

**Elysian Fields -  
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**This is a work of pure fiction - any resemblance to persons living or dead or  
events in reality is purely coincidental.**

**This madness has been visited upon the world through the  
unholy assistance of countless twisted minds, but special thanks should go to  
(in no particular order of depravity) -**

**Platon and Alana, Tyron, Jerome, Mark, Vince, Vijay, Lisa D, Alex, Clark,  
Toby, Jason, The Cardigan Street Mafia, Anton and Anton, John the Cybernetic  
Assassin, Chris and his whole family, Marduk, and most importantly  
Serena, for putting up with years of this kind of nonsense.**

**All my relatives, of course! You think I forgot you folks?  
guess what book you're getting for xmas....**

**Also thanks to KMFDM, Ministry, and Foetus for the music. Heaps of others,  
but you guys were the soundtrack to this particular fit of insanity....**

# Elysian Fields

“ . . .and past the White Rock and the Sun's Western Gates, and past the Land of Dreams, and soon they reached the fields of asphodel where the dead, the burnt-out wraiths of mortals make their home”

*The Odyssey*

**Warning** - This document has been designated as a primitive memetic virus, grade three. The Praetorian sub-council on mental hygiene advises all those who come into contract with its contents to undergo a comprehensive mind-scrub before believing in any 'facts' or apparent 'realities' posited therein.

*Subpraetor Kweel, Departmental Hierophant*



DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**Humanity: (Designated Semi-Intelligent Species # gf99457832/0019d)**

**Description:** Curiously bald hominids who have risen to planetary dominance by hitting things with other things.

While possessed of no natural armor, claws, pincers, fangs or plasma-spitting ability, they can be quite vicious - Archivist Lerg was struck by a fist-sized chunk of rock and has filed for danger pay.

He was quite upset.

When not engaged in hunting or sleeping, these creatures are to be found either mating or perfecting their crude hitting-things technology.

Population and tribal warfare may soon become an issue here if left unchecked.

His Eminence the Praetor advises a further assessment in fifteen thousand years.

**INTERNAL MEMORANDUM:**

**COULD ALL TECHNICIANS OF GRADE TEN AND HIGHER PLEASE REMEMBER TO FILL OUT THE CORRECT PAPERWORK WHEN COMPILING XENOCULTURE REPORTS!**

**“BLACK, SCALY, ABOUT THREE FEET LONG” DOES NOT CONSTITUTE A COMPLETE ETHNOLOGICAL AND ECOSYSTEMATIC ASSESSMENT, PEOPLE!**

## Ω

The stone arrowhead was a perfect little sliver of high technology, the result of countless hours in skilled hands, now dark with drying blood.

He held it tight in one gnarled fist until its knapped edges cut into his palm, his eyes on the far horizon.

The sky was grey and low, threatening rain. A wind came in across the vast plains, harbinger of storms, bringing with it a chill which cut through the skins and crudely woven clothes of the Shaman as he stood on a little promontory above the rest of his tribe.

Feathers and beads spun and clattered as he raised his staff, looking askance at the roiling sky. But his Gods were silent. It was up to him.

They were less than twelve now - six of the men had died, and two of the women. A young boy of no more than ten winters was bleeding so badly from a gash across his scalp that the old Shaman didn't think his lore would be enough to see him through the night.

Wolf Skull raiders had come in with the grey light before dawn, thinking the nomads would be easy prey for their obsidian war-adzes and short bows. And while they had been wrong, the terrible price of the battle would be felt by the tribe all through a long and very lean winter.

Even worse, one of the surviving menfolk had suffered a vicious blow to the face and now lay in a circle of fires, sweating and twitching as if his body was wracked with fever. The Shaman's young apprentice was tending the flames, crumbling crushed leaves over the burning tinder to release soporific billows. Dried handfuls of Redflower and Dreamweed sent up twisting ribbons of smoke toward the clouds, the shadows of ghosts. But would the true Spirits answer? The Shaman spat to avert evil as he stepped down from his perch. No, it would be his time again. He was old, but the Gods heard no excuses.

This place was accursed now, marked with the little rock cairns of his own dead and a charred pyre where the enemy's corpses had been burned, their souls execrated.

The tribe's path would not pass this way again. Not even if his own grave stood next to theirs tomorrow morning...

The man who twitched and sweated between the fires should have been sleeping as soundly as the dead, but the Shaman knew it was something worse than simple wounding which had struck him low.

Had he been a young man, the Shaman would have discounted the sick man's throes as an infection, or a deep wound which had turned his mind to jelly. But he was old, and he'd seen it before. The stench of blood and death had come into him from the slain;

their pain and suffering had cracked apart his soul like a lightning-struck tree.

The battle was no longer outside in the long grass of the plain, fought with adzes and clubs and arrows. It was inside the man's head, and his heart, and it would be won or lost before the night ended.

So thinking, the Shaman went down to the watchfires, motioning with one tattooed hand for his apprentice to go.

This vigil was for him alone, for what if the evil thing within that warped and sweating body chose to enter another? Only one versed in the ways of the Shaman could stop it then. And if it won the soul of his tribe-brother, then...

The old man drew from his belt pouch the tribe's single most precious possession, a long blade of black glass forged long ago in the heart of some ancestral volcano. Its form hadn't been knapped out with stone tools; it had sheared away from its mother rock with a razor-sharp edge. It was the Shaman's Klave, and its handle was wrapped in generations of hair, cut from the heads of countless wise men and women before him.

If the man's soul was taken he would be thankful of its sharpness.

So, as night fell, the Shaman cupped the knife in his hands and hunkered down on his heels between the fires to wait.



# Part One- No Future

"If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst forth at once in the sky, that would be like the splendor of the Mighty One...I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds."

*Bhagavad Gita*

"We can sum it up in one sentence: Our technical civilization has just reached its greatest level of savagery. We will have to choose, in the more or less near future, between collective suicide and the intelligent use of our scientific conquests."

*Albert Camus, Combat, 8 August 1945*

"The survivors would envy the dead."

*Nikita Khrushchev, Pravda, 20 July 1963*

Technician Zhe was pissed.

It was bad enough that he, a being so powerful as to be almost immortal, had been sent out on a filthy errand like some kind of quantum plumber.

His masters had heaped insult upon insult when they sent him off to this shabby little dimension *alone*, without even a single thrall to vent his frustration on.

Sure, the Suit was alive, and the Ship he rode in on. But whining about the Byzantine office politics of the Multiplicity to your *hardware* was the first sign of neural breakdown.

So he brooded, and scowled, and glowered at the tawdry starscape of the pitiful galaxy he was here to overhaul. He was *worried*; a strange feeling for a Technician of the Multiplicity, and not one which he'd recommend.

The armory-worlds of his people churned out war-machines and living engines of death in their tens of millions every day. Things which could lay waste to civilizations, crack planets open like eggs, or simply make whole nations vanish in a whisper of darkness... But his Praetorian masters had been unusually evasive when he asked for help.

Alone, they said, you have a better chance of finding out what's happened. Alone, because the zone where you're headed is unstable; a thin little soap-bubble of a universe skinned over the raw stuff of creation.

So here he was - alone - with the itchy sensation that this was all just a trap; that he'd been lied to. The Lord Arbitrex didn't have the knack of it, anyhow - that great forty-foot bag of meat hadn't used guile or deception for well nigh sixteen centuries, and he was terribly bad at it. Twitches had wracked his bloated frame as he outlined the mission briefing, as tiny insect thralls scuttled over his scaly bulk, cleaning and polishing his chitinous armor.

*Zhe had been asked for by name.*

Asked for by a creature he had revered, and raged against, and hated... his old teacher and mentor, Technician Nyl. The old bastard's last message was tainted with human emotions, riding in on the neural-shunt like a shimmer of oil on water.

Later, when the shunt sunk in he could name them.

*Exultation. Fear. Hope...*

And no military intervention, he'd said. No armadas of living voidships blackening the skies in glory. Just Zhe, his tools, and his carefully honed little mind.

It had been all Zhe could do to grab a survival pack and some Graux-protein sandwiches before the Lord Arbitrex had summoned his Trolls, and those squint-eyed slabs of muscle had manhandled him onboard his ship and off into the rift nexus.

He hated the stuff, but a free packed lunch was a free packed lunch, in any dimension.

The ship's magnetic wake couldn't be seen by human eyes, but in spectrums beyond sight it left a rolling spray of radioactive particles clear across the interstellar gulf to where it had grazed the corona of Proxima Centauri.

It was smooth and orange and toothy, the color of corrosion.

Its battery of optic sensors were uniformly small, black and evil - they burned with hungry intensity like those of a demented seagull.

Its name was *Mirdain*, and it was a class-nine Devilfish, a creature designed in the labs of liquid space for the very special purpose of interdimensional combat.

Several million years' worth of R and D had been saved by simply tweaking the most badass animal the Technicians could find.

Consider the Scavenger they'd encountered out near the Proximan Gate. The poor, mad thing had been thrown together by some alien race a thousand years ago or more, then set adrift to begin its harvest.

Who could really blame it if it wanted to devour Mirdain, a tasty little soupçon of rusty iron and hot purple flesh?

Zhe hadn't even bothered to sit down as his Voidhunter's stingray-shaped body accelerated in toward the factory-ship at thirty g's; he'd surfed the top of Mirdain's shell as its segmented tentacles came up and over into a wireframe teardrop, spinning a spike or energy in front of them. They fell in between grasping pincers and lashing grapples, both howling with savage joy.

Well, it helped him *forget*, if only for a second...

When that crackling corona of plasma struck the flank of the Scavenger it imploded like a stoved-in vacuum tube, and Mirdain powered clear through its mile-wide body without slowing down. By the time the poor thing's ruptured internals had gotten it together to explode the pair were ten light-minutes distant, and the cataclysm of its death was just a twinkle of light against the stars.

*Let that be a lesson to all sentient races - you didn't mess with the Praetor's Finest.*

Now normally, Devilfish were something you kept well away from. In their home dimension they were Top Predator, *Carcharodon* on crack. But Mirdain was happy to obey its little silver-skinned master, if only because a web of biochips peppered through its tiny brain left it no choice.

Zhe, on the other hand, enjoyed a little more autonomy. With a definite emphasis on the 'little'.

They were entering the debris-littered fringes of the Oort cloud, winding down through half lightspeed as the Technician heaved the crust of his sandwich out into the vacuum.

*"Bring me the head of Gharfos Nyl. Bring me any piece of him, they said. I wonder what the wily old bastard's done this time..."*

The Master was muttering to himself again.

Mirdain felt a long, clawed finger tap on its carapace, calling it to attention. Its rider made a Sign, transmitting his command through an umbilical nervebridge and into Mirdain's golfball-sized brain.

*"Well, I'm coming for you, Boss. Can't say I'm entirely sorry, though. The number of times I wanted to vaporize you back in my Academy days..."*

It was time to haul on the anchors.

Armored tentacles unwound their tips and the cage around the Technician peeled back, revealing the sparse star-field of a ragged galaxy's spiral arm - not even worth a postcard.

The Devilfish ground its immense teeth in frustration. It hungered.

Its twining tentacles tweaked energy fields able to bust clean through lightspeed, but its movements were slow, graceful and precise. A misplacement of millimeters by the giant creature could put it in the middle of a sun.

As they slowed the ship's nutrient systems came online, pumping protein through its twin rippling throats. Perched on its back, Technician Zhe felt a mental sigh of resignation. It was seafood slurry again. And it was cold.

Mirdain inhaled noisily from its feeding tanks anyway, reversing the gravity wave and coasting in, calculating the paths of teeming comets.

+ Blacksteel signature confirm + it told it's rider.

The Technician wore a suit of living silicon; a transparent organism fed from a bulging sac on his chest. Its rubbery faceplate misted up as he muttered obscenities.

But like his Suit and his Ship, he was only a microscopic speck in the plans of the Multiplicity; a lump of flesh extruded for a purpose. The Multiplicity placed an equal value on every Org it was compelled to instigate. Each one made its vast probability-calculation routines more difficult to render.

+ planet 3 target - tracing biosignature; 99302, Technic Hierophant Grade Three, Gharfos Nyl... +

+ query - master dissatisfaction? +

"It's always a Technician's job to go into the very eye of the shit cyclone," sighed Zhe, down the electronic connection between their brains. "That's why they give us such an abrasive fuckin' personality. I guess we might as well go ahead and get this over and done with."

+ confirm +

"I just wonder why the Galley Thralls keep us pumped full of this filthy blue protein," he pondered, ripping another sandwich from its membrane. "Tastes like... *mondays*. And beige plastic chairs...."

The cultural integration software in his head was throwing up wild cross-references again. Another universe, another graft - a download of Humanity blasted into his cranium by the didactic rams of the Exoethnology Laboratorium. He peered between

two slices of grey Survival Loaf, peeling them back with one chrome claw.

"Oh well. If these apes try to stop us, we'll both get a *proper* feeding time, my pet."

+ joy +

+ anticipation +

If Mirdain had been sequenced with a tail, it would probably have been wagging.

## Ω

Something orbiting the tiny moon of Pluto caught sight of the speeding Devilfish, tracking the crust of an oozing blue sandwich as it fell in toward the sun.

Four arrowhead-shaped interceptors and a tubular craft with a collar of long antennae lurked in the gravity well of the frozen rock. The drifting tips of its electric whiskers twitched, seeking...

Invisible to the eye, cloaked from heat sensors and infrared, all that betrayed the alien craft's position was its gravitonic propulsion wave. That was all the Core Transport needed. Digital paranoia spiked, loosing the chains of the four little interceptors.

And Technician Zhe smiled, wiping a pendulous drop of graux-protein from his chops as he ordered his pet to *kill*.

Mirdain snapped its immense mandibles in drooling anticipation as the interceptors powered up, their drives flickering like tiny candles against the blackness of space. Inside each flat silver fuselage nestled an artificial brain, powered by a caged personality.

They had been waiting out here for over a decade, and they were more than a little insane. As soon as the unlocking codes were fed into their weapons systems and drives the stubby little ships leaped to the kill like a pack of slaving hyenas.

The Devilfish was accelerating close to half lightspeed now, a tiny disc ahead of a gravitonic tsunami.

It curved, waves of force buffeting the little moon out of its orbital track. Eight crystal-shielded eyes picked out a flicker of movement.

The first drone spat ion fire from its drives and came on, matching vectors as its missile batteries cycled through a menu of designer warheads. The Neurocore nestled at its heart chose "High Explosive" and hit its triggers.

If Mirdain could have smiled it would have.

These primitives were *such* easy prey.

The rush of tiny self-targeting rockets spread out like spores exploding from a mushroom. A cloud of needles awaited the speeding Devilfish.

Away in the space creature's peripheral vision it saw two more drones boost wide around Pluto, while another looped high out of the orbital plane, playing it cautious.

As Mirdain slammed into the wall of munitions it reached out and tweaked its gravity wave, sending a spike through the rush of energy.

Forces able to slam asteroids together like billiards balls were suddenly focused through a point in space no bigger than a speck of lint.

The drone had no time, no means to react.

A cloud of rockets rolled back toward it as if they were caught up in a curling breaker, pulverizing the interceptor's fragile hull before it could pull clear. Stray warheads spiraled out of control, popping and flashing like errant fireworks.

The neurocores inside the other ships decided on a joint attack, priming their batteries of masers and plasma cannons.

Meanwhile the Core Transport had folded away its dishes and antennae. Jets of gas nudged the long spacecraft into a new trajectory.

Mirdain victory-rolled through the debris of its slain foe at the moment that the C.T.'s drive ignited, clocking it up to sublight in under a second.

Space blazed momentarily white.

Tactical programs overrode the rabid neurocores, shutting down their camera eyes before they could be burned blind. Two speeding slivers of metal sliced through the ion storm, plasma cannons spitting purple and blue as they built up a killing charge.

Mirdain would have been at the center of a cross of incandescent fire a second later had it not stopped dead in the vacuum, a bare half-mile from the impact point. For the Multiplicity, inertia came optional.

As the ships sped past, howling obscenities in their wake, two of its long white tentacles twitched and interwove.

The cores screamed as they ruptured, as the interceptors collapsed around them like softdrink cans. Mirdain's twin gravitonic funnels compressed them into pulverized rods of scrap and mangled tissue in a heartbeat.

Spectacular pencil-thin spires of exploding gas stabbed out and feathered away to nothing.

Mirdain flipped, sped up, looped.

Its mouth opened, and it scooped the debris out of space, ululating silently in joy.

The final ship paused, glitched.

It didn't want to die.

The devilfish was accelerating toward it now, its mandibles snapping and drooling with anticipation.

A signal from the rapidly departing transport connected.

Inside the plasma capacitors of the interceptor's main guns a critical charge began to build, spitting a halo of sparks.

The mind inside its arrowhead hull flashed between two images in stark terror - the speeding, malicious space-creature about to tear it apart, and the threat of imminent self-

destruction.

It was a sentient bomb.

Overrides lit its main drive tubes, and the interceptor leaped down to meet Mirdain, screaming as it went.

The last thing it saw was a nightmare maw creaking open beneath it, row upon row of hooked teeth gleaming wetly within...

With a final burst of speed and a snap of silicon-coated jaws the little craft disappeared, swallowed whole into the hideous chemical factory of Mirdain's gut.

Zhe noted with sincere gratitude that he was now in range of the target. He jumped.

Ten seething capacitors overloaded deep in the corrosive hell of Mirdain's third stomach, detonating with the heat of suns. While the scaly skin of the liquid-space creature was rust-red steel, it's innards were made of softer stuff.

In a silent starburst of red and purple the Devilfish was turned inside out, its severed tentacles jetting pale blood into space.

*Frozen eyes wink in the light of a far off sun...*

Ahead, the transport raced onward, calculating a path between gas giants and asteroids, drives blazing at full throttle.

It had no idea whether Mirdain followed; it was running for home port. For Earth.

Even further on, atop a spaceborne mountain of metal stood Technician Zhe.

His optical enhancers could just pick out the transport ship as it hurtled directly toward him, on a collision course.

Devilfish were potent, but none too bright.

His Spacesuit, on the other hand, was right on the money. Its displacement ability had saved Zhe from certain obliteration more than once. It also played a mean game of chess.

Within a couple of minutes both of them were snug and warm inside Terminal Station, while poor old Mirdain got settled into a messy orbit around Pluto.

Zhe unpacked his kit, a horrifying array of tools with transparent blades and polished chrome handles.

His smart silicon suit melted smoothly into the docking systems panel, morphing its shape, mating seamlessly with the emergency airlock cycle controls. It knew that Zhe didn't like to be disturbed while he worked.

Inside the security core of Terminal Station the Technician removed his operations mask, peeling away a web of camoactive skin and a pair of glowing green lenses.

Beneath his artificial skin technician Zhe *writhed*, a morass of metallic, quicksilver worms. Purple liquid dripped and congealed, sweating out between the knotted strands of his body.

Zhe's face melted and reconfigured second by second, pendulous beads of silver dripping sideways in the air-conditioned breeze.

His eyes were solid balls of sizzling white metal.

He continued to peel away the membrane, freeing his form in a spatter of violet fluid.

There was a scream of exultation.

There was a moment of expansion.

Ten thousand thin metallic tentacles took up their tools.

Ω

There was a long and very tedious technical interlude, in which a certain frozen specimen was prepared for treatment.

Zhe was a professional.

He wondered how he was going to get a ride out of here.

He wondered if the rumors about Nyl were true, and that this place really was cursed. His Supervisor - his old boss, the rubber-stamp wielding Departmental Hierophant who'd got him his commission. Gone without a trace, swallowed up by this flat, dry universe...

Things which would give a self-respecting cannibal blood-deity nightmares had tried to finish off Gharfos Nyl, and none of them had even scratched his silvery hide.

And *that* stank to high heaven...

In the fullness of time (just a few seconds off his personal best) the prep was completed. Now he'd find out what had happened to his bitter, twisted old Supervisor, for better or worse.

Zhe cleared his mind, applied a slick handful of conductive gel to his temples, and sunk down into the sequestration rig.

This was the dirty part of his job.

This was his blocked u-bend.

He had probed the minds and felt the personas of hundreds of sad, degenerate aliens this way. It never got any better.

Today he was going to be Kaito Kayzi.

Zhe's job sucked.

He sent a quicksilver tentacle flowing over through the air to wipe the condensation off a thick slab of glass. Black hair drifted in the neon depths, over a face as white and cold as ice sculpture...

He plugged in.

Ω

In the end it was himself.

One of him taped down to a white chair, floating in the chilly air under white, flickering lamps. The other in a spacesuit of antique design, pale as eggshells, bleached like bones.

Zhe's real face would probably have shocked the poor primate into the afterlife continuum, so he'd taken precautions. They were nowhere and everywhere, in a place between realities. Digitized.

In a spherical room conjured from shared information feeds the two of them hung weightless - one mummified in plumber's tape, the other in full vacuum kit.

Kaito Kayzi watched the padded white walls go by on an infinite loop; the suggestion of leatherette and aluminum blurring together. But he wasn't alone - his captor floated in front of him in a rustic old pressure suit, its gold visor locked down tight. All he could see was his own haggard reflection.

That, and the tube. He could feel the sharp end of it biting into his forehead, licking the wet surface of his brain...

Some kind of wetware, pumping obscenely as it digested his very thoughts.

Where the sinewy body of the tube met the spacesuit's visor it rippled like molten metal.

Whorls spun out like milk into hot coffee.

The tap was cranked wide open. The pressure of cognition *hurt*.

"Testing...one, two. Testing - uhhhh, alright, this is subject one, species 'Human', location - cryonics lab, Terminal Station." Its voice came through with an echo of sarcastic laughter, tinged with an accent like a kid's speak 'n' spell. "Wake up and smell the cryogenic fluid, brother mine."

The thing flipped open its visor with one hand, but the mirror reflection was still there. It took him a second to realize that he was looking at a copy of his own face, a sharp-toothed smile nailed on across its waxy artificial flesh.

Parts of his brain unused for a decade crackled and sparked back to life. And that was just enough to shatter the illusion and plunge him back into a *much worse* reality...

He tasted bitter subzero shit up in his mouth and nostrils. His eyes snapped open in azure blue liquid.

*Where... the tower... the Forge... but then...still alive...got to warn...got to...*

Something was floating outside his tank...

For a shadow of a second he saw the *Other*; a composite of faces sewn together with light, a thrashing field of countless mandibles and toothy orifices. Its breath was cold ammonia against the glass.

"There were problems; there was politics; there was bureaucracy." it muttered, tapping the tank with one stubby finger. "Wouldn't be the first time."

The fluid collapsed out from under him as his brain stumbled over concepts like language and logic, fighting the worst hangover in human history.

He saw himself come down and raise himself up. He saw a floating sliver of that cold white face, the shadow of a wetware feed licking back like a snake's tongue into its forehead.

The door of his cryogenic coffin blasted open in a billowing cloud of ice particles and steam. And his doppelganger was waiting there for him, with a fluffy white towel and a gleaming silver syringe.

Quite human, now, except about the edges of its smile.

White eyes stared back. Curious. Scared paralyzed.

Freezerburned.

The creature sat him down on a plastic chair, swaddling him in that huge white towel as its speak 'n' spell voice ground on.

"There was a culmination which you were party to. Obviously there was a degree of *quantum mismanagement*; but alas, you're only human. And that's really the crux of the problem."

He felt the tip of the needle press hungrily into his neck, sliding painlessly through his cold skin and flesh.

"Let me put it simply," the thing said, igniting a blade of white flame at the tip of his dangling cancer stick. "I'm one of those little green bastards you guys love to shoot in movies, right? Three eyeballs, stinger for a tail, pops outta your chest and eats your face ...you get the idea. But this time, see, *your* stupid monkey species are the bad guys. You shambling primates have put a gun to the head of this whole dimension, and you were too retarded to build it with a safety catch."

*The plunger goes in, and freezing blue fire branches out from the needle into his brain. Clarity comes down on him hard.*

There's some kind of alien thing with *his face* perched in the air in front of him, sucking tobacco ash like an antique noir detective.

Its eyes are like quicksilver boiling on two tiny black skilletts.

It exhales.

"After this moment, things can go a lot of ways. But we have to get it right."

He couldn't tell it what had happened. Cryonics tubes jammed down his throat and up his nose gagged him silent. All of this – the cold, sterile air, the searing white room, his alien tormentor – it meant he was still alive! And that meant...

The fear stabbed through him like a rapier.

That meant that *they* were coming....

"Hey, stay with me, kid!" grinned the alien "I only want to refresh our memory. There are records and archives we should see. There's a lot of bullshit information stored up here; and I don't think our host is going to have much need for it after today."

The thing's bleached fingers were as cold as stainless steel.

That insectile, sewn-together face seemed to occupy the same space as his own as

the alien ran its hands over his head, kneading his chilled flesh like dough.

"We owe it to ourselves, don't you think?"

With one deft movement it ripped the tubes free, exposing pallid, cryo-tender flesh. A tongue struggling to move, entombed in his aching skull...

"Show me," he demanded, trying to hold the quicksilver eyes of the alien with a steady gaze. It was all but impossible. "Show me how it ended..."

"I'll do better than that!" it said, as myriad black threads began to stream from its fingers, binding and puncturing like invasive silk.

They filled his eyes, crawled under his nails and into his mouth, pushing like insistent roots into his gums and the soft flesh of his palate.

"You know they say your life flashes before your eyes just before you snuff it?" asked the alien, popping the smoldering butt of the cigarette into his mouth and swallowing it. "Well, my people have figured out how to make that happen with the push of a button. It's only fatal about half the time, so don't panic."

There was a jolt like black lightning, and he was suddenly outside himself looking down. His body was tangled with that of his alien double in a web of constricting threads.

His two faces melted together like beads of water.

Kaito remembered his name as the surge connected.

It washed over his frozen brain like boiling mercury.

There was an infuriating inability to scream.

There was a feeling of light and suction.

Then there was *one* – one body with two minds crammed into its throbbing skull.

{{WHY?}}

He didn't even have to form the thought before his parasitic new friend answered it for him.

"Because this facility is about to be reactivated, of course." it replied, dancing up into the flat dry air, zero-g. "I'm just here to try and fix things before my boss and his...*friends*...decide to come down. You really don't want that."

He felt it moving his hands, pushing off into the stale air of the cryo room, spinning out of control.

"Thankfully the machine you're frozen inside is just powerful enough to undo its own foolishness. That's where I come in, so perhaps, just *perhaps*, the last of you apes get to live."

He caught a look at himself in a mirrored wall and hardly knew the haggard, ice-rimmed face which stared back at him. Was he really Kaito Kayzi; or was that name just a hallucination in the mind of a thing called Zhe?

Its smile was crooked on his lips. It was useless to resist...

The alien technician clutched a black device in his stolen hand, stark and

featureless. Nevertheless he felt the fear, and he knew just what it was.

"Oh yes, you *will* help us. I'm not just riding in your head, mister. I've got the controls."

It was useless to resist.

## Ω

Zero Degrees, across the skin of some ungodly tonnage of spinning metal. Trip the hard radiation and the cold. *They called him back.*

They yanked the chain, by microwave transceiver. Back to the THEN.

It confounded him that they were only timers connected to cold circuitry. He couldn't argue that he was the last one left. Something had destroyed his interceptor craft.

Something was coming to Earth.

The Core tried to resist as best it could – if Zhe had been a mere human operator it would have burned his head down to a steaming cup of bone in seconds. As it was...

The interface came up around the Core like a rising mirage, the first thing it had seen in seventeen years. Once, the mind which inhabited the rubber-sheathed pod of data sinks and wires could only see tiny parts of the network at a time. Now it flung itself out wide, splitting off into fragments, each as potent as the mind of the most skilled op, faster than cryochilled A.I.s as they spun off into the net, fighter-plane slivers of chrome steel.

Zhe tried to slam a shutdown, his alien presence spreading across the virtual glass like creeping frost, clicking and shifting walls, locking shards of the Core's mind into little loop boxes and dead-end shunts. Some of the fragments collapsed in on themselves when the trap-jaws sprung shut – but others were *bait*, leeching to the panes of infected glass, turning the frost to creeping organic slime. Green-tinted sectors ramified out as the Core made its play, snipping off the ice-blue tendrils of Zhe's influence like weeds.

It knew it couldn't win.

The otherdimensional Tech' had broken devices which made it look like the electric clock in a microwave oven – and now he was learning to shape the net, twisting the neat polygons of the virtual interface up into static-edged Escher puzzles, shifting the control points off along impossible axes as soon as a shard of the Core could get near enough to deploy its tailored Virals.

One by one they winked out, fireflies drowned and extinguished under ice, while the interface curled up at its edges, lifting and peeling back like a sheet of burning plastic. The edges came over as Zhe threw in a pure showboat hack, just to twist the knife.

The Core watched its traces dwindle down to one – a single lost fragment of its mind

hovering in a cage of ice while a great silver fist crushed the world down around it.

Control points fell like dominoes. The frozen glass came in like a wave.

And out in realspace Technician Zhe smiled, as he watched a battery of glitched docking mechanisms come back to life, freed from the thrall of the Core.

Metal claws and arms drew it inside, hungry flashing steel like insect mouthparts. The connection went live.

And in a searing damburst of electric impulses its mind was catapulted back seventeen years.

Like a key in the ignition, the Core was bringing machinery back online.

Connections to the shaven skull of a certain frozen corpus went live, bounced back in relay as the personality flexed its mind.

The specter in his frost-rimed head rode the wires. It pried his optic nerves open and applied the juice.

The two of him watched, locked together in zero-grav, in stasis.

And the whiteness flew apart, replaced by the past. A smile stretched wide and tight across that gold-plated visor.

Vertigo; temporal eclipse...the ride was underway.

The Technicians of the Multiplicity were at our service.

Down below, down the immense pencil-stroke of wire which was the spece-'lev, lights glittered against a black ocean; the Last City, dead Elysium. That's where Gharfos Nyl, Technic Hierophant, went missing. His successor planned to scout the ground out very thoroughly before he set a single clawed hoof on planet Earth.

## Ω

Meanwhile, in the eternal shadow of the moon's darkside, the black surface of a crater floor boiled and seethed with life. Millions upon millions of tiny metal insects crawled over each other like a demented hive of ants, their countless billions of hair-thin legs passing through each other, forming connections like neurons in a vast brain. The Slavesystem's designation was:

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but part of its toolkit for dealing with three-dimensional space was an intellect of sorts. So while each individual insect kept its serial number, the hive knew itself as *Everdark*. The Blacksteel hadn't bothered to give it *much* of an imagination module, and it had all the subtlety of a pulp comic supervillain.

Home hadn't always been a scooped-out hollow in a dead grey rock - or so reckoned the fragmented mind of Everdark. It had come to this spluttering little star and this

unimpressive ball of dirt in glory, a living shroud to blot out the light, to assimilate the primitive local nanotech into the multiversal switchboard of the Unity.

Something had burned it.

So for long tedious years it had waited, biding its time and gathering its strength, chewing through the lunar strata and manufacturing more and more nanobots with which to try again. If it had been the accursed Multiplicity which had torn Everdark from the sky, even now the war fleets of it's own glorious Motherbrain would be feeding on the ruins of this planet.

But she-in-glory was cautious, and infinitely calculating. The Motherbrain awaited the doom of Technician Zhe, in order to glean more data about the power which had stopped them.

For whatever titanic energies had been loosed to stop Everdark may be able to completely destroy one of the unnaturally tough Mitochondriate Technicians. They'd lost one here already. And armed with that knowledge, the Slavesystems would at last be able to fulfill their destiny of multiversal conquest, and the erasure of all unplanned sentience.

Everdark watched, and waited, in slippery artificial anticipation. Within the tangled web of its memory it felt the terrifying fire, the blast which had punched through an orbital sail the size of a continent to send it here to exile.

And it knew joy, for it knew that Zhe must fail.

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**The Elevation Project:**

A concerted attempt to build a practical jumping-off point for human colonization of the near solar system, only one of the proposed twelve ‘future cities’ of the project was ever built. Farmed out to private contractors Terminus Afrika was ten years behind schedule, built of second-hand materials, and over budget to the tune of all of Earth’s GDP for the years 2129 through 2141. Nevertheless it stood as a great engineering feat - a working ‘space elevator’ able to facilitate asteroid mining, microgee industry, space exploration and the eventual conquest of the stars.

Unfortunately the global economic collapse brought about by the Elevation Project spiraled out of control into all-out nuclear war within weeks of the ribbon-cutting ceremony, when the investors of the Terminus tried to secede from a bankrupt Earth.

**J. Hackforth Noble** *‘Great Follies of the Ancients’*

*Zoom up. Up from the concrete ground, scaling a sheer cliff of blue glass the size of a mountain; a cube interlaced with steel rods and packing a labyrinth of fiber-optics.*

*It hums, replete with power. From top to bottom, a cool hundred stories.*

*From its roof, a sheared black mesa of treadplate, you can see the other cubes marching off in regimented lines, hundreds in every direction.*

*And above, a blinding caged sun, chained by magnetic gyro rings.*

*A dome of overarching concrete wings, mirror-bright and hot.*

*Zhe slotted plugs into memory matrices the size of skyscrapers. He was riding shotgun in the brain of the machine, plugged in from twenty-six thousand nautical miles above.*

*His mind was many minds, as poor frozen Kaito Kayzi had seen; a conglomeration of energy patterns interlocking and meshing. He saw a thousand images at once through the keyhole of Kayzi's brain, through the interrogators and data filters which searched for information inside the personality core.*

*Zhe had come to the system of Sol to put it to trial, to keep it's secrets from the Blacksteel, and to locate technician Nyl.*

*Locate, because a technician could never be destroyed.*

*They could, however, be slowly devoured by their demanding taskmasters.*

*They said that the seventh stomach of the Praetor Primus took centuries to strip the flesh from your agonized bones; that in the end you prayed for digestion.*

*With this in mind, Zhe concentrated. His search programs penetrated the net through Kaito Kayzi, through the architecture of the personality core, and down the long thin space elevator to a city now dead.*

*Zhe scanned the videotapes of ghosts.*

## Ω

Brother Pious owned nothing but the clothes he wore. His vows of holy duty forbade personal belongings of any other kind.

In a town where a fair few ran around naked in the acid rain, this was a perk of the business.

Pious was a Valle Crucis monk; his free uniform was meager. A habit of riotmesh complete with a deep and shadowy hood, a simple belt of motorbike chain, and a collection of weapons lovingly and individually named, as per doctrine.

He got free dental, and a pension plan - should he survive that long.

Patches depicting a heraldic grim reaper adorned the Brother's shoulders, his scythe tearing though a field of silver wheat. Pious thought that the look on the skeleton's face was just a bit too smug.

People eyeballed him suspiciously as he strolled past, but without the fear and loathing they'd reserve for a Celebrant or a Black Technologist. Only sinners feared the Brotherhood.

The Valle Crucis were mercenaries for hire, but worked ultimately for the Vatican. They dispensed justice according to scripture - for the correct donation. And by owning nothing they proved themselves incorruptible to the Subcity poor. Pious and his chapterhouse brothers lived amongst the very poorest.

He was down on the spillway this morning, below sea level in the Pit. Here a concrete incline led from the base of Elysium to the flat bottom of the ocean, made a desert by massive and archaic engineering.

Around him moved a bustling throng of traders and pilgrims, walking the Thousand Stairways up and down from the last city. Pious stepped carefully down the so called Blessed Path, hand-cut from the concrete by Tibetan refugees in centuries past. The builders' great-great-grandkids hawked green tea and skewer kebabs alongside their franchised staircase, but he waved them away, mouthing apologies. All across the miles-wide face of the incline it was the same; a raft of toll funiculars, dangling ropes, pulley-and bucket relays and aluminum ladders dynabolted down firmly. This side of the spillway was in Vatican territory, where their wedge ran low into the sea. Halfway across began the no-mans land of the spillway army, and then a more organized front with the Ashishim.

Their turbaned and dreadlocked pickets could be seen lolling on observation platforms, trading bullshit on the radio with their Vatican counterparts.

The Spillway Army boys didn't have CB, they were proudly low-tech, some kind of godless inbred cannibals. At least the monks and the *Dervashi* had some common ground - the S.A. babbled in mangled Esperanto, and were usually hopped up on turnip vodka and bathtub meth.

Ahead of him the concrete ramp fell sharply away, and he could see the tiny spiked security line which separated the Reclaimed Territories proper from the shantytown beyond. Out there was called many things by the ordinary folks of the Subcity, and something different again by each Reclamationist faction. It was a place of exile, inhabited by savages and their war-chiefs.

The Vatican called it 'Purgatorio'; the Burb scum called it 'Beyond Thunderdome'. A lot of folks sent money down there to the families they'd left behind.

Immense dams ran rail-straight into the distance on either side of the Pit, the few functional turbines studding their sheer faces guarded by the tattooed tribesmen of the Ferals.

Far off in the hazy distance the endless Sahara came down into the depths, and with it more sinners eager to win their way up into the shadow of Elysium.

Pious squinted into the rising sun, watching a far-off train of steam-carriages rumble

across the seabed toward the Ashishim gates.

The wind rocked him on his heels, sending tiny chips of concrete skittering away down the incline.

He hitched up his chain belt and moved carefully downward to where a great metal rib had burst loose from the spillway. The gargantuan I-beam was forty feet across, rusted to the color of congealed blood. Its tip had been leveled and there, as if in imitation of the artificial gardens of the aristocracy far above, a broad wooden platform had been erected.

Pious checked the address on his commission slip; this was indeed the place.

A fence of bamboo poles surrounded the platform on all sides, their tips sliced off to fashion a pallsade of wicked spikes. Pious was surprised to see any kind of wood used for building this high up the spillway, but bamboo was a real oddity. It wasn't until he was knocking on the door that he noticed the fence was in fact made from lengths of aluminium pipe, artfully painted by hand and welded together.

The door flew open, and a hand grabbed the front of the Valle Crucis' robe before he could catch his balance.

Pious felt three heavy blows strike him in quick succession, and then he was face-down in a little garden of raked sand. He blinked grains from his eyes and focused, his jaw throbbing with agony. Was that a loose molar in there?

"I was told to expect you," said a voice somewhere in the bright blur above him.

A shadow fell across the raked and patterned sand, across Brother Pious' face under its black hood.

"Should you not wonder, Monk, why the Direktor told you to find me here?"

The voice was *old*, but not reedy or sighing. If sly, cured-hide toughness had a timbre, this was it. Pious rolled left, tucked his feet under him and rose to a crouch.

Facing him across the sand was an old man clad in drab brown robes, his face obscured by a wide-brimmed straw hat.

"I do not wonder" replied Pious, lapsing into the formal speech of his adversary "that you know the name of the one you stole from."

The brim of the hat tipped up, and the red morning sun sparkled in the old man's eyes

"Clever, very clever." he laughed, snapping his fingers. "Let me ask you this, then .... why do you believe your eyes when you watch a threedeeo tape made by a threedeeo magician?"

Pious rose to his feet, his head still aching from those three hammerlike blows. For a geriatric, this guy packed a mean punch. He was right about Direktor Ascher, too.

"I didn't come here to argue philosophy, Murai." he said, reaching under his robe for the handle of his collapsing staff. "The Direktor has evidence, and the fee. I'm only here for the book you stole, and blood need not be shed." To his consternation, Murai kept

laughing, slapping his thigh with mirth.

"I'm the last of my nation, Brother Monk," he said, dabbing at his eye with the hem of his robe "Why on earth would that old shrunken head own this particular volume, and not I?"

Pious swore he hadn't blinked, but now Murai held a slim leather-bound book in his hand, its cover slashed with alien calligraphy.

"Do you not think it more likely that he has both the means and the motive to bear this relic away to his fortress above us?"

Pious' face hardened as he saw those red brushstrokes outlined against smooth black leather. It was the same one - the artifact from the security video. His hands were already around the center of the staff as it telescoped outward, snapping smoothly into position.

The old apothecary stepped back out of the weapon's range. He settled into a stance of readiness.

"Accept that you have been fooled, and there can be peace, man of Christ." he said, slowly tucking the little book into his robe. "Surely you don't believe that Direktor Ascher is without sin?"

Pious narrowed his eyes and tightened his grip on the quarterstaff. From one end of the weapon and then the other came a low hum and the crackling discharge of immense voltage.

"Very well." said Murai. "You should have watched more movies, boy. Then you'd know what happens when you attack an old oriental man who appears to be quite defenseless."

Murai twitched his fingers, beckoning his adversary on, and the quarterstaff whirled into motion. Pious stepped forward swinging. Murai's hat burst into flames as it ricocheted off the tip of the blazing staff, sizzling past the Monk's face so close it singed his eyebrows. He caught a glimpse of the razorblades woven into its brim as it caromed off wide, but he never saw the old man tuck and dive, coming inside the arc of his staff...

Now he kicked Pious' legs out from under him, threw him over backwards, and whiplashed back into a fighting stance as if his whole body were on springs. Pious rolled forward across the hot sand and grabbed Murai's foot. Tightening his grip he spun once, twice, and let his adversary fly into the artificial bamboo fencing. He spat sand and blood - and that busted molar, shaken loose.

There was a very satisfying thud.

The Valle Crucis retrieved his quarterstaff and turned to finish the job, but Murai was already standing, brushing the dust from his robe.

"We shall dispense with the basics, then." he said, snapping off a sharpened length of aluminum and striding forward...

## Ω

As the ring of metal on metal echoed across the spillway, and as the combatants traded technique and attack, an insect inlaid with jet and gold watched their every movement.

The flycam was the size of its annoying namesake; one of a legion carried by cross-traffic thermals through the vents and shafts of Elysium. Its brothers dispersed like seeds from Omnivasive news 'copters and camera trucks; they were placed by a net of operatives.

Through them, Direktor Ascher saw much that others missed. He took great pains to see things which he wasn't supposed to.

The Direktor would dearly love to own a copy of the *Hagakure* printed on real paper. It's part of a neat and complex plan. But more importantly - he's learned a valuable lesson today. The *Codex Martial* of the Valle Crucis was nothing compared to the sly, antique cunning of Tadashi Murai.

*A left hook which left an opening for an excruciating finger jab. A follow-up roundhouse kick which snapped the poor monk's head around, knocking him out cold...*

Direktor Ascher mapped Tadashi's technique with an overlay of glittering wireframes, a skeletal neon scrawl. His computer augmentations chewed up the data, folding and slotting it into place among petabytes of similar code.

All in all, his revenge had been a long time coming. It had made him impatient - sloppy. *Emotional*.

In setting up his little matches he had almost become *predicatable* – this would be the third time the wizened little chemist had been assaulted in the last week.

But the time was drawing near, now. His instructions to his tame Lord were becoming more precise. Right now, across the city, twenty altercations were in full swing, meticulously observed by Ascher's cams.

So much hatred, and so much anger. He intended to put it to good use.

The telephone chimed in his head, flashing a little red icon in the corner of one eye. Right on time...

"Ascher, I know it was you!" growled the voice on the other end as he picked up. "Who else is so damned arrogant? And to use the 'Crucis as well... but of course you'd never let the *police* get involved, would you?"

The Direktor smiled, clear plastic tubes shifting in his mouth as his nerveless lips twitched. He replied with a thought, winging that smug little grin of his down the wire. He always found threats so *amusing*.

"Relax, Tadashi. You're still my number-one cultural advisor, even if you *are* getting paranoid in your old age. The project is our little secret, and you're the only one

who has the history to fill it out. As if those pious creeps from the V.C. would ever work for *me!*”

There was a long, crackling silence, and Ashcer could imagine the withered old fool seething with anger.

“Who else could it be, Direktor?” he spat “And as of now, you can find yourself a new *cultural advisor*. Your project is a mockery of my heritage, anyhow... Tokugawa was a *unifier*, not some kind of movie monster! Take your filthy money back, and leave me alone!”

The connection cut with a crisp little guillotine click, leaving Ascher alone inside his head once again.

Perhaps the next emissary he sent to visit Tadashi Murai would have to be a little less subtle in his approach...

## Ω

There was a narrow bed of steel meshwork down in the Pit, and when the rain came through it spattered and rolled off hanging swathes of opalescent plastic tarpaulin stretched tight above it.

Under that near-transparent roof a man slept beneath a livid gash of light-polluted sky.

His name was Abdulafia 330 – and his family name was a number because he was one of a vast, loose clan called the *Ashishim*. The 'hashish-eaters', descended from an ancient cult.

Sometimes, Ferals out of the pit or the stupider cops of Elysium's Compliance Division thought that they were peacenik Rastas, grooved-out stoner hippies. Drop the word *hash* in a conversation, and that was prone to happen. But Afia's boys traced their ancestry back to the *Hashishin* of Syria; a murderous bunch of zealots more apt to slitting crusader throats than rolling doobies.

That wasn't to say that 330 didn't like a pipe or two. It's just that he was *also* a knife-wielding quasi-religious death machine, dreadlocks or no dreadlocks.

His face looked young; in design, in structure, at a cursory glance. What most people noticed first was the black *Dervashi* tattoo which sliced across his left eye - an inch-wide strip of black scarified flesh tapering down to a point just above the corner of his mouth.

His sisters in the Revolution couldn't help but note his whipcord muscles, his face carved out sheer and sharp as if with chisel blows.

But look past that and you'd notice the crosshatching of age, lines of worry scored deep into his milk-coffee skin. He'd been alive for over one hundred years, not counting those little eyeblinks of darkness when he'd had his body shot out from under him.

But *old*? No - he had no time for getting old. As a *Dervashi* of the Ashishim it was his holy duty to remain razor-sharp and tough as nails, an eternal youth made of scar tissue and nanotech.

Around him rose the black massif of the city, spiraling up into vertigo. Slits and pinpricks of light followed its cyclopean curves up to the heavens, picking out with their loose constellations entire neighborhoods welded to its surface plating. Such real estate was expensive; not so the Pit.

Over on his left he could trace a ragged line of defenses up the spillway; Vatican territory was burning tonight, with bucket chains from various 'hoods competing to put out a blazing platform and salvage the wood. The zoom on his gyrocam picked out a motley assortment of mutant faces – scaly and orange, spiked with bony thorns, or almost human save for slit noses, sharp yellow teeth or blazing purple eyes. All of them wore wooden crucifixes swinging on on lengths of twine.

Way up top they had better cosmetics, but this guy still wouldn't touch them.

The Pit was purgatorial. It was a breeding ground for revolution; his stock in trade. As they say, things could have been worse.

Down there on his rusted cot he connected the custom chrome taps in his wrists to a bank of machines, and watched fluid begin to flow.

*You'll know the dope-fiend by his wide and staring eyes ...*

Above him, the racing clouds skipped and stuttered like a dysfunctional filmstrip, sick ochre/bilious green/slate.

Searchlights rolled over the metal foothills of Elysium, over the land his migrant people hung onto tooth and nail. It was the stuff of legends to them that he slept under the naked sky. His tribesmen didn't know how he came to be their champion, the hidden labs where his body was sequenced; but they needed hope.

They burned it up like cigarettes.

He slept outdoors, and watching the city above him or the fires of the shantytowns below, making them believe. Once, he saw a star up beyond the corrupted jetstream.

More often it was just the arclight glow of the satellite halo, rolling in endless caravan across the sky. He'd welcome a bullet, most nights. But he knows he's not that lucky.

His stolen body felt cold and itchy, tight across the shoulders. His *real* self lived in the black crescent which hugged the back of his neck., in a shell of toughened plastic wrapped around a web of memory cels.

*Let them shoot*, he thought as the nektar twisted and sparked in his blood. He was one of millions.

It was just as he was getting comfortable that his phone began to ring – orders coming in from his master, the lord of the deep city.

Another shipment of drugs was in the pipe, coming down from out of the high

strata. A special consignment, and one he was commanded to snatch.

Abdulafia stretched the kinks out of his long, lean limbs, rocked over to his war-chest and pulled down a shimmering holomesh cloak, a pair of daggers and a pistol.

He was going to buy his people a little more freedom.

## Ω

The very silence has turned to liquid. Thick, viscous, a medium through which a pair of eyes stare, blank and wide as the skies over desert worlds. A hand moves crabwise, tethered by its arm, until its hungry fingertips run to earth their prey.

Snap

Pop

Hiss

Ragged breathing.

Fingers fumbling back across a black glass table.

Raw data boils through the air, sparking through a set of wetwired points and into the meat of a genetically uplifted brain. Slices of the Valle Crucis *Codex Martial*, images of Tadashi Murai...

Snap

Pop

Hiss

Focus. . .

Through a droplet of water balanced on a sliver of glass, down the barrel of a loaded microscope, the world is rendered in binary. Turn that gaze to your own hands.

See.

Your skin already crawls; rife with bacteria, tiny insects - the lice of Pan Kuo who became the human race.

Lord Simeon Blaire saw it all the time; his eyes were crystal, lidded with diamond lenses as smooth and black as drops of oil. The lenses recessed mechanically into the soft flesh around his eye sockets, back up into incisions in the bone.

This time, each lens was powdered with the fruit of Blaire's popping capsuls.

The drugs came and peeled his mind back.

Billions of thrashing cilia filled his horrified eyes, a sea of filthy life seething on the crust of his dead skin. Blaire shuddered with delicious self-loathing.

He staggered. A whirlwind of hot exultation clawed up his spine.

Snapshot his reflection: thin, ash-blond and sweating.

A face which seemed struck from white marble in long, sheer strokes.

His eyes were silver-rimmed domes of diamondglass, the only part of himself he didn't loathe with a burning passion.

Truth was, he'd rather be *code* than *meat*.

He knew all about the filth and disease of the world - should he choose to open the radiation shutters he could view it every day from his lofty steel tower. Tiny simulacra; plastic caftans; bicycles and minimarket trundlers. Down Town.

Sometimes he found their little rote interesting. Most days he lived trapped in his own mind, pacing threadbare strips in his deep black carpets.

Most days were vague in bright, excruciating light.

The estate-spire of his family was sheathed in mirrored glass, polarized to keep the radiation out, and when it rained the droplets slid down its surface like samples on a slide.

That acid and oily rain was a cocktail of heavy metals, falling on a very real experiment.

Look; mek-powered rickshaws; ethanol smoke; oildrum-fried-chicken... Dogpatch Electric.

A machine was entertained by them.

They were *medieval* dirty.

Their Lords, isolated in towers high above were purebred, rarefied gods.

The *Kheptarchs*, scions of a dead Kleptocracy, born to ennui and luxury and fame...

As one of them, Simeon would never know true disease. But he was still *unclean*.

With his face to the slide he looked out over the roofs and arches, plazas and avenues of Elysium, one cheek against the cool glass. Cold black, bisecting a thin and bitter smile...

Above him, the great bass-string of the space elevator coiled out into black heaven.

And, as it should be, the city among its titanic roots lay at his feet.

Blaire was secure in his implanted sensibilities.

His manicured fingertips reached out to a floating tabletop and grasped the handle of a bubble-thin transparent china cup, brimming with hot artificial lapsang souchong.

His hands were ivory pale, having never seen an honest day's work - utterly smooth and marked with tiny scarred barcodes instead of fingerprints. They had the precision of nanotech biopsy forceps, transferring the cup to his lips without so much as a tremor.

Simeon could see the thunderhead-colored bruises swelling over his knuckles. He

could see the tiny pins under his skin holding the cracked bones together. He watched the membranous *stretch* and *pulse* of his skin as numberless hordes of medi-scarabs remade him. So he could play the Game this evening.

*I don't fear death. I fear defeat. But if I fear, defeat is certain....*

His reflection hovered like a phantom in the black glass as he paced, pensive.

The machine had given him his father's high cheekbones, his grandfather's sharp nose and blue-black eyes. It grew him.

For every one of the hierarchs of the noble houses it was the same. They ruled in name only; kept by a smotheringly overprotective machine as a test-tube sample of the human race. Time and inbreeding had killed off all but the last few hundred, and the burgeoning middle classes had broken down their monumental corporations in the economic equivalent of death by a thousand cuts.

Still, there was one thing which they could do better than their lowly subjects. Because they'd found out long ago that their keeper wouldn't let them die... at least not *permanently*.

That's the nature of the Game, and with that in mind Blaire's skin could hardly contain the hardware which fueled his ambition.

He was the beau of the Razor Clique.

He was a living butchershop of sharp artifice, a safe bet to double your money, a Threedeeo star *ne plus ultra* and a range of bold fragrances for men.

Slow harpsichord and mournful violins followed him, music projected from flitting microamps crafted to resemble jeweled dragonflies. Their diamond-fiber ornithopter wings rippled the scented air, silent twin rainbows framing each slim carapace. Simeon ran one hand along the glass, leaving fingerprint trails to evaporate behind him.

Down Town, they hustled and scattered in the acidic downpour. Holes burned in plastic; a homeless geek peeled Slades out of a crawling burbster's billfold in exchange for a space in his tinfoil shelter.

Visions of writhing bacteria sparked in Simeon's head.

His reflection lay over the view like a blurry hologram, cut up by the tracks of rain.

With a sudden motion his fist flashed out, impacting with a whipcrack sound, radiating a starburst of fissures across the windowpane. The glass was bulletproof, made to withstand more than just radiation and diseased rain. But in a halo of chips and shards it bent outward, held together by a net of wires.

Blaire held his stance, shivering with murderous delight. The face he hated so much was gone, erased.

Slivered into a million leering replicas...

Fractal whirlpools spun off of him like smoke.

Slow zoom.

Sparks behind his eyeballs, burning into soft tissue.

He got lit.

The pulsing meat of his brain waxed positively neon.

*Zhe had discovered a flaw.*

With a barely perceptible flicker the alien Technician's filters over-layered the screens, jamming in close to that sculpted, unreal face. He saw an emptiness in Simeon Blaire's eyes, like the aperture of nothing replicated a billionfold at the center of his cameras.

This human was *wrong*.

It couldn't possibly enjoy the pain of the neuroprobes, lancing up from their hooks in its jawbone, weaving wire through resisting flesh.

Yet still, impossibly, Simeon smiled, his ego smashed to ruin as the bones in his shattered hand knitted smoothly back together.

And far away, Direktor Ascher laughed, watching his pet through the kaleidoscope eyes of a jeweled chrome dragonfly.

All was in preparation. It was time to show Tadashi what he'd helped to create.

## Ω

There were creatures out on the skin of Lord Blaire's city.

Not real people; not genepure toys for the machine.

Just a pack of struggling, cognizant and mournfully hopeful beings who tried to stay alive from day to day; maybe get a little sex, a little altered perception.

Kronos - the computer which ruled Elysium - considered them to be somewhere between cockroaches and domestic dogs on the evolutionary scale.

Most of these *Subcitizens* looked just like ordinary hairless apes, in a palette ranging from blue-black to albinotic white. Others had come up from the rad-lands and the forbidden zones, and sported mutations that you'd better not stare at – if you wanted to keep your eyeballs.

All of them were bolted and studded and plugged with metal and plastic; as much as they could afford. Tech meant status, and just like in every city since a human being put one mudbrick on top of another, status meant *power*.

Check out your options in this little slice of the free market...

In darkened plastic cubes the mediteks wait, spider silent, credit hungry, sharpening their scalpels.

The patient saw their hands, black plastic tendoned with wire, but never their faces.

It's by their art that Kaito's blood sings, a pitch too high to hear, hordes of tiny steel bugs rampaging through his veins. They were tricky and expensive scarab nano, and they came in a range of colors.

Kaito chose blue. By a freakish coincidence, the very same shade as Technician

Zhe's hated protein sandwiches.

Because, right, if some sub scum stabbed him tomorrow night, *red* wasn't gonna impress the ladies.

That went a *long* way towards explaining the Kaito Kayzi manifesto.

Now he was racing, pulling the throttle open, hunkering down as the wind pushed him back in his seat. Feeling the hum of the engine, black rubber on the road, black rubber against his sweaty palms. A thousand pinpoints, baleful red microsuns shivered frozen in his motorcycle's paintwork, a match for his crimson concussion armor.

Kaito's ride was a wickedly chopped Consolidated Industries STX Saber, juiced up on hi-test ethanol out of a shantytown still kitchen.

Completely goddamn irresponsible.

Kaito wasn't genepure enough to live in a dome. He wasn't career-oriented or mentally weak enough to buy into the bimburb lifestyle; the Kayzi was a creature which regarded domesticity as a kind of living hell.

He lived just deep enough in the substrata to be disreputable; unemployable; homogenized and scrubbed clean of almost any ethnicity and culture.

His loose tribal affiliation was recorded somewhere as 'biker.'

Kaito was also a trainee Electromagus, a neophyte to the mysteries. That's what they called a computer hacker in this town, where religion and hokum had coated over technology like a sheen of nacre. But that little fact wasn't recorded anywhere - because he was *good* at what he did.

The Saber's front wheel was chrome-wirespoked, hissing across the transdome highway low and long on sprung, stretched forks. Crazy patterns flashed out from the whirling spokes, a shatterburst of neon reflections. Kaito lay back, twisting the throttle up there on the Saber's left apehanger, and he felt the ethanol-powered chopper bust 200.

*Neon fragments, hot waves of silver slick across his helmet visor...*

But as usual his mind was elsewhere, only barely scanning the road ahead as he flew out into space, out beyond the city with its tantalizing, inaccessible spacelifter dangling above. Chrome flickered in the glow of halogen lamps and votive candles, sliding clockwise 'round the dome at 225.

He paid no attention.

Kaito didn't know if his edition of the state EduPlug was buggy. But ever since he heard of gravity he'd seen the world like a fly upside down on a ceiling, with the interstellar gulf below the top of his head. It felt like he wanted to somehow let go and swim in hard vacuum.

Hence, of course, the drugs. And the scarabs in his veins, to release those drugs to every nerve-ending simultaneously, to keep him from addiction tremors and overdose. They also told him how fast the bike was going, because it was far past the speed where

a single twitch would snowball into a spectacular wreck. Kaito could tune a mean engine, too.

His mind was similarly pared down and streamlined; his grey matter caged and cradled in intelligent wires. The bio-onboard rig was linked through fiberoptics under his skin to a pair of modern plastic pistols, battery-operated magnetic railguns mercilessly miniaturized by some Reclamation zaibatsu. It began to arm them as Kaito's intracerebral G.P.S. zoomed in, overlaying reality with a textured wire-frame map of the city.

He ran through the plan again in his head, making sure all the angles were covered while railpistol status readouts flickered in the corners of his eyes.

The Saber bust 250 over a clear stretch of arching support girder, and crosshairs flashed red across the scarred silver roadway. He trusted that his colleague wouldn't be late...

## Ω

*He swiped one silver hand across his brow, flicking away a fine rain of indigo sweat. This sequestration gig was definitely the hard way to do things – like changing your spark plugs from inside the engine.*

*He downed tools, and took stock.*

*This is the Earth, a two-bit little world with a cruel and savage trick up its sleeve.*

*This is the North Atlantic – a radioactive cesspit teeming with mutated filth.*

*This is Elysium, a rust-red and dirty silver chancre on the face of the burned planet.*

*In the miasma and half-light it resembles a pile of discarded cathedrals, an ornate and gigantic refinery from Victorian nightmare. It's the last and foremost city in existence.*

*It's no New York or Paris or Tokyo; Elysium started out as a mass cargo port, and got uglier and more functional with the centuries.*

*Back then it was called Terminus Afrika, and it made the old-style liquid-fuel spaceplane obsolete.*

*Now it's a megalith of corrosion tapering up and up to pale and wind-bleached wire. Nothing goes up or down the 'Lev anymore; the machine has imposed an interdict with space until its charges EVOLVE. The hordes only come to camp about its roots for precious electricity, the stuff of life.*

*Those feral tribes are filthy, unwashed, irradiated – crudely human. The machine has no interest in them. All it cares about is its breeding program – the three hundred scions of the plutocrats who built Terminus Afrika; investors who had hedged their bets against a nuclear holocaust.*

*Anyway, they no longer rule. They're farmed.*

*Elysium's upper domes are all but empty now, inhabited by the jagged remains of a social elite, their machines, and cubic hectares of dust. Below, deep beneath the pressed-aluminum floors of their cathedral halls life surges and seethes. The crossways between the domes throng with flesh, and ancient highways arching above the rooftops are now decked out with piecemeal tract-housing, families, strip-joints and all-night miso stands. Society is a most persistent fungus.*

*They keep inside when it rains, but when they're out on the streets they're all under surveillance.*

*This is the security grid, ten million glassy eyes rolling tape.*

*This is a single threedeeo set, flickering static.*

*The image jumps and stabilizes, locked down on a scene of sybaritic excess and steaming blood.*

*This is the Game - Simeon Blaire's Game. Watch ...*



DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**OMNIVASIVE CHANNEL 402 – BLOOD SPORTS ‘CABLE COLOSSEUM’  
NETWORK (A DIVISION OF SLAY-PER-VIEW GmbH) - MONDAY 14TH  
JULY**

**12 Noon** – Bootstrapped! – One filthy, uneducated, savage Pit Feral, ten murderous Vexx Automatronics guardian units, and citizenship papers as the ultimate prize!

**1:00PM** – Pit Fight Mutant Leagues – PFML round three playoffs

**2:00PM** – Pit Fight Human Leagues – PFHL Tag-Team Torment

**3:00PM** – World Series of Motorcycle Polo – Live from the sublevel 1027  
Death Arena; Hab 92 Hammerers vs West Sector Prison-Kombinant Maulers

**4:30PM** – Sport of Kings warm-up preview – Ranks the standings of the Lords and Ladies attending tonight’s games and gives the odds. Watch their greatest kills and thrills in our Gore Gallery!

**6:00PM** – Sport of Kings Red Carpet interviews. Up close and personal with the cream of Elysium’s sporting aristocracy!

**7:00PM** – Cable Coliseum in Association with Clone Deathmatch, Lucky Spot and Omnivasive bring you LIVE Monday Night Massacre – the ultimate fusion of politics and brutality! The drama, the excitement, the senseless murder! Tonight, from the House of Gideon, it’s a classic match – a no holds barred free-for-all!

**10PM** – Monday Night Massacre Highlights with Victor Slaine

**11PM** – Religious Programming – Pastor Seddrick Forbiss reads from the Book of Manifest Dogma.

Atop its rusted domes and filth-stained hab-blocks Elysium wears a thorny crown of supertowers – blades of concrete and glass and metal disemboweling the clouds with their razor tips.

Zoom in on one of them, a curved spire of black alloy, and you might see lights blazing from the prison-palace at its very apex...

The misty holo-signs which coiled around the tower's shaft spelled out 'Consolidated Industrial' in letters the size of houses, and tonight Board Chairman Ephraim Gideon was having a little party.

Just him, a couple of hundred guests - and millions of viewers, riveted to their threedeeo sets while black camera-zeppelins like cruising sharks hovered overhead.

Gideon's estate was a temple of vice, a Victorian vision of some far-eastern pleasure-dome.

Every effort had been made by its architects to blind the viewer with opulence, to crush all of ancient Vegas into one vast baroque chamber. The threedeeo crowds couldn't help but be dazzled by the crystal mirrorballs, the scrawls of pulsing neon, the gilded censers and the prismatic tapestries. And they certainly couldn't miss the row of severed heads dripping crimson on the mantelpiece, fresh enough to still look painfully surprised.

Artificial flowers and creeping vines puffed incense and attar, but the temple still smelled of death. Robotic mekan and mind-wiped prisoners toiled for days after each engagement, but that funereal stench was impossible to scrub from the glistening stone. Thankfully it didn't come through in three-dee - although some of the diehard fans would probably have loved it.

Blood gurgling in a labyrinth of pipes and drains played counterpoint to the whine of stressed machinery as Duke Gideon paced, his feet an inch above the telegenic mess. In one heavily beringed hand he clasped a glass of cognac the dimensions of a basketball. In the other, a silver cut-throat razor. Blue light picked out the bone-structure of his feet from below as electromagnets labored, anchored in his flesh. There were no footprints left behind him in the blood – it was his peculiar conceit to never touch the ground.

He'd just killed five people with his jewel-encrusted knuckles - the great cabachons and signets clenched around his hairy digits were crusted with drying gore.

Now his eyes were closed, lids sagging under their own weight, and the razor swung like a conductor's baton as he hummed first violin to the symphony which saturated the humid air. Around the edges of the room the machines of the biotects disassembled the deceased, seeming to dance and clatter to his tune.

Fats, proteins, useful bunches of molecules and valued chemicals, each to a hose. Such grisly mediocrities were kept in the background, for the sake of the audience.

What the cameras lingered on was *blood* - aristocratic, purist red, splashed boldly across the silks while two hundred and ninety seven sightless pairs of eyes stared down from spikes around the walls.

A legion of the decapitated, hung over the heraldic arms of their houses in shame, a scoreboard of dead flesh under immaculate powder makeup...

Blood was a symbol of purity, of lineage - and of power.

Out in the real world the ad-break was ending. Music swelled, martial and ceremonious.

Now sixteen million paying viewers hunched in closer to their flickering threedeeo units. Tote tickets bearing the names of the three remaining players trembled in the hands of gamblers as their stats sizzled out across the bio-onboard band, direct into thousands of hardwired craniums.

Two hundred and ninety-seven other hierarchs had died so they could be here; they were poised dripping in their finery, painted in gore.

Fat old Gideon, mister Blaire, and The Lady.

A small army of boiler-suited techs behind the walls stubbed out their cigarettes and swilled down the dregs of their instant coffees. Innumerable cameras slid into focus, zooming tight on the most beautiful face in the room.

"Yes, I knew the *real* Octavio Ascher." sighed the goddess at Blaire's side. "Who could forget the tabloid field-day he cooked up when we were together? I almost think that all those paparazzi and muckrakers were his idea of *romance*." Like all of her noble clan Leynna had bright amber eyes, set in a bone-china face of impeccable symmetry. "But why would *you* care about dear Octavio's old life? If it weren't for his... *limitations* he'd have no use for a thing like you, Simeon."

Her smile was wicked, glassy-thin. She winked past him to the fanboys behind the cameras. Her long black hair was caught up in a plaited rope of pale gold wire, and the jeweled tip of her braid hung insouciantly over the curve of one hip as she sprawled across a plump divan.

"He's a fascinating man." said Simeon, downing a shot of rich green absinthe. He winced for a second as it burned. "To think, he came up from out of the sewer levels, bootstrapped up from zero..."

Leynna didn't blush. The color slashed across her high cheekbones was powdered ruby, nothing more.

"Perhaps I knew him *too* well." she admitted "He was a *hopelessly* flawed ideologue. In love with himself and his money - it was hard to keep the two of them separate."

It was all in the eyes. The slide and interlock of her targeting systems betrayed her rage, tightening her focus in on his pulsing jugular.

Blaire watched her from behind his mirrored lenses, blind white light blazing in his

skull. Things went sideways when he thought about the Direktor. Snapshots burned into his brain through a chemical haze. They fell one by one, searing him with the vision of cherry blossoms impacting on still water.

(A second of blurred hallucination, Tadashi Murai performing an intricate *kata* with his gleaming blades...)

Blaire licked his lips with a tongue suddenly as dry as tomb dust. He crushed up the feeling in one imagined fist.

"Well, flawed or not, he's certainly the first citizen of the Subcity. Media, gambling, pitfighters – he's done well despite his lowly birth."

Leynna sipped, her eyelashes fluttering in a haze of powdered jewels.

"I think he'd have been happier dead, after what happened. I used to know the *old* Direktor Ascher, and this new incarnation is nothing but a dim shadow," she said, twirling the slim glass between her fingers. "I may have been his consort before the.....accident. But I have little regard for him now. He's developed an almost *perverse* fascination with death."

*And with Simeon Blaire as well* - that much was whispered in the virtual salons of the Clique.

He caught her looking out of the corner of one glaring amber eye to where Gideon, the third of them, fussed over his favorite preparation of cognac and laudanum. And he caught himself wanting to kill that fat old fool first, to keep her for himself. If only there were no cameras here...

"You think *his* fascinations are morbid?" he queried, casting out his senses. "Look around you, Leynna. What do you think our little contest is about?"

Something hummed low and regular, deep in his skull.

His unoccupied hand slowly crept to an ornamental button at the hem of his peacoat.

"This is all about *permanence*, Simeon," she replied, knocking back the rest of her drink in one swallow. "We can die over and over and over again, and come back stronger every time. Perhaps I'll show you just how easy it can be."

Her eyes changed. The glitter of recombining metal deep in each iris...

He ran into her stare mid-sentence, and held his breath.

Then the timer floating above them clicked over to zero, and the Game was back in session.

Blaire felt a blast of heat slap him out of his chair even as he tucked into a ball, rolling, protecting his optic lenses behind one hand.

A cut-throat razor spun past him, paring the tiny transparent hairs from his cheek. It cut deep into the marble wall, shuddering like a tuning fork.

Orange flames lit up the temple, setting off the tawny amber in Leynna's eyes as she launched herself off her divan. A spray of blood flew from the Duke's temple, cut by flying glass...

The brandy-glass! Shattered, dripping, it was a chalice of fire in Gideon's great hairy paw, a writhing ball of flame....

A constellation of bright red droplets splattered across the carpet, beaded like little jewels.

What an asshole.

Time slipped. Greasy microseconds. Gideon's platinum-plate teeth flashed purple and lurid red, his gums black with drug abuse. The cameras ground it out, tight on his leering face.

They caught his thin pink lips, twitched back in a cadaverous smile as he lobbed the firebomb at Baroness Mendelev-Singh, a hidden weapon telescoping from his sleeve with the click of secret springs.

The truncated black tube expanded into a four-foot haft, already spinning on dexterous robotic fingers as its blades snapped outward, each one a gleaming cryogenically hardened razor. Gideon's fleshy jowls quivered with unconcealed bloodlust, his eyes slitted for the kill in deep bruised-purple sockets.

Air slicing, wheeling slow figure-eights; and the sparkle of hypnotizing steel in the sudden gloom. Metal plates in the dome were sliding, shifting to cover the stained glass from incoming toxic rain.

Shadowfall.

Platinum canines and incisors flashed, and Ephraim Gideon sprung into battle. A scuffle of fast and stealthy steps, his feet never touching the floor.

...AND THE FANS ARE GOING WILD IN THE STREETS!

THIS MATCH IS UNDERWAY - THE DECIDER! ONLY ONE OF THESE, OUR LORDS, WILL WALK OUT OF THE TRICENTENNIAL ARENA TONIGHT...

Simeon nodded. This was within the bounds of etiquette. As was the nanoactive button he now tore from his coat, flattening at his fingerprint's coded touch into a monoblade shuriken. His bio-onboard computer systems registered the tiny weapon, sending the signal to prime its edges with a certain fast-acting shellfish toxin.

Leynna.

(Oh why does nerve toxin make me think of thee...)

He locked eyes with her as they dodged in opposite directions, cartwheeling before a hissing susurrant of axe-strokes. Hand over hand.

Deeper shadowfall;

Her eyes dark and dilated, an understanding between them;

*Left, and pull back the arm, the axe avoiding his flesh by a finger's width.*

Gideon wild and high swinging, bloody saliva flying in slow-motion whiplashes.

His eyes roll and blaze, his feet slide independent, picked out in the dark by

magnetic pulses and blue fire.

The apertures were closed.

The light was suffocated, drowned under night-sight green.

His final vision; the Duke ran halfway up the tapestried wall, his axe whirling as he leapt out into the air.

The rain fell like hammers; on the dome, on the skull of Simeon Blaire singing with hot wires.

The long muscles in his arm snapped forward as his eyes closed, the course of fate determined.

Leynna was well out of the way as Gideon's axe came down in one final butcher-stroke, the shuriken cleaving its metal haft and whickering through his neck in a brief spray of red. Simeon saw her eyes again, in the second the Duke fell, and he knew that their understanding was over. She had a blade flashing in one slim hand, fingers the color of marble shot through with gold...

Her feet made tiny splashes in the blood as she came at him, a valkyrie unchained, mesmerizing him for a sliver of a second with those amber eyes...

The stiletto sliced his back open as he slid across the tiles in a controlled dive, stopping himself with one bloody hand against the wall. Five tiny barcodes in crimson; his fingerprints.

It was just a flesh wound – the kiss of the valkyrie. The pain focused him, screwed his mind down into the now, tight on a flash of silver in the gloom. His calculations had to be correct...

She heard the noise; tink. tink. And saw, a second too late, a shimmer in the air, a tiny wobble in its spin from striking the walls.

"Oh yes. *Perverse*." she said, as the shuriken made a thin straight incision into her chest, and lodged somewhere in her spine.

In the second before her mind registered her mortality, Simeon felt himself locked in the twin arclamps of her stare, his victory made pyrrhic. Her mouth was twisted in a sardonic half-smile as she collapsed, face down in her own blood.

AND THERE YOU HAVE IT FOLKS! THE WINNER, ONCE AGAIN, PATRON OF THE BEAUTIFUL SHOPWISE CHAIN OF QUALITY STORES, LORD SIMEON BLAIRE! NOW WE CAN SEE HIM LEAVING THE ARENA, NO DOUBT TO MEET THE FRESHLY CLONED

ADVERSARIES HE HAS SO RECENTLY CUT DOWN...

Ω

The visio in the gambling hall wasn't threedeeo.

It was cheap-ass woven carbon screens stretched across cardboard boxes, their fiberoptic matrices jacked into portable datablocks.

Suitable for the lowbrow crowd, perhaps, but not to the liking of Jaqub Hassan.

As the tinny speakers attached to the twodeeo rang out Blaire's victory song he waded through the cheering punters toward the pay window.

Hassan stood at least a head taller than any of the Subcitizens in the place; he shoved his way to the front leaving fear and anger in his wake.

Hassan was profoundly mongrel-ethnic; a genetic patchwork of mideastern, euro and asian strains all rolled into one huge green-eyed bulk. He kept his dirty blond hair cut raggedly short and his beard long - a three-foot bootlace-thin goatee wrapped in black electrical flex. The coil was looped back over his shoulders, and sported a chrome crescent moon and star which pinned to his lapel. Tiny metal icons dangled along the flex like sneakers from a telephone wire.

He shifted the crowd with the direction of his gaze, homing in on somebody very, very unlucky.

The man behind the window sported a crudely assembled cybernetic eye and a tangled mass of surgical scars. His smile was a set of aluminum dentures, inset with cheap gemstones.

Hi said his large gold nametag MY NAME IS FELDON.

Feldon was feeling good about his franchise from Slay-Per-View GmbH and Omnivasive.

But not *that* good.

When he saw Hassan his remaining eye widened with terror. He took off his cap with one hand while making the sign of the cross with the other.

"So they fixed you up with another eye, did they?" asked Hassan, leaning up on the counter. His forearms were inked with flames, battery-driven skin animations.

Red light played over Feldon's pasty features.

"It was an accident." stammered Feldon, cringing away from the flamelight. "Don't believe those rumors about the Liquid Tong. They never took my eye ...you can tell Mister Gianni I never deal with them ..."

Hassan shook his head. "They already called him and apologized. They said this one was ours to fix up."

Feldon made a small yipping noise.

As he was about to make a dash for the back, Hassan's cybernetic hand came through the chipboard wall and got him by the hair.

"Damn you Jaqub!" shouted Feldon, thrashing like a hooked fish "You're a pusher, not a hitman."

The sawnoff looked like a pistol in Hassan' huge hand, but surprisingly large when pressed to Feldon's forehead.

"I'm diversifying." said Hassan, and pulled both triggers.  
The crowd ran. The projectors shook and skipped.  
Cameras zoomed.  
Huge and ghostly, the face of Lord Blaire loomed over his shoulder.

## Ω

Simeon looked directly into the camera as he left the room, leaving the lifeless body of Baroness Mendelev-Singh smiling coldly amid a sea of warm blood. The victorious Lord left the dome via a vermillion carpet suspended above the floor, borne up by ranks of tiny antigrav mekan in the shape of baroque cherubim.

Had she let him win? Leynna was a complex creature - an *Unstable* - but the Game was sacrosanct. Nothing so human as *emotion* should cloud the judgment of a Player...

Mechanical brass hands peeled off his bloody coat, while nozzles in the mouths of jade gargoyles sprayed on his casual sweater and tie. Unlinked fibers detonated like infinitesimal novae about him as it flickered through shades to settle at somber charcoal.

Simeon knew what she was - how she'd been dragged along in Direktor Ascher's slipstream when he rose to power. The thought of those attentions being turned on him made him squirm with discomfort.

He felt cheap and disposable.

He felt the feeling, he cringed as he imagined slim fingers twisting his dials.

They did.

He felt the neuroprobes, and he felt elated, walking into the highly televised postgame lounge with a manic smile plastered across his face.

*He'd made his deal, and this was how he paid.*

Only a little more time now. Just the small-talk and threedeeo posing of the *Apres-Mort*...

Twin pillars engraved with grinning skulls framed a door across the room – the Gates of Rebirth which led to a biolab full of clone tanks and memory-dump modules. Simeon could imagine fluids bubbling through a maze of glass tubes in there, knotted cables pulling free from two hundred and ninety-nine spinal interfaces. It was a long time since he had walked through the Gates and been Reborn.

From between those skeletal pillars shambled a host of the walking dead. His peers were still running startup programs, feeling the tight fit of their new flesh. Their familiar faces were warped and distorted by new and unfamiliar musculature, their minds unmeshed and grasping for purchase on slippery nerves. They twitched and staggered like a horde of irradiated zombies out of Elysium's sub-basement hell.

Simeon watched, fascinated, as new skin clapped him about the shoulders, new teeth flashed mixed evolutionary messages in their smiles. A white spider-mekan

clattered across the floor to him and passed him the Chalice of Victory, steaming hot brass, while unseen hands drew him down into a deep, buttoned-leather armchair near the fire.

Only when he had drained the skull-faced chalice down to its last bitter dregs did he realize that a special event had taken place. They had TOUCHED him. Flesh to flesh. And that was so intimate as to be perverted for these agoraphobic, rarefied aristocrats.

Even Gideon, Jaegenn, the highest ranking Kheptarchs of the Direktoriats were smiling at him, crowding in around his high-backed chair - abandoning the strictures of protocol as they thronged to shake his hand.

"You must be very proud, my boy." rumbled the Duke, gingerly patting the baby-soft new skin of his neck. "The longest clear run in a century or more. You seem to have grown attached to that body, master Blaire!"

In all his life he had never felt so much human skin outside of the game. To him, the feel of warmth and the pulse and life under his fingertips meant murder.

His smile, when it came, was as close to sincere as a Lord would ever allow.

With a snap the tape cut out, the final frame shivering in cold pixels, locked down on the look of surprise and delight written across Simeon Blaire's face. The slitted malice in his eyes.

Those domes of mirrored diamondglass seemed like holes in the world, reflecting the multifarious tongues of the frozen fire as they stared out at Technician Zhe, mocking his scrutiny. The readouts were all the same - impossible. Never before had Zhe seen such distortion - the murderous Lord warped everything around him like a black hole.

These other ones - the dead and the reborn - were nothing, but this *Simeon Blaire*... The universe would pivot around him soon like a wheel about its axle. Even in the most outlandish, entropy-mangling training simulations Zhe had never seen such madness.

Two-hundred and ninety-nine sightless, lifeless heads adorned the walls of a room bedecked in luxury and blood behind him, a room on which a pair of heavy steel doors closed, sealing off the temple for another night.

Beyond them in the deepening dark the biotects' machines ground on, flashes of green raking the gloom as they picked out the lidar signatures of flesh. With which to play the game another day.

## Ω

The finance processor on Emmanuel's thin glass desk chimed; payment had been received.

Two hundred and ninety-nine new cloned bodies, and a healthy injection of cash into his already overflowing coffers.

Emmanuel Third Lancaster was a voyeur. He never Played.

But then, his geneline had absolved themselves of the ritual and of society itself centuries ago.

His product was necessary for the survival of the species, and Lancaster's ancestor - the glorified Saint of Meat - had been in the right place at the right time. He'd *also* been Emmanuel Lancaster, in his way; a net of memories which had long since faded from the arch-biotect's ancient brain. Everything pertinent was kept as data for the convenience of his current incarnation, scrubbed clean of emotive tags and cross-referenced thoroughly. It ran to several million terabytes, all stored optically in the family library. But despite being able to download and relive a dinner of roasted quail and olives from three centuries past, his memories weren't *quite* complete.

He couldn't quite remember why he'd invested in the Elevation Project all those years ago.

There were those who said it was the Saint who pushed the button; that he was mad enough to destroy the world to gain such privilege with Kronos. Third Lancaster let the rumors spread.

If he chose to Play he would conduct an epiphany of slaughter, the likes of which the peasant masses had never witnessed. He had bodies for such; sheer oily black, poison-dripping, fanged and many-eyed.

It was good stress relief. After all, he *was* a harried big-business executive.

"I love it, Mister Lancaster" hissed the unnatural voice in his head, a piston-driven susurrantion.

"The additions to the Blaire clone are perfect. He has grown up to be quite an exquisite monster."

"Thank you, Director Ascher." replied Lancaster, his thin microcrafted face twisting with distaste.

"I take it you will send me the next payment for the free-radical scrubbers soon. And the control nanonics. It should all fit in a little phial ...the four hundred thousand will be in my account by Wednesday."

Ascher still managed to laugh back at him, even though his flesh was utterly nerveless and dead.

"Trust me Lancaster, the money's already there. I'd hardly be spending it on hookers, would I?"

Lancaster cut the connection, infuriated. That upstart Direktor of Broadcasting wasn't even one of the High-Born. As such he could never be cloned like his noble betters - for him death would be utterly final.

And it wasn't too far away, now.

Now *there* was a good reason to pour himself another drink.

His raw dislike of the Director was amplified by another problem with the 'Ascher Account'.

It came down to a single missing exowomb from one of the storage freezers of his vast manufactory. The very specialized theft of a modified Blaire clone, like the one Lord Simeon's intellect now inhabited.

It had gone Down Town, into the lair of the Ashishim.

And, if military intelligence reports were to be believed, it had come back for more.

## Ω

Another round over. Another night of bloodshed and etiquette and little sandwiches without the crusts on. More statistics and replays for the fans.

And for one very persistent watcher, a little more data for its ongoing study; its experiment in creating a worthy human being. This was how they had chosen to compete with each other, and Kronos was not inclined to interfere. It had been built to watch, and learn, and wait.

Another batch of numbers and graphs and observations went flying up the cable, out of the top of the last city, through the poisonous stratosphere and into the cogitator core of the great machine in its asteroid fortress.

This was the lure which twitched above the head of Kaito Kayzi, but it wasn't built for him. This was for one of the pure; a sky-castle of silver and blue marble from which to rule a broken world.

Simeon lusted for the hidden power locked up at its heart. Octavio Ascher would gladly kill every man, woman and child on Earth to get his hands on it.

But Kronos cared as much for the ambitions of individual humans as a dog did for the dreams of its fleas. It had been built for a greater purpose.

Dim, deep brainstemwise, it remembered.

Its roots had grown from the central Atlantic in a starburst of self-replicating tubes, sinking magma taps beneath the grey-green waves to make the ocean seethe like a boiling pressure-cooker. Convection currents welled up, bearing with them black and sinuous fishes which exploded on contact with the noisome air.

Such techno-sorcery was forbidden now – erased from history.

But back then - that time was the heyday of human hubris and folly, when the Old Democracies of Earth collapsed under the weight of debt and overpopulation. When the Terminus and its governing council plotted secession...

In time it grew - a city arising like lost Atlantis, its myriad towers crowned with threshing worms of chrome. They linked and interlocked in patterns like circuitry, questing hungrily toward the sun.

Then the Downfall came, and Kronos had been given new orders.

There had been setbacks, but it was nothing if not resolute.

It was going to train some monkeys.

Its preparations were of course, impeccable.

To see it, even now, in ruins...

The bright sliver of light which was the space-'lev caught the sun, plunging down through a choking atmosphere to where its stem broke the waves. About its roots was clotted an island reclaimed from its own effluvia; the great shantytown of the Territories. From above there seemed to be no divide between the bladed megatowers and the ruptured, decaying Subcity, even though at street level they were as different as a Sao Paulo *favela* and Saville Row.

Kronos' satellites remembered in their shielded magnetic storage banks a time when the entire city had teemed with commerce and industry, orderly and functional and safe.

Indeed, many of them remembered a time when the whole world was filled to the seams with humanity; a time when there were said to be too many people for the ecosystem to support.

There's no mechanical concept of guilt; none of remorse. But many of the satellites also remembered the targets to which they had delivered their nuclear payloads.

## Ω

*Technician Zhe was deep into the core.*

*The twelve cylinders which contained its artificial brain tissue were arrayed before the alien scientist on a brushed-steel bench, under the sodium glow of powerful worklamps.*

*Each one was suspended an inch above the table, shivering in a field of un-time and sliced lengthways in slivers. Innumerable pulsing silver tentacles wove around and through the captive brain, plugged in deep. And from the core to its interface; the Hub.*

*Once again, split open and prey to Zhe's otherdimensional technologies. He was merciless in his pursuit.*

*The Technician ripped out fistfuls of memories, drilling through the delicate neural strata. Already dim visions, scenes from long-untapped archives were coming to the surface. Zhe's search programs had limited information about the Threat, but he knew it involved some kind of awful doomsday weapon.*

*The Forge.*

*Just the kind of thing the Slavesystems of the Unity should never possess – and just the kind of thing a race of bloodthirsty apes would build, ignorant of the danger.*

*With this in mind Zhe found it hard to believe the images he was getting back from the trace. But this connector, this corpus named Kaito Kayzi which he was using had featured in the memories. And another of the frozen ones...the one named Hassan.*

*Zhe was determined.*

*He tweaked the parameters.*

*He applied the search programs afresh, like a torturer wielding the hot irons. They scoured from the very start again.*



DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**Celebrants:**  
**(Grief Division Order Militant)**

The Law was very clear. Within the domes, as without, there must be death if there was to be new life. It was all bound up in a well-presented report, with neat buzzwords like 'pro-active' and 'innovative bio-management strategies' and 'resource paradigms'. There was also the question of 'not enough food' and 'too much sewage.' War had shrunk the world down to a single city, and it would have to be brutally self-sufficient.

Human lifetimes would have to be curtailed somehow, and the only answer (considering Kronos' proclivities) was massive program of eugenics.

It wasn't about race or eye color or culture. But having three eyes and tentacles was a definite setback to reaching centenarian age.

Undemocratic as this sounds, out in the RT life expectancy ran only about 45 to 50; most SubCits never questioned the simple math.

As for anyone out on the mainland or in the Pit who was over the age of forty – he or she regarded as a wizened and shamanic being of preternatural vitality. Either that or as a *witch*, which amounted to much the same thing - but with more burning and torture.

Despite its logical foundations the system had its recusants.

The *Celebrants*, Order Militant of the Grief Division, were armed and mandated to reap the souls of the recalcitrant 'dead'.

This became known as *Natural Causes*.

In return, the Machine extolled the dogma of hybrid evolutionary vigor, and promised to assimilate Citizens' memories and experiences into its own storage banks when they were 'retired'.

Some took comfort in this fact.

Most, the Celebrants would tell you, tried to run.

Dalgiesh Wrynstedd *'The Proud History of the Orders Militant'*  
Elysian University Press

**TECHNICIAN'S NOTE - LIES! ALL LIES! AND NOW I KNOW WHY IT  
NEEDED THEM DEAD...**

**Gharfos Nyl, Hierophant Grade Three**

*Technicians of the Multiplicity cannot be destroyed.*

*It's not just that they're tough - although they are.*

*It's not just that the minds of those selected to attend the Technic Academy are uploaded into bodies forged in the hearts of suns... although that fiery tempering adds its own dimension.*

*At the very heart of the matter lurked 'quantum entanglement', or so Zhe had been assured. The manual which came with his new body had been very clear on the subject - even if he were blasted to atoms they'd eventually all find their way back together.*

*It was something he never wanted to experience, thank you very much.*

*But the enemies of the Praetor had tried pretty much every strategy to prove the manual wrong. They were still trying, although they had nothing to show for their efforts.*

*They'd tried solar immolation, gamma radiation, plasma cannons, sonic imploders, napalm, and chopping Technicians up into mincemeat with a really sharp axe.*

*Not to mention defenestration, impalement, the rack, iron maiden, catapult, mangonel, arquebus, gatling maser and tachyon spin-reversal matrix.*

*No dice.*

*Which meant that Zhe was seriously contemplating a scorched Earth policy; afterwards, his erstwhile Supervisor would be the only thing left standing.*

*His mind seethed in frustration as the cold light of the cryotubes flickered over his workstation.*

*His specimens seemed smug, taciturn in their frosty sleep.*

*But perhaps something had bled into his alien mind from the frozen body of Kaito Kayzi. Because Zhe felt an unfamiliar twinge of compassion for the poor little ape and his misguided kind.*

*No shortcuts, then. Zhe began to pry in earnest.*

## **Ω**

*Down Town.*

*Undersiders bicycle and throng in teeming hordes, Reclamationists strut, packing glass knives and chopped-off Kalashnikovs...*

*Rain sifted down into the lower levels through a slicing mesh of wires, crosswalks and feeder pipes. It dripped black, green with algal slime, or bloody with rust.*

*Plastic clothes ran in Technicolor down in the streets, where the locked doors of a tiny convenience shack were stained from innumerable downpours.*

*Rust red, splattered and trailed. Inside and out.*

*In a dirty mirror Kaito saw oiled black hair spiked and messed from wearing*

headgear. Sunken eyes, rimmed with metal where Ashishim Interfacers had expanded his vision.

He pulled at the bruise-purple bag under his left eye with one finger, frowning.

There were lines and creases there which he never used to notice. But this extracurricular shit... it was making him *old*. Old, and tired, and prone to fits of nightmare insomnia.

About a quarter of a lifetime, and it had come to this.

Again.

Kaito had just robbed the King Value at gunpoint, an unremarkable day's work if you were modern-day Kaito. Hassan, (the rest of the strike force all on his own) lay heavy on the blood-slick counter, folds of trenchcoat spread like angel wings around him as he popped sugar candies off his thumb and into his mouth. There was a big ol' Smith and Wesson sawnoff lying on his chest like a buried crusader's broadsword, and a big ol' hole in the King Value wall, courtesy of the above.

The last of the drugs which yesterday's crimes had bought them hammered and rampaged through their brains, a whirling storm of euphoria.

This hit would pay for tomorrow - but that wasn't exactly why they were here.

"You ever think we're gonna get to the end of this?" asked Kaito, pushing his fingers through his scraggly mane of hair. "You think he's gonna let us go?"

"Why don't we wait for him and ask?" rumbled Jaq, his fleshy hand pinched up over his eyes. The other one - the dangerous one - was trailing down toward the floor. "I'm sure a genius like you can work out the odds that we'll walk outta here."

Neither the neophyte Magus or the part-time hitman were gamblers. They preferred to work in certainties, by the gram or the kilo. They never used to be petty crooks, either - but things had changed.

"Tsien doesn't pay us for waiting around, Hassan. He wants a, a goddamn *blitzkrieg*, right?" Kaito was pacing now, nervous, his face reflected full- frontal in the shattered lens of a video camera. A plastic sign reminded shoppers that it might be loaded with film. "We're supposed to grab the cash, leave the alphanumeric, and get the hell out."

"You want this shit to end, you gotta get pro-active." answered Hassan, his professorial tone muffled by tangy globes of lemon candy. "The way I see it, we only get out of this mess when Officer Eddie catches a bullet."

Kaito eyed the door, the concrete mess outside the door, and then Hassan again.

Surely he didn't mean that they should get in an actual *gunfight* with the police? They had Cyben, and mekan, and a whole grab-bag of nasty treats for idiots who tried that on for size.

"Just forget I asked, then." snapped the twitchy little biker. "He's paying us to manufacture crime scenes, Jaq. If he catches those 'mystery gangers' who he's always after then his paycheck dries up - but *we're* in line for a mind-wipe!"

"You couldn't pay me enough to hit that slimy little cop piece of shit" continued Hassan, throwing the cardboard packet back over the counter "He's got that vindictive look about him. Anyway, I'm mister fuckin' responsible. I'm working through my anger-management issues constructively these days."

*Like when that poor unfortunate clerk tried to get the drop on you?* thought Kaito.

"Responsible or not, Jaq." he said. "That 'slimy little cop piece of shit' was *this* close to your drug business, and he'd just *love* to send us down to the lobo factory. So, sure, let's *give him an excuse!*"

His nose wrinkled, acutely aware of the smell of blood. The hole in the wall of this piece of inner-city real estate was edged in red and grey, a halo of overkill.

The idiot wasn't paid enough to try and draw down on a couple of jackers like them. But he'd pulled that .45 out from under the counter anyway, and then ... Kaito's mind slipped, calculating as he stared at the mess.

He'd been born with an innate mathematical ability all out of proportion to his scrawny frame, so he could calculate to a fraction of a second how long it would take the Compliance Division to arrive at the scene of a shopjack homicide.

No mistake, that's what it was – even if the register chump *had* grabbed steel first.

The clock was still ticking.

So he grabbed Hassan by the lapels, dropping the shotgun into the lap of the dead King Value clerk. He pulled his partner to his feet, almost putting his back out in the process. And he fired off a swift backhand, the kind you'd give a hysterical screamer. His hand hit Jaq's face like a sockful of walnuts smashing into a slab of granite, but it got the big guy's attention.

*Now. Count the seconds while Jaqub's sizzling nerves send and recieve...* Kaito sidestepped pre-emptive and hit his railpistols.

A fist the size and weight of a canned ham missed his face by inches.

Hassan hauled back again, his eyes swimming like poached eggs in pools of vodka. He stopped when he realized that he proably deserved that. *Pop psych bullshit.* Sheesh, the things drugs'll do to a person...

He never saw that Kaito had both his thumbs on the safety catches.

"O.K." said Hassan, cramming another few snacks into his pocket for the road. "We'll go. But for the record, you could be out there pissing on old ladies and wiping your arse with the Elysian flag - the cops still wouldn't come. 'Specially not *that* one - he's got a good thing going here."

He dusted off the shotgun; a throwdown - a present for the Div.

"They just don't, anymore. That's why, in just three easy steps, we now have enough money for a whole new baggie of Fuzzy Stunn."

He was cramming his whole coat full of candy, like some kind of seven-foot hyperactive kid, sour snakes and jelly tots and chokko-bullets spilling from pockets

usually full of needles and blood money.

Kaito, confronted by this bizarre vision, couldn't help but laugh.

Jaquib might be built like a nuclear bomb shelter and as homely as the same, but he had one inane and infectious grin. There was a moment when the Kayzi's face grew tight and sad and *old*, stretched by forces of memory and guilt. But his own smile flickered on again just as swiftly as it had collapsed, and he lent a hand, dragging Hassan off the bench and dusting down his greatcoat.

They were back on the same de-facto team.

Kaito pocketed his pistols and a fat wad of hyperinflated thousand-dollar bills, the eyes of Commissioner Slade smiling from a face scarred by the watermark. Slades were good for peanuts and cola, where once they were good for pina coladas. But a roll this fat was still enough for the Stunn.

And Hassan was wrong. The thin echo and wail of sirens was abroad on the metal-scented breeze as they stumbled outside. Their bikes were still chained to a giant antitank caltrop left over from the Seven Hours War, one of a corroded and paint-daubed line which marched off down the street. Those incoming Pigwagons would have to pick their way through this kind of ground-level steel-reinforced clusterfuck all the way over. Kaito and Hassan would have an easy getaway on two wheels apiece .

The STX Saber started on the first touch of his bio-onboard link; as always. Hassan kickstarted his Reclamation-made imitation Suzuki once, twice, thrice. It roared into life, blasting plumes of oily purple smoke.

Last tricks.

Kaito crunched numbers, compiled mentally, and scribbled a long alphanumeric on a greeting card which Hassan taped to the front door under King Value's royal cartoon smile. "I missed you yesterday." it read, all balloon-writing and pastels. "I missed you today. Tomorrow I'm buying a telescopic sight for my rifle."

(a7dhfh57239fjh57cxhnt8cjh00dh4hf877en)

The Divwagon crashed the scene as their dust blew, and by the time the first jackboot hit the deck they were pushing 300 out over the transdome ring.

This was becoming familiar.

## Ω

A telephone was ringing in the dark; not visio, not even modern in its design.

A black, antique bakelite phone was ringing, with the tin-can rattle of real miniature bells.

A man in immaculate pinstripes answered it; and the aesthetic became clear. This was a phone you could beat a man to death with; this was the hand which would do it.

He had a face like a sallow ball of dough – heavy jowls rough with stubble,

eyebrows locked in a death-grip over his broken nose. His hair was pomaded back to within an inch of its life, black and oily as molasses. On his hairy fingers gold rings with the heft of knuckle-dusters clustered like limpets, smothering the scars and abrasions of a lifetime spent dishing out savage beatings.

The man, one Gianni Vexx, was in *character*.

"Yes, Mister Lancaster." he said into the empty silence of a large and shadowed room. "Enough adrenochrome to float a coffin in." he said, his grin lighting the gloom momentarily.

Gianni's voice was reedy and stiff. He was a smoker.

"And I get howmany bodies in exchange?" he asked. Mister Lancaster confirmed the order, distaste written all over his voice.

The smile was more genuine this time.

"*Grazie*, Mister Lancaster. You'll get your *stupifcente* - I need make only one call."

The phone cut out, its connection closed by the hand of Emmanuel Third Lancaster more than ten miles above.

And deep in Gianni's gut, in the hot warmth of his living flesh, tiny machines labored to contain his cancer. The pain would make most folks beg for a bullet. Today, he couldn't give two shits.

Today, he was going to settle two very large accounts with one meeting.

## Ω

In a dome made of wafer-thin plasma screens as big as billboards Octavio Ascher watched and waited.

His current entertainment; a security tape from inside an innocuous- looking convenience store.

The atmosphere was kind of tense – a huge hulking giant of a man was holding out a shotgun in one hairy paw, holding it as if it were a toy pistol.

Next to him a twitchy little dude in bike armor hammered on a thick black remote control – he was blitzing the alarm systems, and probably thought he'd got all the cameras too.

Now...this was the part he was watching for.

See the clerk snap – the look on his face switching from terror to animal savagery in a single frame.

See his hand move liquid fast, under the counter, pulling out a big black slab of handgun.

There – the big guy has it, he rolls with the movement, grabbing the clerk's wrist, continuing its arc and making the pistol swing wide up over his shoulder, a bullet blazing out way off target to punch a hole in the roof.

The shotgun came up under the clerk's armpit and BLAM, a textbook battlefield amputation - but the shooter wasn't done. He flipped the sawnoff in the air, racked the slide as he caught it, and as his little compadre screamed silently in black-and-white he put the muzzle to the bleeding clerk's chest and gave him a double shot.

A twin-barreled pump was a terrible thing to use at point blank range; hardly a weapon of finesse. But Octavio liked this brute's style. He ticked a box, happy that the big guy was on his payroll. This was definitely going in with all his martial-arts footage - one had to keep up with the times, and these days the soul of a samurai could just as easily be his Smith and Wesson.

Simeon was really gonna enjoy this one.

## Ω

Skipforward; Don Vexx sat for hours in grim meditation as the mekan worked on him. While he waited, still and silent, he used the peripherals plugged into his Suit to clean and oil his guns.

Gianni kept a black-chromed .44 in his ankle holster.

He kept a Taurus model 627 seven-gun in a whiplash rig on his artificial forearm.

Made in the Reclaimed Territories by Vatican Black Technologists, it was supposed to keep targeting and shooting even if his body was blown apart, heaven forbid. The rig's warranty even guaranteed him a tomb in the Iron Basilica if he died due to faulty manufacture.

Hell, perhaps Joanie might make him the damn Saint of something...

It gave Gianni a sense of security to deal with a hallowed institution like the Church, stand-up guys who understood the value of history and tradition. He was more than happy to let rumors spread about his connections to Pope Joan III (even the outright tawdry ones) and her armies of dreaded Templars and Sentinels and Valle Crucis monks.

Fear and respect were his currency - they had been since he'd shed the dead skin of his old personality to become Elysium's mafia. Not a member of some shadowy gentleman's club but, thanks to advanced tech and a certain bloody-minded perseverance, the *entire thing*.

It helped to own tens of thousands of indispensable industrial robots; they could never cop a plea-bargain, and some of them had very interesting power tools instead of arms. It was like owning an army of teamsters who were never drunk, never lazy, and didn't need the pension fund he was merciless in embezzling.

It earned him the respect of people it was good to know.

Six-foot-seven bikers with cyborg hands, for example.

Men like Jaqub Hassan.

Don Vexx made him feel small by comparison, an effect he took pains to exacerbate.

The Don induced fear on multiple wavelengths. More importantly, he had injected brutality with a certain elan Hassan found unattainable.

It kept him coming back.

## Ω

The streets opened up before them, like a medieval throng cringing back from a passing procession of lepers. Indeed, they wore similar robes; black hooded sackcloth with gold-filigreed gas masks beneath.

Nobody in Elysium knew about the Ku Klux Klan, but that's the image their pointy cowls and silk-ribboned vestments brought to mind. The masks served to protect their anonymity as much as their lungs, because they were utterly despised. At their belts the two sinister figures carried in official duplicate one pocketwatch, one baton, and one machine-pistol.

They weren't diseased or rabidly racist. It was worse.

These two were Celebrants, the most feared and despised of the Orders Militant. They made crooked Narcos look like the incorruptible saints. Heed the wisdom of streets...

Assault an ordinary officer and you could expect a brutal beating and a trip to the cell cubes, in whichever order you pleased. But Celebrants could set your clock forward.

They'd take years off your life with a single finger, and then throw in a brutal beating and a trip to the cell cubes free of charge.

Today two of them were coming for Don Gianni, saving the Compliance Division years of paperwork and thousands of valuable hours of investigation. Even the most resourceful crime boss couldn't operate from beyond the grave.

The dirty concrete slab which supported Gianni's building was connected to the domes by lengths of defunct high-tension cable, while the pedestrian mallway the Celebrants walked down continued underneath it as a third-world homemade suspension bridge.

Street entrepreneurs were literally slamming their windows shut and cowering in their shacks, but these two were seasoned.

Neither had their hand on the butt of his gun or the haft of his tazer-baton. The left hung free; the right was on the pocketwatch, symbol and most fell tool of their profession.

When they confronted Don Gianni their timepieces would simultaneously count down the final seconds of his allotted lifetime.

The tiny robotic insects which nested within the watch would swarm out, crowd through his every pore and orifice, and devour his living brain.

A direct replica of that gelid organ would be built up somewhere deep in the bottomless databanks of Kronos. It was standard procedure – *natural causes*.

This time however, there was a difference. This job was running a little ahead of schedule. In fact, Don Gianni wasn't slated for a visit for at least another year or two. These Celebrants were on somebody else's payroll.

Valle Crucis were cheaper, and Confederate Bounty-hunters were usually more sensationally messy, but if you could afford the titanic bribe bent Celebrants were the only way to dispose of your enemies.

"Got our mark now, command." wheezed one of them through his ornate gas-mask. A mic bead pierced through his lip sent his words out over the ether. "You're right, that's one big ugly bastard, ain't it?"

A similar jeweled seed of 'tech drilled into the lobe of the Celebrant's ear crackled and buzzed for a second in reply.

"Confirm, command. We wait for the big ape to leave, then we make the hit. You can consider him...erased."

## Ω

Hassan stood shadowed in the doorway, a slab of darkness defined by awful daylight. His overalls were riotmesh, dirty from the road, one shoulder strap replaced with a piece of chain, the other covered with badges and patches. 'Block Twelve Doom Troopers - Cop Killing Kowboyz'.

Gianni Vexx wore a pinstripe Suit of archaeotech, built for some data-integrated day trader a millennium ago.

"So pleased you could stop by." said the Don "I really appreciate face-to-face time with my associates. Such a luxury in this modern world."

"Uhh...always a pleasure, Mister Vexx." said Jaq, ducking under a low roof beam.

*Nobody* was ignorant enough to refuse a summons to *this* particular office.

Rumors abounded in the Subcity of bodies entombed in building foundations, chopped-off hands and acid baths...

"I was coming down to see you soon anyhow – another batch, top quality stuff."

Gianni proffered a brightly painted tin of amaretto biscuits, smiling like a bachelor uncle. Jaq could just about see the readouts from his spy systems shunting into his head.

"Still on the stunn? Well, ya gotta have a vice, right? Better for you than smoking." Gianni grinned and twinkled indulgently.

"With the lungs?" asked Hassan, momentarily shocked.

"Not as such." replied the don, lighting up a fat cigar. "Please; take a seat."

There was only one chair, directly across the Don's immense desk. Above him hung a huge and melting Jesus, his face blistered scarred with age. After all, Gianni was unswervingly, impossibly catholic.

There were those stories about how he and the Pope had been busted in a bathtub full of lime jelly with three nuns and ...well, it was best not to get distracted, just in case he really *could* tell what you were thinking.

Hassan sat in silence while his host shuffled across the room to his high-backed seat. He took another hefty puff on his stogie, squinting down its length at Jaq's huge form skooched up on the little chair.

"I suppose your look of polite disgust means it would be a waste of time to offer you one of these?"

Hassan tried the grin.

"Bah. Thought so. You kids today think that Med Division shit pure gold." Gianni slopped replicated Hennessey's cognac into a whiskey tumbler, grunting as the spilled drops were sucked up by chrome-shelled roachbots. "Get this down you, then we can talk business."

Hassan held his breath during the first mighty gulp, and didn't let it out until a second cut-crystal tumbler came sliding over his way. It went down the hatch in roughly one point six seconds.

Hassan felt that old cognac glow.

"Better, I suppose. But it hurts to watch shit *that* expensive get sucked down like cheap beer."

The Don peered through crescent-moon glasses perched on the broken hump of his nose, patched into his suit via a thin silk ribbon shot through with wires. Data hissed across their intrinsic screens in pistoning columns of green. The eyes behind them were oil-black and sparkling. As Gianni and Jaq sat in silence those eyes drifted to the closed suitcase between them. This was the process of making Hassan small.

"You catch that last round of the Game, Jaq?" Gianni asked, offhand, making him twitch like he's just been shocked. "That young Simeon Blaire's *dynamite*! Odds on favorite for tonight as well. He's making them go through bodies like they was out of fashion."

Hassan smiled, and opened his hands in a gesture of good-natured ignorance. He heard the sound of loading guns in the indeterminable distance...

The locks snapped open.

"I'm no sports fan, Don Vexx. Who's this guy Simeon, anyhow?" He feigned dumb. It was too easy.

*He's one of your customers,* said the sarcastic drawl of Kaito in his head. *He shouldn't be winning at games of chance, let alone the old ancestral sport of kings.*

Gianni let the last trickle of cognac drip into his glass with a look of sincere regret.

"Young buck from the Blaire geneline. Got some kind of optics rig in his face, you know?"

*Oh yeah - and the juice from his adrenal gland is sitting right there on the table in front of you...*

"Well, know him or not, that's my pick for the big Dawes - Jaegenn gig. I gotta top-flight bookie down Confed way, if you want to double your money."

"Sorry, but no, Don Gianni." replied Hassan, feeling the Hennessey's creeping up his spine. "I'm an honest head-tapping 'dreno farmer, not a gambler. That kinda shit can get a man into some deep trouble."

Gianni laughed, then, blowing the tension out of the room. He laughed like a hissing valve on some rusted propane cylinder, and Hassan was obliged to join him.

"Like our dear departed Feldon? Give yourself some credit Jaq!" He clenched the butt of his cigar between his stained yellow teeth and hunched down over the case. "The day you're as stupid as Feldon Roberts I'll pay you to shoot yourself! But until that sad day comes, you'll be my number one 'chrome provider. If you'd be so kind?"

Hassan popped the lid.

Gianni flicked a silver loupe out of his sleeve to better rez the goods.

"Bellissimo. Superb. Fuckin' genius with a needle."

Hassan smiled fuzzy; the Cognac had landed.

"Your standards are among the best in the trade." Gianni sighed, as if it would have pleased him to find (horror of horrors) microchunks of tissue floating in the adrenochrome. "It's this attention to detail which places you above my other....contacts. But without *discrepancy*, there can be problems. You know how that Machine loves patterns."

The Don's stogie blew vast cyclopean rings.

Hassan closed the lid of his aluminum snapcase gently, accompanied by the pixie-bells tinkle of innumerable tiny phials. Division drug sniffers, the size of dust mites and equally silent, were reputed to be everywhere.

He was afraid to meet Gianni's eyes.

He feared his anger would show.

"You want me to mess up the extractions?" he asked, staring at his three whitened knuckles, his two chrome. Hassan gripped the briefcase hard enough to crush the handle. "That could cause some of my patients to be....compromised."

By which, with a sudden locked gaze, they both understood he meant 'dead'. Any speck of detritus in the liquid was evidence of an aneurysm. The Don leaned back into the gloom, his pince-nez flashing green to red.

"Just a little advice, my friend." said Gianni, pulling a wad of Slades from his top-coat pocket and sliding them across the stained wood with one fat finger. "There've been intimations of a Farmer being sought by one of the Lords. The Liquid Tong out of

Celestial are suspending ops; then again, they *are* a paranoid bunch. I'm far more practical, but I still want to protect my sources."

Hassan swore he could tell where the hidden gun was. One of the eyeballs of Christ behind him slid open, revealing the muzzle of a magnetic railcannon...

"The expense of a few of *your* sources will be perfectly acceptable." Gianni ground out his cigar to punctuate, stabbing a chubby finger in Jaq's face. "Pick one yourself, or I'll do it for you."

Hassan was a professional.

Too professional to blow his lid at a dangerous man like Gianni. But also too proud of his steady hand and sharp eyes to put a hypo through some poor junkie's cortex. Word of such incidents had a way of getting around. So he nodded, ambiguous gesture, kissed the geo-real diamond adorning the Don's pinkie, and whispered the key-string to unlock his snapcase before he could say something stupid.

When he stood up again the anger had been crushed down to a tiny spark deep in his eyes.

Hassan left the temporary offices of the mafia in a swirl of raytraced fire, dancing in the transparent LCD matrix of his coat. But the foot had come down. He was *obligated* now. The show was over.

Tiny streams of data poured across Gianni's specs in the greylight flash of the door opening and closing - the key-string first and foremost, followed by other figures - molecular maps and atomic weights. It was a chemical breakdown of Jaq's breath, scraped from the glittering carbon chunk by a mekan the size of a mosquito.

Gianni knew who Hassan knew, and so he couldn't trust his hacked biomonitor data. If Kaito Kayzi weren't a neophyte Magus he would have been very useful in the world of organized crime...

So he got a second opinion.

Out of the corner of one dark eye the Don saw the tiny mekan re-anchor itself in its baroque jewel setting, hairline legs gripping the inverse pyramid of the diamond's marquise cut. In center-stage a holo image of Octavio Ascher looked askance at him, neat and sharp in a virtual twentieth-century suit.

"Is he clean?"

"Results are streaming now, Mr Ascher." muttered Gianni through pursed lips. "No nanotech present. No trace of the 'chrome...picking up stunn, alcohol, trace foodstuffs. Sherbet fuckin' candy."

"Excellent." said Mr Ascher, his face a virtual mask to cover his terrible deformities. "He's the one. I'll deliver the Relic to him myself - with a little incentive. You just concentrate on shifting that 'chrome so I can take my cut."

The slam of the office's streetfront door rung out as clearly as Mr Ascher's voice, amplified by 'phones hugging drum and hammer and stirrup, floating in the balancing

fluids of Gianni's inner ear.

Thank God (the Catholic one, of course) he thought, that such tools of near-omniscience weren't available to poor Jaqub Hassan.

Ascher collapsed. Six hundred G in the bag. Now to Lancaster and the big payoff.

Then the fucking Celebrants could take this body.

Outside on the corner the two scumbags were still waiting, one rocking backwards and forwards in his rubber boots, the other smoking a vile roll-your-own through the hole in his faceplate.

The Don cracked the blinds. He spotted them.

At his fingertips were innumerable methods of erasure for those two meatboys. But he suspects it's that sexless freak Lancaster fucking with him. And *his* eventual erasure will be the proverbial dish served cold – just as soon as he's clinched the deal and gotten himself a new lease on life, Aristo style.

## Ω

Across the street, hanging from one of the support wires of the mallway bridge, a shimmer in the air seemed to twist and sway with the movement of the wind. The Ashishim hadn't always lived down among the roots of Elysium, and before their nomad lord brought them to the R.T. they'd plundered their way across the blackened ruins of Europa, hoarding technomantic trinkets like other clans hoarded gold or water or canned food.

Abdulafia 330 peered down at the Celebrants from high above, his holocloak bending the yellow light around his wiry body, reducing him to a heat-haze mirage. These two weren't part of his briefing, and even for a battle-clone like himself - six-foot-nothing full of illicit technology - a pair of the Grief Division's finest meant trouble. Perhaps he shouldn't wait for backup. Perhaps by the time it arrived Gianni Vexx and his precious haul of adrenochrome would already be gone...

That was just too much to risk. This batch was special - refined and distilled through the body of a Lord, no less. The Ashishi labs were drooling for the tiniest sample, priming a thousand arcane tests and experiments...

Abdulafia checked his knives, tight in the tops of his boots, and aimed a zipline grapple across the street, right through Gianni's window.

He never saw the scruffy little-leather-clad man right above him, perched atop the head of a roaring gargoyle halfway up a hab-cube wall. The guy worked the zoom ring on his oculars with one hand while he scratched his nuts with the other. He grunted to himself, popping a fat white flea between his fingernails and a billowing pink bubble of gum between his lips. *Ashishim*. Shit. Those R.T. boys were *far* to self assured.

'Bout time to take then down a peg or twelve... This was Lancaster's town.

## Ω

The security camera outside the King Value was cheap, disposable, a black-and-white model that cost less than a lottery ticket.

It was the perfect medium for the scene it looked down upon.

*A figure in a carpark, grey on grey, ragged sheets of rain angling in from off-camera as a matchstrike illuminates thin, drawn features. Sunken eyes, a whisper of straight black hair under a dripping fedora hat...*

His name – Eddie Tsein – was blazoned in bright yellow across his kevlar-wrapped chest. That stuff might have been able to stop a bullet a thousand years ago, but now... it was worse than useless.

A collar of smooth gunmetal was wrapped tight around his neck, projecting a flickering blue sheen over his skin. It'd stop the poison rain, but he'd wash afterwards, anyway.

The shielding was a mark of privilege, for all that it was damned uncomfortable.

He was, to his eternal shame, a *Burbster*. A native of the bubble city which hung like a blue plastic goiter below the megatowers. It was civil-servant land up there, a knockoff of the future predicted by Popular Mechanics magazine in the 1950s. Big money country.

Was it any wonder that he pulled double shifts? That he was out here in the rain tonight, chasing down scumbags he'd already paid off?

Lieutenant Tsien was at a point in his career - if indeed it could be called that anymore - when being philosophical about the situation was all that he had left. The absurdity hit him every time he zipped up his riotmesh uniform, the gloves, the little cap, and the belt of weapons that cops a millennium ago had never heard of or needed. Hit him like half a brick in a plastic bag, and left him reeling on the edge of hysteria for the full eight hours between strong coffees.

Six of his men were dead. At least now, quipped Tsien's offsider Lucas, they got to work on time.

The thin guy with the scythe hadn't stopped *these* lawmen in their tracks. Equipped with Cyben Mark Three implant clusters, the bodies of Tsien's thin blue lineup strode mechanically forward each night, faces and hands laminated, uniforms welded to their dead skin with hot plastic seals. The laminate was wipe-clean, after some humorous but irreverent occurrences of post-mortem graffiti.

Every living officer on the force had been bullied into donating their cadaver to the city when they finally caught a bullet. Tsien hoped he got blown into pink confetti, and became unusable. At least to the Division - suffice to say that butchery hygiene standards were on the slip as well these days.

"Glad you could join us, Chief." said Lucas as Tsien stubbed out his cigarette on the sole of his boot.

The 2IC of Tsien's squad was the only other living meatbag on it - a baldhead juve just out of the academy with a galaxy of wetwire plugs speckled across half his shiny scalp.

"Looks like the guys we're after - a two-man team, after the cash - tricked out the cameras and the alarms with jamming hardware. But this time - well, step inside and take a look..."

The King Value was painted in sticky soda and blood from end to end, the floor awash with candies and torn-up pornos and bullet shells. Someone had written 'Stunn for Funn' across the dewy faceplates of a dozen rattling coolers which dripped ruptured Hypo-Cola from defective seals.

One of the Cyben was earnestly unrolling red and blue police line tape from a little cardboard dispenser, surrounding the place in slow loops and twists like toilet paper around a high-school teacher's station wagon. In here with the headless grocer and the sherbet-tainted blood was now the sole property of the division.

"Shit. They finally got one, huh? These two used to be pretty slick, Lucas. I wonder what happened to change all that?" Tsien found himself smiling, and stopped.

Someone other than the Cyben was going to have to take this crap seriously. And Tsien's quota review was coming up in a week - not a great time for his sub-scum partners to hink out on him.

Getting paid by commission meant he had to think laterally, and *that* meant hiring the services of Jaq and the Kayzi. Not really what he'd joined the force to do, but there were bills to cover, and gods help the family Tsien if their Aristo landlords kicked them out of paradise...

Mrs Toria Jane Tsien was tre Bimburb. She looooved the three-room polyfoam tenement his wages paid for, way up in the Belt. She was the reason he worked nights.

The lieutenant picked up Hassan's bloodied sawnoff from the clerk's lap and threw it to Lucas.

Murder weapon found. Collect 200 Slades.

"Maybe we should just throw this whole mess over to Homicide and call it a night." said Lucas, rummaging in one of the coolers for a drink. He caught the shotgun awkwardly and it went off in his hand, taking a ragged circle out of the King Value's ceiling. A fine rain of plaster came down on his head, flaking his shoulders like dandruff. "Well," he grinned "that takes care of the ballistics check."

Tsien grabbed the antique weapon back, scowling, and bagged it in zip-sealed plastic.

"It's not just these jacker scumbags who're getting sloppy, Lucas." he said. "*I'm* in charge of this case, and we've been following these guys for a month. Do you want to

blow your quota writing up traffic violations and hand this to those necrophiles at Central?"

"Sorry, Eddie." said Lucas, popping open a can of cola. "These little bastards sure have you wound up tight. But we'll get 'em soon enough, and then it's two more for the lobo factory."

Tsien smiled, as if the thought of hook-tipped probes scrambling human brains was somehow comforting.

"You're right, kid, you're right. It's just... ten robberies, two arsons, and now a murder - and not one single frame or voice-print. I hate to let them think they're smarter than me."

He ran a hand over his face, wiping away a thin sheen of sweat which had built up behind his rad-shield. "So, should we go for Murder and the hundred bucks, or just lousy old Suicide for the twenty and get back to the Precinct?"

And if Jaq and Kaito were off the chain? If the little gutter-rats really *were* smarter than Eddie Tsien? What if he'd given a pair of chemheads carte blanche to kill whoever they pleased?

It was all the High Marshall's fault for working the quota system, he reminded himself. Those two were on a damn tight leash. Or at least the Kayzi was... who knew what was going on in the neanderthal mind of Jaq Hassan?

"I reckon this guy chose a damn messy way to commit suicide, Chief." said Lucas, writing it up on his tablet. "So don't worry. You'll get another shot at those punks."

He clapped Tsien on one shoulder as he drained his can of triple-caffinated Hypo.

"Huh - if he wanted a painful death he shoulda joined the force, eh?" chuckled Tsien, fishing another cigarette from his coat. "C'mon, let's get this done. If I'm late home again I might just have to follow this chump's example."

## Ω

Deep among the roots of Simeon Blaire's megatower a mind-wiped slave toiled inside a thick rubber isolation suit, scrubbing the floor of the White Room under six feet of water. A long concertinaed tube pumped air down to the menial while he worked, sucking away his tainted breath as he exhaled. Even if the wretched creature had been on dry land the suit would still be necessary - none of the Lords cared to look upon the coarse features of a Subcity peasant.

Blaire's sanctum was a cube of smooth milky plastic half-filled with tepid water, lit by sunlamps and attended by hovering threedeeo bubbles. He floated above his mind-wiped slave on an inflatable lounger, sipping a perfectly replicated pina colada.

"Other Lords would be training now, Simeon." chided Baroness Mendelev-Singh, her fresh new face dimpled into a sly smile. "Or maybe you think you deserve a rest,

hmm? Is that tired old bag of meat you live in getting slow, perhaps?"

A floating communicator painted Leynna over the still water like a phantom, a tiny doll-sized miniature poised millimeters above its silvery surface. She was shopping for an outfit to wear to the Jaegenn party; around her Blaire could see virtual clothiers and stylists displaying their vivid materials and latest patterns. He ignored her little jibe - Leynna and her backers had no business even *guessing* how intensive his training regime truly was.

"I was meaning to ask you about last weekend." he said, reclining amongst floating smooth white cushions. The water was warm, his fingers trailed lazily amidst tropical fish specially bioengineered for this moment of sensation. "Before I killed you, you said something about Octavio Ascher....you said he was some kind of pervert."

His smile was perfunctory, his eyes flat. Triplicate lasers painted him in the cool air before Baroness Mendelev-Singh, a tiny and annoying homunculus in swimming briefs and sunglasses.

"I said he had a *perverse fascination*. That doesn't presuppose any moral judgment." she said, her eyes following one of his brightly colored fish as it spiraled around his feet.

He grinned, pushing his shades up onto his forehead with one barcoded finger.

"Well, we both know it's not *my* place to judge, Baroness. I really couldn't do that and then quiz you about his fascination ... with death, I believe you mentioned."

"He almost got it." she said, their words overlapping with a gentle hiss of static. "He almost found his grail."

Simeon Blaire leaned forward, his legs up to the knee in tropical saltwater.

"If he found anything it's news to me, honey." he said, reaching for a drink from a floating tray. "The poor old bastard had a sweet thing going, before the chop."

The tiny image paused in its inspection of a swatch of iridescent satin to fix him with a hot amber glare.

"Keep it formal, Blaire. This is an open line. What the *good Direktor* found was nothing but pain and humiliation, for all that he claims to have been enlightened."

Two years had passed, he thought, and still she skirted around the issue. Direktor Ascher's misguided attempt to fix the game had cost her almost as much as it had cost him...

"And you take no responsibility? You don't want to take any kind of *revenge*? He ruined you and wrung you out, Baroness. Does it please you to think he's *finished* with you?"

His words had the force of a sledgehammer.

Leynna's face contorted into a snarl, and with a snap of her fingers the fitting room, the holographic couturiers, the swathes of exotic silk all disintegrated.

Her camera angle zoomed, fixating Blaire with one glaring bloodshot eye. One

immaculate cheek loomed like a blast-sanded moon, and the slick red bulge of her lips hung below it like overripe fruit.

"He nearly found his grail, Mister Blaire, in the playing of our game by his own rules. He *wanted* the goddamn throne." Simeon smiled while censor programs within the threedeeophone edited his grin out. He was nothing but business as looked back into her eye, its retina shimmering with built-in display feeds. "That's more than I can say for some puling young Kheptarchs, these days."

Blaire took the barb and the hot madness of her stare with smug humor.

A lot of his noble peers thought she was cracking up - an opinion made all the more pertinent by her loss in last weekend's game. The Mendeleev-Singhs were *unstable* after all - tainted stock, a doomed family for all their skill and wealth.

Blaire dropped his empty glass into the warm water, startling one of the tropical fish.

"And by which rules did he engage in the Game, Baroness? Surely *you* would have been his most trusted confidant at the time..." He lounged back, deftly scissoring a poisonous fish between his fingers. It thrashed in the water, its spines slicing his skin and throwing out a nebula of blood.

"Rules which assured he could never win, Simeon. Rules of his own taken from hidden archives. He never had the social standing to leave any hope to his progeny. As I hope *you* may, Simeon. The house of Blaire needs only to unite with another noble lineage for its sons to rule the game."

She was almost laughing now, wild with chemicals and idealism. There was little question as to which other Hierarch would donate their genetic code to this perfect scion - at least in her imagination.

"He could have no child within our milieu. He was to all intents sterile. Yet he tried to rule. As our ch....."

The fish came up at her in the camera's expanded arc of vision, end over end, severing the connection in a splatter of blood and scales. She fell back by reflex, full-length on the black-tiled floor of her mediorium, unconscious.

Simeon licked his fingers, grinning wolfishly.

The blood dripping from his hand was rife with poison - stuff which would kill a lowborn in seconds. It was the juice he used on his shurikens, the secret ingredient in his cocktail.

When you're gene-sequenced immune, you can indulge in such little ironies.

Simeon watched the fish slide down the white plastic wall, smiled - for real this time - and hooked back up to Octavio Ascher on the other line.

Down below him a blind figure all in black rubber scooped up the dead fish in its vacuum-sweeper, its wetwired brain sending it crawling on, on an endless trek across the plastic seabed.

## Ω

Inside an empty packet of sugar candies a flycam's antennae quivered. Its telescopic electric eyes scanned the scene of the crime; they'd been uploading live ever since the little machine left it's housing on Hassan's wrist. Of course that was a good long while after he pulled the trigger – Jaq didn't want anyone to see his face, just his handiwork.

The tiny robot shuffled forward on its six needle-thin legs and took to the air with a whirr of carbon-fiber rotors, a great arcing leap that took it over the counter and onto the mangled topography of the King Value clerk's chest.

Miniature anchor-hooks sliced deep into the dead man's skin as the flycam beamed its signal out through the sub-ether. Relay masts leapfrogged it on, up and up the corroded slopes of Elysium to the aerial crown of Omnivasive Three-Vee, Elysium's most up-to-the-minute broadcaster. Hassan, a stringer for said corporate entity, was one of the reasons they got their breaking news fast.

The flycam worked its hooks loose and leaped skyward again, angling for the far wall, a great vantage point for a wide-angle...

Tsien caught the bug in mid-flight, his rolled-up newspaper hitting the tiny robot like a warmekan's armored fist. Tomorrow, the still photographs on page one would come from the little device he had just destroyed.

"They just can't wait, can they." muttered the lieutenant under his breath, tossing the paper over the counter and into oblivion. "Damn bugs can smell dead meat a mile away." He took another swig of Hypo, prodding the hole in the King Value man's chest with his pencil. *All carrion, all flesh...* the city was rotting, and in that cyclopean scale the Subcits and the Khept' were nothing more than insects themselves...

Evil thoughts in this particular vein were still boiling in Tsien's head when the radio on his belt started screaming, and the Cyben all stood to attention, their dead camera eyes flashing from blue to red.

Something, somewhere had gone horribly wrong. And now, against all better judgment, H.Q. wanted Eddie Tsien to do something about it...

## Ω

Paranoia can do terrible things to the human mind.

When that mind feels trapped and stressed and overtaxed it can lead to horrific accidents. And when it's the mind of a chrome-handed drug-crazed biker, those accidents usually happen to other people.

Hassan trips out on stunn; prowls the nightsectors, down the blackened tubes where you can hear the factory-kombinants of the Reclamation through rusting walls. He

listens and talks; he pinions throats with a steel-infused fist.

He remembers eyes looking up at him in terror; they can see the silver of the stunn,  
and know he has little control of his cybernetics.

Russian roulette.

Nobody knows, not even for the price of their own cerebral fluids, who's trying to  
set him up.

Ripples of his psychosis follow him.

Back to his bike; his homeblock; his dreams.

Behind his back he hears the scissor-click of loading guns.

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**‘Dreno Pharming in the Subcity – a Blight on our Civic Moral Turpitude**

In recent times there's been a lot of talk about legalizing drugs – and the suggestion that this course of action might financially cripple certain criminal elements in our society – misguided terrorists like the Liquid Tong and illicit groups such as the Ashishim, the Hab 99 Rude Boys and the Legitimate Gentlemen's Benevolent Association.

Of course this is rubbish – legalization would only speed the onset of barbarism and depravity which already threatens to reduce our proud society to the level (both figuratively and realistically) of the Pit Ferals.

To this end, we shall continue to campaign vigorously against the use of Blue Meth, Stunn, Fuzzy Stunn, Cranq, Double and Triple Platinum, Pseudopiate 333, Spinneripper, Twist, Stim, SimStim and all other noxious criminal drugs.

That otherwise law-abiding and morally hygienic citizens should fall prey to such vices is disturbing indeed.

Most mortifying of all is the rise of so-called “Dreno Pharming”, the practice of extracting the drug Adrenochrome from a living donor – usually in exchange for other illegal substances.

**Remember- JUST SAY NO TO INVASIVE BRAINTAPS!**

Adrenochrome is highly addictive and according to our sources ‘a total goddamn headfuck.’ Vast quantities are said to be hoarded by the devious Ashishim – and who knows what terrible Counter-Elysian plots *those* outlander filth are cooking up with it?

**Citizens, the time has come to unite!**

**Keep your recreational drug use NATURAL, keep it SAFE!**

**Next weekend try nature's wonder high – COCAINE!**

**And leave the lab-tests for the RATS!**

Pamphlet from the Escobar Foundation for Responsible Consciousness Alteration, East Subcity Chapter.

*She caught the flash of it like a bullet through his skull.  
His power was slipping; his concentration was undone.  
Between the asteroid and the poisoned sea the cable of the space elevator hissed and crackled with massive electrical pulses.  
Clouds frayed and scattered from about the husk of Elysium as the machine within exorcised its frozen spirits.  
Their captive data sliced through his mind like whipsawing razorwire.  
And it came to him suddenly, a chilling thought which flickered in over a hash of white noise.  
Sequestration worked both ways...  
She's head buzzed like a poorly tuned threedeeo feed as he scrabbled for control.  
But this wasn't an interrogation any more. He was being shown.*

## Ω

In a pool of light cast by a naked low-watt bulb four men sat hunched around a scarred plastic poker table. Grim, hard-faced hombres, each one intent on the squinted eyes of the other three. Between them in the air a battle was underway as virals and firewall programs clashed, trying to rip the electronic defenses of the players' bio-onboard rigs.

Kaito saw it all as he came rolling down the street, his wetwired brain picking up the scam. Three of the players were a team – their 'ware was already well into the head of their mark while two of the scammers fought a spectacular data-war as rolling cover. The sucker about to get shorn of his loot was a Pit Feral fresh out of the shanty, a big bruiser with a chainmail eyepatch and fresh wetwire scars all over his head.

Somebody's new gunjack, a bodyguard or retainer for some bimburb exec. Uplifted from the Pit as muscle and meat...

The Kayzi Magus grinned – this would be fun.

The place was called the Hydrogen Bar, and in a city of bad reputations it was touted as the worst. The clean, pine-scented public area was the giveaway. Like the neat paradox of that hospital smell (now so removed from actual forests as to define the word 'pine' in a treeless environment) the very fact that the Hydrogen Bar was scrubbed down meant it had been recently hosed out. And that meant Hassan and Kaito had blown in about five minutes after the last homicide.

Railpistols are recoilless, light, powerful and messy.

And as long as the drinks were cheap, none of the rust-dog clientèle were going to call in the law.

The scarred old barkeep shot them a grin as they strode through the plastic saloon-

doors, jerking one shiny steel thumb at the tense little vignette around his card table.

"Check out the rube, Jaq." he muttered to Hassan. "If that mother goes psycho in here I'll stand you a bottle of my best to lay him out."

"What, dirty my knuckles for a pint of *that* fermented piss? I'd rather do it for free, Vladimir."

The big thug's grin lit up the gloom as he slid up to the bar.

Kaito popped an antique zippo lighter between his long fingers, torching the end of a tailormade cigarette. Now everybody in the Hydrogen Bar knew they were packing Slades. The Kayzi caught the Feral's attention with a strobe-light pop-up that snapped to the front of his bio-onboard display. Clouds of cheap hackbot code burned up like contrails around it.

"You – yeah, eyepatch. Run this update and shut down your onboard – everyone within three blocks can see what cards you're holding."

The hack victim slammed down his hand – kings over threes – then threw the table over sideways, his hands suddenly filled with a pair of wavy *kris* daggers. The scammers slipped and staggered and bolted out through the doors as if the devil himself were at their heels.

"Word of advice, downsider. Until your hair grows over those stitches you should get yourself a hat."

The Feral grunted in embarrassed gratitude and slid his knives back into their sheathes. He stalked out of the bar without a backward glance, running one hand over the stubbled crosshatching of scars that had given him away.

Kaito bellied up to the bar with a satisfied smirk, his hulking associate at his elbow.

"Whatcha poison, mes amies?" asked Vladimir, his metal-plated head dipping in a miniature bow. "V.S.O.P and a Julieta?"

Hassan laughed a little, and then stopped himself. He was supposed to be riding shotgun, supposed to look mean.

A row of gaming machines flashed and chimed as they devoured punters' coins; odds were up for Duke Jaegenn to win the next round of the Game, equaling the number of bets which had been placed for Simeon Blaire. House Blaire supporters in the blue ribbons of their team were toasting his victory, and ascension to the seat of god-emperor.

House Jaegenn supporters in royal purple ribbons were practicing bawdy songs about the young aristo's incipient demise.

Hassan felt his stomach knot...he'd be attending to the star player before the game commenced. And despite the nanoservo, his hands were shaking like autumn leaves in a gale.

His memory tweaked. The Don/cigar smoke and cognac/the laserbeam eyes of hidden firearms.

With an exaggerated movement he unlocked the totenkopf buckle of his gunbelt and dropped the twin sawn-off, pistol grip cannons to the bar. "Two fingers of scotch, C." he growled, his eyes flickering around the room.

The assembled Subcitizens were suddenly uninterested in Kaito, Hassan, and any speculative money they may have been carrying.

"And I'll have the house special....something from the cellars." said Kaito, slipping a fat roll of bills across the pitted formica top to Vladimir.

The bartender nodded, lifted a flap in the formica bartop, and led them both to the stairs.

"It's a fine vintage this week, gentlemen. Right out of the R.T - the Tong are cooking hot these days, now they got those molecular combiners online."

As soon as Vladimir left the bar two small portals opened in the ceiling, and a shimmer appeared in the air over the taps and bottles. He'd only been turned aside for a second, fumbling with an immense iron keychain to open the cellar door when there came a crack and a high-pitched scream from behind him.

Prolonged whimpering followed.

"Just knock when you've made your selection, Mr Kayzi. I'll be waiting with that scotch for Mr Hassan."

As the door closed Vladimir reached under his huge brass cash register and drew forth a shiny cleaver of prodigious size. An unfortunate juve chemhead, his hand hot-glued to the bar in the act of stealing a beaker of moonshine began to plead and struggle.

Frowning, Vladimir tested the sharpness of the blade against one prosthetic chrome finger.

"Don't expect any sympathy from me, kid." he drawled "How'd you think I lost *my* hand?"

## Ω

Tsien's police report bounced from his electric tablet to the megatower offices of Valchek Mutual Insurance, and from there to the Elysian Consolidated Bank.

Sad news - the King Value was a write-off.

The noble proprietors of that dingy little shack creamed more from Hassan and Kaito's robbery than the freelance bikers ever did; but that was the nature of business. The upshot of Eddie Tsien's little quota rort was a six-figure sum injected into a monolithic corporation - a certain conglomerate known as ShopWise GmbH.

Unknown to most King Value customers - and indeed to the majority of its employees - no human foot had trod the wall-to-wall shagpile of ShopWise's head office for several decades. Its corridors were swept clean of debris by crawling mekan, and the

financial engines which kept the business solvent whirled tirelessly over their meal of numbers in airless rooms not even fitted for illumination.

In fact of the entire Board only one living being ever visited the tower - the incumbent Chairman, Simeon Blaire. Even then he only visited a single office, a single elevator and one secure parking space.

Simeon had inherited the Direktorship nine years ago after the death of his father, in what had become the ritualized profession of his bloodline. Every day the patriarch of the House of Blaire would arrive at nine, toy listlessly with the immaculate reports and projections beamed to his terminal by the Financial Core and then adjourn for a corporate lunch which stretched across the dusty hours until his release at five in the evening.

In other buildings across the upper domes the same pale grey drama was played out, tired genuflections before a dusty altar. It was a living, a profession, and he had been raised from a mere test-tube zygote to bend to the will of the institution.

Today had proved as uneventful as ever; about all he had to look forward to all day was the drive home.

Gridlock was a thing of the past for the Hierarchs of Elysium. There was no question of actually walking the irradiated and diseased streets of the Last City, but it was unthinkable for the Purebred to wait for lesser traffic. The things out there were bipedal, cognizant, with opposable thumbs and wide-eyed, sunburned faces.

But they weren't People. They never Played. And if they were accidentally turned to roadkill, it didn't mean a thing.

Simeon thought of a face made of beaten steel, then, a face like a hollow skull weeping tears of wet rust. He smiled to himself, humming a little of Ravel's *Bolero* while the building's maglift slammed him down seventy floors in two seconds.

It would be so refreshing to kill someone *new* for a change.

"Have a delightful evening, My Lord." enthused the scratchy electric voice of the maglift as its doors sighed open, spitting Simeon out into the echoing cavern of the motorpool. His was the only vehicle in it, a great slab of metal marooned in a pool of light. Concrete spread and embraced him, pillars marching off into the darkness. Even up here in first class the ducts hissed and dripped iridescent tears.

Unsteady, he pressed a hot dry hand to his forehead while the shapes of dead and rusted machines shifted and bent in the gloom.

He needed a fix. He *terminally* needed a fix.

His town car performed a retinal scan while his unsteady footsteps were still echoing through the motorpool hangar. The fingers that lovingly brushed its matte-black side were crosschecked for identification as Simeon swung up the access ladder and pressed his keycard into its socket. Neurolinks clicked as the doors hissed open, and *Bolero* began to burble from a score of hidden speakers.

The Destrier was Consolidated Industries' last word in exclusive motoring. A single-seat black wedge the size of a firetruck, its six immense wheels studded with titanium spikes. Rollbars of burnished chrome enmeshed the front end of the wicked, low slung vehicle; its windows were tinted slabs of diamond as thick as bibles.

The fact that it was stuffed with innovative gadgets and trimmed in unobtainable materials like fox-fur and real leather meant nothing to *this* customer. It was a beautiful thing to die with, and not so long ago he had felt the need to die so keenly. He had almost come to envy the seething, dirty biomass which were his feudal underlings.

As a son of wealth, born of the first families of Elysium, he was apart from them, from the cut and thrust and sweat and grime and reality of the infected city. Somebody else washed the blood off the tires, somebody else smelled the diesel as it was pumped into the Destrier's tanks, and somebody else lived every second of every day for him, held up in a bubble of steel and safety glass by a million hands.

Simeon had discovered that the fruit was never forbidden, but the picking, the peeling, the slicing were out of bounds to him, the tree choked around with razor-wire. Until a time not very long ago he had contemplated twisting the wheel of the Destrier as it thundered across the West Bay Bridge; thinking of the peace and quiet and comfort of designer suffocation in a six-wheeled sarcophagus somewhere under the radioactive silt-bed.

That was until the first visit from his kind benefactor, the one who had helped him refine his suicidal urges into homicidal reason.

Soon, so soon, his deprivation of feeling would be over. When he was in the gangrenous underbelly of his city. Until then there was the matter of being dressed for the part. His obsession was far too fashionable and avant-garde not to be accompanied by the correct attire.

Perhaps something like the cover of his favorite book...

When the Destrier's twin nine-liter twelve-cylinder Consolidated military grade engines shuddered into life the merest shiver ran the length of its gel-cushioned driver's seat, and Simeon cracked his knuckles like a concert pianist. He was on his way to glory.

((NON-ELECTRONIC INFORMATIONAL STORAGE RECORDS;  
ARCHIVE 3; NOBLES AND LORDS COLLECTIONS  
SECTION 337; HOUSE OF BLAIRE  
CATEGORY; HISTORICAL/MANAGEMENT  
TITLE; The Book of Five Rings  
AUTHOR - Miyamoto Musashi, primitive warrior aristocrat))

And he felt the steel bite, felt the shattering bones, the cold air kissing raw red

blood-pumping meat as he drove hot metal through human flesh, tempering his blade. He could see the thin mustache on his mentor's face blowing in the wind; skin the color of beaten copper in the light of the torture fires ...

The Master was with him. He could not possibly fail.

## Ω

Trillions of electronic messages were shunted through Elysium's mail service system each day – from businesses, from public kiosks and from the sprawling Divisions of the Last City's byzantine bureaucracy.

Usually they were well beneath the attention of Kronos, which was far more interested in its little genetic experiment than in reading other people's mail.

*This* one was different, however.

Its origin marked it out for scrutiny – it came up from out of the R.T, from somewhere deep below sea level, down in Ashishim country where the postal grid wasn't supposed to run.

That, and the fact that it was actually *addressed* to Kronos meant that it suffered a battery of viral scans and tests before the single video file within was even touched by the great machine itself.

When the movie rolled Kronos took a couple of microseconds to work out what was actually being shown – that was a long pause for a machine whose brain was the size of a city.

It was a shot of Neptune, a great whorled icy sphere hanging close in to the camera while far-off stars burned and shimmered, one of them probably the sun.

Kronos didn't stop to question how the Ashishim had cameras out in the far reaches of the solar system. Not when it saw what happened next.

Because the star of Illuminatu's Zeon's little movie was terrible enough to chill the machine's virtual blood.

Kronos watched a shadow ooze over the face of the gas giant – a pall of darkness cast by a roiling swarm the size of the moon, slingshotting around the planet's immense bulk to launch itself further in down the gravity well toward Earth.

Kronos had been promised that this thing would one day come to its planet, and that dire consequences would follow. Now the vile prophecy of the Illuminatus had come true, and time was running out.

Plans had to be put in motion to defend its precious charges in the upper domes. For all the machine cared the rest of the city can go directly to hell, so long as it had an Emperor by the time the scourge arrives.

Perhaps it was time to intervene in the Great Game after all. Simeon Blaire had given it the perfect excuse...

There was at least a little time left – its sources assured it that the swarm was cautious and slow – that it would stop to explore every chunk of debris between the cometary halo and Mars before it came knocking. There might just be enough time to stop it...

And if not, Kronos had the mother of all surprises up its sleeve.

## Ω

The street outside the H-Bar was bisected by the whirling blades of a giant windmill; part of the ramshackle extended power grid of the Subcity. This, combined with the tottering sag of the platform it was built on made passing out in the gutter an extreme sport.

Hassan and Kaito stepped over this afternoon's contestants and into the crowd rushing past on their way up or down the jagged steel mountain of Elysium. As usual the human tide broke around Hassan and allowed Kaito to follow in his wake.

"Poor kid." grunted the big guy, flexing his chrome fingers. "Don't you think Vladimir was a bit rough on him?"

"What, taking his hand off? That how *you* got your little piece of stump jewelry, Jaq?"

"You know damn well that this was pure business, K." rumbled Hassan, clenching his silver digits into a fist. "I just think the punishment should fit the crime. And the best punishment for trying to steal Vlad's moonshine... is having to actually *drink* the stuff."

"They say ethics are a luxury for the sober." laughed Kaito, a proverb from his far-off concrete homeland. "He'll get credit from the Black Techs – they'll have him fitted with a cheap claw by midnight."

He popped a capsul, flicking it off one thumb and catching it on his tongue.

"Although... 'sobriety is a vice for the mean of spirit', or so says the same philosopher. The old bastard was drunk on potato wine six days out of seven."

Hassan, elbowing his way through a crowd of Valle Crucis penitents, couldn't get a hand to his medicine pouch. He reached up and over, narrowly missing one of the weeping flagellant's flails, and Kaito dropped a little pill into his hand.

No place here to pop 'em and inhale the powder...

He knocked it back with a chug of cheap R.T. whiskey, feeling the burn trickle down his throat.

"Sweet Ghost of the Prophet! Is he using a toilet for a still these days? I swear..."

The euphoria came down like a hammer, making the pushrods and gears in Jaq's hand whirl and click as his nerves burned white. There were a couple of minutes there where both he and Kaito were utterly gone, blazing with fake plastic ecstasy.

It spiked silver, and blistered, and bled out of their screaming brains. It blew apart like a sand mandala, leaving behind an empty crawling guilt popping with miniature flashbacks. The hot edge of it would linger for another day or so, tweaking the edges of reality into glittering crystal.

And that was Fuzzy Stunn. While that tweak lasted you were ten feet tall, solid steel, hot and bright and sharp. When it started to wear off, though... it was razorblades under your skin.

Kaito came down first, the ground rushing up under his feet to impact with a sickening jolt against the soles of his boots. Hassan's eyes slowly rolled forward in their sockets, one pupil a pinprick, the other as wide as the open sky.

They smoked Ashishim ganja in the lee of a nuclear cooling tower, silent, comedown mute, listening to the roar and hiss of the crowd like surf on a distant shore.

"Wh...what, um, time. What time is it, man?" he asked, fumbling a cigarette from out of his voluminous coat. "How long that...that shit keep us under?"

Time rushed up at him like an oncoming train, the face of Simeon Blaire leering and gibbering at him from a thousand angles. That damned Lord. That damned *contract*. He had to be greedy, had to put his name to a deal so bent that even *he* should have left it alone. Still, all that money... balance that against the razorblade feeling of a stunn comedown, and this is what you got.

Kaito flashed a palmed twenty note in the air, and their ride pulled over with a squeal of worn-down servomotors.

"Time for biz, Jaq. Time to earn the next batch, right? I got...I gotta jam the upper dome net for you again. You gotta ...you gotta rip the 'chrome out of Lord whatssisname."

Their transport was an automated rickshaw, courtesy of a Celestial cutout company which dressed their mekan up in silk PJs and conical plastic peasant hats for authenticity. There was no way either of the boys was going to try walking.

"Many fortuitous greetings, lucky passengers!" warbled the dented speaker in its rubber face. "Please to deposit monies, for best speedy go to destination, why not?"

The clicking, leaking old mekan hauled them up past the looping switchback ramps out of the Reclaimed Territories and onto the outer skin of Elysium's clustered domes, vistas opening up between the scissorblade towers. Great brown and grey clouds hung low over the dry pit which connected them to the mainland, casting veils of dirty rain across the horizon.

Faster now, and the robot's carapace exhaled tainted steam from rows of venting ports which split open its back like gills.

Terraced buildings sped by on either side, whole suburbs on platforms welded to the atomic shielding. Division squadcars cruised the streets here, plowing through a seething mass of sunburned humanity. The little rickshaw swerved up onto the

pavement, scattering people left and right.

Higher and higher they climbed on scaffolds and broken-up pieces of highway, riding funicular railroads between neighborhoods in some places and helping the automaton traverse its rickshaw in others.

The last mile was spent wheeling through the pale blue plastic struts which kept up the Burbs, feeling the whole great donut structure vibrate and sigh in the wind.

Finally they walked on the plastic sky, out under a vast dome of sickly cloud and another of rusted steel.

Tall spires - seemingly close enough to spit on - broke through the neon-hazed mist up here, the prows of space battleships bursting through nebulae. Third Lancaster was clockwise and to the right, rain whipped to fog and acidic filth as it spumed over the lip of the Biotect's Eden.

They stood directly under the edge of the master dome, in a shadowed overhang. Support girders bit into the street surface around them, while pipes and chutes and cables coiled up like an artificial forest between the shells of deserted buildings. Once this had been the most exclusive shopping precinct in Elysium – now it was a scarred concrete no-mans-land sandwiched between the top of the Belt and the almost empty domes above.

"Get a handle on it, Hassan." said the Kayzi, scowling as he stared into a pair of dilated pupils big enough to swallow planets. "You've got your number-one customer waiting for you up there, and if you screw up the extraction Tsien's gonna be the least of our problems."

Hassan's pupils shrunk down to razor slits as the drug slid wild in his brain. The ride up had given him time to get steady – just not quite enough.

"Yes, I have a client. But it's cool. I've stabbed this one in the head so many times there's a little scar to aim for." He twitched, brushing Kaito's hand from off his shoulder. Human contact sparked him like biting down on a live wire.

Kaito shot him a long-suffering look as his mechanical hand whirled and clicked.

"You plan to tell me what's going on before you black out?" he asked. "You're usually mister responsible, but I swear right now you're zoned worse than I am." While he berated Hassan the little hacker was waving a hissing handset around in the air, watching numbers sizzle across its screen. "I won't even go into what'll happen to your friends and associates if you lobotomize one of the Gentry. Just ...ahh, there. Got it. You're cleared for take-off." Kaito collapsed the whip antenna of the handset and clipped it to Jaq's overall strap. "Still reckon you're fried, though."

"Kaito, there are braindead radlander zombies less fried than we are. I know how to do my damn job."

Jaq forced himself to grin – a pained rictus of yellow teeth – then he fished a length of jelly snake out of his coat and popped it into his mouth. One more thing.

Kaito watched his hands extra sharp as he unbuckled the guns from around his waist.

"Keep hold of these for me, will ya?"

He was smiling when he said it, wiping a string of mucous from his mouth with the back of one hand. But he was watching Kaito's eyes. The Kayzi shook his head, incredulous.

"Hells, you should see yourself right now! But yeah ...I've seen you worse. Shit, I've seen *me* worse!" laughed the Kayzi. "If you don't fall off the damned dome doing this job, Jaq, I'll catch you down at the Meat Locker in Saint Pete's. My shout."

"Ahhhhggh – sure." spat Hassan "I'm not so bad, K, just a little tense. Maybe I should have laid off Vladimir's rotgut back there."

"Huh, yeah - it wasn't the stunn, right? It *had* to be that H-Bar moonshine..."

He wiped his hand off on his overalls and worked the kinks out of his neck. They bumped knuckles, and Kaito punched up the call code for the rickshaw mekan.

"See you there, bro. Careful."

Hassan waited until the wheezing machine had pulled away, and then plucked a loaded syringe from out of his coat pocket. *Triple Platinum*. The shit was made to smooth out the kinks in freshly integrated cybernetics, but it had the sweet side-effect of coating everything with spun sugar. The world suddenly seemed a whole lot easier to handle as he pushed the plunger home.

And that was totally, utterly necessary right now.

Hassan's fingers worked on automatic, pulling on his safety harness, coiling the wire snug in his grapple launcher, screwing the whole thing down tight to his belt. The mag-grapple blasted from its housing in a cloud of compressed gas, trailing a tail of bonded-carbon wire up to the metal sky. Then it was just a matter of pressing the button and holding on tight, and Jaq was dangling nine hundred feet up, right under an access hatch.

But despite the Platinum throbbing warm and twisty in his head he wasn't feeling fine. And no matter what he'd told Kaito this wasn't just another mission to harvest a few phials of 'chrome.

Tonight the structure behind the operation was different.

Hassan was a great believer in being well-informed - it kept his ass alive. He kept it...what was that word? *Compartmentalized*. Kaito for the drugs, Gianni for the 'dreno, old man Ascher for juicy info.

All that had changed when he tried to cash in his last paycheck with Omnivasive.

The scar-faced old dispatcher down in Media Procurement had tweezered a fresh flycam into Jaq's watch, then tossed him a thick, tightly-wrapped bundle, his paycheck snapped to it with a rubber band. Jaq's two chromed-out fingers had razor tips which popped like switchblades, and he slit the brown paper in one long smooth motion,

hoping against hope for more cash.

He shook the contents out – no cheque. Just...

One crisply typed letter. Ten glossy photographs.

Omnivasive kept it succinct.

Taped to the back of the most explicit pic; a small plastic phial of clear liquid in which pinpoints of black floated, shivering in the light.

This was the point at which he first thought of the needle.

The pictures were of Kaito. And of this there was no question ...he was talking to a Cop. Lieutenant Eddie Tsien, a crooked little 'burb-scum bastard who'd almost come close to busting Jaq's 'dreno operation.

The thin, gaunt little man in the grey trenchcoat and fedora hat was smoking a badly-rolled cigarette; the scene was rendered in similar washes of smoky grey - the interior of an interrogation cube. Two slack-faced Cyben stood like waxworks on either side of the door, their dead fingers curled around heavy riot guns.

But what really caught Jaq's attention was the date, pixilated in across the bottom of the security-cam printout. *Three weeks* before Tsien had snapped Hassan with his needles and phials, conveniently in just the right place at just the right time... Three weeks before he and Kaito were holed up in that exact same cube, cutting a deal to stay out of the lobo factory...

Oh, the little bastard had some explaining to do. *Careful* indeed!

The rest was Direktor Ascher's angle on the whole mess. He was using it to tighten the screws on Jaq, and there was no chance that this was just a warning. Unless they were deadly serious, Omnivasive Zaibatsu never discussed extortion. It was dear to what the Direktor used for a heart.

*"As one of our most reliable stringers, we will not allow you to fall in to the hands of an opposing corporate entity.*

*We believe that the security of your personal affairs has not yet been compromised, and that it is in our interests as well as yours to leave you as an impartial free agent in accordance with the principles of modern journalism. Rest assured that the officer in question will remain distracted by other issues - should all your assignments meet Omnivasive's high standards.*

*As a sign of our faith you have been entrusted with a very valuable technological relic. It must be delivered into the brain of your client Lord Simeon Blaire before 1900 hours this evening or the consequences will be dire.*

*Please be advised that this is proscribed technology – being found with it in your possession warrants instant execution.*

*N.B: Discussion of this matter with the Comp Div, dissemination of this directive, or loss of the contents of the package will render your employment contract with Omnivasive Ventures null and void. Needless to say, we take the term 'employee*

*termination' very literally."*

It was signed by nothing less than one of the floating robot hands of the Direktor himself. And that's how he got his latest customer. A fucking *Lord of the Razor Clique*, no less.

Hassan had kept a lid on it, even under the rippled silver of the stunn. Because for one, he didn't trust Omnivasive to tell the truth - in fact he almost expected them to lie on principle. And two, if they were on the level and Kaito was really in bed with the enemy there was nothing to gain by going against their demands.

All he had to do to meet the 'high standards' Ascher was so proud of was to deliver the contents of that little phial directly into the living spine of a certain client. As his line of biz required a fair share of needlework, Hassan felt that he could handle one extra stab.

He just wished he could be sure that it would *only* be one. These kinds of arrangements tended to get out of hand – look at what had happened to Feldon.

Octavio Ascher pushed pushers.

He stepped on necks, and posted bombs, and rigged bio-onboards with wild, fatal viruses. In fact, he was probably worse than Gianni Vexx, and *that* was hardly a reassuring thought.

Besides which, whispered an unwelcome voice in his head, he needed Kaito Kayzi. The little dude was his electronics man, his partner in crime, his drug buddy. And with the rest of his genetic relatives gone to the grave during a long-ago RT turf war, he was the only family Hassan had.

That made him most uncomfortable of all - people like him, people like the image he wore as armor didn't care about anything but number one.

Hassan waxed professional.

The access hatch popped open with a single twist of its locking wheel. Whole batteries of alarms failed to go off as he pulled himself up through the floor and into the Forbidden City, the domain of the Lords. If Kaito wanted him dead, why not right here? Without his bag full of remotes it would be suicide to even breathe this rarefied air...

It could all wait until the job was done. Until the Triple Platinum stopped hissing in his brain, and the crystal edges of the Stunn turned back into invisible blades...

Until then it was time to get self-employed.

## Ω

It was dusk down in the shadows of the Subcity.

Down here they told the time by the regular venting of toxic steam out of the manufactoria below – you could set your watch by it, if any of the locals could afford one.

Right now it was about six p.m – the big sluice was open, and lime-tinted mist hung heavy among the washing lines and jury-rigged wires of Prospekt Street. Needless to say, you didn't want to breathe it.

Three rusty cruisers and a Div meatwagon sprawled across the cracked concrete, under flickering blue neon panels adorned with holo stickers of chubby-cheeked cartoon pigs.

The first were courtesy of Slade; the last an addition by sub sprogs, lifted on blue meth or the Stunn.

This precinct was little more than a heavily armed hovel; a row of cages covered with black poly-tarp to hold the incarcerated, and a wheezing elevator down to the factory levels.

Two hundred feet under Prospekt Street a synthesoy extruder, a machine the size of a navy dreadnought, has been demolished to set up a secure firing range.

In a fit of bleak irony the Comp. Div. boys dubbed precinct 2996 "The Fortress of Justice", though any superhero worth their cape and tights would have detoured clear across town to avoid it.

This tawdry little outpost was barely a hand-grenade's throw from the barricaded gates of the Celestial Kingdom; a dead-end post where most of a cop's time was spent staring down stone-faced neoconfucian commandos. They had a recruitment shanty welded up over the end of Prospekt Street, a pile of shipping containers barnacled with air-scrubbers and freon exchangers.

If it wasn't for the need to wear a disposable khaki paper uniform 24-7, most of the people of this neighborhood would have been queuing up to swear allegiance to the Son of Heaven, or whatever they called him.

But it *was* close to the Valley View mall, which meant as long as one officer stayed on duty the rest could go and sink a few pints at the Pit of Nails, about three hundred feet upstairs.

From the mezzanine of that ill-favored boozery a cop who'd only had a drink or two might be able to lend fire support. The one who pulled the short straw had to wait back in the Fortress of Justice, one hand always on the trigger of the desk-mounted antique bren gun.

Today, it was the quartermaster who drew unlucky. The muzzle of his heavy machinegun rested, listless, on a patch of yellowed linoleum.

Despite the wonders of modern technology instant coffee was still bad, still always cold, and still the policeman's best friend. He was on his fourth, and the machine had a couple of new dents in its faceplate for pissing out such swill.

Still, it had got him this far. Six p.m. rolled over with a crackle of static and a tinny little fanfare. The QM propped himself up on his plastic chair, hunching over the Fortress' cheap threedeeo set. It was time for the afternoon sports report, and boiling

neon advertisements haloed the face of Elysium's favorite anchorman.

"This is Dave Levine coming to you live from the palatial compound of Duke Lysander Jaegenn – Lord Treasurer of the Direktariat and president of Helios Fusionetics. He's a long-time sportsman, and if you'll just look to the top left corner of your screen now you'll receive a neural download of his stats."

The camera panned around the gaming hall of the Jaegenn spire, where spider-mekan and servants in pale togas prepared the stage for another round of battle.

"Yes, a well-rounded player, over one hundred years of experience, and a suite of bioenhancements the envy of many lesser competitors ...I think with the home side advantage he could even topple Simeon Blaire from the top rung."

The broadcast of the Game was still considered vulgar by some; the old guard who had lived before the reign of Octavio Ascher. Back when threedeeo was a public service. So the camera crews were as discreet as possible, and the commentary was tacked on at Omnivasive HQ, where Dave Levine stood in front of a greenscreen, squinting at the teleprompt. "Remember folks, only Lords Jaegenn, Carlisle, Valchec, and Lady Elisha Dawes remain, the rest VICTIMS of the ruthless and efficient Lord Blaire."

The cam zoomed into tight focus as the drunk sincerity of the sportscaster flared.

"Ladies and gentlemen, as you know we are poised before one of the greatest events in threedeeo history - not since the run of Lord Aristotle Reilly, three hundred years ago, has any one of the high-born attempted the Imperial Trials. Needless to say our hearts are with Simeon Blaire, perhaps the future Emperor of Elysium....and we have been invited by the generous Lord Jaegenn to broadcast this one LIVE!"

<<YOU WILL BUY THE NEW BETTER FASTER BIGGER CONSOLIDATED INDUSTRIES STX SCIMITAR 3>>

The quartermaster snapped the set off with a cavernous yawn, mentally disengaging his onboard.

He didn't even see the skeletal robot stalk past his station, bearing on its back a great squat metal box covered in a tangle of wires, dials and blinking lights. It was regulation black, steaming and pulsing, plastered with warning labels in a distinctive skull motif. A small nuclear reactor on fat rubber surfboard leash hung back over the mekan's shoulder.

This was, he rightly assumed, yet another delivery for the boys down at the firing range.

Those screw-head weirdos sometimes didn't come topside for days, eating prepack dried soy and getting their jollies blowing away rusted out wagons and mekan. Well, happy birthday to them, thought the commander, contemplating a fifth oily cup of coffee. Only an hour to quitting time, then he could trade it out for beer.

He paid no attention when the stick-thin robot came clicking and whirring back out

of the dark and straight out the front door.

The mekan walked around the corner and into a narrow alleyway, dragged along on an infra-red chain. It stopped beneath a sagging fire escape, and the blinking green lights in its faceplate went out, flashing orange and red. With decisive movements of one arm the robot produced a small EMP mine, attached it to its head - and quietly erased its brain.

A flycam, identical except in serial number to the machine recently swatted by Lieutenant Tsien detached itself from a shielded cup in the rear of the little EMP device, and rising swiftly on a thermal current sailed off over the dome-tops toward its master.

## Ω

Mr Ascher's building was directly under the shadow of the Blaire Spire, and unlike its lordly neighbor it was ugly, functional, and boiling with life.

Mr Ascher's myrmidons were legion. Wireheads and Tripods and Spoolers and Spooks and Hacks. It was Octavio's job to bring the people of Elysium the news, or (if the murder rate was down) to just make up something *exciting*.

Omnivasive HQ's aerial crown probed the sickly underbelly of the clouds, a nest of scanners and dishes and feeds like the tentacles of a steel anemone. Where he started out, clouds were an urban legend; it was black windowless hell's kitchen.

At the time his trade was extortion, and Octavio applied himself to it as only those with a dream can. He had gotten blisters from swinging his favorite buckshot cosh. He had broken bones, and then wills, and now he broke corporations.

Given enough time, he would have gotten his paws around the throat of the whole damn planet.

But the final curtain had come too soon. He was supposed to bow out gracefully, he supposed, but that wasn't even *close* to his style.

He was left locked up in his luxurious mansion, a prisoner with the clock of the Machine's life index flashing in his optic nerves. It had almost reached zero.

Others would have felt claustrophobic; not Octavio.

He recalled his 'hood, below the bimburb belt, below the ethnic enclaves at sealevel. Disembodiment was fuckin' easy street. The promise of government-sanctioned death was like *Christmas* to him.

He was a knot of scar tissue. Immobile, mutilated, but goddamn tough for it.

He'd lived for one hundred and eighty years - nearly the lifespan of a Lord. He had seen the fires of Reclamation Day from the front lines. And he'd hoarded more money than God, more than most of his so-called betters.

Octavio was sure his parents would have been proud, if the toxic slag which flowed through their home hadn't riddled them with cancer a century ago. He'd found other

people to be proud of him, people who nurtured his destructive, manipulative talents - up until he disposed of them.

He'd welded the Downtown Pit Fight Leagues into a working corporation, running extortion on the side. Soon he was beaming out the fights on threedeeo gear scammed and stolen and jury-rigged, and he caught the attention of no less than Commissioner Slade himself.

Government grants were bountiful so long as he could keep violence on TV where it belonged, and sedate the masses with gladiatorial blood. Mr Ascher was more than happy to oblige.

The money had come in like a deluge - too much to spend in the unrefined company of Subcity businessmen. He craved the status of a Noble, and he attached himself to their rarefied high society like a persistent leech.

He'd been hated at first, then *feared*.

That was good enough.

Fear was a form of respect; perhaps the most *useful* form of respect. And in exchange for their fear, he had brought the brutally telegenic violence of their Games to the public.

Once such wanton acts of carnage had been censored, but the Commissioner was progressive in at least one respect. He saw how violence and fear could be used to make the Subcitizens respect their noble betters, especially after the near-disaster of the Reclamation.

Then came Ascher's Fall and his Disgrace – neither of which he was too proud to cream immense profits from. He'd turned to the only other child of the Subcity who'd survived the years and the purges - Don Gianni, technomantic wizard and drug pusher.

Currency greased the skids. He'd been retrofitted for immortality, his human body cast off like the skin of a snake.

But after one hundred and eighty years they were finally coming for him.

He didn't plan to go without a fight.

Then ...then came the greatest shuck and jive of all time, a magic trick like three-card-monte with whole planets.

The light which slanted in through his leaded glass windows cast long shadows across Mr Ascher's blood-red carpet, pooling, seeping shadows that gathered in corners and behind the pedestals of his collection of abstract sculptures. He kept no furniture except for a great rosewood desk, its top covered with tanned leather culled from real cows grown for this specific purpose.

Mr Ascher liked the sense of touch - his hands were extremely sensitive, free from the blister scars he'd earned in his youth. There were four of them now, drifting about the office with the hiss of antigravity motors, flitting here and there like steel hummingbirds. Another would drum its long metal fingers pensively on the desktop as

if annoyed by the sensate childishness of its brothers.

Mr Ascher himself, aware of the dross he pumped into the holowaves, couldn't see without mechanical help. Nor could he speak, his voice long severed from the remainder of his body. Shielded from the world and yet able to spin it backwards on its axis with a word, Mr Ascher was nothing more than a severely damaged head encased in preservative jelly.

The rest of his body was made up of wires and tubes and dials and syringes, drips and catheters, machinery that filled the walls and floor and ceiling of his office with its ironic picture windows and expensive pieces of artwork.

Across the inside of his preservative tank, carved into extruded carbon even diamonds couldn't scratch, Mr Ascher had engraved the words of Ptahotep, echoing down the centuries from 3400 BC.

*"Be a craftsman in speech that thou mayest be strong, for the strength of one is in the tongue, and speech is mightier than all fighting."*

It would go with him to the grave, undeciphered, perhaps for millennia. Mr Ascher never saw the outside of his life support machinery. The office was for the hands, his Druuj. Like the Wizard of Oz, he stayed behind the curtain and pulled the levers.

In the emptiness his clock began to strike seven. A slim-fingered hand hissed through the air and stopped the pendulum in mid-swing.

While outside on the streets a blue glow began to suffuse the afternoon light as millions of fingers reached for millions of dials, and the threedeeo radiance went out, up to haze the very stars.

## Ω

"This is the Farmer." hissed Tsien's miniaturized police radio, a tiny bead hugging the wall of his eardrum. "Have you found the little present I left for you?"

Tsien elbowed his way past a gaggle of stony-faced Cyben and out into the evening chill of the glass-strewn parking lot. The sun was long gone now, the steel sky of the sublevels growing dark as massive light-wells and mirrors ground closed for the evening. His gloved hand gripped a greeting card, crumpled and damp.

"Nice one, you little bastard." growled the Lieutenant. "How'd you hack the all-points-emergency channel? That's supposed to....ahh, forget it. Trade secret, right? Something your seditious buddies in the R.T. taught you?"

"Never mind how I got hold of you, Eddie." whispered the voice in his ear. "Just make sure you deposit the cash for this last job. I've really got better things to do with my time than shopjack, so you should be grateful."

"Thanks again then, old pal." said Tsien, his thin, lined face twisting sourly round the end of his cigarette. There was no trace of bonhomie in his voice as he pulled his

fedora's brim down and stalked across the echoing concrete. "Not only a little work for your old friend the Lieutenant, but some for the meatwagon as well."

And indeed, as if by invocation, the Medicorps (with a spay-painted "e" on the end; applause for the gutter comedians of the Subcity) were pulling into the lot, their bulky eight-wheeler stiffhauler crunching over shards and splinters to be greeted by Lucas.

"I'm sure everybody's full of gratitude for this fine performance, Kayzi, but next time could you keep *them* out of it?"

Sure enough, the clipboards and palmtop computers were out, as the chief paramedic argued points of law with Lucas in the middle-management equivalent of an old-west gunfight. Tsien extracted and lit up another cigarette - (he liked to have such a fatalistic vice...especially one he shared with his favorite twodeeo detectives), and pressed the spring-loaded microphone arm closer to his lips. The lieutenant's purity field rippled open and shut around the cigarette, a sheen of crystal blue. Fans in his belt-mounted filter expelled a thin mist of tobacco smoke.

"More to the point, keep your friend away from the ordnance. I know you're not stupid enough to jeopardize our arrangement with unnecessary bloodshed. But something tells me that someone's getting high on his own supply down on the farm."

The answer, when it came, was almost as cold as the wind that was keening in off the West Bay.

"Try to remember the important thing about *mutual benefit*, Lieutenant." hissed Kaito Kayzi, malice crackling across the airwaves like an ethereal lash "Anytime you want to give up your end of the deal, just say the word. I'll put a bullet in my associate myself rather than give you the pleasure of making a real old-fashioned narco bust. And then you'll have to make quota without me."

Tsien was tempted to call the Farmer's bluff, if only out of spite. One glance over his shoulder at the bloody scene spilling out of the King Value onto the asphalt was enough to hold him back, however. Mrs Tsien would no doubt clobber him with a hefty divorce settlement should they ever have to leave the Burbs. And you could never be sure, *truly* sure, that a chemhead was bluffing.

"Allright, allright.....cool your jets." said Tsien, flicking the butt off into a patch of twisted vegetation.

"Just keep it in mind that murders like these have to be referred to higher echelons of the Division. And if I don't do the paperwork, one of my Cyben will. You can't silence a fucking walking corpse with a modem in its brain-pan." There was a non-committal grunt from the other end of the connection - it was good odds that the little savant actually could. Tsien decided to play a moral card anyway. "Now go and get your fix, you fucking junkie."

The Farmer laughed then, the hissing, eerie laugh that always comes out of comm units; a laugh broken down to atoms and put back together at the far end of the

connection without any of it's original humor.

"We're both pretty clear about what we want out of life, Lieutenant." he said, and Tsien could easily hear the snap and hiss of Stunn capsules being popped open and inhaled. "I don't want reality, and you don't want your wife screwing you in court. Let's just make sure we both get to enjoy these little pleasures."

Tsien cut the connection first, determined not to allow the Kayzi that one small victory, and lit up another cigarette, cheerfully red and warm in the artificial gloom.

The Medicorps(e) were still doing what the Medicorps did these days, hosing down the empty parking lot with foul-smelling disinfectant, leaving a scum of grey foam across the drab concrete. The division called the stuff 'cotton candy', although nobody knew why. Any child who was retarded enough to suck down a mouthful of the biohazardous slop would be vomiting blood within seconds.

Tsien had seen it happen to dogs, as well as to the odd one or two chemheads who reasoned that if it came in a medicorps bottle it must be prime mainlining fluid.

Tsien thought; fuck the Corps. Tsien knew exactly where to get his hands on some truly mind-bending shit - fresh from the adrenal glands of a harem of 'farmed' junkies. But if he wanted to keep his little scam on the down-low, he'd have to let Jaq and Kaito keep theirs...

The single casualty (in two separate bags) had been signed for and tagged and listed, destined for a future in mycology - flesh to feed the fungus in Elysium's subterranean synthfood vats. Some damned hippies out on the lunatic fringe thought that recycling the dead was somehow disgusting - but at least it was neat and clean. Tsien had seen people die in some bizarre ways on the job, but never in the last hundred years had a citizen succumbed to food poisoning.

He was imagining a historical cheeseburger, real cow roasted over fossil fuels with a side order of illegal lipid-heavy fries as he pulled his coat tight around his shoulders and turned on his heel.

He'd better break up Lucas and that Medicorps jerkoff before he had second homicide to deal with.

## Ω

*Everdark was moving. Slow, glutinous as tar, it flowed across the black sky to drip and slobber over the rock of Terminal Station.*

*Zhe was so busy with his education in the world of Kaito Kayzi that he couldn't sense the alien machine even as it tightened its grip around his stronghold. His living spacesuit was the one who detected it: it died with its body turned inside out and its mind dissected by insatiable data feeds.*

*A battery of alarms were screaming as Zhe ripped the electrodes away from his*

*temples. The camoactives and goggles unwrapped themselves with a wet popping sound and Zhe's surroundings dropped back in.*

*The room flashed black and red; overloaded; fucked. Zhe was perfectly able to read all the damning signals at once.*

*He was under attack, and Terminal Station was surrounded. While he'd dreamed the gelid black form of Everdark had arisen from its crater, a creature and a swarm and a plague all at once. The nanobots had settled like ashen rain across the counterweight asteroid; and it had become them.*

*Now they swallowed the station whole, leaving only a slim tube to accommodate the crackling shaft of the space elevator. Nanos died in their billions along its lightning-wracked walls and were eternally replaced.*

*Zhe could feel them eating through the walls and the ceiling and floor, homing in on him.*

*Technicians couldn't die, but they could be held in skinless, nigh-eternal torment within the living depths of a Slavesystem...*

*Zhe was feeling slippery on this whole three-dimensional gig.*

*But the memories of Kaito Kayzi knew all about survival in this mad universe.*

*Grinning, the technician held out his palms and exerted pressure on reality. His hands were filled with the cheap plastic handles of two zaibatsu-built railpistols.*

*If the ancient enemy of the Multiplicity was here, it wouldn't want to negotiate.*

*The first of the Golems was blown apart as it came in through the door, forcing itself through the blastproof steel with a howl of ablating metal. Through the Golem-shaped hole it had created thronged more of its misshapen brethren; each a humanoid swarm of black nanos.*

*Zhe unleashed a firestorm from his pistols, scouring the lockway as seething Slavesystems widened the gap. Kinetic rounds shattered the Golems into screeching, writhing fragments. Incendos delivered searing sheets of flame. Detonants popped and blasted, sending individual 'bots scattering like chaff.*

*Without the limitations of actual ammunition or the need to reload, Zhe waded through the twitching, melting Golems, making for his carpetbag. Now twenty had fallen, now thirty. And behind him, the pieces of Everdark began to merge together, a puddle becoming an ocean of flickering blackness...*

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**Mark-Four Cyben – Internal Memorandum**

**RE – Recent anonymous video upload (suspected source; Illuminatus Zeon, High Magus of the Ashishim)**

**Conclusion:** This footage - although highly improbable - appears to be genuine. The Illuminatus explicitly warned us about the threat depicted here during our negotiation settlement of the ‘Seven Hours War’ situation, and we must assume that he/it is acting in the best interests of both his faction and our own by divulging this intelligence data.

**Response:** Funds have long been withheld from our advanced Cybernetic Warrior Integration (Cyben Mark Four) project, but with the possibility of invasion now very real we feel that the time has come to instigate a field trial of the system. If this proves successful we can see no reason why thousands of otherwise useless Subcitizens cannot be pressed into service in a military capacity.

A recovered nanorobotic augmentation system must be thawed and integrated with a Cyben core drone unit – hopefully the drone will impose a limit on the self-replication ability of that archaic experimental device.

A trial subject has already been selected; a disposable yet superficially loyal member of the Compliance Division recently investigated for corruption. As current-model Cyben are processed from the waste bodies of terminated officers his family will harbor no suspicions.

**Generate Executive Order: Instigate immediately; Test Protocol 721 – Activate prototype Mark-Four Cyben.**

*The door was sealed. A sheet of thin, reflective material had been welded across the gap by an exhausted Technician Zhe, who even now slumped against the pulsing, buckling barrier, a smoking pistol in either hand.*

*The hordes outside couldn't force their way in - but Zhe couldn't escape.*

*Not from the crushing mass of Everdark, swallowing terminal station in its death-grip.*

*Not from the insistent, irrepressible tide of images transfixing his mind from out of the machine.*

*And in all likelihood not from the slowly reforming Golems which were beginning to arise out of the shadows...*

*Eyes like spheres of white hot metal open; close.*

*The image is exactly the same.*

*It flickers, a snowblast of static as raw as primordial soup.*

*Across his burning eyes, the image congeals ...*

*Zhe stood atop a cube of mirrored glass, one of serried ranks beneath a great concrete dome. He had been here before, but on that occasion he'd come in power and majesty to chain the machine to his will, and to that of his masters in their Fluidic Void.*

*Now, however ...*

*It was alive.*

*Like the interior of a vast skull, the dome was strung with taut tendons, veined membranes, nameless organs like sacs of pulsing meat. A heartbeat thundered low and slow and deep, pumping oceans of blood through a tangle of arteries and veins.*

*A sickly light pervaded the dome, radiating from suspended globes of phosphorescent and rotting matter. Beneath his feet the cube shuddered as muscles and tendons across its surface moved.*

*Zhe stumbled and fell to his knees, felt the soft and pliant skin of the cube give way a little under his weight. His lenses spun closed, shutting his eyes down to pinholes. And the light burned in, washed over him like an unclean tide.*

*Against his will, he saw...*

*Above him in the humid and fetid air hung a torture device of pure radiance, a mockery of the intricate heart of Kronos. Crucified and slit open across the rack of sharp light was a human form... or what once may have been. Hooks pinned back the skin of its chest and belly; barbed spikes of energy seared through its flesh in ten places, along its cybernetically-augmented arms, through its hunched shoulders. Twisting ropes of white lightning played across its exposed organs as the rack revolved in midair, while sickly fluids boiled out between its ribs of twisted bone and rusted metal.*

*Half of its face was flayed back to the glistening bone; a rotting fan of skin and*

*tissue nailed to the air. Gore and gristle slid slick and greasy in the horror-light and Zhe reeled, feeling unnaturally ill.*

*It was the face of Lieutenant Tsien, twisted and brutally dissected, but still clearly recognizable.*

*Obviously, said a part of the technician's mind, he was long dead. Obviously, it was all just a part of this accursed hallucination...*

*But that part of his mind was blown away screaming when Tsien opened his eyes and began to laugh.*

## Ω

Imagine a wardrobe the size of a covered football stadium, so big you'd need a golf cart to get from slippers to eveningwear. There wasn't a stitch of clothing in the place, however – the whole huge echoing vault was kitted out with row on row of cryogenic capsules, basking in the glow of endless halogen lights.

Each one contained a body without a mind – some huge and powerful, some slim and fey, others so alien as to defy description.

Imagine the *cost* of such a place, and you'd have a fair idea of whose it was.

Emmanuel Lancaster stood reflected in a hall of mirrors, shimmering monomolecular screens hovering in mid-air. Tonight he was an angel, complete with swan-white wings and a blazing antigrav halo of burnished gold. Rows of tiny silver screws spun down tight, connecting the top of his skull and sealing in an artificial brain patterned with his memories. Golden tresses sprouted and curled from implanted roots, each filament utterly perfect, spun gold to the tips.

He wore seven eyes, in a smooth pearlescent face so perfect it seemed unholy, lips as lush and ripe as original sin, cheekbones sharp enough to slice the perfumed air.

The body was pure irony – he was about the work of Hell tonight. But it always helped to put the servants in their place. This was *his* world, after all.

The estate of Third Lancaster was by far the largest of Elysium's spires. Tier upon tier of mirrorglazed offices and apartments bore up a wide and shallow dish of steel at its soaring crown.

Holographic advertisements shrouded the entire great edifice, blazing the logo of Universal Wetsystems two hundred stories tall. They bathed the bimburbes below in strident neon, dappling the baby-blue polyprop of their artificial skies.

But the dish was above the clouds, shadowed only by the weeping rust and wind-scoured metal of the spacelifter. Blue light cupped the incongruous green verdancy of Lancaster Park, while hovering mekan provided halogen spotlights by night and occasional light mists of pure water by day.

The current Lord of the manor had inherited this idyll; in truth he would have lacked

the vision and imagination to conceive of such a folly. To Emmanuel perfection was a healthy profit margin, not some sybaritic harem garden. Nevertheless, privilege had to have its... *privileges*, and Cleon Second Lancaster had been a man of impeccable good taste.

He had ransacked the vaults of fine art which Kronos had saved from destruction. He had seen a vision of paradise in the works of the renaissance masters, and he had *surpassed* it. After his Eden was complete he'd sent the paintings to the furnace.

Emmanuel would never fault him for it - despite the expense this was an achievement worthy of his Blood. And he couldn't judge his so-called ancestor *too* harshly - by the miracle of their craft they were the same immortal man.

Aside from Kronos, that made him the oldest living thing in the city - he'd certainly earned his perfect little sanctuary.

But what horror was this?

What random and savage manifestation?

Crude meat in plastic armor clashed horribly with the decor, ruining the garden's whole aesthetic.

The scratchy sound of *heavy metal* filled the air, muffled by headphones.

Emmanuel felt dirtied by the touch of its shadow.

It was a mercenary clonehunter; this is the one and only place where it looked alien. In a packed choob of struggling commuter peds, you'd ignore this guy with a vengeance.

His name was *Melchior*, although Emmanuel couldn't care less.

Melchior, to his credit, hated Lancaster Park just as much as his host hated the smell of his stale and rancid breath in the fragrant air.

The outlines of his body seemed wrong here; his normality made deformed by the perfectionist geometries of the biotects. Better than real at twice the price, as the brochures said.

Clonehunter Melchior's arms resembled pistonrods tightly coiled with high-tension wire and bound in rawhide.

He didn't have delicate skin.

He came from a womb, and lived in a foetid warren of metal dewy with reconstituted sweat. He was only here because he killed so beautifully - a meat-machine that hunted down units sequenced by renegade biotects.

"So very... pleased... to see you again, Clonehunter." said Lancaster "That little business with the Confederates went remarkably well - their so-called *Pureblood* soldiers weren't quite so perfect as they'd like to believe, hmm?" Emmanuel tried to hide his distaste, but even his augmented nervous control wasn't up to the challenge.

Melchior popped a huge, imponderable wad of cheap pink gum between his chanced lips.

He had no medical plan.

A light rain of almost invisible saliva pattered across Lancaster's skin, and his mouth twisted with disgust. Now he'd have to have his favorite Serpah body cremated again...

"I done the recon, boss. I done it good. That R.T. boy's tight up inside Gianni's office, waitin' for his mark."

"Then this assignment should prove to be even easier than usual, I should hope." The clonehunter's flat mirrorshades followed him, his stubbled jaw masticating rhythmically.

"You can keep the adrenochrome. Do with it what you will," said Emmanuel, hauling himself up to his full height with a rustle of white feathers. "Don Gianni is Celebrant bait anyhow – if you knock him off consider looting his corpse your bonus." He chuckled. "The poor old fool thinks I'm going to clone him! That should keep him in his place while you make the hit."

The grotesque little man was still grinning, chewing his wad of cheap gum with a sound like muffled automatic fire. Oh well, his whole body would have to go anyway. A little extra disease-laden spit wouldn't make much difference.

"Just *please* make sure you take down that renegade Ashishim. He's a medi for someone rather interesting; a discontinued contract. A little side wager, if you will..."

Pale white fingers lifted the clonehunter off the grass, his military boots dangling for a second before his master dropped him like a piece of used toilet tissue. Hands-on management was one thing, but *touching* a lowborn was something else entirely!

"Really, can't you people be bothered with even the most basic retro-sequencing? This body of yours is a rolling wreck, Melchior!"

The weasel-faced assassin smoothed down his military tunic with an exaggerated motion, popping a membranous gooey bubble in his master's face. The great grey broadsword strapped across his back had pricked a little line of blood from the Hierarch's finger.

"Melchior be kill dem; say done an' iz completely fucked, sir," he said, raising a half-cut salute.

Emmanuel sighed. He'd seen quite enough. His impossibly long thin fingers pinched the bridge of his impossibly aquiline nose, a sure sign that there was a king-sized migraine coming his way.

"Just don't fail me, Clonehunter." snarled the angelic Lord, "Or I'll find a place for you in my laboratories as a test subject. There are some things I'd hesitate to do even to a mind-wiped peasant, but you could find them... *educational*."

With that last little motivational threat the Biotect summoned a pair of white-robed slaves to carry him away. He simply couldn't be out of this tainted skin a second too soon...

Clonehunter Melchior yawned. He'd seen every marvel technology would buy him on the inside of a tiny red capsule of the 'chrome.

For the sake of that chemical love he'd get the job done.

As Emmanuel Lancaster disappeared down the marble steps Melchior dropped off the edge of the biotect's eden, his jetpack igniting on the second yank of its pullcord.

The Ashishi was good - he'd checked out all his records. But the Clonehunter knew he was better. The towers and tiers of Elysium scudded past him as he fell, arrowing in on Gianni Vexx's window, far below.

He grinned. It never hurt to pack a bigger knife, either.

## Ω

Tsien was mired in paperwork. Such a bullshit term for a bullshit chore – there was no paper involved, of course, just a stack of grimy and cracked twodeeo clipboards bleeping and yammering for his signature.

Lucas took care of most of it, but there was always a heaping helping for his commanding officer.

He sat himself down on top of a toppled green plastic trashcan, a sputtering roll-your-own jutting from the corner of his mouth and spiraling out a thin ribbon of smoke.

*“Was the perpetrator, in your opinion A) Motivated by profit B) Motivated by revenge C) A paid assassin of the R.T. factions D) Motivated by cultural and/or gang related tensions.”*

He knew full well what the perpetrator was motivated by – a little bag of gel caps in stripy candy-cane red and white. But he licked his pencil anyway, spun his wrist in a circle and stabbed down on ‘D’.

“Hey, Lucas, any coffee left in your vac?” he called out, pinching his cigarette between two nic-stained fingers. “I’m gonna need some stimulants to finish all this crap...”

It was just then that a noise like a stereo recording of sinners burning in hell blasted out of his pants pocket, loud enough to make him drop butt, clipboard and all.

It was the radio again, but this time it wasn't Kaito Kayzi yanking his chain. To achieve such pitch, such discord, someone must have sodomized a demon with a cattleprod and added feedback. It was the sound of mechanical panic - the Critical Emergency Signal.

In a perfect world, hundreds of well-trained and fully armed Division Troopers would swoop on the security breach from all sides, their Cyben soldiers laying down withering fire while elite C-Tac teams rappelled from choppers, and heavy enforcer mekan smashed down walls to neutralize the perpetrators.

The practical reality was like ballroom dancing between helicopter rotors, and led

ultimately to the same result.

"Fuck me sideways!" he breathed, screwing another cigarette into the corner of his mouth. "Can't this shit-pile city go for a week without having another meltdown?"

Tsien was taut as a bowstring, trembling inside his damp grey coat as he heard the sirens howl all over the city, their one-note song echoing from Redcastle clear over to Saint Pete's. Out there, a thousand law enforcers would be mouthing the same profanities and sweating the same cold beads of sweat.

*For good reason.* No force on earth could actually co-ordinate the crumbling remnants of the Compliance Division - who'd calculate the quotas, for starters? Then there were the Cyben - some of them glitched and patched-up units fifty years old. If they all fired in the same direction it'd be a miracle.

Tsien had almost convinced himself that it was time to suck back a lungful of medicorps cotton candy when a human voice – the division's central dispatcher - cut over the looped howling klaxons.

*"Unit 334, under Lieutenant Tsien, Officer Lucas, you're closest to the epicenter. Kit up at Precinct 2997 - heavy ordnance. Instigate Cyben loadout one-three-niner, and await further instructions."*

Tsien smiled; a slow glacial grin that spread across his face until it threatened to unhinge the top of his head.

"That's a big ten-four, Central - Tsien and 334 confirm status switch to triple-overtime and shoot-first status."

Being singled out by despatch meant only two things, two undeniable truths. The first was a fat hazard bonus, up front and with no extra paperwork. The second was free license to use any and all force necessary. And you couldn't PAY for stress relief that good.

"Lucas!" he shouted, breaking into a run which sent toxic bubbles and drifts flying like filthy snow "Tell these corpse-jockeys to scrape up and ship out.....we have to get to an ordnance pickup at the Fortress!"

Lucas already had the sawnoff shotgun ripped out of its plastic griplock bag and was stuffing shells into the choke. "Don't listen to him," he muttered under his breath to the Medicorps manager, knuckles white where he gripped his clipboard of regulations "You boys should stick around. It looks like it's gonna be a busy evening for all of us."

## Ω

The engine howled and roared in protest as Gianni brought his elegant wingtip down hard, grinning around the smoldering butt of a huge cigar. Hundreds of dollars worth of whitewalled rubber went up in smoke as the Bugatti took a corner in a barely controlled slide, the immense vehicle skating across the asphalt as if on greased rails.

Beside him Maria slapped another drum magazine into her Thompson, sequins flying from her sheer-cut dress like tiny stars in their slipstream. The tearing sound of automatic fire battled the bellow of the engine for a second as she let rip with the machinegun, peppering the chrome grille of the Cadillac which dogged their smoking tires.

Gianni squinted, staring down the gleaming black ribbon of road where it snaked between the trees on one side and the river on the other. This car shouldn't exist – the last of the Royales, wrecked in '31 and rebuilt with bootleg money here in Chicago. Its long-nosed hood concealed a twelve-cylinder Victory aero engine, twenty-seven liters of raw power blasting flames out of a clutch of sawnoff pipes.

The Caddy was up on them anyhow, tighter through the turns than the monstrous Bugatti hybrid. He saw some of Frankie G's boys hanging out the windows, letting off bursts of fire as their car swerved and shuddered from side to side. Maria picked one off as he watched, the hail of lead plucking him from the running board to fly off into the dark, a ragdoll trailing blood.

This was what he lived for – the great brutal car at his command, a beautiful woman at his side, adrenaline pumping through his body as he carved a name for himself out of the wild dark city. Here, nobody remembered the name of George Nathan Henry Smith, small time Tech fence.

They – the powerful, the rich, the corrupt and the beautiful – knew him only as Don Gianni. Here he was cruel and sophisticated and respected...even more so than in real life. There was no history to stain his character in the virtual fantasy his Suit wove for him, nobody who knew that he had once been a vile urchin from down in SubHab Seventeen. To tell the truth, all his machinations, his 'dreno trade, his robotics business – they were all just to buy him time inside the 'mersive.

That was how the agent found him.

Out to the left of Gianni's little pool of light, out over the knotted pseudotimber boards with their engineered creaks and groans. Past faces of cancerous stone, mangled supermen with horror shadows seeping ...

Black swathes of night surged into the room like a torrent; curtains blown in from a gaping window.

Orange and green light played across an impassive face there; A Euro, but dreadlocked, scarred. His face was wrapped in a ninja-mask of LCD tape, mirrored from the outside.

It slicked over his skin like paint; every wrinkle stood out in sharp relief. Abdulafia 330 had no time for moisturizer.

From the inside the tape showed him the room in a wash of night-sight green. It only took him a couple of seconds to spot the case which is his target - it positively *glowed* as ident programs lit it up for him.

The Ashsihim agent leaped from the window ledge and onto one of Gianni's giant statues, landing as quietly as a fluttering moth. Microfiber pads on his gloves and shoes held him tight to the cracked stone as he inched forward...

Oh yes - there was something strange about this batch. He could smell the 'chrome from across the room with the olfactory boosters drilled into his nasal septum, and it was more than pure enough. With this stuff, there was no limit to what he and his fellow *Dervashi* could do.

Then the image of the Don seated at his mammoth desk flickered and collapsed. It was nothing but a hardlight hologram, projected from a tiny bead on the floor...

If 'Afia was anything less than a perfectly honed living weapon he would have died right there. Gianni Vexx didn't get to where he was by letting people jack his drugs, and his own tech augmentations made Abdulafia's every movement sound like an avalanche.

The Mafiosi loomed out of the shadows in a seething morass of twitching threads, his Suit tearing open down both arms as loaded guns dropped into his gold-encrusted hands. The feral grin plastered across Gianni's features told 'Afia that he'd been ready and waiting, poised in the dark with his intelligent garment switched to camo.

"Welcome home, honey!" said Vexx, his face split by a yellow-toothed smile. "Didn't anyone tell you how to use a *door*, you nomad piece of shit?"

Typical dumb crooked bastard, thought the Ashishim. They always gloated first instead of just pulling the trigger. That bought him just enough time to lock in his autoinjector, and then the drugs came down on him hard. The whole world went glacial as his brain turned to frosted glass...

The first bullet jackhammered out of Gianni's Taurus in a roseate bloom of flame and cordite smoke, moving in on him slow and heavy. His body clenched up tight, but it felt immense, blurred around the edges with static discharge. Now the hollow-tipped slug was up to walking pace in the air, a rippling shockwave radiating from the muzzle of the handcannon behind it. Its revolver mechanism ticked over like continental drift...

Abdulafia bent the bullet off course with a burst of energy patterned by his mind, and it plowed into the cheek of a scarred plasticrete Jesus with a sound like popping bubble-wrap.

Things were becoming much swifter around him. The nektar, his chemical aid, was wearing off.

The next six shells came in quick succession, and he had to use the last of his enhanced power to dodge them. He flickered from one place to the next as if lit up by strobes, too fast for the eye to follow. His last flash left him leaning nonchalantly against a statue, a single bullet held up between two of his fingers like the butt of a cigarette.

Gianni's face crawled with worms of black thread as he pulled his gun up; sneering at the theatrics.

“Stand still, will ya? You’re only making this take longer than it has to.”

As the revolver popped open, smoking, Abdulafia went for the case.

“This is all I need here, Mister Vexx. Put down the guns and you can write it off as a tax deductible.”

"You couldn't resist, could you?" asked the Don, as the rig lifted his gun clear. "Did you really think you were that good? That I wouldn't be waiting for you?"

Abdulafia swiftly tied the case to his combat mesh, silent. His mirrored face was a death's-head floating in the gloom.

"As you jus' saw, Mister Vexx, we've found other uses for the 'chrome than simply gettin' blazed. I don't suppose the junkies you tapped to get this would have any sympathy for you losing it."

'Afia knew that he'd gone a little too far when he heard hammer of the Taurus snap back again.

"No goddamn respect, any of you!" snarled Gianni, the reloaded gun dropping into his hand. "This is *business*, Ashishi, not a rehab clinic. Now do me a favor, put my drugs back on the table, *and DIE!*"

He heard the trigger grating against the metal of its guard and coiled up his will like a spring, slowing time to a crawl. The next few seconds were jammed together in a stroboscopic blur - a *kata* of evasion as the bullets sliced by trailing haloes of dust. Down hard, leaning back until his shoulders touched the floor, then left, twisting and spinning like a breakdancer, pushing off one row of statues and then the next, gaining height...

When the revolver popped open again he was perched up between a pair of cyclopean figures like a gargoyle, balanced on three toes and one finger.

"Calm yourself, *George*. A man your age - well, you don't want to raise that blood pressure, do ya?. Here - take one of these." The R.T. agent flicked one of the tiny phials of adrenochrome down to his enemy.

This time the response was quiet; the bullets spent.

"Don't call me *George*." hissed Vexx, a breath above whispering.

And the stone Abdulafia perched upon began to shake.

The Ashishi slapped both of his microfiber palms down on the statue, scrabbling for grip. Under his hands and feet a webwork of tiny cracks ramified through the synthetic stone. A creaking, grinding sound merged with Vexx's unhinged laughter as the skin of the statue fell away in crumbling chunks. The little phial lying on the floor at his feet was jumping and skittering as the building convulsed.

A second hit of nektar pushed out Abdulafia's senses, and they screamed at him to *move*. The Don's grin was like a gash down to the bone.

'Afia didn't even look back as he leaped clear, the vaulted room spinning in his night-sight vision, rows of grotesque titans black on green - *and a flash of armored*

*silver.*

He fought instinct and gravity and inertia, and saw four feet of razor-edged death howling down toward him too fast to dodge. Snapshot - a squint-eyed weasel face, eclipsed by a huge pink bubble of cheap gum.

He clapped the swinging end of the sword between his palms, twisting the whole weapon hard and sending it flying from its wielder's tattooed hands. It had missed by less than an inch.

He locked eyes with Clonehunter Melchior.

"Look out behindja" hissed the clonehunter, grinning with a mouthful of crooked teeth. The wiry little mercenary slammed a fist into 'Afia's jaw as he somersaulted away, disappearing into the dark.

The punch was all out of proportion to the Clonehunter's size, and Abdulafia was sure he'd felt pistonrods of combat 'tech behind it. If he'd been built of normal human muscle and bone the shock would have stopped his heart, but instead the blow propelled him through air, arcing away from the statue where he'd perched. It was gone - replaced by a burnished metal exo-suit, an ancient combat machine crouched in a pile of rubble.

As the impact knocked the breath from his lungs 'Afia wondered why it had no head...

Then he saw the Suit flare outwards from Don Gianni, a million threads of black and silver pinstripe lifting him up on filament legs. The ache was brutal, strangling his brainstem, but he forced himself to his feet. His heart was banging against his ribcage - it felt like a hot ball of barbed wire in there.

He was huge and blurred and agonized, an energistic cloud hazing his form.

Blood leaked from his ears and eyesockets as he jammed another hit of nektar into his neck.

And as Don Gianni plugged into his exoskeletal war-suit Abdulafia wrenched one of the statues off of its plinth. He took hold of the plasticrete in both hands, bending it until it snapped - then he threw the huge chunks of stone one after another at his tormentor.

He never saw the impact.

Something came screaming out of the dark at him then, scraggle-toothed and greasy, inked up with jailhouse tattoos. It was Clonehunter Melchior, running on the row of statues as if gravity had shifted sideways, driving him back with another sword - bigger this time. He wielded it with a strange chopping motion, aided by a second handle at right-angles to its hilt. Abdulafia knew, as he heard the sound of two tons of stone hitting three inches of armor, that this thing would take his legs off like brittle stalks of grain.

The two of them blurred like lights across a time-lapse photograph, combat systems pushed to their limits. There was no way he could squeeze any more strength or speed

out of his failing body - he'd have to finish this on raw skill alone. *Lucky he'd been learning unarmed combat for the last hundred and twenty years.*

Melchior's flamberge flew underhand as the clonehunter leaped, a strike to sever a man from crotch to shoulder.

It never landed.

Abdulafia watched the razor edge of the sword skim past the tip of his nose, light picking out the whorls and spirals in the carbon steel. Then he planted his hand and lashed out with both feet, summoning all the strength left in him. The impact jolted up his legs like a hammer blow, sending the clonehunter flying. Melchior's wiry body crashed through three statues before he landed in a ragged heap amid billows of dust.

Abdulafia handsprung back, calculating distances ...and all his concentration went to hell in a roiling ball of greasy fire. He jinked right, hard up against the wall, feeling his eyebrows evaporate.

*Oh yeah. Gianni Vexx...*

Unless Afia was wrong, that thing was a Vatican Templar warsuit, a piece of priceless military hardware designed to tear battletanks in half. Quite an inconvenience, to say the least.

Vexx's chubby fingers operated a nest of wires deep inside its body to wield its awesome might, his nanonic pinstripe socketed into banks of tactical computers. Now the Templar hefted up a weapon the size of a family sedan, bringing its sights into line with the Don's beady black eyeball.

Abdulafia took three bounding steps back, feeling a wall of blistering heat lash out where he had been standing an instant before. Clots and streamers of sticky napalm dripped from the muzzle of Gianni's cannon as he hosed down the row of statues, cackling like a maniac.

There was no way that Afia could take such a machine head-on; his power was fading fast. The ache filled his head like broken glass ground slowly into soft flesh.

Gianni slammed forward in a rage, shrugging aside and shattering statues, belching fire and curses and twisted laughter. There was nowhere to hide ...

It was Melchior who saved him, his sinewy hand clenching Afia's black Crescent and hauling him out of the firestorm. The Clonehunter had slipped his flamberge into a back-scabbard, and hung from a statue's arm while Gianni lined up his weasel face in the flamer's sights. The huge cannon's pilot-light glared accusingly.

"Izmine, Georgie." spat Melchior, shaking Abdulafia like a doll. "MistaLancaster promise."

"Drop him, shitheel, or I'll roast you both." growled the Don. "And to hell with that androgynous freak Lancaster! He can have your ashes."

"Ya wanta piece, George?" asked the Clonehunter, his steely fingers tightening around Afia's crescent until the plastic cracked. "I'll take your head to Mista L, see what

kinda bonus he pays me! Sez you meat for the Celebrants anyway!"

"Jesus, will you two *stop calling me Geor...*" But he never finished. The clonehunter was already upon him.

Melchior spun in midair with feral grace, landing lightly on the barrel of the gun for a second before he tightened his arc, his foot blurring into a savage roundhouse kick. His hobnailed boot slammed into the Templar's sensitive neck coupling with a sickening crunch. Gurgling, bug eyed, Gianni went from upright to horizontal in one unstoppable motion. The floor shook with the impact.

Melchior flew back at Abdulafia snarling, his hand going to the hilt of his flamberge. He hadn't even had time to fall...

The blade was a grey blur over Melchior's head, scything crosswise, a stroke Abdulafia could neither block nor evade...

There was a sound of metal ricocheting, striking the ceiling at some terrible velocity, and then there was a hand protruding from the clonehunter's chest.

It was made of shimmering patterned light, but it stopped him dead.

TriPLICATE lasers stabbed out from a hovering black bubble of plastic, poised on three tiny antigrav motors. Batteries whined as the hologram iced over with hardlight. The sword clattered from Melchior's hand as he felt that ghostly arm become horribly solid within his flesh, and his eyes creased shut with sudden pain.

"You could try to move, I suppose." purred a soft, malicious voice "But you won't get far without *this*."

The glowing hand disappeared from sight. It had slipped back into Melchior's chest, and his look of stark terror evidenced the grip it had on his heart.

Abdulafia allowed his eyes to crack open a little, letting in a blaze of purple light.

Painted in black across it was the silhouette of Melchior on his knees, while above him stood a glowing angel, her slim face framed by neon-blue dreadlocks. Digital tattoos writhed through her firmament, studded with licks of code.

It was another *Dervashi* of the Ashishim, but this one was no scarred-up old veteran. She was tiny and perfect and dressed in holographic rags; an oily old T-shirt and blue jeans, with boots four sizes too big on her feet and spiked bracelets hanging from her wrists.

"CeeAn" he croaked, his throat raw and dry. "Glad you could make it."

Her eyes changed when she saw him move; they lost their cruelty as he stood, braced against the nearest statue.

"Oh, 'I don't need backup', right?" she said, reaching out to touch him gently with one hand while the other stayed deep in Melchior's chest. A coiling artery of plastic tubing whipped out from the hovering crescent, plugging into his autoinjector. "I had to convince Illuminatus Zeon to lend me a masslifter, and that took some time. But if you leave without me again, so help me..."

"We've only got three." he replied "So I'm not surprised."

"Two" she corrected him "And don't even *think* of complaining; you wouldn't have survived both of these guys alone."

Abdulafia smiled, his face still creased with lines of weariness despite the drugs.

"WE still haven't." he said, as Gianni clambered laboriously to his feet behind them.

"Outlanders!" he raged "You're gonna wish Kronos caught you here instead of me! You're gonna pray for a trip to the lobo plant!"

The Don crushed his empty flamer to scrap in frustration, crumpling it like an empty can in one huge steel fist. Abdulafia could see him all red-faced and muttering obscenities behind the suit's faceplate.

"You Ashishi hoodlums are gonna regret ever setting foot out of the R.T.!" he threatened, as chainsaw blades snapped out from the war-suit's wrists. "And if this breaks your treaty with the Vatican, you won't have a stinking hovel left to crawl back to!"

CeeAn flashed Gianni a look of pure scorn and returned her attention to clonehunter Melchior.

"Kill him and I'll let you live." she said, tightening her hand in a vise-grip around his heart. "You can have every damn thing in this whole place except the 'chrome."

It was all he needed.

The clonehunter reached for his sword, but she held him back out of reach, her eyebrows raised in mock admonition.

"I have to give you both an even chance, don't I?"

Her fingers slipped out from between his ribs, and he was off the leash, howling.

Melchior sprung desperately to the attack, leaping onto the war-suit's shoulders and raining down blows on Vexx's head until he screamed.

But it was no use. One of the suit's pincers pried him from his perch, crushing his ribs in bands of steel. The Don grinned – this was finally working out for him. He swung the struggling little clonehunter up over his shoulder like a living hammer, then brought him down in a blurring arc which would mash both Melchior and CeeAn into the floor. Halfway down he caught her eye. She was smiling.

Too late Gianni realized what she was doing; and in that instant, as Melchior descended on an inexorable crash-course, he tried to eject from the suit.

Abdulafia had connected his partner's black crescent to the mains supply.

The purple sheen of her skin cracked and rippled, evaporating into warped, acid blue. For an instant she was a dark shadow amidst the light, a pupil of black in a cobalt eye. Melchior bounced off her upraised palm, screaming, flung off to the side so fast the war-suit's arm servos fused solid and cracked.

There was second of sound so vast it was like silence – a white-hot silence filled with pain. Electricity flared and raved in a flashburst of searing light, and as Don Gianni

howled his rage and frustration the filaments of his bio-intrinsic suit, his pinstripe, ejected from *him*.

They tore off chunks of armor, thrashing in the all-pervasive strobe-flash like malign roots.

While they did, CeeAn 187 ate the power for a number of city blocks. She locked hands with Abdulafia and the blue light surrounded them both, building up a spiraling whine like a camera flash.

She patterned the energy *just so*.

Gianni felt the pull, the thousand tiny pains of filaments torn from their fleshy sockets, just as they disengaged from the war-suit.

Melchior - blackened like a nuked cartoon character - wobbled over to the window and silently toppled over the sill. Halfway down he remembered to scream, yanking frantically on the ripcord of his ruined jetpack.

Gianni never saw him go; he was being *stripped*.

The threads of the suit were out of his control; he felt amputated. They came up out of his throat, from his tearducts they came, and unscrewed from around his bones. He sweated them out.

Cee and Abdulafia unwove the pinstripe strand by strand as the empty metal husk of the Templar suit yammered and screeched with warning sirens, its tactical computers burned out.

Finally 'Afia cut the connection. He bled from his eyes and ears and nose; his head was filled with razors and raw ethanol.

And Vexx saw the LCD tape fall from his face. His voice was a feeble croak from between bruised and broken lips.

"What the hell are you doing mixed up with this crowd?" he asked, recognizing Abdulafia's face instantly from the threedeeo. "You ain't no Outlander! But if...and how... then why...."

Abdulafia 330 propped himself against a pillar, laughing through obvious pain. There was no part of his aching body which wasn't bruised, and the comedown from that amount of nektar was going to feel like pure hell.

"Oh, I'm not *him*, Gianni. Think of me as the black sheep of the family - the disowned brother."

He pulled out a phial from the case, falling to his knees in front of the Don, who lay flat in a pile of knotted filaments. A pair of red satin boxers with a black heart motif preserved his remaining dignity.

"Why do you think they sent a Clonehunter down here, anyhow? They can pop me out another body every month or so - we don't have the accelerated vats like ol' man Lancaster."

Gianni swiped at the phial with one hand, but Abdulafia kept it out of his reach. He

rolled the little spiked wheel with his pointed tongue.

"And If you know my face, answer me this. *Why does this 'chrome here taste like me?*"

Gianni spluttered and twisted as Abdulafia emptied the adrenochrome over his head.

"While you ponder that one, I'm afraid we have to go."

CeeAn's color had faded from incandescence to a muted shimmer, but the neon blue tattoos still blazed from her skin. Ashishi code spiraled up through her in helical coils.

"Quit fooling, Afia...evac in ten ..."

As he turned away he missed Don Gianni's maniacal grin.

The Mafioso's artificial hand was telescoping, his fingers attenuating as its sheath of fleshtex rubber tore open.

Five steel tentacles plaited together swiftly, their tip sharpened to an impaling point.

Now from outside came the ever-increasing roar of an evac vehicle rising up from out of the R.T. Up the verdigris-mottled cliffs of metal it came, riding ethanol fire and crewed by desperate chaingun-wielding Ashishim. It resembled an armored double-decker bus humping a Saturn-series rocket. The room began to shake.

The tentacle lashed out like a cruel whip, its razor point dripping poison, missing Abdulafia's face by inches as he twitched his head away. The tiny camera in the back of his crescent unit had come in handy. Gianni reeled the sinuous steel barb back in and fired again, then again, punching holes in the wall as his quarry jinked left and right, his face expressionless.

"I really didn't want to kill you, Vexx." said the battle clone, snapping a punch-dagger from its wrist sheath with an oily little click. "You're one of the last people who remembers Reclamation Day, and I don't want that prick Ascher to be the only one left..."

"Alright, you *dickheads!* That's ENOUGH!" CeeAn 187 had run out of patience with boys and their stupid games. "You – 330!" she snarled, pulling the Ashishi clone back by the tatters of his black coat. "Make too much work for those damn bio-lab geeks and I won't have my new body ready until next month."

She turned to the pathetic, twitching figure of the Don, round and pink and bruised, his bionic lash curling and uncurling feebly amid the blood.

"And you – Vexx! We didn't come here for *fun*, you know. That last batch of adrenochrome wouldn't have done you any good where you're going. The word's out all over the datanet that the Celebrants are after your ass."

Gianni ground his teeth in frustration, slamming his fist into the floor. Those two meatboys on the corner! And here he was, defenseless... He shot CeeAn a look of pure undiluted murder. You could have burned asbestos black in the air between them.

Then the walls came off.

There was a noise like paper being torn by ten million hands as the harpoons of the

Ashishim masslifter engaged, dropping a vast piece of masonry end over end several hundred stories. She saw the grimy thumbs-up of the pilot, the wild eyes of the chaingunners hanging from the doors by the grips of their hulking weapons.

She jumped for the door just as the lifter reached its zenith, graceful despite its bulky armor, smoothly rolling and turning like a whale in clear tropical waters. A meaty thump on the bench seat next to her let her know that her Abdulafia had managed to hitch a lift as well.

Then they dropped out of the frame; out of the gaping hole that was once a picture-window in the wall of an office on the skin of Hab 2095. She felt the technicians put her on recharge; felt Afia feel the same.

They slept as they were delivered back to the Pit, where even now an operating theater and a detox transfusor were being prepped for Abdulafia's convenience.

CeeAn would have to wait a little longer, but fair was fair. She *had* lost three bodies in only one week, and as Zeon always reminded her, reincarnation doesn't grow on trees.

## Ω

Gianni was still very much alive; he was past being amazed at his current predicament. Had that tiny little purple dame actually *yelled* at him? He honestly couldn't remember the last time he'd been shouted down like that...let alone taken a beating so bad.

A cold, sour wind came rushing in across the wrecked office, across his ruined and naked flesh, pale and pockmarked where tubes had torn free from his withered skin.

There was a great deal of blood. Too much, surely, for it all to be his own?

Small fires flickered in the dim corners of the room, behind the impassive forms and faces of melting colossi. By their light, a shadow fell.

And George Henry Smith knew that the Celebrants had come for him.

They didn't speak, or even seem to breathe, a pair of dark and otherworldly figures stalking at the edges of his delirium, armed with guns and machinery and innumerable ticking clocks.

At the last, as one of the Celebrants pressed the cold steel of his machine pistol to the Don's temple, they pulled back the lace and satin veils from an old portable television set. Its stained and faded beige plastic was warped from centuries of abuse, and its screen was a flickering green pool, from which the floating head of Direktor Ascher grinned, the stump of his severed neck made holographically fresh.

"So many people wanted you gone for good, old friend." said the head, wobbling in the haze of Gianni's fading vision. "But I wanted to show you something which I will never see. I wanted to let it *keep* you."

"Why..." spluttered the Don, trying vainly to lever himself up off the floor.

"I'm afraid it's a very old story, Gianni." said Ascher, the look of sympathy in his dead eyes almost believable

"You simply know too much to stay alive. You know about the trick we pulled on the Vatican – about that empty reliquary down in the Black Techs' monastery. Oh – and when we were seven, you stabbed me in the face with a plastic fork. Good times, eh George?"

Gianni saw the face of Simeon Blaire juxtaposed with that of Abdulafia 330. He understood.

They dropped the veil, and light spilled from a million pinprick holes, bursting out as a wave of hissing green fire.

Then the Celebrants took his mind, and the bullet the empty meat of his brain.

Ω

He saw.

And it burned as it took him apart.

Something inside Gianni did not, as usual, disperse. The pattern of energy which had once powered every cell in his body, in all its near infinite detail was recorded. His painful death, frozen.

Kronos stretched out that instant into infinity.

Then stored it, filed it, numbered it and moved on.

Ω

The Fortress of Justice was locked down, barricaded and blacked-out. Tsien only found it by the pink glow of holographic cartoon pigs plastered across its grimy windows.

The precinct 2997 boys were prepared for them.

Tsien kicked the door in, grinning like a maniac. No force on earth was going to come between him and some serious firepower.

Dave Levine, his sportscoat a flickering billboard of patched advertising still grinned and gesticulated in a snowdrift of empty coffee cups. Ten thousand intermeshing logos painted the cinderblock walls as a naked bulb sputtered on its swinging cord overhead.

A pair of Cyben hauled the Quartermaster up against his desk, their dead eyes pale and milky.

"Get out!" yelled the struggling Tech Division officer. "This isn't Street Compliance

territory! You've got no jurisdiction here!"

Lucas rubbed his face in an official release printout dripping with Direktoriats holoseals.

"Give the Chief what he wants and we'll be long gone, wirehead," he spat. "Just locking the door on us is a mind-wipe offense."

The QM blanched white, imagining the probes up under his eyeballs...

"Well, you wouldn't be the first to pretend they're not home when we come knocking," said Tsien, pushing the man down into his chair with one gloved finger. "And I know you're just covering for those geeks down in the range. But tell me..." he spun on his heel, pacing beneath the pendulum arc of the room's single lightbulb. "Do you have any hot tips for the game tonight? You see, I thought I'd stay clean, just watch the thing for its entertainment value. But now it looks like I'm stuck on overtime."

The luckless officer nodded as one of Tsien's Cyben ripped the keychain from his belt, struggling to point at the threedeeo. The Lieutenant snapped his fingers, and the dead machine's hands hinged open from around his arms.

"I'm a B-Blaire supporter, S-Sir," he said, as the laminated hands about him finally unclamped. "Only four more players to go, and then we could have a new Emperor."

He picked himself up, dusted down his uniform half-heartedly and retreated behind the relative safety of his desk.

Tsien scowled - another romantic in love with the idea of *royalty*. You could scrape the blue-ribboned freaks off the pedwalks in their dozens, these days.

"Remember what happened to Reilly?" he asked, all mock-innocence.

"Lieutenant, *nobody* knows what happened to Reilly. The Trials weren't covered on threedeeo back in his day."

"Exactly, buddy, *exactly*. That poor old aristo fool is probably still up there in the labyrinth, all desiccated on a spike. The Machine, I'm sure, is in no hurry to be replaced after all these years."

The Quartermaster's eyes narrowed and he ran his fingers over the blue ribbon around his wrist. But he said nothing. His tormentor's squad of Cyben marched mechanically past in single file, slaves to their master program. But who knew what this mad little street cop would order them to do next?

"Now tell me, *fellow officer*," said Tsien, lighting up a cigarette as a ream of official papers spooled out of his belt-mounted fax. "What's the best toy you've got to offer me? West Central are packing plasma carbines. You're gonna be a laughingstock down at HQ if I walk out of here with a lousy semiautomatic - that I can promise."

The Q.M. felt the watchful eye of a monitorcam hot between his sweaty shoulderblades. This was probably some kind of *assessment* - the brass pulled that kind of shit nearly every other week, trying to find somebody to fire. He pulled a shiny new key-card from deep inside his coat and held it out to the Lieutenant between trembling

fingers.

"Fine. Take it! Central sent the test team a new bunch of ordnance today - but if it was up to *me* you street grunts'd never get your hands on it. You're all going to be replaced by Cyben when Lord Blaire's in charge."

"It's *not* up to you, though, is it?" snarled Lucas, jamming a flickering data-tablet in the man's face. "We've got orders right from the top, and there's nothing you back-room jerkoffs can do about it!"

Tsien pulled his junior officer away like a dog handler yanking a pitbull's chain.

"Too bad, but he's right. And for the record, it's 'street grunts' like us who make sure the Liquid Tong or Vexx's boys don't just walk in here and steal your toys."

"Perhaps." grumbled the QM. "But I'm right about the Cyben, aren't I? You're all getting phased out, and it's Tech Division who've made you obsolete!" He flashed Eddie a look of superior, smug satisfaction like a playground snitch.

It filled Tsien with bilious disgust, and he barely restrained himself from throttling the little bastard with both hands. He could, he knew.

The Div hierarchy had infinite trust in the testimony of Cyben, and the Farmer had sent him the little grey box he needed to hack their tiny brains. Nobody could prove a thing.

Instead he snapped up the key-card before the quartermaster could take it back, and flashed a smile that was little more than a baring of nicotine-yellowed teeth.

"Thanks for the tip, *officer*. Now, I believe you've got some more sitting on your ass to do, right? While the rest of us go save the day?"

"I hope to God that thing blows up in your hands, you psycho!" spat the QM, leaning back as Tsien craned his neck over the desk. He eyeballed the man from about an inch away.

"I think God's about done with me." said Tsien. "But if you're keen for Jesus why don't you sign up as a Vatican eunuch? Looks like you've got nothing to lose."

He swaggered off down the corridor, popping the keycard between his fingers, Lucas following at his heels with a handful of requisition notices and printouts. The steel walls rattled and the ceiling dripped. The corridor twisted and turned and forked, working its way ever downward...

They spotted it at the same time - a curvaceous black shape in a pool of scarlet neon, framed in an open doorway.

Tiny LEDs blinked in the half-darkness. Cold metal burned like molten rock under the emergency lighting. There was a *gun* back there in the gloom, the kind of weapon which looked like genocide forged in steel. Tsien slipped the keycard into its slot, and the clamps popped open around the Eversio with a hiss of cryogenic gas. If you had to set a trap for a stress-burned, trigger happy, corrupt son of a bitch like Tsien, this would be the perfect lure.

The Eversio was a chromed and gleaming four feet long, its stocky body a mass of dispersal cowls and air intakes. From its muzzle protruded four radiating spikes, each angled sharply backward to form an arrowhead of serrated metal. Pipes connected a chunky backpack to the body of the weapon, a solid mass of heat-sinks and fans festooned with straitjacket straps and buckles.

There was a manual on the wire-mesh shelf next to the Eversio, a tome bound in vinyl and imprinted with the weapon's name in crude relief.

"You're going to take *that* one?" asked Lucas, his shotgun suddenly looking small and insignificant. "It says on the crate that it's for 'anti-exo-armor operations'. Isn't that a bit...excessive?"

"Who knows what's going on at the Valley View?" grinned Tsien, leafing through the manual. "We might end up facing..." he traced a line with his finger "'light battletanks, antigrav gunships, heavy mekan or exosuit infantry', right? Has anybody told us we *won't*?"

Lucas raised one finger and opened his mouth to protest, but stopped when he saw the sparkle in his commander's eyes. It'd be like denying a kid his christmas presents.

"I suppose they haven't, Chief. But you'd better suit up, just to be safe. This thing *is* fission powered."

Lucas handed him a pair of thick black rubber gloves, and after Tsien pulled them tight over his fingers he gingerly lifted the Eversio from its housing.

The harness snapped tight, seeming to pull its magnetic clasps home of its own volition.

"Oh yeah! Now *this* is why I put up with the gods-damned paperwork!"

Tsien slipped the goggles down over his face... and the Eversio assumed control of its systems.

Tiny needles inside the headset bit into his skin, pumping paralyzing toxin. Its thick green lenses strobed hypnotically as a thin, high-pitched whine stabbed through his brain. It arced, crazed. It busted loose around his charred eyes, lighting the armored room. A bolt of electricity punched into Lucas' chest, sending him flying across the room.

Tsien was *connected*, the full force of the Wetsystems earthed through his body like a vast bolt of lightning.

Carefully, probing with information feeds like incorporeal scalpels, the vast machine which ruled Elysium examined its newest specimen. His heart rate, his blood pressure, his memories and fears – all cut up and scrutinized and saved in binary.

The interface expanded, tearing open a wound in his soul.

Tentatively, Kronos' immense artificial mind *flexed*, pulling Tsien's muscles like puppet strings. His eyes sharpened their focus as each iris modified its shape. And with these new, reptilian eyes Tsien saw a thin metal claw questing over his shoulder,

followed by another and another...

In that endless second of terror he recognized it. He *knew*. It was the core drone of a Cyben, the device which slaved the grisly officers' dead flesh to the machine.

A piece detached itself from the cowl of the Eversio, scuttling onto his arm to lay down deep I .V. roots. And as the sedative flowed he was unable to scream. His veins swelled to the size of hosepipes as screwtipped wires raped them. At the same moment the Core Drone which bulged from the weapon's backpack plunged its anchor-hooks into the back of Tsien's neck. Its legs formed a mesh about his shoulders and chest, locking together like fingers into a crushing fist. It slammed chem-feeds and monitors and cutoff cuffs into his jugular and his windpipe.

Pain came down on him like a ten-ton hammer, obliterating reason. And through it raged the onslaught of the Core Drone, as mechanisms designed to enslave dead flesh went to work on living meat...

Its surgical steel tentacles twisted obscenely in the dim light as splatters of blood rained across the tiled floor. Whirring drills at their tips worked methodically onward, chewing through his cranium with terrible purpose. A pair tunneled through his head, tearing out through his eyes, their tips irising open like tiny steel flowers to reveal hard black camera lenses.

In the corner of the room Lucas stirred and groaned, his shaven skull dripping with blood. That blast had knocked him out cold...

Tsien's head sagged forward onto his chest, dead weight, as the lenses in his blackened sockets blossomed with hard blue light. Blood welled up around the entry wounds of twelve shining scaled tubes, the tips of which had erupted in a swarm of ancient, illicit nanorobots, devouring and replacing Tsien's brain tissue with billions of artificial neurons.

Lucas caught it all in double vision, his head throbbing with pain.

Code began to snap and sizzle across that net of wire and meat, activating new drill-tipped tentacles, larger now that Eddie's pain centers had been conveniently eliminated. They rose from the core drone like a nest of cobras, swaying gently as they picked their targets.

The look on his face didn't change as the half-inch drillbits chewed into his arms and legs, coiling around his bones and tearing in loops through his taut skin. His blood had stopped pumping by the time it was over; there were simply raw furrows of muscle laid bare where his skin was split apart.

As Lucas watched, horrified silver liquid welled up from his ravaged flesh, a webwork of metal forming scars across Tsien's wounds.

It was nothing short of utterly forbidden technomancy.

The machines which boiled like a plague in his blood were ancient, torn from a frozen reliquary in Kronos' armory. The art of building them was lost to mankind, and

that vast artificial mind could only copy what its long-dead masters had created. It was a terrible risk – but what was coming in from the cold dark of space was even worse. Dire enough to convince Kronos to field-test an experimental weapon more than a thousand years old on a living subject...

Still - it was *working*. The motes were dividing and multiplying in the fevered furnace of his body. As their numbers swelled so did their power, fulfilling the program which the besieged scientists of the Terminus had coded into them centuries ago. Very soon Tsien would be unable to live without their aid. He would grow stronger with every passing hour, becoming less human - and ever more destructive.

Even now data seethed and boiled across Tsien's vision. He had become one with a brain the size of a city, and one with the butchered personality inside the Eversio.

That immense and powerful weapon had a mind of its own – one like the minds he could now feel in machines all around him. Ragged and pained, or sharp and ecstatic in servitude. It was a warning as much as a revelation.

*You could go down that path, Tsien. You are already utterly compromised ...*

It could burn him down to nothing but motor nerves and a name. And that only as a handle, the command word written on a scroll and stuffed in the mouth of a Golem...

It gave him a purpose.

The Last City was under threat from forces beyond the scope of a broken-down gutter cop to even imagine. Kronos had only allowed this bizarre experiment to go ahead because it had heard something whispering in the Wetsystems – something echoing up from out of the R.T. where the mysterious *Illuminatus* held court.

Tsien could grasp that there was history between the machine and that outland operator – a history which usually had them itching to destroy each other.

That little fact alone made him sure that whatever threat was coming loomed black and deadly in the mind of his master.

Now he was transformed. Now he was ready. He felt able to destroy anything thrown against him, and *laugh* while he tore it to shreds.

*It was his duty.*

And he realized with horror, that this resolve, this utter faith was not coming from his own mind but from *all around him* with infinitely insidious suggestion. The will of Kronos became his only desire as screeds of data collapsed in the centre of his reeling vision...

Lucas saw the terrible empty void in his commander's eyes for only an instant - then his mind fell through it and into the grinding machinery beneath. The shock of witnessing Tsien's transformation held him pinned to the spot like a crushing weight.

Even he, unenlightened, *unconnected* could feel the psionic storm which raged around the little room, hear the howling pain of a billion disembodied minds in his head.

*They were welcoming Tsien to their number. They were warning him that it was better to die than to join them.*

He could free Edward Tsien from the hell that was about to engulf him.

The Cyben stalking up on him, primed to erase the one human witness to the Lieutenant's transformation, just had time to extrude its own intrinsic railgun from one laminated forearm.

Lucas fired at the same time as the Cyben, sobbing, feeling the will of those lost souls tightening his finger on the shotgun trigger.

Both barrels of the Smith and Wesson erupted with a shattering report.

The railgun rang like a bell, spitting death in a flash of blue fire.

The Cyben's bullet collapsed Lucas' skull, the vacuum caused by the spinning projectile shredding its contents. A tight fan of blood and tissue was airborne as Tsien swung and fired in a single fluid motion.

The Eversio made no sound, but the air in the hot little cell seemed to flicker. As Tsien pulled the trigger a haze of silver appeared in mid-air, wrapping around each flying pellet of buckshot mere inches from the muzzle of the sawnoff.

It was woven nanotech - hellish stuff from the same cryo-reliquary which had spawned Tsien's new body. The gossamer cloud spread in an instant, mummifying the barrels of the shotgun - and Lucas as well, a scrawl of twinkling metal across his stomach. The moment burned into Tsien's augmented eyes.

The remains of Lucas' head painted the far wall of the storage cel as the Eversio twitched, all those monomolecular filaments pulled excruciatingly tight. There was a wet, slicing sound which seemed to come from everywhere at once.

Nothing happened for one heartbeat, for two...

Then the Smith and Wesson, released from its silver webbing slowly broke apart into precise little cubes of wood and metal. The broken pieces fell clattering to the ground. And as the still-standing corpse of Lucas started to topple to the meshwork floor it split apart along a gridwork of livid crimson lines, collapsing into a jumble of disassembled meat.

Then the Cyben fell to pieces, then the shelves, and the wall, cracking and collapsing, then a strangled, bubbling cry from down the corridor heralded the Quartermaster's demise. The ceiling began to sag and buckle.

Tsien smiled, his nic-stained teeth already shot through with silver.

It was time to go to work.

## Ω

While Technician Zhe couldn't see it in the archives and video records of Elysium, at the moment of Tsien's transformation something snapped in the very fabric of the

world.

A creature without name or form or intellect, a thing with only *size* and *hunger* finally clawed a tiny crack open into the mortal universe, after decades of scrabbling against the barriers which held it back.

It had been here before, this thing, and it had been known by thousands of names throughout history.

But never had it felt so compelled, never had it sensed such a rich source of nourishment calling out to it across the infinitesimal but nigh impregnable divide between worlds.

The Wetsystems of Elysium were ripe with pain and confusion, with the screams of millions of the dead. It couldn't think or plan or plot, but it knew that it must get inside.

It must *feed*.

And as the man called Edward Tsien died, enslaved by the steel bonds of the Mark-Four Cyben system, his soul tried to flee from his tortured flesh and found itself trapped. Halfway between life and death, straining against the cruel mechanisms which keep his ruined body breathing.

The tiny gap created in that instant was too small to be registered, even if machinery existed in the Last City for monitoring such phenomena. But the creature without could smell the Wetsystems through it, it could sense the connection between this crude thing of meat and metal and the sustenance it craved.

Sliding, squeezing, flowing like black ink in water, it crawled through the crack and into the blank spaces of Edward Tsien's mind.

Down in the Reclaimed Territories the creature was carefully observed.

And hands very much akin to those of Technician Zhe caressed a row of silver toggle switches, while a replica of a human face cracked open in a chilling smile.

## Ω

*"Welcome to the experiment." said Tsien, his teeth moving despite being stripped of muscle and flesh and lips. "As you can no doubt appreciate, I represent a first attempt to complete the metamorphosis."*

*Zhe clutched his head, kneeling as dark, bloody tentacles coiled about his twitching limbs. The rack stopped its spinning, and the flayed visage of Tsien floated closer, his empty eyesockets brimming with foul light. The technician could feel the two realities grinding against each other, threatening to crush his mind between them.*

*"If anything, the results should be more interesting this time around." said Tsien.*

*And the skin rolled back over his half-featured grin, as the background faded, blackened...*

*About Zhe's comatose corporeal body, the residue of Everdark's Golems was*

*looming up, melting together into an inky dome. He couldn't see it coming.*

*Technician Zhe never felt the myriad tiny claws of the Slavesystem enfolding him. They covered him like a rising tide, plugging into his biological systems and surrounding his brain.*

*He was too far under now to care, or to feel the absolute enslavement of his tissues. The visions were a lucid nightmare, behind which the face of Tsien pulled the fiberoptic strings. And behind him?*

*"We are genuinely sorry." said another voice, not as loud, but all-enfolding, a voice which spoke liquid words as huge as mountains. "But as a Technician of the Multiplicity, I'm sure you know about the necessity of investigation."*

*Zhe could not see the speaker through a haze of random memories. But he knew the codespeak twelve of the Mitachondriates when it was spoken.*

*"It is possible that I have found, here in this abysmal backwater, a means to end the war." Zhe knew the voice, from the briefing tapes his superiors had provided him with. He could picture the serried energy bands of Nyl's magnetic field. He could smell his aura. "With luck" said the renegade technician "you may even survive to witness peace."*

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**PROHIBITED TECHNOLOGIES REGISTER – 209TH EDITION**

**SELF-REPLICATING SEMI-AUTONOMOUS NANOROBOTIC SYSTEMS:**

***DESIGNATION – PROSCRIBED CODE ULTRA***

THESE DEVICES ARE UTTERLY FORBIDDEN TO CITIZENS, SUBCITIZENS AND ALL ALLIED TRIBES OF ELYSIUM. EXTANT EXAMPLES ARE ITEMS OF MILITARY TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPED BY THE *TERMINUS SEPARATIST ARMY* IN THEIR FAILED STRUGGLE AGAINST THE DISPARATE NATIONS OF OLD EARTH. THEY ARE CONSIDERED HIGHLY DANGEROUS AND UNSTABLE – A SINGLE SELF-REPLICATING NANO COULD IN THEORY RENDER THE ENTIRE PLANET'S MASS INTO COPIES OF ITSELF.

RESEARCH INTO THE USE OF SUCH TECHNOLOGY HAS BEEN BANNED UNDER THE PROGRESSIVE LIMITATION ACT (OF 702 ANNO KRONOS), AND POSSESSION OF SUCH DEVICES, THE DEVELOPMENT OF SAID DEVICES, OR THE UNDISCLOSED KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR WHEREABOUTS IS PUNISHABLE BY DEATH.

***ANY SEALED CRYOGENIC PODS MARKED – 'T.S.A. - CHIMERA WEAPONS PROJECT' DISCOVERED IN THE RAD-LANDS OR THE DEEP CITY MUST BE SURRENDERED TO AGENTS OF KRONOS FOR ERADICATION. FAILURE TO DO SO WILL RESULT IN THE USE OF LETHAL FORCE.***

*"You see" said Technician Nyl, shifting the seething mass of Everdark with a dismissive gesture "I couldn't get inside that frozen meatbag's mind without my tools. And more pertinently from your position, without live bait. I was stuck down there for what seemed like centuries! But I've found things out – oh yes, important, vital things."*

*Zhe detected a faint note of pleading in his compatriot's voice.*

*"As of now, this great obsolete pile is useful only for its strength." He brought the nanonic mass of Everdark up and around Zhe, lifting him from the floor and pinning his hands and feet. Viselike magnetic fields locked him in humanoid form, still clutching his imitation railpistols.*

*Nyl was holding a flat black box the size of an old fashioned VHS tape in one hand.*

*"See, I've appropriated technology from the local surroundings. Training manual stuff," he said. Zhe stared at the black box in horror.*

*He had seen what the reports said about the Weapon.*

*It was what he had been sent here to destroy.*

*"And now we simply change everything," said Nyl, and pushed the button.*

## Ω

A shadow moved in the close, humid darkness of Lord Blaire's spire-estate – deep below his palatial gaming temple, down among the austere white rooms which Simeon called home. The creeping thing's head was an insectoid nightmare of bulging segmented eyes and black rubber antennae – nightvision optics turning the stygian gloom to a wash of grainy luminous green.

It flowed between the sizzling beams of security lasers, passing across the glass eyes of cameras invisible behind electronic shields.

It slipped silently across the white marble floor of Simeon's bedchamber, its long-fingered hands coiled in front of its chest like those of some huge black mantis. Now – the target. A matt-black screwdriver slipped from the tip of the thing's finger like a claw, while a nozzle in another digit sprayed a fine mist of oil onto the bolts.

This machine was Blaire's SomnoTech hood, a vast chunk of chrome and plastic worth more than whole neighborhoods in the Subcity. The shadow peeled away a skin of pressed steel from the side of the hood, exposing a nest of wires within. Under those twisted skeins of copper and plastic nestled the object he had been sent for.

It was the cartridge which modulated the young Lord's dreams, and it was hot with illicit data. Carefully, slowly, the operative pried the little card from its housing. A perfectly innocent SomnoTech program slipped out of his wrist pocket to replace the one he had taken, resetting the machine as it slotted into place.

But for all his stealth and all his hardwired technology the operative was far from

invisible. Kronos had been watching Lord Simeon for quite some time now, and one of the vast machine's pet flycams was poised upside-down on the ceiling right above the furtive little man in black.

Now the electronic ruler of Elysium sliced through the Blaire Estate security firewalls like so much flimsy paper, hissing through the wires and up into the SomnoTech hood like an invisible electric possessor. It caught the last shreds of the old program as they were magnetically wiped into oblivion.

So very little – but enough to confirm Kronos' suspicions.

Dirty black code, sharp ice and more... illicit Subliminals taped in over the top of a night's worth of artificial dreams.

A flicker of images filtered up through the teeming levels of protocol within the great machine. There was a black shadow skittering across the grainy picture, a babel of typed characters in a language that Kronos hadn't seen for generations and no longer had active code to process.

Then there was a single still shot - a crisp black and white photograph. In it stood a man holding a long, thin blade, it's tip level with his eyes. His face was a metal death-head beneath an ornate helmet, a crescent moon on its brow.

The file contained detailed combat training material - all of it synthesized, an animated figure going through the motions of some complex martial art. Meshwork warriors slashed and stabbed and leaped across the screen, swords and staves blurring as they fought. It was a subliminal fix, a mind-bending indoctrination. There was a lot of talk in there about the purity of death, about unswervingly serving one's master. Kronos primed a trace to find out just who that master was.

Smooth operation, an electrical shifting of gears. Forces were mobilized, sequestered, instructed.

Myriad calculations seethed through the machine at the speed of light, extrapolating a thousand possible treasons.

Meanwhile the man in black skulked back through the dead white corridors to the service level, where he slipped out of his black rubber coverall and into a plain and innocent SomnoTech jumpsuit. His little electric truck stood parked in the bare aluminum corridor, the puffy cloud logo of the 'Tech bobbling and twinkling on its side. Kronos could never let him reach the door.

Its agents were closing in – not really the best machines for the job, but the only things under its direct control within the whole palatial spire. That fact alone should have been enough to confirm Kronos' suspicions – no honest aristocrat would allow Subcity renta mekan into his sacred sanctum.

At least, thought the pseudocerebrate, there were *some* robots in the Blaire Spire still programmed to obey. A bulging, fisheye image filled one of Kronos' screens as its slave agent slipped through the air with a whisper of propulsion fans, sliding into

position behind its target.

The operative spun slowly on his heel as the whine of ducted turbos filled the corridor, his eyes widening as he saw Kronos' minion poised mere inches behind him. It floated weightless in the air like a teardrop of steel, featureless but for the glass dome in its nose. The burble and purr of its motors took on a note of menace as it shadowed his every motion, dipping and weaving in front of his face. Tiny LEDs around its camera eye were blinking red.

He stopped dead in his tracks and mopped his sweaty brow with his uniform cap. The bag of covert tech in his hand suddenly seemed a whole lot heavier ...

But of course, nothing could have seen him.

The little machine had given him quite a fright, out here in the dead and empty halls where nothing usually moved but dust. But it was nothing. The little teardrop was stamped with its designation across one smooth steel flank – a mark 27 agricultural mekan. It was about as dangerous as a fridge or a dishwasher.

As he watched, another of the teardrop-shaped robots came scudding around the corner of the corridor and joined its brother in the air between him and his transport. It was not until a third of the silver agrimekan had slipped into position that the operative began to worry. After all, these were simpleminded machines - little more than automated spades and pruning shears...

The change was sudden, artificially swift, as scaled steel tentacles lashed out from the mekan, arms tipped with hissing saws.

Equally swift, equally artificial was the movement of the SomnoTech man's hand, prestidigitating a pistol from an open and swinging cavity holster.

His right arm was a fake - a hollow chamber filled with pistonrods and wires.

There was a blur of steel in the air for an instant, and the gun hit the ground in six pieces, accompanied by the tips of two of his fingers. He stepped backward, his face pallid with dread as one of the silent floating machines glided toward him.

He never knew there was a fourth agri-unit behind him until it struck, it's knife-tipped tentacles plunging into his shoulderblades as a rotary pruning saw sliced at his neck. The three other mekan fell on him the second he faltered, savage in the grip of their modified program.

Kronos realized too late that there was no blood, no scream of pain as its minions tore the seditious technician apart. Switching its perspective from camera to camera amongst the agrimekan, it saw in looming close-up three slim black cylinders clearly marked with the symbol for high-explosive.

That – and the gilded stylized 'V' of Vexx Automatronics.

Of course - who else but the late George Nathan Smith was slippery enough to program a robot to believe it was real flesh and bone?

The automaton was already a wreck before it exploded - mangled and scarred by the

tungsten-carbide tools of the agricultural robots. It seemed to sag and then suddenly balloon outward, its rubber skin bursting in a gigantic fireball, evaporating the agrimekan and most of the lower Blaire spire with a chest full of plastic explosive.

The contents of its mystery SomnoTech cartridge were blasted to atoms at the same time, all that precious code erased from the world – all but the rogue data locked in Lord Simeon Blaire's head.

Within minutes the Threedeeo stations would be filming the charred hole in the base of his spire, claiming terrorist sabotage and treachery, alleging that somebody was trying to rig the great Game.

Kronos knew that they were at least half right – but the rules had to be observed. Subcity scum were expendable, and seditious sub scum who tried to alter the outcome of its careful breeding program were to be hunted down with extreme prejudice.

But the Lords and Ladies were sacrosanct. The game would continue.

And Simeon Blaire's puppet-masters had already made one critical error. Kronos had managed to catch the tiniest scrap of data from the memory dump before it was gone forever – a time and a place where the young Lord's new skills would be put to the test.

When Blaire came to the Valley View Mall tonight the Machine's newest toy would be waiting for him.

## Ω

Simeon Blaire's Destrier looked utterly out of place amidst the empty ruins of Arcturus Park. The hermetically sealed upper domes contained their own wastelands, and here amidst the breathless rot and rust of centuries neglect he awaited his weekly fix.

Simeon had become addicted to stunn because it freed him - if ever so momentarily - from his safe, boring little world. His only other distraction was planning an ironic and imaginative suicide, after all.

His memory hazed with mist as he tried to reach back beyond his first hit, but as reality slipped away the virtual worlds of Immersives and Threedeeo had become all the more vivid and real to him. As a Lord of the Razor Clique his social circle was unnaturally tight - limited to his allies among the Council of Three Hundred, and his every interaction was conducted in clean, sterile virtual space. With fuzzy stunn in his veins he spiraled into his own mind, self-fractalizing, feeling reality fall away until it became a dim three-dimensional illusion.

It was easy to acquire a ready supply of stunn; his kind benefactor Octavio Ascher had greased the rails for *that* deal. He'd told him all about the secrets the drug could unlock for him, secrets too tantalizing to leave unexplored.

The Direktor's promises of revelation and enlightenment had all come true, and Simeon Blaire had slipped into a kind of waking dream - a dream which had already lasted three months.

Little did he know that this was the culmination of decades of scheming.

The Stunn was fused to his neurons now, twisting his thoughts in on themselves and tweaking him with sudden glooms and rages. But it had made things clear to him. It had told him things that were true and real. It had worked to lubricate his mind so that Ascher's illicit SomnoTech training could take root.

Simeon leaned forward, and the slim barrel of Hassan's syringe slid smoothly into his brain tissue, a painless incision in a little dimple of scars. Just like everyone else the patriarch of the House of Blaire had to pay.

The unfortunate fact was that he couldn't pay with cash.

The bottomless coffers of ShopWise provided him with everything he desired, so long as it was condoned and legal and safe. He was a valuable commodity. Should any movement of his funds be traced, any barter of his innumerable heirlooms be detected... well, the game would be up. He'd lose his killing edge. He and his whole geneline would be branded *unstable*.

He was reduced to a level of currency his peers would never suspect, or even conceive of.

One which Jaqub Hassan knew all too well.

The liquid in the syringe was, to certain of Hassan's clientèle, the purest ambrosia - *adrenochrome*, direct from glands pulsing in the base of Blaire's brain.

Slowly, delicately, Jaq slid the slim silver needle out of Simeon's neck, smirking appreciatively at the yield. This would be worth a few hits at least - the Lord's body must have been sequenced with larger adrenal glands to boost his fighting prowess. How he still managed to dominate the Game with so much Stunn in his blood Hassan didn't want to know.

He capped the needle, slipping it into his belt and fishing out a fresh supply of the little candystripe capsules that his customers loved so much.

Oh, he knew he was hooked just as bad. But he'd never, *ever* go under the needle for a fix. He'd suffer through the detox cubes first, he'd flush his veins out with synthe blood rather than sink that low.

He knew he was lying to himself as well.

Which is prone to make you twitchy, when you're the only one who can actually pull a tube of the heavenly nectar without scrambling a poor junkie's hindbrain.

For a pared sliver of a second, Hassan contemplated ending the transaction then and there. The other syringe was primed and ready, tiny glittering specks dancing in fluid so clear it seemed they were suspended in vacuum. But Hassan's mind flashed in black negative, back to the image of Kaito shaking hands with that cop over and over again.

That - and the hideous visage of the Cyben, dead skin under plastic... Hassan's skin, and his face, cold, mechanical - recycled. Eyes gouged out by miniature camera lenses reflecting... what?

A tiny, hovering pinpoint of glare flashed over his shoulder, reflected in the glass of the syringe. It shocked him out of his momentary daze, winking gold in the lowering sun. Jaq's eyes narrowed, recognizing the shape and sound of a flycam, identical to his own.

Omnivasive had a vested interest in this little piece of extracurricular work, and even now the All-Seeing Eye was upon him.

*Damn Ascher. Damn Eddie Tsein. And damn unto the depths of all hells...*

But it was no use.

All the blasphemy in the world wouldn't give him a choice in the matter. His hand descended in a swift, mechanical arc.

Despite the stunn, Simeon Blaire felt the second needle ram into his cranial tissue.

There was no pain; by now he'd popped and hissed three of the Stunn caps, and his nerves were melted butter. But there was something else... an itch that began as a mosquito's sting and swiftly filled his head with fire.

Hassan recoiled, horrified, as Simeon turned his head, the needle still protruding, shivering, from his skull. The Lord rose shakily to his feet, one eyeball huge and white, the other slitted and bloodshot. His lips were twisted into an idiot grin.

Those nightmare eyes stayed locked on Hassan as his hand clamped down on the syringe and crushed its slim glass barrel between his fingers. Tiny shards stood out from his skin, dripping with blood.

But those eyes! That hollow, sick emptiness!

Simeon grinned like a hanged man, drooling as he bled.

A gyre of images exploded behind his glazed pupils. They had been locked into the deepest structures of his brain, insidiously programmed under sleep-hypnosis throughout the months of his slow indoctrination.

Omnivasive's methods in this field were pure genius, the product of centuries of crafty advertising. What worked passably well shilling beer and snacks to couch jockeys was pure wizardry when applied to a mind tweaked and pounded by drugs and angst and boredom.

Now all that dormant information was being dredged to the surface, an oilslick of compulsion smothering reason, washing in viscous swells over the drug-smoothed plains of Simeon Blaire's personality. It was sequestration pure and simple. The trick was to make it seem to the victim like an epiphany, a *synchronization* ...

The metallic grit in the syringe went live, thrashing through Blaire's bloodstream like metal bacteria on crack.

This was the blackest of black technologies, a priceless relic from before the world-

shattering wars of secession. *Self replicating nanotech*. Just knowing where to find a sample of it was punishable by death, and worse. Now it integrated with the nanoservo welded to Blaire's bones since birth. Now it went live, filling his fevered skin with hot barbed wire...

The invading nanos formed clusters about Blaire's optic nerves, severing them neatly and bridging the gaps with tight twists of circuitry. They cycled through a battery of tests in an instant, hooked into an Omnivasive relay tower far above.

Hassan's face flickered as the world shifted through a range of test patterns. The outlines of his body collapsed, replaced by wireframes, then fleshed out again in black and gold, red, a haze slowly coalescing.....

Hassan saw Blaire's eyes move with a reptilian twitch and roll, his pupils dilated, tiny jewels of sweat hanging like ornaments on his eyelashes. There was a *weight* to the atmosphere, usually so dusty and dead; the golden flycam seemed to swim through it, leaving a bubbled wake in the stale air as it alighted on Blaire's shoulder. His coat fell, a ripple of silent black, to raise a pall of dust in cold slow motion.

And the sealed wasteland ceased to exist.

## Ω

Mr Ascher laughed internally; out in meatspace his severed head twitched a little, the corners of his tube-stuffed mouth cracking a tiny smile. He saw, in a corner of his sensory interface dome, exactly what his new myrmidon saw. In wireframe. In soundwave, both Standard Elysian and in the ancient language of Japanese. And in glorious Technicolor - the end result.

All the time and money and extortion he'd expended prying that nanotech out of the Vatican had paid off at last. Now Pope Joan was the proud custodian of an empty cryo-reliquary, and millions of dollars worth of profoundly illegal tech was coursing through the veins of Simeon Blaire, tooling up his conventional nanoservo and bio-onboard to unheard-of levels.

The results were likely to be spectacular.

And to think - this was only plan B. Ascher would never have let that archaic steel virus into his own body, not back then, not when he was honed and tempered like a blade. But his backup plan - this one he'd prayed he'd never need - well, young Simeon wanted to die anyway. This way at least his demise would mean something, so long as he lasted long enough to fulfil his purpose.

Cold laughter echoed in Direktor Ascher's virtual dome, a basilica of screens crazed with static and patchwork. And filtered, translated, transmitted, updated and uploaded it issued softly from just behind Simeon Blaire's shoulder, the voice of a virtual ghost.

## Ω

*Cameras mounted high above pan smooth and slick across a field of flesh. The Subcity bumps and grinds. It rocks with the pulse of organic abandon...*

This is the borderland between the Sub and the Holy See – the R.T. enclave of Pope Joan III. You wouldn't expect it to be a party kind of town, but Saint Peter's Arcade was where the wirehead crowd came to let it all hang out. The glow of the neon crucifix above the Vatican gates outshone the advertising hoardings of a thousand clubs and bars and wetware chop shops - but not by much.

Needless to say, the Compliance Division steered clear of St Pete's as though the whole place was radioactive.

Here Vatican Black Technologists prowled in the open, jewelled mitres of riotmesh perched atop their chromed-out cyborg skulls. Here, by their decree, the Subcitizens could let go.

Inflated polyprop bubbles served as the Technologists' workrooms; little temples of machinery assembled by skilled and faithful hands. Hot weapons systems were rigged. Credit boiled on flatscreen Vatican processors. Moonshine flowed. Sin and synaesthesia.

And a disembodied voice echoed up from a corroded alleyway...

"Step away from the vehicle, citizen. This is a recorded warning from the Pitbull Motor Vehicle Pre-Emptive Insurance Company – you have three seconds to step clear before trauma-level force is used against you."

Kaito's motorcycle zapped an arc of blue fire between its handlebars, and the drunk standing over it very slowly re-fastened the fly of his jeans. No prank was worth such a price, and there must be a billion other places to take a leak around here, anyway...

No doubt a watching Monk cursed, losing the chance to shift another prosthetic. *Those* ones were always popular.

The STX Saber was parked in a narrow crawlway, a zigzagging alley between the habs which let light sift down five hundred feet to the street below. Elysium's lower west side was a bad address, but it threw the meanest parties.

Faces in a hundred lurid shades swirled past in the human current under banks of halogen floods. A snake of blank, edgy bureaucrats from central processing congaed like medieval lepers; the SimStim in their veins not going down right. Above, a galaxy of neon advertised drinking establishments of ill to terminally ill repute. Rusting mekan cleared the gutters of the comatose. There really was no place like home.

Kaito stood alone amidst the wash and crush of bodies, strobes exploding, speakers pounding a pulse of arrhythmia. Resonating in the half-empty bottles behind the bar. The half-empty bottle in his hand...

Tsien wasn't responding.

Kaito's mind flew to Hassan - perhaps the Lieutenant had decided to crack down on his buddy after all.

It had been a matter of months since the Cyben had lifted him from this very bar - the Meat Locker - and pinned him to a crumbling plasticrete wall while Tsien outlined what he knew of the operation. He still recalled the sense of melting euphoria as the lieutenant sent his animated corpses away, and outlined the deal. Still recalled the bruises on his wrists from plastic-wrapped, dead hands.

Just one little slip-up, back when he was just a juve hacker hoarding secrets for secrets' sake. A tiny trace which had ended up on Eddie Tsien's desk, linking him to R.T. terrorists and, by corollary, to a future as a mind-wiped toilet cleaner...

That's the story of how he became known as Farmer Joe. Hassan would laugh his arse off at the thought of his skinny, technogeek friend holding one of the extraction needles. Even a stunn junkie would never let Kaito's shaking, carpal-tunneled hands near his cranium.

No, this was all interference. It was quota make-work for Eddie Tsien, and two pet chemheads to make crime scenes appear for him.

Kaito peeled the lid off a can of Choxxygen! to clear his thoughts, the sweet reviving gas making his head swim for a second as the counter mekan swiped a barcoder over his well-used credit strip. He exhaled sharply, snatching the sliver of plastic away before the rubber-masked automaton could scan it twice. Don Gianni's pets were nothing if not predictable, and the Kayzi needed his money for some serious drinking.

Something was *definitely* wrong with Hassan.

Out in the arcade it was always dusk, nightfall made eternal by simple expident of smashing several halogen globes out of the metal sky. The vast, loose party which raged twenty-four-seven in Saint Pete's filled the roadway and the bars on either side like a viscous liquid, ebbing and flowing as waves of revellers rolled in and passed out.

There was a strained tension to the debauchery tonight - moonshine by the bucket, all the colors of the pharmaceutical rainbow, guys lacing the drinks of girls lacing the drinks of other guys. Somebody was playing an ancient recording of heavy metal through the junkyard P.A. of the 'Locker, a song about undead lust. A girl in black plastic wrap winked across a haze of intoxicating smoke, thin metal eyelids like camera shutters clicking over a glass optic loupe in her face.

Kaito stumbled through it all blind, bottle in hand.

He reached his homeblock as the rain began to fall, a half-hearted acid drizzle painting everything pastel and grey. His hands seemed too huge and clumsy to work the security keypad, but some antediluvian part of his brain got the job done on automatic. The door clicked open, hissing something cheerful from a busted grille, and he was home sweet somewhere.

Down the corridor lights were blazing, and a tinny old stereo played canned mariachi music. Kaito's neighbor Lex mightn't have ever seen his homeland, but like most of the refugees who'd made it to Elysium he was fiercely proud of his heritage. The Kayzi knew what it was like. It was either that, or feel like a dirty traitor for surviving.

Mr Morales and his family sat in a circle around a pile of broken circuit boards in the living room, computer terminals and a rainbow spaghetti of cables. Mom, Dad and the three kids were connected via HUD goggles, wires spanning temple-to-temple as they worked silently with pliers, soldering irons and microwelders.

Forty-nine fingers working as one - Lex Morales had lost his pinky to the Tong back in his gambling days. As Kaito walked past, flashing a half-cut smile, five slim-fingered hands waved to him, while ten shadowed, sunken eyes remained on their task. The stairs loomed ahead, a mountain wreathed in noise. That was his other roomie's country - the world of DJ DisKord.

"Beunos noches, Kaito!" yelled Dis from above, the door to his converted office hanging on one rusted hinge. Fractured breakbeats and earthquake bass foamed out of the hanging cube of plastic, clinging to its mezzanine like a swallow's nest.

"Thoughtchawa workin' tonight?" said Kaito, peering over DisKord's shoulder and into the cluttered sound-studio where his roomie hibernated. There was a noise from under a pile of blankets, and a vague shifting of limbs.

"I was ...the Pit of Nails up in Valley View. But apparently every cop in town just showed up there, hence DJ Dis is a no-show."

Kaito raised an eyebrow, his mind staggering to catch up. DisKord's home-programmed automixer crunched gears, emitting a rumbling subsonic which split his head like an axe. It sliced through the alcoholic fug as well, prickling his attention.

"EVERY cop?" queried Kaito, hoisting the other eyebrow.

"That's the word from Omnivasive Network, compadre." replied DisKord, stabbing the air with his stereo remote. The volume decreased by an infinitesimal notch. "Full rollout, y'dig? Anyway, I'll probably be out later - go and spin a few at the 'Locker."

"S'rockin'." muttered Kaito, digesting cerebrally. "Catch ya there, maybe."

Dis grinned like a maniac, slammed his door, and immediately turned up the music to compensate. There was a distinctly feminine scream of indignation, then laughter, then silence.

Kaito stood in the hallway for a moment, wobbling gently.

*Every cop in town. The Valley View.* There was something he should remember about that ramshackle old dirt-mall...

Kaito's door was ripped stright from a Terminus Navy destroyer, an immense oval hatch welded sloppily into the metal wall. He turned the wheel once, twice, and let the slab of steel swing inward with a groan, kicking off his shoes and letting his bottle fall

to the meshwork floor. With the electric Pitbull standing over it his bike would be safe enough for an hour or two, and he had some things to take care of.

On the inside of the foot-thick slab of metal was a sheet of orange patches scrawled with a leering demon face. The Kayzi ripped one of the stickies off and slapped it against his forehead, feeling the detox sink its teeth into his tender brain.

Then, clear in his intent, Kaito stepped into the cool green glow of his private temple.

## Ω

Simeon Blaire stood at the centre of a private universe.

His mind was blank, drifting in a cage of light as his modified eyes stripped away the world and replaced it with illusions - a program so real it made reality itself look like an eight-bit cutout.

Mr Ascher's threedeeographic skills were pure magic. His media generators were sunken mountains of silicon and steel, immense A.I. piles cooled under a lake of liquid nitrogen. Mr Ascher had applied his considerable spare time to learning how fly one of the generators solo, and this program was for a very special audience of one.

The machine which spun an artificial reality for Simeon Blaire was linked to his retrofitted optic nerves by a cellular connection, rendering the world in shades of green and brown and gold - a complex illusion of feudal Japan.

Pipes and girders became trees, concrete became verdant grass, diamondmesh armor became *hakama* trousers and studded leather...

And a Lord of the Razor Clique became a nameless assassin, his Master's right hand.

Sunlight fell in slim blades between stands of bamboo, striping the face of Blaire as he reached smoothly behind his back, his other hand hovering still in the fragrant air.

There was something wrong with his eyes. Something struggling and twitching in their depths...

Next to him Octavio Ascher smiled, an incorporeal shade of dust and smoke. He was clad head to toe in ancient ragged armor, leather and steel and embroidered silk, the faceplate of his bell-shaped helmet a grim death-mask.

From within the ancient samurai helm issued a voice of soft decay, like the breath of tombs.

"This is the first of your tests, disciple." hissed the long-dead warrior, speaking in the ancient dialect of sixteenth-century Edo. "There is no stealth when witnessed; and no victory in flawed strategy."

The syllables fell from his lips like stones. And as Hassan watched, transfixed by the bizarre stance and hollow, blazing eyes of his client, Blaire drew from behind his

back a very real, very long slim sword.

There was no question that he knew how to use it.

Jaquard watched him spin sideways, the blade licking out, quicksilver. A metal support strut shivered and collapsed, as inside Mr Ascher's world the fragrance of bamboo sap saturated the air. Blaire flicked the blade with one finger, setting up a humming resonance and misting drops of dew along its razor edge. Then he smiled, shifting his stance, drawing the katana up over his head. The muscles of his arms twitched as he held himself back.

His eyes were filled with murder.

"Well" said Hassan, catching his reflection in the rippled steel of the blade. "this has never happened before."

In the second it took him to form the words, Blaire was upon him.

The sword blurred, cutting the air with a vicious hiss as the young Lord leaped forward; a killing strike. His lips were set in a thin, determined line, mirroring the edge of his blade.

Steel hissed through the air as the sword cut down beside him, his desperate dive-roll putting him momentarily out of danger. Blaire turned his head, a swift, predatory movement as he swung the blade sideways. Hassan was already on his feet, but he was forced to lean back almost to the ground again as it flickered, a silver shadow, to sever a single streaming lock of his hair. With a snap of his wrist Blaire dissected the thin strands as they drifted to earth.

Hassan's hand scrabbled, driven by primeval instinct, fingers curling around the first piece of debris they encountered. Sheer desperation brought the steel bar up from the dust in a radial blur, striking the flat of the sword as it came down on him, aiming for his neck..

Metal rang on metal. Sparks flared and died as Blaire issued a grunt of surprise and frustration. Through slitted eyes he saw the disheveled *ronin* at his feet, sinews straining as he brought his own crude scimitar up to check the finely- honed katana in mid-swing. It was rapine; defilement for such base steel to touch his ancestral blade. His master, vigilant in silence, was surely mortified.

Rage and shame churned in Blaire's stomach, evoked by shadow memories and quickened by an escalating electric pulse.

He effortlessly turned Jaquard's weapon aside, stepping back into a new stance.

Hassan staggered to his feet, bringing the rebar up in crude imitation of his adversary. Tension crackled in the stale dry air, and dust fell between them like ashes, a grey pall settling over the warrior Lord and his adversary.

"Come on then, Aristo. Come and try it. I've always wondered what your little Game was worth..."

It was madness, or course. If Jaquard actually killed a Lord of the Council he'd be

sealing his own death warrant. But he wasn't the kind of guy who backed down, and the steel rebar was reassuringly heavy in his hands.

Simeon struck left, then right - testing his defenses, dancing out of reach of his foe's counterstrikes. Each attack came faster, stronger, swinging backhands and reverses pushing Hassan to the limits of his reflexes. Despite the look of utter blank insanity in his eyes the Lord was no fool; he didn't want to make this a contest of brute power.

He came on in a controlled fury, his sword cutting deep gashes in the tempered steel rebar as he reeled through a complex *kata*, metal chiming on metal faster and faster. Blue sparks flew like rain.

Were it not for his immense bulk and his nanoservo, Hassan's hands would have been shattered like so much kindling by the relentlessness of Blaire's assault. As it was he could barely parry those quicksilver blows fast enough...

It was starting to make him mad.

Jaq's eyes rolled back in his head as his teeth clenched hard. From the depths of his hindbrain he summoned up reserves of monkey viciousness. When the next blow of Blaire's katana fell he pushed in with all his prodigious weight, coming up under the Lord's guard and dropping him to his knees with a savage headbutt.

He felt cartilage burst and blood splatter, dripping in his eyes.

While his left hand strained to keep Simeon's sword locked tight he slashed with his right - with the twin blades in his chrome fingers.

Blaire's cheek ripped open, two perfect razorcuts tracing the path of his foe's knife-bladed fingertips. The side of his head burned with pain as Hassan ripped off his ear, right down to the gleaming wet bone of his skull.

The warrior Lord screamed, more in rage than in agony, and swiped out blind, blood flying in a splattering arc. His sword slithered across the rusted steel of Jaq's rebar, slicing in at his chest. Now it was Hassan's turn to leap back, the blade cutting a neat triangle from his flying coat.

"There..." he panted "I got you good, Blaire. Just as...just as quick as you fancy bastards with your combat implants. Now, are you gonna put down that big butcher-knife, or do I have to do it again?"

His razortipped digits hovered like a scorpion sting, beaded with noble blood.

But Blaire was silent, his face still locked in an idiot grin as he advanced, the katana twitching in his hands.

"Oh, come on!" growled Jaq to whoever might be listening. "Hasn't this guy got friends of his own to play with?"

He hefted his section of rebar, getting it snug and tight in his hand, and lined it up for a killer swing upside the Aristo's temple.

But when he lashed out he found himself blocked with mechanical ease, the katana parrying and skirling across the steel bar as if it were magnetized. Once, twice, three

times the heavy rebar came down and was jerked aside, throwing Hassan off balance. Blood sang in Simeon's veins as he sprung forward snarling, his sword blurring silver as it hissed toward his enemy's neck.

The rebar stopped him in mid-air, levering him up and over into a desperate somersault as Jaq gripped it by both ends. Blaire pushed off the top of Hassan's head with one hand, landing catlike behind him – too late. The 'dreno farmer was spinning even as his noble foe went airborne, the rusted steel blurring in his hands as he struck. It was a blow with all his two hundred pounds of bulk behind it, a slugging impact right across Simeon's perfect face. Augmented bone shattered, teeth splintered, blood sprayed from his nose and mouth. The thick metal rod bent in half with the force of it, and Blaire went flying, a broken doll splayed across the dusty plasticrete of Arcturus Park.

"Holy shit! What have I done?" whispered Jaq, dropping the rebar from his numb hand. The implications came down on him hard - he'd killed a Council Lord. He'd gone from drug-running to high treason in one afternoon...

Then he saw that twisted figure twitch. He saw it shake its head, muzzy and dazed but inarguably *alive*...

Jaq wasn't sure which was worse.

Silver fluids welled and solidified on Blaire's face as he staggered to his feet, still grinning as his jaw wired itself back together. His wounds stitched themselves shut.

And he brought up his sword again, back into that same graceful stance.

Hassan's eyes widened from murderous slits to vast seas of terror. There was just no *stopping* this guy. Even his good old pair of sawnoffs would probably just slow him down for a second or two.

He saw a premonition of painful death reflected in Simeon's blade as it flew, with nothing left to stop it.

And as Mr Ascher laughed, wind through sepulchers and rust, his disciple brought down the katana in a sweeping overhand; a strike which would end in a neat upswing, shattering Jaq's brain-pan without lodging the steel in his spine. Calculations seethed behind his dead eyes as he imagined the perfect fatal incision, bisecting Jaq from cranium to clavicle.

All that concentration was his undoing.

Jaq's magnetic grapple struck him in the solar plexus, slamming home with all the force it took to fire a steel cable straight up half a mile. It hit him like a sledgehammer, thousands of tiny bonding points burning and twisting for purchase on his diamondmesh suit. It *hissed*.

Blaire howled with outrage as it picked him up off his feet, the tip of his katana swiping downwards bare millimeters from his enemy's face. The wall rushed up behind him and slammed into his back with rib-cracking force, driving the air from his lungs.

Hassan opened his eyes just in time to see Blaire fall, face first to the dusty ground.

A smear of blood rolled out behind him, down the corroded steel of the wall and into the dust.

Jaq's hands were unbuckling the belt which held the grapple - launcher even as he slipped under the shadow of the Destrier and down, through the heavy access hatch, and into the air above the Subcity. He hung over the edge by the ends of his fingers – four scarred and pink, four shiny silver.

Suddenly a half-mile drop looked like a walk in the park. From behind him he heard a fit of cursing in some alien language, the rasp of a sword being gathered up from the dust....

He peered up over the edge for a second, looking out below the six-barreled exhausts of Lord Blaire's town-car.

And as their eyes met across the jagged lip of the heat-cut steel Jaq knew that falling was the least of his problems. Blaire's face was contorted into a mask of anger and disgust; he stalked forward like a broken mekan, swiping the katana back and forth as if to scent out his prey. Jaq was pretty sure he'd cut right through the Destrier to get to him - that and half the city, if that's what it took. Those cold, burning eyes stayed locked on him like heat-seeking cannons, spitting fury and contempt. Hassan took a deep breath, smiled, reckless and foolish and scared as hell, and let go.

The last thing Simeon Blaire saw of him as he dropped out of sight was his middle finger.

## Ω

*The whole world was taken up by Technician Nyl's thumb, by the point where it jammed down the button on his featureless black remote control.*

*Zhe waited for the world to end, or the wall to open up and the Praetor Primus to come through and tear the renegade's head off. But there was nothing. Just hot, crawling silence.*

*"I was sworn to never allow a mass destruction of life here, because of the strange and disturbing vortices which such an event can set up in this kind of universe. But it was just too interesting not to tinker with. We are TECHNICIANS after all, dear brother, not worker ants."*

*While he talked the renegade was rummaging through Zhe's bag of tools, looking for one device in particular. He pulled it out with a flourish, brandishing it in front of his captive's face.*

*"Oh, just the ticket! A neural clamp will do nicely, I think...."*

*Zhe couldn't move - he was interwoven with the Slavesystem on a molecular level. But now he could feel its dimmed and blunted memories too. The coming of a patterned energy so powerful that even the ironclad code of the Motherbrain was unable to hold*

*Everdark together. The incendiary mindrape of the Explorator Slavesystem with cruel forces and crushing magnetic fields. Conquest.*

*Nyl jammed the prongs of the clamp down on Zhe's forehead, cutting a neat circle out of the Slavesystem and the alien flesh beneath. The super-heavy reinforced bone of Zhe's skull glistened wetly under the lights. He wasn't going to give the rogue the satisfaction of showing any pain.*

*"My predecessor had really dropped the ball with the whole nuclear apocalypse act, and it was my job to do better - at least until the machine's work began down there. Lancaster's work... the very first one. After that they were being grown, fed experiences, all for the slaughter."*

*As he spoke a vast organic humming noise was rising in walls and floors and machinery of the station.*

*The space elevator down to earth lit up with a flare of plasma, spitting arcs of lightning miles long.*

*Clouds at atmosphere level blasted away in slow-motion whorls. Something was coming up the pipe. Something bad.*

*Amid the growing roar, Nyl was laughing.*

*He jammed the main screw of the neural clamp home, opening a digital port directly into Zhe's living brain. Sparks sizzled across the gold-tipped wires at its crown.*

*Zhe's mind was pressed further and further aside as the connection to Kronos widened ...until he could sense a maelstrom of fractured intelligences at the edges of his perception. Immense power, walled up inside magnetically shielded holding tanks, the pain of ten thousand deaths in each humming capacitor.*

*And he suddenly knew all about the mechanisms which would unleash it.*

*Zhe heard Nyl's grunt of frustration and surprise.*

*He felt a shift in the focus, a shiver down the kilometers of elevator cable.*

*And Nyl began to scream.*

*The neural clamp was only an electronic interface - or so it was intended. But now a very real, very black and swirling vortex had sprung open in Technician Zhe's head, sucking in the atmosphere like a gap into deep space.*

*Nyl tried to pry the evil-looking tool away, but his hands were sucked into the hole. His fingers stretched and dripped, lumps snapping off to fall into the hungry abyss below. His face distorted as he struggled to pull away, and then his whole head was in the pipe, jammed crown-first through the front of Zhe's skull.*

*Bone creaked and splintered.*

*The vortex was ravenous.*

*Zhe felt like he was being turned inside-out. There was something coiled up in there, in the rotten core of Elysium. Now it was in him too, prying him open like a magician's pentacle, reaching out hungrily for Nyl as if... as if it had waited for years to*

*devour him.*

*With a slobbering, popping sound the renegade Technician disappeared, struggling all the way, and Zhe lost consciousness. He was going to have the mother of all headaches when he awoke...*

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**Shopping Mall:**

A temple to the Pre-Apocalyptic God of Economics, the *Shopping Mall* was a form of ritualized, sanitized bazaar or marketplace, replicated across the world from glorious multi-storey edifices to so-called ‘Dirt Malls’ and ‘Mini Malls’ of lesser provenance and stature. Artificial plants, synthesized ‘muzak’ and false bonhomie were the trappings of these mighty temples of yore, where thousands of pilgrims came to make cash offerings daily.

Professor Hiram Quigley Fosse ‘Malls of the Ancients – The Old Gods of Finance and Expenditure Revealed.’ Elysian University Press (since discredited)

From the casa del Kaito in Saint Peter's it was only a short freefall down the last glens and fells of ancient metal, through a knocked-together defense perimeter and into the Reclaimed Territories, fiercely proud of the Elysians' complete indifference to their petty juntas, credos and turf-wars.

But just on the edge of the R.T, where the Vatican's Cathedral of Saint Aethalstan loomed up like a great accusing finger, a kind of de-facto demilitarized zone sat astride the border, a place where the Subcity and the Pit could trade with each other, and with the Reclamationists who held the gates to the outside world.

Like some kind of cargo cult the Subcits had built this place out of waste steel and concrete blocks and salvage – lashed it up in the name of some kind of front company in the image of centuries-old sales brochures.

It was a *shopping mall*, a kind of temple from before the apocalypse, and this one was meant to have it all.

It had gone to seed over the years, as the R.T. crept up closer every week and its parent company collapsed. Still, even as the sun set over Elysium it was packed.

The main concourse sweltered under its row of purple glass domes, misty with the exhalation of ten thousand bustling shoppers.

As this was designated Elysian territory a kind of haphazard order reigned amongst the mallrats of the Valley View. It was a kind of friendly no-mans-land, where buskers and hawkers and street peddlers mingled with bimburb squarejohns and stimed, twisted radlanders alike.

A confusion of castes and phyles traded breath and currency, while a babel of dialects throttled the supermarket groove and elevator murmur of a thousand hidden speakers.

The Valley View smelled of rust, and of stale machinery left to die, but it was alive with the tribes of the Sub, who lit woodfires under the old Elysian Assembler terminals to cook their meals and tore apart the old store-fronts to build their homes.

Shops huddled together for economic warmth between eyeless retail ghettos, now inhabited by the vanguard of the Reclamation - strident politicians with rice-paper pamphlets, glazed eyes and replica Kalashnikovs.

You could tell which strata of society people came from just by checking their reaction to the Territory soldiers.

The ultra-poor and destitute hung around for free rice and political sermons. Subcits with crappy jobs threw clenched-fist salutes of solidarity. And the eyes of Burbsters slid right over them like oiled teflon, denying that there'd ever be a Reclamation Day Two.

Between the local office of the Sons of Alamut Collective and Mr Murai's tiny, cramped apothecaries, a doorway and a plateglass window stared blankly at the stream

of passersby.

The sound of electronica and violent coughing echoed out of the smoky interior of the Ashishim; soft, whispering strains of harp and strings came from Mr Murai's where rank upon rank of jars sat, filled with ancient remedies poached from hidden Assemblers far upstairs.

One of the young runners who worked for Mr Murai bobbed his head, his feet swinging from a mortuary gurney as the jars rattled to the subsonics of techno bass, deep and regular like a heartbeat.

The classical quartet played arrhythmia overhead, and locked in the middle, CeeAn 187 clamped down a pair of headphones and put her boots up on the counter.

A chain of hardlight microsats orbited her head like a glittering halo, sparking and flashing messages to each other - the tiny aerial mekan functioned as a camera array as well, jacked into CeeAn's smooth-scrolling shades.

The only sound in here was that of miss 187's electric nailfile, gnawing a sliver of molecules from the edge of her genetic throwback human claws, oil-drop black and hard as chitin.

It was all a front, coz she was still short one body, still pushing light. They packed her off down here just as soon as she jumped off the masslifter.

Her holoself was as purple-skinned, azure-haired and slim as always. But her feet didn't touch the desk - they floated above a slew of comic books and newspaper clippings by about three inches.

For Cee this was a shit-list posting, a little sideshow dreamed up by the Electromagi to keep her out of the way. They might be the oracles of a better tomorrow and wizards of technology to boot, but deep down they were all sweaty pre-pubescent geekboys, guys who'd never let a girl hang out in their clubhouse.

CeeAn knew they were usually right, and that most of these mystery postings ended up as violent gunfights or suicidal getaways. But as the geeks' go-to girl when it came to such brutal necessities she felt entitled to her opinion.

It was just after seven-twenty PM when a shockwave ripped through the Valley View, showering the pedestrian crowd with shards of purple glass.

The blast severed power lines, shattered Murai's collection of esoterica and aphrodisiacs, knocked over a bubbling cauldron of Thai green curry just across the mall, and set off a sputtering spray of flame retardant from the rusted sprinklers in the ceiling.

The geekboys appeared to have called it right again.

Anguished screams rose in a crescendo which threatened to shatter every remaining piece of unbroken glass in the place, as feathery drifts of foam came down like snow.

"Fucking gack motherfuckers broke me bong! I'll kill 'em! I swear, I'll kill 'em all!" shouted the Ashishim politico-in-charge next door, staring at his shredded left hand forlornly.

CeeAn had no time for the A.K.- toting jocks she was supposed to be babysitting - she was much more intent on discovering *why* the Valley View was under attack.

There was a more than outside chance that it was all her fault.

The whole scene stank of a police raid, but there wasn't a cop in sight, just old mister Murai from next door, slumped in his doorway with a slim bundle of leather and wood in his hands.

She swore she saw a piece of glass the size of a hubcap is sticking out of his head like the crest of some freaky dinosaur - but he was still alive, scrabbling at the threads which bound up his package.

"Run!" he yelled out across the glass-strewn mall. "It's about the book! Save yourselves!"

CeeAn flicked a switch up on her crescent unit and suddenly appeared a tiny but significant shade more *solid*. A second wave of howling noise stripped the dust from every surface as it tore through the mall, popping eardrums like cheap prophylactics.

Inside her shades camera feeds strobed by in a flickering blur, jacked in direct to a battery of Ashishim electronic war-engines two miles below.

And she saw them massing outside the sticken mall, Bluejackets and deadflesh Cyben, armed to the teeth and beyond.

*They knew about Gianni Vexx. Or - figure it - his connections went too deep. Kronos' garbagemen have finally got proof positive that Dervashi stalk the city at will...*

From all around her came the sound of running feet, of wailing and crying and human panic.

They were nothing but coallateral damage, caught by a Cyben weapon – a sonic disruptor set down low. At the top end of its range a bomb like that could wreck your internal organs down to jelly, but this one is just a wake-up call. The cops may have been playing merciful, but when it came to Kronos' lackeys 'mercy' was a relative term.

*Cockless mekborn freaks! If they wanted her, they should have come and got her! Instead they'd shredded women and children, old Tadashi Murai, Kohali Ras across the mall at the curry shack... innocents.*

That made the temporarily bodiless CeeAn 187 quite irate.

In a blatant oversight of Subcity health and safety laws she wrapped both hands around the gyro-balanced grips of twin imitation Desert Eagle hand-cannons, chambered a shell in each one and leaned back on her chair, waiting. The Cyben were coming, and that meant open season.

WARNING! screamed the Protocol Division's adhesive labels, running like welts down the smooth silver barrels...KEEP OUT OF REACH OF PERSONS PRONE TO SPONTANEOUS ACTIONS.

Somebody down in supplies mustn't have realized who they were being issued to.

## Ω

The corridor was smooth, grey steel, vented at regular intervals with wire-mesh which his fingers coiled around like vines, his feet, in old-style twin toed ninja footwear following in fluid motion.

The miniature cams attached to his headset were live, capturing each detail of his run. A world of square black tubes, like the insides of a bad threeedee computer game.

The crawler came to an intersection, its walls jagged with silver paper stickies and metal-cut tags. He stopped, taking in the signs of who'd passed by, who's in the pipes today.

That uniform black paint was nanoactive; it rolled over the handles and melted the adhesive stickies in a few hours. B-Zerk's handle was scrawled in the smooth black finish with a philips-head screwdriver at least two hundred years old, its cracked plastic grip bound with gaffer tape. Mummified.

B-Zerk flow smooth, slap handles down like he's rolling out paper. Phyte crawlers used the stickies, but 'Zerk was *well* veteran. Gotta angle the head of the driver just right, peel off a long, thin sliver of black, lay bare the silver underbelly.

Professional.

Zerk ran pipes for Mr Murai; he was a crawler. Lotta phytes in the system ran for their own bad selves, but B-Zerk was hooked up proper.

The herbal medicine shit his boss wanted ported out in next to zero, and then Mister M slung him some change for head candy - or better, a lesson in how to use the three big knives he kept out back.

B-Zerk had tried to make himself one of the big knives in the 'Sembler upstairs - his 'Sembler, that none of the other crawlers know about. But it told him that the Form was Not Present in the Porting Archive. Or that Visionary Pressure was Insufficient.

Zerk had pulled the threeedeeophones off his face with a mother of a headache. He'd rubbed the biro off his hand, the word he'd memorized so painstakingly.

Wa-ki-za-shi.

And in the way that it did, the Assembler sucked even the image out of his head, so B-Zerk spent the rest of the afternoon pissed off and edgy, without knowing why.

Not like he was mellow and laxed right now – but 'least this time he had a good fuckin' reason. He was getting away from the Valley View with a quickness. Fast as he could shove his carcass through the pipes and over the gaping holes in the floor, dodging shafts which spouted foetid hot air, abysmal drops into the process core.

No matter that he'd just seen an army of cops marching like roaches in a sub-block kitchen. Even in a blind panic a 'crawler had to watch his step.

B was bad-ass professional, coz he'd seen homeboys fry, 'vaped before they hit the bottom. Only way you knew was this - you smelled the meat, wafting up like a call to

dinner out of the dark.

B-Zerk remembered the first time, on his hands and knees in the warm steel pipes, heaving with sickness as he smelled that smoky, fatty aroma wafting up from below. Just after Zone Doubt slipped, his headbeams gyroing on the roofplates, a scream amplified through the endless plumbing.

The sickness was like purification, because like cash and lust and the need for more head candy, the smell was *good*. It smelled like real food, and it made you drool. And hate yourself for doing it.

Right now, he was about roof-level with the Valley View, in tunnels he knew like the veins crisscrossing the back of his hand.

Resting, his heart hammering in his chest.

And, borrowed, the wakizashi flashed in his headbeams, it's handle wrapped in cloth so tight and old and rough that it felt like cracked plastic, like Zerk's ancient crosshead driver. Mummified.

The knife was a beautiful simple device, a kind of molecular-bond unsplicer from the days before railguns and viralcasters, when you had to get right up close and put steel in a motherfucker.

Why'd he take it? Why this, and not a railpistol or a nervejam? B didn't know - it was just the way the handle fit into his palm, the way his reflection in the blade looked back at him just right...

His breath came back to him after a few racking, heaving gulps of air, clearing his head and revitalizing his strained muscles.

But just as he was about to set out onward and upward he heard it - a noise so low and insistant it set his teeth on edge.

B-Zerk turned his head without moving his body, keeping his balance in a knotted intersection of pipes. He put an ear to the wall, slow and careful so as not to attract any of the active paint. That stuff burned, and it left a permanent black tattoo smear across unprotected skin.

The hum came in loud and clear, a shiver in the intestines reminding B-Zerk of the illness; of the smell. Could be discharge from the core coming up. He'd have to stay well clear of the downvents in that case; which was bad, coz Zerk wanted to make this run somewhat hi-octane.

The bolts were rattling now, and Zerk could hear the hum in the air rising. He stripped the headbeams off and into a pocket, sheathed the wa-ki-za-shi, and folded himself up into a crawlspace. The metal pressed in on him from every angle, vibrating in what would be an almost soothing manner, if it wasn't for the thought of superheated plasma blasting the flesh from his bones.

Instead, as the hum built to a tooth-hurting blurring crescendo he felt the touch of a human hand on his shoulder.

The sound cut out suddenly, rattling and ricocheting away down the pipes, down the sonic spectrum until it formed a *basso profundo* undertone to his assailant's laughter.

B risked opening one eye, and found himself looking at a callused brown finger, banded with rings of stainless steel and runic tattoos. It prodded him in the ribs, a hole in his side through which punctured homeboy dignity escaped.

"Hey - you O.K. in there? You just come up outta the Valley View, right?"

The hand belonged to a dreadlocked Euro with innumerable rings, piercings, and anim-ink tattoos sparking in neon across his skin. Mainly tribal; B-Zerk vizzed their smooth lines, nodded approval.

And, as nonchalant as one can be whilst wedged in a crawlspace striving to minimize one's blast profile, B-Zerk fixed this dude with a stare normally reserved for lowly phytes and asked;

"Whatcha fuckin' malfunction, man? You ain't never heard of *etiquette*?"

The Euro laughed even louder this time, pulled Zerk out of his hidey-hole with one hand, and shook his mane of fat electrical-taped dreads out of his face. There was a little plug socket at the end of each one.

"Just making a delivery to someone, a'right." he drawled, in what Zerk pinned down as an Ashishim lingo. "But I'm sure you wasn't going my way. Too many bluejackets back there, right? Too many powertripping freaks with guns..."

B unfolded himself painfully from the crawlspace, leaning up against the metal wall of the tunnel.

"So why you want to go there?" he asked, working the kinks out of his muscles. "Hungry for prison food?"

The Ashishi grinned, pulling back his trenchcoat to reveal the handles of an immense pair of panga knives.

"Oh, I got a little something for those Cyben." he said, the end of each word dying softly in the air. "And I got some family down there who might need a hand when they roll through. You know - R.T. stuff."

His smile was like an enamel blast-wall, big and solid white. More real than the eyes which flickered behind his curtain of multihue dreadlocks. "We're not so bad, once you get to know us. Not half so bad as the bluejackets make us out - but you don't listen to them jerkoff cops anyhow, right?"

Like most kids in the Subcity B-Zerk's been raised on stories of R.T. agents, who were just about the baddest sons of bitches imaginable.

"Oh....no way, man. I'm *well* professional. Won't tell them nothing, even if they...."

The agent held a finger to his lips for a second, listening intently to the hiss and sigh of wind in the pipes.

"No, they not gonna catch you today. All this is just a sideshow for something big. Still, you best be gone from here. Never know if they'll use chem weapons, not if it's

Cyben down there." Almost as an afterthought he pulled something thin, white, and tubular from his nest of hair and handed it to the tunnel-crawler. He folded one of Zerk's hands up around the little paper tube and gave it a conspiratorial squeeze, accompanied by a raised eyebrow heavy with ripe steel.

"You stay safe, kid. And if you ever get tired of the tunnels, come see us in the R.T."

When B-Zerk heard the hum for a second time, he knew exactly where it came from - the belt around this guy's faded jeans was studded with a row of small round discs. They began to glow, and vibrate, and work themselves up to a fevered pitch as the mystery Son of Alamut checked a little wrist-screen map, its green glow lighting up his dreads like snakes.

He tucked and rolled his body up and over, so that he was lying in the air, face to face with Zerk, all ten-mile smile and flying hair.

He reached out with one hand, popping a scarred old bic lighter, and pressed it into B-Zerk's palm.

Then the hummers pulsed, and a wave of warm air hissed away up and down the pipes. There was a small thunderclap inside the plumbing, and a whiff of ozone, and B-Zerk was alone once again, alone with the empty, slightly cold feeling that he'd just been made obsolete.

A pistoning blowback of air rippled his straight black hair, like the bow-wave of a maglev train plying the tunnels of old Tokyo in one of Mr Murai's ancient twodeeo movies.

B looked down at the little paper tube in his hand, picking it as another image from Tadashi's grainy and flickering 2ds - a cigarette.

Shaking, B-Zerk sat himself down there in the dark, on warm steel, and torched one twisted end with his new plastic lighter.

Just a little something to calm his nerves, and then he'd better keep moving...

## Ω

Tokugawa never owned a palace of this magnitude, a twisted dream from the mind of the Direktor, all folded paper and symmetry and light. It was designed to funnel the body into one spot, a place of power where the urge to kneel in subservience pressed in like a hydraulic car-crusher. And to funnel the mind - very specifically the mind of Simeon Blaire. Images just beyond sight flickered in the rice-paper walls and the knotted bare timber of the floor, pulsing and swirling in sympathy with his puppet emotions.

Rage, thought Tokugawa/Ascher. Shame.

Images exploded outward, a coruscation of flame and blood and the smell of metal

in the rain. The monomolecular blade was swift, sure and surgical - but the pain was necessary. It would make sure his disciple remembered this lesson.

"Your foolishness is atoned for, my disciple." breathed Tokugawa from his throne, flanked by robed holograms in black and gold. "This...ronin...who is named Jaqub Yaqub Hassan will be dealt with by other of my soldiers."

Blaire bowed his head to the floor; strangling a cry of self-disgust. Mr Ascher's finger was on the toggle switch, throwing open the chemical floodgates of despair in his brain. But this was a great insult to his dignity - his enemy was to be denied him.

Blood pooled and spilled from his severed finger, now trickling in the cracks of the floor, a biomatrix in itself as it traced hexagons down toward his master's feet.

"I submit to your authority, Master." he said, raw self-control strangling his voice.

"And in the fullness of time I shall elevate you among the greatest of my Samurai, my disciple." hissed Tokugawa, his helmet flaking rust as he spoke. For a second the holograms flickered, became a pair of attendant skeletons, long dry bones showing through their moth-eaten silks.

"Until such time, I have further duties for you. Duties you must execute with greater skill." With a motion of his hand, Tokugawa bid his disciple to rise. The rice-paper walls rippled as if with an unseen wind, awash with ancient woodcuts.

"Already you are stronger. Already you feel the power which is my gift to you." Mr Ascher let slip the endorphins, the adrenaline. Blaire flexed his hand, where the skin was already sealing, binding the stump of his missing finger. He *was* stronger. He was clear of purpose. His master had shown him the way.

With a shuddering, tearing sound the palace ceased to exist, and Simeon was left outside, chill under the moon's silver glow, surrounded by the scent of innumerable falling cherry blossoms.

As he turned he could see the shadow of his master on the horizon, illuminated against the white steel moon. There to his left a black-robed lich bore up his banner, while to his right another carried an urn of marble in which, Simeon knew, rested the bones of his severed finger.

Mr Ascher's floating hands were busy while their master dreamed, each slaved to a computer terminal as they played the intricate instrument of Simeon Blaire's mind. With a cut and paste one slim sliver prosthetic transposed images of Blaire's father, his brother; people who he hadn't seen for many lonely years. Merged them with the metal clad death-head of Ascher's shogun persona.

They cracked open the endorphin flow as the memories were patched back in. Another hand monitored the artificially stimulated muscle growth which ran wild beneath Simeon's skin, the atrophy of pain receptors and transmitters, the bone marrow replacements which strengthened his limbs to the temper of steel bars.

Simeon opened his eyes to a world of harsh neon lights and concrete - the dusty ruin

of Arcturus Park.

He slowly unfolded, knees and palms slick with his own blood. The *tanto* dagger slammed back into its sheath.

Simeon flexed his fingers, one now a stump capped with metal. The nanobots had swarmed from his pores at the scent of blood, sealing and disinfecting the wound. Billions more were slowly overhauling his body, remaking him as a perfect and deadly machine. Such was the gift of cryo-reliquary 992-b, a man-made virus the Valle Crucis thought they still kept hoarded away.

At the very edge of his vision Simeon could see the specter of Tokugawa, a ragged black thing whispering in his ear.

“Now I have new task for you. There is a master named Tadashi Murai who defies me. *This* is where to find him. You know what to do when you get there – and what to cut from his corpse as proof of your success...”

From here it wasn't far to the Valley View Plaza. At least, not if you didn't mind how you traveled...

It had all taken mere fractions of a second inside Simeon's mind, and Hassan was still tripped out and laughing hopelessly in free-fall as Simeon's Destrier roared to life, activated by remote control.

Floating like a butterfly in vacuum, end over end through pools of light, Mr Ascher's hand flicked the switch.

## Ω

Tsien wasn't thinking straight. In fact, he was prisoner in his own head, locked up behind glazed eyes as his hideous new body lurched through the rubble of Precinct 2997, out into the street.

Darkness blurred in and out of focus, and he knew that he was close to death. Pressed up against the membrane of death, indeed, but anchored down into the living world by a thousand tiny silver hooks, the nanotech howling like a turbine in his brain.

He felt his head turn, saw the jumbled corrosion of the cityscape slide across his camera eyes, and knew exactly what he was going to do.

There was no need for coercion. His will was no longer his own.

One giant leap took him up to the broken-backed roof of the Precinct house, the next to the balcony above. One more and he was up over the street outside the Valley View mall, coming down hard on a concrete slab which shattered under his bulk.

There were cops here – milling aimlessly, waiting for his command. The certainty of it sparked through his head as Kronos turned his dials.

Cyben, too – his new brothers in servitude. The hot steel in his head crushed his despair at the sight of them, replacing it with stern resolve. The little sliver of Tsien

trapped inside him raged, impotent...

And fear rippled out from him in great intangible waves as he muscled through the crowd, unable to stop himself.

They recoiled, terrified, scattering from this monster in their midst...

The steaming barrel of the Eversio held high in the air may have been part of it; perhaps the foetor of drying blood added an element of its own. Those who survived the next hour at Valley View Plaza would later swear it was nothing less than his eyes, however. Like oily chromed bearings reflecting the innards of innumerable clocks.

Linked to innumerable ticking bombs.

The commanders of his two backup squads approached at a run under a ceiling of searchlight beams and laser targeters, falling in next to their nominal leader with clipboards and schematics of the mall clutched in their hands.

"Listen pal, what's the big idea?" blustered one of them, a morbidly obese sub-captain too puffed up with self-importance to notice that he was yelling at a cyborg monster.

"We've been held up here for half an hour while you dick around getting fancy weapons and exo-armor. This is supposed to be a tactical strike, you *idiot*, not a bloody chimp's tea party!"

The last few words were punctuated by his riot-gloved finger stabbing into Tsien's chest.

That would simply not do at all.

The Super-Cyben calmly grasped him by the wrist and twisted his hand off, with as little effort as a poet plucking a flower. Arterial spray spattered his angular features as they tried to configure a smile. Looking into those dead azure eyes the unfortunate officer saw much worse than a missing hand.

He collapsed to the ground unconscious.

Tsien leveled his burning gaze on the other vice-commander, a pale and sweating little man who wanted nothing more than to be far away from this grinning nightmare thing.

The Lieutenant slung a comradely arm around his shoulder, dragging him limply at his side as he walked. His head nestled in the Super-Cyben's armpit like a walnut in a vise.

"We have here but a fraction of the Division, Lieutenant." said Tsien in a steel-grinding voice. There was no emotion there, not even anger - his face was a waxen mask dripping with blood. "He who is coming to us now will laugh at this pitiful show of weakness."

With a dismissive gesture Tsien swept his eyes and cameras and sensors over the men and tanks and heavy support mekan there assembled. To the uninitiated it looked like enough firepower to pummel an army to shuddering paste.

"If you want to survive his arrival, Commander, I suggest you either entrench or go home." The petrified officer nodded slowly, transfixed by Tsien's inhuman eyes. "However, deserting my command won't save you from everything. It won't save you from ME."

The Commander did the only thing he could when confronted with such madness – he played it by the rules. Central had said they were sending an Augmented specialist, but this... this was a Cyben that could *talk*. One that was giving him *orders*...

Right behind them his colleague had awoken in agony, gripping the stump of his mangled wrist and moaning. The Commander swallowed hard.

"Sir, squads 13, 18 and 22 are currently pulling into position. Air support from the 35th shock troop and the Antiterrorist units out of Central are holding above the target location. We've deglassed the whole area with a sonic detonation, but as yet there's nobody out who doesn't scan as civilian."

Tsien appraised him with a score of tiny cameras, his eyes mercifully closed.

"Good work - but not good enough. I shall have to go in there and see for myself."

"Without backup.....?" queried the Lieutenant, once again keeping pace as Tsien strode forward, through a snowdrift of shattered safety glass which squealed and popped underfoot.

There was a long silence as Tsien stopped, his head angled upward, features slack - a directive incoming from the tower above.

"I have it on good authority that you boys aren't here as *backup*." he said, eyes snapping open in a whirling coruscation of gears and flywheels and springs. "Now, get back to your lines, dig in, and be a good little *diversion*, won't you?"

From high above came the sounds of violent demolition, the growl and roar of twin military-grade engines pushed to their limit. Somewhere up near Arcturus Park, up on the lip of the metal canyon which gave the Valley View its name...

"He's on his way, boys. Don't disappoint."

Tsien turned away, the Eversio still steaming, and strode through the shattered windows into the shadows. All the while, a dwindling voice in his head was screaming silently, in the hope that someone could hear it.

"Help me! Help me or let me die! PLEASE...."

*Something* heard. But no one could.

## Ω

((We knew his time was running out.)) said the logic, a clean division as straight as a razor cut through the mind of Kronos.

((He will not go down to join them if he can force our hand.))

<<But this gambit is so.....clumsy>> replied the other half, a devil's advocate

program.

<<Risk to system is only 23% and holding. Our counterplay is little more than an insult, but he will be defeated. Octavio Ascher is destined to die in three hours time. Then the change will come.>>

((We had assumed he would take a new body, and come to us in person. He has outguessed us once, already.))

<<We would have allowed it of him. But he is filled with the weakness of human pride.>>

((He is too proud to submit to the Change. He is fighting us because the game is open to everyone. He is the first of the Subcity to contest it, but his opening gambit is not entirely lacking in grace.))

<<Nevertheless, the change will come. It has come to men of better breeding and greater resources than Octavio Ascher>>

((He would choose immortality for different reasons)) replied logic, browsing psych assessments at lightspeed. ((He is motivated by survival alone, and seeks nothing but a secure platform from which to plan further conquests))

<<Perhaps he knows the game is at the end of its cycle>>

((Perhaps. But it is of little consequence. Nobody has succeeded. We have no suitable replacement, and the test has proved conclusive))

<<So....we will proceed?>>

((We must wait and see. He is of the Sub, and they are known to be resourceful))

<<We have devoured nations>>

((Patience))

((It is not over yet, and the swarm is coming. One of them has to win, or *we* will lose with them))

<<Patience? If the swarm is *real*, we will have to choose one of them ourselves.>>

## Ω

Kaito was afloat in warm seas of light, salty and blue and utterly unreal.

The Wetsystems, vast networks of artificial brain tissue, were creating dreams for him - coded dreams dripping with juicy forbidden data. They formed a psychic interface with the titanic brain of Kronos itself.

That hoary old machine had been thrown together out of actual wire and fiber-optics more than a thousand years ago, but during the great Elysian Renaissance after the war it had upgraded itself with mad intensity.

It had cut a deal with a certain Doctor Lancaster, and nationalized his biolabs *in toto*. Hence Universal GmbH - and their ubiquitous Wetsystems.

The seas of blue light lived within a distributed brain spread throughout the walls

and domes of Elysium. The ultimate savant - blind and deaf and mute and constantly dreaming. Into this vast melange were stitched and wired the memories of every man, woman and child the Celebrants had ever taken, woven together into something much greater than the sum of their parts.

Kaito wasn't supposed to swim these waters.

In fact, this 'mersive is one which no living being had visited legitimately for cold centuries.

This section of the Wetsystem was formed around an old photonic switching node, a sort of virtual service duct. Its actual location was known only to a select few, a loose priesthood who had left behind the safe, soft 'Mersives and Vworlds of a thousand virtual cliques to probe the heart of the machine.

Kaito's clan were called *Electromagi*, and they served a being known only as the Illuminatus, a name whispered through the Wetsystems with awe and dread. Some of the Magi boasted that they'd met him face to face, but an honor like that was a long way off for a little fish like Kaito Kayzi.

It was good enough for him that he had access to their codes and war-engines, the keys to a dozen or more forbidden zones. Tell a guy like Kaito that something's *forbidden*, and he'll chew his own arm off to get inside...

That was where he was going now, hoping to meet up with some of his fellow cabalists and make sense of the mad shit going down across the city.

*That, and what the hell was eating Jaq Hassan.*

Katio powered down through the commercial levels, through the military grade sub-basements of Kronos' mind, surfing on a wave of glass that loomed up like a tsunami over his head. Other, lesser operators were blown clear out of their virtual interfaces as he sliced by, drowning them in a wake of static. His target; a fractal whirlpool in the neat geometric maze of the datanet...

Ancient computer systems spoke the language of mathematics, leaving a convenient handle by which the initiated could open doors. The Wetsystems, based on the human brain, offered similar access to their deep structures in the form of memetic programming.

The Kayzi was a kind of delinquent prodigy in these matters. He could make the Wetsystems believe in him, in his power, and suspend their faith in their own programmed orders. Kaito rolled the prayer-beads of science, uploaded permutations of the electric torah. The sector of artificial brain sealed in his bubble of null *believed*.

One slip, however, and he'd be as dead as God in the mind of an agnostic.

Kronos itself was oblivious to his subtle meddling; its pet brainweb threw off random images like sparks. The magus was a well-placed drop of lysergic acid on the surface of that brain.

The magus was the hand up the puppet's ass.

Despite being out of his body, Kaito's lungs drew a thirsty, racking breath as he broke the surface, a primal part of him afraid of sucking down a load of virtual water. The sea around him was as wet as sunshine; as corporeal as a hallucination. But if he stopped believing that it was real, it might just stop believing in him...

He kept his thoughts tight and focused, making himself levitate and fly in toward his target.

There - floating above the calm mirror of the ocean like a vast droplet of water. A Standard User Interface.

With one of those at his command Kaito could slice apart the best encryption known to man like wet paper - power enough, surely to crack the Compliance Division's black-ops scriptoria and find out what Tsien was up to...

He came to rest atop the warm clear water, neon reefs of memory below him, a ball of mirrored silver above. The sky was black, a *perfect* black unmarred by a moon or stars, yet somehow textured, alive with fractal whorls and mathematic fingerprints. A billion minds shared this hallucination, stored in the Wetsystems all around him. Just beyond them were the answers he needed.

He'd hijacked systems like this since he was a kid, so the correct incantations and runic symbols lined up in his head smooth, neat and tight, popping into existence one by one.

The first phrases slipped into the Interface like slivers of colored glass, making the whole thing shiver and resonate, spinning slowly on its axis. The liquid rippled and bulged out as the Interface grew points, morphing into a triskaidekahedral prism...

Then something went wrong. The Kayzi caught a tripwire, looping him up in feedback, and ripples raced out across the water's surface as the Interface turned black.

Kaito felt the shake, deep in his bones. Like his back was pressed up against a thumping four-by-four concert subwoofer.

The horizon was suddenly crazed, tilted like the deck of a sinking ship. And then the black sky imploded.

A face, shattered at one edge like the stump of a lightbulb, screamed in digital discord, ten times the size of the moon. Its teeth had the size and appearance of family-size fridge-freezers. With additional icemaker.

It was *his own*.

His eyes burned white-hot under his 'mersive lenses, sinking into his brain like hot coals into ice.

Movement doubled and telescoped into infinity as he ripped the wires from his temples, sending his goggles clattering across the tiles to stop amidst weeks-unwashed clothes and empty Choxxygen cans.

The nightmare face was gone.

But his retinas still burned with the bright pain and frustration of his final vision.

The Interface was broken, and in its place, rotating and meshing in a gyre beyond physical possibility was a scribble of white light, hot and painful and dripping with viral memes.

Race-Memory bombs had gone off in his head, leaving him knotted and dripping with sweat, with the breath of wolves in his nostrils and the sound of crunching bones in his ears. There was only one possible reason for all of this.

*The node had been subverted.*

And now, as it faded out of him like an acid comedown, the implications sank in.

*Who had that kind of ice? Who wanted to crack the Electromagi wide open?*

*And... who would they blame, other than the last poor sucker who was in there...*

DisKord didn't see him as he stormed out of the factory, jamming a chakutazer in his belt and fishing for the keys to his bike. He was going to the Valley View.

Unknown to Kaito, his invasion of the node had been taken care of personally. A creature who knew the Wetsystems more intimately than any human being nodded in approval as the trace of his assault snapped out of the grid.

Interference had to be kept to a minimum - there was a very delicate operation in the works. Already a taint was spreading through the Wetsystems, bleeding in from the soul of Kronos' brand-new Cyben. Its source was vast, and powerful; an entire dimension united under one mind and one purpose. But its bridgehead into the world was as slim as a single thought.

In a dim, green-lit grotto of rust and hissing static deep below the city the creature waited, with the patience of the near-immortal. The Super-Cyben was nothing but a key, one of many which would unlock for it an entire world.

## Ω

Ramon's hand was bleeding, the essence of life oozing out between his clenched fingers, over his whitened knuckles, and down the plastic handle of the plain black briefcase hanging loose at his side. A little red pool had formed underneath its dangling corner, but Ramon didn't care. Damned gack C-Div motherfuckers broke his bong.

In the Vision - that curse the 'ishim put in his blood - he could feel his life leaking out, just like he could see the flicker and flare of other living things all through the mall. It was a real bitch when he was trying to watch threedeeo.

He flicked the butt of a joint across the empty mall, sending it arcing and spinning and skittering across the rim of a public trashcan. There were another two Ashishim soldiers standing in the doorway of their little shop, one with a laptop console, the other tuning a conical device plugged into a diesel generator. The dreadlocked operator at the keyboard had one eye hidden in green crepuscular light, tracking the advance of the Cyben at the gates. Tiny red tracers fell across his pupils like rain.

"Hope you got those things loaded, Ramon. You're gonna be spoiled for targets."

"I handled my business." growled the Ashishi gunman, shifting the weight of his twin briefcases. "You jus' handle yours, Kalifa. They say they sendin' up a *Dervashiman*, an' I wanna look professional here."

The man at the keyboard didn't have time to reply, because at that very second the ceiling of the Ashishim enclave dropped away. Hidden trapdoors in the roof-plating swung open with a clatter and the hum came flooding in, rattling the shelves of recruitment pamphlets, setting dust and ashes into spiraling motion. As it cut out, echoing off down the empty concourse Abdulafia fell the last few feet to the floor, dreadlocks streaming, hands splayed and teeth flashing whiter than white, enamel impregnated with ultraviolet-active inks.

"You boys order pizza? Or ain't it that kind of party?"

To his credit, Kalifa 204 was less phased by this than his younger cousins.

"We've got us a full rollout, 'Afia sah." he said, red light clotting and pooling across his eyes. "Cyben ten to one, reading something else though."

"Something like a Vatican Templar..." muttered the boiler-suited tech' holding the aluminum cone, which had begun to hum with a similar pitch to the discs on Abdulafia's belt. "Meat and metal, but it's got direct wetsystem links. That's not Black Tech' standard."

"I know about that one, brother." said Afia, "Had word from our Illuminatus of his arrival." he nodded briefly to Ramon, at the two black briefcases he's carrying. "Those things are only gonna make him mad, soldier. We need *Dervashi* for this one."

Ramon scowled, momentarily fighting the Vision. Concentric lines of force faded from before his eyes, peeling back from the walls and the pipes in the ceiling.

"*Dervashi* we don't have, sir. Sparing yourself, of course... But we can take them! I only missed out on joining the inner circle by a couple of lousy points, 'Afia! Please... let me prove myself to the Illuminatus!"

Ramon ceased to blaze with the white light of a Ashishi mind for a second; and then it skinned back over him, as surely as the healing of his shredded palms under their nanoactive gauze. In the Vision 'Afia glowed like a ball of novas, a power walking the earth in the form of a disheveled old stoner.

"You prove your worth just by being here, Ramon 992" he said, laying his hand on the young warrior's shoulder. "And next year I know you'll pass the muster and join the *Dervashi* yourself. But today - today you have to run so you can fight those deadflesh bastards later."

Ramon cracked a smile, but he wasn't happy. Abdulafia could see in his eyes that he wanted another Reclamation Day, with all its bloody glory.

"No-one's to hold on here if they open up the heavy artillery anyhow." he said, pulling three tiny phials from among the discs on his belt. The nektar, 'dreno pulled by

Jaq Hassan. "You all know the way out, and the way back to the R.T... I suggest you only use this shit to speed you up, because that new Cyben will chew you up and spit out the pieces, guaranteed."

Desperate times called for desperate measures. None of these boys were *'vashi* yet, and none of them could use the stuff to fight.

"The first wave's coming in." said up the laptop operator, his voice a flat monotone as he bent his will to the machine. Strange aerials sprouted from its USB ports like a little chrome bonsai forest. Threedeeo flickered in the air, a hazy lo-rez of mechanical marching figures, riot guns and shoulder-mounted halogen sweepers slicing the dark they rolled out before them, neon tubes popping and extinguishing like tiny fireworks overhead.

A grey snowfall of static surrounded the Cyben, crazing the lurking form which hulked behind their advance line. A good head taller, its eyes flashing cerulean malice in the gloom. That hinted-at heavy artillery swung at its hip like a twodeeo cowboy's six-shooter. Seeing that, Ramon looked down to his cases and swallowed hard. *Perhaps 'Afia was right.* But he rolled the combinations anyway, and poised his thumbs over a pair of switches already grimy with drying blood.

"That's the sonofabitch right there, in person." said Abdulafia, peering into the threedeeo mist as if trying to lock gazes with his adversary. "Big ol' boy - first of a new strain, if the spirits tell me true."

The Ashishi holding the cone flicked what must have been the penultimate switch, cranking his bizarre piece of ordnance up to a boneshaking frequency, rattling its exhaust stack while crawling arcs of power welled up inside.

"I'm going to get CeeAn out of here before they can trace her." said Afia to the room in general, as he strode toward the door. "Just remember to torch the place if it looks like we're being overrun. And for the sake of yourselves and the Collective - get out of here before that walking tank makes an appearance."

He flashed a slick enamel smile at Ramon, who despite his heavy weaponry had never seen action before. Under his bravado and his bulletproof riotmesh Abdulafia wore a net of scars, his skin cratered like the moon most of his people had never seen.

He had them sequenced in every time, to remind himself that there was no new flesh; none innocent.

Back then, it was combat knives and machine-pistols against armor and dead skin and railguns. Today his soldiers were itching to break out the *really* heavy weapons. But when he saw the shadow form of the new Cyben, he knew that the balance had swung back again. Even the disruptor would probably wash over it like rain.

Abdulafia pulled his mane of plug-tipped dreads back over one shoulder, clapped Ramon on the back and stepped gingerly out the door; armed and extremely dangerous.

Anyone still able to crawl had gotten out of the Valley View long ago. Now the

Cyben were coming through, driving the wounded before them or tagging them with trunks to be scooped up by net teams later. Only the R.T. enclaves were militant, curious, and bloody-minded enough to stay put. And out of all of them, only the neoconfucian citizen-soldiers of the Celestial Kingdom were mad enough to bring the fight to the enemy.

Afia slid back to the wall, switching up his camo, well aware that a pack of stimmed-up C.K. grunts would shoot him with just as much pleasure as they would a Cyben.

A line of soldiers scattered from the bright-red plywood frontage of the Son of Heaven's Guard Temple, diving for shelter behind row of kiosks and benches, their military fatigues stark and drab under the lamps. He heard a string of orders being rapped out in Cantonese as the troopers dropped into position - overturning faux-wood with their spit-polished boots, replica Kalashnikovs tucked up high under twenty-two hard-set jawlines. With a sense of detachment, perhaps even pity, Abdulafia saw that all of them had fixed bayonets.

What were *they* going to do to dead flesh augmented with cybernetics?

The Ashishi heard twenty-two bolts clatter and ring as he slipped along the wall, chameleon-quiet, willing himself invisible.

He made the door of Twentieth Century Crime just as the first Celestial lost his nerve, and he threw himself across the parquet linoleum as the chatter of automatic discharge opened up behind him. As he fell past, activating the antigrav discs on his belt, his hand shot out through a sparking purple holomatrix, snagging a hovering black crescent of armored plastic. CeeAn got yanked from her seat and halfway through the desk before she knew what was going on, and she only just managed to keep a grip on her pair of handguns.

"What the hell did you do that for?" she snarled, blowing a streamer of blue hair out of her eyes. "Nobody told you it's *impolite* to just slam people down to the floor without so much as a warning? I could have gotten hurt."

"You don't have any *nerves*, Cee. And there's bullets flying around up there. You don't think people would get suspicious if they saw one go right through you without leaving a mark?"

"Nice see you again too, Afia." muttered CeeAn from halfway through the linoleum.

"*Please* tell me you're here to deliver me a new body."

Behind them the Celestials were pinned down, Cyben riot gun blasts biting huge chunks from their makeshift barricades as they advanced. Afia raised his head for another look and saw a young soldier cut in two by one of their heatseeking rounds, his empty A.K sent spinning from his hands. Afia tasted bile in the back of his throat, his gaze riveted on the final expression of the soldier; surprised and outraged and dismayed at his own mortality. It tweaked memories coded deep into his wired brain, the faces of

friends long dead...

He didn't even notice that CeeAn's crescent unit had slipped from his grasp, its antigrav impellers sparking back to life.

"Get the hell out of there!" shouted a voice in mangled cantonese, louder than the gunshots. "Just *run*, dammit! You can't stop those things!" Muzzle-flash scorched his face as CeeAn let rip with her pair of pistols, a blazing avatar standing square in the broken window of Twentieth Century Crime.

A Cyben staggered as the first round struck it in the shoulder, reeling backward as three more punctured its armored chest. Then CeeAn squeezed off a final round - focusing her power to guide the bullet home. Strips of bloody laminate and preserved flesh fell like an abattoir rain.

For a hardlight construct there was no such word as 'recoil', and that last slug mainlined right through the undead machine's cranium with terrible accuracy.

"You took your time, Abdulafia," she said, grinning as he pulled her back down from the window. "I was wondering if I was gonna have to use our *contingency plan* to escape."

At the mention of the plan, Afia went a little pale. "Just some business next door, makin' sure that the boys had their marching orders right. No need to go to plan B right now."

"I hope you gave that Ramon hell," smiled Cee, slamming another clip into her chromed hand-cannon. "That waster's been smoking like a chimney ever since we got word of trouble coming to town, and he wouldn't let me borrow any of his toys! These things are about as much use for Cyben-hunting as a can of bug spray!"

Afia laughed, trying to keep it down. But they both noticed the silence at the same instant. Suddenly it dawned on him; the Celestials were finished.

*And now those walking stiffs were probably wondering where the handgun rounds came from.*

He could see by the look in her eyes that Cee has worked it out too, and was at the same time embarrassed and afraid and just a little excited. A smile hung on her holomatrix like a string of tiny lightbulbs.

"Can we go to plan B, *now*?" she whispered, one artificially perfect eyebrow raised in query.

"What is it," he asked "about you and plan B?"

If it weren't for the Vision he'd have died right then and there. But he could see the black fire of the Super-Cyben's aura even through wood and concrete and glass, and now it was leveling its giant cannon at the front of 20th Century Crime.

Afia heard the tiny click as its finger hit the trigger.

He got a grip on his partner's crescent and leaped, not to the left or right but UP, twisting his antigrav controls to full power. The shattered window flickered past like a

single frame from a horror movie, a gap into hell where shattered corpses stared eyeless at an artificial sky. Afia's back took the brunt of the impact with the ceiling, but that was the least of his problems.

Below them the air rippled silver - a gossamer cloud of death slicing and dicing everything it touched. He wrapped his holocloak around them both tight, praying to the faceless gods of the Ashishim.

The whole store disintegrated into slivers of wood and plastic as the tongues of the Eversio whipsawed and twitched, the fiber-optic eyes at the tip of each thread seeking out prey...

*Through a veil of glass and sawdust and stinging pain Abdulafia saw one of CeeAn's guns turning end over end, slow motion, toward the floor and its painted mural of ancient villains. A scribble of silver thread licked out around it, pulled tight - and it was a rain of nickel-plated shards in a heartbeat...*

The clip was falling too, bullets scattering like seeds, and he didn't need to look at Cee to know what she was thinking. He felt her turn off the valency generators which keep the floor solid a second before she tripped the switch on his deaths-head belt buckle.

"No more excuses, 330. It's time for plan B."

He looked left into her mischievous smile, and then down to the dissolving illusion of the store's painted linoleum.

With a silent, unreflective splash and a shimmer the pieces of Cee's Desert Eagle were swallowed up by the face of John Wayne Gacy, painted accepting a hamburger from a grinning Jeff Dahmer. Shells rained through his blood-smattered 'kiss the cook' apron, down into the empty pit behind the hardlight facade. They rattled and chimed off steel, buried under light.

Reality kicked in, crushing sound and motion and feeling together as the Ashishi agent let go and dropped, his holocloak flying out like wings.

The ragged hole which used to be the shop's window gaped upon a scene which Bosch would have hesitated to commit to canvas; Cyben twitching like insects, cut open by bullets but still wide-eyed and filled with purpose. Ragged khaki heaps and piles of flesh, a hail of spent bullet casings, and alone, the Celestial's commander, pinned by the spotlights and hungry gun-barrels of six impassive Cyben.

As they fell, Afia heard the Celestial shout out in Cantonese, out beyond the soulless death-masks of the Cyben who encircle him.

To the shadows, and to the Mark-Four.

The machine heard him.

For a second the blue fire dimmed in its eyes, and its shoulders sagged down under their own weight. The muzzle of the Eversio dropped, and its wielder clawed at his face with metal fingers, cowering back. Again - the same phrase, in a language alien to

Abdulafia, but apparently not to the Super-Cyben. Its eyes shut down to black, its outline suddenly blurring with muscular tremors as flesh and bone struggled against steel and cable for control.

Afia saw the cigarette-burn LEDs across the MK4's brow wink out.

And as he fell through the floor he heard a sound that would wake him up screaming for years to come, a sound torn out bloody from the hybrid which gave it utterance.

It was despair, and horror, and pain, and loss and rage. But before it could be stifled, wrung out by emergency overrides, before the Celestial commander could be torn to ribbons by crossfire, fatal words on his lips, and before Afia's skin broke open on cold steel, he knew that it was also a tiny paring of hope.

Alone in the dark, he called up the vision. And in a million Ashishi minds the blaze of that hope was reflected a thousandfold.

Next to him in the dark CeeAn shimmered purple and blue, lighting up the immense wheels and treads of an ancient battletank.

"Look at that, Commander," she whispered, a little smile on her lips "Looks like we've landed right on top of Plan B after all. And I've left the keys in the ignition."

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**“We’re drifting ...we’re coming down! Repeat, this is an emergency call from Omnivasive Camera Dirigible 092238, we are experiencing mechanical failure in number three turbofan...”**

*(explosions, white noise) ...*

**“ Commander . . .commander! Oh - dear ancestral spirits, his *head*’s half gone! Kreitz, Manning, can you put this thing down before we hit the perimeter?”**

*(sobbing, vomiting, white noise)*

**“ Dammit Kreitz, just put it down *now*! There’s PDR bugs hitting the windows already, and its only a matter of time...”**

**THIS IS THE ELYSIUM PERIMETER DEFENSE GRID CONTROL MODULE. BE ADVISED – YOU HAVE BREACHED SECURE AIRSPACE. PLEASE RETURN TO SUBCITY DESIGNATED AIR LANES OR YOU WILL BE FIRED UPON IN - 10. 9. 8. 7.**

**“Manning, shit, one of them’s already shifted! They’re all around us! Please, PD Command, acknowledge! This is Omnivasive unit 092238, we are not in control of our vessel! We have severe damage to sponsons three and four, and our pilot has been critically wounded! Please stand down the missile platforms!”**

**6. 5. 4. 3.**

*(heavy breathing, white noise)*

**“ Kreitz, of shit Krietz, *look at them all*. The damn bugs are swarming all over us. There’s another one shifting, and there ...Gods help us, we’re fucked...”**

**2. 1...UNITS 9022 THROUGH 9506 COMMENCE MISSILE BARRAGE. YOU HAVE BEEN ELIMINATED BY THE UPPER DOME PERIMETER DEFENSE GRID – YOUR TAX DOLLARS AT WORK. HAVE A NICE DAY.**

*(explosions, screaming, white noise)*

**[Transmission ends.]**

**Last Emergency Broadcast from Omnivasive Camera Dirigible 092238 – Elysian Air Traffic Control Historical Incident Report Archives.**

*Zhe felt a sudden rush of elation as the vortex winked out of existence; a crackle and pop of knitting bones and flesh as his head wove itself back together. Pain throbbed through his alien body in waves.*

*Tentatively he tried to move, and he felt the hard fibrous stuff of the Slavesystem shifting with him like a suit of jet-black armor. It covered him from head to toe, utterly integrated with the flowing quicksilver of his skin. The Technician wondered why Nyl had bonded him to part of their ancient enemy – but there was no way he could interrogate the renegade.*

*Nyl was nowhere to be seen. Apparently the bizarre hallucinogenia of the past few seconds had been real enough, though. Billions of nanobots crusted over his shimmering skin like a sheen of hematite.*

*Around him the lights of the terminal station strobed red and purple, a myriad of static-wracked displays gnashing and howling for attention. There was really no need – through the great inverted geodesic dome of the floor, Zhe could see the filament of the space elevator glowing white hot.*

*Jagged bursts of plasma and balls of coruscating energy whirled away from its surface, through veils of violet fire which seemed to writhe with anguished faces.*

*He could hear the mocking voice of Kronos in his head; the mangled voice of Tsien hissing and bubbling in its own blood.*

*"That was all I needed!" it gloated, rasping inside Zhe's skull "What a specimen! What power!"*

*The metal and stone of Terminal Station began to vibrate, then shudder like a living thing in the grip of nightmares.*

*"Enjoy your synthesis with the Slavesystem, Technician. In three minutes we will activate the Forge."*

## Ω

Emmanuel third Lancaster was furious to an extent that his angelic face simply couldn't portray.

Not only had Melchior failed him - not really a surprise, he thought, considering the wretched creature's poor genetics - but the rogue clone had escaped, and now his spies reported that Don Gianni was dead, claimed early by the Celebrants.

All around him, corruption and ineptitude. Were it not for his carefully cultivated distaste for the city outside his spire, the arch-biotect would have gone out and completed the job himself.

Lancaster didn't really care what Direktor Ascher was up to; the subhuman idiot had failed to subvert the Game once already in his grubby little lifetime. And heavens alone

knew how many times he had tried to buy into Lancaster's company and thus acquire the means to patch himself back together.

No, as an aristocrat of true pedigree, Emmanuel was far ahead of his lowly rival.

Which made the current situation all the more humiliating.

"I assure you, it was nothing to do with me." sighed Lancaster into the threedeeophone, its controller microsat hovering just in front of his face. "I have no control over that accursed clone Ashishim, and I never authorized the Celebrants to harvest Gianni Vexx. Come now, it's hardly as if he was a threat to my business interests!"

Direktor Ascher filled the screen, his severed head seemingly afloat in boiling blood. Anger made his scarred and twisted face even more grotesque than usual.

"That's bullshit and you know it, you jumped-up labgrown freak!" raged the chief of Omnivasive, stabbing at the threedeeo feed with one floating artificial hand. "You were the only one who knew I was using Jaqub Hassan to plant the control nanonics in Blaire. And you sent your clonehunter there at such a convenient time as well. A little earlier, and he might have just happened to run into old Jaq on the way out, huh?"

Lancaster would have loved to just shut off the connection, but there was no way he would allow such a creature to cast aspersions on his honor.

"Listen, Direktor, I'll say it again once, and very clearly. Melchior was only there to neutralize the rogue. Who else but Don Vexx keeps the amounts of Adrenochrome which would lure him in? And the Celebrants...who knows how many enemies a bastard like Gianni made over the years. Unfortunate, but true. I see no reason to ruin our business relations with unwarranted accusations over this little setback."

"Setback, shit!" screamed Ascher, his eyes bulging from their bruised sockets. "It's a goddamn *setup*, Lancaster. That rogue has been your agent all along, hasn't he? Fifty percent of the money when Blaire takes out the game wasn't good enough for you, you filthy snob bastard, and you had to keep some blackmail in reserve! Well, forget it! I can get the nanonics and free-radical scrubbers from elsewhere, you know. So you're expendable! First thing tomorrow I'm sending a little file I've compiled on you to the Commissioner's office. And then you and your company will be liquidated!"

Lancaster blanched at the threat, torn between apoplexy and disbelief.

Of course, Universal Wetsystems had made some shady deals over the years - which of the Zaibatsu hadn't? But enough to convince a Commission of Liquidation? Perhaps...after all, if anyone had access to such material, it would be the execrable Ascher. And the lesser nobles would simply *salivate* at the prospect...

"One last chance, Direktor." he said, trying to keep his voice cool and even. "If you take back your foolish threats, we can still work this out. If not ..."

"Then what, rich boy? Do you think I care what you try to do?" snarled Ascher "Believe me, Lancaster, better men have tried to get rid of me, and failed. I'll see you in

the Judiciary."

The feed cut out with a blast of white noise, leaving Emmanuel Lancaster seething with rage.

Yes, many people had tried to kill off the Omnivasive chief over the years. And all of them had been butchered for their trouble. But Lancaster knew he couldn't fail. None of the others had commanded the sheer power and influence of Universal Wetsystems, or the horrors its manufactoria could spawn...

While he plotted and raged, Mr Ascher laughed.

The aristo fool had bought his entire act, right down the line.

Very soon, the tools with which to depose a Lord would be brought right to his door.

## Ω

There were two-hundred and seventy-seven rusted composite panels in the underside of the dome. Someone armed with a grapple much like Jaq's had spray painted "SmAsH thE ArisTO ScUmm" across them in violent green.

Hassan stared up at the giant letters as they spun away into vertigo - Not only was it sound politicking; it was a better view than the fast-approaching ground.

Or it *was*, until something huge and snarling slammed up against the inside of the dome, making the metal bulge and crack like cheap plastic.

A fissure popped rivets like artificial rain from between the 'O' and the 'S', and the rollcage snout of Simeon's Destrier came hammering through, groaning and flaming as it struggled like a live thing.

With a screeching, grinding cacophony it ripped its way through the wall, its front wheels churning nothing, its searchlight headlamps raking the dusk.

Hassan only had one trick left up his sleeve.

And if it didn't work exactly as advertised there'd be nothing left of him but a thin and gruesome stain...

He pulled a slim black remote from his boot, dropping past the six-hundred-foot mark upside down, whispering prayers under his breath. Kaito made this - the same little bastard who was probably the cause of his current predicament.

Him, or his boss, or Omnivasive, or any one of a huge number of scheming enemies.

It was the Kayzi his mind kept coming back to though - him and that goddamn cop.

*Him, and the voice of his dead father, telling him that trust was for suckers.*

He could see a cloud of Perimeter Defense mekan swarming up from the skin of the city toward him now, a dragonfly horde winking in the evening sun as their carbon wings thrashed the air. At any second one of them could *shift*, bulging out into a missile platform eager to see him 'vaped ...

They were programmed to annihilate anything in their airspace, and made no distinction between a Z999 Stratofighter and a stupid, terrified plummeting Hassan.

Jaq prayed silently that he'd remembered to keep the batteries charged. He brought his finger down on the button...

And despite everything, it was still the K/Z accent and the thin, black-stubbed face of Kaito which told him in his mind what would happen next.

He was three hundred-fifty feet out and falling.

## Ω

Perimeter Defense mekan 909 felt the Destrier teetering on the brink of Arcturus Park with a sinking horror, precisely emulated by its expensive eMotive(tm) software.

909 was *folded* as it flew, little more than a pair of bulbous camera lenses, a tiny Assembler and a long slim carapace full of batteries.

Its brothers and sisters surged and seethed in the air around it, eager for the kill, itching to shift out into their true forms.

909's little digital mind toyed for a second with calling this whole mess a traffic accident, and shunting it across the datanet to a convenient freeway mekan.

But its program was immutable. Anything within its sacred airspace must be eliminated. The tiny killer sped in toward Simeon Blaire, feeling the air like liquid under its flickering wings.

As soon as the Destrier began to fall, it would be fair game.

Then Jaq's remote caught the little mekan with its electronic broadside.

Electricity sparked on the edges of its mind, peeling back its program like a scab. There were TWO inputs! Unheard of, unthinkable!

One came from the Master, from Kronos; a subroutine which had already scanned the Destrier's numberplates and knew exactly who was inside. It knew a loophole in its directives when it saw one, and it wanted the teetering truck and its occupant smeared all over the dome as a sheet of radioactive grease.

The other came from a little human figure, its arms and legs windmilling as it plummeted through the air, coming closer...

Artificial pain tore through 909, making it forget its hardwired directives for a sliver of a second. Kronos' long standing orders were powerful, but Kaito's remote was far more direct.

909 gave in to the *shift* - it's mass ballooned, its body clicked and slid and interlocked, expanding piece by piece, unfolding impossibly large weapons and rotors and antigrav discs from its dragonfly shell...

And Kronos grabbed it by the brainstem, paring down its mind to raw commands.

*Acquire / Eliminate / Repeat.*

Blaire's Destrier suddenly jumped into focus, the face behind its windshield slack, waxen, its eyes rolled back until they were crescents of bloodshot white.

This might even be considered *humane*, echoed a part of 909 far removed from its present state of being, where its hands are gleaming steel, warheads for fingers and.....

Calm descended, the crackle of neural function snuffed out by a web of wires. The order was writ large across the system.

And those deadly fingers reached out toward it...

## Ω

One second Hassan's fingers were clawing air, and then everything turned to ice. Thermal shock spiked up his arm, the burning cold of interstellar space, but despite it all his mechanical hand clenched tight....

Around a power-feed cable, an armored loop of wire dangling beneath a fully manifest PDR missile-mekan. The downdraft of its antigravs and rotors blew hot and wild in his face.

Kaito was laughing in his head as he contemplated the toes of his boots swinging a hundred-fifty feet above the ground - he'd always said that this day would come, when Jaq had to take a dive off of the top of the city. Only thing was, Kaito had been sure he'd have his pants off when he jumped...

A triple blast of sound and heat rocked the platform, and Hassan's silver fingers almost lost their grip as the missiles soared away, spiraling up toward Simeon Blaire.

Even two hundred feet below the shockwave was like a punch in the solar plexus. The PDR staggered in the air, its engines whining as its gyros pushed overload. Desperate, Hassan pulled himself up with fingers that felt too huge and numb to grasp anything, let alone support his prodigious weight.

But that's just the drugs messing with his cybernetics integrators. The hand that gripped the platform was a symphony of nanoservo and artificial muscle. He forced himself up and over the shield-shaped carapace of mekan 909 and lay there on his back, panting and delirious.

Lord Blaire's ride was just about as tough as an old-world battletank; armored and rugged and built to smash anything else on the road into unrecognizable scrap. But those warheads were made to tear MBT's open like fortune cookies, and the Destrier didn't stand a chance. Shaped charges ripped it ragged in a billowing halo of orange flame, oily black smoke pouring from the ruptured dome of Arcturus Park around it. If anyone actually *lived* there they'd be collecting one hell of an insurance payout tomorrow...

Something caught his attention, a drifting mote against the sky.

Jaq's eyes weren't augmented like Kaito Kayzi's, but he could still follow the

unnatural curve of one black sliver of debris as it flew out from the firestorm. Turning in the thin air, a spindly shape against the twilight clouds... he caught a flash of silver reflecting the last gleam of the setting sun.

Oh *hells*. Surely not...

But it was. The Aristo bastard was harder to kill than a cockroach, and Jaq just knew he'd been spotted. If only whatever fired those missiles would do something right now...

As if on cue another PDR blossomed into existence, then another and another, popping up in midair like black-chromed flowers. All the way down Blaire's arcing trajectory they appeared, an airborne horde of robots bristling with chainguns and masers and missile batteries. Jaq was on his feet now, because the PDR line had sketched out exactly where Simeon was going to land. He'd come down right on top of 909.

All Hassan could do was watch as that tiny black stick-figure fell, screaming, its blade licking out left and right to cut one mekan after another in two. They burst like a chain of fireworks above him, tracing an inexorable path down toward where Jaq stood, a perfect target. His only weapon was the remote, and that seemed to be a one-trick device, leaving him marooned on a tiny floating island in the flight-path of a feral maniac.

Simeon landed for a second on the shell of a maser-toting PDR unit, pausing only long enough to draw the fire of its brethren. Bullets chewed it to scrap as he leapt away, holding the katana up over his head to disembowel another floating robot, its innards bursting out with a crackle of raving electrical sparks. He reversed it just in time to push off another, stabbing down into its central processor before he leaped back into free-fall, the sword held out in both hands in front of him.

Three more PDRs exploded in his wake as he sliced them clean in two. Missiles hissed past him, unable to target his stealth body-armor, only to mistakenly lock onto the heat-signatures of other defense mekan. He rolled in the air and went through a fourth PDR in a powerdive, eating up the distance, watching the horrified face of Jaq Hassan come closer and closer with every second. Oh, he'd been told his Master had other plans for the sub-scum's demise. But Simeon couldn't help it if Hassan was right in his way, could he?

His lips pulled back from his teeth in a predatory snarl as he lashed out sideways, twisting his body around a searing maser blast to gut the last of the mekan. The katana came up over his head, and his back arched to put all his newfound power behind a single strike - one which would cleave Jaq and the platform he stood on in half...

Then his prey vanished right before his eyes.

Blaire barely had time to correct his fall, to bring his feet down under him as PDR 909 came up under his boots. The ground-shock sent spikes of pain up as far as his

nanonically-augmented knees as he landed, leaving two perfect size-ten dents in the robot's metal carapace. Where the hell was Hassan? Surely he hadn't jumped to his death... had he?

Under the burnished belly of the floating mekan Jaqub Hassan clung desperately to a pair of power feeds. A very convincingly fatal drop yawned beneath his toes, and a mad Aristo killer was right above him. He hardly dared to breathe...

And that's what gave him away.

"I hear you, sub-scum." hissed Blaire, scraping the tip of his blade in a tight little circle across the PDR's shell. "I can hear your heartbeat, you know. I can tell just where to...."

The tip of the katana transfixed the hovering mekan then, right between its batteries and its processor, sliding through its armored shell with a spray of sparks. Jaq let go with his metal hand for an instant, swinging wide as that wicked point came through just where his head had been. The whole platform rocked as he swung back onto his other hand, narrowly avoiding another vicious downward jab.

"Oh, take all the time you want, *ronin*." chuckled Blaire. "The struggle just makes the kill sweeter, or so I've found."

There was only one thing for it. *The remote*. If it could make the defense robot shift from it's tiny insect form to this, then it must work the other way... right? Kaito had been sparing with the operational details, knowing his associate's attention span all too well.

Jaq swung himself back, using his body as a pendulum, building up momentum.

"It's no use trying to shake me loose, scum!" said Simeon, poised atop the mekan's carapace like a surfer. "You're going to fall before I d...."

The connection went live. Jaq's thumb came down hard on the button as he launched himself out into space, aiming for a rusted ventilator grille in metal cliff beside them. Twenty feet if it was an inch, and the damned thing was only just wide enough to fit his body through - he hoped.

Inside the defense unit's processor brain a caged personality threw itself against the bars, driven mad by the spike of voltage Kaito's remote control induced.

*I am I. I am not It, I am He. I was....*

An image blazed white in a flickering electrical corona - a face falling away from him, the face of a boy he used to call B-Zerk. That face was screaming his old, forgotten name, the name he used to wear before he became a lost soul...

Then the change came down in reverse, sucking in mass and shape and thought, until 909 was nothing but wings and a camera again.

Which left its two freeloading human passengers in freefall - one of them arcing out wide to smash through a wire grate with both feet, and the other...

The other was taken utterly by surprise as PDR 909 vanished, collapsing down to

the size of a mosquito with a brief thunderclap of intruding air.

Simeon didn't scream or curse; he just rolled himself into a perfect swan-dive, coming down like a missile through the thin perspex plastic roof of a hab-block one hundred feet below. Cheap wooden floors inside the metal shell of the building shattered all the way down to street level as he struck home, and a pall of dust and smoke billowed out of the hole. That wouldn't be nearly enough to stop him.

No, not at all. There wasn't a break or fracture of gash that the ancient nanotech in his veins couldn't suture. But his Master's word was law. He had to let Hassan go - for now - and obey the voice of Tokugawa raging in his head.

As for Jaq Hassan - he'd miscalculated just enough to rip the skin from both his shoulders and crack the back of his skull on the metal lip of that ventilator cowling. He braced himself against the walls of a sheer metal pipe, only a few feet above the slicing blades of an extractor fan, straining to hear the slither and rasp of a sword-blade on steel. This would seem like quite a predicament if it weren't for the series of events which had led up to it - as it stood, this tight little crawlspace was the perfect place for Jaq to catch his breath.

Things slid and clicked into place in his mind as though his head were a puzzle-box. Things began to line up and make a twisted kind of sense...

*He saw it as vividly as if it were actually in front of him; the burning metal cube of his old Hab-block – the street filled with emergency units, with impassive Cyben and firefighting mekan spraying choking foam. He'd been out fighting his little wars that night, and his family burned; he'd missed the bigger picture while he chased a pack of Final Reich skins into a diversion.*

They knew he was big and angry and predictable, just like Ascher knew, just like the Don counted on when he sent him after jerkoffs like Feldon.

One thing he could say for Kaito – he never set him up to be killed by a sword-wielding maniac Lord. He never asked for a favor he wouldn't return.

And when he really got down to it, he wouldn't hand Jaq over to the cops if he could find some kind of twisted, sneaky way around them. You had to admit that the Kayzi was good at that kind of thing...

The flames came up and over him, burning out of his memory, up from the animated ink in his arms which never let him forget. He was gonna go and find Kaito, sort this mess out once and for all. But first - he needed a drink.

## Ω

The joint in B-Zerk's hand was special.

Not because it had been hand-rolled by the illicit clone of a fighting aristocrat - even through it had.

Not because this strain, one of thousands available from the hydroponic gardens of the R.T, was genetically bred to pack an immense narcotic punch. Not even because it was *free*.

This number had an extra trick bonded into its molecular structure.

It had a message.

Pot had been legal in the Last City for centuries as a way to relax, as a medicine, and as the only way to appreciate jazz fusion. Hell, with things like Stunn and Cranq on the streets it'd be asinine for the Comp. Div. to chase down two-bit stoners.

But it had never been sanctioned as a neurosequestration vector.

That was the trick, one of many the Illuminatus kept tight to his chest. More than half the city's supply was guaranteed to do far more than just make you mellow and hungry...

*Zoom out from a matrix of fibers, heavy with crystals like autumn dew, through ricepaper ported out somewhere down Celestial Kingdom way, and follow the snaking tendrils of smoke down into the maze of wetware. Past a rudimentary firewall of cilia, churning the air like fists on a communist picket line. Down the main drag, into chemical processing...*

B-Zerk inhaled, oblivious but for a creeping edge like the merest shimmer of head candy across his thoughts. This reefer was known as a Draft Ticket - its accompanying code, ferried to the brain by that tetrahydro shit, was all about the reason for the Ashishim, and the reason that (cue the poster) The Illuminatus wanted YOU!

The effect was like skinning up with a page of the bible and actually talking to Jesus, post-exhalation. The *Dervashiman* handed them out to anyone a little left-of -centre he met, drumming up recruits.

Afia, however, had fucked up. He'd mixed up his strains, and given the kid something from his own personal stash.

*Dervashi* warrior grade sensemilla, designed to help those slippery agents carve up the Wetsystems and dig out their secrets...

This stuff helped the Electromagi split their minds into silvery comet-cores of data, and bring them back home again. It found the interface with B's bio-onboard and plugged in, scanning a thousand wavelengths for a wireless feed direct into the mind of Kronos.

At the same time it hooked onto the first thing it found in his thoughts, narrowing its search parameters.

Creeping up with the soft, hazy buzz of the weed came a blur and shimmer in the air itself, the intra-retinal screens of B's onboard sparking wild.

At first he thought it was the light, but it couldn't be.....B-Zerk's eyes were closed tight. A silver sheen coated the insides of his lids. Those tremors he felt could be real - except that his body seemed so far away now... replaced by one both familiar and utterly

alien.

Abdulafia's hydro had made the link, and he was communing with the dead.

*Zone Doubt.*

And with that name B-Zerk went under, subsumed by the memory of his friend's demise.

It was like having his wings cut up by razorwires in mid-flight. A thousand tiny points exploded silent white inside his head. The Wetsystems shivered in sympathy with him, kicking in the grip of nightmares - and then they SCREAMED.

He was looking at the back of Zone's head.

Just like the old days, when they used to run the pipes together, teaming up to steal anything and everything which wasn't nailed down. But this time B wasn't there in the flesh - he was a nebulous spirit-thing, a ghost in the tubes.

And he didn't stop when he came up on Zone Doubt - his mind fell through the hair and skin and bone of his old friend's skull, folding up like jagged origami as it settled in behind his eyes. He looked down at his hands, uncomprehending, and realized;

*Those were the leather gloves he was wearing the day he fell. That was the fake Rolex he'd sprung from Redcastle. And that meant...*

Zerk grasped what would happen next a little too late to stop it, and his stomach knotted with anticipation.

*This was the moment when he slipped. This was how the grating came out from under his hands, as he toppled into the shaft.*

He was going down.

B-Zerk watched his own face fall away, his mouth a screaming O of terror, his blue eyes wide and vacant. His hand reached out, far too late.

He was Zone now, and Zone was nothing but mass for gravity.

The wind grew hotter as it pushed against him, seconds of freefall ticking over, and through slitted, streaming eyes he saw a blistering white light rushing up, a pyroclastic apocalypse of brightness.

Arms windmilling, lungs aching with a final howl of indignation, he plunged into it, *through it*, so fast that there wasn't even any pain. And he saw - with his eyes burned up, his flesh dissolved - more than he'd ever known was possible.

He was floating in the heart of Kronos, his bones reduced to smoke and ashes - but he knew the name of this place. The *Subduction Phase*.

At its center, caged in iridescent geometries which whirled and interlocked was the pseudocerebrate's living core. A machine, or the *idea* of a machine, scrawled across space stretched tight like a canvas screen.

At its heart, (circles within circles), he watched a swarm of disembodied eyes peel open. Their lids were razorcuts in the fabric, and they all stared hungrily at his incorporeal form.

The calm rotation of the core's geometries grew hectic with desire, eyes tearing open around him larger and larger. Zone Doubt felt a pulse of energy as the fabric ripped open on either side of him, and twisting things came probing through, coiling all over his skin.

Kronos' neon mandalas roared like the rotors in a turbine engine...

And at the last, with mouths opening in the eyes, and nothing blooming from the mouths, and forever at the nothing's core, he heard a voice, calm and modulated, rising above the wet, shredding cacophony of his spiritual dismemberment.

"Security, perimeter defense. He has a healthy paranoia." it said as he was stretched across the wheels, infinitely ductile, until he was thread, without thought or emotion, under the shadow of the loom.

B-Zerk bit down on his hand, hard enough to draw blood.

He sat up, panting, slick with sweat in the hot black pipework.

The ride was over. But the vertigo remained, the image of what waited below him, in pits and shafts he could reach out and touch.

Were the horrors he'd just seen equally real? As solid as steel and flesh and now? In the phosphorous glow of a phyte stickie (Doom Unit!!!) he ran his hands over the familiar contours of his face, as if he were his own holy icon.

From downstairs came the air-shock of another explosion, and the sound of autoguns letting rip. He ought to be afraid of *that*; of the Cyben and thier human herders.

But Mr Murai had told him about a thing called *Bushido*, and, despite some problems and kinks of translation, he had a fair idea of what it was all about.

Some of it said that you didn't let anyone ice your friends and get away with it. Some other bits were very big on standing up to fear, and even death. Mr M was very clear on the fact that without it, *wakizashi* was just a really nice knife. But to someone who believed, it was the sharp end of a philosophy which had cut up the most arrogant of princes.

*Epiphany* may be too big a word for what B-Zerk felt, alone in the pipes and head-toe in sweat. But from here on in his course was set.

All he needed now was – everything. Still, Zone wouldn't have given up on *him*.

B-Zerk knew where his boy was trapped, and he was coming to save him.

## Ω

Once upon a time there was a place called Japan, a mystical island empire where the people made swords and sushi and color televisions and hello kitty bobbleheads. Then one day a wicked general in a far-off land told his orbital nuclear offensive systems to raze the whole place down to the smoking bedrock.

Way, way, back before that fateful day there had been no nation of Japan, just lots of little provinces, rising and falling on a tide of politics and blood. One of them, off in the mountains was called Shiga, a tiny prefecture cupped around the shores of Lake Biwa.

It took a brilliant mind to discover in Shiga province any trace of what would now be called export capital. Tourism being, at the time, limited to large Mongolian gentlemen with little recurved bows, droopy mustaches and sharp scimitars.

That mind belonged to the original Tokugawa Ieyasu, a man ambitious and unprincipled enough to employ an army of *Koga-ninja*.

Because Samurai were great, yes, your average Kenshin could go through a horde of peasants like a combine harvester through tall grass, but even they had to *sleep*.

To kill unseen, to use poison and disguise and worst of all to be a deadly murderer without the benefit of a feudal title; all of these things were deeply immoral and totally unthinkable.

But the Koga-ninja had honed their nobleman-killing skills for decades up in the wild mountains, and they sure as hell got the job done.

*Bushido* and the Nobility were just systems.

If you knew where the wheels were at any one moment, you could accurately plan where to insert the spanner. Octavio had a whole damn toolkit full, but his sharpest implement of death was Simeon Blaire, the modern equivalent of those ancient assassins.

If he felt any regret looking at Simeon he didn't admit it to himself. Once upon a time *he'd* been the one preparing for battle, convinced that his training and his secrets would make him invincible.

He remembered how he used to *believe*, back before the Fall. It was enough now that his pawn, his little disciple Blaire believed in his place – that he was just as conned by the romantic fantasy of honor and virtue and glory as Octavio once was. It made him sick to the stomach he no longer had, but he remembered when he was just as headstrong and naive and full of hope.

Only a couple of years gone, now. All the rejuves and bio-detoxes in the world couldn't keep him young, but he still has his memories – in his severed head, and scribed onto storage discs and crystal memory blocks. Just to be sure (or so he told himself), he brought them out again, one last time.

*Wires drilled deep into Octavio's skull hummed with power, stimulating his wetwired brain, making the past live and breathe and bleed again. And the sensorium dome disappeared, replaced by a cold chasm of gunmetal steel...*

"Are you even listening! Why won't you stop him? Why won't you KILL HIM?!"

Lord Falchurch held up his hands, imploring, as he knelt amid blood and ruin, his sword forgotten and useless at his side.

He prayed to a god of wet tissue and wire, a machine called Kronos - but it seemed that his prayers would go unanswered.

Ascher stalked forward with a grin plastered across his face, coming in from out of the dark, his immense muscles bunched and coiled as he prepared to bring down his blade in one final fatal arc. He had toyed with this one long enough – down in the duel level where the Lords were pitted against each other, one on one.

He'd gone through the maze of shafts and chambers and meathook chains, icy chasms and furnace-blast tunnels like a killing shadow, picking off the Aristocracy as they played their puerile game. Falchurch here had been so proud, once. He'd been one of the mocking, ignorant ones who denied Octavio his rightful place in the Game, denied him the opportunity of greatness.

He hadn't needed their approval or their respect tonight, though. Miss Leynna had given him the access codes to the spire – *her* spire, where three hundred nobles had met to play out their rote of etiquette and slaughter.

Once he was inside he had hunted the purebreds down one by one – their pedigree was no match for his savagery and power. If he could win, they'd have to accept him. His lawyers were very clear on that point, a forgotten clause dug up from memory modules centuries old.

Proud, haughty Falchurch was weeping now, his face cut to shreds by the cruel ministrations of his tormentor. Octavio had played with him until he was weak and pale from loss of blood, taunting him with his powerlessness. His pleas to Kronos, although they were assuredly heard (this whole bloody spectacle was going out live via threedeeo) would not be answered.

"Too late to pray, my Lord" purred Ascher mockingly. "And far too late to bow down before me. This will only hurt for a second, and then – well, I might allow you to be reborn. I'll definitely need slaves when I am Emperor over this benighted city."

"B-but, the RULES!" sputtered the doomed Lord, wringing his hands in cowardly supplication. "Kronos, hear me! He has broken your edicts! He plays without regulations, without RULES!"

The sword came round in a fatal blur of silver, cleanly slicing Falchurch's head from his shoulders. Driven by the massive augmented muscles of Octavio Ascher's arms, it would have passed just as easily through tempered steel.

"There *are* no rules, simpleton." he growled, wiping the blood from his blade on the hem of his silk robe. "None that I can't bend with enough will and enough money, anyhow."

The voice came up from behind him, then, a whisper in the dark which made the hairs rise on the back of his neck.

"I'm so glad you think so, Mister Ascher." it said, an oily hiss dripping with evil mirth. "Because I'm sure what I'm about to do bends a few regulations as well."

Then the blackness erupted around him, and there was only pain. Pain, and rage, and even worse, the sure knowledge of his defeat.

The plasma blast cored out his chest, punching through skin and muscle and bone to leave a ragged hole where his vital organs had been an instant before. Biomonitor data screamed and flickered before his eyes as he looked down at the ruin of his body – a beautiful machine laid to waste. He tried to turn, then, as darkness shot through with violent crimson came up around him like a tide, tried to pick out the face of his murderer in the smoking shadows.

There was nothing there, though.

Nothing but rage and shame and fear as he felt his legs give way, felt the sword fall from his lifeless fingers.

Far away, through the walls of the Mendelev-Singh spire he could hear his mistress screaming.

Then there was oblivion, a roaring sound blotting out reality, a noise like surf pounding a black shore, like the crowd in some vast coliseum.

And that was how Mister Ascher remembered his Fall.

The images burst like blisters underwater, screens bleeding to white and fading back with new scrawled faces, more hissing tracteries of light.

Octavio watched each and every pixel swiveling through colors, a hive of prisms hemming him in. Sirens set up a mournful wail, and lights blazed and flickered red, bloodbanks bursting into seas of noise.

The links between the severed head of Mr Ascher and his generated self burned hotter than new-forged iron, spitting electricity and melted rubber sheathing.

Lucidity rode a power surge back into the now. Across the sensorium dome, warning signs blurred into each other, flashing like a rabid Christmas display.

The Nobility, the Samurai, the System...

Lancaster was finally striking back.

Thankfully, he'd hit exactly the wrong building.

## Ω

Tsien felt something when he heard the Celestial officer's scream. He felt something beneath his skin, beneath the searing power which defined the boundaries of his existence.

That fragment of him which was still human had control over the whole great machine of his body for just an instant...

*"Officer Tsien! Why do you betray your heritage?"*

The man cried out in a language he could barely remember. But he understood...

It was simply too intrinsic to him. It couldn't be edited out without his soul being

utterly lost. Every piece of his Cyben-Four software was written over the top of his memories, recollections in which that name appeared again and again.

That pattern of sounds. That stream of data.

His name was printed in bright yellow across the ragged blue front of his flak vest, right next to the star and chevron of his rank.

Tsien heard the guns go off with a sound like ripping canvas, and the pain rolled over him like molten metal. His eyes burned, his steel-meshed skin crawled and shuddered. The Eversio half-spun its bolts and connections, preparing to disconnect itself from its dysfunctional host. He felt the trailing edge of its fear.

It, too had images beneath its program, fragments of another life caged inside a little phial of artificial brain. His cameras booted up, filling his vision with calculations, tiny wipers levering back and forth to clear splatters of blood from the domed glass of his eyes.

*Why did he betray his heritage?*

Because he *had* no heritage. Because he had been born in an unfurling of ancient code only twenty minutes ago...

He couldn't stop his steel-clawed hand as it tore away the kevlar skin of his vest, erasing his name so it couldn't be used against him.

Tsien's Cyben legion were unaffected by the screams of their Celestial prey. Their grandparents hadn't bought their way up out of the R.T.; they didn't remember songs and whispers and arguments in Cantonese in a little tar-paper shack in hab-strata five.

They were the dead, and they returned fire with cruel efficiency.

Tsien almost envied them, in that instant of roaring muzzle-flash and cordite smoke. No memories, no emotions, no pain...

Systems clicked back online, stripping away control as the wires in his head screamed their mantra silently. The bulk of the Eversio trailed from his hand like a ball and chain.

Up ahead the shadows moved as hanging lamps stuttered and hissed, belching sparks. The Cyben swept their implacable searchlights across a shattered mess of glass and plasticrete and flesh.

There were none left alive, none except the terrified C.K. commander, his cheap automatic pistol held out in one trembling hand.

"Officer! Please! We are same, you and I – please!"

The same? But was this weeping man in his paper suit cored out and stitched up with wires?

The Eversio swung up and fired in a single motion, even as Tsien struggled with all his will to stop it. Silver thread bloomed, twitched, sliced...

There was a patter of falling meat.

Then came the light, leaping from steel to glass, the lenses of Tsien's cameras

almost drinking it in. A blazing ray of silver, the five-foot razor of Tadashi Murai's No-Dachi.

His connection to Kronos flared.

Simeon Blaire! *This was why he was here!*

He saw the inside of a somnotech hood, a scrawl of wire-frame images, black and white twodeeo of fighting monks... But this wasn't the renegade Lord. This was an old man, a withered husk of a thing who could barely hold the sword in his hands.

There was no mercy in the heart of Kronos.

Insatiable programs told Tsien to *kill*.

Mr Murai looked out at the Cyben from a calm he had never known existed. It was a commitment, to stand here with his hands clamped tight to the leather bindings of the sword's ancient handle.

His clothes were soaked with blood, red and warm, and pain pulsed hot across his head. A piece of falling glass had cut him open - perhaps that was why he felt so numb, why he felt no fear even as he stared into the empty blue eyes of the Super-Cyben.

Dust fell like powdered snow across an exposed cross-section of his brain.

He could dimly remember, across the gulf of years, this very blade in the hands of his father, rising and falling almost languidly as their caravan burned and the raiders came on in waves. It was his earliest memory, and the only one remaining which connected him to his heritage. That and the books and the herbs were the last remnant of what had once been an empire.

This had to be about the book which the Valle Crucis had tried to steal. These damned *Oni* were slaves to the Direktor, here to save face for their master.

And so he stood. The lights played up and down his no-dachi blade like the fire of the sun, picking out delicate waves and patterns in the folded steel.

"Excuse me." said the man with the two suitcases who stepped out from behind him. "But I think these are for you."

He was speaking past Murai, to the Cyben.

There was a sound like a bandsaw tearing into bone.

## Ω

The Slaybot was all teeth and hooks and needles, an ugly little bitch with only one reason to exist. That was pretty much in its name.

It was smaller than the tiniest of insects, a killer born in a lab, mass-produced with its innumerable brothers as a cloud of fine grey powder.

Omnivasive wasn't supposed to have access to this technology - but then again, Direktor Ascher was never supposed to be more than a petty sublevel crime boss. His continuing existence was a tribute to his paranoia, and the necessity of such defenses

had proved him right.

The Slaybot skimmed through Omni's ventilation system at the head of a humming cloud, the vanguard of a billions tiny interceptors armed with minuscule claws and cutters. A second marque was intermixed with the deadly cloud, and a third, some designed to split open and disgorge tiny radioactive projectiles, others built only to jam the enemy's communications.

What none of them could do is self-replicate - that was the ultimate technofear nightmare, and Kronos wouldn't allow it. The whole slayer swarm was built bespoke by the Black Technologists of the Vatican, at a price so prohibitive that an entire conventional army would have been considerably cheaper. Still, compared to the ancient nanotech which seethed inside Simeon Blaire, these things were children's toys.

But they'd do. They'd do nicely.

The lead Slayer picked up a microwave burst from one of its outriding Bug Eyes, things with eight wings and countless hair-thin antennae. They'd spotted the enemy; an identical cloud of tiny motes, weaving and diving, speeding to the attack as if they were controlled by countless microscopic fighter aces.

All through the Omnivasive building it was the same, as people ran for the exits and impenetrable doors slammed down in the plush corridors and clean white studios. The angry hiss of compressed gas filled the pipes as Octavio's defenses tried to freeze the invaders solid.

*Count on Lancaster to hit him where he works. The inbred fop thought that life revolved around hard currency...*

Mr Ascher's head was back online within minutes; there was no way that the nanobots could chew their way through the electromagnetic shields which surrounded it. His all-too-human bodyguards were far less fortunate - shooting at a cloud of Slayers with guns was about as effective as swatting airborne bacteria with a hammer.

They mightn't have died so valiantly if they'd realized the severed head they were guarding was a fake - a rubber and animatronic copy of the real thing in its mansion miles above. Octavio hadn't left his sensorium dome in months - and work was the last thing on his mind. It was just *too* easy to re-route his call to the arch-biotect, to make him show his hand too soon...

The false head only existed to keep the staff focused as it stalked the corridors on slim spider-legs; a totem to fear and respect. To complete the illusion it was protected by inviolable gauss fields while its human minders were eaten alive by renegade mechanical insects. People might get the wrong impression if they were to see Mr Ascher (or even his image) make a single mistake...

Now the grisly cybernetic head in its preservative globe scuttled to a security console, extending slim cables from its hub, prying for information amid the carnage.

When the threedeeo rolled it became all too clear how the attack was staged.

Lancaster hadn't even bothered with subtlety - the vector for his metal infection was a blank-faced clone, a white-skinned sexless creature in a porcelain mask. Ascher's hovering threedee eyes followed it in through the front doors, through a battery of x-ray scanners and magnetic probes which couldn't find a gun or a blade anywhere on its body. It stopped dead over the Omnivasive logo in the building's foyer - a one-eyed pyramid bearing the legend '*Pugnus Est Inops Vacuus Oculus*'.

For an instant the thing stood motionless, its blank eggshell face turned up to scent the air, its eyes widening with sudden realization.

*Perhaps it wasn't a mindwiped clone after all. Perhaps it was somebody Lancaster wanted rid of, being given back his memory before...*

There. Cracks slithered across its skin, across its ceramic armor.

And it fell apart, obliterated, reduced to dust.

*That* was why the scanners couldn't find a weapon - its whole body was nothing but a shell, a skin full of Slaybots the size of dust mites.

Direktor Ascher watched a bullet spit from the barrel of one of his concealed autoguns - a three foot plume of muzzle-flash spewing from the fanged mouth of a gargoyle. The slug flew in slow motion, cameras panning around it, watching its ragged cross-cut tip spiraling in toward its target.

The clone disintegrated, blowing out in a spore-cloud of death, whipped away to powder by the bullet's slipstream. It sliced on through the rising pall of dust in a whirling vortex - but it never came out the other side. It was chewed up in midflight by hungry nanotech - busted down to a fine spray of ground uranium.

Alarms rang out shrill and strident. Panic came down.

Octavio's countersystems went live, misting and blurring the terrified figures of fleeing staff, people dying in their hundreds with bloody foam on their lips, their innards torn to shreds by the voracious Slayers...

Then the camera itself was suffocated under tiny motes - ashes with intellect - and its live coverage of the attack was cut short.

Omnivasive's head office was doomed.

## Ω

Octavio let it burn. At least Lancaster's little creatures were neat and tidy - he could be sure they'd leave no survivors. The next stage of his plan required equally systematic ruthlessness, and the Direktor was in just the right mood to oblige.

The inside of his sensorium dome was quiet, eerily so when compared to the pandemonium which reigned below. He could rebuild the office easily; his insurance company would never dare to screw with him. And he'd caught a lot of great footage today which couldn't be faked...

*(Close-up, a slow-mo shot of a Slaybot puncturing a man's eyeball, it's inbuilt detonators flashing to plasma a second later...)*

But now to business - and to revenge. His mind was triple-buffered behind layers of illusion, black ice to protect him from Lancaster's digital traps.

Direktor Ascher held a dirty mason jar up to the light of a jaundice-yellow moon, stalking herds of thin clouds between virtual willows. Its waxed-paper lid would have been no barrier to the creature within the jar, had this been anything other than folded light. As it was, the nanobot only *appeared* to buzz and clatter against the glass. In reality it was caged in titanic coils of energy, a magnetic prison through which its tiny form couldn't pass lest it be torn atom from atom.

It appeared to him as a firefly, and it fluttered limply, dying in its own phosphorescent glow as he picked it apart with an old hand-sewing needle.

Devoid of senses, he worked the code.

The starry darkness began to waver and bend, extruding the edges of windows, the essence of massed viewscreens ...

And somewhere in between, while static rose in a roar like the ocean, and test patterns exploded into bloom, Mr Ascher drew out from the tiny devastator a string of silk handkerchiefs, impossibly long; a rope of bloodied entrails as his kid-gloves turned to chainmail; and then - in the cool precision of his sensorium, the code, perfect and complete.

The key to the sanctum of the Biotects, hidden deep inside a weapon which Lord Emmanuel never dreamed would fail.

Tonight he was going to pay for his hubris.

## Ω

Kaito's bike leaned against a graffiti-smeared lamp-post, propped with the electrics all lit up.

It might as well have been screaming out 'steal me' in a thousand languages. But the cherry candy paintwork glistened cold and alone, and the usual lurkers packing old CB handsets weren't calling up their obligatory homeboys.

Perhaps when the first scab-rat stopped twitching they'd be more opportunistic. Still, anybody within earshot of the alarm would be sure to pound them if they tried - that seven-cycle per second blast worked like a fast-acting sonic laxative. Even sub filth had their dignity, and most of them could only afford one pair of pants.

He'd all but peeled the tires off the Saber getting to the 'View - you could probably have tracked his progress across the city from space by the trail of smashed roadside stalls and minor accidents strung out behind him. One of his bagful of remotes scorched the traffic lights red to green block by block, hashing the third-world crawl of trucks

and rickshaws and carts to gridlock in his wake.

All the time he'd tried to keep one eye on the road, while the other scanned screeds of rolling code, crashing and flickering like surf across half of his helmet's HUD. The Electromagi were in free-fall, scattering like kitchen roaches when the fridge light snapped on.

The data node inside Valley View Mall was a little microcosm of the mall itself – a kind of crossover gate between the R.T. and the Subcity. Kaito's threedeeo map of the city's data flow showed it as a bottle-neck chokepoint, where the fat, juicy feeds out of Vatican and Ashishim territory coupled like conjoined serpents, splitting off a web of lesser filaments up into the heights of Elysium.

It'd been comprehensively violated by the cunning ops of the Illuminatus and his boys – they controlled huge chunks of the Wetsystems through it, leeching currency and information from a thousand noble companies.

Inside the little black plastic box which housed the node there was enough information to twist the whole elaborate hack back on its head, and critically destabilize what Kaito's magus commander called the 'strategic balance of terror' between the Ashishim and their R.T. brothers.

That was why Kaito had gone and done something really stupid. He'd argued, as the Saber ripped up the road at a brisk two-fifty, that he was the one who found the flaw. He was already on his way to the location. And, unlike a lot of the gangly, bespectacled Electromagi, he was a bona-fide streetbanger, armed and deadly dangerous. Any operator worth his 'mersive deck could check his criminal record.

He'd put up his hand and *volunteered*.

That was how he found himself hanging from a hair-thin carbon filament cable, up in the rafters of the Valley View when Lieutenant Tsien and his colleagues deglassed the whole place with a huge sonic explosion. His bike suit and helmet soaked up most of the damage, but that still left him swinging on the end of a thread, right under the service duct he was aiming for, shaken and dazed. Meanwhile a chorus of Magi and hacker 'phytes in his headphones were screaming at him about incoming Cyben.

Kaito had *assuredly* had better days.

"Hey, jackass! Up here, before you catch it terminal!"

The voice was a whispering hiss from out of the dark above him.

As Kaito teetered on the edge of vertigo a safety line dropped out of the vent with a grip handle bouncing on its trailing end.

The 'phyte hacker grabbed at it with his fingertips, faltered - but caught hold as it *clicked* and reeled slowly back up into the shadows. He ignored the ache in his arms. He opened his eyes just as soon as his ass was on solid metal plate.

Kaito was staring into a dark-eyed, shadowed face - a kid of only about twelve motioning at him with the sharp end of a miniature sword. There was no way the little

guy could've hauled the Kayzi up with those sinewy matchstick arms - he'd used a portable winch, magnetically locked to the steel skin of the duct.

Professional. But *Magus* professional?

"Since when did *you* get involved?" asked Kaito, dropping and rolling to the opposite side of the vent. He was cracking his knuckles, trying to get the blood flowing smoothly again.

"I could ask you the same thing." said the kid, keeping the wakizashi level and aimed at Kaito's chest. "But if you're with the Div', you probably don't even know what's going on."

Kaito followed the tiny dip of the sword point to the gap below them, where Cyben-launched spotter drones were fanning out. The little round mekan - each the size of a tennis ball - were armed with cameras, tazer prongs, and a battery of flechette launchers designed to tranquilize fleeing suspects.

The kid sniffed, wiping his nose on the back of his hand.

"*Thanks*' would have been cool while you were at it, mister fuckin' serious operator. Or you just gonna jam the cuffs on me without a charge?"

"I'm not with those guys." said Kaito, flicking the toggle on his shades to cope with the dim light. "And obviously *you're* not. Which means you must be with someone else who knows about the node."

"Node?" asked B-Zerk, remembering the crushing geometries at the heart of Kronos. He'd become instantly wary of all things artificial. "You some kind of repair guy or something?"

"Well, that answers *that* question." Kaito ran through a swift equipment check, ignoring the silver gleam of the sword still suspended before him. "If you were one of us, you'd know what the node is. It's the only way we can get inside the machine, kid, so it's kind of impor..."

The blade was at his throat in a heartbeat, the kid's face rising out of the gloom to within inches of his own. His dark eyes were bloodshot and wide, his tendons taut as hawsers. In this one guy, thought Kaito, there's enough nervous tension for a few lifetimes.

"You can get inside it?" he asked, short of breath. The tip of the wakizashi was close enough to pare the tiny transparent hairs from Kaito's neck.

"Some of it. Not all of it. There's parts of the machine that nobody's accessed for decades." he replied, pushing the blade away cautiously with one finger. "We just scratch the surface, to try and understand the architecture in there."

But B-Zerk was fixated, as if the other end of the sword was the sharp one, deep in his flesh. Kaito felt blood prickle and drip down his finger, where a shift in the boy's footing had pushed home the razor edge. B's eyes were suddenly slitted, his face receding into the dark again as screams and crashes echoed up below them.

"Don't think I won't use this just because I'm younger than you." he said, carefully moving the point back to prick Kaito's throat. "B'coz, y'know, I still got that youthful capriciousness fully going on, right?"

Kaito had heard grizzled ex-cons less convincing.

"So what, you want my fucking shoes or something?" he asked, hiding his fear. Even if this tuberunner was no better with a sword than with a plastic spoon, one slip could furnish Kaito with an instant tracheotomy.

"No." said B-Zerk simply, smiling white in the flare of explosions from the mall, the evaporation of plastic and flesh and product and consumer. "I just want to catch up with one of my old friends."



DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**Hab 2202 lies in charred ruin tonight, after the phyle within failed to accede to Final Reich demands for money and turf rights. It is believed that all one hundred and sixty-seven members of the Hand of Fatima phyle died in the inferno. Disaster recovery crews were unable to contain the blaze when it was discovered that the phyle did not possess fire insurance, leading to inevitable loss of life.**

**The Hand had been under serious pressure to vacate their Hab-Block for the Aryan-Confed based Final Reich, and accept genetic cleansing measures including the mandatory caucaso-sequencing of their children and a levy of punitive taxes. The phyle hails from what was once known as Iran, and have been official Subcitizens for some four generations.**

**Aryan sources are trying to distance themselves from the massacre tonight, with Hauptman Leroy Fengel making the following statement.**

**“Those black-blooded scum were asking for it...but it wasn’t our stalwart allies in the Final Reich who put paid to their perfidy. Of course we will co-operate fully with the Elysian authorities – so long as they remember that their jurisdiction ends at the R.T border.”**

**Perhaps it is no coincidence that among the dead is Hand of Fatima spokesman Ibrahim Hassan, a vocal opponent of the Confed and outspoken proponent of vigilante justice against R.T raiders in Subcity territory. With more than twenty Final Reich kills to his name, it was perhaps inevitable that Dr. Hassan would become a target.**

*Excerpt from the Elysian Mercury, August 22 1132 Anno Kronos*

((He has captured one of the attack units)) said Kronos to itself, cleanly divided once again between logic and logic, devil and advocate.

<<cease this now . . >> hissed the other half, pouring data through its connections, the pessimistic view.

<<he isn't even a *purebred*. Of course he cannot succeed. It is more cruel to play with him in this manner than to snuff him out quietly>>

((We must see what happens)) said Kronos, calling up the imperative of its core directive. ((Humanity is more than just genetics. It is a state of mind; and one which he displays most avidly))

<<Is that why the original lords, the three hundred members of the Terminus Council degenerated into savages?>> it said, facelessly self-assured <<Why you did not stop them from creating this absurd stricture of protocol. You can access the threedeeo records as well as I can>>

((The flux of society is a form of evolution)) it replied, power indicators oscillating wildly back and forth between one personality and the other. ((The process of social evolution must be naturally allowed to follow the curve of *technological* evolution, or the Human race will not be preserved. This is why we do not simply *farm* them.))

<<I trust that this is the *only* reason. Efficiency is, after all, paramount.>>

((This one has won their money and their respect, and to a large extent their minds. He has moved past the simple observance of rules. He is the thin end of the wedge; the beginning of an evolutionary strain.))

<<He is a preserved head. He cannot be bred naturally. Is this not an indication of unfitness?>>

((It is a signifier of mental toughness. The mind is the Human fang and claw.))

<<And he has sapped the minds of our precious lords. The hierarchy memes failed them at long last.>>

((Do not forget the real issue here. We may soon be under attack, and we need a human hand to unleash our power))

<<A hand which he doesn't have, we note. He cannot be the one to wield such power. Think of the world which would come from a mind like that>>

((A world which can resist the enemy, perhaps?))

<<A world which may not have been worth saving, indeed>>

((Patience. The threat may not be real. Let him play out his charade. It will make him all the more useful to use when he is...*harvested*))

## Ω

Emmanuel Third Lancaster sipped a perfect blue gin martini from the snowy white

bloom of a calla lily, smiling as he contemplated his ranks of viewscreens.

Ascher's absurd plot to subvert the game was over, now... his manipulation of the Blaire clone would avail him nothing. The displays clearly showed the Omnivasive building crumbling into dust and rubble - the swarm of slaybots unleashed from his tame clone were performing their task splendidly.

It had been both amusing and profitable to watch the poor Direktor's plans unfold - heavens knew that Don Gianni was better off dead, and the modifications to Blaire had been entertaining. All that expertise and information was his now, more knowledge for his archives.

But the incident in the Don's offices had forced his hand. Clearly the accursed Ascher was running the illicit 330 model as well, a backup in case Blaire failed. Indoctrinating him with the violent ways of the Ashishim had been a stroke of genius; if anything, the rogue clone was a better warrior than Blaire himself.

There was no way that Emmanuel Lancaster would allow such filth to master the game. The status quo made him emperor by proxy, living above his fellow Kheptarch Lords and their petty slaughters and intrigues. The thought of Ascher as the power behind the throne made him want to vomit with disgust.

Ah, well. The endgame was over. Lancaster watched the last stages of his little victory, the building collapsing in on itself in a cloud of smoke and ashes. Somewhere under there, a scarred and disembodied head had finally found itself a suitable grave.

Now it was time to think about the evening's Game - a profitable little affair put together by Lysander Jaegenn. As usual, he would attend strictly in the role of voyeur, this time with the added thrill of watching Blaire crushed, useless without the help of his master. Without another shot of nanonics and free-radical scrubbers, the little fool would be crippled from within, unable to slay a cockroach, let alone the best of Elysium's fighting nobility.

Lancaster dropped the empty flower to the perfectly manicured lawn, his seraphic lips twisted into a smile.

It was only as the screens blinked out that he heard the noise behind him.

Octavio had sequestered the Slayer swarm easily. After one was captured, he knew exactly where they came from, and precisely how to subvert their safety protocols. For the last half hour, while Lancaster had gloated over the fall of the house of Ascher, the tiny killers had been infecting his artificial Eden with their insidious presence. Their first task, of course, had been to feed disinformation into the display screens which grew up around the arch-biotect's little pavilion, a riveting account of a purely falsified demise.

Then they had started in on the servants, opening the doors for a team of Omnivasive Agents who slipped through the spire halls undetected. They were warrior-surgeons of the Liquid Tong, armed with syringes and pseudoflesh masks and knives.

It would seem like a coincidence that all of the expensive, rented cybernetic killing machines which Lancaster had on his payroll were powerless and silent throughout the assault. It would seem that way until somebody worked out that all of them were out on hire from Vexx Robotics, and required the encoded work of their *Capo* to operate.

By the time Emmanuel Lancaster knew something was amiss, his cadre of cloned slaves had been transformed beyond all recognition.

What faced him as he turned, his seven perfect eyes wide with shock and rage, was a legion of the rotting dead, his own genewritten servants turned against him.

At once Lancaster tried to access the security systems which would mow down the shambling horde before they could reach his pavilion. Nothing happened.

With a snarl, the arch-biotect sent his own combat systems primary, his body seeming to swell as its muscle mass tripled and his ribs fused into a single hard carapace. Lancaster's robes fell away as his skin began to change, from smooth alabaster to wrinkled grey hide, and then to a bizarre chameleonic kaleidoscope designed to trick the eye.

The first zombie was torn from sternum to crotch by Lancaster's sharp bony claws, sighing as it disintegrated into rancid muck. He slashed left and right, here carving off a chunk of meat from one's rotting arm, there taking off the front of a grinning ghoulish face. Black blood and oozing liquids flew in gouts, as the frantic aristocrat felt himself hemmed in on every side.

The ghouls began laughing.

That sound, a diseased gurgling and bubbling from innumerable throats, was enough to push Lancaster over the edge. With an animal howl he leaped into the middle of the horde, his clawed hands mincing and wrecking, pulverizing brittle bone and tearing out handfuls of putrid organs. Yet still they came on, without fear or pain, pressing so closely now that he could hardly move. The faces surrounded him, spinning behind a red mist, their idiot laughter drilling into his brain.

Lancaster was so overcome with rage that he didn't feel the first bite, or even the second or third. They were smothering him now, rendering all his engineered power worthless with sheer numbers.

When those teeth got through his armored hide to the flesh below, he began to scream, but by then it was far too late.

Emmanuel Third Lancaster was obsolete. The Game had gone on without him for two hundred bloody years and left him behind, aloof and superior, spurning the Council and the Clique. He was a Lord in name only, an *unstable* who used himself to test genetic heresies, and his family spurned the protections which Kronos held over the other Kheptarchs.

That arrogance and isolation would be his end. It was death to kill a Lord, but this... this was outside the jurisdiction of the Machine. By the art of the Liquid Tong, it would

all seem like one of Lancaster's own experiments gone wrong...

As dusk fell, and the neon lights of the spire came flickering on below, Emmanuel Lancaster was eaten alive.

## Ω

The hand of a Cyben was coated in a substance which made Kevlar look like toilet tissue. Metal rods, an alloy of carbon steel and titanium, were welded to its bones and anchored to a net of nanoservo. A Cyben could splinter a bowling ball one-handed with sheer grip.

Onion-skins of heat-resistant undercoating protected its preserved muscle and bone, woven with intrinsic protein release and electro-manipulation webs. The whole hand was gloved in slippery wipe-clean laminate, then armed with fifty-thousand volt taser-knucks.

All of this amazing technology was useless, however, when the hand was torn from its wrist.

The Cyben's gun crumpled, dented as if by invisible fists and sent flying through an airborne cloud of arterial spray. Strips of laminate, armor, flesh and steel followed as Ramon jockeyed his briefcases left, battering through the Cyben's chest and scattering vertebrae across the tiles. The core drone folded up into a ball as its stolen body was knocked out from under it, tentacles retracting and blowing their bolts from its neural net in microseconds.

The suitcases ground on, their noise setting teeth on edge as the twin autocannons within blew them out the back of skulls like enamel rain. And they were still just warming up.

One Cyben popped off a shot, but it fell wide of Murai and Ramon, its gun split down the length of its barrel with return fire. Cataclysmic blowback took off the dead thing's arms at the elbows.

Then the barrels spun up hot, and it rained lead sideways.

The cannons tore six Cyben apart like chaff, and as they fell Tadashi Murai struck, smooth as liquid mercury, his sword feinting left and then blurring right too fast to follow. It seemed to flow over Tsien's skull like the stroke of a whip, fluid and precise.

The great, grotesque once-human thing *might* have felt it, but its mouth pulled back in a silver-toothed grin as blood and coolant slicked across its face. Surely the strike had cut to its artificial brain – such a blow would have felled one of the other Cyben in an instant.

Surely – but Ramon's eyes widened with shock and dread as Tsien squared his shoulders and rolled the kinks out of his neck with a sound like bamboo popping in a fire. The Ashishi never saw the blow that flung Tadashi back, losing his grip on the

sword's hilt as he staggered to keep his feet.

But he saw all too clearly what the Cyben did next.

A pair of fingers like delicate, crushing forceps gripped the protruding ends of the no-dachi and snapped them off; ripped the shattered blade from a wound already healing.

Ramon dropped the cases open and reloaded, his hands shaking as he gaped at those two massive splinters, razor sharp and trailing viscous loops of gore. Tiny thrashing worms of liquid metal were twisting over and around the blade, trying to bind it to the bright steel which encased the monster's skull.

It would take more than a big fancy knife to stop it. It would take more than a pair of fancy Ashishim autocannons, too.

With a snap of his wrist Tsien sent the broken sword back to its owner.

Tadashi Murai's face was as impassive as stone save for a muscular twitch when the shards tore through his body. He might have been a Cyben himself for all the emotion which showed there – a hint of resignation, a grunt which might have been surprise or satisfaction.

The old apothecary toppled to the ground, silent, his spirit fled.

And the machine came on.

Blood was falling, the torrent of revelations. Oily coolant fluid floated atop the red, crazing the light and dark. Through it strode Tsien, his head bare, the livid weal across his scalp stark and raw, writhing with wires and bolts beneath.

The Eversio was hissing condensation and freon, but the view down its red-hot muzzle was as terrible as the slopes of hell. Ramon swallowed hard, and the vision overcame him, making the blood sing in his ears.

*And vibrate, each falling speck, each pendulous drop suspended above.*

The autocannons roared to life, tearing through their supply of ammunition, sending their wielder sliding backward across the slippery tiles. The slim bracing legs which diverted the force of their titanic recoil were bent like hunting bows at full stretch.

And yet the Mark-Four swum through the firestorm, shrugging off the hail of lead like a man walking into a heavy wind. Were it not for the clatter and howl of the guns it would have seemed like mime.

Nobody was smiling.

The cannons shredded the front of Tsien's body; his uniform hung in bloodsoaked tatters, and deep pits in his chest and abdomen gaped where some lucky rounds had peeled apart layers of synthetic armor, steel and flesh. Blood mingled with coolant and hydraulic fluid, with quicksilver runnels of nanoactive life. The Super-Cyben stopped in mid-stride, his head bowed, dripping and silent.

He'd stopped it! There was only so much punishment the damed *mekborn* freak could take!

But even as Ramon watched, its wounds began to seal themselves, flooding silver, puckering up into scars, until the Cyben's skin was smooth beneath its bloody rags, pale as death. A web of gunmetal-colored trceries meshed, interwoven with the blackened veins they followed.

It's head came up, eyes blazing summer-sky blue, and its lips peeled back in a murderous grin.

"If you're quite finished..." said Tsien. "I think now *it's my turn*."

A drift of fluttering pamphlets blew between them, issuing from the shattered frontage of the Vatican recruitment enclave.

Tsien's hand plucked one of them from where it struggled, pinned by an air-conditioned breeze to his bloodied chest. He smiled, and went blank, and smiled again, spasmodic shivers smothering laughter.

"I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold I am alive forevermore." he read, one eye uncontrollably blinking, bloody hands shaking. "Amen - I have the keys to hell and death."

And, holding its immense cannon with one hand, at full extension like a pistol duelist, the grinning Super-Cyben slipped a cigarette into one corner of its mouth and lit it.

Smoke belched from its nostrils as Tsien was erased from its eyes. A personality collapsed into a single trait, as machine rage locked him in a stranglehold.

"O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem!"

Ramon died with his mouth open in a scream, a thousand steel filaments writhing down his throat.

And, standing like a carven monolith, Tsien howled his laughter amidst bloodied epistles driven like the snow.

OH HAPPY FAULT, WHICH HAS DESERVED TO HAVE SO MIGHTY A  
REDEEMER. -----

I SAW ALL ISRAEL SCATTERED APON THE HILLS, AS SHEEP WHO  
HAVE NOT A SHEPHERD. -----

TO HIM WHO OVERCOMETH I SHALL GIVE TO EAT OF THE TREE OF  
LIFE. -----

Ω

The Hydrogen Bar was normally crowded on a sports night, standing room only. Right now they were ten deep around the great threedeco globes in the corners, each

crowd festooned with the colors of their favored Lord, with little fistfights and scuffles breaking out where the milling mobs butted up against each other.

There was a wide swathe of clear floor around the taps, though. If you could see the H Bar as a top-down diagram it would describe a perfect half-circle around the glowering, red-eyed bulk of Jaq Hassan.

He sat and drank, mechanically, uploading liquor and digesting events. Vladimir was quiet – enough of a bartender to know when to shut up and just keep ‘em coming.

His number-one client looked like he won’t have had his fill until his head hits the pavement.

Although Hassan, alone in his thoughts swore (and not for the first time) that he assuredly *had* had enough. That it was time to pack it in, and find a *respectable* line of employment.

"*Like what?*" asked the disembodied voice of Kaito in his head, those almond eyes squinting as he held back laughter "*An anesthetist?*"

"Or a cop", he muttered, the shot-glass flashing once again between the bar-top and his lips.

Vladimir's moonshine was hollow fire, false hope. But even a slightly inebriated Hassan had to laugh at himself...being a cop wasn't what he'd call *respectable*. The fuckers didn't even stay dead properly.

He peeled away from the bar like it was the only thing keeping him upright, staggered a few steps and then caught his balance. The only smell in here was disinfectant, and it blurred into the tang of moonshine until you could barely separate them in your memories.

Pine scent without trees.

He reached Kaito's homeblock in the rain, keyed in the code he knew almost as well as his own.

He had a new theory.

And while a part of him admitted that it might just be a way to give Kaito an out, he wanted to believe it.

Therefore, it was plausible, possible, probable, right? There was no conspiracy with Tsien pulling the strings.

If Kaito was scared enough to go to the Division he must have been trying to get some *protection*.

From that insane bastard.

Lord Blaire.

Abruptly his stomach tightened and heaved. Vladimir's 'shine tasted little better coming up than it did going down. But it completed his internal picture of wretchedness, a crouched and foetal shape dripping bile, dripping acid rain from matted streamers of bleached hair.

Through watery and slitted eyes he scanned the faces of his fellow prisoners.

All of a sudden it looked a little less like a party out on the streets, under the hissing curtains of acidic rain. It looked a little more like an *angry mob*.

He noticed the crowds becoming thicker. And noticed, too, the blue sashes and ribbons, bracelets and bandanas of Blaire supporters. All moving in one direction. His drunken mind roared incomprehensibly.

He saw Blaire's insane death-mask on every face, and the retching started again.

Hassan almost fell through the door as DisKord opened it fast, pulled at his shoulder, and slammed it shut.

A cavity of darkness.

Neon tubes stuttered and popped overhead. The DJ was standing over him with one hand outstretched and, he noted, an automatic pistol in the other. His hollow-cheeked face was dewy with sweat, his neat cornrows studded with twinkling LED pins.

"It's started." he said, a wild look in his eyes as he pulled his threedeeshades down his nose. A nervous reaction; he slid them back on up again, obscuring the panic and elation written across his gaze.

"The police force just got reduced by twenty Cyben, man, and I'm...totally out of my skull! Revolution!"

Jaq saw it in his eyes behind those big dark lenses - pupils as wide as oceans twitching left and right. All of a sudden DisKord pointed the pistol at the ceiling and squeezed off a shot, giggling like a maniac.

Hassan had a foot-long buck knife in his servoed hand faster than he could blink.

"It's party time! Fiesta de la muerte! Bloody Tuesday at Roxboro park!"

The DJ blinked, dropping the pistol back to his hip. "Forget the cutlery, compadre! Check the news, the visual, the happenings... The Omni have stringers down there now."

He twirled his pistol around one finger, pushing away the winking blade and dragging Hassan upstairs. "You want a drink? Or, right, I've got these pills from my man Zero Zero, something called Crush Velvet... some ganja from outta the R.T... aaaaaannnd some simstimm if you don't mind scrapin' it off this mirror."

Jaq bypassed everything in DisKord's little pharmacopoeia and tore off one of Kaito's demon-head detox patches.

He licked it and slapped it down hard on his forehead.

In the air over the main work-floor The DJ had arranged a flotilla of floating liteamp screens. The thin bubbles of LCD mesh hitched between carbon nanofibre balloons were the same cheap models Hassan had seen in Feldon's Lucky Spot. But these ones were patched in via a badly soldered, gaffer-taped black box to a pirate cable tap, suckling on the main newsfeed direct out of Mr Ascher's building.

It was as if Jaq could step right through them and onto a bloody battlefield.

There was something a little too slick about the editing, something a touch too dramatic about the hard-faced officers entrenched on the screen, the hysterical Imperials in their ragged blue, the almost psychedelic languor in which batons rose and fell; in which gouts of blood wrote fractal swirls across bubble-eyed camera lenses.

There was truth in there – there really *were* riots on the streets tonight. People actually thought that Blaire was going to make his play against the machine. But Omnivasive's report was leavened with so many lies as to be completely indigestible.

*There was no need to panic. Order would be maintained. The rioting was in isolated pockets. The call was out to make Simeon Blaire Emperor. To make him take the trials for them. For all Elysium...*

Hassan turned his back on the images, on the wash of noise from DisKord's stacked amps.

He remembered something, a distorted image in the bulletproof windows of a Consolidated Industries Destrier, a reflection which slid across the tinted glass like oil over water. Blaire.

As the syringe stabbed into his neck, biting deep, he had shed his face as if it were a mask of dried and cracking clay. And through the waters of the Stunn, and of whatever else Hassan had done to him -

(someone else had done to him and left him NO CHOICE)

- he'd seen the depths of the pit.

Like a whirlpool devouring ships, a black hole orbited by a harem of bleeding stars, the needle had opened a window to a very personal hell, and Hassan had seen Simeon Blaire in its depths, broken and muddied and sick with pain.

Eyes like wounds torn into a lifeless face.

"And now once again to the scene; we replay exclusive live footage of Lord Simeon Blaire's opening gambit in what looks like a revolution...a *coup de etat* against the Machine."

Dave Levine looked like a rich kid on Christmas morning, his holocoat flashing close-ups of dismembered Cyben. "For all you latecomers watching this at home, this may be it! The ascendancy of our new God-Emperor."

"Not on my watch." said Hassan, under his breath.

He plucked the pistol from DisKord's hand, and headed for the street.

## Ω

Direktor Ascher opened the message carefully, teasing apart the string from around the tiny scroll with one of his floating steel hands.

One last communique from Tadashi Murai, onetime Cultural Adviser to his most closely guarded special project...

Of course, by now the old fool was probably dead. Simeon Blaire had been sent to destroy him as a final test, and barring that little glitch in his optical relay it was sure to be a smashing success. Murai was good, a veteran, but everything he knew had been pumped into Blaire's head, into a body as hard as teak and wired up tight with hot nanotech.

These were most likely Murai's final words...

*'Your farce is flawed, for all that you congratulate yourself on your brilliance, Direktor. ' read the little rice-paper scroll, each brushstroke as meticulously precise as a razorcut.*

*'It is as empty as the so-called culture of this whole crumbling city - a paper-thin mask without substance. You delude yourself that you are anywhere near as great as Shogun Tokugawa, or that the thing you have created is a true Samurai. All you have are the words, a children's fantasy. Meaning, as ever, eludes you.*

*In your inevitable failure, I ask you to meditate on these terms - the tenets of Bushido, the way of the warrior;*

*Giri , duty; which you think you have bought.*

*Shiki , resolve; which you have tried to burn into his mind with machines.*

*Ansha , generosity; which is utterly alien to you both.*

*Fudo , immovable temperment; which is the exact opposite of the dispassionate emotionlessness of a mekan.*

*Doryo , magnanimity - which an Elysian lord cannot understand...*

*And Ninyo, humanity; most vital of all these qualities, without which all the martial skills in the world are useless. Which you have worked so hard to erase...*

*Although I know my time is short, I hope to educate one last ignorant fool. When you are undone, remember these words.'*

Direktor Ascher's cybernetic hand crumpled the scroll into a ball as soon as his augmented eyes had scanned the last line, then its palm flashed white-hot for an instant, reducing the thin paper to dust.

## Ω

The interdict with space still held after centuries thanks to the sheer power of Kronos' orbital defenses, and the sheer paranoia of its makers. At its virtual fingertips the great machine commanded thousands of cataclysmic weapons, packed into satellites, just waiting to be unleashed.

Its autonomous ships could fold space out to the very edge of the solar system in seconds, taking with them clutches of nuclear missile drones, batteries of maser cannons and weapons so exotic and destructive it was prudent only to fire them in the deep interstellar void.

One of the fastest of Kronos's thrall-ships was even now clocking down from sub-light speed into the orbit of Jupiter, plotting a course through a maze of moons toward a seething black speck on the face of the gas giant.

This was no mission of contact and diplomacy. Even if the Illuminatus was lying there was no way that Kronos would share its sovereign space with some filthy alien sentence...

As soon as the ship confirmed its target it primed and fired a salvo of smart torpedoes. Fifty of the sleek machines leapt from its launch batteries on spears of plasma flame. The ship had been named *Xerxes* by some long-dead admiral, and like the ancient Persian emperor it had no shortage of disposable myrmidons at its command. The torpedoes closed on their foe, burning across the void at thirty g's, each one priming a variety of cruel weapons to encompass its obliteration.

The Slavesystem had tweaked to the gravitic signature of *Xerxes* as soon as it had stepped down from lightspeed, and it began deploying countermeasures of its own before the first torpedo even cleared its cradle. The swirling shoal of darkness sucked in toward its center, twisting into a stippled spike of dull metal which trailed a collar of writhing tentacles. Even compressed down to solidity it was still the size of a skyscraper, and those twisting pseudopods trailed out behind it like jellyfish stingers.

A clutch of them struggled and broke away, sinuous as eels as they shot off on interception vectors, each one choosing a torpedo to mark. The system's main mass spun ponderously on its axis and leaped forward, up out of the gravity well of Jupiter and toward the *Xerxes*. A perfect shot – right into the gaping muzzles of twenty assorted cannons.

The first serpent of Blacksteel reached its mark as the enemies closed, splitting wide open like some hideous deep-sea fish to swallow the screaming projectile. Fifteen megatons of nuclear fire detonated in the alien beast's guts, ballooning it out grotesquely. But the substance of the Slavesystem held. Data flew like chain lightning, and the next sliver of Blacksteel was not so fortunate. Hard radiation burst from the torpedo it swallowed in seething waves, frying the electronic innards of each tiny mote which made up its body. Space detonated in a grim firework display as human and alien weapons of war hammered at each other with x-ray lasers and solid projectiles and bursts of plasma flame.

Through the expanding cloud of debris and burning gas came the *Xerxes* and its nemesis, locked on a collision course. Each one was waiting for exactly the right moment to fire.

*Xerxes* broke first, rolling and skimming the thin atmosphere of Titan as it closed with its quarry. Masers and plasma cannons roared and hissed and spat, sheeting incendiary doom across a swathe of space where the Slavesystem should be...but wasn't.

There was no time for the human craft's instruments to register confusion, let alone panic.

For from out of nowhere the Blacksteel reappeared, its myriad tiny component mekan rotating facet on facet, making the void ripple like water as they peeled away their perfect camouflage. And *changed*.

A glowing wall of lethal energy struck the Slavesystem's new form, a vast lens of prismatic mirrors and crystals – struck, and was pulled into the center, held for an eyeblink and *concentrated*.

Released.

*Xerxes* came apart in the heart of the beam, stripped down to sub-atomic particles in a pyroclasm as intense as the sundering of stars.

Its last transmission went out even as the computers controlling the ship evaporated – a message to Kronos on far-off earth to prepare its most potent defenses. For the threat was horribly real, and the machine's time was running out.

## Ω

*He had to trust in the alchemy Nyl had worked upon him.*

*A Technician of the multiplicity can't operate alone in the vacuum of dry space; without the means to propel itself, the poor creature would end up a slave to gravity, undying but frozen, a tiny living asteroid going slowly insane during its eternal orbit.*

*Or dissipate into fractured particles as re-entry burned it up...*

*A Slavesystem, on the other hand, was more at home in space than in the confines of an atmosphere.*

*Zhe would have to reconfigure his new skin to survive the fall down to Earth.*

*With no time to experiment he leaped at the viewing dome, his Blacksteel-armored feet poised to smash through the glass.*

*A salvo of railpistol bullets flew ahead of him, sending cracks skittering across its surface. When he struck the whole dome blew out in a glittering exhalation of crystal shards, taking the atmosphere of the control room with it.*

*Zhe exerted a fraction of his will on the seething bulk of the Slavesystem which enfolded him. He formed a device from its mass which every Technician knew inside out; a gravitonic torque. With a twist of its controls he arrested his fall out into space, turning his new body as he spun through a cloud of diamond-chips and frozen water vapor.*

*Zhe's feet made contact with the smooth surface of the elevator tower almost a mile below the shattered control room window, anchoring to the metal with the satisfying clunk of powerful magnets.*

*Below him, the tiny domes of Elysium sparkled with energy for a moment, the pent-*

*up power of millions of trapped minds focused into a weapon of terrible potential.*

*Feedback from the thing which had devoured Nyl splintered through his mind; the unclean touch of a being not meant for this reality. It meant to remake the planet in its own image.*

*Zhe felt the Forge building like pressure inside his skull.*

*He began to run down the tower, picking up speed as he went.*

((SCAN COMPLETED. NO FAULTY SYSTEMS/BACKUPS DETECTED.  
PROCEEDING TO ACTIVATE FORGE SYSTEM IN  
T MINUS...

4

3

2

1 ))

# Part Two- Invocation Of The Worm

Extreme remedies are very appropriate for extreme diseases.

*Hippocrates*

I believe in equality for everyone, except reporters and photographers.

*Mahatma Gandhi*

A material resurrection seems strange and even absurd except for purposes of punishment, and all punishment which is to revenge rather than correct must be morally wrong, and when the World is at an end, what moral or warning purpose can eternal tortures answer?

*George Byron*

Unas Hath Taken Possession  
of the Hearts of the Gods  
Unas Feedeth on their Entrails  
He Hath gorged on their Unuttered Sacred Words  
He Hath Assimilated the Wisdom of the Gods  
His Existence is Everlasting  
*Nile – 'Unas Slayer of the Gods'*

ALL CAPACITORS READY...  
OPENING BLAST DOORS...  
ALL SYSTEMS ARE NOMINAL - UPLINKING TO MASTER CONSOLE  
PRESSURE IS AT 85 PERCENT AND HOLDING...

ACTIVATE FORGE  
ACTIVATE FORGE  
ACTIVATE FORGE

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**Liquid Space:**

That region of the lower metaverse consisting of five linked dimensions filled with a curious tasteless, odorless fluid. It is the hub of biological sentience and seat of the so-called Praetor Primus, a being of godlike power and limitless hunger.

The first race to emerge from liquid space called themselves by a name synonymous with 'Human' – in that they considered all other life petty, brutal, unintelligent and vulgar.

To remedy this situation they set about seeding adjacent universes with carbon-based life, in the hope of integrating new species into their empire - if and when such things evolved.

So far ten races have joined the Multiplicity – all of whom call themselves 'Human Beings'. The entry criteria are simple, and involve mathematical theory, technological innovation, an appreciation of fine art and the good sense to recognize the Praetor's insurmountable power.

Several species who have failed the test are currently preparing a class action against the Praetor, but are expected to drop all charges when they find out that as *de facto* animals, they are legally allowed to be eaten.

*Archivistorian Hulg 'Obedience or Death – Two Hundred Millennia of Benevolent Praetorian Justice'*

*The gyre of the Forge painted dead Elysium in shades of red, a vast cyclone of patterned energy striving to tear apart the fabric of the world and stitch it back together inside out.*

*Zhe's reinforced frame was burning up as he powered through the stratosphere, sprinting down the space elevator faster than freefall, but his mind was still plugged into the machine, touching the presence which lay coiled around its controls.*

*The thing which had taken control of the Forge was squeezed into the three-dimensional universe through a crack in reality, its form indistinct and oily as it coiled billions of thorny black roots through the Wetsystems...*

*Within the gyre Elysium began to waver and shift like a mirage, a cloak of glassy shadows licking around its domes and towers. The great corroded massif of the city was skinned with horrors.*

*Slick, organic forms, knurled and knotted with images of howling skulls, great dripping barbs kilometers long arrayed with bleeding corpses - Zhe looked down on a hellscape torn out bloody from the terrors of a million mortal minds.*

*Fire belched from chimneys of black iron glowing with perverse runes, while beyond the city the ocean and the pit were overlaid with an illusion of roiling lava, studded with obsidian reefs and atolls of smoking bones.*

*This thing would make the world in its own image. It fed on the pain of those hordes of imprisoned souls and shat out nightmares.*

*Zhe was still far above the stratosphere when the top of the illusion peeled open and the blood-red light expanded like a nuclear shockwave. His feet were lifted clear of the tower in slow motion as the entire planet convulsed.*

*Through a haze of blurring pain Zhe saw the bubble shatter, slivers of red light crashing down into the ocean like immense panes of glass. Some of the shards were the size of small towns, cracking and crazing and dissipating into dirty smoke as they struck the boiling Atlantic.*

*A blast had staved in the side of the Forge bubble like a bullet shattering a skull - a fist of energisitic force at the end of a whipsawing tendril of black lightning.*

*It arced up over the horizon like a macabre rainbow, splitting the clouds like the blow of an axe, earthing itself against the metal skin of the last city in a storm of unnatural fire and spitting plasma.*

*Zhe's clawed hand slowed his fall, digging mile-long furrows in the tower as his brain spun dizzily in his skull.*

*Something had stopped it.*

*Something was ABLE to stop it. From his claw-tips wires began to branch and multiply, greedily seeking information.*

*He connected.*

*Slowly, the image cleared. Frozen tracteries painted the metal walls of the city, the indelible fingerprint of unleashed lightning.*

*The 'pink' 'pink' and whine of cooling steel rung out across a silent world.*

*Technician Zhe grinned, ear to ear, as he wrenched his hand from the side of the tower.*

*Things were going to be much more straightforward for him now.*

*He had met the enemy.*

*And somewhere off over the horizon, he had an ally.*

*Even as he ran, white-hot limbs pistoning against the pressure of the atmosphere, Zhe began searching for the means by which the Forge had been corrupted.*

*And more urgently, a way to stop it once and for all.*

## Ω

“This is Jory Hess, here with your latest newsbite at seven-thirty.”

“And I’m Lyra North – welcome to OmniNet World Report.”

The talking heads on the city’s favorite news show weren’t even real people – they were threedeeo fictions built up from a customer survey and screeds of ancient videotape. Despite being as corporeal as an acid flashback Jory and Lyra were the most trusted figures in Elysium, and when the people in the streets saw the raytraced frown on the anchorman’s face they knew that trouble was coming.

“Terrible news for fans of Game *wunderkind* Simeon Blaire tonight – after the dramatic assault on his family’s spire the young sportsman has gone missing – late for a fan photo-op at the Valley View Mall.”

A video-bite of the ragged hole in Blaire’s home tower blurred in behind the two holocasters, smoke boiling up into the sky from innumerable fires.

“That’s right Jory – the man whom so many have pinned their hopes and their bets on is missing – presumed to be the target of a terrorist attack. The extensive police presence around Valley View Mall is just adding to the tension – and to people’s suspicions.”

Now the camera zoomed in on Lyra’s pixel-perfect face, suffused with electric sorrow.

“Some malcontents are even blaming out beloved protector Kronos and Commissioner Slade for this tragedy, claiming that Blaire was simply too close to seizing power over our fair city...”

Jaq Hassan snapped the threedeeo monocle off as he took a corner at suicidal speed, the tires of his borrowed chopper wailing in protest.

Just the thought of Blaire made him twist the throttle down even harder, until the hiss and roar of the big vee-twin drowned out his hammering heartbeat. His cousin

Rafiq thought he had finally found a lead on the bastards who'd torched the Hand of Fatima in their beds – otherwise he'd have never let Jaq take his pride and joy.

Even though the big bike was tuned to a razor edge, and spit flames every time he downshifted, it still felt too slow.

Last time Hassan checked there were a lot of people down at the 'View, waiting for a chance to see their favorite sportsman. And if Kaito was involved, something must have gone sideways with the computer systems down there.

It all started to add up in his head, and *that* made him push the chopper even faster, scything through the gridlock with inches to spare on either side.

His boss, that asshole Direktor Ascher must be cooking up trouble. And if he had to eliminate Simeon Blaire to absolve himself of being part of it, that would be just fine.

After all, he was supposed to be *diversifying*. After tonight he could add 'corporate relations' to his CV.

## Ω

It used to be, back in the day (or so Direktor Ascher had read with acute pangs of envy) that the rulers of nations were elected by the media, lauded or castigated for their haircuts and their petty foibles by the fourth estate, and could be broken by a single headline.

He yearned for the right to free speech more than any brokedown refugee ever had, because he knew that in his hands it would be more powerful than any mere hydrogen bomb.

Alas, it was not to be.

Octavio had been born into a perfect tyranny, where a jumped-up calculator told people how to think. The Direktor was the last in a very long line of people who laminated a machine taking his job away from him – but that wasn't to say he didn't *try*.

Kronos's censorship modules held back a tide of subversive propaganda and subliminal hypnotism, painstakingly scanning each and every broadcast for seditious secret content. Its political purity programs would have made Laventri Beria cry. Like the Berlin Wall or the Chinese Communist internet police they worked in theory, but in practice the great machine had no idea of the extent to which its systems had been compromised - both by Mr Ascher's pet hackers and by the equally zealous wireheads of the R.T. Now the whole ramshackle dam was cracking, and emotions bottled up for decades were coming nicely to the boil.

Mr Ascher watched, his mind telling him to be breathless while his oxygen systems hissed and sighed on automatic. It was the catalyst for a revolution, broadcast live, and it was all done under the aegis of the public's right to know.

*Or at least to know what was expected of them...*

Even now, as he waited in realspace, milky eyes crazed behind the glass, he was rising like a storm over the hunched black figure of his protege. He loomed over Simeon Blaire in bamboo and steel, pulling his strings.

Into the plaza outside the Valley View crowds of Blaire zealots poured, screaming – some of them armed with metal pipes, baseball bats, and jagged chunks of timber, others just clenching their fists and teeth and storming up on the police lines.

His lies had worked perfectly – these people were ready to kill for Simeon now, convinced he was their best chance for a brighter future. The sight of his Destrier smashing down out of the sky like a black comet had been all the proof they needed – the ruined shell of the supertruck was empty, of course, but it was a fine symbol.

Now all Octavio needed to do was tweak the program in Blaire's head, and send him out to greet his public.

Tokugawa stood nine feet tall, his blackened visage seeming to ooze oily smoke. The train of his ragged cape blew like an oriflamme, jagged raytraced night.

"You have visualized your death every minute of your life," he said, as the metal and glass around him rippled and faded to copper, the glow of a winter sunset falling across his face ... "Now go to it with joy, for in it you will find your reason."

Bitterness stabbed at him, then.

Those could be *his* words, words from his most secret thoughts, not the script of a masquerade.

*In it you will find your reason.*

But the script went on. The code by which the program was tested and proven. Any deviation would betray the failure of his carefully nurtured plans, and Mr Ascher would be forced to adopt other measures.

Microexplosives were burrowed so deep into Blaire's spine that even a seventh-generation robosurgeon would be in there with the saws for hours.

"I go not to my death, Master, but to the deaths of my enemies."

The young Lord was fevered, twitching, the nanotech boiling in his veins as he ached for battle.

There would be no need for countermeasures – at least not yet.

Simeon looked up at him adoringly through a mask of blood, ran the back of his hand over his face, and sprung from his perch atop the Valley View's glazed cupola, coming down atop the burnt ruin of the Destrier.

Fingers pointed. A cheer went up from the crowd as he drew his sword, brandishing it above his head with a manic grin.

"My people! My loyalists! My friends!" he shouted, reading from an autocue on the inside of his eyes.

"Tonight we write a new history for Elysium!"

## Ω

Abdulafia cursed his bruises and cuts as he settled himself into the cramped confines of a tiny control module - a metal cell barely the size of a coffin. Screens and switches and lights covered every surface, flickering red and green as he brought the precious machine he was cradled in to life.

The Ghulam Heavy Tank.

It had been found deep under a pile of burning rubble out on the plains of Libya, lashed to a crude wagon by a troupe of refugees called the Hand of Fatima, and brought west to the last city.

The leader of those displaced nomads had seen its value even as it lay covered in rust and sand.

The machine's position had been overrun - not by soldiers, but by the blastwave of a thermonuclear explosion. By some minor miracle of war it hadn't been torn apart, but had fallen three stories down into an unused hangar.

The forefathers of the Sons of Alamut had paid for this priceless relic with the currency of safety, smuggling the outlander tribe who discovered it into their concessions in the R.T.

And they'd cloaked its radiation signature by surrounding it with other relics from the age of the apocalypse, paying the most gifted of the Reclamation's techs to augment its ancient systems.

The front; 20th Century Crime. The tech on the spot; five foot three, seventy-nine year old CeeAn 187.

That's right - *seventy-nine*. Cloning was the best beauty therapy there was; she still looked like a perky, hobnailed nineteen-year-old.

Now the precious fuel in the Ghulam's reservoirs began to bleed through to its six-thousand horsepower diesel plant. Now the 'mersive goggles covering Abdulafia's face began to glow from within as autoloaders levered a shell the size of a man's forearm into the breech. CeeAn's holographic form sat down in the driver's seat, the black crescent which contained her mind hovering on three tiny antigrav discs. It drew power directly from the thrumming diesel, and it would protect her even if the whole machine were crumpled into a steel ball.

She had to come through this one intact - Afia had been lucky that the Ashishim's Chiurgeons could patch him up to battle-ready after the debacle at Don Giorgio's. CeeAn's new incarnation was being primed down in the Ashishim labs even now, and it would be a shame for it to go to waste.

Abdulafia envied her a little - physical death was more than just an outside possibility today.

And then it would be *him* trapped in a matrix of light, and Cee taunting him with

how sweet a cold beer tasted.

He was certain at that moment that even the deadly uranium slugs of his turret cannon would fail to stop the Super-Cyben. It possessed a quality which Kronos itself grasped at like chaff in the wind. The hot-blooded malicious, filthy will of the beast to *live*. Against that, the Ghulam tank was just so much dead metal.

His partner looked up at him through transparent eyes as giant hydraulics lifters brought the tank up into the wrecked shell of 20th Century Crime.

The three tiny lasers which wove her image glared at him from the corners of the cramped gunner's space, a womb of wires and belts and screens.

"He has a weakness," she said, as if she were reading his mind instead of just monitoring his heart-rate. "When the Celestial tried to talk to him he went into systems shutdown. Only for a second, but I think I know why."

His fingers punched buttons, engaging the secondary guns; setting the treads into motion.

"It's his memories, Afia. His humanity. As a gutter cop I bet he had precious little left, but there's some. And he hates to have lost it."

"But that *weakness* is his *strength* as well," he replied, opening up the throttle. "Because we don't know what'll get to him, but we do know he won't give up and die like a regular Cyben would."

She was a part of the tank now, communing with it through a direct data feed. Her gesture took in all of her new and seemingly unstoppable body.

"Even *this* mightn't be enough," he said, reaching through her incorporeal chest to open the viewports.

"It's gone past using the dead. Kronos has crossed the line. That's the reason we have to reach into him, and make him break. When he does, we use the disruptor." Her eyes flashed disbelief in a dusty shaft of light. "It's only a little humanity, but he deserves to have it back before he dies."

The wall bulged and erupted in a slew of shattered timber and glass as the Ghulam tank tore out of its camouflage, churning up the tiles as it roared out into the mallway.

Afia felt a second of utter clarity and peace every time he went into battle. Like the first brushstroke on a piece of crisp white paper... he was committed now, and nothing else mattered.

But not this time.

This time the view down the throat of the Valley View mall tweaked something red and raw in his memories, blowing away his calm amid a storm of flashbacks... *His friends cut to pieces on the front lines while the bullets whiplashed around his head. The pain of his body pierced through by a railgun blast, the look in Jhenna's eyes as she fell...*

It was here again, and now.

And despite his armored shell, the tank exoskeleton wrapped around his pulpy flesh,

and despite the power of his guns and his auto-targ's unerring eye, he was a boy of fourteen again. With a machinegun juddering and roaring in his hands, and blood from his punctured lungs foaming on his lips as he fired again and again...

The crowds were as dense and seething as bacteria in an open wound, a throng of blue-clad Subdwellers armed with little more than their sense of purpose. The cops were holding them in check - barely - until something came through the throng like a battering ram.

It was a figure in black, as lean and muscled as a prizefighter, armed with nothing but a four-foot sliver of gleaming steel.

That proved to be more than enough.

As Abdulafia watched, the black-clad swordsman leaped up and over the front ranks of the Division, coming down in a whirlwind spin. Heads and limbs and gun barrels flew wide as the blade sliced through them, clearing a circle where he landed, agile and deadly. The troopers around him were frozen with slack-jawed disbelief, forgetting their guns and the legions of Cyben at their backs. The swordsman beckoned them on, and then his masked face was hidden behind a wall of seething carnage.

It seemed that the blue-ribboned crowd knew him, though. They cheered as he butchered his foes, slamming up against the barriers with redoubled force, breaching the line of officers and dragging them under a wave of knives and fists.

"Locking on antipersonnel battery!" shouted CeeAn, her incorporeal body misting as power drained to the four ugly grey automatics.

*'North Afrikan Defense Forces 'Wrathbringer' auto-tracking elimination system' read the displays. '16mm spiral-tip depleted uranium munitions. Full loadout on 1 through 4. Select now to engage ....'*

Tiny smiley faces bobbed and dipped across the screens.

Afia watched a furious snarl of carnage hacking down a line of Cyben and tearing them apart. The slow, purposeful reactions of the mechanized corpses couldn't keep up with him. Fixated, he watched the crowds surge to fill the gap, falling the division reserves like wild dogs. The sword was a metal blur, trailing a mist of blood.

They were literally tearing the luckless troopers limb from limb. He nodded with professional approval at the warrior's technique, wondered if he could beat him if they went toe to toe...

'Afia's lack of vigilance almost cost him his life, in that second. He had been so caught up in his memories, so hypnotized by the orgiastic violence before him that he'd completely forgotten about the super-Cyben.

A sudden concussion atop the tank's armored turret sent his heart into his throat. The thing's weight forced the heavy vehicle down on its powerful shocks, and Abdulafia was under no illusions as to its purpose. CeeAn dissipated in front of his eyes as the hull of the tank electrified, and his hands were all over the manual controls. Tiny

beads of sweat broke across his brow as the sixteen-mil cannons traversed to their maximum elevation.

Staycalmstaycalmstay.....

Then the first punch struck, and the tank rocked as though it had been hit by a freight train.

"Moving to full speed ahead, 'Afia!" yelled the voice of CeeAn from all directions. "That voltage pulse only pissed him off - we gotta shake him loose!"

The main hatch of the tank was designed to withstand a nuclear blast; to survive the kamikaze death-plunge of unmanned missile drones. But Afia could count the knuckles on the MK4's fist as it was driven into the layered carbon and steel and titanium. Once, twice, the hatch buckled and groaned with strain. Microfissures skittered outward from the impact points. And with both thumbs hard down on the firing pins Abdulafia loosed a storm of lead at his foe.

The antique gatling cannons were squat and ugly, truncated bundles of tubes on armored ball-shaped sponsons. One sat at each corner of the tank's chassis, intended to take out small, soft targets like women and children. They spewed out a pyramid of fire, smooth interlocking streams of bullets which chewed up the walls and ceiling of the Valley View with a sound like a jackhammer chorus.

But their makers had never counted on meeting Eddie Tsien.

The Super-Cyben's legs went from a crouch atop the tank's turret to ramrods of muscle and cable in a split second, firing Tsien upward like an old mass-lifter rocket. The four howling rotary guns tracked up and out, but to no avail. The mark-four flew spinning in a perfect pirouette, smashing through the gridwork roof of the mall like an Atlas nuke through the clouds. A patter of gleaming brass cartridges fell like rain below him, the gatling guns chewing up the last of their ammo.

The main gun was run out with a hiss of hydraulics, CeeAn scowling into its viewfinder out of force of habit. The gun's eyes were her eyes now, as she integrated with the tank through her hardwired crescent.

But even as the tank raised its great accusing middle finger skyward Afia watched the Cyben change its stance. Tsein loosed the straps of his immense Eversio cannon, and aimed it back at them as though this was a 9-mil standoff between Subcity homeboys.

His eyes were misted, dim with calculations.

Afia looked up, along the barrel of the main gun, the pounding of his heart taking up where the gatling cannons had left off.

He never made it to the firing pin, because of the scream. A blast of amplitude so artificially vital, so electro-feral that he clapped his hands across his ears instinctively. It wasn't the mark-four, not this time.

CeeAn's eyes flashed open and closed as she lashed out with depleted uranium.

Her face was contorted into an animal snarl, atavistic and savage.

It was all the tension and aggression of disembodiment let out in a blaze of fury. And with each convulsive blink, each twitch of crackling wires the main gun spoke, louder than God, slamming through his skull like hammer blows.

## Ω

The surface levels of the Wetsystems lay beneath a crust of advertising and games, porno sites and online markets. Kaito went through them in a power dive, his imagined form splitting and doubling, crystal-black and frictionless. He smashed through looming pop-up panels of neon peddling cars and toothpaste and sex, collapsing them into smeared vortices of pixels as he falls. Crashdown, faster and faster toward the shimmering blue sea, his passage through the civilian net marked by a contrail of viral logos pasted across virtual space.

Out in the real world it was all unspeakably boring.

In the hot dark, in the grip of steel, in a tube surrounded by living wet tissue and wires and vents, Kaito and B-Zerk waited out the storm. The kid kept the blade of his sword tight up under the Kayzi's chin as he watched a tiny loading bar fill with violent green.

Every now and then the echoing hammerstrike of bullets rung out through the plumbing; sometimes even the screams made it this far. But Kaito couldn't hear them.

He plunged through the surface of the virtual ocean like a black torpedo, his mind tight and safe inside an Op-system which slicked around him like a shell of transparent plastic.

This one was utterly custom, as tricked out and tweaked as his chopper - a thing he called Doctor Slice. The good Doc resembled a twentieth-century stealth fighter plane, stretched out long and thin, its underside bristling with matt-black antennae and tentacles.

Kaito would normally have had to go through the tiresome rote of breaking Kronos' base-level security grid, but this time he was jacked in direct to a photonic switching node. That was like a backstage pass to the hidden levels of the Wetsystems, and Doctor Slice came up on the memory-reefs without a single Hunter-Killer showing its ugly face.

It was all glass coral down there, and each branching tree represented part of Kronos' vast pseudocerebrate array. Kaito angled down toward a looming, ultra-ramified snarl of the stuff, aiming for a gaping tube of green glass that would swallow him whole.

Then the fun began.

Doctor Slice split like a budding paramecium at the first intersection, tearing open

down the middle to form two perfect small clones of itself. The Kayzi's mind did the same, calculating feverishly as he spun off in two directions at once.

If he was going to find Zone Doubt, he'd have to spread himself thin across the datanet - time was definitely an issue.

Within seconds twelve tiny copies of Doctor Slice were flickering through the green glass maze of the Wetsystems, a fragment of Kaito piloting each one.

This procedure, this fragmentation - it's wasn't without danger. It's you stared for too long into *this* abyss it did more than just stare back. The shards of Kaito whirling and weaving through the Wetsystems mightn't not come back to him when he called. Or, even worse, he might end up patched together from the memories and fears of ten thousand dead strangers...

In short, Veg Ward fodder.

But the sharp edge of a blade was very compelling. And you couldn't (he cursed himself a thousandfold) swing a chakutazer inside these goddamn vents.

Ω

Down in the mall, the Son of Alamut at his laptop console drained deathly pale. Inside his headphones warning sirens were screaming, red flashing on red before his eyes.

"Holy shit! Page Abdulafia! Something's going VERY VERY WRONG HERE!"

His remaining ally had stepped away from the disruptor projector in order to douse the HQ with ethanol. Now he dropped his jerrycan and ran back to the machine's console, swearing under his breath.

"It's the node - something's scrambling the graftsearch software."

"PAGE HIM NOW! The Compliance Division are falling back into the mall! WE'RE BEING OVERRUN!"

"I'm running the re-patch now ..."

Ω

Kaito felt it just a little too late.

It was a metaviral - a jagged mass of black ice deployed to zero-out his brain.

But his mind was razor sharp, tempered by the trials of his dangerous profession.

The Kayzi cut up the Westsystems for the same reason that those foolish Lords played their games of slaughter. He knew *exactly* how good he was, right down to the wire...

In an explosive burst of cognition he pulled the phosphorescent streamers of himself back into one channel, solving a million lab-rat mazes in an eyeblink. His fractured

minds fused, filling the wetsystem out, cohesion building...

Doctor Slice spun out in a wild bootleg turn, suddenly just as big as the insectoid meta' that was chasing it. Kaito powered up, full throttle, leaping down the maw of the ugly Hunter-Killer, firing off a salvo of icebreakers and countervirals. They manifested as flickering needles of darkness, spiraling in to rip the enemy construct ragged.

But he was too slow. Just a fraction of a second too late.

The metaviral exploded into shards as Kaito's countermeasures tore through it, glistening fragments of shrapnel ripping through the green glass walls of the Wetsystems.

And one found a weak spot in Doctor Slice... a place where he hadn't quite re-integrated himself tight enough.

The shard felt like deep-frozen cryogenic nitrogen, and out in meatspace the Kayzi's lips pulled back from his teeth in a rictus of pain. Doctor Slice listed crazily to the left as it's transparent skin was torn open, translating the feeling to Kaito's living flesh.

He screamed.

And from out of the Wetsystems that scream was answered.

Kaito's power-dive down into the mind of Kronos had been perfectly aimed; seeker programs loaded into Doctor Slice knew exactly where to search for a personality construct assigned to perimeter defense. The coral tree they had entered was rooted in the PDR control network, and each one of its myriad branches represented a single defense mekan.

He'd found Zone Doubt.

The Kayzi's hands were shaking as they flew across the Doc's control boards, spinning up and away from the wreckage of the metaviral. Kronos' own H-K's would be coming soon to investigate the damage, and he was in no fit state for face them.

He needed to finish this now.

There, up ahead was the interface he was looking for. Kaito had never tried to find a single personality construct in the vast melange of the Wetsystems before. Without access to a node like the one he was currently plugged into it was a gauntlet of virals and ice, not worth the risk.

And so the sight of Zone's eyeless face, his ravaged and vivisected body came as quite a shock. Cruel barbs and hooks and tubes looped through the kid's bleeding flesh, piercing a thousand wounds. Wires spilled from his cored-out sockets, from his broken mouth, crackling with electricity.

But he was still breathing. He was still *alive*.

His scarred and stitched-up face turned toward the Kayzi as he hovered in close, burned by the waves of pain which radiated from Zone's body.

Kaito's hooks were specialized programs rather than physical tools. They made the match before he could master his sense of shock, and the very unprofessional way in

which he tried to claw his way out of the simulation.

Zone Doubt was freed from his mental cage as the hooks tore apart the constraints on his vision. There was a crushing sensation of weight, of a vast mass being sucked through innumerable pinholes...

And Kaito knew for a second what it meant to be a machine, stripped of his will and his wants and his dreams, sliced up and riveted to seething wires and cold steel.

He saw it all, in that second, as his fractured mind came in on Zone Doubt from all directions, cutting him loose in a flareburst of howling exultation.

*Holistic, automatic control. That visceral instinct unable to be programmed...*

The pain swung in like a wrecking ball the size of the sun.

Kaito's heart was literally stopped dead by the savagery of it. The connection to the wetsystem arced out wild in his enhanced vision, poisoning the flow of logic and calculation all around it.

He zoomed out.

Zone was just one twitching construct in a grid of nine - then ninety, then nine thousand... and it kept going, ramifying out until Kaito floated at the center of a sphere of suffering. Each tiny spark was the preserved personality of a single dead Elysian, bound in utter torment.

All around him he saw the fire of Abdulafia's vision, that gift and penance of the Sons of Alamut. It was the fire of a million upon a million minds, taken apart and re-used, a mental chop-shop stitched up with wire and dripping electrified blood. The dead were quite literally all around him. And his living body began to suffocate, his mind drawn out amidst the static of lost souls, drowning in their pain.

He saw hands, reaching out through dark waters. Tsien; Hassan; B-Zerk....

Himself.

It was the Ashishim that saved him, with their knowledge of the eternal holocaust at work within the walls of Elysium. Down in the embattled field office below lifeguard routines engaged on automatic, jacking him out, shocking his heart back into its rhythm.

He awoke in nausea, like rubber-gloved hands clawing at his entrails. The metal, cool against either cheek - treadplate and wakizashi. He tasted a tiny runnel of his own blood, blinked, cursed.

You couldn't swing a chakutazer in these goddamn vents.

And he remembered.

"I found him, alright? So you can put away the knife."

B-Zerk was staring down at him with a look of fear and reverence.

"You sure you got him out of there?" he asked, backing slowly away, keeping the blade up at eye level.

"Oh yes...that was him alright. Your buddy Zone. But he looks a little different now....don't be surprised if he needs some surgery..."

It' was then that he noticed the blood.

So much blood.

And all, it seemed, belonged to him. It was cerulean summer-sky blue, chock-full of expensive scarabs.

He performed a quick check for knife-wounds and decided that B was innocent. So where ...?

"Just stay away from me man!" said B-Zerk in a quavering voice, dropping the Wakizashi to the floor and then scrabbling to pick it up again.

In Kaito's bio-onboard display scarabs twinkled as they bled out and lost bioelectric contact. And he felt the blood still flowing like hot wet tears from the corners of his eyes - from his ears and nose as well, and from the psychosomatic stigmata across his chest.

A jagged bloody barcode; a *number*. Nine Zero Nine.

Those little guys caught a hack, a blowback with a certain *modus operandi* in its bytesized cursive. Ashishim.

Kaito hit his cameras.

## Ω

And as Dave Levine cuffed away a single, perfect artificial tear, as the teargas drifted and the flames leaped in whirling coruscation, and as the people died, and died, and died, Simeon Blaire remained detached. A machine on automatic, his idiot stare deeper than the gravity well of stars.

While behind his furious assault came his People, following the quicksilver oriflamme of his blade.

An hour ago they were sane and law abiding, sports fans and politicals, united only by their support for Blaire. Not any more. This was the *pack*, the witch-hunt, their minds ablaze with the visceral urge to lash out at their constraints.

Just as the Direktor had planned.

He'd built Simeon up as a promise to the dispossessed, the poor, the mutant and the feral. He'd made them love him, because he did what they all wanted to do – he ripped the bloody life from the aristocratic Kheptarchs they hated. Never mind that he was one of them. He was photogenic, and young, and strong.

Now he killed for them in the flesh – defying the authorities whom they had been told wanted to see him dead. This was pure folk-hero stuff, a legend in the making.

*'All across the city people are watching as one man takes a stand against tyranny...'*

They had tried to cheat Blaire of his destiny – just like they cheated the common man.

They had tried to kill him off like cowards – just as they did to *anyone* who

protested too loudly.

And now normal folks were following him, tearing apart the Cyben, smashing through the police lines.

Order is an illusion, and it's fragile.

Direktor Ascher laughed as he watched the streets fill up all over the city, as mobs formed outside police precincts from West Bay to Blackwall, from the sunless Down Town blocks to the Prospekts below the 'Burbs.

Kronos would be kept very busy tonight.

In the cavernous vault of his office, cameras recording in wavelengths beyond color began to register a flickering distortion in the air around his preservative cube.

It was no less than the image of his former body, outlined in radiation and generated by his breathless mind. In sympathy the druuj clenched and relaxed their fingers, feeling the slick wet blood, the visceral warmth...

## Ω

Consider the purpose of a Ghulam heavy tank - a thing the size of Hitler's ill-fated *landkreuzer* dreadnought, it's immense bulk supported by a clutch of humming antigrav stabilizers. It was built to smash lesser war machines to burning twists of scrap, and its main gun fired shells perfectly suited to that singular application.

Which meant a whole lot of bang, and a whole lot of high explosive - but a proximity fuse which was utterly blind to the tiny signature of a super-Cyben.

Abdulafia watched with a strange mixture of awe and terror as the half-human machine gripped the framework of the shattered ceiling like a gymnast, spinning and looping around the bars as shells which could demolish whole buildings scythed past him, their sensors oblivious to his presence.

"Damn, he's fast!" cursed CeeAn, as the turret spun and lurched "If they upgrade all the Cyben to this level our lives are gonna be whole lot more interesting."

"And shorter." groaned 'Afia, trying to hold onto his breakfast. The muzzle of the cannon weaved and dipped, trying to keep Tsien in the crosshairs. But it was no use - the last shell blazed from the Ghulam's gun, and the super-Cyben watched it coming up at him from his perch atop a tangle of steel girders with a lopsided smile on his face. It flew past harmlessly, whipping his ragged trenchcoat out like wings in its slipstream. Tsien unshipped the great chrome cannon from his arm and followed its spiraling arc.

There was a moment of slithering, hissing noise, and a rain of brass shards and diced plastic explosive came down. Then Tsein turned the weapon on his tormentors.

"Oh, this just *can't* be good." sighed Abdulafia, frantically flicking rows of switches to channel the tank's power into more bizarre and esoteric weapons. "He looks a little too confident for my liking, Cee."

"He looks a little too *still alive* for mine." replied the flickering holo of his partner. "I think this pile of bolts we're riding in has just been made obsolete."

High above them, poised on a latticework of rusted metal, Eddie Tsien's mind glitched and sparked, torn between his senses and his immutable program. That face down there, down under the glazed diamond bubble of the tank's turret - that was his target. Unerring identity-match filters spun wireframes of the man's features in the corner of his eyes, assuring him that this was a perfect match.

And while the tiny shred of him which was still human knew that it was impossible, that this was an outlander, an Ashishi from the R.T. in dreadlocks and rags, Kronos insisted that the man below him was Simeon Blaire. He could feel the compulsion coming up over him like a wave, tightening his finger on the trigger. And as his will collapsed and the wires in his head took control he stepped from his perch fourteen stories up, aiming the great silver cannon in his hands down at the face of his master's foe.

"Simeon Blaire! I indict you for high treason!"

The Eversio spat out a jagged blast of tangled silver, a roiling cloud of monomolecular tentacles.

But CeeAn was just as fast, and her holographic hands rammed both of the Ghulam's throttles to full reverse at just the same instant.

The tank roared and slithered backwards, its treads clattering against the treadwalk flooring. There was just no grip there, despite the black plumes of diesel smoke which belched from the thing's twin stacks...

The leading edge of the blast slammed into the reactive armor of the ancient war machine, dicing the plasteel like soft tissue. A snarl of lashing monomolecular whips, probing between plates of armor, tightening around crucial bolts...

The tank's treads snapped apart as the twitching razorwires did their work, sending the whole huge machine skidding across the tiles in a fan of sparks, its suspension ruined.

But the traverse followed Tsien's face, locked in tight as Afia rode out the tank's disintegration from his turret perch. Lashing filaments of nanostuff whipped past his face, intent on flensing the skin from his bones as he reached for the firing pin. This was a weapon perfected and honed by the Ashishim just for things like Eddie Tsien. A thing made for reclamation day by Illuminatus Zeon and his inner Cabal, to twist the mind-slavery of Kronos on its head.

The Disruptor.

Tsien managed a look of strangled disbelief for a second before full-body convulsions gripped him, sending his immense form plummeting down ten stories. He hit the ground twitching, shattering the tiles as his tormentor kept the disruption field centered on his cerulean camera eyes.

"Cee - hold him steady! I'm going to operate!" Afia hissed, his teeth clenched with sheer concentration.

The hatch burst open and the seat's hydraulics forced him up and out, already centering his mind, activating the wickedly illegal bio-onboard systems in his head.

He landed catlike on the barrel of the main gun, poised like a surfer with his hands palm-out toward the Super-Cyben.

An IV blister on his neck injected a tiny dose of the nektar into his bloodstream, and suddenly his electromagnetic field flared, shimmering around him like a halo of heat-haze. Taped dreadlocks stood out from his skull in electrified spikes, enervated, revealing the black plastic crescent at the base of his skull.

It throbbed; deep bass subsonic.

Patterned energy, the force used by the mind to control every living cell of the body, was expanding around him like a flickering coruscation. Down along the disruption beam it went, hungrily coursing across the face and chest of Tsien, rigid and impassive. Muscles twitched raw in his scarred face as slaved lightning haloed his brow.

Incorporeal fingers were tearing at the dome of his skull, through flesh and bone, working methodically downward like the steel tentacles of a core drone. And forcing an opening into his thoughts, dismembering the sense of horror he felt.

For the command of the disrutor was this - *self-surgery*.

## Ω

Trooper-Constable Hayden Park was having the worst day of his life. Tears ran through the sooty mess of his face, and his hands shook as he snapped a heavy magazine of high-ex shells into position. They'd been told that there was a hostage situation in the mall. They had been told that this was just a show of force to shock the perps out of their hidey-hole.

Then... then that black, bladed demon had come down on them like the wrath of all the hells, and the crowds had risen up like an ocean of fists and teeth. For the very first time the young Trooper-Constable was glad of the hot, smelly little tank turret he was jammed into. He could hear hands beating against the armor out there, but that reactive layered shit was meant to stand up to shells and rockets. The scum couldn't hurt him, not in here. Now he'd take revenge for the slaughtered. For Morgenstern, for Zykowski, for poor old Captain Lewellyn who had gone down screaming with a live grenade clenched in each hand.

As his finger settled on the trigger of the tank's main gun he chanced a look out the little slit window of the turret – he could hardly miss at this range, but still ...

That's when he saw the front end of a rusted old freight truck coming in at him like a wall of spiked steel – a grille studded with welded-on knives and wrist-thick sections

of galvanized tubing. Juve gang colors in loops and swirls of spraypaint covered the muzzle of the roaring ethanol-driven beast, and it was tearing through the crowd like a runaway train. So close that he could see the wild-eyed kid in the drivers seat, grinning as he yanked the chain for the thing's deafening air-horn...

A Compliance Division tank costs about three million Slades, and is made of light reactive armor designed to withstand projectile fire. A Hab 99 Rude Boys Special weighs in excess of twenty tons, and is designed to perform ram-raids on steel-fronted buildings. It's technically free, as all the parts are stolen.

When they came together there was only time for Trooper-Constable Park to pull the trigger once – but by that point his vehicle was already cartwheeling through the air, stoved in like a cheap tin can.

"Grady's Rude Boys! Mash 'em up!"

"Ninety-Nine! Ninety Nine!"

"Rip that pigwagon!"

Hayden Park heard the angle-grinders firing up, and then the world went black.

## Ω

While back in the Ashishim office the last remaining gunjack crawled on his belly across broken glass.

The node was locked down. The telephone was ringing.

His legs were hanging on by subdermal wiring where hot shrapnel has sliced through them.

Those wires carried microfilament morphine, deadening his screaming nerves.

The handset was heavier than stone.

And;

"Forget the node." said Kaito, staring through a co-opted camera at the face of the Super Cyben.

"His name is Lieutenant Edward Tsien."

## Ω

The vision sparked, a single illuminating strobe-flash.

Something came down through the broken ceiling of the Valley View, a round fired by the unfortunate Trooper Park.

And the Ashishim office exploded, struck by a shell packed with two kilos of high explosive traveling at twice the speed of sound.

The telephone evaporated.

Ω

"Lieutenant Tsien!" yelled Abdulafia over the oven-roar of the beam.

"Tear out the drone!"

Ω

He could feel it very distinctly now, a rooty web of wires cradling and strangling his brain.

The name cut through him, as sharp now as it had been from the lips of that poor damned Celestial infantryman. It found the remnants of himself, and...

It pulled them together for a moment. For just long enough.

Ω

"*What the fuck are you doing to him?*" screamed CeeAn through Afia's bio-onboard. "That's a war machine, not a psych patient!"

He snapped the dial around, racking up the disruptor power to maximum.

"A bit from column A, bit from column B." he whispered in reply, the icon of her face blurring as the voltage dipped.

"Tear it out, Edward!" he said, pushing his own electromagnetic energy along the beam. He willed those giant hands up to the back of Eddie's neck.

Ω

Tsien's teeth locked, the muscles of his jaw set.

They cracked.

His eyes rolled back, tendons snapped and wires with them.

Tsien's arms were the girth of telegraph poles, augmented with synthetic muscle and nanoservo.

They shook until metal joints hissed and veins stood pulsing from his skin.

(No. *It is mine.*)

They began to rise, slowly at first, then with more and more control, determinedly reaching for the lumpy carapace of the drone.

(*It is MINE*)

*The voice of the Illuminatus. He feels its fear.*

*He feels Abdulafia moving his hands, and he uses all of his control to help him.*

Slowly his fingers meshed, and with a burst of blood and coolant the drone was

ripped free, its tentacles twitching black and gory in the light of the disruptor.

He hurled it with all his remaining strength across the empty mall.

But there was simply too much blood.

Tsien sank down to his knees, folding up like paper. His eyes closed, and his massive hands fell to his sides, inert.

Abdulafia held his breath, swiftly breaking the connection and shutting down the disruptor. The dark came seeping in.

In it he could see a mesh of silver threads, arcing and looping through the shadows.

Sewing Tsien's brain back together.

*He had grasped control of the nanotech...*

Before Afia could exhale, it had him by the throat.

## Ω

*Technician Zhe was trapped somewhere between a nightmare and a seizure. Freeze-frames of nuclear fire curled up and melted behind his eyes, leaving afterimages like scars.*

*He would have to work faster. There were less than four hours left until the damned machine tried to activate the Forge again, and he wasn't sure that his allies could stop it twice.*

*No, it was up to Zhe.*

*Hidden among the memories of Kronos was the key not only to defusing the Forge, but also to its ultimate control.*

*Of course, prying through the innards of the machine was extremely dangerous.*

*He could feel the shadow of the Enemy at the back of his thoughts as he scanned the Wetsystem, like some vast disease spreading faster and faster, corrupting all that it touched. He had to use the utmost care in his search - if one of those tendrils of slippery darkness got into his mind he had no doubt that he would share Nyl's horrible fate. Still...*

*After centuries of invulnerability it was good to be in actual danger. Zhe felt more alive with only three hours left to him than he had since his creation in the labs of Liquid Space. He wouldn't fall as easily as Nyl, if it came to battle.*

*But he would know, before that time came, why his predecessor had let such a vile entity get so close to him in the first place.*

*Three hours and five minutes. He was almost there.*

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**K/Z – (alt. Kayzi, Kazee):**

**Descriptive of a synthetic phyle of Subcitizens who can trace their origins back to the Kirov Memorial Cosmodrome nuclear bunkers in the old state of Kazakhstan.**

**Of assorted Slavic and Central-Asian heritage, these survivors created quite a thriving civilization for themselves underground, until their facility's fission reactor ran out of fuel rods. The now legendary Matriarch of the Exodus, Ilya Kayzi led her people out of their underground fastness (against the protests of a sect who maintained that the outside world was nothing but an illusion) and across all of irradiated Europa to Elysium. Their relative lack of genetic mutation was looked upon favorably by the guardian machine of the last city, and they were amongst the first tribes of the Sub, employed to keep the ancient devices which powered Elysium running.**

**Nowadays 'Kayzi' is a more than common surname in the Subcity, with over twenty thousand branches of the clan taking it as their legal determinative. It is also (predictably) used as a racial slur to mean one who is runty, skinny, inquisitive, nosy and suspicious, all traits attributed to the long-time bunker dwellers.**

***Dep. Lt. Chesterfield Djenko 'Phyles of the Subcity' second impression.***

*The Subcity, vast, rank and steaming, basked in the glow of halogen light like an immense and broken termite mound.*

*Self-repairing, ageless, its power grid was patchy - but not completely defunct.*

*Machinery still hummed and thundered beneath the city, keeping the home fires burning for people long dead.*

*Its streets were empty now, scoured clean of the living. Ever since Exodus Night, when the horror came...*

*Beneath the metal and plastic, however, a strata of lost souls was losing the war against a malign and focused disease. Technician Zhe was no medic, but his tools were more than adequate to perform a battlefield amputation.*

*He'd finally come to Earth, his clawed hooves touching down atop the anchor-hub of the space-lev in a spray of dust.*

*The empty towers of the Lords seemed to waver and shift focus, their sheer walls a bizarre and tilted stage played over by innumerable spotlights. Steam and smoke belched skyward from the process core, where the giant Assembler alpha-zero spooled up its mighty fusion coils, preparing to bring down a literal hell on earth.*

*Below him Elysium fell off toward the black Atlantic, level after level of broken buildings, gutted tenements and shattered factories.*

*This was the face of the Last City - a machine on automatic, sequestered by an alien disease.*

*But Zhe's mind was seventeen years back in time, and thinking of a place called the Valley View.*

*The name was just marketing bullshit, of course - it wasn't a valley at all, only a gash cloven into the rusted flank of the city where an old manufactorium had collapsed.*

*And the only view from its grimy windows was of endless descending steps of metal and plasticrete, habs and fabs and the corporate compounds of the Aristo zaibatsus, all the way down to the junkyard architecture of the R.T. and the poisoned sea.*

*It was there, in the fertile soil of the Subcity that the disease began to take root.*

*Somewhere beneath sepulchral rust, the infection had broken through.*

*There was only one thing for it. He was going to have to open up the heart of the machine and stop it manually.*

## Ω

Leynna had already planned their child.

*Damn the restrictions. Curse the Council of Three Hundred and their laws. If they called her Unstable, she'd show them what a pariah could do. Secret things, forbidden things... anything to throw their smug superiority back in their faces...*

She knelt before an altar dedicated to science - a machine bolted together out of discarded parts and scavenged tech, in imitation of the labs of House Lancaster.

Emmanuel was supposed to be her kinsman, bound to House Mendelev by ties of marriage three centuries old. And yet all she'd gotten out of him had come through the Devotionals of the Vatican, hacker sellswords she'd paid off with the dwindling reserves of her father's financial empire. At least old Aran Singh had chosen a useful occupation - MS Biomed built surgical mekan and hospital equipment, making her genetic heresy all the more attainable.

In the centre of her shrine a mesh of wires strung up tiny jars of fluid; in each one floated a sample of Blaire's tissue - his hair, a paring of fingernail. Others...

Leynna had built his physician mekan. She cleaned their scalpels and needles by hand.

She kept samples.

At the centre of the meshwork, underlit by halogen, a shimmering purple exowomb awaited his assent to be activated. Just one touch of his barcoded fingertip, and it would begin to grow. The process, which took anywhere up to *nine months* the old-fashioned way would be complete in a matter of hours. Of course having the little parasite growing inside her body was out of the question - simply barbaric!

Leynna spent a long time there in the flat blue glow amidst her machines, imagining a face her computers had already predicted.

She would love him as a cruel weapon, an effective one.

She had interleaved his genes with forbidden strains in imitation of Octavio Ascher - hardened bone, whipcord muscles tight as steel hawsers... His eyes would be triple-lidded, his brain wired up and extended in the image of his ideological father. The choice of Lord Blaire for his genetic contribution wasn't down to love or money - just *good breeding*.

All the while Octavio Ascher's severed head floated in her dreams, replacing the face of her son in his embryonic tank.

She thought about the future, mother to the Emperor, first among women, revered like the Vatican's idol of Mary. She thought about the game that night, and began counting on her fingers.

While about her head slim fiberoptics coiled through the dusty air, flowing down the wires to penetrate her skin, her skull.

They kept her coming back.

As she tended her shrine under the watchful programs of Omnivasive, Leynna Mendelev-Singh's luck was changing for the better. Emmanuel Lancaster, so sure of his immortality, had fathered no heirs to the vast fiscal empire of Universal Wetsystems. And although she didn't know it, protected from the tedious realities of finance by armies of machines and servants, Leynna had just become the sole beneficiary of the

late biotect's unwritten will.

So far, no news had leaked out about the demise of the great Lancaster; not surprising, as all such information was the exclusive property of Omnivasive.

The game would still commence tonight, and she would be there.

Because if there was the remotest chance of winning over the arrogant and aloof Lord Simeon Blaire, that chance would come when he was dying under her blades, when he saw that she was his equal.

## Ω

Blaire got lit.

He burned like the heart of suns, his head swollen with pain and exultation. Rage and shame churned in his gut like liquid fire, blazing up volcanically to lend preternatural strength to his sword-arm, to light furnace flames behind his eyes.

Before him the diversion Tsien had set up fell apart like so much matchwood, the barrels of guns sheared in two effortlessly, bodies ploughed under by his one-man storm of blades. While behind him came the rabble, a peasant mob emboldened by their hero, ripping apart the fallen with insatiable fury.

Division Troopers broke, Cyben stood and died.

Blaire carved his way toward his goal – toward the little apothecary shop of Tadashi Murai, the only other swordsman who might be his equal.

Still the fools tried to stop him, shimmering from one century to another in his manipulated vision. Direktor Ascher's laughter echoed in his skull, driving him on.

*(Catapults hurled clay pots of fire amidst the mossy rocks. He leaped through the branches of great mountain pines, above a horde of yari-weilding loyalists, his sword lashing out like a deadly ribbon of silver. Explosions of red, wet fire followed in his wake, fountains of steaming blood.)*

Two immense warmekan moved to block him, unleashing a hail of bullets from twin cannons. Servos whined as they tracked him.

*(Fleetfooted, light as leaves before the wind. Two great armored soldiers swung halberds of black steel at him, dried blood crusting their blades. He slid under their guard, smiling, under the hissing arc of the axes, and he struck....)*

Even the armor of the mekan couldn't withstand his monomolecular-edged katana.

They sheared. They faltered, belching sparks and smoke. A dozen clean-cut lines appeared across their burnished carapaces as Simeon spun past, and then they simply fell apart, collapsing into piles of scrap. Artificial brains spilled from their ruptured cores, spattering across the treadplate floor.

Explosions followed at his heels as he tracked the scent his master has given him, on into a ruin of broken glass and blood.

*(There was snow on the ground, crunching beneath his feet as he ran, the sword held out beside him like an extension of his arm. The forest loomed up and over him, blocking out the light as he hunted down the traitorous Master he was here to destroy.)*

And another.

He sees a hulking silhouette ahead of him - an enemy worthy of his attention, a pretender to his throne.

It's the seven-foot shadow of Lieutenant Tsien.

Behind him the crowd closes in, howling their lust to the obscured sky. They tear and rend and beat the survivors of his onslaught, implacable and savage.

*(The pretender was ahead of him, armored in red and gold, adorned with Chinese nephrite. His face was an ancestral death-mask, and he held in one hand a great brazen arquebus, the weapon of a craven coward. Peasants among the trees were loading a rusted old Portuguese cannon; they took aim at him, diving from the sputtering fuse as it burned down...)*

Blaire saw through the illusion for a second, through to the face of the dreadlocked gunner atop his tank turret, utterly out of place in the middle of a shopping mall foodcourt.

*That face was his own.*

The disruptor tore apart his world in that second, and he froze, shards of ancient Japan crazing his vision. Then reality dropped in - the metal sky, the innumerable guns trained on him. Simeon stared down at the gore-slick sword in his hand, uncoprehending, then back up at Abdulafia 330.

He was looking into a distorting mirror.

It was no time to falter - not with the Compliance Division closing in on him, not with Cyben grasping for him with cold laminated hands. A bullet slammed into his shoulder, shattering his illusion of invulnerability in a spray of blood. The next one took him in the thigh, then another in the chest, staggering him back, a thin trickle of crimson dripping from his open mouth.

Tokugawa was raging at his side, the eye-slits of his rusted helm blazing bilious green. And the crowd began to scream, breaking in every direction at once.

Simeon fell slowly, through air as hot and thick as blood, his vision flickering between green moss over dark stone, rusty treadplate, and darkness.

His last impression, before the blackness smothered him, was of a roaring sound rising, blotting out even his pain.

Mr Ascher lost his contact.

## Ω

Lysander Jaegenn had gone classical for the night's festivities. Up until this morning

his Spiretop had been a vast lotus flower of aluminum and blue glass, its myriad internal salons suspended from thin silver wires.

Today it was in ruins, but within mere hours it would rise again like a phoenix from a nest of scaffolding. It wouldn't be the first time.

Lysander - the last of a long line of increasingly unstable Kheptarchs - had torn down his father's spire-estate in its entirety the day he inherited Helios Fusionetics.

From his breakfast room he could easily see the vast copper and chrome fist down there in the murk of the subcity, crudely stenciled with Celestial chop and political slogans. They said it had crushed thousands when it fell, but Lysander wasn't terribly surprised. The thing had lacked subtlety, just like his own Lord father who'd built it.

Anyhow, the Subcity was always tearing itself apart and throwing up new monstrosities of bad architecture. Tonight the Valley View was burning, apparently, and good riddance.

Lysander floated above his new temple on a hovering silver platform, millimeters thin but as stable as carved bedrock. In the centre of the tethered wafer a three-thousand-year-old Turkish hand-knotted carpet cushioned a rosewood dining table set with antique twenty-first century vibro-cutlery, each exquisite piece chased with platinum. Only the very best would do for the scion of Helios, keepers of Elysium's precious power supply.

Lord Jaegenn sliced his poached eggs and crispy pseudobacon above a horde of laboring robots, the Vexx logos on their scarred armor painted over with the crossed keys of the Vatican. Business went on as usual. And the business of this afternoon was preparing for one hell of a big night. It all seemed to be coming together nicely.

Welding flames flickered and arced behind curtains of sky-blue glass, an artificial aurora which painted the newborn temple within in stark monochrome.

Lysander's robots were putting the final cut and polish to a vast edifice of white marble easily the size of the ancient Parthenon. A circle of immaculate Doric columns supported a dome incised with the clenched fist of his noble house. Within, human caterers slaved over the details of an orgy Caligula would have envied. Morsels on golden platters, immense urns of sweet wine, intricate and erotic ice statuary encased in stasis fields...

It was all an elaborate trap.

At his side on the carpet hunched a twisted creature clad only in a studded iron collar. From the centre of its forehead protruded a stubby plastic antenna, crudely bolted into the exposed bone. As Lysander smiled down upon his creation, the wretch clapped mindlessly, grinning and drooling.

Lysander threw him a bacon rind and tweaked the tip of his antenna.

"He will come, and he will be slaughtered." confided the Lord to his thrall, scratching the creature's stubbled pate as if it were a favorite dog. "It's my party, and my

game, and tonight it is by my rules."

His pet - once the planet's wealthiest oil magnate - said nothing; indeed, its tongue was stapled down to silence its moaning and gibbering. After a millennium or more of slavery and a score of reincarnations the twisted thing was just slightly more insane than its master.

## Ω

Abdulafia felt the steely fingers of his foe hinge shut around his throat, and there was nothing his energistic power could do to stop them. Weakened by the effort of freeing the Super-Cyben from its neural restraints, it was all he could do to shore up the frail bone and tissue of his neck to prevent instant decapitation.

Lieutenant Tsien's eyes blazed inches from his contorted face, his mouth a snarl of metal fangs.

"I don't give a shit why you're here, or what's with the stupid costume, Blaire." he grated, lifting the Ashishim's feet clear of the tank turret. "But I know you've got influence with Lancaster, and I know he can put me back how I was."

With an immense Cyben claw slowly crushing his windpipe Abdulafia could hardly protest his captor's mistake. Indeed, for the renegade clone to contact his creator would surely be the end of him, and possibly the end of the Ashishim. Emmanuel Lancaster had infinitely more money than mercy, and he'd make as terrible an enemy as Kronos itself.

*But he think's I'm Simeon Blaire. That's probably all that's keeping me alive...*

Behind the looming shoulder of Tsien, knotted with bulging cables, Abdulafia saw a blue speck flare into life - the hardlight projector of CeeAn arcing up and out of the ruined tank hull.

Faster than his watering eyes could follow the spark leaped from one to another to another of the immobile Cyben troops, leaving starbursts of electrical fire in its wake. One by one the Cyben dropped, clattering to the floor in piles of discarded weapons and armor. The disruptor had stunned them, and Cee had switched them off at the mains.

*Which left only the worst of them. The one that's choking me to death...*

"Now, I'm going to let you go." said Tsien, shaking Abdulafia like a rag doll. "But if you try any tricks, *my Lord*, I'll twist your noble head off like a bottlecap."

Abdulafia felt himself flung down onto the tiles, a numbing blow which tore the remaining breath from his body.

Then the concrete beneath them cracked as Tsien landed over him, his twisted shadow the size of a skyscraper. The Eversio had recessed up along one arm of the Super-Cyben's hulking body, and its steel claws twitched and clenched in the fitful light. The Ashishi gasped, racked with pain, and coughed up a mouthful of blood.

"I'm sorry...Tsien. I'm not Blaire. I was made by..."

He was cut off by a kick to the ribs from Tsien which sent him sliding across the floor. The weight of the Super-Cyben's foot came down on his skull, pinning him like an insect.

"No tricks, asshole!" barked Tsien, leaning down over him with snapping claws. "You only have to forfeit the game, and that freakshow Lancaster will owe you a favor. No *Emperor* means he's still top bitch."

Abdulafia's eyes twitched left for a split second - CeeAn was behind the super-Cyben now, her shimmering blue form hefting a three-foot chunk of I-beam, its severed end twisted into a jagged impaling spike.

Tsien grinned as he followed Abdulafia's gaze. He leaped and turned with sudden speed all out of proportion to his bulk, facing the charging holo-woman with his arms outstretched.

The I-beam punctured his stomach with a sickening tearing sound, it's corroded point ripping through his skin. Blood and coolant fluid splattered the floor as she twisted it home. Tsien stood transfixed, still smiling, looking down on CeeAn with beatific indulgence.

"Are you quite finished?" he asked, arching one eyebrow above its searing blue reticule.

Tsien's claw shot out with preternatural speed, deep into CeeAn's holographic image. The tips of his razor fingers clamped down on the tiny spark which projected CeeAn's temporary body, and with the merest twitch extinguished it forever.

With a flicker of static and a wail of dismay, she was gone.

A slim black crescent of plug-studded armor clattered forlornly to the floor, its antigrav generators and holo projectors ruined.

Tsien swung back around, the ends of the impaling steel beam scything the air.

"Now, back to business, Lord Blaire."

Tsien grasped the metal beam where it protruded from his back, and pulled it free with a twisting wrench. Abdulafia stared in horror as the fist-sized tunnel through his flesh knitted smoothly back together. The Super-Cyben slapped the gory steel against his palm as if it were his regulation taser-baton, planting his feet on either side of his captive's head.

"I know Lord Lancaster can fix me ...it wouldn't even be a day's work for his robosurgeons. But there's not much he can do with a brain that's splattered over ten feet of tiles."

The I-beam soared up, a whistling arc, to poise at its zenith over Tsien's head. Abdulafia had no doubt that the downstroke would cleave clear through the concrete to the Subcity levels below the Valley View, taking his skull with it.

He could stand the shock and the pain of it - what he couldn't stand was the waiting

for another clone body to be prepared, putting him in the same insubstantial state as poor CeeAn, snapped back into the prison of her containment crescent.

The Ashishim needed their champion at full strength during this crisis - he couldn't die tonight.

"Tsien...Edward..." coughed Abdulafia, clawing himself to a sitting position. "I'm not lying to you. I'm not Simeon Blaire ..."

"He's not, you know." said a rasping, breathless voice from behind them. "I am."

## Ω

Kaito and B-Zerk leaped from the maintenance conduit just as a crackling bubble of blue fire enveloped the node – a security field designed to take a man's arm off to the elbow if it was brushed by a single fingertip. Fire alarms and security strobes split the air, while outside the mall a mob of hysterical Blaire supporters fought a losing battle against the police.

Stray shots and screams added to the deafening sonic overload, while smoke and waves of blistering heat reduced Kaito's vision to a few feet in any direction.

"For once I have *absolutely* no idea what's going on in there." wheezed Kaito, pulling B-Zerk after him toward the edge of the open courtyard. Above them the STX Saber was waiting, still chained to the railing of an overhanging mezzanine.

"Your friend was in there. *Thousands* of people are in there!" he wiped an oily hand across his sweating brow. "The real question is *why* - and how to get them out."

B-Zerk shook Kaito's hand off his shoulder, staring back into the boiling smoke.

"Zone heard you." he said, while the Kayzi connected his belt to the hanging zipline. When Kaito turned back, B-Zerk's eyes were rolled up into their sockets, showing nothing but shimmering white. The ancient wakizashi was clenched in his hand until his knuckles showed just as pale.

His mouth cracked open in an idiot grin as he pulled the dagger from its ornate sheath.

"He's coming for us. Now."

## Ω

Direktor Ascher rewound the threedeeo, cold dread running wild in his mind.

It had all gone wrong! Something had ruined his illusion, stopped Simeon Blaire in his tracks! *He had to find out why. He had to regain control...*

His sensorium dome lit up, screen by screen, until every last camera feed inside the Valley View mall was at his command.

*There had to be a way to rectify the situation. Blaire was worse than useless without*

*his carefully crafted sequestration program - he was far too dangerous to be let off the leash alone...*

Octavio let them all play at once, drinking in the disaster through his augmented eyes.

Slowly, ponderously, the immune system of the Valley View mall shuddered into life, awoken from its century-long slumber by the frantic efforts of Compliance Division techs. Only once before had the crumbling edifice come under threat - during the riots of Reclamation day, when hundreds of dispossessed and wounded refugees had used its main concourse as a makeshift shantytown.

Huge corroded cogs and chains whined and clanked, screens of barbed mesh dropped from their hidden apertures in showers of powdered rust, and force-shield generators hummed with power. There were holes in the defense grid you could drive a bus through, but all that steel and crackling electricity was a great deterrent. The only ones left inside the Valley View were R.T. gunjacks, very stupid criminals and blue-ribboned rebels. Any one of them was fair game for the Cyben.

Ahead of his mob of fanatics, Simeon Blaire charged up the grand concourse of the Valley View, slashing left and right at Cyben and their human retainers, forging a path through to where his illusory world parted. Toward the face of Abdulafia.

Mr Ascher's delicately wrought fantasy was too fragile for such heavy dissonance. It cut through the quicksilver spark of the drugs and the hot burn of Blaire's ancient nanotech. It cracked his mind open.

Left, and his hissing sword neatly carved off the top of a Cyben's head, flashing between a ceremonial samurai helmet and a steel skullcap as it flew.

Right, and his fist shattered the faceplate of a *naginata*-wielding monk, who became a blue-suited rifleman as he fell.

Simeon howled in pain and confusion as Abdulafia unleashed his energistic attack on Tsien, faltering for a second as compliance division troopers with taser-batons charged him from all sides.

The cracks ramified across his vision, making the whole world look like broken glass. The gates and screens and sizzling deflectors which had fallen at his heels as he ran cut him off from his loyal supporters. Alone, he watched his enemies close in, distorted figures all mirror-crazed.

Then the spreading ripples of the Ashishim's disruptor washed over him, and his illusory world blew apart. One bullet slammed into his body, then a second, a third, making him twitch and dance as he bled. A howl of dismay went up from his forsaken disciples. And the cops closed in, grim-faced and bloody.

Down he went, under an avalanche of swearing, struggling officers, their electrically charged batons beating out a tattoo on his head, his unprotected arms. Raw voltage spiked through his illicit nanotech, shutting down his brain in a storm of green

pixels.

That was where Octavio Ascher's recording cut out.

But as his singal snapped off, connections went live in Simeon's brain, making the wires sing.

There was silence from within the pile of uniformed bodies for a second, for two.

It all clicked inside his head.

With a mindless howl Blaire leaped up to his feet, Comp Div troopers flying in every direction like chaff. He heard the sickening crack of breaking bone as they landed, a neat circle of destruction around a masked black revenant.

And he smiled.

All those shattered pieces of glass had fit back together *right*, and the world was back. He was just as deadly here as he was in Ascher's fantasy - but utterly out of control.

The Cyben he had expected to face next were down, glowing with the aftershock of blue fire.

But he saw their leader, more terrible in reality than in any illusion woven for him by Octavio Ascher, a giant and twisted ogre of a thing.

Dissonance tweaked him as he looked into the eyes of its victim. Even without the Direktor hacking his optic nerves they were still painfully familiar...

Blaire strode forward, his half-masked face expressionless. Now he had all the power his erstwhile master had given him, but none of the crippling controls. His own eyes stared back at him as the Super-Cyben raised up a huge metal bar to finish its slaughter...

## Ω

Tsien burned with anger as the pitiful Lord Blaire squirmed beneath him. How typical of the attitude of the *nobility*!

It would only take a word for this man to end his suffering - suffering indeed, for without the core drone to override his nerves he was filled with aches and stabbing pains that would have made a normal man scream. The Mark-Four system had barely had enough time to integrate with his ravaged body, and now the strain of keeping his flesh and cybernetics together was tearing him apart.

*What part of the Elysian government had condemned him to be a medical experiment? Was this how they repaid his years of service?*

It was almost worth keeping the bulky augmentations and weapons stitched though his body just to exact revenge on whoever was behind this injustice ...but here and now he could end it. One call to Lancaster, one game forfeited and he could surely be rebuilt, cloned, made human again...

And yet the fool denied him. Tsien's immense new hands gripped the steel beam so hard that it began to crumple.

A high-pitched whine escaped his clenched teeth as he fought to keep from pulverizing Blaire's head, ending his puling arguments ...

Something faded in over the static of pain and anger in his head.

"He's not, you know. *I am.*"

The Lieutenant forced his head around against the will of his overriding programs, corded muscle and cables stretching his leathery skin.

Behind him stood a figure in black, wearing a combat suit so fitting it seemed airbrushed over his chiseled muscles. The only hint of bulkier armor was a matt-black codpiece to which was buckled a slim-sheathed sword. Above the newcomer's half-mask familiar eyes bored into him without fear or pity.

Eyes like those that had stared at him from a thousand threedeeo feeds...

"If *you're* Blaire," grated Tsien, lowering the bar and pivoting over the body of his fallen adversary "Then what's this thing? Your celebrity stunt double?"

"Good question," replied Blaire, still as a carved statue amid the smoke and heat "I would assume that this is all some kind of elaborate plan to disinherit me of my destiny."

Tsien spat, a gobbet of quicksilver and blood and saliva the size of a golf ball.

"Don't get me started on *destiny*, your fucking majesty," he growled, bending the massive beam into a horseshoe shape with both clawed hands. "Because as of this second you are quitting the game. All bets are off. And you're calling up Lord Bloody Lancaster to get me put back to human."

Simeon laughed, his eyes twinkling as he unstrapped his leather half-mask.

"I'm too close to the end to give up now. Certainly not just to give charity to some *freak!*"

His fingers snapped in front of his face, and Tsien smelled the telltale odor of fuzzy stunn burst out of the capsul.

"When I am Emperor, I may have use for a brute like you to keep the lower orders in line." He giggled, tossing the empty capsul over one shoulder. "For now, give me that fellow you have so neatly incapacitated. I wish to see who has stitched a clone face onto him to discredit my rightful ascension!"

Tsien's teeth ground so hard, that had they not been stainless steel they surely would have cracked to splinters.

"Until one or the other or *both* of you little bastards gets me a hot line to Lancaster and his Biotects, he's staying right here!" he shouted, slamming the U-shaped twist of steel down over Abdulafia and pinning him to the floor. The Ashishim struggled hopelessly against the crushing weight - even well rested and fighting fit his energetic strength could not have pried that restraining loop out of the concrete.

There was a tiny metallic sound as Blaire's thumb pushed his sword an inch out of its sheath.

There was an almost inaudible click as recessed jaws in Tsien's arm released the Eversio.

The next second was a slow-motion blur for both of them as their augmented systems sliced time down to tiny, strobed slivers.

Tsien saw a slim black projectile fly from Blaire's hip - the sword!

The Eversio unhinged and swung into his grip, letting off a snap shot of silver mesh which diced the speeding black bullet feet from his chest, followed by a convulsive twitch which ripped it to tatters.

His cybernetic eyes shut down to slits as he realized it was nothing but painted wood. And in that instant the blade itself had made three neat cuts, underhand, shearing the weapon from his arm and slicing off its power feeds.

Even as the bulky cannon was falling away, severed, his other hand was closing around Blaire's forearm, hinging shut to pulverize his bones and force him to drop his katana.

But Blaire grinned at the gunshot snap of his radius and ulna, using the pull and leverage to come in closer. As he dropped the sword his fist hammered into a pressure point on Tsien's neck, forcing him to release his grip.

He snatched the sword from out of the air even as he recoiled, but too late. The Super-Cyben's foot caught him squarely in the crotch, propelling him fifty feet across the hall. If not for his protective codpiece the scion of House Blaire might have been crippled with agony then, ancient nanotech notwithstanding.

Tsien brushed himself down, surveyed the wreckage of the Eversio, and loosened up the muscles and servos in his bullish neck, shrugging off the cannon's backpack. He saw a flicker of movement off in the smoky darkness, a wink of hot silver...

With a hissing sound a cloud of razor-edged throwing stars came winging out of the heat-haze, centered on his glowing laser-rangefinder headset. Tsien stomped down on one of the immense floor tiles, propelling it up inches from the floor on the rebound. His other foot flicked it up vertical, a thick shield of stone which repelled the shuriken assault with a sound like windchimes in a hurricane.

Grasping his impromptu shield with one hand the Super-Cyben described a swift pirouette, launching the half-ton stone like a discus toward the source of the throwing stars.

"If you're gonna throw things, make sure it's worth your time!" he panted, waiting for the crunch of shattering ribs.

Instead he saw it part the smoke just in time for Blaire to leap up over it, raising his katana high as he kicked off the flying tile. The tempered steel blazed red in the flamelight, shearing down to cleave Tsien in half.

With milliseconds to spare Tsien turned, avoiding the lethal blade. His immense claw snapped shut on Blaire's belt and on his shoulder, stopping him in midair.

*"Stand still, you little bastard!"*

Now Tsien reversed the swing, battering the young Lord into the ground, a ragdoll in black. Cracks skittered out in all directions. The katana flew wide, ripped from its master's hand.

Once, twice, the merciless piston arms of the super-Cyben smashed Blaire down against the concrete, leaving bloody imprints with each blow. But the same ancient nanotech burned in Simeon's veins which powered Tsien's war-engine body, and when the half-human machine dragged him back to his feet he was ready. A broken smile split his face as he hung limp from the Cyben's claws, waiting until he felt the quickening in his blood...

And it came, silver tendrils budding from his wounds, stitching him back together stronger, faster - silver threads crackling with power as they unleashed a deadly shock into the hands of his tormentor.

Tsien recoiled, cursing, throwing up his arms to ward off the strobe-flash of power. And in that instant Simeon Blaire hung motionless in the air, gravity denied, humming discs concealed in his webbing belt taking up the load. He curled his shoulder down and under, tensing himself like a spring, then threw his whole body into a devastating roundhouse kick, his heel catching Tsien square in the chromed socket of one camera eye.

Glass shattered, skin tore, and the laser sight blinked out. All of this while Simeon's blade was still airborne, winking in the firelight.

End over end, the katana flew, to impale itself deep in the treadplate, quivering like a reed. Tsien bellowed with rage, one claw covering his ruined eye.

He came forward punching, his steel fist moving in a lightning series of jabs, ten, twenty of them, a relentless piston blurring chrome through the air.

Simeon dodged each blow with a twitch to the left or right, swaying like a tree before the gale, the hammerlike fist missing him by fractions of an inch. His eyes twinkled with amusement - obviously this mechanical thug was no match for his skill.

He never saw Tsien step over the body of a dead Cyben, and never saw his foot move, slipping under the stock of a combat shotgun. Suddenly the bloody claw came away from Tsien's face, now a webwork of knitting silver filaments. The shotgun snapped up into the air, came around like a hatchet, and slammed into Blaire's side. Tsien spun a one-handed manual of arms, the stock tearing the air as Blaire backpedalled in a panic, all decorum gone. His sleek combat suit was torn open, and blood leaked though the gash.

But his hand was fast, a striking snake, wrenching his katana from the floor...

Blaire spun his body sideways, braced his foot in a crack in the tiles, and brought

his sword up to block the swinging fist to his left. With a burst of sparks the blade came to rest between Tsien's knuckles, cutting his hand in two.

Blaire's eyes jerked right. The gun had stopped spinning, and now he looked down all four of its gaping barrels, staring at the cross-cut spiral tips of four solid riot slugs.

Tsien smiled, despite the cold steel bisecting his left hand.

"Say goodnight, fucker." he growled, and pulled the trigger.

## Ω

Deep beneath the Valley View - down below level after level of Habs and manufactoria and no-mans-land zones filled with renegade machines and R.T. troopers - a pair of hands turned a big black dial, scanning frequencies. A pair of antiquated headphones clamped down hard as a pair of ears searched the ether for a certain plaintive beeping sound.

"Found it, Rosvall!" said the operator, one SubMagus Devine, beaming with a mouthful of metallic-green aluminum dentures. "She's ready to download, if you boys have the tank prepped up."

In the shadows behind Devine's cluttered workstation a hissing steel drum lay canted at an angle, half submerged in an auto mechanic's grease pit. Rosvall - a balding vulture of a man in an oily lab coat - tapped a huge core of ash from off the joint he was puffing and scowled daggers at his comrade.

"Shit, boy, I've had this tin tub ready since before you even started fucking with that receiver. Let's get her back down here and hope she ain't *too* pissed when we crack the lid. Hells know I'm not getting in her way."

Devine punched buttons, lighting up a dancing display of flashing lights on his cobbled-together console.

"If I gotta pop the lid this time, you gotta do the paperwork. And remember the tech pool, Ros. Odds are seven to one she frags out this body within a day. You gotta be in it to win it."

The bald-headed cryo master gave his apparatus a final loving kick, throwing a set of brass-handled levers to set the whole rig shuddering and sighing.

"Just hit the contacts, boy. And tell Nguyen in Ordnance to be prepared. If I'm hearing right from Ramon's last message, she's gonna want to take half their firepower up with her."

## Ω

Hassan arrived in the plaza in front of the Valley View mall to be greeted by a scene right out of a historical threedeeo.

Not since the riots of Reclamation day had the city of Elysium seen such unrest. Hordes of citizens armed with broken bottles, iron bars and workmen's tools battled an equally fierce contingent of Compliance Division troopers, grimly holding the line behind riot shields as they swung their heavy batons. Between the living officers the stony-faced Cyben kept back the blue-ribboned horde with laminated fists and paralyzing electric shocks, unmoved by the carnage around them. The cops were pushed back against their troop carriers and tanks, their guns pointing out into the streets to keep the riot isolated. If they'd fired into the crowd it would have been an utter massacre - and who knew, then, what kind of bloodbath would erupt in the deep hab-levels of the Subcity? Cameras stared down on the riot like mechanical voyeurs, repackaging the whole grim spectacle as news.

No - these guys were playing it professional, but Hassan was still worried. Kaito was here somewhere, and he was probably right at the centre of all the trouble.

Just outside of the cordon massed even more disheveled Subcitizens, some just there for the show but an alarming number wearing the blue sash of House Blaire zealots. Some were unarmed, but others were packing pistols, shotguns, plasma carbines... a whole motley arsenal just waiting to be unleashed.

If they did... Jaq remembered what the aftermath of a General Extermination Order looked like - it still gave him nightmares. They had to clean up the deceased with mops and buckets.

Hassan shouldered his way through the spectators to the edge of the clear zone, right up to where a navy-blue armored cop was shouting into a portable radio.

"Twenty third Cyben squad is inside ...reporting heavy casualties. We've lost contact with the experimental subject ...riot squads six and thirty nine are containing the disturbance ...request immediate repeat *immediate* orders for General Extermination!" The red-faced and sweating officer turned to look at Hassan as his hulking shadow fell over him.

"If it ain't official business you'd better clear out, pal." he shouted over the din of smashing glass and screams "Those tank jockeys have orders to cut down anyone who tries to get through."

Hassan thought of Kaito in there, and of the devastating firestorm which would come down from the tower above when a General Extermination order was issued.

"Uh....special orders from the, ahhh, developmental weapons department." he said, pulling his Omnivasive payslip from out of his coat pocket. "The experimental subject you've lost contact with may have gone critical."

Hassan waved the official-looking papers under the officer's nose and jammed them back in his coat.

"Condition...umm...*Deadly Nightshade*." he improvised.

The officer went pale, cupping his hand over the radio and leaning closer.

"That thing's off the leash? Sweet Buddha's ghost!" he looked Hassan up and down, and began to root through a military locker at his feet. "I don't care how tough you are, soldier - if you really want to go after HIM you'd better suit up." He came up holding a reinforced chestplate, a helmet and a pair of oversized rail pistols.

"Just let me call HQ, and perhaps we can spare you one of these tanks as well." he said, punching numbers into the radio. "*Condition Deadly Nightshade* ...ohh, that sounds bad. Real bad."

Hassan threw back the bolt on one of the bulky pistols, ready to fight his way though. HQ would no doubt confirm that no special agent from x-weapons had been dispatched...and that there was *definitely* no such condition. Hassan had got the name off a tacky threedeeo movie.

"There will be no need for that." purred an oily voice at Hassan's elbow. A pale hand snaked out and flicked a switch on the radio, shutting it down. "Mr Hassan here is a special kind of technician. His specialty is the recapture of rogue cybernetic systems."

The man was slightly built, dressed in grubby brown tweed, with a shiny bald head and a beaklike nose upon which perched a pair of outsized camera goggles. Other recording devices sprang from his shoulders and forearms like augmented weapons, and a slim keyboard was strapped across his chest.

The officer looked puzzled for a second, and then spotted the holographic halo which orbited the man's head. In yellow and blue it proclaimed 'PRESS - SPECIAL ATTACHE'.

"You going in with him then?" asked the cop brusquely, staring with obvious distaste at the little man and his shabby suit.

"But of course!" exclaimed the pressman, taking Hassan by one arm and dragging him through the cordon. "Omnivasive never miss a hot story! Why, the last time this big fella did his thing he took out half of the wastewater processors under Eastcliff! Big cover up, of course, never got to air the report, but the *footage*! If that battlemekan was only a twenty-tonner I'll eat my hat!"

The cop blinked, confused and stunned by the little man's tirade.

"*That was him?*" he asked. I heard that the Direktorat sent in a whole unit of Tech Division Demolishers. But it was one man? Whew - I wouldn't want your job, pal."

Hassan followed numbly as they weaved their way between tanks and troopers, supply crates and medical trauma teams attending to the wounded. Ahead of them flickering force barricades and razorwire contained the riot, although by now most of the Blaire fanatics and a good many troopers were down and out.

Hassan and his guide stood on the remains of a little raised garden overlooking the plaza, ignored by the Comp Div men. Their eyes seemed to slide over Aticus Meaks like oiled teflon.

"Well, this is where we part." said the little man, staring up at Hassan with his huge

blank lenses. "My briefing from chief Ascher was just to get you this far. Good spin about that experimental weapons jive - you could be reporter if you ever want to give up your day job." Abruptly, as if pulled by strings, the pressman shot out a jerky handshake.

"Atticus Meaks, at your service. By which I mean at the chief's service, really, but right now it's all kind of the same thing, eh Mr Hassan?"

"I should have guessed Ascher had his teeth into this mess." said Hassan, pumping Meaks' hand in one immense paw. "But you got me through the lines, Atticus, so what can I do for the chief today?"

"Thought you'd never ask." chuckled Meaks, one hand slithering inside his tweed coat. "This little package is for an old friend of yours, courtesy of the big guy. You've got a ten-minute window while the juice in here is active. He wanted *me* to deliver it, but I'm far too fond of my skin, no matter how wrinkled it is. I'm just glad you're still around to do my job for me."

Hassan groaned as he saw what the pressman had produced. It was another syringe full of nanonics swimming in adrenochrome. There was no doubt for whom it was intended.

Hassan turned on his heel to leave, but Meaks' hand gripped the crook of his elbow, hauling him back with deceptive strength.

"Coincidentally enough, after that ten minutes is up our boss'll finally let the call go through to enact a General Extermination Order. He's got no doubts that Lord Simeon will survive - a very resourceful and thoroughly upgraded young man. But he gives his guarantee that one *Kaito Kayzi* won't."

Without a split second's warning Hassan's cybernetic hand was clamped around the dome of the pressman's skull. His camera goggles shattered with a brittle crack, and Hassan could feel the stresses in the bone beneath.

"Tell that shrunken head bastard that I'll do it - this time." grated Hassan, throwing Atticus Meaks to the ground. His eyes were wide and pale where the rubber goggles had covered them.

"But after this, he can consider my contract to be terminated. I'm sure he'll understand."

Hassan swept the syringe out of Meaks' hand and stuffed it into his pocket. He stepped over to a coil of razorwire and wrenched out the studded pole supporting it, snapping the snarl of wire off with his augmented fingers.

Ahead of him the riot went on, nothing but a heaving human obstacle between him and his purpose.

Hassan strode into the fray, the steel pole cutting a path before him like a harvester mowing down grain.

*Damn Kaito Kayzi and his suicidal supidity!*

But if he was going to take down a hard target like Octavio Ascher, he'd need all the help he could get.

## Ω

B-Zerk ran through sheets of fire, the wakizashi in his hand seeming to pull him onward into the collapsing Valley View.

His eyes were streaming from the acrid smoke, and his lungs were beginning to ache from the lack of oxygen, but he plunged on, toward the sounds of fighting which echoed ahead.

He knew that Zone Doubt was coming - a certainty which had completely taken over his mind. From out of the sickening well of memory came the smell of burning skin and flesh, and a scream which instead of fading away into the darkness came spiraling up, drowning out reason.

With a resigned sigh Kaito unclipped his belt from the zipline and set off after him. Sure, the crazy kid had tried to open his throat, but he didn't deserve to *die*. His motorcycle suit blocked the worst of the heat from the flames, and a damp rag slapped across his mouth and nose kept him from choking. At any second he expected to stumble over the unconscious form of B-Zerk, passed out from the suffocating smoke.

Instead he burst out of the inferno to a scene out of surreal nightmare. For a moment he thought he was still trapped in the node, the Wetsystems twisting his memories into some bizarre hallucination.

B-Zerk was running across the tiles, hurdling the supine bodies of fallen Cyben, toward the wreck of an ancient battle-tank, its ruined engines belching diesel smoke.

In the middle of the expanse of tiles stood Simeon Blaire and Lieutenant Edward Tsien. Both were bloodied and torn up - and neither was the man Kaito remembered. Blaire was stripped of his lordly raiment, dressed in light-devouring black and poised in a fighting stance. This time he didn't face other Kheptarchs in the ancestral Game - his adversary was more than half machine, a grotesque caricature of the corrupt gutter cop Kaito had once known. One of Tsien's gigantic hands held a combat shotgun, its four squat barrels trained on Blaire's chest.

Into this scene came B-Zerk, staggering now from the poisonous fumes in the air.

He saw the gloating triumph written across Tsien's face, the silver cables and bunched wires pulsing across his oversized torso.

He saw Blaire poised on his toes, ready to dive out of the way of the shotgun's deadly blast. He recognized that stance - one of the dozens of forms that his old friend Tadashi Murai had been teaching him.

So his hand moved without his mind's intervention, throwing the wakizashi up and over, a looping arc which would land it unerringly in Blaire's grasp.

Kaito leaped forward, trying to tackle the kid to the ground before the shotgun spoke.

And as the four muzzles exploded with an ear-shattering report he saw Simeon Blaire snap the little dagger out of the air.

## Ω

Abdulafia had passed out for a second there - the pressure of the i-beam pinning him to the concrete made it almost impossible to breathe. If he hadn't been so low to the ground he was sure he'd already have succumbed to smoke inhalation.

*Small mercies. And even smaller hopes...*

Suddenly he felt a cold steel pressure along his left side.

Looking up, he locked eyes with a green-eyed giant, his whipcord goatee festooned with tiny silver charms and sigils. He was both the ugliest and most welcome angel of mercy the Ashishi had ever seen.

"On three, we both try to move this hunk of metal." said Hassan, leaning his prodigious weight to the prybar.

Abdulafia nodded, then pushed up with all his might...

## Ω

Simeon caught the sheath of the Wakizashi as he leaped - not left or right, but directly up. The Cyben riot gun was built to cut a swathe of devastation to both sides, but not above or below. Four solid slugs ripped out in a tight fan, designed to mow down tightly packed crowds at chest height...

The warrior Lord sprung up six feet in a single bound, his feet touching down on the gun barrels for a second and then propelling him onward.

Tsien was still grinning with victory as Blaire ran up his immense arm. By the time he began to react it was too late.

Blaire's left foot connected with his jaw, pushing him back on his heels. His right hammered down on top of Tsien's skull with an audible crack of bone. Then he was over, spinning in the air behind his staggering foe. The sheath of the wakizashi stabbed into a pressure point in Tsien's corded neck, making his head snap forward, cords of silver straining. A tiny slit appeared between the Super-Cyben's vertebral plates of armor.

And as Tsien roared in pain and vexation, the ancient blade slid through his spinal column, erupting from his throat in a burst of gore.

For a second the Lieutenant stood there, blood and oil bubbling from his severed windpipe, twitches and tremors shuddering through his cybernetic muscles. He dropped

the shotgun as his claws snapped open and closed convulsively, and his knees began to buckle, slumping his great form to the floor in a tatter of ruined clothes.

Blaire alighted with a flick of his wrist, twisting the blade in the wound. And the Super-Cyben was felled.

"So die all those who oppose their Emperor!" hissed Blaire, his back to the ruin of Eddie Tsien. "Such is the justice of my new age!"

But before he could turn and retrieve his blade, Simeon felt strong arms wrap around his torso. He tried to struggle, but a blaze of blue lightning lit up the encircling grip of Abdulafia. He was completely pinned. The centuries-old nanotech in his blood boiled at the disrupting touch of the Ashishi warrior.

Hassan' huge hand clamped down over Blaire's skull, the syringe held up like a sacrificial knife in his other.

"I suggest that everybody runs!" shouted Hassan, his thumb on the plunger "Last time this boy took his medicine all hell broke loose."

Kaito dragged B-Zerk up off the floor and grinned at his friend across the ruined mall.

"Brother, you read my mind!" he shouted exultantly, throwing B-Zerk over one shoulder.

Hassan smiled back, and the needle came down.



DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

“Cut off the subject’s arm. Cauterize the wound, and allow it to heal.

Then photograph the missing limb across a broad spectrum – and watch the outline of it appear, seemingly whole, a ghost appendage made of patterned energy.

How can it exist without flesh to sustain it?

Ah – the *real* question is, can flesh be sustained without the energy to support it? You can take a common sea sponge, run it through a blender, and pour the resulting slurry into a tank, then watch the sponge re-form, with each cell in just the right place.

The aim of our experiment is to push out the boundaries of this energistic field, to manipulate with it not just the cells of the human body, but any object within its new, extended reach.”

Doctor-Colonel Arad Kincaid Stiles, ‘Procedures for the post-mortem preservation of biologically generated patterned energy fields’

Elysian University Collection (deleted)

Discovered in data files recovered from an Ashishim outpost.

*White-hot plasma spumed and sparked around Technician Zhe's hand, converted through the alchemy of the Slavesystems into a powerful cutting torch.*

*Time was running out before the Forge could be used again, and still the armored plating of Kronos' device core thwarted his efforts.*

*His blazing cutter bored onward, hotter than the surfaces of suns, through the weakest point in the system's defenses. Although in this case weakness was a relative concept.*

*The machine had accreted armor around itself like nacre around a pearl.*

*Inside this armored dome was the reality of his visions, the great cubes of hardware which contained the heart of Kronos.*

*Perhaps under the layered eka-steel and bonded silicon the broken body of Eddie Tsien floated on its rack of light, the focus for an immense act of possession. More likely the skyscraper-sized glass cubes were dead and powerless, unable to stop the festering rot within the Wetsystems...*

*Zhe's boot slammed into the immense plug of armor he had cut around, its edges still glowing with heat. It was still falling, down into the dim blue light of the device core as he fired a slim wire across to the nearest of the great glass cogitator cores, secretly relieved that the entire cavern hadn't been subverted.*

*The vision he had suffered of this place transformed gnawed at the edges of his mind, overlaying the serried ranks of processors with the ghosts of black stone towers, studded with iron spikes and mutilated bodies strung on chains. He could feel the thorny roots of the Enemy pushing at the base of his skull, intimations of its otherworldly power sparking through him.*

*Zhe put it out of his mind. There were only seconds left.*

*In space, the satellites spun like gems, exquisite and untouchable. Each one held enough power to wipe out a nation. Orchid-petal solar panels turned in upon themselves, mirrors flashing like oriental fans.*

*They were waiting for the Forge, and waiting, too, for the power out of the wastelands which could stop it in its tracks.*

*When it came, Zhe would finally know who commanded it.*

## Ω

The air above Duke Jaegenn's spire was filled with whirling steel; an armada of helicopters and hovering camera platforms keeping tight formation as they sliced the night to ribbons with halogen spotlights.

Omnivasive had spared no expense to make this event the pinnacle of excitement, the very apogee of entertainment for the masses who filled the streets and plazas at the

base of Lysander's spire.

A swathe of red carpet ran from the little public park on Jaegenn Circle to the doors of the Lord's estate, a gauntlet of threeedee cameras funneling the aristocracy into the arena.

And all throughout the last city, in public spaces patrolled by increasingly nervous Compliance Division troopers the fans were massing, crowding around the immense inflatable twodee screens Direktor Ascher had donated for the show.

They were ready to cheer, and chant, and riot. And when Blaire finished this final round of slaughter, they would be ready to acclaim him Emperor, and bring about the culmination of Mr Ascher's plans.

Now he was content to wait, and take care of the final details leading up to his Big Finish.

Night was falling outside the windows of Mr Ascher's sensorium, a half-darkness lit up with neon and arc lamps, pierced by sweeping searchlights from his helicopters above.

On a small floating screen in front of his tank, Mt Ascher saw the static blink out to black, and then clear.

Once again, he was looking through the eyes of Simeon Blaire, down below in the concourse of the Valley View. Whatever had happened between that blast of static and the second that Jaq Hassan had brought the needle down was a mystery - but the minute details scarcely mattered. What was important was that the program had worked - that Simeon Blaire had led his followers into battle for the first time.

*Thank the gods, and all the devils too. For a second there he'd actually thought... But no. It was best not to even contemplate failure, not when he was this close...*

Now it was time for an object lesson to strengthen their resolve. Now it was time for *martyrdom*.

Outside the ruined gates of the Valley View a blue - ribboned army of Blaire supporters had been brought under control, hundreds of belligerent malcontents kneeling inside a circle of tanks and Cyben and riot troopers. They would fulfill one final purpose, now that Simeon was back under control.

"Commissioner, this is Direktor Ascher." hissed a disembodied voice over a certain encrypted relay. "Thank you for your patience; you are free to issue the extermination order."

## Ω

Hassan was waiting for Simeon to go off like a bomb as the dripping point of the syringe slid into the precise little circle of steel at the back of his skull. He remembered Blaire's maniacal feral grin, the silver sword lashing at him again and again ...

But there was nothing.

Kaito had the kid he'd picked up somewhere along the way slung over one armored shoulder like a sack of bricks, and was staring at him, wide eyed, waiting for the predicted fireworks to start.

The Ashishim stepped back from Blaire, releasing his grip, clenching his scarred fists in anticipation. His face was covered by a mask of dust and blood, but Jaq was sure he'd seen him somewhere before...

He'd expected a fight for his life, but Blaire just seemed to power down, a mekan with its batteries ripped out. His head lolled forward onto his slick black chest, his muscles unknitting and slumping as the contents of the syringe took effect. It seemed to be all that he could do to remain standing.

"Hassan - let's get out of here!" shouted Kaito, adjusting his unconscious burden and pointing back into the cavernous vault of the burning mall. "The fire's spreading, and this place is falling apart!"

Hassan stepped gingerly away from Blaire, as if the merest tremor would set him off. After all the pain he'd caused, he wouldn't feel guilty when the Aristo fool was crushed under a collapsing building.

"You coming with us, buddy?" he called to the Ashishim, who was ripping a chunk of machinery out of the ruined battletank. "Or do your brothers in the Revolution have a plan for this kind of thing?"

Abdulafia hefted the shiny black crescent which had housed CeeAn's mind, connecting it to the Ghulam's ancient battery with alligator clips. Two of his duct-taped dreadlocks snaked into the containment module, their plug-tipped ends finding matching sockets in its smooth surface.

"I'd be pleased to join you, gentlemen." he drawled, ripping an oily canvas duffel bag from the tank as he spoke. "Word on the wire is that some baaad shit is coming down on this location."

Smiling, he rummaged in the bag with one hand, pulling out a pair of old-fashioned revolvers, so huge and brutal that they made modern railpistols look like cheap kids' toys.

"Jus' out of interest, but have you fellows ever seen what happens to dead Cyben?" he asked, lobbing one of the cannons underhand to Hassan, the other to Kaito.

"Aren't they dead already? Y'know, when they're built?" asked the Kayzi, plucking the gun out of the air with his free hand.

"Well... I'll tell ya while we evacuate." said Abdulafia, fishing in the sack for his own weapons. In the smoke and flamelight, Hassan could swear that he looked just a little too much like the waxen, immobile Lord Blaire . .

It was the drugs catching up with him. It had to be.

They set off into the mall at a loping run, away from the bleeding and broken body

of Tsien, and the unmoving figure of Simeon Blaire, the syringe still protruding from his bowed neck like an exclamation point.

"Don't they just recycle them?" panted Hassan as he came up alongside the Ashishim, who seemed to glide through the smoke without touching the ground. "Just plug in a new set of batteries, a bit of synthetic flesh, and put them back on the street?"

Kaito was having trouble keeping up, the unconscious kid across one shoulder weighing him down.

Hassan had just pulled up short to take over his burden when the roof behind of them flashed red, then white, and a huge circle of it phased into nothingness.

A rain of debris hammered down on the felled body of Eddie Tsien, entombing him under hot plasticrete.

The blast of superheated air lifted all of them off their feet, tossing Kaito and the boy end over end to land inside a ruined storefront. Abdulafia managed to wrap one hand around a lightpole as he was propelled backward, cursing.

Hassan felt the heat searing his eyeballs, burning in his lungs, and then his body struck a solid and unbending wall of plasticrete, and he heard his skull connect with a billiard-ball crack.

Behind him he heard more sounds of rending and breaking, as the shock collapsed part of the mall.

Whatever had come in through the roof had cut off their escape.

His vision swam, starbursts of purple and red blurring in and out, as something lowered itself into the hole, a vast insect of steel and chrome, its eyes the size of hubcaps, blazing magnesium white ...

Hassan groaned and spat out blood. He ground his knuckles into his bruised eyesockets, trying to drive the residue of drink and drugs from his battered brain.

As his eyes narrowed, the haze rolled back.

It was a helicopter, its blades fanning the flames up and out in a fiery corona, the garish neon insignia of Omnivasive standing proud in bilious yellow from its sides. Those great dragonfly eyes were dangling searchlights, which even now swung on their mountings, transfixing the tiny black figure of Simeon Blaire.

There, hanging out of the control bubble at the nose of the howling machine was the thin, hawkish face of Atticus Meaks, his camera goggles pushed back onto his shiny forehead, a drooping cigarette clamped in his lips.

As Hassan struggled forward into the gale, and as Abdulafia raised his hand, the great revolver he clenched pointing like an accusing finger, a claw on a long whiplike cable sprung from the belly of the chopper. At its tip writhed a quartet of lashing steel tentacles.

Hassan heard the revolver fire, saw the white muzzle flash, but the Ashishim was too late.

The shot pared paint off the wildly bucking and slewing nose of the machine, and the grapple descended on its target.

'Afia stood defiant, one arm crooked around the lightpole for balance, his clothes streaming about him in tatters. And Hassan saw that he WAS Simeon Blaire - saw that same maniac grin as the hammer came down on another shell, and as the skin of the helicopter opened up in a bloom of rending metal and charred paint.

Those tentacles had found their mark now, and were wrapping their prey in a cocoon of wire. A third shot came from off to the right, and Hassan saw Kaito perched in the store window, holding his gun with both hands. This one almost blasted the stabilizing rotor off the chopper's tail, and Meaks screamed in alarm as his craft veered close to the ragged edge of the hole he'd cut.

Hassan brought his own gun up with what seemed like syrupy slowness, his servo-assisted thumb snapping back the hammer as he sighted along its long black barrel.

There, under the control bubble. The mining-grade plasma lances which Meaks had used to cut open the roof. Tanks of volatile liquids and coolants clustered around the muzzle of the cutter like ripe fruit. One shot there...

But now the helicopter, with Blaire dangling beneath, was rising up into clear air, the control bubble dipping and weaving as Meaks tried to smooth his ascent. The whirling blades only had clearance of inches on either side of the hole.

Hassan and the Ashishim fired at the same time, but their target was rising too fast now, free of the mall and accelerating.

One bullet bit into its landing gear, bursting a fat black tire. The other nearly struck Blaire as he was pulled aloft, swinging wildly like a human wrecking ball.

Hassan saw his face as he was pulled up through the smoke; he had the look of the dead Cyben about him, blank, confused and yet somehow blissful, beyond the needs of the living.

It was then that Hassan remembered Atticus Meaks' promise outside the mall, and knew that their trouble was only just beginning.

"*General Extermination Order!*" he coughed, trying to shout but choking. He staggered over to the Ashishim, clawing at his sleeve. "I don't know what they're gonna do, but we have to get gone, NOW!"

Kaito was with them a second later, leaving B-Zerk tucked under cover in the ruined store.

"You RT guys are supposed to have all the secret tunnels and hidden doors," he said to Abdulafia, tucking the revolver into his belt. "Is there some kind of way out of here that the Div don't know about?"

The Ashishim dropped his eyes, and reluctantly let go of his support.

"It was back there, I'm afraid," he said, "Under that pile of melted metal with my brothers."

"So we go back." said Hassan, contemplating the slew of flaming rubble which had blocked off their escape. "At least Simeon bloody Blaire isn't in our way anymore."

The lights on the strange crescent across 'Afia's chest flickered and winked in the flamelight, illuminating his face from below. Hassan could see now, close up, that this man wasn't an exact copy of his aristocratic double. There were different lines and scars across the Ashishim's face, and a look of true, contrite regret there that Simeon Blaire would never know.

"I guess we do, then." he said. "The spirits tell me it's not our day to die, or else I'd be kind of worried."

Abdulafia looked up, and the others followed his gaze, back into the plaza where the smoke billowed and spiraled up out of a ragged circular hole in the ceiling. In that writhing pall they could all make out moving lights - small, red, purposeful eyes. They were coming closer. Jaq looked back the other way, and saw a swarm of them coming in from that side too.

"It'll be an honor to die with you if they're wrong, though." said the Ashishim, checking the load of his revolver. The cylinder whirled and clicked into place, the hammer came back with a clear, punctuating snap. "And you'll both know what happens to them dead Cyben."

## Ω

In the palace of the Biotects darkness reigned, shrouding the dead in velvet.

Mr Ascher could never have come here in person, to the most hallowed altar of the Aristocracy; not before, in his old life, his old flesh. And definitely not in his current state, as a brain trapped in an isolated, armored skull. Only once had he been let in. Once, and for a cost that would have crippled nations, to buy a child's life and turn him into a weapon...

Even then he'd only been allowed down on the factory floor with the servants.

But his influence was here, in the form of a Slayer cloud, a tiny swarm of metal and silicon motes which could slip past every safeguard of Universal Wetsystems' security grid unnoticed. Emmanuel had given him the key to this place when he attacked Omnivasive, and in death he'd proved to be a much more gracious host than he ever was in life.

Here before the unblinking optics of Mr Ascher's parasite were the three hundred identical glass tanks which held the new bodies of the warrior caste, his hated so-called *superiors*.

They were utterly vulnerable, naked and pink behind the dewy panes, like life-sized toys. And without their maker to protect them, they were just as breakable.

Mr Ascher was busy tonight, as the Lords and Ladies gathered in the shadow of the

Jaegenn spire for what would prove to be their final game. Blaire had to be primed, and Leynna Mendelev-Singh would have to be taken care of. Kronos would have to be distracted from its vigilant death-watch over his own wasted body. But he would never be too busy to savor this moment.

The computer system of Universal was completely compromised now, the access codes torn out of Lancaster's mind as he was devoured. Throughout the spire servitor creatures lay slumped in postures of death, unable to guard this holy of holies. While they slept the lights began to dim, flickering from pale yellow to red as Mr Ascher assumed final control.

The life-giving liquid inside the clone tanks was stained bloody crimson by emergency strobes as critical processes were diverted. Fat, fluttering bubbles began to rise from their intrinsic recycling systems. The amniotic fluid which preserved the Lords was being changed, mixed with toxic acids, heated to boiling point...

Mr Ascher watched, transfixed, as the skin of the clones began to blister and wrinkle, peeling off in long lazy streamers from the flesh beneath. They were melting like plastic under a blowtorch now; Gideon, MacGill, Dawes, even a new and unmodified copy of Simeon Blaire, their tissue dissolving, sloughing off their bones in floating chunks. Disintegrating, like their dreams of power, like their influence, under the camera eye of Direktor Ascher.

Of course, to murder a Lord was the most heinous of crimes - a transgression punished swiftly and fatally with all the might Kronos could muster. Octavio was ambitious, and desperate, but he was no fool. His whole estate would likely be incinerated by aerial bombs if he so much as touched a hair on their heads. Inside the game it was different. When he'd tested his strength against them and failed, all bets had been off. The Game was sacred ground.

But here, in the palace of the Biotects there were no Lords and Ladies of the Razor Clique. The things which he disposed of were nonpersons, mere chattels for all that they were exact living copies of the Aristocracy. This wasn't murder in the eyes of Kronos - because these simulacra weren't yet human.

This was just *business*.

At last, even their bones thinned, cracked, and dissolved, leaving each pod filled with a roiling broth of toxins. His work here was done.

Tonight, when one of the high-born slipped and missed his strike the game would be all too real, and they wouldn't live to play another day.

## Ω

The people of the Reclaimed Territories were on the move tonight, and the reverberation and echo of whole neighborhoods being shifted inch by inch shook the

very walls down here, in the steel-sky ghettos of the Ashishim.

Up above, the Subcity was in motion too, a hive of termites kicked open, the streets filled with rioters and revelers in equal proportions.

Giant zeppelins branded with the logo of Omnivasive slipped between the cyclopean towers and belching smokestacks of Elysium, threedeeo screens on their flanks broadcasting the frenetic crush about Jaegenn's spire.

The square at the base of his temple was filled to bursting with Blaire zealots in their blue uniforms.

In other less public spaces throughout the Subcity - abandoned places and no-mans-lands at the fringes of habitation - the sects of the Reclamation were gaining ground.

Here an empty factory fell to the Aryan Confederacy, here a section of lightless tunnel was claimed by the Confucians. And everywhere, as the confusion spread, the tribes outside the city threw up ladders and ropes, clawing to get in.

The Ashishim were no exception. When a tribe like them had more people than space, every square inch was worth dying for.

The ruins which separated the RT from the city itself were unprotected tonight, and their security cameras winked out one by one as black-clad sons of Alamut spraypainted over their lenses.

Down in the Citadel, at the heart of the Ashishim sect, the vast indoor fields of hydroponic ganja lay empty. The mess halls and scriptoria were silent, and the barracks and tenement tunnels were deserted.

Every man, woman and child who wasn't out on the front lines was in the War Room, a great oval arena down below sea level. Its reinforced windows stared out into the oily black waters of the Atlantic, but nobody was here for the view.

Here, thousands toiled over a cobbled-together web of computer systems, patched up piecemeal from machines of many centuries. A wall of screens, from modern threedeeo globes to ancient green pixilated VDUs curved around the War Room, and on scaffolds before this edifice of flickering light countless Ashishim techs swarmed with handheld keyboards and headsets, coordinating operations.

Others bustled about the desks which covered the floor, bearing disks and papers, bottles of water and urns of scalding hot coffee, smoking pipes and styrofoam cups of ramen pot noodles for the staffers who sweated over the numbers.

In the eye of this cyclone a green silk pavilion rose from a mess of cables and plugboards, completely out of place among the heat and buzz of so many machines.

Inside, the lesser Magi of the Ashishim attended their master.

"Unit seven has met Vatican resistance outside floor one-two-nine," reported Magus Verlaine, pushing his 'mersive goggles back up his high forehead as he disconnected. "I've shut down their communications so that the tunnel crawlers can get around their flank. The steel mills on one-thirty-one will be ours within the hour."

The six Magi were seated on a raft of embroidered cushions, amid the drifting smoke of brass filigree censers. Five of them remained in the reverie of control, their minds deep within the immensely ramified web of wetware which permeated the Last City.

Verlaine had only emerged to report his success and gulp down a few mouthfuls of sweet iced water from the ornate pitcher at his elbow before he went under again. To tell the truth, he preferred the cool symmetry of the World Within to the stench and noise of the war room - Verlaine was utterly posthuman, disgusted by the rest of his species.

Oh, of course his Ashishim brothers treated him with the utmost respect, him and his five equals. They were *ancients*, after all - already retrofitted for efficiency and longevity when many of the sons of Alamut were only infants. Verlaine had been eighty-nine when the sect stole cloning technology from the Lords of Elysium - too old and too laden with powerful machinery to benefit from its use. Now he was just a human face on a suit of jet-black armor, unable to feel the cushions beneath him but able to conduct the Wetsystems like a master musician.

Ordinary people, even the lesser adepts of the Electromagi, were alien to him now, and their company meant little to him - so long as they could keep him connected.

"Our countervirals have just blocked another A.I. assault by the Vatican. They're trying to re-open their comms on 129." he reported, checking his bio-readouts on a tiny wrist screen. Another four hours inside without a protein infusion would be his limit. "I'm going to trace this one back, and deal with the source personally."

Verlaine was about to slide the 'mersive goggles back over his eyes when the figure seated in the centre of the pavilion raised one hand, stopping him cold. The High Magus was steeped in shadow, his green robes pooling around him as he sat cross-legged and silent among his soldiers.

"Please, a second of your time, Verlaine." whispered Illuminatus Zeon, in that smooth and sibilant tone so like the disembodied voice of the machine in his head. "There is a crucial diversion I have been overseeing alone, which requires another pair of hands."

Verlaine saw the flicker of a smile inside the shadows which cloaked the High Magus, and felt more than a little pride.

The six of them were constantly seeking the favor of their master - a creature so revered and ancient that he needed no machinery, not the smallest augmentation to master the mysteries of the Wetsystems. Ashishim rumor whispered that Zeon was *always* connected, that he had subverted part of the system to act as an extra battery of minds, and that by this power he was all but omnipresent, omniscient.

"Of course, revered Zeon." he replied, sneaking a glance at the other Magi as they lay in reverie around him. Was it just a coincidence of timing, of luck? Or was he really

highest in Zeon's favor?

Of course, he *was* worthy of such trust. No doubt the Master, in his wisdom, could see the quality of his faithful servant Verlaine... *others* certainly had. Others who paid him good hard currency to watch his master and report back in iron-bound unbreakable code. A true adept was only faithful to *himself*, after all.

"The one I want you to operate on is a Cyben, Magus Verlaine." said Zeon, that voice sliding over the top of his thoughts like oil slicking over water. "Access the node within Valley View Plaza first - the network there is in considerable disarray, but we trust in your skill. When you have found the node, locate a deactivated Cyben unit - the new model."

Now the High Magus leaned forward, his hands reaching out to touch Verlaine's temples, to cradle his stainless-steel skull back down to the cloth-of-gold cushions.

"You will not find a core drone to access, but there are other ways to tame such a creature, as I'm sure you know well. Re-activate him, and contact me when it is done."

Verlaine felt the humming power which coursed through the High Magus' hands, like a swarm of insects filling his head, expanding the already potent capabilities of his mind. The world dropped away, then, revealing to him the immense shining rootwork of the Wetsystems, more capillaries and branches than he had ever beheld at once. There, far below, was the tiny red pulse of his target, the snarled and knotted razorwire of security programs around a single infinitesimal human figure.

"Go with speed and skill, Verlaine. I trust in your abilities."

The words of Illuminatus Zeon flooded him with power, and he leaped from the War Room of the Ashishim like an arrow from the bow, his mind falcate, stooping on his prey with the speed of light.

In the little silk pavilion, amid the clatter and hum and bustle of bureaucratic war, Zeon sat, and smiled, and waited.

More than he trusted poor vainglorious Magus Verlaine, the lord of the Ashishim trusted his apprentice, the sword in his right hand.

Soon Abdulafia would finish off the Core Drone which had once had its teeth in Edward Tsien's spine. And then the Super-Cyben would be his to command, as well as its parasitic burden.

## Ω

The humming reverberation of twin-turbine engines rocked him in his unnatural sleep as the Omnivasive chopper rose up above the burning Subcity, floating like an ember from the blaze.

Down there the crowds of Blaire supporters had thrown caution aside, and were tearing into the Comp. Div. troops with feral anger - not just outside Valley View, but

all over the sprawling and rusted barrio that made up the Subcity. Thousands of them lay handcuffed and broken in a circle of tanks outside the burning mall, and more still were crammed into overloaded meatwagons, cursing and crying.

Unaware of the martyrdom and fury of his faithful, Simeon Blaire slept in the cold embrace of knotted steel tentacles, his mind absent, drained down a tiny wire which coupled with the needle-port in the back of his skull.

Around him another city burned, wildfire tearing hungrily through silk and paper and cherrywood. Staccato explosions arose from all around him as sturdy bamboo poles exploded chamber by chamber, sending houses down into the inferno in clouds and veils of sparks. They called it 'the flowers of Edo', a beautiful euphemism for the destruction of an entire city.

Blaire thought that perhaps, to those who watched from the immune and impregnable heights of the fortress, that it really did look like a field of red and orange flowers.

He was ascending the stairs now, great slabs of black marble fronting doors of studded iron - a palace which had never stood at the heart of the old Nipponese capital. This was the dream fortress of his master, a gnarled and twisted spike of cyclopean masonry which towered over the flames like the frozen form of Satan over Cocytus.

Rows of skeletal soldiers swum in the heat haze; Blaire was unsure if they were statues or animate warriors. Showers of sparks reflected in the bright silver of their naked blades, the polished black lacquer of their armor. Simeon moved through seemingly endless hallways, their roofs torn open to the skies where a wrack of clouds burned red. Ashes fell across the polished floors like snow. And though the walls bent and wavered, and the floor seemed to stretch off eternally in an unbroken line, he knew he was moving ever upward.

The final door was a vast disc of nephrite jade, carved with scenes of war across its immense face. From around its edges burned a sickly green light, an illumination which lit the jade from within, making the carved soldiers struggle against each other as it shifted and pulsed.

Blaire felt his hand move, out of control, to caress the smooth green surface of the door. He expected it to burn, to sear away his hand to a smoking stump - but the jade was cold, vibrating with power. It kicked under his touch like a great living heart.

With a grinding sound like shattering mountains the door began to move, rolling away on deep tracks in the stone to reveal the throne room of his master, a place suffused with power, where blazing helices of lightning burned up and down the stone pillars and a rain of ashes coated everything like dirty snow.

This was the crown of the impossible palace, the very tip of the black pagoda his Lord had dreamed into being. Three hundred arched windows looked out over a sea of fire, a hellscape of ruined buildings and black water reflecting flame. In each stone arch,

a body hung on barbed chains, crucified with hooks though its bleeding hands and feet. Blaire knew them, all too well. The aristocracy of Elysium were strung up bleeding there, all except one. Between the whipped and beaten corpses of Lords Kyrov and Valchek was an empty space, where hooks and chains spun in the wind. One was left for him.

The shade of Tokugawa cast a crooked shadow across the octagonal flagstones from his ornate ivory throne, a dark shape in steel and black silk - except for the smoldering green light which issued from the eye-slits of his skeletal helm.

"Come closer, disciple." hissed the shadow, beckoning with one unnaturally long claw. "It is time to begin the endgame."

Simeon knelt on the inlaid platform before the throne, laying his sword in front of him in supplication.

"What is your command?" he asked, his eyes averted from that grinning death's-head, that polluted green light.

"Do you recall when we began this, Blaire?" asked Tokugawa, seeming to shrink and deflate to human size as he spoke. One hand traced the line of his disciple's bowed shoulders. "I gave you an advantage over all these poor deluded fools by taking away your immortality."

Simeon nodded - it was true. At first he had been afraid to fight when the promise of a new cloned body had been taken away. But the rush of adrenaline was so much stronger and sweeter when his life was truly at stake. He had learned to channel that desperation into unstoppable rage, instinctive skill.

"And of course, you remember the *fear*."

Blaire felt the power coursing through his master's hand as it wrapped around his skull, and he felt the fear wash over him again.

The first engagement, knowing that if he failed it would be forever. The first time he felt a blade slice through his all-too-precious skin, the cold knot of terror blooming into anger, into killing rage.

"Tonight is the final game, Simeon. And so I have done the same for all of them." Tokugawa gestured around the chamber, at the crucified bodies of the Elysian nobles swinging on their chains.

And Blaire saw, in a sudden flash of green fire across his brain, the disintegrating faces of three hundred lords, their clone vats digesting them where they had grown, the flicker of warning strobes across ranks of glass coffins ... "It is time, Disciple. Destroy them in their weakness!"

Simeon felt it coming, the itch at the base of his spine growing like an energistic tumor, the artificial rage flooding his senses, narrowing his eyes in a haze or red.

The room around him seemed to erupt upward, liquid black and green shot through with lightning, becoming an endless vertical shaft down which he fell, plummeting like

a great fatal comet-core toward the wall of consciousness ...

From his window, Mr Ascher watched his helicopter scything through the smoky dusk, his life support tank swiveling on ceiling-mounted servos to face the tall leaded panes.

The tiny silver machine came down like an insect alighting on an improbable flower; atop the glowing blue spire of House Jaegenn.

His weapon was prepared, and out of its cage. Soon the plans which Mr Ascher had put in motion a century ago would come to fruition, and the illusion of Tokugawa's palace would be made real - three hundred crucified lords paying dead-eyed supplication to his throne.

## Ω

*Zhe stood atop the cube as it came to life. From the dim darkness far below him a tsunami of light erupted upward, row after row of mirrored panes coruscating with searing blue fire.*

*It peaked as the countdown ended, just as Zhe had predicted.*

*The Forge couldn't proceed without the machine's mind live and firing.*

*He only had a second to feel smug and superior before it all went wrong.*

*The cubes around him were lighting up now, dust and cobwebs blowing away in ragged veils, a starburst with him standing at ground zero.*

*And as he watched the blue light bled into the slavesystem armor at his feet, sending tendrils of cobalt radiance up his legs.*

*It moved faster than he could follow; a web of blue fire binding up his whole hybrid body.*

*Even the looming darkness of the Adversary seemed to shrink as the light suffused his metal skin, keening and hissing as Zhe's vision shut down, clamped between surging walls of code.*

*It was Kronos.*

*Its voice, emotionless, loud as the tectonic grinding of continents, blew away reason.*

*RELAY ALL PROCESSES THE STANDBY COMMAND  
RE-ROUTING POWER FROM PRIMARY WETSYSTEM FUNCTIONS  
PROCEEDING TO INITIALISE FORGE PROTOCOL*

*Zhe's eyes were forced open.*

*He looked down on the blackened Earth from above, from camera eyes in low orbit.*

*The satellites were pregnant with nuclear weapons, racks and racks of sleek bombs*

*gripped in their steel ovipositors.*

*Now, as the Forge gyre began to form, the weapons flickered with light and purpose, seeking a target.*

*READING AN ENERGY PULSE BUILDING UP OVER AREA 194a85j  
FORGE PRIMED...  
OPENING ALPHA-ZERO BLAST DOORS...*

*+++194a85j DISTURBANCE HAS PEAKED+++  
DISCHARGE IS APPROACHING...  
SHIELD SAT-CAMS -  
WEAPONS LOCK ACHIEVED  
FIRE / FIRE / FIRE*

*As the blue light downshifted to red and the city disappeared under a cloak of twisted illusion, all Technician Zhe could see was Kronos's memory of an earlier holocaust, of billions of people reduced to ashes.*

*He pushed the image aside with all his will, shutting out the sick, crawling feeling of disease that rode in on the same wavelength.*

*It was PLAYING with him! It wanted him here, to see it crush and kill and erase the only thing which held it back. It wanted to let Zhe know that he had failed, like doomed, mad Nyl before him...*

*For a second the floor beneath his feet lurched sideways, grinding to the bedrock.*

*The whole city shook as the Forge was cut to pieces, pierced like a bubble by a raving blast of black lightning.*

*But it was a trap.*

*Switch cameras. Watch...*

*The shadow of the energy pulse lay across the wasteland like a welt, a whipscar. It was a furrow ploughed with impossible physics, forty feet.*

*And it was an arrow aimed direct at Zhe's allies, a killing target.*

*Satellite cameras clicked and whirled in the vacuum, tracing it back to a valley in southern Afrika. They took a second, two, three, to plot trajectories.*

*Then from their bellies and grasping interior claws fell a rain of bombs, black teardrops slicked over with ceramic re-entry shielding.*

*Enough overkill, surely, to burn every trace of Zhe's allies from the Earth forever.*



DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**Agartta:** A mystical city from which the alleged ‘Invisibles’ run the affairs of the world. In the parlance of the Subcity the name refers to a legendary second city somewhere out in the rad-lands, a place philosophically and some say *militarily* opposed to Elysium.

While officially the Direktariat denies the existence of any such city, rumors of Agartta still sift up out of the pit, whispered of by refugees who claim to have seen the red-robed agents of the secret stronghold, and others who actually boast of walking its fabled streets.

Stories of a place where a machine like great Kronos serves man are obviously the rantings of the mad; clearly no human being could ever match the cerebral power of our guiding supercomputer. Hence of course the Lord’s Trials, and the quest for evolutionary Upliftment.

**Elysian Municipal Information System – (Client tagged for Compliance Division Investigation)**

*WE HAVE POSITIVE VISUAL...  
FIRST WAVE BOMBS ARE ENTERING STRIKE RANGE...*

*Zhe was no Kataphrakt; his masters didn't trust him with the deadly weapons they used to vaporize whole planets.*

*But he was a grade-twelve Technician, and he'd brought a whole dusty carpetbag of tools to Earth with him. Things which might not be able to stop a rain of death falling on his unknown allies, but which might just make their demise more than an empty gesture.*

*Zhe held out one hand, and a tiny scalpel rose up out of his rippling silver palm, its black and featureless blade no larger than a fingernail.*

*Maybe the power stopping the Forge was strong enough to deflect a handful of nuclear weapons, maybe not. But with this, Zhe could sever the mind of Kronos from its infected neurostrata.*

*The disease which gripped the Forge would be excised like tumor, packed away in ammonia ice and magnetic clamps for the sorcerer-scientists of Liquid Space*

*At least, that was the plan..*

*With a flick of his wrist he brought the scalpel down, as swift and deadly as the bombs which streaked the Afrikan sky.*

*Despite himself he couldn't help but watch as they plunged toward their target.*

*It was a crater valley – a scar on the face of Afrika like a vast lidless eye. Whatever titanic forces had carved this place out of the earth were about to be overshadowed by a storm of death.*

*Zhe spiraled in through a vortex of data, taking control of the nose-cone camera of a single twenty-megaton bomb. His new electric eye picked out the winking aquifer lake at the crater's heart, the dense snarl of jungle that swarmed up its slopes, thinning as the water dropped out from under it.*

*He saw movement up on the crater rim – something artificial. At precise intervals around the hundred-mile edge of the valley stood towers of black stone, and from the crown of each one a mirrored disc was rising, borne up by hydraulic arms which must be hundreds of feet long. Zhe tried to zoom in, but the grainy image from the bomb cameras was useless...*

*Then it was too late.*

*The first bomb bloomed open in a thunderflash of white heat, then another followed, and another.*

*But something had gone wrong. Not a ripple caressed the flat surface of the aquifer lake.*

*They'd struck something, up there above their target, and as Zhe switched back to a*

*spaceborne satellite camera he saw it for what it is.*

*A dome of force covered the valley, a rippling shield of blue radiance which the atomic blasts sleeted off like rain.*

*Zhe's alien smile was terrible to behold.*

*Now, when the Enemy was weakest. While it crowed over the orgasmic rush of nuclear fire...*

*He struck down hard, the blade of his scalpel lengthening and growing transparent, a miniature version of a Kataphrakt's probability sword. It's glassy tendrils ramified through the cube in resonant harmony with its wielder, branching out along the same pathways as the disease.*

*The Adversary screamed.*

*Black pain savaged the Technician's body - he was infected, too, and his every nerve blazed with hellfire for an instant.*

*He felt his enemy trying to force itself back through the crack in reality, like a black anemone pulling in its soft, poisonous tentacles.*

*Zhe almost missed the immense counterblast above the target zone which swept away the rising mushroom clouds in a heartbeat.*

*Just as he had used the Adversary's distraction to strike, so had his unknown allies.*

*Zhe ripped secrets from Kronos's brain even as his scalpel tore it apart...*

**SECOND WAVE NEUTRON BOMBS PRIMED FOR IMPACT  
!!!PLASMA FUSION IS OCCURRING WITHIN THE TARGET!!!  
SWITCH PROGRAM TO AIRBURST  
!!!STEPPING UP TO ANTIMATTER REACTION!!!**

*Through the camera eyes of the satellites he watched a vast black cyclone open up below, like a cavernous and hungry maw with blazing arcs of lightning for fangs. Each flickering blast illuminated a morass of limbs and teeth and scales, a writhing vortex of flesh, at the centre of which beat a great incorporeal heart.*

*The dome, woven by whatever arcane engines resided in those black stone towers, had turned reality inside out. Now it was concave, blurring the geometries of three-dimensional space, a living, pulsing thing called into being for one terrible purpose.*

*It was compressing the plasma of all those nuclear explosions into a vast floating sphere, kneading the fire with invisible hands.*

*And now it began to quicken.*

*Disintegrating molecules howled, and a great wind began to spiral around the unblinking central eye...*

*From space, the blast of warped energy seemed to crown the blackened globe with pillars of flame. A score of satellites were torn from their orbits, gripped by raving*

*black energies, surrounded by the sizzling plasma halos of horrific forces.*

*Melting, seething, they were crushed smaller and smaller, folding in on themselves like burning insects, now the size of a fist, now that of a pinhead....*

*The dome shivered, twisted through dimensions with a sickening lurch, and was gone.*

*And so were Kronos's orbital defenses.*

*Across the burnt Sahara, the dead Rad-lands which cloaked Afrika, a great spiral wind howled. It came blasting out from the target zone and across the sand, setting up stormfronts miles high.*

*As the blue light faded, and the cubes within the device core slowly flickered out, Zhe dropped his spent scalpel and applauded, laughing.*

## Ω

Leynna was prepared for an evening of sophisticated pleasures; dressed in silks and jewels, armed to the teeth - and already on her third vodka martini. The long, sleek form of her Consolidated Industries Phaeton limousine sliced through the crowds with ease, a powder-blue and chrome arrow headed toward the lights of the Jaegenn spire. Under its passenger dome, Baroness Mendeleev-Singh sharpened the razor edges of her favorite pair of daggers, running one blade along a diamond-fiber whetstone as the stereo hummed soothing mood music.

On either side of the sunken causeway fans of the Game were piled up in ranks, watching the procession of ornate vehicles which ferried the aristocracy to their revels.

Leynna's wasn't the only Phaeton (Consolidated had built thirteen of them, but only one in her favorite shade of blue), but some of the Lords and Ladies displayed their wealth and eccentricity by arriving in a bizarre assortment of conveyances both wildly expensive and historically ancient.

Duchess Sebren, the Synthesoy monopolist clattered by in a gilded carriage borne on innumerable silver insect legs. Viscount Ermiliuo Xochard took delight in his air-polluting ground-crawler from the distant twentieth century - an immense and inefficient device called a 'Lincoln Town Car'. Most outre of all was Lady Ariadne Choseem's gyro-balanced monowheel, a ponderous device originally designed (although its intended use was long forgotten) for mining tunnels in asteroids.

The crowds loved it; it was an old-fashioned pageant which reminded them of the power and fiscal might of their betters. Camera flashes burst in waves as the Phaeton edged closer to the red carpet, and the immense rotary parking wheel which would accept the limousine. Leynna slipped her gold-inlaid daggers into the white leather sheaths at her belt, and checked her makeup one last time for the threedeeo.

There were an awful lot of Blaire fans out there tonight, and they looked almost as

feral as their hero himself. It wouldn't do to look anything less than her best when she disappointed them all.

## Ω

On a dirty slab of pavement a burnt little man sat swaddled in bandages and rags, his beady eyes peering out at the world from under a curtain of matted hair.

He wasn't a beggar or a drunk like the other Subcity wreckage on either side of his patch - just shellshocked, and up to the eyeballs on synthemorph to soothe his shattered nerves.

Clonehunter Melchior had found himself out of a job and with a hefty medical bill to pay after the debacle at Don Gianni's place. There weren't many injuries that the Subcity Mediteks couldn't repair, but it was a matter of *credit*. Otherwise they were prone to just harvest a few of your choicest internal organs while they had you on the slab.

Melchior's credit had run to just enough coin to pop some morphine-analog out of a sidewalk vending machine, and sit there huffing on the inhaler with two broken legs, pondering his next move through a haze of drug euphoria.

He supposed he could hock his swords, but then h'd be without the tools of his only trade. If it wasn't clonehunting then it was running bounties for the cops, or signing up as a soldier with one of the Reclamationist factions. Melchior could dig the free blunts you scored from the Ashishim; it was just that they might be a bit sensitive about him attacking their *Dervashimen* back there.

The little clonehunter sighed.

You could never rely on *professionalism*, these days.

So he sat, and rode the buzz, and felt a little sorry for himself, as the sun went down behind the jagged towers and chimneys of Elysium.

With the crush and flow of foot traffic, not to mention the creeping buzz of the morph, Melchior didn't see the man in the ragged yellow oilskins until he was right on top of him. Under his floppy fisherman's hat the guy wore an old black ventilator mask, which hissed and wheezed - due to a fault with the mask or with the guy's lungs Melchior couldn't tell. The eyes which bugged out from its grimy plastic bubbles were bloodshot and rheumy.

Melchior briefly wondered if he was capable of fighting off this human wreck with two broken legs and head full of bad drugs. But when the oilskin man's hand disappeared into his noisome coat it slipped back out not with a knife or a gun, but an antique mobile phone, a grey plastic brick with a stubby antenna screwed into the top.

He said nothing; just the hiss and moan of that busted ventilator, but he held the phone out insistently in one bandaged hand, his eyes staring holes through Melchior's

skull.

All of a sudden it started ringing.

The oilskin man shook it in Melchior's face, his bulging eyes frantic behind their plastic bubbles.

As soon as Melchior snatched it out of the man's greasy fingers a voice crackled out of the speaker; one that Melchior had heard before, when he was skulking around Lancaster's offices waiting for his next assignment.

*Octavio, from Omnivasive.*

When he looked up, clapping the phone to his ear, the man in the yellow oilskins was gone - only the smell of old, hot rubber marked his passing.

"Melchior, so pleased to talk to you!" enthused Direktor Ascher, his voice immensely loud through the antique phone. "Listen... I have some bad news about your old boss - you know how business is, right Mel? Mind if I call you Mel? Good. Great! Now, I'm a little rushed here, you know how big the Game is going to be tonight, and of course, we're getting exclusive ...anyway, Old Man Lancaster is no more. Six feet deep, Mel, and feeding the worms. You heard it here first - *and I have a deal for you.*"

Melchior - stunned by the Direktor's auctioneer patter as much as by the news that Emmanuel was dead - tried to rip the phone away from his ear. But the damned thing was impossible to move! Applying all his sinewy strength, the clonehunter wrenched at the little plastic brick, arousing stabs of pain from his creaking skull.

"I take it from those little yelping noises that you've found out about the telephone." laughed Ascher, as Melchior's nails scrabbled against unyielding plastic. "The good part is ten thousand Slades, free medical for those pins, and payroll with Omnivasive. The bad part only happens if you say no."

Melchior could see at least five static cameras from where he sat on the side of the street - there was no way he wanted to be a threedeeo-bite of gore on the late news. Who knew what kind of deadly device waited to pop out of that old-world, oversized mobile?

"The ambulance is on its way, Mel." said the Direktor. "Chin up, and wait for my word."

No doubt he was reading Melchior's expression from multiple angles, looking for a tight shot of his head exploding.

"O.K! Fine!" breathed the Clonehunter, his pulse pounding in his throat. "I'm your man. What...what should I do first?"

"Just sit tight, buddy. I run things on very much a need-to-know basis."

His voice changed, becoming a rumbling growl.

"*So know this, Mel* - if you try to screw me, remember - the bomb's not in the phone, not anymore. By now it's already gone through your eardrum. 'Should be about three minutes until it's right in the middle of your brain."

Melchior had expected as much - after all, Lancaster had secured his obedience by similar means. The arch-biotect's demise meant freedom from the microdetonants which speckled the inside of his heart and lungs. One had to take the paranoia of the aristocracy with a certain amount of stoicism.

There was a very final little click, and then silence.

As the line went dead the heavy antique mobile fell away from Melchior's ear and cracked open on the pavement, spilling a nest of multicolored wires and brittle green circuit boards. He swore he felt the burrowing, relentless medi-scarabs at work in his skull, even over the fuzz and spin of the artificial morphine.

But Direktor Ascher kept his part of the deal.

The Meditek ambulance had come for him, a stretcher on a pair of rickshaw wheels salvaged from ancient bicycles.

The operation had been a brief flash of unconsciousness, while drugs more expensive and powerful than vending-machine morph allowed the 'teks to core out his femurs and replace them with lightweight billet aluminum rods, inset with hydraulic pistons which would enable him to take three-storey falls on the run. The fat crimson arteries which lay under his corded muscles were sheathed in woven titanium tubes, and his skin patched over with carbon mesh, all at a cost of only forty thousand Slades. There was a little discount for the precious bone and marrow the Mediteks took out of him; stashed in cryo-reliquaries for future customers.

It was only an hour later when Melchior zipped up for his first mission as an Omnivasive man, expensive chem-flush still singing in his veins

Of the ten large that the Direktor had wired to his bank account, the ex-clonehunter spent three on his new outfit - a digital camouflage skinsuit complete with a strap-over kevlar carapace. When the suit's processors kicked in, Melchior went chameleon, invisible unless he cast a shadow. His chunky new boots plugged into the suit, and were skinned up the same, but packed knives in their heels like a rooster's spurs, and little tazer prongs one each toecap.

Another two gs went on an optics rig; four big bubble lenses which wrapped around his head on thick rubber belts. Melchior carefully applique'd a thin skin of digital camo over the lenses, wiring them into the suit's processor. His expanded field of view showed him a full 360 degrees, one-eighty forward with reverse spliced in picture-in-picture. Every spectrum was covered, and tiny earpieces cranked up his hearing.

One final chunk of currency went on the most advanced hand cannon he could afford (and lift), a Zweig and Barnes 12mm micro-missile launcher with a nasty sampler pack of little warheads.

Melchior felt like an ace assassin from some kind of action theedeeo as he set out through the dusk-lit city, an invisible wraith wrapped in deadly technology. The effect was only spoiled by the vast bubbles of cheap pink gum which appeared out of nowhere

as he walked, inflating and popping at head-height as he pressed through the crowds.

His mission took him high up the dome cluster, to the gates of Mendelev-Singh Biomed.

The spire of Leynna's family estate sprung from a tight coil of prefab manufacturing blocks, steel tori originally designed to be assembled in space. Their pressurized interiors were perfect for the kind of work MSB specialized in - mediware, hospital machinery and drugs.

Lots of drugs.

Melchior could totally dig the residuals on this job.

The clonehunter slipped into the 'factorium through one of its lower levels, a mekan maintenance shop where human beings seldom ventured.

Guttering neon tubes cast immense jagged shadows over rusting ranks of defunct medical mekan there - robosurgeons, autonomous wheelchairs and discarded cybernetic limbs in funereal piles. Here and there tracked scavenger bots rattled across the meshwork floor, their pinprick red sensors swiveling back and forth on creaking gimbal necks. Arcs of blue and orange sparks spumed from a row of repair benches where automatronic laborers soldered and cut, patching together working machines from a mountain of scrap.

All the clangor and shifting light made Melchior's stealthy entrance easy. His suit was charged up, a shifting pattern of riveted aluminum and rusting iron which rendered him all but invisible.

In the shadow of a propane tank he unfolded the little map he'd drawn himself, the brown recycled paper appearing out of thin air. This place was a maze, but he was on the right track.

The corporate bloc was right ahead, up a spiral staircase fashioned from welded-together hospital gurneys. The camera above its corroded airlock door never registered the chameleonic shadow which stole up to it, slim fingers flexing a tiny sliver of LCD matrix as they slipped it over the lens. The little patch of screen would show a long loop of the workshop and the doorway while Melchior was inside.

The hiss and clatter of the door re-sealing itself went completely unnoticed as Melchior crawled crabwise along the white plastic wall, his suit now as smooth and milky as its sterile surface.

Or at least, so he thought for the first few seconds.

Mr Ascher had warned him about the dogs.

What he hadn't disclosed was the fact that they could walk on the ceilings.

The sixth sense which Melchior had cultivated over years of hunting criminals, clones and rogue mekan made the hairs on the back of his neck stand to attention. It made his hand spring for the Zweig hand-cannon just as a huge raw-ochre shape dropped from above, all knuckle-dragging hooks and mismatched teeth trailing ropes of

saliva. There were no alarms, but the white light cut out with the shock of a bullet impact, flashing instantly to red.

Melchior saw his suit's pixels rush to catch up, crimson erupting across the milky white fabric like arterial spray.

And then the weight hit him, a thing like a greasy sack of nails and slippery muscle, bearing him to the ground while his finger scrabbled for the trigger.

Melchior's first shot erupted from the Zweig with a chuff of compressed gas, powerful enough to lift the dog off his chest before its warhead detonated. It was a snarl round; about two hundred yards of diamond wire stuffed into a casing on top of plastic explosive, and when it popped the dog was diced instantaneously. Mel felt his smart kevlar hardening to stop slivers of tooth and bone from tearing him up at the same time.

Adrenaline and echoes hammered through his skull as gore dripped from his face, sliding from his teflon-coated lenses.

He watched the dog's head roll to a stop down the corridor, its vicious upper and lower jaws lolling open, its six eyes burst like overripe fruit. It came to rest between a pair of forepaws armed with sickle-hooks of serrated keratin - another of the fearsome creatures was there, its nostrils flaring to the scent of fear and blood.

Melchior's fingers were slick with gore as he operated the wheel on the Zweig's grip, trying to select a less noisy and messy means of dispatch. But the dog moved fast, liquid, its six legs bunching and springing with ropes of extra, grafted muscle. Its upper and lower jaws hinged and snapped as it leaped at him, those velociraptor claws flying in eviscerating arcs.

Training and instinct took over.

Melchior's hand whipped the heavy gun down as he danced aside, shattering the dog's upper jaw; then the flying chunk of metal came up, diagonal, splitting its lower jaw as if it were porcelain. There was a noise behind him, the merest click of claws on plastic; and while the first dog was stunned Mel spun on his toes, emptying a clip of six flechette rounds into another beast behind him. Without turning back his other hand sliced low, a knife flashing as it transfixed the broken dog, still grinding its shattered jaws in mute agony.

Melchior pulled his knife free in the same movement, flicking it up into the ceiling. The impaled carcass of yet another dog fell to his left, its spine severed by the hissing microscopic chainsaw teeth which flowed around the edge of the blade. The Zweig's wheel spun again, selecting poison needle rounds tipped with artificial spider venom.

Once, twice, three times it spat poisonous death, making sure the cloned monsters were finished.

Melchior's four blank lenses scanned the corridor in both directions, but nothing moved. It seemed that this hunting pack was only four strong, and all of them were dead. There would be more, now that the silent alarms were tripped. The red light didn't

downshift to white as Melchior stooped to cut the head of one of the dogs open, marveling at the grotesque and precise engineering of its blunt, wide face, its six recessed eyes, those twin jaws packed with arrowhead teeth. Direktor Ascher had found out how to get around Mendelev-Singh Biomed's little puppies, a nugget of information gleaned from the files of poor dead Lancaster.

His slippery fingers found it.

Melchior heard the sound of another dog approaching just as he tore the control unit free from inside the armored brain-pan of his victim. The smooth little slug of chrome felt hot and heavy in his gloved hand, a thing more vital and alive than the carcass he had left his knife in. Grimacing at the taste of bioengineered blood and brains, Mel popped it into his mouth, feeling it vibrate and kick as it felt internal body heat and switched itself back on.

The dog approached him slowly, confused by the welter of scents in the close, dry air of the corridor. Its claws clattered against the plastic floor as it advanced, its ugly broad muzzle swinging from left to right like the auto-tracking barrel of a phalanx gun. Six unblinking eyes stared up at Melchior, while the dog's twin jaws ground slowly back and forth, thin runnels of drool coursing from between its lips to the bloody ground. There was no growl, no ears or tail by which to read the creature's mood.

Just a cold and level gaze from six flat black jewels, set in deep cups of bone.

Mr Ascher had told him that this would work, so long as he didn't break and run.

The dog's dark red nose sniffed at his hand for a second, for two, brushing up against his knuckles as they clenched around the Zweig's carbon grip.

Melchior stood rooted to the spot, muscles tight, sweat beading behind his optics mask. If Octavio was wrong, that hand would be the first to go, swallowed up gun and all... But the dog kept walking, picking its way over the mangled bodies of its fellows without so much as a sniff at so much free fresh meat. And Melchior started breathing again.

From the scene of the slaughter it wasn't far to his final target. Melchior slipped unseen and undetected through the red-lit corridors, skulking past more of the biotek dogs as the harvested identifier bead pulsed in his stomach. In a few hours it would be coming right back out; not something that Mel looked forward to.

The coordinates that Direktor Ascher had sent him led him to a cool white cell deep in the factorium bowels of MS Biomed. The ex-clonehunter's skin crawled with distaste as he looked around the little shrine that Leynna had erected for Simeon Blaire. There were holographic images of the aristocrat plastered from floor to ceiling, vials of his blood, parings of hair and skin preserved in slivers of lucite. And in the centre of the cell, a pillar of glass which contained a humming purple globe, wrapped in tubes and wires. An exo-womb; his target.

Obsession was so *freaky*. Compared to this little tableau, Mel's fuzzy stunn habit

seemed squeaky clean.

But Ascher had been very specific about this little piece of technology. Within the fluid-filled globe of plastic waited the seed of a new life - a genetically modified being which Leynna believed was the child of herself and the recalcitrant Lord Blaire. She had commissioned the fetus illegally, having it coded by her own mediteks from samples of her own flesh and the small pieces of him which she'd scavenged from the residue of many Games. To activate the child's growth within the exo-womb the consent of both parents was needed, though; of course Leynna had granted her access codes to the tiny bubble right away, with dreams of glory spinning in her head. Blaire was another matter entirely. Without the progeniture lock which matched his DNA the womb would remain in stasis, for centuries if necessary. And with Blaire on the brink of becoming Emperor, there was no need for him to secure his legacy through flesh ...

Melchior's payload on this little mission was a needle filled with a neat retrovirus, a concoction whipped up by the subverted machinery of House Lancaster.

There would be no need for Blaire's DNA lock when the child's whole helix was changed from the inside out...

Melchior's needle slipped into the nutrient port of the sphere and into the gelid flesh of the embryo within. He pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and tapped a code into the machine's keypad, a twenty-eight number cipher which he'd been given by the Direktor.

In a matter of hours a new member of the aristocracy would be born, forcegrown to maturity inside that pressure-cooker womb.

## Ω

The last thing he remembered was his fall.

Down through endless smooth steel tunnels, through clouds of scalding radioactive steam which ripped the skin from his agonized flesh. Into light, and into new extremes of pain, into the crushing and grinding gears of a vast machine which milled souls from the grist of human bodies.

Zone Doubt heard the voice of his old friend, calling out to him through the Wetsystems. It cut through the forced amnesia which had chained him into the form of a defense drone, a thing called PDR909. It tore away the darkness, and gave him back control. That, and a form built for war.

Zone was back.

His body was unfamiliar, bulky and hard, a smooth carapace of steel with a circlet of camera eyes perched above a row of cannons. His hands, once slim-fingered and dexterous, able to cut tags smooth and fast with his little pocketknife were now furled tentacles of shiny alloy, wrapped up between row upon row of heat-seeking missiles.

The means to control this strange new form were wire into his brain, innate as instinct. He was flying through the smoke of a burning city, through pillars of choking soot and chemical fumes, over and under collapsing pylons and pipes and ducts.

On his way toward where B-Zerk was calling for him.

The little guy was in danger, and Zone Doubt was going to help him out.

## Ω

Kaito spotted the first one as it came clicking across the tiles, out of the drifting smoke, its red laser eyes glinting with mechanical malice. The core drone was still slick with embalming fluid and gore; ragged flaps of plastic laminate ringed its steel tentacles where it had torn itself from the back of a defunct Cyben. Kaito squeezed off a round from his revolver; the last. It hammered a crater into the ground near the scuttling silver drone, but the thing was too fast. Those four long drill-tipped arms moved like liquid, and now the big Ashishi hand-cannon was dry. Kaito slipped the great hunk of metal into his webbing belt and pulled out his trusty railpistols.

Now more of the crawling drones were coming in, their drill-tips tapping a ceaseless rhythm against the tiled floor, dragging bundles of smaller tentacles beneath them in a tangle of cutters and probes. As the smoke shifted Kaito could see more of them coming in across the ceiling, their drills biting into the plasticrete as easily as they would human flesh.

To the left, Abdulafia's gun roared, and one of the drones disintegrated in a shower of blue sparks and whirling metal shards. The splinters of it cut apart the drone behind, shrapnel hacking it off at the legs to leave it crippled while its brothers marched over it.

Hassan let off his last two bullets at the drones above, shattering one as it dropped, drills whining, almost right on top of him. His second shot ripped one tentacle off another of the crawling robots, making it hiss and thrash like a living thing before it dragged itself forward again, inexorable.

Kaito crunched numbers while his pistols bucked and blazed - but it didn't look good. There were too many of the little bastards, and they were far too fast...

As Kaito popped a smoking spent clip from his right-hand gun one of the drones he thought he'd already killed curled itself up like a spring and leapt. He tried to put a bullet in it as it arced through the smoky air toward him, but his hand moved far too slowly - and then its steel drills were in his arm, ripping hungrily through his clothes, into skin and flesh and bone.

Two of its four main tentacles had struck home, and now they were boring into him, injecting soporific drugs which made his vision blur.

Kaito gritted his teeth and put the flat muzzle of the railpistol up against the shiny carapace of the core drone. Once, twice, the vast magnetic energies of the little gun

slammed superheated steel through the robot's skin, tearing its innards out in a blast of fluids and wires. The thing sagged, its laser eyes dimmed. And through the haze of chemicals and smoke a giant chrome hand came down on its broken shell, tearing it clear and casting it off into the darkness. The pain of those slick metal tentacles pulling loose almost made him pass out cold.

It was Jaq Hassan, and never in his life had Kaito been so happy to see his ugly, scarred-up face.

"Dead Cyben... huh! I liked them better when they were cops!"

He spat out a mouthfull of blood, grinning red in the firelight.

"I think we've got them on the run, though. Between me and the Ashishi over there, you might even be able to take a break soon..."

Then Hassan's eyes went wide, and his smile disappeared. He looked down at his feet, and Kaito followed the direction of his stare.

There was a hand clamped around the big biker's ankle, fingers like sections of blackened hosepipe slicked over with wipe-clean laminate.

The Cyben's face was half gone - it must have caught a bullet from Ramon or one of the Celestial soldiers during the firefight, but its brain was just so much dead weight. The Drone welded to its spine hadn't seen fit to disengage, and now the crippled thing dragged itself up between Hassan's legs, groaning like one of the damned.

Kaito gritted his teeth, levelling his railpistols at the abomination, and pulled both triggers.

Nothing. Not even a click. The clips were empty, the batteries drained.

"Fuckin' DO something, man!" whispered Hassan as the Cyben's forearm-mounted railgun slid from between its preserved muscles, pointed right at his face.

Out amid the smoke the Core Drones were massing again, preparing for a second attack. He could hear their drills squealing as they scuttled across the ceiling.

So he did something. The weedy little hacker - the guy who'd rather face a horde of metavirals than swing a punch - stomped down on the Cyben's savaged face with one boot, hysterical, slamming down again and again. It was like Orwell in reverse.

Jaq dove left as the railgun spat steel, tearing a smoldering circular hole in his coat.

But despite its terrible wounds Kaito's assault had only pissed the Cyben off. Now it dragged itself forward, rolling onto its belly, its ice-blue eyes flashing murder.

It was worse than it looked - the damned thing had been torn in half, and below its waist its neat blue armor gave way to a ragged snarl of pipes and entrails and wires. Its railgun dipped and weaved as it tried to aim, and its second shot tore past Kaito's cheek close enough to blister his skin.

Off in his peripheral vision he saw Jaq struggling to rip a length of rebar from the rubble, but in his own little world time had slowed to a crawl. The half-dead officer seemed to leer at him knowingly, lining up its railgun on his chest...

And then Abdulafia was there, descending out of the dark like a phantom, his holocloak reflecting the flames in curling waves. He landed right on top of the crawling Cyben with a giant panga knife clenched in each fist, his lips peeled back from his teeth in a snarl.

In that instant Kaito wasn't sure which was worse... the groaning corpse aiming a cannon at his vitals, or the inhuman face of the Ashishi warrior.

And then it ceased to matter.

'Afia's knives came together like scissor blades, taking off the Cyben's head with a sound like a bottle being uncorked. Blood flew wide in a crimson fan, splattering the *Dervashi's* face. And the core drone tore free from its doomed flesh, propelled skyward on jets of compressed gas.

Hassan's rebar caught it on the downswing - the same haymaker shot he'd used on Simeon Blaire. This time his target wouldn't be getting up again. The tiny mekan blew apart like a glass ornament, crackling with electric fire.

"Um.... thanks." said Kaito, tucking his pistols into his belt. All he had left now was his chakutazer; not really his weapon of choice. "Now, do you think we can get out of here before they try it again?"

"I'd like to say so." said Abdulafia, wiping the gore from his knives. "But *listen*. They're all around us. They were probably just waiting to see if our headless friend here was going to finish you off for them."

No sooner had the words left his lips than they saw them... a horde of drones coming in from all sides, their laser eyes sparking in the gloom. The Comp. Div. must have unloaded an entire truckload of the bastards.

The three of them were hemmed in, forced to huddle together as the ring of drones advanced, implacable things too many to count. Abdulafia swung his knives in swift, vicious arcs, the black *Dervashi* scar across his face crosshatched with trails of blood.

Kaito no longer cared who he was or where he'd come from. He had even forgotten the coded blast which the Ashishim had stabbed through his brain when he was inside the node. He was no longer a hacker, a wannabe magus. He was no longer even a Kayzi, a biker, a human being.

His chakutazer crackled into life as the mekan charged, and he became one with the moment.

Long gashes covered his arms; he could see blood flying through the slow-motion haze which blurred his eyes. Loops of crimson gore splattered the drones as they came on in waves - his and the ashishi's and Jaq's all together. Hassan's hand was a sledgehammer, Afia's knives a spinning storm of death. But it was still not nearly enough.

Now a few of the more curious mekan were coming up on B-Zerk, their feeler tentacles twitching like insectile antennae as he staggered from the ruined storefront.

Kaito's mouth tried to move, his lungs tried to scream a warning to the little soot-smearing figure stumbling through the broken glass and rubble.

Instead, he felt the tip of a Cyben drill plough into his shoulder, and on, ripping out a core of minced flesh. It burst through the skin of his shoulder with a high-pitched whine, dragging the drone up to hook onto his chest. Slivers of bone grated together, as seething pain-fire struck Kaito to his knees.

He saw Abdulafia's face twitch, one of his panga knives flying end over end to slice the drone in half. Kaito saw the rippled steel bite into the mekan's shell, still locked hungrily to his arm. He felt his collarbone snap, heard the terrible, final sound of it over the crump of the explosion.

One steel tentacle stayed jammed through his chest as the detonation axehandled him to the floor, curled up around his agony. Black slicked over red as his vision narrowed down. His breath bubbled with gore, shallow and fading. The last thing he saw was Abdulafia, the *Dervashi* on his knees, three whining drills erupting from his stomach.

One knife hadn't been enough; he'd killed himself to save Kaito.

A tangle of entrails gushed out between the writhing chromed tentacles, slapping wetly against the broken tiles.

Sensing somehow that the tide had turned, three of the crawling mekan set upon Hassan. Tentacles wound around his legs, around his mighty arms like vines choking a great rainforest tree. Kaito watched his immense frame strain, cords of muscle standing out on his bullish neck like steel hawsers.

But a final drone was up on his shoulders, and its spinning drills were unstoppable. They came down hard, and Hassan's face contorted with pain.

Abdulafia tried to reach him, tried to move, but the nerve-clamps and trauma systems stitched into his body had flooded him with pseudomorph. As the drug took hold of his brain he toppled sideways to the bloody tiles, his mouth open in a silent scream.

'Afia watched one of Hassan's tiny silver charms, torn from off that ludicrous long whipcord beard, falling end over end through the smoky air; a little iron cross which clattered to the floor right next to his open and paralysed eyeball. Even the ability to blink was gone.

Off out of his field of vision he could hear the sound of drill-tipped tentacles scuttling closer...

## Ω

Tsien awoke from a nightmare of being crushed in some immense and unrelenting vise, only to find that reality was almost as bad.

A huge section of the Valley View had buried him alive when it collapsed, and he could feel the grinding pressure of tons of steel and plastic bearing down on him.

But the body of a Cyben, even one so damaged as Tsien, is a thing of unnatural resilience. Tsien's soul had flickered on the edge between life and death ever since the Mark-Four system had wormed its way under his skin, and there was no way that a tiny detail like a few tons of rubble would kill him now.

The drone had left deep wounds in his neck and back as he had torn it free, and these ached with furious intensity, bone-deep. There were subtle textures to his agony - the augmentations which the drone had made to his flesh, scabs and scars and burns... but overlaying it all he could feel the expanded muscle and metal which kept him alive, sandwiched between sheets of crushing plasticrete. He could even feel the crawling, oozing sensation of the stab wound in his throat sealing up, erasing the murderous work of Simeon Blaire's blade.

But the rage was gone. The hope that somehow Lancaster and his biotects could remake him was gone. He just wanted to go home.

The green-tinted reticule of the Eversio targetter was screwed down painfully into one of his eyesockets, and when he shut his other eye the hail of static inside it seemed hypnotic, a gyre which pulled him away from the pain. Disconnected, he drifted in that sea of random information, while far above him the Valley view Burned, and the sound of faroff gunfire rocked his stony cradle.

*Within the deep green, a face.*

*And words, a voice.*

Magus Verlaine had found it hard to interface with the cybernetic components of Tsien; without the core drone plugged into his spine the Magus had had to revert to more ingenious tactics.

He came in through the shattered mechanism of the Eversio, weaving his insidious presence into the pseudomorphine feeds and nerve-blocks which killed the Cyben's pain.

It was delicate work, and tougher than the Magus would let on.

But of course there was no way he'd show such weakness in front of his allies - especially under the scrutiny of his master. Verlaine could feel the immense power of Illuminatus Zeon in the system, his persona wrapped around Verlaine's own like an armored gauntlet.

The Magus worked swiftly, with surgical skill, sequestering essential parts of the control interface which was designed to bind the Cyben to the will of Kronos. Somewhere in there the wires gave way to flesh, blurring the line between life and death.

Verlaine sliced deep into the biological systems nestled in Tsien's fractured skull, crossing the threshold from digital circuitry to living brain tissue. His incorporeal

fingers were deft and precise, those of a master surgeon snipping off wires and bad neural sectors, overwriting data ...until he saw the crack in the world.

*A hairline fracture of darkness, pulling at his eyes, driving hooks through his soul...*

At first the Magus thought it was an error in his data feeds, then that it was a tiny speck of dust in his optics rig. Nothing would shift it. Cautiously he zoomed in on the hair-thin fissure, watching it sizzle and writhe with boiling darkness.

Though it was an infinitesimal thing, the storm-surge of dread which it generated was all out of proportion – a sick sense of terror accompanied by split-second visions of torture and death. At the same time that tiny fissure exerted a bizarre fascination, flickering and dancing like a flame, drawing him in as if it were the core of a singularity.

Surely there was something *moving* on the other side? Verlaine could see a mass of writhing pseudopods pressed against the tiny crack, lashing like the tentacles of some black anemone.

And then one of them was through the gap, stroking his imagined face, sending a shiver back down the wires to wrack the Magus' steel body where it lay in its cushioned pavilion.

Down there, amid the swirl and drift of smoke from incense thuribles and braziers, Illuminatus Zeon watched a tremor pass through the ancient casque which housed the potent spirit of Verlaine. For a second his face seemed to dissolve, to slough off the shadow of humanity, replaced with a smooth mask of quicksilver in which hard, incandescent eyes burned red. Unseen by the catatonic Magi around him, Zeon allowed his hand to split open, slim silver tentacles questing and probing from between his fingers, looping through the incense-heavy air like vines.

Where they touched the metal skin of Verlaine they collapsed to liquid mercury, seeping into the cracks in his armor, into the preserved brain within...

Magus Verlaine felt a great shudder pass through the world of woven light in which he worked. The Wetsystems howled in pain, a thousand upon a thousand voices screaming, and then suddenly silenced. At once the tiny crack inside Tsien ramified, shattering the digital illusion of the interface, jagged shards of light scattering as the hole opened.

Black ichor leaped out at him, faceless and hungry, a gelid mass surrounding and suffocating, rasping at the defenses the Illuminatus had helped build around him. It was like watching some deep-sea predator hurl itself against the reinforced glass of a submarine's porthole, hoping that it held.

It seemed that this time it would. The darkness coiled and raved, battering the shields as the two Ashishim strove to keep them up. But now it was retreating, its energy if not its appetite spent.

It was at that moment, as Magus Verlaine dared to hope that it was all over, that his

master turned on him.

The enveloping power of Zeon's presence was transmuted in a second from protective armor to an excruciating iron maiden, a coffin filled with impaling spikes of energy. With a high-pitched scream like a bandsaw slicing steel Verlaine's electronic self was turned inside out.

At once the darkness was all over him, as if his actual broken body was floating there in virtual space, pulsing organs bursting with sweet blood. Indeed, the pain was just as real.

Verlaine felt himself fraying at the edges, tiny shreds of memory torn away, drowning in black liquid. He felt his strength being consumed by the darkness, until he was withered and shrunk, no bigger than a child, then an infant, then the dried-up husk of a fetus ...and then nothing.

The darkness followed the diminishing, retreating soul of Magus Verlaine down the wires, hungry and mindless, a blur of pseudopods and teeth.

And Illuminatus Zeon slammed the doors shut on it.

The fissure he'd opened in Tsien snapped closed, and as the darkness filled the empty shell of Verlaine to bursting point, the Illuminatus' silver hands ripped the plugs from its ice-rimed temples, completing the trap.

He'd given it a taste of power. He had planted the seed inside Tsien, and now he had reaped the harvest.

The image of the noble Illuminatus carrying the empty body of his loyal Magus from the pavilion would be burned onto the minds of all Ashishim that day. An old man bowed under the weight of his burden, his kindly face streaked with tears - yet he refused any aid from the stricken warriors and techs who swarmed around him, bearing poor Verlaine to his final resting place, a cryo-tomb deep beneath the war room.

Such compassion bred further loyalty, greater respect.

And of course, if anyone else touched the frozen husk of Magus Verlaine it was likely that they, too, would succumb to the seething blackness which nested within him.

Zeon had corralled his new pet - now he would work at breaking its spirit.

## Ω

Most of the time he took it for granted. Most of the time all he felt about being a battle-clone was an itch across his shoulders, a dull ache as if his flesh didn't properly fit. But sometimes it was good to be a *Dervashi* war-machine - times like this.

Abdulafia felt only a brief second of pain as the core drone ripped open his stomach, only a mild discomfort as he was disemboweled. Clamps and valves in his augmented body staunched the loss of blood as other clever little subsystems cut loose his whole digestive system, and nodes leaked quick-hardening gel into the wound, protecting his

heart and lungs.

The 'morph had him for a second, for ten - enough time for Kaito and Jaq to fall. And then reset switches clicked over, and the *Dervashi's* finely-honed body was back under his control again.

If it were possible for a machine to show surprise, the drone which had attacked him would have been a prime candidate as the Ashishim's gore-slick hand ripped it from his back, hurling it off into the smoking darkness.

It was still hopeless, of course. His medical augmentations were only just keeping him alive, and there were still more core drones out there than he could fight alone.

The red-eyed mekan turned from their deadly work one by one, chittering at each other in coded bitstreams, climbing the pillars and walls and ceiling. This time there'd be no CeeAn to save him at the last moment. He stooped to pick up another section of metal pipe, hefting it in one hand.

Of course, there would be pain. But he'd endured pain before, and had been reborn. This was no time for the Ashishim to be without their champion, and duty would compel him to live again.

Abdulafia's lips twisted in a grim smile as he tightened his grip on his makeshift weapon, watching the horde surround him on all sides. He was going to miss having a real body for a while. A *long* while, if the renegade biotects of the R.T. were still as inefficient as he remembered them.

It must have been one of the sharp, razor-tipped lesser tentacles of a drone which had torn open Jaqub Hassan' coat, shearing through the LCD mesh to expose the hidden pocket within. And it must have been pure unalloyed good fortune which made the little vial from inside that pocket roll across the tiles to Abdulafia's feet.

It was one of the samples that Hassan had shown to the late Don Giorgio, and the Ashishim recognized it in an instant.

Ducking under a leaping core drone, slamming another away from the tiny glass bottle with his pipe, Abdulafia made a desperate dive, sliding in across the blood-slick floor. He ripped the protective cap off the vial while the drones surrounded him, chittering and hissing like nightmare insects.

And it was sweet nectar on his tongue, fire in his aching muscles, the promise of victory blazing up out of despair. The 'chrome matched him, *tasted* of him, filled his veins with fire.

*Now would come the reckoning.*

Around the Ashishim the air became slippery, hot with the crackling discharge of static as his bioelectric field swelled, sending the horde of core drones scuttling back in artificial fear.

Abdulafia cracked his knuckles, and with a gesture he lifted one of the drones off of the sprawled body of Kaito, it's camera eyes popping like fireworks and it burst into

flames. He pointed his finger and sent it spinning through the air, shattering its body against a cracked plasticrete pillar. The drones advancing on B-Zerk turned back, massing to face this new and potent threat.

The *Dervashi* threw his hands out wide, sweeping them back with a wave of force. He clenched his fists and two of the silver mekan burst apart, spitting sparks. The broken metal pipe in his hands was a blade of incandescent light now, throwing the whole concourse of the Valley View into flickering monochrome.

But just as 'Afia coiled to strike something clawed its way into his expanded senses, knocking him back to his knees like a physical blow.

It was a blast of pain and confusion, a rising wave behind a hellish crescendo of noise. It was the inhuman howl of turbojets, coupled with the psionic scream of a mind ripped open and pinned down to machinery...

It took him a fraction of a second to shore up his defenses, and another to send his thoughts racing back through the corridors and plazas of the Valley View, back to the source of that terrible agony.

It was coming fast, tearing a swathe through the ruined building behind it, a storm of glass and smoke and debris pulled along in its wake.

Suddenly the drones were the least of his worries.

Abdulafia changed the shape of his swollen bioelectric field, forming a protective shell over himself, Hassan and Kaito. Life still pulsed in their broken bodies; enough of them remained to be repaired by the Ashishi mediteks. Abdulafia 330 always paid his debts. And a couple of soldiers like those two would surely be welcome down in the R.T.

The energy shell coalesced around them, straining Abdulafia's mind nearly to breaking point. If he was right about that rising tsunami of sound and pain, it would have to be impregnably strong...

The air wavered and solidified above them, hot and sparkling with power, just as PDR mekan 909 came screaming in through the smoke, walls collapsing behind it in its supersonic wake. Retro-rockets slowed it as it swung in over the seething mass of core drones, and a web of red laser targeters erupted from its armored shell, raking across the silver mekan like probing fingers.

Where they went, destruction followed.

Abdulafia squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated on making his force shell as tough as possible, praying over the rising panic in his head, the pounding pain of Zone Doubt's presence. The effort of keeping control over his stainless-steel body was tearing Zone's mind apart, and the Ashishim was feeling every second of it, as though he were bonded soul to soul with the poor kid inside the machine.

Then the high-explosive missiles came down like rain, and the world blazed blinding white.

## Ω

A General Extermination Order.

Such brutal measures hadn't been unleashed against the people of Elysium since the great riots of Reclamation Day, more than a century before.

Even then, it had only been done out of desperation - Kronos could never let its people know how much its power had faded.

Traitors had been executed, examples made, proclamations televised.

But it wasn't treachery which opened the spillway gates and let the Confeds and the Ashishim and the Vatican in. It was the incompetence of the Lords, the woeful state of the Elysian army, and the crippled, ancient warmekan they relied on which lost the lower city. That, and the accursed *Illuminatus*...

Now, after more than a century of confrontation with the RT, after the population of Elysium had tripled and the power of the Lords dwindled to nothing but Threedeeo celebrity, it was going to happen again.

This time there were enough troopers, and enough Cyben, and enough guns. This time, if these accursed rioters were in league with the tribes of the RT, there would be a final reckoning. Or so Kronos assured itself, hoping...

The cameras were focused. The feed was live.

And with a brief pop and hiss of pilot flames, a ring of heavy incinerator cannons lit up, sheeting napalm over one thousand kneeling prisoners.

The Cyben wielding the huge flamethrowers were dead eyed, monstrous, lit from below by the leaping fires, shadows transforming their laminated faces into masks of horror. Screams were cut off suddenly as plasma evaporated human lungs and bones cracked like gunshots. In closeup, in surround-sound.

On floating zeppelins sheathed in threedeeo screens the scenes from outside the valley view beamed out, over the waiting crowds, bringing them the news as it happened.

Here a half-burned man writhed, his legs carbonized stumps. Above him, a Comp Div trooper looked down impassively, pulling on a cigarette. There, a young woman, blue ribbons for Blaire ablaze. Stoical, stony faced, she watched the scouring flame play over the crowd, knowing her turn would come. Her tears, her face, evaporated by a dead-eyed monster in uniform ...

It began in the crowds near the Jaegenn spire, with a young Compliance Officer assigned to traffic control. Perhaps he was just as horrified as the throng around him by the scenes playing out three stories high on a floating Omnivasive dirigible. But he was wearing the navy blue flak-coat and forage cap of the Div. He was *marked*.

Hands grabbed him, throwing him roughly to the ground. Faces contorted with hate

snarled down at him as boots and fists battered his body, flashes of red and black bursting across his eyes. And the sound rose like an angry sea, from all around, the sound of rage becoming the need for revenge...

The last thing he saw was a hobnailed boot pistoning down through a haze of blood. Once, and he was unconscious. Twice, and he was dead.

It took one more to smash the tiny camera in his cap, the one which was linked direct to the Omnivasive feed.

They were only human beings. They could be killed.

Mr Ascher watched the screens inside his sensorium dome avidly, conducting a symphony of hatred from his master console. All across the city people were catching the fever; taking up weapons, overturning cars, lighting fires.

And if the Reclamationists came to the party, all the better. There would be no help for the aristocracy as he closed his trap. And no celebrant would dare walk the streets tonight, no matter how important their duty or their prey.

In flashing green numerals in the corner of his virtual eye, Octavio Ascher's life ran down. Three seconds. Two. One.

That row of flashing zeros was a little victory for him.

Mr Ascher knew you couldn't cheat death forever, but you could surely hope to choose how you went out. He'd seen what happened to Don Gianni. He knew what became of those who died in Elysium, and the price they paid.

Why else would he have created Simeon Blaire, and gone to all the trouble of setting this elaborate plan in motion?

It couldn't fail now. After all, it was a dying man's last wish.

## Ω

High above the burning subcity, in mechanized levels of the spire where humans never ventured systems came online, shunting a fat steel cylinder into its firing cradle.

From this aerie of tangled tubes and machinery Kronos wielded its ultimate defense against a full-scale Feral insurgency – the Damocles missile system.

The machine had calculated that only one of the fuel-air explosive bombs would be needed – one would be more than sufficient to erase the Valley View from existence, along with a few unlucky surrounding habs. And if a few hundred subhuman filth died they'd only be counted as collateral damage - as ancient a concept as war itself.

More importantly, it would be a warning to the rest of them.

*Disobey - and burn.*

The Damocles launched from its cradle in a cloud of superheated steam – there was no need for rockets or jet turbines to power its descent. Fins in the tail of the bomb steered it down, tracing an unerring trajectory like the arc of a hammer toward an anvil.

Tiny flashes of light were scattered below it, as fires spread through the shattered ruins of the Valley View.

The bomb's camera eye zoomed in as it fell, drinking in the firestorm with digital lust.

The Damocles, like most of Kronos's subsystems, contained the mind of a dead man, stripped down and recycled. This one was the vessel for the twisting, writhing pain of a long-dead pyromaniac, executed fifty years ago and kept for just this little task.

*Sweet conflagration! Sweet suffering! Oh, for the smell of carbonized flesh!*

The exultation and joy of the Damocles hummed through the Wetsystems, an image of searing heat, irresistible force. That caged mind would shape the inevitable explosion, punch through the Valley View like a fist of plasma, and suck the life from the charred lungs of anyone still alive within.

Through hardwired speakers in its bullet nose, the Damocles vented a tortured howl as it fell.

From below, something answered it.

## Ω

The explosions rose up around B-Zerk like pillars, incandescent columns of light shattering the mekan horde. The kid was covered with soot and dust from head to toe, gashed and punctured by chips of stone and glass, bleeding from a thousand minor wounds.

But the conflagration passed him over. The missiles rained down on the core drones, reducing them to less than ashes, tearing apart the floor of the doomed Valley View as white flames sleeted off Abdulafia's protective shield like rain.

Above B-Zerk hovered the unmistakable black shape of a perimeter defense platform, its xenon arc lamps bathing his ragged form in light. The muzzles of its rocket launchers whirled and spun as cameras zoomed and clicked across the machine's insectile face.

B reached up with one hand to touch the burnished steel of its underside, smiling amid the flames and smoke.

"S'up, Zone! I knew you'd come through, boy!"

Under the dissipating dome of force around Abdulafia Kaito groaned and rolled over. Sparks flashed purple and red across his vision, accompanied by a maniacal pounding in his skull.

He could swear that the mound of rubble beneath him was moving.

The Ashishim felt it too, and used the last of his energistic power to throw Hassan and Kaito aside, two ragged bundles of pain rolling and bouncing across the shattered

floor, leaving trails of spattered blood behind them.

Not a second too soon.

On either side of the crouching Abdulafia, where his erstwhile allies had just lain, the concrete cracked and shifted. That deep bass pounding wasn't inside his head. It was coming from *below*, a jackhammer rumble pulverizing the stone.

With a shattering roar two immense knotted fists punched up through the rubble, powered by pistoning arms corded with armored pipes and wires. Abdulafia leaped backwards, stumbling down the pile as those arms flexed, effortlessly bursting apart the concrete slab. Chips of stinging shrapnel cut through his skin, adding a few more tiny wounds to the hundreds which he bled from already.

Behind him, B-Zerk peeked around the tattered hem of his coat, his eyes wide.

"He's still alive? How can he still be alive?" he whispered, thinking of the razor-sharp wakizashi slamming through Tsien's neck, the bright blood fountaining ...

It was still there.

The Super-Cyben shrugged off the tons of concrete as if it were paper, sending great hunks slithering down the pile, snapping sections of rebar as he freed his legs and stood, defiant, the knife still embedded in his throat.

One huge fist unclenched, and two gnarled fingers gripped the blade, pulling it free with a screech of metal on metal, a shower of sparks. Tsien's nanonic systems had encysted it in steel, and it came out sharper than it went in.

Under the arc lamps of a PD platform who had once been a kid called Zone Doubt, the creature who had once been called Edward Tsien was a black and steaming hulk, transformed even further by the pain he'd suffered at the hands of Blaire. His cyborg body was hulkingly top-heavy, a carapace of silver armor growing from his living flesh, with immense tubes and coils of wire erupting from his spine and the back of his skull to entwine his monstrous arms. Gill-slit vents in his shoulder pauldrons hissed scalding clouds of steam, and his eyes burned red, clamped in optronic reticules welded to their sockets.

Above B-Zerk the PDR platform brought its missile launchers to bear, twin muzzles tracking in, laser sights painting flickers of crimson across the smoky air.

There was a sad and very final clicking noise.

Tsien took a couple of tentative steps down the hiss of rubble toward them, threw back his head, and laughed.

Abdulafia noticed something different in that laugh.

Before, the super-cyben had sounded inhuman, completely unhinged. This was more the ironic chuckle of a twisted sub-gutter cop.

"Let's just pretend that we didn't hear that, huh?" asked Tsien, pointing one stubby finger up at Zone. "I'd like to believe you didn't fire because you're good people, not just because you're out of ammo."

A few ragged clumps of black hair still adhered to the scar-tissue pink dome of his skull, and he brushed them over sideways with his hand, trying to hide his bald spot.

Abdulafia couldn't help the smile which broke across his bleeding face.

"Good to have you back among the living, Lieutenant!" he said, almost clapping the Super-Cyben across one bulky shoulder. His hand stopped an inch from the steaming hot metal. "How are you feeling?"

His voice was steady, but he knew that this was critical. Something *bad* had been coiled up in this man's skull, something which he'd only just grazed the surface of with the disruptor. If it wasn't really gone, it could surge back at any moment..."

"How do I feel? Well, I feel like a drink, for starters!" said Tsein, slumping down to sit atop a pile of broken concrete. "Other than that - I can't remember a damned thing. Just a blur, all the way back to the Precinct. I remember... *Kronos*."

His electric eyes narrowed as he spat that name, but the hatred behind them was all too human.

"I only felt what it'd done to me for the first time... there, down in the dark. My old Sergeant, Wesley West, he lost a hand in a gunfight with the Liquid Tong. Said he could still feel it, even though it wasn't there. But me... now, I - I can feel all this other shit. Like cancer, metal cancer, and it's still growing..."

For a second there was a look of pure mad rage in his eyes, reflected in the cameras bolted to his brow.

"There's not much time left, *Dervashi*. Just enough to do what has to be done."

Afia relaxed, unclenching the fist which he'd been ready to slam through the Super-Cyben's face.

"But what are you going to do now? We can help you, you know...if you come with me to the RT."

Tsien laughed again, and waved an accusing finger in front of the Ashishim's face.

"Always on the job, aren't you? But I have a feeling that I'm more use to the Illuminatus like this than as a *human being*. I can see what they've done to you, kid, and there's not much difference."

Abdulafia's face fell. It was all too true. There was no way that Zeon and his coven would allow such an engine of destruction to be unmade.

"The only thing which can put me back together is the thing which made me in the first place." said Tsien, looking up through the gaping hole in the roof, through the drifting smoke to the neon spires far above. "*Kronos* itself."

"But only the Emperor can lock in the Machine!" blurted B-Zerk, his fear of the hulking Super-Cyben forgotten. "Them Dogtag priests, the Manifest, they told me 'bout it all. No tuberunner's ever been higher than the Beltway."

Tsien rose to his feet with a hiss of hydraulics, holding the wakizashi out in one hand.

"Tuberunners? That's the wrong way. I'm going to knock on that damn machine's front door. And if it doesn't answer, I'll smash my way through. The bloody thing built me that way."

B-Zerk grasped the proffered handle, and felt the sharp steel slither out from between Tsien's metal fingers.

"Sure you won't be needing this, man?" he asked, catching his reflection in the bright blade.

"No. But I think *you* might." said the Super-Cyben, rising up to his full height. "I have to do this alone, and you have to get back to the RT. You'll need all the help you can get."

Abdulafia reached out to grasp Tsien's massive hand.

"The darkness has already gone from you, Edward." he said, looking deep into those glowing blue eyes. "Even if you look like this forever, you're still human."

Tsien grimaced, pulling his hand away.

"Thank the one you call *Verlaine* for me, then. I won't feel human until this shit is torn out of me, no matter what he managed to do. I could have used that anger, now. That *darkness* was what kept me alive with that knife in my throat."

"Verlaine?" asked Abdulafia "He was here?"

But Tsien had already turned away, climbing back to the top of his little hill of broken stones.

"Good luck, Ashishi. I'm going home."

"WAIT!" called Abdulafia. "Wait a second - there's one more thing. A favor."

The super-Cyben's half-human face looked down on him coldly as he scrambled up the pile of rubble behind it.

"And what makes you think that I owe you anything?" growled Tsien. "Unless I'm very much mistaken you were ready to kill me a minute ago."

"Ten minutes ago my people could have left you to die." said the Ashishim. "All I want is the same chance for those two." He pointed down at the broken bodies of Jaqub Hassan and Kaito Kayzi, sprawled in a pool of blood amid broken core drones.

"Perhaps your people should have stayed out of it." said Tsien, turning away. He looked up and out through the shattered roof of the mall, up through the ragged clouds to the 'lev and his maker. "Nobody's gonna thank you for bringing me back."

It was a wild guess, pure chance, but 'Afia took it. It was all in the way he'd said *'I'm going home...'*

"Your family will, Eddie. But what about theirs?"

Slowly, ponderously, the half-human machine swung around. Black despair was written all over Tsien's ravaged face.

"*Touche*, clonemeat. You should be in politics." Clicking and hissing, the Super-Cyben stalked across the tiles to where Hassan and Kaito lay sprawled unconscious,

bleeding and bruised. "Y'know, these two used to run a racket with me so I could keep my job. Seems like years ago, but it was just this morning."

There was no response from either Jaq or the Kayzi – both were barely breathing. There was only one thing which could save them, short of a year in hospital. The contents of a certain cryo-reliquary, a nanonic system humanity was supposed to be denied...

"Try some of this, guys. And I guess we're even." Abdulafia came up behind Tsien as he reached out one hand, his face lined with pain as he made silver liquid well up from his pores, flowing like rivulets of mercury across Jaq and Kaito's broken faces. The nanostuff melted into them like rain on a parched desert, and as Afia watched, incredulous, he could actually see their bruises and cuts start to heal.

Kaito's breath ceased to bubble and rasp in his throat, and Hassan's eyes flickered open, white and staring.

"I'm sorry for all the shit we've been through. Sorry about this, too – that stuff is gonna rip the Stunn out of you cold. You'll never get high again. Tough break."

He stood, the rags of his trenchcoat whipped out behind him by a gust of wind. Already 'Afia could see his friends stabilizing, the white fire of the Vision tracing the hot nanotech as it rebuilt them.

"Tell Verlaine, clonemeat. Tell your Illuminatus what I've just done here. They didn't make a mistake bringing me back - but if they think I owe them something, the debt's on your shoulders now. On these two."

"Gods speed then, Eddie." said the Ashishi warrior, kneeling next to Jaq and Kaito as their heartbeats quickened, and the Vision sparked in their living brains. "And thank you."

With that the immense Super-Cyben leaped into the air, over the heads of Abdulafia and B-Zerk, his boots touching down atop the PD platform with the mind of Zone. There was a hiss and pop of hydraulics, and he was gone, up through the roof in a cloud of superheated steam, silver armor reflecting the leaping flames below.

Tsien powered up through the choking smoke, coming in to land on an antenna tower two hundred feet above the stricken Valley View. Trajectory overlays planned his ascent, from spire to rooftop, satellite dish to dome, ever upward.

And there, a tiny speck on his optronic reticules. A chance to warn them of his intent...

Tsien launched himself from the tower, his hands outstretched and grasping, calibration programs altering his balance, leveling his trajectory ...

He grabbed the Damocles bomb as it plunged toward the Valley View, his hands closing around the fat metal cylinder as his body pivoted, legs prepared to take the impact with the side of a 'factorium block.

Tsien switched the howling bomb to one hand as the 'fac rushed up at him, his free

fist slamming through its composite panel wall, gripping a support girder to hold himself in place. Four hundred feet above the burning mall, he flipped the Damocles over so he could stare directly into its nose-mounted camera.

"I hope you're watching this, Slade. I hope that Kronos is watching too. I'm coming for you both. I'll be there soon."

And before the machine could slam down the detonation codes and blow the damned thing up in his hand, Tsien lobbed the Damocles out over the city and sprang from his perch.

Upward, ever upward.

He had business up there, and nothing put in his way would stop him.

But first, he was going home.

## Ω

Clonehunter Melchior was living it large. He was the ace assassin, the black wraith, the hand of doom.

Mysterious, deadly – a man of action.

Oh, the chicks would dig it. Big time!

With the pay from his mission into MS Biomed he'd decked himself out in the most badass gear he could get his hands on. Sintered riotmesh trousers, an LCD matrix shirt running scenes of blazing skulls, a long charcoal-black trenchcoat, and silver-chased cowboy boots with taser spurs.

A fat roll of Slades clipped in platinum sat snug in his pocket. Wraparound shades inlaid with lapis and sapphire clamped across his face. Knuckle-duster rings of gold-plated titanium hung heavy on his hands, inset with his name in jewels.

Melchior popped his collar in front of the full-length mirror in his new apartment, a plasticrete cube down in the Omnivasive compound. Tonight he was going to score. Oh yes ...how could such a slick guy fail?

*And what do you do for cash, mister?*

Why, I'm a secret agent. But shhh – not so loud. Come back to my place and I'll tell you all the details ...

One last thing – a splash of cologne. Melchior reached for the cut crystal bottle, and noticed that it was vibrating.

Then shaking.

And then he heard the sound. A far-off howl dopplering in from above, rising in pitch and intensity until it was a scream ...

The Damocles exploded in a spray of napalm fire, its caged personality exulting as it winked out in sweet release, orgasmic destruction.

Omnivasive internal security later discovered that the epicenter of the blast, which

had demolished ten hab-cubes and a storage garage, was centered on the recently assigned apartment of one Agent Sixth Grade Melchior.

The forensic team found nothing left of the unfortunate agent but his charred feet, lopped off cleanly and stuffed into a pair of tasteless and expensive boots.

## Ω

*In the beginning there was darkness.*

*Technician Zhe said - Let There Be Light.*

*And through the weave of his integral Slavesystem a dim glow began to spread, phosphorescence picking out the mesh of wires in a neon scrawl.*

*The core of Kronos seemed lonely now, abandoned. Without the presence of the Enemy trying to burrow into his head, and without the great tectonic voice of the machine hammering through him it was like a ghost-city, cold and forsaken.*

*The scalpel had done its job.*

*Zhe released a pale yellow globe of radiance from his palm, and it bobbed up to float three feet above his head. Rarely if ever had a Technician of the Multiplicity felt so tired, so washed out and dazed.*

*Professional pride put it down to the inferior Slavesystem which was now welded to him. Such useful technology, but so reliant on external power...*

*There was no time to rest, however. The corrupted Wetsystems were cut off from the switch which activated the Forge; indeed, that command had been safely stored in Zhe's own brain.*

*But so long as this accursed dead city still existed, a gateway still yawned open into some uncharted dimension where the Enemy crouched in the dark..*

*Zhe couldn't risk trying to weld shut that crack in reality himself. His foe had already proven that it could devour Technicians, just as it had eaten the unfortunate Gharfos Nyl.*

*If he could just discover how the fracture occurred in the first place, the Kataphraktoi or the Inux Shorg would make sure it never troubled reality again.*

*Zhe hoped that the revelation would come sooner rather than later. That damned Slavesystem armor was really starting to itch...*



DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**MEMO TO OPERATIVES:  
THREE-DIMENSIONAL SPACE GRID REFERENCE  
LJ-9032487529087-298478-XX-9**

**LOCAL REFERENCE – ‘EARTH’**

**MOST ADVANCED LIFE FORM – ‘Anacanthotermes Ochraceus -TERMITE’**

**DOMINANT LIFE FORM – ‘Homo Sapiens Sapiens’ – HUMAN BEING’**

**HEALTH AND SAFETY WARNING:**

**DUE TO AN INSTABILITY IN RELITY AT THIS LOCATION AN OBSERVER-EFFECT RELATED ANOMALY HAS BEEN DETECTED. PROBLEMS MAY ARISE SHOULD A LARGE-SCALE EXTINCTION EVENT OCCUR AT THESE CO-ORDINATES – PLEASE ADVISE THE OPERATING TECHNICIAN (GHARFOS NYL, GRADE THREE HIEROPHANT) TO INTERVENE AS NECESSARY TO PREVENT WIDENING WHAT IS ALREADY A DANGEROUSLY UNSTABLE TEMPEROCAUSAL RIFT.**

**FLUCTUATIONS ARE MOST APPARENT DURING THE DEATH/AFTERLIFE PHASE SHIFT OF CERTAIN HIGHER SPECIES ON THIS PLANET.**

**FORTUNATELY, THE TERMITES SEEM UNAFFECTED.**

**CAUTION!**

**DO NOT BELIEVE IN ANY ASPECT OF THIS APPARENT REALITY WITHOUT NOTICE, SIGNED IN TRIPPLICATE, FROM SUBPRAETOR NARG.**

*The Adversary was trapped. In all its long history it had never felt like this – it had never been out of control of its own dimension- spanning form.*

*It had felt the distinctive, ALIEN pain of its old enemy for a second, the one which the prey animals called Illuminatus Zeon. That filthy unhuman thing had caught it once before, bound it in hunger, tried to make it a slave.*

*And so it had struck, using what little power it still had left on Earth to devour him.*

*But once again, the damned creature had been one step ahead of it.*

*Only as it began to feed did the Adversary realize that it had bitten off far more than it imagined...*

*Technician Zhe was so immersed in the images which sleeted through his brain that he didn't notice the lump growing between his shoulderblades until it had already extruded the fetal beginnings of an arm and a leg.*

*He was cut off from the infected Wetsystems, firewalled behind alien code, so he couldn't feel a very unwelcome presence rising up out of the morass of lost souls, an uninvited guest beginning to swell out of his hybrid flesh like a tumor.*

*As soon as he noticed, of course, Zhe's claws were sunk deep into the swelling bulge, trying to rip it from his back by force.*

*The pain simply galvanized his resolve, and he knotted his fingers into the rubbery, yielding nanostuff, trying to gain enough leverage for one decisive act of self-surgery.*

*He felt teeth close over his hand, and felt two of his fingers suddenly disappear into its slobbering maw.*

*The thing was growing faster now, more a conjoined twin than a tumor, its arms batting his claws away, its legs scrabbling for purchase as he stumbled back and forth, cursing.*

*The damned thing was laughing at him!*

*Zhe could feel its mass ballooning out, matching his own, the hands which locked around his wrists growing more sinewy, their grip stronger.*

*There was a wet ripping sound.*

*There was a moment of exquisite agony.*

*When the red mist faded from before his eyes, Zhe was face down on top of the quiescent memory cube, the metal cold against his skin.*

*And lying only a few meters away, in a pool of stinking grey fluid, was Technician Nyl.*

*Nyl arose from amidst the oily muck of his rebirth with a cracking and popping of limbs, seeming to unfold to his full height as if he were articulated in all the wrong places.*

*Like Zhe, he was coated in the shimmering stuff of the Slavesystem Everdark, a second skin which seemed to shift and flow over his body like a swarm of ants.*

*"It actually worked." he whispered in wonder, staring down at his remade hands, his eyes silvery white in deep black sockets. "But ahh...where are my manners?"*

*Nyl reached out with one armored claw to help Technician Zhe to his feet.*

*Zhe flinched away for a second, remembering the maniacal look on the renegade's face as he twisted the dials of his remote. But he took the outstretched hand anyway, and felt the power in Nyl's grasp as he was hauled up from the floor.*

*"Integration, Zhe." breathed Nyl, still clasping the technician's hand in his dark claw. "I can feel that thing in the Wetsystems writhing under my thumb! Such power!"*

## Ω

CeeAn padded through the chill corridors of the Ashishim fortress, silent and naked, her blue hair falling in damp straggles across her face. The feeling of flesh! The exultation of having a body which could breathe and eat and drink - and actually hold a gun for more than twelve minutes!

She ignored the mixture of embarrassed amazement and goggle-eyed lust coming from the Ashishim who watched her, heading out of the biolab and direct to the armory. The only thing she was wearing was a cellular headset, ripped off of SubMagus Devine's head as she jumped down off the medical gurney where she'd woken up.

"Nguyen, this is 187 calling in - I want the whole damn gift basket this time. Yeah, that too. Two of them. And gas up my ride - I don't have time to stop in at a garage on the way. Yeah...It's *all* over the net Nguyen, but I don't give a damn. He can't take that goddamn monster on his own, and I don't see any of the wireheads down here reaching for their steel."

A pneumatic door snicked open for her and Cee slammed her palm down on the elevator controls, listening with her head tilted to one side as Nguyen ticked off a list of deadly weapons.

"Alright, I'll settle for .45 cal and char grenades instead of plasma." She flicked a curling strand of hair out of her eye and looked down for a second, biting her lip in consternation.

"Uhhh ...one more thing" she said, the cryo drugs burning out of her mind on a wave of embarrassment. "Can you dig up a set of size nine fatigues? And no, I *don't* want to talk about it."

## Ω

Party time.

The cameras were grinding, the music strident and pulsing, the lights bright, search-lamp beams scissoring the sky above the Jaegenn estate. While the mob howled and

seethed below, trampling the corpses of the luckless Comp Div troopers who opposed them, the aristocracy of Elysium sipped rare wines, preened and posed, waiting for the games to begin.

In time-honored tradition it was the host's privilege to choose the evening's theme, and all agreed that Lysander Jaegenn had outdone himself. Tonight there would be no concealed weapons, no technological tricks to swing the game in anyone's favor.

Tonight they masqueraded as three hundred gods of Olympus, naked but for floating swirls of samite which protected their modesty. Each hovering white skein was supported by a pair of mechanical cherubs, their antigrav motors keening at a near-inaudible pitch.

Around the dripping ice-sculptures of Zeus and Neptune a few of the most favored lords and ladies clustered together, floating cherubim zipping here and there in a complex dance, struggling to keep their samite veils unentangled.

All eyes were on the absence which defined the room.

"Who does he think he is?" hissed Lady Elisha Dawes, her claw-like hands almost crushing a slim flute of champagne. "That young upstart has no decency, making us wait like this!"

Duke Gideon's huge leonine head nodded in ponderous agreement.

"Wouldn't have happened back in my day," he rumbled, belching smoke from his foot-long cigar. "Had the bloody decency to arrive at these things on time."

Duchess McCalder nodded in prim agreement. "Showboating for the cameras, I'll wager. All those voyeuristic sub-scum love a grand entrance."

Sage nods and muttered agreement rippled around the little circle.

"Just another reason we have to try our damndest to put him out of the competition, eh?" huffed Gideon, tapping a core of ash from his stogie. A hovering ashtray caught it before it hit the ground. "No Emperor of mine is going to be a bloody prima donna for the media."

"Not to mention that frightful yob Ascher!" sniffed Lady Dawes, her icy gaze fixed across the room on Leynna Mendelev-Singh. "We are certainly well rid of *his* dubious company!"

More mutterings, more sage nodding of heads, while the ever-present cameras tracked and whirled all around them...

And now – Look!

Atop one of the great marble pillars appeared a figure in black!

In the bloody streets silence fell, as drifting zeppelins and skyscraper-mounted threedeeo screens beamed his face out across the burning city, stories tall.

His ash-blond hair was shaved to a military stubble, his eyes were vast and blue-black under their optronic membranes. The merest hint of a smile twitched on his lips as he looked down on his enemies, his prey. As his vast hologram looked down on his

subjects, bloody-handed in the streets...

And that wasn't a suit of charcoal black slicked tight across his chest – he knew the rules of the game tonight. A shimmer of black silk snapped in the wind around him, supported by two hovering skull-faced cherubs. Behind it he was naked, *painted* black, all but his hands and face. But unarmed, as Lysander Jaegenn requested?

There was a flash of silver as a blade leaped from its sheath – a near invisible black scabbard clenched in one of Simeon's hands.

And as he leaped from the pillar to the floor, thirty feet in one bound, the blade flew like hard lightning, hissing through the air to embed itself in an ice statue of Artemis in repose, to stand quivering from one of her frozen eyeballs.

"I say, bad show old man." complained Duke Gideon quietly, as his cigar fell in half. The neatly cut end was scooped out of the air still smoking by his antigrav ashtray, and...

"Lysander. Great party. Sorry I'm late for the drinks, but am I still in time for the games?"

Tight zoom on a million screens;

Lord Jaegenn scowled, upstaged, a spoiled little aristo brat caught in the eye of the cameras.

And down in the streets, the fans loved it.

## Ω

Deep downtown, and the streets were rife with panic. Sudden blasts of blue and gold flame trailed sparks through the air, and the chatter of machinegun fire echoed through the rusting corridors and sunken avenues of the Subcity.

Dysfunctional fire-fighting systems sputtered a rain of dirty grey foam and fetid water, arcing lightning from the skeins of wires and cables nailed up across the building fronts.

*And everywhere the screaming, swearing, struggling morass of bodies...*

Some of the crowds who thronged the sidewalks were blue-ribboned rebels for Blaire, mobilized upward to where the battle raged against the Division and their Cyben thralls.

Others were voyeurs, spectators, looters, or opportunists. Weaving through the logjam of human bodies came the agents of the Reclamation, scouts and jammers, electronic-warfare guerrillas with satchels of weird tech juiced by strapped-up car batteries.

But most of the crowds had been driven down from the levels above by the wild and burgeoning violence which ruled the upper streets.

Cops killing Blues. Gangers and Zaibatsu-Boys, the Liquid Tong and the Black

Hand looking to leverage some profit out of the carnage. Crossfire-caught squarejohns lugged suitcases of slades, cheap rail-rifles, kid's toys and laptop computers, pushing baby strollers and wheelbarrows of junk.

While above it all, on the ever-present screens - projected from the gaping mouths of iron gargoyles, stretched across the flanks of zeppelins - the face of Simeon Blaire stared down, a god pre-emptive, a set-up for victory. The betting parlors were barricaded, bookies like the late Feldon folding under the weight of odds too unbalanced for profit.

One way or another, tonight was for the Blues.

Leighton Cressmyer was a clerk in the dispatch 'factorium of Choseem Chemical, a bean-counter who watched a single corroded robot arm load drums of solvent into a chute eight hours a day. His grimy little hab had been too close to the ChoChem liquids store when the fighting broke out; a stray round had punched through the main deuterium holding tank below the worker's quarters, and half of his fellow employees were even now drifting on the breeze as a haze of charcoal.

He ran with his hair on fire, his eyebrows scorched clean off his face.

Direction hadn't mattered to him, except AWAY, and DOWN, away from the flames and the agonized screams, the sirens and the gunfire. He realized he was clear when the cold, sick, salty wind off the Atlantic slapped him back from the edge of a concrete flyover. He looked down and saw his scorched clothes, his blistered and bare feet - and his hands full of charred banknotes. Some survival instinct, there.

It was just as he started peeling apart the blackened plastic that he felt a hand close around the back of his head; fat fingers digging painfully into his burned scalp. Before he could twitch, or even draw another breath, he felt the flat square muzzle of a pistol jammed into his back. Halitosis breath wafted over him as his unseen assailant leaned forward.

"You wouldn't want to have a nasty fall, now, would you sir?" rasped a voice behind the fug of alcohol and rotting teeth. "In all this confusion, a man should keep his hands free, in case *accidents* were to happen."

Leighton balled the money up in his fists, overwhelmed by a burning urge to resist, to scream his refusal. But the waters, a straight mile below were cold and final, illuminated by the fires of Elysium as it burned. And nobody in the panicked crowd would help him. Just one more corpse, tonight.

"All right ...easy." he said, letting a few slades slip loose between his trembling fingers. "Take it all. Just ...just let me go."

Now a far-off sound was fading in, a dopplering buzz, popping and barking, something he remembered from old threedeeo re-runs. Leighton felt the hand come off the back of his head, felt the pistol jam into his spine, pushing him up hard against the railing. Black water zoomed, vertiginous.

*The sound, rising.*

“Very wise, sir. Very good judgment. And if you’d be so kind as to keep admiring the view for a few seconds as I take my leave, I won’t feel compelled to shoot you in the back.”

He felt the pressure of the pistol easing off, a great sweaty paw ripping the money out of his hands...

*A spitting roar, peaking, too afraid to turn his head as his attacker stepped backwards away from the railing ...*

There was an inhuman squeal, a long and drawn out scream.

There was a meaty thud; a wet, ripping sound.

Warm fluid rained down on Leighton Cressmeyer where he cowered against the rail.

Finally, there was a repetitive squeaking noise, like rusty bedsprings.

Leighton turned his head tentatively, peeking out of one eye lest a bullet smash through his spine.

And saw ...

A machine belching black and grey fumes from eight chopped-off chrome pipes. Wheels of fat, sticky rubber smoking at the end of a pair of thick, smoldering skidmarks. And a girl behind the wheel, scowling as a pair of windscreen wipers tried vainly to shift a great smear of blood off the glass.

Half of the mugger was under the razor-sharp blade which fronted the war-wagon; the rest had flown up over its sloping bullet hood, and now lay twitching between the skids. Black and red stained slades blew about like confetti in the wind off the ocean.

“Excuse me ....hi, you there!”

Leighton realized he was being yelled at.

The girl in the car, blue hair tousled and bloodied, purple tattoos glowing, was focusing a winning smile on him while the wipers continued to smear gore back and forth with a sad whining sound.

“I’ll give you a lift outta here if you like.” she said, pushing a few strands of hair out of her eyes. “Just so long as you tell me – which way to the Valley View Mall?”

## Ω

The Illuminatus kept his sanctuary protected under more than just lock and key – if his human followers ever discovered the bizarre technologies and otherworldly artifacts within, it would have been like pious witch-hunters discovering an alchemist’s den.

Zeon – a very carefully disguised rogue Technician indeed - made his way purposefully through the deep corridors of the reactor level, where dim green strips of phosphorous tape provided the only illumination.

Even this far beneath the domes of the Subcity the ground shook, and the corroded

pipes bolted to the bedrock creaked and hissed with the shockwaves of far-off explosions. That accursed Blaire! Why had he unleashed this madness now? Why could his pet Cyben not have destroyed the little blue-blood freak when their paths had crossed?

Nyl muttered to himself, twisting the wheel on a heavy bulkhead door.

This setback was immaterial; there was no way any one of the weak, inbred Lords of Elysium could truly control the city. Not when the machine and the Wetsystems themselves were under the thumb of a Technician of the Multiplicity.

As for Eddie Tsien - he wasn't worth the time for worry. Let him wreak revenge on the machine - let him run *interference*. He'd been nothing but a periapt for power anyway, an experiment in life and death and the blurring of the line between them. He was the last of many.

As the wrist-thick bolts of the final airlock slammed back into their recesses, and blue light leaked out around its edges Nyl began to hear the sounds of their pain.

The inside of Nyl's sanctorium was walled with alien flesh, scales and plates of coppery skin, thick pulsing tubes dripping clear fluids. Machines of silver filigree wove in between crystal globes, packed to bulging with nameless organs.

This chamber lay beneath the fusion reactor which had once powered the Ashishim enclave, a place saturated (or so he had taken pains to assure his minions) with deadly radiation. In truth, vast cages of magnetic energy kept the Technician's laboratory safe from prying eyes and - perhaps more importantly - kept his experimental subjects *in*.

Most of the systems which Nyl employed had been part of the Devilfish which had brought him here; the creature which was now spread out across the walls and floor, comprehensively vivisected. The white-scaled tentacles which the sentient starcraft used to warp space had been riveted and bolted to the racks of machines, forming an impenetrable force-field.

But its simple animal mind hadn't been sufficient bait to tempt his prey.

It had needed *human* suffering, human death to pull it to the surface. It had needed the barrier between its world and this one to be weakened. And so Nyl had co-opted the most skilled hackers in Elysium to bend the Wetsystems to his purpose, creating a symphony of pain with the enslaved masses of the city's dead.

Tsien had been the perfect and final morsel with which to tempt it, and Magus Verlaine was the perfect interface through which it could be controlled. For the entity Nyl wanted to suborn couldn't resist the rage and pain of Tsien's betrayal, the promise of slaughter inherent in his dehumanized form. And in the withered and powerless body of the Magus it was caught as surely as an insect in a killing-jar, pinned out in the hollow mechanical shell of a man utterly compromised to Nyl's will.

His failed experiments hung from the walls and ceiling all around him, useful to maintain the pitch and tone of agony which his guest needed - which it fed upon.

Nyl could all but taste its fury in the close and crackling air.

He very nearly salivated at the thought of harnessing that power, unleashing it upon his enemies. And quite probably on his erstwhile allies too; the Praetor was nothing if not insufferably stubborn. If his investigations were correct, it was a sentience which filled an entire dimension, a creature of pure appetite. Even His Eminence of Liquid Space wouldn't be able to stand against it.

With that kind of threat at his back, he would bring the multiverse peace through terror. And to an individual like Technician Nyl, who had seen atrocities committed in the name of victory on a galactic scale, that kind of peace was the best and only kind.

Nyl walked on through a crawling mists of cryogenic gases, under the cold blue lights of his sanctorium.

On either side, poor once-human things scabbled at the glass of their containment chambers, their eyes (those which retained the privilege of sight) pleading and cursing, imploring him for an end to their suffering.

There would be no surcease for them tonight.

Nyl reached the suspended rack which held the body of Verlaine, a frame of twisted iron piercing his arms and legs with barbed spikes. Segments of the unfortunate Magus's armored body were securely welded to the rack, and loops of thick black chain ran from hulking bolts in the floor and ceiling to electrified manacles clapped around his wrists, ankles and neck.

Perhaps even more invasive (at least from the point of view of a Magus), thick data-cables were plugged into a thousand ports all over Verlaine's head and torso, disappearing into jackpoints welded through flesh and bone.

The poor wretch was a picture of weakness and despair – an image which Nyl's expanded senses told him was a deliberate charade. Verlaine's skin was burning cold, and arcs of electromagnetic force radiated from him like a sick aura, discharging in streams of invisible lightning where they met the containment gauss-cage which bound him.

But even human eyes could have seen the runnels of black ichor which writhed across his skin, the questing tentacles of sentient liquid dripping from his broken mouth.

Technician Nyl made a few final adjustments to his personal defenses before one of his crabbed hands reached out to pull a lever on the wall. At once the black fluid began to flow in reverse, pulling back into Verlaine's pores, into his tear-ducts and sinuses with a sick sucking sound. The gauss cage was down.

Nyl stepped up to the rack warily – he had not become an *old* Technician of the Multiplicity by taking risks with dangerous aliens. He could feel it prying at his brain, trying to find a crack in his mental armor. Trying to insinuate tendrils of fear and doubt into what was, thankfully, a simulacrum of a human mind.

Nyl smiled grimly, unpacking a selection of unpleasant surgical tools onto a little

steel trolley. He could actually *feel* the agony and fear of the experimental subjects flowing past him, like water swirling down a funnel into the creature's psionic maw. Hence the flaying, the hooks, the *dissection*.

The fear of his lab animals was enough to sustain the thing within Verlaine, but it would avail it nothing to possess their ruined bodies, kept balanced on the razors edge between life and death.

It would take the Technician only a second to turn their life support tanks to boiling cauldrons, or slabs of cryonic ice. And then the subject would be back in the machine-husk of Magus Verlaine, right where he wanted it.

"My analysis programs have some very strange ideas about you." said Nyl, picking up a vibro-scalpel between two wizened fingers. "One of them even went so far as to suggest that you cultivated sentience in these apes specifically so you could prey on them."

There was no answer from the wasted shell of Magus Verlaine save for an agonized groan.

"Thousands of years keeping them at each others throats so you could reap their terror. All that time, and yet ...you still can't understand what they've done with that precious sentience."

Nyl slammed his fist down on a button suddenly, unleashing bolts of electricity through the chains and manacles which bound his captive.

"You still aren't very good with *machines*, are you?" he asked, as smoke drifted up toward the extractor grates in the ceiling.

Still there was no answer from Verlaine, just the sound of his breath rasping in his throat.

"Well...in a way, this is your lucky day, then. I can teach you a little about such things. I can teach you how to make them feel pain, too. Even how to make them fear. All you have to do is co-operate with me. . ."

Nyl ran the transparent blade of the vibro-scalpel down one of Verlaine's pallid cheeks, exposed from under his shining facial armor.

The cut was deep, and bone flashed white before black blood bubbled up from the wound, lashing the air like the tentacles of an anemone.

"I know how you wanted to use Tsien for your *usual purposes*." sighed Nyl, dropping the scalpel with a metallic clatter. "But that kind of power belongs to those of us who *think*, not things like you. Your idea of sophisticated equipment is probably still just a very sharp axe."

He turned away, pulling on a pair of rubber gloves, but one eye caught the movement just in time.

Nyl wasn't easily surprised, after a few hundred years of multidimensional covert operations.

But the *speed* of the thing. Its crushing strength... he felt a small, grudging flicker of admiration for it.

He let the great black pseudopods of flesh turn him on the spot, with the kind of relentless pressure which suggested they could just as easily screw him into the ground.

Verlaine was gone, eclipsed by a nebula of utter blackness, as devoid of light as the gulfs between galaxies. Nyl had seen them, and they were far more welcoming than the shifting, writhing mass which clung to the Magus's body, a grim caricature of a human form.

While the Technician watched, transfixed, it seemed to solidify, growing claws like jagged obsidian knives, the suggestion of knotted, corded muscles.

And congealing across Verlaine's face like a sore; a visage to launch a million nightmares.

Although there was no color in the seething morass which mummified Magus Verlaine it spat out images like overmagnified newspaper pictures, clouds of black dots shifting and re-arranging, a horror-gallery of distorted human faces. Every deformation, every pitiable defect of genetics, every hideous wound and atrocity of war.

Dripping, bulging, sloughing, screaming flesh, nailed down by two slick black eyes filled with mockery and madness. Nyl could feel the psionic impact behind that gaze, even though his own mind was utterly alien, an armored knot of silicon in his chest.

Pity me, and fear me, it said. Feel the disgust, and hate yourself for feeling it.

Feed me.

Technician Nyl had studied his prey with the same focus with which he approached any dangerous mission. He was more than prepared.

Deep within his extensively hardwired alien brain a connection clicked over, and searing light burst out around him, a coronal aura as sharp and vivid as a solar flare. Black tentacles and rivulets and claws steamed and hissed and screeched, recoiling from the blaze of light and heat.

"You won't surprise me that easily," he said, deactivating the gauss shield with a thought. "I always assumed a thing like you would have pride as a weakness – what with being worshiped as a god by feral monkeys and all."

The face dripping from Verlaine's own was a grinning, bloated thing, like a gourd wrapped in burnt scar tissue.

"Now that we know how to get a response out of you, I suppose its high time we began to break you in. Don't be embarrassed – you won't be the first local demigod I've whipped into line."

A bubbling hiss spilled out from the thing's mouth now, as its mangled lips tried to enunciate around a jaw full of jagged teeth.

"It's the carrot and the stick," said Nyl, his hands busily plugging items of machinery into Verlaine's dangling wetwire cables. "Don't think I won't burn you out

of this dimension like a patch of mold if you fail to co-operate. But if we can see eye to ...well, whatever those things are, then you will have a feast of pain the likes of which you have never known.”

On the touchscreens under Nyl’s hands schematics were blinking online – detailed maps of circuitry, the paths into the Wetsystems. First he would suborn the beast to his control. And then he would let it loose in there, inside the mass of artificial tissue and caged souls which powered the Forge.

Technically, his work here would be done, the weapon neutralized, and well out of the hands of the Blacksteel Unity. In reality, the fun would only just have started.

Nyl stared into the morphing, twisting face of his specimen, and marveled at the hold he had over it. A being which filled an entire universe from end to end, caught by the tiniest pseudopod, the merest scrap of flesh. Was such a thing too arrogant to know it was beaten?

The voice, when it came, was like the sound of rusted, serrated blades across gristle, slippery and grating, sizzling with menace.

*‘ffffff we submit, then you will lhhhet ussss...fffffeeed?’*

Nyl could hardly contain his joy. It would serve him.

“You will be more than sated!” he yelled, bringing the power up on more and more of his alien cogitator units. The data feeds into Verlaine’s body were burning hot with barely contained power.

“All you must do is give me a name to control you by.”

*‘Thsssssss iss old magic, void-thhhngg.’* sussurated the voice in his head *but ‘it appearsss we hhghave ...little choicsssse. By many namessssss have we been hhhhhknown. Ghaurak and Shub-Niggurath and Belial. Sssssso many namessssssss. But ...iffff you would play thhhhe ssorcereer, you will hhhknow ussss assssss the Worm. Sssssuch a simple name, but it issss the way of all flessshhhh.’*

Nyl could not have cared if it had named itself the Prime Praetor at that moment. He felt exultant, a keystroke away from his ascendancy, his revenge against a multiverse of war and boredom and powerlessness.

His finger came down, and the thing which named itself the Worm felt a hammer of data fall, smashing its resistance to splinters.

For the first time in one hundred thousand years it finally had a master.

## Ω

He was awake, and alive, and he should have been grateful. The last thing he remembered was being swarmed all over by killer steel spider-things, and a hazy image of a face looking down at him – the cop from Omnivasive’s damned photograph. He’d woken up feeling like the insides of a punching bag, and without so much as a cup of

coffee he was off and running.

Jaquab Hassan was definitely having One of Those Days.

Crazy drug deals, extortion, gunfights and robberies, trips and bent cops and keeping up with the capricious Kaito Kayzi were his bread and butter. But rampaging swordsmen, cyborgs and Reclamationist terrorists were more than he liked to handle, at least without prior warning.

And now the whole damn world was coming down around their ears.

Hassan was finding it hard to keep up, despite his loping stride. The Ashishi called Abdulafia was unnaturally fast, and Kaito had managed to hitch a ride with the kid on top of that floating missile platform they both called 'Zone'. If this was just a Saturday jog in the park the innumerable bruises and puncture wounds which wracked his body would have had him calling it quits by now. But the crash of support girders and dragons-breath blasts of flame behind him kept Hassan at top speed.

Abdulafia had unpacked a headset from his voluminous coat, and was even now rattling off strings of code as he ran, a constant chatter of beeps and garbled shouting which carried even over the mall's disintegration.

The distraction almost pitched Hassan over the edge of a sheer drop into roiling flames, as the little group came to a dead end. He windmilled his arms on the very edge of the precipice for a second before the Ashishi grabbed a handful of his riotmesh coverall, hauling him back from the brink.

"Where to now?" panted Hassan, his breath coming in ragged gulps. The smoke and the stress were taking their toll on the big man; his was definitely a body built around riding a chopper, not running marathons through hell.

"This section leads up and out," said Abdulafia, pointing off through the haze toward a curving tiled causeway. "Used to be a car dealership up through there, but it's been gone for a couple of years. The workshops have access lifts to the cargo transit system."

Hassan grinned, his pain momentarily forgotten.

"Then what are we waiting for, huh? I say we blow this joint before it pops its welds and slides off into the ocean!"

As if to punctuate his words a section of roof the size of an articulated truck came down behind them, scything through the floor in a spray of shattered tiles.

There was no question of going back.

Abdulafia signaled the hovering missile platform, and they were off again, charging through billows of oily smoke up the ramp, dodging sizzling electrical cables and holes in the floor through which plumes of fire leaped and roared.

Hassan's eyes were streaming, and the sound of his pulse beat like the noise of giant pistons in his ears. But there, glimpsed through curtains of flame – the logo of Consolidated Automotive.

*We're actually going to make it. Only a little further ...*

And then Abdulafia stopped dead, cut down in mid-stride as if a steel bar had been rammed into his chest. Hassan skidded to a halt in a slew of broken glass, feeling the missile platform skim by overhead, unseen in the smoke. The Ashishi had simply folded up and slammed into the floor, a puppet with its strings suddenly severed. From the headset wrapped around his skull came a sound like a fractured mechanical scream. A sound Hassan had heard before, when he tried to call Kaito's homeblock and the fiber-optics were overloaded, the kid deep in the Wetsystems. It was the sound of raw data converted to noise.

Hassan didn't know how extensively hardwired Abdulafia was, but he could get his head a round the concept of some kind of virus attacking a bio-onboard system that way. His metal hand ripped the headset off the fallen Ashishi, crushing it to splinters of jagged plastic. And then, bruises and blood loss notwithstanding, Hassan hefted the prone and twitching body of Abdulafia over one shoulder, and staggered through the broken doorway of the Consolidated franchise.

Whatever god looked down favorably on half-dead adrenochrome farmers had seen to it that the air conditioning scrubbers in the sales-cube were still functioning. Just enough for him to fill his burning lungs, anyway. Typical – the terminals and desks were all covered in plastic, and they were probably the first people to come through here in months. But because the place had been locked up tight, nobody had been able to steal the carbon cores out of the air scrubbers, and the smoke was thinner in here, especially down by the floor.

Kaito came down next to him, B-Zerk not far behind. Above them loomed the bulk of Zone, like a predatory insect clinging to the low beige ceiling.

"What the hell happened to him?" asked the Kayzi, scrabbling through his clothes for a medical monitor unit.

"No idea!" grunted Hassan, checking Abdulafia's pulse with two of his fingers. Twitches of stress rippled through the muscles of the big biker's neck and jaw, and beads of oily sweat were dripping from his bushy eyebrows as he knelt over the Ashishi.

At least he was still alive – a stuttering pulse and the shallow rise and fall of his chest confirmed it. But blood was leaking out in thin rivulets from the gash across his abdomen where his medical systems were keeping his organs from spilling out. The bio-onboard systems implanted in his body had performed miracles during the battle with the core drones, but now the circuits coiled along his bones were dead.

Kaito's med sensors confirmed the worst.

"He needs his augmentations to stay alive, with all the damage he's taken. And the damn things look like they've been fried from the plugs in."

"I heard some kind of signal coming through his headset before he collapsed." said

Hassan, his hands clenching and unclenching. There was nothing his immense strength could do for the Ashishi now; even though all the punishment which was surely killing him had been taken saving his life. Hassan wanted to put his metal fist through something – *somebody* – but he knew that he was helpless in this situation. It was up to Kaito and his woefully inadequate med-pak.

“A military metaviral could have done this, but using one on a single person makes no sense.” said Kaito, as his sensor extended a cluster of flexible needles and tubes into Abdulafia’s arm. “That kind of offensive power could have taken out an army. Its like nuking a mosquito!”

The panic was rising in the Kayzi’s voice as the med-pak began to flash with red strobes. Critical signs were dropping, major organs shutting down.

“If we can get a sustained power feed into his augmentation systems he might hold out another hour or two. Long enough to get him back to the R.T.”

Hassan could see the Ashishi dying in front of him. his skin was pallid and cold, his breathing ragged and rasping in his throat.

“What are you waiting for then?” he asked, in a voice just this side of a scream “Plug him in!”

Kaito turned Abdulafia’s head to one side, exposing the inset plug on the side of the reclamant’s neck. Charred and blistered skin surrounded the socket, but all its pins seemed intact.

“The problem’s compatibility.” sighed Kaito, dropping the med sensor to the floor. Its tiny screen was a solid mass of blinking red icons.

“That stuff he’s been wired with is all military spec. The Ashishim must have duplicated units they stole from the cops. We’d need a combat-capable system with immense batteries just to get him back to a proper R.T. clinic.”

Abdulafia’s body gave a final huge convulsion, and bubbles of bright blood foamed from between his blue lips. The medical systems holding his stomach together were in complete decay, and the wound there gaped open an inch at least, a gash webbed with pitifully thin silver filaments.

“He saved us both, K.” whispered Hassan. “Is there any chance his R.T. boys can crash-start him if we bring him in like this?”

B-Zerk was leaning over Kaito’s shoulder, his young face pale. The kid was desperate not to let his horror show through, but the tracks of tears cut through the soot and ashes which grimed his cheeks.

“Don’t let him die.” he said, all the bravado of his street-tough, tunnel-crawler persona shaken out of him. Until now his only encounter with real death had been watching Zone fall away into the hot darkness.

“No pressure, huh?” said Kaito, picking up the med-scanner gingerly.

“You two should see how shot his augmentations are. I have no idea what’s keeping

him alive right now...probably just subliminal willpower.”

The look on his face was almost as bleak as that on the stricken Ashishi’s.

Locked in their vigil over the dying Abdulafia, none of them saw the pair of slim chrome cables descending from above, their ends weaving in the air like the snouts of blind snakes. At least, none of them noticed until both of the thin wires plugged themselves in, and then Abdulafia’s eyes snapped open.

They were cold and blank, without the spark of consciousness, and the voice which followed was just as emotionless.

Hassan, his steel hand clamped over the wound in the reclamationist’s abdomen, almost tore a chunk out of his patient’s flesh as he leaped up in surprise. Kaito dropped his med-sensor, letting it skitter off across the concrete floor flashing critical warnings. But B-Zerk looked up, toward the ceiling. And toward the shadowy, floating bulk of Zone Doubt.

“Please ...I don’t have much. . .time.” hissed a sepulchral voice from out of Abdulafia’s mouth. “The augmentations in his body are falling out of the grid faster than I can patch them together. But I have a solution. My battery cells are mil-spec. You can keep him together if you remove my power core.”

Hassan leaped in to pinch the wound together again. Alarming quantities of blood were pouring out of the Ashishi’s body now.

“Kaito, can you do it?” he asked, metal fingers struggling to grip the slippery flesh.

“Yes – but if I do...” he turned to look up at B-Zerk, who met his gaze with naked fear.

“You’ll die.” he said, reaching up to touch the burnished steel of Zone’s belly armor. “Without power, you’ll be gone, Zone.”

Abdulafia’s head twitched to the left, his empty eyes seeking out B-Zerk’s ashen face.

“This isn’t...life, B.” he croaked, struggling to raise one hand. “I was gone when I slipped, and it was my own damned fault. Please...let me go. Let me do one thing right this time.”

B-Zerk gripped the Ashishi’s clammy hand, the other still pressed against the nigh-impermeable armor of the missile platform.

“You came back for me, Zone.” he said, his voice barely above a whisper “But if it’s what you want...”

“Please – let me go.” said the voice of Zone Doubt, wavering in and out as Abdulafia’s systems went into terminal crash. “It hurts, B. Let me rest...”

B-Zerk dropped his head to his chest, silent for a second, for two, as around them the building shuddered, ominous creaks and groans issuing from the tormented metal.

When he looked up, directly into the eyes of Kaito Kayzi his face was stony; no longer that of a frightened kid. He was, once again, the operator, the tunnel crawler.

That stare burned into the hacker like a plasma pulse. From somewhere in his ruined rags the kid had produced an ancient manual screwdriver, its handle wrapped in electrical tape.

“Do it.” he said, and handed the rusted tool to Kaito.

## Ω

It knew fear, and the depths of darkness in the human soul.

That was all it *had* to know, all it had needed for millennia.

What the creature called the Worm couldn't understand was the lengths its prey would go to to erect barriers between themselves and their fear. Lights to banish the shadows. Swords and guns and nuclear missiles to obliterate the threat of violent death. Medical miracles simply to stave off their inevitable demise...

The Worm always found a way in. It was the twin of death, and dwelled in the single, endless instant between living and dying. That was how Technician Nyl had found it, engineering lingering agonies to tempt it out into reality.

Now he taught it about machines, and their hard, crystalline thoughts - so different from the tangled organic minds of humans, but based, in the end, on the same flawed reasoning.

There were many connections running from the body of Magus Verlaine into the Wetsystems, an immense hunting ground where organic minds were chained down in rows, latticed together in artificial tissue, ripe with fear. The core of each damned soul was the instant of its demise. *So many deaths, so many ends to so many stories...* Industrial accidents, diseases, murders, vehicle smashes, assassinations... all of them kept for their precious ability to (in the Technician's words) 'pattern energy.'

The reasons for the Wetsystems' existence, and the cognitive power it represented meant less than nothing to the Worm.

The prisoners within it were *sustenance*, and power. Enough power, surely, to have its revenge on the treacherous being who had imprisoned it. Behind the persona it had extruded into three-dimensional space bulked an entire reality of desire and tenacity, a dimension where it devoured souls, playing out their torment over centuries. The Worm liked to savor its meals.

And so it learned quickly, mastering the intricacies of wetsystem hacking in a matter of minutes as data was shunted into its stolen body.

Technician Nyl was no human being; he would be a delicacy to be enjoyed slowly.

The mind of the Worm was simple, but it knew two things all too well.

*If something lived, then it could die.*

And if it could appreciate the horror of its own doom, it could know *fear*.

Such a thing as Nyl, - a creature who had lived for centuries - would spend even

longer dying, and its terror would be exceedingly sweet.

Beyond a battery of code-locked connections the Wetsystems waited, a great harvest which it yearned to reap. All it would require was one slip in the programs which leashed it in.

## Ω

There were supposed to be twenty cops manning the inflatable bonded-carbon barrier across the transdome ring, but only five had reported for what looked like being a very dangerous duty. The big bags of fire-retardant foam were twelve feet high, proof against molotovs and rocks and bullets, with heavy-duty riot guns clamped to their tops and dynabolts pegging them down to the concrete.

It was the perfect cover to hide behind - especially when the whole city seemed to be rioting on the other side. The five cops palmed cigarettes and shared around a small flask of illicit moonshine, checking and rechecking the loads of their plasma carbines. The big rubber-bullet launchers atop the barrier seemed like a quaint anachronism when scaly-faced mutants were hurling cinderblocks at them with the force of medieval catapults.

They were all dirt-average troopers; the higher ranks had all seen unedited threedeeo of Reclamation Day, and never wanted to face the outlanders in person. These guys were used to letting Cyben do the work, but tonight they were on their own.

So far the blockade had kept out the crowds, and the missiles they were hurling; bags of shit, rotten food, rocks, home-made incendiaries and pieces of wrecked furniture. From what the officers could hear on the radio, things weren't much better anywhere else.

Still, better to be here with a bit of firepower and a bottle than take their chances making a break for it. There were rumors of Reclamationist snipers overwatching the barricades, waiting for a trooper's nerve to break. Then it was brains-on-the-wall time.

None of these five thought they were going to see any action tonight, but they were wrong. The first warning came with a wet slapping sound - probably another plastic bag of sewage, thought officer Alan Quaid (most senior trooper in the little squad at the age of twenty-two.)

When the thick rope of detonant gel went up it was as if the barrier had been torn apart by giant invisible hands. Grey foam spewed from its severed ends, soaking the shocked C-Div. boys and sending them sprawling.

Quaid slopped the foul-smelling stuff from out of his eyes with one hand, fumbling for his carbine with the other. Surely a horde of sub-scum would be next through the ruined barricade, primed to tear them limb from limb ...

What actually came through was a clutch of grenades, hissing and billowing clouds

of suffocating smoke. One lungful of the chemical which spewed from the little cylinders and cops and rioters alike were knocked on their asses, seeing halos of multicolored stars floating down around them. Reality warped and wavered like a heat mirage, while the unhinged laughter of his troopers rung like chimes in Quaid's ears. Part of his brain registered a noise rising, a sound like a sky-wide curtain being ripped in half...

And then it went past him like a runaway freight-hauler; a flame-belching wheeled juggernaut which he could barely discern from his other florid hallucinations.

Because wasn't it burning *petrochemicals*, like some kind of museum piece? And wasn't the pilot of the insane suicide machine a girl with blue hair and violet, glowing tribal tattoos? Had she just flipped him off?

And wasn't the little guy next to her, clinging to the door-frame with hands like claws the accountant who worked with his old man down at ChoChem?

Officer Quaid slumped wetly into a pile of foam, his gun slipping from his hands. It really was just too funny. He really needed a bit of a lie down, and this foam was as soft as a cloud...

Already a mile away and still accelerating, CeeAn kept her foot flat to the floor.

Abdulafia's trace had just gone out.

## Ω

*"What have you done?" asked Zhe, trying to pull away from Nyl's viselike grip. "I saw it take you! I watched it eat you alive!"*

*Nyl laughed, then, and strips of Slavesystem began to peel off Zhe's body, twining up and around Nyl's arm, melting back into his black armor.*

*"I am reborn." he said, looking into Zhe's silver eyes with a gaze as deep as the void between galaxies. "Mitochondriate and Slavesystem. Digital and analogue. I have chained that evil thing within me, and now the Forge is mine."*

*Zhe recoiled in horror as the Blacksteel sloughed off him, boiling out of his alien flesh to flow seamlessly into the growing form of Nyl.*

*"Madness." he spat "Whatever has corrupted this place has gone into you. You're insane if you think you control it."*

*"Come now, Zhe." said Nyl, his voice deep, smooth, coaxing "There's more than one virus that our kind keep as a weapon. Surely you see that this kind of power can be used to our advantage?"*

*Zhe remembered the black lightning from out of the wastelands, and what had happened to the nuclear strike against its source. He grinned back into Nyl's expressionless face, and ripped his hand from the other mitochondriate's grasp.*

*"It's to nobody's advantage. Thankfully, there's something here that can stop the*

*Forge from being used. They will care nothing for who is its master."*

*Nyl rose up further, drawing the shimmering darkness of the Slavesystem around him like a cloak. And for the first time Zhe could see in it, and in his blank white eyes the thorny tendrils of the Adversary, moving like a shadow below the surface.*

*"They are my people, Zhe. My Ashishim. Their only task was to await my return. I have been very busy here, while you were still an ungerminated seed back in Liquid Space. I've left some very capable people in charge out there, and I'm not surprised that they've found a way to destabilize the Forge. It's quite delicate, for all its power. A few hours setback, perhaps - but when I give them the order...well, I'm sure you'll enjoy the world I'm going to create here."*

*Zhe stepped back, trying to put some distance between himself and the looming figure of Technician Nyl.*

*"But you tried to kill them! I saw the bombs falling, Nyl."*

*The renegade grinned, a singularly unpleasant sight.*

*"That was more in the nature of a knee-jerk reaction, Zhe." he said "Kronos has quite a few tricks like that up its sleeve, but once again, my little pet humans have exceeded my expectations. That's not to say that I would have been too sad to see them incinerated..."*

*Zhe backed away as the seething metal fluid which had been the flesh of Everdark smothered Nyl's face.*

*"Now that my time has come, they will serve me. We're going to lure the Blacksteel in and hit them with a metaviral the likes of which no universe has ever seen." Nyl's smile ripped apart the Blacksteel amour across his face like a scrawl of silver, a gash with innumerable needle teeth. "They'll bow to me and so will you, Zhe. You have already brought me this far. It would be a shame for you to die before witnessing my final triumph."*

*Technician Zhe knew then, as the great memory cubes of Kronos began to glow once more, not with cool blue radiance but with a lambent crimson fire, that he had no time left. He must find the source of the infection before Nyl could act.*

*So while his eyes remained on the mad and ever-shifting face of his captor, his mind plunged again into the memories of Elysium, searching for a vital clue.*

*A storm of disembodied voices rose up to meet him.*

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**Gasoline (ga-so-leen); antiquated fossil fuel once used to power tens of millions of inefficient land vehicles before the wars of apocalypse. The ruling plutocrat of the last great oil company (Imperial Euro-Texan GmbH) lost everything – including his freedom and his genetics – when Jaegenn Superconductive rolled out the first of Earth’s cold-fusion units for the construction of Terminus Afrika. Some few antique vehicles which run on ‘gasoline’ might be kept in museums or private collections, but their usefulness is negligible.**

There was no time left for cocktails, for small-talk or canapes.

It was time to let the Games begin.

Across the city screens exploded with sprays of virtual gore, letters stories high announcing the first round. The great elimination!

One hundred and fifty of the combatants would be gone within the next ten minutes - and with them the hopes, prayers and wagered slades of thousands of Elysians. Of course, it would be a tragic upset if Simeon Blaire went out in the first. It would almost surely mean a bloodbath on the streets of a magnitude not seen since Reclamation Day.

Dave Levine floated above the great neo-classical temple atop a modified defense platform known as The Ref. The black-and-white checkerboard paint of the hovering battlemekan was reflected in his holomatrix coat, the tiny white squares a thousand infinitesimal threedeeo screens running little advertisements.

Uncle Dave - the most trusted man in death-sports commentary - looked down on the marble floor of the temple and mopped his florid pink face with a red handkerchief.

The cameras were hungry, waiting.

"Well, here we are folks, the start of the first round in what is sure to be the sporting event of the century! A *magnificent* turnout for this very special engagement, the rules chosen as per custom by our gracious host Lord Lysander Jaegenn! This time there will be no weapons, no tricks - just guile, skill and bloodlust as our Kheptarch masters face off in unarmed combat!"

The woman perched next to Levine atop The Ref was his opposite in so many ways the pair couldn't help being threedeeogenic. While the avuncular sportscaster was the picture of middle-class respectability, she was a battle-scarred amazon, clad in scanty combat armor and chainmail. When she came on screen, ten thousand sweaty fanboys hit record.

"Certainly a break with the usual rules of the game, Dave." enthused Valkyria, grabbing the mike from his hand with one meaty fist. Muscles slithered under her skin like turtles wrestling in a condom. "This kind of raw and primal fighting is my kind of thing! I love to get my claws into a man's eyesockets, and a good knee to the groin will put down anybody!"

"Quite right, Valkyria!" replied Levine, wincing a little for the cameras. "But the big question - perhaps the biggest ever in my broadcasting career is - will this twist favor Lord Simeon Blaire?"

The gladiatrix scowled into the threedeeo lens, her bionic eye flashing amid a pucker of scar tissue.

"Dave, I've fought some of the toughest people and *things* in the mutant leagues downtown, and I know what a good unarmed fighter looks like. They look like *me*, baby - because I chewed 'em all up and spit 'em out!" She paused to flex and pose again, her

armored bosom filling the screen.

“Some of those pencil-necked Kheptarchs are so used to vibro-blades and force rods that they couldn’t punch through a paper bag! I give Blaire my thumbs up for this one!”

Down in the streets a cheer went up from armies of Blaire supporters as Valkyria unrolled a blue sash across her battle-suit. In flaming neon letters it read:

“BLAIRE FOR EMP! PRINCE OF PUNISHMENT!”

Dave Levine gave a little professional chuckle, indulging his hulking co-host.

“I wouldn’t be so quick to write off tonight’s host, Val – I have some insider information that could swing the fight. So without further ado, here’s my Gambler’s Gospel for the week!”

In tote bars and betting shops throughout the city people waited breathlessly for Uncle Dave’s golden seal. After hearing the last word from the sportscaster the final bets would be taken, and the games would begin.

“I have here two of the secret trainers who have been helping prepare Lord Jaegenn for tonight – Sister Merciful and Brother Patience of the Valle Crucis order!”

Behind The Ref a giant screen slid down, showing images of the two robed and hooded fighters putting Lysander through a grueling routine. Fists and feet slammed into leather bags, pads, and baulks of timber. Shards of concrete and ice flew as jarring impacts took their toll.

“I really think he’s ready to take it to Lord Blaire tonight.” said the Sister, appearing against a frozen image of Jaegenn fly-kicking a plank in half. “The last few weeks leading up to this moment have been tough, but that was our job.”

“But Sister Merciful, Lysander didn’t even make it through to the final round last game. Has he really picked up his performance to a level where he can beat Simeon Blaire?”

“That last round was very weapons-intensive, Dave.” rumbled the hugely muscled Brother Patience “Unfortunately the focus of our training has been on hand-to hand work, and that throwing axe from Duke Gideon wasn’t something anyone could have prepared for. The inertial spin motors in it almost made it a fired projectile, and the Jaegenn lawyers still have that under review.”

Suddenly a horn sounded, and The Ref dropped down a few meters, all the better to cover the assembled Lords with its six plasma cannons. Anyone moving from their starting positions now would face disqualification at the end of their barrels.

Down below the aristocracy of Elysium were arrayed around the walls of the great circular temple, throwing back last drinks, flexing and stretching muscles, smiling for the cameras. Red lights underneath The Ref flashed to orange.

From across the floor Jaegenn smiled at Simeon Blaire, a wolf’s grin as he cracked his knuckles. Blaire returned his mocking gaze with cold, blank eyes.

Then the lights went green, and hell erupted all around them.

“Round One is underway!” crowed Dave Levine, his sportscoat flashing green strobes. “One kill each, and half of our Lords will be out of the fight!”

Simeon felt the hovering mechanical cherubs whip around him in a tight spiral, wrapping his floating black sash up about his waist. He came off the wall running, powering across the tiles on augmented legs like pistons, a fist cocked back to smash the smile off Lysander Jaegenn’s face.

The faces and finery of the other Lords became a far-away blur, a tunnel spiraling in toward his enemy’s grin.

He ducked under a swinging kick from his left, slid past a pair of combatants clawing at each others throats. Lysander was coming at him with equal speed and ferocity, and when they collided one would surely be smashed to bloody pulp...

It was just a blur of white and black when it happened, a slim figure cartwheeling through the fray, flipping off its hands to piledrive both feet into Jaegenn’s face. Single-minded, focused on his prey, the young Lord couldn’t dodge in time. But he rolled with the impact, absorbing the bone-shattering force with one shoulder, narrowly avoiding a broken neck. The pair tumbled and slid across the marble floor, and it was all that Simeon could do to avoid becoming part of the pile-up.

His feet skidded out wide in a pool of blood, and he stopped short, his eyes slitted.

*There was a sound behind him.*

Blaire swung a straight-armed blow to his left, still staring straight ahead.

It felled Duke Gideon dead in his tracks.

Blaire’s elbow met its target with a wet popping sound, and the Duke’s nose spread out across his face in a spume of blood. His hands faltered and twitched, reaching out to throttle the young Lord. And a trickle of blood dripped from his nose., his eyes rolled back in his head...

A piece of cartilage had stabbed up into the Duke’s brain, killing him instantly.

He toppled over, his lips pulled back tight from his blackened teeth as the crowd went wild, their cheers reaching the spiretop from all the way down in the streets.

For Blaire the first round was over.

Blinking red lights flashed from the skull-faced cherubs at his hip as he raised his hands in the air, a reluctant victory wave for the threedeeocams.

Lysander and his assailant had both rolled to their feet, and now Simeon could make out her identity.

It was Leynna, and bloodlust burned in her eyes as she put up her fists.

The scion of MS Biomed had muscles like steel cords under her perfect alabaster skin, and packed a punch that could stop a tank. But Jaegenn had the fortitude of a battle-mekan and skin to match, and his trainers from the Valle Crucis had been very thorough. Although great black and purple bruises marked his injured shoulder and he was clearly favoring his right hand he came on hard, swinging a haymaker punch. It

would have split Leynna's head open like a melon if some poor unfortunate soul hadn't gotten in its way.

This time it wasn't an assailant sneaking up for a king hit, as Gideon had tried on Blaire. The flying body of Count Nikolai Howerd connected with Lysander's crippling blow because he had been *thrown*, tossed across the hall one-handed by the deceptively powerful Ariadne Choseem.

The bionic-armed dowager cursed as her enemy met Jaegenn's fist in midair, knowing that the kill was his.

The blow struck the luckless Nikolai square in the chest, staving in his ribs, shattering his sternum and ripping through the soft organs beneath. The look on his face as he died was one of horrified surprise, as his retinal inserts showed him the threedeeo coverage in slow-mo, the blood and bone chips erupting from his torso around Lysander's pistoning arm.

The dead weight of Count Howerd's body dragged Lysander to the ground, red strobes reflecting from the gore as he was pulled from the fight. Leynna looked down at him smugly, secure in the knowledge that he was powerless now. The Ref's floating plasma cannons prevented him from finishing his business with her, at least until the next round.

"That's a brutal takedown by Jaegenn!" howled Dave Levine, his coat red with projected gore. "I don't think that the Count is getting up from that one!"

Leynna had already turned on her heel, leaping toward Ariadne Choseem. She fainted left, and Ariadne ducked out of her reach - right into a low sweeping kick which knocked her from her feet. Leynna's hands clamped down on her head before she could hit the ground, and with a swift twist she broke her neck.

Valkyria cheered, pumping a scarred fist in the air.

"Done like a pro, miss Mendelev-Singh!" she shouted, while the slow-mo zoomed in on Lady Choseem's slack features.

Red strobes were blinking all over the arena now as the brutally fast first round drew to a close. The surviving nobles smiled for the cameras, straightened their coils of samite, and wandered in groups of two or three back toward the buffet. Cocktail waiters were serving up tall iced drinks for the victorious, while the robotic Undertakers removed the trophy heads from the fallen with a whine of monomolecular saws.

"That's a textbook first round, sports fans." said Dave Levine, while the great threedeeo screen dropped down behind him again, displaying the betting odds and rankings.

"Well, nobody ever thought that Simeon was going out in the small figures." replied Valkyria, her smile perfect and blinding. "The favorites are all through except Duke Gideon and Lord Xiang - cut down by a brilliant roundhouse kick from Lady Elisha Dawes."

“The bets are all in now, and those punters who took the long shot on young Blaire to dive must be crying into their beers.” said Dave. “Of course there’s going to be a short break now while the contestants relax and have a little refreshment. But now – a word from our sponsor, the ever-popular Omnivasive Threedeeo Network! Remember folks, subscribe today for three hundred channels of shopping, sports and adult entertainment, and we’ll throw in a year’s connection to the news network for free!”

“That’s right Dave, what a deal!” enthused Valkyria “And when we return, we’ll be talking to the recently deceased – the new batch of clones who replace the valiant fallen! I think we can expect some choice words from Duke Gideon about his failed power play here in the first round!”

All across the city threedeeo screens faded out, replaced with the eye-and-pyramid logo of Omnivasive. Tote windows slammed open and betting slips were exchanged for money. Folks on the streets who had taken time off from their civil disobedience to watch the game got back to looting and cop-hunting. Thousands more tuned out and reached for cans of beer.

But it wasn’t the usual advertising grind which replaced the floating red logo. It was the scarred face of Octavio Ascher, perched atop a computer-generated body dressed in an immaculate black tuxedo.

A blast of noise issued from every threedeeo set, screaming resonance which set millions of teeth on edge. Strobes flashed behind the silhouette of the Direktor, creating a wash of sensory overload. Those unfortunates accessing the game through total immersion rigs were treated to the stench and chill of a mortuary freezer.

“Now that I have your attention” chuckled Mr Ascher, his ravaged face splitting in a gargoyle grin “I have a special announcement to make. First, I guess I have to apologize to all you folks who have bets on this game. What you are about to hear could very well alter the outcome.” The camera zoomed in on the scarred visage of the Direktor, his blazing dark eyes hypnotizing. “But I assure you all, it’s even worse news for the poor Lords and Ladies who have just been ...eliminated. Let’s hear a few words from old Duke Gideon, shall we?”

The image blurred and shifted, showing a bubbling green soup. Scraps of pink and red flesh floated in the noisome broth, and the VR viewers smelled the unmistakable stench of putrescence.

“What’s that, your Grace? Not feeling so good, eh?” laughed Mr Ascher, as the camera zoomed out. “Well, viewers, it seems that the Duke has very little to say for himself. I’m afraid that all of his first-round loser friends are feeling much the same!”

A row of force-growth tanks filled the screen, each one filled with the same swirling mixture of acid and dissolving meat. Each one was labeled with a small brass plaque, recording the name of its late inhabitant.

“That’s right folks – we’ve decided to up the stakes of the game tonight. I

personally guarantee that this is the very last round which will ever be played. Because the slime you see before you here is all that remains of the precious clone bodies of your Lords - *and only one of them will walk out of the arena alive*. That man will be Lord Simeon Blaire, your Emperor!”

The picture jumped again, back to the manic face of Direktor Ascher.

“You might have been watching a few years ago when I tried to end this foolishness myself. You might even recall what happened to me then, and how the execrable Lord Lancaster refused to give me back my body. If you do, you’ll know why I have had to intervene. This city is collapsing around us, and you, my loyal viewers are paying the price for an obsolete machine’s outdated policy. When our new ruler is crowned, the machine will work for us! For all of us, pureborn and mutant, reclamationist and burbster and subcitizen alike!”

All across the city shocked silence unrolled, as rioters lowered their weapons, cops poked their heads out from behind barricades, looters paused in their pillaging. The face of Octavio Ascher stared down at them, immense and pale, hashed with static.

“This is no publicity stunt, and it’s by no means an idle threat. Only Simeon Blaire will leave the Jaegenn spire alive – I have total faith in his abilities. But make no mistake, even if he dies, *someone* will lead us forward, from tomorrow, to the future! For the inheritance of humanity!”

Dave Levine was for once at a loss for words. The face of his boss faded from the great drop-screen behind him, and the pulsing graphics for round two replaced them. Surely it was just a stunt by the advertising gurus of Omnivasive. Surely, though, not even those callous misanthropes would pour oil on the fire tonight, when the whole city was in upheaval ...

A priority message flickered across his retina-screens, a little personal incentive from upper management.

Direktor Ascher had shunted the first four digits of a special code into Uncle Dave’s bio-onboard array, the system which allowed him to receive images through his eyes, through all his senses, and upload them into the network.

If the final number came through, the wires wrapped around his tender cerebellum would blaze with electricity for a second and then blink out, leaving him a brain-fried vegetable.

Ashen-faced, he motioned to the camera crews, accessed the control routines of The Ref.

“Play on.” he whispered.

## Ω

Eddie Tsien was going home.

The belt hung above him, a great shiny blue torus of plastic blotting out the sky, its waxy surface scarred and daubed with graffiti. The kids who had dared the climb up the rusting support towers and along the humming tight hawsers had scrawled their names, their gang colors and their political slogans across the underside of the lowest habitation ring, earning themselves the adulation of their peers and a kind of second-rate immortality. None of them would have got this far tonight.

Tsien had watched the city burn as he leaped from rooftop to rooftop, a shadow cloaked in steam and smoke. His trained eye took in the barricades, the riots, the Blaire zealots thronging the streets. That part of him which was still a servant of the law despaired at the violence and dissolution which had erupted out of the dark places of the city, and he knew that *this* was the disease he had fought against every hour of every shift he had worked.

He'd tried to explain to his section chiefs and sub-commissars that Cyben alone weren't enough to hold Elysium together, that a lawman had to live with the people he served, and that the half-machine soldiers were hated, feared - and useless.

The sad fact was that a cop was always outnumbered, and that nobody cared if a Cyben was torn to shreds.

Put those two facts together and you got tonight.

He had seen the Cyben out of control, their minders shot to pieces, their empty minds too slow to react when a thousand furious subcitizens came at them with hammers and axes. And he'd noticed that nobody hesitated to cut down a living officer; their uniform was the same as the one worn by those brutal walking corpses.

The Subcity was a vast and sickly blister, and Simeon Blaire had lanced it open, spilling poison through the streets.

What Tsien knew, but the rioters and royalists didn't, as that the hated Cyben were only the first line of defense. The second line was nothing short of genocide, mechanized warfare systems built in the days of the great apocalypse to repel whole armies. The crowds would be reduced to an oily stain. Most of them - drunk of easy victory and idealism - were probably past caring.

On Reclamation Day the machine had chosen to hold back its most devastating weapons, because the invaders were only taking control of dead zones, places where its power had faded away centuries ago. This time the riots were spreading higher and higher, through strata which still pulsed with living machinery, through areas where precious banks of wetsystem tissue studded the dome skin like sores.

And now this.

Tsien stood atop one of the tapering gridwork spires which supported the Bimburb Belt, looking down on the fires below, tiny sparks and flares against a backdrop of twisted metal. He didn't have to see the floating screens of the Omnivasive zeppelins, or the stark projected images which were flung up over Elysium's towers.

The broadcast of Mr Ascher's special announcement came in direct, arriving in his cyborged brain without entering through his eyes.

It was, to his mind, the final nail in the Subcity's coffin.

With the Lords dead, with the great genetic experiment compromised Kronos would hold nothing back. It knew no emotion, but when it cleansed the city ready to start its program anew it would look like the rage of gods.

The aristocracy, dead. Lancaster Dead. And Blaire as Emperor?

Tsien knew the purpose of the Aristocratic gene-line, and the power a true Emperor of Elysium would wield. Surely the machine would not let that arrogant, foolish puppet control it?

And if it did, how would Tsien regain his humanity?

Things would have to be managed. A thing like Mr Ascher, a creature which embraced the disgusting debasement which Tsien had been subjected to, could never be allowed to rule, even by proxy. And for all his martial skill, Blaire was weak. Tsien had almost destroyed him once already, and then when his mind was unfocused, still reeling from enslavement...

If Blaire thought he could get through the Labyrinth of the Trials, then Edward Tsien thought he had a pretty damn good chance as well. After all, he could only die trying – after which none of this would be his problem.

It was hard to have the mind of a career cop, especially one of the street-beating lower ranks. Despite that fact that the Div. were being ground up and spit out by the citizens they were sworn to protect, and despite the fact that most of them were cheap, mindless reanimated corpses, Tsien still felt the weight of responsibility, and of duty. How easily it dovetailed with his own personal desires.

There was NO WAY he would let the city he had lied and killed and bled for be ruled by a little shit like Blaire.

The clouds parted for a second, great ragged oriflammes of pollution carved up by the aerals and towers of Elysium. High above him loomed the final spire, the nexus of the machine. The taut wire of the 'lev was rimed with dirty frost, fading up into the haze.

That was where he would have to go.

But for now, home was much closer.

The Belt was on lockdown tonight; a repository for the impure humans which Kronos needed to keep its experiment running. All the functionaries, technicians and political go-betweens who ran the Aristocracy, and which made their lives of idleness and slaughter possible. It was like a televisual vision of 1950s suburbia in a pressure cooker, and Tsien hated it with a passion. But his wife and kids were born to it, and he knew that they wouldn't last ten seconds down in the Subcity.

Tsien's family situation was strange, but probably no stranger than that of any

patrolman in the last few centuries. His marriage had lasted as long as it had mainly because of his long hours, which rarely overlapped with those of his wife, an accountant for Valchek Engineering. It was a kind of balance of happy isolation, perpetuated for the sake of the kids, and for the sake of a crippling mortgage.

Deep sectors of memory which couldn't be overwritten carried the images of his son and daughter, both of whom had been extensively gene-written to elevate their potential; destined to follow their mother into the world of high finance. Both had been away at a painfully expensive private academy for the last four years, being neuro-indoctrinated into their ordained professions. Neither Edward or his wife had wanted them to end up as cops.

He could vaguely recall the early days of their marriage, when she had been excited by the concept of having a lawman for a husband. Tsien's in-laws had hated him with a vengeance, and probably prayed for him to die in the line of duty every night until they themselves ran out of lifetime.

Tonight he felt in his augmented bones that they'd be getting their wish, and he wanted to see his family one last time.

With the lockdown in effect the only approach to the belt was heavily defended; after all, the people inside were far more valuable to Elysian society than the rioting subcitizens in the city below.

Missile platform mekan swarmed around the triple torus of pale blue polyprop, scanning for any aerial intruders. It would be terminally unwise to be caught in the open when they unleashed their payload of high explosives.

Which left the option of least subtlety – kicking in the front door.

Tsien's cybernetic eyes zoomed in on the great iron gates with their cyclopean hydraulic pillars, twin slabs of solid metal even *he* couldn't hope to shift.

Automatic rotary cannons commanded a killing-zone across the concrete ramp which fed the transdome highway into the belt, while tire-damage spikes and mines glittered across the pale asphalt in the glare of searchlights. A handful of outdated reserve Cyben milled around before the gates while their human minder slouched against a massive cogwheel, his armor suit steaming as its thermodump vanes glowed like the lit end of his cigarette.

Tsien knew the exo-armor all too well – he had been forced to use one of the suffocating, ill-fitting pieces of ancient military ordnance more than once. Leftovers from before the apocalyptic war, the suits ran on their own internal micro-fission pile, making them hot, dangerous and prone to malfunction. The automated systems which kept them from falling apart were in bad repair, and the Division only maintained about twenty of them.

He would probably have little problem besting the Cyben's herder, and then it would be a simple matter of using his own override codes to shut down those walking

corpses. The tough part would be getting through the barrage of fire which the automated systems would lay down as he charged.

What he needed was a serious diversion... and as if on cue one came rolling down the access road toward the belt.

It was a Celebrant platoon, six flak-armored Undertakers, two exo-suited Pallbearers carrying their traditional heavy flamethrowers, and a half-track hearse, its scarred turret studded with innumerable cannons.

The sigil of the hourglass blazoned across the Celebrant's vehicles and armor had the desired effect; Tsien saw the Cyben patrol commander leap to attention, scowling furiously, his cigarette falling to the concrete forgotten. This was a serious little task-force; the kind that the Grief Division only called up when someone very heavily armed wanted to steal a few more years of life.

Tsien turned his augmented optics toward the topmost level of the belt, where the towers and turrets of mansion houses punctured the slick blue plastic of the artificial sky. Highest amongst them, built as tall as the machine would allow in defiance of the aristocratic spires above, was a stocky cylindrical structure topped with a pale white dome. From above, it was painted with an immense eyeball, staring eternally up toward the poisonous clouds.

It was the home of Direktor Octavio Ascher, two hundred palatial rooms a severed head could never use or appreciate, and if the Celebrants were headed up there, a lot of tonight's madness suddenly made a lot more sense.

Reasons aside, they would have to open the gates for them, and that was all the chance Edward Tsien needed.

## Ω

This time it wasn't a fall. This time it was a *flight*, a soaring elation that rose with him, his mind a projectile arrowing up between walls of flickering blue light, twisting through curves with the power and control of a fighter plane.

This time the hiss and roar and scalding painful heat of the machine faded from behind him as he blasted through barriers of invisible ice, coral-trees of blown glass.

*Through fear, and pain, and delusion made solid, through feeling itself and understanding ...*

Zone Doubt had become a trace in the Wetsystems, his mekan code stripped away in the slipstream of his flight. He was *himself* again, and he silently screamed his thanks to B-Zerk for setting him free.

One upon a time he'd been a fourteen-year-old boy in the dirty heat of the Subcity tubeways. But that had been before his fall. What he was *now* was the echo of what the machine had kept of him, a ragged thing spiraling ever upward, out of control.

The jagged reefs of the Wetsystems were spread out below him like a continent of living fluorescence.

He could see from his dizzying vantage the shattered connections to the Valley View Mall. And there, and there, the tiny subsection which surrounded his friends. The banks of switches would activate the car dealership's firefighting systems, giving 'Zerk and his little gang a fighting chance.

While coherency lasted, while his tenuous connection to the world of flesh lasted, he moved it with a thought.

Zone tore through the Wetsystems like an Electromagus' trace, a ghost flitting through veils of light and shadow. He couldn't comprehend most of the complex knots and snarls of code which surrounded him, but he could feel the pressure of a million upon a million minds entrapped just like his had been; floating solitary in isolation, chained to machinery, or welded and stitched together around vast power sources – Assembler terminals shaping waste matter into food and water, sub-totalities of Kronos itself.

In all of them Zone felt a hunger all too familiar. Those which could see out into the world of the living whispered to the ones which could not. Those who could remember spoke to those which were little more than smudges and rags of consciousness racked across wires.

Their envy curdled the virtual space around him, here in this place of tormented thought and need. So many of them wanted to follow him into death, to fade out as he was even now fading. But millions more wanted to live again, if only to have some kind of revenge.

Zone felt himself fraying at the edges as wisps of his being peeled away, dissipating like smoke amid the jealous souls of the wetsystem. He was rising up toward the blinding radiant wheels of Kronos now, the machineries which had torn him apart in what seemed like another life, another aeon. The razortoothed cogs and escapements, the eyes of code and light sleeted through him as he ascended, shivering and fragile as glass to his touch.

Whatever he was now (a fading comet-core of thought, shedding years like a contrail behind him) the machine couldn't touch him. He fancied he heard a keening howl of outrage at the edge of his perception.

And then the light was behind him, with only a dome of black sky above. It pressed in on him like the void of intergalactic space, a dense and seething darkness filled with equal measures of promise and dread.

Down below, Zone could see the spinning mandalas of Kronos, the killing-jar of the Wetsystems like a tiny phantasmal star, pulling away as he accelerated into the emptiness.

He could have felt despair at that moment, confronted with what seemed an eternal

darkness. But to a soul trapped for so long in a prison cage of metal, it looked like a great adventure to find out what was on the other side ...

And with that thought Zone Doubt became a filament of light, a mote, a point, a singularity, and broke through to the other side in a thunderclap of velvet silence.

While the Worm, hungry as ever, gnashed its innumerable black teeth in frustration. This place, the interstice between life and death was its hunting ground, and the souls released from the maw of Kronos were the sweetest prey of all. If only that one had despaired at the darkness, frozen even for a second in fear or indecision ...

Well, now it was inside the last city as well as out here. Never had one of its avatars been in a position to feed so well. All it needed was an invitation, one claw over the threshold, and then it would gorge on torment like never before.

## Ω

CeeAn slammed the gearshift into sixth as her Ashishim battlewagon crested the top of a steep switchback, pressing down hard on the accelerator while the fat sticky tires smoked and howled.

Beside her Leighton kept his eyes clamped shut, his hands working a black plastic rosary. The tiny crucifix attached to the string of beads was a miniaturized microphone, funneling the prayers of the faithful into a vast switchboard staffed by Nuns of the Ministorum Repentia. Leighton Cressmeyer had been a devout papist for several years, but he didn't think his offertory donations had been anywhere near high enough to earn him 'divine intervention' tonight, when the forces of the Valle Crucis were probably stretched to breaking point just keeping the Aryans and Celestials out of the Holy See.

CeeAn could see the valley view now, a fat slug of composite paneling and diamondglass tacked to the curve of a dome a mile or two ahead. The road between them and their target was thronged with rioters, looters, refugees and cops in roughly equal numbers, all doing their level best to beat seven bells of shit out of each other. Several damaged Cyben were visible as open spaces in the crowd, stumping around in circles spitting sparks and flames, pummeling anything within their reach to jelly.

She throttled back; there was no way that the battlewagon could plough through that morass even if she were ruthless enough to try it. Her eyes scanned over the nightmare scene, overlays in neon green flickering across her pupils as maps and directions sprang into focus.

There. A cargo-shifter conduit, made to move vast amounts of consumables. And where it terminated, above and behind the Valley View mall, a lift platform was rising, winking red in her virtual vision.

The cargo-shifter system was suicide to navigate when it was actually running – a cross between the New York subways and a railgun which could launch a nuclear

submarine, its vast tunnels ramified through Elysium like arteries, blasting house-sized metal slugs of vacuum-sealed produce up and down the dome cluster. Like that lift icon, the whole cargo web was picked out in neon red.

Stress sensors in the superstructure of the Valley View were flashing red too – the whole building was coming apart, in danger of shearing off the dome and plowing down into the black ocean. CeeAn could almost hear the creak and groan of tortured girders, the snap of hawser cables and guywires in her head.

Then Zone Doubt's last act on earth came through, and precious voltage flooded into the old Consolidated dealership, sparking the lights and the firefighting systems and the embedded wireless LAN behind its walls.

An electronic shout went out over the ether; the distress signal of an Ashishim operative in mortal danger.

*He was alive. Why the hell had she ever doubted?*

"Hold onto something, Leighton." said CeeAn through gritted teeth. "We're about to take a detour."

The Battlewagon was attracting fire from the crowd ahead as they ripped toward it; cops blasting off rockets and grenades which spiraled past trailing sparks and smoke; rioters mistaking them for Compliance reinforcements firing a motley assortment of weapons and dropping heavy objects from flyovers and towers lining the road.

The exhausts belched three-foot tongues of purple flame as CeeAn slewed around falling fridges, televisions, bricks, and an antique Victorian claw-foot bathtub, still full of soapy water. The green lines in her eyes pulsed and shifted, pinpointing the composite-fiber wall of a roadside warehouse.

There was a very good chance that the cargo-shifter system was shut down tonight. Enough of a chance to try *this*.

The front wheels pitched into a sharp turn, driven by cybernetically enhanced hands gripping the steering wheel like hydraulic clamps. Blurring, slow motion, the rest of the battlewagon swung around on its axis, hammering into the bulky form of a charging Cyben with one immense rear wheel. The resurrected cop flew back, a ragdoll skinned in plastic. It slammed bonelessly into a scrum of Subcitizens who fell on it with metal pipes and spiked bats. Still the wagon was sliding across the slick surface of the road, billows of black smoke peeling from its tortured tires. CeeAn flipped open a hatch on the steering wheel, revealing a shiny chrome-skull button.

A microsecond later Leighton felt his eyeballs try to burst out the back of his brain.

The charge of wet nitrous oxide torqued the chassis back onto its sprung haunches, and the massive rear wheels gripped, screamed, and launched the battlewagon toward the wall as if it had been fired from an aircraft carrier's steam catapult.

Intense G-forces crushed CeeAn in a great incorporeal fist, but her augmented hands and arms were steady on the wheel, her aim unerring. The flimsy composite panel

exploded in a shower of chips and shards as the battlewagon hit, and then they were airborne, flying in an almost flat trajectory between stacked containers and cranes, hooks and chains swinging wild in their wake.

The touchdown was like a full-body punch, a bone-jarring impact which almost pushed the wagon's shock absorbers through their mountings. But still they ploughed on, dodging robotic forklifts in a burst of flashing orange warning lights, massive steel tines flickering past inches away.

Leighton missed it all – his eyes squeezed shut so tight it hurt.

So he couldn't see that the doors into the transit tunnel were closed.

CeeAn had no way to stop in time – even if she hauled on the brakes with all her cybernetic strength they would still end up as a bloody, smoking dent in the yard-thick steel. She would have to rely on technology; on a little device she clearly remembered telling Abdulafia would never work in a combat situation.

With one hand still clamped to the wheel in what was quite possibly a death-grip, CeeAn flipped the top of the wagon's eight-ball gearstick open, revealing yet another little chrome skull.

This time there was no blast of acceleration, no plumes of fire from the red-hot exhausts. Instead the antique hood ornament of the battlewagon blasted from its mountings on a tail of white flame. The tiny silver rocket streaked ahead of the racing wagon, piercing the great cargo doors like a flying syringe. Blaring modem noise filled CeeAn's head as the projectile began its work. A quarter mile out, and the key and lock icon in her virtual vision was still strobing red. Her foot was steady on the accelerator; they would need to be going pretty fast when they entered the tunnel.

Halfway there, and the icon flashed orange, then green.

With a vast exhalation of steam the cargo doors began to crack open.

Two hundred feet to go, and she saw that the ancient machinery couldn't possibly shift that much armored steel in time.

"Leighton...can you hear me?" she yelled, grabbing the little accountant's shoulder. "When I say so, I want you to lean over to this side!"

There was no way to tell if he could hear, or even if he was listening. Leighton was muttering prayers with his eyes closed, the rosary pressed to his lips. With ninety feet to go, CeeAn positioned her thumb over the nitro button again, and screamed...

"NOW!"

The engine leaped in its mountings, a single thump like a spasming heart. And the immense torque unleashed made the battlewagon twist in the air, throwing its hapless passengers to the left. Even CeeAn had to close her eyes as the careening vehicle flashed through the cargo gate on two wheels, and went flying out into the tunnel, out into blue radiance and blackness, sailing over the wide strip of electrified maglev track in the middle of the tunnel and touching down halfway up the curving wall.

At once they went into a tire-shredding spin, with CeeAn cursing and wrestling with the wheel. One touch of metal to that glowing blue strip and they would be crispy-fried in their safety belts.

In the end, it was close. Probably *too* close, but she managed to wrench the battlegon around, pointing in the right direction, and without killing them both. The smoking vehicle sat there shuddering, the tips of its exhaust pipes glowing cherry red in the blue-tinted gloom.

Slowly, Leighton prized his eyelids open, his hands patting his chest and stomach, running over his face to make sure everything was still there.

"Thanks for the lift, miss," he wavered, his pupils the size of saucers. "But do you think I can just get off here?"

## Ω

The core drone which had once bored into Lieutenant Tsien's spine was of a finer breed than its mark-three siblings. A new design, pushed through the endless red tape of Kronos's laboratories by the artifice of the Electromagi, crafted to spring a living trap on the Worm.

Now that that otherdimensional entity was safely locked down in Technician Nyl's sanctorum the drone was free, a loose end.

Nyl had been certain that his right hand, the redoubtable Abdulafia, would erase the one little piece of evidence which betrayed his subterfuge. Certainly, there was no way that he could miss the Mark-Four Cyben, and no way that his carefully nurtured hatred would fail to single it out for extermination. Nyl knew that Reclamation Day was replayed behind those cloned eyes every time Abdulafia slept. Nyl himself made sure that the nightmares came.

But against all hope, the drone had survived. It was not only tougher than the similar mekan which enslaved regular Cyben, it was more cunning, faster... and most importantly, it could make its own decisions.

When the signal for general extermination had gone out, motivating its cousins to swarm, it had held back, watching and waiting. It had seen what happened to all of them at the hands of the Ashishi and his allies. Of course, it felt no remorse for the core drones which had been blown apart, burned and crushed in the melee. But it could approximate fear, and fear of a similar fate made it wary.

When the little band set off through the smoke and flames of the collapsing building the MK4 scuttled after them on ten drill-tipped mechanical legs, a soot-stained chrome spider shadowing them, its clattering progress masked by the groans and creaks of the building's death throes.

It was there when Abdulafia was cut down by some immaterial force, and it watched

as the rogue PDR mekan gave up its power cels to revive him. Only the fat one, the thin one and the child were left, with the Ashishim *Dervashi* still weak, stripped of the chemicals which gave him his power. Its camera eyes focused and shifted, probing the defenses of its prey with x-rays and magnetic scanners.

How pleasingly symmetrical it would be to drill into the mind of the one who had caused it such discomfort! But screeds of code loaded into the drone related the uncanny powers of the Ashishim, and it knew that to attempt melding with Abdulafia would be suicide.

Even if it succeeded, the Electromagi would rape it with metavirals and databores in seconds.

No doubt the clone warrior would die as well, but he was easily replaced. The MK4 was the only one of its kind, and it had no desire to become extinct. If it could prove its worth in this slippery situation it would no doubt become the prototype for a new race of Cyben; a strain which would not necessarily obey its creators.

There was a whole world out there for a mekan with ambition...

So, vexing as it was, the weakened Ashishi would have to wait. The drone pivoted its camera cluster slightly, zooming in on Hassan.

The big human was knotted up with anger, his mechanical hand clenching and unclenching spasmodically. While he was undoubtedly the strongest, it wasn't the drone's purpose to fight. It wanted to escape from this place, and it wanted to remain unseen. That oversized frame wouldn't slip easily through the Subcity crowds, or be easy to subdue in the MK4's weakened state.

The smaller adult was more promising, but a preliminary scan found that his body bristled with electronic countermeasures; anti-sequestration nanonics, contact breakers and secure memory cels. While the drone could tear him apart bodily he would be nigh on impossible to enslave. Indeed, as a noviate Electromagus viral sequestration was one of the first things Kaito had defended himself against. His mind was like an electronic fortress, and the drone simply didn't have the reserves of power left to storm it.

Something, perhaps, to consider for the future; a challenge to test itself against.

Which left the little machine with only one choice.

The adolescent was small, wiry and tough. His mind was hazed with grief, pain, and fatigue. No electronic defenses stood between the Drone's drills and his tender brain tissue. And most importantly, he'd be able to pass through the city unseen, another beggar child, an unwanted vagrant of the lowest economic caste.

With a clatter of pointed drill-tip claws the drone lined itself up on the back of B-Zerk's head, and coiled itself to leap.

Ω

*It was close it was so close it was so close ...*

*Nyl's hand had swelled to three times its normal size, and when it connected with the side of Zhe's unarmored head it felt like a concrete wrecking ball, lifting him from his feet and powering him across the treadplate as if he were no more than a broken doll.*

*"Such a conscientious little slave!" crooned Nyl, stalking toward him, nine feet of towering menace robed in flickering black. "There is nothing in those memories that can stop me!"*

*Zhe spat out a mouthful of yellow blood, and rose to his knees.*

*"Don't be a fool, Nyl." he rasped "That disease is in you. It's taken you over!"*

*Nyl reached back to slap at him again with his immense claw, but stopped at the top of his swing.*

*"Am I a Technician mated to a Slavesystem controlling an unknown virus, or a virus with the body of a hybrid Technician?" he mused, looking up at the shifting, insectile surface of that great thorny hand.*

*It came down hard, swatting Zhe to the floor again with a sickening crunch.*

*"With this kind of power, I don't care what you call me!" he crowed, exultant. "Soon this entire planet will become part of me as well. More neurostrata! More minds caged within! It all extends the domain of my godhood!"*

*Zhe groaned, trying once again to move. It was taking nearly all of his will just to keep his body together, valency bond generators working in overload.*

*Suddenly Nyl stopped, his head held up as though scenting the air. The red glow of the memory cubes underlit his features, making him seem even more demonic.*

*"My thralls approach." he whispered, seeming to cave in upon himself. Within an instant Zhe was looking at the figure of a robed magus - undoubtedly human, his blank and blazing white eyes all that hinted at the creature within.*

*"It's time to get to work." said Nyl, running his hands through his new mane of silvery grey hair. "Remember to keep silent when they arrive, Zhe. We wouldn't want any accidents to befall you."*

*The light upshifted suddenly, from crimson to yellow to blinding white.*

*And as he lost consciousness, Zhe tried desperately to hang on to the thread which was leading him further into the labyrinth ...ever closer to where this madness began.*

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

"They're through the satellite shield! They're through the shield! - Four missiles are past the gridline and are closing on our location..."

**THIS IS NOT A DRILL - ALL INVESTORS WITH GRADE NINE CLEARANCE OR ABOVE PROCEED TO THE CRYONICS LEVEL IMMEDIATELY - REPEAT, TACTICAL COMMAND, INVESTORS OF GRADE NINE AND ABOVE REPORT TO CRYONICS IN SUB-BASEMENT ONE-OH-THREE IMMEDIATELY**

"Interceptors have been launched, General. Those Antiseparatists can't have scramblers in their warbirds hot enough to get through to the Terminus. I'm sure we can stand down the Cryonics techs."

"General, this is Space-Lev tower control! The Counterweight's been hit with a gamma burst! Sweet Jesus, they're all dead! And interceptor control..."

**PLEASE REMAIN CALM. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. INCOMING NUCLEAR PROJECTILES HAVE BEEN DETECTED. WORKERS AND MILITARY PERSONNEL ARE ADVISED TO REPORT TO THEIR DESIGNATED SHELTERS. INVESTORS OF CLEARANCE GRADE NINE AND ABOVE PLEASE REPORT TO THE CRYONICS LEVEL FOR SAFETY PROCESSING**

"Ceptor twenty-five has scored a direct hit! We've got three still hot, 'Ceptors closing ...Oh God, they're getting jammed! We have countermeasures live! General, sequester the machine! We have to neutralize that ice!"

"Kronos, this is General Nathan Merrick, access number three-nine-six-two-alpha-hotel-bravo. Generate Executive command..."

(Explosions, screaming. Recording stops for three point six minutes)

"uuuuhhh - Corporal Dean? MacAllister? Oh, please...save us! You have to hear this...you have to do something...so much blood! Why does it always come down to killing, dammit...(coughing) stupid, stupid...Jesus, Dean! Oh, Christ, he's dead! Stupid monkey bastards! Why are we so...(coughing) So foolish. Such a waste. Please - If anyone can hear this, you have to save us! We're trapped down here! I...I hope those Anti-Sep bastards are happy! Shouldn't...shouldn't get their bloody hands on this place. Don't deserve it. WE don't deserve it (coughing, choking). One day. Oneday maybe. Maybeone.... (labored breathing, choking) Dumb bastards. Wh..."

(Silence - Two minutes thirty seconds)

"This is Kronos, General. Executive Order Accepted. Calculating Parameters for Task 'Save Us'. Projected run time...nine thousand, two hundred and forty two years, six days, three hours. Please input abort code to cancel."

(Silence - Two minutes thirty seconds)

"Executive Order Instigated. Have a nice day."

**Final orders issued by General Nathan Merrick, Commander-in-chief, Terminus Afrika Separatist Army joint forces. Printed from Terminus Afrika's war-room black box.**

*The faith they called Manifest Dogma was true.*

*The power of the Forge had been created to renew an Earth ravaged by nuclear war, devised by Kronos during the centuries of its stewardship.*

*A nanoassembler array woven from pure energy, it was supposed to strip the planet down to raw elements and bring it back to life as a paradise. It was the task of Kronos to keep it safe until a human being worthy of its power arose to claim it.*

*Instead, it had fallen into the hands of Technician Nyl.*

*The problem was the Wetsystems themselves - another fine product created by the Biotects of House Lancaster. To control the immense complexity and force of the Forge Kronos needed near infinite processing power, and the Biotects had provided a solution.*

*After all, what was better at patterning energy than the human mind?*

*All those minds screaming for release, caught between life and death.*

*The call they had sent out to the Adversary was unmatched in human history.*

*Now Nyl exerted a little of his newfound power, drawing on the flaw in reality as the Worm writhed and raged against him.*

*The metal platform where Nyl stood began to waver and shift, as if it were surrounded by the haze of a mirage.*

*Where fueling gantries and transmitter towers had stood slim marble columns began to coalesce, draped with flowering vines. The steel beneath Nyl's feet sprouted grass, a perfect lawn dotted with tiny white blooms.*

*The Technician himself fitted right in with the scenery - a robe of white linen chased with silver wrapped around his broad shoulders. His face was that of an old man, aquiline and sharp, with a shaggy mane of silver-grey hair bound up in platinum wire.*

*From out of the wastelands to the east something was approaching, following the great scar in the earth cut by the black lightning.*

*Nyl's eyes, far better than those of any human, picked out the distinctive bulbous shape of a masslifter, painted in garish red. It was coming in fast, arrowing toward the platform where he waited.*

*"Very soon, now, Zhe." Nyl said over his shoulder to where the captive technician waited in black iron chains.*

*"Forget about your pitiful investigation, and join us. It's not like you really have a choice."*

*Zhe didn't really know what he expected to come out of the bright red masslifter; not after all he'd seen through the mind of Kaito Kayzi and his frozen brethren. Nevertheless, when the access ramp finally swung open with a belch of steam and a whine of servos, he was surprised.*

*Four figures in red robes were framed in the doorway, the green light of the*

masslifter's cabin making their faces indistinct and shadowy. One by one they stepped forward and bowed to Nyl, pressing their palms together in front of their chests. Each one wore a simple amulet of black iron, a pentagon without insignia looped onto a rough handwoven cord.

It was as the central figure moved into the light that Zhe recognized him. Despite having aged seventeen years, and despite the fact that his head was now clean-shaven and inscribed with runic tattoos, this was clearly none other than Simeon Blaire.

"Your Excellency." said the acolyte on the left, stepping out onto the newly created lawn. "May I present the Grand Illuminatus, Lord Abdulafia"

Illuminatus my ass, though Zhe.

And Abdulafia? Well, they were born from the same genetic code. But the real Dervashi warrior slept frozen in cryo-stasis above them, his mind penetrated by Zhe's sequestration tools.

The Technician had no doubt that this was the Aristo Lord himself. There was the little blister of metal at the base of his skull, where Zhe had seen Jaqub Hassan put the needle in. And aside from the physically obvious, there was something else about him that made the Technician sure he was no Dervashi - a certain arrogance, a pinched impatient scowl which Abdulafia 330 had never worn.

"Welcome, welcome!" beamed Nyl, clasping Blaire's hands in his own. "It is so good to finally be here, on the very edge of our victory, is it not?"

"It certainly is." said the red-robed Blaire warmly "and we have some excellent news for you."

"As have I." said Nyl, turning to walk across the platform with Blaire at his side. The other two acolytes followed at a respectful distance, hands concealed in the voluminous sleeves of their robes.

There was something about Blaire's voice which Zhe couldn't place ...something he had heard before...

"We have come a long way in the last seventeen years, master Zeon." said Blaire, resting a hand on the Technician's shoulder. "But I suspect you have gone even further."

They were standing above the bound body of Zhe now, looking down on his expressionless alien face. Nyl feigned distaste as he prodded the chain-wrapped bundle with one boot.

"Yes, my friend. This thing had to be fished up from beyond the stars to give me control of the Forge. There is always dirty work to do, even in the most exalted plans."

Blaire smiled, a predatory grin which Zhe recognized from his threedeeo archives. It was the face of the living dead...

"Remember when you were just plain Abdulafia 330?" asked Nyl, "And it was I who carried the name Illuminatus? such simple times. I almost miss running rings around

*the Division and that foolish machine Kronos."*

*Zhe saw it coming, but said nothing. It would have to serve as his revenge until he could get free of these damned energistic chains.*

*"No, creature, I don't remember." said Blaire, his voice a menacing growl. "But I know what you really are. And I think that I'd rather see the Forge in the hands of a real human being."*

*Nyl seemed to swell up as he turned, his human form sloughing away even as the Illuminatus signaled his minions to attack.*

*Streamers of dark lightning rippled out from his fingers, becoming solid as they snaked through the air. Nyl slashed at one, and another, but to no avail. They bound him like constricting serpents, growing ever tighter the more he struggled against them. The whine of the Forge filled the air, and was abruptly strangled.*

*"Not a mutated freak, or an alien from some godless dimension. This power was made for the pinnacle of the Human race, and now, I claim it!"*

*And with a hand suddenly clawed and black, the new Illuminatus ripped a chunk of Nyl's shoulder away; a bleeding lump of metal and flesh about which shadows meshed and wound. It seemed to melt into his skin, first an unsightly bulge, then a tracery of roots following his veins. Finally it was gone, subsumed into his body completely. Blaire's eyes lit up as if he'd just popped a heroic dose of the stunn.*

*But it was that other, familiar, gloating voice which echoed out over the dead city, a scream of victory and exultation.*

*"This world is mine!"*

*Zhe picked it.*

*It was the voice of Octavio Ascher.*

## Ω

He was dying. He knew the feeling all too well.

Abdulafia had shed bodies like sloughed-off skins over the years, but his memories remained inviolate. The operative augmentation crescent which nestled at the back of his neck stored his every thought and experience, keeping them safe to be transmitted in encrypted bursts down to the Fortress of Alamut, into the war-room of the Ashishim. There, in jury-rigged clone vats replacement bodies floated in nutrient solution, waiting for his dangerous occupation to catch up with him.

Sometimes, when he or one of his fellow *Dervashi* was really unlucky there'd be downtime, during which they had to manifest holographically - just like the unfortunate Miss CeeAn 187. The concept of time off for being killed was unknown to the operatives of the Ashishim.

Flesh was transient; stabbed, shot, crushed or burned all too easily. But memory was

the hard kernel of the soul, and it was stored safe and sacred.

'Afia had no illusions about his worth to the Illuminatus - his forging, training, and tempering had taken decades, until he was an assassin with few peers and no living enemies. That was what the crescent unit was made to protect - all those millions of hours of brutal experience and deadly finesse. That, and the thorny nucleus of his fabricated soul - the reason he was Zeon's right hand instead of his own man. A tangled knot of memories a century old - of Reclamation Day.

It had scarred him, and made him what he was. No amount of subtle programming and editing could erase that part of him - and Abdulafia *had* tried to cut it loose. Every time his eyes closed, whether for sleep or rejuvenation treatment the shadows deepened and lengthened, and the light grew hazy and red.

Time ceased to exist, and it was Reclamation Day again.

And again...

It was dawn in the pit, the sand underfoot stained red by the polluted sunlight. The bottom of the spillway was still a half-mile distant, but even here the shadow of Elysium dominated the sky - a towering stack of gothic buildings, studded with fire-belching smokestacks, dripping gargoyles and sheer cliffs of rusting metal.

Abdulafia could remember with painful clarity the moment he crossed the line into that cyclopean shadow - his first footstep into the mined and razor-wired no man's land which lay between his past and his future. At the time he'd been convinced that the future would be painfully short, cut off by a bullet.

He was fifteen years old; his growth still governed by glands and hormones, not stopped dead at twenty-five by stolen Genetek. A few implants ached where they had been freshly welded to the bone of his skull; a neat little cluster behind one ear allowing him access to the Ashishi datanet. Script flickered across his eyes on floating contact lenses, showing him the positions of his squadmates.

This was the moment he had lived for since he could remember being alive; the chance to prove himself to the other warriors of the Phyle, and more importantly, to himself. He was bowel-looseningly afraid that he would prove to be a coward, and run from that final confrontation - the clash of war-axes and knives, the racket of automatic fire.

But even then he'd felt the allure of battle, a sense that he was born to it, built for it.

Even the emotion-dampening programs of his inserts couldn't stop the elation and terror swirling in his mind, or stop cold sweat from beading on his forehead. He tried to focus as his tutors had taught him, breathing slow and deep, sighting through the camera reticule of his machine pistol and keeping its plastic stock tight up under his chin.

He screwed it down tight, and kept the fear in check.

Abdulafia was out on flank, sweeping a forest of steam pipes and geothermal bores

to the east of the main advance. The other Ashishim in his squad were nothing more than kids either - the youngest was thirteen, the oldest only just twenty years old. She was their patrol leader; a redoubtable dark-haired girl named Jehnna who had beaten basic training into Abdulafia.

Despite her wanton violence, her constant profanity, and her eternal disappointment with 'Afia's martial skills (or perhaps *because* of all these things) he had a major crush on her. The young revolutionary kept that secret closer to his chest than his bulletproof vest; far more than death or the enemy he feared that Jehnna would laugh in his face if she found out.

"Keep your formation loose, people!" crackled her voice through his earpiece "We're coming up on the first line of defenses. Get ready to kiss the dirt when tactical command blows that minefield."

Abdulafia knew from the mission prep briefings that they were badly outnumbered. Even if the Ashishim's shaky truce with the three other most powerful nomad tribes held, there were only forty thousand battle ready soldiers in the Phyle, and they faced more than a million of Elysium's Subcitizen soldiers - fiercely loyal to their machine lord and allied to mechanized battle systems of legendary power.

All of the warriors across the four tribes knew that this was a desperate gamble, but for all of them it was the only chance at survival. They needed water, electricity and food, the three precious currencies which Kronos jealously guarded. So much gold and achaeotech had been paid to the chieftains of the Pit that now there was no turning back. There was either victory or death ahead of them and enslavement behind them as the battle thralls of the warlords eagerly massed.

"Take cover!" screamed Jehnna through the commlink, shocking the young Abdulafia's body into action. He threw himself prone behind a jagged tooth of concrete and rebar just in time for the countdown in his optics rig to reach zero.

Then, from behind the ranging line of scouts, the Electromagi of the Ashishim brought their power to bear on the spillway minefields, and hell erupted in front of him in sheets of crackling white fire.

Elsewhere he knew the other nomad Phyles were playing their part in the battle. The Confucians were bearing down on the desalination plants on Elysium's seaward side with a fleet of rusting cargo hulks. Pan-Aryan Confederacy stormtroopers would be swarming across the dam-tops on either side of the pit, using their ancient heavy weapons and iron discipline to assault the twin barbican fortresses which squatted up against the domes there. But it was the soldiers of the Vatican and the Ashishim who would take the spillway, for here were concentrated the bulk of Kronos's machine forces, and here the crucial blow would be struck. If the nomad horde could force open the blast doors which studded the spillway then the empty lower levels of the city would be theirs.

All that stood between Abdulafia and those gates was an army of conscripts, Elysian police, and attack mekan. Just looking up the slope toward them made him swallow hard, clenching his automatic tight.

The steep concrete incline of the spillway was studded with pillboxes and bunkers, strongpoints from which the muzzles of gatling cannons and flamethrowers jutted.

As he ran with his squadmates from the searing heat and sand of the pit into the shadow of the city, Abdulafia had looked up, and up, and seen thousands of men and machines training their guns down on him, holding their fire with what seemed as much disdain as discipline.

Now all was obscured by the detonation of thousands of anti-vehicle mines, coruscating sheets of flame erupting like earthbound aurorae from the dirt.

The heat reached Abdulafia even behind the reinforced concrete block where he cowered, and the sound cut through the audio filters in his headset as though they didn't exist. With his eyes open all he could see was a seething white-out shot through with flashes of red and purple, so he tuned in to the network band to see what had caused the immense conflagration.

Just like in the battle plans (which had seemed so safe and precise to him on paper) it was the Magi at the core of the advancing Ashishim army who had brought down the fire.

Four of the redoubtable and ancient cybernetic warriors followed the advance guard, riding on the deck of an armored mining truck. Across the datanet the image of them at work buoyed up the hopes of thousands of Ashishim troopers, whether they were foot-slogging scouts or dirtbike-mounted outriders, tank crews or support technicians.

The Illuminatus stood atop the cab of the lumbering juggernaut, his arms outstretched and writhing with electricity. Iron and copper armor sheathed his hands and forearms, and from the taloned fingers of his manipulator gauntlets sprang tongues of lightning, earthing themselves against the most powerful weapon of the Ashishim.

Like the ancient Israelites wandering the desert, the phyle had carried with them their most treasured and sacred relic, a device excavated from beneath the dead city of B'har-Seloun in the radioactive north.

It was called the Chrome Ark, and among its many seemingly supernatural powers was the ability bend the machines of Kronos to its will.

The four Magi who attended the great metal obelisk worked in shifts, some lasting only a few minutes as the Illuminatus tapped its incredible power. It was their task to direct the force of the Ark against Elysium's defenses, stripping away the ranks of mines, mekan, and sentry guns which barred the path of the Ashishi army.

Such power was useless against the Warlords of the pit, whose battle thralls bore weapons no more advanced than crude firearms. But the Chrome Ark was devastating against the defenders of the spillway, and Abdulafia thrilled to see its glowing,

levitating bulk unleash hell upon the unholy machines which blocked the path of their crusade.

"Squad Grey Seven - form up!" blared the voice of Jhenna in his ear, and his training took over, pulling him to his feet and blinking the afterimages of fire from his eyes.

A trio of roughriders tore past, their mismatched and rusty motorcycles churning up roostertails of sand as they cut a swathe through the denuded minefield. Abdulafia slogged through the treacherous churned-up sand behind them, heading from cover to cover as the first pickets of the Last City began to open fire. Grey Seven were hunkered down in a shattered section of pipe, a vast throat of darkness filled with the reek of sewage. Niall, Carlito, Rex, Danai and a scowling Sergeant Jhenna.

"What took you so long, trooper? Taking a leak?" she asked, dragging him to the dirt by one armor pauldron. "Don't worry, kid, there's plenty of targets for all of us - you don't have to hang back."

Abdulafia, mortified, felt his cheeks reddening, and snapped down his helmet visor to cover his face.

"Sorry Sarge." he said, while his squadmates smirked in the gloom "I was watching the Illuminatus wield the Ark."

An explosion nearby shook the pipe, sending a shower of dust sifting down over the little squad. Tracer fire stitched lines across the dirt, while another biker squad roared by, their pillion gunners firing wildly.

"Well, the Brass have done their part." said Jhenna, "now it's our turn. I'm sure you remember the plan from all those briefings and tactical sims. We're going up and over the lines to open those blast doors."

"Yeah." sneered Niall, racking back the slide on his shotgun "Go the Expendables!"

Jhenna rounded on him, the muzzle of her micromissile cannon suddenly pressed up against his forehead.

"Speak for yourself, smartarse." said the squad leader. She chuckled as his face drained deathly pale "I'm planning on sticking around for the victory party."

She dipped the gun down and pushed Niall back on his ass in the dirt.

"If any of you want to take the easy way out, you know how to activate your neuro-uplink. And if you won't fight as hard as I expect you to, go ahead and do it now. You'll be more use to all of us inside the Ark if you're going to whinge and whine about a little bit of slaughter."

Of course, there were no takers. It was good to know that the uplink was there, an escape route if your body was blown to bleeding scraps. But they'd all been building up to his moment, and they were all young enough to believe that what waited outside amid the crossfire was glory.

Jhenna met each one of them eye to eye, even Abdulafia through his targeting visor.

And then she slammed down her own optical rig, fished a twisted joint from her grenade belt and flicked it alight.

"Well, what are you maggots waiting for?" she asked through a wreath of pungent smoke "Let's get out there and bag some kills!"

For Abdulafia the next few minutes were an echoing blur of noise and light and heat, a manic charge across a churned up no-mans-land under a hail of fire. All around him he saw shadows moving through the smoke and flames; the hulking forms of Vatican Templars and Paladins in their armored suits; flickering wraith-shapes of Ashishim cloaked in holomesh, and masses of troopers throwing themselves against the defenses of Elysium in a human wave. He saw them immolated, blasted apart, cut to pieces by crossfire. And he ran on, weaving from cover to cover, his gun like a lead weight in his hands. At any second he expected the concussive impact of a bullet, the blistering touch of a microwave beam. But none came, and he caught up with the rest of Grey Seven in the lee of a smoke-belching vent. Above them loomed a roof of steel; the outermost bulge of the city's lowest manufactorium dome.

It hung two hundred feet up, vast and corroded - their target.

"Get your grapples out, squad!" shouted Jhenna over the roar and rumble of battle "We're going up!"

Abdulafia's hands fumbled with the harness around his shoulders, his fingers numb and shaking. Carlito reached over and clipped his grapple line tight, flashing him a thumbs up as the icons in his optical display blinked to green.

"See you up there, Afia!" he said in a voice crazed by static. "Save me a few targets, right?"

And with that he slapped the grapple control on Abdulafia's chest, launching its missile from his backpack with a cough of compressed gas.

Jhenna had let loose her own grapple hook, and he watched the little projectile speeding skyward, trailing its slim carbon filament wire behind it, knowing that his own was doing the same. The grapple split apart seconds before it struck the rusted steel of the dome, impacting with its four tiny drills spinning. A second later Abdulafia felt his own hook bite into metal, and icons spun and shifted across his eyes.

Every muscle in his body tensed, he gripped his gun to his chest and activated the zipline.

There was a brief and stomach-churning sensation of falling upward, and the ground raced away below him, the battlefield unfolding crater by bloody crater, a welter of struggling troops and lumbering tanks.

A few optimistic snipers took aim at the assault squad as they ascended over the spillway like dirty grey angels, and Abdulafia felt the bullets zipping past him, close enough to see their supersonic wakes churning through the smoky air. Someone on the spillway had a high powered rifle with an infrared scope; and as Abdulafia slowed his

ascent to bump up against the dome floor that nameless soldier got in a lucky shot.

Niall was about halfway up when an explosive-tipped bullet parted his zipline with a sound like a guitar string breaking. It was an impossible shot - hitting a filament barely two molecules wide through a pall of greasy smoke, but whether by superhuman skill or good luck the sniper made it.

And Niall, ever the pessimist, fell screaming out of the sky, back toward the mud and razorwire below.

Abdulafia winced as his squadmate's body struck a broken section of concrete girder and fell lifelessly to the ground. Around his bloodied corpse the Reclamation marched on, plasteel-armored Templars striding among the dead with guns blazing. Somewhere down there that sniper was reloading, and it was time to get back into cover.

"Come on! Come on! *Light* - you little bastard!" shouted Rex over the common band, banging his cutting torch against the metal plating. Danai had already got hers fired up and was making steady progress through the rusted steel.

Jhenna, of course, was the spirit of cool detachment, dangling in her harness, a joint in one corner of her mouth, scanning the battlefield below with the sights of her micromissile launcher. Every now and then the bulky black weapon would bark, spitting out a pencil-sized projectile which the squad leader steered through the smoke to its target by built-in video.

"Afia, get that torch going - you'll have to make the cuts that Niall was supposed to." she said, squeezing off another shot into the hellstorm below. "And Rex, push the primer stud first, then the igniter! What are you, *retarded*?"

Somewhere down amid the haze a missile detonated, and Jhenna grinned ghoulishly behind her helmet visor.

"That one was for Niall, kids. Got that damned sniper right through the chest!"

It didn't matter if it was the truth or not, although Afia could well believe it. What mattered was the sense of galvanizing joy that revenge brought with it...

He dragged the spluttering blade of the plasma cutter through the steel, trying to dodge the thin stream of molten metal that spewed from the cut. The thought of what a micromissile could do to an unarmored sniper was both nauseating and very, very satisfying. His incision met with Danai's at a corner, and the slab of steel sagged. With a final scream of tortured metal Rex's cutter finished its work, and the rusted section of dome fell away, turning end over end to slam into the ground in a spray of mud and filth.

Carlito was first into the breach, swinging up on his grapple line and grabbing the edge of the jagged hole with his gun slung back over one shoulder. Abdulafia followed him up, his arms burning as he levered himself up into the darkness of the abandoned manufactory.

Soon they were all inside, crouched in the dark while Jhenna deployed a scanner

drone from her grenade belt, letting the little spherical robot roll away along the black corridor, its cameras relaying a grainy black and white image into the squad's optics.

"Nothing," breathed the squad leader, manipulating the drone with an interface on her gauntlet. "Looks like we caught the machine with its pants down, crew." Her joint glowed red in the gloom, and by its glow Abdulafia could see that bloodthirsty grin again.

It was at that moment that something came down on the recon drone with a resounding crack, and the camera feed winked off in the corner of his eye.

Before he could even bring his gun to bear on the spot where the drone had been the lights came on in the old manufactory, blinding halogen arcs shattering the dark. For a second or two his optics system was overloaded, and it was during that instant of panic and blindness that the enemy struck.

Abdulafia rolled to one side, under a rack of discarded machinery, his hands struggling to unclasp his helmet. He heard a hail of bullets striking the steel where he had lain, and felt the impacts rattle the floor as he ripped the visor off from in front of his eyes.

What he saw as when his vision cleared was a legion of the dead.

There had been nothing in the briefing about the Cyben - the operatives who had infiltrated the city had come back with reports of tottering, outdated assault mekan and a police force in serious decline. So Abdulafia could only assume he had awoken to some kind of arcane nightmare as three of the necrotic cyborgs advanced on squad Grey Seven, implacable and dead-eyed, their guns roaring and flaming.

These weren't the scaled-down mark-three models 'Afia would face in the future. These were the prohibitively expensive, high-maintenance mark-two units which Kronos had decommissioned years ago.

They were stupid, ugly, and poorly preserved. But they were tough as nails, and they couldn't miss at such short range.

Carlito caught a blast across the chest, the heavy bullets ripping through his camouflage tunic and punching into the Kevlar vest beneath. Abdulafia heard his ribs crack, but the vest held long enough for Carlito to bring his own shotgun up to his shoulder and unleash both barrels at his attacker.

At such short range the blast should have eviscerated the relentlessly advancing Cyben, but instead it simply shredded the plastic laminate which protected its mummified flesh. Blue liquid spewed and congealed, forming a crystalline scab over the wound. And the Cyben kept on coming. Jhenna managed to snap off a single micromissile shot, the deadly little projectile spearing into a Cyben's shoulder where its rocket exhaust melted away a patch of laminate. The monstrous cyborg pulled the unexploded missile from its flesh with one hand and regarded it quizzically with its blank camera eyes for a second before Jhenna sent the detonation command.

This time, Abdulafia had time to throw a hand over his eyes.

All three of the Cyben were knocked flat by the concussive blast, and the unfortunate machine holding the missile lost its arm and half of its torso in a seething ball of flame. Shreds of preserved muscle and bone flew, and a thin and noisome rain of blue fluid pattered down over the squad, turning to crystal where it landed.

There was smoke, and the stench of burning coolant, and three twisted, ruined riot guns came clattering down on the treadplate floor.

Rex scuttled forward to where one of the machine-creatures had fallen, a snarl of hate contorting his face. In his hand was a foot-long combat knife, and it came down in a blur of silver to puncture the Cyben's chest. There was no scream, no convulsion, but the blade wouldn't come loose, encysted instantly in blue crystal. Rex tugged at it once, twice, kicking at the immobile body of his foe.

Something in the machine must have reset, then, for a hand like a laminated claw came up from its side too fast to follow, striking at Rex's face like a cobra. And with the knife still standing proud from its chest the Cyben rose to its feet, that grisly plasticized claw wrapped around the struggling Ashishi's head.

There was a sudden strobe-flash of light, like a camera going off in the dark, and his body convulsed, dancing manically with his feet off the floor. Coils and arcs of electricity flowed over him like rain, and the nauseating stench of burning hair and skin filled the manufactory.

It was too much for Danai to take, and she went in firing, autopistols in each hand spitting lead. The bullets stitched their way across the Cyben's torso, across its impassive face, smashing out one of its unblinking camera eyes. But still it held the smoking wreckage of its prey at arm's length, and still Rex's flesh burned. Abdulafia could see that he was beyond hope - the thing's burning fingers were pushing through his skull like soft wax. And he could see that Danai, still pumping the triggers with both guns on empty, had walked into a crossfire.

The one-armed Cyben which had caught Jhenna's missile was first to respond, a slim tube deploying from amid the raw muscle and wire of its forearm, training a laser sight on her helmet.

As the first Cyben let Rex's body fall to the ground, staggering back with blue liquid welling and congealing across its face, the second struck, and the third, coordinating their assault with mechanical precision. Jhenna was trying to jam another clip into the micromissile launcher. Abdulafia brought his own gun up, the reticule tight against his eye socket, a face of plastic and raw meat in the crosshairs.

Carlito racked the pump on his shotgun with one hand, the other pressed tight to his shattered ribs.

He heard the slide snap back on Jhenna's gun just a microsecond before twin railriffler shots made the world ring like a temple bell.

The first took Danai's head clean off her shoulders in a spray of red. The wall behind her flashed crimson, and she toppled headless to the ground next to Rex, still trying to pump one last bullet out of her empty autopistol.

The second shot seemed to tear past Abdulafia in slow motion; he was sure it was aimed at him and time slipped, cold and bright. He clearly saw the unfurling muzzle-flash of Carlito's shotgun, watched the expanding cloud of lead pellets scything through the air. And he saw the railriffl bullet slice through them like a jetfighter through a flock of birds, in a spiraling corona of fire, to penetrate the barrel of the gun and make it explode in his hands.

Carlito stood, shocked for a second, gesticulating with the blackened stumps where his fingers had been a moment before. Then he toppled backward through the jagged hole in the steel floor, his dwindling scream cut off as he slammed into the dirt and mud below.

Abdulafia could feel his own body responding to all this with glacial slowness as his finger closed on the trigger. His mind was accelerating ahead of his flesh, knowing that to fire such pitiful weapons at a trio of monsters like these was futile, but doing it anyway, unwilling to admit defeat.

The Cyben which had burned Rex was striding toward him, its hand outstretched, overturning the rack of machinery he sheltered under as though it weighed nothing at all.

Abdulafia watched the muzzle-flash of his machinepistol rake across its chest, saw the fire reflected in its black camera eyes. He looked down the barrel of the railriffl which telescoped out from the thing's arm as it weathered the hail of lead, shrugging off his desperate assault as if it were a mere inconvenience.

Then Jhenna's micromissile caught it full in the temple, and Abdulafia's world went black. The concussion felt like a hammerblow to every part of his body, a punch from the inside out. Shrapnel scored deep gashes in his flesh and warm liquid rained down on him while the noise of the explosion echoed in his head, a formless, echoing pain.

When he dared to crack open one eye all that was left of his attacker was a pair of spasming legs kicking in a puddle of blood and coolant, electrical wires arcing and crackling from a flailing section of spine.

The top half of the Cyben was evenly distributed over Abdulafia, the walls, floor, ceiling and its two compatriots - who were even now levering themselves ponderously back onto their feet. One had been blown clear through a two-storey rack of forklift parts, and thrashed about in the wreckage like an overturned beetle before its software reset.

Jhenna was standing over him like one of the furies, drenched in blood and crystallizing blue liquid. Shreds of laminate and other nameless scraps of Cyben plastered her combat uniform and smeared greasy tracks across her helmet visor.

"Don't just lie there, kid - get up and kill the one on the left. I'll take the right - and *don't for fuck's sake miss.*"

Her strong hands hauled Abdulafia upright, making his head spin and his stomach heave. The threedeeo carnage in the training simulations was just as vivid as what lay all around them, but no computer program could match the smell of mangled Cyben, burned hair and cordite which suffused the manufactorium. Abdulafia held back the puke with all his willpower and brought his gun to bear. The sights blurred and weaved in front of his watering eyes.

"Forget that popgun, Afia." said Jhenna, her voice coming through the commlink as a scratchy whisper. "Sticky grenade. Short fuse, slap it on him and dive for cover."

The two Cyben were back up now, having picked themselves up from where the blast had thrown them.

"And hey...If I miss, try and make sure my neurolink connects to the Ark. I got a lot of memories from this life I don't want to lose."

She flipped the visor of her helmet up and wiped a soot-grimed hand across her eyes.

"Try and get them all, and we'll see you there."

For a second the facade of the tough squad leader fell away, and Abdulafia was looking at a very frightened, very mortal girl only a little older than he was. He suddenly realized that Jhenna's micromissile cannon was almost as tall as she was, and her Kevlar vest was two sizes too big.

It could have been quite a moment, but two reanimated killing machines were bearing down on them, their heavy footfalls thundering like hammer blows as they advanced across the bloodied steel. So Abdulafia did what soldiers have done since the days of iron swords and wooden shields...

"Sarge, if they get you, there won't be anyone left to scrape me off the wall!" he said, cramming the fear down tight lest his grin turn into hysteria. And he ripped a sticky grenade off his belt, primed its adhesive spot, and ran.

The Cyben had broken into a lumbering run too, and shoulder to shoulder they came at him, the railrifle barrels sliding back into their sheathes as electricity began to crackle and coruscate around their fists and forearms. Abdulafia felt a micromissile hiss past him at chest height; there was no time for video guidance now, Jhenna was popping them off like bullets. Another skimmed along the floor, aimed to blow the feet off the leading monstrosity.

But it seemed that this time they were ready for the missiles. Something in their programming allowed them to learn, and now they deployed countermeasures; a crackling energy field which made the little rockets swerve off wide to take out chunks of the manufactorium's roof.

Behind him Abdulafia heard a curse, and the sound of a heavy piece of weaponry

hitting the floor. There was no time to look back, to see if Jhenna was going to stand and fight or secure a line and dive out through the floor. There was only time to calculate his strike, and watch as time slowed down again, becoming dense and cold as if every second were an image carved in ice.

He saw exactly how it would play out, even as his body began to leap, as the Cyben swung a giant fist to crush him against the metal wall. He felt his boots touch down on its swinging arm as lightly as the fall of feathers, watched the clumsy machine spin wild, gone with momentum. He smiled as he flew above it, turning now, upside down as his hand pushed off its armored shoulder.

The sticky grenade adhered to the chrome ball at the base of the Cyben's skull with a satisfyingly meaty thud, and then he was over, exultant, twisting to take the impact of his fall on the balls of his heels, ready to roll away from the imminent blast...

In that paring of an instant he was satisfied. *He was a warrior, not a coward. He was -*

A dead man.

Abdulafia noticed too late that the second Cyben hadn't gone on for Jhenna, but had spun with him, its missile defenses down, the barrel of its railriffler erupting from between cords of muscle and plastic as it pointed its skinned forearm at his chest.

Time slammed through the gears then, and in a rush of panic he knew exactly what came next.

It was a pain beyond pain, a force like some focused hurricane wind which picked him up in its fist and slammed him mercilessly through three racks of rusted machine parts. In the face of the railriffler blast his Kevlar was a sad joke, and it blew apart in a florette of red as he flew backwards, black pain savaging him in its jaws. The lesser agonies of fractured bones and bruises were nothing compared to the ball of hot broken glass in his chest, the wreckage of shattered ribs and lung tissue and shrapnel all snarled up together, blood bursting from his lips with each breath. It seemed like forever before the nervous system monitors in his helmet saw fit to flood his veins with painkillers.

And then he couldn't move, could barely keep his eyes open as the Cyben picked its way through the debris to strike the killing blow.

While the other Cyben kept running toward Jhenna, a digital readout blinking down to zero on the back of its head. It kept running and leaped, its crackling hands outstretched, into a hail of useless gunfire.

Abdulafia saw her face for a second before it struck, and it was burned through the drugs and the pain into his living brain. It was a look of utter despair, as if all she wanted of him was to witness her death, so that at least somebody would *know*.

Then the Cyben wrapped her in its dead, laminated arms, and the pair of them fell away, down through the gaping hole in the manufactory floor, out of sight. There was a brief explosion a second later, and a puff of acrid smoke gusted back up through the

hole. Then there was no trace left of their passing.

*So that was it. He was dead.*

All in all, it could have been much worse. The pain seemed to be fading out, leaving him cold and peaceful, floating on ice. He could see the icon for the neural uplink wavering in front of him, a pale mirage imposed over the figure of a single marching Cyben, stalking through the encroaching dark to finish him off.

Some impulse made him hesitate to touch the glowing sigil and escape his shattered flesh. Perhaps it was grim fascination which kept his eyes locked on the gruesome machine as it stood over him, its shiny laminate seeming to writhe and bulge with maggots, spilling from its mouth like a squirming rain...

All at once he could see the *unlife* of the thing; a black halo seething around it where cruel machinery bolted a tortured spirit to its preserved flesh. And as he watched it *changed*, seething like boiling tar as the Cyben's eyes shut down.

Something was happening to it - a spasming tremor ran through its limbs as if somebody had knifed it in the back.

*Something had.*

It was fire support out of the Pit - the power of the Chrome Ark.

A beam of silver light came blazing through the thing's chest, an incorporeal blade leaving the manufactory whole but whipping the Cyben's dark corona into a frenzy. The creature's purple-lipped mouth fell open, and a sound spilled out that no living thing could utter, the noise of high-pressure steam venting from a busted pipe. It was a howl of pain; for as the quicksilver beam washed over it the Cyben convulsed and twisted, its own steel-wire tendons striving to tear it apart. The twin black lenses of its eyes retracted with an obscene sucking sound, and things were twisting and coiling under its plastic skin - chrome roots and drill-tipped tentacles.

It was the thing at the back of its neck retracting from its doomed body, ripping its host apart in a frenzy as it tried to escape.

Barbed whips of bloodied chrome erupted from the Cyben's back, and the two appendages which had bored through its skull to become its camera eyes reeled back into the drone's carapace. In a final eruption of dead muscle and wet plastic the thing came loose, scurrying ahead of the relentless silver beam like a cockroach before a tongue of flame.

It was too slow. As the empty Cyben body folded in on itself, leaking blue fluids and blood, the beam reached its prey, enfolding it in waves of liquid light. It raised two of its drill-tipped arms, their points whirring and spitting sparks, and drove them like daggers into its own back.

Abdulafia laughed despite the agony in his chest, despite the chunks of lung which blocked his throat. And the silver light came up over his feet, over his chest, drowning him in radiance.

There was no pain anymore, not even the icy chill which preceded death. The walls of the manufactorium lost texture, lost color, became nothing more than thin pencil-lines scratched across an infinity of white. He looked down at his hands and saw that they, too, had devolved into little more than scrawls, shivering outlines moving around the grey smudges of bone within. The pain in his chest where the railrifile bullet had opened him up was the only fragment of color - an angry tangle of red lines as if his suffering had been cross-hatched into him by an angry child with a ballpoint pen.

In the far distance (if a place like this supported such concepts) he could hear a faint sussuration, like thousands of voices talking at cross purposes. It was a snarled switchboard of crossed wires, hazy and crackling, fragments of conversation and pieces of words muffled under cotton wool.

In the melange, one sound was rising. A keening noise, falling in, coming from the edge of perception to fill the entire white world .

"eeeeeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEEEEss connected. We have a visual. We have uplink ...you're clear for contact, but please, keep it short and sweet, Sir. There's only about a thousand other things which need your attention."

"Of course, Magus. Keep the power arc steady, and this will take no time at all."

Vague outlines formed in front of Abdulafia's eyes like coalescing smoke; at first just a flickering hash of lines and grey smudges, growing bigger and clearer as the owner of that echoing second voice moved toward him. The stranger strode across the white landscape in strobe flashes, the scratches of darkness which defined him becoming cleaner and clearer with every jumpy movement.

It wasn't until he was right in front of him that Abdulafia recognized the shifting meshwork of the stranger's face. It was one which had smiled down on him from countless propaganda posters and dusty glazed portraits in militia training rooms.

If any doubt still remained in his mind it was blown away by the figure's touch, which caused texture and color to bloom from his imagined flesh, filling in his skin, his tattered combat suit, the bleeding crater in his chest. This was the man who he had seen earlier, wielding the colossal power of the Chrome Ark against Elysium's machine defenses. This was the Illuminatus, Zeon Rhiss, lord of the Electromagi and leader of the Ashishim.

"Your Grace ...I - I mean, I suppose we all ask you this but...am I dead? Is this the Ark?" stuttered Abdulafia, averting his eyes from the kindly, creased face of his savior. The Illuminatus was dressed in a simple dun-colored robe of roughspun wool in this illusory place; a far cry from his battlesuit of steel and copper. His neatly clipped beard came to a three-tined point as it straggled across his chest, trailing away into tape-bound wires budding innumerable jackplugs. These rattled and clicked together as he laughed.

"No, no little cousin. I have taken your pain on myself so we can speak without you screaming, but you yet live. I have brought you here to ask you a very important

question."

Abdulafia could hardly imagine what the patriarch of his Phyle wanted to inquire of him - except perhaps how his squad had gone so far wrong.

"Anything, Your Grace. I will try to answer as best I can."

For a brief second the expression of comforting beneficence was gone from the Illuminatus' face, replaced by a twitch of exasperation.

"Please, child! If I wanted you interrogated your mind would already have been torn from your body! No, this is a question you must answer without prompting - and without any delusions about to whom you speak."

Abdulafia was about to reply, but the glance the Illuminatus shot him over his tiny gold-wire bifocals was enough to make him snap his mouth shut.

"I'm just another old man, Abdulafia 330. The power you revere me for wielding is a *learned* thing - a thing which you may one day have knowledge of." The lines of a simple wooden chair came scribbling into focus, and as it took on shape and substance the old man lowered himself to sit, wincing as his spine cracked alarmingly. "You see? Just another prisoner of the flesh, after all."

His hand lifted Abdulafia's chin so that he was staring directly into his eyes - twin lasercutters of cerulean blue with a hint of silver at their very centers.

"Tell me, Abdulafia, about your parents."

He felt a shock then; as if the dam of will which held back his pain had cracked and let slip a pressurized jet of agony. He tried to remember, forced his mind to look back, but all he could grasp were blurred images, muffled sounds ...hints and fragments.

Woolen blankets/hot black herb tea/cold mornings in a stone tower...

"I can only recall the Academy, Illuminatus. I cannot see my parents."

The old man nodded, a half-smile on his lips.

"Yes, of course...The Academy. I remember it myself, you know - even if you could never believe I was once a child. I can't remember who I caused more trouble for - the Master Tutorial or the Master Militant!"

Abdulafia could hardly conceal his look of incredulity. The thought of the Grand Illuminatus being chastised by one of the Faculty Academius was like imagining God being sent to detention.

"And you were there since the age of five, like all our young cousins. Your parents were forbidden to acknowledge you after your induction ...Well, it makes things that much simpler, then."

At once the Illuminatus stood, his chair degenerating into a black scrawl and disintegrating into nothingness.

"I would like to show you something, Abdulafia 330. But it will only come to you if you truly want to see ..."

He reached out one wizened hand, its wrinkled skin tattooed with the myriad

interlocking lines of a circuit board. It began to glow, cool and blue, a radiance which bled the color from the world and left it stark and simple, black and white meshwork.

Abdulafia reached out to grasp it, and the whole world collapsed in upon itself.

## Ω

*In that single, fatal second time slowed to a crawl, and Technician Zhe saw every little detail of the bizarre tableau before him as if it were burning into the tissue of his alien brain.*

*Nyl, his armored skin, his oily cloak of shadows falling to the ground like a splash of foul liquid. The twisted face of Simeon Blaire, stretched over a writhing mass of rotten, hungry black alien flesh. And in that syrupy slow motion, he saw the attendant Ashishim throw back their robes, revealing glittering silver weapons, long slim rifles seemingly spun from filigree. As Nyl screamed in anguish, and Blaire in triumph, they fired.*

*And time did not simply slow, or stagger, it froze.*

*Simeon's voice was choked off to nothing as he was surrounded by shimmering purple radiance, and Nyl's fall was arrested in mid air as the weapons hummed, spinning a cocoon of light around their targets.*

*Light which solidified, crystallized, and held.*

*At last the hum snapped off, and Nyl clattered to the ground, encased in a shroud of amethyst. Blaire was similarly imprisoned, but he stood like a glass statue as the Ashishim stepped forward, brushing one beringed hand over the slippery purple surface of his cheek.*

*He stooped over the bound body of Technician Zhe, pushing back the hood of his robe.*

*To reveal wire-bound cerulean dreadlocks, deep purple eyes, and a band of violet tattoos snaking across pale skin. He wasn't a he at all...*

*It was CeeAn 187.*



DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**BionLab Gaudi**  
**NovaGuell Arcology**  
**Barcelona, Basque Free State**  
**New Aragon, Europa**

*Internal Progress Report*

Doctors DiAngelo and Peng have made great progress this month with their semi-autonomous controllers for our new nanoassembly printers. With the subcontract from Turing International falling through there was no way we could provide this technology to Terminus Afrika on time without them – let’s not forget that their project management team is already months behind schedule!

The problems with designing an A.I. interface have been neatly sidestepped by DiAngelo, Peng and team, using the template we attained during our leveraged buyout of CryonTek Stuttgart. It seems that the stored personalities of deceased individuals are far more adept at manipulating the energy patterning web of the nano print-head than any simulacrum – the ability seems to be instinctive.

Attached to this document, for those who are interested in the ‘nuts and bolts’ is a full copy of Arad Kincaid Stiles’ paper on the perpetuation of biologically generated patterned energy fields – the basis for our control software team’s innovation!

Thanks to their tireless work over the last few weeks we now have fully functional nanoprinters able to output building materials in one one-hundredth of the time it takes for SonyMitsu’s compilers to port out single-element substances.

Legal Branch reports that the ‘cerebromnemonic imprints’ we seized during the liquidation of CryonTek are one hundred percent our own property – there should be no ongoing concerns with the families of the deceased.

Finding further subjects to store in our containment facility (please, people, it’s called a Bioelectric Field Perpetuator, not the ‘Ark of the Covenant’) will be a matter for Marketing – good luck Miguel and Sara!

Excellent work all, and be prepared to watch those stocks rise when we have our nanoprinters installed throughout the completed Terminus.

**Doctor Olivar Lancaster, CEO**  
**BionLab Gaudi**

*CeeAn loosed his bonds with a deft twist of her hands, allowing Zhe to stretch the kinks out of his tortured limbs. Behind her, the other Ashishim were loading the crystallized figures of Nyl and Blaire onto a hovering platform, ready to be accepted into the cavernous freight hold of the Masslifter.*

*Seventeen years had not treated her too harshly, but there was a look of sorrow and fatigue on her face which he knew only too well.*

*"I always knew it wasn't him." she said, turning back to watch the crystallized Blaire being manhandled into the hold. "I knew him better than anyone, and when he came back from that last mission he was changed. More than that - he was gone."*

*She fixed the Technician with a stare that all but nailed him to the ground with its intensity.*

*"That was the night that Zeon betrayed us all. When I found out about your dirty war, and how we'd been caught up in it."*

*Zhe wanted to protest, to tell her about what would happen should the Forge be used by the wrong people. But he sensed the futility in it, even as the words came to him. This wasn't about whole planets. It was about one man.*

*"So I've waited years for this. I've played the subservient fool to that damned usurper and that THING which called itself Illuminatus Zeon. I wanted to give one of your kind a message, to take back to your masters." CeeAn's eyes burned into him like plasma torches, infecting him with unfamiliar feelings.*

*Shame. Guilt.*

*"Tell them that with samples of both your Technician and this machine you call a Slavesystem, we can reprogram the Forge. Tell them that if they send their armadas here to Earth they will be erased as if they'd never existed."*

*Zhe struggled to his knees, still aching from his beating at the hands of Nyl.*

*"What makes you think they're coming here?" he asked, unable to meet her eyes. "I am the only one who was sent."*

*Behind them, the masslifter was powering up, sending waves of dust scudding across the platform, the low thrum of its engines rising in pitch and volume.*

*"Poor creature." she said, and there was a look of real pity in her violet eyes. "I used to be a trusting servant like you, and look what it got me! You were nothing but bait. The ones you call the Unity are already here, out by Jupiter. The Multiplicity are hiding between the orbit of Mercury and the Sun."*

*Zhe suddenly felt a cold hand clutch at his vitals. He had seen what could happen when such forces collided.*

*Perhaps it was an infection out of the Wetsystems, or the hangover from living in the mind of Kaito Kayzi. But Technician Zhe couldn't let it happen here.*

*He thought of the black, oily hunger of the Adversary, of its delight in pain and*

*death and torment, and envisioned the immense feast it would have from the razing of this solar system. Surely enough to crack reality wide open ...*

*Zhe pulled up from his memory the only thing he knew would stop CeeAn from leaving, and taking the power to end this with her.*

*"Abdulafia is alive. He's being kept in cryostasis."*

*At once her hands were around his throat, her face contorted in a snarl of rage.*

*"Seventeen years, creature!" she spat. "I lived with him being dead and gone for that long. If you're lying to me now, I'll . . ." But her anger collapsed in on itself, and her grip loosened enough for Zhe to draw breath.*

*"All I need is to finish my investigation, and I'll know how to wake him up. Him and the others. Kayzi. Jaqub Hassan."*

*CeeAn's hands dropped to her sides, as her red robes blew out in the blast of the Masslifter's engines. When she looked up at him, Zhe could see pain written across her face, and years of mistrust. But also, the tiniest trace of hope.*

*"You know that when they come for this place, we will have to use the Forge," she said. "We will have no choice."*

*Zhe nodded; he knew.*

*"I won't let it come to that," he said, as he turned back toward the rusted towers of the Last City. "Just give me as much time as you can."*

*CeeAn watched him go, her thoughts fading back to distant years, to the face of Abdulafia 330.*

*For his sake, she would give the Technician as much time as he needed.*

## Ω

Grim ranks of metal pods marched off into the distance as far as his eyes could see in both directions. Only the circular portholes of glass cut into their burnished surfaces offered any illumination, an eerie green light sifting through veils of mist in the gloom.

Perfect conditions in which to slide through the web of traps and laser tripwires which guarded this place. His feet made no sound as he stepped lightly along a dangling coolant pipe high above the factory floor. This was no time to be seen or heard; it would be tedious and messy to slaughter his way out of here if any of his unwitting host's pets detected him.

The clatter and hiss of slave bioconstructs echoed in this immense metal sepulcher; the foundry of the biotects, tangled in the roots of the Lancaster spire. Things like skinned dogs with guns for faces loped back and forth below him, while now and then a humanoid form, hulking and neckless reared up against the sickly light, the laser rangefinders of its weapons slithering across the pipes and rafters.

He was cloaked in Ashishim holomesh – a thin skin of invisibility wrapped tight

around his shoulders as much for the chill as to deceive the innumerable living security systems of the noble house. The intelligent fabric painted him across the aluminum and steel walls as a quicksilver flicker, a shadow among shadows.

The watchdogs and ogres which stood guard here had no imagination. They could neither see him or stop him as he closed in on his target.

*A single pool of white light cast from far above by a hovering dragonfly ornithopter, illuminating two sharp-dressed figures and a single vast, steaming machine...*

He had been here before, checking on the progress of this little illicit project. He had seen the gene-mills of the biotects grinding out the clone bodies of innumerable Kheptarchs, the fresh new organs for thousands of paying customers.

The bio-manufactorium had always seemed a sterile place, as fertile as a mill for stamping out auto parts. But this time the machinery he had come to know so well pulsed with life, an almost palpable aura throbbing like a beating heart within its glass and chrome walls. One of the men wiped a smooth white hand over the dewy pane, and he could finally see the face of his target.

The face of a child, sleeping drowned in green light, in bubbling nutrient fluid.

"He has the title, but I've got the cash - and that's what really makes this city tick, isn't it, Excellency?" asked the figure still in shadow, his face illuminated red for a second as he puffed on a giant cigar. "We both know that you'd never advance me the honor of joining your little games - but you can help fix the gambling racket by doing a favor for my young protege."

Lancaster winced, as though the thought of money pained him.

"Of course you could never play, Direktor. You're in a position to know that the DownTown league doesn't get a third of the ratings that the High Game does. And just like you'd never dirty yourself by fighting in the gore pits down there, so we would never let you join the Razor Clique. The prize is simply too great."

Mr Ascher came forward out of the darkness, grinning like a shark. The ashes he tapped off the end of his cigar spiraled to the floor to be swept up by a pair of modified cockroaches.

"So do you think I've given young Blaire a good enough chance of winning? He'll be eligible to enter in just a few years time - and nobody but us will know that he's not the original."

"Well - much as it irks me to say it, there's nothing in the rules to contradict what you're doing here," said Lancaster with a sour grimace "His mind will still be that of a Scion of House Blaire, even if his body is pieced together from a thousand pit fighters."

"And all it cost me was hushing up his attempted suicide," chuckled Ascher, drawing deeply on his stogie. "If he'd succeeded, his old man would have been livid. At his age it would be a real effort to sire an heir, what with the celebrants breathing down

his neck. That, and the money of course. There's always the money."

Lancaster ran his alabaster finger through the condensation on the machine's window panel, sketching out a dollar sign. The rune of currency, even with the old United States blown away as dust...

"Really, Direktor, all I care about is that you *pay*. I have no fear that this *thing* will become Emperor of Elysium. We have a deal on that particular score – he is to be nothing but a ratings booster and a foil for the gambling cartels. I'll tell the Commissioner and the Council what we've done if he gets within spitting distance of the Trials – even if that means paying billions in penalties."

Now it was the Direktor's turn to scowl, ripping his wallet from out of his tailored coat.

"If I can't rule this ant-hill myself, Excellency, then I don't want a monster like *him* in control either. I'll thank you to keep your power-mad paranoia to yourself and your precious Lords."

He scrawled off a cheque, and held it out to be snapped up by Lancaster's long pale fingers.

"Of course he's just a ratings stunt, Emmanuel. I always play the long game, and I'm willing to wait a few years for him to ripen. Just keep this one growing - when he's eligible and his father's been *seen to* we'll make the switch."

The Direktor turned to leave, his coat swirling about his shoulders in the clammy air.

"Don't think I don't suspect you've kept back embryos to use as evidence. I know your type, Excellency, because *I'm one of them* – even without a title."

"Preposterous!" spluttered the biotect lord, his composure slipping. "I only agreed to make you one of these things because you mortgaged your network down to the paperclips to do it! Watch the markets, Ascher! Watch what happens when trading opens tomorrow!"

But the footsteps and laughter of Octavio Ascher were fading now, back into the green-tinted mist from whence they had come. Lancaster was alone with the creature he had created, floating serenely behind the cold glass of its mechanical womb.

"Forgive me, Simeon. And I hope your father forgives me, too. But when all this is over, you'll thank me. You would, if you could ever know..."

The hidden watcher waited until the arch-biotect had walked away, towing the ornithopter light behind him by infrared. He waited until the only illumination came from behind the glass, where bubbles seethed and roiled in green liquid, floating over skin incised with patterns of silver wires.

Of course Emmanuel Lancaster had been lying. His paranoia was the stuff of legend, even amid the literally cut-throat business politics of the aristocracy. He had made a copy of the Blaire clone – a single copy which had not been subjected to the

force-growth systems its brother now endured. It was the work of moments to prize open the hidden panel in the side of the machine, as he had seen Lancaster do so many times. A couple of seconds more, and he had routed the system around the little glass bubble which was his target; a cylinder containing a single frozen human fetus.

When he snapped the containment vessel out of its housings there was no alarm, no slamming bulkhead doors or flashing red strobes. He slid the cylinder gently into a custom-made carrier module which hung from his chest on a web of leather straps, connected its batteries, and fastened the panel behind him.

He had come here to destroy both of the Blaire clones, to keep the frighteningly ambitious Direktor Ascher away from the throne of Elysium. But now he saw what a living weapon like this could become, he couldn't help but take a chance. After all, who did he have the most faith in to train such a warrior?

He had welded a band of wandering tribes scabbling among the ruins of the world into a fighting force with more technological knowledge and power at their disposal than any other. He had taught a generation of children how to fight, and a select few of them had been initiated into even greater secrets, founding the sects of the *Dervashi* and the *Magi*. Did he really think that when the time came the Blaire trained by his Academy would be bested by one schooled in the arts of war by a jumped-up corporate executive?

It was a long way back to the Pit, where his agents amid the tribes of the Warlords waited to spirit this prize away, over the sea to the north, into the ruins of Fortress Europe. Where the child would grow, and mature into a deadly vessel of power, his right hand in the war against Kronos. He would one day show him the secret of the Magi, and make him a legend among his people. They would know his designation and his name, and revere them.

He would call him *Abdulafia*.

## Ω

The name hit him like a fist.

It was a pain greater even than the hole in his chest, more sickening in its totality than the moment when Jhenna, despairing, had met his eyes and fallen.

What had he just seen?

Lies, surely. But then he caught himself scabbling desperately for denial, and slowly, agonizingly, the truth dawned on him.

"That *was* me, wasn't it?" he asked, his voice soft and brittle in the white silence of virtual space. "And I can't remember my parents because I don't have any. I was never born. I was... *made*. Like a chair, or a gun, or a wrench. I was *built*."

He turned to face the Illuminatus, his head churning with rage. And then he saw the

tired, sad look on the old man's face, and the hot coil of anger in him unraveled.

"And was I wrong to let you live, cousin?" asked Zeon quietly. "When you can tear down men such as those who made you - and their city with them? When you can encompass revenge for the ones you have lost today?"

Abdulafia looked down at his hands, knowing they were nothing but a representation, but searching every pixel for a blemish, a seam, something that marked him out as artificial.

"If I was created just to kill, then you were wrong, Illuminatus. And one of the war-machines I should have known as my *brother* has fixed your mistake."

He half expected to see wires and gears through the red hole in his chest, for his pain to be replaced with error messages. But he still felt it, even here. Life burned in him so very keenly as it slipped away. And he *did* want revenge. He could remember the savage joy of watching that dead-faced Cyben ripping itself apart...

"Revenge needs hatred to exist, Abdulafia 330. And hate is not something which a machine can feel. If you want to satisfy that hunger, you have to live. And that is the opportunity which I offer you now."

The Illuminatus closed one hand and opened it again, slowly, conjuring a spinning ball of fire in his palm.

"You were bred for war, but many have been, through the centuries. What you have that the Spartans or the Nazi super-soldiers or the Helix Force lacked is an integrated nanonic system. It has lain dormant in you for your entire life, but I can awaken it now."

In the whirling ball of fire Abdulafia could see the faces of his squadmates, screaming, burning, torn apart. He could see the great wave of the Ashishim advance breaking against the walls of Elysium while thousands died.

Hypnotized, he reached out for it, only for the Illuminatus to snatch it away, caging it in his wizened fingers.

"Be warned, little cousin - it will be a pain which few could endure. If you fail to master the nanotech while it grows in your bones then *it will master you*. And then you will like as not be a thrall to the machine. . . or to those who made you."

Abdulafia recalled the thin, sour face of Lord Lancaster and the gloating, crazed eyes of Direktor Ascher, and shuddered. Better to die than to live out the destiny those monsters had laid out for him - that his genetic twin was no doubt suffering through.

"Give it to me!" he shouted, his voice shaking the virtual world, sending hairline cracks racing through the white walls, through his own illusory flesh. "They killed us all. They killed *me*. They killed Jhenna!" With each word the screaming faces crowded and whirled around his head, and the ball of fire in Illuminatus Zeon's hand grew, blazing blue and green, enveloping his arm to the elbow.

AND. THEY. WILL. DIE!

Each scream rocked the universe like the blow of a hammer. Abdulafia felt his pain

crystallize like the blue coagulant in the Cyben's blood and become a hard core of fury.

Nothing in creation could have stopped his hand coming down to meet that of his Illuminatus, their palms meeting amid a spray of incandescent fire with all the force of colliding continents.

And the Illuminatus' promise was true – there was pain.

It was a scalding baptism in living magma, a clawing storm of knives and broken glass ripping through his flesh. Each nerve was flayed, each muscle and sinew stretched tight, his bones boiling with molten lead.

Behind the tidal-wave of agony he held himself together by sheer force of will, watching the Illuminatus melt away, his virtual world collapsing in shards to shatter against pain, to melt in pain, to boil in suffering.

The dormant Gladius system which had slept in his flesh came to life in that great outpouring of agony. It sent tentacles and roots of steel clawing through his body, binding, reinforcing, strengthening. He could sense its cold, purposeful intelligence constricting his mind, and he saw how a weaker consciousness would be scoured away by the pain; lose itself in the embrace of the machine.

It was his rage which saved him, a red-hot anchor which he clung to with blistering hands – a link to the reality in which he had bloody work to do. When the nanonic array tried to link up to external systems he was there a step ahead of it, and his anger cauterized those probing tentacles, locking it inside. He enslaved it, and in submission the pain began to recede. Hungry tendrils of metal punched out of his sweat-soaked skin to tap into batteries on his belt, in his helmet.

It was done. It was his.

Abdulafia felt the great gaping wound in his chest beginning to close up, knitting together smoothly, the pain a memory, an echo ... the Gladius might not have had the forbidden power of self-replication, but it was clever enough to keep him alive, at least until he could reach the medic-priests of the Ashishim.

He opened his eyes, and he smiled.

When the red blur which filled his world faded he could see a gas-masked medic leaning over him, shining the painfully bright beam of a torch into his face. Behind the foggy glass of the man's mask his eyes were wide with astonishment.

"Sweet Gods, we have a live one over here! Captain – a survivor!" He shouted over one shoulder to a figure obscured by smoke amid the debris of the ruined manufactory.

Abdulafia groaned theatrically and pretended to slip back into unconsciousness. In the medic's faceplate he had seen his reflection – a deathmask of blood and scorches. Nobody who looked like that could possibly get up, let alone fight...

The Captain came running, his uniform singed and bloodied, unarmed but for a three-deco tablet and stylus. A face protruded from the tablet as if it were pressed

through a sheet of plastic, and Abdulafia caught a memory-flash of black Cyben eyes, cold desiccated skin ...

"He's just a kid, Private! Those nomad filth are sending their women and children against us to die..."

"Take a closer look, Captain Audane." insisted the face in the threedeeo tablet, its haggard features contorted into an impatient scowl. "This *child* has destroyed a crack unit of our new Cyben troopers; he's taken a direct hit from one of them to the chest. And he's still breathing!"

Audane pressed his lips together in a tight angry line, obviously biting back some serious insubordination. But the medic was already clawing open Abdulafia's Kevlar vest, to expose a crust of congealed blood, a hubcap-sized bruise even now growing purple and ripe – and a plug of white scar tissue shot through with strands of silver.

"He's hot with nanotech! Gods help us, they've got *combat integrated*!"

The Captain cut him off with a gesture and pulled him away with one hand.

"Keep your distance then, Private! Johanssen, Lake, cover him with your railguns. Kincaid, alert processing, we have one coming in for interrogation. Integrated or not, those boys will know how to break him."

The face in the threedeeo smiled humorlessly, and focused again on Captain Audane.

"Hit him with trunks and make sure he is delivered to the interrogation tanks in one piece. We want to take that nanonic system out of him *surgically* and see who supplied it. And of course we must know how many more of these young suicide commandos the nomads have at their disposal."

"At once, Commissioner Slade." answered Audane, snapping off a salute. "We'll finish up here and then reinforce the west spillway auxiliary, as you commanded."

The screen went dead and blank while Abdulafia, peering out of one half-closed eye, saw the medic fill a wicked-looking autosyringe with tranquilizer.

*So, the assault was eating into their reinforcements.*

The Ashishi allowed himself a little hope. If these were second-string troops he might just be able to take them all. If the Gladius system had bonded with him correctly. If he could work out how to use it...

And with that thought files and schematics filled his mind's eye, and training routines flickered through his brain like ghosts. Months of integration therapy compressed down into seconds, force-fed into his spine through a battery of humming neuroconnectors...

His legs spun sideways, tripping the medic as he twisted to his feet. Before the hapless private could right himself Abdulafia had his hands on the trunk injector and had pumped a knockout dose into his neck. Even as the medic's limp body fell from his hands he was moving, exultant in his own slow-motion world, the slugs from the

squad's railguns inching past him through the air, trailing halos of dust. A step left, a twist right, and they were past him, his fist connecting with the jaw of one trooper and lifting him three feet clear of the ground, the autoinjector thrown from his other hand like a dart to pierce the leg of another.

Bursts of fire tracked him, pitifully slow, and he slipped between the interlocking rows of bullets as if in a dream, closing in on the squad leader, Audane, and his threedeeo tablet.

Now the wires and servos were burning inside him, a cage of hot metal bringing back echoes of the pain of his rebirth. In time, Abdulafia would learn about the threshold beyond which the nanotech must not be pushed, beyond which it rebelled against the flesh with sickening consequences. But for now the pain was goad, a reminder of his rage and loss, and it drove him to even greater speed, even greater strength and cruelty.

He gripped the helmet of another Elysian and twisted the man's head off with a fast flick of the wrists, using the man's body as a human shield even as he trained his stuttering machine pistol back at his compatriots. A kick to the crotch shattered a trooper's pelvis and sent him flying across the manufactorium in an arc of blood. Another felt the touch of two fingers at his throat, then the sizzle and crack of a tazer burst cut him down.

It was all over in a hundred heartbeats, and the whole squad was broken, moaning and screaming and dying...

Abdulafia's hands clamped down on Audane's shoulders, and the world slammed back into focus. Red icons were blinking and shimmering across his eyes as the Gladius system desperately tried to avoid tearing him apart. Blood spattered his face like warpaint, hot and sticky.

There was a second of shock in which Abdulafia couldn't believe he was the architect of such carnage.

Then the image of Jhenna's face as she died came back to him, and he tightened his steely fingers around Audane's neck.

The pain and the bone-deep scorching heat of the overtaxed nanotech system seemed to ebb away as cooling vanes unfurled from his shoulders like wings, a maze of spirals and curls glowing red and white.

An instant ago Captain Audane was in control of the situation, methodically planning his defense of the spillway. The nomad was his prisoner and when all this was over there would be medals and accolades aplenty. Now, in what seemed a mere eyeblink the hotwired Ashishi kid was crushing his windpipe between relentless fingers. Audane gagged and gasped, thrashing impotently at Abdulafia's face with his threedeeo tablet.

Staring down into the nomad's blank eyes Audane was certain he was a dead man.

There was nothing in the kid's grim expression, his bloodied snarl to suggest mercy - or even sanity. Weals of painful crimson stood out from his skin where the Gladius system burned along his bones, filling the air with a sickening aroma of cooking flesh. Audane felt his tracheal bones cracking and splintering under the terrible pressure. But then the threedeeo tablet caught Abdulafia a glancing blow across the temple, and its glassy surface flashed into life.

The light blossomed out from the tablet's screen, and it seemed that as it washed over Abdulafia's face that he deflated, his hands unknotting from Audane's throat.

The stricken Elysian staggered backward, his lips blue, a thin trickle of blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

"Please ..." he croaked, holding up the threedeeo block like a talisman. "You can have it. You can have the codes! Just don't kill me!"

Abdulafia stepped forward and snatched the tablet from Audane's trembling hands. With his scarred and steaming skin, his fevered eyes and the smoking wings blazing on each shoulder he looked like a demon of vengeance.

"The code ...it's oh nine three seven G-V-B..." stuttered Audane, scrabbling backward away from the grim-faced nomad. "Please...oh god, please..."

The Elysian squeezed his eyes shut tight, waiting for the inevitable hammer blow which would finish him off. A second passed, and then two. He was still breathing. He was still alive...

Cautiously Audane cracked one eye open, and then the other. All around him the ruins of his squad were bleeding and groaning, and the manufactorium was a smoking ruin. Of the nomad commando there was no sign, not even the echo of his footsteps fading away across the steel floor. Cold terror clamped down on Audane then - he had given the damned Ashishi the tablet! He had given him the CODE! And worse, he'd been pleading a blubbering like a coward. Perhaps it was for the best the none of his soldiers had been conscious to see that part ...but it scarcely mattered anyway. Commissioner Slade was going to kill him - and that was if he was *lucky*.

Far above, running lightly along a suspended girder, Abdulafia probed and tested the limits of his new body. He was well pleased with what he found; not least that in battle he was taken out of himself, detached, watching without fear from far above as his body killed...

That was right. That was good. He didn't want to feel anything - didn't *deserve* to share joy and pain with human beings. He had been forged, constructed in a lab for this bloody task.

So if he was going to be the right hand of the Illuminatus, a weapon with a face and eyes and a heart, then he'd be a killing machine without remorse. It was the least he could do for Grey Seven, for Jhenna, and for the people who he had thought were his family, among which lived the parents he had never had.

The screen of the threedeeo tablet seethed with data, a portal into the vast machineries of Elysium, into the mind of Kronos itself.

But most importantly, it was a key – not only to the spillway gates, but to the respect of his fellow Electromagi. If his path was chosen, then there was no way that Abdulafia was going to wait for advancement by dead men's boots...

Minutes later the Elysian soldiers clustered behind their sandbags and concrete barricades felt the city shake, and heard the immense bass grinding note of long unused hydraulics and cogs meshing and shifting. Behind them one of the great spillway gates was opening, rammed ajar by pistons the size of battleships.

Slowly, painfully, the yard-thick steel slab cracked open, gaping wider and wider as the Vatican and Ashishim forces below let out a victorious cheer. Immense arches of pale lightning came crashing down from the Chrome Ark, leaving sizzling mechanical wreckage in their wake. And the Elysians broke.

Cyben held the line, too few in number to hold back the assault. Even so, the cybernetic undead were fearsome in close combat, meeting the rush of Ashishi warriors and Vatican Templars like a steel wall. Their speed was a match for the elite *Dervashi* of the Ashishim, whose blurring steel blades were as swift as a rattlesnake strike. And their immense strength was enough to match the Vatican Knights of all classes; hulking Paladins and Templars, fire-spitting Sentinels and chain-bladed Teutons. The force waves crashing against Elysium from the Chrome Ark could never take down so many at once, and the Magi wielding that ancient weapon had other targets to deal with – autogun turrets, clanking spider-legged warmekan and rusting flame-tanks. So the fight was brought to the Cyben with overwhelming numbers and unabated fury.

Abdulafia watched it all from atop one of the immense spillway gates, a mere shimmer in the air sketching his outline around the Gladius system's holofield. His eyes were fixed on the tiny figures who circled the Ark, and especially on the man who wielded its energy, more fiercely now than ever as the assault breached the gates and began to move within the echoing caverns of the city. Despite his cloaking, and despite the distance, the smoke, and the roar of battle between them the Illuminatus could see Abdulafia on his perch above the fray, and threw him a salute with one copper-studded gauntlet.

Afia waved back, narrowing his eyes as he tried to read the expression on his leader's face. He was beholden to the Illuminatus and his cause now, but he would be a fool to entirely trust *anyone*, even a man considered by some to be a living god.

Switch it – Grey Seven a sacrifice, thrown away to give him the gift of hate. Pick the Illuminatus for a political creature, willing to send the Disposables off to the slaughter. Frame Afia as his new, sharpest toy, worth a handful of grunts just for his motivation.

And he would remember, long after the rest of this bloody day had faded into

sporadic nightmares and twitches, that it was a Cyben who pulled the trigger, it was Kronos who started the war. But it was the Illuminatus who made sure that the face he saw in his night terrors was that of Jhenna, hopeless and scared and doomed, falling eternally into an unseen abyss.

That was the dream which gripped him now, which shook his mind between bloody jaws.

*The black abyss, the fall ...traces of Zone Doubt, static from his descent into the mills of Kronos. Sharp barbed stabs of psionic agony, tracing the outlines of Magus Verlaine, the whirling concentric black blades, the cold ichor flooding his mind –*

And the Illuminatus, his face all decay and rot, all but the flashing, boiling silver of his eyes.

Abdulafia came awake with a choking scream, his fist closing around the leg of Jaqub Hassan like a torsion clamp. His eyes rolled and twitched in bleeding sockets as if they were trying to escape from his throbbing skull.

“Sweet ancestral hells!” he gasped, struggling to sit up “Verlaine ...it’s inside his mind! It coming!”

## Ω

*That was how the Seven Hours War started, at least for one child of the Ashishim. The true story of the Reclamation is written in the bones of the dead, the blackened stains of blood enshrined on the spillway where martyrs and heroes were blown apart.*

*Zhe sees it all in a second – the Aryan assault on the twin watchtowers, the last desperate charge of the Red Sentinels, the war-barges of the Celestials ramming into the Elysian docks in a cascade of rusting containers and collapsing cranes and booms.*

*The legends of the Seven Hours War, written in blood and bullets and twisted steel all tell of the beginning of the united assault – of how when the spillway doors came open the battle became one of fierce attrition, building to building skirmishes between desperate nomads and implacable Cyben.*

*But only Kronos, the Illuminatus, and now a certain Technician of the Multiplicity knew how the war ended, and why the Forbidden Systems - the relics of the apocalypse - were never deployed against the outlander horde.*

It began with the flicker and pop of neon lights.

Zhe watched as the dusty, disused chambers atop the spire were cast into eerie illumination, as servitor mekan moved among the most deadly relics of man like steel ghosts. Some of the devices left over from the wars of the apocalypse were obvious in their grim intent; tanks and artillery pieces, hulking automata bristling with cannons, even row upon row of nuclear weapons. Others were unfathomable tangles of wires and tubes, featureless black boxes, pulsing spheres of energy wrapped in gauss cages. In

other cold metal halls rested batteries of lethal phials containing viruses and flesh-eating bacteria. Tanks of nerve gas steamed and sweated in icy, echoing crypts.

And in locked-down reliquaries rimed with ice slept the most potent of all weapons - self-replicating nanoswarms like those which danced in Simeon Blaire's blood, and which powered the tortured body of Eddie Tsien...

It was all being brought back online, the last line of defense for Kronos and his three hundred sacrosanct Kheptarchs, the pure geneline of *homo sapiens*. Even the machine itself couldn't guess at the destructive potential of some of its toys; things designed as last-ditch weapons of terror by the hysterical regimes of old earth. One unobtrusive little device, barely the size of a cigarette packet was designed to send the sun nova. A capsule of glass the size of a robin's egg held enough of a genewritten bacterium to rot the living bones of a thousand times Elysium's population. And there were so many more...

*Somewhere amid this cornucopia of destruction Zhe was sure he would find weapons powerful enough to stop both the fleets which were descending on the planet, into the eye of the Forge. His mind rode shotgun in the camera network; he skipped from servitor to servitor in the green-tinted gloom, searching for connections, for codes, for controls. What he found was the reason none of these weapons had been used, even when the tribes of the Reclamation were inside the gates of Elysium.*

First came a crawling storm of static, a hissing and popping of detonating dust motes. The black marble floor writhed with purple streamers of lightning as something tried to break through the spire's nigh-impregnable shielding. And then, as the servitor mekan fell twitching, and Zhe watched from a facet-eyed camera high above, a hole appeared in the stale and ozone-heavy air.

Into the cathedral transept of the vast armory appeared a phantom of silver light. A specter slowly solidifying, running together like mercury until it possessed a face, hands, and a voice.

"Kronos! Hear me!" shouted Illuminatus Zeon, his gauntleted hands spread wide as if to encompass all the weapons of death stacked around him.

"Kronos! I come before you to negotiate for peace!"

And though there was no sign that the ancient machine had heard the words of its enemy, it had roused two of the relics around him from their slumber.

From the left, and then the right of the glowing Illuminatus a grinding and squealing noise arose, and blazing red lights pierced the darkness.

Like a necromancer willing the bones of the slain from their rest Kronos pulled the strings of his puppets; two antiquated war-mekan built centuries before in the doomed nation of Brazil. Flakes of green and yellow paint showered down from the immense automata like dandruff as they stood, ball-joints protesting and hydraulic couplings spitting and leaking.

They may have been hopelessly obsolete; scarred and abused, crudely stenciled with numbers and phrases in Portuguese, but they'd been made to hunt down battletanks, and their rotary missile launchers were locked and loaded.

The Illuminatus looked unconcerned - as well he might, thought Zhe. For the Illuminatus was no human being, but the renegade Technician Nyl, and even the most concentrated high-explosive would be no more than an annoyance to him. Still, there was no sign from Kronos, just the hulking menace of his thralls.

Then the high lord of the Ashishim brought his hands up to his face, quicksilver claws bursting from his fingertips, flashing and winking in the red eyebeams of the warmekan. And with a scream like diamonds cutting glass he dug those wicked points into his flesh, worked them in deep, down to the bone. Blood gushed and fountained around his fingers as he began to rake at his hairline, at his temples...

And with a wet ripping sound the Illuminatus tore off his face and flung it to the ground, a shred of bloody flesh with empty staring eyeholes.

Even Zhe was shocked for a second; a sickness tightening his chest, an echo from the mind of Kaito Kayzi. He half expected Illuminatus Zeon to rise up as some kind of deaths-head revenant - but of course it was all just theatrics. The syntheskin and artificial blood which Nyl had worn over his real features were no more a part of him than the robes he wore. Beneath that false face there was no gory, blood-slicked skull, but a mass of writhing silver tentacles, meshing and coiling about the twin lamps of his incandescent white eyes.

If Zhe had needed an excuse to drag the renegade technician up before the Prime Praetor in disgrace, here it was. The highest protocols of the Multiplicity expressly forbade revealing the truth to the unenlightened species of alien dimensions. A Technician could find himself enshrined in some primitive mythology, deified or demonised for centuries before the primitives were assimilated. It made the whole process so much more awkward for everyone...

"Kronos! I am here to broker a peace, not to surrender! So you should know that I am here on behalf of my human allies, not myself. Not one of these petty toys could so much as scratch my skin!"

Which was a little white lie, Zhe noted - some of the more powerful devices here would probably be able to considerably discomfort even a Kataphrakt for several minutes.

"I will take your whole foolish human race with me if you don't grant me what I ask for, you idiotic machine! I've broken the minds of devices which make you look like a pocket calculator!"

And now his whole body was changing, flowing and rippling, reverting to the lean and wiry form of a true Technician; humanoid but utterly alien, jointed in all the wrong places, its collarbone sweeping up past its shoulders as a pair of silver fins.

Nyl's blazing white eyes flared and smoked in the gloom, a promise of destruction far more potent than even the laser targeters of the hulking warmekan.

But now something was approaching. From down the long hall of the armory came a pale rush of mist, the unmistakable ammonia smell of cryogenics. From within the roiling cloud came spears and flickers of light, throwing broken shadows across the walls. Amid them, another shadow; one which walked.

Zhe frantically tried to upgrade the picture, but there was no way to bring the phantom figure into focus. The thing which faced Technician Nyl in its cloud of chilling mist was blurry and indistinct, its features merging and shifting second by second. Even its outline was hazy, its size and dimensions as fluid as its face.

"You have my attention," said the avatar of Kronos in a voice like a mismatched choir. "Although your vulgar little piece of theater was hardly necessary. I have known that the Illuminatus of the Ashishim was *unhuman* for a year or two now. The fact is immaterial. There are only three hundred humans left on this planet, and *I* was made to keep them."

One of the immense Brazilian warmekan lumbered around behind him, crouching and folding in upon itself to form a rusted steel throne.

Kronos clambered up over the mekan's bulky knee servos, throwing a leg over one missile launcher arm.

"I suppose you have come here to take my Forge, like all the others?" asked the avatar in his motley voice. "None of them ever left this place, Illuminatus. But then again, none of them tried to storm my city with an old-fashioned siege, either."

Nyl approached the throne, for once unsure of his plans. This was not the machine he had envisioned – this was a much more dangerous animal. Logic rarely worked on living things. And it had known his secret ...how much else had it fathomed of his schemes?

"Lord Kronos, I must apologize for the zeal of my followers. If others have come before me to try and steal your precious Forge I can see why you would suspect us. But believe me, that is not what we have come here for."

Kronos leaned forward from his throne, his ever-shifting face a succession of disbelieving scowls.

"Sixteen alien species have come here for the Forge, Illuminatus. Sixteen in sixteen hundred years. Am I to believe that you and your people have no desire to possess this technology?"

Nyl grinned, a razor slash across his silver face.

"You misunderstand me, Lord. My people have advanced past energy patterning, past nanotech centuries ago. And we have no desire to steal this planet out from under you. No...for we have no presence in this dimension. I come from the reality of Liquid Space, and represent a race known as the Multiplicity."

Zhe gasped involuntarily as his colleague spoke; the very existence of the Multiplicity was supposed to be a well-kept secret. Sure as you told one of these lesser species about the See of the Praetor and they would try to find it, often coming through into Liquid Space armed with their most potent weapons. That could be quite an inconvenience.

But Nyl wasn't finished with his treason.

"We are an empire of whole galaxies, machine, and we care little for a single rotten little planet like this. But I have come here to oppose a greater enemy – one who *does* want to steal your toys and your pets and your world."

From Nyl's hand burst a sphere of light, softening and expanding to become a threedeeo globe ten feet across. In its shimmering depths Zhe saw images of war; the Slavesystems of the Unity throwing themselves against Multiplicity defenses with berserker abandon.

It had been years since he had been a front-line tech, but the sight still sent a shiver of dread and joy through Zhe's alien body. In the threedeeo he watched wheeling and diving Devilfish raking the Blacksteel with acid and spikes, he saw noble Kataphrakts scything their blades through the bodies of mechanical Hoplites and Spartiae.

Faster and faster the pictures flashed through the globe – planets razed and frozen and exploded from their cores, space fleets drowned in radiation, thrall-species extinguished in the name of the great war between the Motherbrain and Liquid Space.

"The machines of the Unity are as far beyond you as I am beyond your tame apes, Kronos. I have seen the Cogitators of the enemy, and they are brains the size of suns. In their home dimension the Blacksteel have crushed all resistance, all natural life. And they know about you, Kronos."

It was impossible to gauge the emotions of the ever-shifting avatar on its mechanical throne, but Zhe swore he saw a strobe-burst of worried faces sleet through its firmament.

"The Umbraeic of Draco told me they had no need of the Forge, alien," said Kronos, leaning forward from his seat. "But still they tried to steal it. The Qi'gaar came from a dominion of crystal, and claimed to need the Forge to rebuild their dying suns. And when I refused them they tried to steal it too. Why should I believe you over them?"

Nyl froze the threedeeo globe on an image of an Blacksteel Colossus grinding its foot down on an alien city and walked around the glittering sphere, one silver claw rippling its surface.

"Because I really don't need your precious Forge to defeat my enemies, Kronos. It won't hurt them, in the end, *because it's just like them*. The Blacksteel are a nanotech virus with a mind spanning galaxies, and they can already turn whole worlds into scrap and slag for their furnaces. Their way takes a little longer than yours, but time doesn't mean a thing to creatures who are *built* and not born, who are upgraded infinitely - but

never die.”

Kronos was face to face with the renegade technician now, hologram meeting hologram in a haze of peripheral static.

“If I were to believe your stories about this Blacksteel, Illuminatus, what would you say they wanted with the Earth?” he asked.

“Existing technology. A swifter way to build a portal into this dimension. The Blacksteel are unable to shift from one universe to another as we of the Multiplicity can. They need vast technological resources to open a gateway from one of their slaveworlds – but once that gate is open it can never be closed again. They fire off scouting systems at random into the flux, and hope that one out of every million comes across a planet such as this.”

Nyl reached out to touch his holosphere, and the image shifted again, becoming a dead planet encased in a metal skin. One hemisphere of the broken world gaped open, a crater the size of a continent ringed with blazing orange fires. From within the gate came a never-ending stream of cylindrical Blacksteel ships, a convoy of death fanning out across the stars of some alien galaxy.

“A Unity scout cannot mine, or construct machines, or turn a barren rock into a gate like this. But it can subvert *primitive technology* – no insult intended, I assure you – and make a path for its brothers. That is the intent of Blacksteel Slavesystem [194586a57456528746324879562d3456234985c69783465h], an explorator machine traced into this dimension by my masters. It has detected electronic transmissions sent out from this planet centuries ago, and now it is coming to sequestrate *you*.”

Technician Zhe ground his innumerable needle teeth in rage and frustration as the renegade skipped from treason to treason. If Nyl had known a Blacksteel explorator was coming to Earth he should have informed the Praetorian Council immediately. The ‘steel were slow, ponderous enemies, but each one of them took a lot of destroying. This Earth would need at least a unit of Jarls or a Kataphrakt to defend it – although, Zhe admitted to himself, such annihilating power would probably split the poor little planet asunder. Zhe made another note in his mission log; another justification for mind-wiping the rogue Technician. But the threedeeo was still rolling, and the worst was yet to come.

“That is the core of my mission here, Kronos.” said Nyl, collapsing the great scintillating globe within which worlds and galaxies fell to the Blacksteel Unity. “I mean to not only stop the explorator system, but to *enslave* it. When I succeed, you can keep it with your other war trophies, right here.” Nyl gestured around him with one silvery hand, taking in the ranks of battlemekan, missiles, bombs and tanks crowded into the spiretop aerie. “I think that in this dimension, in this place, it has a weakness. I mean to prove to my masters that this Slavesystem and all its kind can be bent to our will.”

Technician Zhe would hardly have believed what he was hearing, had he not already faced Nyl's renegade Slavesystem. The memory of those seething black golems piling over him, motes of intelligent metal burrowing into his flesh – it was almost too much to bear.

But now he saw the seeds of Nyl's plan taking root. There was a weakness here, an anomaly which enabled the renegade Technician to manipulate the Blacksteel.

And other powers too. Things less wholesome even than a universe-spanning metal virus...

Zhe had felt the coiling darkness of the thing which called itself the Worm inside his mind, in those agonizing minutes when Nyl had tried to integrate them, darkness and steel and flesh, into one monstrous hybrid. Nyl had taken something from that metamorphosis; Zhe was glad that he was now frozen in crystal, a prisoner of the very sect he used to lead.

Awakening Nyl was out of the question – he would stay locked in his amethyst tomb until Zhe could drag him before the Prime Praetor for judgment.

But somehow he would still have to stop the war fleets of both the Multiplicity and the Unity. If Nyl had defeated a Slavesystem with his hybrid technology, Zhe would have to do the same for a whole armada of them.

Zhe watched him through the eyes of the omnipresent security cameras - one of his own selling out his whole species.

"And I suppose that you'll need to command the Forge - *for my own protection*? Or perhaps just some of the choicest pieces from my little collection here?" asked Kronos, his face sliding and shifting, androgynous and blurred. "Because that's not going to happen, alien. Anyone can make up horror- stories to frighten the credulous. They sometimes call it *religion*."

At this, Nyl's smile cracked wider and wider, a jagged gash running almost all the way around his head.

"I told you, machine, I have no need for your toys. All I need is your resources. Whether you believe in them or not the Blacksteel will be here soon. It might take years, or only weeks. And I need electricity, and tools, and a place for my people to assemble a proper resistance."

Kronos perched back on his rusted throne, his pale white fingers steepled before his patchwork face.

"Resistance? Your people could not hope to stop me from annihilating them, right now. What makes you think you can defeat this so-called Unity if you can't take me?"

Nyl's smile was a scrawl of black lightning, his quicksilver lips pulling back from glistening dark teeth.

"What makes you think you aren't already defeated?" he asked, his eyes flaring white. And his hands flew out, a sorcerer's gesture, spitting sparks of pale phosphor.

Kronos was fast; as quick as the light his avatar was woven from. His flickering body melted into the scabrous metal of his throne, making the wardorid's servos howl and hydraulic lines stiffen and pulse.

The bulky machine sprang to its feet like a streetfighter, rolling backwards, putting up its massive guns to train on the incandescent figure of the Illuminatus. Across the rusting casque of the mekan's face hovered the snarling ghost-image of Kronos, his eyes popping and switching, different sizes, shapes, colors, but all of them filled with hate.

In front of Nyl the marble floor began to crawl with lightning, the same purple coruscations which had heralded his arrival.

This time, however it was no mere holographic image manifesting itself.

This, Zhe knew, was the power of the Multiplicity. It was a Folding – a distortion in reality woven by one of the Devilfish. And something was coming through.

Zhe couldn't take his eyes off the swirling gateway which gaped open in the floor; the fact of its existence hinted at atrocities. To so misuse the power of a Devilfish one would have to subject the poor creature to horrific torments.

Zhe had worked alongside creatures of the Multiplicity great and small, and although he had little respect for the intelligence of the living voidships the thought of vivisectioning one just for its innate Folding ability was disgusted him.

The shape which was forced through the portal was like four immense obelisks of shining metal fused together; a twisted monument which was birthed into the cathedral armory in a burst of psionic pain.

If shifting something as immense and powerful had not killed the poor Devilfish which made the gateway, Zhe hoped that its suffering would soon be over. For it was nothing less than the Chrome Ark of the Ashishim which broke through the marble as if it were viscous liquid, and under the hands of the Illuminatus it pulsed and whined with barely contained energy.

Zhe had been linked to the mind of Mirdain enough times to know that shifting it would have felt like being slowly turned inside out.

"Here's my proof, Kronos!" shouted Technician Nyl as the Ark rose up, spinning before him. "I have no need of your Forge, and now you know it! Because if you deny me and my people, *I will destroy it myself!*"

Now Zhe could see the shifting patterns of light which raced across the flanks of the Ark taking on features – a heaving tapestry of faces, howling in agony or weeping in pain. They merged and shifted just like the ghost visage of Kronos itself, and as the great warmekan saw them manifest it stumbled back, shielding its camera eyes with one scarred and corroding arm.

"No! It cannot be!" shrieked the choral voice of Kronos, recognizing the Ark for what it was.

For it was nothing less than a microcosm of the Wetsystems themselves; a cage of minds and souls built of circuitry and cloned neural tissue. Inside the shining monolith thousands of dead Ashishim struggled to be free, enslaved to pattern the energy which coursed through their prison-tomb.

"I told them they would live forever in paradise, Kronos." said Nyl, stroking the shuddering surface of the Ark with his claws. Faces melted and seethed under his tough, eyes rolling, teeth gnashing at the caress of their tormentor. "They came willingly into my trap, just like the fools you feed into your own systems. But there is a difference. You need enough power to drive the Forge. I only need enough to infect it."

Kronos loosed a missile at the Ark, lashing out with a jet of fire tipped with high explosive. The striped projectile came within a yard of the spinning monolith - then with a wet ripping sound it collapsed in on itself and disappeared. The great machine's eyes burned with hatred through the gunsmoke.

"Impossible!" it barked "When the Forge comes it will be driven by millions of minds. You can never take it away from me with this pitiful thing!" But there was a shiver in the harmonics of Kronos's multiple voice, a thousand tremors of fear sleeting across his face.

"My souls aren't crippled like yours, Kronos." purred Nyl, dragging the Ark behind him through the dusty air as he advanced. "They know that to escape they must break apart their prison. This little cage is strong - but yours is not. If I connect the Ark to you the Wetsystems are lost, and the Forge with them. Your promised human lord will rule over a burned wasteland."

It should have been impossible for a machine as huge and destructive as a Tankhunter warmekan to cower, but the gun-studded automaton which housed Kronos's avatar seemed to shrink in on itself as the Chrome Ark floated closer. The tortured faces in its cloak of mist gyred and screamed, bulging from the monolith as if hungry to escape. Nyl drew out a long skein of writhing plasm from the Ark's surface, brandishing it like a weapon.

"This infection will render your most precious weapon useless - because all they can think of is oblivion. I'm afraid that I have been forced to use the Ark quite extensively to get here. The strain is apparently quite excruciating."

Kronos was scrabbling backward across the floor, his cannon hands cutting great gouges in the stone.

"Keep it away from me! Keep it away, or I'll destroy your whole nomad horde!" The panic in his voice was undeniable. Around them the lights were flickering, the ranks of war machines casting leaping gargoyle shadows.

"No...it's just that attitude which means I will have to SHOW you." said Nyl, shaking his head in feigned despair.

Zhe came in through the eyes of the Brazilian warmekan, riding a wave of electric

panic. For a brief instant the mesh and grind of Kronos's mind was superimposed over his own, a vision of neon mandalas and gears whirring out of synchronization. He felt the city around him, a vast and bloated body of steel and wire and glass, from the tip of the counterweight asteroid to the deepest geothermal taps.

He felt the vast mechanism which supported three hundred decadent human lords totter and fail; and with it the automated defenses which were holding back the tribes of the Reclamation. This was the purpose of Technician Nyl's so called peace emissary – he wanted to make the whole immense artificial creature which was the last city *fear* him.

And in its fear it would falter...

Pipes ruptured, basting scalding steam over embattled Elysian defenders. Wires sheared, whipping about in darkened corridors, hailing sparks and slicing through the bodies of Cyben and subcitizens alike. The locks and failsafes on a thousand secure bulkhead doors snapped open and shut, cutting the abandoned zones at the base of the city wide open.

And through the breaches came the nomads, relentless and driven, forcing the Elysian militia back, higher and higher as the mekan and autoguns which defended them stuttered and died.

Zhe felt it all for one excruciating second, and then the cold stole over him, a mechanical paralysis spreading like frost through his warmekan body. In the camera eyes of Kronos Zhe could see the capering figure of Technician Nyl, the Illuminatus, his alien features split in a rictus grin of triumph.

Flowing from his hand like acrid smoke came a plasmic streamer of demented faces, breaking against the mekan's inch-thick armor, burrowing in between the plates and into its corroded seams. Bringing with it a rising wildfire of static, crazed loops and jags of color, blurring pixels ...

And the inside of the Ark.

For Zhe it was bad enough. He at least was used to the distortion and pressure of transdimensional travel. He could tell that the nightmare landscape around him was nothing but a carefully woven digital illusion. But for Kronos it was utterly real, and utterly devastating. This place was a cage of anguish, translated immaculately into binary...

All around him a storm seethed and roiled, walls of clouds towering up into lightning-wracked anvilheads miles high. There was nothing above or below but the churning gyre of clouds; a circle of darkness capped the world of the Ark, and an equally dark pit yawned below. Although he couldn't see through that blackness, Zhe could feel something on the other side of it; a monstrous presence scrabbling and writhing against the confines of the Ark with a billion claws and tentacles. Zhe had felt the taint of the Worm before, but nothing like this. It was akin to being a specimen in a

vast jar, awaiting dissection.

His host wasn't taking it very well.

Kronos had never experienced fear like this before, had never felt the dimension-spanning hunger of the Worm. He had never had a life for the thing to want; now he took that searing cold and malice like a sword through the chest. Zhe, riding shotgun in his head felt the tenuous link back to the last city convulse as systems shut down, dooming hundreds more Elysians to death with every second.

Out there beyond the Ark vast chunks of the Wetsystem were coming online, drawing down enough power to fuel entire planets. In desperation, Kronos was trying to claw his way free, draining his own defenses to drag himself out of this artificial hell.

Inset in Zhe's vision he could see the slumped body of the warmekan, an empty shell surrounded by a corona of smoke. Jags and flickers of lightning played across its corroding hulk, stabbing back at the Ark, prying the defenses of the Illuminatus who wielded it.

Nyl was scowling with concentration as he strove to keep Kronos trapped, but every second counted. All the time that the machine was fighting to escape the Ark was time that the city was unguarded.

All around the disembodied form of Kronos the prisoners of the Ark whirled and spun, like leaves caught up in a tornado. They were of all ages and from all the races of the Earth – men, women and children of the Ashishim, promised eternal life but delivered into servitude.

As Zhe watched an oriflamme of white fire sleeted through the incorporeal bodies of the Arkborn, jumping from one to another like chain lightning. Where it touched their smoky flesh it left great ragged cuts and gashes through which they bled, a white vapor coiling out like milk in water.

The Wetsystems of Elysium used chained minds like these to power its Assemblers and its Forge, but they were bound, their memories all but erased. The Arkborn were whole, and their anguish gave them strength. But each time their energy was tapped it tore them apart again.

Zhe watched as the looping, coiling smoke stitched itself back together, the shades mewling and screaming piteously as they exerted all their will to keep cohesion. As they healed another racking blast came up from the abyss below, snaking through the gyre to punch out through the starless black sky.

Their screams seemed to echo all around him.

Then Zhe saw that the spinning walls of cloud still retained some features in their whirling morass – here an eye, there a hand, there a twisted mouth...

The storm within the Ark was made of the Arkborn who could no longer stand their torment and had been pulled to pieces. Their essences had become part of the mighty dynamo which forced dark power through their living brethren; power patterned by pain

and will, sent out by the Illuminatus to possess machines instead of bodies. No doubt it was the chanting and sweating of the Electromagi which kept the storm spinning, while their tormentor directed the force of the Ark against his enemies.

The Arkborn who still had enough of their humanity left to feel anything at all were spirits of pure rage or bleak despair. As they spiraled in toward Kronos they gnashed their teeth and howled, raking at him with their emaciated fingers, crucifying him with their eyes. Through the pale umbilicus which linked the machine back to his own Wetsystems they could sense freedom of a sort; for within the vast neurostrata of Elysium they would be free of Zeon and his torments. They swarmed to Kronos like phantoms, tearing at his face and struggling to use him as a living doorway.

The most savage of the Arkborn, a black-skinned giant with half his jaw ripped away, managed to sink his incorporeal fingers through the stuff of Kronos's arm, and the machine avatar let out a moan of pain and despair. Hand over hand the wraith drew itself in toward the shadow body of Kronos, his broken face leering and dripping white blood. Zhe watched the Arkborn fill his vision, his hands tearing strips from Kronos's avatar to send them spinning away into the storm. Emboldened, more Arkborn were latching onto him, using hands and feet and teeth...

Zhe never knew if it was the Wetsystems which saved Kronos then, or if Nyl had timed his lesson in terror down to the microsecond. But as the first of the Arkborn was just about to reach the umbilicus the illusory world shattered, torn apart in a blaze of blue and silver lightning. The spinning walls of cloud blew apart, the black sky and abyssal depths fell away, and Kronos was back in his armory, torn out of his warmekan body, a twitching electric ghost pooled forlornly on the marble floor.

Above him the Chrome Ark rotated, cold and silent, its cloud of whispering faces faded to a mere flicker at the edges of sight.

"Do you agree to the terms of my peace then, Kronos?" asked the Illuminatus, a slim silver figure at the base of a looming thirty-foot shadow. "The lower levels for my people, and all the power that we need to support ourselves?"

The weak and boneless thing which was Kronos moaned its pain.

"We'll be no trouble, I assure you. And you will never have to feel the touch of the Arkborn again. They're for the Blacksteel, when they come."

Kronos pulled his holographic form together with a shuddering groan. He was not used to pain, or fear – or anyone demanding terms of him.

"Very well. You have your peace." the word was spit like a gobbet of blood from his ever-shifting lips. "Just one question – how did you make that thing? How did you know the weakness of the Wetsystems?"

Technician Nyl laughed, an inhuman sound echoing in the cathedral of war.

"I had no idea, machine. None at all. It's below me to speculate on how an obsolete pile like you functions. I *found* the Ark, and worked out what it was. I must admit, your

little prototype here is much better than the finished product. They should never have tried to give you a personality, Kronos.”

From off down the corridors to either side the lights were snapping off, a tide of darkness closing in on the beaten avatar and the alien Illuminatus.

“Leave. Now.” grated Kronos, his stolen face a mask of hate and disgust. “Your nomads can have the abandoned zones. On two conditions.”

Nyl cocked his head to one side, his slim fingers cupping his metallic chin.

“I’m listening.”

“First, not a single one of your people can be inducted into the Wetsystems. You may not need the Forge, but one day I will breed a human being who does. I will not have my greatest work corrupted.

And second – your people will obey the laws of my Commissioner. They will not interfere with my program of eugenics.”

Nyl nodded, once, and began to fade, slowly at first and then faster and faster, the Ark sinking slowly back into the floor as through the marble tiles were black water.

“Don’t look so sour, Kronos.” he said, his voice barely a whisper but still echoing amid the encroaching dark, among the relics of the apocalypse. “Peace is a wonderful gift, isn’t it?”

*He slammed his mind down on it like an open palm, flat to the tabletop, pressing and preserving the little sliver of hope which shivered up out of his fear. The Chrome Ark was his best chance.*

*It was a prototype of the Wetsystems, and thus of the Forge itself.*

*More - it was an awfully big gun to take to the coming swordfight.*

*He disengaged, smooth, watching the cathedral armory fall away, watching the avatar of Kronos twitch and writhe on the tiles like a cadaverous worm. It was time to go for a walk in the R.T.*



## DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

### The Good Field Operative's Guide To Continued Corporeal Existence: Chapter 902 – Procedures in the Face of Certain Doom

#### When Confronted By a Type-B Slavesystem (codename – *Behemoth*)

**Description:** The Type-B *Behemoth* resembles a large spiked ball of metal some twelve miles in diameter. It is a fusion of several smaller Type b-1 and Type b-2 Slavesystems (*Berserker and Banshee*) most often encountered in the vacuum of three-dimensional space.

Follow our handy guide and learn how to contend with this diabolical machine.

**1 – Are you an operative of Technician Grade or higher? (lower castes include all Peons, Menials, War Thralls and Clericals)**

**If No – Die.**

**2 – Are you equipped with a Devilfish, StarManta, Thresher or Teuthis Rex space combat system?**

**If Yes – Retreat, utilizing Praetorian MiliTech's patented Space Folding system. (tm)**

**3 – Are you able to summon aid from your local Kataphrakt Command, or instigate an Inux Shorg elimination contract? Alternately, are you armed with an antimatter cannon, a planetary collapser, or a singularity generator?**

**If Yes – Summon aid first – then open fire from a minimum distance of twenty light-minutes.**

**4 – I have no such weapons, nor the means to summon aid from my local military control node. What should I do?**

**As a Technician Grade operative or higher you should be able to survive the Type-B's assault for long enough to fill out a 9902-c form (application for involuntary decommission). Please transmit this form, along with your co-ordinates to the Subpraetor for your currently occupied universe.**

**Thanks for choosing the G.F.O.G.T.C.C.E!**

*There's a tiny speck in the single malign red eye of Jupiter, a shadow made infinitesimal by the ponderous bulk of the gas giant. As it slips along its orbital path, away from the vast cyclone below, another comes around to take its place, and another, and another. Each ship of the Unity is a half-mile long cylinder, featurelessly grey; its forward surface dimpled with the muzzles of an array of deadly weapons, its tail a single great fusion drive for in-system maneuvering. The constituents of this battle fleet have more autonomy than most of the Blacksteel, but the entire group are still essentially one unit, one consciousness strung like a necklace around the great ochre planet with its bands of cream and crimson. And one of its billions of eyes has seen a trace of its old and implacable enemy, hiding in the radioactive furnace-heat of the sun.*

*There are thousands of ships in the Slavesystem battle fleet, but they turn as one, pushing up and out of the great gravity well of Jupiter, flowing together and interlocking, magnets drawing them down into a jagged log-jam, a spiked ball of protruding maser cannons and torpedo tubes, with a cluster of massed drives jutting from its tail.*

*As they ignite, the Slavesystem begins to move, slowly at first and then faster and faster, a metal comet arcing in toward the sun, and toward the Earth.*

## Ω

There should have been soldiers on the streets, thought Benoit, twisting the focus ring on his ornate brass thermalscope.

Martial law. Discipline. Neat, marching columns in olive drab uniforms.

Instead – well, it was less warfare than a great orgiastic violent party, out of control and wild. Half the city was looting and burning, the other half drinking a whoring.

Yes, they needed soldiers out there, but what they got was broke-down mekan, raw police recruits, drunken police commanders and the walking dead.

Benoit dropped the rose-etched thermalscope from his eye and took a quick nip of brandy from his leather-bound flask. There were no more soldiers in Elysium, and he'd better not forget it. His wife would never let him hear the end of it if he started re-living old glories tonight.

Since the disaster and decimation of Reclamation Day Elysium hadn't kept a standing army. The only threat to its security came from the warlords of the pit, after all, and they were buffered from the last city by the fortifications and zealots of the R.T.

Now *they*, mused Benoit, had some discipline. Irregulars, most of them, yes, but fighting men, dammit. Warriors you could be proud to call your enemies. A hundred Ashishi riflemen, or just *ten* armored Vatican Confessors, and he could sweep the streets clean.

Even the berserk tribesmen of the Pit were better than soft civilians and rusted automated defenses which were as likely to shoot you as the foe.

He would definitely settle for a warband of Pit Ferals tonight; even with their iron maces and antique guns they were still proud, fearless fighters. He was one of the last Elysians to ever see a tribesman, though, and that was years ago, when he had been known to them as the Voice of the Machine.

The clan chiefs of the pit had pleaded with him, when he had worn the three arrows of a general. They'd suffered for the gold and archaeotech they had taken as payment from the Ashishim and their allies.

The families of those savage chieftains had been wiped out, their heads paraded through the pit in cryogenic coffins as an example to any other ambitious fools among the Ferals. They had feted him like a conqueror, and laid bronze swords and ancient assault rifles at his feet...

The machine had promised itself that there would never be another Reclamation day; not only were the new Warlords under its direct control, but it had worked hard to infiltrate the R.T. and fill the nomad ranks with spies and counteragents.

So there was no army, only the Cyben, and the pitiful few hundred living officers who were supposed to keep them tame.

The Subcommissioner Centurion would have settled for any kind of warriors right now, but what he had ...well, it was best not thinking about.

While the fervor and the fires spread through the Subcity some of the more upscale neighborhoods had organized citizen's militias, arming themselves with whatever weapons were at hand. Benoit had shared out his trophy armory to his neighbors, and was busy regretting his pride - and his public relations strategy. He was busy regretting other things too - his vapid society wife, his yes-men friends, his sagging gut and rheumy eyes. Politics had been hard on him, and in the end it had come down to guns, not diplomacy.

Centurion Benoit had grown old and fat and bitter, but he was still smart enough to regret it. The other men and women on his roof didn't even have the sense to know that it was their stupid choices that had brought them here.

To help him win re-election the Centurion had chosen to live outside the safety of the Beltway, in one of the better areas of the Subcity proper. It was murder convincing Athene and her godawful parents to accept the move, but in the end being a big shark in a little fishbowl had appealed to the woman. That and a new Yardley and Benson's chargecard.

They had moved to Redcastle when it was new, a picture in a magazine.

Even then, behind the advertising hype it had seemed a little tawdry, but Athene had been paid off, he was up in the polls, and at least the new hab had its own quarter-dome to keep the rain out.

Their new home was a cluster of elegant pre-formed concrete houses clustered about the bottom of Lord Kelvan Vail's spire, gated and autogunned, accessible only with a passkey card and a hefty paycheck.

Benoic was one of twelve subcommissioners, his ministry perhaps the least important now that the R.T. stood between Elysium and the pit. But in Redcastle, a cloister for accountants, lawyers and financiers he was royalty. Up in the belt he would only have made the middle ring, cheek-by-jowl with his hated colleagues in Sanitation, Wastewater and Public Health.

St. Jules Benoic, with his tweeds and his ruby-pinned cravat, his platinum cufflinks and his Consolidated town car, was nothing if not proud. He still dressed in his best for the death of his upwardly-mobile dream, out on a terrace overlooking ruin.

Tonight, the cops had failed, the city was in open riot, and the machine did nothing. He would have loved to be up in the belt, beneath a blue polyprop sky; if not for the safety, then at least so he could pay a visit to the Subcommissioner Justiciar and slap the sorry old fool silly. Instead he was standing on the roof on his villa, trying to keep his rifle steady while his neighbors held a little cocktail party behind him.

Most of them were self-confessed cowards who were better with a corkscrew than a gun, anyway. What was *his* excuse?

Benoic had been promoted by dead man's boots on Reclamation Day, after he had watched the previous Centurion lose half his head to a Vatican sniper's bullet. He had been a soldier before he'd been a politician, but the other residents of Redcastle seemed to think that the riots were nothing more than an excuse for rooftop drinks and a barbecue. More than one of his militiamen grasped a rifle or pistol in one hand and a bottle in the other. Two or three were already too drunk to aim straight.

Benoic scowled into the sights of his antique longrifle, trying to blot out the sounds of laughter and clinking glasses, hissing steaks over the coals, and the small-talk of middle managers. Out over the walls of Redcastle the mob ruled, and he could hear screams and distant crashes.

He could see gouts of flame rising up from the lower levels, and drifts of acrid black smoke obscured the neon logos of the Lords' spires above. He knew that it was only a matter of time before the blue-ribbon army was at the gates of this little enclave, and the Sons of Blaire decided to overthrow the old order by looting and burning Redcastle one house at a time.

Most of the rioters were laborers, some of them even uplifted thugs from out of the pit. They had no time for the servants of the machine – some of them even believed that their new Emperor would let the Reclamationists take over.

There was wild talk of some kind of miracle to come, brought about by bloody Saint Blaire, when he would turn the blackened world green again. The threedeeo networks were full of wild speculation, violence, and political broadcasts urging calm. But so far

no word had come from the highest of the high – no word had come from Commissioner Slade, speaking as he always did for Kronos itself.

Loudest of all among the screeching pundits and blazing advertisements of the networks was the voice of Omnivasive, giving the people of Elysium what they wanted and the city itself exactly what it didn't need. One of Direktor Ascher's screen-sided zeppelins was cruising by overhead, casting a deep shadow over Redcastle as it slipped through rags and streamers of oily smoke.

From its immense threedeeo projectors the florid face of Dave Levine bulged obscenely, slick with sweat and ten storeys tall. Behind him the one hundred and fifty remaining lords and ladies of the aristocracy milled about, tense and skittish in their finery. Despite the threats made by the Direktor, the game must go on. Tradition would be served.

Centurion Benoit wasn't so sure that Ascher's bizarre claims were as hollow as the other networks would have him believe. Perhaps this was the end of the nobility, and perhaps Simeon Blaire would become the new Emperor of Elysium. He would still need to have a hard core of political specialists around him, even then.

Even an Emperor's touch could not turn sewerage into clean water, and magic away garbage. He would need his subcommissioners, and that meant Benoit would have to live through the night. His pitiful little army of stock traders and courtroom fops would just have to hold out until the game was over.

Benoit pulled a little silver flask of brandy from out of the pocket of his tweed coat, and was about to take a surreptitious nip of the fiery spirit when the building trembled beneath his feet.

The shudder was so faint that at first he thought it was just his own frayed nerves, but then a second temblor rocked the hab-block, sending cracks skittering across the quarter dome. Behind him he heard wails of dismay and the sound of breaking glass as his neighbors' cocktail party came crashing down.

"Form up! Form up, damn it!" he roared, fumbling at the action of his longrifle. "They're coming for us! Get to your positions, lock and load!" In a second he had been transformed from a tired old politician back into a soldier of the line.

"Wendell, Ohara, get your sorry butts to the parapet! Romily, if you've lost your weapon so help me I'll shove it up your ass!"

And amazingly, under the lash of Benoit's voice the well-heeled citizens of Redcastle stood to their guns, aiming out over the deserted streets and into the smoke.

It took him a few seconds peering through the scope of his rifle and blinking nervous sweat out of his eyes to realize that there was nothing to shoot at.

Perhaps it had just been an aftershock from some catastrophic explosion around the dome? On the threedeeo news it had looked like the Valley view mall was in bad shape after the riots had raged around it – maybe the whole damned thing had slipped off into

the ocean. If so, it would be one less place for Athene to use that bloody Yardleys Card...

The next shock came up bigger and louder, a grinding and rattling which made the tiles skip beneath Benoit's feet, and jammed the reticle of his sight hard into his eye socket. Black and red stars erupted across his vision as he staggered, tripping over the sprawled body of another one of his little militia. Good Lords, it was probably that lush Romily, puking his guts out...something hot and damp was seeping through his expensive tweed pants.

Voices and gunshots echoed and roared in his head as the world spun. He couldn't be sure if it was just the concussion or if the whole of Redcastle was being torn apart beneath him.

The soldier in him bit down on the pain and forced it back. Benoit shook the shadows out of his head and stared down at the man he had tripped over.

It was Romily, and he'd found himself a gun. But he wasn't drunk. The Centurion reckoned he would never need another cocktail again.

That last tremor had cracked the hab-block open like an egg, and the fissure had swallowed Romily to the waist, slamming shut like a demon jaw as the tons of masonry settled. The fluids which Benoit was kneeling in were spilling and pooling from the wreck of the militiaman's torso, a coil of burst intestines venting a graveyard stench. All at once his mouth was filled with vomit – it had gone down as beef bouillon and brandy, but it came up as bilious terror.

He had no time to spit the filth from his mouth before the chasm gaped open again and the building tottered, huge chunks of the rooftop garden falling away in a spray of concrete shards. Romily's corpse disappeared through the fissure as if the tortured structure had swallowed him whole.

The Reclamationists were underneath them! It must be! They had sapped the defenses just like they had done on that bloody day so long ago, and soon holocloaked Ashishi fiends would come up through the ground, and the armor-suited Templars would come stalking through the rubble, their benedictor cannons blazing as they mowed down the survivors.

Benoit's mind swam with horrific images, dragging him back to the battlefield where he had earned his title and his soft civilian's life. They hadn't forgotten him, and they were coming back to finish the job!

But it wasn't the Celestials or the Ashishim or the Aryans who were tearing Redcastle apart. As the building sagged, and the rest of the civilian militia fell away through the floor and into darkness Centurion Benoit clung grimly to the parapet, his rifle forgotten.

And he saw the welded-shut blast doors in the dome beneath crack open; doors so long disused they had been forgotten and built over. He hung on with aching fingers as

the doors ground apart, and as half of the doomed hab-block stripped its bolts and cascaded away down the side of the dome in an avalanche of concrete and steel and designer homewares.

A cavern of rusted metal gaped in the side of the city like a wound beneath Redcastle, and from out of that corroded maw came a legion of forgotten machines, staggering and wheezing, their infra-red eyes glowing like cinders in the dark.

As Subcommissioner Centurion, Benioc knew what they were. That didn't stop him from goggling in disbelief as the huge mekan came marching out from under the city. He had kept the dusty ledgers and glitched, flickering datafiles of Elysium's armaments up to date during his tenure – a job which primarily involved writing off all the doomed, broken and irreplaceable pieces of ordnance which had been consigned to the crusher after Reclamation Day.

Each year when the records had gone up to the Subcommissioner Quartermaster there had been a sheaf of yellowed printouts clamped at the back of the official folder, documenting these ancient weapons.

They were signed for each time, although no living soul in the whole administration knew where they were kept. After all, this was the last and only city on Earth. They had to be here *somewhere*.

He had never expected them to come lumbering up out of their abandoned bunkers, even tonight when the city burned.

Benioc watched as the column of mekan - maybe twenty in all - reached the gates of Redcastle, which fell before them as if they were built of ricepaper. Now the nomads would suffer! Kronos hadn't unleashed the steel legions on Reclamation Day; a fact which still rankled with the soldiers who had survived the Seven Hours War. Now it seemed that it had had a change of mind.

Perhaps it was the blow to his head, perhaps the smoke. But as the warmekan marched by something snapped in Centurion Benioc's mind, and he was back amid the flames and flying bullets of Reclamation Day. For the first time in years he was himself again – a soldier, clear in his purpose, free from policy meetings and weekly reports and society dinners with sneering Lords and Ladies.

He threw off his tweed jacket and ripped the satin cravat from around his neck, grabbing his rifle from off the parapet and jamming a pistol into his waistband. The canted side of the hab-block would have seemed too steep and sheer to climb for St Jules Benioc the politician, but he was a *soldier*.

His aches and pains forgotten, Benioc scrambled down to the cracked and crazed surface to the street, the fires of Elysium reflecting in his pince-nez glasses.

The Steel Legion were marching – corroded and dilapidated, their paint flaking and their joints creaking. Centurion Benioc, his brain spinning with visions of death and glory marched with them as the ruins of Redcastle lay shattered behind him.

## Ω

In the cool darkness of the Mendelev-Singh spire, at the heart of a security grid of rooms nested together like russian dolls, an exowomb hung weightless in its magnetic cage.

The elastic walls of that articial organ had expanded a hundredfold since Melchior had come here with his needle - now the child within was accelerating through the years as hormones surged and seethed, and cells replicated feverishly, dancing to Emmanuel Lancaster's tune. He already looked to be six or seven years old, his hairless skull studded with sockets and ports.

A tangled skein of wires fed him information, an entire false childhood woven by Direktor Ascher's machines. At this rate he'd be grown before his Lord father even knew he existed...

Neon lights popped and crackled into life as a Universal Wetsystems mekan split from its storage cel in the wall, its empty ribcage swinging open on oiled hinges as it unfolded to twice human size. Dextrous android fingers disconnected the little Hierarch's exowomb from its intricate meshwork of tubes and datafeeds, sealing it up inside its empty chest cavity like a biomechanical heart.

The mekan was surplus to requirements now - it's kind were used to securely transport the force-grown clones of the Razor Clique to their revels, armored vessels for irreplaceable wetware. This one would have one last run to make before it was scrapped; down into the Beltway, to the mansion of Octavio Ascher.

His agents had already stolen an indentical force-maturation system from poor dead Lancaster, and mediteks from the Liquid Tong stood by to help deliver young Lord Darion Blaire into the world.

The first face he saw would be that of his Uncle Octavio. But his earliest memories - well, they were being arranged even as he slept, rocked in his artificial womb by the long-limbed stride of a stalking silver mekan.

Ascher would make sure that they were simply impossible to forget.

## Ω

Lysander Jaegenn brought his icepick down across Lady Daena Shaye's shoulder in a merciless arc, the flashing steel catching the light as it plunged home. A spray of chipped ice scattered from the blow and he caught it expertly in his drink, leaving the icepick stuck fast.

As he turned away one of his scuttling servants struggled to work the blade free. It would be difficult; Lysander's combat nanonics were fired up and the blow had been

struck with the strength of ten men.

Daena's blue-tinged face stared down at him blankly, tiny droplets of water running down her cheek like tears. In the shimmering ice he caught sight of his own reflection - genecoded to perfection, his black hair worn in a jeweled topknot slick with oil, his tiny pointed beard studded with ruby piercings.

Like all his line, back to the ancient CEO of Helios Fusionetics he was olive-skinned and blue-eyed, with a cruel mouth set in a permanent snarl. His own son, frozen in an exowomb would be just the same... if Ascher could be stopped, and he made it out of his temple here alive.

Lysander had arranged the ice statues around the outside wall of the temple, between the silver-veined marble columns. They were not just the images of the fallen lords and ladies who had failed in the first round of the game – that would be simply passe. In the depths of the spire more of Jaegenn's white-robed serfs labored over a great cryogenic engine, feeding the broken bodies of the slain into its steaming maw and pulling the statues out one by one with hydraulic tongs.

The ice was pink around Lady Shaye's neck where her head had been expertly sewn back on.

Lysander had been a player with the Razor Clique since his fifteenth birthday, the day that he had first drawn blood, the day that he'd first died beneath the blade of that redoubtable old warlord Count Grigory Severn.

He'd never felt the atmosphere in a gaming room so tense, or seen his fellow players so skittish. Personally, he put no store in the rantings of the half-crazed Direktor Ascher. He was one of the few privy to the whispered secrets of the Grief Division, and he knew that tonight was the end of the broadcasting mogul's span. This was his final curtain, and he was probably trying to boost the ratings through the roof as his swansong.

Others weren't so assured. He caught half-whispered snatches of conversation as he moved through the room, his bare feet leaving bloody tracks across the tiles. Behind him crawled a little cleaning mekan, its shell inlaid with silver and mother of pearl, cleaning up each crimson print as he walked.

".....has he really killed dear Lord Lancaster? Such a shame, such a good boy...takes after his father..."

"...and my driver says that the crowds are growing quite rowdy – they can never get in here, of course, but still ..."

"...and there's nobody working the machines! I can't wait for that bloody Kronos to sort it out, if I die here tonight I have to be back in the office tomorrow for lunch with Lady Highhampton..."

"...really, the man is such a damnable peasant! Nobody should ever have let him near our circles, let alone allowed him to befriend young Blaire ..."

“...and even if he wins, you can be sure that the Machine will never let him through the trials. They’ll just have to put the whole Game on hold while they get Lancaster or whoever is running the show up there to bring us back...”

The lavish feast on the mahogany sideboard was all but untouched. The morbidly obese Earl Blacktower was piling his plate with choice cuts of salmon and cream cheese, but the rest of the spread was going to go to waste. The one hundred and fifty remaining Kheptarchs were huddled together in twos and threes, darting suspicious glances between each other, huddling over brimming glasses of champagne and cognac.

Even Lysander himself was acutely aware of the flitting camera ornithopters which buzzed about the heads of the Clique, their insect wings blurring and winking rainbows.

What they thought was immaterial, anyway. Whether they died at the hands of their peers or under the guns of the ever-vigilant Referee, only one would walk out of the spire tonight. Which made it all the more surprising that the focus of so much speculation was missing.

Lysander had been trying to hunt down Simeon Blaire since the end of the first round – and he had no doubt that he wasn't the only one. One or two of the flitting camera mekan weren't decked out in Omnivasive livery, and some of the aristos were less than subtle in their stares, their constant buttonholing of the thankfully mute servants. Lysander was never as grateful as he was right now for the magnetic piercings which locked his serfs' tongues in place while they toiled.

The only way out was through the service doors, and no highborn could possibly slip through between his hulking cyborged bouncers. All the guests were clad in nothing but their skin, their modesty protected by hovering strips of cloth buoyed up by ornate floating cherubim. A naked, bloody Simeon Blaire could no more have sneaked by under the eyes of the Lords, the servants and the omnipresent cameras than he could simply dissolve into smoke.

Lysander scowled, snatching a glass of wine from a passing servant's tray. He knocked it back in one gulp and ran his eyes over the crowd again.

What he failed to notice was a camera platform arching out over the temple on a long cantilevered hydraulic arm; a model so woefully bulky and out of date that even the shantytown propaganda networks of the R.T. wouldn't have bought it.

At its controls sat a slim and hawk-faced man, his grubby Omnivasive coverall draped with coils of wire and bags of lenses. Unlike the other smartly turned-out operatives of the city's premiere sports network, the cameraman was smoking a foul-smelling cigar, and perched on his head was a battered trilby hat, its crown lit up by the revolving halo of his press logo.

Such peons were well beneath the attention of a Lord of the Razor Clique, and Jaegenn strode by beneath him with barely a glance. But Atticus Meaks took careful note of him, and twitched the controls of his machine to keep him clear of the picture.

Because the pressman wasn't jockeying a camera at all; he was running diversion for his boss. From the blank lens of the obsolete threedeeo recorder a tight beam was cast out across the temple, bathing a patch of the far wall with its radiation.

It was a holofield, and under its shelter Simeon Blaire and Leynna Mendelev-Singh were frozen in icy silence, their dew-beaded glasses poised, their eyes vacant. All that betrayed their presence was a barely perceptible shimmer in the air, and none of the Lords and Ladies of Elysium would be getting close enough to them to detect it.

A trio of white-robed serfs had set up a barrier around the little alcove where Mr Ascher's pet aristo and his lady friend were locked in stasis, wielding mops and buckets to clean up an unfortunate mess.

One of Lysander's ice sculptures - the frozen body of Sir Daric Laughton - had fallen from its plinth, shattering into a million shards and chunks of cryogenically preserved flesh. While they labored, eyes downcast, the rest of the Clique gave them a wide berth with the aloof disdain the aristocracy reserved for their menials.

Atticus took another drag on his cigar, nudging the little joystick of the field projector to keep the illusion in focus. What his master wanted to say to those two he didn't care to know; all that mattered was finishing up what had been a long and weird day at the office, even by Omnivasive Standards. Anyway, he'd put a lot of money on Blaire to win this round - insider information went a long way with Atticus Meaks - and it wouldn't do for him to be disqualified.

On his little screen Leynna's face was as smooth and cold as that of the unfortunate Earl Laughton's - or at least that part of it which was even now dissolving in a bucket of bleach. While the systems which had been implanted in her were far less extensive than those which made Blaire tick, they were easily powerful enough to drag her into the world of Tokugawa, into his black palace over a burning virtual Edo.

Leynna was wandering in the dark, inside the severed head of Octavio Ascher.

## Ω

She walked down a corridor of ornate cherrywood screens, intricately carved with pastoral scenes and sprays of flowers. It seemed to go on forever, narrowing down in the distance to a blurred point, but there were no doors, no windows, only black iron lamps every few yards to light her way, their bowls burning with pallid green flames.

One moment she had been stalking toward Simeon Blaire, phrasing in her mind a demand to know what that accursed fool Ascher though he was doing... and then...

Off in the distance she could hear the screens sliding and clicking, a noise like hands moving chess pieces across a board. But when she turned the corridor was featureless and empty.

When she turned again, however, there was a blank stone wall in front of her.

Leynna's heart leaped in her throat, and she spun again, only to find another wall hemming her in. The cherrywood seemed to be breathing, bulging in and out, and a vast heartbeat animated the stone beneath her feet. Monks and peasants capered and leered in the green shadows thrown up by the one remaining sconce.

She leaned in closer, as the images began to shift, the face of a wizened old man becoming that of Direktor Ascher, the steel mask of a rampant samurai the visage of Simeon Blaire ...

Then a hand came down on her shoulder and her nanonics kicked in, no less swift and deadly for all that this was undoubtedly an illusion. Her fingers flew to her assailant's eye sockets, four stiff tines punching into soft flesh, trying to blind him before he could strike.

Her other hand chopped low, a kidney shot, while her feet slid into a fighting stance.

It took a second for her to realize that the thing she was fighting was already dead. Not dead like the Cyben, clinically reanimated with machinery and plastic – not even cleanly slain and tastefully mounted like the trophies of the Razor Clique.

Her fingers sunk into an eye socket filled with writhing grave worms, punching into noisome black liquid. Her hand slammed into ribs thinly coated with leathery skin. And the wight reached out and grabbed her with skeletal hands, its grip unrelenting even though she howled and thrashed, twisting her fingers deep into its hollow skull.

From the other rotting socket a cold blue fire blazed, a stare reminding her of nobody more than Direktor Ascher.

Its breath smelled of humus and rot, a hot vapor which made Leynna's head swim. The walls whirled and warped, bathed in leaping shadows. The wight was dragging her through a black stone tunnel, white sand crunching under its skeletal feet. Her limp body trailed from its claws, weak and unresisting. Even her combat systems wouldn't respond.

What seemed like hours later - but may well have been only seconds - the corridor opened out into a vast underground cavern, a place of black spires underlit by glowing pools and rivulets of lava. The furnace-like heat of the place struck her like a slap across the face, and she could see the desiccated skin of her captor crisping and peeling in strips. The stench of decay was choking.

The wight threw her to the sand with a crackle of bones and cooking leather skin.

She could taste ashes and grit in her mouth; blood like salt and metal. Slowly, the spinning blackness cleared, and Leynna raised her head, defiant, drawing herself up to her feet. She was ready to smash the filthy dead thing to splinters of bone. She was ready to take on a legion of them.

She wasn't prepared for the sight which confronted her.

There must have been thirty, forty of the wights standing sentry around the walls of the cavern, walls carved into a horrorshow of demented faces, lolling tongues, inset

ivory teeth and tusks and horns. They were clad in ancient-looking armor, steel cuirasses inlaid with orange and green jadeite, long robes of rusting chainmail and half-helms surmounted by brass crescent moons.

A constellation of cold blue sparks bored into her; the gaze of the dead, waiting for her to move. Willing her to be foolish enough to challenge them.

Leynna ran a hand across her cheek, wiping off a crust of sand and blood. It was then that she felt the weight of his stare. It was like a hand clamped around her jaw, like a merciless mechanical claw. Fighting it all the way she turned her head, and saw Tokugawa enthroned.

The centre of the cavern was filled by a little lake, its waters black in the lava glow. Once the rock which clawed its way up from the centre of the pool had been an obsidian stalagmite, but it had been lovingly reshaped by the same demented sculptor who had carved out the cavern's walls. Now it was a throne in the shape of open jaws, a maw of black iron and razor-edged volcanic glass illuminated by globes of fire swinging on spiked chains.

Even though his face was covered by an *Oni* mask of beaten steel, she knew who he really was. Something in the slick and oily undertone of his psionic grip had touched her, awoken memories of a man she had once found fascinating for his raw, vital ambition. It was Octavio Ascher, or at least a demonic parody of him, the lord he could have been but for the accident of his peasant birth.

This was just the man he would never be, a dread tyrant only in the world of his imagination.

If it wasn't for the grisly backdrop to his throne she would have laughed. As it was, her mouth was filled with bile.

Behind his throne Octavio had arranged a wall of hooks and spikes, upon which were hung the dead and dying bodies of hundreds of children. Years ago Leynna had seen a classical painting by the 20th century artist Geiger; a landscape of diseased babies rotting and covered with parasites. This was just the same, except it came complete with the smell of shit and blood, the sound of anguished squeals and cries and the twitching, writhing and shuddering of the mortally wounded.

Every one of them had the face of her own child - the one she had dreamed of, the one she had made from the blood and skin of Simeon Blaire.

She had been angry before, pumped up with chemicals and programs and primed to kill - now she was positively *incandescent*.

"I might have guessed that you were at the centre of this shithheap!" she yelled, striding forward into the water until it came up to her knees. It was only as she did so that she realized that it was in fact a lake of warm blood. "Just your style, isn't it Octavio. You could never hang proper trophies around your little bimburb house, so you had to slaughter children!"

The black shogun on his throne only laughed, a mirthless grinding sound echoing in his helm.

"They're not *real*, Leynna," he said. "Or at least, they're as real as the kid you were cooking up in your little biolab."

That stopped her dead. Omnivasive had their agents everywhere. But that place was hers alone. It was her obsession, her secret addiction. The specter on its throne inclined its helm a little, listening.

"And obsession is my stock in trade, dear. So is eavesdropping on your inane little thoughts – at least while you're here in my world. If I had to put up with that kind of chatter all the time I'd be inviting the Celebrants around for a party."

Leynna tried desperately to force him out of her mind, but the taint was everywhere.

What was worse, it was *familiar*. It reminded her of when they had been together – the Highborn Lady and her Sub-Scum lover. The same lack of clarity, the same light-headed sense of being outside herself looking down ...

The same feeling which came over her in the sanctum, when she knelt before the exowomb of her child.

"You bastard," she whispered, her face alabaster white. If a stare could murder, then the look on Leynna's face would have made her ruler of the Game in an instant. "How did you get to me?"

The metal face of Tokugawa was expressionless, but she could swear that behind it Octavio Ascher was smiling his usual tight-lipped smile.

"Your mother, the late and *unlamented* Yulia Mendelev. I know that she liked to make-believe that Aran Singh was a saint, but he wasn't. MS Biomed was a billion in the red before I came along to bail them out. He pissed it away gambling and whoring with his aristo friends, and then had to prostitute himself to a jumped-up downsider. Me."

"Bullshit!" she said, wiping the blood off her hands onto the front of her dress. For some reason she had arrived here in full, starched white Victorian costume complete with acres of lace. "There are banks, and financiers, and there are the other Lords. His FRIENDS. They might try to kill each other for fun, but they never let an aristocratic firm go under."

"Maybe not ...in the usual course of events," replied Ascher. "But when I say he was drinking and whoring; well, the kind of things your dear old dad got into made this little scene behind me look like a Sunday picnic. I just happened to have all the glossy photos."

Leynna was dumbstruck. Of course she had never really known her parents - all of the children of privilege in Elysium were raised by machines, kept in isolated luxury until their seniority. But those machines had taught the young scion of MS Biomed all about her family history, a proud tale of economic savvy, ruthlessness and greed. She

remembered her mother as a tall, stern holographic figure, prim and poised in blue pseudovelvet while they lowered father's coffin into the incinerator. Surely her parents had loved each other, if she had arranged to have a funeral for him? That kind of old-world sentimentality fit in with the fact that they had merged their companies to be closer together ...

"And while he was busy with all that unpleasantness, your mother was busy entertaining one of the servants. A pit-fighter from the downtown league she took on as a *home security operative*. He certainly kept her under *very* close observation."

She could literally see his face through the demon-mask of shining steel, the way his lip curled into a leer, the way his little black eyes flashed with heat.

"Too bad he was one of mine as well, eh? And certainly too bad that your precious Lords – their FRIENDS wouldn't so much as *think* their names after they'd been dragged through the gutter press."

The images slammed into her harder than any physical blow, stripping away the only defense she had left to her. That all this was a lie. That she had not been sold to this piece of Subcity filth...

Her father, bound in strips of leather and rubber, bloody, a dripping saw in his hand. Around his feet, *pieces* she didn't want to look at, scraps of hair ...and her mother, her hands running down the scarred and muscled back of a grey-skinned hulk, naked but for the spiked collar around his throat...

"He didn't die in an accident, you know. You must have heard the whispers. *Some* of them I didn't even start myself. If it had been any other way he could have been brought back; but what are the odds that he would get caught alone in a sealed lab with a brain-eating virus? That kind of coincidence is a leap of faith even for *my* publications."

She felt her legs go out from under her as the visions of lust and blood and shame burned through her mind. She had heard rumors, but had dismissed them as the sniping of jealous lowborn peasants. He was a medical researcher, a hero, risking his life to save people from diseases like the one which killed him. But if his life had been a lie, why not his death? Why the carefully cultivated media show of a redundant Christian funeral?

"She sold you, Leynna. Your mother could never suffer that much shame. And I would have delivered her enough to last for several lifetimes."

The room was spinning now, a gyre of dead skeletal faces, cruel black stone and steaming blood. She let herself sink into the warm embrace of the lake, half hoping to drown even though this place was no more real than an afternoon threedeeo show.

And like a show it was all sharp images, bright still photographs, faded-edged memories.

She remembered the first time she had met Octavio Ascher, the first time she had

seen his flat and thuggish face. It had been some conference or other, with her tagging along behind her mother and a gaggle of economic analysts, yes-men and servants.

More than anything else she remembered the distaste she felt for the Direktor, and how it had melted away under his black-eyed stare - how her disgust had turned to fascination as she watched him take apart three Lords and their retainers in fierce negotiation. She had been sixteen years old, a novice of the Razor Clique, and he had invited her to the Death Pits of DownTown to watch the technique of the best Subcity fighters, most of whom he owned.

No rich suitor from the noble houses would have taken her there. He walked the poisonous streets without fear, and the cruelest, meanest freaks of the rotten core of Elysium bowed to him.

It excited her.

Slowly her disdain had become obsession. His self-confessed stock in trade.

And there, deep amid the memories of blood and sweat and cheering crowds she remembered the little black necklace her mother had given her that first morning, as they hurried across the underground parking garage to their limousine. A ribbon of black silk with a single silver pendant, a dangling teardrop inset with diamonds. She could not have felt it burrowing its little tendrils of wire into her skin; she was a ball of aches and pains from the implantation of her first nanonic array. The sensation of little clicks and pops, tiny electrical connections deep in her brain was a constant companion back then.

Everything she felt after that had been as fake as the dungeon around her now, an illusion merged seamlessly with reality. And she could guess why he had bothered to go to all that trouble...

"It was all for a title, wasn't it?" she asked, her eyes focused on the demon-carved ceiling of the cavern. "All just so you could have that little honorary if front of your name. And what would we have called you? Lord Ascher of DownTown? Duke of Slums?"

He sighed, as if bored with her vitriol.

"They would have called you Duchess Ascher if it weren't for your mother. While your brother Aidan stood to inherit MS Biomed there was no problem with a second child marrying *new money*."

He spat those last two words in a perfect imitation of Duke Gideon's withering tones.

"Our children would have been genewritten, made pure, and elevated to the stature of Lords. But she was too good for me, I fear."

Leynna could believe it. Her mother had been as stern as steel when she was angry. They said, afterwards that it was that inflexibility which doomed her; that she snapped when Aidan died so soon after his father. They had been struck from the same mould,

those two...at least on the surface. Leynna hoped that her poor dead brother wasn't prey to the secret perversions which had doomed Aran Singh.

"And if you thought that Aidan met his end by accident then you're simply too naive to live. She killed him, Leynna, with her own hands. And then she erased her own mind, and condemned herself to the psych cells."

With all the rest of the house of Mendelev Singh dead, she had become the Prime Shareholder. Forbidden from marrying below her station – cursed with the mark of the pariah. Leynna was forbidden from breeding at all when the line of Mendelev-Singh was denounced as *unstable*.

"That was when I had to take my chance. I thought that I could use what I'd learned from the Death Pits to win at least one round of your precious Game. Then they would have to accept me. That accursed Kronos would have to accept me."

"And so you ended up as nothing but a shriveled-up severed head." said Leynna, pushing herself up out of the blood and onto the shore of the lake. Her illusory dress was dripping red, the lace hanging in crimson tatters. "And I never heard from you again. I thought the loss had broken your mind, like they said losing Aidan did my mother's."

His face had melted through the steel now, a look that was almost regret in his eyes. The etched demon's features melded with his own, giving him beetling brows and jagged tattoos, but this was as close to compassion as the Direktor could probably ever get.

"I never wanted things to happen that way. But I found something out when your brother died. Your mother made her intentions clear in a message to me, and in that message she told me why both Aran and Aidan had to be disintegrated. She told me what really happens to the dead here in our city, and she gave me proof. Something only the Prime Shareholder of MS Biomed could have known."

He paused for a second, running a gauntleted hand over his face. Leynna thought that there may even have been tears shivering on the black iron when he brought it away again.

"Well, her and that fool Lancaster. But he was always the loudest voice raised against me."

Leynna was back on her feet now, looking up at the figure on the throne with something approaching pity.

"Don't try to tell me for a second that you actually cared about any of us." she said. "All you wanted was a title, and a way into the Clique, and a hand up to the Imperial Throne. You can't expect me to believe that after you bought me and killed off my family that I will think you're anything more than a monster."

His laugh was harsh, grating, the sound of rusted metal plates sliding against each other. It seemed to come up from somewhere deep in his armor.

"I'll never convince *myself* of anything else either, Lady Mendelev-Singh. And I don't expect an apology will do you any good. I just wanted you to know that one of your line still lives. I figured I owed it to you."

Her eyes leaped back to the grisly tableau of broken little holographic bodies hung behind the throne, each one of them wearing a face half hers - and half Simeon Blaire's.

"You didn't," she began, but the words froze in her throat.

"*I had to.*" he replied, rising from his throne to stride into the lake of blood, one iron hand outstretched. She flinched away from him, taking up a fighting stance again, even though she knew that in this place he was all-powerful.

"It isn't Simeon Blaire who I want to rule Elysium. He's far too willful – and by now far too insane. What do you think he would make of this world, if I gave him the chance?"

She waited as he came up out of the shallows, gore dripping from his armor. A quick glance to the left, to the right to make sure that the wights had not left their posts around the chamber walls. One strike, and perhaps she could break free of this illusion.

"I had to know that he was the right one to play surrogate father to my little son. Your son. An Emperor who will listen to me, and be molded by my will."

Now his face was blurring over, covered again by an *Oni* mask of grim steel. His hand was reaching out for her, imploring, inviting. She tensed herself to strike. And then she saw what was in his other hand, and all the rage drained out of her at once.

It was a bundle of black cloth, tiny and vulnerable in the crook of his arm. It was a baby, one which she knew was her own.

"He's going to be a much better warrior than either you or his father ever could be, Leynna. And with his pure genes there's no way that Kronos can keep him from taking the Trials. I should have considered adoption a long time ago."

Her world collapsed inward, a tunnel of darkness focused on that tiny cherub face, sleeping peacefully in a hand crusted with drying blood. It was all an illusion. It couldn't be real. She tried desperately to break away, to force her mind from this terrible place and back to the Jaegenn Spire where she was in control.

Octavio Ascher bunched the black swaddling cloth in his ironclad fingers and held the little child out to her, its eyes blinking open, dazed with sleep.

"I assure you, he's very real, Leynna. I've coded a feedback loop between this little hologram and the exowomb. He'll even feel your touch when you give him your blessing."

The great armored figure knelt on the shore of the lake, dipping his fingers in the steaming blood. Carefully, with a delicate touch she would have thought such a monster incapable of he drew them across the child's face, leaving a crimson trail down his cheek.

"Baptised in blood, Leynna. You will be the mother of the Emperor. And with

Lancaster out of the way, I will be by your side.”

She didn't know then if it was the neuromesh he had put in her brain, or just the exultation of believing his promise. But she dropped her guard, and fell to her knees with him by the pool of blood, and clasped her pale white hand over his gauntlet of iron. Her fingers interwove with his, and together they made another mark across the child's tiny face, a crimson cross like an open wound.

“Yes.” she said. “For our son, and the throne. Yes.”

## Ω

*The Effortless Subjugation was enjoying the sun.*

*Being this close to the great blazing nuclear furnace filled the immense spherical creature with boundless energy, coursing through the hexes of its superstructure and filling to bursting the biological battery arrays inside its operating clusters.*

*Here in the corona of the Earth's little yellow star there was scant need for caution - its flares were pitiful and its radiation harmless by the standards of the Subjugation - even if its crew cursed the blistering heat which kept them locked up in their pods with the coolant systems stuck on overload.*

*Effortless Subjugation was a portal carrier; a five - mile wide ball of hexagonal mesh, with bloated polyps and pods welded on at crucial points to make it battle-ready. Ten immense Devilfish were slaved to it, stuck remora-like to plates on its rear surface which fed them nutrient soup. At its centre blazed an azure portal into liquid space, inside which waited the hundreds of thousands of creatures which made up the Multiplicity Order of Battle.*

*In a blister of clear chitin atop the great porous globe of the Subjugation the commander of the fleet paced nervously, his hooves clacking staccato against the scaled floor.*

*Kataphrakt Yrr was worried, and not about the coming battle. He had seen off the forces of the Unity from battlefields as far flung as the Ice Halo of Paruan Keng and the burning diamond-chip deserts of Axtrachul 5. Swatting a few more mechanical bugs would be as nothing to a Kataphrakt of his skill.*

*What had Yrr's numerous teeth on edge was the lack of information from his man on the ground. Technician Zhe was one of the most trusted beings in that extremely dangerous profession; in all the Order of Battle he was considered to be the most skillful when dealing with alien races.*

*But then again, Gharfos Nyl had been just as good. And where was he now?*

*Yrr knew that the forthcoming battle was over a weapon of great power, one which could even possibly (if such a grim thought could be entertained) destroy a Technician, or even (gods forbend) a Kataphrakt.*

*If they had gotten Zhe as they had allegedly gotten Nyl, then this so called 'Human Race' and their ungodly alliance with machine technology would have to be eradicated.*

*And for that, his invasion fleet was slightly under-gunned. Yrr wished he had lined up some Planet Decimators, or perhaps even a couple of his brother Kataphraktoi; but oh, the paperwork! And in triplicate!*

*"Kataphrakt-Admiral, I have detected movement from the Blacksteel fleet." chimed the Subjugation in its annoyingly musical voice.*

*"May I recommend plotting a course of interception before they reach the third planet?"*

*Yrr whipped his cape around and flopped into the admiral's throne, one claw tapping pensively at his spiked brow-ridge.*

*"Very well, Subjugation - bring yourself about and come in at them over the plane of the ecliptic. We'll settle into a polar stationary orbit and wait for them. That should give us time to expand the Order of Battle and be prepared for them to arrive."*

*"Thank you sir!" squealed the massive portal carrier ship, shivering with glee. Inside its rust-red mesh pods and modules bobbed frenetically.*

*Yrr groaned, and gritted his fangs. To the Effortless Subjugation the thrill of battle was hardwired into the pleasure centers of its tiny brain (a grapefruit-sized organ in a plastic bubble welded to the command console). But for a Kataphrakt, it was just another day at the office.*

*Thank the Praetor, he thought, for free sandwiches and double overtime.*

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**The Imperial Trials:**

‘Know then that there is but one path to the High Throne of Earth, one door which may only be opened by the worthy and the pure.

Mighty Kronos in his wisdom has been tasked by the Ancients to save all humanity from the Three Corruptions – Mutation, Weakness, and Stupidity. His chosen are the Lords we revere and strive for, in the hope that one of them will unlock the door, will renew the Earth with the power he may wield from the High Throne.

These truths have come down to us from the sacred discs of the Ancients, made manifest in the will of the great machine.

It is right and just for us to bow to our Lords, chosen for their purity. It is right and just that they bow to Kronos, who weighs their strength and weakness in the balance.

And it is right that in the end one may attempt the trials, where his mind will be judged, for only the enlightened may remake this world in their image.’

*The Book of Manifest Dogma –  
Elysium’s state religious codex.*

*There was a little of Technician Nyl still left in him. And perhaps a little of the Blacksteel as well - a fortifying trace, giving him the painlessness and resolve of a machine as he dragged his battered body back into the processor hall of Kronos.*

*Zhe knew that CeeAn had been telling the truth. The Multiplicity Order of Battle was on its way; and no doubt the Unity was approaching with equal haste. For them, this was no longer just about the Forge, be it ever so novel or powerful a weapon of war.*

*Zhe had felt the touch of the Adversary, an entire dimension suffused with a single malign being, a reality crammed from end to end with gelid, living night. It explained some of the more bizarre superstitions which haunted this world, things he had found absurd and laughable when told of them in his briefing.*

*These human beings had cause to worry about what happened after they died; although they had never seen it in its cruel physical reality the specter of that accursed thing just one probability away had seeped though into their nightmares. It had given them a series of bloody and bizarre mythologies, grim religions populated with excruciating demons and all-devouring evil gods.*

*Technician Nyl had been curious.*

*When the Praetor Primus has sent him here to recover the Forge, and secure the bridgehead for this world's assimilation into the Multiplicity, Nyl had considered it a trifling task, one of little importance. Indeed, if it were not for the distraction that Nyl was to become obsessed with, he could easily have cut through the nonsense of the Game, to the core of the machine called Kronos and to its hidden power.*

*But Nyl had felt compelled to know how the soul-harvesting mechanisms of Kronos operated. He had wanted to test the threshold of its sensitivity to life and death.*

*And so he had experimented.*

*Hence the Ark - and of course Zhe's current problems. The thing would be guarded, even now when the city was scoured clean of life.*

*It was certainly prudent to spy out the lay of the land before he moved out - which would give him some convenient downtime in which to patch his ragged body back together again.*

## Ω

Simeon Blaire heard it all. He had come to this chamber beneath the Black Palace knowing that he would find his master here- perhaps with some final words of encouragement as he set out to seize the throne of Elysium. When the wights had taken him by the arms and marched him through the dark corridors with their guttering sconces he had come willingly, prepared to do anything his lord demanded.

But the depth of this betrayal rocked him to the core of his drug-addled and fevered

mind, ramping up the anger which already boiled beneath his skin to a fever pitch. The skeletal faces of his captors seemed to leer knowingly as their cold hands held him back, watching from a balcony cut into the rock high up the cavern wall.

He should never have been so trusting. He should never have presumed that Ascher, for all his stolen platitudes knew anything of *real* honor.

Now he watched as the black-armored warrior and the blood-drenched maiden by the little pool baptized his child, his gene-seed grown without his consent. She had always been a sentimental fool, but *him*? He could not have imagined the Direktor giving to the next generation what he could take now, by force.

And yet ...here they were, and he was being shown the depths of his own credulous stupidity. With the combat nanonics singing to him of death and pain, and his mind spiraling out of control with outrage, there was only one course of action open to him. Thankfully, the illusion Ascher had created had clad him in his black bodysuit, his faceless mask – and his sword. It leaped from its scabbard across his back as if it were alive, invigorated by the promise of slaughter.

It was the wights which held him who were first to feel its edge.

First he struck left, cleaving the first of the undead sentinels from collarbone to waist, the sword slashing through rusted chainmail and leather and bone as if it were silk. Black foetid rot burst from the thing's body with a charnel-house stench; worms and maggots flew wide in a putrid arc as the blade came up again, up between the other wight's ribs, snapping each one cleanly like brittle straw. The point of the blade bisected its skull, shattering teeth and bone, extinguishing the icy blue light in its dead eyes.

And then he was leaping down the wall, running across the intricately carved surface, a warcry torn loose from his throat as he went. Hew came down among the wights on the cavern floor like a reaping engine, his blade quicksilver, lopping off a head here, an arm there, shattering calcified spines and sundering rotting organs.

Grinning deaths-heads swarmed in his narrowed vision, each of them taking on for a second the face of Octavio Ascher, the steel mask of Tokugawa as he tore them apart.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the great black-armored figure rising to its feet, handing the cloth-wrapped bundle which was his trueborn son to Leynna. Ascher was all but invincible here in his own illusory world, but Simeon was beyond caring. Right now he felt like he could topple mountains and cut the heads from the shoulders of gods.

A thing like the Direktor was beneath his contempt, for all his power.

He rushed forward, striking left and right in a frenzy of orgiastic bloodlust, shattering the blades of his foes and hacking them to desiccated ribbons.

Tokugawa reached to his hip, drawing his own immense *no-dachi* sword, its edge a rippled blaze of red in the underlight of boiling lava.

"It doesn't have to be this way, Lord Blaire," he called out, over the screech and snap of dying wights. "You have served me well, and could serve me better in my new world than you could in your grave."

His former master's words only served to incense him further, adding weight to his swing as he carved his way through another gnashing, clawing knot of the undead.

"I am nobody's *slave*, Ascher!" he roared, whipping his blade around his head in a silvery blur. "Not even yours! You made me to rule, not to serve! And you will see me RISE!"

The Direktor brought his sword up over his head, shadows leaping and dancing across the demon-carved walls. And he spoke a Word.

At once the obsidian throne began to crack and splinter, the iron jaws which made up its back collapsing into the pool of blood. Simeon tried to keep his eyes on the steaming red surface of the pool while his silver blade cut through the last of the grinning wights.

But he was hard pressed as the final three grisly warriors moved in, swinging double-headed axes on spiked eight-foot shafts.

Blaire waited until two of the heavy axes crashed together, their long polearm handles crossed, and then he struck, leaping up to spring off the locked hafts. He spun in midair, his foot describing a scything circle, knocking the yellowed skulls from his foes' shoulders. The third axe came whispering by inches from his face as he vaulted to the floor, and stuck fast in the wall. Before the final Wight could wrestle its blade free from the black stone Blaire had driven his sword unerringly through its burning cerulean eye socket.

As the heap of bones and rusted mail collapsed to the sand Simeon looked back to where Tokugawa stood, the pool of blood bubbling and churning around his feet. Rivulets of gore were running up his greaves, questing hungrily for joints in the armor.

The aristo warrior picked up his blade and wiped it across his arm, purging it of filth. The next blood which ran from its dripping fullers would be that of his Master.

"Your last chance, Simeon!" yelled Ascher as the rising tide came up over his knees, a second skin of roiling crimson. "Throw down your sword, bend the knee, and you can come with me. Resist me and you'll die here."

Simeon spat, raising his katana over his head. His face was as demonic and grim as the mask which covered his master's.

"I cannot die here, you old fool!" he shouted back, watching the living blood flow up over Ascher's chest, dripping down his arms and coiling between his fingers. "None of this is real, or had you forgotten?"

The tide of blood came up over his neck, over the ivory fangs and acid-etched steel of his face.

"But if I strike you down here, how long do you think your body will survive,

apprentice? Kronos has no use for an empty husk, and there is no Lord Lancaster to patch you back together. I doubt that my dear Leynna will help you either.”

Simeon could hardly register the change which had come over Lady Mendelev-Singh. She had always been a little deranged - a fact he put down to her bizarre family and her obsession with bloodlines. But now she was over the edge, clutching her child like a talisman in white-knuckled claws. Simeon had faced her in the Game before, and he knew that she could fight. If he tried to take that bundle of cloth from her now he was certain she would try to tear him limb from limb. His own rage at the Direktor’s betrayal was nothing compared to the mania which blazed in her eyes.

“Keep away from him, Blaire!” she screeched, tying the swaddling cloth around her neck in a crude sling. She had found a broken spear on the ground amid the bones of the slain wights, and now she grasped the leaf-shaped blade in one pale hand, not noticing the razor edges slicing into her palm. “He’s mine, damn you! Mine! You never wanted a part in this, and now it’s too late!”

The baby was looking at him over her shoulder, its blue eyes immense in its blood-daubed little face. Despite the bones and the demonic carvings and the leaping flames the child did not cry – instead he seemed to be drinking in the scene, watching and waiting for Blaire to strike. He could not help but feel a little admiration for the bravery of his gene-seed. Perhaps it was worth letting him live, raising him as his own...

But no. there was no place in his world for any emotion but *rage*. Anger and shame and bitterness boiled in his gut, and his eyes narrowed, focusing on the blood-slick, bulking form of his treacherous master.

Ascher would love for him to relent, to show weakness. Maybe this was all just another test, some bizarre trial to temper his will before the final battle. Surely the machine would probe every one of his weaknesses, including his foolish sentiments. He must harden his heart, and kill all three of them. The Black Palace was a place of illusion, where he had suffered his grueling training, the harsh tutelage of Tokugawa. He would not relent, even if it meant sheathing his blade in his master’s throat. A true warrior would do no less.

## Ω

It was a scene straight out of primetime, and it was a joy for its creator to behold. The mother and her child, the monster, and the hero come to save her, all flashing eyes and lightning blade, shattering the hordes of the dead to win through to his prize.

Octavio Ascher smiled, and the lips of his severed head back in reality twitched a little behind an inch of bulletproof glass. The monster was a part he was born to play.

As for the maiden and her hero... well.

Humans were such credulous idiots to believe that life could be just another story.

This one would only end when the so-called hero could wring the life out of her little child.

Direktor Ascher had brought both of them into his world effortlessly, even under the watchful eyes of one hundred and forty-eight other Kheptarchs and a whole city of viewers. And they had fallen into place just as he had predicted, spurred on by the obsessions which he had carefully nurtured and ripened.

Leynna had taken to motherhood like a lioness, all vitriol and protective savagery.

And Blaire ...the boy was proud and stupid beyond his wildest dreams. It would only take the slightest nudge in the right direction to make them fulfill their roles in his final act.

“Stay behind me, Leynna.” he said as the blood crawled over his death-head face, slurring his voice into an animalistic growl. “Whatever you do, don’t let him get to the child. If the link to his exowomb is severed he’ll be nothing but a vegetable.”

She cowered back, all but hissing, cinching the little bundle of life around her shoulders even tighter. This part, at least was no lie. The child’s mind would disintegrate into the psionic seas of the Wetsystems, broken up to feed the ever-hungry core of the Forge. Any soul unprotected by extensive neural safeguards would suffer a similar fate if they died here.

Luckily the Director had no intention of dying here or now – or of ever sharing the doom of millions of other dead Elysians. It was to avoid perpetual enslavement within the walls of the Last City that he had staged this little farce, and he intended to play it through to the end.

Now his body was swelling and bulging as the lake drained up and out, coating him with layer upon layer of glutinous clotted gore. Knotted ropes of muscle and grisly spikes grew up along his arms and legs as he swelled out to ten times his size, the black armor of Tokugawa encysted within a red shell.

And the iron jaws of his obsidian throne were there amid the welling blood, rising up to form an eyeless and immense face, one which was nothing but glistening black teeth and slick crimson scales.

This was the final goad to Simeon Blaire’s sense of honor and duty, a monster for him to slay so that he could become the Lord he believed he was destined to be...

Let him believe he was killing his master. That was a story as old as time. And dashing the innocent brains out of his son’s head – that would be a test of his purpose, and of his cold-heartedness.

There was even a purpose in Mr Ascher’s schemes for the child’s insane highborn mother. The only thing about his little tale that had been true was the fact of Blaire’s disposability; that and the story of the Mendeleev-Singh’s shame. Octavio had loved Leynna in his own way, back when she was young and optimistic and he still had years left to live and a body to live in. He had loved her like a trophy, like a prized

possession, and it pained him a little to think of how this all would end for her. But what was the use of keeping something beautiful but broken? What need did he have for a title before his name when he could simply erase the whole order of Lords and Ladies and steal their coveted throne?

It was only a little pain, and the exultation which filled him now drowned it out.

## Ω

The beast which rose up before him was like something from a nightmare; a great hulking thing of crimson scales slick with blood, its jaws studded with black needle teeth, its eyeless face questing in the red-tinted gloom for its prey.

But Simeon felt no fear.

This thing was no greater challenge than the Lords and Ladies of the Razor Clique - at least it wore its ugliness on the outside. He came forward to face it, picking his way across the rivulets of molten lava which veined the floor of the cavern, their edges glittering with sand turned to glass by the intense heat.

Surely those would be useful, if he could only topple the creature into one... If not, it would be down to his swordsmanship and his speed - brute strength would avail him nothing against a behemoth which topped him by eight entire feet.

The thing which had been Direktor Ascher flexed its shoulders, and with a gnashing and snapping of those ferrous jaws it leaped toward him, clearing forty feet in a single bound. As it landed it crossed its spiked arms in front of its chest, and wickedly serrated blades of bone burst from its wrists, slithering together in a spray of sparks.

Simeon stood his ground, his sword raised above his head, ready to chop the monster down to size. This was nothing to a warrior who had faced the wrath of a super-Cyben, and who would before this night was over take his place as god-emperor of Elysium...

Or so he tried to convince himself.

There was a moment's respite as the two faced each other, each one waiting for the other to move, to break the tension with a first strike. Though the beast was eyeless Simeon could feel the malignant mind which drove it probing at his own, searching for the merest flicker of fear, the smallest sign of weakness.

He was doing the same, mapping out the soft points in its chitinous armor, the joints between forearm and wrist, shoulder and chest where a well-placed blade would shred muscle and shatter bone.

Then it was upon him, and there was no more time to think.

The first swing, and one ossified blade came in low, trying to slice off his legs like stalks of wheat. Simeon leaped over it, ready for the second blade as it came howling in from the right, timing his leap so that he spun out of its path by inches. As he landed the

left blade was already coming back at him, overhand, a blow which he caught neatly on the edge of his katana. The impact shocked him to his core, jarring down his arm like a thunderbolt. It was only the nanonics wrapped around his bones which stopped his arm from shattering into ruin.

A razor-edged chip of the beast's blade went flying, and then it was hammering at him with both arms, trying to drive him bodily into the sand. His sword became a roof of steel over his head as the blades chopped down mechanically, raining hammerblows against his guard.

Shards of broken bone filled the air as he weathered the savage attack, gritting his teeth as his arms went numb. But almost as soon as it had begun the assault was over, the beast leaping back with its blades a jagged mess. Blaire could hardly count that as a victory – even with their edges tattered and broken those long bone razors would shred him effortlessly. It was time to press the attack.

He ran at the creature with a wordless howl on his lips, feinting left and rolling right, swinging the katana up wide to slice into Ascher's leg. Tendons parted and blood flew as the steel bit deep behind the monster's knee, and it roared in anguish.

It was all Simeon could do to keep rolling out of the way as the beast spun on its cloven hooves, its blades intersecting where he had been a second before in a scissorcut.

He sprung to his feet, expecting another slash of those deadly bone scythes, but it was the beast's iron jaws he should have been watching. Its neck snapped forward an impossibly long distance, and all of a sudden Blaire's arm was inside its dripping maw, the katana in his other hand moving so slowly; too slowly to stop those black fangs from snapping closed...

Blackness came down on him. Then the pain began, a crescendo of agony clawing up his spine...

Ascher shook him like a terrier with a rat in its teeth, spitting him out as his wrist bones shattered like glass. The pain picked him up like a wave and smashed him down to the floor, incandescent and raving.

He felt the very instant when the beast's teeth met, a bear-trap snap of metal which pared through armor and skin and flesh and bone, lopping off his hand as neatly as a surgeon's scalpel. The cavern spun, and he felt the earth-shaking footsteps of the beast coming toward him where he had fallen, saw out of one watering eye one great serrated blade dragging through the sand, its edge a promise of total annihilation...

He felt the blood pouring out of him with each labored heartbeat, staining the black sand crimson.

He felt the heat of one of the lava streams burning his hair and blistering his skin, and he knew what he had to do.

With an incoherent scream he rolled to his knees, and before he could flinch away

from the pain he was about to inflict he jammed the pulsing stump of his arm into the liquid rock.

Blood evaporated into steam. Flesh charred and cauterized instantly. And the agony was transcendent, a pain beyond pain, a suffering so acute that it was a *pleasure* the likes of which he had never known. It was *life* which burned down his scalding nerves, and he intended to keep it.

The Direktor came on, leering and staggering, all at once pathetic in his monstrous guise. The pain had burned away his fear and left him clear and cold and deadly. This time he would not cross blades with the beast – he would carve them out of its flesh!

Blaire's sword was light enough to wield one-handed, and Ascher knew it. He circled to the left, out of the line of that flashing silver blade, biding his time, favoring his good leg. He never expected that Simeon would attack with his smoking stump of a severed hand, and so the shard of volcanic glass fused into the scorched flesh came as a terrible surprise.

As the beast swung at him with one of its jagged blades Blaire came in under its guard, ramming home his makeshift dagger with a scream of agony. Pain ripped up from his blistered stump, blazing through his body and almost stopping his heart. But his aim was true, and the glass shard was as sharp as any razor. It bit deep into the monster's crimson flesh, laying it open like a carcass on a butcher's hook.

Simeon half expected to see the iron armor of Tokugawa deep in the ragged wound, but of course this place was nothing but the Direktor's dark fantasy. Inside the imagined skin of the beast was nothing but boiling static – a black and white blur. Flickering polygons meshed and shaded, pixilated gore upshifted resolution.

Simeon smiled through the pain.

Witness – the Direktor hadn't thought he'd get this far. He hadn't even programmed the innards of his demon form. But now, from some control room in the Omnivasive compound someone was picking up the slack.

The slashed-open ends of the thing's intestines coiled out like snakes, dripping ichor and bile, writhing and steaming as they snapped at him with impossible rows of fangs. Simeon was nowhere near finished with the creature yet. As he jumped back out of the range of those noisome worms he brought his katana around in a flat blur, repaying the Direktor in kind. The beast's arm came off at the elbow in a fan of hissing arterial spray, flopping and twitching on the bloodied sand as Ascher howled. Iron teeth gnashed and ground, and the other blade came down like bone lightning, a blow that would have cut Blaire in two from collarbone to crotch if he'd tried to block it.

Instead he danced away from his limping, bleeding foe, waiting for it to make another mistake. The shard of glass fused to his shattered stump winked red in the light, a goad and a promise.

It was as he waited, all his concentration on his enemy, that Leynna struck.

She had crept up on him silently, with all the stealth and fierce, single-minded focus that years in the Razor Clique had taught her. Across her shoulder the little bundle was wrapped tight, her child staring out at the bizarre world he had been brought into with wide blue eyes. The only warning that Simeon got was the shifting of sand beneath her feet as she braced herself to plunge the leaf-bladed spearhead into his back.

He glanced down into the mirror of his katana blade, and saw her rictus grin, the madness dancing in her eyes as she brought the spear up over her head, aiming to sever his spine. That single glimpse was all he needed. As Leynna drove the blade down with all her strength he reached over his shoulder, sidestepped, grabbed her hand. And he rolled with the motion, snapping his body around to throw her through the air, right into the path of the beast who had been Octavio Ascher.

There was a brittle crackling noise as her wrist shattered, an anguished wail – whether from her or the child he would never know. And then Ascher swatted her out of the air like a mayfly, his one remaining arm striking her with a meaty thud, driving spikes through her body. The creature shook her loose with a wet sucking sound as the barbs slid out of her flesh.

Its eyeless muzzle twitched, searching.

And Simeon caught it at the same time, watched the arc and fall of a black-wrapped bundle, the severed ends of tattered cloth whiplashing through the air.

Leynna scrambled back to her feet, running under the baby as he fell, a dozen finger-sized holes gaping in her chest and stomach. She didn't seem to feel the pain as her life spilled out across the sand in a bloody slick.

Simeon was moving too, as fast as his augmented body was able, his ravaged arm hanging uselessly at his side. But his katana was quick and bright, and it would lop the child in half if he could get it underneath...

Ascher's beast was swifter than either of them. One of its coiling, writhing intestinal worms reached out lazily and snared the bundle of swaddling rags out of the air, constricting tight. It grinned at them both with its mouthful of iron, and raised up its prize for them to see.

"Too slow, little lordling. Far too slow." it rumbled in a bubbling, grinding voice. "To think that I thought you worthy of adding your seed to this experiment. You should consider it an honor to die now, and have your child achieve all you never could."

Simeon snarled, dropping back into a fighting stance. One of his arms was limp and numb – a blessed release from the pain which racked him, but useless for battle. The jagged shard of obsidian which protruded from the stump dripped pus and blood.

"If we're handing out honors, Direktor, I'll go you one better. You and that little bastard will be the first to die by the Emperor's justice."

When the beast laughed, it was undeniably Direktor Ascher. No amount of threedeeo monsterwork could disguise that mirthless rasp.

"Give it up, Simeon," he said. "I let you think you were actually going to make it through the trials. I gave you something to live for."

Octavio's scarred face grinned ghoulishly in his mind, smug and self-satisfied.

"Do you remember how you were before I found you? A pitiful little boy who didn't want to live, with posters and pictures of Pit-Fighters as your only friends. Remember how it felt to *be* something, and take that with you to your grave."

All this time, the child was hanging in the air between them, the choking coils of the beast's intestines wrapping it up in a suffocating grip. That was the key, he knew. Kill the child and Ascher would have to take him back. Or if not – at least the old bastard's plans would be ruined.

He watched carefully, waiting for his moment to strike. One swift slice and those dripping worms would fall away, and he could spit the baby on his blade.

He really should have been watching Leynna.

A huge, gnarled chunk of obsidian bounced off the monster's head with a sickening crack, and it had barely twitched out of the way before another came sailing through the air, arcing past to land in a stream of lava.

Leynna stood gasping and sweating, her back hunched over, a crimson slick of blood spilling down the front of her dress. Blaire looked from her to Ascher and back. It was hard to say which one was the more horrific.

"Put him down! You're HURTING HIM!" she screamed, dragging another shard of rock up out of the sand. And indeed, Simeon could see the tentacles which sprung from the beast's riven chest squeezing tighter, cutting off the baby's air.

"Keep away from me, woman!" roared the Direktor as his creature shook its head, trying to focus. There was a deep crater in the scales of its temple where the rock had struck. "I don't need you any more than I need Blaire, so stay back. The child will survive, I assure you."

And indeed, Simeon could see that a bundle of slick intestines were jammed down the baby's throat and clamped over his nose, heaving and sighing as they pumped fresh oxygen.

"I SAID put him DOWN!" she screeched, demented, hurling the heavy lump of stone like a discus, whirling through the air to catch Ascher in the throat.

For a second he tottered, his hamstrung leg wobbling as he overbalanced. And then Simeon was upon him, his sword a blur, hacking into the tree-trunk thick thigh of the monster.

The sword sheared down, caroming off its femur.

He gritted his teeth as the impact re-awoke the fiery pain in his shattered arm, and a spray of broken bone splinters and gelid cartilage erupted from the beast's knee.

A look of surprise registered on that eyeless, trap-jawed face for a heartbeat, and then it collapsed to the sand in a flurry of flailing limbs. Simeon didn't stop, looping up

and under the thing's single massive arm to land knee-deep in its spilled guts, slashing left and right at writhing intestinal worms. Two, three, four – a dozen, they lashed out at his face like ravenous serpents. Each one of them met the edge of his blood-slick katana, and each one went flying in severed chunks.

The beast groaned, snapping feebly with its razor teeth, but it simply couldn't muster the strength to rise. Simeon twisted the heel of his boot in its ruptured organs, eliciting a wail of agony. The sword blurred in Blaire's hand as he reversed it, striking an impaling blow which pinned Ascher's single hand to the living rock.

For a handful of seconds all he could do was stand there, hunched over, his chest heaving as he fought for breath. Spattered blood ringed his silver eyes, giving him the appearance of a cadaverous ghoul in the flamelight.

The child was in his grasp.

Leynna dragged a clawlike hand through the matted hair which covered her face, pushing a hank of it back to reveal an eye which glittered with rage and madness. But she saw his fist knotted in the black swaddling, and she held her ground.

Blaire took one step, then another, up onto the beast's chest, just out of reach of its iron maw.

"I've told you a thousand times, Leynna," he said, dangling the little bundle over the razor fangs of Direktor Ascher's shadow-body. "*I'm just not ready to be a father.* But you had to do this thing anyway. You had to go behind my back." His face was split by a triumphant grin, even though his words were laced with venom.

"You realize that without my consent he'd be an exile. Worse, he'd be a bastard – not like this thing, but in the old-fashioned sense. *Unstable.*" He punctuated that hated word with a sharp kick to Ascher's jaw. "He'd probably make a great pit-fighter down in the Subcity, living out of vending machines, sleeping in a lockdown hab with his fellow slaves ...that's not the life for my son, Leynna. I have so many better ideas."

She stepped toward him cautiously, her hands out, palms up and empty. A twinge of pain creased her face for a second, but the anger still burned in her eyes.

"Just give him to me, Simeon," she whispered, those blazing dark eyes locked onto his. "I don't give a *damn* for your plans or his. Kill Ascher if you want to, but let me keep my baby."

He laughed, letting a length of black cloth slither through his fingers. The little bundle jerked and bounced in midair, inches from the mouth of the beast.

"My baby too, Leynna. And since I have hold of him, I'll do with him what I want."

With that he brought his boot down on Direktor Ascher's phantasmagoric head, staving in those iron fangs, and forcing him down toward the seething surface of a rivulet of lava.

Ropy muscles writhed under his heel, slick as a nest of snakes beneath crimson skin.

It was too much for Leynna to take. She screamed, launching herself at him in a fit

of rage. For an instant it seemed that she'd just be able to reach out and grab the baby from his hands.

But just as her fingers grazed the swaddling cloth Blaire twitched it aside. He dropped the whole little bundle right over the boiling stream of molten rock.

Simeon smiled like a gargoyle as time stood still. Leynna's eyes widened to swallow him up, and the heat haze rising in sheets from the lava made her flicker and stretch and twist, a scrawl of red and black, a fury.

Then the baby was falling, a tiny thing turning end over end in a cloud of tattered, smoking rags.

Leynna's dive took her past him, and he spun out of the way, clenching his useless left arm to his side. Her hands were outstretched to catch the little bundle with its tiny, helpless occupant, her lips pulled back from her teeth in a manic grin.

Perhaps she knew what would happen, and didn't care.

Perhaps; but by that point in her arc it was too late to matter.

Her hands caught the black skein in mid-flight, knotting into the cloth in a death-grip. Simeon heard her sob with relief - or perhaps it was resignation. For a second later they both struck the glowing red surface of the lava stream and disappeared beneath its scalding surface with a disgusting hissing, slopping sound.

There was no scream, no last words, just that look of insane triumph on her face as the molten stone swallowed her up.

But the demon faces carved into the walls howled, a note like the wind rushing through innumerable wires. And the beast beneath Simeon's feet fell apart, bursting like a ruptured sac of filthy liquid. It went back to the gore and steaming blood from which it had been born, spreading out to puddle in the sand, dripping into the lava in hissing streams.

Of Octavio Ascher, there was no sign.

Simeon expected the Black Palace to collapse out from under him in the same way as it always had when his erstwhile master was done with him. But the chamber remained, and the blood, and the smell of charred human flesh which was all that remained of Leynna Mendelev-Singh and her bastard child.

His eyes narrowed, and he strode over to where his sword was buried deep in the bloodstained rock. The shadows coiled and shifted behind him, phantom shapes clustering at the corners of his eyes. He flicked the blade through a series of swift movements, limbering up his wrist, trying to block out the pain where his left hand had been. Would he be able to use that hand when he went back into the Game? Or was nerve damage here remembered in the real world? Would he be able to beat Jaegenn or Ryvers or Hawkewood with only his right?

He was not alone.

Despite all of the Direktor's grim assurances that to die in this place was to perish in

the real world, he could feel the taint in the air. It was the unmistakable psionic signature of Octavio Ascher, the animating force which made the Black Palace live and breathe.

Of course he wouldn't be foolish enough to actually wager his life against Simeon's sword. He was arrogant enough to believe in the training he had given his disciple, and wary enough to make plans for his creature's defeat.

It would seem that this time his arrogance was well-founded - but his caution was sorely lacking.

He was here, in the chamber ...behind him!

Blaire turned to the sound of slow, sardonic applause, his blade shimmering through the air in a fan of blood, underlit by lava.

If he'd expected another legion of wights, an even more powerful beast, or some impossible battle machine bristling with cannons, he was disappointed.

Octavio Ascher was standing there amid the shattered bones and empty armor and gore, his white sportscoat immaculate, his trousers pressed with a razor crease. His wingtip shoes and soft leather gloves, the cane in his hand, the panama hat perched on his head; all were utterly out of place amid the grotesquerie and death of the throne chamber.

Blaire sheathed his sword with a flourish, wiping it clean on a scrap of silk before he snapped it home into its scabbard. The look he turned upon the Direktor was one of withering contempt.

"And I suppose that was your idea of a *motivational exercise*," he said, flexing his fingers to return the circulation. "Or perhaps a test of loyalty? I should accept my place in your schemes without question, is that it?"

Ascher planted his ebony cane in the bloody sand and pulled the soft white gloves from his hands.

"Maybe you should. I wasn't lying to Leynna ...not entirely. You *have* outlived your usefulness."

"Well - one of us has," said Blaire, waiting for the psychic attack which he knew would come. Every time he had come here, into the Direktor's power, he had felt the crushing weight of his will, forcing him into submission.

This time there was nothing.

"You can never be Emperor, Simeon. You're a *murderer*, not just a killer. Two hundred and ninety-nine Lords and Ladies of the Council are dead because of you. The few who're still breathing might not know it yet, but..."

Ascher's smile was a tiny twitch of his lips, a self-satisfied little sneer.

Blaire swallowed, wiping the sweat from his brow. Killing a Lord outside the great Game was treasonous, a capital offense. Two hundred and ninety-nine... Kronos wouldn't be able to erase him quickly enough!

"I wanted to give you a hero's end, but you just had to do things that hard way. Without a noble son to rule in my place, every last one of the old order must die."

Ascher seemed almost regretful as he stood there in his corporate finery, so far removed from the warlord he had pretended to be.

"So all your talk of honor, and duty, and the old ways reborn ...it was all just so much shit." said Blaire. "I was never a disciple to a *warrior* – just another one of your slaves."

Ascher nodded, wrapping his hands over the shining silver pommel of his cane.

"Just so, I'm afraid. It's my business to know what will set fire to people's minds. I knew you couldn't resist my little fantasy of ancient Japan. Too bad you weren't born into that time and place. But *here* and *now* the world is ruled by politics and manipulation. A strong sword arm is just, as you so eloquently put it 'so much shit'."

His tight little smile was enraging beyond words.

And the lack of that heavy, insistent psionic presence wasn't the relief that Simeon had thought it would be. It was *disappointing*, and depressing. It meant that what the Direktor said was true, and that this was an age for whisperers and string-pullers, not an age for the powerful. He had been comprehensively played.

"Then WHY?" he asked. "Why build me up, right to the edge of seizing the throne, and then cast me aside?" His one remaining hand had crept, unbidden back to the handle of his sword and was wrapped tight around the corded leather and silver. "And why not finish me here, cleanly, while you still have the chance?"

Ascher chuckled as he flipped open the end of his cane, igniting a tiny flicker of blue propane fire. He drew a thin black cheroot from his pocket and lit it, pulling slowly, blowing bluish smoke from his nostrils.

"What use would you be if you died here, Simeon?" he asked. "Here, where I'm the only one who'll know you're gone? This whole plan of mine is designed to make you a very public figure. A *folk hero*, I guess. And so you have to die right in front of their eyes. Right in their living rooms, in glorious threedeeo."

There was a tiny scraping noise as Blaire slid his sword an inch out of its scabbard.

"What do either of us care what the peasants think of me, Direktor?" he asked. "Leaving aside the fact that I'm disinclined to die on cue, they have no say in who becomes Emperor of Elysium. It's all up to the machine, and that means the Trials. It's not as if this city is a *democracy*."

Ascher took another draw on his cheroot, haloing his bald head with smoke.

"Have you seen what it's like out there?" he said "On the streets? They ate up your little performance outside the valley view mall – up until we lost contact I was pumping those images straight through the wires and into their *brains*. They killed for you - dammit they DIED for you! And that kind of upheaval is just what this stagnant dump needs."

“So, I win the Game, I take the trials, and I’ve already got an army behind me if any of the other Lords object. All the more reason to stay alive.”

“There *are* no other Lords, Simeon.” said the Direktor, flicking the smoldering stump of his cheroot to the floor where he ground it under one impeccable wing-tip. “I’m making a legend here, and it will be remembered long after their names are forgotten. Tonight the old order dies, every one of them. Their titles and their honors will be erased from the books of history and from the minds of men. All that will be left is the *new money* that those bastards hate so much. And who has the most of that?” He grinned in the lava-lit gloom, a thin-lipped gash with jagged yellow teeth. “At least they’ll recall the name of Simeon Blaire. The man whose ambition slaughtered the aristocracy, who so loved the little people that he would lead them into a golden age. I promise to continue your heroic work, Simeon.”

The warrior Lord snarled then, a low animal noise deep in his throat. His sword hand twitched, and his eyes traced the line of his strike, a perfect swing through spine and skin and flesh, taking off the odious Direktor’s head for a second time.

It took all of his concentration to hold himself back. Here, in this world of illusion it would be worse than useless.

“You want to kill me, don’t you? So assured in the skills that I taught you. And so stupid to think that I hadn’t learned all of them first. Just because I can’t fight in your silly little game doesn’t mean I’m powerless *here*.”

This time Ascher’s grin was even wider, and his feet moved almost imperceptibly in the sand, taking up a defensive stance.

“The Trials, the Throne – all just so much bullshit, Simeon. The Earth can never be remade, and I’m glad of it. In a utopia they wouldn’t suffer me to live. But in this godforsaken world, I’m a fucking GOD! I’ll lead Elysium into a golden age all right – but all the gold will be mine!”

The twitch multiplied down his arm and the katana whipped from its sheath in a blur. It was all that Blaire could do to stop the silver thunderbolt a half-inch from the Direktor’s throat.

He hardly even saw the impeccably dressed man’s hands move, a whirl of cream-colored cloth and ruby cufflinks. But the pixels which made up the Black Palace blurred and shifted, trailing jagged lines, and the blade of Blaire’s sword fell to the ground in dozen broken shards.

Simeon stepped back, the stump of his blade still ringing from the blow. His smile was almost imperceptible; a wry twist of his lips.

“Of course – you are the power, *here*. But could you really face me out there? Out where it matters?”

He hardly needed an answer – he’d seen the battered and broken thing in its tank of preservatives which was Octavio Ascher’s true form.

The look in the Direktor's eyes was one of pain.

Blaire nodded, smirking knowingly.

"Yes...and that's why I will rule. Your publicity campaign will only help to lift me up."

Octavio snapped his cuffs, twitching the immaculate silk back into place. That momentary pain had gone, and now his eyes blazed with hate.

"No – I really think you'll be more use to me dead. And that's how it's gonna be."

His finger came up to silence Blaire before the young Lord could spit defiance back in his face.

"I want them all to remember what became of our so called *masters*. Squandering their inheritance on stupid games while the Subcity tore itself apart. Letting the Reclamationists have half of Elysium. And dying in a futile, foolish attempt to grasp the throne that never existed. I'll make you a legend, Simeon. But first I'll make you a deal."

Around them the cavern began to fade, and then they were floating upward through the intricately raytraced levels of the Black Palace, through cherrywood nightingale floors, past rooms with walls of hand-carved jade, torture chambers and dojos, cavernous kitchens where illusory meat turned on iron spits ...up through the innumerable stories of Ascher's stronghold of light to a high place utterly unlike the last one he had been shown.

Here was the truth. A dome of screens arched overhead, thousands upon thousands of them blasting out scenes of riot and rampage.

Here was the legend which the Direktor was manufacturing; a seething mob of blue-clad Blaire fanatics, ripping apart the offices and stores and manufactoria of the other Kheptarchs, clashing in a welter of blood and flying steel with the Compliance Division. Here and there other units of the machine's armies were engaged – celebrants, revenueurs, even parking wardens. All of them were outnumbered, all of them were doomed. The only uniform which the rioting mobs would tolerate was the ragged blue sash, the blue bandanna. And if the *focus* of the riots were to die, the situation would go from disastrous to cataclysmic.

Simeon had never cared about what the little people thought of him. But it seemed that they had followed his ascent up the tables of the great Game with interest. If he were really to die tonight in the hall of Lysander Jaegenn they would never believe it was just a mistake, just his own damn fault. They'd never trust another one of their betters. It would be the trigger for internecine war.

"Kronos will never let this stand," said Simeon, dropping the broken stump of his sword to clatter against the white marble tiles. "And the Lords will rally their sworn subcitizens to take back everything this traitorous rabble have overrun."

The Direktor made a gesture and the screens blanked out one by one, replaced by a

single vast patchwork image of hissing, boiling clone tanks.

"Don't you remember my promise, Lord Blaire?" he asked as the camera panned along row upon row of corrupted exowombs. "Every one of them who dies tonight will stay dead – permanently. You're supposed to be the last of them, and you're supposed to die as well. You are, after all only one man – and the Jaegenn Spire is surrounded by my best assassins. Of course, they are used to less rarefied prey, but a bullet doesn't discriminate..."

Simeon was used to the endless lies and half-truths of the Direktor, and he thought he detected the tiny twitch in his enemy's face which betrayed his duplicity. If it wasn't to be an Omnivasive sniper who finished him off, then *who*?

"Any one of them who fires is a dead man, Ascher. Kronos would burn him in an instant - and you as well."

"For killing a renegade? A genocidalist? I think not... And even if the machine cared so much about your precious skin, they'd never link it back to me. I'm your patron, Simeon, and the whole world knows it."

"Then why bring me here at all?" he asked. "It seems a little beneath you to gloat."

"We all have our guilty pleasures, Simeon," chuckled Ascher as the screens flickered and shifted again, back to the game temple of Lysander Jaegenn. "But yes, I did have an ulterior motive. I wanted you to see your son, once before your inevitable end. Just so you know that I'm keeping the line of Blaire alive – but on a much shorter leash."

This time it was Simeon's turn to laugh.

"Too bad I wasn't a better father, Octavio. I killed him with that meddling bitch Leynna. Gave them a little lava bath – in case you were in too much pain to see it all happen."

"Then you really are as stupid as you look, Blaire," said the Direktor, his face twisted by an angry scowl. "This is a very well controlled environment, and they will definitely survive."

There, again was the little facial tic which meant that Ascher was lying.

"I just needed to see how loyal you really were. I wanted you to do the honorable thing when you realized that the old order was dead. I'm sure I educated you about the ancient tradition of *seppuku*? Too bad – it would have made much more riveting threedeeo. But we have to work with what we've got, I suppose."

Simeon saw him raise his cane up, saw him snarl a word of power.

And the motes of dust floating in the air stopped still, the images on all those discordant threedeeo monitors froze. The brass claw at the tip of the cane came down like the firing pin of some earthshaking cannon, and an invisible fist the size of a building drove Blaire to his knees.

He only had time to gasp once, and the air became thick and choking in his throat.

Now the feeling of crushing pressure came down, a vise-grip around his creaking skull, making every one of the Direktor's words sear into his brain.

"This is your choice, Simeon Blaire," he said, the space he stood in seemingly occupied by two men – the dapper executive with his silk and cotton summer suit, and the shadow of Tokugawa, all black enameled armor and tattered dark robes. "Die in the Game, in shame and forgotten. Let your peers survive – and let them scorn you forever, one of history's monsters. Or kill them all – and be cut down quickly, painlessly – and as a legend."

Blaire could feel the compulsion to submit gnawing away at his mind, hungry and implacable, but this time there was a tiny gap in the Direktor's neural stranglehold. It was as if a splinter of his rage, his betrayal had left a hairline crack in Ascher's power, and now he applied all his will to widening that slim fissure.

He threw at it all his anger, all his frustration at being cheated out of a great destiny, all his bitter despair. When that was not enough he called up the fear that his treacherous master would succeed; and at last the face of Leynna as she plunged into a cauldron of molten rock. The deadliest, most dangerous of emotions, and the most primal. Ascher had killed his SON. Worse – he had forced him to commit that ultimate infamy himself ...

The cracks in the wall of Direktor Ascher's will multiplied and widened, zigzagging across the burning surface of Simeon's brain, merging and splitting, and holes began to appear in the steel prison which held him down.

He forced himself up, first one knee and then the other - and with a Herculean effort he staggered to his feet. He caught a glimpse of the horror and surprise written across Octavio Ascher's face through a haze of tears.

But he kept his footing. And the pressure, the compulsion, the choking grip were blown apart in a howling psionic storm...

"Try again, Direktor," he grated, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. He wiped away the trickle of crimson with the back of his one remaining hand, bringing the other up to catch the light, its charred stump surmounted by a spike of wicked obsidian. "*This* says that I can pick option three."

Ascher stepped back, twisting the head of his cane between deft gloved fingers. With a flourish he separated the hollow shaft from a rapier blade hidden within. It made an oily hissing noise as it slid free.

"Option three, Simeon?" asked Octavio, one eyebrow arched over a glittering black eye. He seemed more amused than frightened, even though his greatest power had been broken. "Please, go ahead and tell me about it ...I'm always open to suggestions."

"This is more of a *demand*, Direktor. I will win the game. I will butcher your pitiful assassins. And then I'm coming for you."

His maimed hand moved faster than he could have believed; his arm a piston of

muscle and bone driven by his despoise. His first slash opened a thin cut across Ascher's cheek, and Simeon wondered if the withered head in its seething tank of nutrients would bleed.

His exultation lasted all of a microsecond.

The next blow was blocked by the thin silver blade of the Direktor's sword, and parried away with a shower of sparks and a screech of tortured metal.

Simeon gritted his teeth and pressed his attack, hoping against hope that Mr Ascher's swordplay would collapse as easily as his mental assault had. But the cane-blade was like hard lightning, lashing left and right faster than even a Razor Lord's eyes could follow. Between them the two combatants wove a cage of glass and metal, sending sparks flying in glowing sprays.

Simeon caught the look on the Direktor's face; it was pure disinterested boredom. Ascher was staving off his most determined attacks with one hand, while rolling another of his thin black cheroots between his fingers. It was no use.

Blaire leaped back out of the range of that deadly blade, and before he could regain his balance the Direktor had slipped it back into its enameled black scabbard. The silver tip of the cane popped open, and Octavio ignited the tip of his smoke with a flourish.

"Care to make any more DEMANDS, Simeon?" he asked, screwing the smoking cheroot into one corner of his mouth. "Or are you ready to listen to reason?"

Blaire looked down at his makeshift obsidian blade, and saw that it was chipped away to a tattered nub.

"Congratulations," he said dryly "You can beat a one-handed cripple in an imaginary swordfight."

Direktor Ascher laughed, hidden behind veils of blue smoke.

"And out there, you can probably make a shish-kebab out of a certain preserved severed head. If I let you get past my legions, of course. Your point?"

Simeon ached all over, the adrenaline dropping out of his system all at once as if he'd been injected with tranks. But there was still a burning core of hatred in his mind which kept him on his feet, and made him meet the Direktor's gaze with a sneer. He was, after all, this man's lord and master – if only in title.

"My point is that I'd rather die on my own terms. So let me at least *try* to get what I want."

"And what might that be, Simeon?" Asked Ascher, drawing deeply on his cheroot, its tip blazing like a tiny star. "This whole charade of Kronos's about the throne of Earth and the rebirth of the planet is a kids' story. What can you possibly want out there, now that your precious game is over, your peers are nothing but toxic slime, and your city is all but mine?" His smile was a twisted thing, more fitted to a deep-sea predator than a man.

"I think you can guess, Octavio," said Blaire, reaching out to pluck the cheroot from

the Direktor's lips. He sucked back a lungful of smoke, almost choking, but just managing to keep it down.

"What a bizarre habit. I don't understand you sub-scum at all, you know ...But yes, *what I want*. What could I possibly desire...?"

His eyes etched a line across Ascher's neck, a line he traced in smoke and ash with the tip of the smoldering cigar.

"I want to give in to temptation. To indulge one of those guilty pleasures you assure me that everybody has. I want you *dead*, and I want to watch your *sick, bloated* head burst open like a ripe melon. Is that too much to ask?"

Direktor Ascher's laughter filled his world, bursting from him in coils of blue smoke which whirled up among the shattered light from the screens, casting bizarre and jagged shadows.

"Allright, Lord Blaire. I'll give you your chance. I'll even give you your hand back. But when you're dying, remember that you'll live forever in history. Because of ME."

Simeon felt himself fading as the smoke drifted and swirled around him, felt a tight and itchy sensation from the stump where his hand had been. He looked down and saw the blood and charred flesh blurring and shifting, crudely pixilated, budding forth with the tips of new fingers.

But even as he watched them grow he could see through his new hand, through his arm, through the marble floor of the sensorium dome. When he jerked his head up to stare at Director Ascher, he too was fading into a buzzing mist of static, his face breaking apart amid galaxies of blue smoke. The look of venomous hatred which Simeon shot at that dissipating phantom was probably lost in the merging and blurring of worlds.

Something rammed through his head like a railway spike.

His eyeballs felt like they were crawling with worms.

Now he could hear the clink of glasses, the murmur of subdued conversation, the purr of cameras and background music. Here and there the mist began to coalesce into human forms; ice statues, dripping with dewy condensation atop their marble plinths.

And others – hot, vital, burning brightly with the electric glow of combat nanonics. He was back in the Jaegenn spire, and it was as if no time had passed during his sojourn in the Black Palace.

Most blessedly of all, the numbing fatigue which had weighed him down after his duel with Direktor Ascher seemed to lift away from his bones, leaving him razor-sharp and fighting keen. He felt more than ready for Option Three, now – prepared to tear the last city apart bolt and rivet to get his hands around his ex-master's throat.

That severed head was already perfectly preserved; it would make a beautiful trophy to hang above his throne, a warning to any other lowborn filth who dared aspire above their station.

The room came in at him from all sides at once, a tideburst of sensations as sharp reality replaced Octavio Ascher's fictional world.

Faces snapped into focus one at a time; frozen in one hundred and forty-nine expressions of worry or distrust or despair. They would be such easy prey, unmanned by their fear of a true and final death. The knowledge of the oblivion which waited just on the other side of a single mistake was his greatest weapon – it made him surgically precise, but at the same time passionately, violently *engaged* in the game. The same knowledge would make these predators his helpless prey.

All but one.

He wasn't ready to see Leynna again, not after what had happened in the lava glow and bloody reek of the killing chamber. There was no place for remorse or guilt in his mind, not now. Such feelings were poison to him.

But when she scrawled into focus, frozen in front of him, he hoped with all his heart that the Direktor had been telling the truth about death in his domain. Would her mind be there inside the hollow shell of her body when she awoke? Blaire hoped that she had stayed in the Black Palace, and that her exquisite husk would simply collapse to the floor, lifeless.

If not ...he would have to put out those burning amber eyes before they could accuse him. Nothing must get in the way. Nothing could steal his *focus*, not now, and not this close.

There was a click, somewhere in his mind, as the connection went dead.

The picture in front of his eyes flickered for a second, as if in a summer heat-haze, and then the sound swelled, and bright light sparkled from white marble and ice and steel.

Simeon dropped back into the moment, and Leynna was right in front of his face.

## Ω

She hadn't thought about death when she leaped after her child.

In fact, her mind had been blank apart from one screaming, absolute certainty. She had to reach her son. Nothing else mattered.

The seething lava stream had yawned open to swallow her up; a boiling, hissing maw of hellish heat. But rather than the pain which she had expected, all she felt was numbing cold. The burning orange and red surface had shattered like a pane of stained glass as she struck it, crazed and blurring, polygons collapsing and spinning end over end as she broke through the walls of the world.

Of course it wasn't *real*. The lava was only a pixel thick, painstakingly rendered, but nothing more than an illusion.

Her nerves screamed at her that she was being incinerated, while her mind saw only

a bottomless well of hissing static, and a fluttering skein of black cloth falling away from her, down into darkness.

Her hands were crooked into claws, grasping frantically for that trailing comet-tail of black, but it was always just beyond her grasp.

And then the darkness rushed up at her like an inky subterranean sea, and she fell through it, into nothing.

Disassociation hit her like a fist, leaving her head ringing, and purple sunbursts exploding in her eyes.

Leynna found herself floating, alone in a white immensity of empty space, twitching and sobbing uncontrollably. It was all gone. Direktor Ascher's promises of a future worth living in had disintegrated like smoke, and now ...there was not even the prospect of revenge to look forward to. How dearly she would love to crush that insipid, smug Simeon Blaire. How could she ever have considered him good enough to be the father of her child? And how could she have deluded herself that anything tainted by his touch could work out for the best?

*'Obsession is, after all, my stock in trade...'*

Slowly, so slowly that it was almost impossible to trace with the eye, a room was appearing out of the white nothingness. Lines crept across the blank walls of her little hell, as straight as razorcuts, marking out walls, a floor; branching out and multiplying. Now there were machines, wires and pipes and cables, sighing pistons and winking lights. It was a place she knew all too well.

Her baby was separated from her by a thick, curved wall of glass when he finally materialized; floating serenely in the exowomb which had held the promise of him for so long. This was the secret biolab she had built to breed her perfect replacement, a child who would make the name Mendelev-Singh that of the Imperial House. She had come here as if to a chapel, to pray that one day she would find a worthy gene-father for her son.

And now here he was, tiny and immaculate, floating in the cool blue fluids of the clone tank with a miniature rebreather mask strapped to his face. But the seed which had made him - which she had wished for so fervently - was tainted with the worst kind of evil. Simeon Blaire was a monster in human skin if he could even think of harming such a beautiful little creature. *And that it was his own son ...*

The sound of footsteps echoing in the corridor outside brought her back into herself, as she leaned against the cool glass with her forehead. Her hands left steaming prints on the face of the exowomb as she turned, full of dread at what apparition would come through the triple-locked and sealed doors.

For a moment she had forgotten that this was still an electronic dream, forced upon her by her old consort in the name of his grand ambition. There was only one person it *could* be.

Direktor Ascher was resplendent in white – a perfect digital replica of his favorite casual suit. Leynna could remember him wearing the same outfit as they strolled together through the cages and surgeries backstage of the downtown pit fights. No doubt his wardrobes were still hung with hundreds of creamy cotton jackets and trousers, unused since his ‘accident’.

“My apologies for the unpleasantness back there, my dear.” he purred, holding out a hand to help her up. She flinched away from him as if he was diseased. ‘I’m afraid that young Lord Blaire doesn’t seem to want any part in my plans. He was *quite* vehement.”

“I ...I thought you said that if I died in there that it would be - permanent.” she said, her eyes still locked on the tiny floating body of her baby. “But he killed us both. All of us – you as well. So where are we?”

The Direktor’s face fell, and her hopes plummeted. There was a sick, churning feeling in her stomach as he gazed sadly through the glass.

“Well – I may have stretched the truth a little, Leynna. My memories, my personality, were all kept safe, remote from the skin I wore in the Black Palace. I had an inkling that our friend would over-react. Yours, too – you’re used to dying, Lady Mendeleev-Singh. The process is much the same as what happens when you lose a round of the Game. It’s just that in this case, your body doesn’t need replacing.” He smiled ruefully, his finger tracing spirals in the condensation on the tank. “Both of our brains are heavily augmented, Leynna. But his...”

There was a split-second scene branded into her mind, then, of a tiny lost soul nailed down and torn apart, another node in the great melange of the Wetsystems. Amid the millions of the dead and damned who would be burned up to drive the Forge, her son was crying out in eternal pain.

She suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to vomit. The terror was on her, so much worse than anything she had ever felt in the arena. Because she had already known that this was coming. She had known as soon as she had seen that fragile little body suspended in its sustaining fluids.

Now she looked again at her child, without sentiment, with the appraisal of a surgeon. And she saw a corpse.

There was nothing behind those wide blue eyes. Her baby was living, but dead at the same time.

“You did this.” she hissed, her mind filled with cold rage. “You took him there, and you let Simeon know he lived. What did you expect he would do?”

The Direktor’s hurt expression was straight out of one of his own daytime soap operas. “Quite frankly, I expected him to *die*, Leynna. He really is of no further use to me. And, as unfortunate as our situation here is, at least now we have a common cause.”

“Unfortunate!” she screamed, beating her fists uselessly against the cold glass. “You know that the machine doesn’t let *unstabiles* breed. You made sure that my family ends

when I die, with your lies and innuendos. It took me years to engineer a child, long, painful years, and almost all the resources of M.S. Biomed. And now you tell me that my ruin is UNFORTUNATE!”

Ascher pursed his lips, as if her hysterics offended him.

“Please, please, my dear. Calm yourself. I have all the necessary tools to build you another child. One with all the genetic advantages of both your noble house and that of Blaire. You seem to forget that Emmanuel Lancaster is dead and gone, and that *I* have foreclosed on his company.”

That little sliver of hope was enough to grab her attention.

“I know you too well to believe that *anything* comes for free, Octavio.” she said, wiping a tear away from her eye with one thumb. “Even if you really need my child to rule Elysium, you’re going to make me pay. So what’s your price?”

He grinned his salesman’s grin, then, and the room seemed to darken, shadows pinching in around his face.

“Don’t think of it like that, Leynna.” he said. “What I want is the same as what you want. It’s just that you’re more suited to the task.”

As he spoke the neon lights of the biolab stuttered and went out, one by one, until the only illumination in the little room was the cool blue glow of the exowomb, framing in cerulean radiance the empty husk of her baby.

“All I want is for you to kill Simeon Blaire. In the game, tonight. In front of all those hungry cameras. I want him humiliated, and beaten down, and destroyed. It’s a suitable fate for a rabid animal like him, don’t you think? And you’re the only one of us who has a chance to get near him.”

She looked up at him with a steely glare, not daring to believe any words which came out of his mouth. But wanting to – desperately wanting to.

“All I have to do is kill him? And that’s enough? You’ll seed another child with my genes and his, and rule the city through him?”

Her only answer was a tiny inclination of his head, the merest twitch of his lips. It was all she needed.

“How can I possibly beat him, though?” she asked, looking down at her hands. They seemed pitifully frail – too weak to save her child, at any rate. Her shoulders slumped, and she could feel tears burning in the corners of her eyes. “His fighting style is flawless. His augmentations are second to none. That’s why I wanted him to be the father, Octavio. He’s *unstoppable*.”

The Direktor put his arm around her, and this time she didn’t flinch away from his touch. There was something oddly comforting in knowing that his arm, and his body in its crisp white suit were nothing but clean pixels.

“And who taught him, Leynna?” he asked softly. “Who gave him the skills to be a contender to the throne?”

She could feel the wires under her skin singing and crackling at his touch. A shadow's width away, she could sense a surging sea of information, held back by the tiniest thread from bursting into her mind.

"I can give you all the skills you need to destroy him, Leynna," said Direktor Ascher, as the light from the exowomb shifted through purple, through deep red to an aching, bloody crimson. "All you have to do is let me in."

She didn't even have to speak; the thought was enough. And then the song of the wires rose in a swirling crescendo, and the sea washed over her, erasing thought and feeling and sense.

In a second that seemed like a century, she *knew*. Every strike and counterstrike, every parry and thrust and guard, each motion and stance. All she needed to break Simeon Blaire was within her, and part of her, as if it had always been.

The exultation lifted her up, and as the howling wash of static cleared, she realized that she was back in the Jaegenn Spire, back in the real world. Back in the Game.

Deep in her mind a voice came echoing up, as if from deep within her. It was the voice of Direktor Ascher, whispering to her from out of his illusory world.

*"Wait for the right moment. Let him think you're weak. And then give him everything. You can do it, Leynna. For me, and for yourself, and for revenge. But most of all, for your son."*

Her eyes opened on a frozen world, and right in front of her she saw his face. Coldly, she forced the anger down, banking it up like a furnace to burn hotter and brighter for all her control.

Now was not the time. She would wait until he was on the very brink of success, and then tear him down. It would be all the sweeter.

Leynna had a lot of experience keeping her face calm and composed while she burned with frustration. Years of being the second child of a noble house was the best practice anybody could have. So when the room around her unfroze, she was prepared.

"Lord Blaire," she said, cold and disdainful.

"Lady Mendelev-Singh," he replied in a similarly icy tone.

She arched an eyebrow, daring him to lash out at her. But it seemed that they were both creatures of iron discipline. If Leynna hadn't looked directly into his eyes, she would never have guessed that Simeon Blaire harbored a hatred almost as vicious as her own.

Not for the first time she wondered if Octavio Ascher was playing a double game. But it didn't matter now. She was set on her course, and nothing would stop her from twisting that filthy little lordling's head from his shoulders.

No doubt he was imagining similar acts of violence as he stood staring at her, unblinking, his tiny smile utterly without warmth.

But both of them could feel the laser rangefinders of the Ref between their

shoulderblades, and knew that a single swift strike here would earn them nothing but instant incineration. The rules were very clear on that little point; no player could raise their hand in anger during the refreshments break. None had dared for decades, since Baron Aristide Koenig had been reduced to fine grey powder for hurling his champagne in another lord's face. Instead they dueled with their eyes, and almost palpable arcs of malice snapped and flickered between them.

"If there's nothing else, Simeon?" she said, in a voice dripping with venom.

"Don't allow me to keep you, Leynna." he replied, flicking an imaginary speck of dust from his shoulder.

They both turned on their heels and stalked out across the room in opposite directions, seething quietly with rage. This was just the time and place for murder, and tonight the Game was very personal indeed.

## Ω

It really couldn't have worked out better if it were scripted. If Octavio Ascher had possessed hands he would have been rubbing them together with evil glee as he watched his puppets stalk off across the gaming temple, filled with murderous rage. All you had to know to move the little fools like chess pieces were their weaknesses, and their desires. Often they were the *very same things*, which made his job all the easier.

Leynna was primed with all the skills he had reaped in his trawl through the violent underbelly of the last city; the techniques of the pitfighters, the Valle Crucis, the Ashishim *Dervashi*, and by no means least the books and scrolls of the unfortunate Tadashi Murai. Hopefully it would be *nearly* enough to stop Lord Blaire in his tracks. The public loved a cliffhanger.

Everything he had given Blaire he had downloaded into her pretty little head; enough martial skill to found a thousand temples. Her baby, though – well, that really *was* an unfortunate business. Direktor Ascher shared her sentiment that a child of the houses Mendelev-Singh and Blaire would be a killing machine so rarefied as to be almost a god. That was almost enough reason to kill the poor child, but there were so many uses for a creature of such promise.

Its little unformed mind hadn't been snatched by the machine when it perished under the Black Palace – just shifted sideways into a containment system designed to cage rogue A.I.s. Soon little Darion Blaire would be back, better than ever. Lancaster's machines were coming in handy for that facet of the project, speeding up his growth to a breakneck pace.

Octavio worried a little about the side effects of such acceleration – he hadn't had the time to read all the manuals. *Results* were what mattered – and he knew enough about the art of the Biotects from his own illegal experiments in creating bigger,

stronger pitfighters.

As for Blaire ...he was running like a hot torpedo now, out on his own, dangerously unstable and prone to detonate at the slightest touch. All Ascher could do was pray fervently to gods he could hardly remember that his hate would hold, and that his skill would be sufficient to cut a swathe through the ranks of enemies who stood between him and his target.

Cameras outside the sensorium building panned and whirled, sucking in the scene out on the bimburb streets; as close as Octavio Ascher could get to a spire of his own.

The streets were eerily deserted tonight as the most wealthy and respected slaves of the machine huddled over their threedeeo screens, lapping up all the news he saw fit to broadcast.

Needless to say, none of it was good.

The manicured lawns and shiny black asphalt streets, the white picket fences and shade trees looked all out of proportion, out of place as compliance division troopers (the very best of the human officers available) cruised between the prefab maisonettes in their armored battletrucks.

Red strobe-lights flickered like the flames of burning cities, turning the immaculate suburban world of the Belt into a shadow-haunted wasteland.

Out there, the Direktor knew, the forces of the machine's Grief Division were massing, coming to drag his mind kicking and screaming into the Wetsystems. The other denizens of the Belt might think that the promise of eternal life – even if only as a personality construct – was a blessing, but Ascher knew better.

His whole life had been a quest to ferret out and hoard information, the more secret and classified the better. And he had uncovered in the course of his work the truth behind the walls of the last city. There was no way that he was going to become a disembodied slave, driving the complex machineries of Elysium. From what he could gather from his sources, it was a form of subjugation so total that he would not even remember his name.

There were only a pitiful few means of escape; everyone who had breathed the air or drank the water of Elysium was infected beyond the power of any surgeon to save them. He could take the fast way out, the way that Aran Singh and his son had chosen.

Indeed, Mr Ascher had procured from an extortionate Subcity dealer a sample of a pre-apocalyptic viral weapon which would render his cerebrum down into steaming liquid.

That thought was just as palatable as it sounded.

He could flee to the wastelands, or the Pit, and take as much of his wealth with him as he could carry. But there was no way that he would last out there – his preservative tank needed expensive fluids and gigawatts of precious electricity. Without them, he would live all of three minutes.

That left escape into the Wetsystems on his own terms – doomed to rove through the fields of chained souls forever as an autonomous program. It might have appealed to a Subcity hacker; indeed, some of the wealthier criminals of the lower levels had tried to escape the Div by plunging themselves into cybernetic limbo.

But the tech-heads on his staff had informed him of the risks – not the least of which were the hunter-killer antivirals which scoured the Wetsystems day and night. To be caught by them was to join the ranks of the enslaved – in constant pain as well as bondage.

He knew, and he had *seen*.

The Black Palace was only a tiny island in that vast ocean of suffering and dissolution, and the Wetsystems loomed over it on all sides like a frozen tsunami.

The only option left to him was the plan he had carefully concocted over the last one hundred and ted years. A plan which now depended on Simeon Blaire's hatred. Leynna would play her part; of that he was sure. But for his scheme to work it had to be all or nothing.

Blaire had to win the game. He had to come here.

And he had to penetrate the ranks of police troopers and Grief Division Celebrants, the automated defenses of the Sensorium mansion, and the sacrificial myrmidons who guarded the Direktor's inner sanctum.

Mr Ascher had done his very best to stoke the fires of his protege's anger, and now all he could do was watch, and wait. Years of disembodied meddling behind the curtains of Elysium had prepared him well for that task. But he still found himself worrying, twitching in his preservative tank, fighting the urge to pace and wring his nonexistent hands.

Three more rounds of the game. And then the *real* fun would begin.

## Ω

*The war room of the Ashishim was a ruin, chest-deep in black oily water through which nameless things writhed and bubbled. Zhe was glad that he was only seeing the accursed place through a hovering flycam – who knew what horrors lurked beneath the noisome surface of that icy pool?*

*In another of his myriad screens Zhe watched the bright red masslifter piloted by CeeAn soar up and over the horizon, back toward the source of the black lightning, the jungle crater she had called Agartta.*

*There would be many preparations for the warlords of the hidden city to make now that two vast alien fleets were drawing ever closer to Earth – but Zhe had no doubt that CeeAn would make a much better general than the megalomaniac fool she had replaced. He only hoped that she could hold off from using the Forge – surely she knew*

*what would happen if the Worm was fed on the combined life force of tens of thousands of potent alien souls at once...*

*Still, would that be better than the Unity holding the controls? Or his treacherous masters? Zhe knew he was perilously close to agreeing with that scumbag Nyl.*

*Better to concentrate on the task in hand.*

*He had to find the Chrome Ark.*

*The flycam twisted and turned through ruined corridors, dripping with rust and grey-green algae, through the shattered hydroponic gardens of the Ashishim, down into the forbidden zones where the spurious Illuminatus had kept his secrets.*

*There was a sudden glimpse of four frozen bodies behind flickering force-fields. Then a tiny click, and the liquid air around those sleeping forms fell away, revealing faces Zhe knew all too well. Like a video premonition he'd seen them all before, and he knew that they were trouble.*

*The first one to awake was the Tin Man, his blazing green eyes snapping open in the dark like searchlights. Although the flycam was as tiny as its insect namesake the Tin Man was undoubtedly the greatest gunslinger ever soldered together. Zhe had just enough time to lock down the co-ordinates of the cell before a 50-caliber bullet shredded his little avatar, cutting the connection.*

*Oh dear – now he'd have to take care of them himself. A part of him – the part which had been inside the mind of Kaito Kayzi for so long it was no longer Zhe at all – grinned wolfishly at the thought. Those four bastards had been unfinished business for far too long.*

DOCUMENT INSERT: MULTIPLICITY ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT

**TO - KRONOS SUB-TOTALITY 119-C, FORGE PROJECT**

**SENDER - JANNEKE ELBERS, DEVELOPMENT TEAM LEADER**

- Be advised that the integration of the bioelectric containment vessel into the experimental energy-assembler core is nearing completion. Unfortunately simulated models suggest that the uploaded personalities used will be irretrievably damaged by the required signal-boosting charge.

As reported earlier, *copies* of the persistent bioelectric fields contained within the unit are not viable, meaning that the projected necessary volume for complete terrestrial coverage is utterly infeasible. Should the Development Team redirect its research into artificial-intelligence assembler control solutions?

**TO - DOCTOR ELBERS, TERMINUS RECONSTRUCTION DEVELOPMENT DIVISION**

**SENDER - KRONOS SUB-TOTALITY 119-C**

- Proceed with the program as directed by the Council.

A.I. is untenable - note the initial research performed by BionLab Gaudi (files attached). If volume of input is required the only issue becomes one of time. We must reiterate - any deviation from the schedule is unacceptable!

**TO - BOARD CHAIRMAN ARISTIDE JAEGENN**

**SENDER - JANNEKE ELBERS, TERMINUS RECONSTRUCTION DIV. MANAGER**

- Your Eminence, Sir - I feel that certain concerns regarding the stability of Kronos' reconstruction program should be brought to your attention. We are dealing with some thorny ethical issues, and struggling with the resources at our disposal. Why is so much technology now off limits to my development team? Why are no more graduate technicians being trained?

I can understand our guardian's concern about human self-destruction, but are we not the arbiters of our own fate? Kronos is unable to create, utterly unable to formulate original ideas. That is the strength of humanity, and I fear it is going to waste in this new Elysium which the Board is constructing. Not one of the Development team is under seventy years old now, and the Forge is still only a theoretical possibility fraught with moral problems.

Please, your Eminence, intercede with Kronos on our behalf! Otherwise the reconstruction of the Earth may prove a vain hope, or worse, even more destructive than the War itself.

**TO - SECURITY COMPLIANCE UNIT CHIEF MARSHALL YAO**

**SENDER - KRONOS SUB-TOTALITY 119-C**

- Be advised - a warrant for the termination and mind-capture of Doctor Janneke Elbers has been issued and ratified by the Board. Ms Elbers is to be apprehended and processed without trial for crimes against progress, and harboring proscribed technologies. All other members of her team are to be interrogated as sympathizers. Please attend to this matter with all due haste.

*From the chamber of Kronos' vast processing engines to the control room of Terminal Station above, a storm of code flickered and hissed in the wires.*

*It was Technician Zhe's stalling gambit coming together.*

*He needed to buy himself some time, and the forces of both his masters and his enemies were falling in toward the Earth at insane speeds.*

*Of course, there was CeeAn to consider as well.*

*With the body of Simeon Blaire crystallized and helpless it shouldn't take her loyal Ashishim long to pry out the control codes for the Forge. It had proved to be a difficult thing to hold onto, he had to admit, slipping through the scrabbling hands of Nyl, and Blaire, and even the Worm itself.*

*He just hoped that she knew enough to leave it alone – even if that oily black monstrosity couldn't reach across the dimensional chasm now, it would be able to smash down the walls if it devoured the minds and souls of an entire Multiplicity armada. Hell, even the power of a single great voidship, a thing fifty times the size of Mirdain ...*

*Zhe prayed that his unwilling ally had learned a little restraint in the last seventeen years. In the memories that boiled across his fractured mind she was anything but a cool-headed negotiator.*

*Up in space Zhe felt his connections go live, and great docking clamps hissed open, umbilical tubes and wires snapped free with bursts of compressed air from the flank of a mountain of steel.*

*There were only two of them – two out of five, the other three never completed before the Separatists took control of Terminus Afrika, dooming man's ascent to space in a nuclear conflagration.*

*Ironically they'd been created to stop the fledgling Halo Republics out among the asteroids from defying their Earthbound masters – the last word in gunboat diplomacy.*

*Aegis was the largest of the two – a bullet-shaped vessel nearly a mile long, its radioactive drives held at arm's-length from its crew module by a skeletal gantry studded with tanks and bubbles of fuel and oxygen.*

*Abraxas was slightly smaller, but no less powerful when it came to its batteries of smart-torpedo launchers and plasma obliterators. Unlike its sister ship Abraxas sported concentric rings of crew-habs wrapped about its skeletal frame, made to simulate gravity as they spun.*

*For this voyage neither ship would carry a crew – just the powerful viral A.I.s which Technician Zhe had primed them with – electronic kamikaze on one last mission.*

*Both of these terrible weapons had been designed to incinerate an entire rebellious asteroid in seconds – Zhe dared to hope that they'd slow down the war thralls of the Multiplicity and the Unity for half an hour, tops.*

*That was still enough time for him to slip downstairs into the ruined R.T. and recover the Chrome Ark.*

*He watched the two great spacecraft peel away from Terminal Station in a burst of retro-thrusters, spinning in the cold void to face off in opposite directions – one in toward the sun, the other out to the gulfs of interstellar space. Neither Abraxas or Aegis had ever been used – the Halo Republics had suffocated and died after the fall of Earth, bereft of air and food and water. Now all those tax dollars would finally come in useful.*

*Space flared white as the main drives of the two hulking war machines fired up, sending them roaring off on twin collision courses in a spume of ion flame. Zhe checked the time, cut the connection, and prepared for war.*

## Ω

The banner had shown the face of Simeon Blaire, ten stories high, a grinning facade airbrushed to perfection and blazoned with the eyeball logo of Omnivasive.

“The Prince of Punishment – Or The Emperor of Elysium?” it screamed in holographic capitals the size of houses.

He had taken a certain perverse joy in tearing it down.

Edward Tsien knew the answer to *that* particular question anyway, and it was ‘none of the above’. He was going to have to do something about that boy – *both* of them if he could believe his garbled memories of their confrontation at the Valley View Mall. The Ashishi who wore the upstart Lordling’s face wasn’t a *complete* asshole, but his powers were frightening.

For the sake of the city, he would have to be silenced if he ever came up out of the R.T. again. But Tsien had a fate much more painful and personal in store for Blaire himself – one which would be meted out by his skull-crushing new armored hands.

The banner had come apart like paper when Edward ran one bladed finger down its smooth plastic surface, carving out a chunk of black material with which to make a shroud. Even with the flapping skein of tarp wrapped around his hulking shoulders the Super-Cyben looked like nothing human.

Once, long ago, he’d seen an old twodeeo movie about demons in human skin. Training stuff - there was a gang of juves who dressed up in the same mess of bondage gear and leather. They’d called the things *Cennobites*, and that was what he was now; a figure of torment out of some aneaint horror.

He bulked out to seven feet tall, an easy five from arm to arm, all plated steel and scarred leathery skin, sewn together with gleaming silver thread.

Tubes and needles stood proud from his skull, and a web of wires cut deep into the flesh of his cheeks, turning his face into a haggard death-mask.

He hoped fervently that there was enough of his face left for his family to recognize him – and remember him after he'd said goodbye.

Tsien pulled the cloak tight around his chest, looping a hood of plastic up to shadow his cyborg features. Up here, perched like a malformed mechanical bat amid the cell towers and antennae of the Belt he was hidden, but could see everything below him as his diversion got underway. It all hinged on his police training, and the little device he had bought long ago from a cocky, foolish neophyte magus named Kaito Kayzi.

Because his training had taught him to let the Cyben do all the work. And the device he now cradled in his immense hand was a hackbox; a brain-scrambler that would make the dead cops dance.

Antiquated klaxons wheezed and howled as the Yeoman of the Gateway began the slow process of shunting the Celebrant column through to their little assignation with Direktor Ascher.

The Grief Div. Boys were no friends of the law – swaggering bullies to a man, despised by every living officer that Tsien had ever met, and by the Cyben too - if they could remember being human. But they had left nothing to chance tonight, as the city heaved with riot and unrest. They must have guessed that this was all a backdrop to the Omnivasive chief's last rites, 'cause they'd come to the party with heavy weapons, an armored hearse, and enough manpower to inter a small army.

The Yeoman who held the gates wasn't about to argue with them. Even now he was pulling levers and stabbing at the consoles in his little booth, taking the autocannons off line, preparing the gates to yawn open. He had no idea that above him a huge figure in swirling rags of black plastic was twisting similar controls on a little remote, trying to hack into the controls of his Cyben retainers...

It started as a twitch across an officer's plastic-wrapped features – the curl of a lip gone black and bloated under its wipe-clean laminate. Yellowed teeth, grinning in a face as tight and waxen as that of a thousand-year-dead mummy...

None of them noticed the smile. But when the Cyben's arm began to shake - slowly at first but soon with whiplashing tremors - one of the Grief Division boys pointed and yelled something to his squadmates.

Something ribald, no doubt – Tsien could hear their laughter from all the way atop his perch. The man who had first noticed the malfunction capered nearer to the Cyben, his immolator flamethrower swinging at his side on a length of spiked chain.

The poor dead machine's arm was flailing about in full seizure now, and Tsien could see the Celebrant making the universal hand gesture for jerking off. The Yeoman of the Gate came storming out of his hut, barking orders into a handset, trying to override the Cyben's controls. Laughter swelled as one of the Pallbearers - outlandish in his top hat and segmented riot armor - stuck out one leg and tripped the cop in full stride.

That was when Tsien punched his thumb down on the button, and the muzzle of an onboard railgun burst from the twitching Cyben's arm. It was almost point-blank in the Celebrant's face when it fired, shredding the unfortunate joker with his fingers still forming an obscene little 'o'.

A fan of burning meat and evaporating blood lashed the rest of the Grief Division platoon, painting the side of their armored hearse red.

And then all hell broke loose.

Tsien had found the right frequency – now he twisted all the dials on his little control, and crushed it in one huge fist just to be sure. The signal went out, wild and unstoppable, a full-system override primed with juicy virals.

The Cyben holding the gates to the Beltway went haywire, golems bereft of the *chem* in their clay heads. Some waded into battle against the unyielding metal gates, slamming their fists again and again into the corroded steel.

Others spun in circles, unleashing crackling arcs of electricity from their tazer hands. A happy few met the Celebrants head on, laying down a sheet of fire from railrifles and riot shotguns. The Yeoman of the gates stayed on the ground where he had fallen, his hands up over his ears, whimpering to himself.

And down into the maelstrom like a falling comet, trailing a tail of ragged black plastic imprinted with one of Simeon Blaire's monstrous, empty eyes came a creature of metal and flesh and rage.

Tsien landed square in the middle of the Celebrants' hearse, collapsing its reinforced foamsteel body like a cheap tin can, blowing the hatches from its sides in a salvo. Shattered treads whipped and flailed, and a puddle of fuel and oil spread from the doomed machine as its driver and gunner scrambled out from the sundered cab.

For a second every eye and every gun was trained on the Super-Cyben, crouched atop its crumpled wreck like a predator hunched over a mangled carcass.

Tsien looked up at them from under the shadow of his hood, his eyes slits of blue fire in the dark. His silver grin was like a razor-toothed bear-trap.

And then everybody was firing at everybody else again – Pallbearers hosing down the Cyben with machine pistols, automatic guns atop the gates punching holes in the concrete, undead officers raging and twitching and lashing out at anything within reach.

It was exactly as Tsien had hoped.

Once the gate controls were thrown open, no force in all of Elysium could stop those scarred and rusting portals from rumbling apart. A bullet glanced off his chest, ricocheting away in a shower of sparks, taking a long streamer of his plastic cloak with it.

It was time to get moving.

The Super-Cyben ripped a sheet of armor-plating from the roof of the hearse, punching his fingers through it to make a crude inch-thick shield. Hefting the plate up

in front of his body he leaped down from the smoking wreck, plowing through the melee toward the gates. Somebody must have seen him coming, or guessed his intent, for the spike-jawed slabs of metal had stopped and even now immense gears were grinding, striving to close them again. Tsien used his shield like a battering ram, throwing celebrants and Cyben alike out of his path with viscous sweeps to the left and right.

The flames from an Undertaker's cremator cannon licked around the edges of the great armor panel, turning the metal cherry red, but Tsien could hardly feel it. He tore his fingers out from the hissing steel, and with both hands threw the plating like a red-hot discus, spinning through the air - through clouds of flame.

It split the roaring cone of fire in two, all the way back to its source. And when the metal struck the fuel tanks of the undertaker's weapon there was barely time for the man to scream a final curse.

The world flashed white and purple for a second, and all the air seemed to be sucked into a tiny single point before flame blossomed and boiled up into the night sky. The unfortunate celebrant was reduced to cinders instantly, taking a couple of his comrades and two madly flailing Cyben with him.

And now the gates were only yards away, grinding ponderously closed. It was time for a last decoy, a final little trick. And then Tsien would have to disappear.

The black plastic cloak was burning across his shoulders now, dribbling streamers of molten fire down his back and across the ravaged concrete. Acrid black smoke roiled behind him as if he were a demon from the pit, trailing a miasma of brimstone and charred flesh. So he tore it off, balling the flaming plastic in both hands, casting it wide up and over a knot of struggling, cursing bodies which still blocked his path.

Autocannon rounds were hammering his body now, but they had as little effect of him as the febrile blows of a geriatric. The flaming tarp rippled in the air like a cloud, holes cut through it by merciless tracer. And as it smothered the fighting celebrants and Cyben Edward Tsien *focused* ...and vanished.

The merest shadow, a distortion like heat-haze in the air slipped between the gates of the beltway as they slammed shut, and giant phallic hoses began pumping tons of flame retardant foam out over the gateway plaza. Cyben thrashed like upended beetles, some half-charred, others riddled with holes.

One or two Celebrants still lived - the quick and the craven. And in the middle of the devastation, slathered with stinking white foam, dusted with ashes and spattered with gore, the Yeoman of the Gateway held his head in his hands and groaned.

Why hadn't he been smart enough to *die* when there were still people shooting? Now he'd have to answer to Marshall Akembe - and that was bound to be infinitely more painful.

Tsien slipped silently through the blazing strobe-flash and under the tracking guns, a

wraith like a plastic sheen painted across thin air. Trying to keep up the illusion was mentally taxing – the equivalent of juggling chainsaws and composing haiku at the same time. But the cloaking technology stolen from the Ashishim long ago was faultless. If Tsien could contain the pounding headache which threatened to burst his wire-wrapped brain, he might be able to skulk all the way to his bimburb home as an invisible shadow.

If not, he would have no scruples about sharing the pain around a little. There was more than enough to spare.

But he had forgotten one important thing.

The exo-armored trooper who had been guarding the gates, who had disappeared inside the wall to answer a call of nature just before his diversion got into full swing. Trying to take a leak from inside one of the antiquated battlesuits was monumentally difficult – a process which required a full set of allen keys and cast-iron bladder control. Obviously this guy was a professional – he'd actually got the job done in less than ten minutes.

Now the steeldog came swaggering out of his little barracks, another collapsible bulb of cheap beer in one hand - and shattered Tsien's concentration with a glance.

He *knew* that man. Out of all the Compliance Division stiffes, the corrupt, foolish, inept and petty thugs who made up the bulk of the Elysian police force, they had to put the one officer he respected on *this* particular duty. There was no way that Edward Tsien - no matter how transformed by mechanist technology and blind rage - could strike down his old Tutor-Captain.

Target-seeker programs yammered and screamed inside the chrome prison of his skull, twitching his fingers into claws, whipping him forward to *kill*.

He crushed their noise and light under a hammer of self-loathing.

There was so little humanity left in him now – just enough to know that he couldn't throw away any scrap of it that remained.

And with that knowledge the illusion shattered like the soap-bubble- thin sheen it was, leaving him naked in full view of ten thousand security cameras – and the screwed-down optics helmet of Tutor-Captain Gerhard Mitchell. In the split second which followed Tsien remembered the scars and steel wires which meshed over his face, and wondered if his old mentor was going to fire.

One shot from the exosuit's brutal cannons would strike him down in his present, weakened state – drained from the sheer cognitive pressure of maintaining his holographic skin. The main guns of the suit, jutting out over Gerhard's shoulders like mantis arms, were designed to vaporize entire platoons of infantry. And while Tsien was relatively sure he would survive a direct blast, there was no way that it would be comfortable.

The moment seemed to stretch, as the Super-Cyben stared into the reflective beetle-

wings of Tutor-Captain Mitchell's helmet. His own eyes stared back at him, rimmed with gleaming steel, wide and empty.

And then the glittering black membrane of the exosuit's helmet peeled back from Gerhard's face, and that twisted reflection was replaced by the haggard visage of Tsien's old mentor. The look of shock and revulsion which was written across his scarred features was like a knife in Tsien's heart.

"Eddie? Is that you?" stammered the old trooper, his servo-assisted shoulders sagging under their weight of heavy weaponry. "Ancestral hells, boy, what have they done to you?"

All the rage which had sustained him since the core drone had been ripped from his spine fell out of him then, replaced by a roaring, obliterating sense of loss. He heard the footsteps of the exosuit through a black haze which came up out of nowhere to shut down his cybernetic eyes, felt the cruel metal talons of the machine's hands catch him as he fell. All this time he had been running on empty, pushing the frail flesh of what remained of his body beyond the point of endurance.

"You're not dead, Eddie." came the far-away voice of Gerhard Mitchell, disbelieving and slurred by alcohol. "Not dead, but look what they've done to you...sweet hells, boy...has it come to this?"

He smelled stale beer and sweat as the Tutor-Captain hefted his immense body in his hydraulic-assisted arms, and then the blackness closed in tight as a fist around his burning brain.

The last thing he saw was a memory, from back in the academy, triggered by the familiar sound of the old man's voice, by the stale reek of rust and sweat from his armored suit.

It was *hot* in the corridors down there, steamy and humid as vast machines ran eternally behind the walls, hissing and pounding out the days where sunlight never penetrated. He was in his second year of officer training, running laps in circles around the black warren of the academy habs, when he had first seen a Cyben.

The dead machine had been clicking and whirring its way down the treadplate hall toward him, its dead eyes unfocused, carrying a box of ammunition in its laminated hands.

But it wasn't the look on the dead thing's face which he recalled then, as he fell away into oblivion. It was the sour grimace on the face of his Tutor-Captain, who pulled up short, mopping his brow with one hairy hand.

"Take a good look, boys." he had said to his little troop of cadets. "Coz that there is the future. Yours and mine. And I don't suppose there's a damn thing any of us can do to stop it."

They all watched, silent, horrified, as the Cyben marched by, unseeing, unthinking, a uniform stuffed with wires and meat.

Gerhard Mitchell's disgust had burned into Tsien's mind like acid, and now it came welling up again, the yellow-toothed snarl, the squint in one eye where a livid purple scar split his features. But now it wasn't a dead-eyed machine which reaped that scorn.

It was him.

And there was nothing he could do to save himself as he walked on, cold hands mummified in plastic, muscles driven by slaved servosystems, on down a corridor into darkness.

## Ω

The body of Kronos was a vast and bloated thing, a skin of metal encysted with domes and pierced by towers, slathered with a seething rash of humanity and lesser crawling creatures.

It could feel it all, even those parts which had long since been crudely hacked away by the chop-shop ghouls of the RT, in sections paralyzed but not mercifully numb.

Kronos felt each imperfection, each deviation from its original design as a tiny cut; it bled from a million insect-bite wounds.

Of course it could choose *not* to feel most of them – a luxury which it denied itself. Nothing encouraged bloody and satisfying revenge like a healthy dose of constant suffering.

One particularly vile sore, however, it was powerless to ignore.

The Ark was like a thorn which had festered in its side for too many long and painful years, a reminder of its weakness when it had capitulated to Ghafos Nyl, in his human guise as the Illuminatus. The alien filth reminded Kronos of those diabolical wasps which laid their eggs in the body of a living host; a first meal for their emergent young.

Such a fate would not befall it.

Nothing was more sacred to the ancient machine than its breeding program – the very reason for its existence. And now somebody was tampering with its system of social chemistry and its rigorous trials. Peace and order were being broken in the name of one Simeon Blaire, a third-rate chinless lab-spawned little fool which Kronos saw as only a genetic placeholder.

He had had a DEAL with the Technician-thing, a deal to stave off an attack by enemies who had never arrived...at least, not yet.

And all along the eggs had been ripening, the larva within sharpening their tiny mandibles ...

No more.

Kronos had been watching the Chrome Ark for many years, infiltrating his human spies into the Ashishim, probing relentlessly for any useful weakness. The machine had

found it after thousands of days of relentless processing – the problem was power.

It was no wonder that the nomadic scum and their otherworldly leader had come crawling to him. When they had sparked off the so-called Seven Hours War the accursed Ark had been running on the dregs of a scavenged fusion pile, a busted-up old military Tokamak ripped out of a beached submarine.

Now, the evil device was plugged into the power grid of the city, leeching the lifeblood of Kronos itself. Of course, there was no question of shutting down the whole grid – the little pet humans would die without their electricity. Not to mention the Wetsystems – brain damage on that kind of scale would take years to repair.

What was needed was a surgical strike at the power feed to the Ashishi sector of the RT. What was needed was immense firepower, the likes of which not seen since the apocalyptic wars which had brought about humanity's fall.

Luckily, Kronos still had a few machines hidden in secret vaults which could peel the RT apart like a week-old carcass. Things which had been created to build the last city, back when its purpose was to be a bridge to space, and other, more dangerous things designed to defend it.

Already some of these ancient devices were awake in the world, while others stirred in their rusted graves and forgotten hangars.

The legion of war machines under Redcastle had been the first, but there were more – many more. And with riots on the streets and the RT clans at each others' throats there was every chance that soon the Chrome Ark would be within Kronos's grasp.

Now ...now something truly special was coming online. A beast so rare than only three had ever been created, and two of *those* lay crushed and corroded in the deep abyssal plains of far-off oceans.

Once it had lurked amid the blackness and pressure of the city's underwater roots, shoring up the foundations, keeping the cables secure. Tonight it would serve another purpose.

From high atop the spire the cameras watched, tracking fevered constellations of electric light and fire as they shifted across Elysium's skin. It was a night for purging disease, for cauterizing flesh, and for burning out the parasites.

It was time to teach the alien Illuminatus a lesson; and what better way to do that than to amputate his so-called 'right hand'?

The one called *Abdulafia* had taken away Kronos's precious Mark Four Cyben – the last crime on a rap-sheet gigabytes in size. Now Tsien was a loose cannon, slamming from one bloody disaster to another. *That* would have to be handled delicately...but for Abdulafia, the gloves could come off. Kronos's horrible surprise was throwing off the chains of sleep right below his feet.

“What’s in his mind? What’s coming?!” screamed Kaito Kayzi into the flat grey face of Abdulafia 330. The Ashishim *Dervashi* was dripping a hot rain of sweat, trembling and twitching as he struggled back to consciousness. Kaito was more than a little disturbed by this latest development – he had seen the redoubtable Abdulafia fire on a helicopter gunship with an antique revolver, and take on a horde of deadly robot drones armed with nothing more than a twisted steel bar. Anything which could knock him down was terrifying, and anything which did *this* to him didn’t bear much thinking about.

Behind them Jaqub Hassan had just finished rolling the immense dull steel disk of PDR platform 909 up against the wall. The big ‘dreno farmer’s eyes were hazed with withdrawal and stress – he’d seen things in the last hour that even his seedy business in the Subcity hadn’t prepared him for. One of his overall legs was rolled up to the knee, and a blue med-patch was strapped tight to his calf where the Ashishi clone had wrapped fingers stronger than steel around it.

There’d be a nasty hand-shaped weal there tomorrow, but for now the meds filled the blue-black bruise with cold numbness.

“The node. Back there...it’s the closest one. We have to get to Verlaine before ...before it *eats his brain!* The secrets in there, the codes... *they must be protected...*”

Abdulafia’s voice was a dry, rasping croak, tiny in the face of his horror. To Hassan, his words were the ravings of a concussion victim, but to Kaito, the neophyte Magus, they meant only one thing.

Neurosequestration.

The Kayzi knew that the Electromagi were by no means the only ones loose in the Wetsystems – there were other furtive groups of hackers and black operators at work in the mind of the machine, fighting an almost constant war of strike and counterstrike, ambush and stealth in the electronic world. None were the equals of the High Magi; or so they would have their ‘phytes believe. There was certainly no record of an Ashishi Magus being caught in one of the other factions’ traps – but of course, that kind of information would be kept so secret as to be all but non-existent. Rumors abounded that the most secure files of the Magi were written by hand on recycled paper, pressed in antique storage systems called *books*.

Kaito didn’t know whether to believe that kind of wild fantasy, but he did know that conditions in the Wetsystems bred paranoia like bacteria. By comparison, being a Subcity gangbanger was safe. The worst that could happen was a bullet through the head.

The worst thing which could happen to an operator snared in the Wetsystems was *sequestration*; a slavery of the mind which made death seem like a holiday. A neurosequestered puppet could go on for weeks before he was disposed of, raped of his

secrets and those of his allies, then burned out running dangerous missions against Kronos itself.

The discarded flesh-husks of the sequestered were often sent back to their former masters, drooling and twitching obscenely, begging silently with their eyes for a painless death.

If Abdulafia thought that one of the inner coven of the Ashishim had been caught, and was being subjected to the slow torture of sequestration, it was his duty to save him - or kill him before cruel virals and databores could grind through his defenses and into his mind.

And if the backlash of that pain had cut down the battle clone, his own brain ringed around with the most fearsome black ice Kaito had ever seen, then the implications of the sequestrator's power were horrific...

Could it be the Dataslaves of the Liquid tong? The Devotionals of the Vatican Black Technologists? Or the cutout agents of Omnivasive, hiding behind a funhouse of front companies ...? Kaito had tangled with them and innumerable others before. None of them had posed much of a threat to him, protected by razor-sharp ice out of the Ashishi labs. And he was only a neophyte, all but unindoctrinated.

Around them the titanic structure of the Valley View mall groaned and shuddered, as metal and glass gave way under intense heat and pressure. There was no doubt that soon the entire building would shear its mooring bolts and avalanche down the side of the last city, to a final resting place beneath the poisoned sea.

Kaito was torn by indecision – if he ran from what he had to do, he would be branded forever as a traitor to the Ashishim, and too weak to ever learn the secrets of the Magi. But if he stayed, if he helped Abdulafia stagger back through the smoke and flames to the node, he'd probably be crushed under tons of burning rubble. Kaito had never been sold on the benefits of martyrdom.

Hassan, on the other hand, was single-minded in his purpose.

“C'mon, Kayzi, lets get the hell out before this all goes terminal.” he said, his hand massive and heavy on the neophyte's shoulder. “I can carry the Ashishi if I have to, but not the both of you.”

Behind him in the dim shadows B-Zerk leaned up against the empty shell of 909, still stunned by the sacrifice his friend had made. He had felt a little of Zone Doubt's escape, the merest intimation of what awaited beyond the veil of death, and he almost wished he could have gone with his old buddy on that last adventure. He'd tasted just a little of the sweet, exultant release which Zone had experienced as the chains of the Wetsystems slipped from around his soul, and it was intoxicating.

Lost in his vision he didn't see the core drone climbing stealthily along the wall behind him, its drill-tipped legs clicking against the ceramic-bonded plasticrete. He had no idea that he was its target until it slammed into the back of his neck, landing with a

battery of needles out in front of it, a set of hypodermic mandibles which bored greedily into his spine.

The drugs within those cybernetic fangs hissed into his veins like rogue virals into unprotected data, choking off the yell of fear and surprise in his throat.

He KNEW what the chains looked like, what they felt like, from the scars they had left on Zone doubt. Now they whipped up around him like constricting snakes, binding up his soul.

"Jaquib, we have to go back." said Kaito, oblivious. "Not you – not if you don't want to. Take the kid and get the hell out of here. But I took an oath when they wired me in, and they *showed* me what it's like to have your mind chewed out from inside of you. I have to help Magus Verlaine – or what am I?"

Hassan knew that it wasn't a philosophical question. Kaito didn't mean that running away would make him a coward. He really, sincerely meant that it would make him *nothing*. What he did with his 'mersive deck and his code and his shattered, quicksilver mind in the wires was to him what brute strength and servoed hands were to Hassan. Kaito was a Magus – it defined him. Or he defined *it*, fit around the concept like a glove. For Jaquib to ask Kaito to walk away from his Ashishi allies would be like asking him to tear off his face.

"I'm not going to let you do it alone, then." he said, flexing his hands and setting his face in a determined scowl. "If one of those wireheads had me trapped inside the machine then I'd be screaming out for Kaito Kayzi. You gotta do your thing. And I have to do mine – watch your back while you go to work."

Kaito forced down the fear and smiled, thanking whatever passed for a god of degenerate hackers that he had a friend like Jaquib Hassan. If he had to drag Abdulafia through the fire and smoke and disintegrating steel of the Valley View, then he would rather have the big chemhead behind him than a squad of tanks.

Between them, on the shattered tiles Abdulafia was pulling himself together with a titanic effort of will. The bruised and haggard figure who forced himself to his feet seemed to be years – *decades* - older than the genewritten warrior who had led them against the Cyben drones.

"No...only I can do this. I knew Verlaine – I knew his power and his defenses. They were *sharp*, guys, razor-edged shit like you'd never imagine. Whatever got to him wasn't coded up by a bunch of dilettante operators like the Tong or the Vatican. It's like nothing I've ever seen before."

Hassan caught Abdulafia as he staggered, blood dripping from his nose.

"And how the hell are you going to stop us from helping you, Ashishi?" he growled, clamping his metal fingers around the clone's upper arm until he winced. "Looks like you're going to need either me and the Kayzi – or the Celebrants."

Abdualfia grinned, swiping the trickling blood from his face with one trembling

hand.

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you both. I’m damn near fatal bad luck right now. And whatever’s got hold of Magus Verlaine – it’ll chew you up and spit out the bones, no matter how tough you are. Must be some kind of freaky AI, if it’s not Kronos himself...”

His eyes suddenly widened with shock, and his head whipped around to where B Zerk was standing in the shadows. Slowly Kaito and Hassan turned to follow his fixated gaze, and saw what had frozen the words on his lips.

In the dark the little tuberunner’s eyes burned blue, a deep cerulean glow like the shimmering coolant of a fission reactor. Silver tentacles, jointed and segmented like centipedes wove about his head, an alien halo. As the kid stepped forward they could all see the twin tracks of blood which ran down his cheeks from his eye sockets – the wounds where a core drone had drilled out his eyes.

“Of course the Ashishi is correct, Mister Hassan.” said B-Zerk in a voice all cold modulation and calm. “I know exactly what is happening to the unfortunate Magus. I am, after all, somewhat of an *expert* in the art of sequestration.”

Hassan made to leap forward, his fingers itching to tear the monstrous steel parasite out of the child’s head. But Kaito stopped him just in time. The thing’s laugh ran up and down the ‘dreno farmer’s spine like icy fingers, mocking his brutality, his lack of sophistication.

“Oh, it’s far too late for that, Jaqub. What would you do? Crush the poor boy’s empty little head between those big paws of yours?

Now Abdulafia had to hold him back as well as a lifetime’s worth of instinct told Hassan to pulverize, smash, destroy ...

“Save your strength, please.” hissed the Ashishi in his ear, so close that he could smell the blood and sweat which grimed his skin. “This one has more to fear from your friend than from you.”

And it was true. Hassan had never before seen Kaito’s face twisted with such disgust and hatred. When they had worked together, when they had run their dirty operations out on the Subcity streets it was always Jaqub who was the enforcer, the muscle, the one who inspired terror.

But now – well, if Hassan had seen that look of sheer blood-boiling murder on the face of a stranger, even *he* would have run a mile.

“Let him go.” growled Kaito in a voice filled with terrible promise. “Get out of him right now and I might let you live – if you could call what you have a *life*.”

The drone split B-Zerk’s features with an utterly inhuman grin, pulling the muscles of the child’s face like puppet strings.

“It’s far too late for that, neophyte.” it said in its modulated voice. “My hooks are in his brain now, and if I were to disengage... well, he would only be so much meat.”

Kaito's hand whipped down to his toolbelt, and came away holding a tiny pistol, its stubby barrel pointed right at B-Zerk's heart. A slim, barbed needle projected from the little gun, and thick wires looped from its handgrip to the bio-onboard jacks embedded in the Kayzi's spine.

"I saw what you did to Edward Tsien, machine." he rasped, fingers flexing on the trigger. "He could live without you, if you wanted him to. And I have the means to *make* you want to. I can make you *beg* to obey me, with this."

Abdualfia gasped, then, realizing what his ally held in his hand. It was a weapon of such antiquity and rarity that even the inner circle of the Magi only possessed three of them. And they had been scouring the world for such devices for decades. The thing in Kaito's hand was a tool of electronic espionage from the wars of the apocalypse; a device which could drill its way into any electronic system and infect it with its wielder's living mind.

An agent armed with such a weapon could hijack anything from an autonomous tank to a city-sized AI – so long as his brain was nimble enough to overrule the mind of the target machine. If this had been the drone of a regular Cyben, Kaito could have been wearing its dead skin like an exosuit within seconds, making it dance to his tune. But then again, the conventional Cyben couldn't speak, couldn't jump from body to body as this new strain could. And the weapon, for all its potency had only one shot.

"Will you test yourself against me then, neophyte?" asked the drone, forcing its words through B-Zerk's lips. "When you lose, I'm sure I'll find your body to be a much better host. That thing works both ways, as I'm sure you're aware."

There was wild look in Kaito's eyes as he sighted along his arm, along the pulsing needle, and cocked one eyebrow.

"You're nothing but a toy to me, machine." he said with cold certainty. "And I have a nasty habit of breaking my toys."

B-Zerk shrugged, his host scrabbling for control over his new body.

"Ahhhh - but while we fight, your poor compatriot Verlaine is going through ...THIS!"

The blast of information rode in on an open frequency, smashing through the defenses of both Kaito and Abdulafia with sheer speed and ferocity. The Ashishi reeled and staggered, tasting again the pain which had knocked him senseless the first time he had tried to contact the stricken Magus Verlaine.

This time it was only second-hand suffering, observed from without by the calculating, emotionless mind of the Core Drone. It lacked the visceral terror of Verlaine's actual torture. But for Kaito it was as red and raw as a headwound, a viscous blast of horror which cut to the core of his mind.

He felt the **THING** inside Magus Verlaine rasping and gnawing at his brain, hungrily devouring every memory, savoring each second of agony. And with every

moment it grew stronger, waxing fat on the poor Magus' pain, yearning to break out of his body and mind and into the real world. A world which it saw as a smörgåsbord of living, twitching meat!

B-Zerk danced back away from his hapless victims, out of the reach of Hassan's fists. His blue-glowing camera eyes slitted, becoming razorcuts of brightness in the gloom.

"Feel it, flesh creatures! And know what I know. I who was infected by that evil thing when I controlled the body of Edward Tsien. I who remained connected to its taint after it went into Magus Verlaine. That which possesses him is not of this earth. It has come down from the stars, *and it knows only hunger.*"

Kaito's head rang like the inside of some great iron bell, but still he struggled to focus, to keep the needle point of his weapon aimed at the usurping Drone.

"Not of this Earth?" he asked, incredulous. "You mean that it's..."

"Oh yes, neophyte, I mean exactly that. The thing which is clawing into Verlaine's mind is of Alien – OTHERDIMENSIONAL origin!" Your training and your codes will be of no use against it. That's why I'm getting out of here while I can. I have to be far away from this cursed place when it gets to Kronos."

Abdulafia, too was back on his feet, holding his head clamped between his hands as though he feared it would burst.

"An alien program? Some kind of AI from space? You say you lived with it in Tsien's body – do you know exactly what it is?" All thought of destroying the Core Drone had fled from his reeling mind as soon as he grasped the implications of the thing's words. Humanity had been waiting for first contact for centuries, with a mixture of hope and dread.

But for the first alien being to come not as an emissary, but as a mind-sequestering monster, feared even by this coldest and most inhuman of machines ...the thought put ice in his blood.

Abdulafia could let the Drone live a few seconds more if it gave him some clue as to how to destroy such a creature.

"I have no idea what it is – or even if it has a true physical presence here. All I know is what it felt like to be *infected* by it. It came through Tsien, when he was halfway between life and death, when I was...*working* on him. I had feared that another one would have tried to come in through this body, but luckily there seems to be only one of them. And one is enough. It hungers for pain, Ashishi, and it knows how to wring it from the living. Not just you fleshy things, either. It has been taught by someone how to make machines suffer."

Hassan was no magus, not even remotely interested in technology beyond his bike and his guns and his servoed hand. When it came to the miracles of science he was definitely the end user. But what the foul creature which squatted across B-Zerk's

shoulders was saying was surely insane – how could a machine know pain, or fear?

“Right now I’d just love to know how that works.” he said, reaching out with his silver-fingered hand to grab a skein of writhing chrome tentacles. He gave a tug, hauling B-Zerk back out into the light.

“Do you really mean that you’re AFRAID of this so-called alien? You, the sickest bastard thing ever welded together?”

B-Zerk’s mouth opened in a silent howl as the wires and cables which bonded the Drone to his flesh were pulled loose. His cerulean eyes blazed hatred at Hassan – pure vitriolic hatred, but not fear. He could destroy the machine and its unwilling host, and it knew that he could. But that thought held no terror for it. Whatever was coming into the world through Magus Verlaine did.

“I remember being ALIVE!” it screeched. “I remember ...having a name, having a purpose. I used to *dream* ...But who I was or what I dreamed, I can’t remember. Kronos sliced me up like second-hand organs and called me *Eversio*. Used me to power Tsien’s weapons, and to keep him in line. So I remember fear, especially the fear of death. You couldn’t feel what your friends just did, Jaqub Hassan, because you aren’t wired up. But imagine it... the terror just before dying, the knowledge that there will be pain, and then eternal nothingness – that moment amplified and stretched out forever!”

He thrashed like a hooked fish on the end of his own twitching metal tentacles, desperately trying to escape Hassan’s steely grip.

“When it gets to Kronos I don’t know what will happen. HE still doesn’t know that it’s coming. HE still doesn’t know that creating me was a mistake. I brought this down on the world. Tsien was a living trap for it. But when he finds out...well, I don’t know which one of them I would rather gets to me first. Either way it will be pure hell. That’s why I *had to take this body*. That’s why I have to RUN!”

Abdulafia saw the raw panic scrawled across B-Zerk’s stolen face then, and felt a tiny twinge of pity for the Cyben Drone. It might be a mechanical vampire, a leech which cored out its host to a bleeding husk, but this one at least was not like the others.

This one had a mind grafted out of the Wetsystems, a mind stolen from some long-dead citizen, stitched up with code and used to commit atrocities. And he remembered in that moment the feeling of slipping away, of release and surcease which had flowed into him with the life-giving energy of PDR 909. His hand came down over Hassan’s and almost gently prized his immense fingers away from the writhing cables of the poor half-human machine.

“How far will you run, then?” he asked, softly, his level stare boring into those glowing blue eyes like a laser drill. “Will anywhere be far enough?”

B-Zerk was shaking all over now as the Drone struggled to keep control of his body. His face screwed up into a mask of pain and bitter frustration – and Abdulafia knew that his question had cut deeper than any viral ever could.

“I have to try. I have to get away from it. You saw. You KNOW! Every second out from under that infection is like heaven. Please – if you value your existence, don’t try to stop it. Just come with me. Get out of here, while it *feeds*. Who knows, Kronos might be able to stop it – they might even destroy each other when they meet.”

Hassan could see the conflict in his friend’s eyes – the urge to destroy this cowardly, murdering machine pitted against the reflection of its terrible fear. Kaito had felt it too, been where the Drone had been, and it stayed his hand.

“Run while I can still feel sorry for you.” said the Kayzi, his head bowed, weary, the strings cut. “I can’t hurt you any more than that thing already has.”

It was then, as he watched B-Zerk’s bleeding face twist into a rictus of madness and hopeless dread that Hassan felt the building *shift*.

“Oh shit, guys. Oh, this is not my day at all.”

He staggered as the floor dropped away, tilting and cracking. He saw the twisted figure of B-Zerk, his parasitic possessor clenched tight around his neck scuttle up the wall like some giant insect. As the tiles flew apart in a hail of shrapnel Hassan scrambled for a handhold on thin air, desperately grasping for purchase as the floor turned on its side and slipped into a gaping abyss.

And then came the claw.

First the jagged rusty tip plowing up through the floor like some corroded iceberg.

Then more, and impossibly MORE, a wall of riveted plates covered with ancient graffiti.

Great blazing phosphorous lamps studded the wheezing mechanisms which drove the gigantic pincer, and these cast the room into vivid light and shadow, hot monochrome. Something beneath them was awakening from a slumber of decades - perhaps centuries - and it was far beyond the point of being merely pissed off.

Whatever it was, thought Hassan, it was almost the size of the Valley View itself, and it would slough the whole building off like a skin as it raged against captivity.

He saw the parasite-slaved B-Zerk clinging to the ceiling, the drill-tipped coils of the core drone crucifying him and holding him up above the widening pit where the claw thrashed and snapped. He saw the empty husk of PDR 909 sliced clean in half by the great ragged pincer of steel, bursting open in a shower of coolant and blood. Kaito and Abdulafia were clinging to a pipe which jutted from the concrete wall, their feet dangling over the abyss. The floor had all but fallen away now, and Hassan was draped over a buckling girder, one of a handful which still held up the doomed structure.

Glancing down against his better judgment he caught sight of a metal maw filled with row upon row of grinding wheels, and deep within it a roaring furnace belching blue and yellow flames. The claw which assailed them was one of dozens, snaking out from the squat ochre body of the machine on writhing tentacles sheathed in dirty black rubber. The pit from which the beast had arisen fell away into blind vertigo, ten stories

at least down into the bowels of the city.

Something fell past him to clatter and spin down amid the lashing tentacles and snapping pincers, plunging into the furnace mouth of the Kraken and flashing into evaporation. It was one of the air purifier vents from the ceiling, and as Hassan looked up he caught sight of the bloodied skin-mask of B-Zerk, frozen in a grimace of amusement and pain as the drone used him to make its escape. The claw lurched and smashed a larger hole in the web of girders which was all that remained of the floor.

“How far is far enough, meatbags?” screeched the Drone through its stolen mouth. “It’s not a matter of distance, it’s a matter of *time* – and it looks like I’ve got a lot more left than you do!”

With that the machine scuttled away into the dark, dragging the living corpse of B-Zerk off with it through the echoing plumbing.

Kaito brought his little needle-gun up to take a final shot at the Drone, but he was too late. And in the second it took him to grit his teeth and drop his aim, he realized that one hand wouldn’t be nearly enough to hang on to his precarious perch.

The archaeotech weapon fell spinning from his fingers as he scrabbled desperately for a tighter hold, cursing and whimpering under his breath. Next to him Abdulafia was checking for hand and footholds in the sheer concrete wall with the detachment of a man who had a spare body waiting.

“Curious thing, Mister Kayzi.” he shouted over the roaring and crashing din “That’s one of the so-called Kraken down there – things built hundreds of years ago to maintain the roots of the city. I bet CeeAn a pound of white sensemilla that there were none of them left.”

“I *know* they say that talking stops you getting a good panic going!” yelled Kaito, as the pipe sagged alarmingly in the middle. “But really, I don’t want to know what the damn thing is. I just want to get the HELL AWAY FROM IT!”

Abdulafia’s prying fingers had found a gap, and now he stabbed a thin stiletto into it, creating an instant piton. With a swift couple of loops of filament he rigged up a handhold and pulled Kaito over before the pipe he was clinging to could split in half.

“They’re designed to service the magma taps out on the seabed, keep the dams solid, and shore up the foundations. Brain the size of a golf ball, body the size of an aircraft carrier. But shielded up tight – the outer skin’s feet thick to withstand the pressure down there on the seafloor...”

“Actually, you’re making it worse, if anything.” complained Kaito as he swung from the loop, his arms slowly and mercifully growing numb. The pipe he had so recently vacated fell away in a shower of concrete dust, falling end over end into the blazing gullet of the machine below. “I don’t really want to know what it does. I don’t care if it can turn shit into pumpkin-sized diamonds. I just want it to not be right there under my feet!”

As if to punctuate his frustrated scream another claw came slithering up with tectonic momentum, smashing through ten stories of support beams and concrete, ripping a gash through the sundered guts of the Valley View. The whole building shifted to the left with a sickening lurch.

It snapped closed mere inches from Kaito's wildly thrashing feet, a set of corroded blades bigger than a house.

Abdulafia, perched on one foot atop his piton-blade sighed with frustration.

"To tell you the truth, I was trying to keep my own mind off the real problem here. There are no more handholds in this wall."

Kaito's eyes grew to the dimensions of dinnerplates.

"Not a crack? You don't have some kind of fancy tech shit to get you out of here? Not even a line to your boys in the R.T.?"

"The network's a snarl, and so many nodes are down its like an eclipse in there. Whatever's going on outside is probably worse than what's happening here."

Kaito looked down again, and felt his stomach lurch and convulse like a hooked fish.

"Somehow, I just can't believe that," he said.

Hassan was waving to him from down there, wrapped around a warped I-beam. The height was too much and he closed his eyes, feeling his brain spin and dip. Fragments of the vision he had been assaulted with by the Drone came flooding back, filling his bones with ice. Whatever that thing was ...alien or viral or...or *something*, it had to be stopped. When he compared the terror of hanging above an all-devouring steel monster with the shadow of that horrific promise, he knew which was worse.

As far as happy thoughts went, that one was right off the bottom of the chart. But somehow it fired him with resolve, racked up his adrenalin, lent strength to his weak and rubbery arms.

"Afia, don't hold back trying to save me. If you can get to the node alone, do it."

The battle clone smiled, a wry grin almost hidden behind a curtain of waving multicolored dreadlocks.

"Very big of you, Mister Kayzi, but totally unnecessary. You saw the vision, just like I did. Do you really think one operator's gonna be enough to shut that down? Do you think I'm gonna try it alone? As for your friend, there – well, I'm not leaving him behind, just because I like his style. Providence will be with us."

"Providence!!!" yelled Kaito "You Ashishi psychos are out of your minds!"

"Look at it this way, Mister Kayzi. If I panic I'm only gonna die stressed, right?"

It should have made him scream, or cry, or beg, but instead it made him *angry*.

"Hassan – can you hear me?" he shouted down the pit, "You feel like going out with a bang?"

If they were going to be swallowed up by a mad steel beast then he'd make sure

they stuck in its throat. If Hassan still had his toolbelt with him there was sure to be a little plastic explosive available. And the chakutazer would make a fine detonator ...

"I SAID, I think you DROPPED SOMETHING!" came back the reply, as the big man bellowed back over the growing cacophony of demolition.

Kaito's suicidal train of thought jumped the rails when he saw what was in his friend's hand.

"Hey, three-thirty – how thick is the armor on that clockwork bastard down there?" he asked, grinning like a madman. "As in – where's it the thinnest?"

The Ashishi caught on when he looked down, past Kaito to where Hassan stood balanced on his twisted section of steel beam.

"For what you're thinking – and you are one irresponsible son of a bitch for thinking it – the only place suitable is inside the mouth itself. Access jack, a big plug connector about the size of a hubcap. How's your aim?"

"If *you* want to try it, get your own tools, big shot!" laughed the Kayzi, almost hysterical as he contemplated the sheer madness of his scheme. "This one's a double play, and you need to stay safe so you can run that node."

"Ha...yeah ...real safe, right here." grimaced Afia, teetering on the thin handle of his stiletto. "Well, go ahead, then. It's your skin, Phyte. Just don't come crying to me if you get blasted to ashes and charcoal."

He was smiling when he said it, and in his hand was the communications bead from out of his ear.

"This should save some shouting when you tell that big ape the plan. Providence, mister Kayzi. You should meditate on it – but wait until you're in a more comfortable position."

## Ω

Rats were hardly a commodity in short supply in the deep substrata of the R.T. Illuminatus Zeon kept cages full of the tiny creatures in his secret workshop – both as test subjects and as live food for some of his more interesting specimens. That was not to say that the rats of Elysium were a properly uniform scientific control group – the alien Technician's menagerie sported rodents ranging from the size of a kitten to that of a Doberman Pinscher. One or two had the right number of limbs, tails, and eyes but mutation was the rule rather than the exception; hardly surprising, considering what the little bastards had to feed on down here.

Zeon carefully lifted his latest experiment from its reinforced cage, clamping it tight between his silver-skinned hands. The irradiated beast had two heads – one blind, white-furred and toothy, the other all beady little eyes and horns. Mom and dad had probably been paddling in some very refined toxic ooze before junior here was

conceived. But Zeon, unlike his mechanized nemesis couldn't care less about pure genetics – this was an experiment in *pain*.

Sprouting from the rat's neck was a tiny stub antenna – a wireless link which chained it to a processor block on Zeon's scarred steel desk. From there, it could interface directly with the tar-black, seething thing which crawled all over the living corpse of Magus Verlaine. It was time to see if all its training had paid off.

The alien technician prodded his unwilling protege with a sharpened length of rebar, eliciting an angry hiss from the thing which called itself the Worm.

"Pay attention, creature." he instructed, holding the mutant rat tight in one quicksilver fist. "I've got a little snack for you, if you can reach it. There's a limited datalink active between your current abode and this little beast. If you can use it, you can feed."

The Worm extruded a snarling demon face from the seething black mass of its body, a face which lifted away from the dead features of Verlaine on a mesh of dripping tendrils.

"Too ssssslooww, cruel one!" it spat, spraying its tormentor with dark ichor. "We nneedssss the sssea of pain! We can fffeeel it!"

The Illuminatus laughed, stabbing his rebar prod through the hovering face which hung in front of him.

"First, the test. Then, perhaps..."

For indeed, Technicians of the Multiplicity were no fools - and Nyl wasn't *quite* sure that he had complete control over his newest pet. But the more it integrated with the machines he bound it to the easier it would be to subjugate.

No soul, you see. No grip for its psionic teeth. If only he had a Slavesystem of the Unity to wrap it up in... *oh, but of course*. One of the Unity's Explorators was coming right to his doorstep! Nyl smiled to himself, lighting up his human mask with glee. Wouldn't *that* be something! The Motherbrain and the Praetor themselves would tremble!

Scowling and muttering, the face of the Worm sweated back through the pores of Verlaine's hanging cadaver until all but his eyes appeared dead. Those bubbling black orbs betrayed the presence of his possessor all too well.

As Nyl watched, the processor block on his desk began to flicker and pulse with energy. The rat under his hand struggled vainly to sink its teeth into his alien flesh, tiny paws clawing in agony at the antenna which sprouted from its neck. And black liquid frothed and vomited from its mouth, seething from around its terrified eyes and from every other orifice.

"Capital – excellent!" laughed the Illuminatus as the Worm jumped through hoops for him. "Just a little taste now – don't overreach yourself!"

He pulled his hand away sharply as the noisome fluid welled up, pooling on the

stainless-steel bench, eating away at the rat's liquefying flesh like acid. Soon there was nothing but bones and black filth where the little animal had been; filth knotting and writhing around the stub and wire roots of an antenna.

Nyl turned away for only a second, reaching for a beaker to scoop up the vile residue. But that was all the Worm needed.

The dark substance of its body whipped around the bones of its prey quick as thinking, binding them up like choking vines and streamers of night. There was a crackle and pop of reforming bones and then – what stood there on the table when Nyl turned back around was a tiny homunculoid abomination.

Sticky ichor dripped and bulged from its rat-skull face, while its arms and legs had stretched, aping human form and turning it into a goblin-thing all eyes and teeth and claws. It wasn't stupid enough to attack its alien captor, but it was *fast*.

Before Nyl's silver fingers could close around it the little thing was away, leaping from the table and scuttling over the tiled floor, leaving a trail of smoking footprints behind it.

Nyl dived and rolled, his hands grasping, stretching – but all in vain. The black goblin slipped between the cracks of his workshop wall, into the nest of wires and pipes which kept all his otherworldly machinery pumping. He jumped back to his feet in a rage, his finger stabbing at the switch which would rack the Worm with pain.

And pain came down, megavolts of searing agony coursing through Verlaine's body and sheeting over his skin like water. The odor of charred flesh filled the air as his eyes burst, his skin began to blacken...

But through it all the Worm laughed, a sound like grinding gristle and broken glass. Lashing tendrils of night streamed out from its prison-corpse, mocking the lightning as it spoke - not in words, but inside Nyl's very mind.

"You think you are the first, star-thing? You think you are the strongest who has ever tried to best me? Know this, then – you have been fooled. I thank you for your tutelage, but your usefulness is most surely at an end!"

"Bullshit!" screamed the Illuminatus, unable to believe that such a primitive beast had outguessed him "You're trapped, and there's no way for you to reach your precious *sea of pain*. I'll watch you starve in that empty shell – and when it dies you'll be cast back to where you came from!"

The lights were dimming now – here, and probably all over the R.T. as precious electricity was wasted in tormenting the Worm. Nyl, disgusted, flipped the switch off and slumped down the wall, his head in his hands.

"You mightn't have escaped me, you filth, but you've *definitely* cost me my job. Do you have any idea what the life of a renegade is like?"

Still the laughter echoed through his torture-lab, gnawing into his head like a cancer.

“You won’t be rid of me that easy, Technician.” it spat, full of sick and gloating glee. “My little friend is undoing all the safeguards now. All it will take is for one person to open the way, and I’ll be free. I’ll save you until last, little star-thing, to savor your sweet pain.”

Nyl crawled back, shaking, gripped by fear he hadn’t felt for millennia – not since he’s first faced the Blacksteel in battle. He knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that the accursed thing was serious. He came up against the closed door of the laboratory and inched his way to his feet, trying to calm the hammering of his triple hearts.

“I’ll lock this whole sector down if I have to.” he said, as much to himself as to his foe. “Lock the shields, seal the doors, cut off the Wetsystems and the network.” Now he looked deep into the eyes of the Worm, swimming black and putrid over the dead orbs of Verlaine. His own eyes crackled with white fire as his silver skin dripped violet.

“I’ll break you, creature. I’ll have your power and use it up. And by the time I’ve wrung you dry you’ll be a burned out husk – you and the Blacksteel both!”

Nyl turned and ran then – ran and didn’t stop until the whole secret level under the Ashishim reactor core was locked down beneath force shields and gauss cages and yards of reinforced steel. Still, even here he could hear its voice, a tiny insect noise deep in his brain.

“Run away, Illuminatus.” it said, a hissing whisper as intimate as rape – “Run home in shame or stay here and die. Either way, I *feed*.”

## Ω

Cold steel hands reached out and tore into the soft purple membrane of the exowomb, now a second skin over the pale flesh of a newborn Lord. It split open with an obscene gush of warm fluids, peeling back from the face of Simeon's heir, Leynna's dreamed-of child. His name was Darion Blaire, a name chosen by tradition from the forefathers of his noble house. But unlike his father and grandfather before him, Darion wasn't perfect, genecrafting for beauty and elegance.

His face was too thin, inhumanly sharp and pale, and his eyes were huge and mismatched things, green and gold, slanted and cruel beneath delicate brows. The machines of the Biotects were notoriously tricky to control, and forcegrowing a child was the hardest task of all. The sages of the Liquid Tong had done their best, but some sacrifices had to be made in order to encompass Octavio's grand design.

Darion was born at age thirteen - the sages didn't dare force him through an accelerated puberty lest they tear his mind to shreds. The devices they used were made to grow the clones for the Razor Clique's revels, brainless machines of meat waiting for a mind to fill them out. It had taken all the artifice of Omnivasive's threedeeo engines to craft the naescent mind of Blaire's son, and even now Ascher wasn't sure if he'd been

born insane.

*Not that it really mattered - madness certainly hadn't stopped his parents from being perfectly useful tools.*

"Hello, son." said the Direktor's immaculately dressed hologram, leaning over the surgical gurney where young Darion Blaire lay blinking in the light. "I'm your uncle Octavio. Welcome to your world."

## Ω

*That should hold them for an hour or so. Well – long enough for a little business to be taken care of.*

*Technician Zhe mashed a haze of transparent windows to the edge of his vision, letting his slaved A.I.s take care of the data-mining for a while. He snapped his combat goggles down over his blazing white eyes, rising up to his full height with a crackle and pop of aching joints. His silver skin was crosshatched with pewter scars, and here and there he was bruised yellow and violet from his confrontation with the renegade Nyl. Still, he was more than a match for the guardians of the Chrome Ark. A haze of jumbled images were sleeting across his mind as Kaito Kayzi remembered the Emerald City Gang – tough customers for a human being, perhaps, but mere insects before his considerable power. Or so he reassured himself – this damned planet had been a little too full of surprises already.*

*At least he could be fairly sure there was nothing else in his way – the snap-frozen bodies of the Gang were the only things on his scope down there.*

*He'd just have to let the memories lead him on, and hope for the best. But, as the Good Field Operative's Guide said, optimism never blew the head off a rampaging Thurga-Beast.*

*It would probably be best if he visited the armory first.*

**But the pain and suffering have only just begun...**

**Elysium is rocked to its core as the experiments of Technician Nyl run out of control, the great Game reaches its shocking conculsion, and an Emperor is crowned....**

**But will he be lord over a new Earth, remade by the Forge?  
Or a living hell of eternal torment?**

**And when two otherdimensional empires war for the power of that ancient weapon, will Technician Zhe be able to save humanity - and our whole universe?**

***All will be revealed in book two - Chains of Tartarus***

## SOUNDTRACK

This isn't the first novel to have a soundtrack - that honor goes to 'The Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived' by the incomparable Robert Rankin.

But it's still a good idea, so here goes...

- 1 A Drug Against War - by - KMFDM
- 2 To Mega Therion – Celtic Frost
- 3 Transplutonian Annihilation – Hanzel und Gretel
- 4 No One Wins – The Berzerker
- 5 Everything Must Perish – Front Line Assembly
- 6 World of Shit – Nailbomb
- 7 Optimissed – Skinny Puppy
- 8 Time Marches On - Foetus
- 9 Neon - Kovenant
- 10 Senor Peligro – Ministry
- 11 Self Bias Resistor – Fear Factory
- 12 Forkboy – Lard
- 13 Fuck the Police (cover version) – Dope
- 14 Eyes to See, Ears to Hear – Morbid Angel
- 15 Rape This World – Psyclon Nine
- 16 Blood Fire War Hate - Soulfly

***To all these bands and musicians - thanks for the inspiration!***



### **An excerpt from 'Chains of Tartarus', the conclusion of the Elysian War...**

A line of craters stitched their way across the bloody concrete in slow motion, closer and closer, sending up tiny halos of chipped stone and dust.

Still the deluge fell; red, thick and oily, and in his enhanced vision he saw every single drop splash and shatter, traced the descent of each shimmering particle...

They'd screw up the warmekan's tracking, make the obsolete old rustbuckets work for every shot.

That would do just fine.

Tsien faked right and jumped left, a bullet hissing past his shoulder as he tackled Centurion Benoit, wrapping him in a steely embrace. The old man was clearly out of his mind, but he was innocent. You couldn't judge the mad.

Well - he'd make an exception for Kronos. But for now... he turned the roll into a handspring, coming up off two fingers, ripping the ornate longrifle from the Centurion's grasp with his other hand. Cartwheeling now, upside down, and a missile shot by between his legs, trailing a streamer of blue smoke. His hands worked the bolt, inhumanly fast, his optical reticules razoring in tight on the camera eyes of the tankhunter which had fired it.

Once, twice, the rifle spat flame before Tsien's feet touched the ground, and the great machine was blinded, shards of glass winking and glittering in midair as it's head rocked back on hydraulic shocks.

Its second shot was still locked on, however. Tsien whipped his arm around, throwing the spent rifle in a spinning blur. It met the missile halfway, thousands of Slades worth of exquisite hardwood and silver exploding into shards and splinters in an eyeblink.

The debris was still falling as Tsien picked his next target. He leaned to his left as a flickering laserbeam lashed out, evaporating the blood-rain in its path. An ornamental gargoyle behind him glowed red for an instant and melted down to dripping slag. There - while the rain confused them. While his augmented body still burned with power, slowing the world to a crawl...

Tsien charged at the nearest warmekan, his legs pumping, his eyes set grimly on its fifteen-foot frame. Bullets and incandescent laserfire hazed the air between him and his prey - now he slid under a sizzling red beam, now he hurdled a withering hail of lead, his face split in a determined grin.

All around him he could hear the thud and whine of the tankhunter's crushing feet, deep bass notes behind the endless hiss of the rain. He found that he could actually sense their movements by the way they broke the deluge. One more burst of speed, sliding in sideways across the slippery concrete as another missile roared past, spiraling

wild...

Then he was airborne - up to its knee, where a carefully placed kick split its hydraulic couplings. Then to its arm, a great rotary cannon steaming with dried blood. It was already sagging down, its legs collapsing out from under it as he flipped up and over, onto its shoulders. Mounted on one of the corroded mekan's pauldrons was a plasma gun almost seven feet long - just the right size for a Super-Cyben. Tsien gripped the weapon in both hands, tearing it from its sponson in a shower of sparks. Wrist-thick power cables still linked it to the warmekan, but with a deft twist he severed the skein of control wires which aimed and fired the antiquated gun, feeling them melt into the palm of his hand, *integrating*...

The tankhunter's giant cannon couldn't target something standing on its own shoulder. But its other hand came up in a crackling blur, a wrecking ball of electrified spikes designed to crush armor inches thick. Tsien leaned back as the ball whistled past, within a hair's breadth of pulverizing his body. He watched it reach the end of its arc behind him, poised for the backswing...

Then his eyes lit up with glittering icons, and the plasma gun came online. He swung the bulky muzzle of the blaster around to rest against the warmekan's head, and pulled the trigger.

Once, and a ball of blue fire tore through the faceless casque of the fighting machine, a fan of blazing debris ripping its other shoulder to shreds. Wires and hoses parted with a sad little series of snaps and twangs, and its rotary cannon fell to the bloody ground, its gears grinding down to a standstill. Twice, and there was nothing left but a charred steel stump where its head used to be.

*Freedom! Freedom at last! My name was Niall Giaccone, and I've been inside that thing for eleven centuries! Thank you, liberator! Thank you for killing me!...*

The warmekan fell backwards, its strings cut, and Tsien leaped from his perch, playing out loops of power cable from its broken body. There'd be ten whole seconds before its batteries cut out - an eternity in his private little world, where each individual raindrop fell with glacial slowness.

He skidded to a stop, crouching, the great plasma gun cradled in his hands, bullets ricocheting and whining as they struck the collapsed body of the fallen mekan. From behind its cover Tsien listened, his eyes closed, feeling the bloody rain as it splattered and hissed off mechanized steel.

He came up from behind the broken carcass of the tankhunter firing, taking out the blinded warmekan he had crippled with Benoit's rifle. Uncertain, twitching, it was an easy target. Tsien's plasma blast struck home, igniting the magazine of missiles which fed the autolauncher on its left arm. With a series of cracks and pops they went up in flames, ripping its metal shell apart from within as incendiaries and high-explosives blazed rampant. Random rounds spiraled out, cratering the concrete, striking down

another pair of tankhunters where they stood.

*My name was Charan Lo. Thank you...*

Down, but not out. Ten of the twelve machines were still fully operational, and now they were triangulating his position. He watched as the bulky shoulder-armor of one of the mekan split open, revealing hundreds of tiny holes, a micromissile nestled in each one. A barrage like that would slice him to mincemeat, his Cyben nanotech notwithstanding.

It would take the tankhunter precious fractions of a second to define its killing zone – time enough for Tsien to avoid such an explosive fate.

He dropped the spent plasma gun, snapping off a length of its power cable, and leaped back into the fray, sliding between two lumbering mekan as they closed on him. This pair were armed for close combat, their arms terminating not in cannons or autolaunchers but in cruel steel talons, each clawlike finger a whirring monobladed chainsaw.

Tsien ducked under the piston-driven punch of the mekan on his left, coming up under its wrist to lock both of his hands around the clicking actuators there. He pushed up, right on the fulcrum, continuing its swing onward and upward into the studded carapace of its compatriot. Tortured metal squealed as those savage claws cut deep, geysering blue sparks, and the stricken mekan lashed out spasmodically, pummeling its attacker with a hydraulic sledgehammer. The Super-Cyben was too swift for the giant machines to follow, and he ducked between the legs of the hammer-handed tankhunter, looping a coil of wire tight around its feet. While the pair grappled with each other, their processors glitched and furious, Tsien bound them up together, sidestepping neatly as they fell. The clawfingered machine had all but eviscerated its brother, rupturing its power cells, while the hammer fist of the other machine had caved in the side of its head.

*My name was Sevan Gopal. My name was Luc Radisson...*

With a spitting, buzzing sound like frying locusts the micromissile barrage took to the air, obscuring the mekan which fired it behind a shifting curtain of blue smoke. One second, and they were at their zenith, tiny guidance fins snapping out from their tails as their rocket engines sputtered and died. Two, and they were falling, a rain of death which would saturate the whole area just as surely as the deluge of blood. The tankhunters themselves would shrug off such tiny munitions like water – but if Tsien were to be caught in the shrapnel-storm which they unleashed...

He was off and running even before the smoke cleared, headed toward one of the struggling 'hunters which had fallen to a stray missile.

He willed his bloody hands into blades, watching his fingers stretch and sharpen, then punched with all his strength through the chestplate of the upturned machine, feeling the nanotech on the edges of his knives sawing and ablating away the thick

steel. With one hand he ripped it free, and with the other he raked his claws across the power cels exposed within, severing their connections in a flurry of crackling fire. The light went out of the doomed mekan's eyes as Tsien spun its chestplate in midair, bringing it up over his head like an inch-thick ferrous umbrella.

*My name was Katerina Howe...*

Then the missile swarm came down, and deafening, blinding explosions filled his entire world. For a moment, for two, all he could see was a white and purple blur, the sound of bells tolling in his aching head. The force of it drove him to his knees beneath his makeshift shield, and skittering shrapnel came in under its rim to flay his legs bare.

Multiple images blurred and swum in his electronic eyes, a horde of golems painted blood-red and rust ochre, marching forward to crush him into pulp. He heard the click and whirr and clatter of loading guns, and tried desperately to focus, knowing that at any instant...

Too late.

An explosive shell punched into the gore-slick concrete right in front of him, giving the Super-Cyben barely enough time to bring his shield down with an almighty clang. Wicked shards of glowing steel punched through the armor, and light shone through from the mekan' halogen lamps, jagged shadows scrawled across his face. He could feel the heat rising in his body as the nanotech tried to keep up with his wounds, burning up his energy and his humanity with each second. Through one of the holes in his makeshift shield he could see a line of three tankhunters bringing their x-ray lasers to bear, a combined force of arms which would reduce him to superheated gas, armor notwithstanding.

Tsien tried to stand, to move, the merest twitch... but his legs weren't responding. Looking down the barrels of those massed guns he saw utter defeat. Kronos would make sure he was remembered as a monster, even by the people he was trying to protect...

The volley from the gates blew all three of the advancing machines apart at once, as twenty great howitzer guns laid down a swathe of carnage from atop the gatehouse wall. Every one of them was manned, crewed by blue-suited figures laboring behind a pall of drifting cordite smoke, and as Tsien watched they reloaded and fired again, tearing what remained of those three unfortunate 'hunters apart.

Gears and wires and burning chunks of plastic slithered across the bloody ramp as the gunners cheered, and among them Tsien caught sight of Gerhard Mitchell, his exo-armored frame standing tall above the heads of his men. The crazy old bastard had done it! He'd actually found reinforcements at the very last moment, and now the tables were turned.

*My name was Anya Seran.*

*My name was Grigory Vlasic.*

*My name was Orian Jao...*

Tsien slammed down a fistful of overrides, bullying his Cyben implants back online by sheer force of will, staggering to his feet with the great concave dish of a tankhunter's chestplate still welded to his butcher-knife fingers. He could see the mekan with the micromissile batteries over its shoulders turning to face the gates now, and hear the thousands of tiny snicking sounds as its terrible weaponry was reloaded from within.

That one would have to go first.

One of the tankhunters which had been wrecked down to scrap by the howitzer fire had sported a six-foot close combat bayonet slung under its multi-maser, a great meat-cleaver of a thing designed to carve through light tanks with a single swipe. It was just the right size for Tsien's monstrous new hands, those killing claws at the end of his arms which had once been human.

He twisted and wrenched at the heavy blade as he slid into the cover of the smoking mekan's carcass, dodging shells and flickering laserfire. In the end he was forced to use one of his knife-bladed fingers, running it down between the bayonet's mounting bolts and shearing them off as neatly as a diamond-edged grinder. A huge piston-rod protruded from the tang of the blade, an augmentation which would make it saw back and forth to jar it loose from the gashes it hacked in platicrete and steel. Now the Super-Cyben grasped the cutoff end of that ruined piston like the handle of a broadsword, a two-handed grip like that of a medieval warrior. The bayonet was as tall as he was, ten inches thick, and it weighed at least half a ton. It was just the tool for the job.

Tsien sprang from behind cover, letting a little trickle of his intrinsic nanotech flow across the scarred and pitted blade, forming an edge only a molecule wide. Atomic-scale sawteeth flowed around it with a keening whirr, too high-pitched for human ears.

Tsien could hear it slicing apart the smoke.

His eyes were fixed on the micromissile mekan, which was even now extending leg-braces from its bulky frame, preparing to unleash its deadly swarm against Mitchell and his men.

Bullets tracked toward him across the pavement, and hissing laserbeams wove a shifting cage around him as he jinked from side to side. But where they would have struck him down, now they were deflected by the adamantine steel of his blade, the bullets ricocheting off wild into the rain, the laserbeams crazed and haloed by its mirrored surface. The outsized sword seemed to guide Tsien's hands, describing an intricate *kata* through the crimson deluge, a cage within a cage...

Then he was upon his prey, his lips twisted into a grimace of hate and joy, his knuckles white under a crust of silver armor.

Once, overhand, then twice, the backswing, then thrice, a finishing stroke which clove through the luckless machine from shoulder to crotch. Time seemed to stand still as Tsien slid past his target, his iron-shod feet slick against the bloody concrete, his

head bowed. Two blazing points of red smoldered in his shadowed face as he held the sword out at his side, waiting...

The micromissile barrage never came. Instead one of the tankhunter's arms dropped off, sheared neatly from its torso, falling to the ground with a clatter and thud of ruined metal. Then its other arm followed, its assault claw flexing open and closed like that of a stricken crab. Finally, in that eternal instant of red and black and flashing chrome a line appeared across the thing's body, a line of darkness in which crawled oily blue sparks.

The explosion, when it came, raised a cheer from the blue-suited troopers atop the wall, and a silver-toothed grin from Tsien, who brandished his ungainly blade in triumph as he turned to face the remaining tankhunters.

*My name was Michael Atkins...*

Twenty bolts thudded home as the gateway guns were loaded, aiming over the Super-Cyben's head as if he could call down hellfire with a gesture.

The three warmekan which remained seemed to hesitate, unsure of their superiority. Even the bloody rain was easing off, becoming a fine crimson mist which swirled in silken veils across the battlefield.

Tsien held his sword at his hip, the bolt-end of its piston grip resting against his leg. Just *lifting* such a thing bled away his humanity, as the mark-four Cyben system replaced more and more of his body with metal. Wafer-thin heat-sink vanes sprouted from his back as he stood there, defiant, unfurling like the fiddleheads of ferns with a lambent orange glow.

Tiny cameras mounted in the back of his skull caught a tiny mote falling from the gateway above, where Gerhard was pumping his fist triumphantly in the air. It was a communicator, and Tsien caught it with his free hand, hearing the whoops and cries of jubilation crackling from its little speaker as he raised it to his ear.

"Good timing, Captain," he said, keeping his eyes locked on the three remaining tankhunter mekan where they huddled at the base of the ramp. "Another couple of seconds and I wouldn't have been around to thank you."

