



NECROMUNDA

# LASGUN WEDDING

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**Necromunda - 10**

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**(An Undead Scan v1.0)**

*This book is dedicated to the members of Thundering Word for their invaluable help in developing the plot of Lasgun Wedding, and especially to its founding members, Al Katerinsky and Herb Kauderer, for making life tolerable during my five year exile from Oz. And a special thank you to Stacie Magelssen for opening the gateway back to the Emerald City after five long years in the desolation.*

In order to even begin to understand the blasted world of Necromunda you must first understand the hive cities. These man-made mountains of plasteel, ceramite and rockrete have accreted over centuries to protect their inhabitants from a hostile environment, so very much like the termite mounds they resemble. The Necromundan hive cities have populations in the billions and are intensely industrialised, each one commanding the manufacturing potential of an entire planet or colony system compacted into a few hundred square kilometres.

The internal stratification of the hive cities is also illuminating to observe. The entire hive structure replicates the social status of its inhabitants in a vertical plane. At the top are the nobility, below them are the workers, and below the workers are the dregs of society, the outcasts. Hive Primus, seat of the planetary governor Lord Helmawr of Necromunda, illustrates this in the starkest terms. The nobles — Houses Helmawr, Catallus, Ty, Ulandi, Greim, Ran Lo and Ko'Iron — live in the “Spire” and seldom set foot below the “Wall” that exists between themselves and the great forges and hab zones of the hive city proper.

Below the hive city is the “Underhive”, foundation layers of habitation domes, industrial zones and tunnels, which have been abandoned in prior generations, only to be reoccupied by those with nowhere else to go.

But... humans are not insects. They do not hive together well. Necessity may force it, but the hive cities of Necromunda remain internally divided to the point of brutalisation, outright violence being an everyday fact of life. The Underhive, meanwhile, is a thoroughly lawless place, beset by gangs and renegades, where only the strongest or the most cunning survive. The Goliaths, who believe firmly that might is right; the matriarchal, man-hating Escher; the industrial Orlocks; the technologically-minded Van Saar; the Delaque whose very existence depends on their espionage network: the fiery zealots of the Cawdor. All strive for the advantage that will elevate them, no matter how briefly, above the other houses and gangs of the Underhive.

Most fascinating of all is when individuals attempt to cross the monumental physical and social divides of the hive to start new lives. Given social conditions, ascension through the hive is nigh on impossible, but descent is an altogether easier, albeit less appealing, possibility.

—excerpted from Xonariarius the Younger's  
*Nobilite Pax Imperator — the Triumph  
of Aristocracy over Democracy.*

## **PROLOGUE: DOUBLE JEOPARDY**

“Mayday! Mayday! This is Royal Transport X29. We are under heavy fire. I repeat. This is Royal Transport X29 taking heavy ground fire.”

“X29, pull up out of their range, over?”

Jarl Demont, a veteran of countless battles, stared dumbfounded at the com-panel. “Scavving bureaucrat,” he said. Another explosion rocked the small transport. Jarl wrestled the yoke as a giant fireball engulfed the view screen. His ear slammed against the headrest as the transport lurched to the side, leaving him with a throbbing headache and a horrible ringing permeating his brain.

“That last one took out the port thrusters, Jarl,” reported the co-pilot, Enri Sandovan.

Jarl shook his head to try to clear the bells and then glanced over at Enri. His friend and co-pilot had just said something, but the ringing in his ears had drowned out everything but his name.

In the cramped cockpit, the two men sat practically hip to hip, but that made it easier to reach all the knobs, switches and buttons lining the control panel arrayed before them. After twenty years of flying together, the questioning look on Jarl’s face obviously was enough for Enri.

He reached past Jarl and flipped a switch, turning off the warning claxon.

“Flame out, port side,” he said. Even with the claxon off, End’s voice sounded faint and far away. The yoke wrenched at Jarl’s grip as the engine died.

“Enri!” cried Jarl as he began to flip switches. His voice sounded like a distant echo. He continued shouting so he could hear himself as he attempted to restart the engines. “Contact that idiot at the Spire Docks. We need tactical support.”

With one hand holding the bucking yoke, Jarl set the port fuel injectors to neutral and tried a cold restart. Nothing. A contrail streaked across the dark clouds, curving right towards the front of the transport. Jarl slammed the yoke hard right. The missile sped past the view screen. It came so close he could practically read the lettering on the side.

An explosion in the rear of the transport made the ship buck violently. Jarl and Enri were tossed forward, their bodies straining at the harnesses. Jarl fought the yoke for a time, trying to get back to an even keel on just one engine.

After their harrowing escape, Jarl wiped sweat from his brow, mouthed a quick “phew” at Enri and then returned to trying a cold restart on the port engine. He flipped a few more switches and then tossed a large lever between their black-booted feet. Nothing happened. He reset the switches and tried the lever again. Again, nothing. The engine was dead.

As he looked at Enri, a brief but bitter smile flitted across Jarl’s face. It seemed his swarthy co-pilot wasn’t having any better luck. Enri’s olive-skinned face turned beet red and his straight black hair flew around his head like angry noodles as he screamed into the com. “We’re down one engine! Can’t maintain altitude... No. We can’t get out of range. They’ve got heavy weapons... Get us some damn support!”

The view screen once again erupted in flame as a rocket exploded just below them. The force of the explosion set off the claxons again. Jarl’s hearing must have returned to near normal, because he almost unconsciously turned off the “extremely helpful” close contact warning indicator.

After they cleared the fireball, Enri shook his head at Jarl. “We’re on our own,” he said.

Jarl scanned his instruments as the ship bucked and lurched through the air. Mixed in with the banks of switches and buttons, several dozen glowing dials showed the location of the transport and the condition of all its systems. What they told Jarl was that they were in deep trouble. Red lights flashed next to nearly every dial indicating some problem or another.

They had only partial power in the right engine and the left was completely dead. The rear cabin had depressurized, which meant their passengers were all now on canned air, which wouldn't last long. The air pressure in the cockpit was also dropping, and it seemed the automatic fire suppression system had gotten fried in that last explosion.

All of that was survivable, assuming they could get past this rain of missiles. But the big problem was the fuel gauge. It was dropping at an alarming rate. And if they ran out of fuel, this flying brick would plummet to the ground. It wasn't like they had wings they could use to glide to a safe landing.

Assuming they survived a two-mile drop, Jarl didn't like the prospect of hoofing it through the Ash Wastes, let alone dodging whoever or whatever was down there shooting at them. One thing was for sure: with a single, partial engine and nearly depleted fuel supply, they couldn't climb up to the Spire docks.

"We've got to make it to the Hive City docks," he said at last. "It's our only chance."

Jarl wrenched at the yoke, trying to control the bucking ship through sheer force of determination.

He jammed the controls to the left and back to the right to dodge another incoming missile. "See if you can coax any more power out of our last engine," he said. "And drop the landing gear. We're going in, one way or another."

He slapped the corn-link again and twisted the dial to change the frequency. "Hive City docks," called Jarl. "This is Royal Transport X29 requesting — no, demanding — emergency clearance for immediate landing. Clear the scavving docks. We're coming in hot!"

Jarl banked the transport hard to the left and began to descend. Hive Primus loomed large in the view screen. He rarely saw this view, beneath the thick layer of acid-laden clouds. Above the clouds, the Spire gleamed in the sunlight like a white beacon pointing to the stars. Down here, the hive base looked like nothing more than refuse stacked in a huge heap.

Ash and dirt hanging in the air clung to the hive like a dingy coat. Instead of the gleaming architecture of the spire with its flying buttresses, domed protrusions and enormous windows, the hive bottom looked like a haphazard jumble of rockrete erected by a deranged architect. Sections stuck out at odd angles, while others seemed jammed in where they didn't quite fit. Jagged scars left deep shadows where large blocks had crumbled under the enormous weight of the ten-mile edifice.

The comm crackled as the response came in. "This is Hive City. Please confirm your identity."

"Helmawr's rump," grumbled Jarl. He flipped the switch, prepared to tell the comm officer exactly what he thought about his ancestry. He never got the chance.

Another explosion rocked the transport, throwing Jarl against the left side of the headrest. He had no chance to worry about his ears this time, for his stomach jumped into his throat as the transport plummeted from the sky.

"We've lost all power!" yelled Enri.

A roar of air from an enormous hole next to Enri nearly drowned out the multiple claxons that began blaring all at once. The control panel fried and sparked under Jarl's hands and smoke billowed from the rear of the small compartment as flames licked the walls just above and behind their heads. Enri frantically flipped switches and threw levers, apparently trying to find some combination that would coax the damaged engines back to life.

"I know!" said Jarl. "Tell our passengers to brace for impact." As Enri spoke into the intercom, Jarl flipped another switch to open a broadband channel.

"Mayday. Mayday. This is Royal Transport X29. We are dead stick. I repeat. We are dead stick and headed into the Ash Wastes." He thought for a moment, and then, as he watched the grey desert

zoom towards him, Jarl added. “Tell the LC the package has been jeopardized. The package has been jeopardized.”

“Mr. Jerico?”

Kal Jerico had had a rough few days. He’d lost a huge sum of money to his worst enemy, the master spy Nemo the Faceless, forfeited his metal mastiff Wotan as collateral, and been forced to hunt down an innocent man for bounty to repay the debt. Then, after saving the day, yet again, he’d just lost his last credit paying off another debt to two goons who would have much rather turned his face into ground meat than to take his payment back to their employer.

But Kal was alive and sitting in his usual chair in his favourite dive with his pet back and his two best friends — well, his two best associates, Scabbs and Yolanda — at his side. He had a bottle of wildsnake in front of him, prospects for another moneymaking scheme on the table and his eye on several buxom barmaids.

Life, for the moment, was good, and so when Kal looked up into the beady, bespectacled eyes of a squirrely guy in a silk suit — the same weasel who’d been following Kal around during those rough few days — he didn’t immediately pull out his laspistol and shoot the annoying little rat between the eyes; a decision he would soon regret.

“What?” asked Kal. “What is it? Why have you been following me?”

“I have a letter for you,” said the little man. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a single finger and smiled as he handed Kal a white envelope.

A letter? Kal never got letters. If someone wanted his attention, they usually shot at him, or sent goons to rough him up, or, as in Yolanda’s case, simply smacked him on the back of the head. Kal took the envelope and turned it over and over in his hands.

His name had been printed on the back in ornate lettering with glittering, gold ink. The flap on the front had been sealed with red wax embossed by a signet design Kal didn’t quite recognize. Although as he studied it, Kal realized that some elements of the design bore a striking and frightening resemblance to the seal of House Helmawr; the seal of the ruler of Hive Primus, the seal of his father’s house.

This was not going to be good news. A dozen different scenarios flitted through Kal’s head as he stared at the ominous letter. It had obviously come from the Spire. The quality of the parchment and the fine, silk clothes worn by the squirrely messenger attested to that. But the altered Helmawr logo presented any number of possible dilemmas.

The old man could be dead or deposed, which would leave a power vacuum and a struggle amongst Helmawr’s inner circle and his various illegitimate children, as well as the power brokers within the rival houses. This could then be an invitation to an execution — his, or a ploy by any number of people to curry his favour in the coming struggle for control of House Helmawr.

One of his “cousins” could be trying to usurp their common father, and the logo was a not so subtle indication of that grab for power. Again, someone might want Kal’s help or might simply be sending a warning to Kal to not interfere.

Of course, Helmawr could have simply ordered a new logo. He was very nearly insane and prone to odd decisions and proclamations. This letter, then, could be the old man asking — no, ordering — Kal to do yet another favour for the family.

Kal shuddered at the last possibility, which he felt was both the worst and the most likely. He looked at the messenger and then back at the letter. He couldn’t make his hands open the envelope. “What is it?” he asked.

“It’s an invitation to a wedding, Mr. Jerico,” replied the Spire messenger. His pursed lips barely moved as he spoke. “Your wedding.”

Scabbs, who had just swallowed a huge mouthful of wildsnake, sprayed the table with the vile liquor. The worm from the bottom of the bottle squirmed and flopped around in the resulting puddle. Across from Kal, Yolanda doubled over in laughter, snorting like a pig wallowing in its favourite

swill. She then whipped her head back and howled like a wild animal, sending her dreadlocks careening around her tattooed head.

As Yolanda gasped for air between guffaws and Scabbs stared, slack-jawed, the last of the wildsnake dripping from his scab-covered cheeks and nose, Kal finally ripped open the envelope and pulled out the embossed invitation within.

Kal read the pronouncement printed in the centre of the card in flowing gold script: *House Helmawr cordially invites you to attend the wedding ceremony of its favourite son, and future ruler of Hive Primus and, by extension, all Necromunda: Kal Jerico.*

Kal thought the wording seemed a bit odd, but the feeling of dread that came over him as he read what could only be regarded as the obituary to his carefree, if constantly life-threatening, life drove all rational thought from his body.

Kal liked to joke that his style and good looks had some mystical qualities, that they somehow created the aura of luck that seemed to follow him through his many adventures and misadventures. And, to be honest, he'd gotten out of some situations that no mere mortal could have ever survived.

But when he was honest with himself, alone in the dark on the odd night that he didn't share his bed with a barmaid or "friend" for the evening, Kal knew that what had kept him alive for so many years was a highly refined fight or flight response that he'd honed to razor sharpness over the years. He acted or, more often, reacted well before most men had the time to absorb and analyze the situation. He had a mental edge, a tingling sensation in the back of his brain that told him when to leave.

Kal pondered this survival ability of his as he swept through the swinging front doors of the Sump Hole at a full run. Unfortunately, this time, his danger sense had fired a bit too late. Upon hitting the street outside the bar, Kal ran full steam into a platoon of royal guards. He bounced off a barrel-chested giant with a square jaw, chiselled face and close-cropped hair, and fell unceremoniously in a heap in the dirt.

"After our last few encounters, I thought you might react, shall we say, rashly, Mr. Jerico," said the weasel. He stood over Kal and peered down at him through his tiny, square glasses. "So I brought some support to our meeting this time. These nice gentlemen will escort you to the Royal Palace. Please do not struggle or they will be forced to..."

Kal kicked at the jarhead standing over him as he reached for the twin, pearl-handled laspistols at his waist. His hands never reached the weapons. The world began to go dark around the edges as a poison dart from a needier punctured his skin. The last thing Kal saw before he blacked out was Yolanda, standing in the doorway of the Sump Hole, howling with laughter.



## CHAPTER ONE: A SENSE OF LOSS

He watched the battle through a spyscope from a safe distance. The hood of his massive, black cloak kept drifting down over his other eye. He wished to be rid of the scavving thing as it impeded his movement and kept getting caught in his hands and legs as he had trudged across the Ash Wastes, but the discomfort of kicking the fabric away from his heavy, iron boots and constantly pushing the hood up onto his wide forehead were far outweighed by the need to keep the ash from building up on his joints and weapons. Without an ash cloak and the respirator that covered his wide face, he wouldn't last an hour in this desolate wasteland. Luckily, it wouldn't be much longer.

Muties had surrounded the transport almost as soon as it slammed into the wastes. The impact had created a trough fifty metres long. The transport lay half buried in ash at the end of the trough. A hundred muties, the barbaric, scavenging natives of the wastes, pounded on the sides with clubs made from iron beams or copper pipes or any piece of scrap metal they could salvage from the deteriorating exterior of the hive.

A dozen muties had climbed on top of the transport and begun banging on it, scratching at it, and even, it seemed, getting on their hands and knees and biting the metallic exterior. Amazingly, they had managed to pull up and tear off several metal panels, which they then dropped on top of their comrades below.

He marvelled at both their strength and the durability of their fingernails and teeth. It was said they could claw the bones out of a man's body and bite through his skull. He no longer doubted these claims.

But it was their small victory that precipitated the muties' ultimate defeat. As soon as the second panel hit the ground, the rear of the transport opened up. Las blasts sprayed out of the opening, dropping two dozen muties in the opening salvo. A squad of royal guards took up defensive positions around the door, dropping any who charged them. More las blasts ripped into the mutie ranks from inside as well, followed by rocket propelled grenades that blasted holes in the ash dunes and sent mutant bodies flying into the air.

But he gave the muties credit. They regrouped quickly, moving out of range of both the interior and exterior royal forces. Then, after a deathly calm, the muties brought out their own artillery — rocks and chunks of rockcrete — that they launched through the air with just the force of their own arms. The projectiles hit the ash all around the rear guard. A single rock couldn't do any real damage, but the constant barrage had a cumulative effect, and the cloaked man saw at least two guards fall, wounded or possibly even killed, and dragged inside.

As the bombardment continued, the royals had no choice but to give up on their defensive position. Two squads charged out of the transport and fanned out around the sides. Their first target: the remaining muties on top of the transport. Once they took those out, a third squad climbed up to claim the high ground.

Several more royals dropped, screaming, with chunks of metal sticking out of their body armour or blood spewing from broken noses and slashed foreheads from lucky shots. But they were slowly gaining the upper hand.

A shuffling noise behind him made the hooded man turn. The leader of a ragged group of scummers, hired mercenaries the cloaked man had brought out into the wastes with him, stood impatiently behind him. He thought his name was Kyrian.

He could see little more than Kyrian's eyes beneath the slightly built man's cloak and respirator, but those eyes kept darting back and forth between him and the battle raging below them. "Just give the order, sir," he said with a half-hearted salute, "and we'll move in on the transport."

The "sir" was more sneer than respect, and by the snickering of the other scummers behind Kyrian, the cloaked man was certain the salute was some private insult. The scummers had been told to obey the cloaked man; he was in charge of the expedition. They were little more than hired guns, and it seemed to irk Kyrian and the rest somewhat. The damn scummer had been calling him "sir" ever since they left the hive.

He glared at the snickering scummers, almost daring one of them to make a move. Of course, the respirator and cloak minimized the power of the glare, and he couldn't tell if it had any impact since they were all covered as well.

He did notice several scummers drop their hands down to the butts of their weapons, and that satisfied him. If he couldn't get fear out of these killers then anger would suffice, so long as they took that anger out against the enemies they were being paid to fight.

They were only twenty strong, including Kyrian, but he'd been told they were the best. They certainly looked the part. The cloaked man hadn't seen such a large arsenal in many years. Each member of Kyrian's group had a lasgun as well as a smaller sidearm, and a full third of them carried heavy weapons, while the rest had a shotgun as a back-up. Before they'd donned their ash cloaks, he'd seen some impressive armour as well, plus a wide array of grenades and even a few chainswords. Still, the cloaked man would reserve judgement until he saw them in action. All of the advanced weaponry in the hive mattered little in inexperienced hands.

Kyrian gave him that odd half salute, again. It was starting to get quite aggravating. He growled a little before answering and was gratified when the scummer took half a step backwards. "Give the muties more time," he said. "They can't defeat those royal scum, but perhaps they can thin out their ranks a little more before we move in."

"We're not afraid of royal troops," said the scummer leader. He cupped his hands over his eyes and scanned the distant battle. "We can handle them."

He pocketed his spyscope and stared at Kyrian for a moment before continuing. Was this scummer really that green? Where had they hired this idiot? "You should be afraid," he said, "because you can't handle them; not an entire platoon anyway, and that's what they've got in there. We wait."

"Yes, sir."

"And stop calling me 'sir'," he growled. "And if I see one more salute, I'll rip that arm out of its socket and slap you on the forehead with it myself."

Kal Jerico, Underhive bounty hunter, awoke in an unfamiliar bed. Of course, he rarely rose from the same bed twice and more often than not hadn't even made it to a bed before passing out from the night's festivities. Then there were the countless times out on the hunt when he'd been forced to bed down in the wilds of the Underhive, amidst vermin both human and animal, covered in muck and blood and other bodily fluids too horrible to think about.

But this was different, and yet familiar at the same time. For one thing, the bed moulded around his body, gently pulling him into the comfort of its folds. The cool, crisp sheets slid against his bare legs and chest like a soft caress. It was a far cry from the lumpy, sawdust-filled mattresses and burlap covers of the various Underhive dives where he normally woke up in the morning.

And then there was the light. A bright, white light permeated everything, reaching into every crevice of his brain. Even with his eyelids shut tight, it seemed to assault him from all sides. Kal squinted as he opened his eyes, trying to keep the light out a little longer. He couldn't make out

anything past his toes pushing up the covers into two little towers, but he already knew where he was. The soft sheets, the enveloping bed and the bright glare of natural light could only be found in one place in the hive.

He'd been kidnapped and transported to the Spire. Again.

He might even be in the same apartment that had served as his ersatz prison the last time his father had required his services. As his Underhive eyes adjusted to the direct sunlight, more and more of the room came into focus. A tapestry hung on the wall above him depicting Lord Helmawr directing a great space battle from the bridge of a huge ship — a scene Kal knew to be pure fantasy. To the side, a mahogany table held a bowl of real fruit and a pitcher of water so clear it sparkled in the sunlight. Beneath the bank of windows opposite the bed were several plush velvet couches. And, backlit by the bright sunlight streaming in behind them, three lovely ladies lounged on the couches.

Kal sat up, letting the sheet covering his naked body drop to his waist. "Candi?" he asked. "Brandi? Sandi?"

The girls rose to their feet almost as one. Blonde, brunette, and Sandi, the redhead. Their silk nightgowns shimmered, turning nearly transparent in the direct sunlight, offering tantalizing glimpses of the wonderful curves beneath as they slinked their way to the bed.

"We were wondering when you would wake up," said Sandi.

Brandi and Candi just smiled and nodded as they crawled up the bed towards Kal and pushed him back down onto the sheets.

"So, whatcha wanna do?" asked Scabbs.

Yolanda glared at him. "Don't start that again," she warned. Her brow furrowed, making the gang tattoos snaking across her forehead and around both ears seem to pulse with intensity. Scabbs decided he'd better heed her warning.

He considered the runny, brown eggs and the black brick he supposed was toast on the plate in front of him and shrugged. "Looks like the Sump Hole got a new cook," he said.

"Somebody shot the last one," replied Yolanda. She wasn't even looking at Scabbs now. She seemed to be staring at a spot on the wall far behind him.

"Again?" he said, tossing the fork onto the plate. It slobbered through the eggs and landed on the table, leaving a brown smear in its wake. "Don't you think they'd get the message and find a better cook?"

"This one is better," she said.

A silence descended on them, broken only by occasional whimpers from beneath the table. Scabbs peered down at Wotan. The metal mastiff hadn't moved since Kal ran out of the bar the night before. The bartender had tried to make the dog leave at closing time, but it had growled and almost snapped the poor man's hand right off.

Scabbs had told him the bar would be safer with a watchdog and that he'd try to get Wotan to leave in the morning. Now, he looked at the mastiff and wondered how he would accomplish that feat. Wotan must not have seen Kal leave, and Kal'd been in such a hurry, he had forgotten to give the mastiff any new orders. It was now following the last command Kal had uttered, which was "Stay."

Scabbs looked back at Yolanda. She seemed almost as lost as Wotan. No. Not lost. There was something else there on her face. Disgust? Disdain? Anger? They all looked pretty much the same on Yolanda. Scabbs had always found her hard to read.

"What should..." he began slowly, and then continued more quickly as Yolanda's brow furrows returned, "...we do with Wotan?"

"What do I care about Jerico's scavving dog?" she said. Yolanda picked up the toast and whipped it at Scabbs.

He ducked just in time to avoid a concussion. Behind him, Scabbs heard the sound of glass shattering. He turned to see the toast imbedded in the wall behind the bar. The contents of several bottles of wildsnake dripped onto the bald head of the bartender.

“You’re paying for those, Yolanda,” he said. “I covered you on the cook, but broken bottles is bought bottles.”

The bartender took his brown-stained rag and wiped the remnants of the bottles onto the metal grate floor where, Scabbs knew, it would all congeal together into a thick paste that gave the Sump Hole the wonderful odour it had been named for.

Wotan whimpered again, bringing Scabbs’ attention back to the table. “We’ve got to do something about Wotan,” he started again, ready to duck if the eggs followed the toast. “Or else, those bottles will be the least of what we owe here.”

Yolanda growled something vulgar and kicked her leg out under the table. The resulting dull clang was quickly followed by a scream of pain. “Damn Jerico,” said Yolanda. She pulled her foot up onto her other knee and massaged the toes. “This is all his fault. Again.”

Scabbs remained silent. He knew better than to get in the way of this particular tirade. “If it’s not Nemo and Crimson, it’s his scavving family. We go from crisis to crisis, always looking over our shoulders in case one of his enemies wants to take a pot-shot at him. And you know he’ll come out smelling like fresh, Spire air while we end up in the cesspool. Scavving Jerico.”

Scabbs hardly even listened. It was the same rant he’d heard a thousand times. He picked at a sore on his chin and considered his eggs. He was almost hungry enough now to eat them. Maybe he could get his toast back to sop up the brown yolk from the table. That might just soften up the black brick.

“We never just go out and hunt down bad guys anymore,” said Yolanda, continuing into the second verse. “It’s always family business and doing Nemo’s dirty work. Just once, I’d like to go on a good, old-fashioned bounty chase. Or a treasure hunt. We could go looking for the Mother Lode or even just a cache of artefacts.”

She stomped her foot down on the floor, shaking the table and with it Scabbs’ plate full of eggs. It clattered dangerously near the edge. Scabbs was torn between wanting to save his breakfast and wanting an excuse to not eat it. He decided to let the plate fall on the floor. The rest of the yolk sluiced through the grating followed by the grey outer parts. Wotan whined and chomped down on the plate, quickly reducing it to dust that mixed in with the eggs beneath the grating.

Scabbs was officially no longer hungry. But he was happy about one thing. Yolanda’s perpetual gripe was finally winding down to its inevitable conclusion.

“We don’t need that family-obligated, danger-attracting, ego-inflated rogue, do we Scabbs?” she said. Yolanda jumped to her feet, knocking the chair over, which hit the grating with a slosh and clatter.

“Are we bounty hunters or are we sidekicks?” She tried to strike an awe-inspiring, Kal Jerico pose, which would have succeeded if she hadn’t slipped on the slick Sump Hole floor and landed on her loincloth.

Yolanda pulled herself back up and slammed her fist on the table, which made Wotan jump to his feet underneath. “Come on, Scabbs,” she said. She walked to the back of the bar and yanked a bounty poster off the wall. “We’re bounty hunters. Let’s go make some bounty.”

Yolanda stormed out of the Sump Hole, obviously unaware of the brown stain across the back of her loincloth. Scabbs wasn’t going to tell her, that was for sure. In fact, anyone who knew Yolanda well enough to make such a personal comment knew her well enough to keep that comment to himself, assuming he wanted to continue breathing.

Scabbs took one last look at Wotan and realized if he didn’t leave now with Yolanda, the bartender would soon ask him how he planned to get rid of the mastiff. It only took the scabby half-ratskin a second to decide which wild animal he’d rather deal with. He slipped off the chair and

slunk out of the sump hole. Yolanda had turned right and strode down the street. Scabbs pumped his little legs to catch up. Behind him, he could hear the bartender yelling at Wotan.

The hooded man had to admit it. The scummers were no slouches. Perhaps Kyrian, their leader, hadn't been all that naive when he'd said they could handle the royals. Still, their competence was no reason to enter a battle against two potential enemies.

Mutant bodies littered the ground around the downed transport as the mercenaries advanced on it. The wastes would claim the bodies by morning. Creatures far worse than muties roamed the ash after nightfall and what was not devoured or dragged off by carrion eaters would be consumed by the dunes themselves not long after.

The first barrage of weapon fire from the scummers had finished off or driven inside the remaining royals, but the battle was long from over. He counted fewer than ten royals amongst the dead. There would be that or more still inside.

The leader stood at his side again. The man could move quite silently. The hooded man reminded himself to watch this one closely during their remaining time together.

"They've closed the hatch," he said. "We'll set up the missile launcher to take it down. My men will move in to finish the job amidst the ensuing smoke and confusion."

"No," said the hooded man. He pulled at the cloak, the folds of which had once again caught on the metal beneath.

"But we should breach the ship quickly," said the scummer leader. "They are most likely waiting for reinforcements."

"Exactly." He stared at Kyrian, driving holes into the young warrior's forehead with his eyes. The scummer tried to maintain eye contact, and lasted longer than most men under his scrutiny, but eventually looked away.

"If military ships do arrive," he continued, "we'll need the launcher to defend ourselves from the greater threat. Besides, we can't take any chances of destroying the package. Find another way."

He gave the scummer leader credit. The man only hesitated a second before replying. "Fine," he said. "Any suggestions?"

He sighed. "Draw them out," he said, pointing a cloaked hand at the top of the transport. "It worked for the mutants."

"Helmawr's rump!" cried the bartender as the door closed behind Scabbs. "Where in the hive is that ratskin off to? He promised to take that scavving metal mutt with him. Damnation!"

The bartender, an oddly thin man named Roddy, with a shock of thick, black hair fluttering around his head, came out from behind the bar and ran to the door. Throwing it open, he stepped outside and looked up and down the street. Other than a fresh pile of cracked masonry that had fallen from the abandoned building across the alley, the shadowy morning streets were empty.

Grumbling, Roddy kicked open the swinging door and slipped back inside the bar. He smoothed down his apron and ran his fingers through the curly bangs that always threatened to fall down over his eyes. It was all mental preparation for the dangerous job he knew lay before him.

Wotan had nearly taken his hand last night, but this was business, and when it came to business Roddy had a determination rarely matched in the Underhive. Most bartenders were fat and jolly from constantly partaking of their own wares. Not Roddy. Every bottle in the place was bought and paid for. Even his waitresses and cooks had to pay for their own drinks. This was business and Roddy never mixed business with pleasure. Well once, but he'd regretted it ever since.

"Never did get paid for that bottle," he muttered as he walked towards the table.

The metal mastiff had to go. It would drive off paying customers. Roddy knew that because it routinely snapped at patrons even while Kal Jerico was here to control it. Roddy had always left

well enough alone because the bounty hunter brought in more business than the mutt drove away, but now it was him or Wotan.

As Roddy neared the table, Wotan began to growl. It was an unbelievably scary sound, reminiscent of a revving chainsword. It made you think that your arm was about to be cut off, which was pretty apt really.

“Good dog,” said Roddy in a sing-song voice. He saw the remnants of the busted plate and leaned back towards the bar to get another. He lowered the plate towards the table. “Here you go, Wotan,” he said. “Want the plate?”

Unfortunately, he misjudged the mastiffs reach. Wotan’s head snapped forward in a blur, and his metallic jaws clamped down on the dish, snatching it from Roddy’s grasp. A bizarre mixture of sounds came from beneath the table. To Roddy, it sounded like the thrashing machine from his old factory grinding up the skeletal remains of a body that would never be found. The memory of that day made Roddy’s stomach turn, and he immediately backed away from the table.

He swiped long fingers across his forehead to wipe away the beading sweat, and began to grumble again. A litany of complaints and epithets about Kal Jerico, Wotan and Yolanda escaped his lips in a matter of seconds.

And then Roddy, overcome by emotion for only the second time in his life, yelled, “Dammit, Wotan. Why don’t you just go and find that scavving Kal Jerico and leave me alone.”

“Wotan... Go... Find... Jerico.”

The metal mastiffs ear perked up, which somewhere down in the base of its mechanical brain it knew were nothing more than a bunch of gears responding to a subroutine in its programming that pulled on wires to rotate extraneous flaps on either side of its head back and forth.

But still there was an odd sensation of something akin to relief — almost joy — in hearing that command. Wotan now had a task, a direction to follow — a purpose.

“Find Jerico.”

The command processed across sensors and odd bits of wiring, through solid state transistors, deep down into the salvaged memory core of an ancient construct built in another age for another purpose. Out of that core came more commands. Simple commands like the ear perk and the ensuing tail wag and tongue lick, but also more complex commands that propelled the metal mastiff into action.

Wotan bounded out from beneath the table past the stick-like human cowering by the bar. For some reason that went beyond simple wiring and programming, he stopped and growled at the stick, taking one last snap that caught a square of the man’s trousers and just a small patch of skin.

His mouth opened into a big grin and his tongue, a moistened scrap of rubber that ran on small hydraulic compressors, lolled out to the side as he ran through the swinging door out into the street. Behind him, the door clattered to the ground, ripped off its hinges by the force of the impact, but that didn’t concern Wotan.

Another program began running in the background of his metal brain, and he put his nose to the ground to sniff the dirt. The same compressors that moved his tongue now drew air into his body, where it was analyzed in a small compartment in his chest. Mixed in with the remnants of various waste products and the ozone-rich scent of laser fire were wisps of leather and hair gel.

Jerico. Kal Jerico.

Wotan ran off to the left, following the trail. He would find Kal Jerico, and nothing would get in his way. Nothing.

\* \* \*

Kal needed to find his trousers. While he'd enjoyed the last couple of hours immensely, Sandi still hadn't gotten the chance to show him her much talked about grape trick, and a small niggling doubt had remained at the back of Kal's mind throughout all the shenanigans.

He'd found himself almost disinterested when Brandi and Candi had invited him into a bubble bath. Almost. And really, an entire bath filled with hot, clean water was nearly more exciting than the two voluptuous women lounging amidst the bubbles. That was a luxury you never saw below the Spire, not even in Hive City.

The enticement of getting squeaky clean in a hot bath, while at the same time playing dirty with a blonde and a brunette, proved too much for Kal. But the entire time he spent soaping Brandi's back while Candi ran her wet fingers through his braids and down his chest, he couldn't help thinking back on the last time he and the girls had enjoyed each other's company in this plush and quite comfortable prison.

It was a prison. A prison made to hold Kal Jerico inside, content to never try to leave. He probably could be happy here for a time. Fine, fresh food, clear water with no aftertaste burning the back of your throat, a soft bed, and even softer company; but it was a prison, and eventually the warden would come calling with a job he needed performed.

So, as the girls slept in the bed, their silk covered breasts rising and falling in a rhythmic and intoxicating dance, Kal pushed his impulses deep down inside and turned away from the bed to look for his trousers. He knew that at any moment Lord Helmawr or, more likely, one of his many lackeys would burst through the locked front door and escort Kal away from his heavenly prison. This time he intended to be dressed.

He eventually found a set of drawers hidden beneath the bed skirt. He eased the first drawer out as Sandi turned over in the bed above him. Her leg slipped off the edge of the bed, bringing her pearl-white thigh dangerously close to Kal's lips. The lilac perfume she wore wafted across his face, practically pulling him into the warmth of her exposed skin.

He shook off the intoxicating effects and closed the drawer. It had been empty. He moved to the next one and tugged on the handle. It didn't budge. He pulled a little harder. Still nothing. Kal braced his foot against the bed and yanked with all his strength. The drawer flew out, almost smacking him in the face. It soared over his head and clattered to the floor behind him, spilling his leather coat and trousers, which had been jammed inside, across the couches far beyond.

Kal glanced up as three heads full of thick, lustrous hair peered over the bed at him. He smiled. "Good morning again, girls," he said.

"What are you doing, Kal?" purred Sandi. "You know you can't leave us, even if you wanted to." She cocked her head and let a sly smile play across her lips. "And we know you don't want to."

Kal scooted away from the bed towards his clothes. It was just a little too tough to bluff the girls without his trousers on. "It's not that I want to leave," he said as he reached for the couch. "I just know that at any moment, I will be pulled away from you."

Brandi, the blonde, slid out from under the silk sheets and sauntered towards Kal. "You can stay as long as you like, Kal," she said. She bounced ever so nicely as she moved. "You're the master and we're your willing slaves."

Kal shook his head again and backed away like a wounded crab. "That's not exactly true," he said. His flailing hand finally found the leather trousers draped on the couch behind him. "The real master here is Lord Helmawr, and we all jump when he says 'how high'."

Kal thought about what he just said, and was about to reverse it, when he noticed the girls were no longer advancing upon him. He pulled himself onto the couch and draped the trousers over his lap before glancing over at them.

All three girls sat on the edge of the bed, faces cradled in their hands, crying soft tears and moaning, almost in unison. Kal slipped his legs into the trousers and pulled them up in one swift move as he stood. Snapping the tight, leather leggings around his waist as he crossed the room, Kal stood above the girls.

“What?” he asked, looking from one to the other down the line. “What’s wrong? What did I say?”

For a minute, the girls did nothing but sob quietly into their hands. Kal wanted to reach out and hold them, but worried this might be just another ploy to keep him from getting dressed.

Finally, Candi, the brunette, grabbed an edge of the silk sheets and dried the tears streaming down her face. She looked as if she were about to burst back into tears, when Kal put his hand on her shoulder. She looked up into his face and he could tell that this was no act. The girls were truly distraught, and it had something to do with Lord Helmawr.

Kal looked deep into Candi’s big, brown eyes. “Tell me, Candi,” he said. “Why are you so sad? What’s happened to my father?”

“He’s... he’s...” she started, but couldn’t seem to finish.

Kal sat down beside Candi and swept her into his arms. He held her tight and stroked her hair. “It’s okay,” he said. “I’m here to help.”

“Lord Helmawr is... dead,” she said at last and began sobbing again.

The other two girls, whose wailing had dwindled to mere weeping, turned on the waterworks again. Kal looked at the three wounded women and knew his work here was just beginning.

One set of scummers toiled away at the loose panels atop the transport. The rest had hidden themselves amongst the mutant bodies behind the ship. From his vantage point just over a dune in front of the ship, the hooded man couldn’t tell which of the rotting bodies hid scummers and which didn’t. He had to grudgingly admit that these men were good at their jobs.

But as the scummers continued to peel away the plasteel plating, he began to wonder if this plan would produce the desired results. Using chainswords and the few melta bomb charges in their supplies, the team had made great progress in creating a breach hole. The melta bombs worked well on the plasteel hull, but would have had little effect on the reinforced rear hatch. This was the only way inside and, from his angle, it looked like they would cut through within minutes. If he were in charge of the royal troops, the hooded man wouldn’t rush out the back and give up tactical advantage. He’d wait for the hole to open and then fight his way out on to the roof to gain the high ground.

He considered informing the scummer leader of his concerns, but decided not to bother. They would lose more men if that happened, but they would still prevail, and they were just mercenaries; not really anything to be concerned over.

A grinding noise echoed across the dunes as the reinforced hatch opened. Las blasts with accompanying tracers lanced into the mound of ash behind the downed transport. Dust and bits of dead skin and bone vaporized, sending an acrid cloud into the air.

The barrage continued for a full minute before stopping. Kyrian and his men maintained their silent vigil beneath their rotting shields. They were either well trained or dead.

The royal troops unleashed another salvo a moment later. This one lasted only ten seconds before troops began to rush out. They dived and rolled and crawled into defensive positions around the base of the transport. Once in position, the exterior soldiers took up the covering fire as the rest of the squad rushed out and found cover. He counted twenty in all — probably all but the officers.

Still, Kyrian’s men held their positions.

The onslaught from the royals continued unabated. They fired in crossing patterns out in three directions from the transport, covering the perimeter with laser blasts and a few explosions.

After two minutes of continuous fire, a command emanated from inside. The royal troops inched out away from the transport, turned as one to face the ship, and began firing at the roof. An explosion engulfed the air above the transport. The hooded man almost felt sorry for the poor scummers trapped on top. He did not, however, feel anything at all for the royals as the ambush sprung up behind them.



The scummer leader and his men rose up from beneath the dead muties as the royals opened fire on the breach unit. As the explosion ripped through the air, deafening everyone in the area, the mercenaries opened fire. Half of the royals dropped before they even knew they were under attack.

When the other half turned to face their enemy they realized the error of their previous tactics. A fog of ash and burnt flesh lay between them and their attackers. As they fired blindly into the cloud behind the ship, the scummers emerged from the smoke at their sides, having moved to flanking positions after the first volley.

Moments later, the royal troops all lay in the wastes, holes burnt in their chests and heads, their bodily fluids mixing with the ash. The hooded man slid down the dune to the front of the transport.

“Area secured,” said Kyrian, with a certain sarcasm underlying the report, as if the fact was not evident from the carnage surrounding them.

“Good work,” he replied. “Sorry about your men on top. But sacrifices must be made in battle.”

“Not to worry,” replied the scummer leader, “I think you will find we suffered no casualties at all.”

Just then, five scummers emerged from the back of the transport, dragging several royal officers behind them.

“Passenger compartment secured,” one reported.

“Excellent work,” replied Kyrian.

The hooded man shook his head. His employers had obviously spared no expense at all on these troops. They had just taken out an entire transport full of royal soldiers with hardly a scratch.

He walked up to one of the royal officers. From the number of bars and medals on the man’s uniform, he appeared to be the leader. He motioned to the scummer holding him to pull the officer to his feet.

“Captain,” he said. “Where’s the package?”

“Colonel,” replied the man, trying very hard to puff out his chest and regain some bit of composure. “Colonel Shepard. Royal Guard. Serial number one-eight-nine-alpha-gamma-six...”

A huge metallic limb shot out from beneath the folds of the hooded man’s cloak and grabbed the colonel. Long, claw-like fingers encircled the officer’s neck. Hydraulic gears, metal plating and the hint of a weapon barrel could be seen on his arm, still partially shrouded in the cloak. With a casual flick of his wrist, he snapped the colonel’s neck.

As the metal-encased arm disappeared back into the folds of the heavy, grey fabric, he turned to the next officer. “Captain?” he said. “Where’s the package?”

\* \* \*

Valtin Schemko, Lord Chamberlain and senior political advisor to Lord Gerontius Helmawr, looked up from the papers spread out on his desk and motioned the man at his door to enter. He welcomed the break from the tedium of his current duties, even though it meant dealing with Kauderer and the latest crisis to hit House Helmawr.

Hermod Kauderer, Master of Security and Intrigue for House Helmawr, swooped into the room like a hawk, which is exactly what the other senior advisors called him when he wasn’t around. His angular face, sharp beak of a nose and icy, soulless eyes were more than enough to warrant the nickname, but his tendency to constantly scan his surroundings, as if searching for his next meal, was what really tended to put people on edge around him. Everyone feared Kauderer and what he could do to them with the information he supposedly had stored in his impenetrable office.

Everyone, that is, except Valtin. The two men had come to an understanding after some recent unpleasanties involving spies working right under Kauderer’s slightly hooked nose. Kauderer had also dispatched a rogue spyer unit into the Underhive at the time to further his own agenda. That

unit nearly killed Valtin as he helped his uncle — one Kal Jerico — hunt down another Helmawr relative who had stolen vital information from the old man.

The fact that Valtin now possessed that intel and Kauderer did not had gone a long way to cementing his current political position as well as his ability to handle Kauderer without fear.

Valtin gestured to the chair in front of his desk. The house spy glared back at the Lord Chamberlain and, to his credit, only hesitated a moment before sitting. Kauderer enjoyed using his height to intimidate, so rarely sat in meetings. Valtin had broken him of that habit, at least in his presence.

“I can tell by the look on your face, Hermod, that all does not go well with our rescue efforts,” said Valtin. In fact, he could never read Kauderer’s expression, as he had incredible control over his hawkish features. But with Kauderer, it was always a good bet that he came bearing bad news.

“As usual, you are correct, Lord Chamberlain,” said Kauderer. The last report from the transport suggested a renewed attack. “The message was somewhat garbled. I have my best men working to decipher the text.”

Valtin wasn’t sure, but he could have sworn Kauderer’s hands fidgeted just below the top of the desk. Kauderer detested uncertainty when it came to information. Valtin allowed himself an inward smile at seeing a crack in the man’s icy demeanour.

“More muties?” asked Valtin. “I’m sure the colonel’s men can handle those barbarians and their scavenged arsenal.”

“It is unclear, my lord,” said Kauderer.

Was that a twitch in his left eye? The stress seemed to finally be getting to Kauderer.

“The colonel reported increased efforts to breach the hull,” continued Kauderer. “The transmission ended abruptly after that.”

Valtin ran his fingers over his recently grown goatee as he digested this new information. He had to admit he had no idea what to make of the situation, which forced him to relinquish some control of the conversation back to Kauderer.

“What is your assessment, Hermod?” he asked. “What’s going on down there?”

Kauderer’s shoulders rose and straightened slightly, and it seemed his haughty demeanour took on a bit more shine. “I believe whoever shot down our transport has now arrived to claim their prize.”

“Damn,” said Valtin. “How did this happen? What happened to security?”

Kauderer’s glare returned briefly. “Security on our end was airtight,” he said. “I handled the negotiations myself, and no one outside this office even knew what was in that package.”

“The merchant, then?”

Kauderer nodded. “We paid him a noble’s ransom for his silence, but we have limited control of off-world merchants. He must have talked.”

“This would point, I assume, to one of the other houses?” said Valtin, stroking his goatee again. “No one else in the spire would have the resources and no one outside Hive Primus would have a motive. What steps are you taking?”

“I have agents on the way to interrogate the merchant,” said Kauderer. “He’ll tell us what he knows, and then serve as an example to others to never cross House Helmawr.”

“And the package?” said Valtin. “How close are Katerin and his men? Will they reach the transport in time to secure the package?”

Kauderer shook his head. “It’s impossible to tell. All will depend on how long the colonel can hold out and how determined our enemies are to thwart us.”

Valtin nodded. “Keep me informed,” he said. “I want to know the moment Katerin enters the transport.” He looked down at the guest lists and table assignments spread out across his desk and shuddered at the thought of returning to that task.

“We need that package, Hermod,” he said, looking back up and staring at the house spy. “The survival of House Helmawr depends upon it. There is precious little time. The Kal Jerico gambit will only buy us so much.”

## CHAPTER TWO: BODY COUNT

Captain Katerin strode down the aisle of his transport. He was a huge tank of a man, with a wide, almost plump head sitting on a squat neck, and a barrel chest with a bit of a spread beneath from too many years behind a desk. Many would say he was nearly as wide as he was tall, but not to his face, of course. That would be suicidal.

Even with the air blowers on full, sweat beaded up on Katerin's round, bald head and dripped down into the dense tangles of his beard, making it glisten in the muted lights in the transport. The sweat somehow also found its way past his wild, scraggly eyebrows and into his eyes. But Katerin didn't let it bother him — not today.

It wasn't just the importance of the mission, though. It was the thrill of impending battle, the adrenaline rush he always felt at the beginning of a hunt. Katerin was in his element, and as far as he was concerned, a little sweat just came with the territory.

Although born of noble blood, Aldous Katerin had always gravitated more to battle than courtly intrigue. It was an ironic twist of fate that his prowess in battle had led to his appointment as Captain of the Royal Guard and a position in the inner circle of House Helmawr. But Katerin never forgot where he'd come from and what was truly important — battle in the name of nobility.

"Aye, there we were, up to our necks in mud and blood and bullets," screamed Katerin over the roar of the engines as he continued to regale his men with a war story. "Then all hell broke loose..."

"Excuse me, sir," said a guard sitting to his right. Katerin thought his name was Dwibbs or Debbs or something like that. The young guard's eyes were bright and attentive, a distinct difference from the rest of the troops, most of whom had heard this particular story a few times before.

"Yes, Dwebbs," said Katerin, smiling at the newest guard.

"Dobbs, sir."

Katerin lost his smile and glared. He pulled a kerchief from inside his shirt and dabbed at the sweat on his forehead before replying. "Yes, Dobbs. What is it?"

"Sorry, sir," he said. "Your story is riveting, but what exactly does it have to do with our mission?"

Katerin sputtered for a moment as the impudence of this green guard sent his blood pressure soaring, but two chortles from behind him turned his ire away from Dobbs.

He spun to see Mageson and Stein, the only other two nobles on the transport, leaning against a set of huge crates at the back of the transport. Try as they might, they couldn't contain their laughter. After a moment, Mageson, a little wisp of a girl with long, curly hair and bright, green eyes, regained her composure and said, "Really, captain, give them the speech already. We have to suit up."

As if to punctuate Mageson's remarks, Stein, a powerfully built, but smallish noble with jet-black hair and a stem, lined face, pounded his fist on top of the crate next to him. "We don't have much time," he said. "These rigs are a pain to get into."

Katerin dabbed at the sweat on his forehead as he pushed his anger back down. "Fine," he said. "The mission." He turned and looked at the double row of guards.

Grim faces stared back beneath gleaming helmets. They looked like a set of stone statues with square faces and hard jaws. Their large chests and wide shoulders, accentuated by their armour,

looked nearly identical all the way down the row. Fine specimens, thought Katerin. Now to scare the hell out of them.

“Okay, you maggots,” he growled. “Today we embark on the most important mission of our lives.” He marched down the aisle, the guns at his hips slapping into the knees of the men on either side.

“Some of you will die,” he continued. “In fact, many of you may not make it back to the Spire whole. But that’s not important.” He stopped and stared at them, the silence almost deafening despite the constant roar of the engines. “We are all in the service of House Helmawr. Our lives mean nothing compared to the safety and welfare of the House.”

Katerin marched back up the aisle, staring hard at each stoic face in turn. “What we do today we do to ensure the very existence of the House. Those who survive will be heroes. The names of those who die will be remembered for generations.”

He stopped at the end, just in front of Stein and Mageson. He now had the rapt attention of the entire squad. “But we do not fight for glory,” he said, his tone softening a little. “We fight for the lives of every member of the House. We fight so they may live. For if we fail today, gentlemen, the House will fall. And then none of us, not you nor any of your loved ones in the Spire, will be safe. So fight for them. That is what is expected of you.”

He could see Dobbs’ hand inching up a little at a time. The wrinkles around the boy’s eyes showed a mixture of apprehension and confusion as if he wanted to ask a question, but wasn’t sure he’d survive the asking.

Katerin remembered Dobbs’ previous question about the meaning of the war story. “To answer your question, Dibble,” he said. “We are going into the fight of our lives. There will be confusion. There will be chaos. There will be death. But keep your heads and keep your eyes on the prize. We cannot let that package fall into enemy hands. If it does, we fail. We all fail.”

The hooded man tossed aside the limp body of the last royal officer. It flew through the air like a soiled rag, slapping into the scraped and blackened side of the transport before dropping to the ground.

“He was most helpful,” said the man. “Almost a pity I can’t afford any witnesses. Almost.”

He turned to the scummer leader. “Come with me,” he commanded. “I have a package to retrieve.”

With that, he strode around the downed transport and pulled himself up and into the open hatch. His clawed, metal hand glinted in the muted light filtering through the toxic haze as he extended his arm out from beneath the folds of the cloak.

Inside, the ship was littered with bodies. The royals who had died during the earlier firefights were laid out neatly in rows to one side. A few mutant bodies lay where they had fallen. It looked like some of the savage beasts that roamed the wastes had rushed inside against the hail of weapons fire or perhaps dropped in from above the hatch. None of them had survived.

The cloaked figure walked through the cabin, ignoring the dead. The wastes would reclaim their bodies soon enough. What he searched for would be found at the far end, near the hatch to the cockpit.

Movement to the side flickered in his peripheral vision. He snapped his head around to see a wounded soldier, twitching but unconscious. A quick shot to the head left a small hole in the soldier’s temple and the twitching stopped. He decided to check the rest of the bodies for any signs of life. After a half dozen las blasts, he was certain there were no survivors.

A few moments later, he stood near the bulkhead at the front of the passenger cabin. The wall seemed solid enough. Rows of rivets held sections of the plasteel plating together. He counted five down and four over from the upper left corner of the wall, and placed his hand on the panel. It seemed no different from any of the others. He knocked on it a few times. There was a slight echo to

the reverberation, perhaps from a hollow space behind the panel. He banged the panels around it and then the designated panel again. Yes. The vibrations were somewhat different.

“Now which rivet did that officer say to turn?” he mumbled. “Ah yes.” His metal claws snuck out from the robes and reached towards the lower left corner of the panel. “Three up from the corner,” he said, counting them with a single claw. “Twist twice to the right, once to the left and three times to the right.”

He tried to grasp the rivet and turn it, but found it didn't move. He tried the rivet three up from the other corner to no avail. “Damn,” he cried. “That scavving officer lied. No wonder he was so helpful. I killed him too fast.”

Frantically, he tried all the other rivets. None of them moved an inch, not even when he applied all the strength his enhanced arm could muster. They were just too small to grab. He pulled out his laspistol and fired several times at the panel to no avail. One shot strayed and left a small hole in the next panel, but there was not a mark on the one that hid his prize.

The scummer leader appeared at his side. “Problems?” he asked.

“Scavving panel is indestructible,” he replied. He continued to stare at the panel, straining his brain to figure out another way through. “Do we have any melta bombs left?” he asked.

“Sorry, no,” said the leader. “We used them all breaching the hull. We do still have the rocket launcher.”

The man shook his head. “We can't afford the chance. The safe behind this panel holds a treasure worth a hive's ransom.”

The two men stared at the unblemished panel a little longer. “You could just burn it out and take the whole thing back to the hive.”

The man shook his head again. “With this much plating on the cover, the safe must weigh a ton or more.” But then he got an idea. His normal hand shot out from beneath the robes and clapped the leader on the shoulder.

“We don't need to burn out the whole safe,” he said, the excitement of an impending bounty putting a bit of a lilt to his voice. “I just need to get more room for leverage.”

He snapped his laspistol out of its holster again and began firing at the edge of the panel. Soon, the hole he'd inadvertently put in the panel to the side turned into a gaping wound in the wall. Bits of molten plasteel dripped along the ragged edge.

The robed man didn't even bother waiting for the metal to cool. He threw back the sleeve of his cloak to keep it from catching fire on the red-hot steel, revealing not an arm but an arsenal. His entire right arm had been replaced by a metallic contraption with a set of ten-centimetre steel claws attached at the end to use as a hand. Gears and pistons flexed the elbow with a small grating sound and the hiss of releasing air. The forearm section of the casing was enormous, easily larger around than the man's massive thighs. Barrels of varying sizes and lengths poked out from the casing just past his wrist, and panels all along his forearm hid weaponry away for easy deployment.

It wasn't the armoury he needed from his mechanical arm today. He needed its strength. The robed man grasped the edge of the pristine panel with his claws and pulled. At first, nothing happened. The gears whirred and clicked and the piston released a massive hiss of air, but the panel didn't budge. He practically pulled his head into the wall with the effort. Repositioning, he slapped a boot up against the wall and then made a few adjustments to the hydraulics on the arm.

He yanked back again. Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead beneath the cowl and ran down his cheeks onto the respirator, but he could feel the panel begin to move. With a mighty yank, he ripped it from the wall, flinging it over his head as he fell backwards onto the metal grating.

The scummer leader, who was entirely too smart for his own good, did not offer to help the man to his feet. He simply smiled and said, “Well done. An excellent plan.”

The robed man harrumphed at the scummer as he pushed himself off the floor and back to his feet. He looked back at the panel, which had crashed halfway through the deck grate. It was nearly thirty centimetres thick, tapering in from the exterior panel section to the inner, dark-grey edge.

He turned back towards the remaining panels to see a square box set in the wall. The box was the same dark-grey colour as the back of the panel. Reaching in, the robed man finally felt his prize in his gloved hand. He pulled it out and heard the leader's gasp. This was not an exclamation of amazement so much as one of disappointment.

"Don't worry," he said, looking at the dull brown, leather satchel in his hand, "What's inside this little package will pay for our entire excursion and have enough left over to make you and I very rich men."

He tucked the satchel under his mechanical arm beneath the folds of his robes and turned to leave. As they walked towards the rear of the transport, one of the scummers, the one who had led the breach team, appeared at the hatch.

"Muties," he reported.

"How many?" barked Kyrian.

"From the looks of it," said the scummer, "I'd say all of them."

The robed man ran to the hatch and looked out. A massive cloud of dust spanned the horizon. Just in front of that cloud he could see dark forms moving. Even though they were still quite a way off, he could tell they were muties and not more royals. There was no structure to their formation. It was more of a mass of bodies. They weren't so much marching as shambling forward.

"They're muties, alright," said the scummer leader. "What are your orders, Mr. Feg?"

Vandal Feg tossed back his hood revealing a scarred, pug-like face and muscle-bound neck. Hoses connected to his mechanical arm ran up over his head and down into his bulging neck and back. He focused the lens that had replaced his left eye on the mutant horde descending on their position and then flipped a switch at his wrist. A chainsword extended out from the casing and unfolded to an impressive length before whining to life.

"Kill them all," said Vandal Feg. "Kill them all."

Somehow in the last hour, Kal had managed to lose his trousers again. He wasn't too worried about them at the moment. He had been too busy comforting the girls during their time of grief. On the upside, the girls had stopped crying over the death of Lord Helmawr; although Kal was certain he had heard a few whimpers in the last few moments. Of course, those could have been moans.

Candi and Brandi had fallen asleep after the last comforting session, but Sandi lay next to Kal, one arm draped over his chest, her head nestled atop his shoulder. Thick, red hair tickled at his nose while her long, delicate fingers traced intricate patterns up and down Kal's arm and across his bare chest.

While Kal could have stayed right where he was for another hour, enjoying Sandi's idle attention and the feel of her body cuddled up against his own, another thought popped into his mind, making him smile at the memory.

"Sandi," he said.

"Hmmm?"

"The last time we were here together," continued Kal, "you told me about something special you do with grapes. Do you remember that?"

"My grape routine?" she said. For a moment, her caressing halted, making Kal almost sorry he had spoken at all. "Normally that costs extra. But you're a special client, Kal."

Kal beamed his trademark smile, even though Sandi wasn't even looking at his face. "Cause I'm Kal Jerico? Underhive bounty hunter?" he asked.

Sandi shook her head, making her hair flit around Kal's face and nose. "No," she said. "You're all expenses paid, just like last time."

Kal tried not to let his ego deflate too much. "Oh," he said.

"Not that we don't enjoy your company," said Sandi quickly. "All three of us volunteered as soon as the contract came in."

“Well that’s something, anyway,” said Kal. His heart just wasn’t into comforting anymore, though. It’s not that he hadn’t paid for comfort in the past. It was just that he hadn’t paid for it this time and that had made the experience feel different up until now. But business was business, and if he was all expenses paid, he might as well enjoy all the extras.

“Why don’t you go get the grapes from that bowl,” he said after a moment. “As I remember, last time we were rudely interrupted before you could show me that grape trick.”

Sandi crawled over Kal to get out of the bed and he marvelled again at just how soft and clean her skin was and how wonderful she smelled as she brushed past him. The barmaids and other women of comfort down in the Underhive felt, and smelled, like some nasty reptile from beneath Dust Falls in comparison.

Sandi tiptoed across the carpeted floor, bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet as she moved, which made the rest of her body shake and jiggle in the most tantalizing ways. She grabbed the bowl of fruit and tiptoed back again. Kal, so intent on Sandi’s wriggling body, was startled by the voice that broke into the pre-routine show.

“That will be all, Sandi,” said the voice.

Sandi looked over towards the previously locked front door, bowed ever so slightly and retreated into the bathroom, still carrying the bowl of fruit.

“Damn!” said Kal as he watched her lithe form disappear into the next room. “Next time we start with the grapes.”

Kal turned over to face the intruder, not even bothering to cover up his body. “You know, nephew,” he said looking up at Valtin Schemko, “The last man who interrupted Sandi and me turned out to be a traitor to the House of Helmawr. Barging in here, uninvited, may not be the best way to win my trust.”

Valtin stooped over, picked up Kal’s trousers, and tossed them towards the bed. “You are the one who was invited, uncle,” said Valtin. “I sent the invitation myself.”

Kal grabbed the trousers out of the air and decided to slip them on. He suddenly felt a little too vulnerable. His nephew, who had seemed somewhat inept during their last adventure together, had obviously taken quite well to the political life of the Spire. He was calm, sure of himself and in control.

“I wondered if you were behind that little prank,” said Kal. He stood and buttoned himself up before continuing. “And while I can appreciate a good joke now and then, and I certainly enjoyed my time here with the girls, either tell me why I’m really here or send me on my way down-hive.”

Valtin strolled over to the couch beneath the bank of windows and sat down before he spoke. It was an obvious ploy meant to infuriate Kal, and it was working. “All in good time,” said Valtin, finally. “But first I have some bad news for you.”

Kal tired of his nephew’s little stalling games. He stormed over to the couch and stared down at Valtin, hoping to tower over him and put him off his game. It didn’t seem to work and just made Kal stare into the rising sun as it peeked over the noxious cloud layer below. Kal averted his eyes as little balls of light danced in his vision.

“I know about Lord Helmawr’s death,” he said. “Horrible thing, but hardly any of my concern. Just tell me who you want me to kill, and then I can laugh in your face and leave.”

But it was Valtin who began to laugh. “Poor Kal,” he said. “You have no idea why you are here, do you?”

Kal had had enough. He grabbed Valtin by the shoulders, pulled him to his feet and kned him in the groin. As Valtin Schemko, Lord Chamberlain of the most powerful House on all Necromunda, doubled over in pain, Kal Jerico, ticked off Underhive bounty hunter, picked him up at the waist and tossed him across the room onto the bed.

Brandi and Candi, who’d apparently sat up during the commotion, bounced off the bed to either side as Valtin fell between them. They both screamed and ran from the room.



Kal crossed to the bed, stepped up onto the mattress and sat on top of Valtin's chest. "We used to be friends," he said, looking down into his nephew's frightened eyes. "And that's why you're still alive. But if you treat me like one of your Spire lackeys again, I will kill you."

Valtin raised his hands up to his face in surrender. "I'm sorry, Kal," he said. "It's so hard to turn it off. I have to watch my back all the time up here."

"It's no different downhive," snarled Kal.

"But at least you can see your enemies coming," said Valtin. "I never know if I'm talking to an ally or an adversary, so I must guard my words and speak in half-truths to make sure valuable information doesn't make it into the wrong hands."

Kal considered letting Valtin back up. He wasn't such a bad guy, but he knew how the game was played. If he let up too soon, he'd lose control again. "At least if you mess up, nobody dies," said Kal.

"Don't be too sure of that," said Valtin. "Look, I'll tell you everything, but it's getting kind of hard to breathe, and I think the girls would probably like us to leave."

"Will they be here when I get back?" asked Kal.

"If you'd like them to be," said Valtin.

"Then you have a deal," said Kal. He stood, making sure to put just a little extra pressure on his nephew's chest before stepping off the bed. He wanted Valtin to have a constant reminder of who was truly in charge in this room.

Kal pointed at the door, which he noticed Valtin had closed and locked behind him when he entered. "Lead the way, nephew," said Kal.

Valtin stood up with a twinge and then rubbed his palm against his sternum. He looked at Kal. "Shouldn't you finish dressing first?" he asked.

"Right," said Kal. "Where are my weapons?"

\* \* \*

"There he goes," yelled Scabbs. He pointed up towards a catwalk running between two huge vent fans. The force of the air blew dead pieces of skin from his arm into his face. "Don't shoot him in the head!" he added.

It was too late. A bolt from Yolanda's laspistol ripped through the air towards their quarry, a surprisingly fast ratskin who'd been scavenging around Glory Hole recently. He'd apparently looted the wrong person — a guildler by the name of Tritus — earning him a bounty on his head. The ratskin had broken the first rule of stealing: never steal from a guildler.

Amazingly, Yolanda's shot missed its mark, burning a hole through the grating behind the ratskin as he ran towards the far fan.

"Scawing ratskin," she said. "He swerved when he should have veered."

Scabbs never understood more than half of what Yolanda said, but he knew she'd been shooting to kill. "He's hardly worth anything dead, Yolanda," he said. "Try to aim low."

The ratskin thief had almost made it to the other fan. Scabbs had no idea what their quarry was up to. The catwalk didn't go past the fan housing, and the blades would rip him apart if he tried to make it into the ductwork behind them.

Yolanda shot again as the ratskin reached the fan. The blast hit the metal housing just above the thief's head, sending a cloud of sparks into the air around their quarry. When it dissipated, the ratskin was nowhere to be seen.

Scabbs and Yolanda looked at each other. She broke the silence first. "Well, go after him, Scabbs," she said. "You're a half-ratskin tracker. He's a ratskin thief. So track. How hard can it be?"

Scabbs was about to argue, but knew from long experience the futility of it all. "Just make sure you shoot the right ratskin, okay?"

Scabbs scampered up the ladder. When he reached the top, the force of the air from the first fan blew a huge cloud of dead skin from his arms and face that slowly filtered towards the ground. He glanced down at the ground through the cloud, hoping for a reprieve. Yolanda pointed her gun at him and motioned him on, so he shrugged and trotted off towards the other fan.

When Scabbs got to the other end of the catwalk he began to laugh.

“What’s so scavving funny?” yelled Yolanda from below.

Scabbs looked over the railing at his partner. Well, you got him... sort of he said. “Come up here. I need help getting him out.”

“What?”

Scabbs just motioned for Yolanda to join him and turned back to their squirming quarry.

The side of the fan housing had a gash where someone had pulled back the plasteel plating. It was an escape hatch that led into the ductwork just past the fan blades. Their bounty had obviously been planning to use it to get away.

Yolanda’s shot must have hit the housing just as their quarry tried to squeeze through, and the blast had either melted the metal or the impact had jammed it closed a little, making the hole just too small for the ratskin. He had one leg up to his groin and one arm up past the shoulder through the narrow opening. His head kept banging into the top of the crack as he twisted back and forth trying to get out.

Scabbs laughed again.

Kal sat in a comfortable chair with his boots resting on the edge of Valtin’s desk. He’d pushed the chair around to the side to avoid looking into the sun behind his nephew. As they talked, Kal idly drew a laspistol and aimed it at various pieces of art hanging on the walls and the statues on Valtin’s bookshelves. Periodically, Valtin would cringe and Kal made mental notes of which objects were the most valuable to his nephew. It felt good to have his weapons back, and his trousers.

“So, Helmawr’s dead and you need me to track down his killer, right?” said Kal. He mentally shot a painting of his father taking on an entire ratskin clan with his bare hands. In reality, the old man had probably been wearing his patriarch power armour and ripped the defenceless ratskins apart with his power claws, if it, or anything remotely like it, had ever happened at all.

“Not exactly,” said Valtin. When Kal’s laspistol strayed over towards him he raised his hands. “Let me continue,” he said. “We have others working to uncover the assassins. Your role is more vital than that.”

Kal waved the barrel of his laspistol in a circle around Valtin’s face. “Get to the point, nephew.”

“I want you to assume the throne,” said Valtin. He ducked under his desk. After a moment, he peeked his head over the top and looked at Kal.

“You want my ass to do what?” asked Kal.

“Take the throne,” said Valtin. He crawled back into his chair, but kept low. “Lead the house, with my help, of course.”

“Of course,” said Kal.

Valtin stood and faced Kal with his hands raised, palms forward to show he had nothing to hide. “Look,” he said, “The house needs a strong leader and I need someone I can trust on the throne.”

“You mean someone you can control,” said Kal.

“Not at all,” said Valtin. “I had that with Gerontius. He was getting so senile some days he would order skull chips with tea.”

Kal laughed despite himself.

“No, what we need right now is someone strong enough to hold the house together before it tears itself apart in sibling rivalry.”

“The other heirs won’t mind me stepping in?” asked Kal. He’d gone back to taking mental pot shots at the various art objects in the room.

“Oh, they’ll mind,” said Valtin. “They just won’t do anything about it. Not openly anyway. You see, they’re all afraid of you.”

Kal smiled. He liked the sound of that. “Bunch of prissy Spire nobles afraid of the downhiver?”

Valtin shook his head. “No, many of them are quite accomplished fighters...”

“Especially in their spyer rigs,” said Kal, returning to the painting of Gerontius and the ratskins.

“True,” said Valtin. He sat down again. Kal could tell he was trying not to watch where the laspistol was pointing. “They can hold their own, but all of them were terrified of Armand...”

“And I killed Armand,” said Kal. “I get it.”

“Exactly,” said Valtin. “He’d never been bested, and you killed him while he was wearing his rig.”

“It wasn’t exactly working at the time,” said Kal. He bolstered his laspistol.

Valtin laughed. “Funny, I always seem to forget that part when I tell the story. The point is that everyone assumed Armand would inherit the throne, so with him gone, you are the logical choice that should quash any House civil wars, which we can ill afford at a time when we are under attack.”

Kal stood and stretched. This meeting had lasted too long and he needed a drink. “So that wedding invitation was a ruse to get me into the Spire without arousing suspicion, huh? Not a bad idea.”

“No,” said Valtin. “The wedding is real. You may be able to control the heirs with just your good looks and reputation, but the other houses won’t follow the lead of a bastard child from the depths of the hive. So, we need to shore up your power base before you take the throne.”

“Through marriage?” asked Kal. Both laspistols had somehow found their way back into his hands. “That’s just not going to happen. You’ll have to put a lasgun to my head to get me to walk down the aisle.”

“Can’t be helped,” said Valtin. “To make this work, we need allies outside the house, especially in House Catallus. With them on your side, we can easily control the rest.”

Kal moved towards the door. “No scavving way,” he said. “I don’t want to lead the house and I definitely don’t want to get married.”

Valtin came around the desk. “It would be a marriage in name only,” he said, “and I promise it won’t last long. Once we root out the assassin and get through this critical time, you can abdicate. Until then, you can live with Candi, Brandi and Sandi — or have a different girl every night if you want. Plus the house treasury would be at your disposal, within certain limits, of course.”

Kal kicked the chair over towards him and sat down again. “Keep talking,” he said.

“Look what we have here,” said Yolanda as she came up beside Scabbs on the catwalk, “A rat caught in a trap.”

The ratskin had made it halfway through a small crack in the ductwork. He turned his bulbous head towards her as he struggled to get through. His large, fleshy ears twitched, as did the whiskers beneath his snout-like nose. If he had a tail, it was caught on the other side of the opening. Yolanda decided she didn’t really want to know.

He stopped struggling long enough to spit at Yolanda. She grabbed Scabbs and pulled him into the path of the soggy projectile. “Very funny,” said the trapped thief. “I’ve never heard that one before.”

His words were oddly clipped as if making the consonant sounds took extra effort with all that mouth to work with. Yolanda pushed past Scabbs, who was busy wiping spit off his face. “Listen, rat,” said Yolanda.

“My name is Sonny,” said the ratskin.

“Original,” said Yolanda. “Do you have a sister named Girlie, too?” She thumped Sonny on the forehead. “Listen, here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to give your arm a good yank. Either

you come unstuck and I take you in for the bounty on your head, or you don't and I shoot your head off and plop it into my sack."

"His arm could come off," said Scabbs.

Yolanda shot a glare back at her partner.

"I'm just saying," said Scabbs as he wiped his hands on his trousers. "That's a third option. His arm could come off. Depends on how stuck he is and how hard you pull."

When Yolanda turned back to their bounty, she saw Sonny had renewed his efforts to push past the opening. He was now trying to duck his head down and get it through to the other side, and out of Yolanda's line of sight.

Yolanda spat on her hands and rubbed them together. Bracing her foot against the side of the air duct, she grabbed Sonny's flailing arm and gave a hard yank. Something definitely popped up around the ratskin's shoulder.

"Hey!" yelled Sonny. "That scavving hurt."

"At least your arm stayed on," said Scabbs.

Yolanda let go of Sonny's arm and pulled out her laspistol and aimed it just below his chin.

"Wait," said Sonny. "I can tell you about another score worth far more than the bounty on my head."

Yolanda kept her weapon trained on the ratskin, but didn't pull the trigger. "I'm listening," she said.

"I was working up near the Fresh Air Saloon last week," said Sonny.

"Helping patrons with their wallets, no doubt?"

Sonny nodded, making his ears flop up and down. "Anyway, some Orlock gangers went up to this huge guy drinking by himself and began asking him questions. At first he just told them to go away, but they got persistent, like Orlocks do, and they got louder and louder, until everyone in the bar could hear the conversation..."

Yolanda pushed the barrel of her laspistol into the folds of Sonny's ear. "Get to the point," she said.

"They kept asking him about a big score outside the hive, some royal transport coming in with valuable Spire artefacts or something. Sounded like he was planning to bring it down and rob it. At least these gangers thought he'd been looking for scummers."

"Nobody can take down a royal transport," said Scabbs. "Shoot him, Yolanda. He's giving ratskins a bad name with that crazy story."

"That's what I thought, too," said Sonny. "But this morning I was by the docks liberating some cargo, and I heard some guards talking about a royal transport coming in for an emergency landing, only no transport ever came in."

Yolanda pulled her gun out of Sonny's ear. "Who was this big guy in the bar?" she asked.

"I never saw his face," said Sonny. "He wore a cloak that covered his entire body. It looked like a tent it was so huge. But when the lead Orlock got up in his face demanding a piece of the action, the big guy swiped out with something under his cloak and ripped the ganger's chest open. I left right after that as I'm not too popular with the enforcers."

Sonny looked back and forth between Yolanda and Scabbs. "So is that information worth my life?" he asked.

"Possibly," said Yolanda "If it's true."

"And if we can get the artefact away from that big brute and his mercenaries," added Scabbs.

"I'll help," said Sonny. "And look, I'll let you have half of my stash." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of jewellery and coins. "There's plenty more where that came from back at my lair."

Yolanda took one look at the stash in Sonny's hand and then raised her gun and shot twice in succession. Sonny fell limp, still stuck in the cramped opening, with two round, smoking holes in

his forehead. Yolanda reached out and grabbed the loot from his hand before it fell through the catwalk grating.

“Why’d you do that?” asked Scabbs. “I thought his plan sounded pretty good.”

“It did,” said Yolanda. She pulled a pair of loop earrings from the pile of Sonny’s loot. “But these are mine. Scavving runt must have stolen them from me last week.”

After pocketing the rest of the loot, Yolanda put her earrings back on. “Funny,” she said, “I thought Jerico’s stupid dog had eaten them.”

“Oh scav,” said Scabbs.

“What?” asked Yolanda. She pulled out her sword and looked for an angle to get at Sonny’s neck.

“I totally forgot about Wotan,” said Scabbs. “We left him back in the Sump Hole.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Yolanda. “It can’t get into too much trouble there.”

Wotan stopped running. It wasn’t that he was tired. That could never happen. At least not during the thousand year half-life of his power core. No, he stopped to let his processors deal with all the extra scents being drawn into his body.

He’d followed Kal’s trail to the Hive City docks. It was a smelly place. Not that Wotan could differentiate between pleasant and foul smells. To him everything from the backside of a human to a hunk of mystery meat smelled the same — and in the Underhive that wasn’t far from the truth.

But the docks held far too many scents for Wotan’s analyzers to handle quickly. So he stopped and waited. As he sat, the metal mastiff looked around the area. To the left, the docks extended out to the edge of the dome. Ships and men and goods all moved around in a chaotic weave. To his right stood a row of buildings in various stages of repair. The one at the end sparked something somewhere deep in Wotan’s memory core.

The mastiff released a short series of tinny barks that roughly translated in his software as, “Jerico! Jerico! Jerico! Jerico!”

He ran off and bounded towards the building opposite the docks. As he crashed through the door, ripping a huge hole in the lower quarter panel, the name above the door made its way through the circuits towards his memory core: Madam Noritake’s House of Fun.

Hermod Kauderer pressed a hidden switch that opened the door to the darkened room and stepped through. Only Kauderer could access the room. In fact, nobody else in the Spire even knew of its existence; nobody left alive anyway. It was tucked away in a windowless corner of the Helmawr estate with only the one door, which opened onto Kauderer’s personal maze of secret passages.

He had always believed there were certain tasks best left to the experts, and as he was the resident expert on extracting information, he left this task to himself. Kauderer didn’t particularly enjoy this part of his job. He felt that resorting to torture meant someone somewhere hadn’t done their job properly. In his business, there were many ways of obtaining information; most of which didn’t leave the informant bloody and beaten and requiring of disposal.

Kauderer rinsed his hands in the basin he’d installed in the dead-end corridor just outside the torture room. He glanced at the unconscious man strapped to the chair in the middle of the room. The chamber’s only light glared at the man from just above him, illuminating his still form. Thick, red blood dripped from his legs and back onto the floor, where it sluiced through the grating strategically placed beneath the chair.

The man’s eyes had swollen shut and one of his ear-lobes hung against the side of his head, held on by just a wisp of dead skin. Dark streaks of red crisscrossed his face and chest, some from the whip hanging on the wall just inside the door, but most from the razor-sharp knife Hermod was currently cleaning in the basin.

“Well, I’m sorry to say that I believe you, Mr. Blanco,” said Hermod. He re-entered the room, closing the door behind him, and crossed to the unconscious Spire merchant. “You truly don’t know anything about the assassins or the missing package.”

Mr. Blanco didn’t respond, but then Hermod didn’t expect him to. The man had endured a great deal of pain and loss of blood in the last hour. If he had known anything, he certainly would have shared that information by now. It was a pity really. Hermod quite liked Mr. Blanco. He’d helped Kauderer acquire most of the tools and accoutrements in this room.

“This is why I detest torture,” said Hermod. “It’s so unreliable.” He walked around the edge of the room towards a set of gears set in the far wall. “Your name was given to my agents abroad,” he continued. “Under torture, the off-world supplier of said package named you as his co-conspirator. I couldn’t believe it, but I had to find out the truth. So, here we are. I was right. Although I’m sure that’s of little value to you now.”

Hermod pulled one lever, which opened a large hole in the grating just in front of the chair. He pulled a second lever, which released the shackles holding Mr. Blanco to the chair. A third lever tipped the chair forward slightly. Mr. Blanco moaned slightly as he slid off the chair and fell into the hole.

Hermod waited a few minutes for the small flash of fire that just reached the top of the hole, signifying the body had made it to the furnace. A wisp of smoke rose through the grate as Kauderer flipped the lever back to close off the hole.

“Yes,” he said. “Truly a pity.”

Kauderer left the rest of the mess for later. He just couldn’t face cleaning Blanco’s blood from the chair and floor right now. Besides, he needed a new plan. He’d just incinerated their best lead. The problem was that the information he needed was most certainly located somewhere within the Spire, and he was far too recognizable to get it through subterfuge.

Plus, most of his agents were off-world tracking down that leak. Those still stationed within the Spire had been on duty so long they had already been detected by the agents of the other houses. The spy business really was a small community. As Hermod walked the dark corridors back towards his office, he realized that what he needed was a rogue agent. Someone completely off the Spire radar. Perhaps an Underhive asset.

As he palmed open another secret door and stepped into the back corner of his office, it hit him. He knew the perfect spy for this job. Small, unassuming, blends into the background in every crowd, and fairly trustworthy for an Underhive spy. Now, the only matter was how to invite Markel Bobo to the Spire without rousing the suspicion of all the other houses’ spy masters.

He snapped his fingers. “Of course,” he said. “The wedding.”

## CHAPTER THREE: TARGET PRACTICE

Markel Bobo hadn't had any rest in weeks, and precious little time for food either. So the soggy, reconstituted noodles and the slab of mystery meat on his plate actually tasted good. He sat in an overstuffed chair, sinking his slight, one-and-a-half metre frame into the soft cushions.

The chairs were one of the reasons he made Madam Noritake's his home away from home. The other was heading up the stairs across the parlour. Her name was Jenn Strings. She had short-cropped, not-quite-blond hair that bounced every so slightly when she walked. Even though Jenn was one of Madam Noritake's girls, she somehow managed to retain an air of innocence about her that pleased him. Plus she was one of the few girls in the Underhive shorter than Bobo.

Jenn smiled back at Bobo as she led her latest client upstairs. She held up her hand with the fingers splayed wide and mouthed the words "Five minutes."

Bobo looked at the client, a fat Van Saar merchant, and laughed. That was information he might just be able to use someday. For Bobo was in the information business. His main employer, House Helmawr, kept him busy enough to afford the extended stay plan at Madam Noritake's — something he hoped to enjoy with Jenn during this week off.

He sometimes freelanced for the various Hive City families, so he made a mental note of Jenn's client for later use. He was about to go through his own client list to see which of his regulars might be interested in a little Van Saar dirt when the door to Noritake's exploded inward.

The bottom of the door blew off the frame and flew across the room. Before Bobo could even move, Wotan bound into the parlour, coming to a skidding halt near Madam Noritake's desk. The little, yellow woman screamed a stream of epithets that would have made dockworkers pause.

Coming out from behind the desk, she brandished a metal baton she kept close at hand for unruly clients. Wotan stood there, apparently not worried about the tiny lady with the big bat. He seemed to be sniffing the air, which seemed odd to Bobo, since it wasn't a real dog, just a metal machine of some sort.

He'd asked Kal about Wotan a couple of times, but the bounty hunter refused to talk about it. He said something about "payment for some family obligations", but Bobo never did get the whole story.

Madam Noritake hadn't stopped screaming and, somehow, hadn't run out of new curses to throw at the metal mastiff. Bobo assumed she must have heard a lot of swearing in her life, but he was still impressed. She finally gave up on yelling and waving the baton around in the air, which was usually enough even for the drunkest clients, and swung the club at Wotan.

That turned out to be a big mistake. The mastiff, which had seemed to be completely unaware of the danger, turned his head at the last moment and caught the baton in its mouth. Madam Noritake screamed in terror as Wotan bit down. The metal club snapped into three pieces. One section fell on the floor while Madam Noritake raised the other back into the air. Just a few centimetres were left above her hand.

Wotan spat out the third piece and then ran up the stairs. Bobo waited for what he knew was about to happen next. Sure enough, he heard screams of terror and yells of rage from above. Those second yells quickly turned to fear as Bobo heard Wotan's sharp, metallic bark.

A moment later, many of the girls in Madam Noritake's employ came streaking down the stairs followed by several men, all of whom were struggling to pull on their trousers without falling down the steps. The last man down the steps was the Van Saar merchant. Bobo felt an odd sense of glee when he saw a trickle of blood running down the man's leg from a gash in his backside. He'd obviously not moved quickly enough when Wotan came at him.

"I'm going to kill that Jerico," screamed Madam Noritake. Her small, but oddly wide, yellow face had turned almost red. She pulled at her straight, black hair, balling large bits of it in her fists. When she let go, the sides looked like a tangled mass of conduit running down the dome wall. "Can't somebody get that stupid metal mutt out of my house?"

All eyes turned to the only man left in the room. Bobo shook his head. "Uh uh," he said. "Only Kal Jerico can handle Wotan, and then just barely. Besides, I'm on vacation. Go find Jerico if you want that dog gone."

He turned away from the group of half-dressed women, deciding to get back to his meal, but found instead a thin man in a silk suit sitting in the chair next to him.

"That's exactly why I am here," said the stranger. He pushed his wire-rimmed glasses back up his face with his forefinger. "To take you to see Mr. Jerico."

"What the..." said Bobo. "How'd you get there?"

Markel Bobo prided himself on two things. First was his ability to blend into every situation without being noticed. Unlike Madam Noritake, he kept his looks and his dress so nondescript that there was never anything for anyone to remember about him after they saw him. The second point of pride was that nobody ever snuck up on him. If Bobo didn't know you were there, then you just weren't there.

He closed his eyes and tried to disbelieve the bespectacled little man. It didn't work.

"I walked in during all the commotion," said the stranger. "I have an invitation for you." He tried to hand Bobo an envelope.

Bobo looked back at the girls, wondering if one of them — probably Jenn — was pulling a joke on him. But they were all whispering and pointing up the stairs. From above, Bobo could still hear Wotan romping about from room to room. Occasionally something would fall and break, prompting a new set of curses to escape from Madam Noritake's mouth.

Bobo looked back at the stranger. "You open it," he said. "I don't trust strange envelopes from stranger men."

The stranger slipped his finger under the flap and Bobo noticed it had been resealed at some point. It seemed odd, but he just filed the information away. The man pulled out a thick card and handed it to Bobo. On it he read: *House Helmawr cordially invites you to attend the wedding ceremony of its favourite son, and future ruler of Hive Primus and, by extension, all Necromunda: Kal Jerico.*

"If you would come with me, Mr. Bobo," said the man. "I can expedite your travel through the wall into the Spire."

Bobo stared at the card and then at the silk-suited stranger. "This is a joke, right?" he said. "No way that Kal Jerico is going to be ruler of the hive."

"Our future lord is already in the Spire," said the man. "Why do you think his metal friend is running loose and terrorizing Hive City?"

Bobo shook his head. "Well, thank you very much for the invitation, but I'll find my own way into the Spire, if you don't mind. I don't go on trips with strangers. It's, um, bad for my health."

The man rose from the chair and bowed. "As you wish, Mr. Bobo. Simply present your invitation at the wall and you shall be allowed entrance. I now bid you adieu. It would be best if I left before Mr. Jerico's mastiff returns to this floor."

Bobo glanced back up the stairs and nodded. "Me too," he said but when he turned back around, the man in the silk suit had vanished.



Vandal Feg rotated the ring of weapon barrels mounted on his metal arm one turn clockwise. “Another power pack depleted,” he grumbled. “Time to bring out the big gun.” He truly appreciated the upgrades he’d bought for his mechanical arm. His previous losses to that pain-in-the-rear, Kal Jerico, all stemmed from letting the bounty hunter fight on his terms.

Vandal should have been able to crush puny Jerico’s head with his claws, but Jerico had a knack for getting out of tight spots. Next time, he’d shoot the scavving son of a ratskin and everything around him before he could get away. Then maybe, he’d have some fun with his chainsword.

Mutant bodies piled up around Feg and his band of mercenaries, but there didn’t seem to be any end in sight. A sea of muties surrounded them, ebbing and flowing out past the tops of the dunes on all sides. The transport was lost in the dust behind them. They had moved off, hoping it was the transport the mutants were after.

“They smell the meat on our bones,” said Kyrian. He fired methodically back and forth in a sixty-degree arc, dropping an enemy with nearly every shot. It didn’t seem to matter as two more moved in for every one that fell.

“How can they smell anything?” asked Feg. “They barely have faces, let alone noses.” He looked at a corpse lying nearby as he locked the largest barrel in his arsenal into place on his arm.

What skin was left on the face of the mutant was a mass of scar tissue and pockmarks. Most of the fleshy parts — ears, nose, cheeks — looked like they’d been ground down, exposing cartilage and bone underneath. Vandal had been told the constant wind-whipped ash blowing across the wastes could rip the flesh off a man. Now he believed the tales.

“There,” he said, getting the two-inch barrel securely locked into place. “This ought to thin things out a little.” Flexing one of his long claws triggered the weapon, which discharged a frag grenade with a loud “thwoomp”. Before the first grenade hit, he turned and fired a second one over Kyrian’s head.

“Down,” called the scummer leader. As one, the mercenaries, who were arrayed in a rough circle around Feg, knelt.

The kneeling scummers continued firing as Feg unleashed explosive rain on the encroaching mutants. The frag grenade rounds detonated one after another in a circle around them. Pockets of muties simply dropped to the ground as searing hot bits of metal ripped through their ranks, flaying what little skin they had left from their bodies.

“Heavies,” called Kyrian. “Concentrate your fire to the east.” Those to either side of him switched to their heavy stubbers and filled the area in front with a hail of screaming bullets, creating a curtain of fire that sliced through the scavvy ranks. The scummers arrayed in a circle behind Feg widened their firing arcs to keep the muties coming from the sides at bay. Those men were now fighting a losing battle, so Feg launched several more grenades to each side to thin out the attackers.

He glanced forward, ready to berate Kyrian for leaving their flanks so exposed, but then saw what the scummer leader had noticed. The mass of muties in front of them ended at the top of the next dune. He raised his arm and shot his remaining grenades in a cluster just beyond the leading edge of the horde.

“Move on my command,” yelled the scummer leader. As the first grenades blew up, he called out, “Forward!”

Feg flipped a switch and held his arm up while the chainsword flipped out and screamed to life. All around him, the mercenaries continued firing as they moved forward in a tight diamond formation. Feg stopped and turned, taking up position at the rear point of the diamond. He slashed out with his raging chainsword as muties rushed forward towards the retreating mercenaries.

They flailed at him with their bony hands. Some wielded hunks of metal or even rusted swords, but most simply attacked with their long fingernails. One even tried to bite him, but picked the wrong arm. Feg smacked the biter in the face with his mechanical elbow, sending him flying back into the grasping arms of his comrades.

Fingers, limbs, heads and dismembered torsos littered the ash around Feg as he walked backward with the group of mercenaries. Besides the heavies at the apex of the diamond, who were blazing the trail, all the other scummers had switched to melee weapons. Their job was to keep the crushing mob of muties at bay long enough for the formation to break through the back line.

“How are we doing?” called Feg above the roar of his chainsword.

“We have another problem,” said the scummer leader.

Vandal glanced over his shoulder. It looked like they were getting close to the edge of the horde, although some on the flanks seemed to realize their plan and were heading towards the rear. “What’s the problem?” he asked.

“Up above.” He pointed skyward.

Feg looked up. “Oh scav,” he said. The wail of his chainsword had drowned out the roar of the military transport coming in for a landing.

The scummer leader pulled the rocket launcher from his back, unfolded the stock and loaded their remaining rocket.

“Hold,” said Feg. “I need you to punch me a path through to the top of that dune. I have to be free of this horde before that transport lands.”

The leader looked at the transport and Feg could see him come to the same conclusion. The military markings meant the transport had an extra layer of reinforced plasteel. It would be thicker than the door to the safe. The rocket launcher would be next to useless against it. He saluted, and said, “Yes sir.” This time, Feg thought the scummer really meant it.

“Prepare for launch,” he called. “Covering fire!”

The leader aimed the rocket launcher and pulled the trigger. The missile tore through the ranks of mutants. Those unlucky enough to live through the impact fell to the sides, their bodies charred and burning from the rocket’s flame. The rocket exploded near the top of the dune in a huge ball of fire. Black smoke billowed up just behind a massive cloud of white ash from the dune.

The scummers concentrated their fire on the edges of the opening made from the rocket’s path as bodies tossed into the air from the explosion dropped out of the smoke and ash. Clutching the satchel in his left hand, Vandal Feg scrambled up the dune, cutting down any muties foolish enough to try to get in his way. As he disappeared into the black and white cloud, Feg altered direction, coming out on the other side of the horde but running parallel to its rear echelon, away from the transport.

He felt confident his chainsword and the prospect of royal blood would keep the horde off him long enough to get away. Besides, while the muties might be fighting to survive, Feg fought for a much more important purpose: money.

“Valtin,” pleaded Kal, digging his thumbs into his eyes, “we’ve been at this for over an hour. I’m beginning to regret agreeing to this scavving marriage.” He stood and paced from the chair to the door and back again. He didn’t know what hurt more, his brain or his backside. At the moment, it was a dead heat.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” said Valtin. “I’ve got to prepare you for courtly life. You know, take off some of the rough edges before you make your first public appearance.”

“I know. I know,” said Kal. He plopped back into the chair, putting his backside in the lead for the moment. “But, it’s really not that tough.”

Kal ticked off the points on his fingers as he went down the list. “First, I don’t kick the Earl of House Ulanti in the groin if he spills wine on my shirt. Second, as much as I would like to, I should refrain from giving the Duchess of House Greim an open-mouthed kiss upon meeting her. Third, should the princes of House Ty and House Ko’Iron get into a duel, I should certainly not begin taking bets on who will live and who will die. Fourth, under no circumstances should I shoot any

member of House Catallus, as we are trying to curry their favour. And fifth... hmm, it seems there is no fifth, so I guess it's open season on House Ran Lo."

Valtin clapped his hands three times. "Very funny, uncle," he said. "But there's more to political manoeuvring than simply not killing people."

"Look," said Kal, "I don't know anything about surviving in this political quagmire. That's your job." He stretched out his legs and propped his feet up on a pile of papers at the edge of Valtin's desk. Closing his eyes and dropping his chin down onto his chest, he added, "For my part, I will try my best to suppress my urges to kill or kiss or bet on everything that crosses my path."

"Kal..." started Valtin.

Kal opened one eye. "I'll be a good boy," he said. "I'll stand up straight, not spit, wash behind my ears, and bow when I meet people. Okay? Can I get some rest now? My head hurts..."

Valtin jumped to his feet. "No. No. No!" he said, shaking his pen at Kal. "I told you this already. You don't bow when you meet people. You never bow. You're the Lord of the Hive. People bow to you..."

His tirade was cut short by a knock at the door.

"What?" screamed Valtin. "What is it?"

Kal glanced over his shoulder as the door opened a crack. Valtin's assistant peeked her head just inside the room. "I'm sorry, sir," said the girl, a slight quiver in her voice. "But you wanted to know when that, um, thing was happening."

"Yes," said Valtin. He dropped the pen on his desk. "Yes, of course. Thank you, Cait."

Valtin moved around from behind his desk. "I have another meeting," he said to Kal. "Can you find your way back to your quarters?"

Kal smiled. Not only was he getting a break from politics class, he got to go to break with his favourite classmates, Candi, Brandi and Sandi. "I'm sure I can manage," he said. Kal dropped his feet off the desk, taking most of the stack of papers with him. As he followed Cait out the door, Kal added, "Make sure you knock when you come back for me."

He practically skipped his way through Cait's office, stopping only when Valtin's assistant said, "Have a good morning, my lord."

My lord. Kal actually liked the sound of that. He looked back at the cute, young girl. She had a round face with just the tiniest hint of baby fat still present. Her brown hair had been pulled back into a ponytail, accentuating her round face and long neck. Cait's eyes shone brightly as she smiled at Kal and he sensed something behind those eyes. She was a smart girl. Of course she would have to be to rise to personal assistant to the Lord Chamberlain. He filed that away for later.

"I certainly will," said Kal. "I have a date with some grapes and nothing will keep me from that bowl of fruit this time." He opened the door and stepped out into the corridor but hadn't the faintest idea which way to go.

"To the right, my lord," called Cait. "Up one level and then follow the corridor around to the left."

Kal waved and started down the hall. The directions had sounded easy, but after a while of following the corridor through many twists and turns and side halls with no stairs, he decided it was time to retrace his steps.

As he turned to find his way back to Cait, Kal saw a shadow move around the corner ahead. It was subtle, and he almost missed it. Life in the Spire had already dulled his survival sense. He hadn't checked behind him once while walking the corridors. That would get you killed in the Underhive, as someone was always trying to sneak up behind you.

Kal flattened his back against the wall and slid his sword out of the sheath. He inched down the corridor, keeping an eye on the corner. He heard nothing, but was certain someone had ducked out of sight just as he turned. Perhaps it was just Cait, coming to help him find his way. With Kal's luck, it was more likely to be someone coming to kill him or worse, collect a debt.

Then he saw the shadow again. But it wasn't a shadow so much as a wrinkle in reality, as if the wall had folded over on itself for a moment. Kal stopped. He wasn't sure what had just happened, but felt certain it didn't bode well for him.

He continued to stare at the spot, but began backing up just in case. Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw another wrinkle. This time it was like a shimmering light against the windows to the side.

He turned, just in time to see the barrel of a gun peek out from the folds of shimmering nothingness, seemingly floating in mid-air.

"Oh scav!" said Kal.

"Give me a low pass over that battle!" said Katerin into the cockpit. He couldn't fit through the door as he had donned his Orrus rig. His massive, tank-like body had doubled in size in the armour and he loomed in the doorway. He'd had to order Dobbs to open the door for him, as his huge gauntlets couldn't do anything more delicate than smash holes in walls.

"No way," said the pilot. "We've already lost one transport today."

"I'm not asking," yelled Katerin. "I'm ordering. I need one... No. Make that two, low passes — now!" The order given, he turned his back on the pilot and left the cockpit, grumbling about "flyboys" and "chain of command". He turned to his men. "Heavies to the rear," he called.

As the men moved to take position by the rear hatch, Katerin turned to his second-in-command, the female noble named Stache Mageson. The slight wisp of a girl, who'd claimed the role of his second through determination and warrior instincts he hadn't seen since his own early days, now looked like an avenging angel in her Yeld spyrer rig. The rig's wings, which were currently folded behind Mageson, provided sustained flight. They were also razor-sharp, making for a nasty surprise on strafing runs.

"Mageson," he said. "Launch during the second pass. Provide covering fire as the troops hit the wastes and air support during the assault."

"I'll cut 'em down to size," she said, extending her wings out to their full length. The razor-tipped edges cut into the plasteel wall next to her.

"Careful, Mageson," snapped Katerin. "These rigs aren't military assets. They're on loan from the Lord Chamberlain himself. Considering the importance of this operation and the fact that one royal transport has been shot down already today, he deemed it prudent to allow their use. That's why you and Stein are on this mission. I needed three nobles for the three rigs: you, me, and Stein."

"Where do you need me?" asked Stein, whose aids had just finished strapping him into his Orrus rig. Like the rigs, Stein was also on loan from the Lord Chamberlain; some young noble who, like Mageson, had recently risen into a position of authority in the house. The fact that he always had a smile on his face and that he had become an indispensable aid to the Lord Chamberlain, made Katerin instantly suspicious of Stein.

"Stay with the rest of the guard," said Katerin, "and help in their advance through the enemy."

"Where will you be, Captain?" asked Mageson. She seemed surprised Katerin wouldn't be leading the charge into battle.

"I'll meet you both in the middle." Katerin smiled despite his worries about Stein. He didn't even mind the sweat beading on his brow.

"Beginning our first pass," called the pilot.

As the transport tilted forward into a dive, Katerin tromped to the rear. When the transport levelled out again, he pulled a large, red lever. The entire rear wall of the transport creaked open from the top, lowering on hydraulic pistons to each side. He and his heavies crept forward as the wall turned into a ramp.

"Fire," called Katerin to his men as soon as he saw the rear lines of the enemy muties.

A dozen grenade launchers unleashed explosive rounds at the same time. A moment later, twelve explosions ripped through the mutant horde.

“Fire,” said Katerin again, and watched as another dozen frag grenades arced out into the muties.

He could see those near the explosions begin to panic, as the savages ran into each other to escape the barrage.

“Fire,” said Katerin. A third salvo flew out of the transport, hitting close to the front edge of the mob of muties below. He turned and called out to Mageson.

“You direct the grenade launchers on the next pass,” he said. With that, Katerin pushed his way through his men and stepped off the end of the ramp.

Wotan padded down the stairs again. Some odd subroutine in his mechanical brain had ordered his mouth to open up and his rubber tongue to hang out the side. A small piece of the fat man’s trousers still clung to his front teeth.

The women all moved back and some screamed again as he jumped onto the landing from the third step. He ignored them, although part of his vision routine ordered one eye to keep the small lady with the yellow skin in sight at all times.

He was searching for someone else. He’d heard a male voice say Jerico’s name shortly after he bit the fat man. The voice had registered as familiar in his memory core, but the sample had been too faint and brief to lock in a positive identification.

He scanned the room. There were still a few half-dressed men standing in the corner, desperately pulling on trousers or shirts or shoes. He’d seen all of them upstairs. Then he saw a small man with short-cropped hair, pale skin and slightly ruffled, brownish clothes, just outside the door. Wotan’s memory circuits completed a quick scan and found a match. Bobo.

Wotan barked a single, sharp, tinny bark. The girls screamed again and the little, yellow lady advanced on him with the remnant of her stick. He turned and growled. The lady gasped and crumpled to the floor. Wotan leaned over and licked her face before turning towards the door and loping off after Bobo, stopping briefly at the door to gain the little man’s scent.

“Read those directions, again,” said Yolanda. She looked up and down the docks, her brow furrowed so hard the wrinkles threatened to swallow her gang tattoo. Scabbs could tell she was lost but like Jerico she was too proud to admit it or ask for help. The two of them were so much alike it was no wonder they couldn’t stand each other.

“It’s not so much directions as code,” said Scabbs. “It says ‘Big Score — HC docks, third column, last row, at the wall. Enter at loose board, keep right, except for final left’. Sounds like gibberish.”

“But that gibberish is our only lead to the Spire artefact Sonny told us about.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have killed him so fast,” said Scabbs. He kept reading the note they’d scavenged from Sonny’s belongings. It seemed like a wild goose chase to him.

Yolanda ignored the comment and walked back towards the docking bays. She stood with one hand resting on the hilt of her sword and the other fingering the laspistol on her other hip. Scabbs thought it looked like a very Kal Jerico pose. A breeze from a passing transport even made her leather loincloth and vest flutter slightly. Scabbs smirked, thinking: Kal couldn’t have done better.

“This is the third row,” she said, “but I didn’t see any loose boards back there.”

Something in that statement sounded odd to Scabbs. He looked at the note again and slapped his forehead. A cloud of dead skin fluttered down onto the note. “Not third row,” he said. “Third column.”

He looked around a bit to get his bearings. “Ah, I’ve got it. Follow me.”

“About time,” said Yolanda.

Scabbs led the way down to the very end of the docks. The warehouses at the end looked as if they would fall over if you leaned on them. They weren't much more than sheets of thin metal tied or, rarely, bolted to poles driven into the floor of the dome. None of them looked like they had seen much use in the last decade or more, and the area was completely deserted.

"This looks better," said Yolanda.

"Down here, I think," said Scabbs. He walked down the last row, counting the narrow alleys between warehouses. "One, two, three. Right here."

The warehouse backed up to the dome wall. The door had been nailed shut with a plasteel barricade. A sign on the boards stated the warehouse had been condemned and closed by order of the dockmaster.

Yolanda pushed Scabbs out of the way and pulled at the boards. Nothing moved. As she pulled out her laspistol, Scabbs cleared his throat.

"Ahem," he said. Yolanda held her gun at the ready, but looked back at Scabbs. "You need to think like a ratskin, not an Escher." Yolanda glared at him. "Try lower," he added.

She waved him towards the door. Scabbs moved in, pulled at the bottom of several boards, until one of them rotated up. As the board turned, he heard a click from inside and the door, barricade boards and all, opened towards him.

They moved in and Scabbs closed the door behind them. He slapped his hands together twice and smiled, but both self-congratulatory actions were lost in the darkness of the abandoned warehouse.

"Now what?" asked Yolanda.

Scabbs snapped his fingers. "This is the old smuggler's entrance," he said. He began picking his way towards the back of the warehouse, towards the wall of the dome. "Kal and I tried to find these guys a few years back, but we never figured out how they moved their goods into and out of the hive. There must be a tunnel back here some..."

Scabbs fell into a hole in the floor. He skidded down a steep slope, coming to rest a few dozen metres below the warehouse. "Found it!" he said. "Watch the first step..."

Above him, Scabbs heard a yelp and then the sound of another body coming down the slope. Before he could cover his head, Yolanda slid into him, her big boots kicking him twice in the head as she tried to slow herself down.

Scabbs truly wanted to say something witty and sarcastic about her big feet, but he was too busy falling unconscious.

Kal dove into a side corridor just as the floating laspistol fired. A chunk of plaster vaporized behind him as he rolled forward down the hall. As he came to his feet, Kal looked at the sabre in his hand and wondered why he'd brought a sword to a lasgun battle. He had no time to switch weapons now.

He looked back over his shoulder, but saw nothing there. Kal had seen stealth tech before. The Yeld spyrer rig somehow bent light around itself, rendering it basically invisible. If he was up against a spyrer, Kal knew he was totally scavved.

As he zig-zagged down the corridor, another las blast hit the wall next to his shoulder. He dived to the right and rolled again. As he came up, Kal twirled around and threw his sword back towards the invisible assassin. He didn't really expect to hit anything, but even a momentary dodge might make his pursuer pause long enough for him to make the next corner.

The audible "oof" from behind Kal came as a complete surprise. Not only had he hit, but the assassin had felt the impact. This was no spyrer. That changed everything. Kal concocted a plan as he came to the next corridor intersection.

As he rounded the corner, Kal grabbed the wall to help him turn more sharply. With his free hand, he tugged at his leather coat, slipping it off one shoulder. He skidded to a halt with his back to the wall as the jacket slipped off his other shoulder. He grabbed it by the lapels and waited.

Kal tried to control his breathing, both to mask his location and to calm his nerves for the upcoming fight. A moment later, he saw the shimmering air come around the corner. He flung the coat into the air towards the shimmer. As the coat fluttered towards the invisible assassin, Kal whipped his hands around and down towards his holsters.

He either missed the mark or the assassin was quick enough to sidestep the heavy, leather coat. Instead of landing on the invisible assailant's head, it looked like it glanced off a shoulder. In that instant, before the coat slid to the ground, Kal could see the outline of half of the assassin's body.

Kal's laspistols were already out of the holster. With his arms outstretched, he leaped to the side, firing three times with both weapons as he flew through the air. Two las blasts scorched the air above Kal as he hit the ground next to the far wall. As he rolled away from the battle, trying to get back to his feet, Kal heard a thud behind him.

He came up, both laspistols aimed down the corridor, but saw nothing. He scanned the corridor for the shimmer, his muscles ready to spring should he see the assassin's weapon. Then he saw it. Not the weapon or the shimmer, but a pool of blood on the floor that seemed to spread of its own accord.

"Oh scav!" said Kal, rushing forward. He grabbed his coat from the floor just before the blood reached it. As he flipped the coat over his back and slid his arms into the sleeves, Kal kicked at the air above the spreading blood. He hit something soft. He kicked again, harder this time, but got no reaction.

"Now, let's see who you are," said Kal. He bent down and poked around in the air, and felt something soft, like silk. As he pulled at it, he saw the air shimmer around his hand. Kal yanked on the cloth and pulled it away, revealing a dead female wearing Delaquer body armour.

"Nice gadget," said Kal, looking at the shimmering cloak in his hand. He fumbled with it, trying to determine which end was up, so he could put it on. Something heavy pulled at one end. He reached around until he felt a small box-shaped object hidden in an inner pocket. "Aha!" he said. "A holo-projector. I wonder how you turn it off?"

When he hit the ground, Captain Katerin sunk into the ash up to his waist. Unperturbed, he launched two explosive bolts from his wrists into the dune and then simply climbed out of the hole.

Katerin moved in, launching his own explosives ahead of him to clear a path. Those muties who weren't already running from the area turned and advanced on him. He caved in the face of the first with a single blow from his hydraulic-powered punch. Ahead, the transport flew back over the horde, dropping waves of frag grenades on the enemy army.

He back-handed one coming at him from the side, cracking numerous ribs and sending the poor wretch flying into the side of the dune, where he lay in a crumpled pile. A third and fourth beat on Katerin's armour with chunks of metal. He grabbed the two attackers around the necks, raised them off the ground, and slammed their heads together before dropping them. He stepped on their still forms as he moved forward, pressing them down into the ash.

Katerin glanced up just as Mageson flew out of the transport. She immediately went into stealth mode. Katerin smiled and turned back to his various assailants. The rag-clad, club-wielding mutants posed no threat to him in his spyer rig. He slapped a couple away that tried to skewer him with rusty swords. He thought they looked like walking zombies with their spindly arms and sunken faces. Their stomachs were distended and their leathery skin had a horrible pallor from the toxic air they were forced to breathe.

But they didn't scare Katerin. He dispatched several more with a sweeping roundhouse punch. He'd never believed in monsters. Five more came at him and he calmly launched a bolt into the one in the middle. When it exploded, the concussion and flying bone fragments took down the other four. What Katerin believed in was the power of an army; an army with guns.

"Ready on our end," said Stein over the com. "Meet you in the middle."

Let's hope we find more than muties, thought Katerin, or else we're in the wrong place.

Almost in response, the mutant horde thinned ahead of him as more and more of the degenerates ran off or turned on their own dead for an easy meal. As the muties dissipated, Katerin saw the mercenaries at the centre of it all. He'd known this was no mutie attack. There was just no way those savages could have brought down a transport.

The question was, how much heavy munitions did the mercenaries have left? Only one way to find out. Katerin launched two explosive bolts towards the mercenaries. They immediately scattered, returning fire as they dived for cover. Several laser blasts splayed across the force field surrounding Katerin's armour. "Okay," he said, a small smile creeping over his face. "Now this is more like it."

His bolts exploded right where the mercenaries had been standing. He wasn't sure, but he thought one or two of them got caught in the blast radius. He moved in as the barrage of laser fire continued to pelt his armour. He launched two more bolts at the closest mercenaries. They didn't have time to get out of the way and the blasts ripped through the exposed flesh around their armour.

Unfortunately, his bolt launchers were almost depleted, and he wanted to reserve at least one in each arm for an emergency. So, it was time for close quarters. As he lumbered forward, one of the laser blasts finally found its way through the force field, hitting his power unit. He watched as the shimmering field surrounding him disappeared.

"Oh scav," he said. The big problem with the Orrus rig was its slow speed. He simply couldn't cover the remaining distance quickly.

Twin streaks of red light descended from the sky, burning through two more of the mercenaries. Katerin saw Mageson's smile as she flew over. He could almost feel the adrenaline dripping off her.

Half of the scummers turned their weapons on Mageson in her Yeld rig. With their attention now divided, Katerin launched his last bolts into the group and advanced in behind his shots. The explosions helped cover his charge and he reached the first scummer before he could get another shot off. He grabbed the man's head in both hands and squeezed with all his hydraulic-powered might, crushing the man's skull in seconds.

He dropped the body in the ash and moved on. A few laser blasts impacted his rig, but the armour held. Although it was starting to get warm inside as the metal heated up around him. Only five remained, and none had fired anything more than lasguns. Katerin hoped they'd used up their heavy weapons bringing down the first transport.

Two more laser beams from above thinned the scummer group to three. Katerin struck one with his gore-covered hand, spraying the man's face with blood as he caved in his nose. A second blow from his other hand went right through the man's armour and chest, lifting him off the ground as Katerin's fist impaled him.

After the impressive punch, Katerin's arm was wedged inside the scummer's chest, held in place by the sundered armour. He turned to see the last two advancing on him. Both had dropped their lasguns and pulled out shotguns. One had an empty rocket launcher strapped to his back.

"Your force field is down," said the one with the rocket launcher. A smile spread across his face. "And I don't think I can miss your face from here."

He pumped a shell into the chamber, aimed, and fired the shotgun. Katerin swung the impaled scummer around in front of him. The shotgun blast slammed into the back of the dead man, dislodging it. The bloody body slipped off his arm into the ash. "I think you missed," said Katerin.

He advanced on what he now assumed was the leader. The other scummer pumped his shotgun and aimed. Before the man could fire, an explosion burst over his back, ripping through his armour and sending him sprawling, face-first into the ash.

"Sorry I'm late," said Stein, adding, "I almost missed the fun."

He raised his arm towards the scummer leader and fired just as Katerin yelled, "No!"

The leader smiled and tried to salute as the bolt hit his armour. His arm only made it half way to his forehead before the explosion tore through his body.



“Damn,” said Katerin. He looked around at the carnage. While at one level, it was gratifying to tear through an enemy force with such precision, he knew their mission hadn’t been simply to kill everything.

“Stein, Mageson,” he said. “Start checking these mercenaries to see if any of them are still alive. I don’t see the package. And if the package is not here, we need someone to interrogate.”

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE LIVING DEAD

Kal picked his way back towards Valtin's office. After figuring out how to use the holo projector, Kal had slipped it into his own pocket and moved away from the grisly scene. Being practically invisible at least made him feel a little safer. Of course, he wondered how the assassin had made it into the royal estate in the first place, and why Valtin hadn't assigned him any guards yet. These were two questions he planned to ask while sitting on his nephew's chest.

He looked down where his legs should be and was gratified that all he could see was a slight shimmer. Then Kal smiled as he thought of the fun he could have with Cait before surprising Valtin in his office.

When Kal reached Cait's office, she wasn't there and he heard voices coming from behind Valtin's door. He moved to the doorway and listened. One voice was Valtin's and the other sounded familiar: one of the other advisors he'd met on his last trip to the Spire. There was also a third voice that sounded tinny, like it was coming through a speaker.

Valtin said, "So you don't have the package?"

"There's no sign of it," said the tinny voice. "It appears to have been removed from the transport by force."

"And none of the mercenaries had it?" asked the second voice in the room, which had a clipped, staccato cadence as if each word had to be definitively completed before the next one could start.

"We are still searching, but it appears to have disappeared."

"So you let it slip through your fingers?" asked the staccato voice. The accusation hung in the air.

Before the tinny voice could respond, Valtin cut in. "Gentlemen," he said. "We do not have time for this. Katerin, go find that package. Do whatever it takes. Tear the Underhive apart if you have to, but do not return without it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Lord Chamberlain," said Katerin. "We will sweep through and find the thief."

There was a soft click and Kal noticed the absence of a hissing sound that had accompanied the tinny voice.

Valtin continued talking to the other man in the office. "There is still the problem of Kal Jerico."

Kal leaned in at the mention of his name.

"I have a man coming in to help with that, Lord Chamberlain," said staccato. "He will have very explicit instructions on how to deal with the problem."

"Good," said Valtin. "I don't know how long I can keep Kal in the dark. He can be very persistent when it comes to protecting his, shall we say, assets."

"Do not worry, Lord Chamberlain," said staccato. Kal thought he heard just a little extra emphasis placed on Valtin's title each time the man said it, as if it was painful for him to say. "I shall handle the situation before Kal Jerico knows what you're doing to him."

"Good," said Valtin. "Make sure you do."

The conversation seemed to have ended because Kal heard one of the men walking towards the door. He decided it was time to leave and slipped out of Cait's office back into the corridor. There was more going on here than he knew and it was obvious he wasn't going to get any information

from Valtin. His nephew had already lied to him twice — once under threat. So, now it was time for Kal to learn the truth on his own.

Scabbs woke up in the dark with a horrible headache. He had trouble remembering where he was and what had happened. His arms and legs burned and itched as if they had been scraped raw, and not by his own scratching. A sliver of light above him beckoned to him and, as he climbed, the last few hours began playing back in his mind: Kal's disappearance, Sonny, the ratskin thief, and then his sudden descent into the hole at the back of the abandoned warehouse.

As he scrambled up the ever steeper slope, Scabbs called out, "Yolanda? Yolanda? Where are you?" He waited a few moments for a response, not really expecting one, and then, once he was certain she wasn't around to hear, Scabbs yelled, "You scavving Escher. I hope you're up to your hips in ash and muties by now!"

If this had been the first time that one of his two bounty hunter partners had left him lying unconscious in a hole, Scabbs might have been even more upset, but it was a common enough occurrence when running around with Kal and Yolanda. He didn't really blame them. In the Underhive, the first rule is to look out for yourself. Everyone else is secondary. He tried not to feel too abandoned and concentrated on getting himself out of the tunnel. Then maybe he could go back to the Sump Hole and drink something to take care of his headache.

After a few minutes, he reached the top of the slope. He could see the dim warehouse above him as light from Hive City filtered through gaps in the walls and ceilings. The lip of the hole in the floor was at least ten feet over his head. He felt around on the wall of the hole, trying to find some handholds. What he found instead was a ladder.

A few seconds later, Scabbs sat on the floor at the back of the warehouse holding his throbbing head. He wondered if he should follow Yolanda, but wasn't sure if she had continued down the hole or not. Plus, she had the only light beam. His half-ratskin eyes were better than a human's in the dark, but not good enough for poking around in uncharted areas between domes. You never knew when you might come across a chasm caused by a hivequake.

Scabbs had just decided that the best course of action really was to head back to the Sump Hole for a drink when he heard someone scrambling up towards the ladder beneath him. Before he could call out for Yolanda, though, he heard a low-pitched grunt from below.

"Unnh," he heard. And then, "Helmawr's rump, I hate this part."

Now, Yolanda had a fairly husky voice, but this person was quite definitely male and, from the volume and resonance, Scabbs thought it was quite a large male. In fact, the voice sounded oddly familiar and gave him a sudden chill running up his back to the nape of his neck.

Scabbs then did what Scabbs did best — he hid. He scanned the warehouse for something he could duck behind, but it really had been abandoned. He couldn't see anything nearby except the walls and some poles that supported the roof. The corners were quite dark, though, and if whoever came out went straight for the door, he might have a chance huddled in the shadows.

As the intruder climbed the ladder, Scabbs tiptoed to the furthest corner and curled up in a ball, keeping his arm over his forehead to keep the light from reflecting off his eyes.

A large head surrounded by shoulder armour peeked up through the floor, just barely fitting through the hole. In the dim light, Scabbs could see something else encircling the head, but wasn't sure what it was. The next thing out of the hole was a massive arm that definitely did not look human.

Scabbs gulped down a gasp, suddenly aware that Underhive monsters often had excellent dark vision. But the next hand and arm out of the hole looked normal, man-sized. Scabbs wondered if it might be a spyrer, and now worried about photo-contacts. He put a hand on the butt of his laspistol, knowing full well it would be next to worthless against a spyrer.

The rest of the hulking figure exited the hole, and the terrible truth of who now had Scabbs quite literally cornered dawned on the little half-ratskin. “But you’re supposed to be dead,” said Scabbs to himself as he gazed in pure terror at Vandal Feg.

He must have moved or made a sound at the surprise of seeing Feg because the giant man with the mechanical arm who had sworn vengeance upon both Kal and Scabbs with what was supposed to be his dying breath turned and looked into the corner.

Scabbs closed his eyes and prayed to the ratskin ancestors, to the undying emperor and even to Kal Jerico.

By the time Wotan hit the street, he’d lost Bobo in the crowd, even though most of the people outside Madam Noritake’s rushed away from the mastiff when he crashed back through the door. Of course, from Wotan’s perspective, everyone looked tall, even the short spy in the plain, grey clothes.

The mastiff rarely relied on sight for tracking anyway. The air analyzers built into his torso had been state of the art when they’d been scavenged for his creation, and were still far better than just about anything in the hive. As nondescript as Bobo might be to the human eye, he couldn’t escape Wotan’s nose. The combination of cigar smoke, cheap perfume off that girl upstairs and a certain oily musk the analyzers couldn’t quite place made Bobo shine like a beacon of malodorous light.

Wotan padded off down the street, following Bobo’s heavy scent. People moved out of his way wherever he went, but the streets were so crowded that he was like a bubble of soap in the basin of grease that was Hive City. The pocket of space that opened in front of Wotan closed up behind him just as quickly.

He followed Bobo as the little spy meandered back and forth through Hive City. Even though the trail seemed haphazard to Wotan’s visual sensors, his altimeter detected a near-constant increase in altitude as Bobo led him through dome after dome. In fact, one tunnel connecting domes contained a spiralling, thirty-degree ramp curved around itself at least ten times before opening back up into the next dome. If the mastiff had been a flesh and blood dog, it would have been panting and huffing by the time Bobo came to a stop at an enormous wall.

The wall was so massive Wotan saw it several minutes before he finally noticed where Bobo had halted. The little man stood at the back of a large queue of people who all seemed to have some odd interest in the enormous wall ahead of them.

The giant wall reached up at least a hundred metres. As Wotan stared at the massive barrier, he discerned something interesting — it was a huge door. To each side, one metre-diameter hinges corkscrewed their way up the wall, running nearly to the top. Far above him, the outer edges of the doors curved towards each other, meeting in a triangle far up the side of the dome.

An intricate spiral pattern inlaid into both doors had grown dingy and encrusted with greasy dirt, grime, rust and worse effluvia over many centuries, but Wotan’s enhanced visual cortex could reconstruct most of the design. The symbols were meaningless to the mastiff’s memory core, though, so it simply stored the information away.

Of more interest were the ranks of guards on patrol, walking up and down the lines of people. He could discern no pattern to their movements or to those people they pulled out of line to subject to a wide array of dehumanizing procedures.

Most were allowed back in line, at the back of course, but some were hauled off to one of several buildings to the side of the huge wall. For as long as Wotan stood there, tongue hanging out while his mechanical canine brain attempted to sort out the procedure for getting through the doors, none of the people taken into the side buildings ever exited.

People who reached the front of each line handed over papers to another set of guards, who asked them questions, sometimes for many long minutes, while looking at the submitted papers. After a while, Wotan cocked his head and the servos in his face made a metallic eyelid raise slightly. None of the people at the front of the line ever got to go through the wall. Many of them wandered away from the great wall, but quite a few simply got into another line.

As Bobo neared the front of the line, Wotan moved forward, ready to spring into action should the door finally open. Bobo handed over a piece of paper, which the guard looked at for a few moments as he asked questions. Then he called over one of the other guards, who came and looked at the paper over the first guard's shoulder. That guard called another and soon, all of the lines had stopped moving as the guards took turns looking at Bobo's paper.

Wotan sat down, getting bored with the entire process. Somewhere deep down in his brain, he felt the urge to scratch his back, but there were no neural pathways for that particular command from his memory core to his legs, so he simply ignored the urge.

Then all of the lights in the plaza began to flash and sirens blared into life. Several guards surrounded Bobo and moved him away from the crowd, while the rest of the guards pulled out their weapons and formed a line between the wall and the queues. The line of guards pointed their weapons at the crowd and began moving forward, pushing them all back away from the wall.

The crowd tried to push back, but after several got shot and fell to the ground, the rest turned and ran. Wotan growled and barked as people ran past him, but for the moment they didn't seem terribly worried about the metal mastiff and his razor-sharp teeth.

Once the last of the crowd passed Wotan, he saw the wall had opened and that Bobo was walking through. Wotan stood and ran towards the open wall just as the blare of the siren changed pitch and the wall began to close. The guards had relaxed and let the barrels of their weapons drop slightly, but immediately brought their guns back up and aimed at Wotan.

Wotan stopped, but not because of the guns trained on him. No, this was something far worse. Deep down in his processors, another odd command had been activated. The neural pathways for this command had been connected, and the metal mastiff had no choice but to comply with the mental order.

The slightly higher pitch of the blaring siren as the wall closed had triggered the response and try as he might to fight the urge, Wotan found himself sitting down, raising his nose up to point at the top of the dome and howling.

Katerin stepped out onto the Hive City docks. One of the scummers had survived the assault, but just barely. His leg had been blown off by the captain's bolt launcher, and he wouldn't last the night. At first the scummer wouldn't talk. Katerin was amazed by the man's loyalty, but when he'd been reminded about what happened to injured creatures in the Ash Wastes at night, the scummer had been more than happy to tell Katerin everything he knew in exchange for a quick, clean death before the spiders came.

And so they had piled back into the transport and headed for the Hive City docks, chasing after some one-armed mercenary named Vandal Feg, who the dying scummer said had taken the satchel and run off before their first pass over the battlefield.

Katerin had decided to keep his spyer rig on. It was a calculated risk, he knew. Hive City residents didn't take kindly to Spire nobles rampaging through their streets in rigs. That type of thing might be fine in the lawless Underhive, but in the City there were rules, and one rule was that they all hated anyone from the Spire interfering in their daily lives.

But that was exactly why Katerin had decided to wear the rig. It would cut through the lengthy process of complaints and protests he expected from the Hive City officials. There would be hell to pay later, but that wouldn't be his problem.

Behind him, the royal guard hustled off the transport and began spreading out onto the docks in groups of three. "Slam and sweep," he called. "Break open every locked door; check every corner. No lethal force unless absolutely necessary, but nobody leaves these docks unless I say so."

An official-looking man with a clipboard and wire-rimmed glasses sitting on top of his bald head rushed over towards Katerin. "What in the hive is the meaning of this?" he asked.

Katerin held up one, armoured finger, almost poking the man in the cheek, and glared for a moment before turning back to his troops. "Mageson, give me an aerial view. Stein, guard the

entrance. Nothing gets past you. Understand? Use any means necessary to keep this dock locked down.”

The bald dock official sputtered and fumed. Keeping his finger poised in front of the man’s eyes, Katerin slowly turned to look at him. The man’s face had turned bright red from his neck to the top of his head, but Katerin wasn’t about to let the man go on the offensive.

“What is your name?” demanded Katerin.

The sputtering turned into an open-mouthed exclamation of surprise. “Bwah...” he started, before regaining his composure. “I am Remor Donne, comptroller of the Hive City docks. You can’t...”

“Excellent,” said Katerin. He turned and walked a few metres away. “Just the man I need.” He looked back at Donne and waved him over. He waved his hands at the docks, which his troops were already busy searching. “I am Aldous Katerin, captain of the royal guard... Lord Helmawr’s royal guard. My troops are here to search for a fugitive. I expect your full cooperation in this matter.”

The controller raised his own finger and opened his mouth to protest, but Katerin took that moment to drape his heavily armoured arm around Donne’s shoulders. He let just enough of the weight of the rig rest on the man to exert pressure throughout his entire body. He smiled at Donne as he cocked the bolt launcher, which was right next to the man’s ear, to load an explosive bolt into the firing chamber.

“You can’t do this,” said Donne, his voice hardly trembling at all.

Katerin was actually quite impressed when Donne finished his thought, and with much more authority in his voice than most people could muster with a loaded bolt launcher so close to their head.

“I just did,” said Katerin. “Consider the docks under martial law until further notice. You can either help this process end quickly or you can spend the next few days explaining to Herr Kauderer why you hindered this operation.”

Kal snuck out of Cait’s office just as a freakishly tall man with an angular face and a long, sharp nose opened the door adjoining Valtin’s office. Now Kal remembered the hawkish man. He’d been in the room during Kal’s meeting with old Helmawr during his last visit to the Helmawr estate. Some other high-ranking official in his father’s inner circle. He hadn’t said anything during the meeting, but it was obvious to Kal that he normally dominated any room he entered.

Kal bumped into the door frame as he looked back at the hawkish man. The man’s eyes immediately darted towards the door as he stood stock still. He searched the area and Kal was certain that he’d see the shimmering air surrounding him. He tried to slip around the door frame as silently as possible.

“Who’s there?” said the hawk. “Guards!” he called. “Guards!”

As usual, luck was with Kal Jerico, for at that moment, a woman screamed. This wasn’t a “Sweet Emperor, there’s a rat in the room,” scream. This blood-curdling howl continued like the wail of a siren, completely drowning out the hawk’s call for aid.

The scream echoed through the halls, but as it continued, Kal could tell it was getting closer. Then, from around a corner down the hall came Cait, running and flailing her arms, and screaming like she’d been stabbed in the gut — a sound Kal had heard all too often in his life; had even made on more than one occasion.

Cait had no blood on her that Kal could see. She moved much too quickly for someone with a stomach wound. The hawk ran out into the hall, quickly followed by Valtin. Kal backed away from the scene before the hawk remembered the shimmering air and turned to look for him.

As he turned the corner, he heard Cait scream. “She’s dead... Someone... I don’t know who, but she’s dead. There’s blood everywhere!” and then the crying started.

Kal thanked his luck and jogged off in the opposite direction. As he ran, Kal wondered what he should do next. He couldn't trust anyone up here, not even Valtin it seemed. He was all alone and someone wanted him dead. Well, okay, that made it a normal day, but he was out of his element in the Spire. He had no idea where to start looking for answers.

At the very least, he needed a safe haven where he could hole up and think things through. Normally, he'd retreat to the Sump Hole; his office of sorts. He'd sit, have a few wildsnakes and wait for an idea to hit him — or some barmaid's brother — whichever came first. But here in the Spire he had no refuge, no office.

Then it came to him. The last time his father had screwed up his life, they'd taken him to a private chamber where the crazy, old recluse had holed up; Helmawr's private office. With the old man dead, and Kal next in line, the office belonged to him now, didn't it? And it had the added bonus of being secluded and a secret to all but Helmawr's most senior advisors. It was the perfect place for Kal to catch his breath and figure out his next move. Now, if he only had some idea how to get to that secret room.

Kal stopped and tried to get his bearings. The estate was like a maze and he'd never been very good at directions; that's what Scabbs was for. "Damn," he said. "I could really use that son of a ratskin right now."

Scabbs pulled his knees into his chest, trying to get just a little smaller as he hid in the dark. Feg stared into the corner for a moment, but then continued to scan the room. Maybe he hadn't seen him.

"I know you're in here somewhere," said Feg. "Come out so I can kill you quickly and quietly. Otherwise it's going to hurt. A lot."

Scabbs began to shake from head to toe, which sent a cloud of dead skin into the air around him. Before he realized it, he breathed some of the skin flakes into his nose, and sneezed.

Feg whirled around, snapping his mechanical arm out to the side, and activated his chainsword. A thousand tiny blades began spinning along the length of the sword as he moved towards the corner. "Okay," he snarled. "You asked for it. Here comes the pain!"

Scabbs aimed his laspistol at the hulking monstrosity coming towards him, but knew that no matter how many shots he got off, it would do little but make Feg even madder. He squeezed the trigger anyway, hoping beyond hope that some of Kal's luck might have finally rubbed off on poor old Scabbs.

He aimed for the eyes. It seemed the most reasonable thing to do. But his hands were shaking so hard that the las blast shot well over Feg's head, blasting a hole in the thin metal roof.

"Ha ha," said Feg, and Scabbs could see the glee in his eyes. "There you are, you little rodent."

Scabbs wasn't sure if Feg had seen his face in the flash of light from the las blast or just assumed anyone hiding in a dark corner was likely to be a rodent. It didn't matter. He needed to move. As Feg advanced, Scabbs darted forward.

Feg must have heard him, because the huge chainsword sliced down in a long arc. Scabbs got inside the reach of the weapon just in time and continued on, scrambling on hands and feet right through Feg's legs.

He got out the other side, but behind him the huge bruiser had turned and swung his screaming chainsword down towards the ground again. Scabbs darted to the side, but the sword caught him in the foot, leaving a long gash below his ankle.

He screamed and rolled to the ground, slamming up against the back wall. As Scabbs lay there, writhing in pain, Feg advanced, raising his chainsword up high for the final strike. Scabbs closed his eyes and muttered a silent curse at Kal and Yolanda.

Feg smiled, his face lit by a beam of light coming through the hole Scabbs had shot through the roof. Before he could strike again, the door behind Feg exploded. Plasteel shrapnel pelted the room as three royal guards entered. They levelled their weapons at Feg. "You're coming with us," said one of them.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” said Feg. “You’re the ones going straight to the sump.” He rushed at the guards, revving his chainsword as he ran.

Scabbs thanked his lucky, Kal Jerico, stars and crawled over to the hole. Before dropping out of sight, he glanced back at the fight. One royal was already down and the other two were backing towards the door. Scabbs slipped over the edge, going head first into the hole. He tucked and rolled down the slope, hitting his head on something hard and sharp as he barrelled down the tunnel. As he came to a stop, his foot and his head screamed in pain, but at least he wasn’t dead.

Quite some time later, Kal found a familiar set of stairs and headed down. He felt he was finally getting close and was fairly certain he wouldn’t find himself going past Valtin’s office a fourth time. At the bottom of the stairs was a curving corridor with no windows. As he moved down the hall, he could tell he was winding around some large central space.

A moment later the door came into view. He knew it was the right door by the two guards standing at attention outside. The door was closed, so Kal couldn’t just slip past the guards cloaked in his shimmering, light-bending field. Technically, they were his guards, so he didn’t think killing them was a good idea, either.

Then he had a thought. He snuck up next to the near guard. He got so close he could see the wax built up inside the guard’s ear. It was actually pretty disgusting and Kal considered reporting the guard to his superiors, but he had something much more fun in mind.

Reaching carefully around behind the guard, Kal poised his hand just above the hilt of the man’s service sword. Then, with one quick movement, he shoved the pommel down, forcing the sheath up and over, smacking the other guard in the leg.

“Ow,” said the injured guard. “What’d you do that for?”

Kal slipped back away from the guard.

“Do what?” asked the first guard.

“Don’t give me that,” said the second guard. “You just hit me with your sword.”

Kal moved around behind the second guard, who had turned to face the first guard.

“I did no such thing,” said the first guard. “You must have dreamt it.”

“You saying I was asleep on duty?” asked the second guard.

Kal got ready.

“Wouldn’t have been the first time.”

“Why you…”

Kal shoved the second guard in the back. The guard lurched forward, throwing his arms up defensively, and ended up hitting the first guard in the nose as he fell on top of him. As the first guard went down, he brought his knee up into the groin of the second.

In a moment, they were both on the floor, rolling over each other trying to get one another into a head lock or scissor their legs around the other’s torso. One landed a nasty punch to the midriff of the other, and Kal heard a loud crack as one guard’s head smacked into the floor.

“That was too easy,” mumbled Kal as he stepped past the now bruised and bloodied guards and opened the door. “I need better guards if I’m going to stay here much longer,” he added after entering the darkened chamber beyond.

Kal didn’t know what to expect when he got into Helmawr’s private office. If he was lucky, the old man’s desk would still be sitting at the far end of the chamber with a comfy chair, and, perhaps, a bottle of the Spire’s finest liquor stashed away in the bottom drawer. More than likely, all he would find inside was Valtin waiting for him. His nephew had an annoying habit of showing up unannounced.

What he didn’t expect — never even dreamt of, or would have ever guessed — was that he would find the body of Lord Helmawr lying on a bed. There, in the back of the room where the old man’s desk once stood in that single pool of light, now sat a large bed bathed in white light holding



the unmistakable figure of old Gerontius Helmawr, lying with his arms folded over his chest as if placed there to lie in state.

Except this was no audience chamber. It was a secret room that only the most senior members of House Helmawr even knew existed. As Kal walked towards the bed, he noticed something else odd about this situation. There were tubes connected to the body that led to upturned bottles hanging on pegs behind the bed.

There was also what looked like a medi-pack attached to the pale, sunken chest by a series of wires. This was like no medi-pack Kal had ever seen. It had a pict screen with little squiggly lines and numbers that flashed from side to side, and it beeped periodically.

Kal began to get an odd feeling in his gut. There was something not quite right here. It wasn't just that they'd placed Lord Helmawr's body in this secret room connected to a bunch of weird machines. Kal stuck the fingers of one hand under Helmawr's nose and felt the slightest breeze rustle his skin.

"He's alive," said Kal. "What the scav?"

"I suppose you have some questions for me," said Valtin from behind Kal.

After wrapping up his wounded foot with a dirty strip of cloth from his shirt, Scabbs had made his way down the tunnel. As he suspected, it was full of twists and turns and dead ends and sheer drop offs. Within the hive, the areas between the domes were notorious for these kinds of secret pathways, lying hidden from most, yet allowing those who knew of them to move undetected from place to place.

They were also notorious for killing more people than ever got through to the other side. Hive quakes would render a path useless or worse, leave a deathtrap in its wake. Too often, wars between gangs would be fought over which gang had the right to control the tunnel. Some thought that most hive quakes were actually started by errant frag grenades set off within these enclosed and unstable areas of the hive.

Eventually, Scabbs saw some light coming from the tunnel ahead of him. As he got closer, the light got almost unbearable to his sensitive eyes. As he turned one last corner, he saw it — a large hole with nothing beyond it but white ash and whiter light.

"I made it," said Scabbs as he limped down to the exit.

"About scavving time," said Yolanda, who stepped into the tunnel just as he reached its end. Scabbs was too tired and too sore to even rise to the bait. Instead, he decided it seemed like a good time for a rest. He put his back against the wall of the tunnel and started to slide down to the ground.

"Don't bother sitting," said Yolanda. She kicked him in the thigh. "We're heading back up to the docks." She pointed at the tunnel exit. "It opened onto the ash wastes, a place no hiver would go... at least not without a gun to his head or the promise of a huge score when, or if, he returned. There's nothing out there but an abandoned transport and a scavving lot of bodies."

"But..." said Scabbs. He slid a little further down the wall, only to get another kick in his thigh.

"No," said Yolanda. "Come on. Whatever was in that transport is already gone. The only thing left was an empty safe that something ripped open. I don't know how they did it. I couldn't even lift the door, which I found embedded in the floor across the chamber."

"Feg," said Scabbs and he slipped the rest of the way to the ground.

Yolanda was obviously too surprised to remember to kick Scabbs. "What?" she asked.

"Vandal Feg has it," said Scabbs. "Whatever was in that safe, Feg ripped it open with his big, metal hand and now he's in the hive with it."

"But Feg is dead," she said. "You said you saw it yourself. Vandal Feg is dead... right?"

The sirens blared as the wall closed. Wotan could do nothing but howl and howl. The pitches of the two sounds combined into an awful, disharmonious wail that apparently human hearing couldn't

handle very well. The guards, who had all trained their weapons on the metal mastiff, now dropped to their knees around him, holding their hands against the sides of their heads.

For several, long minutes, nothing in the plaza moved. Wotan, transfixed by the hard-wiring of his mechanical canine brain, could not stop howling, and the guards, incapacitated by the power of sound waves, fell over and twitched as spasms wracked their bodies.

Then, the automatic systems that had triggered the sirens in the first place, switched off as the wall finally closed with a thundering clang that echoed throughout the dome. With the wailing of the sirens gone, Wotan's actions returned to his own control. The same couldn't be said for the guards, who continued to twitch on the ground.

Wotan licked the nearest guard on the cheek and panted for a few seconds before turning and padding off out of the plaza, leaving the incapacitated guards lying on the ground. He didn't have time for them anymore. He needed to find another way to the other side of that wall.

Feg desperately wanted to chase Kal Jerico's half-ratskin comrade through the maze of tunnels. He knew that wherever Scabbs was, Kal was certain to be nearby, and he owed them both a great deal of pain.

However, the royals had somehow beaten him to the docks and it wouldn't be long before someone checked in with the three guards he'd killed. He dumped their bodies down the hole and, after a short detour, slipped out of the warehouse.

The docks swarmed with security. They were methodically moving through the entire area, breaking open doors and searching every warehouse and docked ship. Luckily, they weren't being quiet about it, so Feg could stay ahead of them. He didn't want to risk another fight out in the open; that would surely draw too much attention.

He had one chance. The old smuggler's tunnel wasn't the only secret passage connected to the docks. It was far too important a place to have just the single passage. He knew of another one that would get him off the docks and even out of Hive City. The only problem was that he had to get to the rooftops to use it.

Feg made his way to the side of the dome and waited for the nearby troops to clomp away from him. He then used the claws of his mechanical arm to carve out hand holds in the masonry and pulled himself up onto the roof of the closest warehouse. Staying as low as possible while still keeping an eye on the troops below, Feg crossed the roof and jumped to the next.

The passage was close. Just two more jumps and he was there. He made the first no problem, but as he landed on the last roof, a laser beam lanced the wall next to him. He looked around trying to figure out where the shot had come from. Another shot tore into his knee and he jumped to the side.

He'd seen the direction of that last one and looked up, finding a young noble in a Yeld spyer rig swooping towards him. "Damn," said Feg. He had no ammo left, so unless she came within range of his chainsword, Feg was defenceless. His only choice was to make a ran for it. He dashed off across the roof, zig-zagging as best he could with his wounded knee.

Lasers tore into the roof on either side of him but Feg was almost to the hatch. He had no time to work the secret latch, so he switched on his chainsword and slashed twice across the huge air duct that ran up the wall towards a giant fan. He crashed through the criss-crossed metal barrier as two more shots from the laser etched the wall to either side.

Feg immediately fell about ten feet, but he'd expected that and hit the bottom on his good leg and continued running, not even bothering to look back.

A short while later, as Feg jogged down the tunnel, wincing with every step, and expecting at any moment to hear his pursuers behind him, he instead saw two forms standing in front of him.

They were a pair of Orlock gangers, twins named Brynn and Riyl in matching outfits. They wore dark, leather vests over red and blue shirts with matching bandanas wrapped around their shaved heads. Dark sunglasses, which seemed an odd choice in the dimly-lit tunnel, and long, black coats, had been donned to make some sort of statement about their cold-blooded nature.

Unfortunately, once they opened their mouths, the twin Orlocks gave away any advantage their slick clothes provided.

“Halt,” said one. “This is Mr. Nemo’s secret passage.”

“Hey,” said the other. “It was my turn to say that.”

The first figure punched the second figure. “Nuh uh! You did it last time.” To which the second figure’s response was a swift kick to the shin of the first.

Feg was pretty certain he could hear the sound of footsteps echoing through the tunnel behind him. He could simply kill these two and continue running, but he had finally recognized them and knew a quicker way to deal with the situation.

“Okay, Seek and Destroy,” he said. “You got me. You’d better take me to see Nemo, and I mean right now.”

Bobo showed his invitation to the guards at the gate to the royal estate and was quite surprised to be immediately escorted through and into the palace. He was beginning to think that he probably should have dressed for the occasion. He kind of figured he’d have a little time before the wedding to get ready.

“Am I late?” he asked the guard walking with him through the palace. He glanced out a window and caught his breath at the sudden realization that he was near the top of the hive, in the very pinnacle of the Spire. Outside the window was not more dull-grey metal or another dingy passageway. Outside this window there was nothing but sky.

“No,” replied the guard. “I believe you are right on time. Minister Kauderer is expecting you in his office. We should be there in just a moment.”

“Minister Kauderer?” asked Bobo, more to himself than to the guard.

“Yes,” said the guard. “He instructed us to bring you to his office as soon as you arrived.”

Bobo smiled. Now it all made sense. Kauderer had some job for him but for some reason couldn’t risk using their normal contact protocols. Thus the ruse of the Kal Jerico wedding invitation. Kauderer knew that Bobo couldn’t resist that invitation, even though it was too preposterous to be true.

“Guess I won’t be needing a suit for the wedding, then,” said Bobo, almost laughing at the thought of Kal Jerico getting married and ruling the hive.

“Oh no,” said the guard. “Not yet, anyway. The wedding isn’t for several more days.”

He stopped in front of Bobo, which was good because Bobo had already stopped walking, his mouth hanging open.

“Here we are, sir,” said the guard. He opened the door, ushered the flabbergasted Bobo inside, and then shut the door behind him.

“Ah, Bobo,” said Kauderer from across the room. “Come here for a moment. I have something important to show you.”

Bobo shook off the surprise that the wedding was indeed real, and walked over to see what his Spire boss had for him. It was a body. A dead Delaque, from the look of the armour, although her equipment seemed to be a step or two above what he normally saw in Hive City or the Underhive.

“Am I supposed to know her?” asked Bobo.

“I doubt it,” said Kauderer. “She’s strictly a Spire operative, an assassin actually.”

Bobo smiled. “Looks like she killed the wrong person.”

Kauderer’s glare made him instantly regret the statement. A long pause followed and Kauderer’s searching eyes made Bobo feel like a bug caught in the web of a sump spider.

“What did you want of me, sir?” said Bobo at last, trying to get the conversation back on track and get himself out from under the hawkish eye of Hermod Kauderer.

“This woman’s job was to assassinate the hive’s ruler,” said Kauderer. “She failed, obviously. I want you to take her place.”

“You want me to do what?” asked Bobo.

Kauderer flipped a lever on the wall and watched as the body slid off the table down into a chute that opened in the floor. A moment later, smoke and a few cinders floated up into the room. He turned and stared down his nose at Bobo again. “I want you to assassinate Kal Jerico.”

Seek and Destroy, two of Nemo’s henchmen — and not his best, obviously — had argued all the way back to Nemo’s hideout. They hadn’t even bothered to blindfold Feg before leading him into the master spy’s secret lair. Not that it mattered much. Feg knew the way. He and Nemo went way back.

The twins pushed against one another as they both tried to fit through the doorway into Nemo’s office at the same time. One started calling and then the other joined in: “Mr. Nemo. Mr. Nemo,” they cried. “I caught someone in your special tunnel...”

“No, I caught him. You weren’t even there...”

The twin Orlocks grabbed each other by the lapels of their leather coats and screamed at each other.

“Yes I was...”

“No you weren’t...”

Before their argument devolved into a brawl, again, Feg pushed his way past them and strode into Nemo’s office.

As usual, the master spy sat in a well-padded chair surrounded by a dozen or more pict-screens. His black helmet, which constantly reflected the images on his screens, was hooked by wires into the wall behind him. What those wires brought to the master spy, Feg had never dared ask. Perhaps messages from informants. Maybe data that he somehow routed directly into his brain, or some sort of medication or mind-altering drugs, although Feg doubted the latter. Nemo was far too serious to let his mind be altered in any way.

“Ah, Mr. Feg,” said Nemo. “It is good to see you again. My sources said you were dead. But after I heard about the job today, I knew you were alive. Do you have the item in question?”

Feg smiled. “I’m not that stupid,” he said. “It’s somewhere safe. Now, let’s talk about what we can do for each other.”

## CHAPTER FIVE: THREATS FIND BARGAINS

Kal pulled back from the unconscious body of Gerontius Helmawr and turned around. Valtin stood just inside the pool of light, staring at him with an odd look on his face, somewhere between a smirk and a sheepish grin. He'd been caught lying — again — but obviously knew that Kal wouldn't kill him; at least not until he learned the truth.

Kal's first question had nothing to do with Helmawr or the assassin who tried to kill him earlier. "How did you know I was here? How can you see me?"

"The answer to your first question is obvious," said Valtin. "After you disappeared, I thought, where is the one place I didn't want you to go. And, as usual, Kal Jerico did exactly what he wasn't supposed to do."

Kal raised his finger to interrupt, but Valtin waved him off. That's when Kal noticed that his hand wasn't invisible anymore. Valtin held up his own hand, showing a small black box with an antenna at the top.

"It sends out a pulse that disrupts electro-magnetic fields," he said, turning the gizmo over and over in his hand. "Handy in the spy business. When Cait showed us the dead Delaque assassin and Kauderer mentioned the shimmer he'd seen in the office, we figured out what had happened."

Kal hadn't really listened past the first sentence. "You broke my holo projector?" he screamed.

Valtin shrugged. "Sorry, I can't afford to have the heir to the Helmawr throne sneaking around the palace unprotected."

Kal pulled the holo-projector from his pocket and tossed it on the ground. "Just unprotected, right?" he said. "That's what this whole charade is all about."

The sheepish smirk returned to Valtin's face. "I would have told you all of this up front," he said. "But it was decided you couldn't be trusted with the information."

"Well, you're going to tell me now," said Kal. Before Valtin could even respond, Kal whipped out his pearl-handled laspistols and held them at arm's length to either side of his body. One he aimed directly at Valtin's head, the other he brought down slowly until it rested on the gaunt, pale face of Lord Gerontius Helmawr.

"All of it, nephew," added Kal. "And if I even think you're holding anything back, I commit patricide and then, um, nephewcide."

Valtin held his hands up in front of him. "Okay. Okay," he said. "There was an assassination attempt on Lord Helmawr and it almost succeeded. He was injected with some sort of neuro-toxin. We don't know how it happened, but I would guess now that it was that same Delaque agent. But even with the holo-projector, she must have had help from the inside to get past all of our security."

"Everyone has a price," said Kal.

Valtin nodded. "Exactly. Anyway, we rushed him to his doctors, but there was nothing they could do for him. The toxin had already begun shutting down messages from his brain to all of his vital organs. But we do have the most advanced medical tools on all of Necromunda at our disposal. These machines are the only thing keeping him alive. They breathe for him and pump his blood and everything else a body needs to sustain life."

"Doesn't sound like living to me," said Kal. "Sounds like I would be doing old dad a favour if I finished the job right now."

Valtin stepped forward and reached out towards Kal.

“No,” he said.

Kal snapped the laspistol in his hand and motioned for Valtin to stop.

“There is medicine that can reverse the effect of the toxin,” said Valtin. The concern on his face was evident and Kal began to believe his nephew was truly telling him everything this time.

“We had the medication shipped in from an off-world supplier, but somehow our enemies found out about it. They shot down the transport and stole the medicine. It’s now lost in the hive. Just before coming in here, I got a communiqué from Captain Katerin. They had the thief cornered in the Hive City docks, but he got away through some hidden passage.”

“So let me see if I have all this straight,” said Kal. “Dad’s not dead and you have medicine that can save him. Only you’ve lost the medicine, which is by now somewhere deep in the Underhive. I was brought up here to be your lightning rod to flush out the assassins because you had no leads. Oh, and I’m not really going to be the master of House Helmawr and there is no wedding. That about sum it up?”

Valtin nodded. “I wanted to tell you all of this as soon as you got here, but I was convinced that it would be too much of a security risk.”

“And I’m guessing it was old hawk-face who convinced you of that, right?”

“Kauderer?” asked Valtin and then the smirk returned. “Yes, although we don’t call him that to his face.”

“Well, in that case,” said Kal as he lowered and bolstered his weapons, “I guess I’ll be leaving now.”

Valtin raised his hands again. “No,” he said. “Wait! We still need you, uncle. You killed the assassin. Now we don’t have any leads. There really is a wedding, and we think that now that their assassin is dead, whoever wants to destabilize House Helmawr will try to stop the wedding. It may be our only chance to find out who’s behind all of this.”

Kal shook his head. “I’m nobody’s target,” he said. “All of the money in dear old dad’s coffers wouldn’t make me stay up here unprotected.”

“But Kal,” pleaded Valtin, “When I said earlier that you were the only person I could trust, I meant it. I need your help with this. I’m trying to hold the house together, but now that the medicine is gone it’s likely Gerontius will die. Believe me, there will be a civil war over succession that will rip this house apart.”

“I don’t care,” said Kal. “It’s all Spire politics and it has nothing to do with me.”

“You don’t think this will affect your world?” asked Valtin. “What do you suppose happens to the economy of Hive City if the Spire destabilizes? By the time the political war is over up here, the Underhive will extend all the way to the great Spiral Gates.”

Kal thought it over. He had to admit his nephew had a point. It was always the lowest level of society that paid for the problems of the elite. Besides if the Hive economy collapsed, who would pay for Kal’s services? But dammit, why did it always have to be his job to clean up the family’s business.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do, nephew,” said Kal. “I’ll find that medicine for you then you call off this damned wedding and we all get back to normal.”

Valtin thought about it and then nodded. “Okay,” he said. “We’ll smuggle you out so nobody knows you’re gone. But I must continue to prepare for the wedding just in case you fail. The doctors tell me that Gerontius can’t last on those machines for more than a week, and it’s already been four days. You’ve got three days to find the medicine or we have to go through with the wedding. I won’t let House Helmawr perish, even if that means putting Kal Jerico on the throne.”

“You want me to kill Kal Jerico?” asked Bobo. He looked for a place to sit, but the only spot seemed to be the low table that had just tipped the Delaque’s body into the incinerator. He decided to stand.

Kauderer used a towel to wipe down the table and dropped the rag into the incinerator chute. Then he walked back towards his desk, flipping the lever that shut the incinerator door along the way. Only after he had taken a seat did he look back up at Bobo and respond.

“We work in a difficult business,” he said. “It is often necessary to perform the unpleasant tasks that no one else is willing to do.”

“But Kal is my: not so much my friend,” said Bobo, “but he’s a kindred spirit. We understand one another; respect each other.”

“Are you telling me that if ordered to kill Kal Jerico, you would refuse?”

Bobo’s professionalism jostled with his emotion for just a brief moment before the personal detachment he’d trained long and hard to turn into a reflex kicked in. “No sir,” he said. “I will do whatever is necessary for the good of House Helmawr. You know you can count on me.”

“Good,” said Kauderer. “Bobo wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw a smile for a brief moment cross Kauderer’s stern features. That’s what I wanted to hear.”

“So, how is it to be accomplished?” asked Bobo. “I assume you chose me because I can get close to Kal without arousing suspicion.”

Kauderer sighed. “As much as it pains me to say this,” he said, staring at his desk as if the words truly gave him physical discomfort, “I do not actually want you to kill Kal Jerico.”

Bobo forgot himself and sat down on the low table. “I don’t understand.”

“Someone sent an assassin to kill Lord Helmawr,” said Kauderer. He pointed at the table. “That assassin. Now it seems the new target is our future ruler, Kal Jerico.”

Bobo detected just the slightest hesitation in Kauderer’s voice before saying Kal’s name. He knew better than to ask the unanswered question about the first assassination attempt.

“It seems that Kal Jerico is much tougher to kill than he looks. Not only did he survive his encounter with the assassin, he made sure I couldn’t get any information out of her.”

He looked up at Bobo again. “That’s where you come in,” he said. “I chose you because you are unknown up here in the Spire. You’ve spent your entire career below the wall. And you’ve proven your loyalty to this house.”

“So, what is it you want me to do?” asked Bobo. “How can I help you?”

“Your mission is to root out whoever is behind these attacks,” said Kauderer. “I have established an alias for you. Once you leave here, you will become, to all eyes in the Spire, an off-world assassin trying to establish new business in Hive Primus.”

Bobo pointed at the floor. “You’re hoping whoever hired her will come to me once they realize she’s failed?”

Kauderer nodded. “Once we are done here, you will be smuggled off the estate to an apartment. Information about your new identity as well as a new wardrobe will be waiting for you there, along with a list of possible suspects and their regular haunts.”

“Do I make contact or let them come to me?”

“I will leave that up to your discretion,” said Kauderer. “The word of your arrival should be out by now, and I will leak news of the death of the assassin as soon as you are in place.”

Bobo nodded and stood up.

“However,” said Kauderer. “You only have three days. After that Kal Jerico may well be the master of House Helmawr, and Emperor help us all if that happens.”

Scabbs sat with his back up against the wall at the end of the old smuggler tunnel and described his aborted battle with Vandal Feg for Yolanda. He only embellished a little about his role in his own escape.

“You sure you only saw three guards?” asked Yolanda.

Scabbs nodded. “And Feg cut one in half right before I jumped down the hole. The others looked like they were about to run. Why?”

“Because my guess is that there are a lot more on the docks than those three,” she said. “Sonny was right. They did bring down a royal transport, but that’s not all. The troops on the first transport are all dead, along with dozens of muties.”

“First transport?” asked Scabbs. “There were others?”

Yolanda nodded. She turned to look out over the Ash Wastes, still visible beyond the tunnel entrance some distance away. “At least one more landed and the troops in that ship laid waste to a couple of hundred muties and a group of scummers without losing a single man.”

“Maybe the muties and the scummers killed each other,” said Scabbs. “Can we go home now?” His foot ached and he really just wanted to get back to the Sump Hole and not worry about muties, scummers, packages of spire tech or especially Vandal Feg.

“No, most of the scummers were killed by explosions and I saw shell casings from a bolt launcher. It was the second transport and they had some heavy firepower with them. Whatever Feg has is valuable, really valuable to the right people.”

“And to the wrong people, it’s lethal,” said Scabbs. He unwrapped his bandage and looked at the gash in his foot. It had started to heal okay. He picked at the scab a little as he talked. “I mean we have to fight either Feg or these royals to get the stupid package, and given a choice between Vandal Feg and a unit of royal troops, I pick a bottle of wildsnake in the Sump Hole.”

Yolanda turned and glared at Scabbs. As the silence grew around him, he looked up at her and withered under her gaze. “What we need,” she said, “is our own shock troops.”

“The Wildcats?” said Scabbs. “You sure you want to drag them into this? I mean they’ve stopped trying to kill you now. Do you really want to get a bunch of them killed again? That just makes them mad.”

“This could be the biggest score of our lives, Scabbs,” said Yolanda. “Just think about it, we get this piece of tech and sell it back to whoever it is wants it so badly, and then we never have to go bounty hunting with stupid Jerico ever again.”

“But I like Kal,” said Scabbs. He pulled at the scab on his foot a little too hard and blood started running down towards his toes again. He hastily wrapped it back up. “And I like living even more. This sounds like suicide. Besides, what if the uphivers from that second transport already have it?”

Yolanda yanked the half-ratskin off the ground, easily lifting him into the air before dropping him back onto his feet. “Only one way to find out,” she said. “Come on.”

She half-pulled, half-dragged Scabbs along behind her as she began climbing back up through the smuggler’s tunnel towards the Hive City docks.

\* \* \*

When Scabbs and Yolanda got to the top of the tunnel, they found the bodies of the three dead royal troops that Feg had obviously dropped down the hole.

“Well, I guess we know Feg survived this battle, anyway,” said Yolanda. She stepped on the bodies as she reached for the ladder, then she heard voices from above.

“In here, captain,” said the first voice. “A trail of blood leads right into the warehouse.”

“Stein, get more troops and investigate,” said the second voice, presumably the captain. “I don’t want any more deaths today. Mageson and I are heading into the secret passage that behemoth escaped through.”

“Yes, captain,” said Stein.

Yolanda heard the door to the warehouse open and the unmistakable sound of a spyrer rig clomping across the floor above her.



“Oh scav,” she muttered. She turned to Scabbs and motioned for him to follow.

As they tramped back down the tunnel, Yolanda kept looking over her shoulder. Once she felt they were out of earshot, she said, “Just what we needed, a trigger-happy noble in a spyer rig finding us standing over his dead men.”

Scabbs limped along beside her, grunting with each step. “How do you know he was trigger happy?”

“They all are.”

They continued on for a little while before Yolanda spoke again. “At least we know Feg escaped with that Spire tech.”

“Yippee,” said Scabbs.

Yolanda ignored him. Sure, it would be tough. They had to find Feg and somehow get the item from him without getting killed. Then they had to find a way to sell the item back to its owners without getting killed. It would all be worth it if it meant she never had to follow Kal Jerico’s orders ever again.

Something began to gnaw at the back of Yolanda’s mind as they got closer to the bottom of the tunnel again. Then it hit her. “Hey Scabbs,” she said. “Do you know about another secret tunnel leading out of the docks?”

Scabbs grunted and then said, “No, but there’s probably several. It’s got to be a hot target for smugglers and such.”

“Sure,” said Yolanda. “But the enforcers sweep the docks pretty regularly. I remember them shutting down a couple of back entrances recently. How did they miss both the one we’re in and the one Feg used to escape, and how did Feg know about them?”

They had reached the Ash Wastes again and Yolanda turned towards Scabbs. He shrugged and said, “I dunno. I guess they were paid off. I mean this one wasn’t hard to miss. We fell right into it.”

“Right,” said Yolanda. “That’s the only explanation. But who can pay off so many enforcers, and keep them paid off.”

The sudden realization hit them both harder than the wave of heat from the Ash Wastes. “Nemo,” they said together.

They looked at each other for a moment, and then Yolanda left the tunnel and turned to walk along the edge of the hive. “Come on,” she said. “I know another way back in.”

“Where are we going?” asked Scabbs.

She stopped and turned to look at Scabbs. “You remember when Crimson chased us out of the hive a few years back?” she asked. “Those tunnels aren’t too far from here. Then we can head to the Sump Hole to forget about this whole mess.”

“What? Why?”

“Vandal Feg is one thing,” said Yolanda. “But you know my feelings about Nemo. There is nothing in this world worth going up against him for.”

They shuffled down the tunnel in silence. “You know,” said Scabbs. “We should have seen it earlier. Vandal Feg isn’t smart enough to pull this off himself. He must have been working for Nemo the whole time.”

“I don’t work for you anymore, Nemo,” said Vandal Feg.

Nemo stared at the giant mercenary through his reflective, black mask and smiled, secure in the knowledge that his smile could not be seen. “Everyone works for me,” he said, “whether they know it or not.”

He looked at Seek and Destroy, his loyal and ruthless henchmen who, unfortunately, spent as much time fighting each other as doing their job. They were currently playing “punch the shoulder” while guarding the door. At least they’d stopped arguing.

“Well, this is my job, this time, Nemo,” said Feg, “not yours. Now, I’m willing to cut you in on the action if you help me. You see, I want you to work for me.”

Nemo decided to humour Feg for the moment. “And what would be my role in this little venture?” he asked. As Feg spoke, Nemo flipped a few switches on one of his consoles. Several views of the Hive City docks sprang to life on his screens.

“All I require is transport into the Spire,” said Feg. “I was supposed to meet up with a contact in the docks, but I guess you already know what’s going on there.”

“Yes,” said Nemo. “Yes, I do. Bit of a botched job, don’t you think?” One view showed two nobles in spyer rigs entering the secret entrance that Feg had sliced open. He switched to a different pict-camera that showed the interior of the tunnel.

“There’s no way those royals should have beaten me back to the docks,” said Feg. “Anyway, my contacts will pay you a handsome fee for providing me safe and quiet passage through the wall.”

“Including expenses?” asked Nemo. “All expenses?” his fingers hovered over a switch on his console as he watched the monitors. When the two spyers moved into view of his tunnel camera, Nemo flipped the switch. The monitor flashed brightly, illuminating his face for a moment as the explosion he triggered tore through the tunnel. Almost immediately static replaced the bright image as he lost the signal from the camera.

He looked back at Feg, who hadn’t spoken; perhaps distracted by the flash of light in Nemo’s otherwise darkened office. “It would seem we shall be adding the cost of a new access point to the docks to your list of expenses,” he said. “Will that be agreeable to your contact?”

Feg seemed to consider it and looked back at the two guards behind him, perhaps wondering if he could fight his way out. He then looked back at Nemo and smiled. “Look,” he said. “Because we’re old friends…”

Nemo shook his head.

“Partners? Associates?”

“Associates, perhaps,” said Nemo.

Feg smiled again and talked quickly. “Because we’ve worked together in the past, I’m willing to cut you in for half of my take, and all you got to do is get me to the Spire. That should be easy for Nemo, the Underhive’s master spy.”

Nemo flipped a few more switches on one of his control panels before continuing. “But why should I cut you in for any of the profit?” he asked.

Feg was taken aback. This was obviously not going the way he’d planned. But he still had one card to play. “Because you don’t have the package,” he said. “I do. It’s hidden. Besides, you have no idea what it is or who wants it so bad, that it’s worth a hundred thousand creds.”

Nemo placed his hand over one last switch. “You’d be surprised what I know,” said Nemo. “There’s very little that happens beneath, or above, the wall that I don’t find out about. I know exactly who wants your precious medicine and why. And as for finding the package, I’m sure you’ll tell me in time.”

Several doors opened behind Feg and a dozen more guards entered the room with weapons drawn. Seek and Destroy stopped their punching game and pulled out their weapons as well.

“You think you can hold me?” asked Feg. As he reached towards his arm to activate his chainsword, Nemo pressed the switch, which released a reinforced plasteel net that dropped over the head of the huge man, dragging him to the ground under the weight of heavy and nearly indestructible metal.

“I do, actually,” said Nemo. “Needle him!”

Several guards shot Vandal Feg with needlers, knocking him out before he could even attempt to cut his way through the heavy metal net.

A small, thin man wearing a suit and tie had escorted Bobo off the royal estate, through a series of tunnels that opened into the Spire docks. Before leaving the estate, Kauderer had given Bobo a new set of clothes, which he now wore.

The clothes were pure silk and fitted perfectly. Bobo had never felt so comfortable in a set of clothes before. He'd always seen clothing as an inconvenience. He wore them only because he would draw attention otherwise. The rough texture of his old clothes and the way they bound in all the wrong places had not only been uncomfortable but had hindered his movement, which he abhorred when he was on the job.

These clothes looked similar to his old set. They were grey in colour and fairly non-descript so as to not draw any undue attention. Functional without looking too utilitarian, but refined enough to not look out of place amongst the residents of the Spire.

"Here you are, sir," said Bobo's temporary guide, who he suspected was another of Kauderer's agents even though he looked like a scribe. The man carried himself like a spy and his eyes had constantly scanned their path as they walked.

He motioned Bobo towards a blank wall down the tunnel and then disappeared into the darkness. Bobo moved forwards and opened the secret door at the end of the tunnel. The mechanism was the same as the one the "scribe" had opened at the other end.

He stepped into a secluded section of the docks and closed the door before walking towards the docking ports ahead of him. As he reached the end of the corridor, a group of people began passing by right on cue. He slipped into the group and walked with them to a large building where their luggage waited. He looked around and found a set of bags with the name Jackal Bristol on them. He picked them up and left the docks.

Bobo was worried someone might try to contact him on his way to his apartment, because he wanted some time to look through his belongings and immerse himself in the role before beginning. Luckily, the trip was uneventful and he breathed a sigh of relief when he closed the door behind him.

When he looked up, Bobo gasped. He had thought the rooms in the royal estate had been huge and lush. It had nothing on this apartment. It was roughly the size of an entire floor at Madam Noritake's. He dropped his bags and wandered around.

The sitting room alone had enough furniture for all of Noritake's girls and their clients. The bedroom had a bed that apparently had been built for five and a closet with enough silk clothing to outfit the entire dock workers' union. The most impressive thing in the apartment by far was the window, which covered both walls in the bedroom. He'd been given a corner apartment. It seemed Jackal Bristol liked to live well.

Foremost amongst the obvious symbols of wealth was an expensive looking bottle of fluid which immediately caught Bobo's attention. He opened the bottle and took a swig. The bubbly liquid glided down his throat, gently warming his mouth and chest as it passed, a far cry from the acidic burning sensation of a bottle of wildsnake. He sat on one of his many couches and looked through the information Kauderer had given him in his luggage.

It seemed the most promising option was a young prince from House Ko'Iron, who'd been very vocal of late about the unworthiness of House Helmawr's continued rule. "Interesting," said Bobo. "It seems our young prince likes to frequent the Kitty Club. Looks like I'm going out tonight."

He took another swig from his bottle. "Yes," he said. "I could get used to this."

Wotan's air analyzers had been taxed almost to their limits. His body had actually heated up to the point that his paws sizzled slightly on the stone floor of the Hive City dome. He'd finally tracked down the source of an odd odour he'd first smelled while the wall had been open. It was a non-metallic, non-toxic odour that had no place on this side of the wall.

After the wall closed, Wotan had searched the city blocks near the wall for any indication of that scent coming from anywhere other than the wall itself. His analyzers had picked up trace amounts

and he'd followed the scent like a bloodhound into and out of buildings, up and down ramps, and across numerous catwalks.

He finally found the source of the odour at a large fan hung high up on the wall of the dome. It had taken him quite a while to reach the fan housing, as he'd had to find a way that didn't include the use of ladders. He'd had to jump from the top of a ramp onto a building and then follow the ductwork over to another building where a ramp took him up to a higher catwalk.

He followed that catwalk for some way before jumping down onto more ductwork that eventually climbed its way up above the fan. The last jump was the toughest. The fan, although enormous, had only a small ledge next to the housing, and that ledge was directly underneath the duct Wotan stood upon.

Deep down in his visual cortex, synapses fired estimating the distance and trajectory. This information was transferred to his memory core and from there to the servos that controlled his legs. He jumped the twenty metres flawlessly, coming to a stop at the edge of the ledge.

Wotan turned and looked at the fan housing. He sniffed the air. The fresh scent didn't come from the fan itself. It drifted out of a crack in the wall beside the housing. Wotan pawed at it and the resulting sound echoed slightly as if the space behind the wall was empty.

He had no room to make a running leap through the wall, as he had done at the house of the little yellow lady. Wotan had to rely on the strength of his jaws. He snapped his mouth forward, sinking his top row of metal teeth into the crack and then biting down with his lower teeth.

The wall felt oddly soft, more like plaster than stone or rock. He clamped his jaw down tight and pulled back, digging his claws into the ledge. As he pulled, his claws scraped against the ledge, leaving long furrows in the metal beneath him. At last, the wall panel began to give.

He repositioned his feet and pulled again. A low growl came from deep within him. As he tugged he walked backwards, whipping his head from side to side to rip open the plasteel panel set into the wall.

After several minutes, Wotan had ripped the panel far enough to squeeze through. He released his hold and crawled into the opening behind the panel. It was a long tunnel. The scent of fresh air was much stronger inside and he padded forward, confident that he would find Bobo and Jerico on the other side.

At the other end of the tunnel, Wotan found himself looking through a round grate down onto the plaza before the wall. This time he was on the Spire side. Even his mechanical brain could easily tell the difference. For one thing, there was only one guard and no throng of people trying to get through. For another, everything on this side gleamed. It was as if the entire world up here were made of silver, gold and polished marble, and that odd scent of fresh air was everywhere.

Wotan breathed it in and set his analyzers to work. He almost barked when the analysis finished. He smelled Jerico, and he was close. Wotan searched the plaza, but didn't see his owner. In fact, there weren't that many people in the plaza at all, just a single group of three heading past the wall down a side passage.

Wotan looked closer. The one in the middle was wearing a strange cloak that hid his body, but Wotan's sharp eyes looked closer and saw just the hint of leather swishing around beneath the cloak. This time he did bark. A loud, tinny bark that sounded like two swords scraping against one another.

But Kal didn't hear him. Wotan grabbed the grate in his teeth and pulled and twisted as before, whipping his head around and growling. Then, all at once, the entire grate came loose and fell towards the marble-covered plaza below, taking Wotan with it.

He landed on his front feet, smacking his head into the ground before his back feet hit. Disoriented, he spun around several times before he remembered which way Kal had gone. He ran off across the plaza, barking. He looked over at the lone guard by the wall, but the man didn't seem at all interested in getting involved with the crazy metal dog.

Wotan ran past the wall and into the passage where Kal had gone, which was basically an alley between the wall and the first set of buildings. The alley curved slightly so he could no longer see Kal, but then he saw the other two men, alone, and continuing on down the narrow passage.

Wotan stopped and sniffed the air. He could still smell Jerico, but the scent came from behind him now. He backtracked until the newer scent ended, but there was no sign of Jerico. He looked around for a door or side passage, but there was nothing to be found.

Then he looked up. Above him Wotan saw another large, round grate like the one he'd just crashed through. He sniffed the air. Sure enough, Kal's scent wafted down to him through the grating along with another, unmistakable odour—the acidic, stale, musky odour of Hive City.

Wotan sat down and howled.

## CHAPTER SIX: NIGHT LIFE

The Kitty Club. Bobo walked through and marvelled at the sights, sounds, and smells. It was dark, but only in the Spire sense of the word. Thick velvet curtains and tapestries depicting the most interesting scenes of debauchery had been hung over the windows. Inside the club, candles and odd orbs of flowing, luminescent goo created pockets of light for those who wished to see or be seen.

A thick haze hung over the entire club, a mixture of conflicting perfumes and toxtick smoke. The resulting odour was oddly sweet with just a hint of spice. It was almost intoxicating and Bobo was glad his small stature kept his head out of the thick cloud. Underneath all this rich atmosphere of opulence was a beating pulse of music that seemed to drive forward with its own living rhythm. There was no band and Bobo was unsure where the music came from. It seemed to be everywhere and he could feel the beat of the music invading his body through the soles of his feet.

Through an open fold in one of the curtains, Bobo caught the lingering purple bands of the setting sun streaking through the cloud cover. He'd spent a full hour in his apartment just watching the sun set. It was the most amazing sight he'd ever witnessed and he couldn't believe all these people were so jaded they could ignore that natural wonder.

For them, it happened every day; it wasn't a once in a lifetime opportunity. They ignored the natural blessings that their charmed lives provided for them, like fresh air, clean water and plentiful, warm sunshine, and instead had to frequent places like the Kitty Club to feel alive.

A silk-skinned, blonde goddess walked by Bobo, arm-in-arm with some fat noble. The fresh, fruity scent of the gorgeous woman made Bobo smile and sigh, but the noble appeared bored and distracted. He stopped to talk to another noble, a skinny young kid of no more than twenty lounging on a plush couch with several scantily-clad women and a couple of his young cronies.

They argued about something while the girls just sat there, continuing to touch and caress the men. Two things struck Bobo about the scene. First, he knew he was being somewhat hypocritical of the Spire nobles. He too frequented places like this down in Hive City, but for him and the other hard-working men and women below the wall, it was a release from the hardship of their lives, not just another in a long string of decadent perversions to relieve the boredom of too much wealth. Maybe it wasn't much of a distinction, but it somehow mattered to Bobo.

Second, he realized that just like in Hive City, the girls in the Kitty Club had access to a great wealth of information about the private lives of the nobles. As he noticed a slightly-built redhead with freckle-specked, pearly-white skin looking at him from one of the five bars in the club, Bobo decided he would need to spend a great deal of time exploring this bountiful source of information.

"Hi," he said, climbing onto the stool next to the redhead. "My name's Bristol. Jackal Bristol."

"I know," she said. "Someone wants to meet you." She reached out and caressed Bobo's arm as she smiled a seductive, little smile at him. "Would you like to follow me?"

"Anywhere and everywhere," said Bobo.

Her smile widened even further as she slipped off the bar stool and sauntered off. Bobo followed her, taking one last glance around to make sure he hadn't been noticed or followed.

Captain Katerin punched his armoured fist through the top of the rubble, creating a hole big enough for some air to get through. He inhaled deeply and then coughed and spat up phlegm for several minutes as he cleared his lungs of masonry dust.

“Mageson,” he said and then repeated it through his comm-link. “Mageson. Are you okay?”

As the resulting silence stretched out, Katerin continued to extract himself from the rubble of the collapsed tunnel. After shoving both arms through the opening above him, he managed to move enough rocks and girders out of the way to create a large enough space to climb out.

He pulled himself to the top of the pile and switched on his arm beams to light the area. He stood atop a mound of stone, jagged metal, broken pipes, and beams. Part way down the pile to either side, he could just see the roof of the tunnel, which had been completely blocked by the mound. Above him was an empty space; probably an unused section of dome or, if he was lucky, a utility tunnel.

He scanned the rubble itself, looking for some sign of his companion. “Mageson!” he called out again. “Report! Give me some sign, girl.”

In response, a laser beam cut through the rubble next to Katerin, nearly taking off his big toe.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ve got you.” He dropped to his knees and began tossing chunks of debris off the pile, his hydraulic-powered muscles making quick work of the rubble piled on top of the young noble.

In a moment, he’d uncovered enough of Mageson to grab hold of her shoulders and pull her free. The resulting landslide of debris filling in the hole almost made both of them tumble down to the bottom of the pile.

“What the scav was that?” asked Mageson. She tested her wings, but only one opened to its full extent. The servos on the other had been damaged and Katerin could see blood trickling down her arm.

“Somebody didn’t want us following that one-armed freak,” said Katerin. “Brought the whole damn tunnel down on our heads just to stop us.”

“Obviously,” she said. “And that will be their last mistake.” She slammed her fist into the palm of her other hand.

But Katerin saw Mageson grimace as she made the menacing move. “You’re heading back to the docks to see the medic,” said Katerin. “I’ll find a way around this blockage and get a piece of whoever did this.”

Mageson shook her head. “I’m coming with you,” she said. “I’ve got a stake in this, too.” She looked down at the wound on her arm. “Some Underhive scum is going to pay for this.”

As much as Katerin wanted to let Mageson satisfy her bloodlust, he couldn’t afford to lead a wounded noble into battle. It was his head her parents would seek if anything serious happened to her.

“You’re injured, Mageson, and your rig is damaged. You’ll just slow me down. Get back and take control of the docks.”

Mageson nodded finally and turned to scramble down the pile, blood trickling off her arm as she went. Katerin climbed down behind her and began opening a hole back into the tunnel. The rubble was pretty loose and he made good time. He hoped the blockage on the other end was as easy to get through. The gap between the top of the tunnel and the top of the pile had widened almost far enough for his spyer rig to squeeze through when Katerin heard his comm crackle to life.

“Captain Katerin,” the voice said into his ear. “This is Lord Chamberlain Schemko. What is your status?”

“Scawing bureaucrat,” muttered Katerin before clicking on his link. “Nearly blown up, sir,” he said. Before his superior could ask the resulting question, Katerin added, “We encountered a minor setback while pursuing the satchel, sir. Mageson and I are fine, but it will be some time before we are in pursuit again. Stein has the docks secured.”

“Your orders have changed, Captain,” said the Lord Chamberlain in his ear. “I am recalling your troops. Move your men back to the transport for a return trip to the Spire.”

“But, sir,” said Katerin. He turned towards Mageson and made an obscene gesture, indicating just what he thought of the Lord Chamberlain. “We are close. I know it. That’s why our pursuit was halted by such extreme measures. I just need a little more time. As you said, the fate of the house depends on this mission.”

“You have your orders, captain,” said the Lord Chamberlain. “Others will take up the chase. The martial law you imposed on the Hive City docks has stirred up a great deal of trouble and brought unwanted attention down upon this mission. I want your men off the docks within the hour. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” said Katerin. His obscene gesture turned into an even more obscene salute.

“I’m surprised,” said Mageson. “I can’t believe you agreed to his orders so quickly.”

Katerin smiled at Mageson “Ah, but what did I agree to?”

“Why, ending martial law and going back to the Spire.” Katerin shook his head. “The good Lord Chamberlain never told *me* to return to the Spire. He only ordered my men to the transport for a return trip. And I plan to follow that order to the letter.”

He bent over and began moving rubble again. “Now, let’s get you out of here. I need *you* at the docks following *my* orders. I’ve got to see a man about a bomb.”

“Excuse me?”

He crushed a piece of masonry in his armoured glove. “Nobody drops a tunnel on me and gets away with it.”

Peeking through the velvet curtain, Bobo found a small room with a private booth. As he pushed his way through, two large, bald men stepped up and frisked him roughly. Afterwards, they went through the curtain, but Bobo was certain they hadn’t gone far beyond that point.

The redhead slid into the booth and cosied up next to a white-haired man wearing what looked like red, silk pyjamas. Platinum and gold chains hung around his neck and he wore dark glasses, even though the only light in the booth came from one of those small globes with the luminescent goo hanging over the table.

Between the poor lighting and the glasses, Bobo could hardly make out the man’s features, but he was fairly certain this was the young Ko’Iron prince at the top of Kauderer’s hit parade. Either that or platinum white hair was the new rage for youth in the Spire.

The redhead caressed the prince’s silk-covered arms and whispered in his ear. He leaned over and gave her a long kiss, and Bobo could tell that the prince had great affection for the girl. All the while she kept her eyes open, watching Bobo. There was more to her than just a simple Kitty Club girl.

After the kiss, the prince turned and looked at Bobo who hadn’t moved since coming through the curtain. “Sit down, Mr. Bristol,” he said. “Let us talk business.”

Bobo slid into the booth opposite the prince and the redhead. “Call me Jackal,” said Bobo. “I never talk business with strangers. And you are?”

The white-haired man smiled, showing a set of teeth that were easily as white as his hair. “Let’s just say that I’m the man who’s about to hire you,” he said.

Bobo stood and put a hand on the velvet drapes. “Then let’s say this business meeting is over,” he said, and pushed open the curtain.

Bobo wasn’t certain whether his gamble would work or not, but Jackal Bristol was supposed to be a bit of a hardass. Plus Bobo always felt better when he was in control of a situation instead of the other way around. As he pushed his way past the well-dressed muscle on the other side of the velvet, Bobo heard the glasses rattle and the table shake behind him. He turned to see the young noble standing on the cushion.



“My name is Granit Ko’Iron,” said the prince. The redhead smiled at Bobo as she dabbed at a stain on the young noble’s silk pyjama bottoms with a wet napkin. He slapped her hand away and sat down again. In an obvious attempt to regain his composure, he added, “You may call me ‘Prince’.”

“Okay, Prince,” said Bobo as he sat back down. “Now that pleasantries are over, who did you want eliminated? Got your eye on a promotion, have you?”

The Ko’Iron prince laughed while the redhead shook her head.

“Nothing so vulgar as that,” said the prince. “We leave the killing to the lowlifes below the wall. They’re ever so good at it. I need a message delivered. That’s all.”

Bobo felt the conversation drifting out of his control. “Then why call on me?” he asked. “I’m a specialist. Low profile eliminations for high profile clients. I’m no errand boy.”

“The message I want delivered requires your special services,” said the prince. The redhead handed him a packet. Bobo didn’t want to know where she’d kept it hidden. Well, actually, he did want to know, but didn’t feel it appropriate to ask. The prince slid the packet across the table.

“Go ahead and open it,” he said.

As the prince continued talking, Bobo looked through the contents. Inside were several pics of a high-ranking member of House Orlock, the Hive City family responsible for ninety percent of the refined iron ore produced in the hive. In addition, there were blueprints of some Spire estate and a passkey, along with five thousand guilder credits.

“That is Davol Orlock,” said the prince, indicating the pics. “His father has an exclusive contract for iron with House Greim.” He pointed at the blueprints. “That is the Greim estate. The Ko’Iron family would like to break that contract and force our own deal on the Orlocks.”

“So, I’m supposed to, what?” asked Bobo. “Kill Davol and plant evidence in the Greim estate? And all that for a lousy five thousand creds?”

The prince laughed again, which made Bobo want to jump across the table and kill him. The mission, and the two bodyguards on the other side of the curtain, helped him retain his calm.

“No, no,” said the prince. “I want you to kill Davol and plant his head in the bed of princess Jillian Greim.”

“Whatever,” said Bobo, “I still don’t work this cheap.” He almost had to swallow as he flipped the credits back across the table, as he’d never even seen that much money all in one stack before.

“I know, Mr. Bristol, I mean Jackal. I know. That is simply a down payment. You get the other half upon completion. Isn’t that how it’s done?”

Bobo considered the offer. It was becoming obvious that Granit Ko’Iron wasn’t the mastermind behind the Helmawr assassination plot. Plus Bobo felt an acidic taste welling up in the back of his mouth just thinking about working for this guy. But five thousand credits was a lot of money. A scavving lot of money! And what did he care for the Hive City families. In his mind they weren’t much better than the Spire nobles anyway, feeding off the hard work of others. Of course, the point was moot as he wouldn’t be in the Spire long enough to finish the job anyway.

“Fine,” he said. “But a job like this will take some time. Two locations to scout, two trips through the wall, transporting rotting flesh. I’ll need at least a week.”

The prince nodded. “That should be fine.”

Bobo got up to leave. “Just one thing, Prince,” he said. “I thought you said you leave killing to the lowlifes. And yet here you are, sending the ‘head in the bed’ message.”

“Oh, I don’t consider this killing,” said Prince Granit. “The Hive City families are barely above those animals my brothers and I hunt down in the Underhive. But I would never go around killing real people, Spire people. That would be barbaric.”

Scabbs and Yolanda found themselves back in the Sump Hole. As far as Scabbs was concerned, they could just stay there until their money ran out. It had been a particularly crappy day. And, as usual, Yolanda blamed it all on Kal Jerico.

“Scawing Jerico,” she said, slamming her bottle of wildsnake down on the table so hard that a stream of the greenish liquid spewed out the top along with the little, wriggling snake. “Fall down a hole, have to run around half the hive to find our way back in, all because he wants to go off and play Spire wedding all day long.”

Scabbs was unsure how all of that had been Kal’s fault, but he knew better than to contradict Yolanda when she got started railing about how their partner was the bane of her existence and at fault for every bad thing that ever happened to her.

While it was true that Scabbs and Kal had gotten her kicked out of her gang when they brought her in for a double bounty — she was wanted by the Guilders for crimes she committed as leader of the Wildcats, while her father, Lord Catallus, had put out a reward for the return of his wayward daughter — was it really Kal’s fault that she’d never told the Wildcats about her royal blood?

Scabbs tried to drink his wildsnake in peace, letting Yolanda continue ranting. He nodded every once in a while, but mostly just kept his head down. After a while, he noticed that the bar had gone quiet. He looked up, wondering what had happened, but it was just that Yolanda had stopped complaining about Kal.

Scabbs scratched at his elbow for a minute and then noticed his bottle was empty. He raised his arm to call the bartender over and a cascade of dead skin drifted off and settled on the table.

“Whaddya need?” asked the bartender. He wiped the table down with a dirty cloth, sending the spilled drink, the wriggling snake and the dead skin all onto the floor.

“Another snake,” said Scabbs, “and some grub. What’s the cook killed tonight?”

The bartender shook his head. “Nothing for you two until you settle up this tab.”

“Tab?” asked Scabbs. The bartender held a grubby slip of paper in his dirt-streaked hand.

Before the bartender could answer, Yolanda jumped to her feet and grabbed the piece of paper out of his hand. “Lemme see that,” she said.

“Five hundred creds for damages?” she yelled. “What in the hive is that for?”

The bartender shrunk back a little, but his need for payment obviously outweighed his fear of Yolanda. “Well, there’ve been more than a few brawls lately,” he said. “And I charge all patrons involved a brawl fee. Plus your damn dog broke through my door this morning. That door was real, simulated wood grain. Irreplaceable.”

Scabbs couldn’t help noticing that he’d already replaced it.

“My dog?” asked Yolanda, advancing on him. “My dog? Helmawr’s rump, that’s Jerico’s scavving dog. Make him pay for it.”

“That’s what I’m doing,” said the bartender. Sweat started to bead up on his forehead as Yolanda continued to glare at him. “This is Kal’s table. You’re Kal’s people...”

“I am not Kal’s anything!” said Yolanda.

Scabbs was amazed that the bartender hadn’t fled, or been killed yet. He did, however, move back behind the bar as he spoke next.

“Fine, but Kal Jerico and associates cannot drink or dine in the Sump Hole until that bill is paid.”

Yolanda crumpled up the bill and dropped it on the ground. Scabbs could see every muscle in her neck and shoulders tense up. He completely expected her to pull out her sword or laspistol and drop the bartender where he stood. Instead, she grabbed the bag of creds they’d earned from Sonny’s head and dropped it on the bar.

“There should be enough there to cover everything,” she said through clenched teeth, “including this...”

Yolanda walked towards the door, her breach cloth flapping against her thighs in a staccato rhythm to the heavy beat of her boots on the floor. Two metres from the door, she pulled out her laspistol and fired three quick shots, hitting the hinges and the latch. She raised one leg and kicked at the centre of the door, sending it flying into the street, trailing smoke from the holes she'd burned through it.

She didn't even look back as she called to Scabbs. "Come on," she said. "Looks like we're working again tonight."

Scabbs didn't want to go, but knew the consequences of staying would be far worse. He scrambled to his feet and ran after her. As he looked down at the remains of the door, lying in pieces on the street, Scabbs shuddered. He wondered if perhaps going after Nemo and Feg would be safer than staying with Yolanda.

"Mr. Feg," called Nemo. "Mr. Feg. Wake up!"

He flipped a switch on his console, which sent electricity coursing through Vandal Feg's unconscious form. The huge body twitched uncontrollably, shaking so hard it threatened to tear apart the scaffolding holding Feg's body suspended off the ground.

"I think you killed him, boss," said Seek. Or was it Destroy? Nemo never could tell them apart. They wore nearly identical outfits — leather vests over skin-tight shirts and leather trousers tucked into thick work boots. One wore a red shirt and red bandana over his head, while the other donned blue. The colour coding didn't help though, as he couldn't remember which twin wore which colour, and he was pretty sure they sometimes switched.

"I rather doubt that..." Nemo decided to just leave off the name. He had no time for an argument. "Mr. Feg is actually quite a bit stronger than he even appears. However, let us err on the safe side shall we?"

Seek and Destroy looked at each other and then both shrugged at the exact same moment.

"Seek," said Nemo, "If you would be so kind as to administer an ampoule of adrenaline to Mr. Feg's heart, please?"

The twin wearing the blue bandana scooted over to the medi-pack and picked up a syringe with a long needle.

He crawled under the apparatus which held Feg off the ground and positioned himself beneath the huge man's chest, avoiding the tubes coming out of his neck and back that now hung limply around his face and chest.

Feg's mechanical arm had been removed and set aside, but the tubes seemed to be permanently attached, so Nemo had ordered them left alone. Now he wished he'd pulled the damn things out himself as Seek seemed to have gotten inextricably intertwined with them.

"Just jam it into his chest before he does die," screamed Nemo.

With that Seek plunged the needle hard into Feg's exposed sternum and depressed the syringe all in one swift stroke. A moment later, Vandal Feg opened his eyes and screamed.

"I'll kill you all. I'll pound you into sludge! I'll rip your hearts out and eat them while they still beat." As he screamed, Feg thrashed around in the scaffolding, trying to free his feet, head or hand.

At some point, he must have finally focused on Seek, who was trying to escape but had gotten caught in the flailing tubes. "You're first, blue boy," he said and snapped his head forward, trying to bite Seek in the face.

Seek screamed for help, but his brother had doubled over in laughter. As soon as Seek extracted himself from the tubes he launched at Destroy, tackling him to the ground. The two started kicking and biting each other as Feg continued to scream.

At this point, Nemo had had enough of both Vandal Feg's unwillingness to cooperate — even to the point of near death — and the twins' inability to concentrate on the task at hand without devolving into a brotherly brawl.

Nemo flipped the switch again, and electricity crackled all along the scaffolding and Feg's suspended body. That, for the moment, shut him up.

Nemo pulled a web pistol from a small compartment in his chair. The pistol had been liberated from Spire security some time ago and Nemo had paid a high price for it. He used it only in emergencies, but his stress level had now reached breaking point.

He pointed it at the squirming twins and fired. A tangle of sticky, milk-white threads spread out from the gun, enveloping the twins in their gooey web. They tried to struggle, but the threads hardened almost instantaneously, trapping them in their brotherly hug.

"Boys," he said. They stopped struggling and looked at him. "Once you are free, I want you to go to the docks and look for the item Mr. Feg retrieved from the royal transport. He is proving most difficult to reason with."

"What'd he take?" asked Destroy.

"You will be looking for a small box," said Nemo, showing the size with his hands. "No bigger than a medi-pack. It will most likely be within a bag of some sort, perhaps a suitcase or a duffel. He must have hidden it in the docks or the tunnel before he met you."

"We'll find it for you, boss," said Seek.

"Yes," said Nemo. "Yes, you will. Do not come back until you do, understand?"

The boys didn't respond.

"Do you understand?" he growled.

"Yessir," they said in unison.

Wotan stood atop the lone Spire guard on duty at the wall and barked. He'd leapt at the man several minutes earlier, driving him to the ground and landing on his chest. Since then he'd barked almost incessantly at the man, occasionally stopping to growl and snap at his face.

The guard had started screaming from the moment he'd been able to draw a breath again and hadn't stopped except when Wotan growled and snapped.

Then he just shut his eyes and twisted his head back and forth.

The metal mastiff heard footsteps run up behind him. He stopped barking and turned to growl at the approaching men. Three men in identical uniforms to the guard at his feet skidded to a halt about five metres away from Wotan.

"Great, holy Emperor!" said one of the men. "What in the Spire is that thing?"

Wotan barked at them and then opened his mouth wide and plunged his head down towards the exposed neck of the guard beneath him. He sunk the tips of his teeth just into the man's soft skin. Several small trickles of blood dripped off his spiked, metal teeth onto the marble courtyard.

"S-stay back," said the guard.

"I've got a clean shot," replied one of the men.

Wotan wasn't sure what they were saying, but he didn't like the tone of the last one's voice. He growled again and clamped down a little harder, breaking the skin in several more places.

"N-no," said the guard beneath him. "Don't. Just get it off me."

"How?" said another man.

"Needier?"

"Nah, it's metal."

"Electricity?"

"No. You'll kill me, too," whined the pinned guard. "Rocket launcher?"

"No!" screamed the guard, which just made the mastiff dig its teeth in deeper.

Wotan got tired of the men arguing back and forth. He stepped off to the side of the guard, keeping his mouth clamped on the man's neck, and started moving towards the huge open wall. He'd found in the past that gentle pressure on the neck will make most men quite pliable.

The guard was no different. Instead of allowing his neck to get ripped open, he scooted himself along behind the metal mastiff as he inched towards the opening.

“Where’s it going?” asked one of the men. “It wants to drag Harrell into Hive City.”

“Let it.”

“We can’t open the wall.”

“Why not?”

“Harrell’s got the only key.”

Wotan and the guard had reached the crack in the enormous wall. The mastiff began growling and exerting more and more pressure on the man’s neck. The guard reached into his pocket and fished out something small and golden. He tossed it towards the other men.

“Open it,” rasped the bleeding guard. “Maybe it just wants to leave.”

“There’ll be hell to pay afterwards.”

“Won’t be our problem. None of us were even here.”

“Right.”

“Right.”

“Okay.”

One of the men came up to the wall, inserted the golden object into a small hole and turned it. From the other side of the massive wall, Wotan heard the blare of the siren wind up as the crack began to widen. He released the pressure on the man’s neck slightly as he kept an eye on the wall.

Once the crack had grown large enough, Wotan unclamped his jaw and loped through the opening. On his way through, he had to dodge around and through the throng of Hivers coming the other way. He recognized several from the lines earlier. All of them were screaming.

“Freedom!”

“To the Spire!”

“Finally!”

“I’m coming home, ma!”

Wotan ran on. He wanted to make sure he made it out of the courtyard on the other side before the blare of the horn began to signal the closing of the wall. He remembered what had happened last time.

“You agreed to do what?” asked Kauderer.

The two men had arranged to meet every twelve hours so Bobo could update Kauderer on his mission. Bobo had followed a long, convoluted set of protocols to get to the meeting place. First he’d hired a specific private room at the Kitty Club and asked for Brandi, Sandi and Candi.

That part he’d enjoyed, but the fun had ended much too quickly. Once the girls got going, being quite loud and boisterous to cover his escape, Bobo slipped out of the room through a rear exit. This put him on a deserted street not far from an arched gateway.

Bobo peered into the darkness in either direction, making sure he was alone, and then slipped through the arch. Suddenly, he was outside the Spire, standing on a bridge between the Spire and the grand library. He stopped and stared at the pinpoints of light dotting the blanket of night above him. The white marble facade of the Spire loomed behind him like a massive shadow as he crossed into the grand library.

Only scholars, scribes and students were allowed here, and then only during the day, as the library had no internal lighting, relying on natural sunlight for all those studying inside. This made the library the perfect spot for a late night rendezvous.

Bobo slipped across the bridge and entered a series of numbers into a data pad, which gave him access to the library. He then had to wend his way through the stacks, pull out a particular volume and make his way to a study carrel.

Kauderer had been waiting in the carrel opposite him.

“I took a job for Prince Granit of Ko’Iron,” said Bobo. “I couldn’t exactly turn him down and maintain my cover as a crack assassin.”

Kauderer grumbled something under his breath. Bobo found it little easier to talk to the hawkish man in the dark. Even though he couldn’t see that sharp nose pointing down at him, the man’s eyes still found a way to pierce the gloom and glare at him over the top of the carrel.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Bobo. The wedding is in three days and I told Granit I would need a week to do the job. “I can just leave him hanging. Serve the impudent fool right anyway.”

Silence reigned in the dark library for several minutes before Kauderer responded. “No,” he said. “I have a better idea.”

“Oh no,” said Bobo.

“Oh yes,” said Kauderer. “You’re going to do the job and finish well before deadline. I’ve got an operative in Hive City that can deliver the head tonight. You scout out the Greim estate and I will contact you before morning.”

“And why are we doing this?” asked Bobo. “Won’t this mess up trade relations or something?”

“House Helmawr cares very little whether Ko’Iron or Greim or anyone else controls the iron contract. We get our cut no matter what. But doing this job in one night will launch your reputation into the stars.”

“And then,” said Bobo, “whoever wants the future Lord Helmawr dead will come a-calling for the miracle worker, huh?”

“Exactly.”

“That’s actually a pretty good plan,” said Bobo, adding a late, “Sir,” at the end.

“Why, thank you,” said Kauderer, and Bobo could hear the ice chilling on each word. “You have no idea how much your praise means to me.”

Bobo got up to leave, but Kauderer cleared his throat. “Aren’t you forgetting something?” he asked. “The money?”

Bobo tossed a wad of credits over the top of the carrel.

“This operation is costing House Helmawr plenty,” said Kauderer. “This twenty-five hundred barely covers your wardrobe.”

Bobo slipped out of the study carrel and made his way back to the stacks to shelve the book. As soon as he was certain he was out of ear shot, he muttered. “Smug bastard. No better than that white-haired freak.” He patted the extra twenty-five hundred in his pocket.

Scabbs dropped to the ground as laser blasts sizzled over his head. He was pretty certain his life couldn’t get any worse. However, as he rolled to his feet, his leg slipped off the stone pier and Scabbs found out just how wrong that assumption had been.

He and Yolanda had come to Acid Hole to find the leader of the New Redeemers gang. The entire gang had bounties on their heads, but the leader was worth five hundred creds. Any other heads would just add to their take. Seemed like an easy job. Redemptionists were a pain in the rear, but they weren’t known for their fighting skills. They spent most of their time preaching, not fighting for territory.

This gang must not have understood the Redemptionist manifesto. They had a lot of weapons, and they knew how to use them. Another barrage of las blasts erupted around Scabbs as he pulled his sizzling foot out of the acid pool. Stone dust and acid spray filled the air around him as the blasts pulverized bits of the pier and sliced into the acid pools, turning pockets of the liquid waste into geysers.

Scabbs looked down and screamed. His boot was completely gone and his normally scabby foot had been burned clean of dead skin and turned into a raw, red appendage. He ripped yet another strip of cloth from his ever-diminishing shirt and wrapped it around his bright red foot, and started running again.

“Did you want to start shooting sometime soon?” asked Yolanda. She’d stopped at the next intersection on the pier and fired several shots over Scabbs’ head at the approaching New Redeemers.

Scabbs pulled out his own laspistol as he limped forward. He turned and fired, but his shots all went wide of the mark. Yolanda unleashed several more blasts. As usual she shot for their heads, which at this distance were pretty small targets. But Yolanda was deadly accurate. Her blasts went in a tight arc right through the middle of the pursuing gang. She gave one a glancing shot to the ear, which made him yelp and tumble to the side, his blue cloak flailing around him as he fell.

He toppled into one of his comrades and both lost their footing on the narrow stone path. The splash from their combined plunge into the acid forced the other Redeemers to pull back or get drenched by the potent liquid.

Nobody knew where the acid had come from. There were plenty of theories and stories, but it didn’t really matter. It was here to stay and, even though the pools of acid in Acid Hole were slowly eating away at the settlement and were so strong they could devour a man whole in a matter of minutes, that didn’t stop people from trying to farm the stuff.

The pools were criss-crossed with stone paths — the pier, they called it — made from the crumbling remains of buildings the acid had destroyed by eating away at their foundations. Scabbs and Yolanda had been told the leader, a Redemptionist by the name of Faloway, was holed up in a cave at the far end of the pools.

The information had been entirely correct. Scabbs just wished their informant had bothered to mention the huge stash of weapons the New Redeemers had stowed away for emergencies.

“Come on,” yelled Yolanda. “Now’s our chance to get that bounty.”

Scabbs was thinking it was a better time for getting the scav out of there, but he was so used to following his partners into stupid peril that he hardly even had time for a good “Helmawr’s rump” before following Yolanda back along the stone pier.

“We’ve got them on the run,” cried Yolanda. She shot at several of the fleeing Redeemers, but they ducked and her shots flew over their heads. She ran on past the spot where the two gangers had fallen into the acid.

Scabbs glanced down as he passed but all he could see was the roiling mass of acid churning around the metal slag remains of their weapons. He shuddered and ran on, keenly aware that his right foot had no protection from the acid should he slip again.

As they chased after them, the Redeemers began to split up. Several turned off at each intersection of the branching, stone pier. “Which way?” yelled Scabbs.

“I’m on Faloway,” said Yolanda. She continued running forward, through the first two intersections.

That was when Scabbs started to get a bad feeling. He looked left and right, but didn’t see the fleeing Redeemers running into the distance. Instead, they had stopped and turned around. Then, up ahead, Yolanda skidded to a halt. Scabbs had no choice but to run into her. Any other option sent him into an acid pool.

They tumbled to the ground, arms and legs tangled up in each other. Yolanda’s dreadlocks whipped Scabbs in the face, which made him flinch, and her knee slammed into his groin, which made him gulp and groan and curl into a ball.

They came to a stop at the edge of the pool, in the middle of a four-way intersection. Scabbs looked up through squinted eyes and saw New Redeemers coming at them from all four directions. He was, quite literally, in no shape to help. He was certain he’d be dead before he could uncurl or even speak clearly.

“I’d drop the weapon if I were you,” said one of the Redeemers.

Through his squinted eyes and haze of pain, Scabbs thought it was Faloway speaking.

“You could shoot me,” he continued. “You might even kill me, but then I’d be on my way to Redemption at the right hand of the almighty, all-knowing Emperor, while you would just be a melted pile of slag. Your choice, really.”

Yolanda spat at the Redeemer, but she also dropped her laspistol on the ground.

“Good choice,” said Faloway. “Better for me, as it turns out, because the dear Cardinal Crimson will most certainly reward me greatly for bringing him such fine specimens of heresy and evil.”

Scabbs groaned, partly from the pain emanating out from his groin across all parts of his body, but also partly from what he knew was coming next.

“Yolanda and Scabbs,” said Faloway. “My, my, my. What a prize, indeed.” He chuckled and looked around at his fellow Redeemers. “You know, we might all get to sit at the side of the great cardinal if only we could deliver the heretic Kal Jerico along with these two.”

He looked back at Yolanda and Scabbs. “Now, where do you think Kal Jerico might be?”

Twin explosions rocked the pier behind Faloway. Scabbs couldn’t see what had happened, but he heard screams and a lot of splashing followed by the unmistakable sound of las blasts all around him.

“Right here, you arrogant, self-righteous son of a bitch,” said Kal Jerico.

Several more explosions erupted on the piers to either side of Scabbs. This time he got to watch the devastation from his prone position as several frag grenades exploded in the midst of the Redeemers flanking them. Their bodies flew into the air as shrapnel shredded their blue cloaks and orange body armour. But it wasn’t the explosion that killed them. It was landing in the acid.

Next to him, Yolanda dropped and retrieved her laspistol. She started firing in all directions, adding her las blasts to Kal’s. Scabbs uncurled enough to pull out his own weapon and looked around for a target. Kal’s grenades had left gaping holes in the piers on three sides, and those Redeemers lucky enough to be on the far side of the breaches were running for their lives. Faloway cowered at the edge of the hole, trapped between Kal and the acid.

Scabbs pushed himself to his hands and knees as Kal walked up behind them. He felt two hands grab him by the shoulders and pull him to his feet. Scabbs looked up at Kal, who somehow had found the one spot in Acid Hole with a working light in the dome. It illuminated his head with an angelic aura.

Kal smiled and clapped Scabbs on the back, and then looked at his hand and wiped it off on Scabbs’ ripped and dirty shirt. He strode forward towards Faloway, whipping out both guns and pointing them at the Redeemer’s head.

“The way I see it,” said Kal. “You got two choices — dead or alive. What’s it going to be?”

Faloway looked at the vast empty field of acid around him. His gang had all fled or died. The pier behind him had a gaping hole and the bounty hunters he thought he’d ambushed now had him in their gun sights.

Scabbs knew what he would do in a situation like this, but then, he wasn’t a Redemptionist.

Faloway turned and ran towards the gaping hole in the stone pier, screaming “Redemption now! Redemption now!”

Kal and Yolanda both fired at the same time. Faloway’s body lurched as multiple las blasts hit him in the back. He stumbled forward, smoke rising into the air from the blackened holes in his fluttering, blue cape. He staggered two more steps before dropping onto the pier. As he hit, a small splash of acid leapt into the air just past his shoulders.

“Oh, scav!” said Kal.

He and Yolanda rushed forward. Scabbs limped along behind. When he got there, Scabbs saw the problem. Faloway had fallen right at the edge of the hole in the pier and his head had dropped into the acid. There was now nothing left above his shoulders but a short stump of neck. The acid spat and hissed as blood drained out of his body into the pool.



Kal pulled the body away from the acid and sat down next to it. "I don't suppose there's a bounty on his body is there?" he asked.

Yolanda looked at Kal, huffed, and walked back along the pier.

"You're welcome," he called after her and then smiled.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: SOUGHT AND DESTROYED

Captain Katerin felt dirty, and not just because of the masonry dust caked on his face and head, although that was really starting to itch. No, in forty years of service to House Helmawr, he'd never once disobeyed an order.

As he continued to dig his way to freedom, he thought about what he was doing. Sure, he'd bent the rules now and then, even stretched an order to the breaking point when he thought the reason was just and true; his current rank as head of House Helmawr security proved that he'd been right more often than wrong.

He grabbed an I-beam in two armoured hands and heaved it out of the way. The rig's hydraulics barely even hissed at the enormous weight. As he grabbed another beam, a wave of anger spread through him. Whoever had set off this explosion had tried to kill him, but worse, they'd made him disobey an order.

"Emperor damn this place!" he screamed. He swung the beam around, slamming it into the pile of rubble behind him. At the impact, a large chunk of rock sailed off the pile and smashed against the far wall. The resulting rumbling shook the entire chamber he'd been trapped inside for hours now.

He'd dug an exit back towards the docks for Mageson in fifteen minutes, but the way forward had gotten the bulk of the debris from the original explosion. Every time he felt he'd made some headway, a tremor would dislodge more rockcrete and beams. He'd been partially buried twice since Mageson left.

The current tremor, precipitated by his angry outburst, subsided and he breathed a sigh of relief. It was frustration, that's what it was. He had promised to return the medicine and now, when he'd gotten so close, the rug had been pulled out from under him. Trapped in a hole and ordered home by a stylus-pushing bureaucrat, he felt like bashing something... or someone.

This was what Captain Aldous Katerin did. He fought battles, even if it was against stupid masonry. He knew he was no advisor to the Lord of the Hive. He was a fighting man and, dammit, this was his fight. He knew he was right. Perhaps releasing the docks was the right thing to do, but recalling him when he was so close had been ludicrous. He would show Valtin Schemko. He would show them all. This was his fight and he planned to see it through to the end.

"But I have to get out of this scavving hole first!" he screamed at the walls.

Sweat streamed down his bald head. He could feel the lines of sweat creating little rivers in the caked dust on his face. He didn't even want to know what his beard looked like at this point. He couldn't do anything about it while encased in the Spyrer rig. The massive fingers of his armoured gloves were made for punching, not wiping down his face.

After several hours work, he didn't seem to be any closer to digging his way through to the other side of the rubble. Katerin made a decision — a calculated risk actually. He raised both hands, curled his armoured hands into fists and launched two explosive bolts from his wrists.

He'd tried this earlier, and ended up buried to the waste in debris from the resulting quake. But, other than the small tremor after the I-beam incident a few minutes ago, the chamber had been stable since.

As soon as the bolts impacted the wall of rubble, Katerin moved forward. They exploded one after the other, creating a huge dust cloud, but no rumbling. Katerin fired two more and listened as he moved forward. There was a definite delay before they hit and detonated. He was making headway. He moved into the cloud and launched two more.

These exploded farther down the tunnel. Afterwards, the dust in the tunnel began to move. Instead of billowing up and around him, the dust was being pulled away. He'd broken through! Somewhere a circulation fan was drawing air through the tunnel. Katerin wasted no time with self-congratulation. He simply moved forward, following the escaping air.

Before he got to the far end of the dust cloud, he heard and felt the rumbling start behind him. He tried to run, but the Orrus rig was not built for speed. At best, he could get it up to a fast walk. More and more dust billowed around him, getting sucked down the tunnel by the awaiting fan. The rumble turned into a roar as the chamber behind him collapsed.

A chunk of rock smacked into his back and a scrap of metal nearly sliced through the armour on his thigh. Katerin kept moving. He chanced a glance back over his shoulder and then wished he hadn't. A wall of rock and rubble, pipes and beams, and a lot of dust billowed towards him.

The mass of debris hit him in the legs, tipping him over backwards and then propelling him forward. Katerin might have enjoyed the ride if it weren't for the fact that the mass wasn't so much a wall as a chaotic vortex constantly eating the outer layer and remaking itself as it moved forward.

He felt his feet getting sucked into the roiling mass behind him and struggled to keep the rest of his body from getting pulled inside. He was quickly losing ground and didn't know how much longer he'd be able to keep his head above the mass.

“Stupid Jerico, messing up my bounty and then taking all the credit,” mumbled Yolanda as she trudged through the tunnel outside Acid Hole. “Thinks he can just disappear for a day and then reappear and take all the glory. We were doing just fine without him. Just fine.”

Yolanda grumbled her way through the uneven tunnel that linked Acid Hole to the next settlement, barely looking where she was going. For anyone else, walking through the Underhive without watching where you were going would be suicidal. Yolanda had spent much of her life in the Wildcats, an Escher gang full of large warrior women who lived and died by their wits and their swords.

She'd developed a sixth sense; perhaps it was just a heightened sense of perception, perhaps she had a bit of the witch-wyrd in her. That might explain why she never felt like she belonged in Spire society. She was different. All she wanted was to be appreciated for who she was, not to be moulded into some princess for her daddy, and definitely not pigeon-holed as Kal Jerico's sidekick.

She was Yolanda. Nothing less. Something more than most saw. She'd had it once. As leader of the Wildcats, she had been everything she'd wanted to be. Now, she was something else. Perhaps that was the whole problem. She hadn't yet figured out who she was in the post-Wildcats era of Yolanda.

She blamed it all on Jerico, and continued grumbling about his shortcomings as she sidestepped the edge of a hive quake chasm that intruded halfway into the tunnel. “Stupid Jerico, thinks he's such a lovable vagabond, but he'd turn in his own mother for a bounty.”

Around the next corner was a sludge fall where some pipes between domes had cracked, letting raw waste seep into the void. Beneath her consciousness, her senses picked up on the clues — the rhythmic drip, the faint smell of rotten eggs, the rising moisture content in the air — which all came together to remind her of its presence. She moved to the other side of the tunnel and prepared to jump over the sludge that welled up on the floor.

As she hopped over the sludge pool without even a glance, Yolanda's senses flared in her head. Something was amiss. Strange scents mingled with the rotten egg smell, almost completely masked by the foul sludge behind her. The tunnel ahead seemed darker than normal, as if shadows lurked in the shadows. And there was a slight rustling of fabric against fabric.

That sound she recognized. She'd heard it often enough while waiting to ambush a bounty. It was the sound of someone shifting their weight to relieve the pressure on their knees and ankles.

Yolanda put one hand on her laspistol and the other on the hilt of her sword. She'd stopped grumbling, but kept shuffling forward, trying to appear unaware of the ambush. How many were there? She counted at least four shapes skulking in the shadows.

Redeemers? Doubtful. Feg or Nemo? Nah. She'd given them no reason to come after her. But then, who?

As she walked past the first set of shadows, Yolanda whipped out her weapons. She fired and stabbed into the darkness to either side, connecting with both weapons. In the flare of the las blast she saw a man-sized shape take a hit in the shoulder, which spun him around and slammed him into the wall. While, on the other side, she felt the sword bite into flesh and possibly even skip off something harder like bone or rib.

She didn't wait to see which one. After making both attacks, Yolanda sheathed her weapons and jumped back. Pivoting on one foot, she turned and ran. At least that's what she wanted her attackers to think. As soon as she reached the sludge pool, Yolanda sidestepped, stopped and dropped into a crouch.

As expected, her attackers pursued. The first one came running hard, and Yolanda leaned her shoulder in for the impact. As the attacker reached her, Yolanda grabbed him around the knees and lifted. Using his own momentum against him, she dumped him over her shoulder into the pool of sludge.

She then did a backflip, using her prone attacker's sludge covered body as a spring board to vault the pool, making sure to slam his head down hard along the way. She ran on, jumping over the chasm and stopping just on the other side. She pulled her weapons back out and struck a pose. As soon as she heard the last attacker come around the corner, she aimed and shot.

The laser blast went wide and high, but she hadn't been trying to hit him anyway. She simply wanted to announce her presence in the corridor. She turned and ran a few more steps, making sure her big boots clomped just a little louder than normal. She could hear him barrel on down the corridor behind her.

She dived forward into a roll just in case he decided to shoot. Before she came back up to her feet, Yolanda heard the man scream as he fell into the gaping hole in the tunnel. She put her weapons away again and slapped her hands together to clean off the sludge and congratulate herself on a job well done.

As she moved back down the corridor, Yolanda swore she heard an echo of her hands clapping. Then she realized the clapping continued longer than the original sound and wasn't fading.

"Well done, Yolanda," said an oddly familiar voice. "You make me proud."

"Oh, scav," said Yolanda. Not only did she recognize the voice, but she knew he wouldn't have revealed himself if he hadn't already won. As that thought leapt into her brain, she felt the needle prick her in the neck.

"As the blackness began to envelop her brain from the poison invading her body, Yolanda could only say, What did I do to deserve this...?"

"Well, I guess half of half-a-bounty is better than nothing," said Scabbs. He dug into his breakfast with gusto. The soupy eggs were the only semi-solid food he'd had in a couple of days. And, as usual, just about anything served in the Sump Hole tasted better with enough wild-snake to wash it down.

Kal frowned. "Fifty credits? Those grenades cost me more than that. Why are you and Yolanda going after such crappy bounties? Where's your self respect?"

Scabbs looked up at Kal. Egg whites dripped from his scabby chin back onto the plate.

“Never mind,” said Kal, looking away in a hurry. He dug a coin out of his pocket and began flipping it back and forth across his knuckles.

Scabbs wiped his face on his sleeve and then picked a few crumbs of bread off the dirty fabric and popped them in his mouth. “Well, you weren’t here and the only other option at the time was to go after Nemo and Feg.”

“Nemo and Feg have teamed up?” asked Kal. “I thought Feg was dead.”

“Yeah,” said Scabbs. “I mean, no. He’s alive and they’ve teamed up.” He picked up the plate and began licking it up and down, trying to get every slippery bit of the egg. In between licks, he kept talking. “At least we think so. Seems Feg got his hands on some tech from a downed transport. He was last seen using one of Nemo’s private tunnels.”

“Feg took the...?”

Scabbs peered at Kal over his plate. The coin had stopped between his third and fourth knuckle, and stood straight up in the air, quivering a little as Kal’s mouth hung open.

“Yeah,” said Scabbs. “One of Nemo’s own tunnels. Right from the docks. You see, I fought Feg off in this warehouse...”

Kal popped the coin into the air and held up his hand to stop Scabbs from speaking. The coin dropped right between his middle and ring fingers. “Start from the beginning,” he said. “I want to know about this transport.”

Scabbs told Kal the whole story starting with Sonny, the ratskin thief and ending with he and Yolanda trudging around the ash wastes looking for a way back into the hive past the royal guards.

When the story was done, Kal stared at him with such a serious look on his face that it scared Scabbs down to his dirty socks. “Listen very carefully,” said Kal. “When you saw Feg come out that hole in the warehouse, did he have a satchel, a bag of some sort?”

Scabbs didn’t answer right away. He had to put himself back in that room, curled up in a ball and trying not to look at the man who wanted to kill him. He didn’t really want to go back there. The memory was mostly a blank.

“I’m sorry, Kal,” he said finally. “It was dark and I was trying to hide. I just don’t remember.”

Kal sighed and dropped the coin on the table along with his head and hands.

“Is it important?”

Kal nodded his head on his hands. After a while, he looked up. “If I don’t find that satchel in the next two days,” he said, “I have to get married.”

Scabbs nodded out of habit. Then the message sank in, causing his eyebrows to furrow and his mouth to open and close a few times before he could speak. “Huh? What?” he said at last.

Kal opened his mouth and then closed it and then opened it to try again. “I couldn’t explain it to you even if I could... um... explain it to you. Look, I need that satchel. My very freedom depends on it. You say Feg was on his way to see Nemo?”

It took a moment for Scabbs to catch up to the end of the conversation. “Yeah,” he said. “At least we think so.”

“Then that’s where we have to go,” said Kal. He stood and checked his weapons.

“To Nemo’s?” asked Scabbs. He suddenly felt very sick to his stomach and he didn’t think it was the runny eggs coming back up on him, although they were. “Don’t we need, I don’t know, a plan, an army, some spyer rigs?”

“No,” said Kal. “What we need is information.” He pulled Scabbs out of his chair and shoved him towards the door. “And I think I know where to get it.”

Before they got to the door, Kal turned back towards the table and scanned the floor. “By the way,” he said, “where’s Wotan?”

Bobo washed his hands again, nearly scrubbing his palms raw with his fingernails. He wasn’t being obsessive — well not overly obsessive. It was just that the Spire soap had no grit in it. He didn’t

know how the nobles got clean when they couldn't scrape off a layer of dirt with just a bar of soap and some spit. This soap was all suds and no substance.

It was, in fact, a lot like this washroom. The faucets, knobs and even the free-standing basins all gleamed in brass and gold and silver with lots of little bits of filigree here and there that had absolutely no practical value. All he needed was a knob and a spigot, but what he had here looked like an extravagant shrine to some porcelain god.

He looked at himself in the oval glass mirror hanging on silver chains over the overwrought basin and was amazed again at the horrible opulence of life in the Spire. Where a hunk of polished metal would serve just as well, some noble had instead purchased a dozen enormous mirrors set in engraved gold frames that depicted cherubs and angels cavorting amidst the clouds. Who really needed to look at that, especially in what was essentially a public toilet?

Bobo sighed and splashed water on his face. The head had been delivered without a hitch and he'd washed and changed twice since returning to his apartment. He just couldn't get the stench of that bloody head in a bag out of his nostrils, out of his head. He didn't know how Kal and Yolanda did it without throwing up each and every time.

He walked across the marble floor towards a brass and oak table that held an array of tonics, sprays and colognes. Looking at the various scents, Bobo thought that perhaps one might help cover the stench stuck in his nose. He opted instead for one of the heated towels held in a brass steamer next to the table. As he wrapped the towel around his head, Bobo decided that this was one luxury he could get used to. But not if it meant toting heads around ever again.

"I'm just not cut out for this," he said as he pulled the towel off his head.

"I would say you're doing quite well," said Kauderer. He grabbed a bottle of green liquid and splashed it on his hands. "Were you followed?"

Bobo wanted to ask Kauderer how he'd managed to slip in without making a sound, but he let it pass. He really should have known better than to let himself be so vulnerable with the towel over his head.

"Let's see," he said. "I went from my apartment to the Kitty Club to the library, then up to the tourist area outside the Helmawr estate and down to the wall, where I circled the square several times before coming into the visitor's bureau, which nobody ever uses, asked to use the washroom, was given the only key and came in. In all that time, I saw nobody twice except the poor guard with the large bandage around his neck at the wall."

Kauderer splashed the liquid on his face and rubbed it in. He then opened the brass steamer and pulled a large, embroidered towel from within. He patted his face ten times before turning to drying his hands. Bobo began counting and soon realized that the master spy wiped each and every finger exactly ten times before moving to the next. Bobo assumed the man did everything with the same meticulous, surgical care. "Were you followed?" he asked again.

"No," said Bobo. "I was not followed." He tossed his own towel into the wrought-iron receptacle provided. It seemed that in the Spire, even used towels had a special place to call their own. He didn't feel quite that special anymore up here.

Kauderer finished patting his hands dry and tossed his towel to Bobo, who dropped it into the receptacle with barely a grumble. "You received your final payment?"

It was more a statement than a question. Bobo was certain Kauderer rarely asked a question to which he didn't already know the answer.

"I did," he said, handing over an envelope containing another twenty-five hundred credits. "The prince seemed pleased with the job." So pleased, in fact, he'd gotten a little bonus, which he'd stashed with his unreported five thousand. Bobo kept all of that information to himself. "It seems he's already told his friends about my 'prompt and professional' services."

"Oh?" Kauderer picked up another bottle, making Bobo wonder how much cologne one man needed. This one he tipped over and poured into one of a myriad of silver cups lining the back of the table. He brought the cup to his lips and drank deeply.

“In between my first and second showers, I received several gifts,” said Bobo. “Gifts?”

Bobo nodded his head. “Yeah. At first I was alarmed, but then the house boy knocked and brought in yet another gift and said something about my secret admirers.”

Kauderer smiled. “Ah, yes. Secret admirers of your work,” he said.

It was obvious from his tone of voice and smug smile that he was taking credit for that work, even though it was Bobo who’d had to break into the Greim estate with only four hours of prep work. He swallowed and sighed, shaking off the rising ire. This was for the good of the house, not for personal gain. Besides, he was already up five thousand credits, plus the bonus.

“Exactly,” he said, with only a moment’s hesitation. “A box of chocolates — the real thing, not synth — from the duke of Ty, with an invitation to his table at the Grand Sky City Restaurant tonight. A set of silk pyjamas from Prince Gregor Ulanti with a note to join him at the Kitty Club. A gorgeous steel sword from someone in House Ran Lo with an attached note requesting me to appear before the Lord of the House. And a set of iron throwing stars from Princess Jillian of House Greim. I’m not sure if that one’s an invitation or a threat. But she does want to meet.”

“You did make quite an impression,” said Kauderer. He smiled again, which was no more than a slight lip curl on one side of his thin lips. Perhaps the taut muscles of his gaunt face could do little more.

“It was your idea to go through with the Ko’Iron job,” said Bobo. “Now I need to decide which invitation to accept.”

“Why, all of them of course,” said Kauderer. “This is the perfect chance to find out who’s behind the assassination plot. That’s every house except Catallus, and they have no reason to kill Jerico as the wedding will only strengthen their position in the Spire.”

“Kal’s marrying someone from House Catallus?” asked Bobo. “Don’t you think that’s reason enough to try to kill him?” It was meant as a joke and Bobo started to smile, but the look on Kauderer’s face stopped him.

“Good point,” he said. “We shouldn’t discount them yet. But let’s rule out the others first. Make arrangements to meet them all tonight. We’ll meet in the library again at midnight.”

With that, Kauderer turned and left, slipping through the door without making a single sound and leaving the used cup sitting on the table. Bobo assumed it was meant for him to clean and replace. He left it there and returned to the golden basin. Twisting the silver knobs, he let the hot water fill the basin and then plunged his entire head into the near boiling water. The searing heat finally eradicated the stench of blood from his nose, but did little for his overall feeling of being constantly dirty in the cleanest place in the world.

“Let me get this straight,” said Scabbs. “We’re going to capture Seek and Destroy?”

Kal nodded. He could see Madam Noritake’s up ahead. They were almost there. “I saw them snooping around the docks earlier when I was looking for you and Yolanda. Nemo must have sent them down here to look for the package.”

“So you think Nemo doesn’t have it yet?”

Kal nodded again.

“So why don’t we just find it ourselves?”

Kal stopped and ducked into an alley next to Noritake’s. “Look,” he said. “I see two possibilities. Either Nemo already has the package, in which case we need inside information to get it back.”

“And the second?”

“Nemo doesn’t have it, which means Feg hid it and Nemo’s trying to double-cross him by finding it before he pays for it.”

“So, why don’t we look for it?” Scabbs scratched his chin, obviously perplexed. A large scab came off and landed on his shirt. He brushed it onto the ground.

“Because if Feg hid it, nobody’s going to find it except Feg,” said Kal. “He may be a big bruiser, but he’s still smart enough to outwit Seek and Destroy.”

Scabbs worked at the edges of the spot where the scab had fallen off. “What if Nemo already paid for it and sent the boys out to fetch it?”

Kal was surprised by the question. He hadn’t considered that. As usual he had an answer, even if he had to make it up on the spot. “Then they won’t be at the docks and I’m scavved.”

He pulled Scabbs out of the alley and crossed the street to the Hive City docks. “Show me this warehouse where you first saw Feg,” said Kal. “That seems like the best place to start.”

Scabbs led the way down towards the far end of the docks. “It’s down this way,” said Scabbs as he reached the corner by the wall of the dome.

Kal turned the corner and immediately grabbed Scabbs and pulled him back. “There they are,” he hissed. He glanced back around the corner to see if Seek and Destroy had spotted them. Luckily, it looked like they were too busy arguing to notice anything at the moment.

“What’s the plan?” asked Scabbs.

Kal looked at his little friend and smiled. “You create a diversion.” With that, Kal shoved Scabbs in the back with his boot, sending him sprawling into the middle of the street.

He fell with just a soft thump and an *oof*. Not nearly enough noise to draw the boys down to the corner. But then, being Scabbs, he got up, dusted himself off, turned towards Kal and screamed, “What the scav was that for?”

He immediately threw his hands over his mouth as he turned towards Seek and Destroy. Scabbs’ jaw dropped and Kal heard one of the boys say, “Hey, it’s that ratskin friend of Jerico’s. Get him.”

Scabbs glanced at Kal, his eyebrows raised in a pleading look. Kal mouthed the words “fall down” and pointed at the ground.

Scabbs shrugged, his eyebrows furrowed and mouth half open.

Just then, two las blasts shot past Scabbs on either side of his head. He screamed and ran towards Kal.

“Oh scav,” muttered Kal. He had no choice with what he did next. As Scabbs reached the corner, Kal stuck his foot out and tripped him. Scabbs went down hard. Kal heard something crack and was pretty sure it wasn’t the rockrete street. “Stay down,” hissed Kal. “Time for plan W.”

He ran off down the docks, leaving Scabbs groaning on the ground.

Bobo decided to meet with Princess Jillian first. He didn’t want to appear to be avoiding her because that would show weakness, which he could ill-afford when meeting with the woman whose bed he’d dumped a head in that morning. He also didn’t want to be in that house after dark.

He was led through the Greim estate by a valet dressed in a suit and tie. Bobo marvelled that even the help in the Spire dressed better than the most prominent members of the Hive City houses.

The Greim estate was lush, though nothing so nice as the Helmawr estate. For one thing, they had fewer exterior windows, being located in a mostly interior space of the Spire. Marble columns dotted the expansive foyer leading to a sweeping staircase with real wood banisters engraved with swirling designs along their length and topped by carved lion’s heads at the pedestals. Of course, he’d been up those stairs earlier, but it had been dark.

“Ms. Jillian will meet you in the garden,” said the valet. “I’ll show you the way.”

Bobo waved the valet on ahead. They passed through a corridor lined with portraits of the Greim ancestry. The gold and platinum frames gleamed, but the faces were all dour and stern. Glass double doors at the end of the hall led into the garden.

Bobo stepped out and almost lost his breath. He was outside the Spire, standing on a wide balcony filled with plants and exotic flowers whose multi-coloured blooms strained to get ever closer to the bright sun above. In the middle of the balcony sat Princess Jillian at an iron table eating fresh fruit and what looked like real eggs.



Bobo decided to play this meeting bold and loose. “Little late in the day for breakfast, isn’t it?”

Jillian looked up and waved off the valet. She smiled. “I didn’t sleep at all well this morning,” she said through the smile. “Must have been some problem with my bed.”

Bobo, well-trained in the art of the straight face, simply nodded and sat across from Jillian. She had full, thick, black hair that was currently tied back into an elaborate bun, with what looked like teak wood sticks poking out at odd angles. She was a full figured girl wearing a long, pleated velvet dress and a tight-fitting, low-cut top that accentuated her considerable assets. Perhaps the most striking thing was the black eyeshadow and thick, dark-red blush she wore, which made it very tough to read her expressions.

“A large lump in the mattress?” he asked with an innocent look on his face.

Princess Jillian smiled again, which made Bobo worry that he’d gone too far with his brazen act. “Mr. Bristol,” she began.

“Call me Jackal.”

“Mr. Bristol,” she began again, and Bobo felt a chill run down his spine as the temperature out in the sun seemed to take a nose dive. “I received a message this morning from a rival of mine. I would like to send a reply.”

“Surely your valet can deliver a message for you,” said Bobo.

“Not this message,” said Jillian. “This will require your special expertise.” She pulled an envelope out from beneath her dish and passed it to Bobo. “Inside you will find pictures of Davol Orlock’s sister as well as five thousand credits. I think you know what to do with her head.”

Bobo had a great deal of trouble controlling his face and breath as he accepted the envelope. What had he started here? These nobles were in a price war, but real people were getting hurt. He opened the envelope and took out the pictures. His gasp was quite audible.

“She’s no more than ten,” said Bobo, disgust dripping from every word.

“And your point being?” asked Jillian as she casually buttered her toast. She took a bite and smiled at Bobo as she chewed.

Bobo pressed his feelings into a ball and shoved them back down to a pit in his stomach where they would most certainly fester. “Only that it will take more time to get her alone,” he said. “I assume you wish no collateral damage.”

Jillian dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her napkin. “I think we understand each other,” she said. “Can you show yourself out? I believe you know the way.”

Bobo gladly rose and left the balcony. He waved off the valet as he came rushing towards him.

Scabbs rolled over on his side and wrapped his arms around his chest. He was pretty sure he’d cracked a rib.

“Damn,” he muttered. “Why do I always get hurt when we wing it?”

He tried to pull his laspistol out but every movement shot sharp tendrils of pain deep into his chest and back. He just managed to get the weapon out of its holster as Seek and Destroy came around the corner. One of them kicked his hand as he raised the gun, sending the weapon sliding away and possibly breaking a finger or two.

“Well, well, well,” said the other. “What do we have here?” He kicked Scabbs in the ribs, which drove all of his breath out of his lungs and nearly made him pass out from the pain.

“You shouldn’t ought to have made us run,” said the first. “That makes us mad.”

Scabbs looked up at the two of them. They tried to slap each other’s hands, but one went high and the other low and they ended up hitting each other instead. This led to a brief argument during which Scabbs could only groan in pain.

“Hey Destroy, let’s take him back to Nemo,” said Seek.

“No, you idiot,” said Destroy. “Nemo said not to come back until we find the package.”

“Shut up,” said Seek. “And don’t call me an idiot.”

Scabbs tried to get to his hands and knees as they started punching each other again. They must have both noticed because he got a boot in his stomach and another one in his chest. This time he did lose consciousness for a moment. When he came to, the boys were still standing over him.

Seek snapped his fingers. "I know. He's a ratskin, right? He's gotta be a tracker, right? Let's use him to find the package for us and then we take 'em both back to Nemo."

"Hey, good idea," said Destroy. "Don't sound so surprised."

"Don't take everything so personally, dummy."

They grabbed each other and began wrestling, eventually falling on top of Scabbs.

"I think that's enough, boys!" said Kal a moment later.

Scabbs rolled out from beneath Seek and Destroy and looked up at Kal standing above them all, his pearl-handled laspistols pointing at the leather clad goons. "Sorry," he said. "These warehouses are big. Took me forever to run around behind them."

Scabbs nodded his head and then passed out.

Bobo folded up the envelope full of credits and photos of a little girl he had no intention of killing and stuck it in his inner coat pocket. He'd now made contact with two houses, and neither seemed at all interested in House Helmawr or killing Kal Jerico. Perhaps those two were simply too caught up in their own little rivalry to worry about ascending into the upper Spire.

Since that meeting hadn't taken very long, Bobo decided to pay a visit to the Kitty Club to see if Prince Gregor of House Ulanti had arrived for his afternoon special yet.

The Kitty Club was conveniently located near the entrance to one of the tunnels that ran between the Spire's myriad levels. As Bobo walked in, it took a minute for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The goo globes were no match for the sun's rays.

Before his eyes adjusted, Bobo felt his arms grabbed, and he was pulled forward through a curtain into one of the numerous alcoves situated around the perimeter of the club. Bobo began to wonder if these were ever used for their intended purpose, although their purpose probably was for clandestine meetings.

"Mr. Bristol," said a figure sitting at the table. The goo globe above him provided just enough illumination to see his outline. "Have a seat."

Bobo closed his eyes and felt his way into the booth. "My friends call me Jackal," he said. "Are you my friend?"

Bobo opened his eyes, which had now adjusted enough to see some facial details of the man across the booth from him. He was a large man with a round, plump face and a wide smile. His blue eyes sparkled beneath a thick shock of wavy black hair that seemed just this side of out of control.

"I am Gregor," said the man. "Prince Gregor, of House Ulanti, if you must, but my friends call me Gregor and I truly wish you to be my good friend."

He smiled again as he extended a meaty hand across the table. Bobo had thought the man to be heavy-set when he first saw his shape in the dark, fat from a life of leisure, but there was enormous strength in Gregor's arm and hand and very little flab. His fingers enveloped Bobo's small hand, practically crushing it when he squeezed.

Bobo smiled through the pain. "Thank you for your kind gift Prince, I mean, Gregor. To what do I owe the pleasure of your largesse?"

"I require the services of one such as yourself," he said. As he talked, Gregor kept running his thick fingers through his hair as if something felt out of place up top. As far as Bobo could tell, the prince's constant rearranging never changed a thing. His hair simply returned to the same wavy state after each pass.

"You need a well-dressed, dashing handsome businessman?" asked Bobo, getting into the good natured banter.

Gregor laughed out loud, which was a sight to behold. He threw his arms up in the air and leaned back on the couch and then slammed both hands down flat on the table with such force that Bobo nearly jumped out of his seat.

“No, no, no!” said Gregor. “I need someone trained in the art of death.” His eyes bored a hole into Bobo’s forehead. “I need a killer.”

Bobo resisted the urge to lean in. Perhaps he was finally getting somewhere with this investigation. “Oh?” he asked. “And you believe I have the look of a killer?”

Gregor laughed again, but this time Bobo was ready for the loud crack as his hands smacked the table. “Your reputation proceeds you, Jackal,” he said after the laughter subsided. “I know of your exploits downhive.”

“Well, let’s say I have a certain knack,” said Bobo. “A flair if you will. Was there a specific target you had in mind?”

Gregor shook his head. “Nothing specific,” he said. “I am planning an excursion and wish to take a skilled hunter along with me.”

“Excursion?”

“Into the depths of the Underhive,” said Gregor. His smile returned. “I take an annual trip down into the bowels of this massive city to hunt the most dangerous prey imaginable.”

“Giant spiders?” asked Bobo, hopefully.

“No, you silly assassin,” roared Gregor. “Man!”

Here we go again, thought Bobo.

“The Underhive is full of gangs, you see,” he said as he passed his hands through his hair again. “Very dangerous they are, like cornered animals. Now, I normally go down in a spyer rig, but lately that has lost much of its thrill, so I would like to go on a hunt with just my wits, a kevlar suit and my trusty heavy plasma gun. But I would like a professional along to protect me. Here’s the plan...”

Bobo’s eyes glazed over as Gregor outlined their itinerary using objects from the table to illustrate. He wondered why it seemed that every job these nobles had for him involved killing regular people. But, he realized, his question contained the answer: because they were nobles.

After they dropped all of their weapons, Kal handed the twins some rope and told them to tie each other up. This proved to be too much trouble as they almost instantly began arguing about who would tie up the other first.

Kal blasted the ground next to them to get their attention and pointed at the one wearing the blue bandana tied around his bald head (the other wore a red bandana). “Which one are you?” he asked.

“I’m Seek,” he replied. “That’s Destroy.”

“Nice names,” said Kal. “Tie him up Seek. Nice and tight. In fact, the tighter you make his knots, the looser yours will be. Got it?”

Kal glanced down at Scabbs as Seek got started. From the cursing coming from Destroy’s lips, he knew the blue twin was doing a good job. Scabbs was unconscious, but seemed okay. There were no bones protruding anywhere and just a trickle of drying blood around his mouth. Kal would need to get him somewhere safe where he could recover.

After Seek finished tying up his brother, he looked expectantly at Kal, holding his arms out with his wrists together. Kal smacked the pearl-handled butt of his laspistol into Seek’s jaw, dropping him to the ground.

As he leaned down to tie up Seek, Destroy started laughing. “Good one, Kal. That serves him right for tying me up so tight.” He then kicked his brother in the stomach.

Kal just shook his head. He knew you could always count on family to kick you while you were down. He raised his weapon up towards Destroy. “That’s enough,” he said. “Now, you tell me what Nemo and Feg have planned for the satchel or you’ll be down here on the ground after your brother wakes up, and I’ll tell him you kicked him.”

Destroy's face paled to a deathly white. He began speaking very quickly. "I don't know what Nemo's plan is. He never tells us nothing. But I heard Feg say he was looking for transport up to the Spire."

"Wait," said Kal as he finished tying the knots around Seek's wrists. "You mean Feg and Nemo aren't working together?"

"Course not," said Destroy. "You either work for Nemo or get tortured into working for Nemo."

Kal stood up and trained a gun on each twin again. "Let me get this straight," he said. "Nemo is torturing Feg?"

Destroy nodded his head.

"So Nemo doesn't know where the satchel is yet?" Destroy nodded again.

Kal thought for a moment and an idea sprang into his mind. It was a terrible idea, but it was the only one he had and it was so old and so bad that only Kal Jerico could pull it off.

"Okay," he said. "Here's what we're going to do. When your brother wakes up, you two are going to take me to see Nemo. I know how to get the information out of Feg, but Nemo will have to pay me to get it."

"That's your plan?" asked Destroy. He rolled his eyes and let out a low whistle. "You are scavving crazy, Jerico."

"True," said Kal, smiling. "But it works for me."

## CHAPTER EIGHT: BAIT AND SWITCH

Yolanda tumbled forward, blindfolded, her hands tied behind her back. "This isn't necessary," she said.

"Oh, but I think it is," said the familiar voice. "I know you all too well."

"What do you want from me?" asked Yolanda. Free of the hands that had held her, she whirled around and kicked out, hitting nothing but air.

"Just a little favour," said the man. "You owe it to me."

"I owe you nothing but pain," she said. Yolanda lowered her head and charged blindly towards the voice. Hands caught her before she reached him, pulling her backwards. Kicking out, Yolanda landed a couple of good blows, but whoever held her was strong enough to withstand a few off-balanced kicks.

She reared one leg back, getting ready to snap it down towards what she hoped would be a knee or ankle. But before she unleashed the kick, the hands slammed her back into a chair. She felt a rope go around her waist. She kept kicking, but once they cinched the rope tight, they worked together to grab her legs and tie them to the chair as well.

She couldn't move, so she screamed. "I'll never do anything for you again!" Her blindfold came off and she stared at her father. "You hear me?"

"Never!"

"Oh, but you will," said Lord Catallus. "For if you don't, I will send spyrers down to wipe out your precious Wildcats; every last one of them, and any other Escher women they happen to see along the way."

"You monster!" she screamed.

Yolanda's father simply smiled. He turned to the guards standing beside him. They stopped massaging their thighs and calves long enough to stand straight and salute their lord. "Bring it in," he said.

The guards left the room. "Bring what in?" she asked. "What do you want from me?"

"It's not what I want," said her father. "It's what the house wants: needs actually."

"Let me guess," she said. "More power."

Her father smiled again. "You always were a smart girl," he said. "And you are uniquely qualified to perform this little task for the good of the house."

"Why's that?" spat Yolanda.

"Because it involves your comrade, Kal Jerico," he said. The door opened and the guards returned. Yolanda gasped. "No," she said. "Absolutely not."

"You know we're not supposed to bring anyone here without a blindfold," said Destroy.

Kal walked just behind the two thugs, his hands folded inside his jacket holding his pistols beneath his arm pits. "Don't worry," he said. "I've been here enough times that I already know the way by heart."

"It's just that it'll look funny, us bringing you in without a blindfold."

"But we brought in Feg without a blindfold," said Seek.

Destroy elbowed him in the side.

“Don’t worry, boys,” said Kal. “I’m sure nobody will notice. They’ll all be too impressed by my presence to worry about such trivial matters.”

After a while, the twins led Kal up to a blank wall. Seek stepped forward and tapped out a series of knocks on the wall with his fist, waited for a response, and then rapped out another series of knocks. As the wall slid open, he turned to Kal, his laspistol in hand. “What if we just decide to turn on you right now? We’re bad guys, remember?”

Kal smiled. “Well, for one thing,” he said. “I took the liberty of depleting your power cells before I gave back your weapons.”

Seek popped open the cell compartment and took a look. “Scav!” he said.

“So,” said Kal, showing them his weapons again, “if either of you tries anything while we’re inside, I’ll shoot you both in the back. And if you survive that, you’ll have to face Nemo afterwards. You don’t think he’ll be happy about the two of you showing me the way into his secret base of operations, do you?”

Destroy huffed, his eyebrows crinkling. “You said you knew the way,” he said.

“I lied,” said Kal. “I’m a bad guy, too, remember? Now move in, both of you. And remember: try to get as many guards to follow us as possible.”

“Why do you want the guards?” asked Seek.

“All part of the plan,” said Kal. Just not the plan I told you about, he added to himself.

As they stepped through the opening in the wall, the panel started to slide shut behind them. Kal immediately knew something was wrong. Other than a little ratskin slave operating the wall controls, there was nobody at all in the outer room.

“Where is everybody?” asked Seek.

“I dunno,” said Destroy. “Maybe they smelled you coming.”

As Seek grabbed his brother in a neck hold and tried to wrestle him to the ground, Kal began to hear sounds of a battle from deep inside the complex. Then an explosion shook the room around them. The twins stopped their tussle and looked around.

“Sounds like someone already beat us to the punch,” said Kal. “I guess with that diversion going on, I don’t really need you two any longer.”

Seek and Destroy, still holding each other in bear hugs, looked back at Kal just in time to see the pearl handles of his laspistols come down on their foreheads.

“Looks like we go with plan W as usual,” said Kal as he followed the sounds of battle into the complex.

Gregor had given Bobo a sizeable retainer for his services on the hunt and Bobo, in turn, promised to meet the prince at the wall at dawn the day after the upcoming royal wedding. Gregor couldn’t miss that, of course. Every noble in the Spire was practically required to attend. He’d asked Bobo to stay at the Kitty Club and enjoy some companionship with him in his private suite upstairs, but Bobo begged off, saying he hadn’t eaten all day and needed his strength before he could handle any more pleasure today.

Most of that was the truth. What Bobo didn’t tell the Prince of Ulanti was that he had a meeting with the Duke of Ty at the Grand Sky City Restaurant. However, the real truth of the matter was that for all its finery and pleasures — the sunshine and silk clothes, the clean buildings with no gaping holes blown into them and the cleaner people with their coiffed hair and smooth skin, not to mention the wonderful, fresh air bereft of any tinge of acidic vapour — the Spire was beginning to leave a bad taste in his mouth.

The Grand Sky City Restaurant was just about as close as you could get to the Helmawr estates in the Spire. Of course, there was an entire level of Helmawr guard posts to go through first. Lord Helmawr, and now Kal, were, the most well-protected people on the planet.

The restaurant itself took up the entire outer ring of the level and it rotated. Every table had a window seat, and if your meal took long enough, you would get to see the entire vista surrounding the Spire. Of course, with the ever-present cloud cover a mile beneath the windows, there really wasn't that much to see.

The Duke didn't so much have a table as an entire section of the restaurant to himself. He was a darkish man with close-cropped, tightly curled, black hair. In the dim light of the restaurant — the sun had gone down below the clouds as Bobo had wound his way up from the Kitty Club — the whites around the Duke's dark-brown irises nearly glowed. He stood and smiled a bright white smile as Bobo was escorted to his table.

"Mr. Bristol," he said, and then corrected himself. "I mean, Jackal. I know how you like to use first names."

Bobo marvelled once again at the speed with which information moved around the Spire. He bowed and said, "At your service..."

The duke picked up on the hint immediately. "You may call me Derokin," he said and then laughed. "My actual name is much longer and more difficult, even for me to pronounce. My mother was quite interested in preserving the ancient culture of our ancestors and went a bit overboard on naming."

Bobo smiled. On the outside, most of the Spire nobles seemed so kind and affable, but only when they thought you an equal or needed something from you. So far, none of them had any respect for anyone beneath the wall.

"Please sit and order," said Derokin. "It takes forever to get your food here. I guess they have to wait for the doors to line up between the dining hall and the kitchens. At least we have the view to pass the time."

Bobo looked out the bank of windows and saw that they were just in time to witness the colour shift from orange to red to purple as the sunlight streamed through the clouds. He had thought that only someone like him could truly appreciate that sight, but perhaps this duke was different after all. Bobo tore his gaze from the window and ordered a steak with all the trimmings. He had no idea what that meant, but he figured he'd be able to eat the steak if nothing else.

After the sun finally set and the spectacular light show concluded, Derokin turned back to Bobo and said, "Well, we should talk before our meals come. I always like to get business out of the way before a meal."

Bobo took a sip of the wine that had been placed in front of him and marvelled at its smoothness and heady aroma. "A fine strategy," he said. "How may I be of service to the House of Ty?"

"Well," said Derokin. "We have been having some trouble in our dealings with House Ran Lo," he said.

Bobo kept his demeanour calm, nodded his head, and even managed to smile at the appropriate times as Derokin laid out a plan whereby Bobo would make his way down to Hive City and blow up a Van Saar weapons plant that had an exclusive contract with House Ran Lo. The duke would then be able to sell his weapons made in a different plant for a much greater profit while the Van Saar plant was rebuilt.

"And how do I limit collateral damage?" asked Bobo. "A weapons plant is sure to make quite a large hole in the City. Not to mention the potential for a massive hive quake."

"Oh, most certainly," said Derokin. "It will be spectacular. But I doubt we'll feel anything up here other than a small rumble. Just make sure it appears to be an accident. Shouldn't be too much of a problem, though. Those downhivers aren't all that bright."

Bobo hid his reaction behind the glass as he drained its contents. He waved at the waiter for another glass. It was going to be a long night.

Kal ran blindly through Nemo's lair, opening and glancing through doors, looking for the source of the battle sounds. Every once in while, he'd feel another explosion rock the entire building. He had

some idea of where he was going. He'd lied twice to the twins. He had been here enough times to sort of know his way around. He'd just never been through that particular secret entrance before. Nemo undoubtedly had several.

He finally found a door that opened onto a staircase leading down. The battle sounded much closer now. He checked the levels on his laspistols and patted his pocket where he'd put Seek's and Destroy's extra power packs. He slipped down the stairs and glanced around the wall at the bottom.

There, in the middle of the room, stood a large man wearing an Orrus spyer rig holding one of Nemo's henchmen off the ground by his neck. The rest of the guards were already dead. "Tell me where I can find the one-armed brute that blew me up," he growled.

"I think you'll find he can talk a lot better if you don't crush his windpipe," said Kal.

The spyer whirled around and pointed his other hand at Kal. From his vantage point, Kal could see the tip of the explosive bolt snap into the chamber. He held his hands up, palms forward, leaving his fingers lightly on the triggers of his laspistols, just in case.

"Whoa there, big fella," said Kal. "I'm on your side." Kal had no idea if that was true, but considering his options this deep into Nemo's base, it seemed safer to be on the side of the Spyer.

The sweaty, heavily-bearded and yet oddly bald man gave Kal a quizzical look. "Jerico?" he said. "Kal Jerico? You're supposed to be getting ready for your wedding."

Then it started to click in with Kal. He'd met this behemoth before, sans spyer rig, of course. He was some military general or something of Helmawr's. In fact, Kal recognized the man's voice. He'd been talking to Valtin remotely in his office when Kal had been eavesdropping.

What was his name? Kal snapped his fingers. "Kraferin, right?" he said.

"Katerin," he replied, deadpan. "Captain Katerin."

Kal snapped his fingers again. "Right, right. Valtin gave me some time off to come down and help you get the package back."

"I don't need any help," said Katerin.

The guard's eyes were beginning to bulge and his face was turning blue from lack of air.

"That's exactly what I told Valtin," said Kal. "But here I am. So why don't you put that poor guard down and let's find that satchel. I'll just follow your lead."

Katerin looked back and forth between Kal and the nearly unconscious guard for a moment before dropping the man and pointing his armed fist at him. "Talk, you!" he growled.

Kal smiled. Military men were so easy to manipulate. All any of them wanted was a little recognition for their work. That and the chance to blow things up from time to time.

"The guard coughed for a minute before looking up and asking What was the question?"

"Where's the one-armed brute who blew me up?" said Katerin.

Kal could tell the guard had no idea what Katerin meant, so he cut in. "Where's Nemo holding Feg?" When Katerin glared at him, Kal shrugged. "The one-armed brute is Vandal Feg. He has the satchel. He blew you up?"

"Somebody did while I was following this Feg character."

Kal and Katerin looked back at the guard. "Well?" they both asked at the same time.

"In the torture room," said the guard.

Katerin reached down and picked the guard up by the collar. "Take us there," he said, adding under his breath, "Man's going to pay for trying to blow me up."

As the guard led them down into the recesses of Nemo's lair, Kal got an idea. "You know, Kater... captain," he said. "I doubt it was Feg who tried to blow you up. It was probably Nemo. You know, master spy. You were in his tunnel. He probably did it to protect his secret base; not that it helped though."

"Makes sense," said Katerin.

Of course it does, thought Kal, smiling. The best lies always make sense. Kal had no idea he'd hit on the exact truth. He'd just pieced together a convincing story based on the information he



knew; a story intended to make Captain Katerin behave exactly like Kal needed him to behave during the next stage of plan W.

House Ran Lo had a much different feel to it than House Greim or any other spot within the Spire that Bobo had seen. Where Greim had been imposing with marble floors and columns, the Ran Lo estate felt more like a garden. They were blessed with southern exposure and had put it to great use, replacing nearly the entire back wall of the estate with windows.

Bobo could see thousands of pinpoints of light in the night sky through those windows, and once again marvelled at the grand beauty of the Spire, which was so tainted by the lust for power of all its residents.

He entered the estate through a wooden gazebo bedecked with tangles of ivy that seemed to pulse and constrict as he brushed past them, climbing roses with enormous thorns and some odd-looking plant with fuzzy foliage that looked more like tentacles than leaves. On the other side, he walked down a path of pebbles set in a garden of spiked grass, exotic plants that had deep, pitcher-like bulbs, trees with waving, low-hanging limbs and bushes adorned with bright red flowers and long stamens that seemed to wave at him as he passed. In fact, throughout his trip through the garden, Bobo couldn't shake the feeling that all the plants were watching and waiting for him to step off the path.

He passed many side paths curving around towards the back of the estate. He also passed guards at regular intervals. Somehow they all knew who he was and why he was here — something even Bobo didn't know yet. In the centre of the garden stood a mansion of natural wood and glass.

The Ran Lo manor seemed to almost grow naturally out of the garden. It was a large, low building; just a single floor, but had no right angles that Bobo could see. Even the door was oddly shaped, almost like a peanut.

The door opened as he approached. He entered a circular room with a wood floor that seemed to have been sliced from an enormous tree. Rings of alternating browns emanated from the centre and grew in size all the way out to the edges of the room. Bobo wanted to get a closer look, to see if it was truly natural or simply another unnatural design, but a manservant appeared from behind the door.

A small man, even by Bobo's standards, the manservant was also quite old. He walked with the stoop of the aged, but kept a permanent smile on his leathery, olive-yellow face. He motioned for Bobo to follow and led him into the house.

As he walked behind the manservant, Bobo soon realized he would need to be escorted out of this mansion. It was a maze of strangely shaped rooms all connected to one another through open doorways. There were no halls and no doors inside but each room had so many exits to other rooms, it was dizzying.

The manservant finally led him into an office. In the middle of the room sat a middle-aged man behind a large, birch desk. He had straight hair that might once have been jet black, but was now mottled with grey. A small nose jutted out beneath oval eyes on his almond-coloured face. It was the eyes that drew Bobo's attention. They seemed to pierce him as soon as he walked in.

The man stood and bowed slightly. "Good evening, Mr. Bobo. Thank you so much for coming to meet with me in my humble house."

Bobo was so taken aback by the gracious nature of his host that he completely forgot to ask to be called by his first name. "I appreciate the invitation... and the gift," he said.

The elder Ran Lo waved his hand at a high-backed, leather chair. "Please sit and we shall conduct our business. Sing will bring us some tea."

As Bobo took his seat, the manservant left, closing the door.

"What can I do for you?" Bobo trailed off, finally realizing that the elderly man had used his real name.

Ran Lo smiled a very disconcerting smile. Not quite an all-knowing Kal Jerico smirk, but close.

After a rather long pause Ran Lo said, "It's not what you can do for me, Mr. Bobo, but what I can do for you."

There followed another pause. Bobo was still smart enough to not give anything more away than he already had. He scanned the wall behind Ran Lo looking for any means of escape or any weapons.

Ran Lo kept his eyes firmly on Bobo. "I can free you of Hermod Kauderer's grasp, or rather pay you to free yourself."

He tossed Bobo a large envelope. "A down payment for your services," said Ran Lo.

Bobo opened the envelope. It was jammed full with credits. Something stuck up from the bundle — a photo. He pulled it out.

"That," said Ran Lo, "is my insurance policy. A Miss Jenn Strings, I believe. Quite lovely by downhive standards. She's under the watchful eye of someone in my employ, a small lady I believe you know as Madam Noritake."

Bobo reminded himself to breathe. He needed to stay focused, but the thought of Jenn in trouble made his heart rate quicken and his breath run shallow.

"You will take care of Hermod Kauderer for me, Mr. Bobo or Madam Noritake will take care of Jenn for you."

He glanced at an ornate clock with hands that looked like tree branches and numbers fashioned from leaves. "Oh my," he said. "You'd best hurry. You don't want to be late for your meeting with Hermod."

Sing came in with the tea on a tray. "I'm sorry you won't be able to stay for tea, Mr. Bobo," said Ran Lo. "Mr. Sing will show you the way out. Please conclude our business before you leave the Spire. Good night."

Bobo left the Ran Lo grounds in a daze. What had he gotten himself into? What had he gotten Jenn into? He ran towards the library, completely forgetting to follow Kauderer's safety protocols.

It didn't take Kal and Katerin long to make their way to the torture chamber. Katerin had already wiped out a significant portion of Nemo's guards. Nemo must have called in all of his guards as soon as the spyer-suited warrior had breached the lair. That plan had backfired as it left the rest of the building completely empty.

Kal was beginning to worry that Nemo might have taken Feg and escaped already, or worse, killed the bruiser to keep his secret safe. They would know soon enough. Their guide showed them the door to the torture chamber, but before he could open it, Kal pistol-whipped the poor guard at the base of the neck. He dropped at their feet and then Kal opened the door.

A hail of bullets screamed into the hallway from inside. Kal dived to the side, hoping the walls of Nemo's base were made of heavy-duty rockcrete.

"Autocannon," he yelled at Katerin. "Looks like they've been waiting for us."

"Now this is more like it," said Katerin. "Let's see how they like this..."

He locked two shells into place and, just as Kal shouted "Nooo!", fired them into the room. "Feg may be in there, too," yelled Kal. "We need him alive."

He had to admit that the autocannon had stopped, though. Kal crawled forward and peered inside. He could see the huge barrel of the cannon still spinning in the middle of the room, but there was nobody at the controls anymore. A shadow moved towards the big gun from the side. Kal jumped to his feet and ran forward, firing with both pistols.

Blasts impacted the back wall to either side of the guard moving towards the autocannon. Kal re-sighted and shot again. This time both shots hit their mark and the man dropped to the ground with holes in his chest and stomach.

"I'm going for the cannon," said Kal. "Cover me!"

He sprinted forward, not even waiting for a reply. He heard the unmistakable sound of explosive shells being launched behind him and ducked as he ran.

A moment later, Kal was standing behind the auto-cannon, which had been set up on a tripod. He whirled it around and began spraying the room with bullets. Guards dived and rolled or died where they were standing. As he pelted the room with gunfire, Kal could see they weren't in the torture room, but in a guard post.

The autocannon sat in the middle. To each side were several tables, presumably for the guards to use for eating and playing cards. The tables had been overturned to use as barricades, but they did little to slow the barrage of bullets from their own heavy weapon. A row of thick metal doors with small, bar-covered windows spanned the back wall of the room. They'd found Nemo's prison block.

"It's beautiful!" yelled Kal as he held the trigger down and swept the gun back and forth around almost the entire perimeter of the room. No need to worry about collateral damage. Even if he hit Katerin, the noble captain's rig would surely protect him. Then the gun jammed. A moment later, the guards who had hidden behind the farthest tables stood back up and opened fire again.

Kal dove behind the autocannon and crawled away looking for cover. He found an overturned table and crawled behind it, being careful not to slide in the pool of blood. Peeking over the top with his laspistols in hand, Kal watched as Katerin stomped to the far end of the room, right into the middle of the guards behind the last table and began bashing heads with his hydraulic powered fists. It was bloody and it was short.

"Which one's Nemo?" said Katerin, looking at the pile of dead bodies around him.

"None of them," said Kal. "My guess is that Nemo's with Feg. That's his only bargaining chip left." Kal looked around the room. There was the door they had entered, four cell doors along the back wall and one more door on each side. "One of these two," he said, pointing to the side doors.

Katerin didn't wait to talk strategy. He simply kicked the bodies out of his way and opened the nearest door. Kal shrugged and waited to see what would happen next.

Katerin raised his hands, clicked two shells into place and entered. "You Nemo?" he asked as he went through the door.

Kal slipped around the table and moved towards the door, making sure he couldn't be seen by anyone in the next room. He listened to the exchange as he moved.

"Stop right there," said Nemo. Kal knew that muffled, yet incredibly sinister voice anywhere. "One more step and Mr. Feg's head becomes a molten puddle of goo."

"That satchel is royal property," said Katerin. "If you destroy that man's head, you will be obstructing a royal inquiry. The penalty for that is death."

Kal shook his head. Nobles. Hrmph. The man had no tact. No flair. Kal peered through the crack in the door to locate Nemo. He needed more information before he acted. Most of the room was blocked from view as Katerin had stopped on the other side of the door, but he could just make out the glint off the master spy's dark helmet in the middle of the room.

Nemo wasn't one to make idle threats, so he must have some weapon trained on Feg, although Kal couldn't see the one-armed scummer yet. One thing Kal knew about dealing with Nemo was that the only way to bargain with him was to change the odds. Kal fingered his laspistol, stepped out from behind the door, sighted and fired.

His shot flew true, blasting a meltagun right out of Nemo's hand.

"Jerico!" screamed Nemo. He reached into his jacket and tossed something at them as he dived to the side.

The room exploded with light and sound. Nemo had thrown a flash bomb. Kal was blinded, but he was pretty sure the Orrus rig came complete with a photo visor or at least photo contacts. Katerin should be able to see.

"What's going on?" he called out as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Nemo opened a tunnel and took off," yelled Katerin. "I'm going after the bastard."

“You go ahead,” said Kal. “I’ll safeguard Feg.”

A few moments later, once Kal could see again, he bolstered his weapons and sauntered over to Feg, who looked like he’d been slung from the top of some sadistic cage. “Hello Vandal,” he said, smiling. “I’m here to rescue you.”

Feg spat at him, but Kal was ready for that move and sidestepped. The second wad of spittle, though, smacked him right between the eyes.

“Now, now,” said Kal. “Any more of that and I won’t get you out of here.”

“What’s the catch?” asked Feg.

“I get you out of Nemo’s clutches and you lead me to the satchel,” said Kal. “If you’re a good boy, I’ll even get my contacts to pay you for it. Or you could wait for mister ‘No Personality’ to come back.”

“Phah,” said Feg. “Which one’s that?”

“Either,” said Kal. “Deal or no deal?”

Feg looked at Kal and he could tell that the chained up bruiser was thinking about launching another wad of spit at him. Instead, he swallowed the spit along with his pride and said, “Deal.”

Kal looked at the structure. It wasn’t so much a cage as an elaborate crucifix. Lattice beams had been attached to Feg’s body and limbs by ropes. These beams were roped together in such a way that they held the scummer with his arm and legs spread out horizontal over the floor. Pipes attached to the beam structure hung down to the ground all around the huge man. Kal had no idea what those were for and wanted ever so much to twist a few to see if they hurt Feg.

What he really needed was to find a way to release the scummer as quickly as possible. The “cage” had been hoisted two metres off the ground by ropes attached to a pulley at the ceiling. The rope snaked its way through a few more pulleys towards a side wall and down to a large winch.

“Hmmm,” said Kal. He pulled out his sabre and gave the ropes a good whack.

“Nooo,” said Feg as the ropes went slack. His exclamation was cut short as he dropped to the floor, face first.

“Perfect,” said Kal. “Now, let’s get out of here.”

Bobo had no idea what he was going to say to Kauderer when he got to the meeting spot. Kill Kauderer or lose Jenn. It wasn’t like he had strong feelings for either one. Kauderer was his boss. Jenn was his girl as long as he had enough credits to keep her that way. One thing was certain. Bobo was tired of everyone else knowing more about him than he knew about them.

He decided to play dumb with Kauderer, since that wouldn’t be much of a stretch.

“You buffoon,” said Kauderer from the shadows of the stacks. “You made such a racket coming up here, I’m surprised you didn’t wake the spirit of the first librarian.”

Bobo dropped into his chair at the study carrel. “What happened to him?” he asked. “Who?”

“The first librarian,” said Bobo with a sigh. “I assume something tragic happened or you wouldn’t have mentioned it.”

“He fell off the top bridge while carrying a large load of books,” said Kauderer. “Never mind. What have you learned today?”

Bobo was glad he’d at least been able to derail Kauderer’s initial anger. Now he needed to feel his way along with just enough truth to draw out what Kauderer already knew about his day.

“None of them seem at all interested in House Helmawr,” he said. “They’re all too caught up in their petty bickering about Hive City contracts.”

“Oh?”

“Princess Jillian wants to get back at Prince Granit with yet another head in the bed,” said Bobo, ticking off the nobles on his fingers. “While the Duke of Ty wants me to blow up some manufacturing plant to honk off the Ran Lo family. Oh, and for a nice diversion from all the infighting, I can go on a gang hunt with Prince Gregor down in the Underhive.”

“What did House Ran Lo want?” asked Kauderer.

“I’m sorry,” said Bobo, buying some time. “What?”

He could see Kauderer’s eyes narrow in the gloom. “House Ran Lo,” he said. “What did that old bastard want?”

Bobo could tell by Kauderer’s tone of voice that there was definitely some history between them. “Nothing,” he said, finally. “He wanted me to get take care of some contract dispute he was having with House Ty. I think it was over that Hive City plant the duke wanted me to blow up.”

“Hmmm,” said Kauderer. “That doesn’t seem his style. Oh well, give me the particulars about each job and we’ll get started on them. Then maybe something will shake loose from somewhere else. Once everyone in the hive knows you can handle any situation, the assassin will most certainly come to you. Oh, and I’ll need your retainer fees. These will be expensive operations.”

“No,” said Bobo.

“What do you mean, no?” snapped Kauderer. “Give me the money. It belongs to House Helmawr, not you.”

“No,” said Bobo again. “I mean, I’m not giving you the particulars about the jobs. These jobs are not to be done. Okay?”

Kauderer began to fume. “What?” he got out at last.

“Don’t you get it?” asked Bobo. “Nobody in any of the other houses has anything to do with the assassination attempt. They’re all too caught up in their own bickering to care about Helmawr. Everything they do hurts people down in Hive City. My people. So, no. That’s it. I’m out.”

Kauderer exploded out of his chair, towering over Bobo. “You’re not out until I say you’re out,” he said through clenched teeth. Even in the gloom of the library, Bobo felt cowed by the tall man’s overpowering presence. “Now give me your instructions and your fees and then go wait in your apartment until I contact you again.”

Bobo fingered the knife he always kept in his pocket. It was small enough that he could palm it or place it in places where it wouldn’t be found except under the most intense searches, but he knew at least a dozen places where he could stick it into a man that would result in death.

He got up and walked away. “I threw it all off the bridge before I came in,” he said as he walked away. It was at least partially true. He’d shredded the instructions and photos and let them drift away on the breeze as he ran across the bridge. The packets full of credits were in a safe place.

Kauderer let him go. Bobo wasn’t sure he would, but neither of them wanted to draw any attention to their clandestine meeting. Bobo still had his hand on the knife, but he knew he wasn’t safe.

As he walked, Bobo wondered if he and Jenn could lose themselves in the Underhive before Ran Lo got the word out. But first he had to get to Jenn. “I’ve got to get out of the Spire,” he said to himself as he trudged across the bridge. “Away from all of this nasty Spire politics and away from that son of a bitch, Kauderer.”

As Bobo stepped off the bridge, a voice from the darkness replied. “I can help you with that if you’d like.”

After re-attaching his mechanical arm, Vandal Feg led Kal out of Nemo’s lair through a different secret entrance. Kal wasn’t happy about giving the brute his arm back, but he knew that if this “partnership” was going to work, he needed Feg at his best, and that meant allowing him to have his big, mechanical toy.

“Where are we going?” asked Kal as they trudged through the tunnel.

“You’ll find out when we get there, Jerico,” said Feg. He stretched and flexed his muscles, practically scraping the ceiling of the tunnel with the outstretched claws on his mechanical arm. Kal heard a series of pops and cracks, but wasn’t sure if it came from the man’s sore joints or from the big metal arm.

“Feels good to get out of that stretcher,” said Feg. “I owe you one.”

“At least,” said Kal.

Feg stopped and whirled around. “Just one!” he said. “And I’ll pick when you get it, got it?”

Kal tossed his hands up. “You’re the boss, Vandal,” he said. “Just remember our deal. You give me the package, and if you’re a good boy and don’t try to double-cross me, you’ll even get paid for it.”

Feg snorted. “And where are you going to get that kind of cred?”

“My family has deep pockets,” said Kal, “and at the moment, I hold the purse strings. Now move it. That noble captain won’t buy us much time with Nemo.”

They continued down the tunnel in silence for a while.

“What set him off on Nemo like that?” asked Feg. “I was sure he’d stay and try to beat the package out of me.”

Me too, thought Kal before answering. “He had some grudge against Nemo, something about blowing him up...”

Kal’s voice trailed off as they came to a pile of rubble blocking their path.

“Hey, this wasn’t here when I came through earlier,” said Feg.

“That’s because Nemo blew it up when he saw the royals chasing after you,” said Kal. “Damn, I was right. Who knew?”

“What?”

“Nothing,” said Kal. “Katerin must have found a way through here. You got a light beam on that mechanical arm of yours?”

Feg glared at Kal but then switched on the beam attached to his mechanical arm and shined it around the pile of rubble. Up towards the top, he halted the beam at what looked to be a small opening.

“I don’t know if I can squeeze through there,” said Feg. “You better go first, skinny.”

“Right,” said Kal. “Like I’m going to fall for that. I’m staying right behind you the whole way, with my guns levelled at your head.”

Feg shrugged and started to climb the pile. Kal thought he’d won that round a little too easily and decided to stay close in case Feg tried to bolt once he got to the other side. However, right after Feg made it through the hole, he turned off his beam.

Kal scrambled through the hole and stood up on the other side. A horrible grinding sound made him dive for cover. Feg had his chainsword out.

The scummer revved the chainsword, which sent off sparks that fell onto the pile about three metres above him. At least now Kal had some idea where he was standing. He shot off two las blasts from his guns, but saw them impact another ten metres past where he thought Feg ought to be. Worse, he felt a low rumbling right after the impact.

“No good, Jerico,” said Feg. “You use those pea shooters in here and the whole place will collapse. Which one of us you think has the better chance to dig his way out?” he laughed and advanced from the side, sparks flying and outlining his legs as he moved.

Kal holstered his guns and pulled out his sabre. It didn’t seem much of a fair fight against the chainsword. Then again, Kal didn’t fight fair.

He stayed low as the brute advanced. Luckily, his eyes were adjusting to the gloom of the tunnel again, so he could see the looming shape before it got to him. Kal grabbed a handful of mortar dust and flung it up high, hoping to hit Feg’s eyes.

As Vandal screamed, Kal scrambled forward, up the incline of the pile. He swiped at Vandal’s knee with his sabre. The blade bit deep into his flesh but Vandal Feg was one tough bastard, right down to his skin, and Kal didn’t get much power behind the swing.

Vandal turned and swung his chainsword blindly in a long arc. The tip cut into the shoulder of Kal’s leather coat as he tried to get farther up the pile of debris.

Kal stood and turned around. He stuck his finger through the hole in his coat and screamed. "Look what you did! That is it! You're a dead man, Feg. I don't care about the scavving medicine. You cut my coat. Now, I'm going to kill..."

Vandal cut his tirade short with a roundhouse punch to Kal's jaw. Kal dropped to the ground. Feg stood over him, waiting for Kal to get up. When he didn't, Feg said, "That's one, Jerico. And that's all you get."

Feg shut down his chainsword and strode off around the pile of debris and disappeared back into the tunnel.

Kal rolled over and smiled. "One was all I needed, Vandal."

Seek and Destroy woke up at the same time, rolled over and looked at each other.

"We're in deep trouble, brother," they said simultaneously. Then they both nodded at each other.

"Let's get out of here," they said in unison, but knocked their heads together as they stood up.

Destroy pushed his brother back down and opened the secret entrance, and then to make sure they stopped saying the same things, he added, "Dinglesnort."

"What the scav?" asked Seek.

"I said 'dinglesnort'," said Destroy. "Bet you weren't expecting that."

Seek sat up and pointed behind his brother. "No, what the scav is that?"

Destroy turned around just in time to get slammed into the floor by the flying Wotan.

The metal mastiff landed on his chest and began barking and growling.

"Get him off me!" yelled Destroy. "Get him off of me!"

Seek just began to laugh. "Ha, ha, ha. I remember this one," he said. "That dog just loves you."

"Shoot him, will you?"

Seek grabbed his lasgun, but then stopped. "Jerico drained our power cells, remember?"

Wotan continued to bark and growl and snap at Destroy's neck. Seek stood and backed away, edging around the room towards the door.

"Don't you leave me," cried Destroy. "Don't you dare leave me."

"I was just going to go get some help," said Seek. "Honest."

"Liar." Destroy got one arm free and put it up over his face, but instead of protecting himself, he just gave Wotan something else to snap at. Wotan closed his jaw around the forearm. Destroy took in a huge breath, getting ready to scream, but there was no pain.

"What the scav?" he said.

Wotan backed up, stepping off Destroy's chest, but held onto the arm, effectively pulling Destroy to his feet. It was either that or lose his arm.

"What's he doing?" asked Seek.

"I don't know but I wish he'd stop."

Wotan growled and pulled on Seek, leading him down into Nemo's lair.

"I've got an idea," said Seek. He grabbed the stick the ratskin used to tap out the code on the door and tossed it back through the secret entrance.

Wotan didn't even seem to notice. He just kept growling and pulling Destroy on into the lair.

"You don't suppose he's looking for Jerico, do you?" asked Destroy.

Wotan stopped.

Destroy looked down at the metal mastiff. "Jerico?" he said again.

Wotan released his arm and barked.

Destroy nodded at the dog. "Sure," he said. "We'll take you to Jerico." Behind his back, Destroy waved his brother towards the door. He moved forward a little and looked at Wotan.

"Come on, boy," he said. "This way. Jerico's down here." He moved on and then added. "Get Jerico, Wotan. Get Jerico."

As soon as the mastiff began running down the steps, Destroy turned and bolted for the door, slapping his brother in the shoulder along the way to get him to run.

“Come on, stupid,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.” Seek ran after his brother and tackled him. “Don’t call me stupid,” he said as he began punching.



## CHAPTER NINE: OVER THE EDGE

Vandal Feg slipped through the blasted opening of Nemo's tunnel and stepped onto the roof of the warehouse. He glanced around and then trotted off towards the edge of the roof. Grabbing the rungs of the ladder, he swung around and descended from view.

Scabbs gave Feg a few moments to reach the bottom before crawling out from beneath the air duct where he'd been hiding for the last hour. He pushed aside the pile of trash in front of him and tiptoed across the roof. He got to the edge just in time to see Feg turn the corner, heading towards the back of the docks.

"I sure hope this works, Kal," he muttered as he pulled out the blindsnake pouch he'd snatched from Sonny's body a few days earlier. He opened the top of the pouch and stuck a finger inside. The gooey paste felt like something he'd avoid stepping on, and when he pulled his paste-covered finger back out, he realized it smelled much worse than anything he'd ever stepped in.

Scabbs wiped the paste on the top of the ladder and then climbed down and slapped another splotch of it at the bottom. Ratskins made the vile stuff from the venom of the albino blindsnake and some secret fungi that Scabbs figured must stink from the Hive Bottom to the top of the Spire.

He'd been wearing the pouch ever since Yolanda had killed Sonny. It was supposed to imbue the wearer with a sixth sense against incoming attacks. Of course, it hadn't worked so well for either himself or Sonny, so maybe using it to mark Feg's trail was a better use for it anyway.

It was a typical Kal Jerico plan: long and complicated. Kal figured Feg would never tell him the location of the satchel. The man was too tough to break and carried a grudge too long to be bought out. So, they had to make him believe he'd escaped free and clear and then follow him to the hiding place. After Scabbs got knocked out, Kal had left him at Madam Noritake's with Bobo's girlfriend, Jenn, and then laid out the plan for Jenn to tell Scabbs when he woke up.

Scabbs' job was to keep tabs on the one-armed scummer until Kal showed up. That's where the blind-snake pouch came into the plan. Scabbs needed some way to mark a trail for Kal to follow as he shadowed Feg.

He stuck his finger back into the pouch to get another glob of goo and trotted after Feg. At every intersection, he glanced around the edge to make sure Feg was still ahead of him, waited for the big brute to turn another corner, and then slapped some paste on the wall and ran after him again.

Luckily, it was late enough in the day that the docks were practically deserted. Most of the workers were either home having dinner or inside Madam Noritake's partaking in a different kind of feast. That left Feg and Scabbs to themselves as Vandal ran towards his prize while Scabbs kept tabs on him.

Scabbs just hoped Kal wasn't too far behind, because Vandal was heading straight towards the warehouse with the exit tunnel and he didn't want to have to try to follow the brute down that hole.

"Helmawr's rump!" said Scabbs as Feg opened the supposedly boarded-up door of the warehouse with the smuggling tunnel and slipped inside.

The little ratskin made an executive decision. There was nowhere for Feg to go at this point but back into the docks or out into the Ash Wastes. If Feg came back out before Kal arrived, he could just follow him again. If he went into the wastes, well Kal would know what to do. One thing

Scabbs knew, there was no way he would follow that maniac into the wastes alone. So he decided to wait it out.

After a few long minutes of intolerable silence, Scabbs heard someone kick a stone behind him. He turned, a smile spreading across his face, expecting to see Kal.

“Well now! Well now,” said the dock guard. “What do we have here?”

“And who might you be?” asked Bobo of the man in the dark. “Let me guess, the Duke of Catallus.”

“Wrong!” said the shadowy figure. “I will explain, but not here. If you wish to leave the Spire alive, and wealthy, follow me.”

The figure slipped away from the bridge abutment and darted across the street towards an alley. Bobo could just barely make out his form in the dark as the man stepped into the alley. A moment later, a shadowy arm snuck out of the black alley and beckoned him in.

Bobo had little choice. Ran Lo had put him on a deadly clock and Kal’s wedding was in the morning. He was out of time. Bobo checked behind him for Kauderer, but even if the master spy was there, Bobo knew he had little chance of seeing him. He shrugged and trotted across the street into the alley. He kept his hand on the knife in his pocket just in case.

“Okay,” he said into the darkness. “I’m here. Tell me what this is about or I’m gone.”

“Certainly, Mr. Bobo,” said the man in the dark. “Yes, I know your real name. My employer saw through Kauderer’s alias quite quickly. But now it seems that we are both in unique positions.”

Bobo was getting impatient. “Get to the point,” he said. “What does your employer want?”

“Due to your current disaffected position vis-à-vis your current employer, you are in the unique position of being able to make your alias permanent,” said the man, ignoring Bobo’s request for a more direct conversation. “And my employer, needing the services of a man not only with your skills but your access to House Helmawr and your dislike of certain men in charge of said house, is in the unique position of being able to grant that permanent transfer, assuming you perform one task for him.”

Bobo almost followed all of that, and it seemed they had finally come to the point in the conversation when he could ask a direct question and maybe even receive an answer. “Fine,” he said. “What is the task?”

“Why, to kill Kal Jerico before he marries and gets crowned Lord of Hive Primus, of course.”

“Of course,” said Bobo. “And I do this for your employer why?”

“Upon successful completion of the requested task,” said the man, “my employer will be in a position to grant you any request you wish. You could even leave Necromunda with your little girlfriend and start a new life elsewhere, perhaps as Jackal Bristol.”

“And how would I afford to live the life of Jackal Bristol?” asked Bobo. He still couldn’t see well enough in the dark to get more than a silhouette of the man. “Mr. Bristol has expensive tastes.”

“My employer is prepared to pay you the sum of one hundred thousand credits for the successful completion of this task, plus clandestine transport off Necromunda.”

Bobo gasped. That sum of money was so beyond anything he’d ever imagined that he momentarily lost control of his normally guarded emotions. He recovered quickly. “And how can your employer afford such an amount?”

“Let’s just say he has connections to the wealth of the Spire and, once Kal Jerico is dead, he plans to solidify those connections even further.”

“When do I get to meet this employer of yours?” asked Bobo. But the silhouette was already fading away as the man moved off down the alley.

“Tomorrow at the wedding, Mr. Bobo,” he said as he left. “Instructions and gear will be waiting for you in your apartment.”

“Gear?” asked Bobo, but there was nobody there to answer his question.

The guard had a laspistol in one hand and a billy club in the other. His uniform had been recently cleaned and pressed and all his buttons were not only intact but polished to a bright sheen. All Scabbs had was his blindsnake pouch, which once again had failed to warn him about someone sneaking up behind him.

“There’s been an awful lot of commotion around the docks lately,” said the guard. “You know anything about all that?”

Scabbs shook his head, but the guard didn’t seem convinced.

“I think you do,” said the guard. “See, I’ve noticed you skulking around here quite a bit the last few days. Now, you can either tell me what you know, or Mr. Billy here will begin prodding your memory for you.”

He shook the club menacingly; obviously wanting to make sure his threat didn’t remain even thinly veiled.

Scabbs tried to think of some lie to tell the guard that would sound convincing enough to stave off another beating, but he wasn’t an accomplished liar like Kal. The best he could come up with was, “I’m looking for a friend?”

“Your friend’s not here right now, is he?” said the guard. “It’s just you and me. Now, tell me what you know, Scabbs, or Mr. Billy and I persuade you to talk.”

Scabbs was about to spill his guts when he realised the guard had called him by his name. He hadn’t given his name yet. He stammered a little to buy some time as he scrutinized the guard a little closer. The polished buttons, the clean uniform, and Scabbs now noticed that the guard’s laspistol had a pearl-handled grip, just like Kal’s.

“That’s an expensive gun,” said Scabbs finally.

The guard stopped shaking the club and stared at Scabbs. “Huh?” He glanced at the gun. “What’s that got to do with the whereabouts of your friend?”

Scabbs suppressed a smile as a Kal Jerico plan formed in his head. “I’m just saying that a gun like that must have taken a large chunk of your pay check; perhaps several pay checks.”

The guard looked confused, but before he could try to retake control of the conversation Scabbs pressed on. “I would think a man like you is not adverse to finding ways to bring in a little extra money on the side, you might say.”

Now the guard understood. “Ah,” he said. “I think I see where you’re headed. But I should warn you that my ‘night’ job pays pretty well. It would take a large sum to make me look the other way right now.”

Scabbs let his smile spread across his face. Yolanda had been right. Nemo had some dock guards in his pocket and this must be one of them. That meant all bets were off. “But you haven’t seen what I have in my pouch,” he said. “Let me show you just a sample.”

Scabbs stuck a finger into the blindsnake pouch and scooped a large gob of paste onto his finger. He pulled out his finger and flung the goo at the guard’s face. It hit dead centre, splattering on the man’s nose and spreading up into his eyes and down into his open mouth. Scabbs could smell the stench of the fungi/venom mixture from several feet away.

The guard started hacking and sneezing and screaming. He tossed his weapons aside and clawed at his eyes and mouth. Eventually, his knees buckled and he dropped to the ground and vomited. Tears streamed down his face and blood began to trickle from his nose. Scabbs strolled over, picked up Mr. Billy and lined up a shot at the guard’s head.

“That’s no way to treat a man in uniform,” said Kal as he walked up.

Scabbs held his swing for a moment. The guard continued vomiting and spitting on the ground. “I’m pretty sure he’s been paid off by Nemo,” said Scabbs. “Maybe even reports to him.”

“Then, by all means,” said Kal. He folded his arms over his chest.

Scabbs put both hands on Mr. Billy, pulled the club back over his shoulder and unleashed a mighty swing.

“So,” said Kal, after the guard dropped to the ground unconscious. “Where’s Feg?”

Vandal Feg shone his beam down into the smuggler’s tunnel to check for guards or Nemo’s men, or anyone else who might possibly be waiting for him in the dark. This entire operation had left a sour taste in his mouth. Mr. Smythe had said it would be so simple. Just shoot down the transport, steal the package and bring it to him in the docks. He not only supplied the heavy weapons and the mercenaries, but promised Feg twenty-five thousand credits for his part in the operation.

But then the royals beat him back to the docks. So, after taking out the three guards that barged in on him and the little ratskin, Feg decided he needed to stow the package somewhere safe.

Content that nobody was below him in the tunnel, Feg dropped through the hole. He waved the light beam around and then trotted and skidded down the steep incline, keeping an eye and an ear open for anything moving.

Luckily, his knowledge of these tunnels went well beyond that of anyone still alive in the hive. Feg was the sole living member of the smuggling gang that first found the tunnel. In retrospect he probably shouldn’t have killed all of his partners. But that last score had just been too big and tempting.

He stopped about halfway down the tunnel, at the edge of a deep drop-off that looked like it had been caused by a hivequake. In reality, the smugglers had created the chasm by accident while excavating the tunnel. They then decided to use what appeared to be a lethal drop into the darkness as a holding area for the loot they planned to smuggle into and out of the hive.

Feg got down on his hands and knees and swung his legs over the edge of the chasm. Holding onto the rocky lip with his steel claws, he lowered his legs down to a ledge cut back beneath the lip of the chasm. The little alcove couldn’t be seen from above unless you leaned way out over the chasm and shined a light beam back towards the wall. Even then it looked like a natural outcropping of stone.

Once his feet reached the ledge, Feg let go and lurched forward. He always hated that part. Of course, getting back out was even worse. Back during the smuggling days they had used a winch to get stolen goods in and out of the alcove, but Feg didn’t need that. He illuminated the back of the alcove with his beam and found the satchel.

He slung it over his head and went back to the ledge. It had been the perfect hiding place, because only someone as large as Vandal Feg could get back out without help. He stood on his tiptoes and reached up with his mechanical arm. Digging his claws into the stone floor above him, he used all the hydraulic strength in his arm to pull himself back out of the chasm, scrabbling at the sheer wall with his legs as he ascended.

He got his other hand up to help pull his massive body out of the hole and then sat there for a moment, breathing heavily, before getting to his feet.

“Thanks, Vandal,” said a familiar voice from behind him. “I’ll take that satchel now, or have you forgotten our deal?”

Vandal turned around and scowled at the smiling face of Kal Jerico. His little ratskin half-breed pal stood cowering behind the bounty hunter.

“Sure thing,” said Vandal. He grabbed the strap and pulled the satchel from around his neck. “Show me fifty thousand credits and it’s all yours.” He held the satchel out over the chasm. “Otherwise, you can dive for it.”

Kal sputtered. “Fifty thousand?” He wondered who in the Spire could afford to throw so much money around.

“The deal was for double, right?” said Vandal. “So, double twenty-five is fifty.”

Kal smiled. “No problem,” he said. “You come with me to my estate in the Spire and I’ll get that out of petty cash.”

“You think I’m a fool, Jerico?” yelled Feg. As he said it, he pointed at Kal with the hand holding the satchel strap.

Kal drew both laspistols and shot. The blasts hit Feg’s body armour, doing little damage, but the shots passed through the strap, severing the leather on either side of the brute’s massive hand. The satchel fell to the ground at Feg’s feet.

Kal rushed in, trying to reach the satchel before Feg could react.

“Oh no you don’t, Jerico,” said Feg. He kicked at the satchel.

Kal dove and got his hands on the satchel. Feg’s huge boot smacked him in the ribs. He tumbled away, losing his grip on the satchel. As Kal lay there trying to draw a breath, he watched the satchel slide down the tunnel along with his laspistols.

“You’re dead, Jerico!” cried Feg.

“If I had a cred for every time someone said that, I could retire,” said Kal. He pushed himself back to his feet. “Hell, Yolanda says it ten times a day.”

Feg’s chainsword revved to life, its whining scream echoing through the tunnel. Kal went for his guns, but then remembered they’d gone down the tunnel with the satchel.

“Aw, scav,” he said, ducking and backing away just as Feg swung his chainsword in a long arc over his head. “Um, Scabbs?” called Kal. “Little help here?”

“On it,” said Scabbs. He ran down the tunnel behind Feg. Kal ducked and weaved as the chainsword screamed at him again.

“Stand still and die,” said Feg.

Kal smiled. “I’m too pretty to die,” he said, pulling out his sabre. “You on the other hand…”

He slipped inside Feg’s reach after the chainsword passed and stuck him in the thigh with the point of his blade. The sword dug deep, but Kal knew he didn’t have time to drive it home. He pulled out quickly and ran on through.

Twirling around, Kal had to sidestep as the chainsword came down at his head from above. As always with Feg, it was turning into a battle of brute force versus speed and guile. Kal would be fine as long as Feg never touched him.

He spun away as Feg punched at him with his massive left hand. He then had to dive to the ground and roll away as the chainsword came spinning back in from the side. It seemed Feg had learned some new moves.

Feg stomped at him as he rolled, but didn’t seem interested in using the chainsword at the moment. Kal wondered why, and then saw the edge of the chasm coming towards him as he rolled. Vandal was driving him towards the edge.

Kal couldn’t slow down, though. If he stopped, he’d get a face full of boot. So instead he sped up, lifting his arms over his head and rolling faster. His feet went over the edge first. As his lower body fell, Kal swung his legs around like a pendulum. Then, catching the ledge with his free hand, he continued rotating his body around until his legs came back up over the top.

He scrambled up and kicked out at Feg as he tried to stomp one last time. Kal’s boot caught Vandal’s ankle in mid-air, kicking it up high enough to put the huge man off balance. Kal kicked out with his other leg, smacking Feg behind the knee. The brute fell backwards onto the ground.

Kal jumped to his feet and called out, “Now would be a good time, Scabbs,” He looked down the tunnel just in time to see the satchel flying at him. As the package hit him in the stomach, Kal yelled, “My guns, Scabbs. My guns!”

But it was too late. Vandal had reared both legs back and kicked out at Kal, slamming him in the chest. Kal went flying back onto the hard ground while the satchel tumbled high up into the air and fell at the edge of the chasm, teetering over the lip.

“Shoot him!” screamed Kal as he tried to reach the satchel. Right then, his pearl-handled laspistols clattered to the ground next to him. As usual, Scabbs was one step behind where Kal needed him.

Kal heard the chainsword whine to life above him. He rolled over just in time for Vandal's foot to press down on his chest, holding him in place. The big brute raised his mechanical hand over his head and revved the chain on his sword.

"Now you die, Jerico!"

Wotan heard the sounds of battle. That was nothing new to his processors. In the Underhive, someone was always fighting someone else. He was far more interested in the large rat he'd just seen sticking its nose out from a crack in the tunnel wall. He growled, but the rat didn't move. It just stared at Wotan and twitched its nose.

That made Wotan even angrier. He wasn't sure why he should hate the rat so much. It wasn't like the rat had done anything other than exist and happen to come out of its hole at the wrong time. But he did hate the rat, and he hated it even more for not running. Rats should run when he growled. That's how this worked.

Wotan crept forward, his head low and his stubby, metal tail twitching. A low growl escaped his mouth again. Three metres. He took another couple of tentative steps, but the rat didn't move. Two metres. The sounds of battle intensified and Wotan thought he heard a familiar voice, but the sounds echoed so much his processors couldn't identify it. One metre.

Wotan lunged forward, his jaws snapping shut just as the rat ran off down the tunnel. He barked and gave chase. But even with his mechanical legs, he couldn't outrun the rat. It dodged and scampered and jumped off the wall to get away. Wotan finally gave up. His rubber tongue lolled out to the side as he trotted along with his mouth hanging open. The anger had passed. The rat had run. That's all he wanted.

Then he heard the voices again, just up ahead. One still sounded familiar. Then the other one said, "Blah, blah, blah, Jerico!"

Wotan's ears picked up. "Jerico!" That was the owner of the familiar voice. Wotan bounded off down the tunnel.

Kal tried to squirm out of the way, but Feg's big boot held him fast to the ground. He tried to kick, but couldn't even lift his legs because his hips were being crushed by Vandal's massive weight. And he'd dropped his sabre before he'd rolled over the edge the chasm. Only one thing to do: stall.

"Vandal?" he cried. "What's that behind you?" Yeah, Kal knew it was weak, but he had nothing else and no time to think of anything better. Besides, Vandal might just be dumb enough to fall for it. He didn't.

"Give me a break, Jerico," he said. "Just how dumb do you think I am?" The chainsword began its rapid descent towards Kal's face.

Just then, Kal saw a flash of metal fly over Vandal Feg's head. The next thing he knew, the whine of the chainsword died away and Feg's forearm snapped back up towards his shoulder.

"Helmawr's rump!" screamed Feg.

Wotan landed next to Kal, a long line of tubing hanging out of his mouth. He dropped the tube and licked Kal in the ears, eyes and down into his open mouth. Kal pushed Wotan's face away and looked up at Feg.

Liquid spewed out the top of his mechanical arm. Hydraulic fluid released like a fountain when Wotan ripped the hose out of Feg's shoulder. As the big man vainly tried to stem the tide of fluid from the housing of his mechanical arm, Vandal's weight shifted just enough for Kal to push him off and sit up.

Kal wasted no time. He reared back and punched Vandal right where he knew it would hurt the most. Vandal Feg might be a monstrously large, armoured man with a mechanical arm and attached chainsword, but he was a man nonetheless. A quick jab to the groin was all Kal really needed to bring him to his knees. Literally.

Feg doubled over and fell to the ground. Kal stood up, grabbed his weapons and stood over the groaning man. He bolstered his guns and then slipped his sabre into the tangle of remaining hoses snaking around Vandal's head. With a quick flip of his wrist, Kal slit the hoses. The hoses hissed and gushed as they flopped around like live snakes spewing gas and liquid all over the ground.

"Kal!" yelled Scabbs, running up beside him finally. "The satchel!"

Then Kal saw it. The hydraulic fluid and compressed gas jetting out of the hoses had pushed the satchel to the brink of the chasm.

Before Kal could react, the satchel tipped over the lip and fell away. Scabbs dived forward, sliding over the edge as well. Kal dropped his sword again and fell to his knees. His hands shot out and he grabbed Scabbs by the ankles just before he slid into the darkness.

Scabbs' weight pulled Kal towards the edge. He fell onto his chest and slid towards the chasm as well. As his chest went over the edge, Kal felt a sharp pain in his rear. He heard Wotan growl as he held onto Kal by his trousers.

"Back, Wotan," called Kal. "Pull back, boy!"

Wotan dug his claws into the stone floor of the tunnel and began inching his way back. Kal's biceps screamed at him and his forearms ached from the strain. After what seemed an eternity, he dragged his arms back up over the edge. Once he got purchase again, Kal slipped his legs under him and pulled Scabbs out of the chasm.

His half-ratskin companion flopped to the ground next to him. When he rolled over, Kal saw the satchel hugged against his chest.

"We've got to stop doing that," said Scabbs. Kal sat down next to Scabbs. "I agree," he said. "That really wasn't as much fun as it looked."

"Just how much fun was it?" asked a familiar voice. Wotan growled.

"Aw scav," said Kal, looking up. "Nemo's here."

Nemo stood behind the still foetal Vandal Feg with at least a half-dozen of his goons. All of them, Nemo included, held weapons pointing at Kal and Scabbs. The light from Feg's beam glinted off Nemo's pitch black helmet and the goon's weapons, but the rest of Nemo's black-clad body was cast in shadow. "You didn't really think you could win against me, did you, Kal?"

"You do have history on your side, Nemo, but I figured I was due," said Kal. He grabbed the satchel from off Scabbs' chest.

"You know the odds never change," said Nemo. "No matter how many times you lose."

"Perhaps," said Kal, "But we're not in your house today." He flung the satchel down the tunnel and called out, "Wotan, fetch!"

Before Nemo or his men could react, the metal mastiff bolted into the dark after the satchel. Kal rolled over Scabbs, and whispered, "run!" He got to his knees and pulled out his laspistols. Firing several shots at Nemo and his men, Kal jumped to his feet and ran down the tunnel after Wotan. He heard Scabbs scrambling to his feet behind him.

Las blasts hit the walls and floor all around Kal. He dodged back and forth in the tunnel. As he came upon Wotan holding the satchel in his mouth. Kal yelled, "Wotan! Follow!" The mastiff skidded to a halt, jumped, and pivoted in mid air, coming down beside Kal in full gallop. "Good dog!"

Kal glanced back and saw Scabbs a few metres behind him. "Duck!" he called. Scabbs crouched down as he ran and Kal let loose several blind shots, which he hoped would at least slow down their pursuers.

"Where are we going?" yelled Scabbs in between wheezing breaths.

"Away from Nemo!" called Kal back.

"But, Kal..." said Scabbs. His breathing was getting laboured and he could barely talk. "This tunnel comes out in the Ash Wastes."

“I know,” said Kal. “You told me about it already, remember?”

“But... muties... and heat... and... toxic... air,” said Scabbs. “We can’t last out there.”

“Fine,” said Kal. “You stop here and fight off Nemo.”

“Never mind,” said Scabbs.

For a time there was only silence, broken every few moments by the sound of las blasts behind them. Kal turned and returned fire, but in the dark nobody had much chance of hitting anyone, which was fine because Kal didn’t really care if he hit anything, but he did care if he got hit.

Luckily they were past all the chasms, so Kal only had to worry about hitting the walls. After the first couple of collisions, he holstered one gun and kept his fingers running along the wall as he ran. Wotan and Scabbs didn’t seem to have any trouble, though.

“Can you see?” asked Kal.

“Yeah,” said Scabbs. “Pretty well.”

“Then shoot at the bad guys!”

“Oh, right,” said Scabbs.

Kal heard Scabbs fire off several blasts behind him and thought he heard at least one body fall back up the tunnel.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” said Kal. He turned to shoot again just in time to see the tell-tale flash of fire from a grenade launcher. “Aw, scav. Dive for cover!”

The tunnel exploded around Kal. He flew forward, rolling down the incline and smacking into the wall. Wotan stopped next to him, the satchel still hanging out of his mouth. Kal pointed down the tunnel. He could just see the opening into the Ash Wastes below. “Wotan!” he said. “Deliver!”

The mastiff ran off towards the tunnel mouth as Kal dragged himself back to his feet. He looked around for his laspistols but couldn’t see them. He scanned the nibble behind him for Scabbs but didn’t see him either.

What he did see was a beam of light bobbing along the tunnel just past the pile of debris. Kal tried to run, but a sharp pain shot up his leg as his knee gave out beneath him. He fell to the ground and screamed.

Kal tried to pull himself down the tunnel, but then gave up. As Feg, Nemo and the goons crawled over and around the pile towards him, Kal said, “Well, at least now I won’t have to get married tomorrow.”

“Perhaps,” said Nemo. He pointed his gun at Kal with one hand while holding Feg back with the other. “But your precious father won’t live to see his empire crumble, either.”

“Wrong on both points,” said another voice.

Kal turned to see the silhouette of either a monster or a large man in power armour. He opted for the second. “Captain!” he called. “Good of you to join us.”

“I’d have been here sooner,” said Katerin, “But I had to take a slight detour.”

The tunnel opening behind Katerin darkened as an entire platoon of royal soldiers filed inside. Someone behind them all called out, “Lights!” and the tunnel flared to near daylight as a dozen beams came to life.

Kal leaned against the wall and pushed himself up to one foot. “Looks like I win after all,” said Kal. But when he turned back to gloat at Nemo, the master spy and his men were already gone.

Vandal Feg, however, remained behind just at the far edge of the debris. “Next time, Jerico,” he said, before vanishing into the darkness. “Watch your back,” he called from up the tunnel. “I’ll be waiting for you. And you won’t have daddy’s men to fight your battles for you.”

Kal ignored him. Vandal wasn’t the problem. He could handle that big, dumb ox... always had. Nemo, however, did not take kindly to losing. That would definitely cost Kal in the future.

“Want me to send my men up after them?” asked Katerin.



“No,” said Kal. “We need to dig my guns out of this pile. Oh, and Scabbs is under there somewhere, too.”

“Where’s the package?” asked Katerin.

“Oh scav!” said Kal. “You didn’t see...” He hobbled down the tunnel, pushing Katerin’s men out of the way. “Wotan!” he called. “Wotan. Return, Wotan!”

Some time later, Kal sat aboard Katerin’s transport as a med tech tended to the gash in his leg. He patted his holsters and sword sheath, happy to have his weapons back where they belonged. Wotan had curled up at his feet, while Scabbs scowled at him from across the aisle.

The little half-ratskin was covered from head to toe in dust, which did nothing to help his looks. “I heard what you said back there, Jerico,” said Scabbs. “You were more worried about your guns than me.”

“Oh, come on, Scabbs,” said Kal. “If I’d been really worried about you, I would have dug you out myself. But you’re a survivor. How many times have you been blown up since we’ve been together?”

Scabbs thought for a minute. “I dunno. A lot I guess.”

“There you go,” said Kal, smiling. “Being with me is downright lucky, isn’t it. You get blown up all the time and yet here you are!”

“I guess so,” said Scabbs. He picked at a large piece of dead skin hanging off his elbow as dust cascaded from his body onto the floor. “You did save my life back there.”

“That I did,” said Kal. “Looks like you owe me one, huh?”

“Um, sure Kal,” said Scabbs. “Thanks, I guess.”

Kal looked back at Katerin. “We should be going, Captain. My father is a sick man, you know.”

Katerin closed the hatch. A moment later, a huge explosion rocked the transport. “Just closing that tunnel for good before we leave,” he said.

“Good idea,” said Kal. “You can just drop us back at the docks on your way up to the Spire.”

Katerin shook his head. “Sorry,” he said. “You’re along for the whole ride. Only a few more hours until your wedding.”

Kal sputtered. “B-b-but... you’ve got the medicine. That was the deal. I get the medicine back, and in exchange I get to skip the whole getting married part of this stupid plan.”

“Only problem with that,” said Katerin, “is that there’s still an assassin loose in the Spire who wants you and Lord Helmawr dead.”

“So,” said Kal, “everyone thinks better me than Helmawr in the crosshairs, huh? Well I don’t think so.”

Just then the transport took off.

“You don’t understand, Jerico,” said Katerin. He wiped the sweat from his bald head. “You don’t have a choice.”

Kal looked around the transport. The entire platoon of royal guards had their lasguns drawn and pointing at Kal. “Ah, I see,” said Kal. “It’s to be a lasgun wedding, then? Fine. I damn well better get paid hazard duty for this.”

He looked over at Scabbs again, who had a huge white smile on his ash-grey face. “What are you so happy about?” asked Kal.

“I get to go to your wedding,” said Scabbs. “In the Spire no less. This will be great. We should send someone to find Yolanda. She wouldn’t want to miss this.”

Yolanda stood in the middle of the sunlit room, grumbling. “Stupid Jerico,” she said. “This is all his fault... again!” She screamed as a pin stuck her in the leg.

“Watch that!” she called down at the seamstress. “Helmawr’s rump. There’s no way I am going through with this.”

Her father walked around from behind her and said, “But you look beautiful, Yolanda. That wedding dress has been in the family for generations. It’s worth a fortune.”

“Besides,” said another voice in the back of the room. “This union will be good for both families.”

Yolanda turned around, kicking the seamstress as she tried to scoot around with her.

“Valtin,” she said. “I liked you much better when you were huddled on the ground in the vampire’s lair than now that you’re lord muckety muck of House Helmawr.”

“Lord Chamberlain,” said Valtin. “And don’t you forget it. I can make or break you and your father, and I will for the good of House Helmawr and Hive Primus. Go through with the wedding and your house will reap the benefits. Fail me and there won’t be a hole deep enough for you to crawl down to escape my wrath, you or your Wildcats!”

Her father clasped his hands together. “Please, darling?” he pleaded. “For me? Do this and I will never again ask you for anything. You can go do whatever you want with your life.”

Yolanda scowled at them both, but she knew she didn’t have a choice. She was trapped again in the Spire with no way to even warn the Wildcats of what was hanging over their heads. She had to see this through to the end.

“Can you at least attach a sword sheath to this dress?” she asked. “Or a holster? I feel naked without my weapons.”

## CHAPTER TEN: LASGUN WEDDING

Bobo crawled through the ductwork, grumbling. “Everyone else gets a plush seat for the wedding except me,” he said as he pushed the sniper rifle ahead of him through the cramped pipe. “No, I get to watch everything from the comfort of a metal box.”

He’d switched back to his old Hive City clothes. He didn’t want to get his Jackal Bristol silks filthy crawling through the air vents. As it was, he wished he’d picked up some filter plugs for his nostrils. He’d kicked up so much dust he was afraid he’d sneeze right in the middle of the ceremony.

He stopped to wipe his face again with his sleeve. At least it wasn’t much farther to the spot indicated on the map by Mr. Smythe. Bobo turned a corner in the duct and moved down a short way to a dead-end. He peered through the vent grate and sighed. Just as the map indicated, he was at the rear of the chapel. “Best seat in the house,” he said, and tried to get comfortable, which was impossible in the cramped quarters.

He gave up and just lay down with his head propped up over the rifle so he could see down into the chapel. It was an enormous, triangular room with huge banks of windows on the two walls opposite Bobo. A white marble dais stood just in front of the sunlit corner in front of row upon row of velvet-lined chairs. Massive gold and silver candles — each emblazoned with a foot-tall image of the Helmawr crest in red wax — lined the rows of chairs.

Behind the dais rose a giant archway sculpted from ice with heads of at least twenty animals sculpted up and down both sides of the arch. Bobo had no idea what most of them were, but he’d seen pictures of some. He recognized the lion, the bear, the elephant and the unicorn. The rest were more fantastical with double heads or long snouts and intricately carved horns and tusks. The archway sculpture, itself had been designed with multiple facets that reflected the light from the windows into hundreds of rainbows throughout the chapel.

Below him, Bobo could hear the sound of running water. He looked down as far as he could and saw six fountains set in a geometric design. They sprayed water from one to another around the perimeter and even across through the streams in a hypnotic dance. The water itself somehow changed colours through a wide spectrum as it jumped around its beautiful circuit.

In the back left corner of the room sat a massive brass and iron automata with tubes ranging from a few centimetres to more than a metre in diameter, flaring out in all directions from a central bronze ball measuring at least five metres across. A servitor stood beside the ball, waiting; for what, Bobo didn’t know.

The rest of the chapel was bedecked in all manner of flowers. Some Bobo recognized from Ran Lo’s garden, which made him worry about the fate of the guests. The rest added to the rainbow of colours throughout the hall with both flowers and leaves of every imaginable hue. Some even seemed to radiate their own light, glowing purple or yellow or red and almost pulsing in the bright room.

Above it all hung giant crystals roughly a metre in length. At first Bobo thought they were simply there to catch the light rays from the ice arch and continue reflecting them, but as he looked at them, he could see they were generating their own illumination. He began to realize that he could even feel their power as they thrummed with some inner energy. Those worried him almost more than the carnivorous plants from the Ran Lo gardens.

Bobo let out a low whistle as he took in the spectacle. “They sure know how to throw away money up here,” he said. He shushed himself as the crystals flared to life with light and a melodious, humming music that seemed to have a life of its own. Shortly afterwards, the ushers began showing the guests to their seats.

“This is ridiculous,” said Kal. “I look like a general from the pansy brigade.” He pulled the military dress coat off and, before anyone could stop him, ripped it from hem to collar. “The trousers are okay,” he said, “but I think I’ll need a different coat. Something more befitting Kal Jerico, Lord of the Underhive.”

“I think you mean Lord of the Hive,” said Scabbs. He looked equally ludicrous in his suit jacket and cummerbund. He kept reaching inside his ruffled shirt to scratch at his stomach and chest. He must have seen Kal staring, because he said, “This thing itches.”

“What?” said Kal. “Your body?”

“Luckily,” said Kauderer. “We do have one other jacket you can use. Interestingly, it was fashioned for your half-brother, Armand, before he went crazy and turned into a mass murderer.”

“Sounds promising,” said Kal.

Katerin came running in with the new coat. It was still obviously a military dress coat, but it was definitely more in the Kal Jerico style than the bright purple thing they’d tried to foist on him. Kal slipped it on and it felt like he’d been wearing it all his life.

“Perfect,” he said. He reached for his weapons belt.

“No weapons,” said Kauderer.

“What?”

“That’s the rule of the wedding. Only the guards will have weapons.”

“Look,” said Kal. “You can paint a target on my back and toss me out into the middle of all those hunters out there, and even announce open season on Kal Jerico, but I won’t go without my guns and sword.”

“The sword might be okay,” said Katerin. “It is military tradition to wear a sword in dress uniform.”

“Fine, you can have your sword,” said Kauderer. “But no guns. If the other nobles see guns on your waist, all hell will break loose and then we’ll never find the assassin.”

The coat seemed awfully roomy around the waist. Armand had been a tad bigger than Kal. He got an idea, and kicked Scabbs in the shin.

“Ow!” he screamed. “What’d you do that for?” The little half-ratskin started hopping around the room, eventually falling over, stumbling over his dress shoes. As Katerin and Kauderer helped Scabbs to his feet, Kal slipped his pistols into the back of his trousers.

“I’m ready,” he declared.

A slow procession began with the least important people who’d somehow snagged invitations to the event. As they entered, the servitor came to life and began pulling levers and twisting knobs on the bronze sphere. An eerie, howling music resounded throughout the chapel, coming from the pipes of the automata. Somehow the pipe music and the crystal music complemented one another perfectly.

Bobo watched the procession and noticed that the dancing water the guests had to navigate to enter the chapel had quickened in step with the music. The water now truly was dancing, much to the chagrin of all the guests who had to find a safe path through the fountains.

Bobo didn’t recognize any of the early guests. He assumed they were mostly younger members of the houses and perhaps some courtesans or entrepreneurs whose favour was being carried by members of the various houses. However, one section of courtesans split off from the early guests and walked to the sides of the chapel, taking up position in front of the windows. Once both lines

finished filing in, the courtesans began to sing, lending their voices to the chorus of music inside the chapel.

After the lesser guests were seated, members of the noble houses entered. All of them wore silk or velvet and their gems and jewellery glittered in the reflecting light of the chapel, almost overshadowing the hanging crystals and faceted ice sculpture.

Bobo watched as Prince Granit came in with other members of the Ko'Iron family. They were followed by Princess Jillian and House Greim. These two feuding houses were seated across the aisle from one another and Bobo could see them all glaring at each other.

Representatives from Ty and Ulanti came in next. Bobo watched to see where Gregor and the duke sat. He wanted to have a good sight line on all the major players. Interestingly, House Ty was seated in front of Ulanti. He assumed the pecking order of the houses must be a bone of contention between all of them, and Gregor didn't look happy to be so far back.

As Bobo watched Gregor fume, House Ran Lo entered the chapel. They were seated across the aisle from Ulanti, which didn't seem to phase the elder Ran Lo at all. Bobo didn't think anything could mar that man's public image. His face was as expressionless as a rock.

Strangely, the members of House Helmawr were ushered in next. Bobo didn't understand why. They were all seated on the right side, in front of House Ran Lo — and there were a lot of them. Mostly the various sons of Lord Helmawr and their spouses or companions for the evening. Bobo didn't know many of them.

Some of them had come down to Hive City on occasion, and Kauderer had asked Bobo to keep an eye on them and clean up any messes they made. He recognized Carlos, Gustav, Umberto, Tomas and Ramone right away.

The last member of House Helmawr to be seated was Valtin, whom Bobo had met when he and Kal went after Armand. Valtin was now some high-ranking official in the house, and as such got the seat of honour in the front row. Bobo didn't see Kauderer yet, so watched as House Catallus filed in.

He knew even fewer of these people. In fact, he didn't recognize a single one. For some reason, they got the best seats in the house, right across the aisle from House Helmawr. The duchess of Catallus was the last one led in and was escorted to the front, across from Valtin. The duchess was decked out in the most extravagant gown in the entire hall, a layered taffeta and silk dress in a dozen shades of purple. She wore an enormous ruby pendant on an inch-thick, braided, diamond and gold rope around her neck and a gold tiara also set with an enormous ruby and hundreds of diamonds. It suddenly dawned on Bobo why Catallus was last. She was the mother of the bride.

A hush came over the hall as the groomsmen began walking down the aisle together. There were only three. The first was a huge tank of a man who just barely fitted into his black tuxedo. He took up the entire aisle and was sweating profusely. Halfway down the aisle, he stopped to dab at his bald head with a handkerchief he pulled from his breast pocket. He then tried in vain to get the handkerchief back in, deciding finally to just carry it.

The second man loomed over the first, practically glaring him back into motion when he stopped. It was Kauderer. Once the two of them made their way to the front, Bobo picked up the rifle and sighted in on Kauderer, making a few adjustments to get the distance just right. He then set the rifle back down and watched as the best man stumbled up to the dais.

The little man obviously was not used to the tuxedo and dress shoes as he almost fell over himself several times on the way down the aisle. When he got to the end and turned around, Bobo gasped to see that it was Scabbs, decked out to the nines, but still scabby-looking even with his hair combed almost straight.

Kal strode down the aisle next. He wore not the expected white tuxedo, but what looked like a black, leather dress uniform jacket, trimmed in gold at the cuffs and collar, with gold-trimmed epaulets on both shoulders. He wore his sabre at his waist, and Bobo wasn't sure, but he thought Kal's jacket bulged a little. Did he have his laspistols with him?

The priest stepped through the ice sculpture archway and set a large black tome on the crystal pulpit in the middle of the dais. He raised his hand and, right on cue, the music changed. Bobo covered his ears as the servitor apparently opened up the largest pipes in the automata. It was so loud he had to fight to keep the sound from deafening him and making his ear drums explode.

“What have you done?” asked Duke Catallus. He had just come in to escort his daughter to the chapel and found yards and yards of white silk and taffeta draped all over the floor and chairs in the room.

“I made a few alterations,” said Yolanda. “I couldn’t move in that thing.”

“And what are those... things?” asked her father. He pointed at various spots on his daughter’s body.

“Oh these?” she asked. “I found them in my old room. Do you like them? I think it really makes the whole ensemble come together.”

“There’s no time to do anything about it now,” he said. “The music’s already started.”

“I know,” said Yolanda. “It’s my wedding, and I plan to do it my way.”

“About time this thing started,” said Kal as the automata played. “I feel a bit exposed up here by myself.”

Scabbs leaned over to look at Kal’s trousers. “No,” he said. “You’re all buttoned up.”

Kal quashed his desire to smack the little rat. “Just keep your eyes open for any weapons, Scabbs,” whispered Kal. “And if you see one, jump in front of me, okay?”

“Don’t worry, Kal,” said Katerin. “My men will keep you safe.”

“What about your men, Kauderer?” asked Kal. “I’m not worried about an army, but the thought of one hidden assassin with a rifle does have me a little perturbed.”

“I’m not exactly sure where my man is,” he said.

“Man?” hissed Kal. “One man? And you don’t even know where he is?”

“Shhh,” said Scabbs. “Here comes the bride.”

Kal peered down the aisle as the bride and her father walked through the opened doors. At first he couldn’t see her as the water jets from the fountains obscured the back of the chapel. Then, on cue, the dancing water turned into an arcing waterfall tunnel. As the bride stepped through, Kal gasped out loud.

“Yolanda?” both he and Scabbs said at once.

This was like no Yolanda he’d ever seen, though. This was not the leather-dad Escher with wild gang tattoos and a massed tangle of dreadlocks he remembered—the dangerous woman who’d nearly killed him on several occasions, and who nobody in their right mind would ever cross.

Instead, this was the young duchess of House Catallus being led to the altar by her father, the duke. A sheer, white veil covered her face, draped down from an enormous, silver crown that held aloft a floor-length, silk train between its tines.

The crown and veil covered her tats and dreadlocks, but the old Yolanda still shone through. The rest of her outfit consisted of a tight-fitting white — for lack of a better word — undergarment, cut low in the front and high on her thighs. Her arms and legs were covered in white, and she wore silver epaulets on her shoulders and spiked gauntlets and knee guards. To finish off the ensemble, her sword hung at her nearly bare waist.

“Wow!” said Kal. He’d never seen Yolanda like this... like a woman. She’d always been a thorn in his side. At best, a comrade in arms. At worst, a very deadly enemy. He wasn’t sure he could ever go back to the way it was between them after seeing her like this.

Yolanda left her father at the base of the dais and climbed the steps to stand next to Kal. They turned to face one another and Kal found his eyes slipping down from her face and snapped them back to attention.

“Let me get one thing straight, Jerico,” she said beneath her breath.

“Yes, Yolanda?” asked Kal, drinking in the aroma that she’d been sprinkled in.

“Try to kiss me at the end of this wedding and I will kill you.”

That brought Kal back down to reality. “Not a problem,” he said. “Dearly beloved,” said the priest.

Bobo watched from his hiding spot as the wedding began. He had good sight lines on Kal, Kauderer, Ran Lo and even Valtin. He picked up the rifle and scanned the crowd. The only person he didn’t see was Mr. Smythe.

“I’m sorry, Kal,” he said. “I never wanted to see this happen to you, but now that it has, all I can say is better you than me.”

The wedding progressed for a while. There was singing, some chanting and praying, and an odd little homily from the priest about life as a star being more than just burning up your fuel — that — you had to warm the planets circling around you to nurture them during their lives before your ultimate end in a fiery cataclysm.

Then the priest got down to the nitty gritty.

“Do you, Kal Jerico, son of Gerontius Helmawr, slayer of Underhive vampires, despoiler of cardinals, nemesis of the dregs of society and heir apparent to the throne of Hive Primus, take this woman to be your wife, to have and to hold...”

Both Kal and Yolanda kicked the priest at that point.

Bobo picked up his rifle again and got ready. Mr. Smythe had furnished him with quite a nice weapon for his final assignment. It was a modified needle rifle with a combined telescopic and red-dot laser sight, along with a clip of especially virulent toxin darts. The darts came with their own set of directions. Bobo had had to use rubber gloves while loading them, as one drop would kill instantly.

“...for richer and even richer, until you finally tire of her and take a mistress?”

The room went completely silent as Kal glanced around. The wedding wasn’t supposed to get this far. Valtin had practically guaranteed that the assassin would strike before he finished his vows and was crowned Lord of the Hive. He gulped and looked at Yolanda. The daggers coming from her eyes were not all that reassuring either. “I do?” he finally croaked out.

The priest turned to Yolanda. “And do you, Yolanda Catallus, Duchess of House Catallus, leader of the Wildcats, scourge of the Underhive and saviour on more occasions than you wish to count of the worthless lives of both Kal Jerico and... Scabbs...” Kal glared at Yolanda.

“Part of my deal was that I got to write my own vows,” she said, smiling.

“Do you take this man, who’s so obviously not worthy of your great beauty and strength to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to... to never obey, but to constantly ridicule for as long as you can stand to look at his miserable face in the morning?”

Yolanda’s smile disappeared as soon as the priest got to the end of the litany. Kal could see the pain of what she was about to say cross her face. Her mouth contorted back and forth until she finally got it open enough to say, “I do.”

The priest picked up the crown sitting on the pulpit in front of him and brought it over towards Kal. He lifted it high in the air above Kal’s head and said, “Then, by the power vested in me by the holy Emperor of Man, and by the House of Helmawr, lords of Necromunda and Hive Primus, I pronounce you Lord of the Hive and...”

“Wait just a scavving minute!” screamed someone from the congregation.

Kal looked down to see one of the Helmawr princes stand up and step into the aisle.

He was a dark, swarthy young man with thick black hair pulled back into a pony tail and long sideburns that dominated his olive-coloured face. And, of course, he had the iron jaw line and pronounced chin of all Helmaurs.

“What in the hive happened to ‘does anyone know a reason why these two should not be wed?’” he asked. “Because I got a big reason why. A huge reason.”

“Who the scav is that?” asked Kal.

“Your cousin, Ramone,” said Kauderer.

“What’s he want? Is he next in line or something?”

Katerin chortled. Kauderer shot a hawkish glance at the captain before answering. “He’s probably fifteenth in line,” he said. “Right ahead of you, actually.”

“Ah,” said Kal. He turned to Ramone. “Brother,” he started. “I think we can find a better time and place to discuss your concerns.”

“My concern is you, Jerico,” spat Ramone. “My concern is this travesty you call a wedding.”

Kal motioned Kauderer over to him. “Is he the assassin?” he whispered.

Kauderer shrugged. “Hard to say. Nobody’s very happy about this wedding.”

“Not even the bride and groom,” said Kal.

Ramone continued his rant. He turned to face the rest of the congregation. “Do you know that neither of them lives in the Spire? They’re bounty hunters. They don’t even live in Hive City. They dwell down with the vermin in the Underhive. And we are all going to bow down to them as our new Lord and Lady of the Hive? Is this a joke?”

“Ramone,” said Kal. “There’s bigger things at stake here than just this wedding. I know you want the crown for yourself. Hell everyone in this room wants the crown, except me and Yolanda, and maybe Valtin, but I’m not so sure about that either.”

Kal stepped in front of Yolanda and faced the crowd. As he did, he slipped one of his laspistols from beneath his jacket and placed it in her hand. He then stepped forward. “But this wedding isn’t about you, Ramone. It’s not about the Helmaur family or even the Spire. It’s about the hive. Nobody wants to see a civil war between the houses. That hurts everyone.”

He moved a little closer to Ramone, still speaking to the crowd. “Catallus, Ran Lo, Ko’Iron, Greim, Ty, Ulant and Helmaur all profit from their positions up here. Does anyone here really want to upset that balance and take the chance that the new order will be less profitable? I don’t think so.”

He was almost next to Ramone. “So, let’s all sit back and see where this wedding takes us, shall we? I promise it will be fun and profitable for all.”

Kal was within striking distance of Ramone, and his hand rested on the pommel of his sabre at the end of his speech.

Ramone began to clap the slow clap of someone completely unimpressed by Kal’s showmanship.

“Nice speech, Jerico,” he said. “You might have actually made a decent Lord of Hive Primus. But that honour will now go to me!”

Kal pulled out his sword, but Ramone was quicker. He whipped a laspistol from his jacket and fired at Kal’s head.

Kal dove to the side as the blast sheared off one of his epaulets. He swiped at Ramone with his sabre, catching his younger cousin in the leg with a glancing blow.

Yolanda returned fire, but Ramone ducked behind some of the panicking guests. The entire hall erupted in screams as guests ran towards the exits, getting drenched in the fountain jets.

“Katerin,” yelled Kal. “Why don’t your men do something?”

Ramone answered instead from the chaos. “Because,” he said. “I control this wedding, not your precious captain. Now!” At that, a dozen or so security guards by the doors pulled out their weapons and began shooting. Those guests closest to the doors stopped suddenly, causing a mass collision



amidst the fountains. Many of them fell under the press from behind and screams of terror turned to screams of pain.

Kal crawled back to the dais. From there he could see that the guards weren't shooting into the mass of bodies. They were shooting at the other guards. He looked for Ramone, but his cousin had disappeared into the crowd. Kal pulled out his second laspistol, but couldn't get a clear shot at any of the guards, and didn't really know which ones to shoot at anyway.

"Wotan," he called. His mastiff trotted out from behind the ice sculpture. Kal had ordered him to stay back there with the priest before the doors to the chapel opened. He wiped the blood off the tip of his sabre and put his fingers up to Wotan's nose.

"Find Ramone," he said. "Wotan! Fetch."

Kal crawled back towards the arch where Yolanda had taken a defensive position. "Having fun on the honeymoon yet, darling?" he asked.

Yolanda scowled at him. "Call me darling again, and this will be your last honeymoon... ever!"

"Fair enough," said Kal. "Can you get a clear shot at any of Ramone's guards?"

Yolanda shook her head. "Of course we could just kill everyone and sort it out later."

Kal considered it, but then shook his head. "Then we would end up as rulers of the hive, and I don't think either of us wants that."

Kal heard Wotan bark and crawled out from behind the arch to have a look. Wotan barked again and then let out a squeaky little yip.

"Nice try, Jerico," said Ramone. "But I've thought of everything. Remember that little gadget you used on Armand to disrupt his spyrer rig? That wasn't the only one. Your little metal friend is dead."

"Now, I'm really mad," said Kal. "Scabbs, go get him!" Kal looked around but Scabbs was nowhere to be seen.

Then Kal noticed something else. The weapons fire had stopped. The wedding guests still screamed and tried to hide or at least get out from underneath the pile, but the laser blasts had stopped for the moment.

"Everyone quiet!" screamed Ramone. He shot into the air to punctuate his command, shattering one of the crystals. Shards rained down on a chapel that had gone completely silent, except for a few whimpers. "I control this wedding now," continued Ramone. "And the only way for any of you to get out of here alive is for Kal Jerico and Yolanda Catallus to die and for me to be crowned Lord of the Hive."

"Why me?" asked Yolanda immediately. "Kal's the one you want. Just kill him. I won't stand in your way."

"Thanks for sticking by me, honey," said Kal.

Yolanda pointed her gun at Kal. "No honeys either," she growled. "And don't even think about calling me sugar plum."

"You shot at me," said Ramone. "So you have to die now, too." Ramone fired into the air again. "Are you people listening to me? Either Kal Jerico dies or everyone dies. Now go get him!"

"Uh oh," said Kal.

Bobo swore under his breath. Ever since the guards started shooting, he'd lost sight of all the major players. It was total chaos down there. Now he could do nothing but watch as the crowd turned on Kal and Yolanda.

They advanced on the dais. Kal actually stood in front of Yolanda as they came, making Bobo smile despite the stress of the situation.

As the first of the crowd reached the front of the chapel, Kauderer, Katerin and Valtin all stepped in front of them and held up their hands.

"You will not give in to the rantings of this madman," said Valtin.

“You’ll have to get through us to get to them,” said Captain Katerin. He puffed up his considerable chest, looking quite impressive despite his slick bald head and glistening beard. The hot lights and tuxedo had not been kind to the large, sweaty man.

Kauderer simply stood and glared down at the oncoming crowd, which would have worked had there been less than a hundred scared people pressing in on the three lone men.

They put up a brave fight. Katerin knocked down the first three people who grabbed at him, but got distracted by the low neckline on Jillian Greim’s dress, and was pulled down to the ground by Granit Ko’Iron.

Kauderer and Valtin went back to back, fending off the first few attacks with precision martial arts moves. Valtin had obviously been practicing since Bobo had seen him bumbling through the Underhive a few months earlier. His front and side kicks were precise and strong, but he was no match for Ran Lo.

The elder noble blocked Valtin’s kicks with ease and moved in with such blinding speed that Bobo didn’t even see what happened next. All of a sudden, Valtin was on the ground desperately trying to breathe. Ran Lo stepped over the top of him before Kauderer even knew his backup man had fallen, and jabbed the House Helmawr master spy twice in the ribs from behind, dropping him to the floor.

Then the crowd was on the dais. Kal and Yolanda stood side by side, waving their weapons at the incoming crowd, but these weren’t Underhive criminals. They were Spire nobles. Neither bounty hunter could pull the trigger.

Yolanda’s parents went up to her. As her father grabbed the gun from her hand, her mother said, “We’re sorry, dear. It’s for the good of the house.”

Kal simply put his hands in the air. He was instantly mobbed by a group consisting mostly of his half-brothers and cousins. They pulled him to the ground and began kicking at him.

“Enough!” yelled Ramone. “This is my show. I get the honour of playing the lead role and executioner.” The crowd parted and Ramone ascended the dais. “Besides, do you have any idea how much money I’ve spent on this production already? An entire year’s allowance and you and your father still aren’t dead...”

That was Bobo’s cue. Of course, he’d suspected that Ramone was the man behind Smythe since he’d pulled the gun on Jerico, but without definitive proof he couldn’t pull the trigger. Those had been Kauderer’s orders. Confession first. Besides, he never had a clear shot at Ramone or any of his guards.

Bobo aimed the rifle at Ramone, flipped on the laser sight and started to pull the trigger, but the crowd closed back in on him at the last second and Bobo lost his clear shot.

“So, the great Kal Jerico brought to his knees by little old me,” said Ramone.

“I’m not on my knees,” said Kal. He spat blood on the marble dais and wondered if his last act on this world was to commit sacrilege. It seemed about right.

“Pull him to his knees,” roared Ramone. “I want him to kneel before his better before I incinerate that little brain of his.”

Two of Kal’s other cousins — he thought their names were Tomas and Carlos — pulled him up from his foetal position and set him on his knees.

Kal looked up at the barrel of Ramone’s gun. “What in the hive did I ever do to you?” he asked.

“You killed my brother,” said Ramone.

“Could you be a little more specific?” asked Kal. “I’ve killed lots of people. I bet lots of them had brothers.”

Ramone punched Kal in the jaw.

“My brother was Armand,” said Ramone. “A great patriot who tried to bring down this rotten house. A feat I will now accomplish for him.”

Kal spat another gob of blood onto the floor and then pulled his arm away from Carlos to wipe the bloody spittle from his lips. "I should have recognized you," said Kal. "The resemblance to your brother is uncanny."

Ramone smiled at Kal.

"You're both spider-shit insane."

Ramone tried to punch Kal again, but Kal caught him by the wrist. "Nobody ever hits me twice! Nobody!"

Ramone tried to pull free, but Kal wouldn't let go. As Ramone pressed his gun to his temple, Kal saw a laser sight circling on Ramone's arms. He wasn't sure, but it seemed to be tracing letters. B... O... B... O.

"Any last words, Mr. Kal Jerico, Underhive bounty hunter?" asked Ramone as he pushed the gun harder against Kal's head.

Kal smiled. "Yeah," he said. "Say hello to your brother for me."

Kal released his hold on Ramone's arm and fell on his rump. Ramone's gun went off, just missing Kal's head as he rolled onto his back. With his legs free beneath him, Kal swung his feet up and kicked out, catching Ramone in the chest and sending him reeling back through the gathered crowd.

Ramone lifted his weapon and aimed at Kal again. "Why you bas..."

Ramone's mouth stayed open but he didn't finish the sentence. Instead he started gurgling. Blood and phlegm welled up in his mouth, spilled onto his chin and ran down his neck onto his tuxedo. His whole body went rigid. Then, as the entire congregation watched in silence, he toppled to the ground. A small, black hole in the back of his neck was the only indication of the poison dart that killed him.

The room erupted into chaos again. The guards in the back of the room began shooting at anyone who came close and the guests all scattered, looking for cover. Screams and laser blasts filled the air.

Kal slugged Carlos and Tomas in the face with the back of his fists and then crawled over to Yolanda, kicking his half-brothers in the stomach along the way. "Where are the weapons?" he asked when he got there.

Yolanda shrugged.

Another voice answered instead. "Kal," said Scabbs.

Kal looked around, but didn't see his scabby friend. "Where have you been, you little chicken-rat?" he asked.

"Gathering these," said Scabbs. He crawled out from behind the ice archway, pushing a large stash of weapons ahead of him. "The dead guards didn't seem to need them."

He tossed lasguns to Kal and Yolanda, and then, after a moment's hesitation, scooted three more towards Valtin, Katerin and Kauderer who had freed themselves during the confusion.

"On the count of three," said Kal. They all nodded at him. "Everybody get down!" he called out.

Kal looked back at his comrades, nodded, and said, "Three!"

He stood up and started firing. Yolanda and Scabbs stood beside him. Kal smiled as he gunned down one of Ramone's guards. The Spire brats were a little slow on the uptake, not understanding how you count to three in the Underhive. But once Valtin, Kauderer and Katerin joined in, they had six battle-hardened professionals against a bunch of guards. It was, as Kal would later describe it, a complete rout.

In a matter of moments, all of Ramone's guards had either been gunned down or thrown their weapons to the floor and raised their arms above their heads. Kal was pretty certain that Scabbs had shot one of them as he raised his hands, but nobody else seemed to notice so Kal kept that piece of information to himself.

After the firefight, Kal tossed the borrowed lasgun to the floor and sat down on the edge of the marble dais.

“Someone want to tell me what in the hive happened here just now?” he asked.

Katerin pulled out his handkerchief and ran it over his sweaty head. “I would, Kal,” he said, “but I need to check on my men and re-establish control over this chapel.”

He trudged off through the crowd, which had quieted down, but also needed tending to. Most were beginning to huddle in their own little groups again to check on the wounded and gripe about the state of affairs in the Spire.

Kal turned to Kauderer and Valtin, but Valtin had already disappeared. “Well, hawk-nose?” asked Kal. “Looks like it’s up to you to explain.”

Kauderer glared at Kal, and then pulled his tux vest down to straighten it out and nodded at him. “You know most of it,” he began. “Someone tried to kill our Lord Helmawr and then tried to have you killed as well.”

“Uh huh,” said Kal. “And I played the lightning rod for you all. How long did you know it was Ramone?”

Kauderer shook his head. “We didn’t. That’s why we needed you to go along with this charade. We were pretty sure it was someone inside the house. Especially after that assassin tried to kill you. Our security is too tight for anyone outside to get in that easily. She must have had inside help.”

“Okay,” said Kal. “But where did Bobo come in?”

“Kauderer glanced at Kal, briefly, with a ‘how did you know that?’ look. “I set him up as a hired assassin to flush out the culprit, but we had to make it look like he’d turned on me; that he despised me enough to even kill me.”

“That couldn’t have been too hard,” said Kal.

“It worked,” said Kauderer, ignoring the comment. “He was contacted last night by an intermediary, so we still didn’t know who was behind it. But we were pretty sure that when he failed to kill you before the end of the ceremony, it would force the assassin out into the open.”

“You just didn’t count on Ramone being prepared with backup, huh?”

Kauderer stared at Kal for a minute before answering. “No,” he said, and it was obvious that was the end of the discussion.

Scabbs came over and sat next to Kal. “I found these for you,” he said and handed Kal his pearl-handled laspistols and his sabre.

“Thanks, Scabbs,” said Kal. “I need to find a way to hold onto these better. Perhaps rope or glue.”

“What do I do with this?” asked Scabbs. He held up the crown that the priest had almost put on Kal’s head.

“I’ll take that, if you please,” said a loud, booming voice from the back of the hall. “I do believe it belongs to me.”

A hush descended upon the murmuring and complaining crowd as all eyes turned towards the double doors. The fountains magically receded to mere bubbling so everyone could see the doorway. There, surrounded by guards and flanked by four scribes who busily scratched away at their parchments, stood Gerontius Helmawr apparently fully recovered.

Valtin stepped in front of his lord and announced him. “Ladies and gentlemen, gathered nobles and guests, people of the Spire... your Lord, head of House Helmawr, ruler of Hive Primus and all of Necromunda... I give you, Lord Gerontius Helmawr.”

“The rumours of my death were most unfounded,” said the silver-haired man.

He looked like a fit man of fifty, although by all accounts he was at least two hundred. Nobody else was alive from that long ago, so there was really no way to know his true age. He definitely looked much better than when Kal had seen him lying in bed being kept alive by tubes and wires.

“Now, what in my hive has been going on here?” he continued as he moved through the crowd. “Looks like a war zone. This is my house, isn’t it?”

Valtin nodded. “It is, sire,” he said.

“Then it shouldn’t look like a war zone, should it?”

Nobody answered.

“Should it?” he bellowed.

“No sire,” said Valtin. “Of course not.”

“That’s better,” said Helmawr. He walked up to Kal and looked down at him. “Who are you?” he asked.

Kal could tell that Helmawr’s vitality had returned, but could also tell that his mind still wasn’t entirely all there. Valtin had played a calculated risk bringing the old man in here. His presence amongst the assembled nobles would certainly quash any rumours, but if he went off the deep end, the plan could backfire.

Kal thought about having just a little bit of fun at his father’s expense, but knew that if the rest of the Spire did find out just how batty their lord truly was there really would be a coup d’etat. And if that happened Valtin would probably try to put that damned crown back on his head.

So, Kal swallowed his pride and playful spirit and simply bowed before his lord and father. “Just your humble servant,” he said. With that, Kal took the crown from Scabbs’ hands, brushed off the dead skin that came with it, and placed it on Helmawr’s head. He then bowed and backed away.

Helmawr smiled a knowing smile, which made Kal wonder if his old man had been playing with him instead. He then turned to the assembled guests and said, “I am alive. Now all of you — get out of my house and get back to work... for me.”

As the guests filed out, Kal, Yolanda and Scabbs walked at the back of the crowd. Yolanda’s parents tried to come over to her as she walked, but she raised her borrowed lasgun and shook it at them. They disappeared back into the crowd.

“Is it over?” asked Scabbs.

“It’s over,” said Kal.

“Can we go home now?” asked Scabbs. “Yeah,” said Kal. “Let’s go home and get back to our old lives.”

As they left the chapel, Scabbs asked, “But aren’t you two married? And whatever happened to Bobo?”

## **EPILOGUE: TWO HONEYMOONS AND A FUNERAL**

Markel Bobo sat back in his seat and breathed a sigh of relief as the transport lifted off.

He glanced at Jenn Strings beside him. She looked absolutely terrified. Yet, even with stress lines bulging across her forehead and white-knuckled hands clutching the arms of her seat, she somehow managed to still look so damn cute.

He had no idea where they were going, but was fairly certain it would be safer than staying on Necromunda. After shooting Ramone and waiting to make sure that Kal and Yolanda were safe, Bobo had left the chapel and made his way to the wall. In exchange for the information about Ran Lo's contract on his life, Kauderer had gladly given Bobo a "get out of the Spire free" card, which had allowed him passage back through the wall.

From there, he'd gone straight to Madam Noritake's and grabbed Jenn. They were out the door in under two minutes. Her client at the time hadn't been happy, but he was even less happy when Bobo pressed his knife into the man's neck.

"What are you doing?" Jenn had asked.

"Getting us somewhere safe," Bobo had replied. He pulled her down the street towards the industrial district. He had to find a certain rotund member of House Van Saar.

"Why aren't we safe?" asked Jenn. She pulled her hand out of his grasp and stopped in the street, her arms crossed and her foot tapping the ground.

"I can't explain it all here," he'd told her. "You know my work is dangerous, right?"

She'd nodded, but still glared at him.

"Well it got really dangerous this week and now we have to leave."

"But I don't want to go hide in the Underhive," she'd said. "I like it at Madam Noritake's. I have a nice bed and warm food."

"I'm not taking us to the Underhive," Bobo had said. He pulled her into an alley, as he was getting nervous about standing on the street. "Look, I'm leaving. I want you to come with me. I promise a nice bed will await us on the other side, and hot food. Real food."

"Real food?"

"Food grown naturally instead of being reconstituted. I've also heard of things called fruits and vegetables. Meat from animals, that haven't grown up drinking acid and eating poison waste. You name it, Jenn, and it's yours."

She hugged him and they ran off. From there, it was just a matter of convincing Jenn's five-minute Van Saar client that his lack of stamina would remain a secret if he could quietly book them passage on the next transport leaving Necromunda.

A thousand credits for bribes and another thousand for the Van Saar merchant to help keep his mouth shut after they were gone got them two seats on a transport, waiting to leave Hive Primus behind forever. Jenn had looked at him funny when Bobo didn't even blink before handing over two thousand credits. But she didn't ask any questions.

Bobo didn't relax until the transport left the Hive City docks and rocketed into the sky above the hive. He sat back in his seat for a moment and just breathed. He'd done it. He'd beaten the Spire and lived. He had close to fifty thousand credits in his bag along with several changes of clothing from Jackal Bristol's wardrobe. Let Kauderer bill me, he thought.

Once they left the atmosphere, Bobo reached under his seat and pulled out a small package from his bag. It was a new outfit for Jenn, something silky and short. He'd bought it right after telling Kauderer about his conversation with Mr. Smythe.

"Here," he said. "A little something for you to wear as we start our new life, Mrs. Bristol."

"Mrs who?" she asked.

"We're now Jackal and Jenn Bristol," said Bobo. "And our lives are just beginning."

Jenn took the package and made her way to the bathroom in the back of the transport. Bobo sat back and closed his eyes. It was over. His nightmare trip to the Spire had finally ended and it had all turned out for the best.

"You're wrong about that, Mr. Bobo," said a male voice next to him.

Bobo opened his eyes to see Mr. Smythe sitting next to him. Without his years of training, he might have looked surprised. But surprise dulled the senses. He would never allow that.

"Wrong about what?" he asked.

"Your life is not beginning," said Mr. Smythe. "In fact, it's about to end."

He opened his coat to show Bobo a laspistol hidden underneath.

"Your employer is dead," said Bobo. He shifted in his seat to face Mr. Smythe. His hand slipped down into the seat cushion for just a moment as he turned. "There's no reason for you to seek revenge."

"Oh, this isn't revenge," said Mr. Smythe. "It's business. I have a new employer now. I think you've met him. Lord Ran Lo. Apparently you and he have unfinished business and I'm here to..."

Bobo's hand shot out, sticking the poison dart he'd stashed in the cushion into Mr. Smythe's stomach. Smythe gasped as the fast-acting poison coursed through his body. Bobo grabbed the gun from his hand and dropped it into the bag.

He got up from his seat, moved the gurgling Mr. Smythe over against the window and buckled him in. As Jenn came back from the bathroom, Bobo picked up his bag and took her hand.

"That looks great on you," he said. The silk draped ever so nicely on her lithe form. "Come on," he said. "That man wanted our seats. We're moving up to first class."

Jenn hugged him and Bobo smiled. "In fact, it's first class from now on for the Bristols."

"But he never finished the sentence," said Yolanda. "I was there, okay? He said, 'I now pronounce you Lord of the Hive and...' He never finished the sentence."

The trio sat in their usual spot in the Sump Hole. Three wildsnakes sat on the table; two of them completely untouched. Only Scabbs was drinking. Kal and Yolanda just sat there, staring at the table.

Scabbs set his empty bottle down and took a moment to swallow the squirming worm from the bottom. He'd gotten a little better at that lately. It really wasn't much worse than swallowing the cook's runny eggs.

"He did finish the sentence," said Scabbs. "I heard him."

Kal and Yolanda both stared at him. Kal still wore his wedding coat. He'd even gotten a tailor to replace the missing epaulet. Yolanda had gotten out of her wedding dress almost immediately. In fact, her mother had to close the dressing room door lest everyone see as she ripped it off.

She had kept the spiked gauntlets though, and now Scabbs was a little worried that she might use those spikes on him.

"Explain yourself," said Kal, quietly and slowly.

"After Ramone interrupted and weapons started going off all over the place," said Scabbs, looking back and forth between Kal and Yolanda, "the priest and I ran for cover behind the arch."

Scabbs looked at his empty bottle and thought about ordering another one, but Kal reached over and grabbed him by the lapel. "And...?" he asked.

"Oh," said Scabbs. "While we were down there, I heard the priest say 'wife'."

“That doesn’t mean a thing,” said Yolanda. “You might have misheard him or he was worried about his wife.”

“That’s just what I thought,” said Scabbs. “So I turned to him and I said, ‘What?’ and he said ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’. I guess he had to get it out of him or something. You know priests. They hate to be interrupted when they’re on a roll.”

Kal and Yolanda lapsed into silence and stared at the table a little longer. Scabbs reached out and pulled Kal’s bottle towards him. He drank as the two fumed.

“I’m married,” said Kal after a while.

“I’m married,” said Yolanda. “To you!”

Kal sat back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. “I never thought I’d get married,” he said. “I’m Kal Jerico, Underhive bounty hunter. Not Kal Jerico, family man.”

Yolanda jumped out of her chair. “It’s your scavving family that got us into this mess,” she screamed. “And your family will get us out of it.”

Kal just sat there with an odd expression on his face. Scabbs wasn’t sure if it was concern, contemplation or simply gas.

“So,” said Yolanda, standing over Kal. “What are you going to do about this?”

Kal looked up at Yolanda. Her breasts were heaving beneath her tight, leather vest and the veins were practically popping out from beneath the gang tattoos on her forehead. He smirked at her.

“Well, it’s my wedding night,” he said. “And I plan to do what every married man does on his wedding night.”

Yolanda reared back and slapped Kal across the face. But his smirk remained in place.

Just then, a barmaid came over to see if they needed anything else. Kal grabbed her around the waist, pulled her onto his lap and gave her a long, deep kiss. She wrapped her arms around Kal and kissed him back.

Afterwards, Kal looked up at Yolanda, his smirk still in place. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I don’t need you for what I have in mind.”

Yolanda slapped him again and stormed out of the Sump Hole.

The barmaid, her arms still around Kal’s neck, watched Yolanda leave. “What was that about?” she asked.

“Don’t worry about her,” said Kal. “That’s just my wife.”



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Will McDermott** is a fantasy and science fiction writer specializing in game-related fiction. In addition to his Necromunda novels, He's written novels and short stories in the worlds of Magic: The Gathering, Dungeons&Dragons, and Monte Cook's Lands of the Diamond Throne.

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Scanning and basic  
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