Si.’

One man sweated bravado amidst his hostages. The other didn’t dare to look up from the ground. They spoke in a rich and charismatic language above the frightened sobbing of women.

‘I see that my men failed to find the box?’

Juliane didn’t answer. He clutched the rucksack as if it were his baby.

‘Oh Juliane, you didn’t. You decided to bring it *to me* instead?’ He started to laugh. ‘Juliane, do you have the box in the rucksack?’

Smart bastard.

‘Bring it to me Juliane. Bring me the rucksack.’

‘No.’

‘Bring me the box.’

‘I cannot.’

‘I’ll kill them all, Juliane, every last one of them. Their blood will be on your head.’

He pretended to drop the grenade. A dozen women screamed and shrank closer to the ground heads held tightly in hands. Not

much protection against explosives, but when you're desperate, Gregor guessed it must help.

James grabbed at the rucksack his gun now levelled at Alice. Juliane refused to let it go. The gun swung parallel to Julianes' nose.

'Let it go asshole.' Juliane panicked. Faced with the thought of a lead projectile hitting his face at a million miles an hour he fumbled the rucksack and it was wrenched from his grasp.

'Thankyou. First smart thing you've done since we met.' James' gun resumed its aim toward Alice, rucksack hanging from his free arm.

'You sure you haven't got a shot?'

'Look, Gregor. I can take her and him with the same shot mate. But I don't think the bullets clever enough to put the pin back in the grenade.'

Alice screamed at the hostages again as James moved to his left and Gregor to his right. He waved his hand around like a football hooligan. The words came thick and fast.

'What's he saying, Bishop?'

'He says you must both stand still, major. He... he is insistent that you drop your guns, and that you leave

immediately. He swears he will let the hostages go if you comply.'

'What else did he say? Come on, Bishop. What else?'

Silence from Juliane.

'I told him that I want the box, major.'

Son of a bitch speaks English.

James lowered his gun.

'If someone don't tell me what's in this fucking box.' He gave a hard stare at Alice. 'I'm gonna start killing people myself.'

'You haven't told them? Come, come, Juliane. Tell them about the box. Tell them about the Secret the Church has kept for over two thousand years. Tell them why the plagues have come, why the world is suffering. Tell them about the power of God that is concealed in the box.' He seemed to be enjoying attention. 'It's all right, Juliane. They won't believe you. Why would they?'

He laughed again, moving the hostages quicker. Alice was stalling for time.

'A simple trade gentlemen. I offer the lives of these people for a box. Be sensible, they have no need to die. I am even willing to share what's in the box. Think of it, gentlemen. You

could have Immortality, wisdom, anything you desire. We could divide the world with the gifts hidden inside.'

'What about the Church, Alice? What about God and everything that goes with him?'

'God has had his day?' Alice pretended to drop the grenade again. More screams and panic and a look of sheer delight on the man's face. 'It doesn't mean that we cannot profit from his demise.'

Just keep talking.

Gregor was running daemons, problem solving in his head.

First. He had to take down the perp.

Second. He had to neutralise the threat of the grenade.

He stared at the woman Alice had by the throat. Willing her to open her eyes and look up. She did. She made solid eye contact. He fixed her gaze. *Don't you dare look away?*

She didn't.

Gregor raised his eyes to the grenade held high and then back to her. He eased his left hand away from the HK and made a fist.

Come on woman, work it out. Look what I'm doing and work it out.

Eureka. She got it.

Her reddened eyes widened and screamed a silent... *No*. She wouldn't do it. Then she closed her eyes tight shut and went back into puppy mode.

Not that it mattered. Alice was moving quickly back toward the cave. Barking at the other women as he did so, all of whom moved in herd like unison to obey his instructions. Alice was smart. Change the scenario before they could formulate a plan. Keep them on their toes and get the hostages into a more confined space. More protection for him and a place where the bomb would do most damage.

Bollocks. Gregor had lost control. Not that he'd had it in the first place. He slipped the HK over his shoulder and drew the Sig as both men edged forward and followed. Ten yards out from the caves entrance he saw a child. No, there were two of them. They both moved smartly back into the darkness. So the children had been hidden before the strangers had arrived. What about the men? Where were the men?

The answer came swiftly as the women were backed through the cave's entrance. No more help from the firelight then. Gregor followed as close as he dared, stepping from the light into the dim mood of the cavern. It was dark in here, spooky too, just the muted sounds of sobbing women. His eyes were slow to adjust but he knew that Alice was having the same problem. Something tugged on his foot, tried to tackle him as he made his way inside. Whatever it was it wasn't moving. Just a root, or discarded rope. Now he had two things to watch for. Two things to make out as his pupils widened craving for more of the scarce light.

He saw it. Saw them to be precise. Numerous male bodies were lying haphazard on the ground, up against the wall. All fallen where they had been shot. It was an outstretched leg he had almost tripped on.

Why? Gregor's eyes darted across their remains, his Sig fixed on Alice, waiting for a clean shot.

'Why?' The word was edged with contempt. He hadn't actually meant to say it out loud.

'Opportunity.' Replied Alice. He sounded surprised at the question. 'We have to repopulate somehow.'

The bastard was calm as bath water.

‘We’re starting again.’ He shouted. ‘Out with the old regimes and in with the new. It’s a brave new world for us to populate again. The women were a gift. They still can be. My gift to you *if* you join us.’

‘Us?’

‘I have friends. Certain members of the government who have joined with army and NATO troops operating with, what shall we call it? An independent agenda. As we speak Lazio, Umbria and Marche are already under Marshal Law. Other regions will doubtless see sense and join with us.’ He smiled. ‘I of course represent the Church’s interests.’

‘I take it Pope Benedict didn’t want to play along?’ His murder made more sense now. ‘After Marshal Law is established you begin quarantine, I expect.’

‘Plagues a nasty thing, major. A lot of people are dying. Hundreds of millions are dead already. We don’t all have to join them.’ His free hand extended toward James. ‘Please, give me the box.’

‘Sorry Gregor. I think it’s time to pick a side.’

Gregor felt the warm steel muzzle of James’ gun against his neck.

‘Drop the Sig buddy.’

Fuck it. Didn't see that one coming.

‘Hedging your bets James?’ He asked.

‘Politics mate. It’s not like we’re besties or anything. Now drop the gun and we can all have a nice chat.’ He raised his voice. ‘I’m sure the cardinal will realise that mistakes are made in the heat of things. We could help him out of all this, and then he could help us get back to home territory in return. Am I right?.’

‘Of course. The new government will be very grateful to you. Though I would appreciate a quick decision as my fingers are getting tired.’

‘He killed your men, James.’

‘Casualties of war.’

‘And what about those men? Are they just collateral damage?’

‘Hmm, there’ll probably be a lot more before things calm down. Now drop the gun.’

What choice did he have? The Sig clattered to the ground.

James pushed Gregor, the warm barrel still firm against his neck. He picked up the Sig and tossed it toward Alice who duly took it in his free hand.

‘We can use you, English. The prospects are excellent for a man with your skills and foresight.’

‘Think it through, Gregor. You me and the barking mad over there. We’d make a great team. Someone’s gotta take charge. Think about it. Your dad’s doin the same thing right now in Moscow? Its Kings and Princes time, only this time we got guns instead of breeding.’

‘Do it James. I don’t want any part of this. I *will* kill you if I get the chance.’

‘Fair enough mate, it’s nothing personal. I want you to know it’s been a pleasure.’ Gregor closed his eyes as the hammer clicked back, James’ finger squeezed down on the trigger.

He never fired the gun.

A clop clop of hands clapping slowly redirected everyone's attention. They belonged to a big man who wore a long dark coat and fingerless gloves. At six foot six he resembled the Rock but struggled to mimic the actor's tanned looks. The man's face was more weathered and mature. More bad tempered and mean. As the slow handclap ceased one hand reached into his coat.

'Easy mate. Don't do anything stupid.' James' gun had changed direction.

The stranger pulled a brass zippo slowly into view so all parties could see. Three cigarettes were clipped to its side, one of which went straight into his mouth. A loud clink as the wheel sparked the flint. Gregor wasn't sure what to make of it all.

He heard James take a deep breath. He hadn't meant to. His habit had been bitching at him for days and by the look on his face he was savouring the sweet aroma as it found its way to his nose.

He grabbed Gregor's shoulder and forced the gun back to his neck. 'Stay tight mate... stay tight.'

'Friend of yours?' He asked Alice.

‘No. May I take it that he is not with you?’

‘Never seen him before.’

This was awkward, Gregor saw opportunity.

If James pointed the Shrike at the stranger he might get the chance to pull free. If he left it where it was the Cardinal might have a change of mind and shoot him. Gregor didn’t fancy his chances either way. *Just wait, be ready, you never know what might happen. And who the heck is this new guy?*

‘That’s lousy dress sense you got there mate. What’s with the cowboy boots? You Wyatt fucking Earp or what?’

‘Chi la sono’ Who are you? ‘Che vuole lei?’ what do you want?’ Alice received no reply.

‘Maybe he speaks Russian.’ James tugged on Gregor. ‘Ask him. Ask the bastard what he wants?’

‘Do it yourself.’

‘I just did.’

Gregor’s ear smarted as the gun’s butt struck hard.

‘I don’t need attitude from *both* of you.’ The stranger was staring at James. ‘What? You want a piece of me? Hey, Priest. Just shoot him will you. Shoot the idiot and let’s get on.’

Alice didn't seem too keen. Maybe he thought that James would cock his weapon in *his* direction whilst he was shooting the stranger.

No trust amongst vipers.

'He's not looking at you.' Gregor decided the more voices the more confusion, the better chance he had of staying alive. Besides his ear smarted like hell. 'He's looking at the bag, you imbeciles.'

'Don't call me names, mate.' The Shrike pressed harder. 'What... you want my rucksack? You a skater boy, is that it?'

'I think he wants the box, James.'

'Here we go with the box again. What is it with this box? Will you just just shoot him.'

Alice relented. Four shots in quick succession spat from the Beretta hitting the man flush in the chest. The percussion alone was deafening as women screamed and the stranger reeled. He stumbled, but didn't fall, not all the way.

Down on one knee but far from dead Wyatt took a long drag of his fag before flicking it away. The smoke bilged from his lips as the ash exploded in a brief and fiery frenzy. Wyatt flapped back his coat and drew two massive hand guns one in each hand.

They rasped like a baby chimp. Six, eight, maybe ten bullets ripped into Alice's body and face shredding the man apart.

'GRENADE.' Gregor heaved himself away from James and the two men parted in a desperate bid for cover as the grenade rolled along the contours of the ground. The explosive pineapple chinked, bumped, and tapped. It pitched and bumbled its way across the rough cave floor and rolled to a stop right in front of James's face.

'Fuck.' The word seemed insufficient.

The explosion was deafening, filling the cave with light and flames, and another belch of thunder.

He was alive.

Gregor checked himself, barely believing it possible. His hand was shaking and no wonder. That was the third time in a couple of days that someone had tried to blow him up. Taking one hand in the other helped to stop them trembling but it couldn't stop the hoarse nervous laughter. It came to Gregor's lips loud and unashamed. Three times in two days and he was still breathing, that had to be some sort of record. It *had* to be the ring. It was Mikael, it had to be. He was staring at the ring his mother had placed on his finger and laughing. Mother's gift had protected him again. The laugh got chesty as it mixed with the dust in his lungs. It ended in a coughing spasm that nearly made him hurl.

"Angels are just men who cast no shadows." He still didn't know what that meant. It didn't matter. She had told him how the ring would watch over him. She was convinced that it would protect him. He'd never really believed.

He did now.

Truly, it *had* to be the ring.

As the dust began to settle his vision cleared and refocused on the Sig Saur just a few feet away. Gregor reached out ignoring the pain and took the weapon in his hand. It had never felt that heavy as his fingers gripped the dusty handle and dragged it from the floor.

The stranger was still standing, how could that be? *Who the fuck was he?* He watched as Wyatt picked up the rucksack. Four bullets and a few ounces of tnt didn't slow him down. The zippo flicked shut as another cigarette burned.

'I wouldn't advise use of the weapon.' It was a deep and dire warning made without bothering to actually look at Gregor.

'*Who are you?*' Gregor croaked the words. He tried again. 'Who are you?.'

'He is Entity.' Another voice answered on Wyatt's behalf.

'Bishop? I thought you were dead.'

'Apparently not.' Juliane entered the cave a little sheepishly and stared pitifully for a moment at the dead males and crossed his chest. He too coughed as the dust was dragged into his lungs one hand raised in horror to his mouth.

'Please let him take the box, Gregor. It belongs to him; we were just safeguarding it.'

‘All this shit going on in the world and all you care about is a box? Gregor dragged himself to sit up. ‘I think you need to explain that to me.’ He waved the Sig at Wyatt. ‘You’re Entity, right? The Medieval Avengers.’ He laughed. ‘You got a real good vest under that coat?’ He cocked the trigger.

‘Please don’t, Gregor. You can’t harm him. He’ll kill you.’

‘Yeah, sure.’ The hammer was thumbed another click back. ‘What’s in the box?’

‘God’s gift to his children.’ Wyatt spoke with a subtle accent that Gregor didn’t recognise. Scandinavian maybe?

‘Bullshit.’ He replied. ‘If there was a God he wouldn’t let things go as far as they have. He’d stop the pain and make things good in the world. Or is that too black and white for you?’

‘Sorry, it doesn’t work like that.’ Another butt end danced across the dusty ground instantly replaced by a fresh stick between Wyatt’s lips. ‘You heard of the Old Testament? It’s all true... mostly.’

‘Don’t get up,’ Gregor ordered. ‘You’re not leaving. Hey, I’m not finished with you yet.’

The final click of the hammer caused Wyatt to pause.

‘We’re done.’ Wyatt looked like he meant it. ‘And personally I think the human race is done too. You’ve heard the other

expression, “give your kids a little, and they’ll take a lot more.” That’s true as well. Sometimes a parent has to say *no*. The child has to earn the right; they have to want it real bad. And they need to ask you for the right reasons.’

‘Or what, he’ll fuck us all up? Is that it? Plague and pestilence time... hey, what you know. God is doing a good job after all. Too much to ask for a little love and understanding, I suppose?’

‘You have been helped, guided, and at times instructed. He sent you signs that you ignored. What more did you want? Isn’t life, opportunity, and free will enough for you? Look what you have done with them.’

‘That’s rhetorical, right?’

‘No. I’ll give you a hint about where you went wrong.’ He said. ‘You’ve heard of Adam and his apple.’ He opened his arms. ‘Here it is, all around you. You’ve been eating it ever since. You’ve devoured it, core and all. And now you’re looking beyond.’

Gregor followed his hand upward.

‘Now you want to take your filthy ways out there into the Garden of Eden. This cannot be allowed. Do you really think that you are God’s only children?’ Wyatt threw the rucksack across

his shoulder and heaved a sorrowful sigh. 'This world needs to heal. Man needs to be humbled, he needs to be returned to simpler ways. *You*, need to believe in something greater than yourselves again. *He* has more patience than I think you deserve. *He* understands that sometimes the things you care for need to be pruned. Left to wither before they can begin to grow anew. The contents of *this* box will be your last chance. I will ensure that it gets into the right hands... after that?' Wyatt shrugged. 'Let's just say that the clock is ticking.'

'Bullshit.' Gregor hauled himself up. 'You're a fucking liar. There is no God.'

The muzzled flashed twice followed by snappy clicks on an empty chamber. Two hits, dead centre of Wyatt's back forced him to reel. His massive handgun was a blur as it left its holster.

'No, please.' Juliane rushed between them, face turned away from the gun and trying to hide behind his hands. Like that would stop the bullets. 'He doesn't understand.' He squealed. 'Don't shoot him, please, I beg you.'

'I'm not as patient as *He* is.'

The gun blasted a long strafe. Frightened women screamed as bullets ricocheted across the cavern wall. Juliane felt the

trickle of warm fluid down his leg. He was thankful that it wasn't blood.

'You're a liar. You're a fucking charlatan. I don't believe a word.' The Sig clicked several more times in Gregor's hand. 'God is dead, do you hear me. God is freecking dead.'

Futile words as Wyatt turned and walked away.

From the corner of his eye he saw figures moving slowly. The gypsy women were on the move. Some gathered around him. Gregor felt broken, hammered by the hardships of the last few days. His head throbbed from the explosion, or was it because there was nothing left in which to believe? He lay helpless, exhausted, the Gypsies were probably going to kill him anyway.

Not so, not yet. Soft words were being whispered. Were they praying for him, or planning his demise. A hand reached out and took his. He was being lifted, carried toward the light outside.

'*God is dead.*' Gregor wept. '*God is dead.*'

Unconsciousness finally calmed his mind.

'RELIQUARY'

'GOD IS DEAD.' Patron slammed his fist knocking Isabella from her perch on the chair's arm. The effort sent the blood racing through his veins.

'I see that the treatment is working.' She said adjusting her dress. 'I can think of a few Legates who would benefit from a dose in their coco.'

It was an amusing notion as Illuminai opened and closed his hand. A few minutes ago there had been nothing but atrophy in his joints. Now he felt the movement and strength return. Little stars bounced before his eyes, a trick of the light? No, the magic was in his mind. Bridges were being built. Synapses were swelling and relaying old paths as the neurons leapt through their brave, if fragile, new world.

'I'll alter the dosage and prepare further medication. Do I have your permission to see our friend for more of the serum?'

'Make it your priority.'

'I will need to guarantee the usual gratuities for him?'

‘Tell him that delivery will be made as agreed. Tell him I have sourced some very fresh produce for him. I think he will be pleased.’

Isabella crossed the room and drew back the long drapes that were closed across the windows. Sunlight leapt to fill the room in golden streams. The room mirrored his own sense of euphoria.

‘There was something else.’ She said. ‘Something you wanted to me to see?’

‘Yes.’ He remembered. There was something. ‘Liam has given me some unwelcome information.’ He said.

‘Liam... Why do you tolerate that creature living down there in the dark?’ She stepped toward the fire suddenly feeling cold. ‘He makes my skin crawl.’

‘Liam is a soldier for the Saints. He has skills that I find useful from time to time.’

‘You can have the Legates and a corps of Jarig on the streets in an instant, more if you need. What’s so special about your secret little Troll? Why do you indulge him?’

Illuminai sat forward. A hawk tuned to its prey. She’d overstepped the mark and would be well advised to change the subject. ‘Liam is my concern and no-one else’s.’

‘Very well.’ She said. ‘What’s *he* to me.’ She changed her focus. ‘What is that, a shopping list?’

‘Read it.’

Isabella took it. Unfolded the paper and read the contents.

It was impossible to see her perfectly tanned skin go pale but the smile definitely drained from her face.

‘So. The Relic, it’s back in circulation.’

Isabella's features didn't take long to register the importance of the information hidden in Liam's scrawl. The ramifications of the box falling into the wrong hands were unthinkable.

'Do you want me to order the Preacher's arrest?'

'No, I will deal with him at later time. His arrest would upset relations with the Duma. Besides, too many questions would be asked. I need to go about this in a more subtle manner.'

'Liam?'

Patron nodded.

'Why didn't the Preacher bring it to you? He knows that all Pre War artefacts are to be censored by the arts office before ownership is determined.'

'I can only think of one reason.'

Isabella's beautiful eyes narrowed as she came to the same reasoning. 'Does he know what it is?'

'The Preacher is a student of the past. He has an unhealthy interest in the Old Religion.'

'Is he a Heretic?'

‘Doubtful. We can leave that accusation for another, more pertinent time. Everything that the Preacher does is for financial gain or personal gratification. If he has somehow found out what is inside he will want to profit from it. He would sell the Relic.’

‘To us?’

‘No. That would be too dangerous for him. Why would I buy when I could take, and have him arrested in the bargain? No, he would try to sell it to the Elders of the Trinity. They would pay any price for the Relic to be returned.’

‘Do you think he opened it?’

‘Oh... I’m sure he tried. Unfortunately for him the box is sealed by Divine ordinance. At least that’s what the legend tells us. Please, stoke the fire my dear. I’m still a little cold.’

Isabella took tight grip of the closest of several ornately brass pokers standing next to the grate. She stabbed it into the embers. Each thrust and twist with the skill of a professional fencer. ‘It’s the Stems.’ She said. ‘A side effect from such a large dose on your body. You’ll adjust soon enough.’

The wood crackled with renewed excitement as the flames rose in an eerie jig.

‘You were saying?’

‘I was, wasn’t I?’ Patron realised he was being remarkably candid about the situation. If he couldn’t trust Isabella then who could he trust? ‘There are forces at work here,’ he continued, ‘that must be exposed.’

‘Do tell. I love to gossip, it causes so much trouble.’ She resumed her perch on the arm of the chair. ‘Besides, I can’t help you unless I know all of the facts.’

‘There are no facts about the box, just stories and myth. That’s its charm, its allure. It’s an itch that cannot be scratched. Always out of reach. But never out of mind. I’ve seen first hand the trouble it can inspire.’

Illuminai leaned toward the fire feathering a leather cord that hung around his neck. ‘My mother gave me this a long time ago.’ He teased out a cord hidden below his robe and ran it through his fingers. A ring hung looped on its end. He kissed it, allowing his lips to linger. ‘I understand the power of Faith. It is a powerful weapon when wielded in the right hands.’

‘So the box is a weapon?’

‘Of course it’s a weapon. The box contains a threat that would consume us all. It houses a power of Biblical authority, a force more potent than the Arc of the Covenant.’ The outburst exhausted him and he reclined fully into the chair. ‘Have no

doubt. If the Trinity acquire the box, they will attempt to harness its power. They will try to resurrect the past.'

'And how would they do that?'

'You're scepticism denies your intelligence.' He said. 'You know as well as I that the Trinity dabble in the ways of science. For some time now I have been receiving reports, from trusted sources, that they have a secret facility somewhere in the City. They have pieced together a fully operational laboratory with biological capabilities.'

'Then you must shut it down.'

'I have to find it first. It's one thing to understand *what* they are doing, it's quite another to track them down. They are trying to recreate experiments from the past. For them it is all about the resurrection of the Old Religion.'

'The Old Religion.'

'You sound doubtful, my dear.'

'It's died a long time ago. You place too much stock in a few fanatics.'

'Fanatics that have will and support. They will use forbidden technology to achieve their aims. And if they succeed, they will infect the city and even beyond?'

‘Beyond? There is nothing outside of the City but the wheat fields and the coast.’

Patron closed his eyes. ‘It’s just a figure of speech, my dear. The box alone is a banner, a standard around which the heretics would flock. It is a smoking gun and a call to arms for heretics that. Who knows how many of them there really are.’

Isabella stabbed the poker deep into the fire leaving it standing. ‘The Old Religion is gone.’ She spat. ‘Why bring back something that caused so much misery?’

‘Religions have a habit of changing their point of view, my dear. It is the *focus* of this religion that they want to resurrect. Their *God* has an attraction for many that think they should have more.’

‘Why not burn them all.’

What a delicious but impractical thought.

‘Unfortunately that would only encourage them. Martyrs are the last thing we need. No, you can’t fight an idea with sticks and guns, but you can encourage another to take its place.’

He had done that once before, many years ago. The survivors of the apocalypse had flocked to his side. They had listened in earnest to his teachings about the Saints. He had touched hearts that wanted desperately to change. It was Gregor

that had led the survivors in their fight for survival, for a place in a world where nothing remained. No law, no order. No belief any more. Gregor had changed that. He hadn't intended to, these things just happen. Out of discourse had come harmony. From despair had come Faith. From the smouldering fires the Saints and the Reliquary had risen.

The one thing that he had forgotten as time passed by was the nature of the beast. How quickly humanity reverts to its sinful ways when the threat has passed.

'Liam will find the Relic.' He assured her. 'He has a gift for prodding secrets out from under stones.'

'Your little Troll again.'

'My *little Troll* can come and go with anonymity. An invisible scalpel I can take to my enemies. Never doubt his value.'

Isabella scoffed. 'He's still a Troll.'

The car door slammed shut. Carlos had dropped him several streets from the club, probably just to piss him off.

‘Thanks guys, we should do it again sometime.’ Truth was that he shouldn’t have got into the car in the first place. What the hell had he just gotten himself into?

‘It was fun.’ He added as the car drew away. ‘Yeah, fun, fun, fun.’ He a little wave.

Street was empty and quiet. Trash cans were out and ready for the monthly recycle, not that much was ever wasted. You used and reused. This was the Labour Quarter of the City. Not much to look at but he guessed the occupants of all the old terraces were happy to be this side of the Line. Scout checked his watch. Rush time was over. Any earlier and this street would have been a hive of activity. Thousands making their way in the same direction. The big Monday migration where the adult population headed for the transit stations around the City. Most would be heading out of the city, south toward the Productivity Fields. Some were allowed to commute daily but most would stay out there for days. Long shifts and intense productivity were the norm. Sod that. Four days of hard graft for a few dollars and a

food pack. Not for him. Besides, he liked weekdays in the City. They were so much quieter than the weekends.

He half waved to an old woman watching from a window.

Take a good look you Nosey cow. That was as far as the thought got when he heard a voice, not from a window but the tarmac behind.

‘Hey handsome.’

A second voice.

‘Why didn’t you introduce your friends?’

The smell of strong perfume and bad cigarettes had already made their way to his senses telling him everything that he needed to know. Girls from the club, heading home after a long night.

‘I expect you’ve met them before.’ He said. ‘Xala.’ Of course it was. Her nickname was ‘the Mouth.’ A title she held for more than one reason. And she was with the new girl.

What was her name?

‘Does your mother know you’ve been out all night?’

The Mouth scowled.

‘That bitch taught me everything I know.’ The tight eyes and awkward stance oozed a night of alcohol. If it wasn’t for the pretty brunette’s arm, whose name he still couldn’t remember,

she'd probably have fell on her arse. 'Got time for a quickie... Scouty?' The rocket fuel in her veins made her head roll with drunken amusement. 'Special rates for old mates.'

'I don't have the time and we're not friends.'

'There was a time when you weren't so fussy.' She tried to look bored of the conversation. 'Just cos your woman did you for nothing it don't change what she was.'

The waspish remark pricked his skin. The childish giggling that erupted between the two of them riled him further. She was jealous that was all. Xala blamed him for breaking her friendship with Chia. They'd been tight as a knot when he'd first met them. She still believed he'd killed his wife. No smoke without fire, right? Truth was that some people were meant to stay in the gutter. He didn't welcome the touch of her finger on his neck, running from chin to chest and then prodding him hard.'

'She was too good for you. I'm too good for you.' She should have stuck to words. 'That hurts. Mother... Fuc, aargh, aargh, that hurts.'

'You're a pretty girl Xala. Shut your mouth and walk away before I change that.'

'Bastard.' She slurred and yanked her finger free. A torrent of profanity spilled from drink fuelled lips. Scout wasn't

listening. He'd caught movement from a third storey window. Other curtains were twitching too. He tuned into the neighbourhood watch aware of something more than Xala's anger. He turned, and saw.

'Xala.' Scout pointed back down the road.

'Shit, come on Tai.'

Tai, that was her name.

'You girls be good now.' He called after them unsure that he could recollect anyone ever sobering up quite so quickly. Tai half dragged Xala away, and gave him the finger.

He was tempted to follow as four Jag now loitered on the corner a block away. One spoke on the hard-line as the others watched. Not a good sign, the phone in a box, they were all over the City. Use them at your peril, there was always someone listening. They were known as wagging tales, due to the excessive length of chord from the handset and the real reason they were so prominent. Press nine for a direct line to the Commission. There was always money to be had in denouncing heretics, or neighbours that sin.

Scout slipped the envelope into the back of his trousers and pulled his shirt down tight. Maybe they'd ignore him, maybe not. The lead Jarig had ended his brief call. Nice, they were heading

straight toward him. What was it; was there a sign pointing down above his head? *Stop me, I'm suspicious.* Whatever, there was no chance of sloping off now, he fell foul of the Falcon stare. It was the uniform, the black grey fatigues, all tinged with intimidation and topped with a blackcurrant berry. The Commission must have found a warehouse full of them, there were more and more on the streets. Now he watched with real dismay as their guns were unhitched to a man, and re-directed toward him.

Another poster sprang to mind.

Wear the emblem.

Serve the State.

Dispense the Law

The words were blazoned on posters all over the City and usually stamped above someone's idea of a heroic pose. Nobody messed with you when you wore the uniform. Even hard core Duma crossed the street.

The quartet was en-route and daring him to play chicken. A neat line fanned out across the road ahead. They were trying to spook him, daring him to make a run. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction. Nobody would argue that they kept the peace, but

they also kept you in your place. Most people they just scared shitless.

For the good of the people.

By order of the State.

Join the Arrogant Bastards.

He had added the last bit with a brush, more than once as a kid.

Too late to avoid them it would only look suspicious. Not that they needed an excuse.

Just walk on by, mind your own business, and don't get arsy with them when they stop you.

Initial contact came with intimidation, tactics well rehearsed. It was okay, he had nothing to hide. Not today.

Two Jag split from the others their Numero Uno stayed a yard ahead. He raised his hand.

'Take a moment please citizen.'

How many times have I heard that before?

Numero Uno was fresh faced and blue eyed. Two fingers beckoned Scout to attend. He couldn't have been more than late teens. Bet his mum still wiped his arse. Kid was a lifer, for sure.

This one had been brought up in the Corp since childhood and raised to wield his authority like a big fat stick. He'd seen his type before, all tight arsed and top buttons shining. Even the machine pistol he carried was unnaturally clean. Scout recognised the hard searching gaze of the eyes. A projection of the true conviction of his work, allied with the power of the shirt he wore. He had a stare that could tear through insecurity, and hammer apart lies.

‘Where are you going, citizen?’ Uno asked.

‘For a walk.’ Scout replied. ‘It’s a beautiful day.’ That was the truth; it was blue skies and diamond white clouds, if a bit chilly. ‘I’m just taking in the sights.’

‘In the Labour district? You like dirty brickwork and boarded windows?’ He didn’t mention the twitching curtains. ‘Tag.’ He did the thing with his fingers again. ‘Why aren’t you working like a good citizen?’

Cos I’m not a good citizen, you fuck head.

‘Special dispensation.’ Scout replied.

He dutifully offered his forearm the cuff of his sleeve already lifted in anticipation. It was never a bad idea to appear compliant.

‘Nothing I’d like better than a hard day in the fields, officer. Seriously. It breaks my heart to see the others leave me behind. But I’ve got dispensation.’ Scout reached over his shoulder and pointed. ‘Right here. Can you see? Just there in my neck. It’s a damaged ligament in my posterior atlas. It’s awkward to see, but if you look, just here...’ He started to undo his collar. ‘Just in here, in the lower neck region between the c1 and c2 vertebrae. All I have to do is sneeze too hard and...’ A click of his fingers. ‘I get immediate asphyxia, and you get the paperwork.’

Their lack of sympathy was touching.

Numero Due was bigger and harder faced, but somehow less intimidating. Not the same crisp sharp look that his superior held. Doubtless he was pissed off that a kid got to boss him about all day. A scanner passed roughly over Scout’s Tag. A needle thrust out for a nanosecond and stabbed through to the lower dermis. A tiny skin sample was ripped away as a red light flashed on the upper dermis to read the ink.

‘I work for the State in the Outreach programme. It’s important work.’

The job was real, at least on paper if not in practise. Dok had arranged the position to keep him out of trouble in situations like this.

‘I do my bit for the community. I’m not as important as you gentlemen, obviously.’ He went into puppy mode and smiled like a moron. ‘But it is important. I love my job. I bet you love your job too.’ He reached out to touch the Uno’s ebony collar only to have the hand slapped away.

‘Apologies. It’s the uniform. I always wanted...’

The scanner beeped. Test was positive. Numero Due read from the small screen.

‘That’s disappointing, he’s for real. An Outreach worker with a Commission Permit to fund food aid for under privileged kids. Frigging hand-outs.’ Due dropped Scouts arm. ‘If they want food stamps tell them to try honest work in the fields.’

‘Yes, that’s what I tell the mothers. Hard work is good for the soul.’ Scout took a nervous step forward; some fidgety handwork lowered his sleeve. He reached out again toward Uno’s shirt, and then changed his mind.

‘I’ve got an hour, almost two before my shift starts. Don’t suppose I could hang out with you guys? Just for while. I promise I won’t get in the way.’

Okay, they didn’t have to be like that about it. He wasn’t diseased or anything.

‘Thank you Officer. May the Saints smile on your endeavours?’

‘I said, *move along*, citizen.’

Sure. What else could he do but comply. Making sure a took the direction opposite to theirs. Numero Due needed to work on his public skills and scanning technique. It felt like he’d stuck a fork in his arm making his Tag sting.

Twenty lines with a dozen numbers tattooed into the skin. No more than an inch and a half long, by half as much wide. It was a bar code that acknowledged your entire life at the flash of a laser light. A seditious tool if ever there was one.

Fucking hypocrites.

The skin prick was for DNA to confirm the scans authenticity. The light read the bars inked into the skin. Tags were a present from the State, non negotiable and non refundable. You were inked on your fourth birthday, like it or not. Everyone had one, no exceptions. They got added to as you got older. For some it was essential, to others it was a chain. There were those that wore it as a centre piece for a much larger ink to make the Tag more acceptable. Cool even.

There, the pain was gone, all rubbed better.

A brisk walk down narrow streets and Scout arrived at the Odyssey. He liked this part of the city. It wasn't the claustrophobic nature of the tall buildings, or the peeling masonry of everything that was Pre-War. It was the ancient architecture that still survived. That wove itself into the here and now. This part of the city still had the echoes of a glorious past. Scout hammered his fist on the metal plates covering the door that barred him, making a few echoes himself. A peep hole slid open.

'Open up its cold out here.' He said.

The hole closed as quickly as it had opened. Large bars shifted in unison and the door opened inward. A sallow boxer's face greeted him. Puffy eyes with dark circles looked him up and down like he had X-ray vision. His big squat nose twitched and told the tale of the man's former profession.

'Hey handsome.' Greeted Scout. 'I've come to see the old man.'

The burly bald headed doorman nodded toward the end of the corridor. 'He's where he always is... arsehole.'

That would be the table at the rear of the club. Two chairs parked horizontal with an eye line toward the entrance. Dok's chair the one facing the entrance. Only one guest would be seated at a time. Split level flooring gave good vantage toward the entrance when things were quiet.

'I hope you aint forgot his money.' Baldy added. 'The man's not in a good mood this morning.'

Money? What money?

'What mon...?' A sudden recollection stabbed the oncoming words in the back. He *had* borrowed from Dok last week. Shit, he really should start to write things down.

'Got something better.' No stopping that statement coming out.

'Something better than money? Stay there.' Baldy jarred the peep hole closed and bolted the door. 'Okay, I'll take you in. I might enjoy this.'

'Have faith. Me and Dok, we're like this.'

'The man's got rules,' he deliberately cricked his tree trunk of a neck, 'don't matter who you are. You know that.'

Two hundred and forty pounds of tattoo covered Rottweiler lead Scout into the club. His demeanour was a little too polite, a

little too eager. Two more heavy set bouncers emerged. Both men armed with rifles and a dire grin.

‘Where you been, Scout.’ Dumb, talked like he looked. Scout had pet names for them all. He easily slipped the mallet hand that attempted to halt him.

‘Don’t fucking touch me.’ He said, and meant it. They only did it to wind him up.

‘Hey, he’s grumpy today.’ Mused Dumber, who was slightly taller than Dumb. They had to be related.

‘Back off before I put my foot through your knee and give you a permanent limp. Then your leg can imitate your mouth.’

Dumber closed ranks with Dumb.

‘Stop fucking around and make a hole for the man.’ barked Baldy.

One thing you could be sure of with Dok. He kept more muscle on site than most State buildings. All of them armed and very proficient in the art of growling and cussing.

‘Hey Baldy, these guys make the place look *soffistikated*.’

Dumb and Dumber were still breathing down his neck as he walked out into the hub of the Odyssey. It was a club that never slept. Even at this hour there were well healed patrons lounging and enjoying the down time. Well worn expressions beaten into

them by the excess' of the previous night, when this place had rocked. He took a slow look around. Curtains were still drawn for privacy in the booths. A dozen or so punters still occupied the snugs and the girls. Nice girls clad in tall boots and short skirts, tight tops that fronted ample cleavage. You could talk and stare, maybe even hold hands if you missed your mummy. But you couldn't touch the more vital statistics. Those were the rules, and no-one dared to break them. You wanted extras you went upstairs to see Xala and her friends.

Xala? He didn't like the woman but it was difficult to look down on her, on any of them. He'd rolled in enough shit in his time to understand that everyone had to make a living. Top side was a better living than most. It was a palace lined with leather and lace, dim lights and comfy bedding. A party playground where the wine and women flowed, everything a man could wish for, if he had the cash.

Baldy followed him through the club. The parquet floors had been cleaned recently, nice job. The trail offered differing routes between tall Corinthian columns. The club had twenty seven of them downstairs, even more Topside. They stood like rose topped sentinels in a vast arena. Each pillar accepting its share of the weight levied by three circular domes above. He only knew

they were Corinth's because Dok had told him. Dok had told him, at least twenty times, that the Odyssey started life as a place of worship for the Old Religion. Not that anyone here gave a shit. But Dok was a student of all things Pre-War. He liked to educate.

The ceilings were a buzz. It was difficult not to appreciate the passion levied in creating the scenes. He wasn't a fan of the subject matter. Small chubby children playing trumpets were an oddity, and he'd never connected with the crowds of Sainly onlookers. Not his sort of thing. What he did appreciate was the thousand man hours of laid back pigment brushing to create the characters, and the near perfect cloud filled skies. Dok said they were over a thousand years old.

Can you imagine? A thousand years?

Today he barely noticed any of it. He was trying not to stare at the lights still flashing about the room, the soft base of the music thumping in harmony. It would have been louder last night, no doubt about that. There were enough lights flashing about the Odyssey to poke an eye out. The dance floor was a writhing pleasure of hot talent that was usually *available*. It was a club for well heeled Does and Stags to rut their stuff. This place smoked after dark.

He loved it, and gave a nod to Jamel behind the bar. It was returned with pursed lips and a shake of the head. Not a good sign. No pause of the sandy coloured hands as his cloth continued to clean glasses. Behind his busy frame was another sight to take pleasure in. Scout stopped following Baldy and took a moment to enjoy the mural. It was vast, covered the entire wall. The bloody thing was bigger than his apartment.

“Homage to the bearded Titan.” That was its title.

The God of the Sea stood atop two powerful waves, trident in hand. A dozen or so strange creatures reeled in the surf paying homage to the bearded titan. Dok had had it lovingly restored, he understood why. It was a powerful image with the lights flashing across its surface.

‘He hasn’t got your money, Boss.’

Nice... Thanks Handsome. He’d intended to put it a bit more could have waited.

‘Want me to take him out the back. Give him a shake. Go through his pockets?’ Baldy’s face said more. *Can I, huh, huh, Can I?* He was busting a gut with anticipation. And Scout thought they were friends.

Most likely Baldy was teasing, but you never could tell.

‘I’ve told you before, Baldy. Scout has special dispensation. Besides, our friend here is financially solvent and free to clear his debt. You are here to pay your debt?’

‘Would I forget?’ Scout jutted his face toward Baldy and moved his head back and forth to the music’s rhythm. ‘Would I forget big boy... Would I?’ Scout gave Baldy a face full of sarcasm and then placed a handful of notes on the table.

Aww, muscles was disappointed.

Baldy was a man that preferred people not to pay up. Not that his disappointment stopped him from plucking up every note and checking for payment in full.

‘One, five, twenty seven.’ Scout was helping. ‘Six, nine, four. Need help counting, muscles?’

The Rottweiler’s scowl suggested.

‘It’s all here, Boss. Want me to put it in the usual place?’

Confirmed with a nod.

‘Oh, and the Bum said he had something *better* than cash.’

Would he let someone else make an announcement? Scout gave Baldy a *fuck you* stare, then plucked the cream bag from the tight fit in his pocket.

‘Sniff that and tell me I’m not worth all the trouble.’

Baldy took the bag. He teased one corner at a time.

‘What is it?’ Baldy asked.

‘I crapped in a bag and thought of you.’

Big man was still wary. He sniffed, tentatively at first, and then closer. His nose increasingly intrigued by the smell.

‘Boss, this is coffee.’

‘It’s the kind of beans they say doesn’t exist any more.’

‘Is it real?’ Baldy looked hopeful. ‘Take your fucking hands off the bag, you know I’ve always liked you.’

‘He was kidding about taking me out the back, right?’

Dok shrugged. ‘You know Baldy, all smiles and sense of humour.’

Yeah, right. Captain Neanderthal had a crusty candy shell and a soft chocolaty bit in the centre. Still, the coffee would smooth out their differences, for now.

‘I trust you drove a hard bargain?’

‘Bargain?’

‘With the Preacher.’

‘I only left the psycho an hour ago.’

One thing that remained constant was the old man’s enigmatic features. He could set them in stone; you’d never know what he was really thinking. A well practised poker face. The man was a good seventy plus with shoulder length hair. The white ones *had* gone a shade more rampant than highlights over the years. He had a stony gaze, all flint and no sparkle. He was always brisk and businesslike, even when he liked you. The girls that worked the club reckoned he was handsome. They should know. Apparently Dok’s strong jaw line and steely eyes could still work their magic. Apparently he had a cheeky grin.

Dok wasn't grinning now.

'You accepted the job?' He asked.

How the hell do you know? Scout seriously wondered whether Dok was somehow hardwired into the grapevine and maybe the psychic hot line too.

"*Whom?*" He remembered how the Preacher had corrected him. "*Highly recommended... By whom?*" He hadn't bothered pushing for an answer he didn't think would come. Besides, he hadn't really cared; they might have wanted a finder's fee.

A job was a job, right?

'It was you that gave my name to the Preacher. Why?'

'You need the work.'

'Bullshit. I could work here full time.'

'You'd be bored in a week.'

'I'd be more likely to keep my fingers. Look, we're attached.'

A granite faced stare.

'What's going on Dok? You could've just asked me to go see him.'

'I could have. But would you have gone?'

'No.'

'Then you just answered your own question.'

In all the years since they had known each other Dok had never taken advantage of him like this. Sure, he was a bad ass when he needed to be, down right vicious if the situation required. And there were countless pots the old man pissed in, most of which Scout knew nothing about. He was a serious player. But this was out of character for the man. Dok was big on loyalty to the people he trusted. The kind of fidelity a man earns, that isn't paid for. This was definitely out of character.

'What's the box got to do with you?' Scout asked. It was the only thing that made sense.

'Not answering that question will keep you safe. Scout, I have to ask you to trust me.'

'Okaaay. What do you need?'

'I need you to find the item that the Preacher has lost.'

'It was stolen. And to steal it from a viper like that it must be valuable. Oh, and let me guess. You don't want me to give it back to him if I find it.'

There it was. The first smile that Dok had parted with since Scout had sat down. 'That's what I like about you.' Dok tapped his forehead. 'You see things very clearly.'

'Yeah? Well I'm not seeing too clearly at the moment. What it is that I've just jumped right into the middle of? Oh and here's

another thought that comes to mind. Whoever's got the balls to steal from a Duma nut job needs serious respect, and the utmost of consideration. Have you got any thoughts on that?'

Dok's face suggested not. Scout needed a minute to think.

Scout waved toward the bar. Not to Jamel, he was still too busy pretending his ignorance, but to one of the regular staff at the club, Sasha. A shy smile winged its way back to him. He liked that. He liked her. She picked up a tray with two glasses already prepared.

Sasha was in her early to mid twenties. Slim and well curved, all smiles and blonde hair. There was freshness about her, an innocence that marked her out amongst the other girls. She tended bar, mostly, sometimes working in the kitchens. She put up with a hundred stags a night trying to hit on her and had never once said yes. Damn, she was cute as a button.

Sasha and him, they had a sort of history. She lived upstairs on the top floor. It was a room with a great view and not just from the window. Sometimes, when he worked the bar and the door downstairs she would let him stay. It was easier to walk upstairs than make the hike back home. He'd lost count of the times he'd awoken to her burning breakfast clad in nothing more than the bra and shorts she'd slept in. Sometimes just a shirt

and he had to try real hard not to peek below the hem. They'd never slept together, nothing like that. Scout always spooned with the fluffy pillows on the couch and was just grateful for her company. She asked for nothing and gave a lot in return.

He watched the way she approached. There was something hidden in her subtle movements. Scout instinctively felt for the envelope that Carlos had begrudgingly thumped into his chest. There was something about her walk, no, not the walk. It was something else.

'It's a bit early for you.'

Was she chastising him?

He ignored the words but registered the touch of her hand as she placed the glass down. She set the other one down not nearly so close to her employer.

'Anything else I can get for you?' She asked.

Scout motioned her closer and whispered loud in her ear. Sasha smiled and looked toward Dok who nodded. She gave Scout a warm grin and left. A minute later the throb of the lighting stopped and the music changed to a soulful ballad. A dozen people became momentarily disorientated. Not too much, just a raised eyebrow, a bored lift of the head and a shifting buttock or two. They'd get over it.

‘I don’t know where you get that shit from but I tell you it’s bad for the brain.’ He squeezed an imaginary ball between his hands. ‘Incessant thumping of baselines,’ he said, ‘it makes the brain cells clump together.’ Right now he needed to think.

‘She likes you, you know that.’

‘Everyone likes me. It’s a gift.’

‘You know what I mean. Sasha, she’s a nice kid.’ Dok waited for a reply. It wasn’t forthcoming. ‘You two would be good together.’

Not this again.

‘Maybe it’s time for you to move on?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘You need to get your head out of the past?’

‘Mind your own fucking business, Dok.’

‘Watch your mouth.’

Tread softly, he means well. He just doesn’t understand.

‘I’m not ready, okay.’ Scout lifted his drink. ‘Just business, okay?’ The shot was downed in one and the glass jarred hard on the table. ‘Are people I don’t know going to try and kill me?’

‘You can always walk away. You could let the Preacher know you’re no longer available.’

‘That’s good.’ Sarcasm was his forte. ‘Hey psycho, I don’t want the job now. Silly me. Oh by the way, I spent some of the money. You’re not mad at me are you?’

What made the situation worse was Dok was making no attempt to pressure him. But then he’d already done that with the initial reference. *Very smart*. But why hadn’t he just come and asked? The Preacher was bad shit but that didn’t mean he’d have turned Dok down. It would just have been nice to been given the choice.

‘No guilt trip then. Not gonna say I owe you?’ Scout didn’t need an answer. ‘Are you in trouble?’ He asked.

Silence.

It was the only thing that made sense.

‘He said it was old; something from the past. Is that what the Preacher had, something from *your* past?’

‘I can tell you that it’s old. But it’s not the past that makes it so important. It’s the future.’

Great. Let’s continue the conversation in riddles. He loved it when the old man did that.

‘Are you going to tell me what it is?’

No reply

‘Going to tell me why the Preacher wants it so bad?’

Still nothing.

'Gonna say anything?'

'Will you find the box, and will you bring it to me?'

'Yeah. Did you think I wouldn't?'

Scout tried to read Dok's eyes but had his own stare bounced back. There wasn't a flicker of emotion but you could bet there was plenty going on in the man's head. Problem was he didn't know what. They'd been through a lot together over the years. No way Dok would fuck him over. No way... right?'

'Show me the photos.'

Scout shook his head. 'Why? You probably know what's on them already.' Now was as good a time to check them over as any, he supposed. 'I haven't looked at them myself yet. Carlos was in my face. He's got an attitude problem that one.'

The envelope came out like a State warrant held for Dok to see. The lip was slipped open and a dozen stills slid out onto the table.

'Freeze frames of the intruder. Not much to go on when the subject blacks himself out like some ninja assassin. The Preacher was lucky he was visited by a thief and not an assassin.'

'He's white.' Dok peered at a photo through a small magnifying glass. 'There's a break between the jumper and the glove.' He picked them up at random. 'Is this all you have? No shots of the stolen item?'

‘No, it went straight into the bag behind the safe door. These are the best of the bunch. I’ll have Rubi take a look. See if he can find any more detail.’

‘Rubi?’

‘If there’s something to find, *he’ll* find it.’ Scout took the photos and placed them in order of sequence. ‘What else do you see?’

‘Nothing. Do I take it that you see something different?’

Scout pushed the photos closer to his friend and moved them back into sequence. ‘Look at the body language. Our thief has a most interesting demeanour. Look at the movement through the frames. I think that our *he...* is a *she.*’

‘You can tell that from the photos?’

‘It’s a gift.’

Scout slid the prints back into a single pile and they disappeared back into the envelope.

‘Now I have to find a highly skilled, white female thief, in a city of thousands. I’m going to need help.’

‘Anything.’

‘No, you stay out of this for now. Besides, I don’t want you lying to me. If I need anything I’ll call.’ The envelope went back

inside his shirt. 'I'll go see Rubi. Get the picture's into more detail, see what I can find.'

'Are you sure about Rubi? I thought you and he had a...'

'A misunderstanding, that's all. He's a complicated character, a little unpredictable but not unhelpful. Don't worry, he likes me. Everybody likes me, you know that.' He stood. 'One last thing. I got you a present, though I'm not sure you deserve it.' Clever fingers interlaced themselves in the rhythmic manner of a magician plying his trade. They reopened to reveal his open palm, and a pen. 'I know you like old things.'

'It's beautiful. Do I want to know where it came from?'

Scout shook his head. 'The previous owner had plenty. Reckon he'll have a fit when he misses it.'

'And that amuses you.'

'Hey, it's got a nice *smoooooth* action.' Scout scrawled the tip in the air. 'Clips made of... something nice. I liked the colour. Blue, just like the sea. It goes with your eyes.'

'Lapis.' Dok said. 'The clip is made from Lapis. It's a semi precious stone used to make jewellery in the old days.'

'I'm just glad you like it.'

Dok was a collector just like the Preacher. Almost anything that dated back before the Wars got their attention. These sorts

of trinkets, the personal kind, were most important. They could fetch good money from the right buyers. But now was not the time for driving hard bargains. It gave him pleasure to see how the old man savoured the object.

‘I have something for you too.’ Dok nodded to the bar.

‘Baldy will do the honours.’

Meeting was over then.

‘I’ll call when I know something.’

Three steps led down to the main floor as the music changed unexpectedly. A sharp increase in volume propelled an aggressive thump thumping out from invisible speakers. Baldy stood by the volume controls, a steaming mug raised in his hand.

Smug bastard slid a brown bag across the counter. Ooh, Scout liked pressies. He was tempted to make some cool meaningful moves to the rhythm as he crossed the floor, but restrained himself.

‘Thanks.’ The package was heavy.

Baldy forced a grin as he picked it up. The big man casually pointed toward the exit. This was good. They were bonding.

Scout left the Odyssey by the door he had entered.

‘Baldy!’

The tattooed Rottweiler responded immediately to Dok's voice taking long even strides to his Boss' side. Eyes still fixed toward the exit to make sure that Scout had left.

'Empty the Club, Baldy. I'm going to the office and I don't want to be disturbed. Not for any reason.'

'Sure. Is there a problem, Boss?'

'No.' He said. 'I think everything is going to work out just fine.'

It was definitely getting colder outside. This time of year meant bright skies and warm days but not today. Scout stayed off the road and took one of the tight knit streets that honeycombed this part of the City. It kept him out of what little sunshine there was as he searched for some privacy. He had an old friend to welcome and it was best done without prying eyes.

It was easy to lose yourself in the Work Quarter it could be a claustrophobic place; its streets narrow and winding with tall buildings rising three or four storeys on either side. A hundred wash lines crisscrossed the old architecture a few garments hanging out in the cold. He'd often wondered if a fit man could jump from one rooftop to the roof on other side. Probably? Stupid idea more like. If he ever found himself in the position of having to prove that theory he'd definitely take the stairs.

This whole area was dank and grey. The once beautiful bricks and masonry were shelled badly from years of damp and frost. Streets of mortared joints now rampant with moss flaked what little paint remained. In a few hours these streets would become a hive of migrant workers returning home from the

fields. It would buzz with anticipation and stink with the odour of sweat from manual toil. For now it was eerily still and empty. That was exactly what he desired.

Scout stepped from the street into a dark spot between two buildings. No prying eyes to watch as a steady hand unfolded the paper and his fingers slipped about the handle of the gun.

Glock, Austria. Two words stamped on the barrel.

Fingering the two clips adjacent, he checked that both were fully laden with their 10mm rounds. He liked the 10mm, harder hitting, brute stopping power. If your going to shoot someone, make sure they fall over at the first attempt. It was a simple theory. He liked it. One clip was slipped into his pocket the second placed into the slick housing inside the weapons grip. He clicked it home and put Mr Glock inside his belt tight against the small of his back. Barely had the metal touched his skin when instinct and reaction fuelled its return. Movement behind, someone was there. Skulking unseen and hiding in the shadows. Shit, he'd inadvertently stumbled into someone else's quiet space.

'Show yourself.' He called out being careful not to attract further attention. He received no answer.

It may be quiet in the Quarter but there were still people living in the surrounding buildings. Maybe he should just leave. Go quickly. No harm done.

Not going to happen.

Both head and gun twitched at the darker places keen to search each recess. There was nothing. A quick check of the alley and he moved toward where he'd pinpointed the sound. He moved further into the darkness to find a small courtyard half bathed in sunshine but hidden from the street. The Glock swept the area at eye level searching for the intruder.

'I won't ask you again. Come out where I can see you.'

'Please, don't hurt us.' The voice was female and young. 'We don't want any trouble, please.'

'Then step out where I can see you.' Pulse had jumped up by at least twenty beats. Further caution helped his eyes to adjust. He could see better now. There was a woman crouched alone in an alcove trying to remain invisible in the gloom.

'You said we? Who else?'

The woman looked petrified. It was difficult to see her face for her hands and she refused to look directly at him. Slowly one hand was extended toward the dark and beckoned. Scout lowered the gun. Just enough to reduce the threat as another smaller

figure came into view. A small child. She moved slowly and deliberately then wrapped her arms around the woman.

‘Don’t hurt us,’ she pleaded again. ‘We’re no threat.’

Scout would decide that not her.

‘Then do as you’re told. Come out into the light where I can see you.’

They refused. The Glock rose again applying maximum intimidation.

‘Now.’

It was the woman that complied, reluctantly.

The moment her features hit the light he saw why she was hiding, and not just from him. From anyone that might see her. He took a step back.

Stem user. Pretty far gone by the looks.

No wonder she’d kept to the dark recesses. She’d seen him coming and probably prayed that he’d stop anywhere but where he did. For a moment he didn’t know what to do. The law said he had to turn her in. They’d kick her arse over the Line for sure. Take the child as a ward of the Commission. Probably be doing the kid a favour. This far from the Line she was definitely being hidden. Family probably, who else would care? Poor sod probably just came out for some air.

Bad luck for him and for her.

It was bad image, barely any colour left in her skin. The eyes had begun to sink. That's why they called them Ghosts. He gave her the benefit of the doubt and assumed that she was ill; the Stems had probably been a lifeline. That was how some of them got started on the habit, but not all. How she looked now was how all of them ended up, sallow and haunting. This woman didn't have long left. His lips were suddenly dry.

'What was the diagnosis?' He asked as the Glock was lowered down toward the ground, finger still present on the trigger. The woman turned away. The child looked up at him for the first time still holding tight to her mother, all big brown eyes, bold as a bear. If she was frightened she hid it real good.

'Leukemia.' She said a bit too aggressively for a child. Her tone was pumped full of crap childhood and youthful hostility. It was hardly natural for a child not yet ten. Tough break... for them both.

There were many reasons for the use of Stems. The child's mother had the sad pitiful look that suggested long illness. Not the crazed jack in the box expression of a recreational user.

'Please don't tell anyone about us.' Daughter tugged mother by the hand. The kid was taking control of the situation. 'Please.'

This was not what he needed right now. Let them go. Not his concern. He watched as the child pulled her mother back into the dark place he had found them.

‘Please.’ A heartfelt plea had replaced the anger.

He *should* turn them in. The woman wouldn’t have to hide any more. The kid would be better off... maybe? To cap it off he was getting angry at own his indecision. Stems were a festering sore on the City. He loathed the people that used them, no matter what the cause. They were a blight.

Mouth still dry he backed away. Not his problem. The weapon was returned to the small of his back. Besides, it would be tough to explain the gun even with all his bullshit.

Just before Scout entered the alley again he took a last look at the shadows. Nothing but dark and empty space to see from the street but he could feel their wary eyes watching him, still frightened that he would turn them in.

Fucking Stems.

He took cash from his pocket and placed it between two loose bricks in the wall, looked back, and then walked away.

‘No.’ Illuminai banged his hand hard down onto the table. ‘We must continue the status quo between the State and the Duma. Do nothing to antagonise the situation. Am I clear.’

The subject was the Line again. Many of the Prime Legates who sat in the Grand Assembly were unhappy at their Patron’s decision, at his refusal to let the Jarig cross the Line. Imposing Commission will at the point of a gun was popular around the grand circular table.

Of the twelve that made up the Assembly only eight were present and that was eight too many as far as Patron was concerned. They continued to argue with each other beneath the ornately plastered ceiling. Whitewashed walls between limestone block-work cared nothing for their dissent. The ancient walls had seen many *Great men* pass in their presence. Even the alabaster statues of the Saints, present in the recesses, seemed to turn their heads having heard it all before.

‘The assembly agreed.’ Stax, the shortest of the six Prime Legates could barely hide his anger. With arms folded like a petulant child he pulled the ceremonial cassock tight around his chest. He was a man used to having his way. He didn’t like

Illuminai blocking his will. Interference more like. ‘More housing is needed for my workers.’ He demanded. ‘Large areas must be conscripted and put to better use. It was agreed by every member of the Assembly here present.’

More vocal rumination as it seemed the others were equally as dissatisfied.

‘The inhabitants must be moved on.’ Stax insisted. He was an intense man at the best of times now his face reddened showing its angular design. He was up on his feet and pressing. ‘If they resist they must be arrested or conscripted for labour and sent to the fields. It was agreed, Illuminai.’

‘When *I* give the word.’ Patron motioned the Prime to return to his seat. ‘Until then *you* will be patient. And may I remind you all that the workers are ultimately subject to State regulation and not to the Commissions office for Works.’ He ran his eyes around the gathering to enforce the words.

The statement was true in theory if not in practise. Over the years the Commission had taken over almost all of the important State positions. Prime Legates once subservient to State officials now wore the hats of both politicians and religious leaders. It had made them fat, and enormously rich. It had made them powerful men.

Radan cleared his throat. ‘May we move on?’

A good many years sitting as Chair made it easy for him to move the focus of the Assembly. They accepted direction on most matters that didn’t directly concern them.

‘The population,’ he said, ‘has reached three hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants inside of the City. A further ten thousand live in the field stations or on the coast. The demand for power is causing concern for administrators at the power station.’ He hated the thought of the place. Saints forbid that he should actually have to go there in person. It was a dire, oppressive place, dirty and dangerous.

‘They seek permission to limit electrical supply through non City substations at weekends. Consumption by coastal dependencies is, and I quote, “unsustainable for the immediate future.”

Legate Gerald added his considerable voice to the proceedings. ‘Will this impede on our coastal productivity?’

Radan. ‘No. I have consulted with local Legates and am assured that Gold stock foods from coastal assets will continue as normal.

His Grace need have no fear. His fish and fowl will arrive on schedule.’ A murmur of amusement passed around the table.

‘Don’t worry Gerald; you won’t lose any of your girth. It’s just a question of redistribution.’ The tall gangly, Legate Freish, wasn’t prepared to miss an opportunity to insult Gerald. No love lost between the two.

Gerald. ‘Redistribution? Or a need to cut down to size?’

The two were fencing. If they weren’t stopped it would likely become a verbal brawl. Gerald was portly and had developed several chins over the years. Freish was the opposite, tall and thin of face. The man had no chin and deep set eyes that scowled even when he laughed, which wasn’t often. He was as excellent an exponent in the art of finance as Gerald was in logistics. Talents which had lifted them both to the positions they now held. It had been decided some time ago to sit the Legates at opposite ends of the table to reduce the threat of something more spiteful than mere rhetoric.

Radan pressed on.

‘As you all know.’ Radan looked enquiringly around the table. ‘The city’s allocation for power is coming up for its own annual reassessment. It has been suggested, by your Graces, that we increase the City Centre’s power allowance to a full one hundred percent. No further interruptions by blackouts between the hours of midnight and four am. Of course to attain the new

quota, cuts will have to be made in other areas.’ He raised his eyes peering above the slim glasses on his nose. Predictably, there were no objections. ‘Very well then. The Old Quarter is to remain at seventy percent. Labour and Housing districts to be cut by four percent and power to Downtown to be reduced from twenty percent to eighteen. Tram operations are to be unaltered.’ He didn’t bother to look up again and none of the Legates bothered to make verbal comment.

‘Motion, carried. The new allowances will be implemented by midnight on Saturday.’ He stroked his pen across the next two sheets.

Look at them. Patron was disgusted. When was the last time any one of them left their comfortable lives and walked out amongst the people? Every man here was in league with the Duma, content to line their pockets with silver, and blood. Where had it all gone wrong? When did pious men become so immoral, so corruptable?

It was increasingly difficult even for him to curb their excesses. This Assembly was an abomination; he feared that the Reliquary would become a Petri dish in which Legates like this

would breed. Even *he* must now be careful of the men sat at this Assembly.

He watched them in silence as they spoke amongst themselves, listened to their odious drivel. All of them were there, the original sins, all sat at his table. They made him sick. The time had come for him to clean house. He would break them, each one of them, and cast them out into the wilderness. They were no longer acceptable as human beings.

Patron had great plans that he had shared with none of them. A new assembly of Legates would be chosen from the most faithful and devout. It would be Illuminai's gift to his people. He would go further. New laws would be passed that would limit a Prime's personal wealth but enhance their pious influence upon the population. Prayer would be compulsory for *everyone* at least twice a day. Schools will teach the words of the Saints from a younger age. His Jarig troops would end the trade of goods on the black market. *They* would ensure that every man child and woman ate from the same bowl. He would personally oversee the arrest and execution of the Duma Overlords.

Yes, he had plans, very detailed plans that would change everything. Patron would purge the city. Do what he should have

done a long time ago. Man was too excessive; he pandered too easily to his own needs.

He remembered a younger, different Patron. Gregor. There was that name again. He had been naive to believe that the love and admiration of good men and women would be enough to inspire the flock. To teach them that the old ways were wrong.

It was *he* that was wrong.

It had been a great presence of mind to make himself sole leader of the Jag when they had formed. A wise manoeuvre when to ensure that each member swore personal allegiance to him and not to the office he held. He trusted none of the men around the table. In truth he knew that they were working against him.

‘Patron?’

Radan was waiting for instruction. The Legates had become silent.

‘There are minor problems,’ Patron said, ‘that have come to my attention. I ask the assembly to be patient just a moment longer. You will get your land Brother Stax. And the Office for works will get its labour. The City’s expansion will take priority and receive my personal attention. Problems on both sides of the Line will be dealt with once and for all.’ That seemed to be agreeable judging by the nod of heads, from all but Stax.

Priorities had changed. The last thing Patron needed now was trouble on the Line, or with his Primes. He could hardly tell his Prime Legates the real reason why his attention must be elsewhere. He had no doubt at all that they would be tempted to seek out the box and use it for their own gain.

Use it to get rid of him.

Social upheaval now could see the box spirited away in the confusion. Matters of State were trivial in comparison. The meeting must move on.

‘What problems?’ Asked Stax,. ‘What can possibly be of more importance than this project? If Illuminai would allow one of us to oversee the...’

‘No. The subject is at an end, for now. Radan, move the meeting on?’

‘Yes, Illuminai. I must turn the Assembly’s attention to more menial matters. The supply of power from the city grid.’ The usual groans were let out. ‘If your Graces will give me their attention for a just few minutes more. Your Graces... please. Thank you.’

‘Independent generators.’ Radan tried to sound upbeat on the subject. ‘We have numerous applications for licences. The Licence office needs a decision on the numbers to be granted

this year. As I previously mentioned there is concern from the power station administrators and they are wholly in favour of any measures that will reduce demand. There will of course be a tax on their use.'

He received the usual grunts of agreement as the Legates attention waned.

'Also, the budget for the annual Saints fair in the city centre has yet to be approved. It has been suggested by Prime Tobias,' he bowed his head slightly to the elderly Legate at the far end of the table, who reciprocated, 'that we double the current budget. Would that be agreeable to the Assembly?'

It was. One thing they could all agree on was State funding of religious festivity. Radan moved on.

'May I have the Assembly's authorisation to increase production of Bio Fuel from wheat field number one's plant? The power station requires the extra fuel to meet demand. Surplus fuel will fall within the city's remit for re-distribution.'

Legate Tobias spoke again. 'May I suggest using one of our Duma contacts to maximise the distribution to the more *needy* in the city. It will save funds from our own meagre budgets.'

‘And increase your own profits.’ Patron had heard all the excuses before. It caused a backlash of protest, mostly muted, but vocal nevertheless.

‘One final item your Graces.’ Radan called out. He waved a piece of white paper in the air like a flag of truce. ‘We are receiving an increased demand for visas to allow workers from outside the Line to settle within the city. With your permission I wish to advise the relevant Clerks to filter out the undesirables by use of a new means test. Apparently people are lying on their applications.’

The levity was well appreciated and the growls turned to smiles and nodding heads.

‘Very well. The Assembly’s business is now concluded. As resident chair I declare this Assembly to be at an end.’

A squeak of chairs on the wooden floor and the declaration was confirmed.

The meeting had gone on for far too long. It had become tedious and tiring. It was not yet completely at an end as Patron placed himself in the vaulted doorway that led from the Assembly Chamber, the heavily studded door standing open.

Outside the passage forked in two different directions. There were no electric lights outside of the main working chambers of the Reliquary. Patron had long since insisted that they be removed. The endless corridors and personal habitats could only be lit by candles mounted in the stone. He felt it gave a more pious flavour to the building. Encouraged more thought and contemplation in its inhabitants. It also kept the visiting Primes from overstaying their welcome.

Patron welcomed the first of his Primes. At least he went through the motions. Wishing them all well as they left with a well practised smile.

‘It was good to see you Lagate Felin.’ He lied. ‘Saints be with you and your lovely wife.’ Though Patron doubted the tall gangly man with permanently flushed cheeks could actually remember what she looked like. He was a notorious womaniser

and father to a brace of bastard children. Indiscretions overlooked solely because of the man's position.

'The Saints be blessed.' Felin replied. He looked tense and concerned that he shouldn't be overheard. 'There are matters of a personal nature that I would like to bring to your attention. If you could spare me the time, Illuminai?'

'For you I will make the time.' Patron lied again.

What was it this time he wondered? Three decades a Legate and almost a fourth serving as a Prime, yet still his transgressions multiplied. He was a powerful man but weak of will and often spiteful of nature. They shook hands and shallow warmth was exchanged.

'A pleasure as always, Illuminai.' Stax bowed his head next and received his Patron's hand. He had such warm hands for a reptile. What a cold viper this man was. Look at him. He could cut a man's throat with his smile.

'A moment whilst we are alone.' Stax said and gave a slight pause as his sly mind began to calculate the appropriate words. 'Rumours of a distressing nature have come to my attention.'

'There are always rumours; we live in city full of gossips.'

'Of course. Then please forgive me for being direct but the rumours concern your health. The Assembly is concerned. I am

concerned, Illuminai. Concerned that you work too hard and share too little of your immense responsibilities. If I may be bold. You are looking increasingly burdened and it's not just myself or the Primes who have noticed. I understand there was an incident in the Reliquary; a number of the Novices were concerned by your... *behaviour.*'

Patron felt his pulse rise. *My Behaviour?* His fuse was lit. *I'll eat you for breakfast you contemptuous little shit.* He knew exactly what the Prime Legate was suggesting. Nevertheless he returned the man's silky smile and clasped his warm hand with both of his own. They shared a moment's gaze where Patron was sure Staz tried to probe his mind for weakness. The little man with the bad haircut and the snakes tongue could smell blood. Patron was sure of it. He had a good mind to strike Stax down, right there and then, for *he* was a prime example of what the Assembly had become. It was a snake pit of political intrigue and a vicious struggle for power. Was this what he had strived two lifetimes to achieve. Was this to be his legacy to the world?

He thought not.

Images of the past replaced Stax's gaze. He remembered how it had been all those years ago. He remembered how the people had come to *him*. How they had sought *him* out to receive his

words. All those years spent in hiding. Of preaching whilst the fires raged and the Plague devastated the population. It was his followers that had survived. It was his followers that had flourished and multiplied.

It was Gregor himself that had led them back into Oasis, this island City in a black sea of despair. It had been his vision and his voice that had ordered the bells to be tolled.

But he hadn't been able to do it on his own. He had raised a few good men, a Round Table, an Assembly of hope in a world that had soured and threatened to expire. But still, it had come to this, a gilded trough at which pigs now gorged themselves. A deep silent breath entered Patron's lungs as the flash of adrenaline faded.

'Illuminai? Is there anything that I can do? I have excellent physicians.'

'You lift my spirits with your concern, Brother. But be assured that I am in perfect health.' He squeezed hard at the smaller man's hand and stared back into his ice grey eyes. 'There is no need for your concern. As you can see I am well and have matters *completely* in hand.'

Both men gave a courteous smile and a bow of the head.

‘Of course.’ Said Stax. ‘I will pray to the Saints for your continued good health. Good day to you, Illuminai.’

Stax left.

Patron waited until the room was completely empty.

‘Radan.’ He motioned for the dutiful secretary to approach from the doorway. ‘Cancel all my appointments for the next two days.’

‘I will see to it, Illuminai.’

‘And I want you to take a message to Liam for me. Tell him that he is to leave immediately. Tell him that he is not return until he has found the woman. Go, he will understand.’

‘Yes, at once, Illuminai.’

Lya had no idea why it was so difficult to focus. Had she fallen asleep? No, that wasn't possible. Truth was she couldn't remember.

Walking, yes, she'd been walking. It was dark, and the stars were as bright as she'd ever seen them. She'd waved to the boys on the corner and passed the old man with the white hair out walking his little dog. He always had a smile for her, which was nice. Just two more corners and she would be home. Where were her keys, her hand had felt through her handbag feeling for keys. She could picture the scene vividly.

Footsteps, there had been footsteps. Not hers but someone else's, coming up rapidly from behind. It didn't cause concern, why should it. *Where were the bloody keys?*

Lya flinched. It was all coming back. Filling her head like a direful tune. The shock as strong hands grabbed her from behind. So powerful and so quick they gave her no time to shout or struggle. Something wet pressed hard against her lips. *No... No, let me go. Let me go.*

It was all so quick, so final.

Lya tried to sit up. Not possible. Why couldn't she move? Why did she feel so tired drained and tired? Nothing to do but stare upward and allow the strange reddish tinge to calm her eyes. Like squinting at the world through wine filled glasses. A sudden and fearful thought, did she have blood in her eyes?

A few more moments passed and the focus began to return. Things sharpened and became a lot clearer. That was better, much better. Though even blinking was difficult to do. Above her head something moved. It was a lamp, yes, definitely a lamp. It hung from the ceiling below a pendant shade. She could make it out now. The bulb at its centre blushed with a rouge coloured glow.

But why couldn't she move?

'You're awake. That's excellent. I thought you were going to sleep all day.' It was a cold desensitised voice.

Who's there? Lya asked. Only she didn't. It was all so confusing. The words stuck fast in her head and refused to leave her mouth. Why couldn't she move her lips or say the words out loud? Lya tried to lift herself again forgetting her limbs were would refuse to obey. She still couldn't move. She couldn't even twitch her head.

Please, who's there?

‘My apologies but I had to sedate you.’

The voice had switched to her right. There was more. She could hear metal objects being picked up and put down in close proximity.

‘It was the easiest way to assure your cooperation.’ The voice said. ‘Things will be a bit hazy but your head *will* clear. Oh, and let me apologise for the lack of light. I like to think of it as mood lighting, much better for us both to relax.’

Who are you? Where am I?

‘About now I expect that you’ve realised you cannot move. That’s because I have given you a very powerful muscle relaxant.’

Please don’t... don’t hurt me.

Lya was the only one that heard the desperate appeal.

The light above her stopped hurting her eyes as a gentle but strong hand turned her head. It was good to no longer have the light in her eyes. As they focused she could see a wall and cabinets, below was a work surface and sinks, two of them, both old and both stained from years of use. She could see a table just a few feet away. It was still difficult to focus without the ability to blink hard. One thing did stand out on its surface, an object stood erect. *Was that a bear?*

She swore that it was a child's toy, very old and worn. The fur was brown and patchy in places. It wore a small jacket and despite being only half turned she could just make out words on its back.

Ha... Harley... Harley Dav?

Lya couldn't see the rest and she didn't understand what the words meant. It was at the centre of a complicated arrangement, various types of metal objects. It was so much effort to move her eyes. Not that they really moved, it was more the focus than the eye itself.

No... Please, don't hurt me. I want to go home.

Too late, her vision had strayed from the bear. She wished it had stayed blurred but the images had sharpened. Become precise and deadly. The image gave her a chill that she couldn't feel and caused her to cry.

The table was covered in a large cloth. There were tools on the table but not screwdrivers or tapes. These were mean and seditious tools, they were surgical instruments and readied for use.

But for what? Panic leapt unleashed like a spark about her body.

What's happening? Why am I here? Please... I want to go home.

In her head she sounded like a petulant child demanding what she couldn't have. She wanted to jump up and run away but gravity pinned her down. She shrieked for help inside her mind. Why oh why wouldn't the words come out?

Something dark moved just out of her eye line. She refocused. A floating shadow that was difficult to describe. Slowly it registered in the reddish haze as a man. *Was he the person that had spoken to her?* A mask hid his face and a strange rounded cap covered his head. She could only see his eyes. They appeared red like the evil eye on a badly taken photo. *Was he a doctor? No, he looked more like a surgeon.* Fear gripped Lya as focus brought more detail. The man's hands held a large syringe. She tried to back away, tried to recoil from the long needle that had started down toward her face.

Lya didn't feel it but somehow she knew that the needle had been stabbed into her neck. It had been plunged deep into the tissue below the outer skin. Only the Prophets knew what this maniac had injected into her body. A sudden feeling of nausea seized her. The temperature in the room rose by ten degrees. It

became difficult to breath, like someone had covered her mouth with cloth with only tiny holes to suck at and gasp for air.

‘There, that’s all done now.’ The Surgeon said. ‘We just have to wait for a few minutes and you’ll be ready.’

Ready? Ready for what? Please don’t do this...

The Surgeon’s fingers grew like talons reaching for her face. They pulled open sagging eyelids and he came so close she could see tiny spots in his eyes. The man placed glasses with golden rims over his nose, he inspected her, and then turned her head away.

‘That’s right. Focus on Harley. I just need to check that there is no damage. No, it all looks good.’ He made close examination of her eyes, her mouth, and her ears. Then spoke in a language she had never heard before. Quietly muttering to himself.

‘Apologies.’ He said finally. ‘I was remarking that you are a very healthy specimen. I am very pleased to make your acquaintance.’

Lya was glad that he was pleased. Maybe he would let her go now? Maybe he wouldn’t hurt her after all?

‘This won’t take long. And in case you’re interested the injection I just gave you was a concentrated solution of

hormones. They'll be swimming about in your blood stream for the next little while, encouraging some very interesting chemical reactions within your body. Would you like to see?'

The light moved in and out of view again. This time her head was tilted to the left and what she saw reflected in the wall of glass opposite chilled her to the very bone.

Lya couldn't feel it but there was no doubt that it was happening as her vision began to blur again. Tears were streaming from her eyes.

Oh Misha. Please help me. Pleeese... help me. I don't want to die.

She tried to shout the frantic plea. Beg mercy from her favourite Saint. Force the deity to hear and do something to help. Wasn't Misha the mother of a dozen sons and a dozen daughters? She was Misha the Watchful, Misha the protector of a mother's womb. Lya was a good mother. She had three healthy loving girls. She was happily pregnant with another child sleeping in her womb.

Oh Misha, the baby? What will happen to the baby?

This couldn't be happening. It was a dreadful dream and she would wake up soon.

The reflection was one of horror. Lya lay prostrate on a metal table her ankles and wrists bound by leather belts. Her head was slightly raised and strapped back to ensure that no movement was possible. Someone had dressed her in a long plain gown that covered from her neck to her ankles. Only her eyes could move, just barely, and Lya wished that they couldn't. She didn't want to see, she didn't want to know. Didn't want to understand what the tubes were that this madman had inserted into her neck. She didn't want to know what evil procedure was being performed. What it was that was being slowly drained from her body, one singled drop at a time, falling into the jar on the floor? She just wanted to go home and see her children. Touch their pretty faces and hold them close one last time.

There was nothing else to do but stare at herself in the reflection. *Oh Misha*, she hadn't even done her hair this morning. Lya continued to cry.

The longer you stare at something the less you tend to see. That was how it was for Lya. She hadn't seen them at first... the others. Three... no... four women prostrate on tables. Each one strapped down with a neck pipe and a jar. Each head tilted, just like Lya. They were all staring at the mirrored wall.

Look at their eyes. They saw her too. They could see each other in the wall.

Lya tuned into their despair and for a moment she heard their screams. Lya began to scream too. In her mind the piercing shrieks reached into every corner of the city. She thrashed with her feet and arched at her back, all the time screaming for someone to come, someone to rip away the restraints and carry her away.

Help me. Pleeease, Misha... Senwin... Otwan...

Silent pleas for mercy screamed to any Saint that would listen. She was a good and faithful woman. She loved her husband she loved her children. She was faithful to the Saints. She didn't deserve this, she didn't deserve any of this.

For pity's sake, help me.

Reality enforced silence, a mind numbing and deafening calm. Five women captured on a canvas of glass. This was a mistake, a stupid nightmare, a case of mistaken identity. Lya ranted and felt her head would burst. Why was it so hot? Why couldn't she close her eyes and pretend this was a dream?

Oh dear Misha...

There was one final and gutting realisation. One obvious condition that all the victims shared and that she had failed to

notice. All of the women in the mirror were pregnant. It was then that Lya realised her abduction wasn't a mistake. The revelation traumatised her mind. She was lost and Misha wasn't going to save her.

No-one was going to save her.

No-one was going to save the baby that slept in her womb.

A quick breakfast was all Scout had wanted before he left. But what the hell, he'd made the effort to be sociable with Tass. Then left wondering why he had bothered. Last night the woman was uncharacteristically sympathetic, it hadn't lasted past the coffee when he had helped himself. Big mistake. Just because you give it to someone in the first place doesn't mean you can help yourself. She'd even threatened to move him downstairs into the basement. In with the two bottle washers from Langos, a local wine bar. Scout had left in a right mood. Walked to tram stop 131 and caught the first carriage going his way

Another half an hour and he would be calling on Rubi. Best hope that his mood had changed for the better after their last encounter. In between the silent arguments in his head he recognised an uneasy feeling about the job. He couldn't help but wonder if he was involved in something that was better left alone.

Guess it was too late to back out now.

Watching as the people got on and off helped. It always had as a kid. He guessed that the busy footplate and pole endured hundreds of citizens a day, a thousand in a busy shift. Personally

he liked the feel of the Carriage and the slow pace it provided. He'd ridden Carriages all his life, always sat at the back, watchful as others came and went. He'd been a *rider* as a kid. From one stop to the next each one taken just for the thrill. Hardly unusual, a lot of kids rode the Carriages. Being chased off was a big part of the attraction. Where did the years go?

Outside of the city centre this was the only way to get about. Cars were for the rich and the important. Fuel was State controlled, so were the permits. Cars were unnecessary. There were hundreds of these wonderful work horses ambling their way around the city. They gave continuity and flow to the human traffic, their diesel motors long since run dry of fossil fuel. The low geared engines now sucked in corn oil reaped out in the fields.

Tram one four two had its number painted on the wall. There was a route map to their right that was hard not to stare at it was so big. It was the only colourful object in the grey and black of the vehicle's interior. All the local routes were highlighted. Above it was an overview of the city, a mosaic of different coloured zones that made up the Northern Line. City centre didn't have a colour, he'd always wondered why? It was surrounded by different Quarters, each zone a different colour.

Orange was the pits, the Labour district. Workers were crammed, one family one room, sometimes two. He'd heard rumours about expansion for certain Quarters into areas on the other side of the river. The best kept secret in town. You'd have to start a war to make that happen.

Promotion was the carrot, advance yourself and you could move your entire family into one of the Public Housing sectors marked in yellow. One more step away from the north. It was a move towards prosperity and paradise, a little closer to City Centre.

Blue was the Old Quarter. Scout didn't much like to venture up there. Too close to Downtown where the air was filled with prayer and the streets with cassock clad snakes that slithered out into the city to spread the word. It was where the devout preached and the cults of the Saints flourished. It was a hole for the devoted to tumble into after dark.

Green left a different and far more palatable taste in his mouth. It represented the market districts and there were plenty of them. Bread, Soya, everything bland in the world was available at a hundred different outlets run by the Commission and the State. For a more varied diet there was nowhere else to go but the markets. They sold everything from raw insects to

meat and honey. Apparently even coffee was on the market if you knew whose palm to grease. Duma influence was especially heavy where the map was marked with green. It should have been black, for the markets they dealt in. The black market was awash with the little luxuries only the Duma could provide.

An old woman got on the tram and limped slowly in front of him breaking his train of thought. There were other seats but she fell lazily into the one next to him. The woman's arse took more than the seat could offer and squeezed his personal space in the process.

'It's a fine day.' She said and pulled the skirt of her dress out from where it had jammed between them. A jingle of effigies as the bracelets she wore jarred in the effort. 'Are you visiting or just riding?'

'What?' Scout glared at her. He counted a dozen Saints including the two that hung prominently from her ears.

'I'm off to visit my daughter.' She said. 'But sometimes I just like to ride.'

So it wasn't just a juvenile obsession. Open to all ages.

'You can call me Dabriel.'

'Why?' That was uncalled for. 'Why... that's a very nice name.' He really should think before he opened his mouth.

First she flattens me and now she wants to talk.

‘Alexander.’ He said and even managed a smile to go with the lie. This was good, he was being polite.

‘Going far?’ She asked with a needle sharp voice.

‘No.’

‘I’m visiting my daughter in the Old Quarter. It’s been a while. You have children?’

‘No.’

‘I’ve got three beautiful daughters.’

And three chins. Just smile. He did just that. *She’s just a nice old woman.* His stop was coming up. *Praise be to the Saints that it came sooner rather than later.*

‘One still lives in the Labour District. I like to visit when I can. She gave my husband and me four wonderful grandchildren. I’ve got pictures, would you like to see?’

Scout viewed the rest of the carriage. Several inviting seats beckoned.

‘I’ve got pictures of them in here,’ she shuffled, ‘somewh...’

‘Lady, keep your bag on your lap, not in mine.’ The twin handled cotton tote was pushed back.

‘How rude.’

‘You can always sit somewhere else.’ He gave her a cautionary glance. *Or you could lose the other person attached to your arse.* Then he smiled, more a forced grimace. The woman wore a lot of weight when food was hardly abundant. Proof maybe that prayer doesn’t always go unanswered. She squeezed him again trying to burrow a little more of her rear end into his seat.

Scout made no attempt to hide his frustration but there really wasn’t any point in getting into one with her. Just be patient and endure.

Scout looked up at the map again and followed the routes north. The City ended at the river. That was the end of the line. No it wasn’t. Everyone knew that Uptown was a short walk across heavily patrolled bridges. A river walk across the Line. Just because the map doesn’t show, it don’t make it so. It was dirty and dark but good people lived there. People he knew and hadn’t seen for years still lived there. Below the map was the inside wall of the carriage and a recycling box below. It was nearly full. His eyes stopped at the well worn floor just shy of the exit and watched the road pass slowly by outside.

The carriage slowed but didn’t stop as two more women jumped on with children in tow. One child a piece, both skipped

down the aisle, neither more than six years of age. Why did children skip anywhere instead of walking, and why were they staring at him? Scout sat forward and growled silently. Both quickly found a seat near their parents.

The road picked up speed again.

Stupid thing was he'd wanted kids once. Despite all the disappointments that waited for them in life he would have gladly brought them into the world. They'd talked about it often. Chia and Scout, or *Ma and Pa*. It would make her eyes sparkle and her voice quiver. Chia would have made a wonderful mother. Fuck it; he'd have made a great father too.

'We'd have had great kids.' He bit his lip the moment the words were out.

'Scuse me?' The fat woman's voice. 'Now you want to talk?'

Shit, no. The last thing he wanted was a conversation. And this bitch was really turning up the heat. She'd shuffled again and he lost another inch of bum space. He was feeling crowded and hot but he was damned if he was going to get up and let her spread her *fat arse* across both seats.

Thankfully none of that came out in the verbal form.

'Private conversation.' He replied and jabbed with his hip. Inch of space returned to the slim guy.

Scout refocused on the map. A different thought process took priority. *What's out there to the east, beyond the edge of the map?* It wasn't that he really wanted to know. Or did he? Not like he stayed awake at nights thinking about it. Not any more.

There had been a time when he'd wanted to explore the Exterior. Join up with the Loaders. Go out into the wilds in search of Golden Goods. He didn't care that Loaders were considered grave robbers with a permit. One in four never came back. Those that did were heroes in his eyes. They brought back useful things packed in wagons. Drugs, tools and machinery, iron and steel towed behind powerful sleds. There were all manner of objects from the old world. Things that inevitably managed to find the Black market.

As a kid he had idolised these people. Just to journey through the mountain ranges to the north was a dream. They say it gets crazy out there after that. They say that the earth is parched and opens into wide sores that go down forever. Nothing lives anymore. He'd actually been as far as the Commission would allow. Not so far as to get personal with the State patrols, they didn't like that. What was there to see, just miles of open land full of dry dirt and rocks. Danger signs everywhere. Warnings of impending doom and radiation left over from the

war. It was death and unpleasantness in an invisible guise. He'd even heard that plague was still out there waiting.

Galstram was out there too. It really was the last place before the end of the world.

City South wasn't on the map. It didn't matter. He knew what happened if you followed that direction. All the arable lands were south of the city, the wheat fields and the power station. There were other Cities but they were quarantined, dangerous areas and denied. Only the Loaders were allowed.

Walk far enough South and you came to the coast. He pictured the Preacher's paintings. Was that what the sea really looked like? It looked majestic and a little scary. No. If he ever left the City he would head north. Cross the mountains and head into the barren unknown. Ironic really, if it wasn't for the north, for the rivers flowing down from secret wells in the mountains, there would be no City. There would be no survivors. There would be no more humanity.

"Thanks be to the Saints for our preservation. Thank the Prophets for delivering us to this Oasis in a desert of woe." He'd heard the official line a thousand times, just like everyone else.

Dok had once told him that before the wars the Earth had a life of its own and had stretched for thousands of miles in every

direction. It teemed with life; over six billion people living and breathing on its surface.

Six billion. Can you imagine?

He couldn't, and he expected that three chins couldn't either. Not one of them on this carriage could.

There was a place in the city centre. Dok called it *the library*. Everything you wanted to know about the world Pre War was there. It was the fountain of knowledge. His words not Scout's. No access without a very special clearance attached to your Tag. It was just about the only place that could coax the Old man away from the Odyssey. He thought that he would like to go to this Library, to see the past for himself. It sounded so much better than the present. One day.

Scout's stop was coming up.

He heaved his butt out of the dwindling space to a thinly disguised harrumph.

Don't bite. Feel the love. Just get of the carriage.

Work district seven was Scout's stop. Another couple of minutes would see him there. His boots skipped over the brass plate with a clank. Did he really just skip? He left the tram and hit the pavement running. It was more fun than waiting for the tram to actually stop and besides jumping off here saved him a bit of a walk back.

It wasn't as if the view was worth the stroll. There wasn't much to look at. Work districts tended to be all bricks and no inspiration. Factory dwellings built in a time when practicality outweighed the city's love of architecture. At least it was clean. This was as close to city centre as you could live without the benefits of wealth and favourable contacts.

From here he could just make out the Dome of the Reliquary. It was the home of the pious and the Faithful, the very heart of the City and the Rule of the Saints.

Maybe he'd take a tram into the city centre after seeing Rubi. It would be dark soon and he could follow the river upstream. Watch the boats cruise on its still waters. Maybe take the time to stand on the bridge and admire the Reliquary close

up. He hadn't been that close for many years. The lights that led to the Square of the Saints were sure to be ablaze. *Why not?* It was such a beautiful building and so peaceful at night. And the massive dome *was* a treat for the eyes, follower of the faith or not. He'd heard that a thousand lamps now hung from the nearby castle walls and reflected in the river like stars. A vista that was sure to stir an ethereal reaction for many.

Url and Gresia used to take the pilgrimage every year. The first weekend of every June, come rain or shine. It was inevitable that Sebastian and Jorja would be led to homage. The need to worship passed down from one generation to the next.

For two days and two nights they prayed in the Square of the Saints sleeping under mild night skies. A two day fast mixed with hours of prayer and the chance for his parents to instil in their children the importance of faith. It might have worked too, if later events hadn't shaped him differently. A sudden chill stung at his innards. Was it the breeze or the sobering memory of images presented to him as child? He could still picture the Prophets looking down on him from numerous pedestals. Each one watching eagle eyed the frightened little rabbits below. He was too fearful to look up, to take their stony gaze. Playing hide and seek with Jorja and trying to lose each other between the

colonnades was what he went for. Shouting echoes in the square. The games made it bearable. Disapproving looks and raised eyebrows made it fun.

Inside was different. You could feel the silence. Occasional whispers that wandered to your ears on the perfectly still air. The Reliquary interior was a sprawling vision of gold and silver. A candle-lit palace of birch and oak, fine white plaster inlaid into the walls. It had cavernous ceilings that reached up where no man could ever hope to touch.

He could never forget the first time he visited the Reliquary. On that day he had truly walked with the Saints. On that day he had started to understand the pride in Greisha's smile as she watched her children's awe.

One more thing he should avoid contemplating. It was a life time ago. A foul, stinking, shit of a life time ago.

Kids, no more than eight years of age mulled on each landing. Some sat, others just talked. All were aware of his presence. One threw a ball against the wall, eagle eyed they watched his progress. None of them lived here. They were observing. Kids employed by the tenants to give warning.

Behind the doors, four on each landing, were drugs, booze, loose women, and probably a poker table or two. In about three hours when the workers returned these stairs would become a hive of traffic. The whole damn City would heave back into life.

Scout hardly broke sweat as tattered carpet passed below his boots. Long legs carried him two steps at a time up the six flights of stairs to the top floor. The stairwell stank of piss.

Three hard raps as his fist assaulted the wooden door of apartment forty. The four and the zero gone but the wood where they had been was still a shade darker than the rest of the door.

He banged impatiently for a second time.

‘Who is it?’ A hesitant voice demanded from the other side of. ‘What do you want?’

‘It’s me.’

‘Me who?’

‘It’s Scout.’ His fist slammed against the top panel. ‘Open the door.’

‘Scout? You’ve got a nerve after last time.’ Pause. ‘Are you alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sure?’

Scout took a look about the empty landing and peeked gingerly over the railing. Dappled sunlight through broken windows set on the stairwell to warm the smell that floated up with the draught.

‘Shit... Jag.’ He assaulted the door with his fist again. ‘Open up. Open the frigging door, the Jag are on their way up.’

It sounded like someone had tripped over the cat inside and taken the bookcase down with them as they fell. Nothing ever changed. Rubi still saw movement in shadows, saw faces in the cracks in windows. He was too paranoid, too easy. Probably best not to aggravate him any more. Scout put his ear to the door. He swore he could hear Rubi’s heart pounding like a cannon even with the door between them.

‘I can hear you panting and smell your perspiration.’ Scout whispered through the lock.

‘It’s just you. You were lying weren’t you?’

‘Yes. Now open the door, Rubes. ’

The ratchet grind of two locks was followed by a chain being hooked on the other side. The door opened just wide enough to see a partial face and a curious eye that worked the socket from one side to the other staring at the empty space behind Scout.

‘You owe me.’ A none too friendly welcome.

‘Bollocks.’ Scout put his best boot forward and the door flew off the chain to a shriek and a curse. Its sudden movement paused, wood against man, and then both renewed its vigour inward.

‘Think yourself lucky it was the door and not your face.’

If Rubi objected he kept it to four words. ‘Son of a bitch.’ He mumbled. ‘Look...what happened last time. It was a misunderstanding, that’s all. I thought we were good?’

A misunderstanding that almost cost Scout a beating, or worse. Never mind. That was all water under the bridge now. This was a chance for Rubes to put things right.

‘I would have opened it. No need to be like that. You’re not going to hit me are you?’

‘I should tear you a new one.’ Scout dropped the redundant chain, its retainer having been propelled across the room. ‘You knew what was in those packages.’

‘Be fair. I didn’t. If I had I would have walked away. No way would I have involved you. They lied to me as well.’

The penalty for running Stems was harsh. To make it worse the recipients had tried to default on paying. He’d had to encourage them with his friend Mr Glock. That’s when things had got ugly and two men had got hurt. There was lots of blood and screaming, the usual chaos.

‘It was just a misunderstanding.’ A long pause. ‘Scout, are we good? You know I don’t like it when you go all tense and quiet. Things get broken. And please don’t stare at me like that. It wasn’t my fault. I said I was sorry. I’m not gonna get broken am I?’

Scout already knew the truth. A few well placed blows on a scumbags face had loosened his lips and told him everything that he needed to know. Rubes wasn’t entirely to blame. Even so, Scout still had doubts about his *old friend*. If he’d thought for one minute that Rubi had known what was in those packages he would have done a lot worse. Their long relationship and past

friendship would have counted for nothing. He stepped into the doorway.

Rubi was a couple of inches shorter than Scout. The man was a lean piece of meat that covered a wiry frame. And what the heck had he done to his hair? His usual thick dark mop must have been cut with a knife whilst using a broken mirror. What did he have against putting a razor to his cheeks? Scout despaired at him. Rubi was a primitive fashion statement that was for sure.

‘I want you to look at something for me.’ Scout said.

‘Sure, anything for you. Do you mind if I...’ Rubi edged past Scout to take a peek through the spy hole in the door. ‘Could you move, just a bit’ He ushered with his hands but was careful not to touch. ‘Just a little bit. That’s fine. I can’t be too careful since I got new neighbours. A couple of tarts moved in next door. Got guys coming up and down all the time? No pun intended.’

‘Next door? What happened to the old couple?’

‘Thirty eight got moved on by the Jag. Nearly gave me a heart attack when I heard all the noise. I half expected *my* door to come of its hinges.’ Rubi engaged Scout directly for the first time. ‘My mistake,’ he said, ‘that was you.’

‘Get over it.’ Scout pushed the door closed which pleased Rubi. ‘What happened?’ He asked.

‘When?’ Fingers tried to push the locks back together.

‘To the old couple at Thirty eight?’

Rubi shied away from the door and brushed at his shirt looking uncomfortable. He even lowered his voice to a hush.

‘Trins.’ He said. ‘Freeking heretics and living right there, on the other side of my wall.’ He kept pointing. ‘Can you believe it?’ Rubi kissed his fist.

It seemed a shame. They’d always seemed such a nice couple. Mr Solvit was a most polite and considerate man. His wife always wore a smile and a scarf no matter what the weather. Scout found it hard to believe.

‘Bad business.’ Rubi had moved. He was circling the only chair in the room. ‘It was rough. I saw them through the peep hole as they were dragged down the stairwell. The old man’s face was covered in blood.’ Rubi plucked something eagerly from his pocket and kissed the fist he made around the hidden item.

‘Trins.’ Said Scout. ‘Seriously?’

‘Shhh, keep it down. I shit you not and I guarantee there’s at least a dozen eyes parked on this building right now watching

for more.’ Scout’s eyes tracked onto Rubi. ‘Oh, didn’t I mention that? Don’t worry, we’re cool in here. I’ve got friends.’

True, Rubi was well connected. But nobody had friends where Trins were concerned. Scout knew that much. But not a lot more and it must have showed.

‘Followers of the Old Religion. Bad Ju Ju. Scout, you really need to get out more.’

That was the pot calling the kettle black.

‘I know what they are, Rubes. It’s just... They seemed like nice people.’

‘Trins don’t have three heads and Tourette’s syndrome. You don’t hear them cussing as they come down the street. They’re a bit harder to spot than that. You want to hold this?’ His hand trembled as he held it out. In the palm rested a leather thong with a shard of bone attached. ‘It’s Celia. Not too many tarts make it as Relics. Apparently she was quite the little home maker.’ Rubi shrugged. ‘Suit yourself. I hear they’re in State detention? I really don’t want to think about it. That’s heavy shit. Do you have any idea how bad the Commission want to find those degenerates. There’s an underground movement out there and it’s growing. Heretics everywhere. Did you know that the Commission has set up a secret tribune to deal with the

problem? Legates have been given holy dispensation to do... well, bad things.'

'Rubes, you're getting excited.' He did this. Talking without breathing, it was a real bad habit.

'Damn right I am. Scout, they were living next door to me. Ever heard of suspicion by association? I promise you will. Have you any idea what the Commission can do to you? You need to pay attention cos things are gonna get real bad for anyone that doesn't believe. And frankly mate your walking on thin ice.' He paused long enough to rub at his face.

'You remember when they crossed the Line to deal with the gangs? You remember how bad that was for us?'

Scout nodded. 'It was worse for others.' He said.

'Yeah, well I hear rumours that the Jag will cross the Line again. They want to clear the place of heretics and dissenters. Open up the living space for workers. The Commission's warming up to go on a witch hunt.' He laughed. 'The idiots don't realise how bad the problem is. Start looking closer to home, that's what I say, and not just across the Line. I mean, those fucks were living next door to me and I didn't know.'

'Are you sure?'

'Sure of what?'

‘Are you sure that you didn’t know?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean? Are you accusing me of something?’ Rubi started to pace. ‘Live and let live that’s my motto.’

Fine words indeed but Scout wasn’t exactly convinced of their sincerity. Rubi was man who had a dozen relics sown into his pillow.

‘Live and let live,’ he repeated, ‘just don’t involve me. I’ve got a nice thing going here. People respect me. I mean, why rock the boat?’ Two meaningful steps and he was beside the bed and yanking open a drawer below. Out came a handful of objects he scattered on the covers. Two pendants, three chains, a ring, and an assortment of small bones, mostly fingers by the look of them. ‘I’m a believer.’ He said aloud as if others in the building needed to hear. ‘I believe in the goodness of Saints. Yes I do. Saints are good for business.’ His meek, frightened personality turned scathing. ‘You still got yours?’ Rubi pointed to Scout’s neck. ‘I know she meant a lot to you. You kept it didn’t you. Are you wearing it now?’ He started pacing again. ‘They’re a comfort, don’t you think? We all need more than what we have. You know it’s never too late to find comfort in the Prophets, Scout. You’re a man that needs to find comfort. You need to find some peace.’

He was going for the hard sell. This was one of the reasons Scout only came round on business. Fragile... life had made Rubi, fragile.

Four strides were all it took to cross the small bed-sit being careful to avoid the newspapers piled everywhere. Copies of the 'The City' lay in abundance. Rubi must have collected every edition of the weekly for months. If the paper was a fire hazard then the unfinished meals and thick scent of body odour were a definite danger to his health. The bed hadn't seen clean sheets in months and as far as Scout could recollect, Rubi never opened the curtains. Not that anyone could see in with The City taped all over the glass.

'Don't you ever throw this shit out?'

'Hey, don't mess with the piles. Everything's in order.'

Scout fingered the top edition on the pile closest. 'You read this shit?'

'It's local news.'

'It's Commission propaganda?'

'I gotta know what's going on out there.'

'Try leaving the building once in a while.'

‘Out there? No. Not me. People come to me. I don’t go to them. I buy and sell, you know that. Why would I go outside? All I have is all I need, the rest is up here.’ He tapped his forehead.

Scout cleared a pile of papers unceremoniously onto the floor exposing a table.

‘Not the piles, not the piles.’

Scout dropped the envelope onto the table’s surface.

‘I need you to find the person in these pictures. There’s not a lot to go on.’

‘No shit.’ Rubi was already flipping through them. ‘Check out the Ninja with the bad lighting.’ One in particular had caught his eye as it hovered in his hand below the light. ‘I’ll need to take a closer look.’ The hound already had a scent.

Rubi might be a slob but he had a particular obsession that made him invaluable to many people. And it wasn’t collecting newspapers. He had an eye for detail and a passion for solving problems. It had made him a wealthy man. He sure as hell didn’t have to live like this.

‘What’s this woman to you?’

He’d spotted it straight off. Scout had stared at the photos for some time, worked them in sequence before Sasha’s movement had helped him make the connection.

‘I have to find her for a client.’ The less Rubi knew the better. ‘See anything else that jumps out at you?’

‘Yeh, she dresses badly.’ He placed them back in the envelope. ‘Come with me.’

Scout knew it was there but it still impressed him. It was a secret, a door into another world. A scary place that could get them both arrested and maybe even killed. It had needed a forceful shoulder to push it back but the wall had opened. An inch of industrial metal had moved silently on hinges the size of a grown man's fist.

'We need to be quick.' Said Rubi. 'The power will be off in an hour.' He flicked a switch just inside and a tube light on the ceiling buzzed with anticipation. One, two, three flickers and it lit the entire room. Rubi retained a vigilant eye on the apartment as the opening closed it out.

Twelve steps lead them down.

'Welcome to number thirty four.'

Rubes had spent years setting this place up. Spared no expense to ensure the apartment was invisible from the outside. Downstairs was just a wall where the door used to be. Heavy soundproofing meant no one could hear you from the outside. This was Rubi's pad.

Inside there were rows of small boxes against the far wall. Half a dozen shelves above them all filled with forbidden

goodies. There was a crazed abundance of wired looms and connectors hanging from the walls. Every corner was stuffed with relays, contacts and isolators. The closest table had its surface covered with circuit boards stacked in piles. It looked like the inside of a giant slot machine. Everywhere was salvaged parts from Pre War electrical goods. Two televisions, a computer, an alarm, even an old toaster. It was a techie's delight. He recognised the tools and testers of his youth well organised on a smaller bench that Rubi now made use of.

A handful of mobile phones lay on a second desk. These were rare and Scout made sure Rubi's attention was elsewhere as he flipped one open.

Son of a bitch. The damn thing had a signal. That meant a satellite connection. Not that they were a secret. Great big hunks of technology lost up there in orbit.

'Just like old times, eh?'

Yeah. Just like old times Rubes. Only back then the two of them had fixed things to benefit others, not just for profit. This shit was part of the reason that the Gangs were broken. Technology was considered heresy unless it was sanctified by the Commission. It was the 'clunkers and clickers rule.' If it made a noise you could probably keep it. All you had to do was repair it.

That's what they did, him and Rubi. It was inevitable that their talents would lead them into more profitable, more illegal ventures. Deep into the world of the one and the zero.

This was only a workshop, Scout wondered where the rest of the treasure trove was stashed.

'Look what I made. This baby's got flavour, took forever to get the right bits.'

Scout closed the phone and followed Rubi's direction. It was a plastic box. He watched as Rubi closed the lid, pressed the flashing button on the side, and a piece of paper was ejected from within.

'Nice. Very... plastic. I need to know about the photos?'

'You're so bloody impatient. Take a look at this.' He showed Scout the paper ejected from the box. Then opened its lid and held up the photo. 'I made it bigger for you.' The enlargement was tucked into the top and the lid shut. It whirred with complaint as Rubi opened a slim plastic contraption on the desk. There was genuine affection and pride as his finger lifted the lid. 'You know what this is?'

'Trouble.' Scout replied.

'This is the lush version. And I remember when this shit gave you a hard on.' Fingers tapped on the keyboard. 'Don't

worry about a thing. I'm protected. I've got friends in high places.'

It was difficult to imagine but there had been a time when Scout had yearned for this kind of knowledge. Youth it seemed, was a distant memory. Its rebellious excitement now replaced by a more sinister feeling as he felt the sweat begin to seep through his pores.

Rubi placed the laptop on his knees, fingers dancing across the keyboard.

Why was it so damn hot in here?

He heard a door slammed somewhere, followed by another. Hard metal jammed against a frame as large keys jangled and tumblers were turned in locks. Rubi's fingers barely paused. A moments silence before a scream shrieked in the distance, a man's voice distorted by pain.

Still the keys tapped.

Scout watched the door. What if they came? What if they saw all this? He didn't want to be here, he shouldn't have come. Just being present would get him sent him back.

Get a grip.

'And voila.' Rubi announced snapping him back. 'You got lucky. There's a gap between her glove and her sleeve as it

catches on the safe door. She probably didn't even notice and impossible to see without our little plastic friends here. A totally innocuous and irrelevant action unless, that is, you have the technology and the programme to exploit the mistake. Oh, and me, of course. Ah, here it comes. What we are starting to see is a reflection on something glass in the safe.' He kept tap tapping on the keys.

'If I adjust the resolution and zoom. Even closer still, and more close than that. And there it is. Check this out. Uh huh. It's an etching of a Cutter if I'm not mistaken.' Rubi looked up.

'That's a single mast boat with two or more headsails. The masts are set further back than they are on Sloops, and that's how you tell the difference. Rubi,' he told himself, 'your knowledge of nautical history is outstanding... I know, I know.'

He remembered the feel of the glass object in his hand. Some kind of paper weight, it had been irrelevant at the time.

'What will really interest you,' Rubi continued, is what I can detail in the reflection?' He looked up. 'Pay attention class.'

'Just get on with it, Rubes.'

'Sure, sure' His finger hovered. Then dropped and hit the return key. He spun the laptop round for Scout to see.

‘Tell me how good I am. Tell me I’m the freeking best. I just found the last few bars of her Tag.’

‘Seriously?’

‘You sound surprised. You wound my professional pride.’

‘Can you find her from a partial Tag?’

‘I can send you in the right direction.’ Rubi checked his watch. ‘Forty minutes till lights out.’ One of three drawers below the desk was opened. ‘Let’s see what we can find.’ He said and before his words had faded the printer clunked into operation. A dozen squeaky operations later and the paper fell into the tray.

‘Where did you get that?’

‘I keep telling you, I’ve got friends.’

‘That’s a Tag scanner.’ It was just like the one that had molested him earlier in the day. ‘Where did you get it?’

‘People bring me things. The State can’t keep count of all of their hardware.’

‘Yes they can.’ Questions arose. ‘Who are these friends of yours Rubes?’

‘Shhh mustn’t tell secrets.’ He said. ‘Right now it’s you that’s paying the wages. Besides, we’re old friends you and me. Nothing I wouldn’t do for an old friend. We go back a long way.’

What Scout recollected was the unfortunate arrest of the Solvits. Nice people. Also his prior dealings with Rubi had involved an altercation involving Stems. Maybe he knew Rubi in the past, but not so much in the present. His *old friend* was increasingly erratic, even unstable at times.

‘I can see your mind working overtime, old friend.’

‘Who is she?’ I don’t need to know anything else. ‘I just want to know who the woman is.’

Rubi had already run the scan.

‘Interesting things Tags. Did you know they are made up of two stripes, the ink and the skin? It’s all about numbers. The entire city, and I include the population, are distinguished by numeric code. It’s all in the Tag.’ He flicked the scanner to flash the light and a tiny needle popped in and out in unison. ‘Little bastard has coitus with your upper dermis.’ He clicked the trigger several more times.’ It’s disgusting really. But it can’t lie when skin and blood samples are compared. Your thief has her Tag tattooed inside her wrist, which in itself is hardly uncommon, just very convenient for us. Thank the thousands of parents that perpetuated the craze.’

‘Who is she?.’

‘I can’t tell you her name. That part of the code is under her sleeve. But she lives in the Old Quarter. District called Sassia, ever heard of it? Me neither. Don’t have the street name, you’d need access to Commission records to be that specific. What’s she stealing from the safe, Scout?’

The question was unexpected.

‘Jewellery.’ He answered. First thing that came to mind. ‘Some stuff my client has sentimental attachment too.’

‘Is it valuable?’

Scout pursed his lips. ‘Not particularly. They belonged to his mother. She died. You know how it is.’

‘Yeah, sure.’ Rubi closed the laptop. ‘Why are you lying to me Scout? I thought we were friends.’

Silence.

‘Ninja’s in the dark? Come on, who you trying to kid. That safe’s heavy shit. You’d need a licence signed by a Legate to own one of those. And why did you come to me? Is it because we’re friends, Scout? We are friends aren’t we? Friends share with each other when one gets in on something big.’

‘Sure. We’re friends, Rubi.’

‘Maybe I could help. We could work together on this, partners maybe?’

‘No partners, Rubi. You’d just be disappointed. I have a habit of disappointing people.’

Scout turned away, just enough to hide his hand reaching behind his back. Fingers and thumb slipped onto the warm moulding of the Glock’s grip.

‘What else can you tell me, Rubes?’

Rubi relented with a smile. ‘She’s twenty four years old and got blue eyes. Oh, and she’s blonde. There’s a hair on the ninja suit just below the shoulder. Gets a bit fuzzy the closer I zoom. But she’s definitely blonde. Am I getting paid for this, Scout? Because I’m expensive, I don’t do for free. I have friends that can collect for me.’

It wasn’t the Glock that filled Scout’s palm but a wad of notes. One hundred dollars that he’d counted out before entering the building. Hard currency tossed down onto the copier’s hood.

‘It’s all there.’ He added.

‘Sure, I wouldn’t count it. We are friends after all.’

‘That’s right Rubi. We’re friends.’

It was a sense of relief to have left. Rubi was too heavy a reminder of the past. Those days were dangerous and gone. They needed to stay that way.

Scout walked slowly to the nearest tram stop enjoying the open space. He had a lot to think on. At least now he had a solid lead to help him find the woman. It was a damn sight more than he'd hoped for. Problem was the Old quarter was just south of the River, a stone's throw from the Reliquary. It meant passing through Downtown. He hated Downtown. It was a hive of religious lunacy. Maybe she was some sort of a religious nut? That would make sense; it was a Relic that was stolen. He couldn't help wondering what she looked like under that mask.

The woman was young, blonde and obviously fit. She was intelligent. Opening the safe proved that. And smart too. No dummy could get in and out of the Preacher's home like that undetected. She wasn't driven by greed that was for sure. She left a lot of currency in the safe. A girl that brimmed with confidence and courage that was for sure.

Hey, he liked her already.

Scout's hand dipped into his pocket and retrieved a cell phone in its palm. He was careful not to be observed as he flipped it open. Unbelievable, the signal bars showed full reception. How could that be? With light pressure his thumb skipped through the menu and found nothing in any of the directories. The memory was empty too. No numbers. No incoming or outgoing calls. It snapped closed in his palm. He shouldn't have taken it. He should take it back to Rubi before he realised it was missing. Rubi could get into serious trouble. A smile breached his features as the tram pulled up.

Ting ting went the bell.

For the second time that day the door at number forty resounded to sharp strikes from the outside.

‘Take it easy. I’m coming.’

Rubi paused as another salvo of fist beat against the wood. So violent he felt the air ringing in sympathy. ‘Son of bitch. If you don’t stop beating on my door...’ He placed both palms on the wood and his eye to the peep hole.

Nothing but darkness.

‘Take your finger of the hole, Scout.’ Still nothing. ‘Scout, is that you?’

Several more curses were spat as the bolts were flicked open. ‘You better have brought my property back. You know how much those things are wor...’

It’s difficult to finish a sentence when a door slams into your face. An undisclosed speed but hard enough to force two teeth from his mouth and send them spiralling through the air. Rubes went down hard in a blood splattered and painful daze. He wasn’t grounded for long. Strong hands grabbed Rubi from both sides and he was carried marionette style. Lifted, dragged and deposited into the only chair in the room.

‘Easy, easy. Whatever you want, it’s cool.’ He said and tried to get up.

Several hands pulled his torso back to the chair. Another yanked his right arm outstretched. A sharp stabbing pain told him he was being Tagged. To make matters worse his cheek smarted fiercely to a violent slap.

‘Alright, I’m awake. Stop hitting me.’ The octopus released him, reluctantly it seemed.

‘Ow... ow... ouch.’ On came the throbbing reminder that his teeth were awol as blood dribbled down onto his shirt. Didn’t these people understand that he was protected? Shit would happen to them now, really bad shit, and from a very great height. ‘You’re in big trouble, whoever you are.’ And what where they doing to his apartment? More personal space was being invaded as the malicious sounds of his room being interrogated reached his ears.

This was not turning out to be a good day.

One eye stretched open and daylight pierced the haze. That was better, he could see again. He instantly wished he couldn’t. Half a dozen Jag were tossing the room.

‘Don’t touch the papers. Please, not the papers.’ They were kicked brushed and thrown along with drawers and other bits of

furniture. ‘Do you know who you’re messing with?’ A globule of phlegm and blood was discharged. ‘I’ve got friends.’

This wasn’t good.

‘What are you doing? You shouldn’t be doing this. I’m a loyal follower of the Faith.’ He shouted trying to look behind. Through the open door he could see the stairs. He flashed back to old man Solvit being dragged down them by his hair. Rubi’s fingers fumbled toward his pocket trying to get his fingers to Celia. *Celia?* What possible use would the Homemaker be? Saints should be a little more spiteful. And where were the eyes he’d paid to watch the landings?

Someone spoke to him. A nasty looking little man stepped into view reading a scanner.

‘How did you get up here without me knowing?’ Talking with no teeth really hurt. ‘Never trust kids. Did you bribe them with lollies... Are they dead?’ Holy crap, the man that stood in front of him looked like the walking dead.

‘Your name is Henri Dvorak. Your file says that you are a thief, a liar and a Heretic.’

Rubi didn’t like the sound of that.

‘No. Now that’s not true. I love the Saints. I can prove it. Take a look in the...’ Both drawers were gone, the contents mixing with the stains on the carpet.

‘Look, over there, John the Prior and Peter the Walker. Look, by the bed leg.’ They were both there, tossed from the drawers. ‘Have you no respect for other people’s property. There are others, I, I, just can’t see them. They’re here somewhere. What are you doing with my things?’¹

The man spoke again. Ruby shut up and listened.

‘You have an interesting file. Not the best start to life. I see you are a bastard from the North Reach Orphanage.’

It was the biggest State orphanage in the City. A boy could go walkabout for years in its endless rooms and corridors.

‘Born out of wedlock, I see. The file says that your mother was cast out across the Line.’ His oppressor raised an eyebrow. ‘Just deserves for a maternal slut. You, on the other hand were given an opportunity. Placed as a State Ward.’ He tushed. ‘But you ran away from the protection and Love of the Commission?’

‘No. I, I was mislead by others. I came back; I came back and I served the Faith.’

‘It says here that you were arrested four years later trying to avoid arrest during a raid on a Stem house. Interesting, you

turned State's evidence against other members of your gang and were subsequently released back into the community. You were a turncoat, Mr Dvorak. I applaud you.'

'I prefer to think of it as gainful employment by the State. I was saved again by the Commission.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes. I love the Saints. I love my Patron and the Commission. Who doesn't?' He wasn't bowled over by the lack of response. 'What is all this? How do you know about me? You shouldn't know anything. You shouldn't even know to look. My past is sealed. I've got friends in high places.'

'I think you'll find that I'm the only friend that you have now, Mr Dvorak. And I'm not feeling very friendly.' The hand he placed on Rubi's shoulder sent a chill down his spine. 'For the record my name is Liam.'

What stone did this one crawl out from under? He must have been such a disappointment to his mother. Not to mention scaring the other parents shitless. 'Hi.' Rubi stuttered, deciding that the man frightened him just as much. 'Have you ever thought of dying your hair?' And those eyes. Rubi couldn't help staring. 'Maybe sunglasses would help.'

Shut up Rubi, stop talking, he's not a nice man.

‘Over here, sir.’ The voice distracted both men’s attention.
‘We’ve found something hidden in the wall.’

It was a small room, easy to search. When the Jag found nothing they had started to put holes in the walls with their rifle butts. If they’d asked, Rubi would have told them there was a catch under the architrave. Just run a finger below and it would spring open. He supposed that would have spoiled their fun. Their preferred tactic was obviously rifle butts blitzing at the wall. It was a plaster massacre leaving debris strewn across the floor. A size twelve boot finished the job and a heavy metal box was pulled from hiding and dragged out into view.

‘I’ve never seen that before.’

‘And I believe you.’ Liam addressed the looming figure that held Rubi to the chair. ‘Captain, instruct your men to leave immediately. Apologise to Citizen Dvorak and ask him to forgive you for the intrusion.’

‘Really? You’re going to leave?’ *Thank the Saints. Cuthbert, Ferdinand, Celia. All of them.* Rubi reeled through them all in his head in a brief and thankful moment.

None of the uniforms moved.

Three callous and threatening faces stared straight at him. It seemed they’d had to break a sweat during the search and that

had made them angry. No way was he going to look at the one behind, he didn't dare. *Oh shit*. A cold silent shriek of realisation pumped a gallon of adrenalin through his body. Too frightened to move the drug nearly collapsed his nervous system and threatened to give Rubi a coronary.

'That was a good one.' The words faltered and nearly resisted leaving his mouth. 'Sarcasm, I like it. No really, I do.' He took a good look at the lack of sympathy on Liam's face. 'I think I might need a potty break.'

'It is important to me that you understand I don't have a sense of humour.'

Rubi watched those bulbous eyes rise to his unseen confederate and gave a nod. He felt himself yanked back and held firm. The grim faced officer he couldn't see stuck his knee in the chair back and stretched Rubi's arms backward until he felt they would break.

'The item on the floor. Tell me what it is.'

'It's an old generator.'

'It's a radio transmitter, Rubi. May I call you Rubi?'

Rubi nodded. 'Call me anything you like, you bastard.'

Both arms were yanked back again and this time his right shoulder dislocated. The sudden clunk of muscle and tissue was followed by searing pain and the need to vomit. Rubi screamed.

‘Stop, stop. Whatever you want? I’ll tell you whatever you want.’ *Blessed are the Saints, goodly are the Saints. Blessed are you and your fine men. Please, I’ll tell you anything you want to know. Help me... Intercede on my behalf. Make them stop.*

‘Stop. I’ll say, anything, you want.’

‘Yes you will.’ Liam wiped the tears gently from Rubi’s cheek. ‘The radio is a seditious tool. It is absolutely forbidden. I can arrest you and put you in a hole for a very long time. But I won’t. All I require from you is information.’

‘That’s good I can do that. I always try to help the authorities. Just ask the questions. I’ll tell you. Oh shit, there’s no need for any of this.’

There wasn’t. He’d have told them whatever they wanted. Just put his shoulder back where it had come from.

‘Tell me everything you know about the man that left here a few minutes ago.’

He’s a bad ass mother fucker who’s going to kick your face in.

Rubi laughed. It was more a crazed giggle. 'He's just an acquaintance. He was looking for someone. Aaargh, stop, stop. My arm.' The pressure reduced. 'Oh, blessed are the Saints. They are goodly and they are kind. Please don't do that. You have no idea how much it hurts.'

'Tell me about your friend.'

'Not a friend, just someone I know. He gave me some photos. I enlarged them, messed with them a bit. I found a partial Tag.'

Through watery eyes Rubi saw how much that interested Liam who motioned the officer to release him. A gesture of good will, no doubt.

Oh dear prophets that was worse. Letting go hurt even more. Rubi slumped forward but felt like his shoulder had been left behind. He tried to be brave but tears flowed like Niagara on the inside. He ventured a glazed look back at his abuser. *Captain? He's a kid.* He was. No more than eighteen... nineteen max. Six feet plus of dark black uniform that shouldered a malicious glare. That in itself made Rubi want to cry some more.

'Hi.' It was all he could think to say.

Liam clicked his fingers three times bringing Rubi's attention back. Staring up at his hand.

‘Yes?’

‘You mentioned a Tag. Photos of a woman, where are they?’

‘He took them with him.’ He didn’t want to lie but what else could he say. He’d copied the photos onto the hard drive of the laptop. No way could he tell them about that, without telling where it was. The saints preserve him, what if they found the workshop?

Liam stepped aside and a trooper raised his weapon. The wooden stock kissed Rubi violently on the cheek. A sharp impact followed but no pain. It took a moment. Yes, there it was, and coming like a freight train. Sharp searing and rampant as half of his face began to howl in protest. An instant swelling of his face closed up his left eye and stars began to dance in mayhem inside both eyelids. Was that another tooth lying on his tongue? The molar was ejected on a cushion of blood.

‘My face... my f, face.’

Next came the pain in his neck as the dislocated shoulder was dislocated some more.

‘Stop, stop it, pleeease.’ *Blessed are the Saints. Blessed are the Saints.* ‘Its downstairs, I copied everything downstairs.’

Everything else that was bunged up in his head now started to blurt out of his mouth. Scout had done this. They could have

the asshole and the laptop too. He was happy to tell them everything. Turn the fucker in and let him get what was coming.

Better him than me.

He told them about the wall, its combination, about the laptop and he begged them to let him be. 'I have friends.' He kept saying.

Damn you Scout. Damn you, damn you, damn you.

'I'm not a sinner.' He protested again. 'I love the Prophets. Praise be to the Saints. All hallow the Commission. How about it? Are, are we good? I told, you everything.' It was getting much harder to speak. The swelling in his face and mouth was stinging like salt on a wound. 'I won't, say anything. I'm a man of the Faith. I'm not like, that criminal. He took me in, lied to me. I even heard that, that he might be... a Heretic.'

'And you heard that from whom?'

Oh crap. Rubi shrugged, or tried to. The pain burnt bad.

'I, I, don't remember.'

'So you admit consorting with known heretics.'

'No. I didn't mean to say that... it was a mistake.'

'You consort, associate and conduct illicit proceedings with heretics?'

‘No. Please, that’s not what I meant. Its being seen out of context.’

‘Tell me what do you know about the Relic?’

‘Relic?’

‘Yes. Tell me about the Relic that was stolen?’

‘I don’t... What Relic? He said it was jewelry.’ Fat lips couldn’t even say the word properly. ‘Please, I want to be saved.’

Liam came close. Eyeball to eyeball. Rubi felt those big panda eyes try to peer into his soul.

‘Then this, Scout. He doesn’t know what the Relic is?’

Rubi mimicked the hushed tone of his voice.

‘What Relic?’

‘I like you Rubi. I do.’ Liam stroked Rubi’s face and smiled. Rubi stared wide eyed back and wanted to cry, but what was the point. Liam was going to kill him. He knew it right then. The moment the man’s breath and gaze fell upon him so serenely. It wasn’t fair. He hadn’t done anything wrong. This wasn’t fair, no his fault.

‘I know your secret.’ Rubi whispered, trying to lash out with words. ‘I know what the Commission is trying to hide.’

‘And what secret would that be?’

‘I can hear them. I hear them at night whispering.’ He made the final word linger on swollen lips.

Liam backed his face away as if the word had been a weapon pointed straight at him. ‘You know about the whispers?’

‘I hear them on that.’ He pointed toward the radio set left forgotten on the floor. ‘I hear the ghosts hiding in the static. The Commission lied to us. They told us we were alone.’ The effort was too much and he sank back into the chair, closed his eyes and began to pray. He prayed to anyone that would listen. He prayed for forgiveness, he prayed for a pardon. He begged the Prophets for eternal joy. And one more thing, he prayed that this freak would get what was coming to him. He was going to fuck with Scout, and Rubi knew that was a really bad thing to do.

It was a blessing indeed that Rubi did not see the Captain re-enter the room. He certainly didn’t hear him. Nor did he see the movement of Liam’s eyes toward his subordinate. The only sense that realised the officer’s presence was touch. The tingling feeling of a chord as it stroked his throat. A strangely sharp sensation as it cut into his skin and jerked back his neck. Liam was no longer visible to him. All thought for redemption or revenge was forgotten as Rubi took one futile lunge for breath after another.

Fuck the freeking lot of you. I hate you all...

Rubi knew their darkest secret. He knew that they had lied. He knew that the whole damn thing was a sham and he knew it didn't matter.

Dead men know nothing, and they tell even less.

‘Is the shipment ready?’

‘Have I ever let you down?’

‘No, never.’ Isabella conceded. ‘Has the asset made contact?’

‘Yes. Everything is going to plan.’ He crossed his chest with his finger. ‘It is God’s will. We cannot fail.’

Isabella wasn’t so sure. Was it really going to happen? Was the prophecy going to be fulfilled in her lifetime? Of course it was. She too was God’s instrument. She too was following God’s command.

‘Come in for a moment.’

‘Thank you.’

She didn’t like standing in the courtyard like that. It was too open and there were too many busybodies in the world. She had never wholly agreed with the Surgeon’s philosophy that putting them in plain sight meant that no-one would see. It was dangerous. To build a laboratory here in the middle of the City had seemed madness at first. What she had readily accepted was not seeing his face. The familiar cap and mask showed nothing but his eyes. A guise that was remnant of a surgeon recently made ready for theatre. It was safer for him that she was

unaware. She had no problem with that. He was too important. His identity must never be known, not even to her?

It was better not to think about such things.

‘You look nervous Isabella.’ The Surgeon took her hand and led her down the steps of a candlelit passage. As always he was calm and succinct. She followed, firm in the mind that she didn’t like it down here. It made her sad that God’s work must be hidden in such a deep out of the way place when it should be shouted from the rooftops. It was sad that it had always been like this.

Soon. She thought. *Soon there would be nothing that the Commission could do to stop them.*

Isabella let him go on ahead following a few paces behind. There was one other sadness that pulled her close to one of the doors they passed. It was guilt that made her stop and open the door. Part of her wished that she hadn’t.

Isabella counted twelve women lying on tables. The tubes from their bodies were as horrifying now as they had been the first time she had seen them. *It is God’s work*, she told herself. The same words she had told herself the first time she had seen this room. She whispered a prayer for their souls and moved her fingers across her chest in the sign of the cross.

‘They look so peaceful.’ She said aware the Surgeon was now stood behind. ‘Can they hear me?’

‘Yes.’

‘There are so many. Must there be so many?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why do they all face the mirror?’

Why hadn’t she asked that question before?

‘Do you suppose that it would it be better for them if they thought they were alone?’

‘No.’ She didn’t suppose it would. ‘They look so peaceful.’ Isabella closed her eyes and allowed the music that played in the room to soothe troubled thoughts. Soft violin played by a soulful bow. She hoped that it helped them in some way. She looked away. It did no good to stare at them. Gently she closed the door not wanting to disturb them. ‘When we’re done here I don’t want them to feel it. Their end must be quick and painless.’

‘Of course.’

They moved on.

The corridor opened finally into an antechamber. A tall metallic door all of eight feet in height and half that size in width stood barring her way. Was the future behind this door? Its presence lifted more than her heart rate. The Surgeon had

never brought her here. It took all of her strength to push the door open.

‘Enter.’ He said. ‘See what we have strived so long for.’

A soft purring ensued as switches were flicked. Big mechanical levers were pulled and a dozen oversized breakers buzzed with electrical charge. Isabella recognised the significance of the small red lights on a tower that flickered with chaotic patterns.

‘Is it powerful enough?’ She asked. ‘The computer?’

‘Oh yes. I have managed to scavenge more than enough parts to construct a working main frame. I wrote most of the programming myself. It will crunch the numbers most satisfactorily.’

She was pleased.

‘We have two generators.’ He said. ‘Both are independently fuelled and either is capable of supplying the energy required.’

Another switch was turned. Lights glimmered everywhere. Clunking strips that pulsed and flickered one after the other until the entire room was completely lit from end to end.

‘From this moment on the power will not be disengaged until our work is completed. As you can see everything that we need is here. Sterile hoods and fridges to your right. Over there

are the incubators. They are tested and they work flawlessly. We have three of them in case of malfunctions. The glass tube in the middle of the room is the maturation chamber. I will submerge the body in intense light and a concentrated bio solution that contains dense nutrients that the flesh can absorb.'

Isabella thought it looked like a fish tank. She didn't know what these things were or what most would be used for. She didn't care. It was only important that he had everything that he needed. Nothing could be left to chance.

'As you see the freezers are now up and running. Spare parts for them were most difficult to procure. Petri dishes, microscopes....' He shook his head. '...This room has taken over two decades to complete. It's a jigsaw and the final pieces are now in place.' He seemed pleased as he motioned to a strange object in the far corner. 'This was the final piece.' He said. 'The robotic arm you see will inject the cells. The Loaders had particular difficulty finding one in perfect working order. The smaller items, gowns and gloves, are not as easy to come by as you may think. But you already know that. Please, walk around. Ask questions. You have been responsible for most of what you see. I have been instructed by the Trinity Elders to relay their gratitude to you, Isabella.'

It was pleasing to hear those words. More than Surgeon could ever appreciate. She had worked tirelessly for their goal to be achieved. From the moment that Patron had found her on that bridge she had understood the opportunity that God had proffered. From her faith had come the courage and strength to endure servitude as a Commission Ward. She learnt to ignore her own needs. She learnt how to be patient. Isabella had allowed the Sisters to groom and mould her into the woman that Patron now relied on and trusted. It was the foresight and the will of God.

So many lies told. So much deception and deceit, it *had* taken its toll. Dear God it had taken its toll.

Thank God it was soon to be over.

‘It is a beautiful thing that we are about to do.’ His voice brought her back. Surgeon’s forehead showed signs of perspiration. Was it excitement, the expectation for the coming days? She couldn’t blame him. A knot had settled in her stomach, arriving unexpectedly on a wave of anticipation.

‘In that room,’ he gestured to a metal door in the far wall. ‘I have my cultures. It will be a simple procedure to remove the ovum from the ovaries of the host’s. None of the women will be harmed, I promise. It is not necessary. The difficult part will be

extracting the cells from the donor tissue as the sample inside the box is very old. I have been assured that atrophy will not be a problem, it appears that the box has seen to that.'

'By whom?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Who has assured you?'

'Oh, he's an old acquaintance. Someone I expect to show up when the work is done.'

Surgeon moved to a shiny metal table on four tall legs. Test tubes, beakers and syringes were organised on its surface. From the pocket of his lab coat came a child's toy. It was a small bear its colour soiled with age. He placed it on the table with exaggerated care.

'This is where Harley and I will open the box. We will extract the cells and place them in an RPMI medium. That's a growing solution. I have used some creative licence with the serum to help stimulate cell growth. From there they will be placed into the incubators.'

Surgeon unclipped his mask and let it hang allowing her to see his face for the first time. Another sign that the work was about to begin. He had been handsome once but now his appearance was aged with somewhat saddened features. The

smile she saw was enthusiasm laced with loneliness. It was hard to live a life alone, she knew that. It was also irrelevant. Only the procedure was important to her now.

He continued his tour.

‘Once the cells stop dividing they have reached what is called a quiescent state. They will be ready for implantation into the ovum. After removing the nucleus of each egg I will implant a quiescent cell into the zona pellucida, the eggs outer coating. I will electroshock the eggs to fuse them to the donor’s cells. This is when the cells will start to divide. When they are ready I will implant the eggs into the maturation chamber. There *are* other procedures required. I must stop degradation and scavenging of the cells. Certain cell functions can be tripped or ended, but even with this equipment I am confident I can reduce the risk.’ He seemed pleased that she was still listening, eager that she should learn.

‘I’m sorry; I don’t get out too much. In fact I hardly ever leave. Most of my patients can only listen which leaves me far too easily absorbed by own voice. Please, tell your Patron that his last delivery of donors was most suitable. I don’t think he would have been so generous with the woman had he known what

they were actually for. Technology is Heresy.' He mused. 'Patron would see cloning as an abysmal sin.'

'A bit hypocritical when it is he that supplies the females for you to produce Stems, don't you think?'

'An unfortunate means to an end. I think we would all prefer another means to finance our endeavours.'

That wasn't her concern. She shouldn't have mentioned it. She had not initiated, approved of, or ever condoned the trade. It made her feel sick to think of those women in the room back there.

'Can you really do it?' She had to hear the words. 'What about the memories, the soul? A body is just a shell without the man.'

'That's a fine observation. You may regret inviting the answers. Remember, I gave you the opportunity to leave.'

She was going nowhere. Isabella wanted to learn.

'You have to understand that dna is so much more than a complex combination of switches that tell a cell *what* to grow. We are going to leap far beyond that. What we are about to do is... is biologically beautiful.'

Isabella liked that. Hearing him speak with true wonder about what they were attempting.

‘Memories and perception,’ he said, ‘every familiarity we ever experience they are just electrical impulses. A trillion supernova that flash tirelessly across our synapses storing knowledge and reason. It is the process that creates individuality within the race. That stops us being one of nature’s clones.’

‘I understand.’ She lied.

‘Do you? It is a far deeper process than the greatest minds have ever imagined. Those tiny sparks of light are stored in the brain for later retrieval.’

He was looking at her, no, smiling, doubting that she really did understand.

‘Let me put it to you like this. The computer, you are familiar with how it works?’

She was, mostly, and acknowledged accordingly.

‘Good. Imagine an individual cell from your body is the same as the computer’s hard drive. Its operating system is the coding in the dna strand. When I remove a cell, it is no longer part of the whole machine. The body is gone. All the other connected hardware has been removed. Now *only* the dna can instruct the cell, tell it what to do, how to work, and how to grow. All the space that is left inside, just like the hard drive, can be used to store information. Other programmes for future

use. This data can only exist as forms of sound and light. Feelings, memories and emotions. These are what define us, but they cannot exist in the physical world. All the data that makes us what we are is written and stored in the brain just as it is on the hard drive. It is being continuously updated and overwritten.’ Surgeon clasped his hands together. ‘Now we get to the really interesting part. Periodically the brain flashes this data into the Junk spaces in new cell growth. At given moments they are flooded throughout the nervous system. It’s a flash process that piggy backs our ability to regenerate tissue. Its part of a natural biorhythm that begins the day we are born. Bio updates, if you like. Ask me why?’ He didn’t wait. ‘It is because new cells have to be regenerated to replace those that are old and worn. How else would we survive? No-one lives forever.’

He tapped his head. ‘We reside up here in a world of light and wonder. This physical world of ours is just a garden, created by a Father where his children have been left to play.’ He laughed. ‘A stranger told me that, a long time ago.

‘With every new batch of cells that our bodies produce, the information in our brains is logged within them, shunted into what scientists used to term “Junk dna.” It’s the ninety eight percent of dna that is non-coding, that no-one was ever able to

explain. What was this empty space inside a cell? No-one knew. It just didn't seem to do anything. Well they were wrong, wrong, wrong. It has a powerful and unique function. It's a lifeboat where every individual that our dna has ever produced, is stored and saved. Continuously updated during each and every lifetime and then dumped forward into the next. No different to a re-boot on that computer.'

She had never seen him so eager, so expressive with his hands.

'Only this transfer never stops, it never tires. The data leaps from generation to generation where it is stored and re-stored and then stored again. A hundred years of life elapses into a thousand, one hundred thousand years, it just goes on and on. Do you understand Isabella?'

It was clearly important to him that she did so Isabella nodded. She wanted to, desperately.

'Each individual has the memory and personality of their ancestors stored inside their Junk dna. Every person with which they have ever shared their dna is retained. It goes right back to the beginning of man and his very first thoughts and decisions. It is individuality in perpetuity.'

She appreciated the pause, tried to get to grips with what he was telling her.

‘How else do you think an elephant learnt how to grow a trunk? Or a fish developed fins to help it swim? Was it by random chance?’ He scoffed. ‘It is the shared memories and experiences of the individual being passing on to the next generation. Slowly these assets conspire to change the *coding* in the dna. Another memory added into the sequence helps to inspire perfection within the code. There is level of intelligence at work, it’s truly beautiful’

Isabella didn’t understand, but she wanted to. It almost enough just to hear the words, feel the passion and emotion in his voice. Yes, she believed him when he said it was a beautiful thing. There was no doubting the wonder of what was about to transpire. Cloning... dna... she recognised the words but not their meaning. It didn’t matter. The only thing she needed to understand was a miracle was about to happen. Everything that they had done was a means to an end. It was God’s will. *He* was instrumental in their work. *God* was guiding their hands. In a few days they would have resurrected more than just a symbol of faith. Yes, she would listen to the Surgeon for as long as he desired to speak.

‘You said that a body was a shell without the man. You’re quite correct.’ He pulled on a drawer in a table. A plastic container was lifted to its surface so he could easily flip the catches on either side. As the lid opened Isabella felt drawn toward the contents.

‘Our donor doesn’t carry the baggage of evolution. I don’t have to randomly guess who is in which particular packet of data. Our donor is a one of a kind. We have a unique specimen that only has singular contributing genes.’ Surgeon took the box from its snug fit within the foam filled container. ‘I will re-grow the body, which is relatively easy. The important detail is that I can release the conscious mind that is stored within the *Junk*. The label is truly ironic.’

Isabella barely heard him. It was the box. Such a pretty silver cube with clever, mysterious symbols carved into every facet. She felt a sudden limbo standing there with so many questions, yet unable to speak. Isabella wanted to reach out but she dared not try to touch. To think that such a small and insignificant object could contain the destiny of mankind. To be a part of this was too much. It almost wasn’t enough.

‘I have much to do Isabella.’

‘Of course.’ Yes, she too must get back before she was missed.

The surgeon picked up a package and handed it to Isabella. Its paper wrapping was familiar, always bound in the same way. The contents always folded in soft tissue. Isabella slipped it inside her shoulder bag.

‘Those Stem’s are some of the purest I have ever produced.’ He said. ‘Pregnancy really does make the mother shine. And I’ve added a little something extra, it’s in the package and wrapped separately. Stir it into a drink; the potion is odourless and tasteless. The recipient will feel fine for about an hour giving you time to be somewhere else.’

I understand.’ She said. ‘Sacrifices have to be made.’

‘Sacrifice? Are you feeling sorry for him? The Patron would have the flesh stripped from us all without thought or hesitation.’

‘He’s dying.’ She said.

‘Stem cell rejection?’

Isabella looked surprised. ‘Yes. But how...’

‘Then he’s lucky that you will finish him quickly before his body moves to the next stage. Do not forget Isabella, how evil this man is.’

‘Sometimes the end of something masks how great it was at the beginning.’ She said.

‘Your *employer* has lied to the people ever since the beginning. He doesn’t want any of them to know what is really out there. What lies beyond his guns? The Jarig are not a wall to keep us safe, Isabella. They are a net to keep us in.’ He had raised his voice. She’d never heard him do that before.

‘You of all people know what he is planning next. How much blood will he spill to further his cause? If he wants to hold a coup on his own government who am I to object? But how many will die and be rejected when he purges the Line, when he forces everyone to foreswear to all but his precious Saints. Do not fail us now, Isabella. Not when we are so close.’ The surgeon made a fist then opened his fingers and placed them on Isabella’s arm. ‘The Patron rejected God, Isabella. He is a man that cannot be saved. Can you do what must be done?’

‘In a heartbeat.’ She replied. ‘His time is done. Are you sure that everything is ready here? You won’t have much time when you open the box. There are others already on its trail. I will do what I can. But even with Patron dead.’ She shook her head. ‘Can you really do it?’

Surgeon's eyes narrowed with a smile. 'The gestation tanks are warming as we speak. I've had two lifetimes to prepare for this, Isabella. Ever since the Entity first came to me.' He crossed his chest, all four points touched slowly. 'There is nothing that can stop us now. In a few days the world we know will begin to change. I personally hope that the blasphemer's burn for what they have tried to do.'

The pen stopped writing as Scout adjusted the lamp beside the bed. Nights got dark earlier now. Two old rechargeable lamps gave surprisingly good light. Even so, his room took on a hollow, even eerie quality.

He started writing again.

I'll head to Downtown at first light. Find the Via Al Santa. Hopefully get a lead on the girl. Maybe San, the old hermit, can help. Maybe I'll get lucky and find her; Maybe she'll still have the box?

The pen exaggerated a question mark.

I've got a strange feeling about this one. Something about the way Dok's behaving. He never says much, doesn't have to. Something about this Relic has got under his skin. He's worried. I think its getting under mine too, must be. I got the shakes at Rubi's. Flash back, real bad. I almost pulled the Glock on him. Maybe I should have done. Put him out of his misery, lol.

A gentle knock on the door coaxed his attention from the diary pages.

'What?'

'You decent man? Got something here for you. Open door.'

Tass, not now.

Big smile. 'It's not locked.'

He watched her ease the door open with her foot.

'You eat food. Got big job to do. Important you keep up strength.'

What are you, my mother?

Still smiling.

'Thanks. Just put the tray on the bed.' He swung his legs off the covers and closed the diary but kept the book on his lap.

Down went the plastic tray. Coffee in the mug smelt good. It wasn't like Tass to share. Receiving anything more than an earful from the woman was a rarity at best. Scout noted how purposefully she stood up, handing the mug to him with awkward fingers. Her skin looked pale and thin, almost transparent in the lamp light. The room looked positively warm in the woman's ghoulish presence.

'You feel okay, Sebastian? I worry bout you.'

Now this was being down right attentive. That meant she wanted something. It wasn't money; he'd paid up in full. Scout eased his knees up as Tass sat beside him.

'You make old woman happy tonight? Make me happy tonight.'

‘What?’

The question had the chilled charm of a gun pointed straight at his head. He wasn’t sure what to say. How to answer the toothy grin and listing eyes now firmly directed toward at him.

‘No.’ He said.

‘I put something in coffee. Make special... to help.’

Whoa. Steady there Tass.

This was awkward, skin crawlingly so. He politely refused to take the coffee and stood up putting space between them.

‘Sebastian. You have to remember that I got other tenants.’

‘Then make them coffee. I can’t help you, sorry.’

‘Sure you can. Other tenants, they complain. Not like it when you dream out loud. Say it worry them. Drink will help you sleep. Not make noise and upset others.’

Scout needed to get this straight in his head.

‘What’s in the coffee, Tass?’ He asked.

‘Just potion my mother teach me. It help you with relaxing sleep. All night long.’

‘You’re saying the others are complaining?’ Greater understanding warmed away the chill. He took the mug from her hands. ‘Thank you. I appreciate the thought.’

‘Yes.’ She pointed up at the ceiling. ‘No sleep with crazy screams downstairs. Get many complaints.’

If his choices were sleeping with the land lady or being labelled a head case, the latter was all appeal. It wasn’t as if he was going to go all head spin and chainsaw on anyone.

‘Thank you. Mmm, smells good.’ He took Tass by the hand and led her toward the door. ‘And the food. Yummy, looks good.’

It didn’t. Last time he saw a preparation like that it had been vomited by number four’s cat.

‘I here if you want talk, Sebastian.’

‘No, yes... maybe?’ He feigned a yawn. ‘Need coffee and big sleep.’ Another yawn. ‘I’ll be gone early in the morning, don’t wait up.’ The door almost shut her out, one last peek. ‘Night night.’ He said, and the door was closed. Tass well removed on the other side.

OMG. The first letters he wrote down on the page. What’s come over the woman? I thought she was going to take her teeth out and start spooning..

A fist fight at the Odyssey had way more appeal. Scout bathed in a sense of relief as his back sank into the pillows again. Train of thought was completely gone. He had to concentrate. *Rubi... Dok...* The pen started to scribble again.

Dok's being all mysterious and putting me in a corner over this job. Not being himself. I hate to say it but I don't think I can trust him on this. I'm really not sure what I've got myself into, probably best not to think about it too much. He exaggerated the exclamation. To cap it off someone's following me. Probably one of the Preacher's goons keeping an eye, but I'll be careful just in case.

Scout re-read the last paragraph as he left the bed and headed toward the window. One finger teased the curtain, just enough to see outside. Stalker man was there. The guy was big and not making too much of an effort to hide himself. He couldn't make out any features, it was too dark, but his new friend drew incessantly on the cigarette in his mouth, one fireside glow after another. Scout let the curtain back gently and returned to the book. He re-read the last paragraph, began writing again.

*Why do I give a shit? I know damn well this job is going to end somewhere nasty. Maybe this time I won't bother to shoot back. I'm tired Chi. Tired of the nights and getting more and more lost in the days. I just don't fit anymore. The pen scored a hard line through the word **anymore**. I miss you.*

How is she? I haven't forgotten. She'd be seven in just over three weeks. I try to imagine what she'd look like now. All slim and pretty, just like her mother. Just like you.

'Fuck this.'

The journal slammed, pen fell to the floor. He slipped his hand below the pillow and slid out the Glock and laid it on his lap. For a second he was somewhere else. A quiet and lonely place, a nowhere place he'd been to many times before. Just him and Mr Glock.

His thumb pressed the slide release and dropped the clip. Sixteen ten mil stub nose rounds, lethal projectiles. The first ran cold beneath his finger, a pause, before the mag was rammed back home and the handgun slid between his belt and spine. He wanted a word with his stalker.

A few seconds and he was out of the back door. Down three steps and into the tiny garden he shared with the other tenants. Six feet of wall was no barrier and scaled with hardly any effort. He dropped down to the other side, following the alley to its end. A quick check of the road, just three people, all men and moving away. Not a soul visible at any of the windows of the houses opposite. Plenty of visibility, the moon was almost full

and the sky all but clear of cloud. *Okay, let's go see what this guy wants.*

Scout walked casually out and crossed to the alley on the other side of the road and was quickly into a sprint between the walls at the back of the houses. The cobbled blocks passed in an almost silent procession below his boots.

People should really lock their gates. It was too easy to access the garden at the end of terrace. Long legs jumped him up the steps and he was over the rail down onto a moss covered flat roof which he crossed with ease. With a lot more care Scout stepped between the dozen or so pots on the edge and pulled himself up using another railing. He eased himself over to the first of several window ledges and took hold. Fingers found purchase and he moved hand over hand until its end. It wasn't a long drop to the ground but he figured it could still break bones he'd rather keep intact.

Old metal down pipes proved handy to cling to. Useful branches between the windows, most of which were long since boarded and gave little chance of him being seen. He hopped up and took giant steps from one ledge to another with no looking below until he eased himself down the final pipe. It was an old rickety shed that his feet touched down on and the structure

balked, uneasy below his weight. Gingerly he traversed the pitched roof until finally swinging himself over the edge and dropping back to the ground. Landing with knees well bent to absorb the fall.

Two deep and silent breaths exhaled themselves to encourage absolute focus. Out came the Glock pointing forward, its sights foraging for signs of any movement ahead.

He'd moved like an alley cat. Quick and fluid not stopping until Stalker was right around the corner in the alcove. No reason he'd have moved in the last two or three minutes. A few choice words were due with whoever was trailing him. Maybe even a bruise or two, it was turning into that kind of evening.

The Glock came round the brickwork first. Sharp hand movements pointing its barrel into the open space where he'd seen the man last. Hands moved the weapon left and then right.

Son of a bitch, he wasn't there.

The weapon was fanned from two o'clock to ten in a single movement. The wall was a good eight feet high. Stalker could have scaled it and gone over, but why? No way could the bastard have known he was coming.

Scout lowered the Glock to a seven o'clock position, gun still poised and ready. Hugging the brickwork he turned about to peek north up the street.

Empty. Not a soul to be seen.

He moved to the opposing wall and peered south, then took a step out from the alcove. Not a movement. Not a man, woman or child in sight. There were no open doorways or walls to hide a

man across the road. Buildings went straight up. Immense disappointment and an instant oil change as his body drained of adrenaline. The Glock hung unusually heavy all the way down to six.

That's when he felt it. Cold steel pressed against his neck.

Shit... Son of a bitch.

Scout had a split second to decide. A nano decision. Did he stay completely passive or duck, roll, and start shooting? The latter wasn't really an option; six o'clock could only shoot a hole in his foot. Besides, he had no idea how quick the man was.

Damn it. He'd well and truly got the drop on him. Nano decision took a mite longer but was probably the right one. Do nothing. See what he wants. That was why he'd come here in the first place.

He started to turn his head.

'No.' The voice was calm and definitely used to being heeded. The muzzle of the weapon pushed a little harder to ensure compliance. 'I am no threat to you. I was just sent to watch you.'

'By who... whom?'

From the angle and pressure that the gun was being poked at his neck Scout could tell the man was taller than he was. That

made him at least six foot four, maybe more. The weapon never wavered and its pressure was constant so he had good strength and control. The man was a pro. The guy was a ghost. How the hell did he get behind him?

Son of a...

Cussing was not going to help.

‘You only need to know that our interests are the same. As long as this situation continues I am not a threat to you.’

‘Good to know.’ Scout was grateful for that as he stared at the empty street. ‘Maybe we could get a drink? Exchange information. Help each other out.’

‘What would be the point? I am forbidden to get involved, unless I am left with no other course of action. I added that last bit myself.’

‘Forbidden? You work for the Preacher?’

No answer.

‘You work for Dok?’ That would make sense. ‘Speak up. Everyone works for someone.’

A stream of smoke wafted past Scout’s face leaving a familiar and sweet smell that any ex smoker would recognise. From the corner of his eye Scout saw the remains of the butt flicked out toward the road. He tried to turn and face the Stalker again.

‘Don’t you ever do what you’re told?’ The circular impression dug hard into Scout’s neck.

‘Yeah, but mum’s not here anymore.’

‘Smart mouth. They told me about that.’

‘Who?’ Or frigging *whom* told you what?’ He was getting sick of making the correction. He wasn’t even sure that it was valid this time. A change of approach was needed. ‘You shouldn’t smoke whilst on the job.’ He said. ‘Bit of a giveaway.’

Scout had a second oil change in as many minutes. Not quite as spine tingling as the last but chilly nevertheless.

‘You made yourself visible.’

Shit, it was an invitation. He’d accepted it like the idiot he was. The realisation made him angry. That made him unpredictable. Likely to do something stupid despite the gun dug deep in his neck.

‘You knew I’d come out.’

‘I wanted to see if you were as good as I’d heard.’

‘Obviously not.’

‘I beg to differ. You’re quick, agile and silent. Just try to leave the emotional baggage at home.’

There wasn’t time to absorb the last sentence as pain entered the equation. A sharp tap on his head was levied by the

gun previously pointed at his neck. Scout dropped to one knee and grabbed at the back of his head.

‘Bastard... What was that for?’ Muzzle met head and jerked his head down and forward. This close to the ground he could count the cracks in the paving.

‘To remind you what happens,’ Stalker said, ‘when you get careless.’

Was Stalker laughing? Was there something funny about this?

The needle hit boiling and Scout pushed himself up bucking the jab of the weapon to keep him down.

‘I like you.’ Stalker said. ‘Maybe *she* will to?’

‘She? You gonna take me home to meet your mother? Sorry, I’m not into threesomes, have to pass on that one.’

Saints alive, that stung more than the previous one as the weapon’s butt tapped his head again.

Maybe he deserved that one.

‘What woman?’ He asked. What exactly did Stalker know? ‘This mystery woman, she got a tendency to steal things?’ His eyes opened and the pain receded. ‘Is she blonde?’

‘You see. Smart as well. I’m going to run out of adjectives for you.’

‘Here’s one for you... Arsehole.’ Scout waited for the metal to bounce off his head again. It didn’t.

‘She’s going to need your help.’ Stalker said. ‘They’re coming for her and they’ll kill her if they can.’

‘You like her so much. You help her.’

‘You’re the Guardian. I chose you for that job. Myself, I must allow things to run their course. Besides, there’s a lot more going on than you realise. She’s as big a part of this as you are. It’s game on, Sebastian. Time you came face to face with your own demons. Oops, I think that was a spoiler.’

‘Sounds like shit to me. Hey, you got a name for mystery woman? Don’t suppose you’d write the address on the back of an envelope for me?’

Head still hurt but there was something different. Muzzle pressure had lifted and Stalker had gone quiet. *Was he still there?*

Scout risked a cautious peek, then a little more until he’d turned fully and found he was alone. Finger moved away from trigger. A sigh exited puffed cheeks. He lifted the gun and pointed it at the empty space.

Bang, bang.

Now was a good time for that coffee Tass had made him.
Tomorrow was promising to be a long day.

It had been four days since she'd made the delivery. Five since she had wowed the world with her skills. Not that anyone would ever know. The Preacher would keep it quite for sure. Never looks good for a gangster, being turned over in his own home.

“Wait until you are contacted. Do nothing to draw attention to yourself. We will be in touch.”

Those were the last words that she had received from her contact. Kat stared at her image in the mirror.

‘Hey pretty girl.’ She said.

Below the mirror was a mess of make up. Its surface littered with powders, foundations and lip sticks. The glass reflection showed the rest of the Loft through the door. She preferred not see it. It was her Spartan world, all clinical and clean. Not a photo or knick-knack to be seen. Not a single picture hung on the wall.

‘What’s a girl to do?’ She asked her reflection as her index finger traced at the objects of vanity. Red was the preferred colour of lipstick now in her hand. It brushed against her lower lip drawing the colour across the skin and pressing too hard.

‘Don’t go anywhere. Don’t do anything.’ She mimicked her contact.

The pigment and wax stick smeared the deep red colour upward as her mouth arched. She puckered her lips and opened her mouth, teeth stained red at the edges. A child could have lipped better. She grabbed a damp cloth and wiped it all away.

Real make up was expensive. Not hard to get hold of, if you knew the right people, just ridiculously priced. She knew there was a big warehouse full of it somewhere. Leftovers from before the Wars all hoarded and piled into storage like a lot of things. Goldmines of goods that the no good Legates peddled to make their fortunes.

Screw the money, there was a treasure trove of girly stuff out there that needed liberating. Maybe one day she’d find it and put her talents to better use.

Yeah, that sounded like a good plan.

Kat dropped the cloth. It was so mind numbingly boring just sitting around. Inactivity held no purpose. It bored her, it stifled her. She revisited her choices. She could go blonde, red head or black. The three colours of hair draped on the stands next to the mirror.

‘Hey Foxie, it’s been a while.’ She said slipping the deep auburn wig onto her head.

‘You and me blazing a trail out on the town. Just like old times.’ She smiled at her image and blew it a kiss, stood and walked to the closet. A sharp tug on the sliding door to appease her frustration and several racks of clothing were exposed.

Index finger passed the hangers over one at a time.
Something laced, and cut from leather. What better to show off a woman’s finer points?

‘I like you.’ She announced, as if the dress cared. Holding the wig above the dangling dress it fired her approval.

Maybe she would meet a man. Kat laughed out loud. Men were hardly a problem. A night of passion, well, sex at least. Worst case scenario, she’d get drunk and ride the tram till early morning.

Kat placed the dress like a gown on the bed, all neat and tidy. The wig was laid on the pillow and stroked into long lines to keep the strands perfectly straight. No not in here. That was for out there. In here chaos ruled.

She’d been like this ever since the accident. Everything had to be ordered and just so. Christ, she’d even ironed the curtains once. The answer was no, no, no, every time the urge reared its

ugly head. She couldn't believe that she was like this prior to the accident. It had to be a side effect. Some sort of damage to her brain. She still wondered, tried to remember but couldn't recollect a thing from before the big sleep. Kat returned to the vanity table. She sat and stared again at her reflection. This was her haven, her release from the girl that she was. She rolled a different shade of lipstick across the table's surface and drew a deep line in a powder pot with her finger.

She was twenty seven years old. Or was she two? That was all she could remember. Two years of her life the rest was a blank. *They'd* told her who she was. *What* she was. Why should she doubt them? It was obvious from what she could do that what they told her was the truth. Why then *did* she doubt them? Why when she looked at herself like this did she still doubt who she was?

She had memories, no, not actual memories. More flashes, glimpses of the past. But it didn't feel like her past. It felt like someone else's even though she knew it could only be her own.

Thinking like that will only give me another headache. I really don't want to feel anything right now. Except wanted. Even if it was just for a few stinky hours.

Right now she wanted some fun. She wanted a man and the auburn and the leather would ensure that she'd get a fit one. It wasn't so much the desire to get laid, not wholly, as a need to feel wanted. For a short time at least she wanted to feel a part of something more than herself.

Kat stood and walked into the bathroom. She slipped out of her robe, slid back the frosted screen, and stepped into the shower. The pull of a lever sent a thousand drops of water tumbled down onto her face and body. Hot water ran in arcs around her figure and down onto floral tiles. Whoever her benefactors where, they could well afford the luxuries that kept her happy.

A single candle was all Liam required to read by. It had already burnt half way down its thick stem leaving hot wax pooled at its tip. The molten excess was slow pouring itself down the sides in a slow bid to escape the heat from the flame.

Liam turned another page. The captain was hard on the trail of the whale. He urged his men on in their long boats, one more bold effort to catch and kill the monster. He read the immortal words out aloud in a hushed whisper.

‘There she blows, captain.’

What a thrill it must have been to stand tall in one of those boats. Life on the edge as the craft was tossed by violent waves in pursuit of such a violent beast.

The sound of gentle footsteps broke his concentration. He closed the book, placed it on his lap and waited.

‘Sir?’ A female voice spoke the single word in a soft and hesitant manner.

Only three people ever came to the cellar. Patron was welcome, of course. Radan, the Patron’s secretary who was a bore. The only other visitor was Kara, a servant and ward of the

Commission. Kara would come twice a day to leave food for him. It was she that had brought the apple and hid it in the tin.

‘Enter.’ Said Liam.

Kara did as she was bid. She smiled and bowed her head slightly as she always did. There was something fresh and virtuous about the woman, about the dresses that she wore. He’d never seen her wear a hem that didn’t dropped to cover the ankles. No pockets, and hardly fashionable they had all been repaired by stitching from a very delicate hand. Liam admired the precision of the stitches.

He supposed she was pretty but had no real experience with which to compare. The woman was not yet out of her teens. She was slender and showed scarce figure from her chest or hips. Always she wore her hair pulled tight back to the head bound and dropped down her neck in a short tail. All topped with a lovely bonnet. Her features were sharp with an angular nose set above mousy lips that had no colour. She had a slight jaw and her skin was pale.

Something about the woman fascinated him.

Liam understood that he didn’t feel like ordinary people. He accepted the lack of empathy he held towards others. You cannot

miss what you have never had. But there was something about Kara.

It was the way she hardly ever looked directly at him, content to raise her eyes now and then, and only when she spoke. She did so right now and lifted them to take his gaze. It was the clarity and brilliance of the emerald swirls, the clear lustre of the whitened flesh that reached out to beguile him. Her lone distinctive feature was his only furtive pleasure.

Never before had he looked upon such innocence.

‘May I?’ She asked.

Liam gestured acceptance with his hand. Kara stepped fully into the den.

‘I’ve brought juice and a sandwich. I know you like honey so I smeared a little on the inside of the bread.’

Twice in one day, that was a treat indeed. Kara paused as if waiting for him to say something. He didn’t. Her mouth always opened when she smiled. What was it she wanted to say?

Before Kara could turn away Liam did something out of character. He took an action that filled him with surprise, one that he would never have *thought* to take. Liam examined every action very carefully; he was extremely practised in the art.

Liam had just been impulsive.

‘Stay, please.’ He said and offered her the bench whilst sitting himself even straighter on the bed. ‘If you would like to, that is?’

She replied by nodding her head. Her hesitance still present but more relaxed. Kara cupped her dress neatly beneath her legs and sat.

This felt strangely awkward, another surprise to Liam.

‘I am reading,’ he said stating the obvious and lifting the book to show her. ‘It is a tale about a man named Ahab, who hunts a monster that stole his pride, and his leg.’

There was that open smile again. Kara raised her head but he could tell she was looking at his chest not his face.

‘Shall I read to you?’ He asked.

‘Yes. Please.’ Each answer came accompanied by school girl nods and a refusal to raise her eyes.

Liam flicked back through the pages. There was a passage that he particularly liked. It would be a good place to start.

“The White Whale swam before him.” he recited, glancing up just as her gaze slipped away. “As the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity which has been from the

beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of the east revered in their statue devil; -- Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it."

Liam lifted his attention from the page. Kara seemed enthralled by his words. He wondered if she understood what the passage meant. It didn't matter. It was enough that she listened.

This was a strange feeling to be in another's company and not to hear the whispers bay and snipe. Not to feel the urge to strike evil down. He liked her, not in a sexual way, that wasn't possible. At least he didn't think it was. No, this was a different feeling of pleasure for Liam and at long last he was willing to embrace it. Even to revel in it. For tomorrow would see Liam out

there in the City again hunting the streets for his own white whale.

An early start and three busy trams had seen Scout traverse the City. He left the 409 as it began to loop back in the direction it had come. The only transport allowed in Downtown and City Centre was a wealthy man's car, the rest used their feet. Apparently walking was the sign of a humble man and a Pilgrim. He already loathed each step taken into Downtown or 'All Saints,' if you preferred the local's *pet name*. You'd have to be blind, dumb and stupid not to understand why.

Already the laymen were out staking their claims. Street corners were the most popular pitch. They gave a good view down two streets and maximum exposure to the crowds.

Look at them, eager to get started. Stalls only half erected whilst the chosen prepared. Practise time for sermons and the work of the Saints. It was just another market place selling redemption for troubled believers. He was thankful it was still early. Later, when the foot traffic gained weight, they would start to Preach. A hundred voices of proclamation. A choir that would speak to anyone prepared to stop and listen. Show indecision and they would incite you to turn. For their Prophet was always greater than the others. Their Saint would always

promise more. And there was never a shortage of believers. Already he felt their unwelcome gaze directed towards his person. These were hawks with stark eyes well skilled to prey on the crowd or the individual.

The word was that in the past these streets hadn't been big enough. Far too many groups had converged to find new followers. The back biting and name calling often turned to fists and fights. A new law had to be passed to limit their number at any one time. The 'Cord' was introduced. A minimum spacing between the pedlars of Saints. Every Hawker had one. Woe betides the voice that shortened his 'Cord.'

Scout took step after step, head down, as the first of the voices irritated his silence. He could hear at least three but only one clearly. At least it proved the piece of string did work. A man was knelt in a grey robe hands rigid in prayer. His eyes stared upward toward the freshening sky. Scout had to resist the urge to follow them. They liked to play games. There was a cane beside him and on the pavement small pictures anchored with stones to stop them blowing away. Scout *had* to look. It seemed a child had scrawled the form of a stick man on each piece of paper.

‘Pictures of our Prophet.’ The kneeling man said without looking. ‘Gaze with me brother. Share the light of the sky through Jonas’ eyes.’

Hmm, not a Saint he was familiar with.

‘Bless you brother,’ Scout replied, ‘and bless your Saintly vigil. But when I look at the sky the sun hurts my eyes and my face gets wet when it rains.’

The kneeling man’s concentration waned. Scout would have been proud to unleash a scowl of that intensity. Kneeling man obviously didn’t like smart arses and returned to his vigil.

That was a good opener, Scout was prepared. He was ready to banter with these people but was firm in his conviction not to stop and talk. Not to become embroiled in senseless debates that he knew would goad him to argue. He knew just how short a fuse he had with the religiously afflicted. He’d been there too often in the past.

‘You look troubled my son.’

Here came the next pitch. They were always different. Some were complex, many worked on guilt. Others, he conceded, just brimmed with innovation.

Bring it on.

‘Take a moment and sit.’ Said the man in a long coat. Unwashed feet poked out from the fraying hem. ‘Unburden yourself and Saint Constance will listen.’

‘That’s exactly what I need to do.’ Scout slowed his pace, changed direction, and headed slightly toward Barefoot. ‘I need to unburden and quickly, can you help?’

‘Oh yes, my boy. Constance will listen and give fresh direction.’ He said.

‘Which way?’ Scout bent slightly and grabbed at his groin. His feet slowed but they didn’t stop.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Which way?’

Barefoot seemed confused.

‘I’m bursting for a piss. Please?’ ‘Which way, I need direction.’

Barefoot hesitated and then pointed. ‘Down the street,’ he said, ‘second turning on the right.’

‘Blessed is Constance.’ Called Scout. ‘She has answered my call.’ He trotted on.

‘You will come back after?’

‘Yes, I’ll be back. Constance has shown me the way.’

As fun as this was even he knew he didn't have enough rhetoric for the entire gauntlet, it was far too long. He counted them all ahead. There were so many. At least a dozen that he could see and the street wound out of sight before splitting into two. They would be standing, waiting, ready to ambush the lost and the needy, the unsuspecting. He should have come much earlier, before the sun came up. He could have just waited around; San was always early to get his pitch. No-one got here earlier than San. There were rumours that he actually slept in the fountain in the Square.

He wasn't sure he was going in the right direction the whole place had changed. Long banners floated from poles. The sign of the Reliquary, twisted lines in a purple circle, was out flapping everywhere. Scout shouted to the next man that appealed to him.

'I'm sorry I don't have time. I'll be back to talk. I promise. I'll talk to you all. Every last one of you.'

If I don't shoot myself in the head first.

Scout ran the gauntlet. No choice. The deeper into Hawker territory the madder it became, busier and more claustrophobic. The 'Cord' dictated and implemented a rhetoric divide but it made no mention of the use of the space in-between. Kneeling man's stick images had needed work he should make more of an effort. The deeper into Downtown he ventured the more sophisticated the market place became, the more professional *the followers* became.

The streets and particularly the paths were overburdened with tables, boards and banners. Everywhere the eye was assaulted. It was a mad collage of cults and Saints. Hawker's helpers constantly on the move their arms well laden, always there were trinkets for sale. They were keen to catch an eye and a full a purse. It wouldn't be long now until the activity became a frenzy.

Who wouldn't want to buy cloth off the hanger, dyed in your Saints favourite shade? Would sir require a little extra tint for a dash of holy tinge? Rack after rack of scarves and shirts, hats and bonnets. Even skin and hair was offered as holy. Metal and wooden jewellery hung like meat at the butchers. Scout

especially liked the relic stalls. Bones and other bodily fragments set in metal and wood. If you put all the fragments together the sum would definitely be greater than the man. *Had no-one worked that out yet?*

He'd heard that there were over four hundred and fifty Saints now. And that was just those that were officially endorsed. Most Hawkers found room to peddle more than one. Why limit your options and your audience. Some of the bigger stands offered a complete range of attractions, everything from a Prophet's lucky dip to a complete collection of Saintly icons. And there was something new afoot, a Hawking trick that he was previously unaware of. Some had taken to a new and irritating form of approach. It consisted of a long cane with which to point the passing individuals. It reached out and touched them as they passed.

Scout swore that the next Speaker that poked him with the *holy diviner* would find it shoved somewhere the Saints most definitely wouldn't shine. In one way he was fortunate that the streets were getting busier. He became less of a target. It wasn't easy being the lone gunman in streets filled with sheriffs keen to take you in. At the moment irritation was running at a level constant to his amusement. The crowds weren't too large and the

noise was acceptable. He especially liked the obligatory mockers and hecklers, mostly paid for by competitive Saints. Hey, this was a holy business and competition was fierce.

He managed to join the back of a large group of Pilgrims. Used them as a buffer and then turned off alone toward the Square. Eyes down and lots of crazy smiles, he was just a punter, like so many others out at this early hour. No, no, he didn't want a finger or a toe. He'd pass on the peddler of pendants and it was a big *no* to a towel bearing the face of Saint Imogen. As far as Downtown was concerned he was just here to watch and maybe even to learn. This was good. The feet hadn't stopped once. Avoiding the crazies was like stepping on the cracks in the pavement as a kid, you'd think it would be easy.

Of course for every ten relics that came straight off the shelf, there was one that came from under it. Not all relics were endorsed by the Commission; even the dead sold well on the Black Market. This was a market place, nothing more nothing less. The people came to buy trinkets and to listen. The Hawkers came to collect their souls whilst looting them of much cash as their Holy Spirit would part with.

Not far now, nearly at the Square. He would find San sat by the fountain plying his trade. Plan was to get what information

he could and beat a hasty retreat back to sanity. No more brushing people aside and getting irritated. If he took many more deep breaths he'd probably pass out. This was the centre of his City, the great tree from which all the Saints hung. All soft and juicy they dangled like ripe fruit ready to be picked. Unfortunately the root of every Saint here was watered by money. He had none to spare.

Scout turned another noisy corner where Preachers contested each others word. His ears stopped listening as his eyes opened in outrage and surprise. The Square he entered had changed. Wow, some difference. This had always been the Commission's domain, the place where the Legates performed. They'd definitely upped their game since the last time he was here. Such a lot to take in. The other Saints could only watch and weep at the new marble pillars that circled the Square. Faces were carved into the polished stone. He didn't recognise any of them; maybe the name plates would come later.

The whole Square had changed.

Three Legates preached to growing crowds from different wooden pulpits. The buildings that framed the Square bloomed with red cloth slung from windows and balconies. Bunting swayed in the light breeze from old lampposts. Even the cobbles

had paths painted red like carpets. One carpet laid for each entrance into the Square. Both paths guiding the Pilgrims to the Legate's stands. No chance of getting lost.

Scout had to concede there was an air of serenity despite the voices. The dark shop fronts had gone and been replaced by fresh paint and small herds of chairs. Dozens of metal legs all gathered below the numerous archways. They were corralled into the narrow walkway around the Square, all hogging the shade. Cheeky bastards had turned them into café's. No doubt selling over priced Saintly buns to enhance your divinely brewed tea.

It seemed that preaching al fresco had gone seriously upmarket. Now it came with tea and cake. He had to admit he was impressed. If he hadn't been on the job he might have been tempted to take in some refreshment with the new ambience. Root tea accompanied by a soya scone.

He moved on.

At weekends and special days this place would heave with bodies, the curious, the un-decidors, and of course the Faithful. Already a couple of hundred people were milling about with noses in the air each pushing for a better view, a keener sense of the Legates oratory skills. He got a good one himself as he followed the Square around.

Posters of Mikael, the Patron's favourite Saint were fixed to the scaffolding under crimson cloth. His image was always first amongst the equals. Scout knew the Prophet well as he'd defaced him numerous times as a child. He watched as the Legate's boots moved across the scaffold, and he listened to the Legate's voice as he preached to the gathering below. He supposed it was only the dressing of the Square that had changed; the tall buildings were still the same. It was the wrapping that had altered beyond all recognition.

Enough. He'd done enough staring it was time to find San. He took the long way around under the new archways. He followed the pavement taking in more of the shade. It also took some fancy weaving through the fast filling chairs. Somewhere in the Square was a friend. The reason he had come. Ten minutes spent with San was always productive. And there he was. The old goat sat on the wall of the fountain enjoying the sun.

It is a fact that everyman has a past; some are just more chequered than others. The old man that sat so innocently on the wall had the most complete history he knew. San had been a fervent Jarig in his younger years. A Legate's clerk when his hair had first started to recede. By the time San had reached his mid life crisis he had been Chief Clerk at the Office of Historical

Study. He had studied for Legateship at the Reliquary, and finally been excommunicated by the Commission. True, they later lifted the ban. But by that time the frail specimen of a man that sat out in the sun had moved on into private life and more than profitable business. He had earned and lost the size of fortune that most could only ever dream of.

San had told Scout once that he sat out there in the Square every day, at the exact same time, and would do so until one of the many enemies he had acquired decided to retire him for good. Why would they bother? He was dying slowly in a pool of his own bitter memories. Life was tough. Passing on would be way too easy.

He'd first met San when he was a kid out running packages for the Duma. He never found out what the old man was taking from him every day but by then San was almost broke, financially and spiritually. They'd had a relationship of sorts ever since. It had been some time since he had visited. San was sure to point that out.

The old man sat in an old heavy habit that a monk would once have worn. By his feet lay a wooden cane and an old sack of a bag opened and closed by use of a drawstring.

‘Move your arse out of the Square, old man.’ Scout gave it his best mimic of authority. ‘We’ve had complaints about an old pervert lusting at decent and righteous women. Know anything about that?’

‘I know everything about that. I *was* young once. Being blind as a bat may stop me undressing women with my eyes, more’s the pity, but there’s no lack of imagination I can assure you.’ San picked up his cane and threatened to stand. Old legs refused to respond, so he didn’t bother. ‘Fortunately though, I still think they’re all beautiful up here.’ The old man cracked his twisted cane twice to his head.

‘And the stale smell of urine? Are you responsible for that too?’

On reflection he shouldn’t have said that to the old man. There was a bit of a nif in the air. Still, if you can’t mess with a blind man’s head what can you do for fun?

‘I’m impressed that you can tell the difference between stale and fresh urine. I won’t ask how. But I will refute the inference that it belongs to me. I’ll have you know that the habit I’m wearing was worn by Saint Jude himself, who was by all

historical reference a very reluctant bather.’ He shrugged, ‘He believed that a man’s sins could not be simply washed away, and that they should be carried like a bell and denounced with hardened fervour at all times. As for my own hygiene, I’ll have you know that I wash at least once a week.’

A smile breached the ragged hairs around the old man’s lips. It was doubtful that he’d trimmed the lengthy beard, or his eyebrows, in many years.

‘How are you Sebastian? It’s been a while.’

Scout parked his backside on the wall.

‘I thought you were blind?’

‘As the proverbial.’

Then how did you know it was me? And don’t tell me you knew I was coming. I won’t believe you.’

‘I heard you enter the Square ten minutes ago.’

‘Bollocks.’

‘It’s true. You have a distinctively awkward walk. Your left leg always follows your right. In ninety eight percent of people it’s the other way round.’

Scout thought about that for a moment. ‘Bollocks.’ He said again. ‘And blind men don’t walk in straight lines.’

San laughed. That is a most unfortunate fact. How are you?’

‘Young and looking good in a mirror. Yourself?’

‘Old.’ He replied. ‘My arthritis is playing me up and I have a twinge in my lower back that comes and goes.’ He tapped his ear. ‘I get a noise, a high tone in my hearing that won’t go away. I have a rash on arse and it hurts when I shit sometimes. All of which would soothe if my old friends would visit a little more often.’

‘Ahh, are you lonely? That’s what a lifetime of pissing people off does for you.’

‘Then I have what I deserve. I take it you wish to share my fountain of woe?’

‘No, people still like me. But it is good to see you.’

‘It’s good to see you too. Was that another pun? Listen to me; I think I’m on a roll. Who says that old people aren’t fun to be around?’

‘Young people?’

‘You’re a philistine. So, now that the pleasantries are done. What do you want, and make it quick. I’ve got a living to earn?’

‘Can we talk in the shade?’

‘No. I like it here. The old fountain and I enjoy each other’s company. We have much in common. Neither of us is young anymore and we both have problems with our plumbing.’

‘Can’t get it up anymore?’

San’s smile widened.

‘I’ll have you know that I got laid last week by a couple of tourists from one of the work districts. Curiously enough they have a thing for old men with dirty habits. Excuse the pun.’

‘You’re joking, right?’

‘Not at all. I think they thought I was a Prophet and capable of divine intervention. And for the record I was. Twice.’

‘Uh, that’s disgusting.’

‘It was bloody miraculous.’

Scout wasn’t sure whether to take San seriously. He Judged by the beaming grin now parting the sheep dog beard that the old boy had actually got himself laid. Good for him. Unfortunate for the women involved. Yuk, building pictures he couldn’t handle.

‘Considering your feelings for All Saints I’m going to guess you’re not here for a visit?’

‘No. It’s business. I need information of a geographical nature. And since you live in these parts I thought you could help.’

San pulled his hand out from resting in the fold of the habit. Aged fingers held a small cup. He jarred it twice and the coins inside chinked.

‘You did say this was business? It’s expensive to live in this part of town.’ The coins chinked again. ‘It’s such a small cup and you have such a big heart.’

‘Information first.’

San sighed. ‘What do you want to know?’

‘I need to find a woman.’

A bigger sigh this time. ‘I know two lovely girls. I could rent you the habit for a meagre consideration.’

Unhealthy images resurfaced.

‘No thanks, San. This one lives in Sassia. I got a partial address from her Tag. You got any idea where that is?’

‘Sassia? There’s a name from the past. It’s an old term that no-one has used for decades. It’s an area of exclusive residence; your woman has expensive taste. Are you looking to be a pensioner’s toy boy?’

That seemed an odd thing to say.

‘Woman’s in her mid twenties, San. Bit older maybe.’

‘Not if you got the address from her Tag she isn’t. Tags don’t use names any more, not for sixty odd years. They phased

that out when I was a Novice. People with Tags like that are older than me'

This was no geriatric burglar. Had Rubi made a mistake? He doubted it. Rubi was a whack job but he was the best.

'Why would a girl have the Tag belonging to her grandma?' He asked.

'You're asking me? Why don't you ask her?'

'I've never met her.'

'So, you've never met her so you don't know what she looks like or how old she is, and you have no idea where she lives. You've got quite a puzzle. Are you taking up random stalking as a hobby?'

‘Women are strange creatures indeed. I’ve often considered them to be the cement that binds society together. They are a great force in nature. It’s a fact that only women can drive evolution forward. They don’t need a man, just a fluid that he carries around in a sack.’

‘Nice thought, San. No wonder you sit here on your own.’

‘But it’s true. We are mere playthings to them. A woman can manipulate the fire in a man’s veins. Cause our bodies to secrete heady potions. Induce us into a little bit of Heaven or a large dose of Hell.’ He paused and then pointed. ‘You see the dome at the far end of the Square?’

It was a bit hard not to. Bloody thing was massive. ‘Yes.’ He said.

‘Do you know what it was?’

Scout knew where this was going. ‘Yes.’ He said. ‘But you’re going to tell me again anyway.’

‘History is important. It’s why we know who we are and where we come from. And before you say it... I insist you let me indulge myself. You don’t come to see me anymore. And as you see I don’t have too many friends or admirers. Besides, I already

know more about your female than you do. Information is gold.'

He chinked the coins again. 'My cup does not runneth over.'

'Unfortunately your mouth is about to.'

This had better not be a waste of time. He knew what was coming. A history lesson about something he couldn't care less about. He supposed he deserved it. It had been a while since he'd bothered to come see the old man. He knew exactly why San sat here. The old man liked to smell the women as they walked by. It was all he had left. As the crowds grow the women become plentiful. San had often referred to the Square as a whore house for the blind. Scout couldn't answer for that but the Square was becoming quite colourful. There had always been a tendency for people to wear their best shirts and frocks... and fragrances, when coming to this part of the City. Prayer was obviously more intimate when you looked and smelled your best.

Who the hell was this?

A woman in floral pants stooped to stare at them both. A small party of five stood behind her.

There was a sudden jerked reaction from San in response to the woman. The cup rattled in his hand toward her movement.

‘Pennies for an old scholar? I gave my eyes for the Faith.’
He looked like a dog stretching its head for a quick rub of the neck. Two coins chinked into his cup.

‘You should take more care of your father.’

‘Blessed are the Saints.’ San called after her. ‘Wretched are the blind man’s children.’

‘Cheeky cow. I can’t believe they actually give you money.’

‘Some don’t need to be asked.’ The cup was angled toward Scout, who pushed it back. ‘It’s a harsh world that we live in.’ San continued. ‘Fucking Saints ensure that we all have to pay our own way.’ He paused. ‘Do you see the dome at the end of the Square?’

‘The same one as last time?’

‘In the ancient world they called that dome the Pantheon. It’s an incredibly old religious temple. Can’t get in there now, its structurally unsound. A bit like me, I suppose. I sit here sometimes and try to imagine what it was like to go inside and make offerings to the Gods. How grand it must have been burning sweet smelling incense in dappled sunlight. It must have been bloody marvellous to slaughter a goat or two on the altar. They were Pagan’s, did I mention that? They fiercely worshipped

a hundred different Gods, and were proud of it. Nothing ever changes, eh?’

More walkers came close by.

‘Alms so an old man can pray one last time in the Reliquary. One last pilgrimage before he lies in the arms of the Saints?... No? Well may the Saints watch over you anyway?’ A snide shake of the cup followed. ‘This city was once the centre of the known world did you know that? An empire was conceived, conquered and administrated from where we sit.

‘From the fountain?’

‘You’re a philistine.’

‘Again? Is that an insult?’

Some evenings I go to the Colloseo.’ San shook his head. ‘It’s that big circular building down the road. You’ve been there?’

‘Of course I have. Everyone has.’ Granted he hadn’t been since he was a child.

‘Before the Commission bricked it up and put roofs on for the rent, that structure was a place were men fought and died. It was an arena of combat and honour. I like to sit there and...’

‘Shake your cup?’

‘No. I like to try and imagine what it was like before.’ San put the cup on the ground just as a dozen people walked by. ‘You see that monstrosity across the river? The Reliquary. The big house where they dream up the identities of a thousand phantom Saints?’

‘Easy San. Watch what you say.’ The old man was in fiery mood.

‘It was a house of history and worship once. Not a residence for story tellers and dreamers. Market whores, the lot of them. If you can’t barter or buy from them they don’t want to know you. It wasn’t always like that. The Reliquary was like the dome there, it was a channel, a vessel that sent your prayers to reach God.’

Scout felt the hairs rise across his body. A cat would have hissed its displeasure. He needed to be sure no-one had heard. Crap, there were people five or six feet away. What was he thinking?

‘San? You feeling okay?’

‘I’m tired, Scout. Sometimes things have to be said.’ He took two painful looking breaths. ‘We live in a City where men kiss objects venerated by the Commission, and then sold for a few coins. I’ve seen women crawl under stones covered with

expensive effigies in the hope they will conceive a child. This City has a fire that burns. It's a furnace of false faith that blows on commercial winds. Phoney prophets conjured by the whim of wealthy Legates.'

'San, keep it down.'

'What's wrong? Are you frightened of words? Are you frightened of what you might hear?'

'I'm frightened of what others might hear. Now shut the fuck up.'

‘Are you trying to get us both arrested? If you want to rant about the Commission do it in private and nowhere near me.’

‘I’m sorry. Forgive me. There really wasn’t anyone listening.’

‘You seem pretty sure of that for a blind guy. Oh, I’m sorry, did I say something amusing?’

‘No, no. I just think that sometimes when your eyes don’t work it’s easier to see. That’s all.’ The old man stretched out a hand and grabbed his arm. ‘You don’t like people touching you, do you? The sigh says it all.’ He removed his hand. ‘Did you know that the bodies of the Prophets Mark and Peter are entombed in the Reliquary?’

He didn’t much like the direction or content of the conversation. Maybe he should grab the old man by the scruff and move the conversation back to where it started. Or maybe it was just better to get up and leave. Like an idiot he sat and listened? ‘Yes.’ He finally replied. ‘I know that they are interned in the Reliquary.’ He took a glance around. Only San was smiling. ‘And watch what you say. We’re in a yard filled with Legates, remember.’

‘Did you also know that Mark and Peter had their Sainthoods bestowed by the Catholic Church? That they actually sat at the feet of Christ *who was* the son of God.’

It was like a crashing wave flooding from the stomach upward. At least the old bastard had kept his voice low this time. *What was wrong with him? Did he want to get himself arrested? Did he want to get them both arrested?*

‘A lot of Saints were hijacked from the Old Religion. Not that we haven’t made a lot of them up ourselves, courtesy of the Commission.’

‘Why are you telling me? I don’t want to know.’

The truth wasn’t quite that simple. If it was he’d have moved away? Gone and got himself lost in the crowd. The truth was that he did want to know. He’d heard stories, tales about the Old Religion. He’d heard whispers over the years about how it was returning. How it was seeping into the homes of ordinary people who wanted more than the Commission could offer. He remembered the poster again.

Science is dead.

Technology is dead.

God... Is dead.

So long as he kept his voice to a whisper.

‘Why should I care? God is dead, right?’ There, the *word* was out there. He’d said it... God. It was just a *word*. So why take such a deep breath? What was with the goosebumps spreading like a rash on his skin?

‘God isn’t dead.’ San barely moved his lips but Scout heard the words as if he’d shouted them aloud.

‘Easy, old man.’

‘He’s here, right now. And he’s calling you.’

‘Me? He’s calling... You need help.’

‘She needs you. We all need you. The time has come.’

Scout leaped to his feet, more a reflex than a reaction.

‘You stop this shit, right now.’ He’d stepped into oncoming traffic, an excited group of young men and women. ‘Excuse me.’ He said, not bothering to look as if he meant it. ‘Hey, you don’t own the Square. Yeah... you too.’

He’d seen San pull this *I’m in touch with the Saints, for a fee*, shit with the tourists.

‘What, you think this is funny? You want to get us both arrested?’

San obviously found something amusing. Right on cue the Jag entered the Square. Ten, twelve, maybe more.

None of them were armed, probably off duty and coming to hear the Legates preach. Suddenly he heard them himself. The provocative words filled the air. No, not the words, just the sounds, the inciting force of the sermon not yet in full flow. Talk about being in the lion's den.

'Sit down.' San insisted. 'You'll attract attention.'

'And you'll get a slap. Don't pull that phoney trance stuff with me.'

'I'm sure I don't know what you mean.'

Scout sat and the coins rattled again at passers by.

'All donations go to the widowers and orphans. Thank you, thank you. May the blessing of Arimius be upon you?' He angled the cup toward Scout again. 'Lying is a sin.' He said aloud and then whispered. 'Don't worry, I'm not a sinner. My wife is dead and I grew up in an orphanage.'

'Sassia?' Impatience in the voice. 'I can always buy a map.'

'You wouldn't find it. There are no maps for the City centre. They like it that way. Gives a sense of mystery and adds to the privacy.' San leant against his cane as if considering whether to share or not. 'You'll find your woman in the Santo Spirito. You

can still find the old name plates if you know where to look. It's where the old hospital church stands... or at least stood. There's not a lot of it left. They liked to burn places like that after the Wars. You'll have to cross the bridge to get there. It's a very wealthy, very exclusive neighbourhood. There are Legates who live in more deprived areas. Tell me about the girl?'

'She's a thief.'

'Professional?'

'Very.'

'What did she steal?'

'An old Relic, and from a Duma Overlord.' *Did he really just tell him that?*

'Interesting. She's got balls. But I have to wonder how a girl who steals for a living could afford to live at such an exclusive address. It's also a district renowned for its religious residents, being so close to the Reliquary and all.' He paused for thought bottom lip protruding like a spoilt child. 'Want to know what I think?'

'I think you've shared too much already '

'We know several things about your mystery woman. She is independently wealthy, or has a rich benefactor. I suspect the latter with her questionable occupation. She's most likely single

and probably a loner. It's hard to be a wife or a mother with such a nocturnal and dangerous occupation, though not impossible. And she is probably a very religious girl. But I wonder which faith she follows.'

'You mean which Saint?'

'No. I said what I meant. Which faith?'

The old sod was doing that thing again. All glazed eyes and floppy head.

'San, stop it. I mean it.'

'Why steal a Relic?' He asked. 'You can buy them on any street corner. What is so special about this one? I wonder. Can I trust you Sebastian?'

'No.' He knew that look. 'Whatever it is, you keep it to yourself.' Scout got the wandering eye again, flitting between the uniforms and the crowds. Thankfully none of the uniforms were showing them any attention, at least not yet. But that could change. 'Just tell me where Sassia is and I'll be on my way.'

'When you want to conceal something.' He said aloud. 'It's often best to hide it in plain sight.'

'That's nice, San. Now where's Sassia?' This was like pulling teeth.'

‘I think she’s Old Religion, Sebastian. And I think I know what she stole.’ San lifted his gaze. ‘You’re really in the shit this time.’

‘They’ll fight to the death to protect their own.’

‘Who will?’

‘The people whose property you’re trying to steal.’

‘It’s not theirs, whoever *they* are? I’ve been hired to return it to the owner.’

‘It’s a box isn’t it? An old silver box with strange inscriptions scribed onto its outer case. It is isn’t it? Wow, I’d heard it had surfaced again. I thought it was just another rumour like so many in the past.’ He started to laugh. ‘You have no idea who the real owner is. And I promise you it’s not some psychopathic sadist from up river. I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Sebastian. You’re in trouble, the big doo doo kind.’

‘Is there any other kind?’

‘Yes. The small doo doo kind. Where bad people don’t try to shoot you in the face or cut bits from your anatomy. Slice your never parts, or stick...’

‘I get it.’

‘Blessed are the virgins and the eunuch’s, the humble and the meek. The generous are always remembered for their

goodness.’ San poked his finger into the cup. ‘That sounded like two big ones. Did she have big ones, Sebastian? Did she?’

‘There’s something wrong with you. You sit in the sun too much.’

‘I’m old and I’m blind.’ He said his thumb picking at his teeth. ‘I piss far too much and most of these, teeth, are not my own. Did I miss anything?’

Scout grabbed San’s hand and disarmed him of his cup, placing it at his sandalled feet.

‘No touchy touchy, San no like. Just like Sebastian.’

‘Tough shit. Start talking, San. I want you to tell everything you know about this box. If I’m in the middle of something hot I want to know why.’

A beardy smirk was followed by a grimace.

‘Can you smell that, Sebastian? Can you smell the people in the square?’ He pulled on the habit, tightening the garment to his neck. A strange act, as if he reacted to a chill despite the warm nature of the morning breeze. ‘It’s a strange odour.’ He said. ‘A heady brew of excitement and deceit. This entire City is bathed in its scent. Can’t you smell it?’

‘No. The only thing I smell is bullshit. See you later San.’ He got to his feet but San grabbed his wrist.

‘I know, no touchy touchy. But you wouldn’t hit a blind man, would you?’

‘Don’t push me. I tend to disappoint people.’

San relented and let go.

‘Change is coming, and the box is the focus.’

Okay that got his interest. But San needed to start talking and he needed to do it quietly.

‘It’s a holy vessel lost in time. Some say that it holds a recording of God’s voice. I’d love to hear that, it’s my personal favourite. I’ve also heard that it’s a powerful weapon, or the ultimate receptacle of knowledge. Maybe an elixir to give eternal life. Who knows, you can take your pick, the speculation is endless. The facts are that it’s been around for a very long time and that certain factions will stop at nothing to possess it.’

Now that the blood had returned to his butt cheeks Scout sat them back on the wall. He’d bluffed and San had folded. No way was he going anywhere; this conversation was just getting interesting.

‘Who wants it?’ He asked.

‘Well, there’s your Duma employer for a start. There are numerous Relic Hunters and Saintly sects. Let’s not forget the Trinity who believe that it is theirs by divine right. They’ll want

anything that relates to the Old Religion. And then there's Illuminai... the Great Patron himself. If you know about it, then I guarantee that he does too.'

'Why would Patron be interested in a box?'

'Because it's Old Religion. Simple physics, two worlds cannot occupy the same space and time. Believe me, Scout. That man will stop at nothing to obtain and destroy this box. The Trinity are a threat to everything he believes and there are more of them out there than anyone knows. The movement grows every day. It's a threat, plain and simple. And the only way Patron can stop it is to send in the Jag. Trust me, the last thing he needs is this artefact, whatever it is, being used to insight the heretic believers. His position of power has become precarious as it is.'

'You're right; I'm in big doo doo.'

'Hah... You'd best find the girl. She obviously knows more than we do.'

'Your insight is invaluable. If only I'd thought of that.'

'Is that sarcasm, Sebastian? That's really not going to help at a time like this. What, with your impending doom and all.'

Scout remembered what the gunman in the alley had said. Oh, and then there was San's little outburst in his trance. He

hated it when he did that. How did he do that? Since when did a blind beggar know so much?’

‘How long have you been Old Religion, San?’

The smile on San’s face weaved more lines than a spider’s web. ‘Not really Old, more like New. There are two testaments on the subject. We favour the more forgiving of the two. It’s been my calling to spread the word, discreetly of course.’ San pulled the bag at his leg close and opened the draw string. He looked up toward the sky as his hand delved into the lining and returned with spectacles held delicately between forefinger and thumb. Wiry frames held two dark circles of glass. He put the arms over his ears. ‘Do you realise you could be arrested just for talking to me? I’m a dangerous man, according to the Commission.’ He let the statement linger. ‘Cat got your tongue?’

Yes it had. Scout put his radar on full alert.

‘Are you scared Sebastian. You should be. If the box has surfaced again then maybe the time has come for it to open? Though why God would choose *you* to facilitate the rite is beyond me. I suggest that you use your gifts to find the girl. Ask her what’s going on. I think that you and she may have a destiny to play out. It sounds rather exciting don’t you think?’

‘Maybe I’ll just quit. Retire to the coast.’

‘You *could* walk away. But that would make you look guilty. I’d think you were guilty. Found the box, kept the box. You know how it works. They’d be on you like a rash.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Your welcome.’

Silence ensued, if you didn’t count the murmur of the growing crowd. Or the voices of the three Legates who definitely harboured a more threatening tone in the last few moments. The square seemed to shrink and the black scary uniforms had multiplied. Scout had to look away, down at the dust on the ground. ‘Sassia?’ He said with the tone implying a severe impatience.

‘It’s an old name for a small cluster of buildings a good walk in that direction.’ He pointed without looking. ‘And that’s why you won’t find it on a map. It’s a privacy thing, adds to the mystique of the community.’

‘You said that already.’

‘Memory loss, something I didn’t mention earlier. Just head toward the river and cross ...’ he turned to his right, ‘the bridge on your left as if you’re heading for the Reliquary.’ San teased his glasses down the bridge of his nose exposing some well trained puppy dog eyes.

‘Why are you looking at me like that San? You’re blind. You can’t see me.’

‘Don’t need to. I can smell the poverty on you. They’ll notice you coming from a mile away. You’ll need new shoes just to walk on the pavements.’

‘I’m a humanitarian.’ Scout showed the Tag on his wrist. ‘Opens up a lot of doors.’

‘Not these ones. That ink won’t even get you on the bridge let alone over it. I’m thinking it’s been a while since you took prayer at the Reliquary. Because if you had you’d know that things have changed. Bridges are closed outside of Pilgrim season. You need a licence just to cross the river now. There was some trouble, something to do with an explosive device or two. Jarig troops had found a den of Trins who had then blown themselves up, took half a building and a dozen Jag with them, rather than be arrested.’

‘I heard something about that.’

San shrugged. ‘It was hard not to. And believe me they tried hard to suppress it. I suppose if you wait till the summer you can join the Pilgrims and they’ll probably let you in. But they’ll be watching.’

‘That’s not really practical, San. Come on, you must know someone that can help?’

‘Sure, if you come back in a week. No problem.’

‘By tonight, San?’

The question obviously appealed to San’s sense of humour. When he’d stopped laughing the old man sat up straight and took a more serious posture. ‘Not possible. And before you say anything, it’s not about the money. It’s just a matter of time.’

‘Then how do I get across?’

‘There are options. You could fly? Maybe stow away in the boot of a car and hope no-one looks? Or you can swim. It’s just a matter of avoiding the guards, the lights and a few river monsters.’

‘Sounds like fun, you want to come with me?’

Scout had hit the humour button again. San, bless him, he nearly choked on the reply. ‘Got no wings and I never learnt how to swim.’ He said. ‘Have I mentioned that I’m claustrophobic?’ He opened his arms as if readying himself for a big hallelujah. ‘Why do you think I sit out here in the Square? Hell, I need a nap after taking a crap. You’re on your own, Scout. You’ll figure it out. I can help if you get to the other side. I do have a friend who might help. You’ll need one.’

‘I’ll manage.’

‘I *can* help you a little bit more with the woman. Sassia is a strictly family district where the tenants are rich and very devout. They like their privacy. The Commission gives it to them in return for big fat donations to the cause. I can tell you there are only three sets of apartments used for single occupancy. Two are exclusively male with most of the rooms occupied by Prospects who study at the Reliquary. You’ll even find some hot shots training at the Jarig academy. I wouldn’t go there. It’s way out of my comfort zone.’

Here came those pulled teeth again.

‘The other apartment, San? And if you rattle that tin again before we’re finished.’

‘You’re a difficult man to love, Sebastian. Regardless. The block in question is, shall we say, more accommodating for society’s elite. A place where, for example, a wealthy man could keep an acquaintance that he didn’t want his wife to run into.’

‘It’s a brothel?’

‘Goodness no. These people go to social events; they’re not on the payroll. If I was a girl trying to hide myself in plain sight, that’s where I’d be. The building has a nickname. “Lucky Blu.”

Some reference to a theatre that used to be part of the site.

You'll find it behind the old hospital.'

San poked his glasses tighter to the bridge of his nose then reached for the cup. 'Alms for a poor beggar who has spent his life pursuing goodness... and failed. Be kind, be generous.'

What could he do? It wasn't that he really wanted to give San cash. But the old boy had given him a place to start looking. He plucked a small wad from his pocket. One note after another was peeled from the pile. San seemed tuned to the sound of each crisp tone.

'Are those tens or twenties?' Another note was crinkled and then pulled slowly from the wad. 'Ahh... twenties, good.' Individual notes were flipped and pulled, the old man's head twitching to each movement. Scout stopped. 'Information is gold, boy. Don't give me silver. The Saints wouldn't like that. Taking advantage of a blind old man is a sin.'

Well Scout wasn't a sinner. At least that was what he told himself. A few more notes left the hand. San's cup lowered from the pressure of being filled. It was money well spent. Scout now had a place to start looking for his mysterious woman.

San whispered something to him. A single word followed by an address. 'Write nothing down.' He instructed. Whispered

directions followed, clear and concise, and then he raised his voice.

‘Saints preserve you.’ He stopped whispering. ‘Just one more thing and this one’s for free. You’re being followed. I presume you know that?’

‘I do. But how do ...’

‘There are two of them and I don’t think that they’re a pair.’

That was interesting news. Someone else was showing an active interest in his activities. Scout studied the Square in the direction of San’s interest, taking care not to be obvious. .

‘They’re behind us.’ San said.

Scout’s eyes rolled. *Of course they were.*

‘What do they look like?’

‘I’m blind, Sebastian.’

‘Okay, what do they smell like?’

‘One walks tall. He stinks of smoke. I don’t like him, something odd about him.’

‘Yeah, we’ve met already.’

‘It’s good to have friends.’ San said. ‘The other is shorter and shuffles his feet when he moves. He’s far sneakier and hides himself well. I suggest you be very careful, Sebastian. I’m

getting a rather dark and disturbing feeling about your prospects.'

He grinned showing teeth for the first time.

'Sebastian?'

'Scout, are you still here?'

Off to the Old Quarter then.

San was right he probably wouldn't fit in. It was as close to City Centre as man could get, as his finance could get him. A straight spit over the river to the Reliquary and the Primes of the Commission. There was a great big castle on the riverbank, the Castel Saint Angelo. Headquarters and main city Barracks for the Jag. It gave him the willies just thinking about them. About how many would doubtless be hanging around. Probably best not to think about them.

Old Quarter was a thin stretch between Downtown and the river. Parts of it were a warren of narrow streets and alleys. Its bigger main roads open to official traffic only. Although the trams were plenty he decided to use his feet and avoid the troopers crossing the river. Wasn't such a long walk, just try to remain anonymous and blend in. Enjoy the view and the walk.

He had often felt that whoever had built this City had been driven by an infatuation with straight lines. The flat exterior facades of the many buildings were rampant with an obsession for small and fine detail. Everywhere he looked the decaying remains of capitals and cornices, fancy corbeling and plinths. It

was a city of balconies and rich ornate doors, somewhat tarnished by age.

It seemed that no-one cared any more for the ancient wealth of the City. An ancient Empire's ruins had been pillaged and scavenged. Goods to be carted away until only the dregs remained.

Some said that Oasis was blessed to survive the Wars. Only the big awkward buildings had been pulled down, some marred by fire others by age. Most of its churches were burnt to a cinder. The Commission had seen to that. It had become an eclectic mix of old and older still. Post War Oasis had seen to that with much of its stone and marble being reused, re-laid for the good of the City. The wealth of resource came from the outside in. All the land across the Line had suffered the worst from the purge. Its resources scoured and raped, its treasures of timber and metal removed to be recycled. That was the way it had to be back then. The need was of the few. Now it was the need of the many.

It was a wonder that the Line turned out the way it did. You'd think it would sit harshly to the eye, but not so. There was a love of nature across the Line, sweet buildings that brimmed with green and flora, cascading waterfalls of vines at every turn.

In summer the colour from the boxes and balconies was a sheer delight. Maybe it was them that had it right? Who was he to decide? A man with just a small room and a bed hardly made an expert. Although he hated the wealth in the Old Quarter he did have to concede an admiration for its buildings. Who wouldn't want to live in a building by the river? It didn't matter which particular one. It just required deep pockets and a few more friends with influence than he had. Hey, he was about to go hobnobbing with the wealth of the City.

Hell, he'd fit in just fine.

Scout quickened his pace and put on his friendly face. He tried to blend in. Not so easy, everyone looked so serious. Just a touch of paranoia crept in as he felt the eyes of the passers by. Every corner or two he would glance over his shoulder, take a stretch of his neck. Casually check the rear and watch for his tail. Only the short man followed. Shorty was good. He might not have noticed him without the warning from San.

Fortunately there were always lot of shadows for a man to step into. He took advantage of several and quickened his pace. An opportune wall was scaled. Once over he waited. He doubted Shorty could even reach the top let alone climb over. A few

seconds passed and no-one had tried. Shorty was good, but not that good.

‘Who are you, what are doing down there.?’ The red cheeked face of a large woman had been thrust through an open upstairs window. Nosy cow had a big mouth. What was the point of concealing himself if Big Mouth was going tell everyone where he was? He had to shut her up.

‘I’m an officer from State architecture... Courtyard Department.’ It was the first thing that came into his head. ‘We’ve had a permit request to upgrade your yard to courtyard status.’

He could do this. Being Chief Yard Attendant from the Dept of Works was right up his street. Scout stepped fully into the yard.

‘I have to tell you Madam that I am not happy with what I find. This yard is six square feet below the minimum size permitted for consideration. If you’d checked the forms properly you would have understood this. I may have to instigate a full investigation into the improper use of department forms and the wasting of a State official’s valuable time. Both of which are serious offences and carry severe penalties.’

Big Mouth was speechless. He took a last look over the wall. There was no-one to be seen. Hey, maybe he could get a drink and something to eat out of this charade.

‘But may I compliment you on the hanging baskets and the window box.’ He felt it a point well made. Whoever tended the half dozen or so bowls that hung from walls had nurtured a particularly fine floral arrangement. The window box itself was a spectacle of colour.

‘I would like to come up and...’

Big Mouth withdrew behind closed windows. That wasn’t very hospitable. He thanked the stars for a limited exchange and left the yard double time.

Most of the day was spent walking the river. San was right about the bridges. Jag present at both ends. It seemed the Reliquary and the entire area around it was off limits without the right Tag. It was a puzzle for sure. Travel in the boot of someone’s car had held a lot of merit until he observed several being opened as they crossed. Security was keen and traffic too light. The guards were quick and efficient. They had dogs too. He wasn’t going to mess with them.

A stop at a cafe playing the humble visitor had allowed some well directed questions to its female host. It appeared that the

Reliquary had suffered a terrorist attack less than a year previous.

“It was the third such outrage from those Trinity scum.” Those were her words not his. An explosion had left several Novices deceased. No-one knew who the criminals were. He’d not pushed the subject and quickly returned the conversation back to the views. Folk here were suspicious but rather proud of their adjacent setting to City Centre. “The views of the Reliquaries Dome are unparalleled in the City.” A damn good excuse to legitimise the overpricing of beverages and food.

Another walk of the river convinced Scout that the only way across was to test his swimming skills. He wasn’t too keen as the water flowed much quicker than expected and he would have to make the crossing after dark. No shortage of places where he could get down to the water. He just needed to find a convenient place where he could slip in without being seen. Once across the water it was a simple task to find some stairs up the far walls. Directions were a bit hazy but San had given him a name and an address. Someone he could trust on the other side.

The other side?

What the hell was he doing? Scout had no doubt that the contact was a Trinity sympathiser. Maybe even an agent. He was

jumping in bed with heretics and what worried him most was his own lack of concern about the situation. It was something that Stalker had said. Something about having to face his demons and answer questions about his past. That last bit still hung in his mind.

Twenty four hours ago he was content to mind his own business. Let the world pass him by. It wasn't too late to back off. Go tell the Preacher to do one. Then he remembered how quickly he had taken the Duma Overlord's money. And there was the slight matter of the coffee. Was it too late to ask for it back?

What he wouldn't give for a hot steaming shot of caffeine right now.

Waiting till dark had seemed a practical approach. It was a good tactic for thieves and vampires. He hoped it would work for the late night swimmer. Unfortunately the Commission, in their infinite wisdom, had set a blaze of lamps into the far bank. The other side of the river was lit up like a night club. Whilst it made the sights real pretty, it also cast a dawn that reached halfway across the water. For that reason he'd been forced to attempt the crossing beneath a bridge further up stream. If the faster flow got him it would be a one way voyage out of the City.

One thing that he'd always liked about the river was the trees. They lined the bank on the Old Quarter side. Maybe he'd just sit and watch for a while. Give himself a chance to bottle it and change his mind. Once he went in there was no coming back. Sink or swim. Not much of a choice. But then he didn't really have a choice, did he?

Do it.

Come on, best foot forward, trousers off and in for a dip. There was hardly anyone around now. Anyone with sense had headed for bed. People around here didn't party they prayed. That was good for him.

He was right there was less light here, more illumination on the walls than the river. One thing in Scout's favour was he'd made a good guess at the darkest place to cross. From the bridge a casual look wouldn't reveal his progress. On the other side he could see the water stairs he'd use to get up to the promenade.

He slipped over the wall. Dangled from his finger tips and dropped. The woman he was looking for would undoubtedly consider this sort of thing to be having a good time. He didn't concur. The jolt of the drop had jarred through his knees but he rolled and was up moving quickly to the waters edge. Both shoes were flipped off his feet and slipped into the plastic bag he'd charmed from the waitress. It already held what cash he had. The Glock and both clips went in plus a small diary that never left his side, a pen knife and the mobile phone followed. Twisting the bag's neck he tied it once with his boot lace and then again to his belt.

Crap, that water looked cold. One eye fell toward the lapping water, its surface had a grim look and a sour smell the closer he got. It still looked cold. He dipped a foot and wished he hadn't. *Holy Saints the water's bloody freezing.* It would have been so much better to have dropped straight in and not known what was coming.

Half a dozen sharp but deep breaths and it was time to man up. Time to take the plunge. A few seconds later he was in.

Holy shit, shit, shit. Brisk was an understatement. The water cast a violent assault on his skin. It was a shot of alcohol straight to the brain, the exposure made him dizzy.

Swim. The silent shout aroused movement. *Swim little fish, swim.* It was true; there really was something wrong with him. Enough people had told him over the years and now he was a believer. He took a silent scream with every frigid stroke that hauled him further away from the river bank. One stroke after another gained him ten and then ten more.

Keep heading for the nice warm lights. Coffee and dry clothes waiting on the other side. He wished.

With each underwater stroke he forced the water behind and propelled his body forward. Then he noticed the flaw in his plan. He was moving as far to his left as he was toward the middle. Current had him. Water was side swiping him fast. The bridge was getting closer. And quickly.

Swim little duckling, swim.

With each stroke the triumphant statues on the bridge's piers came closer into view. The granite effigies loomed above him as did the bridge's span. The Water went dark. He swam

long and hard strokes. Light again as he emerged from the underside of the arch. Voices, clear as a bell from the bridge. The loudest voice was his own still bitching in his head. It urged him to swim faster and harder. Halfway now and the strokes had more bite, more purchase on the wet stuff around him. He was slowing his sideways descent. Thirty yards from the other side and Scout gritted his teeth so hard he thought they would break.

Swim, swim, swim.

He couldn't hear what the Jag on the next bridge were saying but the sounds of their voices were growing loud enough for him to join the conversation. And he really didn't have anything to say. The structure loomed into his eyesight. It's final arch growing fast above his head. Fifteen yards to go... Ten... nine.

Scout reached with his hands pawing at the water for advancement. Seven... six... five, the bridge rose high above his head. Oh shit, it was about to pass overhead. Scout grabbed out with his hand. He no longer felt the cold or the wet, just the panic. He had one thing raging in his head. Get a hold of something before he was sucked under the bridge and carried away downstream by the current. Next stop would be the spotlights and the crosshairs of guns.

Scout kicked on with his feet stretching out with his arm. The buttress was inches from his fingers as he passed below the underside of the looming arch. Fingertips touched the bricks and were teased by the edges of the rough surface. Nothing to grab, no purchase to find, he kicked again with his feet. He felt it impossible to stretch out any further and then his hand made contact. It slipped and he was pulled away. Harder kicks with his feet and both hands lunged out this time. He was a frigging dolphin, nothing could stop him.

Instant relief as he finally found a hold. Scout's hip bounced hard against the solid wall as his momentum was checked. Fingernails worked at the bricks feeling for better purchase. He had a hold and a damn good one. One hand at a time, take it one at a time. He felt his way, careful not to reach too far, desperate not to slip. One more reach and he had the corner. Firm hands pulled him round. A fierce grip pulled him into safe water. He was out of the main current and hugging hard against the wall.

Adrenaline sagged, a balloon deflating as he clung like a spider to the wall. Desperation and panic retired into the need to rest and even to sleep. The cold started to bite again.

One hand moved in front of the other as fingers already weary pulled around the buttress. Any rough spot or hole was

used. The water seemed to roar at him below the bridge but was finally stifled as he passed and cleared its flank. One more massive effort and Scout was climbing out of the water. He rolled out onto the concrete and into the shadow of the bridge. Saints alive it was cold as he backed tight into the looming masonry. Now he could hear exactly what the guards above him were talking about. Bless them. They were moaning about the chill of the night. Scout was panting, soaked, and half a degree short of full blown hyperthermia. They thought they were cold. He shook his head and almost roared with laughter.

What he wouldn't do for a few minutes sleep. No time. He waited a minute or two, what seemed like an hour. So far as he could tell the Jag were no longer at the exit of the bridge. They'd walked further across as their voices became more distant. He'd risk it. No way could he just sit here. That would be stupid. No matter how much it hurt he had to get up the river steps and put some distance between himself and the water.

Cold muscles creaked and groaned. They hurt from the movement. It wasn't difficult to stay hunched as he made his way slowly up the steps. He couldn't stop shivering and banged his nose on the wall trying to peer over the thickset balustrade. A car was coming. Headlights fanned across the tarmac at the far

end. The whole bridge was being illuminated; no way could he just walk out now. Bastards could have waited five minutes. There was nothing else to do but to wait. Head down time, take the opportunity to catch some breath and listen to the raised voices. Someone wasn't happy about being stopped. Two car doors clumped shut and the engine growled the car forward. He risked another peek. Three guards all with their backs to him as the vehicle slowly closed. A really bad idea forced his legs to move. It was a dangerous risk and a stupid idea but the ground ahead was way too open. There wasn't a lot of choice. It was the quickest way off the bridge and the quickest way to hospital if he got it wrong.

As the car passed Scout slinked out like an escaped geriatric. He made a grab for the bumper and took hold. Both hands jolted forward and he slammed sickly silent into the tarmac. Even at low speed he felt the friction through his clothes. He couldn't stop himself turning over onto his back as his arms were yanked in their sockets. If the Saints really were up there, now would be a good time to smile on him. Not just a smirk but a good old we love Scout kind of smile. He'd take a toothy grin if it helped him hold on. Anything, just don't let the friction burn at his arse.

The tarmac hurt maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

He watched on as the guards chatted. One laughed as another lit a cigarette and a long loom of smoke was puffed into the air. Now was definitely a good time to start smoking again.

Just keep looking the other way. I swear I'll buy all of Stick Man's drawings and look at the sky for an hour. Just keep them watching at the other side.

They did and the light from the river bank faded. It was time to say goodbye to his ride. He let go and felt his feet catch up with his head forcing him to roll. Two twists and a half roll later all momentum had stopped. Best not to move, not yet, wait till the car gains some distance. Lying still was good he wasn't convinced he could actually move. Good thing was the smooth hum of the car's engine was drifting further away. Now would be a good time to move. He was up on his feet and dashing to nearby trees. Finally, he was bathed in shadows, more than bloody thankful that he could no longer be seen.

From the river bank a short man with dark hair pulled an object that buzzed discreetly in his pocket. The man opened his phone and spoke.

‘Yes,’ replied Shorty, ‘we’ll pick him up on the other side. No, he actually swam the river. That’s right, he swam to the other side. Okay, we’ll watch him. See where he goes. Yes, we’ve picked the old man up from the Square. No, he hasn’t said anything yet.’

‘But he will.’

The phone flipped shut and the hand slipped it back into the pocket. Shorty watched the river. It seemed a placid expanse but he knew the water had a strong current. He’d just seen the swimmer fight hard against it. But that was what these people did. They swam against the tide. His tide came from the Reliquary and it flowed throughout the City to provide.

Shorty really believed that. He loved the Saints and he loved his work for the Commission. He hoped above all things that this man, this swimmer, would lead them to the heretics. To the Trin terrorists who threatened his way of life.

Shorty made his way to the bridge.

Isabella fingered the tiny glass phial in her hand. The contents looked harmless, just like water. Odourless and tasteless it was a silent killer. A few drops of the toxin would more than serve her purpose. How easy it would be to mix the solution into Patron's drink, to smile as she served the beverage. It was necessary.

But could she really look into his eyes as he drank allowing the potion to be absorbed. Allow this silent assassin to go about its work. She took no pleasure from the thought. Once consumed the tiny ticking bomb would spread through his body, it would saturate and disrupt his nervous system and cause it to fail. He would simply shut down and cease to be alive.

If it was so clear cut and simple why did she tremble? Why did her conscience trouble her so? No matter how many times she thought it through it still registered as murder. Could she actually do it?

Isabella placed the phial on top of a book. Now was the time. She was a vessel of the Lord. She had taken an oath to ensure the safety of all concerned. Patron *was* the enemy. He was a Blasphemer who denied her God. He was a danger to her kind.

Patron must die.

Isabella slid open one of the panels in the wall. The wood was dark stained and the lighting in the room dim from candles. She had shut herself inside this small annex attached to her chambers so that she could pray. So that she could focus on what must be done. As her hand clutched the heavy silver cross that she had kept hidden for years her focus changed from murder to humility.

‘Help me, Father. I know it is a sin to take life, yet so many have been taken to ensure success. I have been instrumental and I have been complicit. The burden weighs heavy upon me.’

It wasn't that she questioned what they tried to do just the methods applied. Old Testament judged that an eye was worth an eye. That we should do unto others as they would do unto us. It was God's will. Her path was chosen for her. From the very first time she had met the man she now knew as Patron she knew she would be the instrument that brought him down.

Again she asked herself. *Why do I hesitate?*

She was thirty four years of age and it seemed like only yesterday. Nine years of age when the Lord had first shown her the way. The light of the fires flashed as she closed her eyes. The stink of the fires burnt again at the back of her throat. She heard

barking dogs and soldiers that terrified a little girl. There were gunshots and screams, sobbing and cries for help.

Look at them. These hands had not trembled since that day.

They trembled now.

She remembered how she had trembled as the lines of refugees had trudged past at the point of a gun. Legates and Jarig had forced an exodus across the river. Rifle butts against soft flesh as they forced a march to cross the Line. No-one had taken poor Isabella by the hand. There wasn't a soul who cared.

Patron had cared. He had stridden toward her like a warrior King and she could never forget that. Would he have done the same, she wondered, had he known the truth of who she was? She doubted it. No, it would have been unthinkable to him. He would likely have pushed her in the river himself.

From the moment she could speak the Sisters had taught her about God. They knew the penalties but accepted the risk. They schooled her and opened her mind to God and the Testament that taught, "forgiveness was the path to Heaven." They had taught her well the art of deception and secrecy. Abilities that had served her well, that had kept her alive so long.

Isabella clutched the crucifix to her breast. How could the Father and the Son be so different? One demanded that the

Patron be sacrificed for the Greater good. The other would spare him. Understand that he hadn't always been the monster he was now.

Pray Isabella. Pray for guidance, pray for strength.

She had read the books, the true history of the past. She knew how many had survived because of Illuminai, because of the man and not the monster. Oasis was here because of him. The people were were alive in the city because of *his* will to succeed.

In two days the prophecy would be fulfilled. The contents of the box would mature. It would sweep aside the bastard religion. It would bring new light and new understanding, a new direction for everyone that would listen. But still she wondered. What about those that would not. This had been Patron's great dilemma.

The good book had promised a Second Coming but it had never delivered. No-one had come forth with the word of God. Now *they* were forced to take things into their own hands. Forbidden science would resurrect hope. Man would do it the hard way if he was ever to resurrect true faith.

Her heart fluttered at the thought. *Would it really ever happen in her lifetime?*

A quick check on the stars had kept Scout heading in the right direction. Twice now he had been forced to change his path. Both times the Jag had blocked his way. It must be a nice neighbourhood, they only patrolled in pairs. Scout ducked down another alley away from the latest pairing. He was close now. An old tower with an octagonal roof was his target. An easy spot when he wasn't climbing walls in wet clothes. This time the gate was open; he'd had to force a lock on the last one. A size ten pick backed up by a couple hundred pounds of lunging boot. It had done the trick.

There, he'd found the tower again. A quick visual and he saw the lion on the gate opposite. Welcome confirmation that luck and good judgement had got him to where San had directed. Not that he was too keen to follow the road around; far too open to take the risk. Going through the building would save time. Here came that empty feeling and the extra heartbeats again. Crossing roads exposed him. It made him venerable. He hot footed it sure as he could be that no-one was watching. Four seconds in the open, it felt like minutes.

Scout passed unseen below a low archway and into the back of the building. No hanging about as he passed the closed doors and exited the other side.

This was nice. A metal columned terrace surrounded the interior. The occupants could walk all the way round in the shade. There were trees growing in the yard and a wide set of stairs ascended the far wall. There were three apartments on each walkway each with aged wooden doors with metal studs for effect. Stone blocks corbelled around the windows and there was glass in every one of the windows. In fact there was glass everywhere. He hadn't seen a board blocking a hole, not once. There was even fresh paint on the walls. Something else caught his interest as he crossed the yard. Dark shapes under canopies. They were cars, and big ones.

How nice, they were parked in little houses of their own. It seemed the residents had a car each. You didn't see these trekking down the main roadway into Reliquary Square. The main thoroughfare always pleaded poverty to the pilgrim workers. So much for teams of Novices rattling tins toward the pilgrims. No wonder you couldn't wander freely on this side of the bridge any more.

He gave the thief a thought. Whoever she was, she lived in a different world to the one he was used to. She was spoilt. Did that make her bored or just an adrenaline fiend? By the time the morning sun had risen he intended to find out.

Scout traced the numbers on the door with his finger. One, two and three. They were all there. This was definitely the address San had given him. He stood under a small portico in a narrow street with a dim welcome light above. Not helpful when you're trying to stay concealed. He tapped on the door.

Nothing.

Louder this time, keen to get in.

Open the door.

The chill of the night air was beginning to take its toll. So was the suspense. This was open ground and would take only a moment for his presence to be seen.

Open up damn it.

He rapped again.

Sounds distant but closing the last things he wanted to hear. One hand held onto the small bars over the peep hole. The grip was as much for support as they were trying to pull it open. There was no doubting his hearing now. The noise was footsteps moving quickly. He could hear boots on the ground, and more than a few pairs. This time of night there was no doubting who they belonged too. Scout kicked the door and squeezed himself

tight under the canopy. He'd forgotten about the light above. With a sharp jab of his fist he punched the flat bulb. A stupid thing to do, he could have cut his hand as the glass shattered, splintering into a hundred noisy pieces that you'd have to be death not to hear.

The shutter in the door slid open. He was too attuned, too aware. The sound passed through him in a most unwelcome manner. The slim pale face on the other side eyed him with caution.

'It's late.' Narrow eyes looked beyond him into the street. 'What do you want?'

'Open the door.'

'And why would I do that?'

Shit, San had given him a phrase. Five bloody words, what were they? It was a code, a sign that he was a friend. A man's name?

The boots were getting closer, covering the ground fast. Scout edged closer to the door his face turned, his cheek touching the small bars.

The man half closed the hole.

'Wait.' He had it. 'For the love of Gabriel.'

Why the pause. He'd said it right. He was sure he had.

Boots were loud now, right on top of him. *Open the ...* Still the door barred his entry.

‘I’m sorry. Would you repeat that?’

Scout squeezed his face against the rods of iron. ‘Gabriel.’ He said as loud as he dare then raised the Glock into the hole beside his face pointing it at the man’s nose. ‘Don’t make me say it again.’

All that squeezing against the door caused him to stumble through as it was opened, and then was swiftly closed again. He felt instant relief from the closing sounds outside. It was warm too as he stood hands on knees in the interior’s semi light inside. Candlelight, very calming for his heightened heart rate .

‘Who sent you?’ The man asked calmly.

‘A friend, San.’ Deep breath taken as the Glock pointed passively at the man. Finger removed from trigger. ‘He said you would help me.’

‘Did he now. And why did he suppose I would do that?’

‘He said it had something to do with God, destiny, and a box. You choose. It’s your house.’

‘I said I was sorry about the gun. I *was* somewhat pushed for time out there. The tea’s lovely by the way.’ It really was. ‘What is this?’

Scout had no idea what the cup was made of. Skinny lip with and wide brim it seemed a ridiculous design; not big enough. And where was the handle? Some kind of blue dragon hiding behind a tree was painted on the cup.

‘Porcelain.’ Prosper answered, as if everyone should know. ‘The design is Chinese. Tang dynasty. Though I doubt the cups are genuine. It’s more probable that they are a later copy. Qing was a popular time to make fakes of previous dynastic earthenware.’

Okay, it looked like small talk might be awkward.

‘Thanks for the clothes.’ There, he was making an effort to be more grateful as he sipped tea that was far too hot. ‘Jumpers nice.’ It wasn’t.

Who wore tops with buttons as big as these? And the collar, it went half up his head refusing to lie down on his shoulders. He couldn’t look at the trousers. Not even rich people wore them as loose as these though he had to concede that the footwear was

nice. Full leather grain, they were just made for his feet. He'd probably hang on to them if he got the chance.

'So, has San been a friend for long?' Scout asked.

'We were Novices together.'

'Is that right?' Scout lowered his cup. 'Then you worked for the Commission?'

Prosper raised his own tea closer to his lips. Eyes fixed on his guest. 'Yes, but I'm retired now. I do still visit old friends at the Reliquary from time to time. Not as often as I'd like. Are you a friend?' He asked.

'Everyone likes me. No reason why *you* shouldn't. Nice room, by the way. I really like the Yang stuff. It's, very blue.'

This was good; they were getting to know each other. San had sent him to meet a former Legate, and just a couple of doors down from the Reliquary and the Commission. Shit, for all he knew those boots he heard were waiting outside for him right now?

Play it cool. Don't upset him.

Most of the furniture in the room was old. Nice pieces, mostly finely crafted wood all with drawers and flat surfaces, fancy metal knobs and pulls. Everything was well polished. Why was it that people with money felt a compulsion to be

surrounded by the past? In Prosper's case, most of it was blue. The colour was a familiar theme on the pottery displayed and in the prints on the walls. Blue caricatures seemed abundant; they all seemed to be bowing to each other. Very disturbing.

Despite all the old things the modern was well presented and hiding in the background.

'I like the lights in your ceiling.' That was sincere. 'Halogen, am I right? You have a lot of stuff that's very hard to acquire.'

'Perhaps you'll appreciate this.' Prosper picked up a small hand device. He pressed it and the soft tinkle of piano keys began playing from secret speakers.

'This Ching guy, he made some bad pots. I'm guessing blue was very popular in his house.'

Prosper wasn't biting. Scout changed tact. It was time to be more direct.

'How long have you been taking Stems?' It was Scout's turn to raise his cup, sip, and scrutinise the other man. Prosper definitely flinched first. The signs were all there if you knew what to look for. The man's skin was just too smooth, the eyes too clear for his alleged age. The inevitable lines of ageing were definitely being narrowed artificially.

The comment he made about knowing San could have been a lie, he supposed. Novices only serve in the Reliquary for seven years, long enough to learn their trade or be deferred. After that they were assigned to shadow a Legate out in the field. Further induction for more practical means. If it were true the association would make Prosper a similar age to San.

Spot the difference.

If you didn't know it could easily be missed without a check on his Tag.

The kicker was the stare. It was beautifully masked by a clever man. But when you'd seen that stare as often as he had as a child. More sipping of the tea.

'It must be a high quality product. That means you know some interesting, and dangerous people.'

'Bravo. It appears that I have nothing left to hide from you. You knock on my door, drink my *very* expensive tea, and then you read me like an open book. It's a very impressive talent.'

'I haven't finished yet.'

Prosper clearly welcomed the review. Sitting back comfortably in his tall chair he opened his hands as an invitation to continue.

‘You’re ill. You’ve made it very subtle with practise but you blink a lot. You also rub your forefinger and thumb when you think I’m not looking. I’m thinking that it’s probably degenerative. It’s something that scares you. And I don’t think you’re a man that frightens easily.’ Scout tapped the side of his head. ‘Up here. Am I right?’

‘Bravo again.’ Prosper clapped his hands together. ‘I have AD. Commonly referred to as ...’

‘Scary.’

It was the first time Prosper had smiled since Scout’s arrival.

‘You know about dementia?’ He asked.

Scout shrugged. ‘I know a lot of things. That’s why I’m so popular with everyone.’ He couldn’t help himself as he waded in. ‘Size tens, feet first all the way. ‘How’s God these days. Spoke to him lately?’

Not a flicker of emotion betrayed, or so Prosper thought, but Scout saw it. Prosper was a duck treading water. Brain was engaged, probably in panic mode and searching for a way to resolve the question.

‘Dead. As far as I am aware.’ He answered.

Good answer, but he took too long. As far as Scout was concerned it showed Prosper for what he really was. The man was a stone cold Heretic.

Thanks San. Thanks a lot.

‘You know so much about me.’ Prosper continued. ‘Yet I know so little about you.’

‘What’s to know? I got your address from a friend. I gave the right password at the door. And I didn’t shoot you earlier.’

This was much better. They were really bonding now.

Scout's tea was down and his feet were on the move.

'I'm not here to cause trouble.' That much was true. 'San pointed me in your direction because he said you could help me with a problem I have.'

'I'm intrigued.' He wasn't.

'The problem is that everyone knows more about what I'm doing, than I do. And that sucks.' He picked the vase up without thinking. Pawing it like a child. 'Is this old?'

'Extremely. I would ask you to be very careful with the objects in this room.'

The stupidly small table wobbled as he put it back down.

'Is this table teak?'

'Mahogany. And I think it would be better if we continue this conversation elsewhere.' Was he nervous? Did he consider his guest to be a butterfingers? 'Please, follow me.' Prosper was on the move. 'I have a room more suited to a man that wants to learn.'

It was about time. He'd been here long enough to shower and change. He'd drunk foul tea from a thimble and resisted the urge to break or steal anything owned by his host. What was the

point of passwords if all they got was your senses abused?

Prosper was definitely a hard nut to crack. Like most collectors he cared far too much about the objects he desired. There wasn't much to like about the décor in here anyway. The Tang's, whoever they were, needed to work on their designs and put some decent colour into their work.

The hallway outside led past two more living areas each one more spacious than Scout's apartment. Stairs led down into a kitchen. Prosper flicked a switch and the lights came on. Nice room. An old scullery, its walls pristine white with large plate racks on either side of a big hole of a sink. Scout could get his arse in there and take a bath. One eye levelled on the tall dresser against the far wall the other stuck to Prosper, just in case.

'Gabriel.' Scout tried again. The word had to be worth something or why would San have told him to use it? It was a password, a code... something. *Gabriel, Gabriel, Gabriel.* Then it happened. Prosper moved his fingers from forehead to chest and then from side to side. It was the sign of the cross.

Holy shit. Scout tensed half expecting assassins to leap out from the ... sink? Prosper was finally showing his colours. He reciprocated moving his fingers in a likewise manner, top to bottom and then east to west.

‘You mentioned God, destiny, and a box?’ Prosper had finally made the leap.

‘That’s right. Unfortunately I have all three going on in my life right now.’

‘Brother San was wrong to send you here, but I am bound to help you in any way that I can. Please.’ He motioned Scout to follow him. The man placed a hand behind the plates on the second shelf of the dresser and a moment later the dresser opened silently inward.

It was a nice smooth action, very impressive. Unfortunately the space beyond was cramped and dark.

‘In here.’

Prosper’s invitation sent a chill somewhere deep and dark in himself. This was no time to wimp out. In he went, reluctantly. The entrance closed behind to cut out the kitchen light. Nothing but darkness and anxious moments before a sudden flame ushered away the gloom. Coiled wadding sheaved around a pole had been lit by Prosper’s lighter and not a moment too soon. Dark narrow spaces tended to freak him out. He’d seen too many walls like this before, just as close and just as personal. Just as frigging oppressive. He got a cold flash of the chains and felt them bite into his ankles. It made his heart want to stop. The

dark acted like a poultice sucking the bad memories back to the surface. He felt a glacial movement from head to toe. It stemmed as the exit showed itself as a warm light inviting him to quicken his pace. Another large switch clunked and the open space they entered into was bathed in a bright warm glow of artificial light.

‘My apologies, Gabriel. The passage and this room must remain concealed.’ He placed the lit end of the torch into a silver bowl perfectly sized to extinguish the flame. ‘We are in a bolt hole constructed during the Second World War. It was used to hide Jews when the Nazi’s occupied the City.’

The names meant nothing to him.

‘If you need information the facilities in this room may help. Please, make yourself at home. There is wine in the rack and cheese in the bread bin, just over there.’

That wasn’t all the room had to share. Small alcoves in the walls held pictures and wooden figures. Images portraying a man hung from a cross. It looked painful. Scout scanned the room. Two tables occupied the far end, both set against the wall with several spindle chairs for seating. The light was from several pendants hanging from a cracked plastered ceiling. The decorator had a strong liking for white; it was the only colour from floor to ceiling.

Four identical monitors each with a keyboard and a mouse occupied the desk space. Scout peeked below. *No way*. There were a dozen metal cases with lights blinking furiously. Prosper had working computers. He felt a hot flush and a sudden need to stretch his fingers all thoughts of darkness cleaned from his mind. *Patience, they aren't going anywhere*. He didn't want to look too eager so he ignored them and crossed the room to a crooked arch. A sweep of his hand pulled back a sinister looking curtain in deft need of a wash.

All it revealed was the dark.

'The switches are just inside on the left. I think you'll find the contents of the room very interesting.'

Click, click, click and the levers were tripped. Blinking strip bulbs coughed out light intermittently and then came fully alight.

No, it wasn't possible. It was unbelievable, the sight that greeted him.

'Would you look at that?' He said out loud.

Row upon row of bookshelves, It was a treasure trove. Every rack hard jammed with books; some bending below the weight. Scout stepped inside and then to his right. There were a dozen or more aisles. Each row extended perfectly parallel to the next. They went on for forty, maybe fifty feet. There were hundreds, no, thousands of books and manuscripts. It was a fabulous trove of treasure.

It wasn't that he enjoyed reading so much as selling books. Even cheap looking paperbacks were worth coin. Some older texts bound in leather could fetch a goodly price if offered to the right persons.

He'd never seen so many books.

Scout's thigh brushed a broad wooden desk set in a corner behind the doorway. No need to ask who sat here. The thick scroll legs and shiny wooden surface gave Prosper away. He read by the light of two oil fuelled lamps one sat at each end. Three large manuscripts were atop with one open, its page marked with a solitary red ribbon. Even the floor was a maze of papers all set into small even piles. Rubi would love them.

Prosper joined him.

‘It is a marvellous sight, don’t you agree.’

Yes it was. Dollar signs flashed through Scout’s head. Their value on the black market was... was incalculably large. This was a head blower. Probably best if he went back outside. Good relations probably came dependant on his keeping his hands in his pockets.

‘Do you read these?’ He asked.

‘I try. I’ve been at it for almost sixty years. I inherited the Library from my father and have added to it when possible. Books are not so easy to get hold of any more.’

When were they ever?

‘All of this has been collected over many years. Local supply was adequate. Abandoned houses and private collections were a good source. My Great Great Grandfather was an avid collector after the wars. A plentiful time for the avid reader before the Commission took exception to seditious literature. Seditious being anything the Prime Legates did not approve of. Books were burned, executed really. Just like real people. These days I have to purchase from other, more clandestine sources.’

‘From Nazis?’

‘No.’ He laughed. ‘The Nazis were vanquished a long time ago. There’s was a hateful ideology and best left scattered in the

dust. After the Wars people hid themselves in places like these, there are many scattered across the City. Unfortunately they were too well used when the Commission began the first of its purges. Not everyone lost their faith in God. Some had to be encouraged. Those that wouldn't submit to the Saints risked imprisonment or just simply disappeared. The Commission was brutally insistent about the matter.

'Our Faith went underground. It became a silent prayer and its followers a secret, and of course, a *sedition* cult. We use these facilities for hiding knowledge,' he smiled, 'and our Faith.'

Scout clicked the switches down one at a time and the books vanished back into darkness. The curtain fell back into place. He was more interested in the computers. Books were clumsy and took too long to read.

'Why haven't you asked me who I am?' He stared at the keyboards. 'I'd want to know. I'd insist.'

'You are Gabriel. That is all I need to know. If you wish you may use the computer's data base. I can instruct you in its use.'

'That won't be necessary.' Scout didn't need asking twice. 'For the first time he was appreciative of the eyesore woolly jumper. The temperature had dropped considerably. Good for the computers, bad for the operator. He gave a light touch of the

enter key. The first monitor's screen lit up like a secret portal. This was hardly the first time he had fingered a keyboard. It had just been a while. Scout had to suppress rising feelings not felt since his younger more rebellious days. His fingers were positively buzzing to play.

‘Where does the power come from?’

‘It is syphoned from the main lines under the city. Some creative wiring inside a junction box. We have many spurs hidden in the walls of the sewers. It took a lot of time and a lot of patience.’

I bet it did.

Scout suddenly got it, an understanding for the collectors and their compulsive obsession. Here was something precious and mysterious. This was an artefact that only the past could provide. A fully working machine fuelled by light that chatted in a binary code. The Commission would spew if they saw them. This was a true relic of the past. He couldn't get enough of electronics back then. Guess he still felt the same way now.

Cute, the cursor was shaped like a cross. It hovered at his command over the start menu. It was a late Windows operating system, most of them were. He dragged and clicked. Open... control panel... device manager. An assortment of drives,

controllers and system devices were highlighted. Another click and small towers emerged to indicate Power usage. A clock showed the CPU, the heart of the motherboard as it ticked over on idle, waiting to flex its muscular hardware. This little puppy was barely breaking sweat. A fact that he was about to change.

The machine waited for instruction.

Swift movement of the mouse terminated all the displays. The cross took another path and moved toward the dozens of folders on the screen.

‘Where do I find God?’ He asked.

Prosper pointed at the screen. ‘You can start there.’ His other hand placed a glass of wine on the desktop. A plate followed with a chunk of yellowing cheese. ‘I will leave you to acquaint yourself with the past. Perhaps it will help you to understand your future.’

Prosper left.

That was a weird thing to say. Scout got the strangest feeling that he wasn’t the one that was pushing the buttons. Other forces were at work here trying to direct him. No, that was an absurd thought. He double clicked on the folder Prosper had suggested. It opened onto the screen. He really wasn’t ready for what saw.

This was the first time he'd heard silence since leaving the apartment. As his senses adjusted, the soft whispering of the computers fans became a restful comfort. All he had to do was double click on the blank icon Prosper had indicated. So why did he have such a dry mouth? Not like there was a bomb inside. Wouldn't go bang when he opened it.

There, it was done. The mouse clicked twice.

Smaller folders opened across the screen each one with a different title. Scout opened the first title in the list. 'The Bible,' it seemed a logical place to start. Hey, the pages opened like a real book. He liked that. It didn't take him long to close it again. People didn't speak like that anymore. It didn't make much sense. Folder number two looked far more interesting.

This could be a long night.

Gods had obviously been around for thousands of years. He understood them; they were like the Prophets and Saints citizens worshipped all over the City. He read about Pagan people who worshipped many Gods. Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Barbarians. The list was endless. It seemed there had been a God for just about everything. The list was endless.

One God did seem interesting though, a new boy arriving on the scene thousands of years ago. He seemed to linger where all others had failed. This was a God who denied his followers to worship any other deity. He seemed intent on stealing worshippers from all the other Gods.

Scout read the highlights about his Prophets. It was a long list. Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist to mention a few. Did God really send them out into the world with His word or were they just pedalling the citizen's new ideas? More *stick men* for sale. One thing was for certain. God asked a lot of his prophets. Most ended their lives in violent and bloody ends. So far the advertising campaign wasn't winning him over.

At least the wine was good as he sipped from his second glass. Hmm, good stuff. Nice fruity taste. Even the smell was

restful as more scanning and skipping of text followed. A new name stood out to him. It seemed that God had sired a child, the product of a virgin birth. All end product and no fun. The more he read about the child the less he skipped through the text. It was dry eyes that finally encouraged him to stop. Too much light so he left the monitor and flipped the two switches on the wall. Now it was just him and the image from the screen. He poured a third glass of wine and settled down to read.

Jesus Christ, the Christian folk hero. The son of God going 'walk about.' It was quite a story and a fascinating read. Even the Commission would struggle to pen something so imaginative. The man had a lot to say. He talked about the Kingdom of God as a means for personal and egalitarian social transformation. He was sure that meant all people should be equal. It was a nice sentiment but a ridiculous application for the real world.

Maybe that was why the idea of Heaven became so popular. In reality only the dead are truly equal? Nevertheless there was something about the man that struck a chord within him. Maybe it was the words or just the way that he tried to live his life. He wasn't really sure. A wry grin imprinted itself on his face as he read about Jesus' twelve disciples. He recognised most of the names. What a thieving bunch of bastards, not the disciples, the Commission. They had hijacked most of them into their own religion. He was seeing parallels everywhere.

He read on.

Raising the dead man Lazarus was a good trick. Not that it did Lazarus any good. He read on as Jesus entered Jerusalem, wherever that was? *Blah, blah... He had a big bust up with the*

local money lenders. More parallels, it seemed the Duma wore that hat now. Blah blah...

Jesus takes a final meal with his Disciples.

This was interesting. The Prophet Jesus was betrayed by his friend Judas. He was arrested by the Romans and imprisoned. Then questioned and beaten by the priests of his own people.

Scout's anger level nudged *uncomfortable* as he empathised.

The Prophet was sent to a Roman named Pontius Pilot, who then passed him on to a king named Herod. The King sent him back to the Roman who finally found him guilty of Blasphemy. Guilty of claiming to be the *son* of God.

Shit, they crucified him.

Was that what effigies were on the wall? Was that him, Jesus Christ, hanging from the cross? Wow, they stirred emotions that surprised him. Guess that was why so many people carried Relics. This one was just another one of God's prophets hung out to dry... quite literally.

Text continued. It was written that Jesus forgave them?

Why would he do that?

Scout read, on flipping through the pages, scanning for more references to the man, Jesus. He found the resurrection.

Now that was an even more impressive trick, bringing *yourself* back to life.

He still didn't get it.

Was this what the Trins believed in? In the one true God, who isn't really as dead as the Commission wants everyone to believe? There were questions brewing in his mind. If God was such a brutal Deity then why was his son so gentle? Why did God let his son die in such a vicious and heartless manner?

Dysfunctional family or what?

The Old Faith was clearly descended from the man Jesus Christ. These people believed it, and the Commission hated them for it. Okay, he got that much. But what did the Commission have against God?

The whole subject of Faith was fascinating and a little scary at the same time. He had none himself but what he had read made him think. No, he refused to think. All he needed was to absorb the information. He needed to know what this was all about and why he had ended up in the middle of a religious clash.

Peter, the first Bishop of the Faith. He was another of Jesus' Disciples. It seemed his own faith had wavered when he had denied his beloved Prophet, fearing for his own safety. He

spread the faith and started a church, and was another follower of God left to suffer a nasty ending. Maybe he deserved it. Maybe that was why the Old Faith was riddled with guilt. It was orchestrated by the words of a coward and a liar?

Scout flicked through page after page of text and pictures, the cursor jumping from one link to the next. It was amazing how fast the Christian faith had spread. How it grew. How it was *imposed* on others over the centuries.

He realised that some of their churches still existed in the City. Yeah, he'd seen them many times. Buildings that rotted on both sides of the Line, yet he'd never realised their true history. They were just shells of buildings now, burnt out and forgotten a long time ago.

Scout opened and closed a lot of windows. In truth he was feeling tired. The hour was late and the wine had softened his resolve and more importantly his concentration. That all changed with a single click of the mouse. A single image opened that took his breath away.

There it was the ultimate lie and hypocrisy. The title read “St Peters Square.”

He read on.

Text and images about a place called the Vatican, about the Apostolic Palace. About the great lie, more like. Scout knew it by another name. To the citizens of Oasis it was the Dome of the Reliquary and the Parade of Saints. Laughter escaped his mouth.

He read on, his fatigue forgotten.

Building started on the *Basilica* in 1506. It was a place of pilgrimage built by the Christian Popes to honour their God. That wasn't what the guide books said now. School, when he had bothered to go, had taught everyone that the Reliquary was a labour of love and devotion started during and finished just after the Energy Wars. The Commission had used materials from the old world to build the new. More laughter ensued louder this time. Cheeky bastards', they really were. Why build a home of your own when you can just move into some else's? It appeared that his years of cynicism had been well founded after all.

“Knowledge is gold.” That's what San had said. Scout wasn't feeling very wealthy at the moment. It was a bomb and as the

minutes passed he began to feel the fallout. A wave of justification and scorn had receded leaving shock which quickly turned to anger. He was even sliding toward feelings of hurt at being lied to. Not just him. He could handle that. No. It was the others he felt for, two others in particular whose faces now leapt into his mind's eye. His hands covered his face. Url and Greisha smiled back at him through flickering reels of memory. *They* had believed the lies, with all their heart and soul. They never questioned like so many thousands, tens of thousands, and more. Scout reached for the pendant around his neck. He wanted to tear it away. Throw it to the floor and stamp the shard into dust. But how could he? It was the only physical link he had to the woman he loved. She had worn the relic from childhood, adored it, and kept it close to her heart. She had kissed it before pressing the pendant into his hand and curling his fingers tight around the shard, just as he did now. Chia had wanted *him* to believe as she had. He didn't need to. He had her and that was enough.

Scout's fingers calmed and the anger passed. The fist softened to open hands that rubbed at tired eyes. He stooped and lowered his head onto the table. Knowledge wasn't gold. It was

cat shit and vinegar. Knowing too much only left a bad taste and the need to forget.

No such luck. Prosper returned. Scout heard the last few steps and watched the tall man turn the corner.

‘I’ve brought you tea.’ He said.

Yummy.

‘Thanks. I’ll drink it in a moment.’ He lied catching a whiff of the liquid. It stank of rotting eggs.

‘I assure you the taste is far more glorious than the odour.’ The mug steamed a stinky sweet odour. ‘Honey dew crushed with lilac petals and left to simmer in a boiling pot for nearly an hour. Only then do I add a few secret ingredients. It really should smell much nicer. Try it. You’ll find it a smooth and soothing beverage with a little kick left behind for late night study. And may I add that eyeing the mug with suspicion will not alter the smell.’

Scout risked a sip and was surprised. Sip led to slurp. This really wasn’t bad at all if you kept two fingers up your nose and your eyes screwed shut.

‘Are you answering questions or finding that you have more to ask?’

‘Is this all true?’ He pointed to the screen.

‘Oh yes, there is no question. A few brief generations have seen the world reduce itself to one tiny island of mankind. An Oasis of lies.’

‘I had no idea.’

‘What benefit would there be in the Commission spreading the truth? In the eyes of the authorities the past can only interfere with the Commission’s future. Best to keep it locked away so no-one can ask any of those awkward questions politicians hate.’

‘But you know, and I assume that there are others.’

‘Of course.’

This was going to involve pulling teeth again. Having to ask or state the obvious was becoming a bore.

‘Then why don’t you share?’

‘We do. But we do it quietly. We work in whispers. We wait until the time is right. Patience is our greatest ally and our boldest defence.’ Prosper took a thoughtful pose, hands behind his back and eyes toward the ground. ‘There are more of us than you think.’ He said. ‘But not so many that we have gained a voice. The Commission have guns and troops; they have spies and turncoats everywhere. They have the history with the population, if somewhat distorted. They have a physical link to

every person that covets a relic. Their power sits in men's pockets and hangs about delicate necks. It's difficult to purge an ideal and the habits of a lifetime.'

'Is that soft soap for you're frightened of them.'

'Yes, without a doubt.'

At least he was honest. There was something else more important than the lies that Scout had to know.

'Do you really believe in God?'

'Yes.'

Scout gingerly picked up one of the wooden effigies. 'And this man, do you believe in him?'

'Without reservation.' Prosper crossed himself. 'Jesus died for us. He died for our sins. I do not want to live in a world without him.'

'I don't understand what that means. How can someone die for another's sins?'

Prosper considered the question. He looked a mite uncomfortable.

'You had a wife?' He asked. 'Wasn't she a sinner?'

'No.... She was an innocent.'

'Someone thought otherwise. I don't say this to upset you and I don't for one minute believe that you killed your wife. But

she is dead nevertheless. Is it possible that her past was responsible for her future?’

‘Yes.’ He whispered. Not an admission that he had ever voiced aloud.

‘Let me ask you the same question that God asked of his own son. Would you sacrifice yourself to save her? Would you have taken her sins upon yourself and died in her place? So that she could live, so that your child could be born?’

‘Yes.’ No question no thought. No doubt in his mind at all.

‘Then you understand. Our Lord led by example but we were too weak, we had too many faults. “Whatever you hold true on Earth I will hold true in Heaven.” Those were our Lord’s words to Peter. We are a shamed race that we could not follow his example. There was only *ever* one true religion, and we spoilt it, splintered it into factions that could not be resolved. Our Lord spared us the rod and gave us *New Testament*. He sacrificed his own offspring to prove its worth. We failed him. That is what I believe.’

Prosper took a breath and closed his eyes.

‘I believe that Faith will return the Old Religion back to the masses. Only this time it will be practised as *Peter* intended. I believe that God’s children will be redeemed.’ Prosper opened

his eyes. 'Sorry, I'm not here to try and turn you. I'm only here to help. But tell me, what it is that you believe in, Gabriel?'

How could he answer that? He doubted that there was anything left for him to believe in. The State had seen to that. Where were *they* when his parents needed protection? Where were the Saints the night that Chia was murdered? Where were any of them when they were needed most? He had to stop feeling so bloody emotional.

'Thanks for the chat.' Scout turned his back on Prosper. 'I'll let you know when I'm done.'

The first thing Scout noticed as his eyes opened was his tea was gone. Stretching his eyes between long blinks didn't change that. There was no mug present on the table. Lazy eyes checked the room but saw nothing. Even the monitor was blank, its pixels fallen into idle mode. He'd fallen asleep. The past few minutes had been a dream. This shit was getting weirder by the hour.

The monitor resumed its visual functions as his elbow knocked the keyboard adding a slight change of pitch from the computer's whispering fans. Stranger and stranger. He hadn't done that in his sleep. The image on the screen was completely different to the one that he'd closed his eyes to. A host of new folders were present. A dozen or so all neatly stacked and they'd had a colour change from yellow to brown. One title in particular was ghosting on and off. It was definitely winking at him. The word 'Armageddon' was typed below. Who could resist investigating a title like that? The cross swept across the screen and hovered.

Click click.

Files, videos and documents filled the screen. Several dozen all dated in chronological order between the years 2013AD –

2019AD. That must have been when it happened. The cursor hovered over the first folder. Jump right in. It wasn't every day that you got to read about the end of the world.

Kat opened one eye, and then closed it again. Someone needed to turn the lights out it was way too bright. And who was clanging those freeking cow bells inside her head? She tried again. A tiny peek widened a little more, and then again, until her surroundings started to make sense.

This wasn't her room. She lifted her head. Oh God, this wasn't her face. Everything about it sagged too much. She tried to lift the skin back into place with her fingers stretching at her jaw and then pawing at her eyes. That was better. What the hell did she have to drink last night?

With a flick the bed sheets were tossed back and she swung her legs over the edge. These weren't her sheets. Where the heck was she? Oh wait, it was all starting to come back. Dormant parts of her brain were shifting back into gear. Loud music, it was coming back to her. There'd been thumping music and a lot of energetic dancing. She moved good last night, she could bop with the best, and she had, all night.

Oh yeah, it was definitely coming back now.

There was a cute guy at the bar. All blue eyes and blonde hair. He had a rich daddy, or so he said; he'd brought the drinks

all night for a crowd of them. Ha, she remembered the way he danced. Several hours on the floor doing windmills and punching air. What an idiot.

Why were those bells still clanging in her head?

A deep breath helped, or did it. The air went down in one but spluttered back out in noisy spasms. She staggered to her feet to get her bearings. Four walls were good, something to lean on. There was a lot of glass. Everything was made of glass, she liked that. The table next to the bed and the units against the wall both made of glass. There was a mirror but she decided not to risk a look, not yet. That was something to work up to.

Wow. Look at that window.

It was huge. Oversized glass framed by the walls. She walked over and pulled transparent curtains aside. It wasn't light out there yet but the view was gorgeous. She could see all the way to the river. The buildings beyond were coming to life with the very first signs of sunlight rising from behind them. Fancy that, he hadn't lied. Daddy really must be loaded. This was a view that Princesses surely rose to.

A disgustingly nasal tone broke the ambience. A throaty slobbering followed. Was there a dog in the room? Kat cast her gaze from the view outside back toward the bed. It appeared that

she wasn't alone. A man lay in the bed half covered by the satin sheets. She purred. He had a good body. Not too muscular but well honed. Tanned too, she liked that. Her eyes moved up his back.

Oh my God.

He had the back of a werewolf.

Oh my God.

It wore a wig. The sleepy mop was half way across his face. He wasn't blonde anymore, he was grey. And it got worse. Most of his own hair was missing.

The lying balding bastard.

He had told her he was twenty seven. Forty seven more like. The light must have been bad last night. Dear God she was more tanked than she remembered.

Her Adonis rolled over on the sheets, spittle was hanging from his mouth and chin. And there was that raspy gasping noise from his throat again. Saddle up it was time to leave. She picked up her hair from the floor. Okay, she'd give him that one. But no way would she have lied about her age. That was unforgivable.

Where the hell are my clothes?

It was a quite a distance between her dress and her shoes. She had no idea where her knickers were. No way she was going

under the covers to retrieve them. Hopping on one leg made a meal of the footwear but thankfully the dress slipped over her head with simpler ease.

Damn it, there was no choice. Kat moved to the mirror and took an anxious peek. A silent scream filled her head. Her face... it had gone all marsupial. The alcohol had sucked the life from her skin. Bad make up... bad, bad make up.

She had to get home and fast.

The situation had just become a crisis.

Scout had been at it for hours but barely noticed. He'd found a fascination in a subject that had previously held little interest. He read on.

It seemed that weather patterns had become unstable toward the end of the twentieth century, positively erratic and volatile. Global Weirding had become the buzz word for the new phenomena. No-one knew for sure if it was natural or mechanical, a normal cycle or Global warming helped on by man. The only definitive was that it got worse over the years. Everything from the moon to Sunspots was blamed. Temperatures climbed and dropped to new levels right across the planet. Places where it had never rained suffered Biblical deluge. Other, more temperate climates suffered from drought.

Interesting as it was he didn't want to get stuck on the weather.

It seemed that the world's finances had hit similar pitches and troughs. It had started with the banks and ended with entire countries going bust.

Scout opened a video link.

A man in a loose shirt stood hunkered in front of the camera. The scene behind was one of chaos. Large crowds surged forward into a line of riot police. Bottles and bricks were being thrown. There were roaring fires everywhere.

‘There’s no going back now, John.’ The reporter’s narrow face was strained, his voice sharp. The man was constantly checked behind at odds with facing the camera. ‘The protestors have openly attacked the police in the street.’ He flinched and moved quickly to the shelter of a wall. ‘That was gunfire; I think the Greek police may be dealing with the first shots fired in a civil war.’

‘Do we know where they are getting the guns?’ The voice came from off camera. ‘Do we have any reports of who’s supplying the protestors with weapons?’

‘No. But there are rumours circulating of Russian involvement. It’s happening here just like it did in Athens. A lot of people are going to die if it continues.’ More gunfire echoed the streets below. Screaming and shouting from hundreds of voices. There was an explosion. One.. two.. half a dozen guns had opened fire. The camera ducked low its lens filming bricks and wall.

‘This is bad, John.’ Shouting now. ‘The Greek government...’ Bullets zipped across their balcony. ‘Holy shit, that was too close.’ Footage of the sky was replaced with a tiled floor. ‘John, the Greek government has no choice now but to make good on its threat to mobilise the army and impose martial...’

The screen went blank.

‘Okay, we seem to have lost the picture; we’ll go back to our reporter Ron Moody as soon as we can. And let’s hope he’s okay out there. Tension is definitely rising in countries surrounding the Mediterranean.’

Scout found more of the same. Countries he’d never heard of. Spain, Portugal, Italy. The reasons were the same everywhere. Food banks and soup kitchens just couldn’t keep up with demand. Protest and unrest as people went hungry.

He found a link to a series of reports about the Global Weirding. It seemed that the weather was oscillating so intensely that much of the agriculture around the world was failing.

Global Commerce was declining too. Banks refused to invest. Instead they panicked and tried to force repayment of investments worth trillions of dollars. They enforced closures on businesses to protect themselves. Trade around the world began

to collapse. Apparently the banks had tried to protect themselves at everyone else's expense and quickly became the most hated institutes on the planet.

Global debt was bringing down governments.

Uncertainty and hunger was breeding disorder.

That was when, how did one reporter put it, "The first of the Plagues arrived."

"The Fire and Brimstone came."

There were several sub folders on the subject. Scout opened one, it was a video feed. The words at the bottom of the screen stated simply. 'A catastrophe captured on camera.'

There was no sound just the vibrating of the image as if the ground was shaking violently. The lens watched a mountain in the distance below a dark and terrible sky. The image zoomed in and the shaking got worse. In the distance he watched as the side of the distant mountain began to slide. It was fascinating and terrifying. The camera fell over. Some kind of warning flashed on the screen but it continued to film. The following frames were incredible as the mountain side exploded throwing millions of tons of soil and rock up and out into the air. The silent movement was unnerving. Almost immediately a cloud of dust and ash gathered momentum and rushed across the

landscape. Scout didn't know what it was but the pyroclastic blast flashed mercilessly across the ground eating up the vegetation and a town that lay in its path. The entire image shook as the camera kept rolling. It kept filming as the superheated rush of debris blasted it into oblivion.

Text dropped down onto the screen. It was in Spanish with an English translation below. It read. 'Behold the power of God.'

Scout opened two others and found more of the same. Mountains in the South American continent were erupting. The planet was venting itself inside out. The Pacific Rim was, as one reporter put it, "a depiction of Dantes' Hell". Scout turned the sound off. He could only listen to so many people scream. Towns, villages and cities were being wiped out. Reporters had to wear masks as the cameras recorded the chaos and the numbers of rising dead. A cloud of dust had risen above the continent and blocked out the sun. The air had become impossible to breathe.

The final report in the sequence was a woman stood beside a flag. It had stripes and stars, she was attractive. Long brown hair and a pretty face long since hardened to bad news. He turned the sound back up. She spoke in a melancholy voice.

‘... and intense lava flows. This reporter had just learned that the southern continent has been officially cut off to food and aid by land. Mexican authorities have confirmed that the number of refugees crossing their border has reduced drastically in the last two days to only a trickle compared to previous weeks. Reports are saying that no-one has crossed in the last few hours. It seems that inhabitants of the southern continent are now either dead or unable to find their way out. May God be with them.

Sue Roley, Mexican Border, CNN.’

This was heavy stuff. One phrase kept doing the rounds in his head.

‘The first of the Plagues.’

How many were there? How bad could it have got? Scout really wanted a pee but he didn’t want to stop reading. He had a macabre need to know more. He took a deep breath, moved his hand back onto the mouse, and let the cross settle above another folder.

‘The US government reported today that they would no longer allow the OPEQ countries of the Middle East to strangle the output of oil reserves from the region. “Oil must flow,” one Republican Senator has openly said. And let’s face it, Republican or Democrat, most of the others agree. Back to you in the studio.’

The camera cut away from the slick haired pointy nosed reporter who was barely in his twenties to another image. A panel of four seated analysts who sat eager to talk.

The host had a grim persona. He sat forward and pointed a lot. A man in his sixties with stern features dressed well in a

smart crisp pin stripe-suit. He seemed to enjoy gesticulating toward people, spectacles held in hand.

‘So, where does the government go from here?’ He indicated the question to a demure woman sat to his right. The name tag pinned to her rainbow coloured blouse identified her.

Anna Pare / Economist.

‘It’s not a question of where, Dan. It’s a question of when. We still don’t know why the Earth’s oil reserves have been tainted by the Loomsco Bacteria.’

Text rolled across the screen below the woman’s image. Loomsco Bacteria, named after Doctor Andes Loomsco, Swedish scientist who first identified the rogue gelling agent.

‘I have to remind everyone that we don’t actually know if it’s a natural organism or synthetic. We still can’t be sure it’s not the work of Eco-terrorists.’

‘Of course it’s the work of Eco-terrorism. The bacteria are clearly not natural phenomena. How could they be?’ Name tag... Hans Yurgon / PaSl. An overweight, unkempt and angry man. More on screen text crossed the bar on the bottom of the screen. PaSL / People against Science League. ‘It is yet another organism that scientists have accidentally or, dare I say, deliberately released into our environment. And let me add that

both scenarios are wanton criminal acts. It's time to the curb the scientific community. Rein them in. Manacle them before they...'

'You have something to add Monsignor?' Pinstripe moved on. Keen to involve a confident looking man in a black gown and peculiar red hat.

He had to be religious dressed like that.

'Thank you, yes. The problem is we are just moving too fast.' Monsignor Vitoli Tripti... Special Envoy / Vatican.

'The Church has been warning for centuries about the perils of scientific progress. Mankind has pushed too hard. He has looked too deep into matters that do not concern him.'

Pinstripe... 'Are you saying we should stop evolving? That knowledge is somehow responsible for what's going wrong in the world?'

'Knowledge without guidance from God is a sin. Sin is what is wrong with the world today. It is never too late to seek forgiveness from God. *He* is sending signs every day, each one more terrible than the last. Look not beyond the garden for it is a tempest out there. We would be well advised to return to simpler ways.'

'Oh here we go.' Anna interrupted with spiked scepticism. 'The church would keep us in the Dark Age. Have us all kneeling

before an altar and asking God for forgiveness? Take a look out of the window, Monsignor. I think we're a bit beyond that now. Religion won't solve the issues we're facing.'

It looked like things were going to get bitchy.

'We don't need fossilised fuels. There are other, more ecologically friendly alternatives that can be grown. And for signs from God, please? The weather patterns are changing because of a perfectly natural cycle in the Earth's orbit round the Sun.

Hans... 'No, no. The Monsignor has a point. The world is too complicated. We cannot keep up. It is filled with dangers that scientists have created. They have lost control.'

Anna... 'Baloney. If it wasn't for science we'd still be living in the mud huts.'

Hans... 'And your point being? Perhaps we would be better off?'

Vitoli... 'That's not what I'm saying. The Pope has already told us that...'

'Please.' The host appealed for order. 'I think that those are questions best left for our next show. On the table right now is the question that all Americans want answered? Where is their oil going to come from? Who is going to fuel their cars and keep

their homes warm? And the forecasters *are predicting* that it's going to be another record cold when winter arrives.' His upheld hand turned to invite comment from the well suited red cheeked gentleman with the comb over.

'Senator Kennedy. You've sat quietly listening to the comments?'

'Indeed I have.' He had a strong southern drawl of a voice. 'And I agree with them all, up to a point.' Name tag... Republican Senator Amos Kennedy / Republican. 'I concede that there will always be a place for scientific endeavour in this world, but not at the expense of God.

'I personally pray every day for that our Lord will intervene and show us the way through the troubles that blight the world right now. But until He does, this great nation of ours will have to find its own way.' Amos took a deep sigh of a breath.

'You've all seen the long queues that have become common place at our gasoline stations. Power plants and commercial sites can only run at fifty to seventy percent efficiency. This is because we are being starved of foreign oil supplies. Our countries commerce is being deliberately strangled; we are being extorted by the greedy oil rich nations of the Middle East.' His voice rose. 'I for one find this situation unacceptable.'

Strong applause erupted from an unseen audience.

‘I believe that foreign nations are trying to bring our great country to its knees. And I believe that it is imperative that we use any and all means at our disposal to change the situation.’

More applause intermingled with whoops and hollers. Amos held up his hand for quiet. To make sure that he was heard.

‘My feelings are hand in glove with the president’s. And let me tell you, no President has ever been so in tune with the American people as *he* is now. God, put the fossil rich resources on this Garden of Eden for all his children to share. And after everything the American people have done, have suffered, to keep this a free world. Why then, to be treated in this manner is wholly unacceptable. It is unconstitutional. And it is a god damn act of terrorism against the people of the United States of America.’

Cheers and rapturous applause boomed out from an audience of several hundred that the cameras now panned around from numerous angles. There were angry faces in the crowd. Fists remonstrated their support.

Pinstripe... ‘Have you spoken to the President concerning direct action against the Middle East?’

Amos... 'Yes I have.' The camera panned quickly back to the Senator allowing him to speak directly into the lens.

'We are not an aggressive nation by nature. I don't have to tell you, the American people, that. But this administration cannot allow the outside influence of foreign Nations to hold our great country to ransom. Pressure of a more extreme nature will have to be brought to bear. We will, if we have to, take matters into our own hands.

'The oil has to flow.'

More applause thundered across the studio. Hooting and hollering from a crowd now stood on its feet to a man.

Scout closed the window not sure of what was happening; besides he'd spotted something else that drew his attention. Social Networking sounded interesting. Another box was opened. The first line of text read:-

October 2015. One point five billion people worldwide now subscribe to Facebook. It's a record.

Facebook? He read on.

Top five subjects trending between Fookers.

Top spot.. God, should He take more responsibility?

At two.. Is it too late to repent, to put God back in our hearts?

At three.. Are the Scientists the ones bringing us down?

At four.. Panic? Worldwide unemployment tops 28%

At five.. Who's got all the oil?

Scout scrolled down the chronological listings, opening at random.

September 2017. Six hundred million people worldwide now subscribe to Facebook.

Top five subjects trending between Fookers..

Top spot... XV41 It's a virus. Can you really catch it online?

At two... Peace with the Arabs or war over Oil?

At three... Archimede's principle. Who filled the Chinese bath too high?

At Four... Hanging all the Bankers; was it really the right thing to do?

At Five... Is God still out there?

It seemed that the *Fookers* were dying out, their numbers decreasing exponentially. How could a billion people all talk at the same time anyway? It didn't make any sense. Who was counted them for a start?

August 2019. Thirty thousand people worldwide now subscribe to Facebook.

Top five subjects trending now between Fookers..

Top spot... XV41. Can we survive?

At two... Is it too late to bring back God?

At Three... Do we really need God?

At Four... One hundred ways to find your faith

At Five...

The falling number of Fookers subscribing was disturbing. Were they dead? He knew what a virus was. Had XV41 been a viral Plague? The cross moved on to the next box. A single word typed below.

TWITTER.

There was something innately pointless about the word. The cross moved on.

YOU TUBE.

Scout double clicked. Hundreds of home videos saturated the screen. Tiny capsules of life captured in time. He opened one at random and began to watch.

A young woman edged away from the screen and sat herself crossed legged, her body wrapped in a blanket. She wore a thick hat with tassels and fingerless gloves. She was cold; everything about her manner suggested a lack of warmth. At first she just sat there on the floor back leaning against the foot of a metal bed. Two candles on the floor the only light. The lens was too narrow there was nothing else that he could see. The silence *was* intriguing. The longer he looked at her, the sadder her image became.

‘Cathy.’ The girl said suddenly.

She cleared her throat and then spoke again, much clearer this time.

‘My name is Catherine Jones. I live here in my flat in Greenwich, London. I am posting this via a wireless connection. For some reason they still work. Lucky me, eh?’

Silence.

‘I don’t really know what to say. Except that I’m glad that it will all be over soon. It’s not that I want to die. But I don’t really think I want to live either.’ Her drawn expression hardened. ‘Sorry, I should sit up, stop slouching. How many times did mum tell me that? There, is that better?’

‘I am seventeen years old. I am the daughter of loving parents Mike and Carol Jones who both died of XV41 earlier this year. I haven’t seen my sister since... I can’t remember when. God I hope she’s alright. This... this is *my* home now.’ She shrugged. ‘The previous tenants left, died, I don’t know. Their loss is my gain, eh?’

‘It all happened so quickly. Things just got crazy. Nobody told us that the masks didn’t work. Campus looked like Peking in the rush hour.’ That raised a nervous grin. ‘I didn’t really get scared until the other students stopped coming into college. I

thought they were just staying at home, being silly. They were dying and I never realised. How stupid can a girl be? That was when I took little Stevie out of school. That was the day Mum phoned. She said that Dad was ill. She insisted that I wasn't to come home, that we were to stay indoors and protect ourselves. I miss them.'

Cathy leaned to the side just out of shot. She shuffled back with a small wrap in her arms and cleared her throat.

'I most want to introduce you to little Stevie.' Her voice began to waver and her eyes blinked incessantly to prevent them watering. She tried so hard not to let it out but a tear ran down her cheek defying her will. Her right hand half covered her mouth, it trembled.

'He's... He was my son, my little sweetie, weren't you?'

Scout caught the bitter sweet smile as the girl remembered the child. Doubtless full of joy and mischief like most kids are.

'I wanted to make this and put it out there so that maybe we wouldn't be forgotten.' It threatened to come again, the tearfulness sniffed back and wiped away. 'Michael died, from exposure to XV41. He must have caught it from someone, out there? Now I've got it too. Oh God, I've got it too.'

Her hand was really shaking now but her voice steadied it tried to remain resolute. This was her story and she intended to tell it to him no matter what.

‘I just wanted a record. I wanted someone, anyone, to remember us. I’m so sorry.’ The mother inside the little girl broke down. She leaned forward and shut the camera down.

The screen filled with static.

Scout hadn’t been ready for that. It took his breath away. It was curiosity that had opened the file. Now a sense of empathy kept his hand away from the mouse. Not enough time to even think before the screen flicked on and Cathy was back.

‘Another episode,’ she said. ‘I will post one every day, for as long as I can.’

Maybe it was the dull lighting but she looked pale. Her skin was drawn tighter across the cheeks. She looked emaciated her sweet blue eyes discoloured, her speech had become more difficult. Scout found it hard to believe this was just a single day gone. The illness was obviously very aggressive.

‘There’s nothing much left out there. I did find half a dozen tins in Tesco. They were wrapped in a cloth. I think someone must have hidden them and not been able to come back. Tins of beans and soup,’ she laughed, ‘I love beans, I hate minestrone.

What I wouldn't give for a kebab and a bar of chocolate.' She shrugged. 'Well, at least they're easy to swallow.' An Impish smile followed. 'It's difficult. My throat is feeling so raw. Hey, I saw smoke whilst I was out. It was a long way off but it *proves* that there are others out there. I expect they were burning bodies. It's the only way.'

She shuffled in an attempt to find more comfort. Pushed herself to sit more upright.

'I did think about making contact but I couldn't leave Stevie. I couldn't leave my baby, could I?' She stared straight into the lens. 'What's it like where you are? I hope it's nicer than it is here. I do, honestly. Anywhere would be nicer than here. It's the nights that are worst; I hear the dogs at night. They're as hungry as the rest of us. God, they won't stop howling at night. I hate it.' She pressed her hands to her face. 'I'll try and find a pharmacy tomorrow. Maybe I can find something to sooth my throat,' her hand moved instinctively down to her neck, 'I'll try and find some more batteries for this thing. You can't make a movie without a camera, eh.'

Cathy shuffled forward on her knees. She switched the camera off.

‘Four days now,’ she said struggling back to the bed, ‘most don’t last five. Maybe I’ll be the exception.’ She was wheezing but managed a smile for the sake of the camera. ‘I feel as if I know you now. I wish I knew your name? Mine’s Cathy. I think I may have told you that already. Hey, good news. It rained outside. It was a chance to wash and collect some clean water. It came down in buckets; it was so lovely watching the rain. I even managed to splash in the puddles, had a bit of a sing song. Good job there was no-one out there to see. I’m a terrible singer. Did I tell you that I live in London? Did I mention that? I probably did. It’s weird being here in the middle of the big city with no-one else about. They’ve all gone now. It feels like just me and little Steven now. Have you met Stevie, he’s my baby.’ She just sat there breathing heavily even talking was taking its toll.

‘What is your name? I would love to know.’

‘Scout.’ He felt the impulse to say it out loud.

‘That’s a nice name.’ She whispered. ‘I bet it’s a really nice name. Mine’s Cathy. Oh, and I realised something very exciting this morning. It’s my birthday today. I’m eighteen. Eighteen. If you’re watching this, and I hope you are, I know you are. Please, make sure you have a drink for me.’

Pain crossed her features in a vain attempt to sit forward and show excitement. She managed a slight drawling laugh.

‘I peed for the first time in three days this morning. That’s one for the diary, eh.’ There were tears. ‘For fucks sake, I can’t, even pee.’ Cathy closed her eyes and turned away. ‘I promised myself I wouldn’t do this. Waste of water. Sorry, I have to go now. It’s the batteries in this thing, they’re a bit iffy. I’ll go out later and try to find some, if I can.’

She shuffled forward sobbing softly. Reached out, and the static returned.

‘Happy birthday.’ whispered Scout. His finger pressing the pause.

It seemed that Cathy *was* the exception. Two more instalments of strained effort followed. She was fading rapidly, each exertion more difficult than the last. Perhaps it would be best to end this now? Best for who he wondered, certainly not her. He decided to watch on. How could he refuse? The first words she had ever spoken to him were a plea for someone to remember. If it was difficult to watch how painful had it been to record. This woman, this ghost from the past, she needed to be heard.

Scout pressed play.

Cathy used her elbows and dragged herself back against her usual perch. She was distressed. Breathing was slight and rapid. Her face had yellowed dramatically and her eyes shot with blood. Dark scabs were evident from her nose.

‘Such a, bad night, last night. Everything hurts. I just... I just, want it to be over.’

As bad as Scout wanted to look away, he didn’t. Cathy found the strength to pull her little bundle over onto her lap. Laboured gasps between virtually every word now. Poor girl, her whole world was wrapped in that stinking blanket cradled tight in her arms. There was poor motor function too as her body trembled between small jerking movements. She was worn out and fading fast as she stared into the camera. Several minutes earlier an attractive young girl had started this diary, now a poor pathetic wretch tried to speak. She seemed unable to keep her head still. Even Cathy’s voice wasn’t her own anymore as it wheezed out with more of a whisper than a voice.

‘I had, such dreams. Mum, was a teacher. I wanted... I wanted that too. Big dreams, eh?’ Even her breath trembled. ‘I have to tell you, it’s dark, and cold here. I, I...’ Cathy’s head jerked, the act of someone refusing to fall asleep. ‘Stevie’s

father, he left us, did I tell? I really thought, he was the one. Turns out, he was a juggler, had a stable of girls.’ A chesty giggle tried to follow. ‘He left us, when I started to... show.’

Cathie’s head dipped forward the effort too much. It was forced back up as her lungs laboured for air. A refusal to sleep, she had something to say.

‘Wish, he was here. I don’t want... to be alone.’

‘I’m... scared.’

It was difficult to accept those haunting eyes, so tempting to look away. It wasn’t necessary as they finally closed. Cathy’s head rolled to one side and her body fell limp.

Poor Kid.

Staring at the screen seemed foolish. She had been gone a long time since. At least she had been given her final wish. Someone *would* remember now. Scout would remember. A red light flashed on the camera. Probably the batteries; she hadn’t managed to find more after all. Staring at the body didn’t help either of them. She sat doll like against the bed; one arm still clung tight to her baby.

A short tone beeped several times as he stared and the video ended. It was a relief. He’d probably have just kept on staring at her if it hadn’t. Scout reluctantly closed the folder down.

There were a hundred other folders. He had absolutely no intention of opening any more.

‘I’ve brought you tea.’ It was Prosper’s voice from the steps.

His smooth tone triggered a feeling of *deja vu*. Scout pinched his arm. No question, he *was* awake this time.

‘I see you’ve powered down the system. Did you find the answers you were looked for?’

‘Maybe.’ He said. Truth was if questions trumped answers then he was on the losing side. ‘It’s a big world out there. I had no idea.’

‘Scary, isn’t it.’ Prosper placed a hot drink on the table. ‘But we live here now. We are protected by the State and want for nothing. Beyond Oasis is a nasty dangerous place. That is, if you believe the powers that be.’

‘You don’t?’ Had he met someone as sceptical as he was?

Prosper gave no indication one way or another.

‘Do you believe that we are alone, Gabriel? I mean, really alone. That no-one else has survived out there?’

‘So what if they have? I’m looking for one person, not a missing population.’

‘It matters, Gabriel. If we are not alone it means that the Commission has lied to us.’

‘So what?’ Scout picked up the tea. Smelled good, tasted sweet. He was grateful for it. What he didn’t want was to have this conversation. He’d already seen enough, too much probably. Two days ago he’d been happy in his own little bubble. No, that wasn’t true. Not happy, possibly content. Okay, he was treading water in his own shrinking pond. The last thing he needed right now was dumping in deep water with no sight of the horizon.

‘Is it light outside yet?’ Cup was down; legs were heading toward the stairs. ‘I need to find someone. I appreciate the clothes.’ Maybe he wasn’t that grateful, best to avoid mirrors.

Upstairs was the same as he had left it. Piano music still played softly in the background. Prosper had been reading, his glasses and book left on the table with a half empty glass of red wine. He stopped as Prosper exited the stairwell.

‘One more thing you can help with. Ever heard of the Lucky Blu?’

‘Pull back the curtain. The one to your left. See there, the iron gate opposite. Go through. It will lead you into a yard. On the other side there is an alleyway. Follow it. The wooden gates at the far end open into the courtyard of the Lucky Blu. May I ask what you expect to find there?’

‘Less than I found here with a bit of luck. Thanks again for opening the door.’ He wanted out of here and now.

‘You won’t be able to stop it.’

Scout dropped his head just as his arm reached for the front door. He didn’t have to ask. He could have just walked out.

Curiosity was becoming a liability. ‘Stop what?’

‘Fate.’

Prosper said the word as though it were inevitable.

‘It has the speed and mass of a comet and its heading straight toward you. You’ll have no choice but to get involved. You can feel it already can’t you. It’s like walking in deep water.’

‘Is that it?’ The door opened. ‘Thanks for the heads up. I’ll be sure to cross the road when I see it coming.’

‘Just one more thing, Gabriel. Please, give San my compliments. It’s been a while.’

‘Yeah, I can understand that.’

Scout checked the street outside then shut the door behind.

‘The asset is out. What do you want us to do?’

Shorty had waited patiently through the night. Cramp was setting into both of his legs from standing too long. He thought

that he would have gotten used to the long nights of standing around and waiting by now. But he never had. Not really.

He listened to the phone held next to his ear. The voice on the other end was quite clear. *No action* was to be taken against the occupier of the building, or the asset, not yet. Shorty was to wait. Continue to observe. His instructions were clear.

Shorty clicked the phone closed. His boss was on the way.

Prosper's directions were immaculate as expected. It was a brief walk with no delays and Scout recognised the tower above. Lucky Blu, not much to look at from the outside maybe inside was brighter? If he was right the thief lived in here and he could get a step closer to the box.

Problem was there were probably a lot of people living inside. Maybe there was a fire alarm; he could get all the occupants out at once. Wake half the City at the same time. No, he needed a plan. Best ones came off the top of his head. Deep breath, take a walk inside, see what happens.

It was a slim man that sat idle with feet up on the desk. He was dark haired with an angular face that screamed... boredom. From the piping on the uniform it was evident that he worked as some sort of a clerk. A meet and greet who probably collected the rent as well. He had weasel features really. The man looked soft, almost gormless, as he stared at the latest copy of 'The City' lying open on his lap. Scout considered the best way to approach him. Time was limited. He'd try the bullshit approach.

Prosper's shoes made a nice solid clunk with each step giving official credence to his bold advance. Weasel looked up unsure but stood and brushed briskly at his ill-fitting jacket. 'Can I help you, sir?' He asked. The pitchy voice confirmed what women had known all of Weasel's life... Undateable.

'Where is she?'

'Who, sir?'

'My wife that's who. And don't give me any bull about confidentiality. She's here and I want to know where?'

Weasel was unsure. He folded the paper and placed it onto the desk giving himself time to think.

'I'm sorry sir, but ...'

'Is it money, do I need to pay you? Because if that's what it takes.' Scout pulled some notes from his pocket allowing Weasel to take a good look as they held steady in his fist. One note was slipped across the desk below the window.

'She's my wife.' Scout raised his voice as if talking to an invisible audience. 'I would much prefer to keep this between she and I. But if I have to knock on every door in the house whilst screaming her name, I will. It would nice to avoid that.'

'Please sir. The other guests.'

‘Give me her room number’ Scout slammed his hand on the desk and as if by magic another two twenty dollar notes were left behind.

Weasel’s gaze defaulted to the money and not to him.

‘You say she’s your wife?’

‘Three years of wedded bliss and it’s come to this.’

Another twenty fell to the desk. Weasel was cracking.

‘And you’re sure she’s here, sir?’

‘It wouldn’t hurt to look now would it?’

‘This is most improper, sir. Our tenants are very personal and private people. It would be very unprofessional of me.’

Another note slid across toward him. Weasel’s hand dragged the register out onto the surface.

‘What’s your wife’s name, sir?’

That was the question Scout had hoped for. Good for Weasel, he was playing the game.

‘Nina.’ It was as good a name as any. ‘But I doubt if she’d be using her Saint given name. She’s done this before. She can’t help herself. Its bad genes if you believe the doctors. If only I’d known before I married her.’

‘I see. What does your wife look like, sir?’

‘She’s young, she has blonde hair.’

‘Blonde... Blonde... Blonde?’

Are there that many?

‘Ah, there is a Miss Dalores in room Thirty six.’ He looked up. ‘Five foot two. Round faced with thin lips. She has a big... Smile, she has a big smile. She’s very blonde.’

‘Not her. My wife is taller. We think it’s the strain of her social position, one charity gala after another. You have no idea how demanding it is raising funds for the poor. I was saying to the Legate Prime only last week. We really should take more time off, but the poor are just so needy.’

‘You know a Prime Legate?’

‘Several. They’re friends with my father in law really, but we have to invite them for regular drinks and meals. The endless debates on the unworthy... goodness, they’re endless.’ Scout feigned a yawn and pointed at the register. ‘Any more blondes in there?’

‘Could be room sixteen? My height, in her mid thirties. But she has a lot of visit... ‘She’s a very popular woman.’ He shook his head. ‘Probably not her, sir. The only other possibility is Miss Katie, but she’s a long term resident, been here for about two years.’ He looked up from the book. ‘Five foot nine and slim. She has the most gorgeous blue eyes.’ The smile revealed hidden

warmth toward the woman and clearly preceded the odd fantasy wishing around in his head. Until he remembered his place and looked back down. 'She's blonde... black, red, and sometimes brown.'

'That's her.'

That *was* her. Something about Weasel's descriptive talents brought it home to him. Every sense in his body screamed that Miss Katie was his thief.

'Really? When was the last time you saw your wife.'

'I told you, she's done this before, disappears for weeks, months on end. I bet you don't see her for long periods a time. Gone for days. And the rent is always paid in cash. Straight from her Trust fund. I swear this is the last time I'll come and get her.' He touched his temple and gave an uncomfortable admission. 'She gets confused. Sometimes she believes... well, that she's somebody else.'

'No way?'

'Yeah way.' He wasn't sure why he said that.

'Is that why...?' Weasel touched at his hair.

'Without a doubt.' Scout didn't know what he was going to say. But he saw a glint of recognition in the man, a sudden

awareness he could work with. 'It's a parenting issue. In and out of medical care since she was a teen.'

'No way?'

'Yeah way.' He had to stop saying that.

'That's why I came for her alone. No doctors allowed. She'll come quietly if it's just me.'

'I don't know. It's Miss Katie. I... I should call someone.'

'You're right. We don't need a repeat of last time. The screaming tizzy woke the Saints and half the street. The Jag got involved and it turned into a bloody circus.'

'Jarig?'

'At least a dozen. She was screaming allegations of kidnapping, accusing the staff of abuse. They hauled everyone off to be interro... questioned.'

'No way?'

'Yeah... I'm sure they all got out within the week. Which room did you say?'

'Number sixty three. It's on the fifth floor and across the landing. It's the third door on the left. The white one with the silver handle.'

'I need your key.' Scout placed a single finger to his lips. A Shh, as the notes were pushed closer to Weasel's hand. The man

actually hesitated for a second. Then stepped away, opened a drawer in the bureau and returned with the master key.

‘Please don’t disturb the other residents. They like things very quiet here.’

‘Not a problem. Quiet as a mouse.’ Scout spun on his heels and walked toward the stairs.

What was so good about it? Why did people feel the need to say the words? It just wasn't necessary. Today was just another day no better or worse than yesterday.

Kat forced a semblance of a smile toward the woman who had just said "good morning." Obviously she hadn't had a skinful and woke up staring at dribble and a balding head. Boy did *he* get lucky last night. And thank God he was a heavy sleeper. Awkward or what explaining what wouldn't have happened with fewer drinks and better lighting.

Kat checked her watch, barely six twenty am. Her head was still full of nails as she cast a glance back at the woman. And what gave that *bitch* the right to be so energetic and friendly? Early morning joggers, she despised them.

Another ten minutes and she could curl up on the sofa with a hot tea. Nettle and chamomile was always good for dehydrated brain cells. Maybe take a power nap, just for an hour or so. Then a shower and dress in something with less exposure. Sun might be up but the temperature was down.

Six twenty two. Stop looking at the time. Golden Promise opened its doors at nine. She needed to check the board; see if

Emilio or Uncle had been in touch. At the very least camp down in the garden out back and soak up some sun. Good idea, that's what she'd do. Put on her sun glasses and chill below the willow in the garden.

Roll on nine o'clock. She'd had a change of heart. Today would most definitely be a better day than yesterday.

Number Sixty Three was just where Weasel had directed. Scout placed his ear to the panelled door that was painted in shiny white. He couldn't hear anything from the other side. A soft knock seemed prudent just to be sure. Another check of the hall and stairs was followed by the emergence of Mr Glock. The key slipped into the lock and turned. As one hand twisted the handle the other raised the gun to eye level and he jarred the door wide open.

Gun muzzle pointed sharply around the door and then back to sweep the room before he fully entered. The room seemed empty so he closed the door. The Glock keenly checked the little spaces. No-one found hiding behind the large couch or the tallboy. Gun was now fixed on the only other door in the room. He twisted the well worn knob and it opened. No excitement. Nothing to be found in the bedroom area that too was empty, as was the en-suite.

Safety flicked on, there was no-one at home.

Nice. Whoever Katie was she lived in a pleasant space. Big one too. It must have been fifteen meters from one end of the room to the other and half as much wide. The area was split level

with lush carpeting through the lower living room and thick wood planking where the floor rose for kitchen and dining. Up there was a big window with big blinds. He'd never seen anything quite like the metal shutters that dropped from ceiling to floor.

Three steps led up to the raised area and a glass table with seating for four. The kitchen itself was a simple affair. A dozen white cupboards with stainless steel handles looking down on a glass breakfast bar. No marks or stains on the bar or table. Not so much as a scuff on the floor. No-one was this tidy. He leant against the gallery rail. Below was comfortable leather seating around a small coffee table. Two cupboards and a tallboy stood erect against the walls. There were numerous empty shelves. Not so much as a keepsake to adorn them. Three steps back down to check out a small box lying on the coffee table. Black and plastic not what he was looking for. He picked it up and checked it out. Okay, he'd press the big red button.

The dim lighting immediately went out. Scout went down onto one knee Glock pointing aggressively toward the window. The box had remotely activated the shutters and stoked his heart rate up by a dozen beats. He hadn't seen that coming. The long

foils slid all the way back. It was kind of cool with the sunlight streaming in like that.

He went back up the steps to see what was through the large square window.

Plenty, as the sun was rising outside. The spires and towers of the City bathed in its warm orange glow. The Great Dome of the Reliquary was resplendent through the transparency of the glass. It was beautiful. Why then, did he feel so awkward?

He felt small, that was why. He'd never lived above the ground before, or anywhere with a view come to that. It somehow seemed a different world out there where money and power bought you privilege.

How the other half lived, eh?

Finishing the thought like that snapped another image to mind. Someone that had not been so lucky. There was too much wealth in too few hands. He was getting sick of it but he hadn't come to see the sights. Scout backed away and marched toward the bedroom. The door flew open.

This was different. Katie obviously left the clean gene at the door. He smelt talcum and lilac, a full and heady scent as he entered.

Nice bed, big enough for three, lucky girl. The blankets were heaped at the foot with a pillow tossed onto the floor. A very large vanity table had similar appeal. He got it now, why the clerk had some confusion over the colour of her hair. There were several wigs on stands and another, a red one, on the bed. It looked like a child had been at the makeup box. Lip stick and finger prints were all over the mirror and powder was scattered across the vanity's surface. There were pens, potions, and attractive containers spoilt all over its top with several more upturned on the floor. Whatever side of this woman kept the loft so prim it was obviously caged on the other side of the door. Either that or she kept her evil twin locked in the bedroom at night.

He checked through two walk-in cupboards taking inventory of the clothing with his hand but found nothing that helped. Both floor spaces were filled with shoes, no two shoes parked as a pair.

Miss Katie had nice clothes. He counted over a dozen pairs of jeans and trousers. There were enough blouses and t-shirts to go retail. The woman liked her dresses long and revealing. Tass would piss her pants for a wardrobe like this. One particularly slim dress did catch his attention as he fed the fabric through

his fingers. It wasn't the material, soft as it was. Or the strapless back in a high neck fashion. It was the colour that drew his eye, and the size. Size twelve. Chia had been a twelve. She loved all things green. It would have graced her body perfectly, showed off her long legs and delicate skin. It would have matched her eyes.

Scout pulled the dress from its perch and threw it to the back of the closet. He slid hanger after hanger across the bar and kicked at the walls for hollow panels. There was nothing here.

But nothing can reveal a lot about a person.

No photos, no ornaments, and no memories on show. There was absolutely nothing of a personal nature to view, to explain this woman. No history and no family. With all the vanity and clothes he would have thought there'd be a photo or two. Most women he knew kept mementoes, memories left out on show, even bad ones. Scout walked back to the door. Out there it was immaculate. A few generic prints on the walls had been hung just to fill the space. There were candlesticks without the candles and not a single picture of a Saint. A home just for show. The bedroom was different, it was a mess and well lived.

It seemed that Katie shifted from one extreme to the other. The clothes and make-up, they were another barrier. They said,

look at me. Only it wasn't her, was it. Just another façade she could let slip on a whim or necessity.

Crap, this woman was complicated. Either that or a whack job. There was nothing else to do but sit back and wait for his thief to come home.

Scout's gut told him that there was more. Everyone had secrets. Where were hers? Not in the drawers or the cupboards, he'd already checked. He found nothing taped beneath or hidden below the furniture. Not a thing of real interest was to be found. She sure as hell didn't have the box here. That was when the light played a hand. A small vent high in the wall caught his eye. Why not, he'd looked everywhere else. Three steps up and one of the dining chairs was slid out from the table and placed against the wall. He wasn't the first one to stand on this particular leather seat. Small indentations were evident of regular use by small feet.

Scout found his hopes rising.

One sharp tug and the small grill came away. Hopefully Miss Katie didn't have longer arms than he did. No she didn't. There it was, a small package hidden from view. By the feel of it he hadn't found the box. Not what Scout was looking for but a steady hand brought it out into the light.

What would a thief hide in a brown envelope tucked inside a vent? Only one way to find out, he opened the flap and pulled out the contents.

Photos, a dozen or more. The first two were a baby in a mother's arms. The mother looked overjoyed, the child small and wrinkled. They were stacked in sequence. Baby became a child toddling in a garden. Three more showed a young girl, a happy child it seemed. One was a birthday image with candles and friends. She was seven. The last few were of a young teen posing for the camera with friends. There were various different shots taken from around the City. It must have been summer time, always seemed to be a lot of people in the background. Were these pictures of Katie? If so what happened next? Weasel had said she was older. So he still didn't know what his thief looked like.

He tipped the remaining items from the envelope.

A silver chain draped between his fingers. Dangled below was something he instantly recognised. A Christian cross with an inscription down the shank scribed in a language he didn't understand. He placed it on the table spooling the chain below. Not much here to commemorate a life. One thing *was* clear to him. The envelope was well creased and had been opened often; the contents were obviously of importance to their owner.

There wasn't much good about the past he knew that. Maybe that was why she hid it out of sight.

The final item, a letter, he opened it and read the words neatly penned onto the paper. It was a prayer full of praise and a plea to the 'Almighty' to keep a loved one safe. The last line was personal. The author was sorry. No explanation of what for. And then she swore an oath to return.

It was signed... 'Mama.'

Letter could explain a few things. Parents run off and leave the child. Child learns to hate the world and the people she shares it with. Kid goes a little schizoid and lives a life of profitable crime. He had the overwhelming feeling that this woman was angry. She even hated her bedroom by the looks of it.

Scout's head hit the table top. He wasn't sure which hurt more the oncoming table or the sharp crack on his head that had just been meted out. The room went dark but not total lights out. Enough presence of mind was left to kick at the chair and transfer its energy into the git that had just smacked him on the head. Wood impacted bone and was met with a satisfying grunt of pain. In an instant he was away and staggering down the steps trying desperately to clear his head. He wasn't quick enough. A heavy weight struck him again. Not on the head this time but fully on his back. He went down hard and someone heavy jumped on top of him.

‘Hold him.’ A really pissed off voice gnarled.

The Neanderthal on top was doing just that and doing it well. Powerful hands had him pinned to the floor. The carpet smelled nice. The Glock was thrown onto the couch.

‘He’s clean.’

And you’re fucking fat.

‘Good. Get him up.’ The voice ordered. ‘Get him on his knees.’

Scout was lifted. He didn’t resist. No-one had smacked him a second time. *Play dazed; give the head a chance to clear, almost there.*

‘That’s it, hold him up.’

Eyes were clearing now. Hello, it was the short man that had followed him earlier. He was obviously better at his job than Scout had given him credit.

‘You’re in a lot of trouble.’ Shorty was being patronising. ‘Personally I’d cut your throat right now. Get it over and done with. But my employer says not to. He says that if you tell us what we want to know he’ll forgive and forget.’

‘Bollocks.’

Shorty ignored Scout’s rebuff.

*Employer? So they weren't State officials. Maybe
Commission goons?*

Whoever they were Scout doubted the sincerity of the man.
He breathed slow and deep and kept his mouth from uttering
further profanity.

No sign of young Sib. It was unusual for the desk to be unattended. Bang went that idea. Kat had every intention to invite herself in and get the lad to make tea. Maybe tease him a little. He had a huge crush on her, she knew that. This was the morning's second disappointment.

Kat had expected to find Sib sat with his feet up half asleep. Not so. It was the wrong hour for his rounds and why was the door wide open? Kat leaned across the desk and whistled. Tried to, mouth was too dry to get a serious note. 'Siiib.' She called.

Maybe he was out back.

All levity shied away at the sight of a single boot lying on the floor. Kat craned her body over the desk. The boot was attached to a leg. And it had a pair.

'Sib?... Sib?.'

The ills of last night fled her body as she vaulted the desk and knelt next to the body checking for a pulse. Thank God, he was still alive. 'Sib.' Her bedside manner was lacking as she grabbed his face and tugged the lad's head onto her lap. She slapped him gently and then again more harshly than she meant. But it got the required response as Sib groaned and came round.

‘Sib, what happened to you?’

‘Is that you Miss Katie?’

Aww, that was nice. He smiled as he realised who she was.
Poor little wounded soldier.

‘What happened?’ There was blood on her hand. Someone
had cracked him good. ‘Who did this to you?’

‘They were looking for that man.’

‘What man?’

‘Your husband, he was looking for you.’

She nearly dropped him. *My husband?* It must have been a
better night than she remembered. ‘What did he look like?’

Sib looked confused. ‘Don’t you know?’

‘I’ve got a bad memory. Try hard, Sibby. Tell me what the
nice husband looked like.’

‘He was tall, with dark hair. Handsome, I suppose. About
thirty, give or take. He said he’d come to take you home.’

‘Did he now. That was nice of him. Did you tell him what
room I was in?’

The pause in the conversation gave her the answer.

‘I’m sorry.’ He sounded genuine.

‘Why did he hit you?’

‘No, it wasn’t him. There were others. Three men, they came a few minutes later. They barged in here and grabbed me.

Demanded to know what room he’d gone to.’

‘And you told them?’

Again the pause told the story. She wanted to... pinch his ears.

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s okay. You did the right thing. It’s probably just the rest of the family. No, don’t get up. You need to rest. Try to sleep.’

‘But Miss Katie, I have to get help. Miss... Katie... Stop.’

‘Sorry, but this is for your own good.’ Kat’s arm had snaked around the young man’s throat and the pressure applied was cutting off the blood supply. She didn’t want to hurt Sib. The pressure was just enough to put him to sleep. He slumped forward, unconscious again.

She was careful putting his head to the floor. She didn’t blame him. But there was the question of privacy. The owners of the building guaranteed discretion. A letter would have to be sent to the management. Kat checked her surroundings. Not much in the way of weaponry, she’d be more surprised if there was. The pigeon holes on the wall were full of leaflets and post.

Nothing for her, there never was. Sib's chair was upturned in the corner as was the waste basket.

Try the back room.

Didn't these people keep anything to ward off undesirables?

More assorted paperwork was strewn across the table. A banker's lamp was available as was an old fashioned telephone that the manager obviously used for decoration. There hadn't been private telephones since the Wars. Ah, there was a long handled brush coupled to a deadly dustpan. And don't forget the old kettle, a reminder that a good brew was now off the agenda. Her eyes narrowed toward the ledger below the lamp. They would have to do. She grabbed the slim handle of the letter opener on the book and ripped the cord from the lamp.

Time for a family get together.

Scout spat a mouthful of blood out onto the carpet. That was the second time Shorty had punched him. He was going to pay for both of them. One more and he would most definitely be struck out just as soon as he had worked out how to free himself from Neanderthal Man.

His biggest priority was the freak that was giving the orders. Salt and pepper hair was about to start the questioning and he didn't look the type to understand 'no'. He looked intense. Like someone had vacuum sealed his face.

'Where's the woman?' Freak asked.

Scout said nothing. Satan's scarecrow could do one.

He collected a hefty slap across the cheek which stung worse than both punches. Did Short git just bitch slap him? Scout wrenched forward but was unable to free himself. Both arms were held tight behind his back. There was a foot pinned to his calf to keep him kneeling. Bastards had him pinned. If looks could kill Scout would be murdering Shorty slowly with a plastic spoon and fork.

'Where is the woman?'

'What woman?'

‘The woman you’re looking for. She lives here, I assume?

Where is she?’

‘You got problems finding a date? Try using a service.’

Shorty raised his fist.

‘No.’ Liam stopped the hand advancing. ‘Tag him.’

Scout had never been so popular. Another needle broke the skin and it wasn’t supposed to go that deep. Keep adding them up, just another reason to inflict intense pain on them all. He waited patiently for the grip on his arms to relent. That’s all it would take, the slightest easing of pressure. When it happened he was going to break things

Two short beeps and the machine was passed to Liam.

‘Sebastian... aka Scout. That’s a ridiculous name.’ Liam read on.

‘Interesting, you have strong ties to the Duma. You are a convicted murderer and previously an inmate at Galfstram.’

Was that a pang of respect? *How unusual.* Galfstram was an establishment that very few survived. His incarceration would have to be looked into. Find out the reasons that gave him early release. It also seemed that Rubi hadn’t exaggerated. This man was a tough individual, a dangerous criminal and a deviant. The file on him was reading like a sinner’s handbook. How had this

man remained a part of the community for so long? And who had granted him a Commission Permit to fund food aid for under privileged kids?

Was that a joke?

Liam lifted his gaze to the prisoner. There was a name that he instantly recognised from the file. The name of the woman this man had murdered. Chia Hirlonga. Liam realised for the first time that he had crossed paths with this man once before.

‘Why are you looking for this woman?’ He asked.

‘I’m being paid to find her.’

‘By whom?’

‘Sorry. Client confidentiality.’

‘Not necessary. I know that you are working for the Preacher. Your relationship with him is of no interest to me. But the girl is. She has something in her possession that I require.’

Threats were not going to work with this man. It was time for a change of direction, a change of tact.

‘I apologise for the heavy handed nature of my colleagues. My name is Liam. Please tell me what I want to know and you can be on your way.’

‘Do I get my teeth back? Huh, I didn’t think so.’

*

Kat counted two, no, three men. A hundred and ninety pounds of thug held... she presumed it was her husband? The Short guy was enjoying hitting him. She couldn't quite see the face of the third. The grey hair was a bit much. He looked like he'd slept in a cinder bush.

Who are they and what are they doing in my loft?

Sib was right about one thing. The man on his knees *was* cute, in a feral kind of fashion. She liked the way he kept smiling; it was really jerking them off. She eased her head back as another man entered from her bedroom. He had a stocky build and a narrow face that looked incapable of smiling. Whilst not as tall as the one that restrained hubby he looked mean and experienced. So that made it four against one. As it wasn't her problem she felt it time to move on. Hubby would have to look out for himself. She wasn't about to get involved. Consider the proceedings a divorce. She'd sneak back later and get a few things.

Kat's heart sank. The grill on the wall was missing. From her position at the stairs she could make out the table below and the fourth man now stood beside it. He had something in his

hand. It was her envelope. That was *her* envelope. It contained everything that was left of the past.

It didn't belong to them.

Put it back, put it down.

Kat's heart rate leapt up by twenty beats a minute. She caught herself rising from her vantage.

Stop. Stop.

The two cautionary words tried to restore order. No good. The sight of the photos in his hand pushed the nuke button in her head.

Son of a bitch. They're not yours, they belong to me. She wanted to sprint into the loft take them back and kick some arse. *Think... think this through. There are four of them and one of you.* What would the book say?

"A disciplined body was only as good as the mind that mastered its movement. Seize the moment and victory will be yours."

Oh, she was going to seize it, right by the balls and kick some serious arse.

*

This was all getting a bit tedious. Scout had no intention of telling them anything. His mouth was closed for business just out of spite. He could never have predicted what the Scarecrow said next.

‘You don’t remember me do you?’ He whispered in his ear. ‘It was dark I suppose. I should have taken them back then.’

Scout shied away from the man’s breath as he moved close. *What was this freak talking about?*

‘You have sinner’s eyes.’ He said.

The room went icecap. Time stood still. Scout felt the imminent collapse of his heart and nervous system. He’d heard those words once before. They’d been whispered to him once before but the tone was far crueller back then. Scout’s mind was sucked back to that night. He travelled faster than a wormhole could open or close. It was instant recollection, immediate reaction to the flames and the smoke, to the blood and screams.

Scout stared at the floor unable to move. *Chia.?*

The voice from his dreams was whispering in his ear. He had never been able to hear the actual words the language would never perfectly form. He thought he heard them, but they made no sense. Why would someone say that?

He heard them now.

“You have sinner’s eyes.”

It was the same voice. The same awful words.

Scout’s heart started to pump again. A firm beat that rose quickly in tempo. He drew deep breaths as the numbness receded. It was him, the voice from his dreams. The sudden silence in his head started to purr. It growled, spat, and then screamed. Scout screamed. He cried out in a long and piecing dirge for his lost love.

‘Now I believe I have your full attention.’ Scarecrow withdrew. He seemed pleased and satisfied and then bemused as Scout roared with maniacal laughter. ‘Have I said something to amuse you?’

‘Not really. It’s just, if I don’t kill you you smug bastard. *She* probably will.’

Liam turned to follow Scout’s gaze. A strange black object hurtled towards the man’s face.

The heavy rubber and prongs caught Scarecrow full in the face. Its energy unleashed on the end of the chord giving no time to react. Liam went down holding his face.

Is that a plug? Lying on the floor.

Plug and lead were whipped around to circle the woman's head, it lashed out toward him. Scout closed his eyes and hoped the second assault was as precise as the first. A groan from behind suggested it was. The boot pinning his calf pulled away and his hands were released. Scout unleashed himself, launched his body upward; he smashed the top of his head into the reeling man's chin.

But Neanderthal man didn't go down. The brutish figure staggered back with severe indignation. A tooth was spat out and preceded a hazy grin. At least now he wasn't the only one dribbling blood on the carpet. Neanderthal became Crazy Rhino man and charged. With no chance to side step Scout was caught and both men went over the couch.

The carpet didn't do much to displace the weight of Neanderthal landing on top. Ribs weren't meant to bend like they did. Scout's back tried to flex like a gymnast, and failed. No

time to feel the hurt as a big mauling hand swung toward his face had to be avoided. Scouts' left knee stabbed into Neanderthal's solar plexus followed by a sharp elbow to his neck. Then another before he rolled off. He had to finish this fast. Scout wanted Scarecrow, not this thick necked thug. His fist piled into Neanderthal's face. Gave him everything Scout had. Son of a bitch wouldn't stay down.

A bloodied face came up fast and drove hard into Scout's cheek throwing his head back. If Neanderthal man got up he probably wouldn't get him back down again. Scout fell sideways allowing his opponent to turn and try to lift himself. Suckers move. Scout was on him again this time with an arm around Neanderthal's neck. He locked it tight and began to squeeze. Crap, this guy was strong, really strong.

As the sleeper tightened Scout could see Shorty lying on his back. Was that a paper knife sticking out of his chest? On the raised kitchen level the woman was taking the other man down. She feigned to the left and jabbed a leg out that snapped his head back. The blow forced him back onto the table but not down. These guys were no pussies. Bad guy swung twice and whipped a kick out from a full spin. Really impressive move, if he hadn't missed. Katie was too quick. She flowed with

movement first to the left and then down under the kick. Bad guy didn't see the retaliation. He felt it. A fist jabbed into his face. It was followed by a stabbing right onto his nose. She jumped leading with a knee hard to the chest followed by an open palm to the cheek and then an elbow down into the face. Bad guy was went down, falling through the foils of the blinds. He didn't stay down. He came back again despite being dazed from the blows. The coupe des gras was the full spin kick into the man's face. He had nowhere to go but backward from the vicious blow. Bad guy went through the window arms grabbing at fresh air. The scream he let out was an after thought. Long and loud until the ground outside silenced him.

How long can a man go without air? Just pass out damn you.

Scout was losing his grip. Arms were tiring, but Neanderthal was weakening. *Oh shit.* The woman had turned to face them. *Shit.* Plan B was needed. Scout let Neanderthal go. He coughed and spluttered but the bear got up, still ready to engage. He looked real mean and angry, so did the woman. Neither was meaner than a loaded handgun. Scout squeezed the trigger three times. Three holes blew into Neanderthal's chest.

Glock... One. Neanderthal... Nil.

Smoke streamed from the hot barrel as it swept a ninety degrees to face Katie. It must have seemed ungrateful as she had *probably* just saved his life. But right now all Scout cared about was Scarecrow.

Where was Scarecrow?

Scout fanned the weapon around the room. Only three bodies accounted for, Neanderthal and Shorty were both dead on the carpet.

Noise.

Sound of shoes pounding down the stairs. The bastard was running for it. Scout roared with frustration and jumped the couch then raced from the room. Stairs were leapt in threes. Going down was easy. He'd catch Scarecrow and shoot his kneecaps off if that's what it took. He was there that night. That man knew why Chia was murdered.

No way Scarecrow was leaving the building.

Hinges strained at a stout frame as the front door flew open. Scout was out into the street stumbling, one hand down on the cobbles to stay upright. Which way, left or right? It was a fifty, fifty. He hated fifty fifties. Don't think, go right. He could smell the fear on the bastard.

He sprinted hard to the sound of his shoes echoing out of step. He'd break a neck to get him and there he was. SOB had been hiding, hoping Scout would guess wrong. Surprise, scarecrow could move faster than he looked capable. It wasn't going to be fast enough. Another right turn was made and there he was getting closer. Another seventy yards and he was caught.

That's when he saw them, the four Jag that exited a building.

Scarecrow saw them too. He called to them. He slowed, stopped, and looked back. Smug bastard was smiling. Scout slowed to a walking pace. He watched as the freak flashed some sort of ID. He shouted at the Troopers and then pointed back.

This wasn't good.

Scout came to a stop. From this distance the shot wasn't a good one. Besides, he wanted Scarecrow alive. Damn it. This wasn't fair.

Rifles were slipped from shoulders. Several people on the street moved quickly to cover. Bystanders between him and them made haste to their nearest retreat. Scout lifted the light polymer based weapon. He aimed the static sights and fired twice. Did he get him, did he get the bastard? One of the Jag went down. A volley of shots returned fire. Single shots only but quickly followed by semi auto bursts.

Dull thuds and skipping whistles were everywhere. Scout's feet were moving fast. Rounding the corner saved further exposure as he legged it down the street. The sound of bullets quickly replaced by chasing boots.

Run Scout. Get the hell out of here.

He re-entered the Lucky Blu quicker than he'd exited. Shots slammed against the door as ricochets pinged around the inside walls. He slammed two inches of seasoned oak and threw several large bolts across the frame.

That should hold them for a while.

Scout was on his toes heading toward the desk.

'Head down.' He shouted waving Mr Glock at Weasel who was still rubbing at his head behind the desk. It just wasn't his day. Sib freaked at the sight of the gun and dropped onto all fours crawling like a turtle toward the way out.

'Get in the back room.' A woman's voice screamed at him. 'Now.' Kat was leaping down the stairs in military style boots which took the steps two at a time. A gun was pointed straight at the clerk. She wore jeans and a fluffy jumper that covered her upper body. Sib twisted back and scuttled across the floor into the back office slamming the door shut

This was awkward. Scout stood gun pointed at Katie, pony tails and all.

'Easy.' He called out. 'I could have shot you earlier.'

No reply. But he could tell she was weighing her options.

‘Who are you? Why did you bring them here?’ She demanded.

No pleasantries then?

‘I was just passing.’ He shrugged. ‘The door was open.’

She took two steps closer, her weapon unwavering at his head. Was this an attempt to intimidate?

‘Try again.’ She demanded, hostile and angry.

‘You stole something. I’ve been hired to retrieve it.’ He said ‘You need a hint, right? Been a lot of moonlight romps through other people’s property.’

It was Kats turn to shrug.

Both parties flinched and both muzzles re-directed toward the front door. It sounded like someone wanted in, and bad. The door held firm against heavy blows. Quick as a whip the guns resumed their vigil toward each other.

‘We could continue this conversation elsewhere. That door won’t hold for ever. I think I might have pissed them off.’

‘I was watching. Good shot from that distance. Myself, I would have gone for their leader.’

‘That *was* who I was aiming at.’

‘Really? Then it was a lousy shot. Who is he? What does he want? It all looks a bit personal to me.’

‘It’s a long story and I’m short on time.’ Scout lowered the Glock slowly toward the floor. Hoping it would encourage Miss Angry to do likewise. Hoping she wouldn’t just shoot him anyway. Why would she when they were getting on so well? But then she really did look angry and there was no sign of the gun being pointed elsewhere. He was less convinced that Miss Katie wouldn’t squeeze one of just for spite. Damn, she was intense, and the scowl showed more than a few cross lines. He felt a sense of relief as the gun was lowered to her side.

‘I want answers from you.’ She demanded. ‘This way, now.’

This was unbelievable. How bad a morning can a girl have? Toupee man and a headache had escalated into a knife fight and brawl before breakfast. The loft resembled the aftermath of a dog fight. Were there really two dead bodies on the carpet and one on the street? How out of hand could a situation get?

Another random thought hit home. What about Sib, they were sure to question him. She hoped he would be all right. Poor sod was right in the middle of this too. Nothing she could do for him now.

Kat jumped the wall at the back of the building. Quick marched across the neighbouring yard and took the steps down

to the kerb. With her back to the wall she checked the street and took her first chance to take a breath. Jarig were probably still hammering on the front door and she had no doubt that more were on their way. A quick sprint and the buildings opposite made good cover. Twenty minutes later and they had circled the Reliquary keeping out of trouble. It was a hop, skip, and a climb, walking only when necessary. No need to attract attention. *His* problem if he couldn't keep up.

Unfortunately he had.

The same old questions were barking at her grey matter. Who was he? What was this all about? Why had he brought the sky down on her head? No matter which way she twisted the situation in her there was no going back. The loft, the anonymity, her private life was at an end. She ceased the fierce pace. Twenty minutes of silence was about to end.

'I'm screwed because of you. You do understand that.'

He looked taken aback.

Oh really. An angry woman is not usual for you?

'Damn it. If only I found bald men attractive?' She really didn't mean to say that out loud.

'Who are you?'

'My name's Scout.'

‘Scout... What is that? That’s a stupid name. Why have you just gate crashed my life. What gives you the right?’ She was going to scream at him again. No choice, no other option. Her head wanted to explode in his general direction. Before she could utter a raised word he actually had the audacity to speak.

‘For your information, those men had come looking for you.’

‘Me, I don’t think so.’ She started finger pointing. ‘They followed you.’

‘Yes, they followed me. But they were looking for you.’

‘Is that a joke? I don’t even know you, or them, whoever *they* are.’ She started to pace. ‘This is worse than a bad hair day.’ She paced away from him and then back close. ‘I have a man I don’t know looking for me. He’s being followed by people *neither* of us knows. Oh, and it appears that *they*, are looking for *me*, and not for *him*? Do I have it right? Is there anything that I’ve missed?’

‘Is it in the bag?’ He asked.

‘Is what in the bag?’ Kat shifted the rucksack down from her shoulders. ‘You want to know what’s in the bag. She threw it to him. ‘Take a look. Go on, have a look. You’ve already rifled through my loft.’

Instant regret followed. She was being emotional. The book expressly instructed the purging of emotions in stressful situations. *Oh no.* She'd left the book behind. It was hidden behind the panel in the wardrobe. What had she put in the bag? Bum, it was full of her belongings... women's things. She'd hung around just long enough to grab make-up, powder and paint. Plus other items of a more personal nature. There were a couple of tops, and a dress... and a pair of shoes. Damn it, she'd brought those stockings as well.

'Give me the bag back. Give... give it back.' She reached behind her back as did Scout.

It was gun toting time again.

‘I can do this all day.’ Scout lied. He didn’t like people pointing guns at him. Who did?

‘Guns are strictly outlawed for citizens. You sure you know how to use that?’ He had absolutely no doubt that she did. One eye was kept on her whilst the other flicked back and forth to check the bag’s contents.

‘What is all this? *And where the hell had she hidden it in the flat?* ‘You had a few seconds to grab what was important.’

He pulled a dress from the bag as smaller items of make-up dislodged themselves and spilled onto the ground. It didn’t take much imagination on his part to have her wearing the slim garment. Clingy apparel, a nice stretch fit. Just long enough to reach the knees. It was a toss up which looked better. This or the tight jeans she wore. He ran his weapon down the split thigh muzzle still aimed true.

Maybe the jeans weren’t all that?

‘Nice outfit.’ He approved. ‘Not sure it goes with the shoes though.’ A shoe came out in the same hand that held the dress. ‘You can walk in these?’ He cast both items to the ground and continued to rummage. Fingers left the bag in disappointment.

The only thing of any value was the brown envelope he held up as a prize.

‘It’s not a box.’ He said.

‘Put those back or so help me. I *will* shoot you.’

‘Tell me where the box is.’

No reply.

Scout turned the gun of the envelope.

‘What? You’re going to shoot my photos?’

‘If I have to.’

‘I have an addition to make to my earlier statement. You can add it to the thugs, knife fight, and dead people. And let’s not forget the fire fight in the street and the confusion as to *who* follows *who*. I obviously left out the bit where I’m on the run with a psycho who shoots photos.’ She lowered the Beretta. ‘This cannot be happening to me. Who are you?’

The words fell just short of a plea for sanity. Away went the gun tucked back into her jeans.

She was upset, he could tell. Lots of pent up aggression as she snatched up her possessions, stood and grabbed for the envelope.

‘Bag... Now.’

‘Touchy.’ He handed it over. ‘I’m guessing childhood issues. We can talk about them later. I can help.’

Scout backed off a step deciding for once it was best to shut his mouth. Those rich blue eyes had lost all there allure and turned into gun ports salted with a dash of frenzy. He wasn’t so sure now that she wouldn’t actually shoot him.

‘We need a place to hide.’ He said. ‘City Centre is going to be crawling with Jag looking for us.’

‘Looking for you.’ Fingers resumed their pointing. ‘You need a place to hide. I need a mirror and a bath.’ She stepped away and then back again. ‘And my name is Kat, not Katie.’ With rucksack slung over shoulders she marched off muttering words it was probably best that he couldn’t hear. She definitely wasn’t a happy bunny.

Question was what to do now?

The last forty eight hours flashed uncomfortably in graphic detail. What had he got himself involved in? No way he could go back now, the Preacher would send Carlos for an update that he didn’t have. By now the Jag knew more about him than he did about himself, his Tag had seen to that. And for good measure the Trins were sure to take an interest in him. He was up to his neck in this and had no intention of paddling in circles. *What to*

do? He did feel a strange calm about the situation. As if none of it really mattered. One image overrode them all.

Scarecrow. He was there that night. He was responsible; if he wasn't, then he knew who was. It was even possible that the freak had killed Chia and his baby girl. Loathing eyes burnt on the woman as she walked away. Scarecrow had a weakness. He wanted this woman more than he wanted him. It didn't matter why, only that he did.

'Hey, wait up. You and me, we're a team now.'

Decision made. Where Kat went the Scarecrow would follow and Scout was going to be there when he found them.

‘Stax will not move against you until the Assembly’s objectives have been met. They want the land on the other side of the Line. After that, well, the Prime Legate believes that you will be fair game.’

‘You have identified who supports him?’

‘The ones that count, yes.’

‘How will he attempt to remove me?’

‘He will try to poison you. Make it look like a Trinity plot.’

How easy the lies slipped from Isabella’s lips. She even smiled. She knew that Patron liked to see her smile. When you have beauty and charm it is best to stir them both into the same cocktail.

‘Then the time is upon us, Isabella. You will make the arrangements.’

‘Of course.’

‘Good.’

If Patron was worried he didn’t show any signs.

‘Come with me Isabella. I want to take you somewhere. I have something to show you that I should already have shared.’

Isabella was intrigued.

Neither spoke as they passed through several palatial rooms with ceilings framed by gilded plaster. They entered the old Palace mostly unused now. She remembered hearing rumours about arguments within the Assembly. They'd wanted use of this once grand building for the private offices of the Primes. They had been denied by Patron. It was used primarily by Radan and his Clerks. Some of the Jarig hierarchy had wheedled rooms too. Most was left unoccupied and seemed a waste of resource. At first the rooms were quite lovely with their high walls and roman pillars topped with Cararra marble. The huge candelabras that lit their way were opulent and spread light from hundreds of candles.

The more they walked the less appealing the surroundings. This part of the Reliquary was increasingly unfamiliar to her. She had never walked amongst these ancient statues. She was unsure about where he was taking her. The statues of two pious looking monks welcomed them at the doorway with many more stood watching from plinths sculpted into the walls. Isabella's heels clicked obstinately on unpolished floors.

Unexpected guards appeared and opened the towering twin doors. The brightness of artificial light shone a brilliant white and blinded her momentarily to the interior.

‘What is this place?’ Isabella was astonished. Why had Patron never brought her here? ‘Is this a map?’

Below her feet was a huge chart inlaid into a massive open floor space. It seemed to cover a scaled area immense in size. The room itself was a rotunda and more columns rose to the ceilings spread evenly around the walls. A domed ceiling had been painted black as night.

‘What is this place?’

‘This is my crowning achievement. My legacy for when I am gone.’ Patron walked out into the middle of the room.

‘Unfortunately recent events have forced me to accelerate my schedule.’

‘Schedule for what?’

‘You told me yourself that I am dying. Half the Assembly wants me gone. So it is time to put my plans into action. I welcome you to my War Room. You are standing on our City, Oasis. I hope your feet are clean.’

He was right. She recognised the river and the colours of the city zones. It had different letters at its heart. R O M E.

What was this place? What war was he talking about? It gave her a deep set feeling of foreboding as her eyes took it all in.

‘The other cities you see highlighted on the map are Naples and Florence. To the north we have Turin, Venice and Milan. There are many others. I use their old names because I can still remember them the way they were.

She recognised them. The names familiar through her dealings with the Loaders.

‘Here, you see the black and yellow dots around our City. They are troop deployments. There are lists and timetables on the tables,’ he pointed to the walls, ‘numbers of troops and equipment. Logistical affairs that we don’t need to discuss right now. Suffice to say that I have thirty thousand Jag at my disposal. They are all well-armed and extremely well trained.’

This was incredible.

‘Why was I never told about this?’

‘It was not necessary.

‘But the other Prime Legates? Do they know?’

The grin suggested not.

‘How could you do this without their knowledge?’

‘It’s about knowing who to trust, my dear. The proposal to clear the Line has given me the opportunity to increase troop numbers in the City without suspicion. Numbers are considerably more than the Primes realise. I have also built a

network of Legates that oversee operations in more *forbidden* parts of the country. It's difficult to hide things unless we operate a long way from the City. Stax and the others may suspect but they have no idea of the numbers and scale. The room we are standing in, it doesn't exist.'

'Why? I don't understand what this is?' *Was this some sort of fantasy, a result of his illness?* 'What. Have I said something to amuse you?'

'No, I was just imagining similar faces from my Primes when I have them all arrested.'

Isabella felt a chill. Perhaps one of the jackets on the chairs would help. There were three large tables, other than the one Patron had indicated. Each one was identically curved and set symmetrically to the others around the outer wall. Four chairs rested behind each one. She had no idea who was intended to occupy the seats. Her eyes followed the arrows on the map as she stepped across the floor. They went north mostly. Up toward the mountains where they crossed and then spread out on the other side. Several smaller pointers went south and east into territory that was well known but still considered dangerous. The Wars had left radiation in the other cities. The plague could still be

present. But if that was so then why were Patrons dots presented around them?

It was warming as the jacket wrapped her shoulders. It was soft with quilting but not overly thick as she slipped it on over her dress. It was also a chance to cast discreet enquiry across the documents on the table.

‘We have caps too.’ Patron seemed to be enjoying her surprise. He was showing off. ‘I will get you get you one that fits. The complete uniform comes with an AK47 assault rifle. The Loaders found containers full of them some years ago in a port in Naples. Who knows where they were going but they were never collected.’ He turned his back on her. ‘As you know the Loaders accumulate a variety of provisions for the Commission.’

That statement was chilling, despite the coat.

Did he know?

No, it wasn’t possible. She had only ever used Trin Loaders to supply the laboratory. They had been ultra-careful, building supplies slowly. But still, it would take just one mistake. Anyone could betray her if torture had been used.

‘You seem confused, my dear. I must apologise for keeping you out of the loop.’ Patron raised his hands and turned them around the room with pride. ‘Welcome to my War Room. From

here I will send the Jarig out into the world. They will extend law and order far beyond Oasis. They will spread the word of the Saints and convert the heretics of all the lands beyond.'

This was too incredible. How could he achieve all of this without her knowing? How had he kept it from the Assembly? No, this wasn't possible. How long had Patron been planning this?

The surprise slowly drizzled down to a more personal agenda. This could wreck *their* plans. She had to warn the others. She must let the Surgeon know what was going on.

'I'm impressed.' She said walking back across the map. Her eyes down and committing every last detail to memory. 'How long have you been planning this?'

'Fifteen years, give or take. Each year there are more interns at the Jarig academy than we account for. We've been cooking the books, so to speak. My Loaders have been scouring the other cities for supplies and stockpiling them at various sites.' He pointed to the map. 'The sites marked in yellow. It was the weapons we found ten years ago that confirmed everything I knew to be true. They were a gift from the Saints, Isabella. Mikael had answered my prayers and given his blessing for the Faith to be spread.'

It was agreed under protest then. Both guns were to remain in the rucksack and Kat would shoulder it at all times. Scout was to change his clothes, no argument there. A convenient washing line had provided a change in appearance. He'd pegged Prosper's jumper and slacks in their place, it was the least he could do.

Two trams were taken and a long walk was endured to reach the southern edge of the City. The walk was to ensure that they weren't followed. That was her idea not his. Not a very scenic stroll. City South was non residential for the most part. It was commercial land. Large warehouses used for storing crops from the fields. There were plenty of empty factories and buildings unused in decades. If you had something to hide, where better?

'Nice.' He said and didn't mean it.

The old mill house had a faded yellow door. It was an uninspiring piece of architecture with big windows and large bricks. A key was hidden in a hollow and used to gain entry. There were a lot of steps to tread to reach the top floor and a sizeable door that could probably have resisted the advances of a truck. The same key gained them entry.

‘You’re a girl that likes a view.’ He said.

‘Don’t stand by the window. Most of the City is probably looking for us.’

Scout pulled the curtain further back. ‘Most of the City has better places to be. Can I have my Glock back now?’ He guessed that particular look was a rejection of his request. ‘Where exactly are we?’

‘It’s a safe house.’ She threw the rucksack onto the couch.

‘Nice colour scheme.’ He lied.

The chocolate brown walls just didn’t do the cream skirting justice. Chairs looked snug though. Why was it that everyone he met owned such comfy furniture? He wanted some. It really pissed him off.

‘And why does a two bit thief need a safe house?’

‘This two bit thief saved your life back there.’

And I’m grateful, don’t think I’m not. Did you realise your backside is a work of art in those jeans?

‘And why was that?’ He asked. ‘Not that I didn’t appreciate the distraction. But I had the situation under control.’

‘Sure, it looked like it. Every time he hit you I noticed he was wetting himself.’

‘You could have just walked away. Frightened I was going point you out?’

She’d stopped listening and closed the door behind her after entering another room. She could have just walked away. He would have, probably. Don’t get involved in other people’s fights. It was a good rule. Then it hit him. Bad guy had been pawing over the contents of her envelope. Was that why she came in like that? The photos and the cross, they were important to her. She wasn’t here. She hadn’t said that he couldn’t poke through her bag. Scout drew back the zip of the rucksack, checked the door to see she wasn’t peeking, and lifted the envelope out.

He sat, smiled. *Oh yeah.* Cushion had just the right amount of padding. Arms were a perfect height for his. He wriggled back into the soft padding. This was perfect, his backside was in ecstasy.

‘I knew it. You can’t keep your hands off things that don’t belong to you.’

‘So says the two bit thief.’ *Thanks for ruining the moment.* He hung the envelope out to taunt her. ‘What’s so important that you just couldn’t walk away?’

Silence.

‘You could have walked away. You didn’t know this was about you.’

‘I still don’t.’ She snatched the envelope away and held it close. ‘Start talking. Why were you looking for me?’

‘I told you. I’m recovering something that you stole. Did you know who you were taking it from?’

Kat pulled the bands from her hair and let the tails fall open across her shoulders. She reclined into the sofa staring at the ceiling. ‘The Preacher is a bad man.’ She said.

‘You think?’ *You have no idea.* ‘Where is it? Where’s the box?’

‘Gone. Why do you care? Frightened you won’t get paid?’

Scout was more concerned with the money already advanced than yet to be received. Half of it had already been used to get him into this mess. ‘I do have another motive.’ He said. Maybe the silver cross was his way in. ‘I’m breaking a sacred trust here, but I need your help. I work... I’m working for God.’

Kat sat forward.

‘Personally? *He* gave you a job?’

That came out wrong. Try again.

‘I’m looking for a Relic that needs to be restored to the safekeeping of its owners. Can I trust you? You do have a

trustworthy face but I'm just not sure.' Didn't look like she wasn't buying any of this but he continued anyway. 'Okay, seeing as how you were helpful. I'm working for the Old Faith, I'm a Trinity agent.' Now that changed her attitude. A bit more responsive, impressed even.

The noise came as a rasp down her nose and quickly followed by the parting of lips in a howl of amusement. 'Please, I've had better lines from drunks. You're a liar.'

'And you're a thief.'

'And you're buzzing.'

What?

He was. Short 'zzz' noises from his pocket. Were the jeans he'd stolen alarmed? No way. Scout reached inside the lining and plucked out the phone. Kat's gaze was all over him, suddenly interested in his every move. On went the game face complete with predator eyes, and she was closer to the guns in the rucksack than he was.

'I don't know why this is making a noise.' He was at pains to protest innocence which she clearly didn't believe. He held the phone aloft for her to see. 'I... borrowed it earlier from a friend.'

'You're such a liar. Only Commission agents have cell phones.'

Frankly Scout was surprised that Kat knew what it was. He was even more surprised that it was making a noise.

‘Answer it then.’

He pulled the flip down and moved it slowly to his ear.

‘Yes?’

He wasn’t *actually* sure which end to speak into. The voice on the other end... It was Scarecrow. Where did he get this number? *He* didn’t know what the number was.

‘Are you with the woman?’

He resisted the urge to look at her.’

‘Yes.’

‘Give me your location and I can make all of this go away.’

Scout considered for a moment. ‘No.’ If Kat came any closer the woman would be parked on his lap. Scout stepped away.

‘I understand.’ Liam said. *‘You have questions. I have answers. Give me the girl and I will tell you whatever you want to know.’*

Scout lowered his voice so Kat couldn’t hear.

‘Was it you? Did you kill Chia?’

‘Give me the girl. Tell me your location.’

‘Did you kill Chia.?’

'No. It was not by my hand. But I can tell you why. I can clear your name and I can give you back your life. That's what I can do for you, Scout. What will you do for me in return?'

This time he couldn't help himself. He turned and looked straight at Kat. There was no disguising or deception as to how he felt. What was she to him? Truth was she was irritating and annoying. Everything he had ever desired to know, truths that had kept him from sleeping at nights. It was being offered to him on a plate. So why did he hesitate?

'Call me back in ten minutes.' He hung up.

‘Who was that?’ Kat asked.

To see a hand held phone in his hand was unnerving to say the least. Only Commission agents and high ranking Jag would have access to that type of hardware.

‘Who were you talking to?’

‘Wrong number.’ He replied.

The silence that followed was gut wrenching, almost oppressive. Eight feet she calculated to the bag. He was no more, no less distant, and he’d already looked at it twice. Damn it she should have made a bid for the bag when she’d had the chance. Never mind. Kat allowed her breathing to shallow, her eyes never left his. Was he going to make a move for the guns, or not?

‘He said his name was Liam.’

That was unexpected. Was this an attempt to distract her?

‘The man I just spoke to. You know him?’

She shook her head, clenched her fist. He was forty - fifty pounds heavier and she’d seen that he was capable, tough too. The bruising on his face was slight despite the blows he’d received. All irrelevant, he would go down because she would make it so.

Is he sitting down?

He was. Scout sat, head back and feet up on the arm of the chair.

‘Are you comfortable?’ She asked, hating the fact that he’d done the unexpected again. It meant she couldn’t read him. Had no idea what was going on his head. She began to wonder if he did either.

‘Do you know a man named Prosper?’

He had to make sense of all this. No answer from Kat.

‘Okay, he’s a friend of a friend who I stayed with last night. I learnt something interesting that you may not know. The box that you stole; it’s valuable. It’s wanted by the Commission, by the Duma, and by the Trinity. All of the aforementioned will kill you, and me, to acquire it.’

‘Is that right? So tell me which one of them are you really working for?’

‘I’ve just gone freelance. I’m thinking that I’ve been set up to find you.’ He held the phone up. ‘The charmer on the other end works for one of the interested parties. And you were right, it is personal. This Liam character, he just made it personal.’

‘Go on.’

‘He wants *you*. And he offers something that I want badly, if I hand you over.’

That was well said. She’d probably just shoot him and save herself the trouble. He couldn’t stop thinking about what Stalker had said. That *she’d* need his help, and something about facing his own demons? San had intimated a similar connection with

his tuned in, 'I'm speaking through the sprits routine.' Fucking riddles, he hated them. He couldn't put his finger on it but Miss Katie was the pin that bound all the pieces together. That was the only thing he *was* sure of. No, there was one other certainty to the situation. Liam was not to be trusted. It was in his voice. Besides, if he wanted Katie that bad then denying him was the best possible way of keeping tabs on him, at least for now.

'Maybe you know a big man with hands, big as plates.' Scout gestured with his own. 'He wears a long leather hand me down and likes big guns. Oh, and he smokes waaay too much.'

That got a reaction.

'You know him. You know Stalker?'

'Stalker?'

'It's a term of endearment. We're like that him and me.' He clasped his hands together. 'Brothers in arms. He told me that you needed my help. He was somewhat cryptic, but I'm pretty sure that you're his girl. How about a blind man who likes fountains, know him?'

She shook her head.

'Okay, here's what I know. You stole a box. That box contains an item that a lot of scary people are looking for. I know that you work for the Trins, so I'm guessing that they have

it now. I also know that Stalker wants me to help you. And he's the one that scares *me* the most. So who is he?'

She seemed reluctant.

'Tell, or I'm leaving. You're on your own.'

'Really? You promise?'

Wasn't much of a threat, admittedly? Right now he needed her more than she him.

'Alright, just help me out here. I'm stuck right in the middle of this. It might help us both if we pool information.'

More silence. At least she looked like she was considering cooperating.

'He sounds like the Entity.' She said finally. 'But I don't know. I thought he was a myth.'

'No myth.' He gingerly felt the lumps on the back of his head. 'He called me the Guardian. Does that mean anything to you?'

Both hands came up to her mouth. Now that *was* a reaction.

The phone began to buzz again. He ignored it. The plot thickened.

When you're up to your neck in crap you may as well start swimming freestyle. He had to forget all the stupid notions being planted in his head by one faction or another. He had to stick to the job and this girl was his best lead. The only way to resolve this situation was to get the box back. If he could do that, the Preacher was off his back, screw Dok. If he handed over the girl to Liam, then maybe, just maybe, he could come out ahead.

He cursed his conscience.

That woman over there had probably done him a good turn. Okay she had saved his skin regardless of her motives. This was a nightmare. He'd been sucked into a river of religious calling. San, Prosper, even Stalker seemed to be guiding him where he didn't want to go. And still niggling at the back of his mind was the image of a man long since dead. Nailed to a cross two millennium ago. It was one complication after another.

Listen to yourself Scout. Come out alive and screw your conscience.

Scout flushed and leant against the cistern. And why was it that every place he ended up had the sweet smell of personal

lavatory space. Did anyone live in a place smaller than his? He was beginning to doubt it.

‘Feel better?’ Kat asked as Scout closed the door, just in case the smell of deceit leaked out.

‘Not really.’ He answered.

‘Where are the magazines?’ She held the Glock up and then the Beretta. ‘I know you’ve got them.’

He couldn’t help it. Smug was what he did best. Several clips emerged from his pockets.

‘When did you... How?’

‘You can’t watch me all the time. And the question you should be asking is, why?’ He grinned. ‘For all I knew you were working with Liam. It’s better to be safe than sorry.’

‘And now?’

‘Oh he wants you, and bad. I’m just a means to an end for him. Look, this Liam. It’s pretty obvious he’s working for the Commission. He showed those Jag his ID and they lined up like good little troopers for him.’

Phone started buzzing on the table again.

‘Speaking of Liam.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I’m already doing it.’ Scout flipped open the phone and closed it for the third time. ‘I just wish I could see his face.’

Scout was being playful; his grin had cheese dripping all over. For now he had the upper hand. Liam was at arm’s length and Kat was still vulnerable, unclear as what was going on. She was a thief not a spy and he had one more card left to play. His eyes flit up to meet hers. Two clips left his hand, thrown. She caught them both.

‘Gabriel.’ He said.

There it was written all over her face and she knew it. She tried to hide it, but the Kat was out of the bag.

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m a follower of Jesus Christ.’ He lied.

That was it. All his cards were on the table. The pot was stacked and he was all in. What would she do now?

The sound of a magazine sliding into the handle of a gun is unnerving enough but when it's coupled with the hard stare of an angry woman. From an angry Kat, then best behaviour is advised.

Kat jarred the butt of the clip with her palm to drive it home and then she pulled the recoil forcing a round into the chamber. She had no intention of shooting him; it was just for show, just to let him know that she liked to play too. Alarm him to the fact that he may have miscalculated. Then again, maybe she would just shoot him. After all it was girl's prerogative to change her mind.

He was playing her, she was sure of it, but why? What was his game? The Jag *had* tried to kill him of that much she was sure. The bullets that hit the door of Lucky Blu nearly took his head off. And the thugs in her loft, they weren't playing either. It was beyond the realms of possibility that they had staged it just for her benefit. But why? As if she wasn't confused enough this aggravating man had just given, *the word*. It was a word so secret that very few knew its meaning. Did she honour the request or question its speaker?

'You look worried.' She said.

'Girls got a gun?' He said.

'Good point. Girls not afraid to use it either.' She circled him like a hawk. 'Why would you think that word means anything to me? Where did you come across it?'

'From a blind man with a penchant for dirty habits.'

'I thought he liked fountains?'

'He's a man of varied taste.'

More lies.

'You mentioned another man. What was his name, Prospect?'

'That's such a bad memory for a young mind. I said his name was Prosper. Know him? He knows you.'

She did know him. They'd met several times. He was a trusted friend of her uncle's. She doubted that Scout could be trusted but there was something about him. And he'd met Wyatt? What choice did she have? Besides the silence was awkward.

Kat's palm slapped the clip into the gun again. Her slender finger grazed the slide release and the clip dropped back out. She slapped it in again. 'Nice action,' she said, paused, and then threw Scout his weapon. 'I need to stop somewhere. Check something.'

'Then what?'

‘We’ll see.’

‘A girl of mystery, I like that.’

There was only one place that she could think to take him. It was dangerous. She’d be exposing someone she cared about. But he’d know what to do. She had to buy time. They could make the Golden Promise in an hour if they kept off the main roads. It was heading back to City Centre but it would give her a chance to think without breaking confidences. She’d check the message board. If there was a problem with this man it could already be posted. She had no intention of sharing any more than he seemed to know already.

Was this real?

Isabella found it hard to believe. She had followed Patron into a den of iniquity. Officers of the Commission and Jag were operating forbidden technology. Some twenty or so men busied themselves checking screens and complex machinery. Some were seated at computers, scanners and God only knew what. A low drone filled the room and numerous voices competed with the noise of the equipment to make a garbled sound.

‘What is this place?’ It was at odds with every rule she had grown up accepting. To know that Patron was at its heart shook her. She was no stranger to computers and other remnants of the past. It was inevitable that such things would surface. That is why they were outlawed, confiscated, studied. But this... this was unprecedented. It was unacceptable. ‘What is this place?’ She repeated.

‘From here I keep in contact with my ground forces. Radio and cell phone communication. We managed an uplink with a satellite in orbit some years ago. It has taken some time and effort to restore but now all of this works for me.’

Patron was sweating. She could see the strain on his face; she was feeling the anxiety herself.

‘What is it all for?’

‘Crusade, my dear. This is the central hub from where I will direct operations. Please, look at the screens. Each of those monitors relays information from units outside of the City. I can communicate and direct them without having to leave this room.’

This was technology. It was dangerous, forbidden, and intolerable. ‘To what end?’

‘Living space. The citizens of Oasis demand more so I will give it to them. Troops have already been living in other cities for some years. There is no threat any more, just opportunity. You will have noticed the arrows on the map. Commission troops. They are assembled and will shortly advance into and beyond the mountains. The roads are still good, for the most part. The crossing will be brief. When they reach the other side I will order them to deploy and make contact with Outlanders.’

‘Outlanders, what does that mean? Are there others out there? Are you telling me that we are not alone?’

‘Far from it, my dear. Loaders have been telling me for years that mankind has survived beyond Oasis. I will of course tell the people but not until we have made good gain in the outside.’

Troops and weapons meant a war machine. Why? Patron had mentioned Crusade. The technology and the satellite were powerful advantages over others. Did he mean to conquer them or give them protection? She looked at the uniforms in the room. Dear God, Patron was going to subjugate other survivors. She looked away as if he could read her mind.

‘You are shocked. Tell me what you’re thinking.’

That this is too much. How am I supposed to take this in? Outsiders... there were others outside of Oasis.

‘I was just wondering what will happen if the Outsiders try to resist.’ Another more pressing question formed. ‘What if they are blasphemous? They may not know about the Saints.’ *Oh dear God what if the Old Religion was alive beyond the mountains? Patron would smash it. Grind it into oblivion.*

‘I am making proclamation in the next few days. Everyone in the City will be required to take the Oath of the Prophets. The same Oath will be offered to Outlanders.’

‘And if they refuse?’

‘It would be better for them if they didn’t. *All* will be offered the protection of the Jarig. My protection. Those that are foolish enough to decline will be set to work in the fields. Some will be used as a deterrent to others.’

‘As it should be.’ Isabella kissed Patron’s hand. ‘I want to be the first to take the Oath, to show my loyalty beyond all others.’

There would be no Oath. Surgeon was right. She could see it now. Patron was a monster, a madman. Contact with Outsiders should be cause for joy, not for war.

This could only put *their* plans in jeopardy.

‘I’m feeling tired, my dear. It’s time for my injections.’

‘Yes.’

‘You returned with product from our contact?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then walk with me. We can talk. You can tell me what is on your mind. All of this must be quite a surprise.’

That was the understatement of her life.

Patron had never included her in matters concerning the Jag. He often held council with obscure Legates. Unfamiliar faces. She knew that there were aspects of his rule that she was not wholly privy too. Meetings with the Primes, information from the Assembly, it was notoriously difficult to obtain. Patron had weekly meetings with obscure Legates, she was aware of that. And the Loaders, there were obviously more operatives than she knew about. She could have kicked herself. How had he kept this from her? Wasn’t she here to let the Trinity Elders

know what was in Patron's mind? It seemed that she knew nothing.

The more she mulled the past the more obvious things became. Reasoning was clearer when she wasn't angry. There were Patron's midnight liaisons and Secret meetings. Clever Patron. Stax had asked many times what she knew about them. Patron had never said. He had intimated and they had all drawn the same conclusions. That he was obsessed with the Trinity problem. Clever clever Patron, she saw more clearly now.

Radan left the City on regular inspections. Trips to inspect the fields, the power station and the coastal ports, they were all under his pervue. He was often absent keeping the wheels of industry turning. She'd been watching the wrong wheels.

Liam too, he came and went like the sewer rat he was. No wonder Patron was so keen to keep him away from others. She began to see with different eyes. Clever, clever, Patron. She'd thought herself the perfect spy and been totally unaware of his secret life.

This was mind blowing.

‘Stop looking at me like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like a schoolboy watching his teacher in her underwear.’

‘Not this schoolboy. He’d rather stick pins in his eyes.’

Damn cheek of the woman. Scout closed his mouth and walked to the window. It might help if the towel she had wrapped around her body was bigger than a handkerchief.

I know what you’re doing. A woman’s body can be a lethal weapon.

‘I prefer the view from the window.’ He muttered craning his neck for one more peek as she went back into the bedroom.

She *was* tight. A healthy slice of attitude all wrapped up in a soft smooth butter coating. He grinned. Show the male moron what’s on offer. Get him all warm and gooey inside. Have him licking out of your palm in no time.

Not that easy. Nice try.

Several minutes later Kat reappeared. She wore a short skirt over black leggings and black ankle boots. A black tee shirt and yellow cardigan that was fashionably too small. Her hair was

shorter, and blonde. *Has she got caches of wigs hidden all over the City?*

On went the finishing touch, a narrow pair of glasses slipped over a delicate nose. Scout had to admit it was impressive. A touch of paint on her face and a few accessories and Kat was a teenager again brimming full of confidence. She was dangerously generic when she wanted to be

‘What do you think white or the black?’

‘White,’ he said, ‘looks good.’

The white handbag was tossed back into the bedroom.

‘Don’t be stupid. No self respecting girl would put yellow with white.’

What was he thinking? Oh yeah, that Miss Katie had a personality problem.

‘What do you think?’

‘That it stinks of Commission. Do you really want to go in there?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘No.’

Kat took another look. Café was busy, nothing too unusual about that, the Golden Promise was popular. But she agreed with Scout. It stank of Commission agents.

Half the seats outside the café were occupied and a lot of people were sat in the sun on the promenade above the river. It was a busy scene. Her senses were buzzing with alarm as her gaze checked the windows in the flats above the café’s awning. There wasn’t anything untoward.

‘The guy reading the paper next to the door.’ Scout said.

‘Why do they always read papers?’

Kat agreed. ‘I don’t recognise either of the waiters serving.’ She stepped back. ‘How did they know we’d be here?’

‘Because you’re not as smart as you think you are.’

‘Oh really? Well I wasn’t the one followed half way round the city for two days. Scout, what are doing?’

She felt Scout's arm slip around her waist and watched his mouth come close to hers as several men walked close by. Too close. Were they plain clothes doing the rounds or just locals taking a stroll? Indecision was the only reason she didn't kick him in the sunshines. And what was that smell? Was he wearing her perfume? He was. Did he have any idea how much that stuff cost? Had he applied it with a shovel? This Idiot was taking liberties. Still, this close he did smell nice. And the jumper he'd chosen from the safe house looked well on him. Hugged all the right bits and showed a bit of chest. At least he didn't have a hairy chest; she couldn't abide men with rugs on their head or on their chest.

Ease up there girl. This man was trouble. Last night had obviously been far more traumatic than she realised. *Okay, you can let go now.* He was cute in a rugged simple way. *Get off me before I sink my teeth into your nose.* Maybe she'd let him give her a peck before kicking him in the...

'They've gone.' He backed off. 'Do you really need to go in there? It's a dumb shit thing to do.'

Kat poked her nail sharply at his chest. 'I'm going in and *you* are waiting here. If Emilio or Uncle knows what's going on one of them will have left a message for me.'

She realised the mistake. It hadn't been necessary to mention Uncle. Now she was pissed again and more than willing to take it out on him. Kat shouldered Scout aside. Before he could complain any further she was out into the street and blending with the locals.

Maybe they were just being paranoid? How could the Commission know about this place? One of the new waiters smiled as she passed him. No, she wasn't ready for a drink. She had friends inside. She shied slightly but kept eye contact, gave him her best girly smile. Now *he was* cute, she decided, young, unlike the idiot she was saddled with.

The front doors were both open as she entered and why not, it was turning out to be a gorgeous day. Bright sunshine bathed the café veranda from a clear blue sky. A few hours ago she'd planned to drink tea below the willow out back. Enjoy a fragrant haunt and catch a dreamy sleep. Now it reeked of Commission agents burning with watchful eyes. She managed to slip between the window tables and said hi to the girls already parked there. They were nice, pleasant girls. They had no idea who she was but they all smiled and were welcoming. Just a few innocent remarks and a question or two as her eyes discreetly checked the board. Emilio always posted in the top right corner. There was nothing.

There was nothing but business cards and a note from someone trying to find homes for two adorable kittens.

Kat kissed the girl closest on the cheek. It surprised her but she wasn't offended. As far as any onlookers were concerned she was just a part of the group. She said her goodbyes and walked out the way she had entered. The same waiter seemed disappointed to see her leave. His lips puckered and he shrugged with sadness. Just like he did with every other woman he admired, probably. Either that or he was committing her face to memory. Either way he was out of luck. Newspaper man discreetly watched her leave, eyes only, they returned to the print. That was when she knew for sure. This place had been busted.

'Anything?'

'Nothing. There should be something.'

Scout watched the street. No movement from the Café. No one had followed. Kat had walked in bold as brass and then left. She had balls. But then he knew that already. Anyone willing to turn over the Preacher had to be made of stern stuff with just a dash of crazy stirred in for good measure. He was leaning more

and more toward a liberal smattering of the latter. Still, she looked genuinely worried.

‘Who’s Uncle?’ He asked as they walked away.

There was that look again. At least this time it wasn’t staring down a gun sight.

‘Okay, what now?’ He asked.

‘You said you know Prosper.’

‘We’ve met, yes.’

‘Then you know where he lives?’ She offered him to lead the way.

‘Okay. Follow me. Hey, is this like a test or something?’

Last time he saw this door his face was up close and personal and he couldn't get in. It seemed suspicious that it should now be ajar. Granted Prosper could have left it on the latch, he could be walking the dog, if he had one. Something was most definitely wrong.

'Wait, wait, wait.' He fingered the door and pushed just enough to see inside. Again a hand was needed to stop Kat advancing. Scout pulled his gun. Kat reacted and did likewise.

'Prosper?' She called.

Scout wanted to grab her mouth with his hand. Too late. Stealth turned into open aggression and hopeful surprise. His size ten booted the door open and let the Glock lead the way with Beretta following close behind.

'Shut the door and make sure you lock it.'

'Yes husband. Whatever you say husband.'

'What?'

Oh yeah. She remembered, how sweet.

The room was clear. Wasn't the table on the other side of Prosper's chair? The book on top, its pages had been creased. No way had Prosper done that. Too much respect for the printed

word. The more he looked the less he liked. One of those ugly little figurines was missing from the wall. Two others on the side board were facing the wrong way. There'd been a struggle here and someone had tried to tidy up.

'We need to leave. We need to... Kat? Kat, where are you going?'

That girl needed do as she was told. Scout checked the door as he backed through the room and followed her. He kicked open both doors in the hallway. Both rooms seemed clear. The stairs down to the kitchen seemed tighter than last time. The light was on and the dresser open from the wall. Kat obviously knew Prosper better than she'd let on.

He followed on, hardly minding the dark and damp. The tunnel to Prosper's bolt hole wasn't half as intimidating when the adrenaline flowed.

'Kat?' Where the... was she?

He entered the bolt hole. Others had been here since he had. Intruders had done a job on the monitors. They were busted real good. Computers had been ransacked, their guts removed, empty tins now lying useless on the floor.

'Kat.?'

A muted cry from the library had Scout on his toes again. Stupid girl had found trouble. He hotfoot towards the curtain and flung the drape back.

Nothing.

The lights were on, where was Kat? He checked several rows. Number five had a terrible secret. He found her on her knees close to Prosper's body tied to the chair he'd last seen behind the table by the door.

'Is he?'

'He's still alive,' she said, 'barely.'

Bastards had put a bullet in his shoulder and one in his knee. The chords that tied him were the only things stopping him falling. He'd been tortured. He found himself not wanting to know why. It would only confirm what he already knew. The closer he got the worse Prosper looked. The man had lost a lot of blood the floor was testament to that. Kat was whispering to him. Nothing secret, the words were just full of pain. One by one the ropes that bound him were removed. He slumped into Kat's arms and she helped him down to the floor. That was when he saw, when the images became clear as day.

'Oh shit. Son a bitch.'

This wasn't just torture. The blood on Prosper's face was the result of more than just a beating. Both the man's eyes had been removed. There it was, no disguising the message. The scene had the Scarecrow's fingerprints all over.

But how? How did he know about Prosper?

Prosper groaned as his head touched the ground. Kat was crying.

'Why have they done this to him?' She sobbed. 'Why?'

Wasn't it obvious?

Prosper was a Trin and obviously high up in the chain. Prosper had information the Commission would torture and kill a hundred heretics to procure.

'How did they find him?'

What else could he do but shake his head. That was the very question he had already asked himself. Had Liam's men followed him here too? Had *he* led them straight to Prosper?

'Kat?' Prosper was conscious. 'Is, that you?'

'Yes. It's me. Oh God, who did this to you? What have they done to you.'

'Is, he with you. Is Scout, with you?'

'Yes.'

'Come closer.'

The hand Prosper raised trembled terribly. It was difficult to watch. And it reached for him not for her. That somehow made things worse. Whatever the dying man had to say was important. He supposed the least he could do was listen.

‘Take it easy, we’ll get you some help.’

Scout took the hand in a firm grip and knelt next to Kat. He tried not to let his arm touch hers but she moved to be closer to Prosper. Should he push her away? Scream his guilt aloud or just keep it quiet. He’d thought himself so clever, so up for the task. But Liam had been clever too. He’d let him loose on a rope and was slowly reeling him in, catching all the bystanders in a net. First Kat and now Prosper. *Oh shit. That meant San was a target too. And Liam knew about the Preacher. Had he been followed to the club? Was the Odyssey a target? Had he given them an excuse to take down Doc?*

Prosper’s hand touched his arm, brought him back. It crawled with blind fingers down to the wrist and took hold of his hand. No way could he look either of them in the face. Guilt is a really cold emotion and right now the temperature had dropped considerably.

‘What’s he doing?’ He had both their hands. For a moment the three of them found union. The silence was broken and Scout barely disguised his relief.

‘I told them.’ Prosper forced the words from his lips though he would rather have remained silent. ‘I told them, everything I know. I’m so sorry.’

‘Shh, it’s alright. It doesn’t matter, you had no choice.’

‘I was, weak. I am, damned.’

If it was difficult to listen to the man groan the words it was a damn sight harder to watch. Scout couldn’t watch. He pretended to, but stared at the floor instead. Why wouldn’t the man let go of his hand? He didn’t want to touch him or her. Not know, not ever.

‘We can, no longer protect the Relic. Take him, take Scout to your Uncle. He...’ The words came with pain. Prosper trembled bad and stuttered. Words barely wheezed out of his mouth. ‘He, will know... what to do.’ The man’s hand tightened somehow finding strength. ‘God forgive me. Katerina, please, forgive me. I have, betrayed us all.’

Just let go. Crap, it was time to die. That was another good question. Why *wasn’t* Prosper dead? Why had Liam left him alive? Only one reason he could think of. Prosper was bait. Scout

pulled his hand away and drew his gun. He was at the curtain in several quick steps and watching at the stairs.

‘We have to go.’

‘I’m not leaving him like this.’

‘Yes you are. It’s a frigging trap and we’ve walked straight into it. They’re probably up there right now, waiting for us to come out.’

‘I can’t leave him.’

This was turning into a nightmare. Without even realising what he was doing he’d somehow managed to serve up half the Trinity cause on a Commission platter. Worse still, they were now trapped down here like rats.

Maybe there was a deal to be done? Chances were that Liam still wanted the girl. And he’d want her alive. Scout watched Kat still holding onto Prosper’s hand. He moved the gun’s aim towards her. It was time to stop hanging on and die old man.

‘We have them both in the Heretic’s house. It’s just a matter of time before they come out. At which point we will take them.’

How it pleased Liam to say that down the phone to his master. It was good to hear Patron in such a fine mood.

‘Yes. I have dispatched troops to the addresses that the man, Prosper, gave us. A round up of suspects will commence in less than an hour.’ He took a sharp breath. ‘No, I have not yet ascertained the location of the box. Yes, we now know it was the girl that stole it from the Preacher. She obviously delivered it to someone. She will give me the information.’ He paused. ‘There is one more thing of interest about the woman. I’ve had the records checked, twice. It seems that she died some time ago.’

He paused and listened.

‘No, either the data is wrong, which has never happened before. Or, this woman does not exist. Yes, it is intriguing. What about the man? Yes, I understand. We have no further use for him.’

Liam clicked the phone’s cover shut. Had it been a mistake to omit certain information about the man? After all, the situation had been resolved some years ago. Patron was not

aware that the husband had survived. Admitting the mistake would serve no practical purpose. No, he was right to save Patron the concern. The woman however, interested him beyond her Trinity ties.

She bore the name Katerina Corito, but that woman had died aged twenty one after a long illness, during the subsequent coma she never awoke from. That was over fifteen years ago. The woman in the house obviously wasn't her. So why then was she using a false identity? Liam had checked the hotel's records. She had been Tagged by the local Jag fifteen years ago before entering City Centre. It was a blanket order and a compulsory check. No-one lived in City Centre without one. So how then did she have a dead woman's Tag and not one of her own? And how had she not aged beyond her early twenties. Someone had sponsored her residency. There would be a name on file. That name was not forthcoming.

Liam despised mysteries.

When they had the fugitives in custody he would have questions about her past. As for the man, there was no longer any reason to keep him alive. Liam motioned to his men. It was time to close the street down. He circled a finger to snipers in the building opposite and then pointed at the door. The trap was

laid, nothing to do now but sit and wait. Eventually they would have to come back outside.

Still no movement on the stairs. If they were going to come Scout hoped they'd do it sooner rather than later. He was in the mood to shoot someone. Empty the clip into the first body that entered the room.

Come on, bring it on.

No-one came.

Right from the start it was a set up. Give the dog a bone and set him sniffing in the right direction. He'd sniffed alright and now people were dead. Dok, Rubi, were they okay, or were they taken? Were they dead? Scarecrow was showing epic efficiency. They were probably pulling in everyone he knew. Even Tass, probably.

The sound of whispers stopped behind him.

'Is he?'

Kat placed Prosper's hand on his chest. The man was a mess. Death was a release not a burden.

'I'm sorry. I liked him.' He said.

'How did they know?' She levelled a cold and icy stare.

'How?'

'I don't know.' Scout lied, knowing that she didn't believe him.

'We have to leave. It may be too late already.' It probably was. When the spider had weaved such an elaborate web it could afford to wait until it was hungry.

'I meant it. I'm sorry about the old man.'

The phone rang again. It gave a gut wrenching shrill that scared the hell out of him.

'Well don't look at me. It's not mine.' Said Kat.

Okay, if he wants a chat I'll give him one.

He pulled the phone not wanting it to ring a second time. He wasn't quick enough. The Nokia flipped open.

'What?.'

'You should have taken my offer.'

'Who is this?'

The voice on the speaker was amused.

'I'm glad to see you still have a sense of humour.' It sighed.
'Perhaps you will find my next statement amusing. The building is surrounded and there is most definitely no way out. I am prepared to wait, but time always seems to be of the essence so I have a proposal. Bring me the girl unharmed and you can

walk. Delay or defy and I will see to it that your last hours are spent in excruciating pain. You have... three minutes to decide.'

'I have a counter offer.' Scout replied. Then fully cocked the slide pulling of his weapon letting it snap back to ram a ten mil round into the chamber.

'Scout, what are you doing? Why are you aiming the gun at me?'

*

Liam listened to the man on the other end of the line. This was unexpected. How could he know about that night? He'd been careful. Scout had not seen his face.

'What do you want?'

'I want out of here, but first you'll tell me everything about that night.'

'I don't know what you're...'

A gunshot rang out from the house. Liam cautioned his men not to react.

'Are you still there?'

'The next shot makes this conversation pointless.'

'Are you threatening to kill the girl?'

He wouldn't do it. Or maybe he would. This man was undeniably desperate, and somewhat unpredictable.

'You said it yourself, there's no way out. I've got no-one left to give a shit about. If you want this woman, you'll deal. Or first I do her, and then I do me. I'm not ending up like the old man here. You have till the count of three. One... Two...'

Kat screamed

'Wait. Threats are not necessary.'

Liam walked away. There could be no eavesdroppers on this conversation.

'Exactly what do you want to know?'

'Everything. And if I hear a lie, just one. She dies.'

'And if I comply. Will you release her to me, alive and unharmed?'

'Yes. But I walk. We can pick up where we leave off at a later date. Well?'

'Agreed. Ask your questions.'

'Was it you. Did you kill Chia?'

'No. It was one of my colleagues. A rather distasteful man, a doctor as it happens. I can supply the name.'

'But you were there?'

‘Oh yes. It was me that struck you. You were supposed to die in the fire. I have to admit that I was rather disappointed with your escape. I allowed the authorities to dispense justice. Murder is an ugly act. How did you get released, by the way?’

‘Why? Why did she have to die?’

‘Secrets, Sebastian. My job is to find them out and to make sure that they are kept.’

Liam wasn’t sure how to continue. The man on the other end was astute, no fool. One perceived lie could end his hunt for the Relic. That would displease Patron. The woman knew where it the next link in the his search, maybe more. No, he couldn’t risk her demise.

‘I’m waiting?’

‘Very well. But you may not like what you are going to hear.’ Liam checked that he could not be overheard. ‘Your wife had an unfortunate occupation. She was a whore and had many clients.’

‘She stopped. She’d moved on.’

‘Not true. For the last two years of her life she retained a single... *Client.*’

‘Go on.’

This was awkward. The man was desperate, possibly unstable. Tell a lie and he could kill the woman. Tell the truth

and he may kill her anyway. Either way, Scout ended up dead. So where was the harm?

‘I can only tell you how it was. For my own part I have a certain amount of sympathy. But my own views and feelings were irrelevant.’

‘You’re stalling. If I see a boot come down those stairs. She’s dead.’

‘I understand. But you must understand that what I tell you, you will not want to hear.’

‘Go on.’

‘Very well. As I said, she had a single client, a man who carried great responsibility and high office. A man somewhat obsessed by the woman. Especially when he found out that the child Chia carried was his.

Silence.

She lied to you, Sebastian. The child she was not yours.’

'You're a liar.'

'No, no lies, that was the bargain. I will not lie; you hand over me the girl. We have an agreement.'

Liam heard doubt in the fugitive's voice, a lack of confidence for the first time. Keep the man talking, keep him on the edge. Keep him wanting more. Give the man hope that he could still salvage the situation.

'Leave the building and we can talk. Give me the girl and you can walk away. You can have your life back.'

'You tell a good tale. Don't stop. Tell me who the child's father was? I want to know why she had to die.'

He could hear the words rising up toward a storm of anger. Perhaps this hadn't been a good idea. People skills were not one of Liam's fortes. Try to keep him calm. Control the situation. Try to encourage him to leave.

'Bring the girl out. I want to talk. It's time you found out the truth. Come out and talk to me.'

'No lies remember? Who and why, or so help me I'll do the girl and then myself.'

‘Very well. Your wife refused to cooperate. The child was to be handed over to the State at birth. You were not supposed to be there. She was not meant to be harmed. Things, got out of hand.’

‘Out of hand? So what... it was an accident? You killed my wife and my baby. You tried to kill me, and it was all an accident?’

‘No-one was supposed to be hurt. Those were not our orders. Trust me.’

Liam turned to his men. This had been a mistake. He could hear the voice of the beast speaking through the phone. Circling his hand in the air was the sign for his men to prepare.

‘Listen to me, Sebastian. We can still...’

‘Who gave the orders?’

‘I cannot give you that information.’

‘Who was the father?’

‘I cannot tell you what you want to hear.’

‘Who ordered Chia’s death?’

‘Patron.’ Liam whispered. ‘The woman was an infatuation. She was a mistake. But he believed she was his, and would not listen to reason.’

There, it was said. The deed had been done, and rightly so. So many years to hold a secret and now it was out. No-one was perfect, not even Illuminai. This man would not live to reveal it.

‘Sebastian? Can you hear me Sebastian?’

A single muffled gunshot broke the silence on the street. For a moment he was paralysed, unsure. Had he done it? Had the fugitive shot the girl?

Another shot. ‘Go.’ Liam gave the signal.

Explosives fired and the hinges of the door were blasted free. Jag with breathing apparatus stormed through the opening weapons fanning out to cover all angles. Dull thuds as canisters were fired rolling into each room billowing gas clouds filled the air. Liam’s men stormed Prosper’s home. More troops followed them inside racing toward the stairs.

‘Go.’ He screamed at his men. ‘Find them.’

This couldn’t be it. Surely that lunatic hadn’t ended both their lives. Liam followed his men inside.

‘Make a hole. Get out the way.’

He dragged the mask away from his face. Two troopers held the curtain aloft in gloved hands

No, this couldn’t be. This wasn’t right. How could he have let this happen?

The house was empty. Only Prosper's body lying on the floor.

'Search again. Find them.'

In the name of the Saints, how was this possible?

'Where are they? Heretics don't just vanish into thin air.

Search the entire building. Find out how they got out.'

Apparently the bolt hole had a hole through which to bolt. It was an unforeseen variable in the plan.

'Captain.'

The only Trooper not tapping, hammering or scratching at the walls stepped forward. 'Sir?'

'The men that found them, and failed to take them into custody. Have them arrested.' A moment was needed, Liam had to think. 'Do you have a problem with the order, Captain?'

The Captain removed his headgear. Short blonde hair brushed out from the helmet. An adult barely twenty years of age was revealed. For a foolish fleeting second it seemed that the officer would object. He wisely reconsidered.

'Right away.' He said.

A nod to a subordinate confirmed the order.

If the Captain was the best the Commission had to offer then why had he hesitated when given a direct order. Liam's Authority came from Patron himself. He eyed the officer stood beside him in full tactical gear. When did men become boys he wondered? They were getting younger. Or was it that he was getting older?

There were more immediate concerns. The information given on the phone was now out of his control. The fugitive had played him. Was that a spark of admiration he felt? It was quickly trampled by a surge of anger and a fresh clarity toward an unfortunate turn of events. The Fugitive had been a dead man when the conversation had taken place. He had made an error in judgement, been overconfident. That would not happen again. This man was a loose cannon with a big mouth. Worse, he had control of the only link Liam had to the Relic.

'Over here. I've found something. The wall is hollow.'

More Jarig descended toward him. Rifle stocks beat at the wall.

'Break it down.' Why hadn't they done it already?

Half a dozen gun butts smashed at the thin brickwork. A hole was opening the rubble forced through as it grew wider with each strike.

‘It’s a tunnel, probably a walkway down into the sewers, sir.’

Sweat filled faces waited for orders. Wearing that gear made them hot. They would get a lot warmer if they didn’t move.

‘Find them Captain.’

‘Sir. Alright, heads up. I want teams of four. Search every tunnel you find. Go, go, go.’ He turned behind. ‘Contact headquarters and have them send me every man they have. I want boots on the street. I want a gun on every manhole. Do it now.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Orders were repeated and boots scrambled on floors. More Jag filed down the stairs at a trot. The scene in the library slipped into ordered mayhem as one trooper after another emptied into the tunnel outside. Liam himself remained unmoved. He stood and stared at the body of Prosper.

The man had resisted at first. But they all talked. Most offered everything they knew sooner rather than later. He had given names and addresses. Who wouldn’t when their eyes were being prised from their face? It was the usual; Prosper had only known persons in his own cell. It would take time to find them and from them find others. The luxury of time was not with him. The Captain returned.

‘Find out if the fugitive has left his phone activated. See if we can get a fix on its gps. And I want to know who sponsored the woman to live in City Centre. I don’t care who you have to call or harass. And I include members of the Assembly. You are under orders from Patron himself. Now go, find out.’

‘Yes sir.’ He turned to leave.

‘And Captain.’

‘Sir.’

‘You would be well advised not to hesitate again when I give you an order.’

A respectful nod and the Captain double timed from the library.

The room fell silent with two men at the arch and one at the hole.

What to do with this Aladdin’s cave?

Most of the books would be considered seditious, probably not all. Liam walked up the closest aisle and allowed his finger to run along the manuscripts dipping in and out amongst their spines. His eyes followed the C’s. Chaucer... Child, Crichton... Cicero. The D’s followed of course. Darwin, Dahl, Dante... Defoe... Dickens?

Dickens was familiar. Patron had offered the author to him to read. It was a story about a child and an *odd* personality named Fagan. An absurd tale, its characters had reminded him of the Line.

Back when the gangs and the Duma had wielded power, and flaunted the Commission's rule. They were heretics and deviants all of them.

There, on the table was the answer. Two oil lamps set ready for reading. He knew exactly what to do with this place. Liam raised the nearest lamp. Good, its reservoir was full. He plucked a match from the pot and drew its tip spitting and sparkling across the wooden mantle. The wick and the flame embraced like lovers.

Fire, it was the ultimate purification.

Liam slipped the conifer shaped glass back into place and then hurled the lamp against the farthest aisle. Oil set free from the brass spewed out across a dozen covers. The flame sprang greedily upwards. The guard at the hole moved back unsure, and then he stepped through.

Liam watched to be sure as the flame matured into fire. The fire swelled into a raging blaze. Books burnt and spat as the ceiling blackened. The heat was quickly hostile. Soon there

would be nothing left of this snake's pit. Liam backed out of the library, tore down the curtain and threw it toward the growing inferno.

He left to pursue the fugitives.

‘I hope you know where you’re going.’

No answer. He was sure that wherever they ended up it had to be better than back there. Not that his shoes would agree, the water was sure to damage their supple leather. Kat hadn’t said a word since she had opened the wall. She was angry. Angry about Prosper and angry about the shots he had fired. “They were unnecessary,” she had said. He didn’t agree. Scarecrow had played him. Pulled his strings and watched him dance. Two shots, one for each of them. He could only imagine the bastard’s face when he’d heard them outside. Worse still when he’d entered the Library and found them gone.

Up yours inbreed.

Kat took a sharp left. He followed.

‘Up here. We need to get out of the system before they discover how we got out.’ She was already halfway up the ladder. ‘Why? We had time. You just had to do it. This isn’t a game. They’ll kill us just like Prosper if they find us.’

‘They have to find us first.’

A noisy cover slid back onto the tarmac. Guess she was still mad at him. Probably with good cause, but now wasn’t the time.

He was up the ladder cold rungs on hands. Then out onto the road.

A sudden screech of tyres filled the silence.

‘Whoa, stupid...’ The car missed by inches. All previous thoughts were out the window. That was close. Too close. The driver jammed on his horn. ‘A bit fucking late now.’ He bitched from an insanely dry mouth. ‘What? You think that was funny, Kat?’

Heart rate, blood pressure and sweat glands, all elevated. At least it proved he hadn’t been sideswiped. And this was good, he’d found a positive in his near death experience. It seemed to give Kat a reason to smile. It was the first time she’d smiled at him like that.

‘Pissy car drivers. Try taking the tram like everyone else.’ Crap, the manhole cover was heavy as he heaved it back to the rim. He supposed it *was* funny. At least it had put a smile on her face, hey his too, or was that just shock?

Scout sprinted across the road. Where was she? This *wasn’t* funny, had she let out on him, decided she’d have a better chance on her own? The temperature just dropped to Artic levels.

‘I heard what he said back there. A dying man’s words need to be listened to.’ Had she really gone? That girl could get a right mood on. And this wasn’t *all* his fault.

‘Shut up and get over here.’

There she was. He knew she was there. Just kidding, right?

‘That horn will have been heard half a mile away.’ Kat dragged him back behind the wall. ‘We have to get moving. I know a place we’ll be safe, at least for a while.’

‘Sorry.’ Scout pushed Kat back to the wall. He wasn’t really. He squeezed her up behind the tall brick pier. ‘Jag. Four of them and coming our way.’

‘We should go, now.’

No chance. It was a long wall and they were sure to see them if they tried.

‘We wait until they’re gone.’

She squirmed, not liking being pinned like that. He wasn’t offended.

‘If you get your lips anywhere near mine.’

‘Shh, you need a mint.’

He pulled himself real close, genuinely trying for a snugger fit against the wall.

‘That better be your gun poking me in the stomach.’

‘Yes it is, and don’t flatter yourself. Now shut up.’

Scout could feel their presence. Crap, he could hear the squeak of their boots they were so close.

Kat teased the Beretta from her belt. Fingers were just about hanging on to the trigger guard. *Careful girl, don’t drop it.* She tried not to imagine the noise of gun clattering down to ground. Dead giveaway if you’re trying to play hide and seek. Not that anyone could see her with this meatball denying her air.

Are you smiling at me?

He was. Somehow this was amusing to him.

Come on gun, just a little more.

She had it. Fingers slipped around the grip as it fitted the palm of her hand. There, now she could smile back. *I’m going to shoot you in the foot.* She positively beamed. *That’s right, big toe, big hole.*

Scout’s eyes stared back saying... “What?”

Don’t look at him, he’s an idiot. Her gaze drew slowly away from his. Not so amusing was the two, three... no four troopers spread at two metre intervals moving up the road. They seemed relaxed, despite an aggressive, attentive posture. Scout had tuned in now. He too had stopped breathing. She lifted her eyes

back to his and blinked four times. He'd get it, hopefully. The Glock rubbed at her tummy as he lifted it between them.

Eyes back on the road.

Keep going, don't stop. There's nothing to see here.

Four troopers walked by probably attracted by the noise of the horn but they didn't seem overly concerned. She actually thought they were going to walk on by. It was a heart stopping moment when one decided to stop. Kat felt Scout's heart racing or was that hers? He couldn't get any closer; they were virtually Siamese. Kat held her breath peeking as best she could between the Idiot's arm and the brick pier.

Don't look round. Keep walking and find somewhere else to be.

Hope drained into dread. The shortest of them reached out to the tallest almost turning around. A cigarette hung from his lips. She saw a match box change hands but still their attention lay ahead.

Don't turn around. Light up and move on. Eyes front soldier.

What is it with men? They just can't do as they're asked.

Curly turned around to keep the flame out of what little breeze there was. Hands cupped his head down.

Kat said a prayer. She wished him blind and stupid and anywhere but here. *Don't do it.* She willed the man. *Don't look up. Do not look up.*

He sucked twice and then as lips pursed to draw more heat from the flame his head rose. His face came up and shone like a dread beacon in the light from the match. Their eyes met as he saw her. He froze.

Strange, she didn't expect him to look so ordinary, he had a kind face. He had dark black ridiculously curly hair but a kindly face. She still hoped that he would smile, look away. Do something that wouldn't involve his imminent death, or hers. Kat managed to thumb the hammer back on the Beretta. She heard the clicks like thunder rolling in the Heavens. She heard Scout suck in a deep breath of air as if it may be his last. Still they stared at each other. Curly's hands motionless as the match burned closer to his skin.

Walk away. Please, just walk away.

She knew when it would happen. The moment the flame touched his skin. Any second now and it would happen. It would be too late. There it was. The trooper dropped the match and scowled from the pain. His comrades turned to see.

He should have just walked away.

Scout watched everything play out on her face. The Glock swung toward the road and then the man winced instinctively reaching for his rifle.

Four men in uniform stared. If they reacted with lightning speed they had a chance. They didn't. It's surprising how long it can take for a man to lift and aim a rifle. How quickly another man can just squeeze a trigger.

Scout fired first. One shot to the head and Curly died. The cigarette fell from his mouth as the bullet went clean through his skull. Two more shots and the tallest man went down. Kat squeezed off. More thunder in the sky as a third died. Three more shots sounded and four men lay on the tarmac just as a car rounded the corner headlights highlighting the bloody scene. Scout rushed out into the road weapon primed toward the driver's face.

'Stop. Stop. Pull over, now.'

The little Fiat car ground to a dead stop all panic and brake squeal. The owner's hands left the wheel in terrified surrender.

'Out of the car... Out now.'

Driver didn't need to be asked twice. Car door was open and the frightened man shied out from his seat. Scout helped with a

stern grip of the shoulder sending the confused owner rolling across the road.

‘Kat, get in.’ He was already behind the wheel reaching for the passenger door which he flung wide open. Kat was in, impacting the passenger seat. The engine gunned and the rear wheels span smoke throughout the arches. Rubber grabbed at tarmac forcing the cars momentum.

The vehicle surged forward.

‘A Fiat 500, the cutest car ever built.’

‘Seriously?’ *What were the chances?*

‘Just drive it like you own it.’

‘You sure, you might want to change your mind.’

She saw why. Screeching out from a side road was company.

It was big and black and eating up the ground between them.

Scout recognised the car that had nearly run him down just minutes ago. Cab was full of... Yeah, those were guns.’

‘Your right... better drive it like it’s someone else’s.’

‘Go, go faster little car... your sooo cute.’

‘I think it knows you’re not sincere.’

Apparently it did. Nippy was an unexpected adjective that sprang to mind. Saints bless the obvious modifications to the engine, as blue smoke trailed in its wake.

‘Change gear.’ Kat shouted.

‘I’m trying.’ He tugged at the long stick shift set into the floor that was rasping defiantly and refusing to cooperate. ‘Get in there you...’

‘Use the clutch. Use the clutch.’

‘Oh really, is that what it is?’

Transmission ground metal on metal as cogs refused to engage. Pedal went down, lever came back. He had it, fourth gear was in. The car lurched forward even faster. The gearbox groaned a sigh of relief.

‘Where did you learn to drive?’

‘When I was a kid, it’s been a while.’

‘How old are you?’

Muzzle flashes filled the rear view. The back screen went first smashing into a thousand shards. Hollow tinned explosions as bullets pierced the bodywork. The side mirror was blown apart and was way too close for comfort. Scout hauled the wheel left to the sound of tyres warping on rims. Screaming demons, all four of them as he ran the car up the kerb and back down again. Pedal to the metal he was doing sixty as the road began to run out.

Hard over to the right this time gear lever whining for respect as it tried to engage prior to the clutch. In she went, no problem, this was easy. No doubting now that it was all coming back.

Truth was he hadn’t driven a car for nearly twenty years. He was only a kid but had been competent enough to steal them.

Short runs straight into hiding where bits could be stripped and sold.

Windscreen blew forward and the air inside got racy and turbulent. Eyes squinting he took a left then a right and then a left. Roads were way too short to get good speed and their pursuers were catching again.

‘Would you?’ Kat was offering him her Beretta. ‘You’re a way better shot than me, honest.’ She pointed to the wheel. ‘I’ll give it a go.’

Was that sarcasm, surely not at a time like this? ‘I’m having way too much fun,’ he screamed as kerb met tyres again. He ignored the gun that was being forced on him. She was looking angry again. The rear view mirror exploded sending glass around the cab. ‘Okay, but I drive next time.’

‘Sure, whatever you say hubby.’

Scout snatched the weapon as Kat slid onto his lap. Contortionists worked with bigger boxes than the Fiat’s cab. She did smell good.

‘Do not smile. I do not like it when you smile.’

That was more sarcasm, right?

The moment her foot touched the pedal he tugged himself out of the seat. One knee went down on the passenger chair and

hands took firm position where the headrest should have been. He took aim. One, two, three shots and good ones by the way the chasing car lurched away. The big saloon crunched up a kerb and side swiped a lamppost. It missed anything more substantial and the chase resumed the gap comfortably wider now.

Scout rolled hard against the door as the car was slung hard to his right. Its impact on his back left another bruise to go with all the others. And he was collecting a few. One hand grabbed the dash as he tried to pull himself level, only for Kat to turn the car away again. Nothing to hold onto he lurched back at the door. This time it opened.

Whooh, too fast. Too scary.

The ground was a rush of light with big ugly sounds from the tyres. It bounced too, jarring his body in a way it was never designed to react. One hand still had hold of the seat, the only reason he wasn't getting close and personal with the car behind. He could see it coming getting rapidly closer as was the ground racing between the bumper and his face. Scout's free hand tried desperately to grab anything. The world just wouldn't stop crashing about.

Was she laughing? She was. The Cow was laughing.

One mighty effort brought his torso away from imminent death and he swung with his free hand at the pillar. He missed. Imminent death was rushing below his head again. Fat Car's bumper was looming ever closer. He could see the badge emblazoned on its bonnet.

It was physics that took a helping hand. Kat swung the wheel back in his direction and gravity, or something just as fierce, threw him hard back into the cab. Car door slammed shut behind. He decided that he loved this car. He was never going to open that door again.

'I thought you'd left.' Kat shouted.

'Yeah, that was cute.' Left hand pulled at the passenger seat belt and it made that cool zipping noise as it unreeled. A loud nauseas sigh followed the clunk and the click.

Car turned left and then weaved across into the other lane. Kat jammed the brakes and slid almost sideways through an impossibly narrow opening that nearly topped and toed the car. Here came that nausea again. What was she, suicidal?

Girl must be doing something wrong. Stick shift was smooth and noiseless as it went up and down through each change. Clutch was riding down and up in unison too. The wheel in her

hand was a blur being turned, released, grabbed and then turned again.

So, it was true. Women *could* multi task better than men.

No, he refused to believe that. Next time she could shoot whilst he drove the getaway. He just needed a bit more practise, that was all.

Shoot? He knew there was something else he should be doing.

Right on cue bullets plunged into the cars panels' this time on her side. Dinking like deadly nails spat into tin cans. A quick fight with a tight seat belt and he was crouched and aiming again. Not too much to like about the Beretta, it was heavy, constructed out of metal and weighted like a brick. The Glock was lighter and better balanced. It had a striker system instead of a normal hammer. He liked that. It meant the gun couldn't discharge if accidentally dropped whilst cocked. Safety was important with hand guns.

Three more rounds discharged toward the face of the oncoming driver and emptied the Beretta's clip.

Out came the Glock from his belt pulled with extreme prejudice. It spat venom and lead sending several ten mil slugs exploding from the chamber. Each discharge a copper tipped

rhino released from a metal cage into instant stampede mode.
Saints alive, he loved the Glock. Prophets help the poor bastard
that got in its way.

The problem with shooting at people is that they tend to shoot back and these guys had bigger guns. Bullets whipped in and around the cab. Scout was being outgunned and the chasing car wasn't being left behind.

'Lose them.' Scout urged.

'Trying.' Kat replied. 'Really, I'm trying.' What did he think she was doing?

Two hundred horsepower rammed their rear end. Kat fought with the wheel going left and then right. Kerb met tyres and bumper glanced off wall sending sparks flying from squealing doors. Little Fiat found the middle of the road. It felt good to be heading in just the one direction again. Another lurch as the big saloon lunged their puny vehicle forward.

'Lose him.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I obviously wasn't listening the first time you said that.' She cranked the little car around a hard left and side swiped a recycle box with the back quarter. Foot flat on the floor she slammed into third and gunned it. Valves bounced and exhaust screamed. Kat was sure the tiny engine would explode. Another hard left followed by another. Roads were narrower,

shorter. That had to be an advantage. A crushing blow from behind suggested not. Bullets zipped and whistled and then stopped.

Where'd they go?

Fat car had carried on, had it missed the turn. Kat hadn't realised how narrow this street was. No way Fat Car was following little Fiat down here.

'What now?'

'Don't ask me, you're driving.'

Fat lot of help he was. Slim lane was about to end up ahead. She decided that Prosper was right. There was only one place left to go. Uncle would know what to do.

'Are those steps?' Scout sounded concerned.

'Steps, where? Oh, might be.' She wasn't paying attention.

For a moment the wheels left the ground, it was almost serene. Touchdown. It was a hard and fast reminder of why cars don't fly. The cab shook with impact and the wheels took on a mind of their own. If there was a safe speed to drive down a staircase she had no doubt they were exceeding it.

'Watch out for the....'

'Wall? I see it. Can't stop car, will get back to you.'

Kat *had* seen the wall. It was really hard to miss. She swung the steering wheel to the right and scraped the paint on the passenger side now a perfect match with the driver's. Level ground was resumed and the car sped out onto the road followed by a plume of grey blue smoke spewing from the exhaust.

'You okay hubby?'

'I threw up. But its okay, I swallowed it again.'

Kat started to laugh. Then she wanted to cry. Fat Saloon was on the road blasting tarmac ahead of them.

'This is different.'

'Do you think they've seen us?'

Answer came with instant effect. Fat Saloon screeched its tyres to a full stop and white lights showed it was being slammed into reverse.

'Take a right. Go right. Go right.' She went left just to spite him.

The road was quiet ahead, why wouldn't it be at this time of night. It was pretty really with all the trees. They shot down an avenue of striking foliage as trees flew by in a blur. She drove like a wildcat down numerous slight roads whilst mounting pavements. One small square after another was crossed as a plethora of stone built fountains were desperately avoided.

‘You realise we’re heading for the river.’ Kat shouted above the air still buffeting through the missing screen. ‘There’ll be patrols on every bridge.’

‘City South isn’t like the Line.’ The words caught in his throat. ‘Couple of uniforms maybe, it’ll be a doddle to cross, especially at this speed.’

‘What about them?’ She nodded to the rear.

‘Get onto the main road. Head for the work district and take the first bridge over the river. It’s a nice straight road. You let them get up nice and close.’

‘They don’t need my help to do that. Here they come.’

Scout slapped his last clip into Mr Glock. He snapped back the slide just as the car veered violently over to the other side of the road. The stick shift was rammed into third and the accelerator lurched on the power. A small wall disintegrated under her wheels as the car left the ground for the second time. Hands fought with steering. It was too little too late as the car slid sideways. For a crazy long second the car slid accompanied by a symphony of wailing tyres. Fiat snapped back into a wobbly straight line. The gun wasn’t in Scout’s hand anymore. He’d fumbled the Glock down into the foot-well.

‘Was that close enough?’

Slam went the bumpers again. The chrome cushion sprang away from their vehicle clobbered by the aggressive eighteen inch wheels behind. It was David against Goliath, Pipsqueak versus schoolyard bully. Two ton of saloon bore down again on the runt to inflict another chassis grinding concussion.

‘Get off the main road.’

‘What? Make your mind up.’ It was two lanes on either side with nowhere to hide in-between, just the open road for the next two miles. ‘You said you had a plan. What’s the plan?’ She screamed as another violent shunt rippled through the metal.

‘You lied about the plan?’

Oh God, other road users ahead.

Violent swerving left two cars trailing in their wake.

He said he had a plan?

Scout had had enough. He released the seat belt and reached between his feet. Shit, the Glock was playing hide and seek under the seat. He didn’t want to play this game as finger tips tried to tease the gun out from below.

Not happening.

Just need to get head under dash, contort back like a freak, reach under seat like monkey. Come on, come on...

A hard shunt heaved his body backward ensuring whiplash but the gun slid back out into view. Kat weaved one way and then the other as her foot floored the gas pedal. He plunged forward, whiplash repaired, hand outstretched to finally grab the handle of the gun.

The Saints bless the natural properties of physics.

Scout watched as the car pulled up alongside ready to smash little Fiat off the road once and for all.

Not happening, not today.

Freeze frame the picture as the driver of Fat Car saw the Glock rise into view. Too late he stamped on the brakes. He probably never felt the two bullets that hit him square in the chest. He slumped over the wheel as his passengers desperately tried to take control.

It was over in a second.

Fat Car reeled over into the central barrier. It smashed against the metal rail and was airborne. Scout watched a trail of debris litter violently across the road. The main shell bounced and rolled, pitched and yawed; it erupted into a fireball that spewed flames into the air with brutal ferocity.

It felt good, safe even, as Scout settled back into the velour of the seat. Job done. Why then did his hair and face still react with such discomfort to the onrushing wind?

‘You can slow down now.’ He said. ‘They’ve stopped for a barbeque.’

That was funny, why wasn’t she smiling. Why did Miss Katie always have to have a mood on?

‘You can slow down. Put, foot, on, brake.’ He looked down as he said it. ‘It’s safe now.’ Or was it? Her foot was pressing up and down on the brake. She repeated the process, and then again.

‘Got that?’ She said.

The speedo read seventy. The throttle was wide open despite her foot having left the throttle and being continuously pumped against the brake.

‘I think we’re going to die.’ She said.

Scout had to think. There had to be a way out.

‘Handbrake, pull the handbrake.’

‘At seventy... three miles per hour? Great, we can join them for the barbecue.’

Okay so that wasn’t his best idea. There must be some way of slowing their speed and preferably before they hit the river,

which was coming up around the next bend. Shit, she was right, they were going to die.

I've had enough of this.

Kat yanked at the wheel. *Oops, too much.* The Fiat bounced off the central barrier. She barely registered Scout cowering back as the passenger door tried his seat for size.

'Crazy bitch, what are doing?'

'I'm having a bad day. Got any more stupid questions?'

Wheel turned and steering acted with blind obedience. It was instructed to ram the barrier, so it did. Again the car bounced away, swerved, but continued to accelerate.

'This is my plan to stop the car, yours is taking too long.' Seventy had reduced to fifty five. Car hit the bend and she tried, more gently this time, to slide against the metal obstruction.

This is actually working.

The barrier ceased. No more friction, the car continued to speed up.

'Where's the barrier gone? You have to be joking.'

'Want to try the handbrake now?'

'What is your obsession with the handbrake? We're going too fast. Back wheels lock, car flips, we die. Shut up about the handbrake. I don't want to hear the words hand and brake.'

The car began to lean on soft suspension the roads surface arcing to the left. A long sweeping turn as the road began to rise. They were slowing. Sixty five... Sixty... Fifty... Forty.... Poor little car couldn't handle the gradient of the road as it rose on concrete supports. Engine noise was fading. This was it, they were going to slow, maybe even stop. They were saved.

Thank God. Kat said a silent prayer for deliverance. Speed was still diminishing; Maybe one more prayer. Maybe God could make *him* disappear as well?

To the right and between the buildings she got her first view of the river, close now. The engine started to growl. It was reacting to bloody physics again. What goes up must come down.

'Are we going down? Oh shit. Use the barrier on your side. Hit it hard.' A resounding wallop of metal on concrete ensued.

'Not that hard.'

God, please make him go away. Please make him...

The impact battered any thoughts from her head. They were out in the middle of the road and banking right, heading down toward the river. A sign flashed by, its writing barely legible. Three symbols, she made out three symbols. A91. It was comforting to know the name of the road she was going to die on.

One last attempt to stall the vehicle as she planted the bonnet straight toward the barrier before it ended again. Steering was erratic. Wheels refused the order. She hit the concrete with the back rear quarter and the back end was thrown sideways. Kat pulled full wheel lock to the left in panic. She hit the gas, she had to before the lean became a roll. The Fiat corrected itself but was no longer heading in the favoured direction. They were going off sideways and way too fast. Panic. She grabbed and pulled the handbrake.

Back end of the little car caught up fast with the front but barely altered their trajectory. Car was sliding sideways, no way to stop it now, they were going to hit the bridge doing at least thirty.

Was that a hut coming at them?

Kat braced for impact. Scout shut his eyes. Tyre squeal shrieked like nails down a blackboard. She heard an explosive sound as the hut shattered from the impact. A face bounced off the bonnet a body still attached, legs and arms were flailing with drunken abandon. It was gone in an instant. A more solid impact followed closely and stunned the car into submission. What followed sounded like rain but was pieces of wood falling back down on the roof.

If the car had hit head on she had no doubt things would be much darker than they were. A permanent darkness from which there was no remission. Not unless God deemed her worthy and sent Holy light to guide the way. She groaned a pathetic and childish sound. God *had* smiled on her. She was still alive. Dashboard was a little closer than she remembered.

Kat lay very still trying to understand what was happening. The car was rocking gently. She heard another groan but this time it wasn't her.

Oh good. God was in playful spirit. He had decided to save the Idiot as well.

'I told you not to pull the handbrake.' Scout groaned. 'Was that a shed we crashed into? It was all a bit of a blur.' He was trying to move. Get himself up and out of the foot-well.

'Please don't move.' She really was insistent.

'What? Why not, this is really uncomfortable.'

He tried again to release his body from the foot-well's cocoon.

'Why won't you listen? Can you *not* feel that swaying motion?'

'I thought that was me. Please don't say it's the car.'

'Okay... It's the bridge moving.'

'Are we hanging over the edge of the bridge?'

'Uh huh.' It was making more sense now she could see. 'I wasn't sure for a minute, the impact blurred my vision.' Part of

her wished it still was. 'But I think I can get out if you stay very very still.'

'I've got a better idea. I'll get out and you stay very still.'

He started to move. The car dipped forward.

'Stop moving.'

What's wrong with you? Idiot isn't enough of an adjective. Not affectionate enough?

'Please don't move.' She was trying to be polite. 'Trust me. I'm hanging over the edge here and *you* are the only thing stopping the car from tipping.'

Scout peered up over the dashboard. 'You're such a drama queen.' The grin slid off his face quicker than snow off a porch. The Fiat slumped again to a more than awkward angle, but settled, in a a teetering fashion.

It was such a good word, settled. It felt good. It felt safe.

With a slow groan of metal on bridge the car leaned and then slipped forward again.

Oh shit. Kat resumed her prayers.

‘You get it now?’ She blasted a glare at him. ‘Man moves and woman dies. I don’t want to die. For God’s sake, you’re an idiot.’

She was getting moody again. Car had stopped moving, there was nothing to stress about, not really. He peeked over the dashboard. Water still looked as bleak as it did the last time he peeked. Looked cold and faster flowing than the last time he went swimming.

Okay, best to think this one through. She was right. If she got out without tipping the car he’d probably be okay.

Probably?

Nothing was trapped; his legs were free of obstruction. It was just a bit awkward fitting his muscular frame into such a small foot-well. But as he was tucked down there already he’d hear what she had to say.

‘I’m going to try and get out of the window.’ She said.

She sure as hell wasn’t getting out through the door. He could see that was well crunched up and permanently hammered into place. He watched Kat push at the wooden debris outside. She was attempting the gentle touch but needed to be more forceful.

‘Stop pushing it like a girl. Use both hands. Push.’ She shot him a fierce scowl. ‘Go on, one more big effort.’

The final piece of shed tipped back. Job done. He was tempted to push and help. No, he would do as he was told. He watched as Kat pulled one leg up to her chest and grabbed the back of the seat for leverage in an attempt to release the other. Girl was flexible. That was nice. Were they sliding again or was it just another grating objection from the cars underbelly? Yeah, it was moving again. Millimetre by millimetre, he swore the edge was getting closer, and fast.

‘Can you hurry this up?’

‘Do you have to be somewhere?’

Her other leg was on the chair now. She just had to be careful that was all. Take it easy, not move too fast. Don’t lean too far too quickly. Their eyes met as the car began to teeter.

Steady. Keep it steady. Don’t panic

For several painfully slow moments the car ground out a noisy metal on metal screech, and then stuck. Neither of them dared to move. Neither of them dared to breathe. Everything was calm. This was good, Scout liked things calm. Calm and still, very very still. They might just get away with this.

Fat chance.

A loud metal twang chaste the silence and the car lurched forward and both man and woman screamed louder than the car. Scout was sure his was louder than hers. Fiat 500 went fully into slide mode.

Impact forced the water away and the car into a sudden upward motion. A brief respite as it levelled, and then began to sink. Water rushed in through the open windows, chassis bobbing up and down like a cork. There was no stopping the water flow and the front end began to fill, getting heavier with every second. Kat scrambled to the back seats, to the back window, its glass shot out earlier. She fought a whirling burbling wall of water that refused to let her leave. It was impossible to move against the heavy rush of H₂O.

One by one her fingers loosened on the door and then slipped away. Fingernails tried to find purchase again but she was washed down between the seats. Hundreds of litres gushed in on top the water pinning her down. There was hardly time to take a breath as the rear section filled and the car plummeted downward. Was this how it was going to end? Daylight receded as the murky water held her captive. No, the pressure was equalizing. There was still a chance to get out. Kat reached for the pillar of the door and pulled at it expecting her body to rise. She pulled again and tried to push away with her legs. Oh God, something was holding her back. Her leg was trapped. She pulled

again more frantically. It wouldn't let go. Panic gripped her chest. She'd only managed half a breath before the water had submerged her head. She fought and struggled, saw the seat belt that had wrapped around her ankle. Fingers pulled and pried.

Why wouldn't it let go?

It didn't make sense how the belt had wrapped around her leg. She was all fingers and thumbs. Nothing seemed to help. Why couldn't she help herself, why wouldn't her leg come free?

Another hand took hers away. Idiot was pulling at the strap. All she could do was stare at the stupid, wonderful man that was trying to free her. Kat grabbed at his shirt as he tugged at her leg, it was a nice colour and suited him. It really did. But he was too late. She couldn't hold her breath any longer. Kat didn't want to do it, she didn't have a choice. She grabbed and pulled at his shirt again. No, if death was coming there would be no panic, no hysteria. It was okay, he'd tried his best. She didn't blame him for all of this, not really. Well, she tried not to.

The hell with that bullshit, her lungs screamed for air. It *was* his fault. The Idiot had gate crashed and ruined her life. Everything had been good until he'd turned up. She twisted and kicked, tore at his shirt. *Son of a bitch. It was his fault, all of it.*

Her head was shaking from side to side fingers clawing at the roof of the car. She didn't want it to end like this.

Scout restrained her; he took her face firmly in his hands.

What the fuck. Is he trying to kiss me? I'm drowning here.

She was suffocating. She didn't want to die. No good, the autonomic reflex forced her jaw to lower and she tried to breathe in.

It was a miracle.

She had expected water to breach her lungs and flow into the empty spaces. Asphyxiate her. It didn't happen like that. There was no cerebral hypoxia, just the air that she sucked in deep. The Idiot had closed his lips around hers and she was sucking air from his mouth.

Stop it, stop pulling away.

Why was he trying to push her away?

Stop it.

He had air. It was so wonderful, so invigorating as it coursed from his lungs into hers. He needed to share it, share it all.

Kat felt herself pushed away and then grabbed by the scruff of the neck. Scout wriggled his torso back out of the window and pulled her head first, out of the car. His stroke was forceful and

in earnest. Then he left her. Let go of her hair and kicked for the surface alone. But it was okay. There was no hurry now. No more pain in the chest.

As Kat broke the surface Scout was sucking in air, a fish out of water. Now she got it. Now it made sense. She was suffocating him down there, literally sucking the air out of his lungs. She breathed herself. There was nothing quite like the taste of fresh air.

The rope across the river had stopped them both from being pulled away on powerful currents. It was presumably the property of the guards in the hut. The rope left out to catch fish. Scout couldn't think of any other reason for the small hooks that had randomly stuck in his skin as he had pulled himself to the bank.

He had dragged Kat from the water. She was weak by the time

he had carried her limp body up to the bridge. Miss Katie had passed out before he placed her body in the rear of the jeep. It was nice of the guards to leave the keys in the ignition. There were other items left in the back, but time to check them later. Scout propped Kat's head on a large soft holdall and covered her body with the tarpaulin hoping to keep the chill of the night from giving her pneumonia.

The engine fired up first try and purred like a kitten. Just what he needed as he drove the vehicle slowly and quietly until the bridge was at least a half mile distant. Lights on and pedal depressed he drove out through the old industrial area. This was

better, the long gear stick slipped in and out of contact with the transmission groaning with only the slightest objections.

He headed south at first away from City Centre. It wouldn't be long before the bridge was crawling with Jag. The noise of the crash and the flames of the road burn would attract a lot of attention. He could only hope that no-one would notice the jeep missing; maybe they'd assume it was at the bottom of the river and had drowned along with the two of them. Maybe they'd even give up the chase.

He should be so lucky.

Scout turned west. Why not? He'd never seen the sea. From a fledgling thought it soon became a calling. He remembered the books with the pictures when he was small. Much better than the usual crap that wanted to fill his head. Forbidden and forgotten the books had pictures of hotels and pools filled with water, families playing in the sun. The sea was always blue and sun always shone in the sky. That's what it was like before the wars, he reckoned.

The further he drove the more open the terrain. The countryside was stunning even in the dark. Why had he never stolen a car and done this before?

The jeep's four wheel drive growled like a playful dog across the dirt whenever the jeep had to leave the road. There were patrols and checkpoints. Not hard to see the lights and the warming fires. Scout kept *his* lights off for most of the way. Only a licence from a Legate could grant permission to leave the City. You needed a really good reason. Not having such a licence would complicate matters if they were stopped. Conversation with patrols would be hazardous to everyone's health.

For the first time in days he felt free from watchful eyes. Shit, he just felt free. Free to breathe the open air and feel the wind in his face. At first the cool night breeze had chilled him. Now it invigorated him. This was wild. It was fantastic. It was a bit scary.

Scout drove slowly through another built up area, another ghost town. It was dangerous but unavoidable. There could be Jarig in any one of the buildings. The noise from the engine seemed to magnify ten fold. Now the darkness wasn't so generous. It wasn't his flight that it hid but others that could be watching. Freedom was replaced by oppressive concern. No, it was replaced by fear. He cast watchful resolve from one dark opening to another as he drove the jeep right through a town. He drove through ruins. Whatever had happened here had played

out a long time ago. Nothing but shells of walls remained. Old bones picked clean of meat. Roofs were gone. The streets were strewn with pieces of rubble. The jeep had to move slowly its wheels rising over errant brick and stone. He couldn't take his eyes from the walls. Even in this low light he recognised the holes blown by the indiscriminate strafing of bullets. Larger shells had impacted too. He'd seen structures like these across the Line. But they were inhabited. These were dead. Lifeless ruins deserted since the Wars. One of many, he supposed.

Scout found open road again. He drove on for a mile or so, stopping when he was sure to be clear of prying eyes. He hadn't checked on Kat for an hour. She still slept amongst the bags and tarp. She'd managed to snuggle into what looked like a comfort zone. Frankly he couldn't believe she was still alive let alone asleep.

Most of the night passed. It had been painfully slow progress when the jeep was forced to leave the road due to suspicious lights ahead. Frequent patrols were a hazard but obvious in the distance and showed no signs of awareness to their presence. It took most of the night but a destination was finally achieved.

Was it plain luck or had the Saints been watching over them. He couldn't believe he actually considered the higher involvement. But faith did lead to redemption. What was it the Christians preached? That belief in their God led the faithful to a place called Heaven. Well, it was just possible that this was where they had arrived. He was bloody sure that he wasn't dreaming. If that was all it took, a few uttered words and a hand crisscrossed across the chest once in a while. Hell, he was in.

Sign me up here and now.

Smell it. Taste it. Watch it crash across the shore. It was beautiful. Raw power unleashed as waves broke and spilled across a beach for as far as the eye could see. Even the moon was fully out breaching the cover of clouds. As its light touched the sea its beauty was unleashed as a million tiny stars danced across the water. If he died tomorrow at least one small dream

had been tamed. The sea was finally reached and it spread in welcome before him. What a rush as waves broke to quench the ground before receding, only to come again with another soothing roar. It sent shivers up his spine as the water washed over his bare feet. He'd never seen sand like this before, never felt it crunch between his toes. It amused him how his footprints stepped deep and then faded, re-claimed by the sea.

Maybe he could die happy now?

No, there was still too much to do. The joy left him, not completely, that wasn't possible. Not here. He remembered Scarecrow's words. Had that creep really spoken the truth, or was it more lies? He replayed the same conversation in his head, over and over. It grew in scale and an argument ensued. The outcome was always the same. Scarecrow always ended up dead. That proved beyond doubt that dreams could have happy endings.

He flipped open the phone and switched it on. One phone call was all it would take. Arrange a meeting with Scarecrow. One that ended with a ten mil blasted into his head.

Just then a Gul cawed overhead to distract him. Its coarse unhappy cries finally ended his mental ramblings. He watched as the white dappled wings reached for the rising thermals and the

bird soared away. It was all too much and had given him a headache. At least now the sun was coming up on a breaking horizon, turning grey clouds milky white. The moon shied in its downward turn and the light lifted his soul. They were finally safe, at least for now. That alone was worth celebrating.

Scout ambled down the beach. So far down that he nearly lost sight of the house. Each step saw the sun rise a little higher. It was probably time to return. He'd left Katie asleep on the floor in the lounge. Put her on the floor when they'd arrived. She needed to rest. Near death experiences can be tiring.

He'd finally found a building untouched by the Wars. It was such a shame that the house up there had been left and abandoned. It didn't look too bad from a distance. Not so good close up. He could only imagine how much the previous owners had loved to live here. And why wouldn't they. The cottage had been stunning once. Not now, as the picket fenced veranda had only winged visitors to enjoy the spectacular view. An abundance of bird droppings on the decking was evidence of that. Three of the six windows retained their pale blue shutters, though two hung limp. The simple up and over roof wore worn shingles that no longer offered full protection from the rain.

How ironic that he should finally find the sea and not be able to stay. Another wave crashed up the sand rising up around his knees. He barely noticed as he stared at the distant cottage. Nothing, not even an image this wild and beautiful would last, not until his mind finally found calm and rest. Staring at the building and the beach was when he knew for sure. When he knew that he was going back into the City to find Scarecrow. All the pain and nightmares suffered now had focus. Everything revolved around one single man. He was the core, the nexus. Scarecrow knew more. Scout would roast that freak over hot coals; pull every nail and hair from his body to discover what he knew. There was just one small problem.

What was he going to do with Miss Katie?

If this was Heaven what had she done wrong in her life? Dry eyes flitted from one wall to another, each one in need of fresh paint and new plaster. The ceiling was bowed and fallen in places. Kat teased the tarp away with thumb and forefinger. Something smelled and she hoped that it wasn't her.

This wasn't good. Another sudden flashback, the last image she could recall. Idiot was clamping his lips to hers. What was that all about? No, there was more. He was leaving her, kicking towards the surface and leaving. She buried her head in her hands as she tried to remember. *Oh no*. It was all coming back. Idiot had saved her. No, not that, anything but that. It meant she would be in debt, beholden, and that wasn't fair. She remembered now how Idiot had unhooked her leg and shared his air. *Oh no*. She'd panicked and tried to suck the lungs out of his chest.

He'll be unbearable.

It wasn't that she was ungrateful. He had saved her life after all. It was just the smug grin that Idiot now had moral licence to display.

Oh no. Kat got another nauseous retch, that “end of the world is nigh,” kind of feeling. She pulled the tarp back slowly and had to see. *Oh, thank God. She was still fully dressed.*

Where was she? Getting up wasn't as easy as she remembered. Not quite a quick step, more of a slow waltz toward the open door and a bloody strong draught. The drums were back, beating a distinctly terse rhythm between her ears. As hangovers went this one was particularly brutal.

Six wobbly steps across creaking floorboards found her hand reaching for the door. Broken glass allowed a brisk gale between the panes coupled with sunlight. A swift kick opened the sticking doors.

Urgh, Bird shit.

And what was the whooshing sound, she didn't recognise it? Kat stepped out onto the veranda.

‘Oh my God.’

Despite the pain induced by the light in her eyes she refused to close them.

‘Oh my God.’

What else could a girl say when faced with such a sight?

It was gorgeous, blue, and stretched to the horizon. Waves broke in a big clumsy fashion along a golden shore. A soothing whisper as the water soaked into the sand.

This water was different to the river that ran through the city. Why didn't the river water make such a powerful sound? Its steady flow uniform, its edges a constant lap of impatience. No, this wasn't the same. This wonderful surging beast had a gentle roar

'You should sleep.'

Kat recognised Idiot's voice, his heavy steps clunking up the wooden stair. No doubt about it. Is this wasn't Heaven, it certainly wasn't Hell. So some sort of Purgatory then? The Idiot a constant reminder that God has a mischievous sense of humour.

'You look cold.' He said

She was, but hadn't noticed. The breeze chilled her skin through damp clothes. It didn't matter as her hands rested on the railing. The bird poop thankfully dry, just a bit flaky between her fingers.

Yes, this is definitely some sort of Purgatory.

‘How are you feeling?’ He asked her.

Aww, the Idiot sounds concerned. Let me see now. I’ve lost my home and my life. I’ve been attacked, shot at, and molested by a large car. Not to mention thrown off a bridge and drowned. Did I missed anything? Oh, lets not forget the Guru’s great advice when he said, “pull the handbrake.”

‘I’m fine.’ She said. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve found any dry clothes?’

‘As it happens, I can help you out there.’ The sound of something large but soft dropped onto the decking and encouraged her to look.

‘Is that a joke?’

‘It’s dry.’

Black had never been her preferred choice of colour. It did little for her now. ‘It’s a Jag uniform.’

‘Comes with vest, trousers and boots. Clean laundry left in the jeep.’

‘We have a jeep?’

‘Outside and ready to go. Here, this one’s the smallest, should fit.’

Kat goosebumps were hinting she was acting a bit ungrateful. Maybe black wasn’t that bad.

‘You mentioned boots. Do they come with laces or buckles?’

How unusual, she was moaning again. Dragging her arse out of the river should at least be worth a smile. And what about smuggling her out of the City? He’d even wrapped her up warm and cosy in a nice clean tarp *and* put a soft kit bag under her head. He should have put it over her head, would have been kinder, at least for him.

‘You’ll look the part in those.’ He said. ‘Just two Troopers heading back into the City.’ He dangled a chain. ‘I’ve even got their ID.’

‘I looked good in yellow.’ She was annoyed again. ‘And look at this.’

He wasn’t sure if she was she highlighting her boobs or her jacket?

‘This used to be fluffy, and yellow. I like yellow.’

He could see her point. Yellow fluffy jumper was now limp and mustard flavoured. Uh oh, now she was glaring.

‘I don’t suppose you saw what happened to my hair?’

The blonde hairpiece was last seen floating downstream.

‘No.’ he lied. ‘And for your information, the boots are laced. And we have guns.’ He showed the hand gun in his palm and

released its clip. 'A full clip in the Beretta, one and half for the Glock. The phone still works too, it might come in useful.'

'Where's my bag? You did save my bag?'

'Sorry, the guns were a higher priority. Bang bangs are more useful than face paint.'

'Then it's gone. The envelope, it's gone.' Kat's face reddened and she screwed the shirt up in her arms.

'I'm sorry.' He followed her inside. 'Were the photo's important?' Of course they were that was a dumb thing to ask. A pang of guilt followed as he remembered threatening to burn them with the Glock. He'd done some stupid things in his time but that probably ranked right up there in the top ten.

'It's all gone.' She said again. 'Everything I had, it was all in that bag.'

Scout had no idea what she was talking about, but for some reason he found the need to touch Chia's pendant. He opened his mouth but decided against talking. Let her rant. It was obviously what she needed to do. So he found a corner and sat. When he looked up she was crying.

'Hey, they're just photos.'

'They're more than that.' Now she was embarrassed. Wiping at her face. 'I had an accident.' She said. 'I don't remember; I

was asleep for a long time. I don't recollect anything prior to waking up.'

This was interesting. He wanted to know more.

'I was in a coma.' She said before he could ask. 'My Uncle, he found me; looked after me.' She attempted a smile. 'He said I'd slept like Sleeping Beauty. That I came to him from a dream.'

Who... a what?

Now he just wanted her to stop talking. He wasn't that good at listening anyway. Everyone had shit in their lives. Didn't mean they had to share it around, especially when it came knee deep in emotion.

'You should sleep.' He said. 'We both should.'

'A few hours ago you shoved a gun in my face and told a psychopath you'd kill me if he didn't talk.' Kat took the Beretta from its holster and pointed it at Scout. 'Now I want to talk.'

'Sure... Beauty, dreams, got it.'

The gun lowered.

'I woke up in a bed two years ago and I don't remember anything that happened prior. Those photos were all I had; my only link to the past. 'My cross?' She touched her neck; reflex, nothing more. Kat's heart sank as she realised it was gone.

'You okay?'

‘It belonged to my mother. I can’t even remember what she looked like. What she smelt like?’ She looked Scout straight in the eyes. ‘My head’s empty of anything that happened before the accident.’

Yeah, that’s awkward.

Again his mouth opened before engaging brain.

‘You don’t remember *anything?*’ He had to do it. Couldn’t keep his mouth shut and just let her talk. Didn’t she just say there was nothing? *Dumb, dumb, dumb.*

‘I have dreams.’

Okay, not so dumb. But still awkward.

She was grasping the trooper’s shirt for comfort and staring at him. He wanted her to stop staring, it wasn’t his fault.

‘Do you think they might be memories?’ He asked, and she nodded her head slowly.

‘Yes, they’re memories. They’re just not my memories. I’m in them. I can see myself sometimes, but I know that they’re not *my* memories. That’s odd, right? It’s like they’re some else’s but I have them. It’s difficult to explain.’

It was difficult to listen too.

‘It’s like I didn’t exist before the accident. But I remember the woman that did.’ She was staring at him again. ‘Does that make sense?’

He hoped that was rhetorical.

‘My Uncle gave me the envelope. He said the things inside might help me to remember.’

‘Is that who Prosper was speaking about when he told you to take me to Uncle?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’d like to meet him. Maybe he can sort this mess out?’

‘Maybe.’

She went cold and quiet again.

‘Sometimes...’ He wasn’t sure he wanted to do this. Opening old wounds can let the puss pour out. He was even less convinced that he wanted to reach out to her emotionally. For some reason best known to the Saints he did it anyway.

‘Sometimes, the past is just best forgotten.’ He said and tapped his head. ‘It can leave something dark where something bright used to be.’

There, he’d said it. Empathy was supposed to make people feel better. Job done. Now he had to figure a way back into the City.

‘Are you speaking from experience?’ Kat asked.

We have the jeep and the uniforms. We could try driving in? The ID’s don’t have photos. Just names.

‘Did you lose someone?’

Troopers don’t check each others tags. A wink follows a nice smile, and we drive straight across the river. Real easy.

‘Who was she?’

She? Scout resisted saying it out loud. *Jeep, bridge, City.* Deep down he’d always liked the uniform. Becoming a Jag for the day, it sounded a blast.

‘What was her name?’ Kat was insistent.

‘Chia.’ He blurted.

You see, that’s what happens when you talk about shit. People want to know. It’s none of their business..

It looked like the plan was going on hold.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you angry.’

‘I’m not angry.’

‘You sound angry.’

‘I’m not angry.’

‘Okay... Okay. But you sound angry.’

I’m not fucking angry.

More silence.

‘It’s a lovely name.’ She said. ‘Chia, were you together?’

Questions, questions?

Maybe Miss Katie was still in shock. Ignoring the questions was normally a strong enough hint.

‘Tell me about her... please?’

Oh for crap’s sake.

‘We were married.’ He said at last. The words came in a hushed resistant tone. ‘She was my wife... my life. She’s gone, okay.’

‘I’m sorry. What happened? Was she pretty, I bet she was pretty.’

There was something almost wretched about the woman opposite. Maybe it was the reddened eyes that implored him, or just the way that she held that shirt to her chin. Crap, he wanted to slap her. Bring back the fierce self assured woman that pissed him off. It was far easier to bitch than it was to talk. Kat was a frightened little kitten looking for affection. She was a little girl again. Scout was feeling like an old man.

More uncomfortable silence.

Why wouldn’t she stop looking at him? This had to stop. Scout got to his feet and crossed the room. He held out his hand

and encouraged her to stand. He pulled her close, pulled her tight. She responded.

‘Her light went out,’ he whispered, ‘and left something very dark in its place. Trust me, if you can’t remember, it’s probably for the best.’

‘Suck it up, get dressed, put a smile on your face.’ His voice hushed. He put his hand to her cheek and wiped her tears, then smiled to prove it was possible. ‘We’re going back to the City. You’re taking me to find, Uncle.’

Only one candle burnt on the table. More were not necessary as Liam had no desire to read. He kept the book closed on the table in case his mood changed, though he thought it doubtful. Beside the novel were his phone, his glasses, and a Kel-Tec PF9 handgun inserted into a belt holster.

Some hours had passed since the incident at the bridge and Liam waited patiently. He had to be sure that the fugitives were drowned. It would take time to check the wreckage and the riverbed. Until such a time the wine he sipped was sufficient enough distraction. The bottle was chilled to perfection, a fresh and fruity taste that amused his palate. For now the world outside was kept at bay as he listened to the Whispers chunter like music in the background. Patience was one of his strongest virtues.

The phone rang.

Not a flicker of acknowledgement from the man.

It rang again.

This time he sat forward and reached toward the table. He allowed a third ring before accepting the call.

'We've found them. The phone was switched on thirty minutes ago. They're hiding in a deserted beach house southwest of the City. I wanted to make sure it was them before I called.'

'I understand.' Liam sipped from the glass. 'What action have you taken?'

'We have men watching the cottage. I have ordered no further action taken until we'd had a chance to speak.'

'Good. Do nothing but observe. If they leave, follow them. I will contact you with further instructions shortly.' Liam ended the call.

So, they were still alive.

This man was resourceful and led somewhat of a charmed existence. The girl had shared in his good fortune. This was good. The game was still active. Liam finished the wine in one and reached for the gun. There was still a chance that the woman would lead him to the Relic. That was the only thing that mattered. Or was it?

Why did he dwell on the male? Was it vanity? He *had* been foolish. He had been unprofessional. He had panicked and been indiscreet, allowed the Heretic to manipulate him. Evil had

triumphed. That alone gave the man a death sentence in his eyes.

Yes, whatever else happened, the male had to die.

Glass shattered and glittering shards scattered in all directions. The air stirred as the Whispers were aroused, no longer content. Slithering sounds circled his head and rose in intensity. Others rushed to add their vocal support. Liam stared at his empty hand and listened.

‘See that Radan gets these the moment he returns.’ Letters and requests he had signed passed to the attendant. ‘And cancel all my appointments for tomorrow.’

The serious faced young man in the silken habit held the papers to his chest and bowed, then backed dutifully away to the door. Isabella pushed it closed as he left. *Good riddance.*

Another of Patron’s lackeys that she detested. An obsequious man, Terstan was a secretive man. An obsessively pious sycophant who prayed four times a day and had a clear mistrust of women. Or was it more than that? Not a man that she could approach. She was losing track of Patron’s growing band of personal secretaries.

‘Well? What news?’ Patron demanded.

‘It appears that the girl is still alive.’

‘Thank the Saints for that.’ Patron knelt and took a moment’s silence. A brief prayer of thanks was mumbled. He stood. ‘I trust that Liam has made the situation very clear. No one is to harm the woman until she has led us to the Relic. What were they thinking, Isabella? She is no good to me riddled with bullets or lying dead on the bottom of the river.’

‘Perhaps you would allow me to handle the situation?’

‘No. Liam has authority.’

‘As you wish, Patron. I have just learnt that the woman has a companion with her. He has become a person of interest. Do we know who he is yet?’

‘I have no interest in anyone but the woman. Liam can deal with him as he see’s fit.’

‘That may be unwise.’

‘I will be the judge of what is or is not appropriate. Where is Radan? Why are you here? Where is my Secretary?’

‘You sent him out of the City. You sent for me.’

‘I did not send for you. I sent for Radan. Where is Radan?’

Patron marched to the door, opened it, and shouted down the hall. The same fresh faced attendant scurried to grace his presence. ‘Find me Radan.’ He ordered. ‘Get up, up... Go, find him for me.’

‘But Patron, he has left the City.’

‘He has left the Reliquary without my authority?’

‘But you sent him... I. Yes, of course, immediately.’ Terstan stalled momentarily lacking direction.

Poor little toad. Not sure what to do? What a wonderful thing to observe. She felt great pleasure at the man's fear and frustration. He could sense it too, it was written all over his face

'Find him. I want him here.'

'I will, immediately.' Any lower and the man could kiss the floor. Patron slammed the door shut.

'Why are you here?'

'You summoned me, Patron.'

'For what reason?'

'You instructed me to bring your medication.'

'Yes, yes. That's right. I am tired, Isabella. My thoughts are not my own. My bones ache.' He slumped back into his night chair.

She was right. He remembered now, sending Radan from the City. Isabella was right. She was always right. The medication would have to be increased and given more frequently. Sometimes he wondered what he would do without her.

'Come, sit with me Isabella.' He took her hand in his. 'Pray with me.' A few words were spoken aloud to Mikael. A plea was offered to the Prophet, that he may look kindly on Patron's health. Further the Rule of the Saints. Illuminai took a moment.

This room, it was his only insulation from the incessant requirements of office. He would sit for a while and enjoy the fire. Indulge himself with Isabella's company. He took her hand to his lips and kissed it gently.

'Put some more wood on the flames for me, Isabella.'

'Are you sure? It is so hot in here already.'

'Yes, stoke the flames, I have a chill.' This was restful. 'So you intend to stab me again with that needle of yours?'

'Yes, give me your arm. When the new regime kicks in I think you will feel the benefits. Maybe a day or two, no more.'

Which arm? He couldn't remember. *Does it matter? One is as good as the other.* 'Help me to roll up my sleeve. There, stick your needle there.'

'May I ask you about the woman?'

'What is there to tell? Liam assures me that she is the one who stole the box from the Preacher. He is observing her movement. Sooner or later she will lead him, if not to the box, to others who know its whereabouts.'

'And her companion?'

'He is not a concern. Liam will deal with him.'

'Are you sure I cannot help?'

‘Do not interfere in Liam’s work.’ The injection stung him.
‘Be careful woman.’

He felt it, the serum rise in his arm. A wave of euphoria ensued, a sudden rush from the medication. It hit a massive high, and then the feeling was gone, dispersed into nothing. This didn’t feel right. The endorphins had burnt themselves out. He was sinking, falling, crashing back down. A wave of nausea sat him hard like a gust of wind. He had to get up, rise from the chair, he could barely lean. Motion only took him forward closer to the fire, closer to the overbearing heat. What was wrong, what had she done to him? He was crashing, heading for a burn. His head was on fire and full of darkness. Such intensity, and why was it so hot in here?

‘Isabella... Isabella?’

‘Calm yourself, it’s the Stems. I warned you the side affects would increase. They will pass; fade as your body becomes acquainted with higher doses.’

What had she done? Was he poisoned? Why did the room spin make it stop.

‘Patron, you’re burning up. Come away from the fire, just for a moment.’

‘Don’t touch me; I know what you’ve done. Get your hands off me. Get away from me.’ What was happening? *Don’t touch me, get away from me.* ‘Get away.’

He struck out with new found strength from his rage. He wasn’t sure what he had hit but the back of his hand smarted from the contact. *Why did his hand tremble? And why was it so damn hot in this room.* The thought gave him peace, of sorts. This room, it was a sanctuary, a place to talk with the Saints

‘Isabella? What are you doing?’ Why was she lying at his feet cowering? ‘Give me your hand, Isabella. What troubles you? Come, hold your Patron. Let us pray together. Why could he not remember what he was doing?’

Isabella closed the door without a sound. Patron was sleeping. He had ordered her to stay but it was doubtful that he would remember. She touched her cheek gingerly. It wasn’t swollen, not yet.

‘May I help you, Mistress?’

Terstan. Damn his attentive nature. A conversation was the last she needed right now. He might notice the mark on her cheek. He would doubtless feel obliged to enquire.

‘No, Terstan. I am fine. Patron is sleeping. He is not to be disturbed until I return. Is that clear?’

He nodded understanding. ‘Is Illuminai unwell, Madam?’

Was that genuine concern or was Terstan fishing for information? Who knew to which of the Primes he passed his title tattle. Under normal circumstances she would have rebuked him. Put him in his place.

What a horrid toady little man.

‘Please attend to your own obligations and leave Illuminai’s well being in hands better capable.’

‘Of course, madam. I meant no disrespect.’ Another one of those cowering bows. ‘I will see to it personally that Illuminai is not disturbed.’

Isabella wanted to run down the corridors but that would attract attention. She walked as quickly as she dare, careful to avoid eye contact with others that passed. *Just look down, do not stop. Just be somewhere else.*

Patron's medication was obviously the key. How easy it would be to mix the medication with Surgeon's potion. It was easy, just do it. She could think of nothing else. But what then? To kill was a mortal sin. No end justified the means. Now was the time, the perfect time. Her heart pounded from the stress. She was sure that the Novices stared as she passed. Somehow they knew what was in her mind. The turmoil that made her head spin with decision. She wanted so much to stay angry with Patron but the rage was already beginning to pass.

Several minutes later and Isabella shut the outside away. Dear God, her hands wouldn't stop shaking as she leant against the door. Her thoughts were tumbling around like a gymnast inside her head. She knew what had to be done. She knew why. But it was still murder. Thou shall not kill. It was the sixth of God's commandments. It was still a sin no matter the

justification. What a fool to think that taking a life could be so easy.

She touched her cheek again. The bruise smarted worse than ever and there was definitely a lump rising. He hadn't meant it, how could he. It was the Stems; a reaction to the Stems, that was all.

A few seconds and she'd crossed the room. Such a beautiful room that Patron had assigned to her so many years ago. If she did it, if she really did end his life she would never be able to come here again. Never feel the touch of the silken sheets draped across the bed. Her tiny wonderful piece of this world would be forever denied her.

Why did great men have to reach so high that they left the real world behind them?

And Patron *was* a great man. He had shouldered the grief of a broken people and forged new hope from the irons of their despair. Oasis *was* Illuminai. But like Atlas the weight of the world had become too much.

Look around you, Isabella. It will be the last time you see your home. This has to be done.

Twin arched windows overlooked the gardens; the plants would be in bloom in just a few weeks. It made her sick to think

that she would never again sit and watch the flowers welcome a morning sun. She would have to leave everything behind, the clothes, jewellery, and the comfort. Oh God, her bed. She was seventeen when she had first clambered below that colourful canopy, sprawled herself atop the soft mattress and imagined herself to be a fairy princess. In truth she had been terrified, expectant, that Patron would want to visit during the nights. She had feared the man would treat her as his personal whore. Her faith had prepared her; she had steeled herself to be strong. But he had never come. He had always treated her with respect, with a love that a father would share with his child. Isabella stepped away from the window. She needed a handbag for her things. Several hung above an ornate set of drawers. Just taking the strap in her fingers was harder than she could have imagined. Why did her hands tremble so much? And now her stomach hurt too. She felt sick and almost doubled over. Within seconds she was heaving into the sink of her bathroom. Again and again she puked. Her stomach intent to expel all guilt from the body until there was nothing left but aching contractions. It was bitter sweet when they stopped.

Tears streamed from heavy eyes. A shelf spilling its contents onto the floor, her back grateful to slip down the wall. More than

tears now as her heart released the sounds of anguish from her mouth.

Patron *had* been a great man once. Maybe he still was? Who was she to decide? There would be *no* City, *no* life in Oasis if it wasn't for him. It was Patron who had ordered the bells to be rung. It was Patron who had gathered the survivors. It was Patron who gave the damned a reason to live.

He was ill. Not in his right mind. The medication, it must be the medication. Isabella didn't move. She ceased her sobbing and stared at the mess on the floor.

How easy it is to justify sin. Patron *was* a good man, once. Now he looked beyond the borders of Oasis. His heart was filled with horror. He wanted to subjugate and spread the word of the Saints, of *his* Saints. What if there were others out there that still followed the Faith. That still worshipped God. The Jag would try to turn them. They would burn those not willing to convert. These were not the actions of good man. Clarity shone through the anger and tears. Isabella had no choice. She knew what she had to do.

It was murder, but Patron had to die.

'You look good. I'd do whatever you told me wearing that uniform.'

Hmm, she wondered if that included shooting himself in the head... probably not.

The tunic was a nice fit. There had been four to choose from and one had obviously belonged to a woman of similar build. No man could look this good in black. She pulled the Kalashnikov over her shoulder. Heavy duty firepower or what? And reluctantly she had to admit that the boots looked good too. She was more of a buckles and straps girl, but the laces had a certain appeal. Definitely not so keen on the other end, no, the beret was not going on her head it would have to stay tucked in her belt.

There, all done. Now she looked the part but could they actually pull this off? Were they really going to go through with this? Was it really going to be that easy? Too many questions meant she doubted any plan coming from Idiot would go without a hitch.

'Ready?' He asked.

'Are you sure this is a good idea?'

‘No, but we can’t stay here. Use some of that faith I’ve been hearing about. Say a prayer, sing a hymn. Get your arse outside in the jeep.’

Kat took a deep breath and a squint up at the ceiling. Prayer never hurt.

Lord, I don’t ask for myself but for all the others that depend on us. Please, make him go away. Amen.

She followed him out of the beach house. The sound of grinding shingle below her boots was replaced by the gentle crunch of sand.

‘I’ll have those.’

She snatched the keys from Scout’s hand. ‘You need lessons.’ It was the first time Kat had actually seen the vehicle. Two door open top with a sturdy roll bar. She approved of the big all terrain tyres, very useful for City getaways. Sunlight showed a nice sheen to the jet black bodywork. At least it didn’t clash with the uniform. Yes, she approved and fair skipped around the bonnet, jumped onto the foot plate and landed into the seat ready to orchestrate their departure.

Stick went into neutral and key found ignition. She twisted the fob. Engine fired up first time. One last look at Idiot sat next to her.

Still sulking because I won't let you drive?

Of course he was. Kat floored the pedal and the jeep's wheels dug hard into soft sand lurching the jeep forward.

Liam closed the phone. The news was excellent. The woman and the man were on the move and heading north east. It appeared they were coming back to the City. This changed everything. He beckoned one of three men stood a respectful distance from him.

‘Commander, contact all bridge units.’ He had to make sure that the fugitives could get where they were going. ‘No uniformed patrols entering the City are to be hindered in *any* way. Just for today we will allow them free access without checking vehicles or ID.’

To say the Commander was tall and lean would be an understatement. He was two heads taller than Liam. He used only one to nod the instruction to his underling who instructed the Trooper who waited by the open door of the closest truck. In all there were some two dozen men sat patiently in the back of two open trucks. Beside Liam stood two men in sharp suits well tailored to their bodies. They wore sun glasses as if they were deadly weapons. One of them opened the rear door of the dark blue estate car as Liam approached.

‘Head south toward the river.’ Liam instructed. ‘I will give further instructions when I have them.’

Sunglasses nodded compliance and closed the door behind the odd looking man.

‘Stay close Commander. Have your men perform a final weapons check en-route. We’re going to play cat and mouse.’ He invited the Commander to sit with him in the first truck.

Sunglasses had worked with Hirsten previously against the Heretic threat. He was a good man and had crack troops at his disposal. Sunglasses tapped the smoked window of the car and it pulled away. He circled his hand in the air and pointed ahead to a sedan at the rear and then waved the lead truck forward. He stepped onto the foot plate and climbed into the cab as the big diesel motor roared the vehicle forward. The two trucks and a second sedan moved in convoy behind the lead car.

Sunglasses knew this undertaking was important even if he wasn’t privy to know the entire plan. Not knowing annoyed the shit out of him. He was Spatzno, Reliquary security, a man who had the highest clearance possible. He and his teams oversaw the protection of the Primes, and Illuminai himself.

Spatzno wielded complete authority in all matters of security and worked with impunity amongst the Jarig inside and out of the City. So what was so important that he had been

ordered to bring his men out into the suburbs? Why was he asked to sit and wait whilst the strange looking man in the car whispered out of earshot on his phone? This Liam character was unfamiliar to any of them. Who was he? Not knowing was another irritant. If he had such close ties to the Commission why had their paths had never crossed before. Unfortunately these questions would have to wait. His instructions were crystal clear. Liam had complete authority. That fact alone made him a very powerful and dangerous man.

Isabella hurried down the narrow corridors of the staff billets. It wasn't the quickest way to get to Patron's chambers. But this way there were fewer prying eyes. She thought it best though she wondered why. Within minutes she was crossing the Great Hall ignoring the twin statues of Atlas and leaping the stairs two at a time. She half smiled at two Novices as they descended the wide staircase making a hole for her to pass.

Short breaths as she stopped outside Patron's chambers. *Focus on what has to be done.* A change of clothes had been needed, fortunate, as the sleeve of the fresh blouse now dabbed at slight perspiration from her brow. *Stay calm.* A tug or two on the blouse was followed by fingers nervously picking at her long hair. A gentle tap on the door and she entered without waiting for permission.

Dear God, the heat was stifling. Patron had stoked the fire with more wood and coal. It was like walking into an oven. The heat was so oppressive it took her breath away. How could he sleep so close to the fire?

She knelt next to him. God's name, he was burning up. He had the pulse rate of a young athlete after heavy exercise. It

raced below her finger on his wrist. She jumped as Patron grabbed her hand.

‘I thought you were asleep.’

‘No, I am waiting.’ He made no attempt to look at her. ‘He’s coming, I can hear him. His wings beat as he descends.’

She had no idea what he was talking about. Patron was delirious again. Not surprising in this heat. She was forced to pull the chair back from the fire, already sweating from the exhausting heat.

‘I’m going to give you some more medication.’ Hands fumbled for instruments in her bag.

‘Wait, Isabella. I have to tell you. Someone has to know. He’s come back.’

‘Who? Who has come back?’

He seemed oddly calm. A man resigned to his fate. A wheezing noise from Patron’s chest resembled laughter.

‘I called him Wyatt the first time we met.’ A deep breath. ‘It’s such a ridiculous name. But it stuck, up here. I never thought I’d see him again. I hoped I wouldn’t. He’s come back to the City.’

Let him talk. Yes, talk, what harm could it do? She felt Patron take her hand. For God's sake she couldn't even look at him. *Do it now Isabella. Do what has to be done.*

'He's come for the Relic, my dear. I think perhaps that he may come for me?'

'The Relic? What are you talking about? Who has come for the Relic?'

She pulled a handkerchief from her purse and wiped the old man's brow. She should do it now. It would be a mercy. Patron's hands were jarring an intense rhythm on his lap. His head was unable to stay still. In her hand she held the case with the syringe.

'Who is Wyatt? Why has come for the Relic?'

Were these the raving of a deluded man? Was there another danger out there that she did not know about.

'I'll get you a drink.' *No, she must do it now. Finish this. She owed him that much. To be like this was horrible and it would only get worse. His mind would get worse.*

She crossed to the sink. What if there was someone else looking for the Relic?

The water in the jug was fresh. The glass was pristine. There was absolutely no sign of the potion she now poured. Why did

her hands tremble so much as she stirred? What a fool she had been to think taking his life would be so easy. Her eyes began to water as the glass spoon continued to stir. What would her life have been without Patron? She remembered it all as the water circled, rising up the sides of the glass. For a moment she heard the screams again. Felt the touch of terror and chaos. The dead were fresh and their bodies still littered the ground. She could feel the shock that had stricken her own body, its numbing presence striking her rigid with fear. A young frightened girl frozen as the colours and light of the world moved in chaos around her. It was rancid, even now the smell of the past.

The men in black had come. They had killed, burned and intimidated. Even the walls of the Commission school could not keep them out. That was when Patron had come for her. He and his men clad in crimson and black. He had come to her from the smoke, an angel walking through the fires with his hand held out to take hers.

Only it wasn't really like that, was it?

It was *his* orders, *Patron's words* that had sent the Jarig in. It was *his* command that instructed the Line to be moved further north. *He* was responsible for the end of her second life and the beginning of its third. Each beginning harder than the last and

lived for such a short time. Each one promising so much and then broken into tragic pieces.

It's hard for any child to understand when their birth parents are gunned down for the pennies in their pockets. Everything stops for a brief moment and then it begins to move again. But you have no control, nothing left to cling too. She didn't want to go but they never gave her a choice. Never asked if the cold and harsh environment the Commission school offered was what she wanted.

No-one had ever asked her what she wanted.

Surprisingly she had been happy at the school, happy as a ward of the Commission. Unexpectedly another, more spiritual, more worthy life had begun. It was there, whilst living at the school, that the teachers had shown her the love of God. She learned in secret about God. God the merciful, God the vengeful, about the living Lord, his son. She learned that she *did* have a choice.

Isabella never found out who had betrayed them. But they had been accused. They had been judged and were sentenced. It was the gangs that had to be broken and culled. It was the Duma who were bad, not the beloved teachers at the school. But who

had time to care when the Jag came? There was no-one left at the end. All traces of the school purified in the flames.

There was no mercy for them.

The spoon stopped turning. This was for all of them. This was for God, and those that wanted to love him without fear of the flames. Isabella turned to the old man who stared forlorn at the fire.

God's work will be done.

Or would it? For a moment Patron became lucid.

'We have them, Isabella. I have never been as close to the Relic as I am now.'

She didn't advance, she just listened. The glass stuck in her hand, the fluid now still.

'How close?' She asked.

'Liam, he has found them. He will soon have the Relic. It is only a matter of time.' Patron glowed. Was it from the knowledge that a life spent searching was about to gain reward. Or just the heat from the flames in the hearth.

How she wished she could extinguish the fire. Perspiration had glazed her body from head to toe. *What to do now?*

'How long?' She feared the answer. 'Do you have the names of the heretics?'

‘Yes. A man and a woman are leading Liam to where the Relic can be found.’

That wasn't possible, or was it? The girl, the female that had stolen the box, was it her? She knew that the Surgeon knew the girl personally, but how much did she know?

‘What orders have you given to Liam?’

Patron tried to sit up. His breathing laboured somewhat but the man was looking much stronger.

‘Why is it so hot in here?’

‘I will quench the fire. May I ask about your orders, Patron? What instructions have you given to Liam?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘I would like to help.’

It was getting difficult to tell what he was thinking. The Stems were working, clarifying his thoughts. If she was to learn anything it would have to be now before he regained his senses entirely.

‘Liam is not your concern, my dear.’

‘I understand. Your Troll is extremely capable. But please, allow me the honour of being part of your final victory over the heretics.’

‘Well said, Isabella.’ He smiled, looking fresh now, his body responding to the Stems. ‘It’s quite simple, my dear. Liam will follow the assets back into the City. He will acquire the Relic. His orders are to eliminate everyone he finds.’

The glass smashed at her feet.

‘I’m so sorry, Illuminai. I am very clumsy.’

The potion, it was gone. That was stupid. She must take more care. Why is he looking at me like that? Does he know? Does he suspect?

‘I will get you another glass of water.’

‘That is not necessary.’

‘It is, Illuminai. We cannot allow your body to dehydrate. It will have a negative effect on the Stems. I will get more water and send Terstan to attend you.’ She did not give him a chance to object. For the second time in a few hours Isabella walked swiftly down the hall. She must get word to the Surgeon. He must be warned. The girl, Kat, was she actually stupid enough to lead them to the Relic. She was putting all of their lives in jeopardy.

‘Up you go, Harley. You can see much better from up here.’

Surgeon put the furry toy on the top shelf.

‘I know it’s rude to boast, Harley. But we’ve done it. I told you, I told them all that I could do it.’

Was this too much. Was it too much to glory in ones achievements? And what an achievement it was. It would stun the world. Not just the people in Oasis, but everywhere.

‘We’re not alone Harley.’ He had to laugh. ‘We have company you and I. What about a celebration? I know I know, I promised not to touch another drop, but that was a long time ago. Maybe after Wyatt has been and gone? He’s coming you know. Wyatt is coming. I saw him last night in a dream. He does that; it’s how he introduces himself. A dream or a gun in your face, he likes to scare you shitless that one. It’s been twelve hours and he already knows we’ve succeeded. Incredible.’

Surgeon pulled a rusted tin from his lab coat pocket. He welcomed the aromatic odour as the lid popped off.

‘I know, I know, its bad for my health. Blame Wyatt, it’s one of his filthy habits.’ Match and strike touched with a heated

exchange. A deep breath was followed by a string of coughing.

‘There... that’s, much better.’

He reached up to the closest cupboard and flipped the door ajar. ‘Vodka, Harley. Just one shot to celebrate. No, I don’t want to hear it. This has been a day of days.’ The bottle grabbed was clear and unlabelled, the small glass that accompanied common enough. ‘This bottle has been a long time waiting to be opened, Harley. I was going to wait for Wyatt, fuck him, he’s not here. Nectar, Harley. Look at it pour.’ He held the glass up to the bear.

‘Za vashe zdorovie.’ Here’s to your health.

The shot went down his throat in one.

‘Ahh, it reminds my lungs that there are other things to do than just breathe.’ He sat forward swinging feet to the ground. ‘What now, Harley? What will we do when Wyatt comes for the Relic? All of this, this equipment, it may as well be just scrap. Maybe we will continue in the pharmaceutical business, eh? The profits are good. Time for us to live it up a little; maybe we should find a woman or two, and a big house? Re-live the old days?’

Vodka gurgled from the neck of the bottle.

‘‘Za vashe zdorovie.’ To his health as well.

It was end of two lifetime's work. Success was feeling bitter sweet. Surgeon pulled the white mask that hung from his neck and threw it to the ground. 'No more alter ego, Harley. It makes me feel like someone else. My name is Yuri... Yuri Greminov.' He projected the name as if there were others sat hanging on his words 'And I... need to stop talking to a bear. I used to have friends, before that bastard Wyatt took over my life.' He looked up to the ceiling. 'What sort of a stupid name is that anyhow, sounds like a bad western? God knows. Only *He* knows. But he's back, Harley. I can feel it in my water. Wyatt would not come if we had not been one hundred per cent successful.' Yuri was up on his feet, another glass was emptied. 'Hmm, you wait here. I'm going downstairs to check on our... patient.'

Yuri had often wondered why? If his work was so important, and he knew it was, then why was he always in hiding, forced to work in the shadows? One last puff and he stubbed the cigarette leaving the empty glass outside the door. Deep breath. It was because of a room like this that he had come to the attention of Wyatt in the first place. In Pre-War Russia he'd been a geneticist working with Stem cells for the military. He'd been shipped off to a backwater laboratory in Azerbaijan. Long forgotten memories resurfaced. He'd been banging a whore in a four poster

in Baku. No responsibilities, nice memory. That was the first time he had met Wyatt. Life had got serious, real quick. He'd brought Yuri the box. Turned his study into the research he did now. Two lifetimes and a lot of drugs later, the world had ended, well, ceased to be as he remembered.

'Apologies,' he whispered as he entered, 'I must check your vitals. Please excuse the subtle lighting it is necessary for your eyes to adjust. Sensitivity will be a factor for the next few hours.' He stepped around the large gurney parked in the middle of an almost empty room. A quick adjustment of the drips was followed by a check of the heart monitor that flashed with a constant rhythm but made no sound. 'Can you understand what I am saying?' He watched the body hoping for a sign.

*What's wrong? You should be responsive by now.
Everything has gone to plan. Like clockwork. Why don't you respond?*

'Time,' he said, 'you just need time.' He reached out toward the figure lying below, it was necessary to manually check the patient's pulse.

Dare he? Was it allowed? Would he be struck down for presuming?

He was having a lot of ridiculous thoughts lately. For fucks sake he was still talking to a cuddly toy?

‘I want you know that I think Wyatt is right.’ He said. ‘Just don’t tell him that I said so. He has enough attitude already, you know him, you understand.’

Should he even be talking to the patient? Why not? Hadn’t he already presumed more than any man in history? No. That wasn’t true. Look at him. He was flesh and blood. He was a man like any other. But that wasn’t true either. No man could ever be like him.

Did he know, Yuri wondered? Did he ever suspect that he would return like this? How would He see his return?

Considerations it was a bit late to be thinking about now. Did it even really matter? Yuri was beginning to struggle with the ramifications of what he had done. What he was still doing. This was God’s bidding that he did. He had to get a grip. Yuri was a scientist, a bloody miracle worker. Look what he had done. This was no time to be emotive. He had to remain objective. To a true scientist this was as natural a birth as any delivery ever made in nature. It may even have been how God started creation in the first place.

Where the hell was Wyatt?

Damn him. You could be sure of his presence at the most inconvenient times. Why wasn't he here now when he was needed? Yuri checked the drips again, adjusted the flow. It was comforting to check and recheck. It didn't stop the nervous thoughts flashing through his head though. Dear God they were wearing him out. What had he done? Was this even right, was it natural? Was this the way it was supposed to be. Was this the way the man was supposed to return?

He could only suppose it was. It had to be. No matter which way he spun the dilemma the answer came back the same. And it was him, Yuri, and the advancements of science that had made it happen. It was a fucking miracle, and that was the end of it.

This perfect and pure creation was the result of science and mystical prophecy combined. Everything he had strived and worked so hard to achieve was the result of something that had been prophesied thousands of years ago. It was God's work. He had to believe that. Wyatt had told him as much. He should be proud. He *was* proud. But still, Yuri could not quite believe that it had finally happened. After so many years, one secret endeavour after another, always hiding the real goal of his work. Work for which the world had waited too long.

All thoughts drained from his beautiful mind as he heard the first sounds of awareness from the patient's lips. It could only mean one thing. At long last the slumber that had lasted for over two millennia was coming to an end.

'Are you really Him?

Yuri knelt and prayed. He whispered worshipful words to the Almighty. Thanks and praise for the success of his endeavours.

'Here. Let me help you.'

He took the patient's head in very nervous hands.

'Sip this.' He whispered. 'It will help to revitalise your body and stimulate your mind.'

This was impossible. It was so stupidly unimaginable, yet deliriously true. He, *Yuri*, had made this happen. He had been summoned by God, and the Lord had not found him wanting. This was why his God had given him such a beautiful mind.

'Drink slowly... Not so fast. That's good. A few hours and you will be able to talk. You will remember everything. Blessed be to the Father, and to you, the Son. Dear God you will have so much catch up on.'

‘Are you sure this is a good idea?’ Kat was having reservations about this whole plan.

‘Stop whining. It’ll be a breeze. There’s no reason for them to stop their own?’

It was too late now anyway. The bridge was in sight and so too were the Jarig. Five of them checking the back of two trucks that were headed into the City; several more loitered with intent awaiting their turn. Kat could see the water now, thousands of gallons sweeping unstoppable between the arches. She could feel its power even from here. It would have been her grave but for Divine intervention. The engine slowed to a hum. Gear lever found neutral. This was hardly a good time for the brakes to give a short but intense squeal as the jeep rolled to a halt. Thirty yards away the noise turned heads.

‘Well done for letting them know we’ve arrived.’

‘I didn’t do it on purpose.’

‘You’re driving. Uh oh, heads up, two of them heading straight for us.’

‘Are there normally so many on duty at the same time?’

‘No. They must be looking for something.’

‘Yes, that would be us.’

‘Shhh, shut up. Let me do all the talking.’

These boys were alert. Everything about their posture said “I don’t like you. I’m going to give you a hard time.” The lead man had an unsightly scar that ran from his eyebrow to his cheek.

‘Papers.’ He ordered one hand held ready on the shouldered rifle, finger perched on the trigger. The other hand was beckoning for the ID. ‘State your reason for crossing?’

‘R.R. Heading back to the work district to see the folks. Got a nice young lady waiting for me. Looks like you’re on alert. What did we miss?’

‘Papers.’ He snatched them from Scout’s hand. Not a every comradely thing to do.

‘Take your time. I’ve got a whole week to spend with my lady friend.’

Is he putting his feet on the dash? He’s unbelievable.

What made it worse was the first truck had been sent on its way. Two more troopers were at a loose end and heading their way. Kat wondered if Scarface could hear her heart pounding to be released from her chest.

‘What about you? Where are you going?’

Kat handed her ID over. She stared him down.

‘You see this pip on my sleeve. That means I outrank you, you fucking grunt. So talk to me with respect. Check my papers, find them in order, and then move aside.’

Scarface opened them. He stepped closer. The man was obviously thinking twice about detaining them. Definitely wasn’t happy about being told what to do by a woman. Then he got a change of attitude.

‘Apologies,’ he said begrudgingly. It didn’t stop him checking the jeep closer, eyes on the rear and then back on Scout. Kat got her papers back. She wasn’t sure whether to stop staring. Would that be a sign of weakness or an admission of guilt? She really didn’t like being put on the spot like this.

‘You can squeeze down the side of that truck.’ Said Scarface. ‘No offence, just doing my job. You have a nice time with your lady friend.’

The engine growled with an agitated squeal from the rear tyre. She wanted to bury the pedal, make greater haste, but walking pace would have to suffice. There was just enough room despite the wing mirror kissing the rail of the bridge. It didn’t matter. No way was Kat stopping now. She prodded a smile

toward the remaining troopers as they passed and the jeep finally left the bridge.

‘Are you serious?’ She said. ‘You’re going to see your lady friend?’

‘It looks like we have company, Harley.’

The monitor didn’t lie. A vehicle had pulled up in the courtyard outside. Privacy. That was why Yuri had purchased the entire building. He didn’t want unexpected visitors turning up unannounced. The camera concealed outside zoomed in on the figures exiting the car. They wore uniforms. This wasn’t good. What was the point of giving gifts to high officials if the people that received them couldn’t guarantee his privacy? Yuri pulled the drawer open and took the tokarev tt33 pistol into his hand.

It had been a gift from Mikhail Gorbachev a very long time ago. The great man had given it to him personally the only time they had ever met. Thank God for MG he had been a stolid and resourceful supporter of the cause. He was a visionary that wanted peace in the world. He said it had belonged to his father, that he had used it to kill Germans during the war. Perhaps it would help to keep Yuri and his work safe. Yuri supposed that it still worked. He’d never actually fired it.

Yuri raised his eyes to the greying ceiling. The chimes on the door upstairs had struck. His guests seemed intent to gain entry.

‘Nice Place.’ It was. Scout had pushed open the heavy gates to allow the jeep into a vast courtyard complete with working fountain at its centre. The spring was a veritable gusher.

‘You say your Uncle lives here alone?’

The building rose on two floors with a picket gallery extending the entire length of both. More glass than a bottle factory gave uninterrupted views down into the yard.

‘Does he print his own money, by any chance?’

‘He does okay.’

So did Kat if this guy was loading her trust fund. From the outside the building looked worn and uninteresting. Not now. The wood alone was half a forest and recently stained. The gravel drive that circled the fountain’s female effigy, with vase, was blue marble, crushed and sprinkled and fresh as a summer day. To his left were four large automobiles beautifully preserved and under cover. Ahead of them was a castle keep of a door, all metal studs and wrought iron frame. It was closed and uninviting.

‘I know what you’re thinking. Some of us do work for a living. Granted, it’s mostly for Uncle.’

‘Actually, I was wondering why he didn’t employ someone to open the door.’

‘Good point. You could apply for the job. I’ll put in a good word. Can you make a decent cup of tea as well?’

Good for Kat. She’d found a sense of humour under all those layers of whinging. He wasn’t sure which he liked least.

‘Hello?’ It felt good to pound on something even if it was only the door. ‘Hello... Uncle.’

‘Patience obviously comes to those that wait for it.’ Kat reached up above the door, her fingers searching a hidden recess. They retracted, a large iron key in hand. ‘There, let’s see if we can do something without making a noise, shall we?’

What did that mean? And why didn’t she tell me there was a key?

‘Sorry, but the job offer has been withdrawn.’ Key entered lock and turned. The big heavy door was pushed open without a sound from the oversized hinges.

‘What is this, an airlock?’

‘Shut the door, you’re letting all the warm air out.’

Out? In more like. It was hot day out there. The marble floor was actually cooling, as were the wood panelled walls that rose high around them. A single light bulb blinked on above his

head. Four steps and a cage-like door halted any further advance. The sliding type used for lifts. Heavy duty frame, this one was built to keep visitors out, not to let them in.

‘You don’t let people just walk into *your* house, do you?’

‘Of course not.’

Why would they, there’s nothing worth stealing at his place? If only there was.

The worry was undesirables *leaving* hooky goods in his apartment, not taking them away. *Why was this door shut?* He opened his mouth. Soft fingers parked across his lips before any sound could come out’

‘Please don’t shout.’

A sharp tap on the fifth panel down, fourth one across revealed her exit strategy. Another keypad filled the hole. Technology really wasn’t as rare as citizens were led to believe.

‘Look the other way.’

‘Why?’

‘Other way, please.’

He did. Two identical tones bleeped out.

‘Until I’ve finished.’

She should be more specific. Scout craned his neck back toward the front door. Four more bleeping tones were followed

by a heavy clunk of metal. Door was open. He could have helped her pull the cage back, it did look heavy. He didn't. The light winked out as the cage door opened into the building.

'Close the gate behind you.'

Yes ma'am. Shit, it really was heavy. A wheel on the bottom would help as he clunked it back into place. The panel inside flipped itself shut. Nice touch. Scout closed the interior door and turned around. Now that was definitely not what he expected to see.

There were guns, two of them, and pointed straight at him.

‘I thought we were beyond pointing guns at each other, Kat?’

‘We are.’ She said assured. ‘You’re not pointing one back.’

Granted that was a technicality, but true.

‘Who’s your friend?’ Scout wasn’t sure he liked him. People that dress up in long white coats were unnerving. The mask hooked to his ears didn’t help. It covered the entire face leaving a pair of piercing eyes that probed him from the eyes down. Maybe it was just the handgun he had aimed toward his head that he didn’t like?

‘Uncle, I would like you to meet... Idiot.’

Idiot.? Where was that coming from? Was it a term of endearment?

‘The weapon in your holster, please allow it to find the floor.’

At least Uncle was polite. He unclipped the holster and slowly placed it on the floor. He followed the fingered instruction and slid it over with his foot.

‘I thought we were getting on.’ He said his gaze unflinching toward the stranger. ‘I did drag your arse out of the river.’

‘And I’m still wondering why?’

‘I’ve got a soft spot for drowning animals. Does he speak? Hello? Are you hiding a deformity behind the mask? Hiding a big nose or bad teeth?’

‘He does that, Uncle. Pushes buttons, tries to piss people off.’

‘Hey, its a gift. They say the real personality comes out when the pressures on. I’ve seen yours. The Kat turns into a frightened kitten, remember?’

She took a step forward. The masked man placed a hand on her arm that insisted restraint.

‘Who are you?’ He asked. Damned if his voice didn’t compliment his image, all deep and intense. Strange accent that to boot. ‘Why are you looking for me?’

‘It’s not *you* I’m looking for. I was contracted to find a certain box. Now, I just want some answers to questions that I have.’

‘This is neither a store nor a library. Why come to me?’

‘Blame her. She brought me here.’

That seemed to register as a statement of interest to Masked Man.

‘It was Prosper’s wish,’ she said, ‘before... before he died.’

‘Prosper is dead?’ The gun wavered, its aim unsure for the first time. ‘How?’ He asked.

‘It was Jag. Maybe Spatzno? I’m not sure. They tortured him.’ Her eyes watered as she remembered. ‘They left him alive hoping that we would come back. They were waiting for us.’

There was sadness behind the mask and a mind that was working through the ramifications of the statement. Feelings were definitely hurt. Scout took the time to case his surroundings. Light came with a dim glare at regular intervals. Modern torches cemented in the walls, each bulb framed in its own circular bowl. Not a lot for a hall that was big as a house.

There were three windows with heavy drapes. He could just make out the metal bars through a slight gap. He’d seen them from the outside. Masked Man was big on security, he was Spartan on furniture. Just the three window seats, one below each glass portal, each with a thin quilted cushion. Scout followed the flow of the stairs upward. A winding wooden staircase suspended from the wall, its banister lined with roll-topped posts. He counted eleven. Above them his gaze settled on a gallery that circled the entire hall suspended on giant metal arms below a vaulted ceiling. He found it odd that there was only

a single exit up there. It made for a long walk to answer the front door.

Somewhat tedious a proposition.

Scout remembered the hidden exit from Prosper's library. Bolt holes. That was the term that Prosper had used. Scout wondered if the staircase wasn't just a diversion. They were sneaky bastards these heretics. Intruders would obviously go up. Heretics it seemed had a habit of going down. If there was a secret door down here Scout couldn't see it, but then he supposed that that was the point. Visually he checked out the small recesses and the stone block walls. Kat's voice barking flippantly in the background. *Didn't she ever shut up?*

Now there was something he hadn't noticed. The wall to his right stopped and turned. Clever, almost invisible the way the mortared joints continued from one wall to the next. He took two steps to see clearer. It was a dead end but the hidden wall exposed a faded mural, an image that he had become very familiar to him over the years.

"Homage to the bearded Titan." He was surfing the same two powerful waves, great big trident in hand. Dok had the same picture painted on the wall of the Odyssey. Was it a coincidence? Doubtful.

Clever Dok, real clever. Bolt holes are us? What was that woman going on about?

‘There was a man.’ Kat frowned at the very thought of him. Her hand got descriptive toward her face. ‘He had sunken features, wiry white hair. Looked like a retired goblin.’ She pointed toward Scout. ‘He seemed to know him.’

‘I told you I was popular.’

‘And Prosper told you to bring him here?’ Mask man looked doubtful.

‘He was very insistent.’

Time he chipped in, she obviously needed help.

‘That’s right.’ He said. ‘Prosper told her to bring me here, right here to you. And tell him what the other man said. Tell him about Stalker. Oh, you don’t know about Stalker. A big guy that wears a long dirty coat, he smokes waaay too much. Oh, and he knew about *you*. But I suppose it’s only sinister when I know the creepy creeps.’

That got him. That got Uncle’s attention.

‘Uncle, I don’t know who Stalker is. But Prosper referred to, him, as the Guardian.’

It all seemed too much for the old fella as Masked Man lowered his gun. He placed a hand on Kat’s Beretta encouraging

her to do likewise. She didn't look best pleased. He was beginning to believe that she really did want to shoot him.

'We could just shoot him.' She said. 'It would be no trouble. No-one will ever find the body.'

That was a joke, right? He wasn't entirely convinced. Things were looking up though. At least no guns were being pointing his way. The day was improving rapidly. Uncle removed the mask.

'My name is Yuri.' The statement came with no hand of welcome. It still held the handgun firm. The man was bemused, eyes all over Scout looking for deceit and lies as if they should hang from his clothes. 'You have met Wyatt?'

'Who?' Not a name he was familiar with.

'Stalker?'

'Oh him.' He felt the need to raise a hand. The lump still protruded from his scalp. 'We had a run in. Not an easy man to talk to. He's a big guy that stands maybe a head taller than me. Got short spiky hair and a face that requires a mother's love, Know what I mean? He doesn't have a lot of dress sense.'

That last bit wasn't strictly true. The long coat and boots were kinda cool when you added the two big cannons hiding below. It was every school boys dream.

‘He never gave me a name, I didn’t think to ask.’

Yuri nodded. ‘Sounds like Wyatt. Why didn’t he kill you?’

‘My affable nature?’

‘I doubt that. Please, Uncle. Let me shoot him. I had a life before he gate-crashed it. Now half the City is looking for me.’

Yuri ignored her.

‘Tell me what Wyatt said to you.’

‘It’s a bit hazy. Somewhere between cracking my head and shoving a gun, a really big gun, in my neck. He mumbled something about me being *her* Guardian. There was some complimentary stuff. He said he liked me, a lot.’

‘I doubt that.’

What was her problem?

‘I thought we were getting on?’

Kat shrugged. ‘When I first met you I really didn’t like you.’ She gave a feline furrow of the brow. ‘Nothing’s changed.’

‘I’ve heard enough.’ Yuri intervened. ‘Please, come upstairs and we can talk.’ Yuri reached the stairs alone. He turned. ‘Is there a problem?’

‘Who’s Stalker, Uncle. Or Wyatt, or whatever his name is?’

Yuri looked drawn between sharing a secret and keeping it to himself. It was good to see Kat thinking of shooting someone else for a change.

‘What she said.’ He was keen to support the question with bells and whistles. Maybe now he’d get some answers.

‘Come up.’ He said.

‘I’d rather we went down.’ Scout replied.

‘Down? Down where?’ Kat’s irritation was as obvious as the question.

‘I want you to take me down there.’ Scout pointed at the marble floor. This was getting spooky. He was feeling quite insistent and didn’t know why. The surprise was that Yuri was considering the demand.

‘What’s he talking about? Uncle Yuri, where are you going?’ Yuri?’

‘It’s time.’ He said.

‘Time for what?’

Oh the joy of it. Kat had no idea what was going on. Now they were both ignoring her.

‘Wyatt told me that someone would come. It’s quite a relief really. It’s been just me and Harley for such a long time now.

‘Hello? What about me, remember Kat? And who the hell is Harley?’

Was that a smile? Yuri did look at Kat with genuine affection. He was her Uncle after all. Wasn’t he?

‘Maybe Harley and I should take you away on a holiday when this is all over.’

‘When what’s all over? What’s going on, Yuri? Who’s Harley? What’s going on Idiot?’

‘Me? I have no idea. I’ve never heard of Wyatt and I don’t know anyone called Harley. Why do you want to blame me for everything?’

Before she could answer Yuri left the stairs. Now where was he going? The man stretched as he walked, reaching out as if expelling a night of sleep. He took one last look at the two of them, one final moment to reaffirm his decision. The nod and the grin said it all.

‘You want to find the box, young man. Come, I will show you.’

Yuri did something Kat clearly didn’t expect.

‘Oh my God.’ She said. Then said it again as if once wasn’t enough. ‘Oh... my... God.’

‘Why don’t I know about this?’

‘How should I know? He’s your Uncle.’

A big ugly black hole now replaced the stone wall. You had to love the ingenuity of these heretics. They had hidden passages coming out of their Ar...

Soft lighting illuminated the darkness inside changing the solemn mood. One of them had to go first. They could toss a coin? Kat made the decision for him.

‘Why don’t I know about this?.’ She passed through the opening. ‘Is this where you hide the rest of the family? Are there dwarfs down here?’

That wasn’t really the question Scout was asking himself? How had *he* known there was a cellar? That seemed a far more pertinent question? No way was he putting it down to a lucky guess. Nor was it fate, or some sort of mystic allure. At least he didn’t think so.

Still, he had been prompted and nudged from the moment he’d taken the job. Maybe there *was* something mystical or spiritual going on. Apparently the answers were down there.

Deep breath, follow the girl. He felt his fingers slip around the Glock as he took it from the floor. The slide was snapped back and a round chambered. Just one more hole to ferret down and hopefully this would finally be over.

There it was, that familiar sheen of perspiration rampantly secreting whenever he ventured underground. Scout loathed the underworld. Tunnels, caves and small places, he hated them all. He'd rather live in the sky like a bird, free to ride the winds and feel the breeze and the sun on his neck. This was wrong, he wasn't a fucking Hobbit. Each step took him further down the incline, with Kat and Yuri somewhere up ahead. The hollow tone of her voice piped back up the passage to remind him that he wasn't alone. It helped.

If he could get his feet to move quicker they'd be easy to catch. No, he'd take his time. There was no hurry. Something to do with the feeling of foreboding that gripped at his gut.

This was different.

A door appeared set into an arched frame to break the tedious run of brickwork. Curiosity wasn't a bad thing. No-one had ever proved that it actually killed a cat. A quick pull on the handle and the latch retracted from the lock. He parted door from frame and took a peek as the pathetic light in the tunnel crept inside.

Tables, about a dozen, set out in three lines across a concrete floor. He took a step inside. There were bottles stacked in the corner with long rubber hoses piled in a heap. *What goes on in a room like this?* He felt a chill at his reflection. It was hard not to stare when a mirror covered the entire length of the far wall.

‘What happens in a room like this?’ He whispered out loud.

‘I ran a clinic for pregnant women.’

He hadn’t expected a reply. Scout spun around, Glock facing Yuri. It was instantly lowered.

‘Please don’t do that.’

‘Apologies. I ran a free wellness clinic. I had to close it recently.’

‘Check his pockets.’ Kat called out. ‘He steals things.’

An accusation that fully deserved the arsy look he gave her.

‘So you’re a doctor as well as an Uncle?’

‘Yes.’

‘Of medicine?’

‘Yes. I have a beautiful mind. Ask Harley.’

He would when he met him.

What sort of a clinic needs a supply of jam jars and hoses? Probably best not to ask. A question best left for another time as

Yuri offered him to follow. Several more doors passed but there was no more urge to peek. Something odd was going on in this place and he really wasn't sure he wanted to know what.

At the end of the passage Yuri opened the last remaining exit. A door that stood over eight feet tall and took great effort to push open.

'Please, come in.'

'Oh my God.'

Did she have to keep saying that?

'What is this place, Uncle?'

Scout knew. Yuri wasn't just a doctor, he was a scientist. He recognised a lot of the instruments at hand. He knew what the burners and tubes were for. Greisha used them to mix herbs and to extract useful properties from plants. But this place was so much more than his mother's preparation room. There were freezers in the corner and was that an electron microscope? What the hell did Yuri need such a large and powerful generator for? Holy shit, he was running a working main frame. He was hot for it already.

The tower was black and sleek, it was dormant. No power surged through its copper veins to give life to the microchips and hard drives. It was a sexy beast, no doubt. Scout wanted to

get his hands on the hardware and strip it down. See what made it tick.

‘You have fish?’ Kat asked.

Fish? Who’s got fish?

It did look like a fish tank taking pride of place. It gurgled with bubbles, a sudden surge as the generator began to hum. The sound of electricity buzzed freely from machine to machine. Lights flickered from the ceiling and the main frame glittered and blinked as it frantically awoke. Scout could almost hear the ones and zeros flexing their muscles. Yuri had restored power. The Lab was coming to life.

‘What have you been doing down here, Uncle?’

‘You opened the box.’ It seemed a logical conclusion for Scout to make. ‘What was in it?’

‘Look for yourself.’

He followed the direction of Yuri’s hand. There it was sat unashamedly on a shelf next to a big book. Titled ‘The Bible,’ whatever that was. A hundred other manuscripts were filed and stacked.

‘Is it safe?’

Did it matter? He’d come way too far not to take a look now. Tentative, would best describe both his and Kat’s advance. About

as big as a jewellery box but a hundred times as intricate. The detail on the cube was exquisite. Religious symbols, presumably, all worked delicately into the surface of the metal. *Was it silver?* It was heavy.

‘Open it.’

Scout turned the object in his hands. ‘How?’

‘Just press the top. It’s unlocked.’

Fingers gripped the sides as the thumbs worked to slide the top. Nothing happened. He tried again, and again nothing. He pushed down. This time the lid reacted to the pressure. Scout nearly dropped the cube as the top tipped inward a fraction releasing a hiss of a sound and then opened outward like a flower.

Wow, oil change time again as endorphins flushed through his system. He realised that Kat had inched herself closer too. She was watching intently. Why shouldn’t she be curious? The girl *had* stolen the artefact in the first place.

‘Scared of it?’ She asked.

‘No.’ He was holding it at arms length though.

‘What’s in it?’

She’d asked the question, no choice now but to take a look-see. A gentle sigh showed measured constraint. Scout retracted

his arms and with eyes forward and head back he peered down into the box that had remained sealed for over two thousand years.

‘It’s empty.’

‘And if I told you that there was never anything inside?’

‘I wouldn’t believe you.’

‘What does that matter? You have the box. It is what you came for, take it and leave.’

‘Just like that?’

‘Yes. Just like that. I can lock it for you. No-one will be the wiser to its lack of contents.’

‘I will be.’

‘So will I.’ Kat took the box, turned it upside down. ‘What’s going on, Yuri? Why get me to steal an empty box?’

‘Because it wasn’t empty.’ Scout’s interest had focused away from the box onto the journals stacked upright on the shelf below. There were five in all. The cover of the one exposed read simply...

Subject K... 1-5

Why would the Duma and the Commission both want the box so badly? Why would the Trin’s risk revealing themselves to hide and protect it? This Laboratory was obviously the key. He

shifted his gaze around the room. Why such a large main frame, what work would require such powerful computing?

Put the pieces together.

The microscopes and the incubators suggested the growth of tiny things. Why would Yuri need two huge freezers and so many racks full of chemicals? That was when he noticed the final piece of the puzzle. A robotic arm, he had seen them in books from the past.

Saints preserve him, it was a fantastical theory. It suddenly made sense what this place was. That wasn't a fish tank. No gold fish lived inside. It was a maturation chamber.

Yuri was growing cells.

Subject K... 1-5. Now it made sense. It was an uncomfortable conclusion. It explained why Kat had only two years of memories. Why she dreamed about herself. Why she watched her own image like a home movie.

Coma my arse. This was a laboratory for cloning.

'The box stored blood didn't it.' He said.

'I'm impressed. Wyatt has chosen well, as usual.'

'Fuck Wyatt.' Scout was thinking of the girl. 'Kat, I'm so sorry.'

'What for? I wasn't really going to shoot you.'

‘Why don’t you tell her, Yuri?’

‘Tell me wha...? Scout, put the gun down. Yuri, what’s going on?’

‘Tell her Yuri. Tell her why she can’t remember anything before her coma. Did you do it here? Did she wake up in this room? Is that what goes on in there?’ He stepped the gun closer to Yuri holding it sideways like a cheap hood.

‘Put the gun away Scout.’

He heard the hammer of the Beretta click back. It didn’t matter. Now was the time for answers. He was sick and tired of being manipulated. Duma, Trins, Scarecrow, they were all at it, and now it was going to stop.

‘Whose cells are so important that you manufactured your own thief to go steal them?’

‘What does that mean, Yuri? What’s he talking about? Scout, what are you talking about?’

Silence as both parties waited for someone to speak. Beretta closed toward Scout as Glock tried to intimidate Yuri. The door closed and both weapons turned to a stranger leaning against the door.

‘Show them, Yuri. Let them see what you have worked for so long to achieve.’

‘Who the Hell are you?’ Kat was really fuming, enough to actually shoot someone if answers weren’t forthcoming. ‘You’re him, aren’t you?’ It was the long shabby coat and the cigarette cupped in his hand that gave him away. ‘You’re Stalker. Or is it Wyatt?’ She walked, arm out, weapon raised at his head. ‘Who the hell are you, what do you want?’

‘Easy, Kat. Our friend here is quicker than...’

Too late, she got too close. The speed of Wyatt’s hand was breathtaking. The man’s mallet sized hand took her frail wrist. He twisted it toward the ceiling and snatched the Beretta away. The clip was released and tossed into the air. The gun’s slide was detached and the weapon separated into several parts. All of them clattering to the floor before the magazine hit the ground.

‘Kat, meet Wyatt.’ Scout eased the Glock back into the band of his jeans.

Yuri rushed to Kat. ‘Are you hurt?’ She wasn’t. He turned on Wyatt. ‘That was unnecessary. You could have hurt her.’

‘Children have to learn, my friend. Besides, bullets hurt. And I’m not in the mood to get shot.’ Wyatt walked casually to the table and ground his cigarette into the metal surface. ‘Show them Yuri. They have to know. Let them see for themselves what so many have died to protect.’

‘See what? What haven’t you told me?’ Kat pulled away from Yuri. ‘And you can wipe that smug grin off your face.’ That one was directed toward Scout. ‘Answer me, Yuri. What’s going on? I don’t like being the only one who doesn’t know. No, don’t look at him. Look at me. Tell me.’

Wyatt dumping on her backside hurt. Not knowing what was going on, that made her fume. The smug grin on Scout’s face made her want to explode.

‘I will tell you everything Katarina, I promise.’

‘Tell me now. Please.’

He shook his head.

‘There isn’t time. There is another that I must help first. I am leaving the City Katerina. I will not be coming back.’

That was like a punch to the heart.

‘You’re leaving? When were you going to tell me?’ There it was, right there in his eyes as she spoke the question. She saw the truth. ‘You weren’t going to tell me, were you?’

Scout started to raise his hand then thought better of it. Family matter, best to keep quiet.

‘Yuri.’ Wyatt spoke with absolute authority. ‘The authorities, they are here.’ He turned to Scout. ‘You were followed.’

‘No way. We were careful.’

‘Not careful enough it seems.’

‘We weren’t followed.’ There was no need to get arsy with him. He was absolutely sure. So why was Wyatt striding towards him? Three long strides and he was patting him down, hands violating trouser pockets.

‘This is what they followed.’

‘The Phone?’

‘The handset has GPS.’

Wyatt threw the phone in the air and drew. Several rounds spat violently from his gun splintering the plastic everywhere and scaring the shit out of everyone. ‘Now it is turned off.’ He said. Attention moved to the scientist. ‘Whatever you are going to do, Yuri. I advise that it is done now. Time has just run out for us.’

‘I understand. Katerina, we must go.’

‘So now you’re taking me with you, just like you planned?’

This wasn’t happening. If she closed her eyes she’d wake and everything would be just as it was a few days ago. Only it wouldn’t, would it. It was a toss up whether to laugh or cry. Too late, the first tear smoothed its way down her cheek. No way of putting it back.

Scout, she’d shoot Scout. It was all his fault anyway. This was good. Get angry, stay angry, shoot someone.

‘Come, all of you.’ Yuri moved quickly for an old man to the only other door, on the far side of the Laboratory. Wyatt stomped past to follow.

That was that then. Yuri had made his decision. Who was she kidding; he’d obviously made it long before now. How could she have been so stupid? Deep breath, take a deep breath. Fuck Yuri, fuck everyone. Being on your own isn’t such a bad thing. Why change the habit of a lifetime anyway.

This was a good thing, it was a good thing. So why did her belly ache, and why did the tears threaten to stream from her eyes like bursting dams?

The gentle cocoon of humming machinery dissipated as something touched her hand. Startled she looked up. Idiot had her hand and was encouraging her to stand. He said nothing

which was probably for the best. Before she could say anything he turned her hand up and gently placed the reassembled Beretta into its palm. He closed her fingers and let his own linger just for a moment. It was one of those rare moments when two people look into each others eyes and find an understanding.

And that was all he was getting.

Kat accepted his help, tried not to appear too grateful. She shot him a stony gaze and headed toward the back door. Life had taken a nose dive. Apparently there were men outside that would probably shoot her on sight. Yuri was nothing more than a shit, and Wyatt was... she didn't know what Wyatt was. As for Scout, at least the Idiot was still here.

Oh God, she was a breath away from blubbering like a child.

Scout tried to see into the small room as both men went in before him. From the door the white walled interior seemed perfectly smooth, nothing much to see, just a pair of small tables that were really trays with long legs and wheels. He saw a host of closed cupboards and glass shelves with bottles. There was monitoring equipment half twisted away with wires left dangling. It struck him as strange that Wyatt had dropped to one knee and Yuri had followed suit.

Was that a man lying on the floor?

A push in the back encouraged him through the opening.

‘Don’t mind me.’

‘Katerina.’ Yuri called. ‘Please, there is water on the table.’

Crap, it was a man on the floor. Who, Why... What the hell was going on?

Kat grabbed the bottle that Yuri had motioned to and handed it to him. It seemed that the patient had released himself from the wires and managed to crawl down from the gurney to the floor. He didn’t look capable of doing much else but remained huddled against the wall. For a stranger there was something very familiar about the figure. He was slim, but well

developed. A wiry frame was all he could make out the body dressed in a blue scrub suit that he had half managed to remove. The man had long hair, down past his shoulders; it needed a damned good brush.

‘It’s too early to move him.’

‘We have no choice, Yuri. I will carry him if necessary. Pack what you need for him we must leave.’

Wyatt was adamant, and neither he nor Yuri had any intention of arguing, not if the Jag were close by. He was willing to take the opportunity for information though, as Yuri grabbed what he needed from the wall cupboards.

‘Yuri, what’s going on? Who the hell is he, and please don’t tell me *he* was in the box.’

‘You still haven’t worked it out?’ Yuri seemed surprised as his hands picked quickly through shelves for what he needed. ‘Maybe Wyatt wasn’t right about you.’

‘What was in the box, Yuri? Why are half the Jag in the City looking for us?’

‘It was phial of blood just as you suspected. A source of deoxyribonucleic acid, that’s DNA for short.’

‘I know what it is. I just don’t know why you’re messing with it.’

‘Why? Because Wyatt asked me to, that’s why. Have you ever heard of Junk DNA? Before the Wars I discovered what it was that hides in the Junk of our DNA. Damn it, where’s the vodka? You don’t know do you? You don’t know what that is.’

Was it that obvious?

‘DNA is the building block of life, the programming that tells the cells how to grow, what to grow. The Junk is what’s left. It is the consciousness of every ancestor you have ever shared. It’s quite remarkable really. No? Let me put it like this. How would you like to meet great grandfather or your great great great grandfather, *anyone* that has shared your DNA before it was shared with you. They are all recorded for posterity.’ He laughed. ‘I have no idea what nature’s ultimate goal was; I leave those questions for philosophers to argue over. For now I will settle for... Ah, there you are. Premium potatoes distilled over several months. Perfect qualities for cleaning, sterilising, and getting drunk.’

‘Are you telling me that your science can bring people back from the dead?’

‘No, that would be a ridiculous claim.’ There was more rummaging toward the back of a cupboard. ‘I am telling you that I can re-grow a body from original cells, which... is quite easy.’

The clever bit is to reinstall the program which made the person whoever he or she previously was.’ The end of each nucleic chain hosts an incalculable number of souls. It would be a random selection. Hit and miss no better. But the box contained something wholly unique in the realms of DNA. The blood sample inside had only a single ancestral memory, a sole user prior to the man who has inherited its properties.’

‘Yuri, we have to leave.’

‘Yes, Wyatt. I’m collecting what I need. Vitamins, where are they? His body will need large doses. Ah, there you are. I was so close before the Wars ruined everything. So close and then the box went missing again, stolen actually. I still have the scar from the bullet.’

‘Who is he?’

Yuri tucked the bottle into his bag and focused, firstly on Wyatt who had lifted the man from the floor, and then toward Scout.

‘Who else in history has only one father and no mother to share his deoxyribonucleic acid? The blood in the box was pure. It was taken from the donor just prior to his execution in the year nought. It was hidden away and has waited until the *other* children of God were capable of bringing him back.’ Yuri grabbed

his arm. 'The box contained the DNA of the *direct* and *sole* descendant of Our Lord. The man that you see in Wyatt's arms? His name is Jesus Christ.'

Wait. Wait just a minute. He had to get his head around this one. 'Are you saying that you've cloned Jesus?'

'No.' That term seemed to upset him. 'What good is the body without the mind?' Yuri was tapping at his forehead. 'It was always there in hiding, concealed within the Junk DNA. Every breath, every word, every feeling the Messiah ever had.' Yuri turned to the man sipping at the water held by Kat. 'He *is* the son of God.'

‘And Kat, what is she?’

That didn’t seem such an easy explanation for him. ‘That’s not important.’ He answered. ‘Only *He* is important now.’

‘Tell him everything.’ Wyatt seemed insistent. ‘Scout needs to know everything if he is to be the Guardian.’

‘What Guardian? No, wait, I’ve got it. It all makes absolute sense now. You’re all fucking crazy.’

But he did understand now why everyone wanted the box. He started to pace, feet suddenly in need of movement, preferably toward the exit.

‘The Trins.’ He said aloud. ‘That’s obvious. They’ll kiss his feet and carry him wherever he wants to go. The Commission sure as shit don’t want the competition, that’s for sure. And the Duma. Crap, they want to cut him up for the bits. It’s always about profit with them.’ He stopped pacing, turned to Wyatt. ‘You know what they’ll do to us?’

‘Stop thinking about yourself and start thinking about others. Oasis is not alone. There are others out there, many more looking for hope and salvation. You think Oasis has the only survivors on the planet. That’s what they want you to think. The

Commission is already set on a Crusade. They want to conquer and subdue. They want to hammer the world into an image that they have prepared. This is unacceptable.’ He barged past out into the tunnel. ‘It will begin an inevitable cycle of violence and oppression, the start of yet another enslaving religion. You people never learn.’

‘Oh really. Hey, wait up. Is this shit for real? Hey Stalker boy, why don’t *you* do something about it? I’m busy. I was enjoying my life before you rolled in.’

Wyatt’s gaze shot back toward him.

‘Your life was shit. And I have already risked far more than you ever will. God has gone. *He* must be convinced to return.’ With that Wyatt kicked at the false wall opening it further. Once through he placed the man he carried gently on the ground. Wyatt strode out into the hall towards the windows.

‘What does that mean?’ Yuri was puzzled by the remark as he too brushed by Scout as if he wasn’t there. ‘God is everywhere at all times. Wyatt, explain yourself.’

This was good; now he wasn’t the only one that didn’t know what was going on. Poor Kat looked like she knew the least. He watched from the opening as Wyatt discreetly checked the road outside.

‘Wyatt?’

‘Yuri... He is gone.’

‘I don’t believe you. Why are you lying to me?’

‘Yuri, Yuri. Are you so foolish to believe that all of this would be happening if *He* were still around? ... No. God was disillusioned with his creation and decided to end it once and for all. That is why I was sent, with others, to bring it all to pass. End of Days... that was our instruction. I was to be the last to leave. I was to oversee the “Final Solution.”

‘Liar.’

‘No, Yuri. I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. I ignored an express command for Armageddon. I defied God to give mankind one final chance.’

‘But you let me believe. Why didn’t you tell me.?’

‘Why haven’t you told the girl that she is a clone? Exactly. Sometimes ignorance is all the bliss that a man, or a woman, can handle.’

This was fun. It seemed that all the cats were hopping out of the bag at the same time. He had no idea which one to question first. It was like the Mad Hatter’s tea party. Where was Kat? Poor cow was probably trying to stop her head from spinning.

‘What happened to the others?’ Scout asked. Not that he was sure he really wanted to know. ‘There were four clones before Kat, where are the others?’

That question went to a silent Yuri, and then swung toward Wyatt. Hell he didn’t care what secrets he unleashed.

‘They were... terminated, for their short comings. That version, she is almost perfect.’

‘Almost? What the hell does that mean?’ If there was a problem he wanted to know.

‘It’s not important. We have taken too long, the Commission is already outside. I think we will have to shoot our way out.’

This was dumb. No, it was insane. Okay, the God thing could wait till later. One mind blowing crisis at a time. If the Jag were outside he needed to get himself out of here, and quick. Out came the Glock.

‘I need ammunition, only got one full clip. Any suggestions?’

‘Katerina, will you stay with him.’

Crap, how much had she heard?

It was a reticent response from the girl, a slight nod of agreement. Calm before the storm. She was sat next to the patient holding his hand. He looked weak, barely awake. They were whispering to each other. *Was that a smile from Kat?* He

was sold. Only the Son of God could put a smile like that on her face.

Guns? They needed more guns. He wasn't going out like Prosper.

Scout backed off but his gawking lingered on the two of them. 'We need guns, Yuri. Many as you can muster.'

Yuri seemed happy to oblige. The scientist disappeared for less than a minute and then came back with two very large holdalls in tow. Scout had no idea where he had plucked them from but was more than intrigued to see what was inside.

'This is for you.' Yuri yanked the larger bag across the shiny marble floor for Wyatt to take. 'Help me with this one.'

Scout was happy to oblige.

Mother of Saints it was heavy. Canvas was stocked with weapons, nothing else made a clunk like that. To hell with pulling it, he couldn't wait to get it open. His fingers pulled the zip from end to the other.

Holy shit, they'd just found the mother load.

Tooled up, that was the appropriate expression. One Kalashnikov in hand with another strapped to his back. The bag was a collection of Kalashnikov's and other semi automatics. A quick rummage to the bottom had found an endless supply of magazines. He was Cock Robin, the cat with the cream. Even Mr Glock had an ample re-load now stuffed inside the pockets of a snug fitting military jacket. Hey, it was part of the cache and wasn't being claimed by anyone else. The cammo colours were cool. Wyatt said he looked like Rambo whoever that was. He prowled from one window to the next. Each angle covered, every sight confirming the same bad news. There were Jag everywhere; more were arriving every minute. Best guess, there were about fifty outside. On the plus side there was at least eight inches of wall between them and him. Enough to stop bullets, for sure, he hoped they had nothing bigger to throw his way.

What in Saints name did Wyatt have in that bloody big bag?

He would have asked but didn't want to be disappointed. He just hoped, no, he prayed, that it came with a loud bang and made bloody big holes in anyone that came across that road.

‘You okay?’ He asked Kat.

‘What do you think?’

He wished he hadn’t asked.

‘We’ll sort it out as soon as we get out of here. I promise.’

‘You think?’ She turned her back on him.

I’m sorry, was I trying to be nice?

She looked upset and mean as hell. The clip in the weapon had been ejected and slapped back in three times since he’d been stupid enough to ask how she was. A quick mental note was made. Make sure he didn’t stray between her and whatever she shot at. If it moved it was going to end up with holes in.

Yuri still attended the man on the floor. Patient didn’t look too well. He still couldn’t get his head around the home-made Messiah. The man from the cross was slipping in and out of consciousness and didn’t know much about what was happening. He looked like a hospital porter still tripping from a wicked night out. *Was that a disrespectful thought?* Best he kept those sorts of thoughts to himself. Yuri on the other hand had a surprising grin on his face as he tended his patient. The old Tokarev lay close by at his feet.

‘Wyatt.’ Yuri beckoned. ‘He wants to talk to you.’

The big fella resembled a naughty schoolboy caught in the act. Scout saw doubt in his eyes for the first time. It didn't last long. He snarled a pedigree scowl toward the floor. Nodded like a man having a private and serious conversation in his head and then took the long walk to his Messiah.

'What do you think that's about?'

'Why should I care?'

'Look, Kat...'

'I'll watch the airlock. Happy eavesdropping.'

Don't take it out on me. It wasn't his fault that she was homeless, a wanted criminal, and about to engage in a fire-fight for her life.

He reconsidered the thought. Okay, it probably was his fault. But how long could she stay mad at him for?

Things were interesting on the side of the hall. Wyatt had taken the man's head in his hands and was whispering something to him. He nearly dropped the Kalashnikov. Wyatt's eyes were glowing. He didn't like this, didn't like it at all. Too far out and freaky, maybe he should join Kat at the airlock.

Whatever had transpired between Wyatt and the Messiah, he didn't want to know, best to look somewhere else. He started with the closest window. A finger teased the drape back, just

enough to remind himself that they were surrounded. The harder he looked the more of them he could see, scuttling around out there finding cover. Trucks were parked up, barricades hastily erected with whatever was handy. He felt the cool of the wall against his back as his hand lowered and the curtain closed.

Wyatt let his coat slip from powerful shoulders and crossed his arms to un-holster both weapons together. That was when it became real, when Scout knew he was about to fight. Time for one last oil change, it was a chill and not what he expected. Much better to be angry and get all fired up, but not this time. Maybe a prayer would help? Oh yeah, he forgot. Apparently God wasn't up there any more. Neither, he assumed, were the Saints that the Commission had so liberally hijacked from the past.

His mind raced to the window back at his apartment. He'd seen Greisha, mum, reflected in the glass. It would be nice to see her now, just one last time before... He tried to breathe away the sudden feeling of nausea. This could all have been avoided. Why the fuck had he opened the door to Carlos in the first place? If only he'd gone back to bed and pulled the covers over his head, none of this would have happened.

He really hated his life, no more so than right now.

What a rush, the shock, guilt and anger so prevalent in the last few minutes. Now he was just plain depressed. There was no going back and no-one available to pray to, he closed his eyes, smiled, and watched for her one last time. Chia...

Soon. We'll be together soon.

Chia smiled back. Did she just wink at him? How he loved it when she did that. Now he felt the fire. Now he felt the heat rise in his bowels and the blood surge through rivers of veins. If there was one thing in this life that he had always believed, it was that he and Chia would be together again, and this time it would be forever.

He slid back the bolt on the AK and let it go. Whoever this Rambo fella was, he intended to make him proud.

Was that the Freak out there making a noise? Someone was giving the bullhorn a hard time. Same scratchy tone as Scarecrow only magnified. Demands were being made, something about weapons, floor, and hands above their heads.

Scout found the notion amusing. It was all a bit late for that. Some careful bobbing of his head revealed how the road was being blocked by trucks at either end. Men with guns, big ones, were securing their firing angles. Others created plenty of activity and none of it good, not for them. He listened.

Apparently Scarecrow wanted the heretics. He was giving one final opportunity to hand them over. Maybe they could kiss and make up, forgive and forget.

Not a chance.

If it was the last thing he did he was going to stick the Glock down Scarecrow's throat and unload the entire clip out through his arse. *Shit, how the hell had things got so serious so quickly?*

Any moment now the walls and windows were likely to resound to a barrage of bullets. Like shale being tipped through a hole, probably. Lead shale screaming holy shit as it pinged against any hard surface that got in the way. With the sort of

firepower available outside he was just as likely to get hit by a ricochet as a good shot. It was all about to turn ugly.

Scout relaxed his fingers on the gun, knuckles had turned white and he hadn't noticed. Part of him wanted them to get on with it. Pull the trigger and get it on.

Short bursts, fire from the corners of the window. Don't stick your head out cos it won't come back in one piece.

Good advice and not a moment too soon.

The air rasped to the sound of automatic fire. Scout hunkered down instinctively expectant of a fierce onslaught of ordinance to pebble dash the walls. It didn't come. He turned, stared and watched as flames leaped from Wyatt's cannons both held at arms length out the window. Deadly projectiles spewing out toward the street as the flow of empty cartridges arced their way down to the floor.

If looks could kill, most of the Jarig outside would already be dead.

'Aaaargh ..'

It was the only sound Scout could muster as his AK burst into life banging out on full auto. The Kalashnikov hammered its firing pin to sting the cartridges into life. Ten, twenty, thirty bullets unleashed to hammer the trucks outside. Each one fizzed

and slammed into panels and doors, sending the enemy down onto bellies and cowering to find cover. Kat opened up from the third window adding her weapon to the excited chorus.

This was it; this was how it was going to be. Come get us you mothers. Like shooting ducks in a pond. *‘Come on, is that all you got?’* It wasn’t. As their guns emptied and hands moved swiftly to re-load, the ducks started back.

A generous sprinkling of hailstones was what it sounded like at first, a deluge of tiny ice falling suddenly from the skies. Only this ice brought high velocity and stinging shrapnel. The outside wall smarted with dozens of hits and the reveals on the windows popped and splintered sending shards of stone cascading at impossible angles. Scout hit the floor and covered his head, Kat had done the same. Think small and invulnerable, it barely seemed adequate. It was their turn to cower and shrink.

Wyatt obviously didn’t agree. More rasping erupted from the noisy pistols. Scout backed up against the wall, head down, he squeezed off with the Glock. The entire clip was discharged without looking.

Was he laughing? Did Wyatt find this funny?

Scout hoped it was a nervous reaction and not maniacal delusion as the big man moved low across the window, between

tiny pauses in the constant stream of gun fire. Another clip was rammed into the Glock. Hand went up to the window, head stayed down. He emptied fifteen more rounds with absolutely no intention of looking and then snatched his hand back as a dozen shards of high velocity dust and grain peppered from the sill at his flesh.

Wyatt squatted and two magazines were expelled simultaneously. Both barrels smoked as did the strained butt of the cigarette clasped tight between his lips. The ash glowed to another deep draw and was then ejected with a bit of spit that wanted to hang about.

‘Just like Butch and Sundance.’ He said thrusting the weapons down onto replacement magazines stuck out conveniently from his belt.

‘Who?’

‘Never mind.’ More anger from his weapons.

‘Yuri,’ Scout shouted. ‘Yuri.’ *Damn it.* He was up and moving toward the passage. Yuri crouched over the young man, still unconscious. He was protecting him with his own body from any stray ricochets. Gun held out toward the hall just in case.

‘Take it easy, Yuri.’ The Scientist looked terrified. ‘We need another way out. A back door, a secret passage... anything?’

A shake of the head was not the required response.

‘Think, Yuri.’ He pointed to the stairs. ‘What about upstairs or back down in the basement?’

‘No.’

‘What do you mean no?’

No chance to respond as the hall shuddered to an explosion. The sound was deafening as dust and debris blew inward from the front door. Wyatt was the first to react. He unloaded both weapons into the new hole. It was sketchy at best but through the dust Scout could just make out the men clambering through the breach only to jerk and lurch from Wyatt’s death dealing machines. One, two, three and then half a dozen or more thrown back and downward as their flesh wilted under the intense fire. Scout was up, AK pumping semi auto fire, controlled and aggressive bursts into the hole. Metal abused flesh and the body count rose quickly. Two men somehow made it through the hail of gunfire clambering over their comrade’s bodies. They too died in a storm of dust and bullets as they found the cage barring their way. Scout was more than grateful that the obstacle held firm. Then he saw it, just as the hand slipped down from the bars. A small package stuck to the metal.

Oh shit. He recognised the package instantly as an explosive device. ‘Fire in the hole.’ The man’s hand had stopped on the crossbar, the detonator ring still dangled from his finger.

The high pitched thump wasn’t as powerful as the first explosion but the ringing left in his ears was far more intense. More smoke and dust massed to a choking smog. Best he could do was peer through, his arms still deflecting left over debris. *Oh, shit.* The door was buckled and bent. More dust tried to settle. Visibility improved and there was no doubt now, the cage had been blown.

‘Wyatt?.’ Where was he? He couldn’t see him or Kat. ‘Yuri,’ he pulled at the man to get him going forward, ‘anything moves you shoot it. Okay? You shoot it.’

Yuri nodded uncomfortably.

The Tokarev barked twice. Scout reacted and fired before he could see a target. Jag were in the cloud, a hailstorm of lead preceded them. Scout hit the floor as the bullets whined overhead; Yuri covered his head and fired blindly. Another clip was slapped into the AK. Weapon re-loaded it did its violent thing. No need to aim. She was capable of six hundred rounds a minute if only you load the damn thing fast enough. It was a cheap simple weapon that was bloody effective. At such a short

range it cut men in half. Thirty shots rang out in a blink; he jammed another magazine into the hole.

The same rat a tat rang out, bullets bouncing off the cage but he hadn't pulled the trigger. Kat was advancing, unloading into the airlock, her magazine was ejected. Scout stood, he poured it on whilst she re-loaded. He was out, she opened fire. Side by side they advanced and anything that moved was put down. Soft fleshy hits squelched and the loud crunching of bullets thumped through bone.

They'd had enough. They'd pulled back. No-one else came through the hole. Both AK's ejected and re-loaded, smoke swirling from the red hot metal. Door was gone but a wall of bodies almost three feet high blocked the opening. It looked like a dozer had swept them up in its bucket and sprinkled them down into the hole. Blood was everywhere. The floor was swimming in human oil. The walls were painted crimson red.

Kat's shirt was covered in the stuff. She smiled at him. That wasn't right, something was wrong. Now he could see it, now he knew. It was her blood, not someone else's. In a flash the colour drained from the girl's face and she dropped to her knees.

'I've got you. I've got you.' He had to be quick as she went down.

‘Oh goody, you’ve got me.’ The smile faded and she slumped in his arms.

‘YURI.’

‘Yuri. Kat’s been hit. Get the fuck over here.’

Both men backed her up against the wall of bodies. A dozen open eyes still staring with lifeless resolve as Yuri lifted her top and then turned her over.

‘It’s okay. It’s a through and through. No major organs. We have to stop the bleeding.’ He breathed a deep sigh of relief and rested his forehead against hers. ‘Find me something to stop the bleeding.’

That wasn't too difficult, plenty of spare jackets and shirts no longer needed by their owners. Scout pulled one from the closest body. The owner didn't object.

'Use this. You sure she's okay?'

Yuri shoved the shirt onto the wound and pressed. 'No vital organs or arteries have been hit; she'll be okay if I can stop the bleeding. She's a lucky girl.'

'She's a drama queen.' Scout risked a peek over the top. He barely noticed the two bodies that hung limp by his face.

'I need something to keep the compression tight. Get some more shirts.'

It wasn't necessary; Wyatt had come up with another idea. He placed a cigarette between his lips and frowned at the wound. The zippo snarled a tall flame.

'Is that a condom? What's he going to do with a condom, Yuri?'

It was obvious that Yuri was as much in the dark as Scout. Neither knew why Wyatt was biting the bullets away from several casings and then emptying the propellant into the latex sheaf.

‘If you don’t mind, Yuri. I need some room.’ He moved the scientist’s hands and shirt away and then placed the condom onto the wound. Kat moaned aloud and opened her eyes wide as Wyatt pressed it deep into the bloodied hole.

The zippo chinked again and the flame was drawn into the paper vice, a steady stream of smoke released through his nose. ‘This is going to hurt.’ He said.

Kat got it even if they didn’t. She fingered at the open end of the latex. ‘Fuck off,’ she shouted, and she meant it.

‘Shhh, it’s okay. We have to stop the bleeding.’

‘Do it some other way. Scout, I don’t like him...’

The red hot ash lit the condom like a fuse. A strong billow of acrid stink flashed into the cage igniting a scream of resentment from Kat, who promptly fainted.

It was a gut turner for Scout. A prickly sight and rancid smell that forced vomit into his throat that he promptly swallowed. He gave himself a mental note. If he got himself shot, no medical attention would be required from Wyatt. He’d rather bleed out.

‘It’s done.’ Wyatt concluded. ‘The wound is cauterized. I think she’ll sleep for a while.’

Yuri nodded. The man was white as a sheet.

‘Both of you, pick up the weapons and make a pile. We may need to use them. With that Wyatt returned to his window vigil.

‘Yuri.’ Scout whispered to the sound of gun stocks being dragging across the floor. ‘Who is he?’

‘He is Wyatt. He is Entity.’ Another rifle clattered down onto the pile.

Very helpful, Yuri.

‘Where did he come from? What’s his story?’

‘He has protected the Relic for over two thousand years. He will continue until he is no longer required to do so.’

‘If that lot get in here he’ll find himself out of a job.’

Scout watched as Yuri had picked up a lone handgun. ‘A Stechkin.’ Yuri announced, pleased with himself. ‘I had one of these a very long time ago.’ He released the magazine from the handle, thumbed the hammer back and squeezed the trigger. Click.

‘Don’t worry about Wyatt. He is not so easy to intimidate and even harder to remove.’

‘What was that thing he did, the thing with the eyes?’

Yuri shrugged. I am not privy to such things. But Wyatt does nothing without good reason.’

The man mountain turned just enough to let them know that despite the whispers he knew they were talking about him. The man looked mean as hell as another of those cancer sticks was flicked through the shattered portal. He watched them both with a warrior's eyes, senses keen yet wary. Whoever he was, he was born for the fight. What did it really matter who he was? Knowing that he was friendly, that was more than enough for now.

Wyatt broke eye contact and knelt beside the huge kit bag that Yuri had brought up from the cellar. Scout was drawn to the sound of the opening zip. A quick peek at the outside, nothing, all was quiet for now as they regrouped. His attention fixed now on the big man and the giant holdall.

'Oh my... Now those really are pretty.'

He wasn't disappointed.

An RPG-26 was eased from the holdall like a small baby. The disposable rocket launcher was marked with foreign symbols but was nevertheless familiar to Scout. He was impressed, doubly so when another exited the holdall. Then two more as they were stacked against the wall. Less than three feet long apiece, when opened and deployed they had serious explosive capability. He seriously hoped that nothing so destructive was available to the troopers outside.

‘You like things that go bang.’ He said.

Wyatt ignored him, concentrating instead on producing the final prize from the bag. And it was a feast for the eyes. It was big. A single joystick and handle attached to half a dozen rods fixed in several cylindrical couplings. Scout had never a gun like this before. It needed a tripod not the shoulder strap that it sported. Wyatt clipped a lunch box sized container to its side, pulling a tab to expose a ribbon of bullets which he placed into a top mounted feed chute.

‘What the hell is that?’ The words chuckled out with near disbelief. He was really beginning to appreciate the man’s offensive nature. Brake squeal outside distracted him.

‘More trucks?’

Wyatt nodded and raised three fingers.

Say ten men to each truck. That gave them a slight numbers advantage. No, wait. Wyatt raised his hand again. Five fingers this time. It sounded like the locals were being moved on as well. At least some-one out there gave a damn about them. No doubt they were being saved from Heretic terrorists by the Commission. Spatzno would be out there too looking to direct the siege. This had gone way beyond a local affair.

His eye wandered about the hall. Decor had looked better. Bullet holes really can ruin the desired effect. Wyatt stood vigil. Yuri prayed beside his unconscious Prophet. Kat moaned deep in sleep. Once again he wondered how he had found himself stuck in the middle of someone else’s little war.

‘Wyatt?’ He was an ignorant son of a ... ‘WYATT.’

That got his attention. Yuri’s too.

‘You think one of those could punch a hole in the wall?’

‘To what end?’

‘Make a hole. Get us out of here?’

‘The building is surrounded. That includes the back door.’

‘What about the roof?’ He turned to Yuri. ‘Why haven’t you got a secret exit into the sewer like most heretics? Come on, there must be a way out.’

Yuri exchanged glances with Wyatt. Wyatt continued his vigil.

‘What? Spit it out.’ The silence was infuriating.

‘You really are slow aren’t you?’

‘Kat. How you feeling? What do you mean slow?’

Moving was an effort for her but she managed to sit herself up.

‘They don’t want to leave. You don’t do you? I think they’re waiting for something.’

‘Waiting, for what?’

She shrugged.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Scout slammed the AK’s stock against the cage. ‘Hey, what don’t I know?’

‘You’re quite cute when you get angry.’

‘I’m what?’ Was she serious? No, the woman was obviously in shock. Wyatt’s condom would do that. ‘We’re fugitives,’ He explained, ‘with a hundred guns all aimed at us from out there. You’ve got two dozen corpses sitting you up and you want to be cute. I’m going to wake up real soon.’

Scout levered the magazines from several of the AK’s on the pile, then took a shiny new one from the top. He levered the bolt back and let it go. He threw it to Kat.

‘Point it that way, along with your sense of humour. I don’t know which of them will do more damage.’

Oh wait, he got it. It was a, “now you know how I felt back at the Loft moment.” Very droll.

And she could wipe that grin of her face.

Keeping low went without saying. He just needed a change of view. Peering through the arched window didn’t help his mood too much. And what was it with this guy? Wyatt just stood there, like a statue watching the road.

It wasn’t just his size or even the massive handguns that he shouldered. Scout couldn’t imagine anyone else with hands big

enough to hold those. It was the weathered and serious persona he wore like a masque. He looked like a man that had seen too much combat, maybe killed too many people in his time. He moved and shot with the skill of a surgeon. Way too professional for Scout's liking. It was the dark staring eyes, they hit you like a cloud, a dark presence best avoided. They were the first and final warning of the warrior that lurked behind.

'Hey, Oddjob. I have a question.'

So, his eyes do blink.

'Who is he, really?' Scout motioned over to Yuri's patient. 'The truth. I think I have a right to know. After all I won't be around much longer to tell anyone.'

'*He* is the Prince of Thorns.' It was a title that obviously amused him. 'You and your kind are the thorns.'

'He's a clone.'

Wyatt gave a slow shake of the head.

'The body without the mind is a copy. *He* will remember everything when his strength returns.'

'*He'll* have a lot to catch up on.' *Was that a smile?*

'I have taken measures to ensure *He* will understand everything that has happened.'

‘You mean the glowy eye thing?’ Hey, why not, at least it made sense. Not much else did. ‘I read about him, on Prosper’s computer. Saw pictures. Did they really nail him to a cross?’

‘It was his choice. He could have stopped them.’

‘But he didn’t, did he? The Prince of Thorns sacrificed himself and still nothing changed.’

‘Those that came after him focused too much on the man and not enough on his words. Some called him Jesus, some the Messiah. I thought he was a fool.’

‘Oh really? You think that peace and humanity are ideals for fools?’

‘They are nice sentiments, but they come with a price. Let me tell you what Humanity is. It is an Ideal with barely more substance than a handshake. It’s a stage light that burns with such intensity toward the crowd that it blinds and burns men. I can define Humanity in only two words. Why? And Now. It is an Ideal that reflects selectively on its past and is only mildly curious about its future. It is a self perpetuating delusion that has exhausted the resources that God had allowed. You disappointed Him. You disappointed all of us.’

Sorry I asked.

‘So why are you here? Why bother now?’

‘Because I love him. And because he still believes that you are worth saving. Does that answer your questions?’

Oh yeah, I’m brimming with understanding now.

‘Why’d you do it? By your own admission you were told to shaft us. What, you developed a conscience? I’m thinking not.’

Stalker was looking cranky, not used to being quizzed by the public. Tough on him.

‘I had to wait.’ He said. ‘The others would have stopped me. Besides, you needed to be culled, your kind breeds like rabbits. Man was on the verge of spreading his Humanity beyond this world. Eden is out there. It is a garden of wonders, not a mineral mine to be plundered for profit.’

‘Whatever?’

This conversation was better had with men like San and Prosper. Right now there were more pressing concerns. Like the rising number of guns outside.

‘What’s done is done, I suppose.’ Scout pulled the ragged remains of the curtain away and dusted at the window seat, glass crunching like fresh snails beneath his boots. ‘Now what, we sit here and wait for God to shit on everyone outside and get us out of here? Probably the first question he should have asked. It was answered with the snap of metal on metal

‘Easy with that, Wyatt. Don’t go pissing them off out there.
Wyatt?.... Holy crap, what the hell is wrong with you?’

Scout fell to his knees keen to find the cover of the wall.

An RPG firing from a confined space sounds like the backlash from a broken wind tunnel. The whoosh of a giant firework as it leaves the ground. The rocket had definitely left the building. A second later thunder roared from across the street. A high pitched explosion as the shaped charge warhead won its brief dispute with a truck. Secondary eruptions followed the first as gas tanks crackled in violent response.

Another whoosh set his teeth on edge. Not enough time to count the delay before another hearty explosion. Men were screaming, the poor bastards didn't see it coming. Jag troopers were running, making noise in panic. Small arms crackled a feeble response, which got more and more aggressive. Every weapon outside was pointed at the windows now and poured it on. Metal zinged and pinged off every surface, an orgy of fearful sounds.

Don't look up, don't get up, don't frigging move.

Scout could hear men shouting. The words were more ordered, more structured. Panic stations was over and the officers outside were getting their acts together. Bad mood and

grievous intention was about to try and rush the building. He crawled on all fours toward the cage, and Kat.

‘You okay?’

‘I liked it better when it was quiet.’

‘Tell him not me.’

With a heave two more AK’s were slid fresh from the pile to Kat’s feet. He counted four weapons plus his own and at least twenty magazines piled by the hole that used to be a door. It would have to do for now.

He spied a mass of movement from the courtyard.

‘Heads up, here they come.’

Scout squeezed off in semi auto mode. The recoil lifted the barrel after each ejection, two or three bullets every second. Men fell. He didn’t know who they were, he didn’t give a damn. It was them or us time and he didn’t intend it to be the latter. Kat pulled herself up and opened fire. Both Kalashnikov’s spat pain and suffering. More men fell clutching limbs as others just dropped. The dead men that walled the doorway didn’t care as they soaked up round after rotten round. From such short range the flesh was being shredded.

‘Re-loading.’

One AK ceased as Scout rammed another clip into the slot. In the brief respite he saw Wyatt, an M16 in each hand, unleashing a hail of bullets through window one. Stalker moved to window two both guns unleashing death at every conceivable angle through the portals. He rounded toward the courtyard again and opened fire. Six clips used, eight clips and then ten. The Jarig no longer tried to storm the cage, far more content to strafe the interior from doorways, from any cover they could find. Scout shot at the windows and then at a door. Four shots at a car carefully parked the previous night its body now riddled with holes. Fourteen clips emptied now with fifteen and sixteen being loaded. Pretty soon it was going to come down to just Scout and Mr Glock. Maybe even his bare hands?

It didn't matter, as the next thing that happened was so rude and so violent that it rocked both their worlds.

Yuri's home shook with the impact as window number two erupted in a ball of flame. Ancient stonework melted and the blast dispersed, peppering the hall in super heated dust. So violent was the air which burnt at their lungs then faded to a gentle but gritty rainfall.

Wyatt had started it. The Jag had decided to try and finish it. It was RPG's at dawn. The wall crumpled a little more and both he and Kat started coughing as the air cooled and they began to breath.

'Did the world just end?' She asked, and looked like she thought it was true. Hair and face covered in dust.

Scout crawled forward like a child.

'Door... Cover the door.'

What door, he couldn't even see it. All he could do was shake his head, try to clear his head. The AK he held was discharging, firing at the ghostly shapes now rallying in the courtyard. Cartridges expelled themselves from the weapon in silence. He was in a dream. Why couldn't he stand properly?

Seventeen and eighteen were loaded and depleted. Nineteen and twenty followed. Just three magazines left on the floor. The

noise was rising exponentially. His head cleared his eyes saw, the sounds of bursting gunfire was clear as a bell now.

‘Yuri, we need more ammunition. Yuri.’

Where was he? There were too many of them, not enough guns, not enough bullets. More men died as they crumpled out amongst the fallen. Clip twenty one and then twenty two. Twenty three burnt from Kat’s barrel and Mr Glock fired indiscriminately at anything that moved.

‘Fuck, fuck, fuck.’

Scout felt the fear and panic. They kept on coming. Magazine fully depleted and was renewed. The Beretta sounded off now with single shots. Not enough firepower. They just kept coming. Three more seconds and it was hand to hand, two, one....

‘Down, down, down.’

Scout grabbed Kat and forced her to the ground just as a heavy rasping noise burnt at their ears from behind. Two seconds of thrilling repetition and then a moment of calm. Again the Gatling gun revolved and discharged. A hundred rounds a second flashed from six barrels to strafe into the courtyard. The cars popped and fizzed, dropped on their rims as tyres exploded. Upstairs windows were strafed into oblivion, glass shattered into millions of shards. Wyatt turned the Gatling back toward the yard. A hail of bullets smashed at the fountain beat at the doors; it was decimation as the brickwork was demolished. A tirade of malicious stabbing thumping lumps of hate smashed at their victims with the force of nitro.

When it was over the barrels continued to rotate, whining with the need for more but the box was empty. Carnage was the legacy that the Gatling left behind. Nothing stirred in the courtyard.

‘Are you alright?’ He could feel Kat shaking.

Slowly he dared to look. It was a horror he would never forget. 'Are you alright?' He repeated. She nodded, and he let her go.

Nasty, it was just plain nasty. What had looked so cool in the bag was just plain mean and nasty in reality. Blessed were the Saints that picked Wyatt to be on their side He pressed eject on the Glock and a trembling hand fed yet another clip inside. The worst thing was the smell, all black and filthy. Cordite and gunpowder, whatever it was, it stank.

Wyatt turned back toward the hole in the wall. The lunch box was off the side of the Gatling and another already attached. The man was cut and bruised, blood stained his face. He looked really pissed off. He couldn't bear to watch as the Gat whirred maliciously again raking bullets, tracers through the opening where the windows used to be. Troopers outside tried to weave. Were they kidding? No-one outruns a bullet and when they are that big and numerous there is no-where to hide. It was a maelstrom of death and hate. A hailstone of bullets that turned up the tarmac ripped at bodies and smashed through metal plate.

'I think I'm going to be sick.' Kat turned away and heaved.

He wasn't too far off joining her but he had to take a breath first. Had to hold it all in. Just then part of the balcony outside

creaked as its twisted timbers finally succumbed to the forces of
Gatling and gravity.

Why wouldn't this damn knot untie?

'Do I have to do it for you?'

'No.' He gently warded Kat's hand away with his own. 'I can manage.'

'I'll just bleed to death in the meantime.' She said.

'I hardly think so.' There it was done. A moment later the shirt was eased gingerly away from the wound. How about that, the wimp had worked. Wyatt's improvised medical procedure. Probably have a nasty scar but the nicely blackened bits would heal.

'Does it hurt?'

'I've had periods worse than this.'

Somehow he doubted that. But it was good to see her humour return. Girl was full of bravado, but he saw fear in those watery eyes. The past hour had taken its toll, mentally and physically. She looked like someone had beaten her, thrown her down a hole, and then dragged her a mile through scrub. Poor cow, he knew exactly how she felt. Well almost, apart from the hole in her side. That much he conceded probably hurt more.

With a gentle finger he teased Kat's hair from her face, then dabbed gently with the damp shirt he'd doused with water.

'When this is all over I'll buy you some new hair.'

'You'll get your arse in that river and find the old one.'

'Sure. I'll get the car out whilst I'm at it.'

Was that a smile? It was difficult to tell with so much dust and crap all over her face. *Yeah, that was definitely a smile.*

'Think you can watch the yard for a minute?'

'I think I can manage.'

'Be right back.'

'How is he?'

Yuri was checking his patient's pulse.

'Slipping in and out of consciousness but he'll be fine. We just have to get him out of here.'

'Working on that. Listen, I don't mean to be a sceptic...'

'But?'

This was awkward. No doubting that both Yuri and Wyatt believed, but he was struggling.

'Is he really who you say he is? I mean, it's a bit, well, fantastic.'

'All miracles are. And yes, he really is the Messiah.'

There was that word again.

‘Can I touch him?’

Not necessary. Scout felt the pressure of the Messiah’s hand on his own. If he doubted before he didn’t now. Every hair on his body stood rigid to attention. A warm flush of goosebumps crossed his skin. When the man spoke he wanted nothing more than to listen.

‘You must stop this.’

‘Working on that one as well.’ He replied.

Just because he wanted to listen, didn’t mean he was going to do as he was told.

‘Scout, help me sit him upright.’

‘Sure.’ He did. Prince of Thorns felt like a man. Skin was all smooth and warm like anyone else. ‘You sure he’s...’

‘You must not move, Lord.’ Yuri took his patient’s other hand.

It looked like he wanted to kiss it but refrained. ‘Here, drink. You must take as much fluid as you can.’ Yuri gave another check on the patient’s pulse. ‘Wyatt will get us out. We will find a safe place for you.’

‘Do you remember?’ Scout asked. ‘Anything that happened before... Before now?’

‘Yes. I remember that people wouldn’t listen. It seems that nothing has changed.’ He smiled with a tired face. ‘Please end this.’

Truth was he didn’t know how. Too much blood spilled already. The vultures that were beginning to circle outside again, they wanted flesh. He shrugged. ‘You’re a threat to the people out there. I don’t think they want to talk anymore.’

There was quiet confidence and a calm authority oozing from the man. He didn’t look like a threat. He was quite handsome really. All blue eyes and wavy brown hair. A quick trim and blow dry wouldn’t go amiss, but he set the green scrubs off nicely. His face was young but experienced and from what Scout had read about him that was certainly true. He’d packed a lot of living into so few years. He started talking again.

‘Please, tell Wyatt that *my* life is not worth another’s. This has to stop. I don’t want my words founded on the bodies of the dead.’

He was starting that philosophical shit again. San would love him. Someone for him to talk, talk, talk to. Scout went to break the hand contact then realised the Messiah had slipped back into sleep.

‘Whatever happens,’ he said to Yuri, ‘don’t let them take him. You understand what I’m saying?’

‘No. What are you saying to me?’

Scout picked up the Tokarev from the floor and thrust it into the scientist’s hand, closing his fingers around the guns handle.

‘I mean, don’t let him fall into Commission hands. You want them to crucify him again?’

‘Why have your men retreated? Order them back.’ Liam was incensed. He hadn’t authorised this. This man was disobeying his orders. ‘Send them back. I want this finished.’

‘Are you mad? I’ve lost half my command already. Look at them.’

The road was covered in dead. Three of the trucks were burnt out. One was still smouldering. A wheel lay on its side fifty yards away and the road was strewn with pieces of burnt out truck. The air was thick with the smell of burning oil.

‘I’m not sending my men out there until we have proper support.’

He motioned to the Jarig that helped their wounded comrades away, as others found what cover they could, most just keen to keep a low profile and maybe stay alive. A medic station had been erected to the rear and was out of range. There were wounded on the ground everywhere.

‘I am giving you a direct order to re-commence the assault.’

‘The Commander is waiting for reinforcements.’ Sunglasses seemed to back the Commander’s decision. ‘The garrison at the

castle has been advised of the situation. Three hundred troopers are on their way. Ten minutes and you'll have your assault.'

'Not good enough.'

This was difficult. They were probably right. But ten minutes could give resourceful men the time they needed to escape. 'I said I heard.' Why were they looking at him like that? 'You're frightened, is that it? There are no more than five heretics in there... five.'

'And for now they have superior fire power.' Sunglasses was adamant.

Cowards, they were all cowards. It was the only possible reason for the withdrawal. The box was in there. He was in there. The one with the eyes was just thirty yards away. Why had he let him live all those years ago? 'Why?'

'Why?' Sunglasses and Commander Hirsten shared a disturbed and distrusting look.

'Ten minutes?' Liam asked.

'Ten minutes, sir. That's all we need. Just ten minutes.'

'Ten minutes for what?' The new voice was female and surprised them all. 'Ten minutes for what?' She repeated.

‘Until fresh troops arrive and we make another assault, madam.’ Sunglasses nodded and Hirsten lowered his head with respect.

‘What are you doing here?’ Liam seemed outraged.

‘Checking to see for myself the damage you have caused, little Troll.’

‘Both Sunglasses and Hirsten shared another glance. It seemed they were quite happy at the new arrival. It was a chance to concede authority, and responsibility. She looked every bit Liam’s match.’

Isabella on the other hand was trembling inside. Appearance was everything if her plan was to work. She had taken instant stock of the situation. Mayhem was the result. Liam had overstepped his authority in leaps and bounds, she was sure of it.

‘How many casualties?’ She asked.

‘Seventy, with forty three dead. We were ordered to make frontal assaults.’

‘Casualties are acceptable, Commander.’ Liam was angry.

‘Not to me.’ The words burnt Hirsten’s lips. ‘Those are my men being carried away.’

‘And you will continue the assaults until I tell you otherwise.’

‘You will stand your men down, Commander. I am taking charge here. I have Patron’s authority to end this calamity. Frankly it’s become an embarrassment.’

‘You will follow my orders. Your obedience is not to her, it is to me.’

‘And you will stand down little man.’

There, she was all in with both feet now. Make a good show of belittling him. Get both the Spatzno and Jarig on side. By the looks of the carnage that wouldn’t be too difficult.

‘Arrest this woman Commander, she has no authority here.’ Nobody moved. ‘Do as I say.’

‘You both know who I am?’ She asked them.

Isabella knew they did. What they probably didn’t know was what, if any, her official standing actually was. This was the big test. She was close to Patron. She had his ear and his trust and they knew it. Sunglasses knew it for sure. Question was, would they concede to her authority?

‘I have just left Patron. I am here to appraise the situation and bring it to an end.’ She glared at Liam. ‘By any means necessary.’ Her attention turned back to Sunglasses. ‘The

Assembly is well aware of what is going on. They will not be happy with the loss of so many fine men, or the open nature of your actions.'

Liam was incensed.

'What are you up to? Why are you really here? Patron gave me explicit instructions. I am to handle the situation as I see fit.'

Isabella waved a hand and a dozen armed men came forward. Every one of them wore the Black shirts but they were her men. Hand picked for their loyalty to the Trinity cause.

'You are relieved, Commander. And I will make sure that no blame is attached to you, or to your men.'

'Yes, madam.' He bowed. 'Thankyou.'

This was actually working. She saw the relief in his eyes as he stepped back. Liam was restrained, at least for now, but she had to put the second part of her hasty plan into operation. For that she needed the full cooperation of Sunglasses. She beckoned him with an almost nonchalant finger and stepped out of earshot from the others.

'Half the City already knows we have a situation here. The Politicians are going to scream bloody murder. You'll probably have half a dozen Legate Primes crawling up your backside

within the hour.’ She took pause feigning desperation at the situation. ‘I’m going to talk to them. Promise them whatever they want if they’ll come out. If they do, I want you and three of your men to arrest them. My men will provide a guard whilst we get them somewhere... more appropriate. After that your men will conduct them to a more private facility. The important thing is that we get this resolved, quickly.’

He nodded in agreement. Isabella took a deep breath. It wasn’t deep enough as another problem raised its ugly head and presented itself in plain view to them all.

Kat checked her wound. Still no bleeding, she might actually make it out of this place alive. Then again she always was an optimist. A bit of effort got her onto her knees. Just her luck, a storm of flying ordinance in such a confined space and she was the only one that got shot. Bloody typical. It hurt too. Of course it bloody hurt. But there was something about the pain that made her want to poke at the hole. She decided that wasn't a good idea and refrained.

There was one other thing to consider. She picked a piece of glass thrown out by the windows, there was plenty lying about. She almost screamed at the image reflected. Squinting in the hope of improvement didn't help either. The reflection showed she wore the face pack from hell, and her hair was matted and grey. Then again, maybe it wasn't so bad; it gave her a kind of crazy exterior that she could work with.

The barrel of the AK had cooled sufficiently for her hand to take a grip and using the stock against the ground. She managed to stand. There, wasn't so bad. Or was it? Hundreds of shell casings littered the marble surface. The wall of bodies was

enough to make her look away, close her eyes for a moment.

What she saw outside she would never forget.

Thirty or forty men lay haphazard, their lives extinguished. Oh God, there were body parts and the courtyard was sprayed blood red. Had she really played a part in that? Idiot, where was he? Where was Scout?

‘Scout,’ the word was barely audible, ‘Scout...’

‘Take it easy.’

She felt his arms steady her.

‘I want to go home.’ Her eyes welled and bottom lip quivered.

‘Shhh, you’re in shock. You need to sit.’

‘Of course I’m in shock. And I don’t want to sit down. Have you seen that?’ She couldn’t bring herself to look again. ‘Have you seen what we’ve done?’

He gave no answer. Why should he, what was there to say. Kat leaned against him and rested her face on his shoulder. She wanted someone to hold her.

Take your time, you can work it out.

Did she have to ask him outright? Was she so covered in shit that he didn’t want to touch her? Then she felt them. They were

gentle at first, cautious and unsure. Good for him. He finally got it, as both arms wrapped tight around her body.

Tighter, for God's sake, hold me tighter, she demanded in testy silence, *tight as a bloody straight jacket, and don't stop.*

The tears came. She wasn't going to make a noise about them; she was just letting them out. One tear for every man that had lost his life. One shed for the hole in her side and one for Yuri. The bastard.

Now she wanted him to let go. It was difficult to breathe, she pulled away. Far too much water leaking and now her nose ran. She'd thank him for the use of his sleeve later.

There, much better. Now she could look at him without the fear of being unattractive. *Yeah, right.* She stared up into his eyes.

'Don't read too much into this. I'm just having a weak moment.' Both hands touched his face and she kissed him. 'I don't want to die here.' She whispered. 'Not like this.' Another kiss followed. At least he wasn't pushing her away. 'I think its time for one of your really stupid plans.' She nodded agreeing with herself. 'Yeah, make it a good one.'

'Now get your hands off me before I start screaming and slap your face.'

Was that a pep talk? Was it really necessary to use my sleeve like that?

That woman was one big contradiction. She did taste good though. For several moments there she'd taken him somewhere else. So why did she look like she wanted to slap him now. Like that would help. Still, if he came up with a good plan that saved them all she might be really grateful.

Nope, there was nothing. They were all going to die and that was that. One more attack would likely finish them all off. He moved low toward Wyatt. Too late in the day to get himself killed by some grunt out there taking a pot shot through the window... through the hole in the wall. He found a good spot where he could see.

'Maybe we should go out there and talk to them?'

'If you think it would help.' Wyatt invited him to leave through the hole.

Hmm, he considered it. There was forty yards of open ground out there and a lot of hair triggers waiting to get squeezed. On reflection it didn't seem such a good idea. Wyatt wasn't looking good either.

‘Are you all right? Let me take a look...’ The rebuff of his hand was a tetchy one. Some men don’t like to be touched, he could understand that. ‘You’ve been hit.’

Wyatt looked down at his torso and then at Scout.

‘Occupational hazard.’ He said. ‘I’ll be fine.’

‘I don’t think so.’ Blood was dripping, no, that was more than a drip coming from the cuff. The round neck of the jumper he wore was thick with crimson grit and the stain around his midriff already bigger than when she had first noticed.

‘If not me, then Yuri. Let him check you over.’

‘I’m fine. I think all I need is a hug.’

That wasn’t the expected reply. ‘Why are you looking at me like that?’ *He was joking, right?* That was the first time he’d seen Wyatt smile, if you could call it a smile, more a grin with an angst.

‘There’s nothing wrong with your eyesight then?’ Nor his sense of humour and frankly he was glad to see that Wyatt had one.

‘Heads up, there’s something happening out there.’

Something was happening in here. Too much friendly blood was being let. Kat was down Wyatt was leaking like a sieve. That

was when it happened, that something that no-one could ever have anticipated.

A ball came bouncing across the road. It was small, dirty, the type kid's kick on the street.

'Is that a football?' He asked.

It was. Everyone saw it. Even the Jag were raising cautious heads. The ball bounced, bounced, bounced and then rolled to a stop outside. The silence it heralded was unnatural.

'Hey, kid. What's going on?' A small child had run out into the road to get his ball back. 'What is he crazy? Get out of there. Hey, it's dangerous...'

Two more came laughing after him and then several more close behind. Jarig arms began waving at the children, voices raised to clear the area. Everyone agreed, this was not a good place to be. Regardless, the little sods began a kick about.

'Wyatt, we have to stop them.'

'No. It is nearly time for you to leave.'

'Disguised as children? Do you know something that I don't?'

No answer.

'Is this what you were waiting for?'

‘Hoping for.’ Wyatt said. ‘Not quite the same. Sometimes you just have to rely on faith.’

Within a minute the road was a playground. Twenty five maybe thirty kids were doing their thing. Laughing and shouting as if they hadn’t a care in the world. Who the hell plays tag in the middle of a war zone? They were totally oblivious to the men, to the guns still pointed nervously across the tarmac. Scout had to concede that the sound of a ball clattered against the outside wall was infinitely more pleasant than bullets.

The ball stopped and was collected by an infant no more than six years of age. A freckly grin invited them to come and play.

‘Not bloody likely kid. Now sod off. Get you friends out of here. Wyatt, they’ll get hurt. Wyatt?.’ He needed help. ‘Yuri, Wyatt’s down.’ He was. Stalker was sat... more leant against the inside wall, neither gun still in his hands.

‘Shit, shit... Yuri. YURI, do something.’

Yuri ripped Wyatt’s jumper fingering the bullet holes and pulling the cotton apart. Wow, he really was a solid mass of muscle. Problem was the flesh was torn in numerous places. Holes... at least six, no seven that Scout could see. Blood was everywhere and still oozing.

‘We have to stop the blood or he’ll bleed out, Yuri.’

‘I can see that. Here, hold this.’ He handed the Tokarov to Scout and removed his own jacket pressing it onto the wounds.

‘This isn’t possible. Wyatt cannot be harmed. He is Entity.’

‘He’ll be a dead Entity if we don’t stop this bleeding.’

‘No, you don’t understand. Wyatt cannot die.’ Yuri was pushing every scrap of jumper and parts of his own shirt he’d ripped away into the wounds. ‘Put pressure, here and here. Hold on Wyatt. Hold on.’

Another hand offered help. Slim pale fingers thrust down onto blood soaked garments.

‘You must rest, Lord. Please, stay safe over there, gather your strength.’

The Prince of Thorns moved Yuri aside. ‘We cannot help him.’ He said, his voice soft but commanding. ‘Wyatt understands what he has done. His decision has been made.’ Wyatt took his hand. ‘I paid the Centurion,’ he said, ‘I told him that your blood would be a sacrifice to his Gods. The idiot believed me.’

‘You shouldn’t have done it, not even for me.’

‘Yes I should. Someone had to.’ Wyatt was smiling again. ‘That stinking Roman wretch got well paid in silver.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘Can you save Wyatt, Lord?’ Yuri was almost pleading.

‘No. I cannot give him back what he has already passed on to me. That was a foolish thing to do.’

‘Huh, that’s your opinion. The truth is I’m tired of all this. I welcome an end to it all. You do realise that they’ve all gone now. Peter, Paul, all of them. It’s just you and the children now. Rather you than me.’

‘Lord.’ Yuri reached for his patient; the effort was too much too soon. Even Wyatt with half his blood now pooled on the marble still found the strength to reach out.

‘I’m beginning to see now.’ The Messiah’s eyes were closing, what strength he had was waning fast. ‘You’ve broken all the rules.’ He said. ‘You’ve hurt people to make this happen.’

‘And I’d do it again. I agreed that they had to be reigned in, but not destroyed. God was wrong to order us to end it all.’ Chesty coughing brought more blood it was spat out onto Wyatt’s lips. It moved with solemn purpose down the Entity’s chin. ‘I knew that you wouldn’t agree. That’s why I didn’t ask.’

‘So the end justifies the means?’

‘If it means no end for them, then yes.’ Laughing was no better, yet more blood. It was a wonder the big man could still

speaking. But he did. 'I'll wager you never thought your Second Coming would... turn out... quite like this?'

'You were wrong to do this.'

'Bullshit. You have a second chance now.' More chesty spasms ended in painful grimace. 'I know that *He* will come back.' Wyatt grabbed the Prophet's arm. 'The Father will want to support his Son. *He* will come back. Not for them, but for you. Teach them; teach them what it is to be truly human. Do it before *He* returns. Prove to God that He was wrong.' Wyatt's head slipped back. The man was struggling to stay alive. The Entity behind the words was fading fast. 'I made a good bargain.' He wheezed. 'My existence exchanged for yours. What's the life of one disobedient Angel compared to the Son of God?' Wyatt gathered the last of his strength. Angry was what he did best. 'If a hundred Angels must die so that the Prophet may live, then so be it.... So be it.... So be...'

One last defiant glare and Wyatt's head rested back against the wall. A last futile gasp and he was silent. Everyone was silent. Yuri closed Wyatt's eyes.

'Lord, please.' He had collapsed. 'Help me move him. He is too vulnerable here.'

Outside the volume increased. It sounded like a school yard, a playground out there. Dumb arse kids were going to die. Scout had to do something, fast.

‘Order your men to advance, Commander. Do it now or I’ll have you arrested.’

‘There are children in the way, sir. I cannot with all conscience order an attack with children in the way. It would be a bloodbath.’

‘All heretics are expendable, even small ones.’

‘But, sir. I cannot comply.’

‘No, you will not.’ Isabella was still trying to take it all in. Where had these kids come from? Worse still there were parents arriving too, women in their dozens. This was fast turning into a circus.

Think quickly, maybe this could be turned to an advantage.

After all nothing had changed really, not really. Proceed with the plan. ‘The Assembly will not allow the death of so many innocent citizens. Commander, order your men back two blocks.’

‘No.’ Liam barked. ‘Order them to cross the road. There is no need to fire until they reach the building. Casualties can be kept to a minimum.’ He drew his side arm and aimed it at Hirsten. ‘Give the order. Give the fucking order now.’ Hirsten

shook his head slowly. Fear on his face that the gun would discharge.

‘Then you are hereby removed from your command.’

A single shot rang out.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. The Whispers had told him that they would protect him. His work was far too important to allow anything to stand in his way. All heretics were to be purified. *They* had promised he would be protected.

Liam was disturbed to hear nothing now. No hiss or whisper that demanded to be heard. Not a single sound presented itself. Even the light had faded. Just tiny snapshots of brightness remained. Flashes of lightning that stabbed before eyes that saw nothing else. This was wrong on so many levels.

It was that bitch, she had shot him before he could fire his own weapon. That was it, he was sure of it now. His head had twisted badly from the bullet's impact on his skull. Everything had shut down in an instant. All of his senses were dulled. It was like sinking in dark water with pricks of light passing like bubbles. No sound, nothing, he couldn't even hear his own thoughts.

All eyes were on Isabella. A lot of mouths had opened but no-one dared to speak. No doubting who held the smoking gun.

‘Order your men from the road. All of them back at least a hundred yards. Do it now, Commander.’

‘Yes Madam.’ He gave a whistle so loud that it nearly drove the blood from her veins. ‘Fall back.’ The order enforced by a long wave of his arm.

Fifty or sixty men moved uneasily in the right direction, away from the building.

‘Get transport and get it here now.’ She snapped. ‘I want trucks parked in the middle of that road in thirty seconds.’

‘Yes, madam.’ Sunglasses obeyed without question.

She had only a few minutes before others arrived and then her authority *would* be questioned. She could feel the hairs tremble all over her body. What about the kids? What was she going to do with all these kids?

Two trucks lumbered up the road. That was a good start. Two minutes and this would all be over. Whoever else was in the building with Yuri, she had to get them out.

‘Heads up they’re backing off.’ Scout watched two trucks driving up the road. They stopped bonnet to tail twenty feet from the hole. The drivers evacuated the cabs and scampered for cover.

‘What’s going on? Are they letting us go?’ Kat was less than convinced. She looked barely capable of walking.

‘I have no idea.’ Scout answered.

‘Ask her.’ Said Yuri. ‘I think that this might be her doing.’

Scout spun on his heels Glock raised toward the approaching figure. He lowered the weapon.

‘I should have guessed.’ Isabella quelled a surge of surprise. ‘Unknown male involved with female terrorist. I should have known it would be you. Since when did you become a sympathiser?’

Kat limped her way toward the hole, Beretta pointed at the advancing woman.’

‘Who the hell are you?’

‘Easy Kat.’ Scout eased her weapon to face away. ‘I think the cavalry has just arrived.’

‘The what?’ She recognised a glimmer of recognition in him. ‘Scout, do you know this woman?’

‘Err, Kat meet Jorja. Sorry, Issy. She’s my sister.’

‘Your what?’

‘Introductions later, brother.’ You need to get your backsides on that truck I’m getting you out of here.’ It wasn’t that she was displeased or even shocked to see Scout. Her attention was directed toward the inside of the building.

‘Where is he,’ she asked, ‘where’s...?’ She couldn’t help herself as one hand raised to her mouth. Was it really him after all these years of waiting? Had He really come back for them just as the prophecy had said?

‘Quickly, all of you,’ she couldn’t take her gaze from the blue eyed young man being held up by Yuri. ‘Get him on the truck, fast as you can.’ She watched them pass. ‘Scout, is that really Him?’

‘Yeah he’s real, Issy.’

She could hardly breathe.

‘You’ve got a sister? When were you going to tell me you had a sister?’

‘Excuse me if it never came up in conversation. Yuri, get your... patient on the truck.’ He moved his hand toward Isabella.

‘Don’t, they’re watching. Scout, we have to do this quickly before any of the Primes arrive.’

‘Sure, whatever you say. Guess you’re surprised to see me here?’

‘Surprised? That’s one word. I didn’t have *you* down as a Trinity sympathiser.’

‘That’s you, not me. I’m here through circumstance and bad judgement. Wrong place wrong time, I’m just glad to see you, Issy. You are going to come with us?’

She shook her head. ‘Not going to happen, sorry.’ She addressed the lead Jarig. ‘Arrest them. Get them on the truck.’

Rifles were raised, orders barked, and prisoners jostled toward the trucks.

‘Hey, whose side is she on? What’s going on Scout?’

‘Easy, Kat. She knows what she’s doing. You do know what you’re doing, right?’

‘These men will take you to a holding facility. Only you won’t get there.’ She winked. ‘We’re going to lose you along the way.’

‘She doesn’t look like you.’

Both siblings glared with impatience.

‘Is your girlfriend hard of hearing? Get her on the truck.’

‘My mistake, you obviously *are* related.’

‘Kat, get on the truck before I put you on it myself. And you, she’s not my girlfriend. Issy, please. You can’t stay here.’

‘No choice. My men will drive you out of the City; we have a safe place for you. I’ll come when this mess is cleaned up. Trust me; I know what I’m doing.’ She wanted to hold Scout, hug him in case this opportunity was her last. Not a wise thing to do, someone might see. ‘I’ll join you when it’s safe.’ She dared not even smile at him.

Yuri returned, the Prophet near unconscious again, but safe on the flat bed of the truck. ‘The box, Isabella. I left it with the books in the cellar. Give it to them.’ Yuri was insistent. ‘They will not be able to open it. Patron will not be concerned with us. Just give him the box.’

Was that really Him? She couldn’t drag her gaze away. He sort of looked like the pictures, but not really. Yes, it was Him, it had to be. *Oh dear God.* As soon as she made eye contact there was no doubt. *Look away, Isabella.*

Too late, a storm of emotion had been aroused. She felt she might faint or even start to cry.

‘Isabella, the box.’

‘Yes. I heard, thank you Yuri. Now go.’

Scout was last over the tailgate hands holding onto the roll bar. A hot blast of diesel fumes and the vehicle lumbered away.

Breathe Isabella, breathe. The situation has been contained.

The children's voices had replaced the gunfire but now they too were being replaced by silence. Kids and mothers alike began to disperse. They melted away nearly as quick as they had arrived. Someone had forgotten the ball, the small leather sphere now resting in the gutter against the kerb. A few seconds was all it took for the road to feel like the eye of a passing storm. A calm that brought promise and hope for the future.

This madness was going to take some explaining. Isabella knew exactly who was going to get the blame. The Troll, Liam, lay face down in his own blood, the back of his head missing. He'd got personal and let emotions run unchecked. There were others who would bear witness to the fact. Only she and Patron knew the truth, and he would be overjoyed when she handed him the box. He would not it was empty. The fool didn't even know what it contained. And so what if the captives escaped, they were unimportant now. No-one would blame her? Just one more terrorist act attached to the growing heretic conspiracy, no blame to be attached.

She watched the truck moving away.

Is this how it was the last time, the wolves baying at the gates for blood. Heavens keys denied because a few small men feared change. Men frightened to lose the little that they had, who were unable to take a simple leap of faith? This time it would be different. This time they would make it work. One man would make the difference.

Amen to that.

‘Goodbye Scout.’ Isabella whispered. She was going to remain here at the heart of the City where she could do most good. Gather support for the struggle she knew would come. *Where about the box?* It didn’t matter. Let him bury it. Conceal it deep within the Reliquary, she didn’t care. It was of no concern now that the Resurrection was complete. No concern at all.

The Messiah had returned, that was all that mattered now. *He* had a second chance to herald a brand new beginning. *His* voice could now be heard above all others.

She felt a thrill of excitement which faded quickly to sheer dread. It was faith had had kept the candle of hope alive for over two millennia. Dare she hope now that its flame could relight the world eternal?