

the JOURNEY

An AState Novella by John Dodd



light

pain

darkness

I can taste the still water through my nose as I lay in the street; I can hear the rumbling of the roads through my fingertips as I raise myself up from the floor. I sit back against the wall and smell blood through my tastebuds, and I can see the light even though my eyes are closed. I raise one hand over my eyes and tentatively open one eye, it's early twilight, or at least that's what the streetlights make it look like, the alley I'm in is deserted, but the sounds of the city filter in from both ends. My whole body feels like somebody played a symphony of pain upon it, and whoever they were, they were a good composer. I look down at myself, nothing broken, nothing bending a way that it shouldn't, everything working, sore and aching, but working.

I stand, it's perhaps the most painful thing I've done in my life, something heavy and metallic clicks at my side and I sweep my coat back to see the massive automatic pistol at my right hip and the blade on my left thigh, and then it hits me.

Who am I?

I check the rest of my clothing; there's a layer of base material under the over layer, soft but breathable. The outer layer is harder material, scaled, in a configuration that would stop knives and take the sting from smaller bullets. The coat is tailored to fit me, concealing all my equipment whilst providing perfect access to all the pockets. I reach into the main pocket and draw out what passes for my wallet, several hundred dollars in various denominations and a single card, plain white, business style, no ornamentation, just a name.

Harland-Weiss

Doesn't ring a bell, doesn't feel like my name, which is maybe a strange thing to think for someone who doesn't know what their name is, but it seems like a name of power, something which I most certainly am not. I lever myself off the wall, bracing myself against the other wall as the sheer sensation of movement threatens to crush me to the floor. Dimly, like the shadow of night before the dawn, I can see someone moving towards me, I instinctively reach down for my gun, but even this exertion is too much and unconsciousness falls upon me like a hammer.

Darkness....



I look over the field, a thousand machines till the land there, the sun turns everything a shade of crimson, its light gleaming dully from the surface of the metal skins it finds underneath it. A ship passes above, and in its shadow, in the centre of the field, a man lays, the machines dig around him, wondering what they have found here, in their land. The man rises up, slowly, painfully. A white light shines down upon him from the ship above, he turns to run; the machines around him turn to watch him. As one, they charge after him, he runs.....

I wake to the sound of the deafening roar of absolute silence, the last I remember is someone approaching me, I lunge upwards, my hands stiff like claws, ready to defend myself. With a great clang of bone on metal, something smashes me back down to the bed, and I lay there stunned for a second.

My vision swims briefly and I focus above me on the solid steel base of the bed above me, still vibrating with the force of the impact. I raise one hand to my head and irrationally try to soothe the throbbing by rubbing at it.

"Are you okay?" A soft female voice from the side of me, I take my hand from my head and glance at her through the corner of my eye. What I see there merits a closer inspection, so I turn to face her. Petite would be a good word, although it does not quite do her justice, slender in the waist but wide hipped and full breasted, with a face that would be best described as "Why men fight". Her eyes are impossibly black, no difference between iris and pupil, and it is this that brings me back from my reverie.

"Yes" I reply "I'm fine"

"Good" her face beams in a smile that takes ten years off what I had estimated her age at, only the young at heart can smile like that.

"Where am I?"

"No thank you?" she pouts at me

"Eh?" The throbbing in my head is still a living thing, I'm not even close to being conscious enough for this.

"For cleaning you up?"

Oh yeah, that was it "Thank you" I say instantly, not really putting in any depth of emotion, more an automatic response

"That's alright then." She steps lightly into the other room

I stand up, my body still wants me to stay down, but I don't know where I am, and with a shock, I realise that my clothing appears to have gone missing as well. I grab the bedsheet and make a makeshift toga out of it, then pace into the next room. The Girl is sat at the window, looking through a small telescope out of the window at the night sky.

"Sorry to bother you, but" I begin, she raises one finger to forestall my comment, then beckons me over. I don't want to seem rude, so I walk over, she points at the eyepiece on the telescope, so I lean over and look into it, it's dark outside, and I cannot see anything but darkness out there.

"Do you see it?" she asks, a note of hope in her voice

"I'm not sure" I reply

"All my friends will be so jealous" I glance up from the lens to see her beaming at me again, it's as if my last comment wasn't even heard

"Pardon?" it seems the best thing to say in the circumstance

"That the observers are looking at me"

I raise one eyebrow in question, and in response, she puts both hands on her hips and stares at me "You know, the observers" she sounds a little peeved.

"No" I say calmly, shaking my head to emphasise the point "I don't know the observers"

She looks at me with an expression of horror for a moment and then she forces herself to be calm "That bump must have been harder than I thought" she murmurs, almost to herself "you should sit down" she leads me back to the other room and indicates the bed.

"I.....no thank you, I must get my things, where did you put my clothes and equipment"

"Oh those things," she playfully pushes at my shoulder "you must really have forgotten a lot, those were things from your other life, you don't need them here"

I turn to face her, lowering my face to meet hers and putting an edge into my tone "Where are my things?"

She pauses for a second, and I take the opportunity to stare hard into those black eyes of hers, tilting my head to the side as a predator does

when examining lunch options in the wilds. Her mouth falls open and I see the beginnings of moisture starting at the corner of her eyes. I forestall it by placing one hand on the side of her head and gently but firmly wiping away the tear before it falls, as a parent might do to a child about to have a tantrum. I leave my hand on her head and speak again.

"Where are my things?"

She points wordlessly to a small closet at the end of the bed.

"Thank you" I say quietly, guiding her to the bed and sitting her down

My things are all there, and it's the work of a half minute to re-clothe myself. She hasn't moved from the bed, and is now rocking gently backwards and forwards in a semi-fetal crouch. I crouch down by the side of her and gently take one of her hands.

"I'm sorry" I say quietly "But I have things of importance to do, and I cannot delay here"

She rocks on the bed for a second, then looks up at me "You're not one of us" she says, it's not a question, I answer her with a small shake of the head. She nods calmly, as if the news makes things better, and takes a deep breath, releasing it steadily. "I thought you might not be when they brought you in"

"What is this place?"

"This is the Crag, in Calculus Tor" as if that explained everything.

"And where is that?"

"On the West Side of the city"

"And which city is that?"

Involuntarily, her mouth opens and her hands snakes up to stifle her gasp.

"What?" I ask

"The city"

I shrug "Which City?"

"Where are you from?" she replies, her eyes narrowing

"I don't know" I say, truth might be better than fiction at this point

She pauses briefly and then nods

"Who are you?" she asks

"I don't know" I reply with genuine regret in my voice. She nods again and reaches around my neck to the back of my head, her fingers gently but firmly pressing on a point at the back of my skull.

"You have scarring here" she says quietly "which could only have been caused by recent blunt force trauma, memory loss could be caused by such an injury"

I move her hand and place it back in her lap.

"Who are you?" I ask, keeping my voice level "What is this place?"

Her composure is now total, as if the person I was speaking to but a moment ago was just a facet of her to be cast aside.

"You are in the Crag, on the thirty second level, My name is Kunigunde Mommen," she smiles shyly "My friends call me Kuni, I am a member of the Shining Sky"

"Shining Sky?"

"It is the title that the elders give us, we worship the great observers."

"Observers?"

"The lords of creation, they made this world and placed it within a dome so that none could affect their chosen, then they observe us from beyond"

Not the response I was expecting, dangerous ground to disagree with people who believe, you never know if they'll take it badly or not, and right now, I need her help.

"So you live your life in worship here?"

"Yes" she replies with a smile, but the smile doesn't reach her eyes.

"But?..." I prompt

She looks down at her lap for a second, then up at me, I can see in her eyes the need to be heard, so I don't say anything.

"I don't believe what the others do" she starts "I was a nurse in Deepdown, I saw more hurt and pain than anyone should, and then I heard about a group of people who never hurt anyone, who just stayed together and did peaceful things. I thought it would be a dream come true"

Her hands grip her tunic convulsively, the truth is often a painful thing

"I came here, hoping to find peace, to find some measure of worth from all the pain and suffering I've seen. All they do here is sit around and look at the sky and witter on about how the gods look down on them and bless them, but its such an utter crock"

"What do you mean?"

"They're pacifists, all of them, they're not allowed to carry weapons, and they're not allowed to fight back, so any of them going outside get torn to pieces, and all they can say about those that die is that they didn't believe strongly enough"

I almost smile at the thought of that, but keep my expression neutral

"Is that why you helped me?"

"Not through choice," she replies "our leaders brought you here a few days ago, I had a spare bed, so they left you with me"

"Is that why you were so giddy earlier?"

She blushes slightly "I thought they might have been testing me, you've got so many weapons, and you're covered in scars, you couldn't have been one of the faithful, I thought that maybe you were one of the ones who controls the rest of them"

I smile softly "No" I murmur "No I'm not one of them, I know that if nothing else"

She looks deep into my eyes for some sign that I'm lying, there is none there, and she looks down into her lap.

"I've been a fool" she mutters, her voice beginning to rise above her usual tone "I should never have come here"

I rise up smoothly "Nothing wrong with having a dream" I say quietly "As long as you recognise when a dream is only ever going to be a dream"
She nods, wiping away her tears before they fall.
"How do I get out of here?" I ask
She looks up at me and her voice is calm again "I know the way"

We start down the inside of the Crag, it's a fascinating place, not at all engineered, the passageways are uneven and steady, as if naturally formed. I've seen similar things, but only in the homes of tiny insects that crawl and burrow. Whatever made these tunnels must have been far larger, and long gone by the looks of it. The hallways are filled with people, some wearing the tiny insignia of the shining sky on a pin badge, many not, and it looks as if those who are not are on their way out. We pass an open door as two people are flung through the door to land unceremoniously at my feet. I glance into the room to find a number of shining sky followers setting up a telescope near the window.

"I thought you said that the cult is supposed to be pacifist?" I mutter to Kuni
"Only if you're not obstructing the telescope" she whispers harshly, motioning me forwards
"So what about those they kick out?"
"Not the problem of the believers" she whispers "and there's a lot more believers than infidels in here, ask yourself if you'd start a fight surrounded by two thousand of the other side on the premise that they're supposed to be pacifists?"
I nod, and quicken my pace.

After an hour of seemingly aimless wandering, the hallways take a turn downwards and then level out, widening into a larger hall. Scores of the faithful line the hall, both upon the wall and in the middle of the floor, none of them in groups, each one a solitary figure. I see the exit ahead of me and start towards it, Kuni grabs me urgently and pulls me back.

"Not that way" She whispers
"Why not?" I murmur quietly
"Look at the floor" she replies softly

I look, the floor is painted in the darkest shade of black that I've ever seen, it does not reflect any light whatsoever, and then I notice that there are several orbits carved into the floor. Each one of the faithful is stood upon one of the orbits at some point.

"What's going on?"
"Take a look at each one of the faithful" she replies

I look again, each of the faithful is wearing a robe of some sort, either white, yellow, or black, and each one of them is carrying a sign on their shoulders written in a language I'm not familiar with.

"The map on the floor is the sky as we know it, each one of the faithful represents one of the observers, and stands in the position that you can find that particular observer. It lets the new members of the faithful locate their gods for the first time"

"What about the indentations on the floor?"

"I'm not sure, something about the patterns that the observers favour, I never got deep enough to be told what they are, but when I first came here, one of the faithful walked straight across the floor here, they took her and did things to her"

"Did things to her?"

She shudders almost imperceptibly "I don't know what, but her screams could be heard throughout the entire crag. They lasted seven whole days, and then they found her body at the entrance to the crag, her skin had been etched from head to foot with the diagrams on the floor here. But that's not the worst of it"

I don't reply, this is another one of those things that she needs to get through herself.

She breathes deeply and continues "Creatures, tiny creatures like maggots, had been left in the scars, exactly where the faithful had been when she interrupted the pattern."

"And people still stay here?" My voice rising slightly

"For the most part, no one has anything to fear, if you don't break any of the holy tenements, you have nothing to fear, you don't pay for the housing, and no one messes with you. You only find out the whole truth when you arrive in here and you start to see what goes on where everyone else does not watch"

I nod, classic cult method, present one face to the world in general, ensure that they never see anything but that face, then do what you will where everyone cannot see anything.

We move around the outside of the room towards the exit, and nearly reach the exit when a tall man steps from a side room and moves to bar our way.

"Sister Mommen?" he intones, his voice deep and clear, the accent strange, thick and guttural.

"Brother?" she replies

"Does our guest leave so early without thanks?" he hasn't even looked at me yet, as if I don't even register on his plane of existence

"There are matters of urgency that he had to deal with, I am merely escorting him so that he does not disturb the faithful"

"And how would he know that, unless his memory has returned?"

I surreptitiously reach into the inside of my coat and prime my gun "How would you know that my memory is lost?" I ask, keeping my tone calm and easy

"I await your answer, Sister" his tone gets colder, and there's a nasty edge there now

"You will answer my question" I pull Kuni backwards and to the left, leaving a clean field of fire to his chest.

I see the move as he begins it, both hands reach into his robes and emerge holding long blades, I tilt the gun in its holster and put a single round into his left hand. He howls and drops the left blade, lunging with the right. I grab his wrist with my free hand and curse silently as he rolls his

arm against my thumb, breaking the grip effortlessly, then twists his wrist to scrape against the outside of my left forearm. The knife makes a light indentation but does not penetrate, so I leave my gun in its holster and backshift as I draw my blade, holding it in front of me in a light, three fingered grip. Behind me, I hear horrified gasps as the faithful scatter in all directions, all but those standing on the orbits, these do not move, fear of what may happen to them must be greater than fear of pain and suffering from either me or my adversary.

Introspection is never a good thing in battle, my opponent brings his blade around in a lazy arc, curving elegantly around to my left. I block the blade by stopping his hand, and his wrist curls again, seeking again to draw blood from my arm. My own blade stops his before contact, and my own wrist rolls, sluicing past his guard towards his knuckles, his wrist bends in a way I didn't think possible, simultaneously scraping my blade away from his knuckles and drawing blood from the back of my wrist. I curse and transfer the blade to my left hand with a fluid motion, backshifting again to keep my distance.

My adversary pauses for a second, and time seems to freeze for the briefest of moments, his blade hasn't stopped moving, still weaving almost hypnotic patterns in front of him, never quite the same, but always touching on the same points at the same time. He drifts towards me, slowly, lazily, but somehow implacably. I meet his strike with the edge of my blade, seeking to make contact with his hand. His blade revolves around mine, and suddenly he's inside my guard, I slide backwards yet again, winding my arm around his like a serpent, leaving both of them entwined. He stops again, then bends backwards, the motion pulling me forwards and over him. I feel the tendons in my elbow stretch painfully and I unwind my arm rapidly, falling and rolling across the floor, coming up with the blade in front of me, left side presented towards him leaving a smaller target.

He's crouched on the floor, seemingly not having moved after throwing me, then he switches his footwork and begins taking long steps back and forwards, side to side, staying low to the floor, not so much moving as swaying. Again the pattern, he's not attacking, but I can't help but be fascinated by the movements that he's making. Some part of me realises that this is what he's planning, and I take another step backwards leaving my right side towards him. He leaps, and for a second, I don't know which way he's going, the jump carries him upwards, his body completely level to the ground for a second, and then he lands and bounces without any pause, the motion carrying him directly towards me.

The hole in his chest takes him by surprise, and he lands awkwardly, his blade skidding across the floor to the wall. He tries to get up as I level my gun at him, the problem with any combat art that relies on distraction is that you can often distract yourself if you don't keep your mind on business. He looks up at me with cold eyes and the flicker of a smile passes across his lips, he strains on both arms to raise himself up. Blood, thick and dark, drips from his lips, and he rolls backward to lie against the wall. I get a little closer to him, and he motions with one hand, the gesture causing him to grimace in pain. I lean closer, and he gently points at my right hand, then extends his own right hand towards me, with the palm towards me.

A painful rattle issues from his throat and his last breath hisses from him wordlessly. I look down at his hand, a symbol is tattooed there, a set of eight circles, split equally by eight lines, seven of them straight, one of them, the bottom left one, curving back and forwards like a serpent. A small star is imprinted on the outermost circle, just above the serpentine line. I look at my own palm, a similar symbol is there, but on mine, the star has been placed on the fourth circle, between the vertical line and the one to the right of it.

The sound of other movement breaks my concentration and I holster my gun, turning back to Kuni and indicating the man on the floor.

"Do you know him?"

"No, never seen him before today"

"You!" I snap, pointing my arm in general towards the faithful still in the hall "Do any of you know him?"

A ragged chorus of denial is my answer. I turn back to Kuni once again

"He had something like this on his hand" I say, indicating the tattoo on my palm "Does it look like anything you know?"

She studies it for a second, then looks up at me

"If I had to say, I'd say it looks like a map of the city, those lines correspond to the rivers of the city" She crouches down above the body of my foe, and looks at his hand for a second, then motions for me to join her.

"This star" she says, indicating his hand "is in the same position as this district, its possible that this is where he was stationed"

"So where is this?" I ask, pointing at my hand

"I'm not too sure, but I'd say it was in the vicinity of Lucent Heights"

I stand and look down at my foe, then at Kuni

"He knew where I was" I say, injecting calm into my voice "And he knew quickly, there may be more like him, and they may also know where I am"

Kuni stands and looks at me with a quiet resolve

"We have to get you to Lucent Heights" she says

"It may be dangerous, you might be better staying here" I reply instantly

"No, you saw the way he looked at me, in his eyes, I was already dead" she says quickly, the words almost falling over themselves in their haste to be spoken "I stay with you till we know that I'm safe"

"Very well" I acquiesce, realising only a half second later that I would have been without a guide had she chosen to stay behind.

She tries to smile, but the smile doesn't quite reach her eyes "Let's go"

I don't argue.

As we leave the Crag, I'm assaulted from all directions by noise, sheer, unremitting noise, no purpose or direction, just a wall of sound, penning me in from all angles. I stand for a moment in the cacophony, feeling life all around me, pulsing up through the streets like the heartbeat of the world. I look down the street, hundreds of people all around, every one of them intent only on where they're going, what they're doing, not a single one of them affected by the maelstrom going on around them.

Kuni nudges my shoulder
"You look like a tourist" she chides
I grin unselfconsciously "I feel like one"
"Come on" she pulls slightly at my arm, starting off down the street.
I follow, still watching everything around me, all the people here aren't seeing the world, they're lost in their own lives, you can see it in their eyes.
What an existence it must be to never notice anything other than what you have to.

We walk steadily down the street, Kuni keeps on telling me to put my head down, I can't stop staring at the sheer amount of life around me.
"You look out of place" she murmurs as my head again comes up involuntarily
Well, no surprise there then, I put my head down and we make better time, watching the world go by in a blur, looking the streets crowded with nothing but people. There is a road here, but it looks like it's never seen the touch of powered vehicles. I can see people running with small carriages harnessed to them, each one carrying other people, across the street, a convoy of people run past, all of them wearing the same uniform, all of them carrying someone else on their backs. The smell of a thousand machines fills the air like a swarm of pestilence, not visible, yet there can be no doubting that it is there. I look briefly to the sky, and in that moment, I stop again, caught by the moment.

Looking back where we came from, I can see the Crag looming immensely into the sky, but behind that, far larger, another spires lances into the sky. I look around for a second, seeing that the skyline to all sides is dominated by four smaller points, similar in size to the Crag, and to the south, one more of the far larger Spires. It looks as if God decided that the world should have a point to connect itself to the sky, and here is where he placed the plug. Ahead of me, Kuni stops and moves back down the road to where I'm stood, placing one hand on my shoulder.

"Okay," she starts, her tone easy "shall we stop for a second and let you gape?"
"Who made this?" I mutter, as much to myself as anything, unwilling to take my eyes off these huge constructs.
"Who made what?" she replies
"These" I point vaguely at the spires, then back at the Crag "Who made these?"
"No one I know" she says lightly
"You never wondered?" I breathe
"No," she replies "I mean, why would I?"

I look over at her with a raised eyebrow
"Why wouldn't you?"
"Look around you" she says, indicating the rest of the street "Do you see anything here, do you see any hope? Everyone here looks forwards, that's where they're going, that's what they do, nothing else matters. Who has time to admire the scenery when all your concentration is needed for the road ahead?"

In truth, a part of me can see what she's on about, but it still seems a pity.

As we go through the streets, I see it all around, I can see rows upon rows of identical houses line the street, each one of them only distinguishable by the number on the door, nothing with any value in the windows, dangerous to appear to have more than your neighbour, just makes you a target if you do. The factories, huge industrial edifices, like temples, where workers go every day to worship at the altar of money, its no different from other religions, save that the benefits are tangible, and not merely a promised reward when its all over. I wonder how many people get it wrong, treat religion like work, something that they have to do to get by, and at the same time, treat work like religion, something that is done automatically and without question.

I see a huge beast of a vehicle rumble past over the bridge ahead of me, massive construction, layered over and over again with plates of dull and lifeless metal, permeating everything with its presence, like a god of metal speaking its law to its uncaring subjects. I point the train out to Kuni, she shakes her head knowingly.

"If you're being looked for, they'll almost certainly have your description out to the transport militia and you don't want to mess with them. You may be good, but they're many, and skill doesn't count with those odds." She points at our way ahead "We head through Smokey Mountain, and from there, we can head through the other sectors where there isn't so much of a police presence"

As she continues talking, something occurs to me, she knows a little too much about the police for it to be a coincidence.

"Did you leave Deepdown?" I ask casually "or did you escape?"

She stops instantly, then looks at me with an appraising stare

"You don't miss much do you?" Again, it's not a question.

Calculus Tor is a large sector, and but for the spires tearing into the sky, there's no difference to the landscape, its probably how most people navigate around here, but it must be crushing to live in such a soulless place. I see in the distance that the view has changed, several huge hills are on the horizon, but there's something different about them. They're not smooth like regular hills, there's jagged edges to them, and as I watch, one of the hills collapses to the ground, like sand being eroded by a wave.

We keep walking, it seems like forever, its only the promise of difference that keeps us walking, the sun sits low in the sky, nearly obscured by the clouds, and the darkness is closing in, heavy and oppressive. A sign on the side of the road once read merely "Smokey Mountain", some enterprising soul has helpfully altered the sign slightly, in black paint, underneath the main writing, is written

"Abandon all hope, all ye who enter here"

Under that, another enterprising soul has seen fit to correct the first, in green paint, is written

"If we had hope, do you think we'd be coming here?"

I hope it's not an omen.

The Machines speed up, the man spins and fires, the round taking one of the machines in the face, it staggers and falls, circuits sparking from the ruined hole in its head. Ahead, a figure beckons, a small hole is cut in the wall next to them. The machines open fire, rays of light spray across the ground, leaving small trails of fire where they strike, the man leaps for the hole as one of the rays' touches the figure in front of it. I see the man covered in gore as the figure spontaneously bursts into a shower of entrails, the tunnel is slick and smooth and he slides into darkness.

I think I preferred the sound to be honest.

Kuni keeps informing me that we're not actually in Smokey Mountain yet, that the smell gets worse when you actually arrive in the sector. To be honest, I hope my nose dies before then, and if it doesn't die, I might well happily help it commit suicide to spare me the pain.

The rubbish rises up on all sides, towering like the buildings of the previous sector, and on top of each pile, I can see creatures, both two legged, and in some cases, distinctly more than two legged, scuttling back and forwards across the unstable masses. I can't make them out clearly, and some more logical side of me recognises that that's probably a blessing.

The trail is vague at best, it's more a case of picking the way through the smaller piles of rubbish and avoiding anything that shifts underfoot. There're no signs, no houses, and even with the darkness closing in, no fires, no lights of any sort. We travel on over the junk, the ground becoming an evolving mass of detritus, bound together by the pressure it puts on itself.

High in the sky, something moves, ahead of me, Kuni hasn't noticed in her scramble to get up the latest hill before it crumbles beneath her. Lights on the side of some gigantic craft gleam in a sweeping arc as the ship brings itself in low over the piles to the north.

"Hey" I yell at Kuni "What's that?"

She pauses, leaning precariously from the struts of a long dead vehicle, straining her eyes in the dim light.

"Looks like a dumper" she calls back

"Eh?"

"Dumper, how do you think all this crap gets here?"

"They just drop it on the piles?"

"Does this look like it's got any pattern to it?" I can hear the smile in her tone, even if I can't see it.

Ahead, the ship banks sharply, coming in at a steep angle, they don't slow down, and they're not showing any sign of stopping. The underside of the ship suddenly gleams brilliant red, and too late, I realise that not only do they not care that there's living creatures down here, they're actively aiming at us.

"Cover" I howl, scrambling up the hill towards Kuni

She looks up and with a strangled cry, turns and charges back down the hill towards me, I see the bottom of the ship open, the roar of the engines drowns the sound of the doors out. I run towards Kuni as the first wave of junk falls from the ship, diving behind the vehicle she was clinging to and dragging her behind me.

The wave hits the side of our cover like the wrath of god, but god when he hasn't had a bath, a deluge of filth, slime, what could only be body parts, and bits of engines race past us. The roar of the dumper as it passes over us isn't so much a sound as a force, the overpressure from the jets just speeds up the junk as it flows down past us. A high pitched scream echoes through my ears as several tons of foul smelling waste slosh their way past our vehicle, the torrent doesn't stop for a full minute, and neither does the screaming. I look down the hills to see the wave crush though everything in its path, some of those still scuttling around on the top of the hills are dragged down when their piles disintegrate, adding to the destruction as it sweeps down what was our trail.

I watch in mute horror as the landscape is re-organised in front of my eyes, as huge gaping holes are torn in the ground, and what we walked over but minutes ago is no more. The junk flow slows and stops, but the screaming continues, I look around for a second in confusion till it dawns on me that whatever was doing the screaming just took a breath. I lift up Kuni's head, gently placing one hand over her mouth, raising my other finger to my mouth to signal for silence.

As her screams subside, I notice that they were the only sounds in the neighbourhood, there's no other sounds, it seems that the natives are either used to this, or they're nowhere near the flight paths when they happen. My hearing clears briefly and I hear the junk shift behind me. I draw my pistol and indicate for Kuni to remain where she is.

I lean out cautiously from the side of the vehicle to see a group of seven people, men and women, all of them holding wooden sticks, advancing on our position. None of them are dressed in anything but rags, all of them are obviously suffering from malnutrition, the one in front has a number of pustules on his skin, some of them broken and weeping, others looking painfully close to bursting. Behind him, two women stand together, desperately clinging to each other in a futile bid to remain upright, like siamese twins separated from their bond. Of the others, three of them are all but skin and bone, with the last one far larger, fat and heavy, one hand resting on their stomach, but their hood prevents me from seeing anything more about them.

"Chu in the wrong place, shiny man" says the one in front, hefting his club "Chu wanna come troo ere, chu got to pay d'toll"

I smile, I just survived my first shit storm, no way I'm backing down to a small time thug.

"We're just passing through, don't want no trouble here" I say calmly

"We all be wanting that," he scowls "bu'chu pass troo ma town, chu pay me for the priv'ldge, ya?"

I raise my pistol from my side and sight it on his head, from my left, I hear Kuni

"You crazy? We're in the methane pits, you fire that and we all go up" she whispers urgently

I smile, indulgently, as a parent might to a child whose just figured out an obvious fact

"Maybe" I smile "Maybe not"

"Chu listen to yo w'mn man" snaps the man in front "Chu fire dat ting ere, chu kill all us"

"Or I put it down, and you kill us" I know how this works, any face-off requires that one side stands down, or both sides commit to destroying the other. In a situation like this, we can both destroy the other side, whoever backs down first will let the other one destroy them.

The man looks at me for a second, judging if I'm serious about my threat or not, there's a moan from behind him, and the matter is resolved. The fat one at the back has fallen over and with a shriek, the hood falls from her and her robe falls open slightly to reveal the distended stomach beneath it. Kuni and I are forgotten as the group rushes to the side of the woman, I motion for Kuni to follow me and start to make my way out of the area. I am interrupted as Kuni ignores my summons and moves over to the woman, I hold her arm firmly for a second.

"Are you a midwife?" I ask quietly

"No" she replies

"Do you have any medication for them?"

"No" her tone is a little more resigned

"Then there is nothing we can do here, right?"

I see her struggle with the idea of simply walking away, and I increase the pressure of my grip slightly

"If that were you, they would kill you, eat you, and serve the baby as dessert" I say quietly but firmly "This is a world where compassion will kill you faster than the predators"

I feel her muscles relax slightly as she allows herself to be led away, Its how most people justify not helping things, if there's a reason why they couldn't help, even if they could get around it, most people will not, they'll take the easy out and be done. I'm not saying that's what she's doing, but part of her recognises that there was nothing that she could do, and so being dragged away by me is the closest thing to clearing her conscience that she's going to get this day.

We travel in the darkness, picking over the debris in the pale light from the few lights far overhead, mounted far above to avoid the methane being set off by a faulty light, but not powerful enough to provide anything more than a sickly glow at this level. We make our way across the junk as quietly as possible, Kuni starts slowing down after a few hours, and to be honest, I myself haven't recovered from whatever happened a few days ago, every part of me is feeling as if something is still stepping on it.

By early morning, I can see the end of the sector, a huge ramp leads up onto a monstrous bridge, a line of men bearing arms stands to attention in front of it, and behind it, a cloud gathers in the sky, darkening all below it. As I get closer, I see that its not a cloud in the normal sense, but a cloud of insects, flies, vermin with wings, like a single organism pulsing in and out, as if it were the heart of the pestilence. The smell had almost become bearable, but when I see this, a fresh wave of stronger pollution washes over me, and I cannot help but vomit.

I look back to see Kuni busily emptying her stomach as well, and I turn back to see what there is to be done about this. There's over thirty guards that I can see, far more than I have bullets, but this is the way through, we can't be left behind in this. From behind me, Kuni drags herself up next to me, still gulping for breath, shaking her head.

"We can't go that way" she gasps

"There's no other way" I retort

"There is a way, we just have to take a route less travelled"

Not sure I like the sound of that, but I don't suppose we have much of a choice

"Lead on" I say

We travel south, seemingly further away from the wall, and as the light rises, so again does the stench. It makes sense, if you put meat on ice, it stays exactly as it was, but if you put it in a greenhouse, add in other meats, half cooked and not cooked at all, you've got disease in less than a

few hours. Multiply that by infinity and forever, and you have what I'm standing on. I see to the south that the wall stops, sharply and directly, no crumbling, no degradation, as if it was meant to be like that.

Kuni leads me south, and the smell gets worse and worse, I find myself covering my face with my tunic, then covering the area I'm breathing through with saliva, after an hour or so, I'm considering urinating on it, anything to try and escape the smell. I'm so preoccupied by the stench that I hardly notice Kuni stopping. I turn around and walk slowly back to her, she's followed my example, and is breathing through several layers of cloth, heavily doused in her own sweat.

"Over there" she says, pointing towards the edge of the wall "it's only about a mile"

"What is it?"

"The Black Canal" she replies, as if that explains everything.

An hour later, I see that it did indeed require no explanation, and I can also see why the wall stops where it does. We stand on the edge of a long pit, stretching as far as the eye can see both east and west, and as I look down to the south, I can see, faintly, another bank on the far side. I look down into the sludge that passes past below us, there's a three metre gap between where we are and the surface of the canal, but that rises in places, in a way that nothing made purely of liquid could do.

As I watch, bubbles break the surface of the canal, and without conscious reflex, my gun is pointing down into the blackness

"Things live here?" I gasp, frantically replacing my tunic over my mouth

"Not life as we know it" replies Kuni, taking an involuntary step backwards from the edge

"So what now?"

"There's a boat across the water on a regular basis, it's how I got through in the first place"

"They'll take us across?"

"Depends on how much you want to spend" she replies

I smile beneath my tunic, it seems that even in hell, money is a universal language.

We wait there in silence, conversation would mean drawing more breath than was absolutely necessary to survive, and in truth, there's nothing to be said that would be worth paying that price. Bodies, sometimes just the individual parts of them, float past, some of them mostly intact, some of them all but bones. I watch one body from the point at which it enters my sight, to the point at which it departs, seeing the flesh blacken and melt as the corrosive fluids of the canal eat away at it. Even so, every few minutes, something small and fast scuttles around under the surface, I don't fire at it, that might attract others, but I do keep it in sight, just in case. Larger objects, the remains of vehicles, also float past, not one of them that isn't covered in the tar like substance that makes up most of the canal.

After an hour, a shape on the opposite bank coalesces through the cloud of pestilence, slowly making its way through the murk towards us. We wait in silence for a few minutes as it slowly weaves around the larger obstacles, slowly carving through a thousand years of hardened slime. The ship draws close and I get a better look at it, the hull is pitted and scarred and in several places has been re-welded over with something that looks suspiciously like the bonnet of a car. Not the most inspiring of things on a ship, but I suppose that ships that are invulnerable to this sort of thing cost more than most captains would be willing to pay for.

The crew are nowhere to be seen, not a thing stirs up on deck, and I begin to wonder if it's just another derelict when it banks smoothly and evenly and coasts close to the side of the wall we're standing on. I don't move, neither does Kuni, and for a second, it seems like the world stops moving.

Something shifts on the bridge of the ship and the spell is broken. Whatever it is, it's huge, far larger than anything human could be and the footsteps it takes reverberate on the deck like the sound of cannons on a range. Clad in a rough cloth poncho, it moves slowly and ponderously towards us. At around four metres I see a head on its shoulders, human, female, the features not moving. My hand sneaks into my jacket pocket and thumbs the safety off my gun, there's no way that a human could be that large.

The creature stops at the edge of the boat and reaches out with one hand, one giant, metal, slightly rusted hand, and grips a large stanchion on the side of the dock, reaching out with the other hand to hold the boat. My hand tightens on the grip of my gun as the ship moves closer as the creature flexes inhumanly powerful muscles and brings the ship close enough to step on.

It pauses for a second, then looks down at me with those dead eyes, and extends one hand, palm upturned.

For another second nothing moves, although I'm pretty certain that my gun is only ever going to fit my hand after all the pressure I'm putting on it. There's a soft noise, like the tearing of raw meat on the slab of a butcher and the head swivels to look down at Kuni. I place one hand on her shoulder and prepare to pull her out of the way in case anything happens, but she reaches into her pack and takes out two items, a small toy and a small glass made from crystal, placing them gently on the rusted paw.

The creature angles its head down (I can't imagine those dead eyes seeing anything), and a sound very much like an engine idling emanates from its chest cavity, the fingers close slowly, almost reverently, a soft whining noise coming from them and the head bobs up and down. It turns and lumbers back to the bridge, no longer paying us any heed. Kuni steps onto the ship and gently pulls at my hand, still not willing to say anything.

I step on the ship, it seems more solid than the land I was just standing on, with a faint tremor running through the soles of my feet that must be the engine. We stand on the prow as the ship moves forwards slowly, the transition between being at rest and moving is seamless and the tremor under my feet has ceased, so it can't have been the engine.

The ship negotiates its way through the detritus in the canal with an ease bordering on elegance, as easily as I might avoid trash on the pavement. I look up towards the bridge and see the creature stood there, arms at its side, totally motionless, as if it were part of the ship. I glance around the rest of the deck, its all held together much like the sides, a plate added here, bolts and bars reinforcing the prow where something large has taken chunks out of it at some point. Welds like badly healed scars criss-cross the entire length of the ship, and in truth, the whole ship has the look of something that grew in the canal rather than something that was constructed by the hand of man.

I crouch down on the front of the ship, anchoring myself with my right hand as I lean forwards to look over the edge of the ship. I can see that the ship is far more corroded below the slime, but even so, there's something about the metal there. The discolouration is rising and falling with the level of the slime, even though the ship is staying inhumanly level, the protective covering reacts perfectly to the level of the canal, almost as if it were alive. Though the deck of the ship, I can feel a faint pulsing again and the ship speeds up slightly. I hop back to my feet and walk back to where Kuni is stood, unmoving.

A low moan, deep and reverberating, echoes over the slime. The ship shudders and slows briefly as we coast closer to the south wall. Through the clouds of grease and steam, I see huge spotlights cleaving the air like a sword, pointing downwards towards the slime. Below them, I see five figures, huge, like the owner of this ship, all stood on the wall unmoving. Unlike the one of the ship, these are not wearing the same thick cloth clothing, instead, each one of them a huge skeleton of metal, gleaming and shiny like new, but constructed almost identically.

"Don't move" a voice whispers across the deck, calm, but urgent. I suppress my urge to look around for the owner of the voice and settle for remaining motionless. The spotlight arcs across the ship and pauses on us. I strain my eyes against the cutting light, wondering to myself what's going on. The light sways back and forwards like a casual observer scanning something that isn't really of interest in their peripheral vision, then moves on down the line of the canal.

"What was that?" I whisper to Kuni

Her hand shoots up and stops over my mouth and merely a split second later, the light is back on us. We remain motionless until it passes away, and remain like that till we're a few hundred metres down the bank. Kuni slowly relaxes her hand and we both breathe easily again.

"Sentinels" she replies "We're about to enter Deepdown, they don't much like people coming in or out, you can't get in there via the overground unless you've got the right credentials."

"So what are those creatures?"

"The ones on the dock?"

"Yeah"

"They're called Simil, they're one of the shifted races"

"Shifted?"

"Yeah, lets just hope they're the only ones we meet"

"How many are there?"

Kuni pauses for a second, and over the wind comes that whisper again

"We are legion" it says firmly

"Who said that?" I ask sharply

"Look up, son of man" replies the voice

Something in the voice compels me to look, my eyes lock with the Simil at the helm and that head moves slowly down, a silent acknowledgement.

"Why didn't the light hear you?" I snap, my nerves must be most frayed than I thought.

"We do not judge each other, son of man"

I nod, as much to myself as in reply

"L..." I pause, ordering my thoughts for a second "do you have a name?"

Another pause "yes"

Another pause

"Could you tell me what it is?" I ask

"Could you tell me yours?"

"Er, No, Sorry"

"Then what makes you think I can tell you mine"

"It's different" I say quickly, "I lost my memory, I don't know who I am, I'm trying to find out"

"So you mean that somewhere within you is your name and what you are? You are just waiting for that knowledge to come forwards?"

"Yes, Exactly so"

Another pause and then the ship slows and coasts in towards the southern bank, the voice whispers again and there's a catch in it, like a human about to cry

"Then we are not so very different, son of man"

The ship slows to a halt by the dock, huge metal figures walk all around, slowly pacing to and fro in their duties. One of them, a misshapen creation, standing maybe six feet tall with two arms, easily as broad as its torso hanging down to touch the floor, steps towards the dock, raising both forearms from the floor. It reaches out slowly, almost languidly towards the ship, firmly grasping the post on the dock with one hand and extending itself out over the slime effortlessly. It takes hold of the ship with certainty and guides it into shore with ease.

The ship comes to a halt, and two more Simil step forwards, placing a long metal board between the ship and the dock wall. Each one of them seems completely absorbed in what they are doing, the world around them could vanish, and as long as ships still came by, their existence would mean something.

Such simplicity of existence would be beyond most humans, but I'm sure it's something that most of them would wish for.

Kuni steps off the ship first and I turn to bid farewell to the Simil who brought us here, only to find it (her?) standing right behind me. I feel shamed by the involuntary step backward I take, but it doesn't seem to notice. Those dead eyes look through my skin, straight to my soul.

"Should you pass through the contested grounds, seek out one called Walker, tell him that Ship sent you" The words are still a whisper even though it's right next to me

"I thought you didn't have names" I blurt

"It is not my name, son of man, it is just the title the world knows me as"

"I..." There are no words "Thank you"

There's that sound of tearing flesh as the head slowly dips and raises, I turn to leave.

"Should you find your name"

I pause at the edge of the boat, not turning back

"I should like to know it"

I smile to myself and raise one hand without turning, stepping onto the dock where Kuni waits for me. I don't turn back, it's a strange thing to feel kinship with something belonging to another race, but it's there and I know that when two creatures understand each other, word and gesture are both unnecessary and superfluous.

I would say that Deepdown is a strange place, but after all I've seen in the day since I've regained consciousness, I don't think I'll ever say that anything is strange ever again. This sector has the same amount of noise that Calculus Tor did, but the noise is different, in Tor the noises were alive, people could be heard, life was ever-present as it saturated every pore of the street. Here, it's still noise, still overpowering, but without the same life, only clanks, hisses and mechanical noises from mechanical things. I start to look around in wonder, but remember that looking like a tourist draws attention and school my expression back down to neutral.

I look across the way, the road is wider, reinforced in several places and a single pair of tracks lines the centre of the road, I presume for loading vehicles. Humans scurry back and forwards but their skin is darker, ranging from deep brown, to purest ebony and I realise with a shock that it's not their normal skin colour, it's just the colour that has attached itself to them due to working in this place forever. Looking down at my own skin and that of Kuni, I can see we're going to stand out whether or not I'm acting like a tourist, so I relax a little and take a good long look around.

The buildings are far higher here, but constructed in a way that the average human would never conceive of, some high, some low, no attention paid to ergonomics, every building built for a specific purpose with no concept of travelling between the two. The sun doesn't shine here, it's never shone here, there's light in the sky but it belongs to the machine gods and they're the ones who hold power here. No one even looks where they're going, they know where they're going, free will is an illusion here, just like the sun, the people here aren't humans, they're machines made from biological parts. I pull Kuni out of the way as a chain gang jogs past not pausing or looking, just moving. One at the back falls to the floor and without a pause in motion, two men running at the back of the gang produce *Machete's*, one hacks at the leg so the chain is freed up, one at the head. The woman slumps to the floor shuddering helplessly as her throat sprays arterial fluid everywhere. No one else stops, pauses or even looks, as if the world didn't notice. I look down the road as the next gang goes past, there's an order to it, young people at the front steadily getting older towards the end of the line. Those at the end are quite literally one step from the grave, the first step they take that's not in line with the gang, that's their grave.

We walk past the body, expertly cut, deep enough to sever the front of the windpipe, not too deep to remove the head and make clean up a problem. As we pass, a smaller Simil walks up to the body and effortlessly dumps it over one shoulder. The blood leaks down its back, leaving a trail of rusty flecked crimson behind it like the road to hell.

I look around, there's nothing else going on, we're not supposed to be here, but everyone's so busy trying not to be caught not working that no one's paying us any attention.

Excellent!

I motion to the long road going east which was the way we were headed originally, it makes sense that we continue heading that way. Kuni has no argument to this, so we set off at a brisk pace. There are differences in the sector as we continue down the road, less humans are seen, more machines, more Simil. The air takes on a viscous taste and hangs lifelessly in the air and somehow, the noise is dissipating as though only the humans were making the noise, which is impossible, but still....

A faint smell under the chemical soup in the air, something not mechanical, something biological. I pause for a second and look down the nearest alley, even in the dim light I can see something vaguely resembling a stream running from one of the buildings. I stop Kuni and motion down the alley.

"What's that?"

She looks, then shakes her head "Best you don't know"

It's the second worst answer to any question, barring the eponymous "forget it", it practically guarantees that the questioner will follow up even harder. I start down the alley and am stopped by a surprisingly strong grip.

"No" her voice has a strong edge to it

"So what is it?"

"Food Centre"

"That doesn't sound so bad"

She looks down at her feet momentarily, then motions for us to continue, I pause for a second, morbid curiosity is certainly a human trait if nothing else.

"I tell you if we keep walking" she says quietly

I nod and start off again down the street

"Have you seen any plants or animals here so far?" she asks

"No, it's all been machines and humans and those...shifted beings"

"Right, now understand that its like that all over the city, there are maybe five locations in the whole city that deal with fresh food. Nowhere near enough to handle the requirements for the city"

I can see where she's going with this, but best to hear her to the end.

"There are thousands of processing plants, just like this one, all over the city, they bring the dead to them to take what can be taken and re-process it into something vaguely edible"

She pauses to order her thoughts

"The thing is that in Deepdown and the other industrial areas, anyone working in these areas for a certain amount of time will be irredeemably contaminated by the sheer amount of crap in the air. This makes them useless for food processing, so the masters of the zone devised another use for them"

"Which is?"

"There are some pollutants that are instantly fatal, even by simply inhaling them. Everyone knows how dangerous these things are, so the people in charge have to deal with them by a very expensive and time-consuming method, in order to make them safe"

Not sure where this is going, so I just keep walking

"Most people don't want to spend any more money than they have to, so the simple way is to find a cheaper way of dealing with it, what better way than by using the workers to process the waste?"

I pause for a second "What do you mean?"

She stops and unwillingly looks me in the eye "They bring down those workers too old to continue working, or at the edge of death, or too crazy to work even in the Mad Shafts and they...." Her voice trails off, and I see a tear form in her left eye. I step forwards and place my hands on her shoulders

"You don't have to tell me if it's too painful" I murmur quietly, knowing full well that this will probably spur her into telling me. Her eyes look deeper into mine trying to discern if I'm telling the truth and not just saying it to make her feel better. In truth, I really do want to know what happens, but I'm capable of putting others feelings before my own curiosity.

"They take the waste and feed it to the people who are no longer productive, it gets around the fact that you have to process this waste because its no longer in the open. You avoid the paperwork for the deaths of the workers, because officially they died by ingesting deadly waste. The fact that it was forced ingestion is irrelevant, it's a great loophole. This way they prove that the amount of toxic waste is down, the number of deaths caused by industrial machinery is down, and everyone stays in line just in case they get picked for waste disposal."

"And?"

She looks away from me and makes to turn away, but I hold her steady, she looks back, tears in both her eyes now.

"I was a nurse, it was my job to evaluate people medically, how many people did I send to their deaths?" she cries

"None" I reply firmly

"How can you say that, How can you be so sure?"

"You left, didn't you?"

"Yes"

"You left because you found this out, *didn't you?*"

"Yes"

"You knew nothing of this before you left?"

"No"

"Then you were responsible for no deaths, when you found out about it, you left, you were not to know that you were dooming people, you were just doing your job, yes?"

"Yes"

"Then you are not responsible?"

There's a faint glimmer of a smile as a single tear winds down her cheek "No"

We stand there for a moment as she composes herself, then she nods, more down movement than up, then looks up and tries to smile, it'll be a few months, maybe years before she ever comes to terms with it completely, but it's a start.

"You don't belong here" the voice is sharp, with a particular nasal whine to it, I drop my hand into my pocket and prepare to turn.

I turn slowly, right side first, covertly angling my gun forwards to line up my target as I turn. The sight is not what I expect. A tall woman, thin but with an edge of wiry muscle to her, stares at me with eyes like lasers from the roadside.

"How did you guess?" I keep my tone light

She snorts, the sound sharp and brutal "You're clean and you're not registered for this area, who are you?"

"Registered Nurse Kunigunde Mommen, serial number 1154487" replies Kuni sharply, stepping in front of me

The woman seems unimpressed "And *he* is?"

"None of your concern, *worker*" snaps Kuni in reply

The woman smiles, and it's a nasty smile "So what's a nurse doing this far east?"
"Sightseeing" Kuni's voice now has an edge to it, and what should have sounded like defiance sounds more like fear.

The woman steps off the roadside with liquid grace and I take my gun out of my pocket, people don't move like that without training. I move one hand closer to Kuni as the woman moves forwards.

"But then" the woman says smoothly, switching her gaze from Kuni to me "I would have stopped you anyway, wouldn't I, Talbot?"

I pull Kuni aside, keeping my gun clearly in view "You know me?" I ask quietly

"Don't play games Talbot, what are you going here? This is my zone"

"I don't know you" I say calmly

"Sure you don't" her smile turns feral and she starts to pace to the left, I immediately mirror what she's doing, each of us tracing the others perfect circle.

"I don't" I protest "I didn't know my name till you just told me"

"Pathetic" she sneers "I expected better from you"

The words are a cover for her actions, she flips directly sideways, from left to right, then rebounds and slides across the floor towards me. In that split second, I make the decision to try and keep this one alive, tossing my gun to Kuni. The split second nearly costs me the fight as the woman's foot sweeps into the air as the rest of her stays on the floor. I make a last second abortive block and feel my left arm go numb as her heel connects with my bicep. I dance backwards quickly as she comes to her feet and goes into the same foot pattern that my last assailant did. Unlike the other, she doesn't wait for an invitation, bending at her left step and seemingly flying towards me, revolving gracefully in the air. I'm caught for a second by the sheer energy of the move, then brought back down to earth with a crash as her left foot, closely followed by her right, crashes into the side of my face. I spin and smash to the floor, skidding to a metre down the street.

"Too easy old man," She sneers again "You were supposed to be the best of us"

I get up slowly, too slowly, a combination of adrenal dump and dust makes my defence pathetic. She snaps in a kick to my solar plexus, followed by a straight right to my chin that I only just manage to backshift from, turning what would have been a lethal blow into a merely very painful one. I land on the floor again, my head swimming. Faintly I hear a woman scream "No", it takes me a split second to realise that it's Kuni and she has the pistol aimed at the woman.

The woman realises this and shifts her attention. I hear my gun roar once, twice and then there's a soft thud, a moan and the sound of vomiting. I wrench my eyes sideways and see Kuni on the floor helplessly emptying her stomach onto the floor.

A memory from long ago twists up my spine like the whisper of lightning before the thunder.

"*Never quit, Never stop, Never fail*" the words write themselves across my mind like the commandments of god and without thinking I stand, the pain is as nothing to me now.

"Enough" I command

The woman pauses and looks up, then grins again and bends to attack. I watch the attack unfold, almost in slow motion, watching as her feet scythe through the air. I duck under, fluidly dropping under her line of attack while rotating forwards, almost rolling. I sense more than see her feet cleave the air above me and I continue my spin using the momentum to add speed, driving my fist in-between her legs. My elbow shudders with the impact and I hear a shrill cry as something cracks inside her, her velocity carries her over me and she lands on the floor awkwardly, rolling to a halt.

I rise up from the floor and glance over at her. She's still conscious, moaning and twisting on the floor, but she's not going anywhere, her legs are bent at unnatural angles and there's a thin trail of blood running out of her. I run over to Kuni and make sure that she's okay, then walk steadily back to the woman on the floor. She's struggled to an almost sitting position, but the blood flowing from between her legs is thick and dark, I don't have long.

"Who are you?" I ask firmly

She coughs wetly, still trying to regain her feet, not making any reply

"Who are you?" I roar angrily "Why are people trying to kill me?"

Still no reply, I reach down with one hand and press lightly on her pelvis, the touch alone causes her to scream in agony and she falls back to the floor. I raise my hand, but leave it hovering above the area I just pressed.

"Who are you?" I whisper

No reply, I press down again, harder this time, she screams, the sound carrying all the emotion from a time when man could not speak, raw, primordial pain.

"Who are you?" So low that it's almost inaudible.

Her eyes lock with mine, and some part of her understands that I have no problem with keeping her in agony till she dies, she nods frantically.

"Einigkeit" she coughs and spits blood "I'm Einigkeit, just like you"

"What?"

She holds up her right palm, the same symbol as me, but the star is directly below the west line on the third circle. I look down to her again.

"What are we?"

She smiles softly "Servants, Talbot, just servants" she coughs and something more than blood comes up with the cough, the blood on the floor is now flowing freely. She grips my neck convulsively, pulling me down with the last of her strength. Her last words are choked out frantically.

"Look out for...others, told....you.....traitor"

iii

The man exits the tunnel with a loud howl, landing hard on the floor, he stands unsteadily as the remains of the other man drip from the tunnel in a thick red soup. He looks around, eyes unfocused as blood seeps from the back of his head, turning to see where he is. Rising up from the rotting wood, he paces up the stairs to the main edge of the canal. I look ahead as he staggers away from the canal, towards the sound ahead of him.

I walk back to where Kuni is sat on the floor, sitting down next to her in the middle of the road. Her face is pale and drawn and she's just drawing her stomach back into where it used to be.

"Guess I should leave the fighting to you" she smiles weakly

I don't reply, save to smile softly in return. We sit there is silence for a few minutes.

"What did she say?" she asks

"That apparently I'm Einigkeit, whatever that means"

The shock is evident on her face, she looks at me for any signs of deception and finding none, composes herself.

"You know what they, we, are?" I ask, my tone sharper than what I had intended

"I, no, not really, all I've heard are rumours"

"Go on" I say, as eager as a child opening an unexpected gift.

"When I was in training, I had a friend who used to lecture at the university, bit of a conspiracy nut, he was always on about something to do with an elite group of people, watchers, never interfering with anything, just watching"

My disappointment must be visible

"Well" she goes on quickly "I never listened much, but last I heard, he worked for Arclight over in Luminosity tower, we should go there and see if he knows anything"

I'm not sure about that myself, conspiracy theorists are a unique brand of people, tell them of smoke and mirrors and they'll make it concrete for whoever would listen. Present them with the inescapable truth that they were right about something and they go into a shell, because after all, if one of their theories is correct, then the others might be and that's a thought that most of them can't tolerate.

My doubts must be obvious as Kuni leans forwards

"What else have we got to go on?"

True, I have no idea what's in Lucent Heights and if it's anything like what I've encountered so far, it could be more than I could handle, but any information is better than none. I stand up and help her to her feet, retrieving my gun from the floor.

"Lead on"

I don't bother doing anything with the body, it'll just be seen as someone else dying in the zone and we head east where the noises are lessened. The architecture here has changed again, there's fewer buildings, just huge piles of metal and brick, huge towers arc up into the sky, each one dragging up more materials to dump on the piles. We see very few people but we can hear them nonetheless, the screams and moans melding together till it sounds like a single giant beast, mortally wounded but unable to stop. I see vehicles in the distance, lots of them, I stop Kuni and point ahead

"Those?" I ask

"They're transports, they ferry the goods from here to the other zones"

"Can we use them?"

"What?" Her tone rises slightly "You mean get in one?"

"Yeah"

"No" she shakes her head frantically "No, no, no"

"Why not?"

"You know what goes in there?"

"Materials, I'm guessing"

She shakes her head slowly "The fourth highest mortality cause in Deepdown is people trying to escape in those things. The materials are put in through the top, so you can't wait in the bottom, and they're removed by being upended, so anything that somehow got in the top, is crushed when the goods are offloaded."

I grin "So you don't fancy giving it a go then?"

She smiles wearily and bats the back of my head.

As we get closer to the edge of the zone, I realise how tired I am again, I touch Kuni on the shoulder

"Where do people rest around here?"

She shakes her head again "We don't rest here, it's too dangerous"

I look around at the deserted streets and raise an eyebrow

"It's nearly night" she snaps "What do you think they do with people who are out after dark without reason?"

I nod, picking up the pace as much as I can.

At the edge of Deepdown, we encounter what could be euphemistically be termed as a problem. I look over from the streets at the main exit to the zone, a huge gate separating two enormous walls made of stone looking more solid than the ground I'm walking on. Twenty guards that can be seen are on the floor with another thirty on the walls. As I watch, one of the gates opens and three trucks go through, on their way to wherever.

"How good is your ID?" I ask

"Not, it's a month out of date."

"Would they notice that?"

"If they're anywhere near as good as the guards on the opposite gate, No"

"So we have a choice" I grin tightly "Stay here and eventually end up as food, or risk it and maybe end up as filleted steak"

"There's another way" she says quietly "the drivers."

"What, you mean mug one and take his uniform?"

"No, I mean bribe one, they get paid like the rest of people around here, if they're heading for Merryhell, then usual protocol is to put on a gunman and a nurse. If we can find the next one to Merryhell, then we can bribe the driver into taking us instead of his usual."

"We could be anyone though, he'd have to be an idiot to take two strangers"

"Or poor enough that they have to work here" she says quietly

The drivers station is a mile south of where we were, the sounds of the industrial area have all but faded to nothing, as if the suffering won't travel east lest it feel out of place. The buildings here have been cleaned at least once in the last fifty years, and the street is not covered in blood trails and bits of cloth. We get to the station in no time and walk in without being questioned. The interior is like what I imagine an asylum would look like if the inmates had a hand in the construction. The station is like a set of pigeonholes, each one easily big enough to hold a few people, each one with a destination on it, a set of ladders lead up by the side of each hole. I look up on the wall for Merryhell, and thankfully, find it near the bottom.

There's no one else around, so we make our way over to the hole and open the main door. Inside sit two women and a man, all of them shaven headed and dressed in utilitarian clothing. Each one of them looking as if the only thing that might get their attention is if the whole building went up in flames and even then, they'd wait till the fire was outside the door.

"We've got another hour before we're due" snaps the first of the women, a burly creature with huge muscles and an abundance of hair, both on her head and on her face.

"I know" I reply smoothly, "that's what we came to talk about"

The man looks up at us, and his eyes widen "You're not security, who are you?"

"People in need of a ride" I say "People willing to pay"

The three of them don't react at all so I continue.

"Fifty pounds each if you allow myself and my associate to take the place of the medic and the gunner"

Still no reaction, I reach into my coat and draw out my wallet, laying a crisp fifty in front of each of them. The sight of the money gets a reaction from the smaller woman, who covers her mouth with both hands. The larger woman looks up at us "You expect us to take this?"

My smile has an edge like ice upon it "I care not what you do with it, but we are on the next truck out of here and you can either profit from it, or I can kill you here and take my chances"

The larger woman stands up, easily six inches taller than me and at least half again as broad

"And how" she sneers contemptuously "will you manage that?"

I look up at her and smile "I'll give you a kiss"

I'm moving before the words are finished coming out of my mouth, springing upwards and using all the muscles of my back to propel my head into her chin. There's a sickening crunch and I feel something dribble down the front of my nose as she crumbles bonelessly to the floor. I reach up with one hand and wipe the drool and tooth from my forehead, then look down at other two.

"Your call"

Five minutes later, I have two sets of ID and a set of willing accomplices. It turns out that the man was the nurse and the woman the gunner, which presents an interesting counterpoint. I shuck out of my coat and pass it over to Kuni, who tries it on and then looks at me with a look of utter exasperation as the coat buries her and trails on the floor. I smile and take the coat back, pocketing the nurses ID

"They won't care what you look like" says the smaller woman "As long as your ID's are current, it won't make any difference to them if you were green with extra arms."

"How long have you been doing this route?"

"Twenty years" she replies, and I notice under the grime, that while her face is that of a woman barely forty years of age, her eyes have the dull look of a person not wanting to open them.

I nod, looking away quickly "Then we're set?"

She nods "Just don't speak unless spoken to, leave it all to me"

I nod again, idly wondering to myself if anything could be worse than this area, but then, if the names of the sectors are anything to go by, then Merryhell should certainly be an eye opener.

Up close, the truck looks like it was born in this sector, the sides are heavy steel, thick plating like that on tanks but scarred and lined with damage from small arms fire and flame. The wheels are pockmarked with bullet holes and scarred with acid and the enormous springs providing the suspension have sustained damage themselves, but despite all that, it seems to be in good condition. We get up into the cab, and as the lights go on, I realise that there are no windows in the vehicle, merely several banks of computer screens. I lean out of the front of the cab and see several different cameras mounted at various points on the hull, unless you hit this thing with a rocket (which would damage the cargo), there's no way to knock out all the cameras. I look at the thickness of the plate between the front of the cabin and the place where the driver sits, there's a good five centimetres of metal plating there, more than enough to stop any light round and certainly a good degree of protection against anything heavier as well. I sit in the gunners chair and something feels right, I flick several switches and bring the main armament on line, there's more guns on here than the average tank, Excellent! I see Kuni sequestering herself in the other chair near the first aid kits and looking around the cabin, I can see a bunk, barely capable of holding one and a small fridge and water dispenser. It looks like the door can only be opened electronically or from the inside, negating any possibility of basic forced entry.

Our driver thumbs the ignition and the truck roars into life, the screens on the front all activate simultaneously and the cabin is bathed in a ghostly glow as all the cameras come online. I see the camera array wrap itself around the driver, till it forms a configuration that a normal driver would see, you can see anywhere around the vehicle merely by tilting your head in that direction. I nod to myself at the thought that has gone into constructing this vehicle, then another thought occurs "What's your name?" I ask the driver.

She shakes her head "If I tell you and they catch you, then they'll find out from you who I am, and that's death"

The door closes and the engine noise ceases instantly, the cabin must be fully soundproofed. I hear the radio activate with a burst of static. "G4, this is gate, do you have your personnel on board?" the voice sounds weary, as if they've done this a thousand times already today.

"Gate, this is G4, all personnel secured, situation nominal, good to go"

"Roger G4, proceed to us and await gate opening"

"Affirmative Gate"

The truck moves forwards easily, the suspension devouring the holes in the road effortlessly. We're at the gate in less than a few minutes and roll gently to a stop.

"Gate, this is G4 requesting gate open" she sounds as calm as someone ordering drinks at a bar

"Roger G4, Co-ordinates for drop downloading now"

There's a quiet hum and a click and the largest screen in front changes to a set of numbers of figures that mean nothing to me.

"Gate, this is G4, please confirm co-ordinates sent" her voice has an edge to it now

"Affirmative G4, delivery point is Contested Grounds"

Our driver takes a deep breath to steady her voice, then speaks "Confirm hazard payments?"

"Confirmed G4, full hazard pay will be made"

"Understood Gate"

The gate cracks open and the truck starts forwards again, I wait till we're fifteen minutes out before I speak.

"What's the Contested Grounds?"

Our driver doesn't answer, but Kuni looks across "it's an area where there's nothing but fighting, it's been like that since the Hundred block war"

Our drivers snorts derisively "You've never been to the grounds then?"

Kuni looks forwards "No"

"It's a warzone, pure and simple, this thing was built to handle urban disturbances, it hasn't been fitted for the stuff we may encounter in there"

She doesn't seem inclined to say anything else, so I content myself with looking at the monitors. The scenery has changed again, the main camera has switched to a thermal overlay. Looking at the other cameras, I can see a fierce storm has enveloped the truck, I can't hear it, which is probably a good thing, but on the main screen, I can see a thin line running down the centre of the road.

"What's that?"

"It's a heat strip to guide us through the storm areas of Merryhell, all I do is keep the truck centred on it and all will be well"

"Are the storms that bad?"

"If you're out there without protection, it can strip the skin off you in a minute"

Nice image "So why all the guards on the gate?"

"Most of those working in Deepdown are unaware of what's out there, you've seen how eager people are to leave, the controllers would lose a hundred people a day if they left that door open, and not one of them would be salvageable."

I nod to myself "Sensible"

She snorts again and when she speaks, her tone is venomous "Of course it's sensible, they may be an uncaring bunch of bastards, but they know how to safeguard their investments"

I nod silently and turn back to my screens, the weapon systems on the truck are still active but all of them have switched automatically to thermal imaging. There's nothing showing on the screens but the deep red glow is a little unsettling. I look over to Kuni, who's got her eyes closed and is laying on the bunk trying to catch some sleep, can't say I blame her.

I move forwards to the assistant driver seat and sit down next to the driver "So how far is it to the Contested Grounds?"

"A few hours" she snaps, straining her eyes against the differing glows from the screens. Again, she seems disinclined to say anything else, so I let her go on with her job. The monitors clear and the thermal imaging ceases, so I climb back into the gunnery chair and look around using the

turret camera. The area is a lot like Deepdown in appearance, dark and grimy, looking as if water was something that another planet has. I look around, the street is lined with these huge towers, stretching high into the sky, geometrically perfect, designed to fit into the space they are in. From a purely practical point of view, they're ideal, you can fit the maximum number of people into the minimum of actual ground space, but if one were to collapse, then it's likely that all would collapse. Perhaps they just don't feel concerned about such things. Each building is at least twenty stories high, and the lights of these buildings flicker on and off as if the switches were in spasm. I look over the road at the other side, and see a similar pattern of lights, as if the buildings were trying to communicate with each other. I look to the streets and see people walking around, but without the frenzied purpose of those in Deepdown. Some stand casually on the streets seemingly without a care in the world, some carrying bags, a few congregate on corners in small groups, but all of them appear to be wearing face-masks covering their noses and mouths.

"Is the pollution that bad here?" I ask to no-one in particular

"Look behind us" says the driver

I revolve the turret and point it upward towards Deepdown. I can't see the Sector itself, but I can see the waves of Smoke, dust and grime come billowing down from the towers, like a tide of corruption filling the lower ground. That said, it doesn't quite touch the ground, a strong wind from the south catches the tide and disperses it across the land. I thank whatever gods are listening that I don't have to walk through this myself.

"Eyes front" snaps the driver

I bring the turret around to face front, seeing a small group of men at the edge of the road ahead with a large box on the floor between them. "If they take anything out of that box, blast them"

I line up the main targeting system on the men and see them step away from the box immediately.

"How did you know?" I ask, keeping my crosshairs squarely on the box

"Some people never learn" she replies "Those are part of one of the gangs hereabouts, I forget the name, but they took down one truck last month, they didn't figure on the truck getting images of them and the insignia of their gang"

"And still they come?"

"Poverty makes people do a lot of stupid things" she replies bitterly.

Three or four similar incidents dot the way through the sector, I see the people don't change, most of them wear masks, although this becomes less as we progress through the sector and the Hi-rise blocks are steadily getting smaller and smaller, no longer back to back with each other. "When we arrive, you need to make your own arrangements" says the driver "I'll drop you at the edge of the zone and say that my personnel were urgently recalled, it happens fairly often"

"I understand" I reply, moving over to Kuni. In the pale light of the screens, her face has lost all its stress and a faint snoring can be heard. I almost don't wake her up, but we'll be there soon, and I don't have a choice. I gently shake her shoulder and she's awake almost instantly, eyes wide, hands in front of her.

"Easy" I say softly "No worries, but we're gone in a short while"

She nods silently, swinging her legs off the blanket.

I look into the front cameras again as the view changes. Where before the sky was reasonably clear, marked only by drifting clouds of pollution, up ahead, the sky is thick with heavy clouds, lightning flashes streak by sporadically, and the ground is lit up by the impacts of some explosive. The driver shifts in her seat and directs her voice back towards us

"The Contested Grounds"

The truck goes over the black canal by means of a huge ferry and even through the soundproofing of the vehicle, I can hear the booming of weaponry outside. The crossing takes one half the time our previous crossing took, and the truck is cleared onto the main dock in no time at all. The driver thumbs a few buttons on the side of her control console and hands back a few small moulded plugs to us.

"You'll need these if you expect to get across the grounds with your ears intact" she says, not looking directly at me

"Thank you," I reply, taking the plugs and replacing them with another fifty.

"Our deal was for Fifty, you already paid" she says curtly

"Our deal didn't include extra help" I reply lightly "I'm just settling the bill"

She doesn't say anything, but her hand closes on the money and she nods in silent thanks. It's a thing that most people forget, certainly most people in this world so it would seem, a small act of kindness can mean the world to a stranger who has never seen that kindness.

"You'd better get going" she says, pulling a small lever on side of her chair.

With a hiss of hydraulics the main door pushes out of the side of the truck and opens easily. I drop down to the floor and reach back to help Kuni down from the cabin. As soon as her feet hit the floor, the door hisses shut and the truck rumbles forwards. As it clears my line of sight, I look out onto the fields ahead of us. Several enormous towers pierce the sky, not the size of the Crag or even that of the high rise blocks in Merryhell, but large and looking for all the world as if god himself could not move them. Sporadic bursts of flame erupt from the sides facing east into the fields, and occasionally bursts of fire explode off the side.

I look across and see several different areas below us, a camp where the truck we travelled in is now parking and across the way, several groups of people are clustered. There are several groups of humans, each one clustering around a small fire or huddled beneath a tent. At the side nearest to the actual fields, a number of Simil silently watch the conflict. I remember what Ship told me, and start down towards them. As we walk down, the smell of burnt ozone reaches my nostrils together with that of cordite and a faint undertone of blood. For some reason it puts me at ease, the difficulties faced here should be obvious ones. The ground here is very well paved, designed for the use of the heavy trucks we arrived in but the security is non-existent. I would presume (quite rightly) that only an idiot would want to pass through here, so why bother guarding it.

As that thought passes, I consider it, then turn to Kuni

"Is there any other way past here without going through the grounds?"

"I don't know" she replies "I know the basic layout of the city, this is the most direct route to Lucent Heights"

"Well," I grin "It should be interesting if nothing else"

As we near the bottom of the hill, the noise becomes worse, till at the bottom, it's like standing in a heavy thunderstorm without the rain. I walk steadily over to the Simil and stand to the side of the first one, smaller than its compatriots, standing around six feet tall, with the head of a small child resting on its shoulders.

"Excuse me" I shout above the thunder

No response

"Excuse me" I shout again, raising my voice as much as I can

No response, I move in front of it, looking at those still eyes as directly as I can.

"Move back" a voice echoes in my ear.

I step back obediently, then realise that another Simil has stepped up behind me. A colossus this one, standing easily ten feet tall and not wearing clothing of any sort, only the blood and dust of the fields like the skin on an animal over its armour plated body. I look up but cannot see the head above the enormous chest of steel.

"What is it that you require?" comes the voice again

"I'm looking for Walker" I yell upwards

There's a whirr of activity to my side and suddenly the other Simil are all around me. Kuni clings to my back, don't know what she thinks I'm going to do against eight of them, but still.

"Why do you seek Walker?"

"Ship sent me" I yell back, trying - unsuccessfully - to keep the tremor out of my voice

The other Simil step back a pace, and the larger one goes to one knee in front of me, bringing its head down to look at me. The head is old, almost decrepit, but the eyes somehow burn with a keen intelligence.

"I can take you to him, but there will be a price"

"Name it"

"I require the name of my opposite on the other side"

"Your opposite?"

"He who fights me from afar"

"I'll do my best"

The head bobs up and down, thankfully the noise of the fields drowns out the noise of the flesh moving with the metal. It effortlessly raises itself back to its feet and without another word, moves towards the waterfront up the hill. I follow as best as I'm able, Kuni right behind me.

It reaches the waterfront and spreads both arms wide, the ground seems to shift under me for a second and I step back to steady myself. I look down to see that the ground was just fine, but the Simil is making a noise that is causing the ground to shake beneath me. We stand there a half-minute and it lowers its arms, turning back towards me.

"Walker"

It steps past me, moving back down the ramp towards the fields. I turn back from watching it to find that two huge humanoids have appeared in front of me. Easily standing seven feet tall, each one is a huge mass of perfectly defined muscles, swathed in black clothing of a material I don't recognise. The body is topped by a head that has no features, only a pale oval, and both of them have long, six digitated hands clasped in front of them in a manner that suggests that they could remain there forever.

We stand there looking at each other for a second, then it moves, the hands flashing up and twisting into a series of positions that somehow I understand.

"Ship sent you"

"Yes" I sign back tentatively

"You are he who is not known"

"Yes"

"The way is clear for you, we will give you twenty five hours to pass, after which time, should you still be here, your life is forfeit." The one on the left reaches out to me with a small black disk, inscribed with a single symbol, a red droplet hanging from a silver blade. It (he?) places it on my shoulder where it rests easily and without waiting for my response, both of them turn those pale ovals to look at each other, then turn and begin to walk away.

"Did you get any of that?" asks Kuni

"I think so" I reply "we better get going" I start down the dock towards the east, heading towards what appears to be a small shanty town. Large groups of humans are clustered in huddles around fires burning in the remains of ammunition drums, some of them clad in the remnants of armour, several more nursing the remnants of limbs. None of them pay us any attention as we walk past, whether this is because of the disk or not is something I don't care to test.

The stench of the Canal still reaches up from the edge of the dock, but other smells abound, varying from the powder of the field to the decomposing remains in the canal, as if the war on the fields was being emulated by the scents drifting over them. No one strays too close to the canal, or for that matter too close to the fields. There is a channel on either side of the camps that no man seems to want to walk upon, so we stay off it as well, just in case. In spite of the war going on in the background, there seems to be no animosity here in the camps, a few scuffles here and there but no spilling of blood. Men and women from either side of the conflict sit besides one another, soul sapped and bone weary, the conflict forgotten while they sit to eat together.

After an hours travel, we come across a person by themselves, clad in thick cloth robes. Their head obscured by a deep hood, surrounded by trinkets and equipment, some of which looks fairly new, most of it is old and several of the pieces are broken. Something about the figure interests me, I couldn't say what, so I approach them with care.

"What you after?" says a voice, surprisingly high pitched

"What you got?" I reply, keeping my tone neutral

The figure gestures around, the heavy robes swaying, taking in all the things around them. "I have everything" it says contemptuously
"I want information"

"Ah" the hood moves up slightly so the eyes underneath can see me, the shadow is still enough to cover their face "Not a native then"
"No"

"Well," it says, spreading its hands wide, "what do you have to offer me in return?"

"Unfortunately nothing but cash" I reply.

The hood moves up a fraction more, exposing a mouth full of pearl white teeth "Well then" it says, cocking its head to one side "I guess that'll
have to do, whatchu need?"

"I want to know anything you know about the Einigkeit"

"Ah" the word more breathed than spoken "Then you must be Talbot"

I step back and sweep my coat back, leaving one hand on my gun.

"Easy" it says, raising its right hand casually, exposing the tattoo on its palm "I ain't here to fight you, I been out here so long, they don't check on
me no more"

I don't move, leaving one hand on my pistol.

"They say you turn traitor, they put reward out for your ass, more if we hand in your head at the same time"

"Who's they?"

"Them in control, them who assign us where we live, them"

"Who are they?"

"We don't know, we've never known, we wake up one day, and we have a duty, and we know we have to keep an eye on things out here,
because things is watching us"

"I don't understand"

"No, I expect you don't, you remember anything?"

"Not a damn thing"

The grin broadens again "Then all I got to offer you is my hand" the right hand extends from inside the thick sleeve. I pause for a second, then
reach out and clasp it firmly.

Pain explodes behind my eyes and I stagger backwards as a jumble of images flash across my vision. I raise both arms reflexively but blindly in
case the figure is getting up.

"Easy" says the figure "Now concentrate"

I stop and breathe as Kuni steadies me as best she can

"Concentrate on what?" I ask

"On everything you just saw" it replies.

I look over the canal in front of me, an image of a young woman flashes past, then a house, a multitude of windows plaster the front of it, each
one holding a different image, each image moving, the door open. I see rows upon rows of Simil, like ranks of soldiers waiting orders from their
general, I see white light, then an endless field, with machines working upon those fields, and a sun in the sky, burning a deep red like arterial
blood. White light again, then a street.

I blink as I feel a hand shake my shoulder, I look down suddenly at Kuni, standing there with a look like fear on her face.

"What?" I ask

"What?" she snaps "You've been stood there for an hour looking at nothing"

An hour?

"Impossible" I reply, "I just saw a few things, that's all"

"A few things," says the figure "But enough to die for"

I nod, looking back down at them "Why help me? Why not try and kill me for the reward?"

"You don't remember me" it replies "But I remember you. You're the best, which is why you volunteered for the job, no one else could have
handled it. I knew then that I couldn't handle you, nothing's changed"

There's a brief pause, punctuated by a rapid burst of thunder

"When you find her, don't hesitate"

"Who?"

"You'll know" The figure rises up, its not much taller than when it was sitting down, its hands move slowly, almost theatrically to the sides of the
hood. With a shrug, the hands flip the hood back, revealing a young woman, completely bald, no hair at all on the face, piercing blue eyes that
seem just a little sad. She tilts her head around, revealing a mass of scar tissue, I reach involuntarily to the back of my own head, feeling the
same scarring there.

"When you do what you have to, then you come back and tell me, I'll be right here"

I don't have the words to express my emotion, so I extend my right hand, she clasps it with hers, and for a second, there's the feeling of the two
tattoos rubbing against each other, a silent reminder of a kindred spirit. We let go simultaneously and both turn away, each going our separate
ways.

Kuni catches up with me quickly

"What did you see?" she asks

"Things, fields of machines, a red sun in the sky, things" I murmur vaguely, trying to re-focus on the images I saw.

"What else?"

"I'm tired" I mutter, realising that I've not slept in over thirty-five hours, but we can't stop here. I increase my pace, realising that I'm more stumbling
than running, but unwilling to stop. Beside me, Kuni starts jogging to keep up. The thunder is getting louder now, even though we're no nearer to
the edge of the fields, as if we've reached the centre of the battle. I look over the field for a second and see faintly in the distance, obscured
by clouds of dust and fire, figures locked in mortal combat, it's almost like watching a performance, the sense of unreality is all-pervading. I watch

figures fall back with bloody flowers erupting from them, limbs falling off still clutching weapons that are still firing. The engagement ends in a plume of flame as a shell falls on them, incinerating both friend and foe alike.

Kuni pushes me gently, breaking my focus again. I stagger on, exhaustion falling heavily on me. Its another three hours before we get near the edge of the zone. I see the camps in the middle of the path we're walking have become more sporadic, I must have been too tired to notice. Another camp, almost identical to the one we started in, looms ahead and I stagger up the hill to reach it. A man stops us as we cross the line.

"Friend or Foe?" he asks

"Tired" I reply with a weary smile

He smiles back, like any soldier over the years, he knows what its like to fight and not quit, to not give yourself the chance to let your body do what it needs to do. He motions over to a set of buildings at the edge of the marked area "Get rest, then tell me"

It's a strange thing, put soldiers on opposite sides of the battlefield, and they'll slaughter each other without cause or conscience. But put two warriors from different cultures in a place where neither of them needs to fight and the understanding of their trade will make it a civil meeting. I head over to the building, there's a man at the door with a clean uniform, pressed and lined with boots that shine and a clean clipboard, the Logo "Hirplakker" is emblazoned on the right breast.

"Friend or foe" he rasps

"Tired" I reply, trying the same smile

He grimaces, obviously a man who's not seen combat, probably an administrator more at home playing war games than being on a battlefield. He looks behind me at Kuni and his expression takes on a lecherous slant.

"I suppose we could make exceptions" he leers "We only have one spare bunk, and I wouldn't want the lady to be inconvenienced, she can use my quarters"

Kuni wraps her arm around mine "No need," she smiles brightly "I'll take the bunk in there, you look more like someone who would more enjoy my companions company"

His face turns thunderous and he opens his mouth to speak, lowering his clipboard as he does so. I forestall him by raising a finger.

"Your generosity is appreciated" I mutter, placing a twenty onto his clipboard. His teeth click back together as he smoothly pockets the money and steps out of the way.

The rooms are sparse, but clean, and comfortable, I offer the bunk to Kuni but she looks at me with an expression of exasperation and pushes me on to it. I'm too tired to resist and as I fall asleep, I'm dimly aware of her removing my armour and weapons.

I wake with a strangled cry, my body covered in cold sweat, it takes me a half second to realise where I am, and another second to realise I'm not in any danger. I swing my legs off the bunk and rest them on the cold floor, savouring the feel of stone under my feet. I look back over the bunk to see Kuni still laying there, dressed only in a light shirt, still sleeping soundly, softly snoring.

I get up from the bunk and pick up my clothes from the floor, it's a curious sensation, waking up after not having sleep for a long time, you feel as if the world is somehow more real, colours more bright, sounds sharper. Something is nagging at the back of my mind though, something I should remember.

No matter, it'll come to me.

I get showered and dried, noting for the first time the abundance of scars over my body, I glance in the mirror, none on my back, just on the torso and arms, shallow, as if someone ran a knife over and only just broke the skin. There's a symbol burned into my right bicep, I angle myself so that I get can a good look at it in the mirror. It's a mechanical snake of sorts, its mouth is biting into the end of its tail, and in the circle thus formed, a small letter 'O' is burned. Doesn't make any difference to me, no new memories there so I finish drying myself and put my clothes back on, they're starting to have that feeling that if I left them a while longer, they'd have got up themselves to get washed.

I move back to the bunk and sit down, trying to remember more about what I was dreaming about, but its always the way with a dream you want to remember, its like chasing shadows with a torch. I sit on the bunk and relax a little, savouring the feeling of the warmth from the shower slowly fading from under my skin.

Kuni moans softly and opens her eyes, looking up through a veil of sleep

"What time is it?"

I shrug "No idea, don't have a clock"

She pulls the blanket up self-consciously and rummages around in her pack, coming up with a small device. Her eyes widen and she leaps out of bed, frantically grabbing her clothes, thrusting one leg into her pants and falling over with her own inertia.

"What?" I ask, amused at the mini-pantomime unfolding in front of me.

"We've been asleep for fifteen hours," she yells, and then it comes to me

Walker!

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The man staggers down the alleyway, streetlights reflecting dully in the puddles marking the floor. A group of scruffy looking men stand in front of him, one of them reaches out and places a hand on his shoulder, a blade flashes out in the fading light. Reflexively, the man grabs the hand holding the knife and pushes it into the bolder's eye socket, sinking it all the way in with a wet slurping sound. The others flee and the man stands for a second, his hand still controlling the knife hand, he looks at the knife uncomprehendingly, then releases the hand and continues down the alley, the back of his head still oozing blood.

I grab the rest of our gear and bundle her out of the door, still getting dressed, Clipboard guy has been replaced by another soulless automaton, I grab him by the shoulder

"Which way to get out of the grounds?" I yell

His expression turns from distaste to absolute distaste and he draws breath to spit, I forestall him with the barrel of my pistol under his nose

"Which way?" I roar

He gestures wordlessly out to the east and collapses in a dead faint. I leave him there and start running, then realise that Kuni can't keep up and school my pace down from frantic to merely urgent. As we pass further from the grounds, the sound of war slowly gives way to the sound of industry once again. We race down the main road, keeping to the side as huge armoured trucks roll past, like blood down an artery, supplying the war with its life. After ten minutes of jogging Kuni slumps to the floor with her chest heaving.

"I can't go on"; she gasps, trying to suck in the air that her diaphragm seems hell bent on stopping her from doing.

I pick her up and sling her over my shoulder, the move causing all sorts of pain from my back, but as long as I concentrate, I can move with her. I walk steadily as quickly as I can, hearing Kuni vomiting behind me as my shoulder pummels her stomach relentlessly.

After ten more minutes, I hear a scream of pure, animal fear

"THEY'RE COMING" screams Kuni

I don't spare a glance backwards but force myself to go faster, they say that fear lends strength to tired muscles, all I can say is if it does, then I can't be very scared, my muscles are feeling like a two year olds. I see the ground seem to fall away ahead of us and realise that we must be near one of the canals.

"RUN" Kuni screams again, starting to kick in panic, the movement jars me from side to side, and my back flares with pain again. I reach the edge of the canal and look down, five feet down from where I am is a small platform, I leap without hesitation, crashing to the floor unceremoniously, dumping Kuni to the floor and wrenching myself back up to my feet with my gun trained.

The Two creatures are stood there; this time flanked by another two. Each one of them is stood casually, relaxed, as if I pose no threat to them.

The first one extends its arms and signs.

"You leave no margin for error"

I can't think of a response, but I lower my gun

"You understand that should you return here, you will be killed on sight"

"Thank you" I reply

The other three shrug simultaneously, the first extends its hands again

"It is the payment of a favour to a friend" it inclines its oval head towards me, all of them turn simultaneously and leave. I sit down, exhausted despite my recent sleep and turn back towards Kuni, who's slowly crawling to her knees. She turns to face me and I see the gash on her forehead where she hit the floor.

"I'm sorry" I mumble, unable to conceal my guilt "I thought we were dead, I had to do something"

She winces as she reaches one hand up to her head "It's okay" she murmurs softly "I understand"

I help her to a sitting position and she reaches into her bag, bringing out a small field dressing and applying it to her head. We sit there for a few minutes looking out at the water beneath us, its not as black and corrupted as the previous canal but it's still not something that I'd want to swim in.

Several boats drift past, some crewed by Simil, some by humans, all of them looking as if they've seen better days. I wait till a smaller boat comes into view, then wave my arms at it.

"Hey, over here" I yell, keeping my tone friendly
"What?" comes the reply, sounding more distant than the boat appears to be.
"Want to make some money?"
"Doing what?"
"Need a ride to the other side" I lower my voice slightly as the boat comes into view
"How much you paying?" The boat slowly slightly
"How much you want?"
"Fifty" replies the person at the helm
"Done" I shout, getting Kuni to her feet.

The boat comes to a stop near the platform and a group of four rough looking men appear on deck
"Let's see the money first," says one of them, a heavily tattooed man standing an easy six feet tall. I take the fifty out of my pocket and hold it in front of me. He reaches forwards and snaps it out of my hand, pocketing it without missing a beat.
"Y'know?" he begins, and instantly I know where this is going "A man carrying crisp clean fifties can afford a whole lot more"
"The deal was for fifty," I say wearily, gesturing with my left hand at the opposite side of the bank, the movement covering my right hand dropping into my pocket.
"I be changing the deal" he sneers
"No" I say, lowering my voice "You're not"
He pulls a crude pistol out of his pocket and starts to level it at me, his mistake, my nerves are still on overdrive from the previous encounter. My gun roars once and his head leaves the boat by the other side of the ship. The headless corpse sways and falls into the river where it slowly drifts south on the prevailing currents, I look over at the rest of the men.
"Start the ship up and honour the bargain" I snap icily
They fall over themselves to start up the ship, waiting till both Kuni and I are on board, the trip across the canal takes only a few minutes and we alight at the opposite side.
"What about the money?" asks one of them, younger than the rest, barely out of his teens
"It's headed south at the moment," I reply, pointing at the corpse in the water "if you move quickly, you can catch it"

They depart quickly, turning the boat to pursue their comrades' dead body; I wait till they're out of sight, then turn and pace up the stairs to where Kuni is waiting.
"So which way?" I ask
"You have to ask?" she replies, staring ahead
I follow her gaze, and see what she's on about, a tower, reaching up into the clouds, geometrically perfect, larger than anything I've ever seen, dwarfing the huge natural formations of Calculus Tor.
I stare unashamedly at it, lost in wonder
"To think man can build such a thing" I breathe
I feel rather than see Kuni smile behind me, she pats me on the back lightly and starts off towards the tower.

We've gone maybe a half mile when there's a scream of engines and a small wheeled vehicle skids to a stop in front of us, Kuni steps in front of me and whispers urgently.
"Don't draw your weapon, these people don't mess"
Both sides of the vehicle open and the men inside disembark, smoothly, professionally, with an economy of motion borne of long training. The Sergeant points towards us and Ten weapons instantly line up on us.
"Papers and purpose" he barks
Kuni steps forwards, hands raised high, she tosses her hair over her shoulder arrogantly, her whole manner shifted again.
"We're here to see Pyotr Kropotkin, you inform him it's about the Einigkeit"
The sergeant raises one hand to his helmet, there's a brief burst of communication and then he makes a sharp chopping motion with his hand.
The men lower their weapons instantly.
"Get in the vehicle" he barks, his tone leaving no doubts about what will happen if we resist.

Even though the guards in front of me keep pushing me back into my seat, I can't help but keep staring out of the window. It's like someone took a cloth and wiped over the memory of the other sectors we've been in. This place is magnificent, the streets are clean, well paved and uniform in their construction, the people have been through the same wash as the streets, each one of them resplendent in a variety of vibrant colours. I look around and see a few small vehicles like the one that we're in, the only difference being that the occupants look distinctly less happy than I do. The enforcement types within and on the streets are almost identical to the ones in our vehicle, like someone found a whole bunch of matching uniforms, so created an army of clones to fit them.

The people on the street don't have the same purpose; some of them sit on benches, merely content to watch life go past them. Over there, to the right, that must be the oldest person I've seen yet, must be all of sixty, playing a game with pieces on a table outside a café. Children walk the streets without a parent anxiously grasping their hand and pulling, and groups of women walk in safety, looking in boutiques that charge more for underwear than I started out with. The atmosphere is one of quiet opulence, I expect that the noise will increase when the doors open.

As we get nearer to that massive tower, I find myself silently wishing for a means to see through the roof, I can't get my head out of the window, and it seems such a pity to waste such a vista. The vehicle pulls to a halt and all of the men inside step out, lining the pavement and standing to attention.

I get out first, and pause directly outside as I look upwards, arching my back to get the angle for my head to see directly upwards. Massively constructed, windows as far as the eye can see, reinforced by intricate metalwork all the way up, the reflection of the faint sunlight transforming the tower into a softly glowing rod into the heavens like an elevator to God. As Kuni pushes me forwards to let herself out, I make a mental note

to get a camera and see this place when I have a little more time to myself. The noise level hasn't increased, it's a quiet hum of footsteps and vehicles driving sedately past, no one pays us any heed, as if turning up under police escort was the most normal thing in the world.

The Enforcers don't make any movement to stop us from walking anywhere, but Kuni strides forwards to the entrance, two doors over forty feet tall and thirty wide, easily large enough to allow the largest of vehicles through them, but only people walk here. People surround the front of the building, no way to tell if they're male or female, all appear identical. All of them are unmoving, each one of them clad in a fully sealed suit of metal armour with a single logo on the right breast. I suppress the urge to wander up to one and wave my hand in front of the faceplate, just to see if they respond. Kuni strides in through the doors and I find myself jogging slightly to catch up with her.

"So what's this place?" I ask

"This" she replies, pausing and gesturing around her "Is the Atrium"

I look around me, this room is easily a hundred feet high, the walls are lined with identical glass cases, each one containing an artifact of some description, a small metal plate at the bottom of each identifies what it is (or was). I see a massive variety of things there, something that resembles the body of a Simil without the head, a suit of armour mounted high in the atrium, suspended in mid air by means that I cannot identify, the legend at the bottom simply reads "Hirplakker".

I look back down to my side to find that Kuni is off striding again, so I'm jogging to catch up with her. She doesn't pause at the main desk, but sweeps straight past and into one of the thirty elevators, I all but dive in after her as the doors start to close, turning on her sharply.

"What's going on?" I snap

She has the good grace to look slightly apologetic "You don't pause around here" she says softly, "you go exactly where you need to be, and you don't wait for someone to notice that you're lost"

I realise with a shock that the elevator is moving, there was no transition between pause and motion, it just rose up. I look out of the glass sides and then down through the glass floor, watching as the ground winds away from us. I can imagine that this is nothing for those who've grown up with it but for a man like me, it's all I can do not to try and find a handhold on the side of the elevator. After a half minute of silent ascent, the doors open and I all but dive out of the elevator, praying fervently that this level doesn't also have a floor made out of glass.

It doesn't, I pause for a second, re-acquainting myself with good firm ground and thus don't notice the small man in front of me. Non-descript in a corporate sort of way, the suit he's wearing cost more than most of the buildings in Deepdown. His face is plain, square cut, with his hair immaculately coifed and blue eyes like clear water under sunlight. His mouth is wide but thin lipped, almost cruel in its intensity. The sheer sense of symmetry when looking at him is something that most models would kill for and then my brain re-asserts itself, we're on the fiftieth floor of gods own elevator, they won't tolerate imperfections here. I breathe a little easier, genetics are one thing, genetics with a surgical helping hand can't often be beaten.

"Kunigunde?" his voice is inhumanly level as well, deep and resonant, inflecting both concern and welcome at the same time.

"Pyotr" she replies, stepping off the lift gracefully. I notice that her confident manner has re-surfaced, her head aloof with her hair tossed over her shoulders. They embrace and I see the friendship has become clinical from at least one side of the equation, but I hold my tongue. Scant seconds later they separate and Kuni steps aside leaving him with a direct line of sight to me.

"Is this him?" he asks rhetorically

I step forwards, extending my right hand "Talbot" I announce.

He looks tentatively at the presented hand and then clasps it in his own, the handshake is obviously intended to convey strength and commitment and to a person not versed in combat it might suffice. I keep the pressure just short of breaking bones and shake once.

"You are one of the Einigkeit?" he asks

"So it would appear" I reply

He takes the non-answer in his stride and waves towards the end of the room. Looking around, I realise that I've stepped directly into his office, the whole section of this building is one large office easily large enough to hold over sixty regular workers, currently occupied instead by a bank of secretaries. I look around, conscious of the fact that I'm still carrying my weaponry with me. I see in each corner of the room a bank of guns, each tracking my every step perfectly. Freedom, it seems, still requires control.

He sits at his desk and rests his head back on the seat, two more chairs rise up from the floor and an attendant stands by the side of myself and Kuni. I look at them with amusement, then back at Pyotr.

"Drink?" he asks

"No" I reply, adding "Thank you" as an afterthought.

Kuni shakes her head and we both sit down.

There's a pregnant pause as the attendant departs, then he leans forwards, cupping his chin in both hands.

"Can you show me the marking?" he asks, his mood a little excited

I raise my right hand and extend it, palm up. He raises both index fingers to his lips, then breathes out as if he'd been holding his breath.

"Amazing" he breathes "Simply amazing"

He takes my hand gently, as if handling a delicate piece of art, then traces the rings with a single finger. His face is no longer calm, but beaded in a thin layer of sweat, like a man on the edge of ecstasy.

I make to pull my hand back but he holds it convulsively, like a child with a favoured toy. I could easily pull it away, but that might cause a backlash I don't want to see just yet, the guns are still trained on me and if there are robots manning those guns, they might interpret fast movement as an attack, so I leave my hand there.

"You must be the Lucent Heights Guardian" he murmurs, his voice reverent with emotion

"What?" I reply

He looks up at me, eyes wide
"You don't know?" he stammers
"No" I reply firmly, pulling my hand back steadily
"But you must" his face looks pale now, his eyes slightly haunted "You must know, you must tell me"
"No" I say again "I don't know who I am, this is why we came to you, to find out more"

He is up from his seat in an instant, pacing back and forth in front of the window, he pauses to scrutinise me, then resumes his pacing. This goes on for a good half minute, then he slumps back into his chair and leans towards me, his eyes feverish with his inner thoughts.

"Legend has it" he begins "that the Einigkeit were the eyes and ears of the world, that they wandered from place to place seeing things wondrous sights, battling mythical beasts, warriors without equal, owing their allegiance only to a being known only as the Exiled"

He pauses to draw breath

"There was supposed to be one for every area in the universe, each one of them the complete lord of all they survey." He grabs for my hand, turning it palm up, jabbing at the tattoo there "See, this says that you belong to Lucent Heights, you should be there now, what are you doing here?"

"I don't know" I reply "I woke in Calculus Tor a few days ago, Kunigunde said that you might know more about what we are"

"We?" he echoes "Have you met others of your kind?"

I nod "It's how we came by the name, I've had to kill two of them so far"

His head jerks convulsively "How did you find them?" he asks,

"I didn't" I reply "they found me"

He's up out of the chair in a split second, pacing with the floor with one hand behind his back and one hand on his chin.

"So they know where you are" he murmurs to himself "That won't do, that won't do at all"

I'm about to get up when he throws himself back into his chair and leans forwards again, elbows on his knees, palms held upwards.

"You have to leave" he says firmly

I'm about to agree when he cuts me off

"She has to stay"

"Hey" protests Kuni "You can't keep me here"

He raises one hand to forestall her protest

"Which sectors did you meet the two you had to kill?" he asks

"Deepdown and Calculus Tor" she replies

"Right, you've encountered two in the run down slum zones so far, you had to kill them, yes?"

I nod mutely.

"So it stands to reason that there will be others like you, one for each sector, yes?" He pauses for breath "They identified themselves and then attacked, yes?"

I nod

"You've only encountered the ones in the slum zones, the ones in the sectors from hereon in will be far more trained, far more equipped." His eyes flick from me to Kuni with what seems to be genuine concern "What happens when you meet one that doesn't have a sense of fair play, what happens to her when you find one that guns you down in your sleep?"

He's right, in my quest to find out what I was, I had forgotten the life that travelled beside me. Kuni is less than happy with this development.

"I'm not staying here" she says, her voice shrilling slightly

"You have to" I reply firmly, she turns to face me, her eyes wide with fear. I place both hands firmly on her face, holding her gaze with mine "You have to"

We stay there for what seems forever, each one of us just looking, as if you could communicate all the words in the world with just your eyes. Her eyes falter first as she closes them, a single tear winding down her cheek. I gently kiss the tear away.

"I will find you when this is done" I say softly "I'll be back for you"

She reaches up silently, eyes still averted, running her hand over my face like a blind man tracing an image in his head. Her hand lingers over my nose and mouth feeling the soft warmth from my breath, then she pulls her hand away and turns from me. I look up at Pyotr, who guides me towards the door.

"Go east," he says calmly "I'll have a vehicle waiting for you downstairs that will take you to the Brightlights district. From there you go north, speak to Professor Jaeger at Longshore University, he'll know a way for you to get into Lucent heights" we both stop at the door and look back at Kuni, still hunched over in her chair

"Don't worry about her" he says quietly so she doesn't hear "I'll make sure she's safe for when you return"

I say nothing, merely extending my hand to him. This time he takes it with a surprisingly firm hand and shakes it with vigour. I say nothing else as I step into the elevator and the doors silently shut behind me, I don't look back.

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The man continues, no pattern or reason to his movements, I follow from the gantry above him, always keeping him in sight, never letting him see me. I see a figure ahead leap from one gantry to the next, swooping down towards the man. The man continues walking, the back of his head now thick and matted with half-dried blood. The figure swoops closer and I put a shot into their arm, the shot roaring through the alleyway, the figure falls silently, landing in a twisted heap on the floor close to the man, he doesn't notice as he slowly stumbles onwards towards the edge of the canal.

The elevator and my heart hit the bottom floor at the same time; I had not realised how much comfort I took from just the presence of another person by my side. I leave the Atrium quickly, and am joined on the way out by a cleanly cut young man dressed in a sharply fitting suit.

"Your driver, sir" he says in too high pitched a voice.

I take another look and find that what I had thought was a man is in fact a young lady, her outfit confining any evidence of her sexuality. The enforcement vehicle that was outside merely twenty minutes ago has been replaced with a powerful looking wheeled vehicle. Looking curiously out of place with the minimalist buildings around it, the vehicle is powerfully built with curious gothic stylings all along the wing and doors, culminating in a wide tail at the back of it. The young lady opens the door and waits at the side; I pause and look back up into the sky, the sun on the side of the tower blinding me momentarily. It's irrational I know, some part of me knows that she cannot see me up there, but still I raise one hand, fingers outstretched, as if I could pull down the sky, as if just by reaching, I could make the connection to Kuni.

The moment stretches infinitesimally and I let my arm come down slowly, then turn and step into the car. The lady steps smartly into the drivers compartment and the car rolls down the street easily. Suddenly, the marvellous architecture no longer has my attention, the vibrant colours are no longer so wild and new. The car effortlessly takes the streets and before I realise it, the scenery has changed again. I look out of the window, it's almost as if the architecture sensed my mood and altered itself to suit. The car must be sealed I realise as the almost comforting sight of the black canal looms again, no smell apart from the faint scent of the leather on the seats. I tap gently on the interposing glass and instantly, a microphone in the front of the separator chimes.

"Yes sir?" Perky, there's no other way to describe her voice

"Where are we headed?"

"I have orders to take you to the Brightlights district, we will have to travel along the Black Canal to the docking point, once you are safely delivered, I am to report back to Corporator Kropotkin"

"Do you do this often?"

"No sir, this is the first time I've been entrusted with this responsibility"

"What do you normally do?"

"I work in the traffic pool, co-ordinating arrivals and departures"

Nothing immediately wrong with this, but there's still something nagging at the back of my head

"Who normally deals with this sort of thing?"

"Mr Tarn, sir"

"And what was he doing this time?"

"He was called away to deal with an urgent matter for someone in a higher position than Corporator Kropotkin, sir"

"How long before the call to get me was that urgent matter indicated?" I ask quietly

"About a minute and a half sir," she replies "that sort of thing happens all the time sir"

It could be just me being paranoid, but co-incidence is a thing that happens to other people. The young lady still hasn't said anything, but I start glancing out of the windows a little more. There are no other vehicles in the road, nothing following us on the ground, and we're moving fast for anything on the ground to follow us. I glance into the sky, it's not night time, but we're a lot deeper into the depths of the city than ever we were before and the buildings are closing in over the top of us like the stone over the top of a tomb.

The car slows and bumps gently as we drive directly onto a large barge with the arclight symbol on the side. We close to a complete halt and the young lady remains seated in the car. I test the door and find that it's locked from the front, a sensible precaution if you're dealing with a prisoner, but not something for a guest. I knock on the front panel again, this time there's no response, the car lurches slightly, and I see the

scenery start to move past, the problem is that I can't tell if it's the boat or the car (or indeed both) that's moving. There's a soft moan from the front of the car, and another bump. I pull my gun and put a round in both door locks, kicking the left while thumping the right. Both doors open and a blade scythes down over the right door. I immediately put a round into the roof, directly where the assailant would be perched. The roof indents slightly, but doesn't allow the round to penetrate.

Bloody armoured cars!

My advantage lost, I draw my blade in my left hand and wait in the centre of the car. There's a burst of gunfire from the front of the car and a gasp from the roof, a body falls from the top and slumps to the floor.

"Mr Talbot?" a voice barks from outside

No sense in pretending I'm not in here "Yes" I reply

"Arclight canal security Sah, I'm approaching your left hand door with weapons down and hands clear, do not fire"

Crossing your eyes is an easy enough skill for most people, try making them look in a different direction sometime, its nowhere near as easy. I wait in the back of the car trying to watch both sides at once, giving myself a thumping headache as I do so. A thin armoured person walks to the left of the car, both hands in sight, one of them holding an Arclight security badge. The person leans down to bring their face (sans helmet) into my line of sight.

"Sorry sah" he says, his voice inhumanly even "the assailant got on board from a neighbouring building and killed your driver before we could nail them"

I nod and exit the vehicle on his side, if they wanted to blow the vehicle up, there's more than enough people on this boat to do that twice over.

I look into the front, whatever did this managed to put a sword through an armoured windscreen and the young lady driving it. The interior of the windscreen is sprayed red, I look in through the side front windows and see the young lady slumped in the front seat, her chest still lightly spraying blood, whatever did this knew exactly where to strike to cause an instant death.

I walk around to the other side of the car where three Arclight troops are surrounding the body of the assassin. Dressed completely in black, there's no indication of who or what they are, they were only carrying a blade, looks like a rush job, they must have found out where I was, grabbed whatever was at hand and set off in hot pursuit. The head is mostly missing, having been blown from one end of the boat to the other by the canal security, so I flick the right hand dislodging the blade from it. The tattoo stares back at me, I raise up the hand and indicate the tattoo to the troops.

"What area would this star be in?" I ask, indicating the point on the hand

"That's Burningfell, Sah" replies the captain

"Where is that from here?" I demand

"A few hundred metres in the direction we're headed, Sah" he replies.

Scratch the initial theory, this wasn't the Luminosity tower Einigkeit, this was the one from Burningfell. The only way that they could have known this is if someone leaked my movements, and the only ones that knew where I was going were the ones in the tower, and the ones that relayed the order, sending this young lady to her death. I grin to myself a little self-consciously, the question isn't if you're paranoid, the question is if you're paranoid enough.

I look up, seeing the edge of the dock rise out of range of the deck of the barge, huge industrial buildings arc up from the side of the water, easily out of range of anyone reaching them from here. I look down one of the side canals and see a lock open, disgoring a barge, but also showing how you could actually get one of these craft into that area. Our barge moves south, away from the edge of Burningfell, I look ahead into the murk and see a pillar of rubble, scrap, and bodies falling from a large funnel suspended above the canal. As I watch, I see that the flow doesn't end, it's as if someone just collected everything that the sector didn't need, and put it in the same place for disposal. There's a faint red glow up at the top of those mountainous buildings, and I can see where the sector gets its name from. The smell doesn't seem as bad from here; maybe I'm just getting used to it.

The Captain of the guard is still standing next to me, and my mind is still on the young girl, sent coldly to her death here. I turn to face him.

"How long have you been on duty here?" I ask lightly

"Four hours, Sah!" he replies crisply

"No, how many days?"

"Four thousand two hundred twenty five, Sah!" still that crisp tone to his voice.

"Ever get bored?"

"Sah?" As if the entire question was an alien concept.

"Does it ever get boring?" I press

"Sah, No Sah!" his voice holds the edge of fear in it at the moment. It makes sense, he doesn't know who I really am (which makes two of us), I could be someone sent to test his loyalty to the company, honest answers aren't likely to be forthcoming. I walk towards the prow of the barge, he follows me at one pace behind and to the right, perfect flanking position for a right handed bodyguard.

Ahead of us looms a wide-open space; the smell is almost dissipated now, replaced with a variety of scents. I look around the water in front of us, the canal ends about three hundred metres from where we are, but the water goes on, into a huge, wide open pool. I look closely; the water is black, not with slime or sewage, merely an endless depth, the end of which cannot be fathomed.

"Where is this place?" I ask

The captain favours me with a raised eyebrow for a second

"This is the Basin, Sah!"

I return his raised eyebrow

"This is the point where all the canals meet, Sah!" he continues

"Tell me about it"

"Yes Sah!" he replies before pausing a second "Perhaps we should move inside, Sah!"

I nod and we head inside to the control booth, overlooking the waterways. The captain indicates a well-padded set in the turret, seating himself in the gunners' chair.

"Sah! The basin is the connecting point for all the canals in the city, It stretches over one thousand metres between sides, and has never been fully chartered"

"Why not?"

"Couldn't say, Sah!"

"Take a guess"

He pauses to order his thoughts, then looks back up at me "Permission to speak freely, Sah!"

"Granted"

He leans closer to me "I'd never say it in front of the men, but there are things in this water, things that man was not meant to see or have to deal with"

"What do you mean?"

He responds by flicking on the gun turrets and aligning them with the centre of the pool, indicating the main targeting screen. The main searchlights on the ship cleave into the darkness ahead, illuminating the still waters of the pool. I look out of the window, noticing that the area we're scanning is easily over four hundred metres away, well out of range of regular eyesight in these conditions. I look back to the screen in time to see some thing break the water and lazily thrash at the light above it. I nod to the captain, who reduces the range of the beams back to where they were.

"Has anyone ever been across it?" I ask

"No sir," his voice has lost some of its intensity "There was an expedition to cross it around 11 years ago, when I was still just a rookie. They took a G7 class combat barge and set out to cross to the other side, I was on one of the patrol ships sent to escort it to the edge"

He pauses again; I can see him picturing it in his minds eye.

"They got two hundred metres into the basin when their onboard scanners picked up something moving in the water, something big" He looks up at me, his eyes still recall the events clearly. "We watched from the sides, our lights could only just vaguely pick up what was going on out there, their main gun started firing, and then there was a roar, not human whatever it was, and we saw their ship shudder"

He stops, his hands shaking slightly

"We saw something, I don't know what, but it took hold of their ship, we saw it turn the ship so that it was standing on its prow, and then it slid under the water, we never found what it was that did it, and we never found the ship"

I look at him, his eyes are clear, but I'm sure that there are nightmares in there somewhere for him

"Some of the crew got to the patrol ships, carried out by the tide, we didn't dare go in to get them, and they weren't able to swim, we got a line on them and pulled them in, but not one of them brought their sanity out with them." His eyes drop to the deck, unable to meet my gaze.

I look out to the water again as the barge turns and begins circling the pool

"So why do you do this job?" I ask

He looks up at me "We lost three hundred men that day, and it was because we froze, we could have maybe helped them, we could have saved more than we did. I vowed that day, that I'd never lose another man to this hole, and to this day, I haven't"

"I understand" I reply, any professional soldier won't leave a man down, fear can account for a lot of things, but when you've lost people, many get a resolve that can't be cowed, and they won't ever stand down, even if it means their own death.

The barge cruises around the waterways, passing another large canal opening. I nudge the captain out of his reverie and point at it.

"The Red Canal, Sah!" he replies sharply, his control restored in an instant "Named for the strong red colouration of the banks"

"Is that where we're headed?" I ask

"No, Sah!" he answers "We now pass to the Grand," he flips the gunnery systems on again and trains the spotlights ahead of us, revealing a wide canal opening a few hundred metres ahead.

"The Grand?"

"It's the main canal, Sah, leads to the Brightlights sector" he raises one finger as he recalls something, fishing in his arm pocket for a small card

"This card will allow you to gain access to the trains within the sector"

I take the card from him and look at it, a perfect image of my own face stares back at me, listing my access as level Alpha. I have no idea what this means, raising my eyebrow to the captain again.

"It means that you have unlimited access to the rail system and rights to walk the street in Brightlights, Sah!"

"It's not a free zone?"

"Is anywhere?" he replies before he stops himself. He looks briefly down at the floor and then back up again "I apologise, Sah!" he snaps, continuing on "Brightlights is controlled by the TCMAA"

"TCMAA?" I interrupt

"Three Canals Metropolitan Area Authority, Sah!" he replies "They have authority over everything from rings one to five, lats eight and one"

I nod as if this means anything to me, his eyes flicker briefly as he sees this and he smiles grimly

"Be careful what you do in Brightlights," he says softly but firmly "things go on there which defy rational explanation"

The barge turns slowly and progresses up the Grand Canal, the faint scent of sewage drifts across the deck, but above that, scents of expensive perfume also drift across. I look ahead and see bright vibrant lights ahead on both sides of the canal. Music, crystal clear and sharp, echoes down through the canal, causing mild vibrations under the deck as if the city itself were singing. The Barge comes to a slow stop and several uniformed people meet us at the dock, each one of them dressed in a sharp black uniform. Behind them is stood a single woman, dressed in an ankle length grey coat and a plain military cap. I bid farewell to the Captain of the barge and step off the boat, presenting my card to the personnel on the dock. They nod and wave me through, although in spite of this, the woman in the grey coat scrutinises me with a gaze that is anything but welcoming. I can feel her eyes bore into my back as I continue into the heart of Brightlights.

Brightlights.

It's well named, It's halfway through the evening and I'm still wishing for a pair of shades to cover my eyes with. It's easy to see where the rich are, they're the ones walking down the streets, casually and calmly, but here the boredom is etched onto their faces. I see one woman walking down the street almost wearing clothes with twelve attendants, ten behind her, and one on each side carrying her food and drink following her. She pauses occasionally and erratically, forcing her servants to keep a distance from her lest they bump into her.

A gang of blue suited individuals runs up the street picking up anything on the floor, I see some of the rich throwing things behind them and forcing some of the gang to run behind picking up the pieces as they go. In all of this, none of the blue suits even look up from the floor; none of them dare meet the gaze of those who walk the streets freely. Across the way a little girl no more than six years of age throws crumbs of food to the floor, forcing a whole gang of the blue suits to attend her waste. Sitting behind her in a café, what I presume must be her parents look on with approval.

I walk down the street steadily, my clothes have caused me to be stopped at least three times, I'm neither trendy enough nor clean enough to warrant a free pass through the area but my card has easily let me through the checks so far. I pause at one of the shops, looking in through the windows. There's a piece of cloth displayed there, I can't identify it more than to say that it's a piece of cloth, there's no price tag on it and it's the only thing displayed there. As I watch, it is removed by one of the shop assistants and replaced by another. The assistant doesn't look up at me, must be too dangerous to do that around here. I continue down the street, there are no signs here, just endless rows of shops. Some of the people walking the streets are walking free, but they look like I do, not neat enough to be here and wearing clothing that is functional rather than trendy. These people still go to the shops, but only to the smaller ones, never to those with only one item in the window.

I see one such pair, a young couple, in their mid to late twenties, walk down the same side of the street as me holding hands, laughing and smiling. Obviously in love, they pause in the centre of the street to kiss each other, enjoying this moment in paradise. As I watch, a huge brute of a man steps towards them from one of the café's, raising a large club in his right hand. Without thinking, I grab the club from his hand and toss it behind me, I hear it bounce once before one of the blue gangs picks it up and dumps it in the trash. The man turns and snarls, flexing muscles that he didn't build in the gym and advances on me pounding his fists together. I step back, going into a ready stance with both hands down by my side, seemingly paralysed with fear. The brute lumbers forwards clumsily, swinging one hand like a giant hammer, I wait till it gets closer then shift sideways and watch him tumble past me. He lands on the floor with a thud and then slowly gets to his feet. I look at him and smile, beckoning with one hand, leaving the other behind my back.

He charges again, head forwards, arms outstretched, no style or capability at all. I step sideways and smash my elbow into the side of his neck. He lands on the floor with a crunch and I see at least one tooth fly out of his mouth to be picked up and put in the trash a half second later. I look up to the young couple and motion them on, the young man nods his thanks while the woman still clings to him in shock. I watch as they depart, then get drawn back to the present

"Did you do this?" asks a young female voice imperiously

I turn to face my questioner, the view is distinctly better than I would have thought, the woman in question looks around nineteen years old, flawless skin, perfect figure and the best face that money can buy. The second I spend admiring the view is not appreciated.

"I asked you a question," she shouts, stamping her foot.

"I didn't give you an answer" I reply, grinning at her and turning to leave

I hear the foot stamp again and this time it's accompanied by several clicks of weapon safeties. I turn slowly, keeping my hands in clear sight. I find myself facing several of the area enforcement types, all of them with weapons trained, all of them waiting for the woman's command. I watch as her smile turns vicious.

"You will give me my answer," she says

I sigh inwardly, having already noted the cameras on the street "It was me"

"Good" she replies smugly "You will accompany me, or I will have you shot"

None of the troops around her seem to flinch at this possibility, so I raise both hands and allow them to cuff me. She steps into a large vehicle on the roadside and I reluctantly follow her at gunpoint.

Seconds later, we're airborne, and I see for the first time the city from the air, Brightlights is not a very high district, there are one or two larger buildings, but nothing at the height that we're at. I see other districts, to the west is the mountainous edifice that is Burningfell, north is a huge mass of lights, stretching as far as my eyes can see. Separating them, several canals, each one leading back to Basin, like the heart pumping blood to the limbs of the city. The ship slowly cruises into a landing strip resting on the side of one of the larger buildings and the girl gets out of the ship, commanding me to follow.

I get out of the ship and a robot servant takes hold of my cuffs, leading me after the girl.

"You know" she remarks almost nonchalantly "it's been a while since anything dared to defy me"

I don't say anything; she has the sound of someone enjoying the noise of her own voice.

"Do you know what happens to those who defy me?"

Still no response.

"Then I will show you" she looks back and smiles at me, a smile with no humour in it, only the promise of a painful death. We turn around a corner leading into a hall full of doors. She pauses in front of one of them, waving her hand over a panel in the wall.

"This one thought she was thinner than me" she laughs, pointing to an image on the wall next to the door. The image is of a young girl in her late teens, almost anorexic in her appearance. The servant pulls me in front of the open door. The sight inside makes me close my eyes against it, the girl in the chair weighs easily ten times what I do, bloated into immobility somehow.

My host waves her hand over the panel and the door closes, she turns to the door opposite, the image is of another girl, athletic and attractive.

"This one took one of my boyfriends, he said that she had a better body than I did, and that she was smarter than I was" she spits and waves her hands over the panel. The servant drags me to the opening again. The girl is strapped into a similar chair, her eyes, once sparkling with intelligence are now dull and vacant, a badly stitched scar runs across the top of her shaven head. Her mouth hangs open, drooling vacantly onto her huge torso, where another scar runs the length of her abdomen.

"I made sure they could be together" laughs my host maniacally "This way, they'll never be parted"

I test my cuffs experimentally as she laughs to herself, they're not very well fitted, the probable guess is that they're more for fooling around than for actually restraining determined men. We move down the hall, seeing more and more atrocities in each cell, each one done to satisfy her sense of revenge. The Robot behind me doesn't respond to me testing the cuffs in any way, save to keep them at the same level as it had been ordered to, but its having trouble doing that as well, I suspect that its more a modified servant drone than a prisoner transporter.

We reach the end of the corridor and she turns to face me, hands on her hips

"So what should I do with you?" Her smile turns into a grin and her eyes glitter with a twisted sadism.

"Could always try letting me go" I reply with an easy smile

"I *could* try that" she admits, bringing her hand up to her chin theatrically "but I have so many better ideas than that" she motions to the two doors at the end of the hall.

We get alongside the first one, the door opens to reveal the young couple that I saved from the man-beast; both of them secured to chairs. The girl turns to the door opposite, where an empty chair is waiting.

"I think it'll be *fun*," she says "If you get to see what happens to those who defy me, just before I finish you myself"

"Why them?" I ask

"Because I wanted to see innocent blood spilled, I sent my man to bring me some," her head tilts and I see the gleam of madness in her eyes "you're here because you prevented it, they're here because I won't be cheated of my sport"

"So what are you going to do then" I ask, playing for time, the links in the manacles starting to give

"Well, I was thinking of skinning them alive and seeing how long it took them to bleed to death, a good idea, no?"

"There is that" I grin as the left manacle clicks, shaking my head, "But I have another idea"

"Oh?" she says, tilting her head to the other side.

"Yeah" I reply, already in motion.

I lean forwards, bringing my legs up into the robots chest and rolling forwards, thrusting the robot forwards with my thighs. It flies over me and impacts into her, its wrists shattering from the force of the push. I roll and pull the cuffs out from under me, twisting my wrists as I get them in front of me. The metal, already stressed by the move I just pulled on them, stretches and snaps leaving me with two designer bracelets. I dive to the floor as the girl stands up, sweeping her legs out from under her, she lands hard, squealing in pain.

"How do I get them out?" I roar at her, pointing at the couple

She says nothing, her face a picture of certainty that I wouldn't dare do anything. I pull her upwards and sit her in the chair that was meant for me. The cuffs on the wrists and ankles snap shut instantly and a small red button blinks on by the side of the chair.

"What was it that you wanted to do to me?" I ask, leaving my hand hovering above the button "How do I get them out of there?"

She looks uncertain for a second, but then her face resumes its arrogant look. I shrug, as much to myself as her.

"Have it your way" I say calmly, pressing the button

Her arms are raised up to her sides, then pulled backwards, slowly stretching the tendons in her arms. Her legs are pulled under her, leaving her suspended in the air and then slowly the chair begins pulling her limbs further backwards. A piercing shriek of terror echoes through the air as she realises I'm more than happy to watch her torn to pieces.

"Please no" she begs, tears running down her face. I press the button again and the machine stops

"You press the blue button on the wall and they go free" she cries

I step across the hall and press the blue button, the clamps on the couple release and they both stand up, embracing each other in relief. I step back across and put my face level with the girls.

"How do we get out of here?" I ask sweetly

"There's no way out without me" she says, her chest heaving

"I don't believe you" I reply, putting my hand near the button again, her eyes widen

"Oh god, no" she stammers, "You can take the express elevator at the end of the hall to street level, there are no guards in here, only robots"

"And how" I ask quietly "do we get past those?"

"My belt has a transmitter on it that deactivates them"

I look down and pull her belt off her, then look down at her

"You realise that if you're lying, I'll be back, and that button will get pressed again" I grin as I say it.

"I'm telling the truth" she sobs

I believe her, I suspect that it's the first time she's ever been in a position of helplessness. I don't suppose that it'll make a difference to the way she does things, but it might make her think twice before she does it again. I stand up and grin at my naivete, she'll most likely just make sure she never gets caught like this again. I turn and usher the couple around the corridor to the elevator, we're out of the building in less than a few minutes.

All three of us spend a minute standing in the fresh air, it seems that even here, freedom is not free, maybe we should call it expensivedom instead.

"How do we get out of here?" I ask the couple

"This way" replies the young man "the trains run all night"

The sector seems far smaller than the others I've been in, but its often the way with wealth, poverty usually comes with space that you cannot use, but when there's money it's all concentrated in one place, those with do not like to suffer the presence of those without.

The Station is a huge building, built in the same way that a child's toy might be designed. Massive ornate doorways far larger than are required for the traffic passing through them, so that the child might reach in and pull out what they need without disturbing the actual building. There are no other vehicles near the station, no parking space for cars, but several lines run into the station from both ends, and the entire premises are

surrounded by more of the guards like the ones I encountered on the dock. They stop us directly before we get into the main station, asking us politely (but under gunpoint) for our tickets, checking each one for a full minute before waving us through.

The couple bound up the stairs, urging me to keep up, I'll have to get rid of this tourists instinct sometime, it's going to get me killed sooner or later. I pause at the top of the stairs again, looking at the magnificent engine that is the train. Four wheels that I can see on this side hold upright a giant metal beast of a machine, raw power sparks and writhes over its surface and four people dressed in thick insulating robes tend to the connections between the train and the cables overhead. A sign above the train indicates the destinations, I see the one earmarked for Longshore University and step smartly on board. The couple get on board the same train as me and sit opposite me in the carriage. The furniture of this train is spectacular, plush carpet and thick cushioned seating line the carriage, divided into separate compartments each housing a mere six people. We all sit back and I see them relax slightly, as if nothing could assail them here.

The engine whines and a rumble passes through the entire carriage, there's a slow groan of metal upon metal as the wheels slowly begin to turn and the train pulls away into the night. I look out of the windows as we clear the main station area, the sky is clear, only the bright dots of the buildings below give any illumination. I open the window and sneak a glance outside to make sure that there's no poles on the side of the track waiting to knock me senseless. Nothing as far as the eye can see, so I stick my head out of the window and take a good look around. I can see the huge black pit that is Basin seemingly miles to the south and below us, I can see the entire district of Brightlights, its people moving to and fro, not all that different from the other sectors after all, just a different colour. I look up, seeing blue-green arcs of energy blazing along the upper power cables as the train picks up speed. I look down to see the train cross over the sub canal below us, the boats lit eerily by the pale glow given off by the train. Even so, no one looks up, I suspect that they'd hardly look up if the whole train came flying into the canal next to them, but that's the way of this city.

In a journey all too brief, we arrive at the Longshore University stop, all three of us disembark and stand for a second on the platform, savouring the night air, cool and crisp, just a hint of sewage in the air.

"Where are you headed?" asks the young lady

"I have to see someone called Professor Jaeger" I reply, "I was told that he teaches here"

"He does" she says doubtfully

I turn to face her as the young man grins a little apologetically

"Mina doesn't much like him" he says, smiling "You can stay with us tonight, we'll take you to him in the morning"

I start to protest that it's unnecessary, but he cuts me off with a wave of his hand

"It's the least we can do after what you've done for us." he says

I can't argue with that, we descend the steps into the University grounds.

Uj

The man continues through the ruins, his eyes now almost completely unfocussed, his motions slow and laboured, ahead of him a canal stretches as far as the eye can see in both directions. He picks his way over a bridge constructed of broken pieces of wood and stone, oblivious to the whole structure reverberating with his every step. He reaches the buildings close to him and leans heavily against the wall, his hand reaching behind his head, coming back with dirt and blood plastered across it. He levers himself off the wall and stumbles into the streets ahead.

I wake with a shout dripping with cold sweat, the light in the next room goes on and the young man from last night enters the room, a concerned look on his face. I look up at him.

"I'm okay" I mumble half-heartedly "I just get bad dreams once in a while"

"It's okay, time to get up anyway" he replies, brushing the sleep from his eyes.

The quarters here are surprisingly pleasant, I'm in the lounge area of this particular apartment, it's clean and dry, with a pleasant fragrance in the air, there's a window to the outside, and I can see across the entire campus with little difficulty. It's a huge sprawling construction, obviously designed with more money than sense, walkways lead from building to building and the entire floor is neatly paved, often with the name of the building written in the floor in different coloured tiles. My hosts are ready in less time than I would credit to most students and then we're away down the halls of residence. I'm not spared a second glance as we hurry down the corridors; most of the students here are just frantically trying to get to their lessons on time.

On the ground level, I can see that the university is laid out similar in fashion to a prison, the classrooms are on separate levels, each one separated by a gantry and armoured doors for some reason. The young man leads me to a large conference hall and motions to a small individual carrying a huge bundle of oversized iron keys. This person unerringly flips to the key for the door and unlocks it but does not open it. We wait outside as another young man, mid to late twenties again, walks by and enters the room as if he owned it. We wait for another five minutes or so till a voice echoes from within the room.

"Enter"

We both enter the room cautiously, to find the man who entered a few minutes ago sitting behind a desk at the front of a wide-open room.

"Professor Jaeger, we apologise for disturbing you"

"And so you should" interrupts the man behind the desk "This had better be worth my time"

The young man looks at me uncertainly, I take the initiative and step forwards "It will be" I reply confidently.

"Think you so?" he says with a touch of scorn

"No" I reply, stepping forwards "I don't think so"

He raises an eyebrow at this, I press forwards

"I'm here from Pyotr Kropotkin, he says that you know something of the Einigkeit"

"I might" he replies haughtily "What makes you think I would tell you?"

I raise my right hand, palm towards him "I'm one of them" I reply

His eyes widen and his mouth drops open before he remembers that a student is watching him and he schools his expression back to normal.

"This er, this could be of interest to me" he says, a nervous tick in his cheek now pulsing like a separate heartbeat, he looks at the young man who brought me here "You may go now, Rogers, you'll receive extra credit for this"

"Thank you" I say to Rogers as he turns to leave, he nods once and leaves the room quickly.

As the door closes, the professor raises himself up from his desk and crosses the floor quickly to where I stand.

"Truly" he asks breathlessly "One of the Einigkeit?"

"Apparently" I reply

He takes my right hand and looks at the palm "Lucent Heights?" he asks

"Apparently"

He looks closely at me for a second "Apparently?"

"I don't remember" I say honestly, looking deep into his eyes.

He nods to himself and walks briskly over to his desk, picking out a book from the drawer, opening it to a page that has seen constant revision. He places the book on the desk and revolves it to face me. On it is a map of the city, identical in layout but far more complex in nature than the one on my hand.

"The Einigkeit" he starts "are a legend, watchers of the world, warriors without equal, it is said that one person, high up in the city hierarchy, controls their movements"

He flips the pages of the book to another section, pointing out a number of pictures, one of them looks like a Simil, another like Walker.

"These are images of the shifted" he says, pointing out others "It is said that the Einigkeit are one of those races, but just one that no one has yet managed to catalogue"

"What information do you have on them?" I ask

"Smoke and Mirrors I'm afraid" he replies sadly "It is said that the Einigkeit walk where man cannot, that they see the truth behind everything, that they keep a record secretly where no man can look"

"You said that they were supposedly one of the shifted?" I ask "Is there a place in this university where such things are studied?"

He nods "SSF are doing a funded study at the moment, I can see what results they've come up with"

"Why don't we just pay them a visit?" I reply

The Shifted Study Facility is across from the area we're in, I don't see any students lazing around in the common rooms, it seems that everyone is exactly where they're supposed to be, exactly when they're supposed to be there.

"Is it always like this?" I ask Jaeger

"For the most part" he says "How much do you know about the city?"

"More than I want to" I say with a heartfelt sigh

He grins "Then you know what happens to most people, this place is for those who want to avoid having to live on those streets, if you get through here, if you make it with your life and grades intact, then you're set for life, you can get a job in a good industry, if not....."

We get across to the SSF in a small amount of time, Jaeger places his hand over the panel by the door, there's a faint buzz, and the main door opens, he steps inside and I follow. The facility has a strange smell, like a faint undercurrent of mild spice, nothing that I immediately recognise, the air is calm, there's no wind of any sort, only the quiet hum of air regulators. Jaeger moves swiftly to the office at the end of the facility and wanders in without waiting to be ushered. There's a small commotion inside as I follow him, quickly muted as one of the occupants sees my gun. "We won't be held to ransom" says a middle-aged woman, her voice quivering despite her best attempts to keep it steady.

"He's not here to hold you hostage" snaps Jaeger "He's here to get some answers, answers that we are going to give to him"

"Says who?" asks an arrogant looking teenager at the back of the room

"Says me" snaps Jaeger, staring him down "Or I'll personally revoke all your grants back to beginning of the hundred block war"

The teenager pales visibly "You wouldn't dare"

Jaeger grins, not replying.

The studies that have been done so far seem to consist of a whole lot of time spent in the student bar, and occasional dissection of shifted beings, it seems that these activities follow a 4:1 basis in favour of the bar. It seems that the air of efficiency that rules most of the university does not hold sway here. From what has been found, it seems that if you dismember them, most of the corporeal shifted have a similar but not identical nervous system to man and that it is theorised that many of them have similar thought processes.

"How do you theorise thought processes?" I ask to no one in particular

"We use rudimentary tests" replies the middle-aged woman

"Such as?"

"Primal responses" says an older man "We see if they have responses that could match humans"

"Such as?"

"We test them for basic human emotions such as fear, happiness, sadness, and other similar things"

"How?"

There's a pregnant silence

"How?" I press

"Show him" commands Jaeger

I'm taken into a large elevator that extends deep into the ground, all twelve of us ride down to the bottom where it opens out into a huge area divided into six different sections. All the sections have a glass roof and it's easy to see what's going on in each one of the rooms just by walking around the upper gantry. In the first room are three simil, one of them sat down, two standing, all unmoving.

"What goes on here?" I ask

"We're testing their basic reaction to loss" replies a young girl

"How?"

"The one sitting down has been de-activated, we're observing for the reaction in the other two"

"De-activated?"

"Killed"

Ah, so now we come to it, I step around the gantry to the next room, this room has a strange field in the centre of it that my eyes won't fully focus on, always seeming to slide away, to focus on something else.

"What is this?"

"That's a Drache" replies the same young girl "You wouldn't believe the trouble we had getting this one."

There's no trace of pity in her voice, no remorse for the imprisonment of a living being. We move around the gantry again, seeing a creature very similar to Walker in the next cell.

"That's a Hager" says the middle aged woman proudly "It came quietly when we killed the others that were travelling with it"

The next cell contains two creatures of identical nature, both small obese creatures, almost albino in their colouration, neither one of them make any move save to look up at us as we pass them.

"These are Lugner" says the arrogant teenager "They'll talk to you if you talk to them, but they seem incapable of telling the truth"

"Maybe they just don't want to" I reply

"No," he replies with confidence, "they can't even speak accurately about what colours they are"

I don't bother with an observation about maybe they see things differently, the scientific mindset can be wonderfully fixed when it finds something that it *wants* to find.

The next cell has nothing in it, I point this out, and one of the students sighs.

"Yes, this was an Ubel" says the same teenager "We've never managed to keep one in captivity for more than a few days, they just fade away"

The last cell has three bodies in it, one without a head, one with a deformed pelvis and one with a huge hole in its chest. I suppress any reaction and turn to the teenager again "And these?"

"These are something new" replies an elderly man "There was a possibility that these were a new form of the shifted"

"Oh?"

"About a week back, we got word from one of our sponsors that something called an Einigkeit had appeared downtown, somewhere near Calculus Tor, they said that we should prepare a maximum security pen for it when it was captured, since then we've had these three bodies delivered to us"

"Ever seen one before?" I ask nonchalantly

"No, never even heard of it, we only thought there were five types of shifted" enthuses the young girl

"So you think that these things are a new type of shifted?"

"No" replies the old man with certainty "the basic DNA of these creatures is Human, there's a minor differential in the cerebral cortex, but nothing that would suggest that they are a new type of shifted."

"This difference, what is it?" I ask

"We're not too sure" replies the middle aged woman with an edge of frustration to her voice "As one of the bodies came in without any head, we only have the original two to study, it's in a part of the brain that deals with the senses, but it has no place being there"

"A new strain of human perhaps?"

"No" she shakes her head emphatically "To place an analogy, its like having a third eye mounted in the back of your head, interesting, but the confusion from the differing inputs would be more debilitating than useful"

"And your studies have reached a halt now?" I smile "Your Conclusions?"

The old man steps forwards "Our *preliminary* conclusion..." I smile, always like the scientific mindset to disguise that they don't actually know anything "is that they are human, but we have to make more tests to be certain"

"We can't do anything else with these", snaps the arrogant teenager "we have to wait till we get a live one in the lab, then we'll find out what makes them tick."

I smile without humour "What if it didn't want to be studied?"

The arrogant teenager snorts "We'd find a way to bring it to heel, it wouldn't resist our techniques for long"

Professor Jaeger steps forwards "I think that that's enough of this particular discussion" he says firmly, staring me straight in the eye. I shrug, looking calmly at the teenager.

"Is there anything else you need to know?" Asks the middle-aged woman.

"Yes" I reply "I need to know who your sponsors are, particularly the one that has the interest in the Einigkeit"

"Do you know something about the Einigkeit?" asks the young girl excitedly

"You could say that" I reply evenly

"What is it?" she asks, her eyes wide

"For one thing, they're smarter than all of you"

There's a collected snort and muffled laughter from all present except for Jaeger, who looks down with a smile and shakes his head

"Ridiculous" snaps the elderly man "how could one person be more intelligent than all of us?"

I point down at the cell "I'll show you, but first of all, you need to open that cell up, you've made a mistake in the construction of it"

One of them flips a switch on the wall next to the cell and the gantry lowers itself into the cell.

"Now, all of you, take a look around the cell, look closely at the walls" I say, gesturing at the insides of the cell, making eye contact with Jaeger so he stays on the gantry. All twelve of the scientists look around the walls, trying to find anything that might be wrong with the construction, I silently take my pistol out of the holster.

"Nothing wrong with this cell" proclaims the arrogant teenager, "completely impossible to get out of..." His voice trails off as he realises my pistol is pointed at them all

"That's what I thought" I say, grinning broadly "The person with the access to the sponsor records will get back on the lift"

The young girl steps back onto the lift, the rest of them don't move

"A thing to consider when you all get out of here," I say, flipping the switch that takes the gantry back to its original position "you've all seen the tattoos on the palms of these beings haven't you?"

A variety of sullen nods, I extend my palm, tattoo exposed "There's one of us for each area, maybe you should be wondering where the one that lives here is, we might not like being imprisoned and one day, we might decide to put you in a similar place"

None of them say anything this time, a cage is never quite as much fun from the inside.

I take the young girl back up the elevator and wait for her to pull out the details for the sponsors

"How did you know about us?" she asks, frantically leafing through the papers

"We know these things" I say, unwilling to implicate Jaeger in the whole thing. I see him nod his thanks silently behind her back.

She finishes looking through the papers and produces two different sheets of paper, the first one is a list of the various sponsors, I look down the list

Arclight, Hirplakker, Gorunna, Grid, Icrotech, Arbrow, H-W enterprises

I know some of the names, but none of them mean more than a vague familiarity, the young girl passes over the other sheet, this contains the names of the corporations that requested the Einigkeit sanction.

H-W enterprises

"Who are these?"

"Harland-Weiss?"

The rest of her words are lost as the first two words burn themselves across my mind, I reach into my pocket and pull out the small card.

"Where are they?" I interrupt her monologue

Frantically, she flips through the pages to find an address. I take it and look, then motion for her to turn around, smacking her on the back of the head hard enough to knock her out but nothing else. I turn to Jaeger and indicate the page, he takes it from me and looks.

"It's the personal residence of a Keiko Harland-Weiss, Major shareholder of the Harland-Weiss operation" he says, explaining how the addresses in Lucent heights work. "You'll never get in there by yourself"

"I'll find a way" I reply

"You might try the Hunters Club"

"Hunters Club?"

"Lucent Heights has a lot of bored delinquents, many of them round up the homeless from Folly Hills, then set them loose in Lucent Heights and hunt them down"

"I don't think I'd pass for homeless somehow"

"Maybe" he agrees "but it'll be easier than trying to take the train there."

He's got a point, if I arrive in Lucent heights by any legal method, they'll notice me arriving and give this person warning of my arrival. I nod to myself and turn to Jaeger.

"How do I get to Folly Hills?"

Uii

I see the man walking down the main street, people shy away from him as he staggers from wall to wall, desperately holding on to the crumbling stone in an attempt to stay upright. An alleyway beckons and he stumbles into it, nearly falling over a body at the entrance slumped in the shallow water. Up ahead, he sees me and starts forwards, he looks up as I come into view, the two of us stand facing each other like gunfighters of old, each one the mirror image of the other, the face and clothes the same, his face shifts as he recognises himself.

“You!” he breathes harshly, reaching for his gun.

I reach out with ease and smash him to the floor, leaving him face down in the shallows.....

I walk calmly through the campus, taking a slow walk towards the bridge spanning the sub canal between the University and Folly Hills, there's a strange sense of melancholy in the air, I know where I'm supposed to be and that's a feeling I'm still getting used to. Most people spend their lives in search of where they're supposed to be, what they're supposed to be doing, and here I am with absolute purpose, taking my own sweet time. The university is a quiet place, much as any place of learning should be, no need for wasteful noises, no need for aimless banter, just knowledge to be absorbed by hungry minds. I'm not approached by anyone as I walk through the sector, it occurs to me that had I any bad intentions towards the campus, it would be the easiest thing in the world to get away with it. Maybe that knowledge is what keeps people from doing it, maybe they fear what they don't know, maybe its true about the uneducated fearing those with knowledge.

Maybe it's a question that someone else should be asking

The thought keeps me company as I approach the huge bridge leading over the canals, there is a minimal security force there, maybe ten men in all, they take a cursory look at my card and wave me through with no real concern. The road is still a wide-open thing here, heavily paved, but without the care and attention shown in the University. I look out to the north, seeing a few large hills reaching gently into the sky, each one carrying a statue of sorts upon it. The people hereabouts are poor, I can see that just from the clothing that they're wearing, each one of them wearing functional clothing, each one of them with a purpose, but without the intensity of the industrial zones, their jobs aren't worth their lives, and they know that very well. Looking out to the north again, I see the road open up to admit the hills, and move up to the first one.

They say the difference between a hill and a mountain is only a matter of feet, I almost agree with that, it's actually a matter of how many pairs of feet you use up climbing the damn things. The first hill is directly in front of me, it would be longer to walk around it than it is to walk over it, so I start upwards. It's not a steep hill, and I look up at the statue above, cast in thick grey stone. It's an angel, clasping a sword in both hands before it, the wings blotting out most of the sun, but still, the sight inspires me, like a guardian reaching out, pointing the way with the sword of justice.

After five minutes, my legs take fire, and I measure my pace to make sure I can still make it to the top, After seven minutes, I think of giving up, but I see the angel above me, reaching high, pushing me to go further. At ten minutes, I reach the top and sink to my knees on top of the hill, looking north.

The second hill mounts a huge arch on it, perfectly framing the third hill, where the statue of a soldier holding a rifle stands, his hand extended towards me. I stop for a second, caught in the moment, I sit here under the protection of an angel, ahead of me lies my path, the path of the soldier, no matter the holes he must walk through, he knows his path and that is the way he goes. I rest back under the cold sun, spending another precious moment just looking forwards. Down below me, people still go about their daily lives, in my quest to see what I should be doing, where I should be going, I forgot that life does go on. I sit up there on that hill for a good hour, watching life go by, enjoying the noise of life, feeling the sun upon me, even the faint smell of sewage on the breeze smells sweet.

As the sun starts to set, I get up and walk slowly down the hill, heading to the north, where Professor Jaeger said I might find what I was looking for. It takes me three hours to get past all the hills, and I see in the falling darkness the edge of the sector far to the north, several groups of people huddle around fires. Many of them wearing heavy cloaks, those unfortunate enough not to have cloaks huddled together to try and

keep the heat in. I walk to the nearest group and extend my hands to the fire, grateful for the mild heat against the deepening cold. The group opens their ranks a little and a few nod silent greetings. One of them passes me a can of food, no eating utensils in it, but a little food at the bottom. I nod my thanks and scoop out what little is left, it tastes like something that the black canal threw back, but the gesture makes it seem like fine food indeed.

We stand there for ten minutes, nothing said, no one moving, and I look to each one of them, each one doesn't meet my gaze, only looking down into the flames, as if all the answers lay within those dancing lights. I extend my arms for one last warming against the fire and make my move.

"So where do they take you from?" I ask to no-one in particular

There's no immediate answer, but one of them, a middle-aged man, looks up at me with an intense gaze. He stares for maybe a minute before speaking.

"You mean the brats?"

"Brats?"

"The rich bastards from the Heights"

"Aye, that'd be them"

There's no sound for a second, and then the woman standing next to him speaks up.

"They take anyone who stands up for themselves, we never get our people back"

"Only those who stand up for themselves?" I ask

"Keeps everyone else in line" replies the man to my right

I nod, "When do they come, usually?"

"That'd be them now" replies the woman sullenly as loud shouting echoes down from the north

I reach into my pocket, of the money I had a few days ago, very little of it is left, I take out all but twenty, and share what remains out equally to those around the fire.

"I may not be back this way, but I'm going to do what I can to make sure that it's a little easier for you from now on"

"Why?" asks the middle aged man

I smile across the fire at him "You gave me food when I needed it" I turn and walk from the fire without another word, walking up the street towards Lucent Heights, grabbing a festering cloth from the floor and wrapping it around my shoulders.

Ahead of me, shouts and whoops fill the air as a gang of teenagers walk down the centre of the road, holding bottles in the air and letting off small fireworks, singing tunelessly to songs that have no lyrics. I move to the middle of the road and walk steadily towards them. They don't notice me till I barrel into one of them and send them crashing to the floor. Instantly I find myself surrounded by the rest of the gang who start shouting and pushing at me. The one I knocked over is up in a shot and in my face.

"I'll be taking this one" he shouts, the rest of the group howl their approval and bundle me towards a large truck, where I find several more people dressed in rags. All of them with eyes downcast, looking as if the world has just come to an end. We all sit there as the truck starts up and moves away from folly hills, we can see out of the back, the fires in the streets seem to wave goodbye as the truck bumps up the road. We go over an arch in the road and one of the women starts sobbing quietly. I reach over and raise her face up to look at me.

"You'll make it through this" I say to her firmly

She nods, but her eyes don't believe me. I sit back and raise my voice slightly

"All of you, listen to me, you can all go back to where you came from"

The tone of my voice makes several of them listens up, the others haven't moved from their depression yet.

"When they set us loose, you all follow me and I'll make sure that you get out of here, you leave the fight to me"

"You can't take all of them," says a young lad opposite me

"Maybe not" I admit "But I'll make them think twice before picking anyone out of the hills again"

There's nothing more to be said, we travel on into the night, and the sounds change around us, the quiet of the slums gives way to absolute silence, the truck goes from bouncing occasionally on uneven stones to riding like it was on rails. The Truck slows to a halt and the teenagers all get out of their own vehicles, gathering together at the back of the truck, motioning for the rest of us to get out. We all do so reluctantly, gathering in a line at the edge of the truck.

The one I knocked over steps in front of the rest of them, looking over us.

"Welcome" he shouts, "To the Lucent Heights Sports grounds" the people behind him raise a ragged cheer.

"You are all scum" he continues, "and for that crime, you have all been sentenced to death"

He pauses theatrically, then turns back to his people and bows. They return the bow and as they do so, I put my hand around my gun inside my pocket. He turns back to us and raises his arms, almost like a priest giving benediction.

"I will now show you what happens to those who don't play the game" he shouts as one of his companions produces a long firearm. It looks like a sparklock pistol with an added stock more than anything else. Most likely mummy and daddy occasionally off a peasant here and there, from the way she's carrying it, junior here just borrowed the family "cannon" for the evening, never really fired it at anything that wasn't being held in place by the butler.

The leader walks into a large open archway, gesturing around him like a composer (albeit a composer with a nerve disorder). I'm first in through the door, what I see there reminds me that some of the people in this world don't share my regard for life. Mounted on a pedestal in the centre of the room is a young man in a chair, I'd presume no more than twenty years old at most, his body covered in bruises, badly healed cuts, burns and abrasions. The leader stands at the back of him and looks over the boys shoulder at us. The rest of the group assembles behind me and the leader smirks at us, drawing an ornate long knife from behind him and waving it in front of the boys face.

"This boy refused to run from us" he says calmly, almost conversationally "he decided to fight us rather than run like prey should"

The Leader waves the blade in front of the boys face, lightly running it over his chest, drawing a thin line of blood.

"Now he'll learn what it is to defy his betters" The knife comes up, my hand flashes out and the knife drops again as my gun barks once. I switch my field of fire to behind me where the girl with the pistol has it half raised.

"No" I snap sharply "you don't want to be doing that"

Her face twists as her brain half reacts to the pistol in my hand, the other half is busy being outraged at the thought of a peasant giving her an order. There's a scrape behind me as the leader picks up his knife with his unbloodied hand.

"What's your name?" I ask the girl, turning back to the leader and putting a round in his other hand.

Simple combat strategy, if you ask someone a question, it engages their brain, this disengages other brain functions, such as the ability to pull a trigger. Trained people get around this by just shooting the person asking the question, but junior here doesn't know about that it seems. I turn back to find the girl still standing there with the pistol still half raised.

"Name?" I ask lightly, raising one eyebrow and cocking my head to one side. Her brain is still struggling with the concept of name and trigger, but I think its resolving on the side of trigger, the barrels moves up slightly.

"No" I snap again, more loudly this time, the rest of the group's gone pale, probably the first time they've been on the end of a gun themselves. Junior is now having a serious priorities problem now, I see the barrel inch upwards again, I draw the hammer back and sight the pistol just above her collarbone where the main nerve cluster is, shaking my head almost imperceptibly.

The conflict in her brain resolves with the barrel of her pistol snapping upwards. My gun roars once and her eyes go wide as the round disintegrates her upper spine, for one moment, her eyes are filled with all the terror of the imminent realisation that she's already dead, then her body crumbles to the floor in a sprawled heap. I close my eyes for a split second to mourn that poor girl, then steel my jaw and turn back to the leader who's busy sitting on the floor crying at the holes in his hands. I hear a scrape behind me as someone thinks to pick up the pistol. I don't turn around

"What should prey do?" I ask in a dangerously quiet tone

"Run" blurts out one of the boys as he scrambles for the door, closely followed by the others. The others who were taken from Folly Hills stand uncertainly in the space vacated by them. I raise one finger to them in a gesture of pause and turn back again.

"You have the keys to the big van" I say to the boy on the floor "you will give them to me now"

He scrabbles frantically at his pockets, his fingers won't work, so I reach down and pull out the keys, picking up the knife and cutting the boy on the chair loose. I throw the keys to the group still stood by the door.

"Get back to the hills, sell the truck, these kids won't ever bother you again"

They don't wait to be asked twice, and in minutes, the convoy is on its way back into the hills. I turn back to the leader on the floor, crouching down beside him and taking out the paper I took from the scientists at the University.

"Now you" I say quietly "Will tell me where this is"

Of all the places I've seen in the city, Lucent Heights is the strangest, the streets are empty, silent, there are lights on in the buildings, but no evidence of movement in those buildings. There's a faint noise from above as elegant fighter jets stream through the air high above me, but that's the only noise here. Like a ghost town, but even then, I'm sure ghosts would make more noise than this place does.

The streets are eclectic, that's the only way to describe them, the first rows of buildings are built with economy in mind. They're not hi-rise, only reaching up a mere three floors, but you can see even from the outside that someone designed them for people with no requirement to actually live in them. These are most likely for young professionals who see a house more as a status symbol than anything to actually gain use from, too busy taking stimulants to stay awake and working a hundred and fifty hours a week to sustain their "life". I pass them and see the next set of houses, real houses this time built separately and individually, I look closer, not too individual though, they're all from the same template, just a different batch number. Again, lights but no movement, the silence is deafening. I start to jog up the hill, from what the youth told me; the place I'm looking for is at the top of this hill, where only the richest can be found.

Ahead of me a group of armoured people round the corner in formation, marching with a precision that borders on machinelike. I hunker down in the shadows of the closest house as they march past, they don't appear to be actually looking for anything, more like providing the illusion of safety to those who live here. If they were paying any attention, they would no doubt have seen me here. I wait silently in the darkness as they file past, pausing till they are past and around the next corner before emerging, keeping a little more to the shadows than I had been doing.

The next row of houses is not so much a row as a field of property. Fewer of them than in the previous rows, but larger, more opulent, each one of them more than twice the size of any of the houses I've seen before. This place was built with affluence in mind, this layout couldn't have been added to over time, someone thought about this and made it exactly as they saw fit. Each house here has a fence or railing of some kind, from the obvious metal bars thrust into the ground to the almost imperceptible light beams arcing up on others, no doubt a warning system of some sort. I get past quickly, cover is now very scarce, speed is my ally here. Near the top of the hill, the buildings speak of their owners status, magnificently baroque architecture, long sweeping lines of stone and wood. I see one ahead of me, almost a castle with its many turrets, the entire perimeter sealed by a massive fence that sparks and buzzes gently in the silence. I walk up and stand at the gates and the realisation hits me like a hammer.

I know this place.

This place was my home.

I approach the gate and with a soft whirr, it opens on well-oiled rails. I walk past and look up at the mansion, rows upon rows of windows face back at me, each one of them has the glass tilted at a slightly different angle, each one showing a slightly different image. The door at the front is constructed from wood, real wood, grown at god alone knows what cost. I walk slowly and deliberately up the stairs, there's a motto above the door. It's written in a language that hasn't been spoken for years, and the translation doesn't bear up well to most modern tongues. It roughly says

"Dream as if you'll live forever, live as if you'll die today"

I run my hand over the inscription, trying to remember anything else. I push gently at the door; it opens smoothly, no resistance from the hinges or floors. I look into the hallway thus revealed, deep green carpeting covers every inch of the floor; I tread warily on it, feeling the inch thick pile beneath my boots. I don't bother to close the door behind me; anything that wants me can come and get me.

The corridor turns to the north at the end and I walk slowly around, coming to a set of stairs leading up. I pause at the bottom for a second and draw my gun, pacing up the side of the stairs in an effort to minimise noise. At the top is an open landing, easily covering most of this floor, but around the edge of this room are statues, each one carved in a silver alloy, each one standing to attention. At the bottom of each of these statues is a small symbol, very much like the tattoo on my palm. I look at each one in turn; the one that corresponds with Calculus Tor is a shattered ruin, as is the one for Deepdown and the one for Burningfell. I look up the corridor and see a fourth shattered figure, this one reads Serpentine Canal, I don't remember having been there, but I look through each one in turn, not recognising most of them till I come to Lucent Heights. I look up into the mirror image of myself, silently running my hand over the argent visage.

There's a soft gasp from behind me

"Raphael?"

A woman's voice, soft and melodic.

I turn slowly to see a young woman in her early thirties standing at the edge of the room dressed in a perfectly tailored silken outfit. Her hands are raised to her face in shock and her eyes are moist with tears. I stay where I am and just look at her; there's no memory springing up, no sudden remembrance of who she is.

"Don't you remember me?" she asks from across the room

"No" I reply truthfully "But you remember me"

"Of course" she says, walking around the edge of the room, keeping close to the edges, steadily coming closer.

"Who am I?" I ask, suddenly fearful of the answer.

She stops in the centre of the opposite wall, directly across from where I am

"Raphael Talbot, Guardian of Lucent Heights," her voice catches slightly "Guardian of me"

"Who are you?" I reply, softening my tone

"Keiko" she replies, "Don't you remember me?" she sounds on the edge of tears

I holster my gun and start to walk around the room towards her. She starts to walk around the room in the same direction, keeping her distance from me.

"What are you afraid of?" I ask, stopping in the centre of the east wall.

"Me" replies another voice, deep and resonant, a voice that sounds familiar and yet somehow not. I look around the room for the source of the voice, nothing at all.

I look at Keiko; she's stood motionless on the west wall, her eyes darting left and right for the originator of the voice. Soft footfalls can be heard at the northern corridor where I entered; I draw my gun and stand with it ready.

"You don't need that," says the voice "You've never needed clumsy weapons"

"Who are you?" I call into the hallway

"Me?" asks the voice innocently "I'm Einigkeit, just like you"

The lights in this room go out, leaving the northern corridor streaming light into the open area. A shadow makes its way into the doorway, and a powerfully built man strides into the room, his face hidden by shadows, his long coat flowing easily around him. He turns his face slightly to the light and his voice echoes again

"Or should I say *exactly* like you"

The lights flare up again, and my gun hangs limply for a second. What looks at me across the room is....Me. An exact replica of what I look like, down to the clothes and weapons. It smiles and nods at Keiko, then starts walking around towards me, still talking.

"You see, this.....bitch....." he points at Keiko with a waving finger, "knew about us, knew all about us, you see, for every light, there's a dark, for every soft, there's a hard, for every good," He gestures at me "There's an evil" he finishes, taking a bow.

"What are we?" I ask, keeping my gun trained on him

"Truthfully?" he asks

I nod cautiously

"Not even we know that, all we know that what happens to one of us, happens to the other, she...." he points again to Keiko, "knew about this, and she made the mistake of telling you, what you know, I know, and thus she was in danger"

"I don't understand"

He stops on my side of the room, barely twenty feet away from me, my gun still trained on him

"You know how good we are, don't you?" He grins evilly "You know what we're capable of"

He pauses and turns to face me, turning with an otherworldly grace "Now, imagine all the good that you do, directed in the opposite way. You are the best part of us, and you are capable of acts of massive violence and cruelty, *imagine* what I am capable of"

"But of course" he goes on, "she loved you, you loved her, you couldn't bear the thought of being parted, but you both knew that it was only a matter of time before I got to her, so you had to find a way to get rid of me without getting rid of you...."

My gun hasn't wavered in all this time, I pull back the hammer with a quiet resolve.

"Ah, ah, ah" he says, waving his finger at me like an adult rebuking a petulant child, "Don't want to be doing that, after all, kill me, kill you...."

"Maybe it's worth it" I reply calmly
"No!" cries Keiko from across the room, "Not again"
"Be Silent!" roars my double, turning back to me

"She's afraid you see" he says conversationally "she's seen what's outside the city, why do you think that she stays in all the time. Why do you think that she has no guests in her chambers, no friends to call upon her, why do you think that day after day, she sits in a darkened room hoping for darkness and silence?"

I don't answer, my mind won't let me into my memory no matter how hard I'm trying.

"We all know what's out there, even though we only remember it in bits now," he pauses in his monologue, searching for the right words "We know that the things out there are not meant to be seen by mortal man and *that* is why you went."

"She" The word is spat, not spoken "thought that if one of us went outside of the city, we could break our bond and be free to live our own lives, She thought that she would have someone to share her life with if we could be separated." He smiles, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes, "We on the other hand, know different, don't we?"

I glance across to Keiko and see her stood there, her hands clasped tightly in front of her, her eyes closed, silently mouthing something to herself. I bring my attention back to my twin as he leans against the wall.

"I've followed you across the city, I came back in shortly after you did and I wandered the same as you did, the only difference is that the ones like me found me and let me know what was going on. Why do you think that only some of the Einigkeit tried to kill you, whereas others let you go?" He levers himself off the wall "Their only chance to finish *me* was to finish *you* while you were still confused. But they forgot that even the washed out shadow of *me* that *you* are, is still more than a match for them and on the one occasion when they would have got you, I was there to save you"

He smiles, there's no humour in the motion "Not going to thank me?"

"Thank you" I reply, my aim not wavering

He looks at the gun and smirks tightly, his eyes not leaving mine

"Still not getting through to you am I brother? Perhaps a demonstration is in order"

He reaches into the folds of his coat and draws a throwing knife from his harness, then raises his right hand to his mouth. A shadow of his thoughts crosses my mind and I put a round into his left hand on impulse. A burning shock of pain rips through my hand and I nearly drop my gun, staring in shock at my own left hand, now spraying blood everywhere from the hole formed in the palm.

"Surprised?" he gasps, hastily trying to bind his own damaged hand with his coat. "It's not over Raphael, I'll be back to finish this, you'll never be free of me"

A part of me recognises that he's right and for a split second, I can see his thoughts, I can see what he's done, what he plans to do. I see what simply my being alive has let him do and as the brief connection fades, I see clearly into his mind for the first time

I see the young girl turn towards me, her mouth falls open in shock, then turns into a wide smile as she recognises me. She runs forwards, throwing her arms around me, hugging me tightly.

"I didn't think I'd see you again" she grins

"No, I expect you didn't" I reply coldly

"What is it?" she asks, standing in front of me with a puzzled expression

"Who are you?" I ask

Her brow furrows at the question "It's me" she replies brightly "Kuni"

"Ah yes" I smile roguishly, winking "I remember now"

She grins again, then grunts sharply as my gun kicks once, her back erupting in a spray of gore, she falls to the floor, both hands pressed over the hole in her abdomen. I crouch down beside her as she starts going into shock, her limbs shaking helplessly, her eyes moist with tears of pain and anguish.

I look deep into her eyes, leaning closely, seeing my own face reflected in the confusion there.

"B.....B....." she mumbles half incoherently "you....."

"Yes" I reply, putting my gun to her head "Me"

The Gun roars once

I try to block out the image from his memory as the sound of Kuni's last breath sighs out of her, then clarity comes back to me in a red flood and I open fire, my leg explodes with pain as the first round rips into his thigh. I stagger as I fire again, my ribs shatter under the second hit and I see him stagger towards the door, half-hopping, and half-running. My third shot goes wild, but the fourth connects with his shoulder and my gun drops from nerveless fingers. I pick up the gun in my damaged hand and stagger after him, collapsing to the floor after six paces. I see Keiko run towards me across the room, her fear quashed in the face of her love for me. She cradles me where I lay, her tears splashing down on my wounds. I can feel consciousness fading, but I can still sense him out there, these wounds might not be mortal, I try and raise my gun up, but my fingers won't bend around the trigger. Keiko pushes the gun down.

"Don't move" she sobs, "I'll get a surgeon, you'll be okay"

"No" I say, a curious sense of calm upon me, "No, it has to end here"

"Why?" she holds me to herself, her neck to my face, her love filling all my senses "Why?"

"Because I know now why I left and more importantly, I know why I cannot live" I try again to bring my gun up, my hand still isn't working

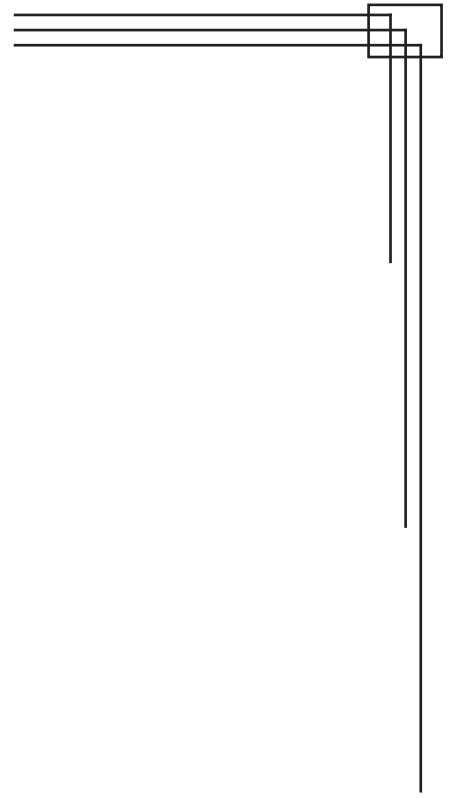
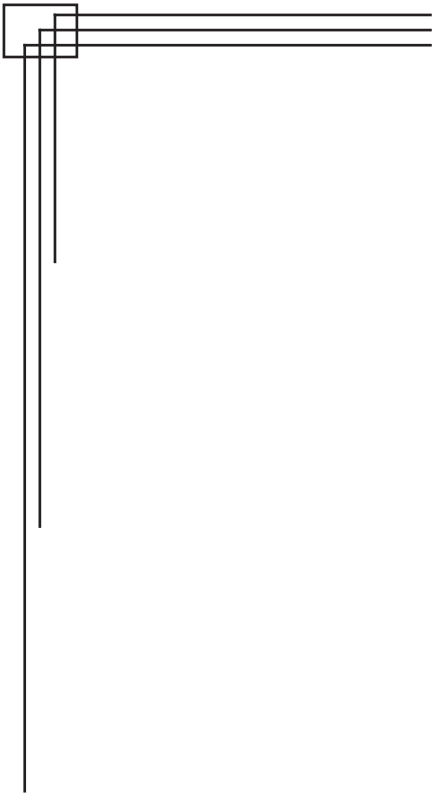
"But what will I do?" she cries forlornly "I can't live without you"

I smile through the pain "You have to" I raise my left hand to her face "I was strong for you once, you have to be strong for me now"

She bites back her tears and takes the gun from me, kissing me gently "I love you" she whispers.

"And I you" I say softly, closing my eyes.

I hear the trigger creak softly, and then.....



light

pain

darkness

