

FOURWAR



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Cover Art

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Chapter One

Antoin watched, fascinated, as the tip of the needle slid out of his skin. A drop of blood formed over the puncture; he touched a fingertip to it and brought it to his mouth, tasting iron. The needle-tipped syringe he simply tossed aside. It was a curiosity, like the sailing-ships which could still be found in museums here and there. He crossed his living room to the couch and dropped onto the air-filled seats. The wall clock showed **21:07** in digital green. He reclined, closing his eyes as he waited.

It better be fast. The dealer had assured him that it was the highest-quality modject available. Antoin never trusted a dealer - in fact, Antoin never trusted anyone other than himself. So it was with some relief that he felt his body temperature rising. It struck him as odd, how a time frame of two weeks could be compressed into five minutes. Things were more leisurely now than they had been in antiquity, where everyone rushed about competing like animals, but he was not willing to spend even a day away from his work. Any absences would make people ask questions. No one got sick anymore. The speed of his body's reaction almost made him relax, but the modject intervened.

A wave of weakness washed over him and his head began to ache. The novelty startled him. So did the convulsions which followed in short order. His temperature was rising faster, too rapidly. The pain became almost intolerable, and he curled into a fetal position, his mind racked with agony and a certain sense of a high. He could have sworn someone was taking a giant hammer to his skull, but a hand brought to his forehead found no wounds, just sweat and smooth skin. He was moaning - but not entirely because of the pain.

Five more minutes and he felt his mouth change. Small bumps were forming, swelling into little round pimples on his tongue. He touched them with his fingers. *So strange!* As the bumps arrived, his fever began to break, and the pain vanished - but then the pimples were larger, now breaking to spread a vile taste in his mouth.

He raised his hands and stared at them with a grimace that was part grin. The rash was spreading over his arms; he could feel the bumps starting to pop out over the rest of his body as well. The weakness was going, though. The bumps hardened into tiny steel-tough spheres that jabbed into his back and legs under the weight of his body. A few moments later, the spheres broke, collapsing into themselves and scabbing over. The scabs began to itch and fall off.

He lay on his couch a moment longer, staring at his hands. They were pitted, cratered like his arms. He managed to sit up. The digital green swam in his eyes: **21:42**. He pulled himself to his feet unsteadily.

Little cleaner bots, like metal cockroaches, scurried out of the walls and climbed onto the couch as he vacated it. They munched all the scabs

and skin away, trailing a thin fluid behind them that sterilized the surface and quickly evaporated. His couch was soon sterile; he supposed that surgeons could have operated on it, were there any to be found inside the city. He was still a little shaky, but his head was clearing now. He went to the bathroom and turned on the tap, splashing water over his face. The mirror showed him a horror when he raised his head again.

His face was etched like it had been sprayed with a burst of some powerful acid. For an instant, irrational panic welled up. *What if it stays this way? What will I tell people?* His worries were for nothing, though, and he knew it. Things just took longer when the damage was systemic. *I've done this before. Be patient.*

He actually forced himself to smile, examining his bared teeth in the mirror to pass time. He opened his mouth, and there was a slight delay as his mirror image copied him. Some bright person had figured out that a mirror could be used to show you what you looked like from behind if there was a delay in the mirror that gave you time to turn around. Antoin grimaced, then regretted it as the mirror image slowly did the same. Sometimes the mirror was creepy. He tapped the surface of the glass and disabled the delay.

He checked his teeth once more. They were perfectly fine, of course - why wouldn't they be? No Citizen had bad teeth...

There! The pits in his skin began to fill up before his eyes. It only took a few seconds before his face was smooth again.

He fingered his chin in the mirror. No one would call it baby-smooth; there was some stubble there. He could have opted to have the hair growth suppressed - a painless biospray would reconfigure his genes to reduce or eliminate it - but he liked the shadowed look. It made him think of ancient dramas he'd seen through his library link, the ones where tough guys fired at each other with explosive ballistic weapons. Antoin found himself having a mock gunfight with his reflection in the mirror; tapping the glass again, he used the mirror's delay to his advantage, spinning around quickly and then shooting his mirror image in the back as it followed him. "Woohoo!"

He flexed his muscles in front of the mirror. Not that he had much to flex. He'd always been the tall, weedy guy in any group. He chuckled anyway and pulled a towel from a nearby rack to pat his face dry.

Back in the living room, he picked up the syringe again. A handwritten label was fixed haphazardly to it: "*smalpoks.*" Antoin scratched his head; a loose scab fell onto the floor and was quickly gobbled up by a cleaner.

Antoin stared at the bug-like bot as it scuttled off into its wall cave. The cleaner bots were useful, but somehow creepy. "One of these days I'm gonna step on the damn thing," he muttered. "For fun." Still, it wouldn't do to be dropping scabs all over his bed. He shrugged and tossed the syringe into the incinerator near the door where it vanished in a quick flash of light and flame.

He went back to the bathroom, dropped his clothes on the floor, and stepped into the shower. The spray kicked on, remembering his temperature preference for this time of night. The skyview overhead showed him a darkening sky, the absolute black to the east broken only by glinting stars. Antoin had heard stories, old men claiming that once the night sky had been filled with ambient light from the cities. Enough to hide the stars, to hear them tell it, but that was almost too strange to believe.

Not that it mattered. He could see outside at night perfectly well without artificial light; any Citizen could. The night lenses on his eyes absorbed energy on a number of non-visible frequencies and interpreted the results to his brain - infrared, ultrasound, even ultraviolet. He could almost taste the outline of the terrain, no matter how dim the visible light might be. There was no need for the cities to be lit at night, and the stars were breathtaking.

The spray switched off silently as he stepped out of the shower. When he was a child, he had loved to play games, to wave a hand in and out of the shower and watch it turn on and off. He was a bit too old for that game now.

In his bedroom, he stretched once before dropping into the sarcophagus that was his bed. It was spacious; it enveloped him, the lid sliding shut over his head as he sank back. Small speakers in the sides of the bed began to play relaxing music, and the climate system blew a light, cool breeze over him. The lights dimmed slowly, and as the bed determined from his breathing and heart rate that he was asleep, the sound faded out and the remaining light vanished altogether. Antoin slipped into uneasy dreams and spent his night chased by a sausage alien who wanted to give him a haircut.

* * *

Waking up was much the same, only in reverse. He trapped the alien in a meat slicer and the grinding whir turned into a steady beat as the music came up slowly and the lights turned on. A morning breeze started up, cool air tickling him back to full awareness.

He blinked and sat up. The bed slid open silently as he moved, clearing his head and shoulders just in time to prevent him from bumping his head. He yawned a little, stretched, and rolled out of the bed.

His clothes were waiting for him in the little closet. The ones he'd worn the night before were hanging neatly inside, already cleaned. "Gotta love housebots," he muttered. He eyed his uniform - regulation stuff, plain yellow with a badge of indicating his rank. Not a wrinkle out of place. He pulled it on, whistling.

Breakfast was waiting, of course - just cereal, the same as his ancestors had eaten. He found the thought funny for some reason as he crunched his way through the bowl and flipped between feeds on the partial Immersion system he was proud to be able to say he owned.

Finished, he stepped outside of his little beehive-shaped house and

patted the wall of the dome as he walked to the little garage. The house was a plain little house, but nobody really needed to grow anything bigger. Oh, New Byanzt's Chief Councilor might've grown a bigger house, Antoin acknowledged, but the Councilor had to hold social functions there. Antoin wouldn't be caught dead at a party. He was only really comfortable working with his creatures. The rest of the time he was thinking about working with them. *No, parties are not for me.*

His little 'sport sat in the garage. It wasn't what the ancients called a "sport car" - rather, it was just a standard personal transport squatting like a bug in his garage. He climbed into it and touched a button displayed on the console that pulled down the top to let fresh air in.

"The usual route?" the 'sport asked him.

"Same as always," he confirmed.

"Acknowledged." The 'sport made some pleasant beeping tones to tell him that all was functional, then glided out of the garage onto the street.

The air blew past his face as the 'sport picked up speed, and soon music was blaring. It was classical music, a thousand years old or more. The symphonic sounds relaxed him, so he sat back to enjoy the ride. At least, he tried to enjoy it. At the first fork in the highway, some slumrats stood on the corner, begging for handouts. They were a ragged group, wearing the leftover clothing of Citizens. Someone in a 'sport ahead of him tossed a bag of food out to them. Antoin regretted that he was moving too quickly to watch them fight over it.

Not much further along, another of the slumrats turned aggressive and stepped out onto the highway to force passing 'sports to slow down. Not that there was any danger to him; a 'sport would automatically slow to avoid injuring a human. It was just an inconvenience. A passing UrbPat security officer stopped, climbed out, and tackled him back onto the walkway. A fight ensued, one-sided, of course; the Citizen officer shrugged off the slumrat as if he were a child.

Antoin snorted as the commotion faded behind him. *People should know their place.* He had no sympathy for the slumrat being kicked around on the ground. The whole lot of them was useless. Antoin knew all about them. They spent their time scrounging for food and trying to get their hands on Medical Conversion technology. No self-respecting citizen paid them any mind. He smoothed his thin, blond hair back with a hand carefully as his own 'sport navigated around the beggars - no point in looking bad in front of filth.

The highway curved around the Preserve, a beautiful area of forests and hills filled with birds and other animals, into the heart of the city. New Byanzt was huge. As the 'sport crested a final hill, the city core, all tall buildings reaching for the sky, spread itself out beneath him. Behind him were the residential areas, thousands of beehive homes like his cluttering the landscape. They weren't necessarily beautiful, but they were functional

-- and infinitely better than the slumrats' shanty town.

He could see the squalid settlement off to the northwest. The distant cluster of huts made an unsightly rust-colored stain on the hillsides. To the southeast was another type of area altogether. A low steel wall ran along a river to fence the area off from the Preserve. Security 'thopters flapped their way along that fence, each manned by a pilot and a gunner. Occasionally one swooped down like a hawk at a mouse, and once Antoin spotted the distant flashing light-beams of particle cannons burning down into streets framed with crumbling buildings. "Hope they flamed the Funkar bastard," he muttered.

The Funkars were the reason for the security. Behind that distant fence the low profile of a temple rose up, minarets and a steeple all in the same building. The temple itself was surrounded by ancient houses, square blocks of stony aggregate that had been the mainstay of city residents two hundred years before. Antoin shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably. He couldn't imagine living in any place so crowded; but then, he couldn't imagine being a Funkar either. The temple was the Funkar headquarters for New Byanzt and the surrounding Wastes. Antoin shuddered a little, genuinely. He had no use for Funkars. "Still don't understand why we don't just kill them all," he muttered.

He did, of course. Despite the awesome power of the nel-bombs, nobody really believed that using them would make more than a scratch in the Funkar population. There simply weren't enough of them. The slumrats, at least, were outnumbered by Citizens - but Funkars outnumbered Citizens a hundred to one. Only sheer technological superiority kept them on the other side of the perimeter fence, and any wise Citizen kept his distance from that fence. As it was, they still ventured out to try Conversion on Citizens, so he'd heard.

The highway whipped him up and away, and soon his 'sport slid under the gates of the city's downtown area. Here was the Chief Councilor's house, and massive triangular towers housed the city's trade centers. Antoin could see the skyport, of course; the control tower was impossible to miss, as was the constant stream of vessels riding the guide-beam to and from the sky. Some of those vessels left the beam as they rose, arcing to distant remaining Cities, while many headed straight up into the sky on their journey to nearby planets. Some, as he knew, even made the journey to nearby star systems. "One day, I'll be on a ship out of the system," he told himself. After all, what better way to study exotic creatures than in their own habitats? It was a xenologist's dream.

The highway dropped into the heart of the city, away from the walls. Antoin was glad to see them fade behind; they were an uncomfortable reminder that a horde of Funkars would be a dangerous proposition even for Citizens. The walls made every Citizen uneasy.

Soon, he was weaving in and out among the towers, dodging

pedestrian traffic as well as other 'sports. The streets were more crowded here, mostly with Citizens going to perform their various services. He passed the occasional slumrat running the streets fleeing from security officers, and once he passed a group of teenage girls giggling their way to the Centers for Learning. Antoin stared at the short skirts and long legs for a moment before an old lady's pointed stare made him focus on where he was going instead. A downside of automatically controlled 'sports was the freedom to stare at everyone without worrying about colliding with something. Antoin flushed, embarrassed.

He chided himself for the embarrassment, though. Young people were rare here; no one had any need to reproduce, so those girls were a great luxury that some wealthy Citizens had permitted themselves. Most young people Antoin had seen were slumrats; the few times he'd seen a Funkar child was when he'd needed a new clone source and the hunters brought one in. He *had* been staring out of scientific curiosity - yes, only scientific curiosity. He held his head high.

The street he was on branched off to the base of one of the towers. Antoin stretched in his seat and tapped a button on the console. The 'sport slowed down, depositing him gently on the front steps of 19 Nido Street. Climbing out, he found his gaze drawn up the side of the structure until the sheer height made him dizzy. He shook himself, caught his breath. *Gotta stop doing that*, he said to himself - but he knew he would do it again the next day, just as he always did. Sighing, he went inside.

The receptionists gave him a cheery "Good morning, Citizen!" as he entered, which made him feel important despite the fact that they greeted everyone who entered with exactly the same friendly manner. Antoin walked nervously through the threatscanners, hoping that none of the smalpoks was still in his system. Evidently it wasn't. *Or maybe it's mutated*. The thought made him frown; the threatscanner databases were probably a century old now. Shaking his head at himself -- *you worry too much, old man* -- he took a lifter to the seventeenth floor, enjoying the soft cushion of magnetism under the platform that propelled him up into the air.

The lifter gates opened after it stopped moving, and he stepped out into a huge, warehouse-like room. The lifter dropped down behind him, and he moved clear of the safety gate. He breathed in the air, smelling thousands of different creatures just as he had every morning for the last eight years. He'd finished his tenth Knowledge acquisition, changing from agriculture to xenology, and this was his first and only position since. His assistant was there already, a skinny young lady whose name badge read "Wendi Vade" but who Antoin always thought of as "Weedy." She looked especially weedy today, he thought, staring at her stringy green hair.

"Citizen Antoin!" She smiled at him as he came into the room. "Sleep well?"

"Of course," said Antoin. She *was* pleasant-looking, he admitted. He

looked around contentedly. This was his domain, the Center For Xenology. "CfeX," everyone called it, for simplicity's sake. CfeX was the New Byanzt bio-customs department, where Antoin Makler ruled with absolute power over a few examination tables, a couple of computer consoles, and some storage compartments against the wall - and, of course, the creature boxes. His badge proclaimed him to be Head Curator and Chief Inspector. *I love my job*, he thought to himself with a smile as he looked around. There was a stack of boxes sitting in the receiving bay. "What do we have today?" he asked Wendi.

"Lots! We just had a shipment come in from Adhara, and there's a Spican cargo to examine. That's in addition to everything else we have," said Wendi with a wave at stacks of boxes already piled along the far wall.

Antoin sighed. What was that he'd just thought? Something about loving his job? *It's my choice to be here*, he reminded himself. Every Citizen was guaranteed food, clothing, and shelter, so it wasn't as if he *had* to work. Boredom drove most Citizens to do it anyway though, and Antoin was no exception. It was the adventure and the novelty that brought him back, day after day. He'd seen some strange things in his time at the Center.

He went over to the first package, walking around it. The shipping container was made of a clear plastic and contained its own atmosphere. He squatted down on his heels, looking thoughtfully at the thing inside. The first order of business was to determine whether or not a given creature was dangerous. With this one, he had no idea. Something gelatinous floated in a pool of liquid, staring at him with strangely human eyes. "What is it?" he asked. It certainly didn't have claws or teeth.

Wendi tapped the air, looking busy. Antoin couldn't see what she saw - not unless she shared it with him - but he'd used the neural interfaces enough to know that she was scanning the creature library for a reference to this particular...*well, whatever it is*.

"Find something yet?" he asked again.

"In a minute," said Wendi, frowning. She was still pawing at the air. The pawing reminded Antoin a bit of a hamster, but he supposed that he looked the same while interfacing. He tried to be patient. The thing in the pool of liquid blinked at him. He blinked back.

"Okay," Wendi said finally. "It's Adharan, of course."

Antoin nodded, looking at the label stuck on the side of the container. "I already knew that. What else do you know about it?"

"It metabolizes light," she said, adjusting her coke-bottle glasses. Antoin sighed. No Citizen actually needed glasses, but apparently Wendi thought of them as a fashion accessory. *If looking like a mole can be considered fashionable*, Antoin thought with a straight face. He knew better than to say anything.

"So it's a plant?" he asked.

"Not exactly. It metabolizes very specific frequencies from Adhara's

spectrum. It's identified as 'Organism 1923ADH' here."

Antoin touched printed-on buttons on the side of the plastic case. The printings contained circuitry which activated the the seal. His nose twitched as the lid opened.

Something like sulfurous cinnamon wafted out of the case. He stuck a finger in, touching the gelatin. Those floating eyeballs tracked every move he made. He brought his finger out and touched it to his tongue. The thing tasted acidic. A vaguely tingling sensation on his finger told him the same thing.

"It's gelatinous, strongly acidic, and emits a sulfur smell," he said.

Wendi nodded. "Got it."

"Right," Antoin said. He rubbed his hands together briskly. "Okay, get the dummy." This was always the interesting part; sometimes it was even fun.

Wendi pressed a button on her console, and from a concealed chute in the ceiling, a body dropped to the floor with a liquid thud. "Give me a hand?" Antoin asked. He grabbed it by one arm, Wendi by the other. It was a child, real flesh and bone. *Gives me the creeps*, Antoin thought with a shudder. The child was not alive, though; its body flopped around like a doll and the eyes stared vacantly in whatever direction the head happened to be pointing. It wasn't alive, but it also wasn't dead. Antoin had personally overseen its growth in a tank, an empty clone purely for research purposes. The clone was brain-dead, of course. No neural activity except what was necessary to keep its cells alive. They hauled the clone body over to the side of a large tub. "Interaction Chamber," a label read.

While Wendi went to get the creature crate, Antoin studied the clone thoughtfully. Every now and then, clone-sources had to be collected again. It was important to have genetic variety for the testings, in case one clone happened to be immune to something for genetic reasons. He couldn't help looking forward to the next hunt coming up in a few weeks. He'd never been invited before and he'd heard that it was exhilarating. *Enough of the future for now*, he told himself. *There is work to be done*. "I'm ready," he told Wendi.

Wendi tipped the gelatinous mass into the Interaction Chamber. Antoin wrestled the clone in after it without ceremony, grimacing as the limp arms and legs flopped into the tub. He and Wendi looked at each other, then at the creature. "Now," said Antoin, "we watch." The creature looked up at them mutely.

They stood there, but nothing immediately exciting happened. For some time, they watched in silence, and Antoin felt increasingly impatient. Finally, even Wendi sighed. "I don't think anything will happen with this one," she complained

The clone just sat there, and the eyes in the gel were looking around as they had been. No explosions and nothing dissolving - it was quite

boring. Antoin nodded. "I think you're right. Take it out and clean it up," he said, pointing at the clone.

Wendi made a face, but it *was* her job, so she did it. Antoin turned away, going over to the Spican crate. This one looked a bit more lively. There was some sort of furry creature inside. The thing was making little whistling and hooting noises, and scratching itself with one of its countless hooked appendages. It was a furball, with stalky eyes on top of its body; it looked a lot like a cross between a koala and a crab.

Antoin reached inside to pat its dusty golden fur. The creature cowered back into the corner of its cage, jabbing at him with a couple of those hooks and hooting at him fiercely. Antoin chuckled, then picked the creature up.

Immediately his hands were pierced by a flurry of hooked legs. Blood welled up around the claws embedded in his skin, and for a brief instant, almost too short to notice, Antoin felt a stab of pain. He looked at the creature's legs with respect. They may have been covered with fur, but the fur concealed sharp tips on those hooks that curled under like a scorpion's sting waiting to pierce the unwary predator. Antoin ignored the wounds on his hand. The punctures closed up as the creature's claws left them, the wounds forcing out a clear liquid that Antoin decided must be a venom of some sort. He grinned. "This one is definitely more interesting."

Wendi came over to stand beside him, looking at the creature he held in his hands. The creature was squirming, stabbing, fighting to get away; Antoin paid it no mind. "I wonder what it eats," she mused. She touched its fur while its claws were distracted by Antoin's hands. "It's soft!" she said with some surprise.

Antoin nodded. The creature's eyes looked up at him in panic. "I think I should put it down before it hurts itself," he said. Wendi nodded, and he set the creature back into its cage. "Another clone," he said.

While Wendi was preparing the clone, Antoin picked up a biospray. He looked at it longingly, but it wasn't very useful, even to a mod-junkie like him. The dosage was too low to have any effect on his hyper-immunity. He sighed as he walked over to the first clone and jabbed the biospray at its neck. The clone was still just lying there. *So boring*. He eyed the biospray wistfully.

That particular biospray acted like a little drug and biohazard lab. A single spray tested thousands of different bacteria, chemicals, and viruses against anything that might have been added to the clone's blood by exposure to the gelatin. Antoin monitored the nearby console as the spray did its work. Nanoscopic probes attached to each bacterium or virus fed back status information to the console, and other free-floating probes monitored blood, tissues, and organs.

Something beeped on the console and Antoin whistled. "That gel looks harmless, but it would easily kill an unmodified newborn who came into

contact with it. It looks like it gives off a nerve toxin that the skin absorbs quite easily after the acid etches it. Not enough to harm an adult, though - especially not one with the Medical Conversion. We're safe." He walked over to the Interaction Chamber again, and the gelatinous creature blinked up at him. He frowned.

One of the peculiarities of his job was that every now and then, one of the creatures he had to examine would irritate him severely. For some reason, this was one of those times; he found himself wanting irrationally to stick a needle in the thing's eye. He restrained himself. Wendi would surely be disturbed if he did that, and damaging goods in transit would win him no friends.

Wendi grunted. "Should we let it go through, then?" She was busy dragging the second clone toward that weird golden creature.

Antoin debated mentally for a few seconds, but it wasn't really a hard decision. The debate was more for the sake of principle. He *was* the Director. "Sure, just put a low-level biohazard warning on it," he said after a moment. He grabbed a sponge, sopping up 1923ADH and squeezing it back into its aquarium. The eyeballs stared at him reproachfully. "Wonder what you'd say if you could talk," Antoin muttered.

Wendi was ready with the new clone, so Antoin went to help her lift it into the Interaction Chamber. He opened the latch on the creature's cage, ignoring the hooked legs to pick it up and place it in the tub. They stood watching.

The little furball watched them back for a moment. By chance, it had fallen onto the clone's head, where it was settling down with its hooked claws embracing the head in a crown-like pattern. Each of the hooks tapered off into a sharp point that stuck through skin and skull into the clone's head. Antoin shuddered. "Looks...freaky."

Wendi stepped back a little without noticing it. "I think I like the gel better," she said, staring at the scene. *Alien creature wrapped around dead-looking clone's head* -- it *did* seem something out of an ancient horror-film image, Antoin had to admit.

After another minute of watching the creature sit there, Antoin felt his skin crawling. "Okay, let's get this...*thing*, whatever it is, off." He stuck his hands in, ignoring the punctures as the hooked legs jabbed into his hand, and pried the creature off. Antoin slipped the creature back into its cage as Wendi grabbed the clone; she tugged and grunted at its weight, but she managed to drag it out of the tank and lay it on one of the examining tables. Antoin latched the cage, studying the creature.

Wendi was already examining the clone. "Antoin," she called, "I think you should see this."

"See what?"

"The head - the puncture marks are gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes, completely - the clone should have puncture marks around its skull - you saw the claws - but the skin is smooth as mine."

Antoin felt some excitement beginning to build. "Okay, test it with the spray," he ordered. He went over to check for himself, running his fingers over the skull. The clone's head was smooth as it had been, an apparently healthy child if rather blank-looking. Yes, only the blank eyes gave it away at all.

Wendi came back with the spray, which Antoin administered himself. "How's the first clone?" he asked without looking up as he listened for the faint hiss of the liquid injector.

"It's in pretty bad shape if you ask me," said Wendi. Antoin pried himself away from the second clone, and walked over to check for himself.

The first clone was definitely dying - not the moaning, gasping death of an actor, digital or otherwise, but a real dying. Its skin was cooling rapidly under Antoin's finger; the breathing slowed and stopped, and finally all electrical activity in its body ceased. Antoin was intrigued. "That gel is pretty mean," he observed.

Wendi nodded. "It seems to eliminate key parts of the immune system; if we'd been using, say, an illegal *modject* instead of a spray, the clone would have literally disintegrated, I think."

Antoin winced at the word *modject*. He looked sharply at Wendi, but she was staring at the clone. *Just a coincidence*, he told himself. All Citizens knew about the *modjects*, but most considered it myth, or at least something so deviant that no Citizen would actually use one. He'd heard the argument before: "It's disrespectful to all the Citizens who gave their lives testing the Medical Conversion!" Wendi looked up at his silence, and he cleared his throat.

Focusing on the damaged clone, he had to agree with her assessment. The clone was in bad enough shape as it was; there was blood on the surface of its skin that had seeped through its pores like sweat. "Oh well," he said. "Definitely one to keep away from the slumrats." *Damn rats, always wanting to move up in the world*. They were constantly searching for a way to get a Medical Conversion, because only Converted individuals qualified for Citizenship. Most of them were the children of Funkars, the smart kids who didn't feel like being religious nutcases, but Antoin felt very little responsibility for those who might be the children of Funkars. Still, they would try anything, he'd heard, and he wouldn't put it past them to try injecting the gel to see what it did. *I'm not totally heartless*, he told himself.

Antoin waved a hand at the dead clone. "Get rid of it," he said. Wendi nodded, pressing a button on the console. A rather large bot slid into the room, walking delicately on three legs as it approached the dead clone. A probe extruded from the knee of one of its jointed legs, poking at the corpse and taking readings. When the bot was satisfied that the clone was indeed dead, two little panels slid open on its rounded top and clawed arms shot

out. They sliced into the clone, cutting through meat to grab bone. A sound of metal creaking filled the room as the bot tossed the clone at a cart it was pulling. The clone flopped halfway into the cart, a bleeding arm trailing over the edge, and the bot stalked out. Cleaner bots scurried out, sucking up the blood from the floor.

Antoin had already turned back to the second clone. Unlike the first, this one was still amazingly healthy. A quick scan of the clone revealed that the piercing injuries on its head had healed internally, and the skin showed not even a trace of a scar. Antoin selected a biohazard scan on the console, and a few seconds later his eyebrows shot up. "Strange," he muttered.

"Wendi, didn't I spray this one?"

Wendi nodded.

"There is no trace of anything in its system. Are you sure I sprayed it?"

"I am," said Wendi. She walked over, peering at the scanner's display. "Amazing," she said.

Antoin wasn't convinced. "Bring me another spray," he said. Wendi grabbed one from a nearby shelf and tossed it to him. He sprayed it into the clone's arm, this time watching with extra caution. "No mistake this time. I did spray it."

Back at the console, he did a quick scan to verify that the spray had worked. The scanner reported thousands of organisms invading the clone body, so Antoin stopped the scan. *Time to wait*, he told himself. A sort of nervous impatience gripped him as the next few moments passed. Wendi simply stood with her eyes closed, humming to herself. Five minutes passed, then ten - but Antoin refused to take any chances. This was actually exciting, for once. He endured the wait, enjoying the torment that his impatience inflicted on his brain. After fifteen minutes, he scanned the clone again.

"I can't believe it," he said finally. "Nothing!" He and Wendi stared at each other for a moment, then nodded at each other as they reached an unspoken agreement. *More clones!*

The afternoon developed into a routine: place the clone in the creature's cage; spray the clone; scan the clone; repeat. They tried five clones, then ten more. As the light coming in from the skyview in the lab began to fade out to black, they both stopped, exhausted.

Antoin scratched his head. "This is incredible," he said eventually.

Wendi wasn't arguing. "What are we going to do with it?" she asked.

"I think that we should tell the Councilors. Think of what an advantage this could be! It could literally change the world as we know it!" He knew he was hyper, talking fast.

Wendi smiled, trying to hide a yawn. Antoin noticed it anyway, and nodded. He took a deep breath and let it out with a good-natured sigh.

"You're right," he said with a tired smile. "First, we get some rest. This can

wait until the morning." He patted the creature's cage, ignored the hooked legs that thrust up, trying to stab through his hand.

They closed up the laboratory, activating the cleaner bots and signing out. The lights dimmed immediately after they left the building. The only bright lights in the lab during the long night were the reflections of starlight bouncing off of 1923ADH's eyes.

Chapter Two

Outside the building, Antoin slipped into his old 'sport. Music filled the air, and he spoke his destination at the console's prompting. This new destination was not far outside the city core, but it was not his home address. The 'sport rose to a hover before heading out of the city, dodging traffic in the heavily-overloaded lanes.

The sun was not quite down yet, and the western sky was red-painted. The east was turning into a dark midnight blue at the horizon; it was often that way, blue chasing red. Antoin was feeling adventurous, so he had decided to go the long way. The road wound out of the city, heading around the Preserve toward the slums and dropping down to run next to New Byzant's Stony River for a few minutes. Why they called it Stony River was a mystery; it always looked more muddy to Antoin than stony.

He always found it beautiful there, at the river. The riverside was technically part of the Preserve, and he did enjoy the sight of trees and unspoiled hills. The only bad thing about the road was that it ran close to the Funkar enclave, but there was a heavy security presence at all times, and Antoin wasn't worried. He smiled at the red sky's reflection on the river; everything was warm tones, reds and oranges and yellows straining to push back the oncoming night. He settled back, crossing his arms peacefully and tilting his head to the setting sun as the occasional 'thopter flapped by high overhead.

Hitting the dash with his face jolted him from his reverie. Something was wrong; the 'sport was tumbling end-over-end down the road. Only the repeller field was keeping him from smacking his head into the hard rubber highway surface. That surface was soft for two-ton vehicles, not for a human's fragile head. Not that such an injury would have been beyond his body's ability to recover from, but he would certainly have memory loss from so violent a rearrangement of his neurons. If it were bad enough, he might even have to resort to a backup. Fortunately, the repeller field worked perfectly. The vehicle stopped its wild tumbling, coming to rest in a squeal of tortured metal to balance upside-down on a cushion of nothing.

The repeller field allowed him to crawl out of the vehicle even while holding its weight up from the road surface. That field didn't work on human bodies. *Thankfully*, Antoin observed wryly as he backed away from the smoldering 'sport. An instant later, he was flung backward to the ground by an explosion which tore through the vehicle and he threw up a hand to ward off the heat wave that blasted his face. Some of his hair was singed off and there were jagged shards of metal embedded in his upraised arm.

He dragged himself to his feet. The melodic tinkle of metal shards hitting the hard roadway surface surrounded him as the shrapnel was

forced out of his body by the nanoscale traumabots in his body. He brushed the shards aside, looking around him.

Five Funkars were just reaching the road in a run, fists clenched around long knives. One tossed aside the empty tube of a rocket launcher as he charged, his now-free hand going for a knife as well. He could hear the shouts - "Die, heretic!" "In the name of Gord!" "For Elijah!" The Funkars wore camouflage, greens and grays and blacks, and black leather vests with an emblem of the cross on a background of a stylized fireball and a drop of blood chasing each other like the ancient tai chi symbol. He froze as they came near. *I'm a Citizen, not an UrbPat officer!* They surrounded him in a circle, chanting "Heretic!" in low tones. One, apparently the leader, stopped in front of him as the others continued to circle with their knives at the ready and pistols in their off hands. Antoin shivered; he'd seen Funkars from a distance before, and he'd hoped never to see one up close. *So much for my luck.*

The Funkar leader spat on the ground, then stared directly at him. "Are you a Heretic, one of those who forsook the natural order of Gord's earth and took the power of life into your own hands?" The leader's eyes were intense, glowing with zealotry.

"Am I a what?" Antoin was genuinely puzzled. The Funkar came nearer, pushing Antoin's chin up with the tip of his knife. The tip was very sharp, Antoin realized.

"Kneel, Heretic." It was clearly an order.

Antoin considered resisting for a moment, then decided that it was probably better to kneel, all things considered. One of the few things that the traumabots could not heal was a complete severance of limb or head. Limbs could be regrown with time and pain, but the head could not. You had to hope that it would be reattached before it became necrosed to the point that your body rejected it. Otherwise, it was backup-time. Antoin dropped to his knees. "What do you want from me?" he blustered. He knew he was blustering, but he didn't feel ashamed at all. He hated being restored from a backup - you never knew what you'd lost.

The knife blade moved from the base of his chin sideways to the side of his neck, under his ear. Its razor edge was held tightly enough against his skin to draw blood. "Confess your sins, and repent, and you will go to meet Gord with a clean heart. Refuse, and be damned for eternity!" The leader's voice was low, urgent - almost pleading, even.

"What sins?" The blade began to slice, and Antoin broke in hurriedly. "Wait! I am willing to repent, if only you tell me how I have sinned!" He felt himself enjoying the pain, but he preferred to stay alive. Being dead meant no pleasure *or* pain.

"Your sin shows plainly on your body, Heretic. The wound on your neck has healed even as you spoke. It is the work of the Puppet Master, and you are corrupted. Repent of your sins and die with a pure heart, or die

sullied and damned - either way you die, so you must choose now!"

"My traumabots are a sin? I don't understand!"

The knife tightened as the man's face twisted. "Enough! You are unrepentant, a heretic and a blasphemer. Die!" The other Funkars chanted more loudly and the blade pressed against his neck, bit into his skin as the leader began to saw. Antoin squeezed his eyes shut and screamed as the pain hit him.

A siren wailing from a 'thopter overhead distracted the leader long enough for him to see the particle beam burn as it lanced through his own chest. A second flash of energy burned through his head; his knife clattered to the ground behind him as he toppled over onto it. A Funkar behind Antoin screamed - it was high-pitched, a woman's voice, but that did not prevent her from charging at him with a shout of "Die, puppet!" She too fell, gurgling through the hole burned in her throat. The other Funkars hesitated only for a second, staring with eyes full of bloodlust at Antoin - but discretion trumped valor and they sprinted back to the river, pulling automatic weapons from under their vests and laying down cover fire on the 'thopter. The bullets ricocheted away as more energy beams flashed out, and one of the Funkars fell as he dove into the water. The beams burned down on the others as they swam. One swung a clean arc through a swimming Funkar - the scream said it was another woman. Two of the Funkars made it back over the river, vanishing into the thick brush.

Antoin stood shakily. An eerie silence surrounded him now. He looked around. His 'sport was in shambles. Pieces of a lifeless corpse floated peacefully on the surface of the river, flowing down toward the shanty town. Funkar bodies lay scattered around him. He almost threw up. He'd seen clones in pieces, but never real people, even if they *were* Funkars.

The 'thopter landed next to Antoin's automobile, and a security officer dismounted. "Are you injured, Citizen?" He was looking Antoin over, checking for missing limbs.

"I'm fine, Officer. What was that about?" Antoin rubbed the dried blood from his neck.

The officer spat. "It's those damn fanatics. They like to hide in the river and ambush upstanding Citizens. Something about 'purifying an abomination,' and I've heard of them brainwashing some Citizens to convert, even."

"I can't imagine that," said Antoin. "Besides, these Funkars weren't offering conversion - they just wanted me to repent before they killed me."

The officer shrugged. "Maybe. No telling what they'll do. Fuckin' animals. Anyway, you're lucky to be alive."

Antoin surveyed his destroyed 'sport. The officer noticed him looking. "No worries, Citizen. A replacement is already on the way."

The officer walked back to his 'thopter. "Dismount and spread out!" he barked. Four other officers dismounted, taking up defensive positions along

the river, searching for Funkars.

In minutes, a replacement 'sport arrived for Antoin, piloting itself around the tangle of UrbPat officers. He slumped down tiredly, not speaking. "Destination?" the 'sport prompted him.

He only hesitated a moment before giving it an address. Still not his home address. He felt the adrenaline wearing away, but not the cravings. The officers ignored him as the 'sport carried him off.

The river grew dirtier as he approached the outskirts of the shanty town. He had no intention of driving into the place, of course. He stopped almost a kilometer away on the edge of the Preserve, manually directing the 'sport off onto a side road that led behind a junkyard piled with discarded metal of all kinds. There were 'sports that had been rusting for two hundred years in that pile, and all manner of junk that Antoin could not identify. He didn't care about the junk, though. A low shack stood among the twisted 'sports, a pipe in the roof twirling a thin column of smoke up into the darkening sky.

Antoin stepped out of the 'sport and started to approach the shack. He had hardly moved two meters when something whirred through the air at him and a floodlight switched on, shining directly into his face. He tried to turn his head, but the light seemed to turn as well. *Damn hoverlight*, he thought. No matter which way he turned, the hoverlight would orbit him so that it kept a powerful searchlight in his eyes. He was used to it by now, but it still annoyed him. He could hear the footsteps approaching, even if he couldn't see a thing. He tried to switch his vision to another spectrum with a sub-vocal command to the night lenses, but the searchlight was flooding his vision on every frequency, even the non-visible ones.

"Back already? Something wrong with the product?" the voice growled.

"N-no, nothing's wrong," Antoin stammered hurriedly. The light made him nervous; he didn't particularly like dealing with someone he couldn't see. "It worked exactly as you said it would." He licked his lips. "I, uh... I actually want to try something else."

A harsh chuckle ripped through the evening air. "You like that shit, freak? You Citizens make me sick, acting all high and mighty in your city and then you all come crawling to me in the dark for modjects because you hate your lives. Pathetic."

Antoin couldn't think of a good response. "Well," he said - and that's all he could find to say.

"Stop blabbering, *Citizen*." The dealer made it sound like an insult. "You didn't come here to sob to me; what do you want?"

Antoin cleared his throat. "Something stronger."

"Stronger?" The voice sounded amused. "Smallpox wasn't enough for you?"

"It was good, but I want to try something else."

"Of course you do."

Something skidded to his feet. It was a modject. Antoin picked it up, reading the label - *ebola*. "How much?" he asked. It didn't occur to him to try to run away with it. He liked to be alive, despite his flirtations with death. And he had come close enough to death already this evening.

"Ten thousand," said the disembodied voice. Antoin blinked; the glare was starting to make spots swim in front of his eyes.

"Ten thousand!?" It was a month's interest.

"Give me back my modject," said the voice in a decidedly more threatening tone.

"No, wait!" Antoin could already feel the adrenaline starting as he stared at the modject. He licked his lips again, then looked back at the light, blinking. "I'll take it."

"Good. Finalize it," said the voice. Another object thudded at his feet; it was a reader. He could see the details of the transaction in digital green: one modject, type 199213 - transaction FINAL. He touched his thumb to the area marked "Purchase?" and the screen blanked. He didn't even feel the needle penetrate his skin to pull out some DNA for the verification process. He tossed the reader back. The details of the transaction would not show in his records, only the serial and the authorization. They only showed now for his benefit; the dealer had proved himself discreet in the past.

"Nice doing business with you," the voice said mockingly. That deep, harsh chuckle rippled out again. The footsteps crunched away on the gravel; seconds later, the light flickered out and Antoin could see that he was alone. He wasted no time climbing back into the 'sport and heading for the little beehive house he called home.

* * *

Snik held up a hand, and the small globe of the hoverlight shot toward it, braking abruptly and going dark and silent as his fingers closed on it. He tossed the heavy ball in the air a few times, staring moodily at the departing 'sport, then let out a puff of air and walked inside his little shack. A quick glance at the displays on his desk showed him that no one else was around for a kilometre, which was precisely why he chose to live in this godawfully deserted place.

He smiled at the reader in his hand, though. Citizens were never suspicious enough. He ejected the microneedle from the reader, dropping the cartridge of greenish glass onto his desk. Honest merchants would tell you that the readers were supposed to destroy the DNA samples after verifying the customer's identity. Snik was not an honest merchant and he'd disabled the incinerator in the needle cartridge the day he acquired the reader.

He pulled out a mealpack from a dusty stack under a corner shelf. The Citizens got to eat real food, grown and cooked by robotic workers up there on Luna, and carried down fresh. It wasn't that there weren't enough willing

workers around to grow things here - oh, not at all. The Funkars and slumrats grew modest amounts of food in the Wastes. The Citizens just didn't want to be contaminated by the presence of slumrats, and they weren't about to let Funkars inside the city - not live ones, at any rate. He was fairly sure they'd all prefer to starve. For his part, he stuck to the mealpacks. They were healthier, if not as appetizing as the Waste-grown food.

He opened the packet of dehydrated food, crunching into the entree bar with an occasional swig of water from a canteen. He never bothered to rehydrate the meal properly, so every few bites earned him a lungful of dusty crumbs which caused him to erupt in a coughing, swearing fit. If he wasn't lazy, he would have added water and waited, but mushy food was less appealing than the dust. Halfway through his food bar, something on the monitor caught his eye; he paused in midchew for an almost imperceptible moment before resuming it. *Damn rats must have followed the freak.*

Despite the fact that he lived outside the city, he didn't really consider himself to be a slumrat. He was taller, better-fed and heavier than the pathetic masses that thrived in the shanty town. Nor did he consider himself a Citizen or a Funkar - he shuddered at either thought. No, he was Snik, and Snik was a force of nature, a law unto himself. And he wasn't from New Byanzt, so he had no sympathy for these losers and their plight. He put the rest of the food bar in his mouth and pulled an amp rifle from under the table, spinning his chair to face the wall. He counted with each crunching chew. 1...2...3...4...5...6 - *now!* He fired straight through the wall of his shack, the green pulse of energy leaving bright streaks in the air that hung slowly before they faded. The wall, of course, was untouched. He slipped the rifle back under the table and stood up slowly, stretching. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and opened the door.

A man and a woman - slumrats, by the look of them - lay writhing in the gravel in front of his door. They'd carried weapons, of course. He hadn't expected otherwise, and he walked casually over to them, kicking the woman's hand aside as she strained to reach her fallen handgun. It was an old ballistic model; ancient, but a surprising amount of those ancient weapons still worked and Snik was no pain-loving Citizen freak. Even a ballistic model could do him damage that he was unwilling to take.

He walked back to the fallen woman, pinning her wrist under his boot while he stomped down hard on the man's hand with his other foot. He rocked back and forth for a moment, finding some amusement in their expressions as they screamed. "Why'd you come?" he asked conversationally. They didn't answer, so he ground the heel of his boot harder into the woman's wrist, looking off at the sunset.

The woman shrieked for a moment, then took a few panting breaths. He could see her staring up at him from the corner of his eye, her face

defiant; one look at him when he turned to face her made her bravado wither. The warning pressure on her wrist increased. "No, wait!" she groaned.

Snik smiled, with his mouth only. "Okay. Why'd you come?"

The woman was focusing on breathing, apparently. It took her a second to respond. "We heard that you sell modjects-" she started, but screamed again under Snik's boot as he turned away; she was clearly useless. He focused on the man.

"Why'd you come?" Snik let some of the pressure up on his back leg to stop the woman's shrieking. It was starting to get on his nerves.

The man apparently felt the need to launch an attack to prove his manhood. Snik's knee caught him under the chin as he rose, snapping his jaw shut onto his tongue. With a strangled cry, the man sagged back to the gravel. The cry turned into a scream again, thanks to Snik's heel on the back of his hand. Some of the small bones were cracking. "I- We-we came for modje-" Blood was bubbling out with the words.

"You lie," said Snik. "No junkies come here with old ballistic gats. They bring gifts, or fingerprints for my reader." He made his voice harder. "Why did you come?"

Neither one looked at him. Snik waited precisely ten seconds; that was enough. "Have it your way," he said. He pressed a button in the top of his boot with his right toe, and the heel suddenly sprouted a blade. Without hesitation he pivoted and drove his heel into the woman's armpit, feeling the blade slice through skin and muscle and bone - and artery. Not bothering to look behind him, he dropped to his left knee. The man's throat happened to be directly underneath. "Oops." Some unpleasant gagging and gasping later, neither one moved. The blade slid back into Snik's boot with another press of the button as he stood.

"I hate work," Snik grumbled as he grabbed the man's corpse by the feet to drag it behind his shack. "Goddamn slumrats." Come to think of it, they'd probably told him a version of the truth. The modjects *were* quite valuable, he reflected. *Probably feed this skinny bastard for days.* But they probably were hoping to clean out everything - food, weapons, modjects. Cursing, he tossed the corpse into a corner, pulling out a large cinderbolt. The weapon was fairly heavy, which was why he didn't use it often, but it did have certain uses for which he could find no better substitute. He crooked his finger and the cinderbolt vomited flames that reduced the corpse to ash in a matter of seconds. The woman's corpse didn't take any longer, once he'd dragged it over. He stared at the piles of ash for a moment before going back inside.

He shoved his table aside and pried up a floorboard, then pulled out a box and placed his thumb on the lock. The box read his fingerprint; a second later, it clicked open. Snik scanned the contents, then frowned. *Only one modject left - time to get more.* This last one was influenza; he'd heard

that the relentless backaches were particularly appealing to some of the Citizen masochists. He tossed the modject back in the box, slammed it shut, and put it away carefully. He pulled a leather coat from the wall, tossing it over his shoulders but not bothering to pull it on. The amp rifle collapsed into a small bundle which he slipped into his pocket. He smoothed back silver-gray hair, looking around. There was nothing he'd forgotten. He stepped out into the night, kicking rocks over the blood staining the gravel.

He always loved the night. It appealed to the hunter in him. One thing he'd paid for early in the game was the lenses he wore; they gave him the same ability to detect any part of the spectrum as a Citizen - and more. Much as he hated the Citizens, especially the ones in Toyko, he had to admit that the technology those bastards came up with was pretty damned good. *A pity they blew up most of it in the last war*, he thought. The Citizens had lost the blueprints for almost everything with the collapse of the GlobeNet. Sure, a few factories survived here and there, pumping out valuable tools and houses and 'sports, but new ones were not being made, as far as he knew. It was all very well that *some* of them still worked, but those factories could not turn out the nanobots that provided the raw materials for Medical Conversions. *What all of us wouldn't give to get our hands on those*. He could probably make a fortune with them, off-world. The setting sun glinted off the distant Funkar temple. *Okay, maybe not **all** of us*.

Chapter Three

The evening wind blew cool around Snik's neck, so after a few moments he stopped to slip on his coat. He was walking along the river, headed purposefully toward the wall that separated the Funkar enclaves from the rest of the city. He always hated these runs, but they had to be made. It didn't make dealing with those Funkar bigots any more pleasant.

He had turned his leather coat inside out, showing the blue cross plainly. He had no tolerance for fools; his preferred manner of dealing with them was death-dealing. Still, he was no fool himself, and the business he had was best kept in the shadows - *or in the light of Gord*, he smirked to himself. In this case, the shadows *were* in the light of Gord. There were too many Funkars for one man to fight, even a dealer like himself.

That was why he marched straight up to the Funkar gates, not attempting to hide his face. No Gord-fearing man would hide his face. Snik made sure to be Gord-fearing and to show his Funkar cross proudly. He only had to be Gord-fearing for an hour or so, but he had to admit that it was still distasteful.

One of the gate guards finally noticed him and leveled a ballistic weapon at him. "State your creed," barked the soldier.

Snik chuckled inwardly. "State your creed" was a circuitous way of asking whether or not he was a Believer. He cleared his throat. "I...ahem...I follow Gord, as does any true Funkar."

The guard eyed him warily, taking in the blue cross on the coat. He glanced at his superior briefly, but the officer was busy, so the guard turned his attention back to Snik. "Why were you outside of the enclave?"

Snik had a smooth answer ready. "I was attempting to convert, but as you can see, I've had no luck. The Lost Ones are dam-damned, and they resist like the spawn of Stan himself." *Watch the language - a slip here will not help things*, he reminded himself. He smoothed his hair back out of his face and looked the guard in the eye. *Gotta be strong; these Funkars are territorial bastards*. He focused on beaming dominant confidence. Predictably, it worked. The guard nodded and waved him in. "Walk in Gord's footsteps," he called after Snik.

Gord can walk in his own damn footsteps, thought Snik. He headed south, away from the city wall, moving ever-closer to the center of the Funkar enclave. Being in this place made him feel claustrophobic. Men peered around suspiciously, looking for any sin to denounce to a Vangel. All of the women were veiled; supposedly, the Funkars had won the civil war ages ago, but they carried on the culture of their once-proud enemies as if it were their own. The hostile ambiance was a strange counter to the urban city inside the Gate Zone. There was no shortage of children, either - not that Snik could think of any reason why any child would stay here

voluntarily. He slipped into the shadows as soon as he could. His lenses shifted automatically at the reduced light, and the ambient heat outlined everything for him in infravision green.

A nearby alley between two tall apartment buildings provided the perfect cover and Snik stepped into it. His enhanced vision showed him that there was no danger here, only garbage and the slumped figures of two homeless Funkars. "Feed the hungry, my ass," Snik muttered under his breath. The Funkars loved to pretend that they cared, but there were more homeless people here than in the shanty town outside of the Enclave. In the street, one of the beggars reached out a hand toward a passing Vangel, but earned himself a kick in the head that left him streaming blood from a broken nose. Snik chuckled with a shake of his head. Even the Vangels - *especially the Vangels* - were assholes. He moved deeper into the alley. More than once he found himself pressing against the wall to avoid garbage - and worse - tossed from upper windows.

The alley broke into a dark street that ran among more of these grim tenements. Snik kept to the walls, wanting no trouble here. Not that he feared it. It would just slow him down. He peered into the darkness, his lenses showing him what he searched for.

Ultrapaint markers on the wall of a building opposite him told him that he'd found his mark. Any person looking at the wall without lenses would see only brick made black with dirt and grime and blood. Only someone who knew what he was looking for would find this place. Snik walked up to the door, checking to be sure he had not been followed. After a moment, he knocked. He could make out the heat-glow through the wall, where two guards had warmed it as they leaned against it next to the door. The door slid silently open, and he stepped through casually. It closed behind him firmly enough to make even him wince. Anything closing that hard would not yield to mere human flesh.

He stood inside a laboratory. The room was sterile, white, and brightly lit. Equipment covered the walls and the floors; tubes ran everywhere, some opaque and some transparent enough for him to see liquids running off from one device to another. At the far end of the room, a dark-haired woman stood among her holograms, transparent columns running from floor to ceiling. She paused, examining a string of DNA hanging in the air near her head. Two slabs of muscle stared at him casually, leaning against the door; the stares were dangerously blank. Snik looked at them. They wore the small crosses of Funkar Soldiers. Where there were two, Snik knew, there were more not far away. He walked toward Gina, careful to keep his hands in the open. "It's me, Snik," he announced calmly, completely ignoring the bodyguards.

"Snik. Let me guess, you want more smallpox." She turned around, tugging at her wrinkled white shirt to straighten it. Snik always found her attractive, even when exhaustion made furrows on her forehead and threw

threads of red onto her eyes. He cleared his throat.

"I need more of everything," he said. "These Citizens drain me; I can't keep the modjects around for more than a day before everyone knows I've restocked, and then they just disappear." He snorted. "You seem to have a good product, Gina. You should be proud of yourself."

Gina glanced at him to see if he was being sarcastic, but Snik kept his face straight. As much as he hated the modject junkies, her product really must be solid or the Citizens wouldn't keep coming back for it. Still, every time he held a modject in his hand, he couldn't help feeling a trace of disgust. Hard to believe that something so small could mean the agonizing death of an honest slumrat, but would be only a minor inconvenience for a Citizen. Gina's voice brought him out of his thoughts. "Er, sorry, I didn't hear that," he said.

Gina frowned at him, absent-mindedly running her hand through her wavy black hair. "I said that if you brought what I asked, I have what you need."

"Already?" Snik was surprised; usually he had to wait for her to sequence more modjects. It didn't take long, only a few hours while he waited, but he *did* have to wait, normally.

Gina nodded. "I anticipated your presence here tonight," she said with a faint smile.

Snik nodded. She probably had his past visits logged into some predictive program on her computers. "That's fine. I have what you need, yes." He slipped his hand into a pocket and pulled out a small capsule of greenish glass. He held it up to the light. "This," he said, looking for her reaction from the corner of his eye. *Good, she's excited.*

Gina came up to him, taking the capsule out of his hands. "It's from a Citizen, you're certain?" None of her excitement showed on her face; it was a certain edginess to her movements that gave her away.

Snik was in a patient mood. "Of course," he said. "I got it myself just this evening."

Gina nodded. "Excellent, excellent," she mumbled, already turning away with the capsule and walking over to her holocolumns. Snik followed her.

"What are you going to do with that?" he asked genially. He looked around at the columns; symbols and pictures floated in the air, painted onto a thin mist that was blown from a recess in the floor. He had no idea what any of it meant. Not that he really cared.

Gina smiled. "One of my clients has requested something unique. This," she tapped the capsule, "is the key ingredient." That smile, Snik saw, was not the most friendly.

"Unique?" Snik probed.

Gina hesitated for a second, studying him. She seemed to weigh him before she spoke. "Elijah has determined that the Citizens must be

eliminated. He knows of the fondness of certain Citizens for the modjects, and if a modject can be—" Gina paused, searching for a word. "If it can be *modified* to bypass the ageproofing, then the modject disease will have its normal effect."

Snik frowned. If she thought he would be happy, she had weighed him wrong. He had no love for the Citizens, but he was sure that having all of his clients killed would be a disaster for his business. And he didn't like the implication that she would use him to distribute such a "unique" solution. "So the Funkars will approve of genocide?" he asked with a frown.

Gina barked a laugh. "Ha! According to my client, it won't be genocide. Gord Himself has declared the Citizens to be an abomination and ordered their elimination, he says."

Snik looked at her. "And this is fine with you?" There was a dangerous edge to his voice, and the two bodyguards straightened up somewhat, hands edging towards weapons. Snik saw them, but didn't bother to move.

Gina shrugged, ignoring the warning tone. "It's not any of my problem. I will still be able to sequence cures for regular diseases for my clients, irrespective of the winning side." She was already preparing the DNA from the capsule and starting to analyze the tiny blood sample; a new holocolumn was growing from the floor. To Snik, it was still just lines and images and colors - not anything he really cared to know more about. He wasn't sure he believed her indifference, though.

He glanced at the bodyguards; they were staring at him with decidedly unfriendly faces. He found their lack of respect annoying. *Wrong time, wrong place*, he reminded himself. "My products, then?" he said to Gina in a more friendly voice than he wanted.

Gina nodded, visibly relaxing. "Of course." She opened a panel on the wall, pulling out a locked box which she handed to him. There was none of the reader nonsense; Snik didn't trust the things, and neither did Gina. Only Citizens were naive enough to assume that no one would tamper with a reader.

Snik checked the contents through his lenses. Everything was there, as he'd expected, and properly packaged. Twenty-six modjects in the *Twenty-six*? "I thought we agreed to twenty-four," he said to Gina.

"Two are on me. This DNA will be very helpful."

"Your loss," Snik shrugged. He sealed the box with a thumbprint. If she thought that her generosity would help to make him forget about the genocide plan, she was mistaken. He tucked the box under his coat, wrapping it up so that the contents were invisible from the outside. "I'll be going now."

Gina was already occupied with her columns, her hands busy manipulating the helices floating in white-lit columns around her. "Good to do business with you," she said without looking at him.

Snik was already closing the door. Her words followed him out into

the night air, along with one of the bodyguards who folded his arms and leaned against the door after it closed. Snik chuckled a little. He always found efforts to intimidate him to be highly amusing.

Sounds told him that the night was alive, a brisk traffic on the streets echoing through the alleyway. Snik wasn't concerned with being seen now. He straightened up, walking through the alleyway. *Be an upstanding citizen.* He did not skulk; he walked straight into the crowded streets like he belonged there.

The Funkars ignored him, even looking away from him. No Funkar wanted to risk being accused of lust or envy. Eye contact was dangerous - who knew what sparks might fly, or who might notice a glance extended for more than a second. Funkar punishment for such things was extreme. Snik found some amusement in deliberately looking straight at passers-by, watching their panic as they looked away. *If they turn any faster, might twist their heads off. Not that it would be a bad thing.*

The gate was not far ahead, so Snik quickened his pace, nearly bowling Funkars over as he headed toward it. There was a very small lineup at the gate. Most of the traffic turned aside to streets along the walls rather than heading outside. No Funkar wanted to risk contamination with the outside if he had not been ordered to do so. Snik pulled the coat on, cross out. The guards waved the person ahead of him on. "Avoid temptation, Brother!" called the guard captain to the man ahead of him. The Funkar vanished through the gate and it was Snik's turn. He stepped up to the captain, looking the man in the eye.

The captain stared at his face, searching for guilt with hard eyes. "State your business with the World, Brother Vangel."

Snik nodded. "It is as you say," he said. He pulled the cross on his coat into the light. "I go to spread the light of Gord to the World."

The guard looked him over, not missing the bundle under his arm. "What do you carry in the box?"

Snik answered smoothly. "I carry copies of the *Gordword* to distribute to those with ears to hear and eyes to see. The Authorized Scroft Version, of course." He slid his thumb precisely over the lock and flipped opened the lid as smoothly as he could, making it seem unlocked. No need to have the guard know it was a secure box. The guard leaned in to take a look. Snik did too.

She's good, he thought again. Gina had packed the modjects inside hollowed-out copies of the *Gordword*, all properly marked with the ASV stamp. The guard ran a hand over them, feeling the leather covers. It was dog leather, but it had been a hundred years since the Funkars had cattle or other large animals. "Sustainability" was not a concept that the Funkars understood.

The guard looked up and nodded. "May Gord speed your feet and harden the hearts of these heretics." A nasty grin crossed his face. Snik

nodded and closed the box.

The guard stepped aside. Snik didn't hesitate; he walked straight out into the night and didn't stop. He breathed easier once he was out of sight of the gate. *Funkar animals*, he thought. For all their attempts to spread the *Gordword*, most of them genuinely hoped that it would be rejected, so that they might kill and loot anyone who was a part of the "World." Snik snorted. He pocketed the knife he'd held loosely in his free hand; if the captain had tried to examine one of those copies closely, Snik would have carved his way out of the Enclave.

He stared up at the night sky as he headed toward his shack. *Gotta do something about this genocide bit*. It wouldn't do to lose all of his customers. It wasn't his fight, sure, but nobody said he would actually do any fighting. As soon as he sure he would not be spotted from the Enclave walls, he jerked the coat off, wrapping it around the box again. He took a deep breath. *Much better*. His shoulders felt lighter already.

Chapter Four

Gina stared at the column nearest her. The genetic information was visually represented as a puzzle, each of the four base chemical compounds shown as a color if she zoomed in closely enough. Usually she didn't. Larger chains of the chemicals were represented by symbols that indicated the genes they represented. A cluster of powerful computers under the floor enabled her to simulate recombinations, growing virtual organisms and enacting their entire pathetic, virtual lives in mere seconds. Even humans. Humans were not the most complicated organisms she had ever simulated.

The first step in satisfying this new Funkar contract was a simple comparison. She selected her own image from a column beside her; in front of her, the symbols representing her own genetic information filled a column. Next to it floated the DNA given to her by the dealer. She didn't really like dealers; she found them creepy, but they were admittedly useful. Putting the dealer out of her head, she examined the Citizen DNA.

The column representing the strange DNA began to fill up with new symbols as the computer matched its sequences to known genes. Brown eyes, medium bone density, strong teeth, low testosterone output, and a thousand other symbols began to stack up. The symbols were not what she was paying attention to, though. A small window kept her attention. "Come on," she muttered at it, tapping her lip absentmindedly with a finger. A soft musical tone drifted through the air and grabbed her attention. She glanced at the door. Pedro and Viktor were already facing it, weapons at the ready. They might wear the Funkar cloaks for show, but they were worth three Soldiers each. Maybe more. She nodded, and Viktor tapped the door release control.

Four men spilled through, taking up crouching positions in the center of the lab; two of them trained weapons on Viktor and Pedro and two covered her. The crossed uniforms gave them away, though. With her eyes, she directed Pedro and Viktor to stand down; they took up their positions at the door, ignoring the guards. A fifth man stepped into the lab. Gina found herself snorting with amusement. No doubt he had four other guards in the alleyway. Not a good way to keep a low profile. "You attract entirely too much attention to my laboratory, Elijah," she said with a frown. *Such a brave man*, she thought, mentally snorting at him.

Elijah stood in the center of her laboratory, looking around. Somehow the man always managed to keep his back straight as a ruler. Gina didn't think she'd ever seen him look relaxed. He cleared his throat pompously. "There are those who would have me dead for doing the work of Gord. I can never be too cautious."

The High Vangel, Defender of the Faith, had a classic salesman's voice, deep and trust-inspiring. He had a lecher's eye, though. Gina could

feel his stare undressing her. She deliberately took the most provocative pose she could manage, just to upset him. "Surely Gord will protect you," she said, twirling a strand of her hair around a finger.

"Gord helps those who help themselves. It has always been so." He was staring even harder now. Gina wondered how he would punish himself for such an evil act later.

"Well, the least you could do is bring four instead of eight. I don't want any unnecessary attention," she said.

Elijah frowned at her, smoothing his hair back with one pale hand. He was pale overall, and the white suit he wore did not help to alleviate his pallor. Neither did his cloak, a white affair adorned with dozens of little red crosses. From a distance one might think those crosses were flowers - but only from a distance. "I will consult with Gord on this matter. For the moment, I have other business. How goes the work?"

Gina found herself excited despite his presence. "It couldn't be better! Just today, I acquired finally the DNA of a Citizen. I am conducting the analysis as we speak. When I find the genes that are responsible for the Heresy, I will proceed to construct the Avenger." She *did* love her work.

"Excellent. These infidel dogs must pay for the abomination that lies beneath their skin. Gord has spoken." Elijah's eyes glowed, and his lips curved up. "We will yet see them writhing in the streets, victims of their own pride. How blessed we are to be mortal - how favored, how Gord's hand protects us!" He was licking his lips; Gina could almost see him tasting the victory - although with his eyes focused on her breasts, she wasn't sure that the victory was what he was tasting. She managed not to flush - she would not give him the satisfaction.

Her discomfort had not made her forget the Vangel's words, though. She found herself speechless for a moment. *What a windbag.* "Yes, well, I have work to do here," she managed finally.

Elijah raised a hand to her, his eyes traveling over her body one last time. "May the blessings of Gord be upon you, and may your work be sped swiftly along to do His will, Child." With a flourish of his cloak, he spun around and walked out. His soldiers followed, trying to keep an eye on Pedro and Viktor as they left. Viktor jumped at one with a little roar - only the motion, really, and not much noise -- but the soldier scuttled out as quickly as he could.

When the laboratory door sealed, Viktor released sudden laughter, so hard that he shook. Pedro was only a second behind. "Did you see how they pretend that they are soldiers?" he asked.

"I think one of them has pissed himself," gasped Viktor between laughs. That caught Gina's attention. She frowned; the cleaner bots were already busy on the floor, circling around a shrinking yellow puddle. She sighed, but not without a smile. "Play nice, boys," she said lightly. They bowed to her, seemingly back in control, but she was sure she heard more

than one stifled laugh as she went back to her columns. She was glad to have her guards, though. She always hated these little visits. Sometimes she felt that if she were alone with the Vangel, he would have...

She shuddered. No point in taking that train of thought. She could take care of herself, of course - but there was little point in letting herself get into such a situation. Her guards were quite useful, indeed. She turned her attention back to her work.

The little window on the column processing the strange DNA was no longer empty. There were a few colored strands blinking there. "Ah," she said to herself. These were the strands that matched no known genes in her database. She eyed them carefully, and began the painstaking work of recombining the strands and simulating the effect of each recombination. She recombined the new strands with that of her own DNA; she found it greatly amusing to watch as her face grew curly antennae or to see her left arm relocated to her tail bone. Always surprises to be had when recombining. *Although*, she thought with a frown, *this particular job would be unnecessary if the Three War hadn't happened.*

Every schoolchild knew that the Three War was responsible for the state of the world. Not that people in the Funkar quarters ever had much in the way of schooling. Vangels had quickly determined that even a little knowledge was volatile, and they had gone to great lengths to suppress anything non-approved. *I was lucky*, Gina thought, not for the first time. What education there was did not rate highly on the list of activities a Gord-fearing woman would engage in.

Of course, there were always...*exceptions*, Gina thought, *like me*. The Vangels were quick enough to look the other way if anything might help to damage the Citizens and their Heresy. It was a Vangel who rescued Gina, found her abandoned at the gates of the Enclave by some Citizen *bitch* who wouldn't - *couldn't?* - take care of her. The Vangels had fed her, clothed her, taught her. And when they saw that her mind was sharp, they gave her direction, funding, the lab, everything. She smiled. She was fortunate, but there was irony there. *It's all because of the damn war*. It had been a slow and dirty war, dragging out over the course of fifty-odd years according to the history books. The Funkars had tried to make peace, but the Moosies and the Citizens would have none of it. She'd heard that once, there were other factions, but they had quickly been suppressed by the Moosies when the Purge started. *Gord is jealous*, she thought, and folded her hands automatically at the sacred name. Not that she was dogmatic, but she had learned the ritual habits through painful blows delivered by her foster parents. In any case, the Funkars were tolerant of other creeds, but Gord chose His own tools and Gina felt no sympathy if He'd chosen to use the Moosies up completely. She was even glad for the Three War. After all, she might have died if the Funkars had lost. She would not forget that it was a Citizen who abandoned her.

The Moosies had been bad enough, slaughtering men, women, and children alike with bloodthirsty zeal. The Citizens, though - they had been the most barbarous of all. The advanced technology they possessed was unleashed without pity. All manner of weapons - biological, kinetic, nuclear, chemical - all were utilized in a futile attempt to stem the rise of Gord's people to power. Gina had seen the history books, seen photographs of Funkar children with their skin blackened and rotting, the cities burning with hellish flames after being reduced to rubble by a lightning bolt from the sky. Between Citizen technology and Moosie fanatacism, there had been little respite for the Believers. And yet they had defended themselves effectively, providing a gateway to Hell for all of Gord's enemies. "Self-defense is blessed of Gord," Gina quoted to herself softly.

And then the Citizens had ageproofed themselves, defying Gord and enacting the most horrific blasphemies against nature. *The Heresy*. Gina tightened her lips. *This little bit*, she thought, looking over her columns, *this is the least I can do. I will strike down the Citizen dogs with their own Heresy*. She quickly lost herself in the trance of colors and symbols as she started to analyze the nanoparticles from the blood sample. The lab grew quiet except for the murmured conversation of her bodyguards.

* * *

Elijah stalked away from the whore's presence, ignoring his guards as they fell into place around him. *At last*, he thought, *real progress*. He looked at the night sky. The stars twinkled down at him, but he could see the spire of the Heretics' Tower rising over the City, mocking Gord as it stabbed up into the heavens with its evil red light. *Not for long must we suffer*. He turned his face upwards as high as he could. *I will avenge the blasphemy, Dear Gord*, he vowed. He clenched his fist, slamming it into his palm. *I will see these infidel dogs dying by their own pride*. He smiled grimly. *And not for long must I endure this heresy in the very pasture of my sheep*.

His guards looked at him strangely, but almost automatically looked away. Their faces blanked again - this was not the first time they'd seen him gesturing in the air. Elijah did not care what they thought of him. So long as he satisfied Gord, he was impervious to any mortal concern of mere image.

A cool breeze whipped his cloak around, but Elijah ignored it as firmly as he ignored his guards and the scum lounging around the edges. He frowned at the scum, for just one second. *I have to remember to deal with them*. He preferred the scum with all their begging and scrounging to the Heretics, though. *At least these grimy maggots know their place*. One stretched out a hand as he walked by, plaintively calling out for alms. That hand almost touched him - not for long, though. Elijah stepped sideways and kept walking with a jerk of his head at the guard beside him. He did not look back; there was no need. A scream and the meaty slap of skin on the stone path told him that the offending hand had been removed. "Gord rewards purity," he said loudly - as he had to, to be heard over the screams.

He never ceased to be surprised at how loudly some of these emaciated dogs could yell.

The Temple rose up over the low buildings around it, throwing darker shadows over any section of the streets not lit with torchlight. Once there had been gaslight here, but no faithful Vangel had the time to do anything so mundane as making sure that the natural gas supply was stable. Elijah snorted to himself. Gord's work did not need gas or electricity to be done. Only firm hearts and strong wills. He smiled at the Temple, though. Vast columns rose up to support a carved roof, the whole thing the size of a couple of city blocks. It was a marvel, proof of what the Children of Gord could accomplish, given the proper motivation.

The small procession turned the corner onto a road that ran from the slums to the market and passed in front of the Temple. There was a vast square with a fountain opposite the temple, surrounded by squalid market booths and the bundled lumps of the homeless huddled on the sidewalk. A flurry of movement in the square caught Elijah's attention and he found himself caught up in a small storm of activity. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a tiny sphere hurtling through the air at him and some part of his mind screamed *Grenade!* He stared at the sphere in wonder; it looked so beautiful, tumbling lazily end-over-end, shining polished in the torchlight like a jewel. Even as he stared, something jolted his left side and he found the world tilting sideways. He looked up at the grenade rolling down a hill of air toward him. Then a hand snatched it out of the air, he hit the ground hard with a huge weight on him, and somewhere in the distance there was a muffled thump and the concussion smashed through him. The smell of scorched air filled his nose as the night filled with searing pulses of orange-red light, and a distance scream of "Die, Vangel-" was cut off with an agonized scream. After a moment, the weight on top of him let up. One of his bodyguards was offering him a hand. Elijah took it, pulling himself up to his feet, and looked around.

The road was marked with a dirty, black scorch-mark where the grenade had exploded. There was one less bodyguard around. *More bodyguard pieces, though*, Elijah thought with a grim chuckle. He raised his arms, and his voice. "Our brother has given his life in the service of Gord. Let us remember!" Blood pooled, shining black in the torchlight, and the disemboweled assailant lay curled up near the fountain. Elijah stalked over. In his belt were a number of small, silver knives; he pulled one out, kneeling down next to the dying man. "Gord offers forgiveness to all, save Heretics. Are you a Heretic?" The dying man spat at him.

Elijah frowned. The man was obviously no Heretic; one of his hands was missing. *Not even a Heretic would go so far just to get near me*, Elijah thought. A closer look at the wrist showed the scar to be an old wound; the punishment was clear enough. Elijah placed his palm on the side of the man's head. "May Gord have mercy on you," he said, then removed his palm

and with his free hand drove the knife through the assassin's temple into the stone street.

The euphoria he always experienced with a kill rushed over him, and he was unable to move for a moment. His guards stood around him silently, waiting. When his head cleared, he stood up, dusting his knees off. He had been careful not to kneel in the blood. "Dispose of that," he said, pointing at the body. Two of his guards stepped out from his group; he could hear one of the men grunting as he tried to pull the knife from the ground. He let the corner of his lip curl into a dark smile. That knife was Heretic technology gotten on a raid, and the blade could bite through steel; it was surely driven deep into the stone pavement. He threw his cloak around him, and the rest of his guards surrounded him as he set off toward the Temple.

Elijah slipped into deep thought as he walked. *Why, Gord, do they hate me so?* he asked in a silent prayer. He had already dispatched eighteen assassins this year, and the spring was barely in progress. He remembered the Gordword, the admonishment that a Vangel was always hated among those most familiar with the Truth. Something scratched at the back of his mind, suggesting that maybe he made them hate him so that he could have the pleasure of the hunt, but he quickly dismissed that. *Begone!* Surely such a thought was one that only the Puppetmaster of the Heretics would place into his mind.

Elijah turned his mind to more mundane matters. He would have to find a replacement bodyguard for the one who had caught the grenade. *And the whore has made progress,* he thought. He had experienced the familiar discomfort in her presence; she aroused lustful thoughts in his mind, and those had no place in the thoughts of a Vangel. It was a slight to his honor. *I am pure,* he insisted to himself. *She! She is a temptress, the Puppetmaster's whore. But she is necessary - for now.* He stomped up the marble steps of the Temple, not even seeing the great, carved columns as he laid his plans. Oh yes, he would use her, and when her usefulness was at an end, he would avenge his honor. A smile was on his face as the Temple guards stationed at each of the massive steel doors fell over each other in their rush to open the Temple to their beloved Vangel Elijah. He turned briefly, eyeing again the distant Heretic towers and their vessels of evil that rose up into the sky pulled by the strings of the Puppetmaster. He spat at the distant glow and turned his back on it.

Inside, he tossed off his cloak as he walked. A servant dove to catch it. "Bring me light and food!" he called, striding to his quarters. He passed the barracks; he could hear his guards inside. They quieted as he passed - probably up to no good, but they were not Vangels. Mere Soldiers were not expected to be perfect. Still, he might need to check up on them, to ensure that proper discipline prevailed over weak will. Later.

He stepped inside his quarters and closed the door. Two of his bodyguards took up their posts outside, one at each side. He locked the

door silently. The Funkar creed said that no man need lock his door, as there was nothing that Gord did not see anyway. Elijah agreed with that saying, but there was no need to...*make waves*, he thought with a quirk of his lips. He'd installed the lock himself, controlled with a hidden switch. It was silent, and he'd made sure to slice off the hand of a guard who'd entered his room unbidden before he started using the lock. There was always the knock now, so his privacy was assured and no one would find out that his door was locked. And if they did, well, accidents could be arranged.

Elijah sat down on his bed. It looked the same as any other bed, but he'd long ago replaced the hard surface underneath the thin sheet with soft down - the maid he'd paid to do the deed had been conveniently killed during a robbery in a darker quarter of the Enclave. No use having rumors spread about him. He turned so that he was lying down, and pressed his hand against the wall. A blue glow shone through the reddish translucency of his hand, making an eerie purple color, and then a series of small whirring noises dropped a hidden console down from a compartment in the ceiling.

Elijah could not help a pleased smile. Access to the computer was one of the few luxuries he permitted himself. Well, for anyone else it might be a luxury, but he felt that Gord would understand his need. A holographic display suddenly hovered in midair over his head. "Map," he said.

The display dispersed, and coalesced again into a shimmering map of the Enclave and beyond, even encompassing that accursed City encircled by the faithful. "Scan," he said, his eyes flickering here and there over the map.

Lights flickered into existence here and there on the map - dozens of them. Each light represented a single human detected by one of the numerous sensors buried throughout the Enclave during the war. Some lights were bright - they represented patterns of heat, light, sound, and energy that the network had not seen before. Most lights were dark. It had been a stroke of luck to realize that the sensor network was still intact; it provided him with a measure of security and power to have knowledge of whether strangers were near. He'd often known of intruders in the past before his patrols did; such clairvoyance gave him something of a godlike status in his men's eyes. He relaxed, though. Nothing indicated any potential Heretic presence near the outer walls of the enclave, and nothing was threatening his Temple. Not tonight. He closed his eyes and slept the untroubled sleep of the innocent.

Chapter Five

The sun was high in the sky already, and there was already too much traffic, too many people walking around. It was absolutely perfect. Tyni edged out into the crowd, walking nonchalantly, just another Citizen going about her business. These Permanents were so clueless. She wore nice clothes - a teched dress and shoes, so that neither would stain or become dirty - and she'd carefully washed her face and combed her hair out neatly. She'd decided to be blonde today. It went better with the black dress. There was nothing out of place; to any Permanent onlooker, she was just another Permanent.

She smiled at random Permanents as she passed, casually stumbling into the occasional oblivious fool and relieving the Permanent of something valuable. The women often had jewelry. Jewelry was surprisingly valuable when traded to Funkars. Every devout Funkar honored a "Gord"-given prohibition against jewelry. The surprise lay in discovering that they weren't above wearing as much of it as they could afford behind the walls of their own homes. She didn't really care about the hypocrisy either way. *Their greed*, she thought as she bumped into a particularly well-dressed Permanent female and sliced the glittering necklace free with a blade concealed under her fingernail, *is my gain*. "Sorry!" Tyni gushed, patting the woman's hand consolingly, pocketing the jewelry with her other hand. "I'm so clumsy this morning!"

The Permanent woman smiled. "May you reach your destination swiftly." She wandered away from Tyni, oblivious of the thin white line on her neck bordered by suntanned skin, where a platinum-and-diamond necklace once lay.

Tyni smiled as she pocketed the necklace and vanished into the crowd. It had been a good morning's work. She had acquired enough between this necklace and two wristcomps to provide herself with at least a week's food, and some entertainment in the process. She was in a good mood now. She passed a Permanent guard and smiled in his general direction. The idiot took it as flirtation, of course, and grinned foolishly at her. She held the smile until she was past. *I'm surprised he didn't try to talk to me*. She held her tongue, too. No use antagonizing a guard.

She looked around her. The City rose up high above her, casting shadows here and there. Pleasant walkways and parks pulled her toward a square in the exact center of the city. *What to do now?* she wondered. She'd satisfied her quota, so the rest of the day was hers. There was no real question, of course; she knew quite well what she was going to do. The old urge was always strong. *Explore!*

The old City had vast mazes of back streets and alleyways that an enterprising property adjuster like herself could utilize if she knew where

they were. Alleyways weren't very dangerous, here in the City. Oh, there were always other slumrats skulking around in them, but she was not afraid of them. Most slumrats were hoping for two things - a dose of ageproofing, and food. Neither of those was easily gotten by fighting, and ageproofing was useless to a slumrat if she managed to become dead. Tyni flowed with the crowd again, until a side street with an interesting sculpted fence caught her eye.

She'd explored this particular area of the city before. The Academy of Knowledge, the marketplaces, the Citadel which served as the capitol of both the city and the region - she recognized them all as she passed. In her tin-walled shack on the shanty town's outskirts, she had a souvenir from a visit previous visit - a flag from the Citadel, which she had snatched out from under the eyes of a none-too-wary guard. Surprisingly, it made a nice blanket; it was better-sewn than most of the fabrics she'd gotten her hands on in her career. Of course, she had immediately dyed away the victorious yellow star on a blue field; it was appallingly ugly. She might have limited resources, but her taste was not so limited.

Her attention was drawn to a little 'sport near the CfeX building. A rail-thin, weedy man was pulling his gangly limbs out one at a time. She watched from the corner of a building, finding him quite amusing. The man finished extracting himself from the 'sport and hurried into the building.

She ambled over to his 'sport, eyeing the CfeX building. She had little use for those academic science-types, all babbling about "the strings of the universe" or "nanobiological constructs" -- but they often had extra resources at their disposal that the common Permanent did not. She glanced around; the street was empty, so she casually slid into the 'sport and rummaged around.

There wasn't much to find. Some old books, mostly things on the Three War, and something about "xenobiology" - whatever that was. Boring stuff. A sixth sense warned her, and she slid out of the car and walked away, ducking into a doorway where she turned around and stared at the empty street patiently. She trusted her instincts. A moment later, the driver came back from the building, carrying a cage of some sort in his hand. She watched curiously. He placed the cage into the 'sport and ran back inside the building.

He would return shortly. There wasn't enough time to check the cage. *Damn it.* Curiosity got the best of her. *Maybe if I run...* She looked around again; there was no one in sight, so she ran over to the 'sport, peering in. There was a metal cage sitting on the passenger seat, with brown fur sticking out around the bars. It looked soft, inviting. *I wonder what it feels like,* she thought as she stretched a finger out to touch the fur. It was completely irrational; she had no business touching strange, furry creatures. Still, nothing bad happened. The fur was very soft. She stroked it gently, marveling at the softness and the way that the creature had moved

so quickly to place that hooked claw through her hand; there was so much blood.

She pulled her hand back, horrified, and stumbled away. Before she thought, she was already running for the corner. *You stupid bitch!* she berated herself savagely. *Can't leave things alone. You'll stand out like a sore thumb here!* Permanents did not bleed freely. Their wounds tended to heal up nearly instantaneously, unless they were massive, and even then the bleeding stopped first. The trail of blood behind her was a giant signal shouting that she was an outsider, no matter how skilled she was at acting like she belonged here.

She swore again, tearing off a sleeve of the dress she wore, and tightly bound her hand. There was something wrong. She could feel a burning, like acid creeping through her veins. It moved so slowly; it hadn't even passed her wrist yet. Maybe the tourniquet would help. She tried to focus away from the pain, to mentally brush away the red haze over the world. *Take deep breaths*, she reminded herself sternly. She was trying, but it hurt so badly.

She stepped onto a sideway as soon as she found one, and the moving belt whipped her out of the downtown and away toward the slums almost as quickly as the 'sports that zipped by on the highway next to her. Half-dazed, she barely managed to hold herself up as she kept her hand pressed against her stomach and covered with her other hand. It was part fear and the rest pride that kept her back straight among the Permanents. Fortunately, the crowds dissipated as she neared the edge of the City, and if her back was less vertical, there were fewer people to notice.

The beltways were elevated along with the highway, a dizzying distance over the Preserves below. From the sideway, all she could see were trees, but she still managed to hit the chute perfectly. It was a slumrat trick -- a chute of thin, completely transparent, durable plastic, strong enough to hold an elephant, that those who knew where to look might find. There were dozens of chutes scattered on the outskirts of the city, and a chute was just the thing she needed. She was a pro; she'd spotted the X sprayed in ultrapaint on the beltway rail, counted "one-thousand one, one-thousand two," and launched herself over the rail for all the world like a suicidal maniac. The Permanents didn't know about the chutes; they thought it was suicide when a slumrat jumped, a loss of will to live. Every now and then a Permanent would try to leap from a beltway too, to end what they considered an unbearable ennui. That behavior was madness. She focused on navigating the chute. No suicidal leap for her.

The chute narrowed quickly from a large, funnel-like opening to a small tube that spiraled down toward the ground, dumping her unceremoniously end-over-end onto the dirt floor of a tunnel. It was an easy dash from there to the Warrens which ran underground and out of Permanent sight to the small, grim shacks of the slums. A Permanent

admiring the view would see only rolling hills. Tyni was too dazed to dash, so she walked haltingly along the tunnel; she usually ran along without a care, but she found herself holding on to the wall. The burn was spreading now, past her arm and entering her chest, and her vision was going strange on her. Sometimes she almost felt like she could see the wall in the dark, but that was madness.

Even feeling ill as she was, she effortlessly navigated the tunnel. Any slumrat could have done it blind. At the end of one branch that looked no different than any other, she popped open a trap that exited behind a pile of garbage and hauled herself out of the tunnels. She staggered between rows of dirty tin huts, avoiding the garbage and dog excrement and worse that stained the dirt paths that served as roads here. One of those tin huts close to the bottom of the hill was hers; she kicked the rickety door aside, and half-crawled through to collapse on the pallet on the floor that she called a bed. The door slapped shut behind her, and she passed out almost instantly.

It wasn't a dreamless unconsciousness, though. She almost felt as if she were a caterpillar that had crawled along the tree of the world, and in doing so, woven a silken cocoon of fire in her veins. She had no idea how long she was lying there; it seemed to her that days bloomed and faded, that rains fell and snows came. Suddenly the dreams vanished, leaving her awake, with a fading headache and tired eyes. When she opened them, she found herself lying drained on the ground, her dress torn and dirty and blood-covered, and with a makeshift bandage on her hand. She pulled herself up to her knees rather shakily, holding herself up with her hands.

Suddenly she realized that something was wrong. She stood up, brushing herself off. The bandage pulled loose, and she stared in surprise at the lack of blood. She ran her fingers over the place where she'd been injured, and dried flakes of blood fell away. There was no pain, no blood, no wound. In fact, though she looked closely, there wasn't so much as a scar to suggest that she'd ever encountered that weird little creature. She stared at the smooth skin.

It was perfect - in fact, she realized with a growing combination of fear and elation that her hand was as smooth as it had ever been, smoother even than when she was a child, even before she'd been forced to scrounge around in refuse containers to find her meals. Oh, her scars from a few fights were still there, but not any marks caused by age or disease. She was a mere eighteen years old, but she would have sworn in the morning before her trip to the City that she looked older. She pulled out the broken shard of glass that served as her mirror, staring at her watery reflection. It was undeniable. She looked *young*.

She pinched herself to make sure that she was awake and not dreaming, but that only succeeded in bringing blood to the surface of her skin and causing her unnecessary pain. Except - the pain vanished surprisingly instantly, as if she'd never pinched herself. The absence was

almost distracting as the pain would have been. She frowned. *Could it be?* A strange, euphoric suspicion grew.

She eyed the broken shard of mirror hesitantly. *No use in risking anything*, she thought irrationally, and drew some water from the rusty tap in the corner. She picked up her dress. "It's already ruined," she mumbled to herself. It wasn't, really, but she tore off another strip of cloth, dipping it into the water and rubbing as much of the dirt and grime from the sliver of glass as she could. What she was about to do was incredibly foolish; she'd seen people lose limbs for less. Infection was not to be trifled with in the Warrens. Still, she didn't hesitate.

She bit her lip and with a concentrated frown she drew the glittering edge of the glass over her palm. She could feel the bite of the glass opening a wound in her skin, feel the air scraping at the raw nerves of the wound and her heart laboring like a traitor to push the blood out of her body through this new escape route. Only...as she watched, the cut healed from the inside out, each layer of healed skin pulling the layer above it together until the cut completely vanished. Five solitary drops of blood marked where the gash had been; she flicked them away carelessly, as if they were water. Her mind was momentarily all stunned confusion.

Not for long, though. She found herself settling into an extreme clarity of thought, all other thoughts fading away. *Free!* She smiled, laughed aloud, spun about in a mad little circle.

The euphoria lasted only a moment, but it felt like hours. She stood up. She no longer felt shaky; she only felt completely starved, as if someone had cut a hole in her stomach and drained out everything she'd ever eaten. *Need food.*

She stepped outside, feeling a foot taller. A few rag-clad figures wandered about; most of them ignored her. Not all of them. One glanced at her, then walked on - but only for a moment before turning around and walking straight toward her.

"Tyni?"

She nodded. The voice she recognized; it had the harsh sound of sand crunching under a hard boot. "Khalid. What do you want?"

Khalid studied her for a moment through half-lidded black eyes. "You seem different," he said finally, with a sigh that heaved his massive chest hard enough to bounce dust away.

She felt her heart beat faster. She was not sure if she understood what she had just experienced in her hovel, much less whether she was willing to share it. She opted for the path of least resistance. "I'm just starved," she said, feigning grumpiness. "What's different about that?" She stumbled a little as she joined him, walking toward the tent that served as a food-distribution center in this slum. The path was muddy, and flies buzzed about. It was growing dark; a fog had settled over the shacks and was glowing with diffused firelight from dozens of barrels. It was enough to see

the path by, if not enough to see what lay ahead.

Khalid chuckled. "You are as astute as ever." He scratched his head absently, rubbing dark, matted curls around. With a sigh, he added, "I don't think you'll find enough to eat here, though."

She grimaced this time. "What's different about that?" she repeated. They both chuckled, although she hoped he was wrong. The food tent was close now, close enough for them to smell the scent of the usual watery soup. Spices were cheap, but not much else. It was easy enough to grow a few herbs and dish them out, but difficult to grow anything worth eating. When they were almost at the door, they were joined by a short old woman with a whiny voice.

"Spare some food for an old woman?" she quavered, moving to stand squarely in their way and grabbing Tyni's arm.

Tyni didn't spare a second thought as she backhanded the woman out of the way. She found herself as shocked as both Khalid and her victim when the old woman sailed through the air and crashed into the side of a hut. Tyni stared. The old woman picked herself up and crawled off, sniveling.

Khalid eyed her with some uncertainty. "While it is each for himself here, was that necessary?"

Tyni shrugged. "It wasn't intentional. Anyway, it's tradition. She should get a job." *Slapping is not tradition*, her conscience told her. Still, everyone in the slums worked. Even old women could do something, and that one could walk. Tyni didn't feel remorseful at all.

Khalid snorted. "You are a coldhearted bitch, Tyni."

She smiled innocently. "I know."

They walked into the kitchen, joining the crowd waiting in a line. Tyni sighed as she pulled out her loot from earlier in the day. The necklace would have to do. It was pretty, but it meant food. Even so, she winced as she broke apart the chain of diamonds and counted off five of them to a hard-faced man behind a rickety table in exchange for a small bowl of watery soup and a slice of hardened bread. Khalid didn't fare any better. He seemed genuinely worried as he parted with what appeared to be the last of his loot, a cheap-looking wristcomp that looked to be broken, its plastic casing cracked badly. She would have offered to help, but it was a severe insult to notice your neighbor's financial trouble here. Too many people had troubles of their own. You just helped them before they got to the food kitchen. In any case, Khalid had skills that ensured he would never really be left to starve.

The soup drained quickly, and the bread lasted a few bites. Mopping up the last of the soup with a final torn piece of bread, she found to her surprise that she was more full than she had expected. Khalid was only halfway through his soup, but there was something she wanted to do. She stood up to leave. "I must speak with Raj," she said, a hand on the big man's

arm. He nodded, and she squeezed his shoulder as she passed him on her way out.

The slumrats had no formal leaders, of course. Every man was free to do as he would - but there were the examples, those men and women of charisma who could command a following without demanding one. Raj was such a man. Tall and slight, he managed to appear both dangerous and mystical at the same time. Some of his more devoted followers claimed to have seen him glowing, at times. Raj himself had an answer for the glow. "Prob'ly saw me after I crawled through some pile of irradiated junk," he would always say, with a pause to spit. He was down-to-earth like that. She needed to talk to someone so grounded now.

She found him where she always did, squatting near a fire burning on the summit of one of the higher hills amid the squalor. He wore jeans and sandals and no shirt; his torso was brown from the sun, which only served to make him look thinner and harder, like he was carved from oak cut near the top of a tree. She crouched down across from him, warming her hands at the fire. He looked up at once, smiling.

"It's a good thing to see you, Tyni." Raj always sounded genuinely happy to see her - but then, he sounded that way with everyone. "What be on your mind?"

On her way over, she had decided that the most efficient way to communicate what had happened might be to demonstrate. She'd picked up one of the countless shattered bottlenecks on the path. She pulled it out now. "This," she said, and stabbed the jagged crystalline teeth into the inside of her thigh, twisting rapidly before the pain overtook her and she grew faint. The blood shot out; she'd severed the femoral artery. *You did it well*, she thought.

Raj had launched himself at her as soon as he realized what she was doing. He was too late; the bottleneck was in and blood shot out from the spout in a macabre imitation of the spray of an opened champagne bottle. Before he could stop her, she pulled the bottleneck out, rewarding herself with another spurt of blood that covered them both. She was moaning, a strange whine in her throat at the pain. For a brief moment, she panicked, thinking that she'd been wrong about what had happened to her.

"What the hell?" Raj shouted. He tore the bottle away from her hand, started to apply pressure to her leg. She pushed him away hard enough to topple him over. He could not understand what she was doing. He pulled himself up again, rushing back at her with determination in his eyes.

Tyni held up a hand, staring at him while she took a deep, shuddering breath. "Look," she said as he reached her, pulling her hands away from the tear in her skin.

Before their eyes, the bleeding was slowing. No more sprays; already, there was only a tiny welling of blood with each beat of her heart, and as he watched, the flow thinned to a tiny trickle at one corner of the wound. Then

it was darkening rapidly and there was no more blood, just a crusty layer over the skin. She brushed her hand over the wound, and the blood floated away in a fine powder. The last trace of the wound was closing up under her hand. Raj just stared. "How...?" he managed lamely. For once, he'd lost his footing, that studied, meditative air he always held so well.

She nodded. "It's going away. Look," she said again, pointing to the now-fading scar over her skin. He looked at her as if she were a ghost. She shook her head. "No, it's me, Raj. It doesn't heal old scars. You remember when I got in that fight last year." She pulled up her shirt to show old knife scars running across her ribs. For being shocked, he was not too shaken to stare at more than just her ribs. She put her shirt down and slapped him half-seriously. "Pay attention," she frowned.

He smirked. "I was paying my full attention to you," he said playfully. Then he grew serious. "You are now a Permanent?" He used the slumrat term, of course, but she felt strange having it applied to her. She nodded. "How?" he asked.

"A creature, of some sort." She told him where she'd been and what had happened.

He nodded, a thoughtful look on his face. "This you should not let slip by," he said. "You know we have to share it."

"I know," she said. "It will change everything, though."

Raj nodded. "Some changes are worth everything. Can you get me this creature, Tyni?"

She bit her lip as she thought. Finally, she sighed. "I don't know. It's pretty tight in the City. Still, nobody pays much attention to you once you're inside. It's just getting in that's difficult." The slumrat flashed her his usual toothy grin. Not particularly beautiful teeth, she thought, but such was the harsh life of one doomed to live between two stronger enemies. Good dental care was hard to come by in the Warrens. "I will try," she added after a moment's silence.

He nodded again. "Tell me later of how it works out," he said. He went back to rubbing his hands over the fire, looking more thoughtful than usual.

She strode back down the hill. In her trade, her new status as a Permanent would be very useful indeed. Getting this creature would be a perfect way to test out her newfound abilities. She smiled. It was a good day after all. Neither she nor Raj noticed the old woman staring wide-eyed from behind a nearby shack.

Chapter Six

Snik stood on the gravel-strewn walk leading to his door. The City, although far away, was bright in the sunshine. That many polished windows could scatter a lot of light. He had once read that New Byanzt was designed to look like a diamond, scattering the rays of the sun. He supposed that it did look that way, with the light glittering from different facets of the towers as the sun moved over the sky. Mostly, though, he found it annoying. The glare interfered with normal vision and he'd had to modify his lenses so that they filtered out stray flashes. A flash from window glass at the wrong time could blind him to a reflection from something more dangerous, like the glint of sun from a weapon. He'd set the filter to work by spectral analysis; the computer would only cancel flashes originating from ordinary glass or other window material, but not the specialized glass used in weapon scopes. He could still see the reflected rays as they struck his eyes, but they were muted enough to avoid distracting him.

He wasn't really thinking about his eyes, though. He was much more concerned about his livelihood. That biohacker was going to screw him over. He frowned. Whatever his intentions, warning the Citizens was out of the question. He could just imagine it. *"Hi, I'm a dealer and my customers are in danger!"* No, it wouldn't be a good idea at all. He had to think of something better. His eyes scanned across the horizon, over the low hills between the city and the Funkar encirclement.

He'd often wondered why the Funkars hadn't been wiped out, but then it had occurred to him that the City's population was simply too small. The Citizens were old now - some had lived hundreds of years - and they were a selfish lot. Common sense would have dictated that they reproduce, but it was a rare Citizen who had a child. And while a Citizen himself was invulnerable, his protection from time and illness was not genetically passed to his children. There was a limited stock of the Permanence modjects remaining, and it was hoarded by the City Council. So the Citizen numbers did not grow, by and large; rather, they shrank, one Citizen at a time over the long years as accidents or ennui claimed their dues.

He turned his mind back to the problem at hand. These Funkars were going to cause him serious problems if they managed to eliminate his biggest customer base. Sure, he could sell pleasures to the Funkars, but it was much more dangerous and there were simply fewer customers in the Enclave with the funds to make it worthwhile. He shook his head to himself. *No, this Funkar plan is not gonna work for me.*

He scratched his head thoughtfully as his eyes ran across the hills and to the shanty town again. He'd met his share of slumrats - besides the ones he'd killed, of course. He had nothing against them in general; he would kill anyone who tried to steal from him, slumrat or not. And he seemed to recall

that slumrats would do almost anything to get their hands on the Permanence modjects. *Yes, that just might be the thing*, he thought. A satisfied hum filled his throat. One way or another, he would get out of this damn city.

A few hours later, he found himself trudging up a hill in the middle of the shanty town. He preferred not to come here; the mud and trash didn't appeal to him at all. Nor did the slumrats, always scrabbling over little scraps of food and stealing from each other. To be fair, there were the few more enlightened ones, like the man he wanted to see. He gave a death-cold stare to a slumrat kid who was eying him warily. *Probably wants to steal shit from me*. He was smarter than these vagrants; anything of value was locked away at home behind an automated defense system that would kill anyone who was not Snik. Anything he carried was equally protected, as he, too, would kill anyone taking his things who was not Snik. He preferred that they tried to take it from him, though, rather than from his home. His home defenses were messier, and it was always irritating as hell to find a dead body on the floor leaking blood everywhere. Just thinking about cleaning a mess like that made him glare even more savagely at anyone in his way as he climbed the hill.

When he reached the top of the hill, it put him in a better mood. He felt as if he could breathe easier, although it had to be a psychological thing; his nasal filters kept the air as clear as it would have been thousands of years before humanity had started to butcher the planet. Snik headed immediately for the figure standing next to the fire. "Raj," he said in greeting.

"Snik, my good friend! Is always good to see you."

"And you," said Snik. He actually meant it. There were a few honorable men left in this world. A very few.

"What brings you out into my wasteland, this swinery I must call my home?" Raj made grand gestures with his arms. Typical Raj.

Snik crouched next to the fire and looked across at Raj, his face serious. "I was in the Enclave last night," he said.

"Why would a sane man go there? I rather cut off my toe," Raj said genially. He wiggled one of the aforementioned digits at Snik for illustration.

Snik chuckled. "I have business there. But that's not important. What is important is that the Funkars are working on something to infect those who - the Permanents, as you call them," he corrected himself. "The Funkars want to make them die. All of them."

Raj looked skeptical, scratching his head and looking off toward the Enclave. "And you think of this plan that it can happen?" he said doubtfully, turning back to Snik.

"I have no doubt that it can. The biohacker is one of the best. If it can be done, she can do it -- and she has said that it can be done."

"Why are you telling me this?" Raj asked. "What is the filling in this pie for you?" He grinned at Snik, waiting.

"I am simply passing along information, as one friend to another!" Snik protested.

Raj just chuckled and waited.

Snik sighed loudly. One disadvantage of having a friend, if he could consider Raj to be such, was that you lost some unpredictability. Friends could read you, and he wasn't exactly comfortable being read so easily. "If the Funkars succeed, then I will lose my biggest customers," he said simply. It was a partial truth. He would lose his easy ticket offworld, but no need to tell that to a slumrat.

Raj nodded, though. "So now fall the pieces together, my friend. But what have we to do with this?" He gestured around him with his arms. "We are small, powerless."

"And if the Funkars succeed in their genocide, you will stay that way," Snik pointed out. "No chance for you to get the Medical Conversion stockpiles."

"If all of the Permanents die, we dance in and take the modjects, no?" Raj raised an eyebrow. "This does not seem to me a problem."

"Even if you could, you would simply be the next to die. There is no reason to believe that the infection would discriminate between old and new Permanents. Funkars want any Permanent dead. They believe any sort of permanent modifications to be a violation of Gord's law." Snik blinked modded eyes once, firmly, for emphasis, pointing at the lenses. "You know this."

Raj nodded. "I do. This poses a problem. How do you propose that we respond?"

Snik shrugged. "Assassinate the Vangel, I would say."

Raj chuckled again. "You mean *you* will assassinate the Vangel. We have no skills to do these things." He shifted his weight in front of the fire as if to dismiss the issue entirely.

Snik glanced up; darkness was creeping over the sky as the night crawled in. "I said that is what I would say, but I'm willing to hear other suggestions. Assassination is messy, and it could have repercussions for you. Hordes of angry Funkars would not be a minor threat to your Warrens." Raj was nodding.

Snik watched the other man think. He was willing to be patient; Raj often thought sideways, and could come up with novel solutions to problems, which is why he'd bothered to climb this fucking hill in the first place. He'd told the truth, though, and he believed Raj knew it. The Funkars had a nasty tendency of jumping to conclusions; they were surely more than willing to blame slumrats for any bad things that happened. It was much easier to burn a slumrat shanty town than to try to take on the Citizens. *And I'll watch from the edges. Let them all kill each other.* Snik was certainly no

coward, and he knew when to take advantage of a situation. He was sure Raj knew it too.

Raj cleared his throat suddenly. "We have had recent news that might make lemonade from this lemon you have tossed to me." He paused for a second to scratch under his arm, staring off absently as if unsure whether to proceed. Only for a second, though. He looked straight at Snik. "There is maybe another source to make Permanents."

Snik was impressed. Raj wasn't one to lie. "Another source?"

Raj nodded. "One of our girls, she is now Permanent. I saw with my own eyes; she sliced into her leg like a piece of meat and the slice vanished in seconds." He pointed at a spot beside Snik. "This was not a day ago; there you can still see spilled blood." He turned his head and spat on the ground to indicate the spot.

Snik crouched down, reaching a finger out to the dark stain in the dust and trying not to touch Raj's spittle. The stain was definitely blood. "If she is walking around after spilling that much, she is Permanent," he agreed. It was too much blood to be otherwise. "This may change much."

Raj nodded. "She has gone into the City again to try to find this creature she claims is the source. But your lemon - ah, that's something else entirely. No good to wait until she comes back. We must act on this now. I will think on it" He nodded a salute at Snik. "Your news was needed, friend. We all owe you."

Snik stood up, stretching tight muscles. "I will follow your thief into the City to make sure she gets this source," he said. "I can track her."

Raj nodded again. "Thank you. This might turn out well." He stretched out his hands over the fire again, ignoring Snik now. It wasn't personal. Raj was clearly sunk in his thoughts again.

Snik stared at him for a moment; the man looked as relaxed as if none of the conversation had occurred. That was Raj's way, though. *Takes things one at a time*. Apparently this time was still hand-warming time. For a moment, Snik thought the man seemed to be glowing, but he shook his head and turned to the bloodstain with a small chuckle. *Time to work. No more seeing things*.

A thought activated the tracking module in his lenses as neural implants picked up the electrical thoughtstorm in his brain. The computer was part of the lens; it was worth dozens of rooms of those ancient computers Gina was using, and it was AI-designed to be more efficient than human engineers could have made it. The algorithms inside analyzed the images of the ground, checking for evident pressure and erosion signatures. After a moment, the lenses highlighted a number of footprints around the stain, laying the outlines over his retina with a notation that there was a 99.7% chance that all of the highlighted footprints belonged to the same individual. It was perfect. Another thought set the lenses into Tracking mode. Snik had paid much for those lenses, but they were worth almost

everything else that he had put together. He strode off, one big step after another. Time to go back to the City.

Chapter Seven

Snik always enjoyed the chase. Even if he wasn't hunting to kill, the act of hunting satisfied some primal instinct of his to chase and track and follow. So even if it was a chore of sorts, he found himself quite happy to be following a trail. The girl had apparently gone back to her hut to grab some supplies. There wasn't much inside; he had noted a pile of dirty bedding and clothes, and a basin that served as a sink - at least, he hoped it was only a sink. *Fucking low in the wall to be a sink.* He was about to leave when he realized that he was standing on more bloodstains. These were drier though. *She must've tested it here first.* He felt amusement as he walked back out and continued following the footprints.

The trail led into an underground tunnel. He hesitated for a second before entering. He'd never really liked dark places, and these dark little crawl-holes in the ground were for worms and slumrat vagrants and other nasty animals. Not for real people. He kicked the ground idly as he walked. Of course, in places there weren't many worms left after the Three War. The soil had been baked into a glass-like surface in places, too hard for worms to digest. Not here, of course, or there wouldn't be a City, but it didn't make Snik feel better that he might be sharing this tunnel with anything non-mammalian.

The footprints were highlighted in a faint red as he walked along. They stood out like ghosts' feet in the darkness. The path was only underground for a few moments, though. Soon enough he popped back onto the surface and the trail vanished. He realized that he'd forgotten to ask Raj for the girl's name. He supposed it didn't matter; he just wanted to see this source for himself. *And perhaps take it for myself.* He was sure he could find a buyer for it, and a source with that power would undoubtedly be quite valuable.

It only took a few seconds for the Tracking module to find the trail again, and a map overlaid onto his vision corrected his location. The hole had popped out in the Preserve, directly underneath one of the elevated highways leading out of the city. The girl had made her way to a cleverly hidden ladder and the trail ended again. It didn't require omniscience to deduce that she'd climbed up, and the lenses noted the probability for him, picking up faint soil stains on the rungs. Snik grinned and stepped onto the lowest rung.

Getting onto the walkway from the ladder required some strength. The walkway actually overhung the ladder, meaning that he had to take his chances and leap backwards and up from the ladder to grab the edge overhead. He hauled his body up by his hands, cursing as he did. Hanging over the edge of a drop like that was not fun. If he fell, he was sure to break ribs. At the least.

He didn't fall, though, and he quickly merged himself into the walking people, ignoring the stares given him by a few surprised onlookers who'd seen him climb over the railing. Better to walk away quickly; people tended to forget about what they didn't have a chance to dwell on. The tracking software picked up the girl's footprints again.

He tried to blend in as he walked. It wasn't easy. He stood a head above everyone around him, and only by slouching could he approach a normal height. Once someone jostled him deliberately, and he had to restrain himself from striking out. A simple palm strike would be enough to knock the offender out into the traffic. A few hits from vehicles would slow even a Permanent down for a minute. *Keep it together*, he told himself. *Keep it professional*.

It didn't take him long to reach the city center. The footsteps were harder to track here, since they merged with hundreds of other tracks. The tracker switched into a best-probability mode, highlighting the most likely tracks based on the direction and velocity indicated by previous ones. Other possibilities were more dimly highlighted. He crossed his fingers and stayed with the brightest trail.

He found himself walking into the academic quarter, home to educational and scientific buildings. They towered around him, some antique and frowning, others sleek and friendly. He slipped into a leisurely amble, the tourist walk. There weren't many tourists in the City, but there were occasionally visitors from New Londis or Toyko. Snik could pass easily enough for a Citizen, even though he wasn't, but it was better to just throw on a Toyko accent if he was approached. He wasn't approached, of course. He didn't skulk, for one thing, and he wasn't begging. And he was large enough that most Citizens stepped wide of him, and the occasional UrbPat officer only gave him a wary glance.

The tracks were stabilizing now, and growing stronger as the traffic thinned. The lenses were detecting near-invisible traces of soil and rubber from the soles of her shoes now, in the absence of soft ground to bear impressions, and confirming a match to the starting tracks back in the shantytown. He immediately slowed down. A digital sign hanging from a cable overhead informed him that he was on Nido Street. Not much to see here, only some government offices and a few scientific buildings. Occasionally, Citizens strolled past, most purposefully. A few were just enjoying the day, and the view. One was out of place.

Snik stopped in a doorway, peering around. "Center for Xenology," the building across the street proclaimed itself. The girl was at the mouth of an adjacent alleyway, leaning against a parked 'sport and pretending to wait for a friend. Snik admired her nerve; she looked quite relaxed. There wasn't much to give her away. He sat down on the steps and waited.

Nothing was happening. People were coming and going. There was an Office of Income a few buildings down. Most of the Citizens were old

enough that they lived on investments made hundreds of years before, and the Office of Income managed those investments. Snik sneered. He had little respect for those parasites, sitting at home collecting and producing nothing. *Still*, he had to admit, *they pay well for modjects*. That did not soothe his urge to cut the throat of every person leaving the Office of Income.

The girl was still standing there. She had a lot of patience. Snik could admire that, like he admired her blonde hair and the black dress she was wearing. He zoomed in; the dress was teched. *Nice touch*, he thought. She was surprisingly thoughtful of the small details. He shifted on the steps.

Across the street, a 'sport pulled up. A man got out and walked around to the back, lifting out some sort of container. Snick zoomed in. It appeared to be a creature holder. He couldn't make out much through the bars; golden fur and some spiny-looking parts. His gaze darted to the girl. She had not moved, but there was some tension in her pose that hadn't been there before. Snik looked back at the man. That had to be the source.

The girl was already moving. She was fast, crossing onto the opposite sidewalk before the man finished straightening. She walked just past him - and without turning to face him, her leg shot up, kicking him in the back of the head hard enough to slam him into the side of the 'sport. He looked dazed, but that lasted only long enough for the girl to land two snappy punches to his skull. The extra bounces of his head against the 'sport were more than enough to knock him out even if the punches themselves had failed; unconscious, he started to slump to the ground, but she caught him and pushed him into the 'sport. She looked around quickly, and hurriedly sat the man up, making him look as if he were napping. With one last look around, she grabbed the container and strolled away casually.

Snik was impressed. He wasn't sure if he could've done better himself. He stood up, stretching - and two UrbPat officers walked past him, not noticing him in the doorway. *Shit!* he thought. So maybe he could have done it a *little* better. As soon as the officers had passed him, he stuck his head out, looking after them. He swore again. The officers were heading toward the girl, not even stopping to check on the unconscious man. *They saw her*.

He strolled out onto the street with a sigh - but a half-hearted sigh. He enjoyed the adrenaline rush; no denying that. He just didn't enjoy the lack of subtlety. The officers were a short way ahead, so he picked up the pace again, with a quick check behind him to make sure there were no other UrbPat officers he was missing. Satisfied, he walked faster, careful to walk in sync with the officers so that the noise of his footsteps was masked. The girl glanced over her shoulder. She kept going, but Snik could tell that she'd seen her pursuers. He looked around - the street was empty of Citizen passers-by. *Perfect*.

He slid two knives out from under his coat, keeping the forearm-length nano-edged blades concealed along his forearms. If he was going to

have to do this, he would make a mess while he did it. He quickened his pace, muttering an "Excuse me" as he shouldered between the officers. As he stepped past, he froze in place, blades whirling out parallel to the ground at neck level. The officers' momentum carried them straight into the blades and Snik pulled his weight backwards to complete the cut. Two heads hit the ground before the bodies crumpled. The blades were barely wet. Snik slid them back under his coat and kept walking. He stepped sideways into an alley, peering around the corner at the girl. No point in letting her see him yet.

The girl was still hurrying away, and she turned to look over her shoulder yet again - and froze. Snik knew she was looking at the bodies; her face expressed horror. He smiled wryly. *And so more innocence dies.* She turned away, walking a measured, if faster, pace onwards, still holding on to the creature container. Snik had to give her credit; she didn't panic and run. That would have been the worst thing she could do, and it would have attracted far more attention than either of them needed at the moment.

Snik glanced back at the bodies. The street beyond was clear, but there was no point making himself obvious. It was only a matter of time before some Citizen came by and noticed the carnage. He decided to take a side street that ran parallel to Nido Street. He walked quickly enough to catch a glance of the girl at each intersecting street. He checked his map on the lenses. It looked like she was headed out of the city. *Good.*

Seldom-heard sirens pierced the air behind them, but they were already on their way out. More than once, security officers ran right by Snik, hand lasers at the ready, but he walked on casually, keeping his eye on the girl. The beltway spilled out of the downtown core and poured down a hillside to start its level run out toward the Preserve.

Snik stayed behind the girl. More than once, she glanced back, once looking straight at him, but he always managed to blend in like he was just another traveler. He could read her easily; she was not suspicious of him. For a moment, he turned his head back, looking at the fading city in the dimming afternoon light for pursuers. When he turned again, she was gone. For a second he was afraid he'd lost her, but then his eyes caught the divemark in ultrapaint. He shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably. *I hate this part.*

He dove at the appropriate moment. He was afraid of heights, but he shoved the fear aside as he fell, landing hard to slide down the funnel-mouth head-first. After some nauseating twists, the funnel tube gave way to thin air, and he free-fell the last few feet, flipping once and landing knees bent and on his toes. It was dark - he was in the tunnel again. The tracks stood out even more, the red footprints were ruby-bright against the blackness around him. He stood straight and settled into his normal quick pace, hiding his unease at being back underground.

It only took a moment to catch up with the girl, and he fell in beside

her. "Good job," he said.

She jumped, startled - but only for a second, and then she was facing him, a knife in her hand pulled from somewhere. "Who are you? What do you want?" she growled. The creature case was tucked behind her, and her eyes seemed to glow as she stared him down.

"Raj suggested I tag along, and I thought it was a good idea," Snik replied. He frowned at her. "You should be more grateful. I saved your ass back there."

"Saved?" she spat. "I was doing just fine, thank you. I don't even know you, but I know that I don't need your help." She gestured with the knife. "I think you should leave."

Snik grinned, ignoring the knife. "I'm Snik. Those UrbPat officers were about to collar you. And we're going the same way. I presume you're going to see Raj?"

The girl frowned at the name, but she nodded reluctantly. "Tyni. If you're coming, you walk ahead." She didn't seem to be in the mood for arguments, so Snik humored her and walked ahead. A sensor on the back of his shoe fed an image of her to his lenses, stabilized to compensate for his footsteps. She looked angry, and that knife was still pointed at his back. He chuckled.

"What's so funny?" she demanded. He shook his head, ignoring her.

Snik studied the creature through his lenses as he walked. Soft golden fur, and dozens of little arms, each tipped with a hooking claw. Eyes peered stalkishly around, swaying with each of Tyni's steps.

When they reached the tunnel exit, she still insisted that he go first, so he shrugged and climbed out. He offered her a hand as she followed, but she glared at him, so he turned away and tried not to laugh. *She'd probably cut my hand off first.*

A few children stared as they wound their way into the shanty town, weaving through the muddy paths. Snik frowned. He was going to have to clean his boots after this. He didn't bother waiting for the girl; long strides took him to Raj on the hilltop before she was even five steps up the hillside.

Raj was crouched before the fire, eating from a tray he held in his hands. Snik grinned. "So you are human after all, my friend," he said, gesturing at the food. There was another man standing nearby, with his arms folded. Snik glanced at him; he kept his face fearless, but privately, he was impressed. *I wouldn't want to go hand-to-hand with that man. He's huge! He might sit on me.* He suppressed a grin. The hunt had put him in a good mood.

Raj wiped his mouth on his arm. His bare bicep wasn't very effective at removing the food, but Raj didn't care much. "A man does not stay alive on lemonade." He grinned back and took another bite of his food. The food looked like some sort of charred animal. *Rat*, Snik guessed.

"Your girl has the creature," Snik said. "What do you intend to do

next?"

Raj made a satisfied grunting noise. "Make lemonade." He tossed aside a bone and glanced at the man beside him, rubbing his hands on his shorts. "It now is the time. As we agreed, Khalid." Khalid was suddenly smiling, and the expression seemed out of place on his giant face. The big man turned and walked down the hill.

"What was that about?" Snik asked.

Raj set aside the plate and smoothed out the dirt in front of him with a foot. "Making lemonade," he said with a wink. "There will be Funkars worshiping face down in the dirt tonight. We will try to acquire the biohacker. But for now-" He leaned down with a finger over the smoothed patch of dirt. A single line appeared in the dust. "For now we have," he finished, "a copier."

"Copier?" Snik asked.

The finger traced other lines in the dirt, parallel to the first one. "It makes many from one," Raj said with a satisfied smile. "And here comes the one."

Tyni was trudging up the hill, carrying something bulky. When she reached them, she tossed the creature cage down in front of Raj. The creature inside whistled at them in protest, not happy to be jarred so badly. Snik squatted down on his heels to take a closer look at it.

Raj whistled back in awe. "That is one ugly piece of meat," he pointed out. No one cared to argue, even though Snik could see a certain beauty in the golden fur.

Raj turned back to his drawing. "Many ugly pieces of meat from this one ugly motherfucker." His finger stabbed multiple lines in the dirt, and then he drew back his arm and slashed a great underline beneath them. He looked pleased with himself.

Chapter Eight

Antoin found himself in the Council Hall of the Citadel in the center of the city. It wasn't a place that any Citizen wanted to be - unless they'd been chosen to serve on the Council, of course. Antoin had not been chosen, and he did not really want to be here. He'd managed to survive this long without ever coming here before, but yet again, his luck was failing him.

He stood in an office reception area on the thirty-seventh level, looking out over the city. The sun glimmered dully on polished buildings that seemed to shine with a golden glow. The completely transparent glass separating him from the plunge was invulnerable to old ballistic or kinetic weapons, and a transparent wire net ran through it to foil any would-be jumpers who might use something more powerful to break the hardened glass. Anything more powerful would probably kill the would-be jumper in the confined area before it broke the transparent plastic, Antoin thought. He shuddered. He had no intention of jumping. He sat down in the silver bucket seat, staring across at the shiny receptionist. The robot ignored him.

For a few moments, he closed his eyes. His head no longer hurt, of course, but somehow he felt personally affronted that someone would attack him. And the Spican-!

The Spican creature was priceless, of course, and Antoin had no idea when another one might come in. It would have made him feel better if he'd seen his attacker, if there was even a shred of evidence to help him recover the creature - but the only thing he saw after he regained consciousness was two headless bodies. It hadn't helped him to feel better when he realized that two bodiless heads were observing those bodies as well.

"Citizen Makler," a voice called.

Antoin looked up. The receptionist was hailing him. He stood up.

"The Councilors will see you now," the bot said.

Antoin nodded. "Thanks." He stood up and took a deep breath, then stepped inside the Council room.

The room was fairly small, but very comfortable. A few chairs surrounded an old mahogany table, and each chair bore the weight of a Councilor. At one end, a fireplace was burning. Antoin felt himself blink at the surprise. *Real wood!* He turned his attention back to the Councilors and cleared his throat. *Be confident.* "I have news that concerns all Citizens," he announced.

The Councilors turned and stared at him. There were five of them. Robert, who was older than anyone else in the city, was Chief Councilor. As such, it was Robert who spoke.

"News is always welcome, Citizen."

It occurred to Antoin that in another era, Robert would have been a fleshless skeleton at his age. Antoin smiled briefly, then focused on the

important matters. He cleared his throat. "As you all know, I am the chief researcher at CfeX."

They all nodded. None of them looked impressed. He flushed, and then continued. "Okay. Yesterday I discovered something that might change the world." Someone snickered, and he glared at them all. "There is a creature - a Spican creature - that has the ability to give Medical Conversion equivalents to any human body."

There were no snickers. The Councilors were definitely paying attention now. Robert frowned at him. "You're sure of this?"

Antoin nodded. "Yes, quite sure. The only problem is that the specimen has been stolen-

"Stolen?" a younger councilwoman burst out. "Are you sure?"

Antoin nodded, refusing to meet her eyes. "And I have no idea who took it. All I saw after I recovered consciousness was the corpses of two Urbpat officers lying on the walkway."

A sharp-eyed Councilor nodded. "I'd heard about the attempted murders. We lose Urbpat officers regularly along the boundaries, but they've never been attacked in the middle of the city before now. These events could have been related."

Robert grunted in agreement, but waved his hand for attention. "That's true, but we have a bigger problem." He turned to Antoin. "Can we acquire any more of these creatures? This must be studied in greater depth."

Antoin nodded. "I've already put in a request for replacements. It's just a matter of weighting for the freighters. I wanted a few extra for testing in any case," he put in.

"Good. We will make extra security arrangements to protect the replacements, and investigators will be sent to find the one you so stupidly lost." Robert waved at him dismissively and turned back to the other Councilors. "There are a few other things we must discuss. Trade with the outer colonies is booming, and our advisers at the Office of Income are suggesting that we diversify our portfolio-

"I don't mean - I hate to interrupt," said Antoin, "but there is something else I was thinking."

Robert looked displeased, then sighed. "As you will, Citizen. You have the right to speak while you stand here." His tone indicated that he would make every effort to ensure that Antoin never stood there again.

Antoin cleared his throat again. He hated public speaking. His fingers dug in to the back of an empty chair in front of him. "Ah... em... well, I have a suggestion that may put an end to the Funkar problem."

Robert raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" The other Councilors were staring at Antoin, too. They looked amused. Waiting to see him say something stupid, he could tell.

Antoin nodded. "If these creatures were to be, shall we say,

introduced to the Funkar slums, they might happen to infect some of the Funkars."

The Councilors were nodding, looking more serious now. "Go on," one of the older ones said. Robert was stroking his chin with his thumb as he listened.

Antoin found himself growing less nervous. "Well, they try to kill people with the Medical Conversion. The Funkars would have a hard time reconciling their faith with their newfound 'divinity.' It might be enough to cause major splits in their ranks. 'Infected' Funkars would be ostracized or killed."

Robert was nodding now. "This is an excellent idea, Citizen!"

A younger Councilor spoke up. "What about providing for the newly age-proofed Funkars if they come to the city?"

Robert shrugged. "In the case that they'd ask to become Citizens, we can re-implement the Repatriation procedures. If they meet the requirements of Repatriation and put aside their nonsense, I don't see it as a problem. I don't think they will put aside their nonsense, though." He turned to Antoin. "Very well, Citizen. Acquire more of these creatures. We will construct a plan for their introduction into the Funkar population." He waved a hand at Antoin in dismissal.

Antoin bowed and stepped outside to the waiting room. He took a deep breath. *That went well*, he thought to himself.

* * *

'Karei crawled through bushes along the riverside, clutching his automatic. One hand in front of the other, he wrestled himself along snake-like toward his target. Above him, the moon was making its run across the night sky.

The 'thopter was flapping along slowly. It was close enough now that 'Karei could see the two Heretic demons in their sleek black uniforms, and he could even make out fragments of their conversation. The silence of the 'thopters never ceased to amaze 'Karei.

"...sign of trouble?" the taller demon was asking.

"Nothing, sir." The shorter demon was examining some sort of diabolical control panel in front of him. The 'thopter was flying lower than usual, 'Karei noticed.

That was the second-to-last thing he noticed. The final thing that entered his awareness was an agonizing pain in his back and a voice whispering, "Don't worry, Elijah and the hacker bitch will join you shortly - in hell."

The slumrat wiped his knife on the back of 'Karei's shirt, eyeing the 'thopter. "We should get out of here," he muttered to his companion. He grabbed the automatic from beneath the body and wriggled back into the

water.

Chapter Nine

Elijah's eyes opened suddenly, leaving him half-dazed as he stared at the display that had opened up above his head. The panel was crawling with bright little spots superimposed on the Enclave map. He rubbed his eyes and stared again - at least a couple of those were *inside* the Enclave. "Impossible," he muttered. There were the usual darker lights, too, each one representing the bioactivity of someone who'd been in the Enclave for years. Some of these were winking out even as he watched. No more bioactivity. *No more life.*

He was up and into his robe, the motions fast and automatic. He didn't care one bit that outsiders were in his Fold. Gord's word was too powerful for Heretic ears and they would bow their knees before the Lord of the Universe. His flock, though - tears came to his eyes at the thought of any of them dead on the ground by the Heretics' treachery. "My people," he groaned aloud, turning his face toward the ceiling. "Gord, I must avenge this dishonor and purify our Enclave of the Heretics, of any who would do violence to your Children, the precious innocents that You have placed under my watch." He was already out of his room, slamming open the wooden doors so forcefully that the two Soldiers standing watch outside were knocked aside.

Elijah wasn't watching where he was going - his eyes were closed and his head down as he planned the doom of his enemies - so it was no surprise that he rammed his head into that of Commander Smail. Smail was wearing a steel helmet, so it did not affect *him* in the least, but Elijah had an instant headache. It did not improve his mood. "What's going on?" he growled at Smail.

Smail had been a Vangel once, but his brilliance at strategy and tactics outshone his rather feeble attempts to grow the flock. Smail had a habit of laying traps so well that the Heretics or Lost Ones he was pursuing with Gord's word rarely survived to hear the message he was bringing them. Other Vangels had wanted to strangle Smail, but Elijah knew a useful man when he saw one. Not long after Elijah met him, short, bald Smail assumed command of the warriors of the Faithful and personally trained the first hundred officers who formed the core of New Byzant's Faithful.

Smail frowned. "Chaos, Your Holiness. The Lost Ones have struck hard at the north gates, and many of the Faithful are down." He grimaced. "Dead."

"I know," Elijah said shortly. "At least fifteen already." Smail looked suitably impressed. Having that secret access to the sensor networks paid off, Elijah thought again. Some believed him to be omniscient. He was happy to have it that way. He was faintly surprised that it was the Lost Ones and not the Heretics attacking, though. The sensors didn't tell him

everything.

They marched into the Temple hall, and Elijah raised a hand. Smail stopped as Elijah scanned the room. Soldiers ran everywhere, trailing belts of ammunition, their long knives clattering about. It was a rabble. Pews were being knocked over, as were desperate members of his flock. A baby was crying somewhere. There were *beggars* in the Temple itself.

"Do something about this," Elijah said through clenched teeth. "This is the Temple of Gord, not an animal stockade."

Smail was immediately wading into the crowd, slapping faces and bashing heads with equal impassivity. In short minutes, he had the Soldiers standing in rough ranks, and the women and children being cared for in a corner of the massive hall. Elijah managed to crack a smile as Smail rounded up two burly men to toss out the scum who had dared to pollute the Temple. He took a deep breath with eyes closed as he reveled in the purity. A moment later, Smail took up his position at Elijah's side.

Time for business. "Why are the Lost Ones attacking us?" Elijah asked.

Smail shrugged.

"Find out," Elijah snarled.

An hour or so later, Smail returned. He wasn't alone; a pair of Soldiers dragged a Lost One behind him. Elijah rubbed his hands together, leaning back on the throne at the head of the hall. "What's this?" he asked pleasantly.

"A Lost One we found near the food stalls in the market, Your Holiness." Smail stepped aside as the two Soldiers threw the man down on the dirty marble floor. "He won't talk."

"What is your name, my son?" Elijah intoned.

The Lost One glared at Elijah, staring with unyielding eyes. Elijah frowned. The Lost One was dirty; he wore pants stained with dirt and pigeon droppings, and he was making the floor dirty. He was bleeding, too. Elijah hated the smell of blood.

Smail decided to encourage the prisoner by backhanding him heavily across the mouth. "Speak up when His Holiness addresses you."

The man spat blood onto Elijah's robe. "You Funkar filth can rot in hell, or whatever your afterlife is." Elijah stared back impassively. The red blood-splatters were darkening quickly on his white robe. Elijah didn't even blink.

When he moved, it was with great calm and deliberation. Justice was now required, after all. Elijah could not allow himself, the messenger of Gord, to be so casually debased. He knelt on one knee in front of the prisoner. "Gord have mercy on your soul, my son" he said gently. He gestured to one of the Soldiers, who grabbed the man's hair and pulled his head back so that the Lost One was looking toward heaven. *Where he is about to go.* With a smile, Elijah closed his left hand around the Lost One's

exposed larynx, crushing it slowly. *I hate it when they scream*, Elijah thought. He tightened his grip suddenly, strangling the scream into a gurgle as the man's eyes bulged. Elijah released the dying man, standing up to address Smail. "We go to the gate," he said as he walked toward the Temple doors. Not even the sound of the Lost One's heels kicking the marble floor made him look back.

Elijah threw open the Temple doors and stepped outside. The sun was barely cresting the horizon outside, casting weak light over the buildings in the Enclave. Soldiers rushed into formation around him, moving so that he stood in the center of a revolving circle as he strolled down the main street leading to the gates. Believers were rushing past him, running the other way, away from the gates. Some of them appeared to have left arms and legs behind in their hurry. Others rushed in a crawl, rather than on their feet. Still, Elijah observed, they were all rushing as best they could. He turned his attention back to the walls.

When he reached the gates, he found chaos. Believers were milling everywhere, and the square just inside the Enclave was filled with live bodies and parts of bodies. Elijah grimaced, scanning for enemies. He didn't see any. He did see Believers clubbing other Believers, and Believers running in circles screaming.

Elijah rounded on Smail. "Where are the Lost Ones?"

Smail was searching the crowd anxiously. "My Soldiers will find them," he assured Elijah.

"I don't see Lost Ones. I see Believers panicking. Disperse them!"

Smail nodded. "Of course, right away!" It took him mere seconds to bark orders to his lieutenants, who unshouldered their weapons and moved into the crowd. A few broken arms and cracked skulls later, the square was deathly quiet. The few remaining Believers stood in ranks, their faces shining as they basked in the presence of their beloved Vangel. Elijah stepped out into the center of the square, standing in a majestic pose for his flock.

"My brothers and sisters! Do not succumb to rank instinct, to the fear that your earthly bodies produce. You are men and women of Gord. Be strong with His strength!" Elijah gestured grandly. "May the blessings of Gord shower upon your lives!" Some of the women - and even some men - fainted as his gesture took them in.

Elijah gestured again to dismiss the Believers. They filed neatly out of the entranceway, ushered by Soldiers. The unconscious ones were thrown out bodily. Elijah smiled as he took in the empty square. In places, crows were already walking up to the odd severed body part. *But no rabble*. "And so all is well again. Now, Smail, I want a report on exactly what happened here. All I have seen is one solitary Lost One." He glanced at the square again. "And have someone purify this square. Have the bodies burnt. Have Believers wash away the blood that has been spilled here today. I will have

this square be a pleasure to Gord again.”

As Elijah walked back toward the temple, slow tendrils of smoke started into sky-reaching columns, carrying the odor of burned flesh. He smiled as the chill morning air dragged its fingers over his cheeks. *Ahh, the smell of spring.*

Chapter Ten

Tyni shuddered. When she was younger, the idea of being able to fight had appealed to her, but she quickly discovered that she was a thief, not a killer. Taking property was one thing; taking life was another entirely.

She stared down at the corpse at her feet. Blood still trickled from the man's mouth, pooled under him, stained his dusty white shirt a brown color where the air was touching fabric soaked in it. There had been much more of it a minute before. The ground was thirsty. Behind her, someone cleared his throat.

"We need to get back. Raj will be waiting for us."

She didn't bother to respond. It was that dealer, still following her. She didn't know why he was following her. He didn't do anything other than stand there, not even when she was fighting. Of course, it wasn't that she needed help; she was fairly invincible now. This poor bastard on the ground had learned that after she soaked up punches and a couple of knife thrusts like they were nothing. *Still*, she thought as she turned back to glare at the dealer, *he could have offered, at least*. She had frozen; she was lucky that another slumrat had stepped in to finish off this Funkar.

She rubbed a hand over her ribs where the knife had penetrated. It had hurt like hell, but it just itched now. She probed the skin through the slashes in her shirt. Not even a scratch left. She felt exhilaration through the nausea.

The Enclave wall rose up in front of her. Raj had told them to cause trouble, and wherever she looked along the wall, it seemed that they had done so. A dozen fires burned against low houses on the other side of the razor wire, courtesy of vials filled with flammable liquids and a wick tossed over the fences onto their roofs. "Deviled eggs," some of the slumrats called the bottles. She was impressed.

Raj had made his instructions clear, though. The dealer was right; it was time to go back, just like he said. Tyni sighed and turned her back on the fence, walking away. She was careful to stay in the shadow of the massive columns that supported the beltway overhead. *No point in giving some zealot a free shot*. The dealer tailed her a few steps behind. She acknowledged that he'd tried to make conversation, but she felt more satisfaction in pretending that she wasn't in the least interested in anything he might say. If the tightening around his mouth was any indication, her tactics were starting to annoy him. That actually made her smile.

As they made their way back to the slums, others joined them. Some of the slumrats were not so fortunate as she was, she noticed, wincing at the sight of half-severed limbs. *Just hope that Raj has been busy with the copier*, she thought.

For some reason, the thought made her feel slightly jealous. She knew

that she should be happy that the others would gain some immunity from the poverty they were forced to live in, and that some of these people bleeding around her might not die. Still, she had been the first to discover the creature, the first to become immortal. It was irrational, but she suddenly wished she hadn't told Raj.

No matter, she thought. It's done. She forced herself to focus on the march home, even lending an arm to a slumrat who was dragging an injured foot along the ground. The gratitude in the man's eyes made her feel guilty for her selfish thoughts. The dealer kept a measured pace behind her; he didn't offer to help, but he didn't get in the way, either.

The sun was high in the sky, bathing the hills in noon fury, when the first of the slumrats straggled into the Warrens. She went straight to Raj, followed by the dealer. Snik's presence irritated her, but she had absolutely no control over him. Raj was at his usual perch on top of the hill, this time sitting on some monstrous machine that seemed to have encompassed most of the crown of the hill.

"We caused trouble," she reported bluntly.

"Beautiful," said Raj. He grinned at her as he said it, making it clear that the comment included herself as well as her news.

"What was the point of that excursion?" She asked him. She watched as Khalid fiddled with some switches on the machine. A grinding noise came from somewhere, and both Raj and Khalid winced. Snik just stood there.

Raj nodded at the copier. "The copier worked as planned. It has had a minor malfunction, which Khalid is repairing. The Funkars, we will meet them with our lemonade." He gestured grandly at the machine. The golden-furred creature sitting next to Raj waved its eyestalks at the humans.

She nodded. "It is a good plan." She frowned at him. "You didn't answer my question."

"The plan is very good," said Raj calmly. "I made it, after all." He cleared his throat. "One more thing we must do. We need an alibi."

Snik spoke; it made her jump. "I agree," he said. "And one more thing." He looked disturbed. "You were not successful in acquiring the biohacker. Your man on the inside was caught."

Tyni frowned and gestured down the hill at wounded slumrats making their way to their huts. They would undoubtedly spend the day licking their wounds, but she wasn't just going to let it slide. "This was all for an assassination attempt?"

Raj sighed, and grinned. "Lemonade is a wonderful concoction, is it not? And now time for an alibi plan."

She just stared at him. "What does a girl have to do to get some answers around here?" Without waiting for an answer, she stalked away.

Chapter Eleven

Antoin stood on his toes, stretching in the morning light as he stood in the over-sized 'thopter. It was deliberately too large; for a hunt, the platform needed to be big enough to carry the hunters, at least two security officers, and the captured primaries. It didn't matter whether the primaries were Funkar or slumrat, but usually Funkars were collected. Ethics dictated that the greater threat to the Citizens should be trimmed down first.

The 'thopter flapped slowly into the air, surprisingly smoothly. He hardly felt a jolt even though the platform was undoubtedly bobbing up and down in the air like a toy duck in a tub.

The City stretched out beneath him as they rose into the air, headed for the wall. Other 'thopters flapped below, patrolling. Today's orders would be different, though. Any suitably young Funkars were to be herded toward the city, rather than being eliminated where they were found.

The security officers looked bored; they chatted to themselves about previous hunts, and about girls they'd known. The lead hunter was a professional; he had obviously done this job many times before. He wore a name badge that said his name was Thor. *Old superstitions die hard*, thought Antoin. He supposed that the tranq beam Thor wielded was a rough equivalent to the mythical thunderbolt.

"Is it dangerous to capture a primary?" Antoin asked the hunter, more for the sake of conversation than any other reason. Surely a primary couldn't really hurt a complement of armed Citizens.

"Not really." Thor seemed short on conversation.

"Oh." Antoin looked away, uncomfortable.

A half-hour later found them circling away from the Funkar enclave walls, drifting out over the Preserves toward the open hills that housed slumrat tenements. The Funkar hunting was slim today; they'd flown the length of the Enclave walls twice and saw a few older men and that was it.

"Got something," Thor grunted. Antoin hurried over. Thor was looking down at the plains; two slumrat children were running about, kicking a ball of some sort. The nearest slumrat shack was at least half a klick away. "It's as good as we'll get," Thor said again, readying his tranq beam as he leaned down. The weapon was handheld, but generated a field that interrupted the nervous system and dropped a living being in its tracks, stunned temporarily. The victim usually required resuscitation to get the heart beating again, but it rendered all fighting absolutely impossible.

Antoin pulled out his own tranq gun, looking to Thor for the go-ahead.

Thor looked at him appraisingly. "Take the smaller kid; if you're lucky, you might get both at once."

Antoin tracked the running child in the sights of the weapon. It had a small display with a target tracking system, and Thor had assured him that

the display would flash green when he was locked on. The 'thopter slowed, hovering above the children, and Antoin steadied his aim. The light flashed green just as Thor had promised. Antoin prepared himself to fire.

The smaller child kicked the ball again. This time, it sailed straight up into the air, heading straight for Antoin. "That's odd," he said. The ball was interfering with his aim, seeming to grow larger as it sailed toward him; it blocked his view of the child completely. Antoin could see the black and white checkered squares rotating as it grew closer.

Thor started to look alarmed. "I think we should-" He didn't have a chance to finish. The ball exploded, a huge cone of fire and concussion directed upward and out. One of the 'thopter's wings snapped, and the other was a flaming mess. Antoin felt the lurch as the craft's lift vanished and gravity seized it.

He squeezed his eyes closed, holding tightly to the platform as the wind rushed past his face. He didn't dare look. If he had been a Funkar, he might have prayed; instead, he thought inanely of Weedy - no, Wendi - his coworker... She was pretty, he realized. The impact with the ground overwhelmed his nervous system and he blanked out.

Only for a minute, but it was long enough. When he woke, he was just in time to see a fighting Thor lose his head to a rather large slumrat's knife. A crowd of slumrats had surrounded the crash site; off beyond the ring of adults stood the two children, pleased looks on their faces. He rose to his knees.

A slumrat girl was on him before he could fully straighten, the knife in her hand cutting into his neck slightly. He relaxed immediately; he had no desire to join the headless guards and hunter on the ground. An injury like that could take months to heal - provided that the head was reattached within an hour. More than that, and it was too late. Antoin frowned. *Why am I not dead?*

A strange-looking man moved to join them. Antoin was unprepared to see him not wearing proper clothes, just shorts and a gold chain around his neck. He wasn't wearing anything else, not even sandals. The man looked at him, then at the girl.

The man looked pleased for some reason, which did not make Antoin feel more secure. "See, an alibi is now ours, for sure." He seemed to Antoin to be grinning.

* * *

Khalid had a sense of humor, to be sure. Tyni always liked to watch the man work; large as he was, he was skilled and used his tools with the proverbial surgeon's finesse.

His tools, if the delicate equipment could be referred to so mundanely, were worth a fortune. A small neural implant was the cheap part; the programming unit he used was much more valuable. There was a stage, with magnetic imagers that tracked the motion of an actor from the gross

movements of running to the most subtle muscle movements of the mouth when speaking, and a digitizer that converted those to commands for the neural implant - it was extremely delicate stuff all around.

A slumrat she'd never seen before was on the stage following a script on a small hand-display. She raised an eyebrow at Khalid. "What are you doing?"

Khalid waved a hand in the actor's direction. "We're making a puppet." He looked a bit distracted, wiping sweat from his shiny skin as he fiddled with controllers on a panel set in the wall.

"I can see that," she said. "What for?"

"For Raj, who else? He says make a puppet, we do it."

"Where'd the script come from?" she persisted.

"Raj gave it to me. No idea where he got it. Go ask him."

She shrugged. She didn't care that much. She walked closer to the actor. A few moments of listening didn't tell her much, other than some rubbish about the Funkars' precious "Gordword" and something about "For the Citizens!" It sounded like a bunch of nonsense.

Bored, she wandered outside again, and found herself heading up the hill to see Raj. He was in his usual place, tapping his feet to a tune only he could hear.

"What's with Khalid and the puppet-making?" she asked.

Raj turned to her. "Tyni. Always a pleasure, yes." She bowed. He cleared his throat. "The puppet-making. Lemonade, it is. We will have this slumrat carry a 'sport full of copies and drive it into the Enclave."

"Won't he be killed?" she asked, feeling a bit silly for pointing out the obvious.

"That is the beauty. He will be a Funkar for a day. A bad Funkar for sure, he will be. That is in the recipe. The Funkars see a Funkar, then they say 'Was he a Funkar?' and he will say 'For the Citizens!' And then they say 'No, he is a Heretic!' and they will blame the Citizens." He smiled widely. "This Citizen will not die - not by my hand. They may kill him, or he may get away." He shrugged. "That is not to say that he may not die anyway when the Funkars descend on the City."

She nodded, thinking it over. She didn't care one bit for any Citizen, unless he had a wristcomp she could steal. "It's a good plan," she admitted.

Raj nodded. "How can it not be?" He tapped his head. "It is the daughter of my own gray cells." He gave her a fatherly smile and turned away. "Now I must be back to my meditations."

She smiled and bowed before she left. She wasn't sure why she bowed, but it seemed appropriate; she respected him a great deal. When she looked back as she walked down the hill, she could have almost sworn he wore a glowing nimbus of greenish light.

* * *

Snik leaned back against a wall as two stone-featured slumrats

dragged the Citizen prisoner into the Operations room. The Op room was really just a makeshift tent set up with a control console on the side and a single chair in the center, the better to walk around the prisoner and make him nervous. The Citizen looked around him, shaking a little as he was shoved into the chair. He glanced at Snik with no recognition while the stonies looped a few meters of rope around his arms and legs. Snik snorted to himself. The Citizen was scrawny; that much rope was overkill. Medical Conversions didn't make Citizens strong enough to overpower elephants.

Snik recognized that particular Citizen, of course. "I never forget a face," he muttered to himself, flipping back through the last few transactions on his lenses. Sure enough. This one's name was Antoin Makler, apparently Head Curator and Chief Inspector of CfeX in the city. And if he was not mistaken, the Citizen that Tyni had so skillfully taken down to get the creature. Snik folded his arms and relaxed. *Should be amusing*, he thought.

Khalid shifted his massive weight through the door, shrugging off tent flaps as he entered. "This is the subject?" he asked one of the stone men. A nod gave him his answer. "Good, good." He held a small injector in one of his massive hands. "Let's get this over with."

Snik frowned. "Shouldn't we interrogate him first?"

Khalid blinked. "I didn't even consider that. What would we learn from him?"

Snik grinned. "No idea. You never know 'til you try." He uncrossed his arms and stalked over to the prisoner, pulling a large knife from his belt. "What do you think?" he asked cheerfully.

Antoin shrank back into his chair, but only an inch - the ropes were too tight for him to do more. "What do you want with me? I'm just an honest Citizen, I don't know anything!"

"Honest Citizen?" Snik's eyebrow rose dangerously, but his voice stayed pleasant. "What were you doing so far from the City?" He watched the lies roll through Antoin's brain.

"I was... uh... touring! With a guard."

Khalid and the stonies didn't look convinced. Neither did Snik. "With one of these?" He pulled the tranq beam from beneath his coat.

"It was for self defense," Antoin protested.

"In a Predator 'thopter?" Snik managed to make it sound almost reasonable.

A bead of sweat rolled down Antoin's forehead into his right eye, causing him to blink furiously. "It's the only 'thopter they had free."

Snik slapped him, not bothering to put effort into it. "Why weren't you after Funkar kids? Isn't that your preferred meat?"

Antoin shook his head to clear the daze. "We couldn't find any..." His voice trailed off as he realized his mistake.

"Fucking kidnappers." Snik walked back to his corner, leaned against

the wall again. He nodded at Khalid. No sympathy for a kidnapper.

Khalid gestured to the two stone-faces, and each took one of Antoin's shoulders, holding him down firmly in his seat, despite the rope. Khalid pulled out the injector and walked behind Antoin, pushing his head forward. He quickly located the base of the skull and stabbed the injector through the skin, past muscle and nerves into the brain. Antoin gasped and tried to struggle, but the stone-faces were impassive and the rope was, well, inanimate. Khalid tapped on the side of the injector, wiggling it around.

"What's the wiggling for?" Snik asked. "Just out of curiosity."

Khalid grinned, wiggling the injector again; Antoin's knee twitched uncontrollably with each motion of Khalid's hand. "It's like a puppet before I even finish the implant."

Snik found it a bit tasteless, but he wasn't one to argue over another man's preferred entertainment. Besides, he always liked to watch Citizens squirm. *They always act so Gord-damned confident.* He supposed it had something to do with immortality.

Khalid pressed a button on the end of the injector, looking almost sad that he could no longer play puppet-master. Not for the moment, anyway, Snik reflected.

When the injector was withdrawn, Antoin sat slumped over, hardly seeming to breathe. After five minutes, Snik was concerned. "We need our puppet alive, you know," he pointed out to Khalid.

"He is breathing," Khalid said, rubbing his hands together briskly. "Nothing to be concerned about." He had already turned away and was fiddling with a small control panel.

"What's that?" Snik asked.

"The master of the puppet," Khalid said. He touched the controller, which gave him a beeping noise in response. Antoin sat up suddenly, staring around him.

"I will call the authorities on you all. You know that, don't you?" he said. Snik just stared at him, and Khalid was smirking.

"The best thing about puppets," said Khalid, "is they can be controlled."

"Controlled? Puppets? What are you talking about?" Antoin asked. He shrugged off the two stone-faces, who looked unconcerned. Khalid looked unconcerned, too. He nodded, and the stone-faces walked out of the tent. Antoin stared at them in confusion as they left.

Khalid was watching Antoin with clinical interest. "I'm loading the override instructions now," he said to Snik.

Snik nodded. Antoin was starting to look panicked. "What did you - what are you doing to me?" Suddenly his eyes blanked and his head slumped sideways.

Khalid smiled. "He is ready," he said.

Snik rubbed his hands together. "Now we get to the fun part." Khalid

nodded, fingers flying as he selected instructions for the puppet.

"Let's see," he muttered. "Forget...courier...suicide." It only took a few seconds. He looked up at Snik. "All done."

Snik nodded. "Stand," he commanded. Antoin lurched to his feet. Snik grinned. "Brilliant."

Chapter Twelve

The knock on Elijah's door was loud enough to drown out the singing, giving the Vangel just enough time to stash his personal music device in a hole under his bed. That device was a vice, oh yes. Particularly, Elijah reflected, because he preferred the sultry voices of those Citizen harlots over the chants of his Funkar brethren. But then, he was special; someone must keep aware of the changes in the world of sin. Otherwise, how could he warn the young ones of the traps that Stan had laid for them? Elijah's face grew long. On second thought, not a vice at all. *Such a burden I bear.* "Come in," he said aloud.

"Your Purity," Smail said. "You have a visitor."

Elijah sighed a martyr's sigh. "Who is it?"

Smail looked concerned at the depth of the sigh, but said merely, "Our Sister Rajni."

"Interesting," said Elijah. "Send her in." Smail nodded and stepped out again.

The old woman hobbled in, carrying a cane. "Your Purity," she said, trying to bow. She sounded like a rusty door as she moved. She raised her voice, quavering. "Heresy, Your Purity!"

Elijah frowned. *Such drama.* And she had a horrid bruise on her face. He idly wondered if she'd fallen. He made his voice deeper. "Where is the Heresy? The might of Gord shall stamp it out!"

"The Lost Ones!" she shrilled. "I saw with my own eyes the brazen hussy!"

Elijah barely suppressed a chuckle. "Explain!" he boomed with appropriate ire.

"I was wandering, bearing the light of Gord by example to the Lost Ones, and I came upon the horror." She was actually shedding tears in her rage. "A Lost One, a shameless whore, has become a Heretic! My own eyes watched as she spilled her lifeblood, yet walked away without a scratch!"

Elijah was no longer playing along. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, your Purity. Tyni, her name is. You must stop this Heresy from spreading!"

Elijah nodded. "Yes, my Sister. It must be done. As for you, continue your witness. Gord will shower you with blessings for your steadfastness in the face of great danger and unrepentant wickedness." He drew a cross in the air and waved a hand at her in benediction. She fainted.

Elijah actually sighed out loud. "Smail!" he called. The Commander stuck his head in the door. Elijah motioned with his head at the old woman. Smail nodded; a moment later, two Soldiers came to drag the old woman away. Smail started to follow them, but Elijah raised a hand. "Stay," he said.

Smail folded his hands behind his back. "Yes?"

"We have a problem," Elijah said. "There is a Lost One, Tyni by name, who has partaken of the City Heresy." He looked annoyed. "If we do not make an example of her, soon the Lost Ones will be awash with this Heresy. This cannot happen."

Smail nodded. "What would you have me do?"

"We have eyes among the Lost Ones. Find this Tyni, track her down, and kill her."

"Of course. I burn out Heresy wherever it arises," Smail said simply.

Elijah almost smiled. "Go," he said. Smail was already moving.

"Always, Gord, the wolves surround the faithful, nipping at our heels," he muttered. No worries. Smail would take care of this newborn Heretic. He stood up, closed his door carefully, and then sat back down on the bed, pulling out the music device again. *Must continue my research*. He even did his best to keep his face long.

* * *

Antoin awoke in his bed and sat up abruptly. He rubbed his hands over his face. He seemed to recall something about a hunt, but it was all foggy in his mind, like a dream. He glanced at the ever-present clock floating in his peripheral vision. "Late," he muttered.

He washed up and was out the door as quickly as he could move. For some reason, it wasn't very fast this morning. He had a horrific headache, and his back felt like someone had stomped on it a few times while wearing heavy boots. It made no sense at all. He hadn't taken anything nasty; the last was the "ebola" more than a week ago. *What's wrong with my system?*

The ride to the CfeX building was uneventful; for once, Antoin couldn't even appreciate a scantily-clad Councilor's wife walking to her home in the City core. "Whore," the thought came unbidden. "Gord will punish her for her lewdness." He actually jumped at the thought. *Where did that come from?*

Wendi was already in the lab when he arrived, frowning over a box of those Spican creatures. She frowned at him too, when she realized he'd arrived.

"Where did these come from?" she asked. It seemed to be a day for questions.

Antoin scratched his head, wincing as he touched it. "I'm not sure. The shipment wasn't supposed to be in 'til next week."

Wendi shook her head. "That's what I thought, but here they are. And these don't even have shipping information."

"Maybe it multiplied, from a piece of hair or something. That would be pretty impressive regenerative power, but these things are capable of making clones age-modded."

Wendi nodded. "I guess that must explain it." She didn't sound overly convinced.

"Well, let's check these out and see. If they have the same physiology

and genetics as the original, we'll assume that's the case. Separate some tissues and see what happens," Antoin suggested.

Wendi didn't protest, so they started the examinations. After a couple hours of testing, it became obvious that the Spican creatures were, indeed, the same as the original.

"I guess that explains it," Wendi said. "I'm just not sure why we didn't notice them reproducing. I'll watch the samples."

Antoin nodded. "I'm not sure about that either. In any case, I need to pack a few of these up to take to the Council."

Wendi went off to examine some Albiran fungus that had just shipped in. Antoin watched until he was sure that she was engrossed. He admired her, he had to admit. She was almost attractive, as dedicated to science as she was. He turned his attention back to the creatures, ignoring the claws and spines as he herded them into a portable crate. *Can't take these to the council, he thought. They might decide not to go ahead with the plan. Gord knows they can't be trusted.* The thought sounded strange to him, but he couldn't find anything wrong with it. He could feel his paranoia increasing.

He didn't even bother to say 'bye to Wendi. He just packed the creatures into the 'sport. Within fifteen minutes, he was heading out of the city, past the slums and down around the loop toward the Stony River. The wall of the Funkar enclave crept along on the far side, and he could see the gate in the distance. He stopped well before the gates, partially hiding the 'sport in the brush at the river's edge. There was a Funkar cloak in his 'sport; he had no idea where it came from, but he pulled it on, showing the cross proudly. He hauled the crate out from the storage hatch and headed toward the river.

He didn't even bother swimming. He could hold his breath for hours, if he needed to; one of the advantages of the Medical Conversion was improved oxygen storage in his body. He just walked straight in, feeling the water close over his head. His lenses automatically adjusted to enable him to see clearly enough through the water. They had originally been designed with swimming pools in mind, but a river was much the same, only dirtier. In a minute he was on the other side. His clothes crawled over his skin as sections contracted to spill out the water, and he was nearly dry before he'd taken five steps.

The Funkar wall wasn't well-designed. Antoin walked along away from the gate, spotting dozens of holes where dogs had dug their way out from the other side. It only took half an hour to find one suitable for him to enlarge. Poking his head through, he found himself staring at a startled cat, but there was nothing around except the backs of ramshackle huts. *Perfect.* Getting himself through was easy; getting the crate through took a few extra moments of work.

Now that he was in, he wasn't exactly sure what he should do. He counted in the crate; fourteen of the creatures looked back at him, eyestalks

quivering and hooked claws clattering as he brushed them aside to count bodies.

A few bricks lying about helped him smash the windows of the nearest houses. He tossed five of the creatures in, each one to a broken window. Shouts and cries of "Gord save us, what is *that*?" broke out. A dog started barking.

Antoin scurried back against the wall, edging along deeper into the enclave. There was more noise in the distance, which was perfect; more people. After skulking for another fifteen minutes, during which he'd managed to step in foul-smelling piles of both human and canine feces, he found himself staring down an alley at a bustling marketplace.

He took a deep breath and strode forward, trying to look like he belonged there. For a moment, no one noticed him. He opened the crate, dumping the creatures out. "For the Citizens!"

The Funkars stood still at first, just staring at him and his Funkar cloak. Soon, shouts of "Heretic!" started to fill the air, and the women and children scampered away. The market erupted in noise, even more than before, if that were possible. The Funkar men surrounding Antoin looked very, very hostile. He tried to run, but he couldn't make his feet move. Something struck him on the side of the head. It hurt, a lot. Unfortunately, the traumabots were faster than unconsciousness. The Funkar swung the brick at him again. It wasn't until four men were kicking his head in turns that he finally slipped away from the pain and embraced the blackness.

* * *

Gina was surprised to hear the knock at her door in the daytime. Usually any visits were in the dark, when prying eyes might not notice. This must be really important. At her nod, Viktor and Pedro tossed on the Funkar cloaks and flanked the door. They looked relaxed, but they held weapons in those hands folded behind their backs. They would die for her.

She personally tapped the unlock code into a panel on a wall near her columns. Elijah strolled in, followed by a half dozen guards. Gina found herself wanting to laugh; the man was so insecure. The Vangel's temper was unpredictable, though, so she restrained herself, and simply stood with her hands folded behind her. Elijah turned back to the door, and two more guards strolled in, escorting a prisoner. Red splatters on his white clothes spoke of harsh treatment; as he got closer, she could see that his face had been heavily beaten, although it seemed to be improving as she looked.

"This," said Elijah, "is good fortune." He gestured at the prisoner. "You are undoubtedly close to finishing the Avenger." It wasn't exactly a question.

Gina nodded. The last simulation she ran showed an exceptionally fast virus, one that literally rotted her body as she watched. "I am."

Elijah rubbed his hands together. "Gord sees your dedication," he said with a smile. "And He has provided us with the means to perfect this task

you have been laboring at." A guard pushed Antoin to his knees. "This Heretic has fallen into our laps. He is stronger than he looks, so do not fail to be vigilant."

Gina nodded again in agreement. "I will not fail. I will begin the tests tonight."

The Vangel smiled again, not a very nice smile. "I look forward to your report." He spat at the Heretic. "Gord brings vengeance upon the wicked. You will experience His vengeance firsthand. Consider it an honor, dog." The prisoner didn't even look up. Elijah left without a backward glance, careful not to brush his white cloak against the Heretic.

Viktor and Pedro were on the prisoner before Gina said a word. Before a moment had passed, he was tied firmly to a chair. The last Funkar Soldiers tested the knots, and then left to catch up with Elijah. Gina smiled at the Heretic as her bodyguards shut the door again. The smile seemed to make him relax.

"What is this place?" he asked.

Gina ignored him. She opened a small cabinet recessed into the wall and pulled out a scalpel and a small vial. She walked back to the prisoner and stood in front of him, studying him. From the way he flinched at her gaze, she assumed she must look hostile. She smiled, and slashed the scalpel across his face. He only gasped in surprise, she knew; the blade was too sharp for him to fully feel the cut immediately. Viktor grinned; Pedro looked bored.

It was amazing to watch, she thought. The blood welled out of the cut, only a thin line, and then the cut was healing, fading before her eyes. The blood was still wet. "You Heretic bastards have truly been touched by the Master of Puppets," she muttered. Even Pedro looked impressed.

She used the handle of the scalpel to pull blood from the prisoner's face into the vial. He flinched, but did not seem overly concerned. She patted him on the head with a smirk and went back to her equipment, inserting the vial into a manipulator chamber.

Even though she'd tested the Avenger on a simulacrum made from preserved Heretic DNA - the sample she'd gotten from that dealer - Gina wasn't sure that it would work on live cells. She waited patiently, working at her columns as the computer modeled the prisoner's body. Something struck her as she looked at the sequence from the dealer's sample, and then at the sequences in the cells she'd just taken from the prisoner. She whistled softly to herself. "It's the same Heretic." She looked over at him. "Gord must really hate you." He looked puzzled, but she turned away.

There was one more modification to make. Gina manipulated the virus until it only responded to the nano-modified cells of a Heretic. There was no point in having it attack Believers accidentally. When she was satisfied that everything was in order, she held her breath and initiated the Avenger infection in the sample cells.

"Beautiful," she murmured, as she watched the infestation of the cells. The virus completely bypassed the accursed nanobots in the Heretic's blood. The Heretic cells were defenseless.

It was a beautiful virus, too. For the first two weeks, said the simulation, the Avenger was nearly invisible, aside from a cough and weakened immunity. Then it abruptly began to dissolve the tissues of the victim, from the outside in. She knew it was ghastly, but she didn't find the thought bothersome; it was perfect engineering, and she took pride in that.

She tapped a few codes into her computer and the fabrication unit on the wall chimed. Gina opened it and picked up the biospray. A near-transparent, green liquid sloshed around inside. She thought of the Heretics who had abandoned her to the Funkars as she injected the Avenger into the prisoner's neck.

There was no flash of lightning or triumphant music, but Gina felt a thrill all the same. Finally, the Heretics would pay. She found herself wanting to dance, but first, she needed to be sure.

After an hour, Gina sampled the Heretic's blood again. She let out breath she'd been holding unaware. The infection was thorough. She smiled a nasty smile at him. "You're fucked," she said with a nasty hiss.

"What did you do to me?" he asked. He seemed to be checking himself mentally, trying to feel for anything wrong. "I don't feel anything. What was in that biospray?"

"You'll find out," Gina said. *And you'll wish you hadn't.*

The prisoner continued to protest, writhing against the ropes. It got tedious, so she injected him with a paralyzing agent. He slumped back in the chair, out of her way. A knock sounded outside. She glanced at the prisoner. *Perfect timing.*

The Vangel strode in, attempting to be majestic, as usual. She might have been more impressed if he wasn't leering at her. And if he didn't always seem to be cowering behind his guards. "How has your work gone?" he asked.

"It's done," she said.

"You are certain?"

"Yes."

Elijah actually rubbed his hands together. "It is as Gord has commanded. We will dump this Heretic dog outside the gates, so that a patrol will find him. How long will it take for the Avenger to spread?"

"Contagion should start immediately. It's designed to make him sneeze and cough to spread droplets, and the virus will survive in the environment long enough to infect others. I'll synthesize more biosprays, and you can have the Faithful spread it in the city even further," Gina replied.

"This is a glorious day for Gord and His people," intoned the Vangel. "It is a day of vengeance, one which shall strike the fear of Gord into the

Lost and the Heretics alike." He waved a finger toward the prisoner, and his guards hesitated. Elijah looked murderous for a moment, but then he frowned and touched his tongue to his lips nervously. "He is not dangerous to the Faithful?"

Gina shook her head. "The Avenger will only infect those who have partaken of the Heresy."

The guards brightened, and a pair of them untied the ropes and dragged the prisoner out. Elijah seemed relieved. "See that you do not delay. Gord honors those who obey Him with promptness."

Gina nodded. Elijah ran his eyes over her once more before walking out. She found herself shuddering, as usual, after he left. She would not give him the satisfaction of doing it while he was there. *What a disgusting person.* She sighed, turned back to the colored symbols floating on her columns. They made her feel better.

Viktor and Pedro sealed the door, taking up their customary posts as Gina slipped back into her work-trance. Before long, she was humming. They listened for a while, then Pedro frowned at Viktor "That Vangel, he makes her sad."

"I have noticed," admitted Viktor.

"Maybe something will have to be done."

"You might be right," Viktor agreed. The crack of his knuckles was masked in the rhythm of Gina's hum.

Chapter Thirteen

Tyni was becoming very, very annoyed. Not at the heat, or the dirty squalor of her little hut, or the flies that buzzed incessantly around her head. It was that old woman constantly shadowing her that really pissed her off. *I'm a thief!* Tyni wanted to shout at her. *Do you think I don't notice when I'm being followed?* Apparently the old woman thought exactly that. She had no doubt that her stalker was waiting outside.

Granted, there were many old women in the slum, always traipsing here and there. Old women did laundry in the dirty stream, or shuffled to the food tent, or shooed dirty chickens along one of the bird-shit strewn paths meandering between rusty shacks - they were everywhere. But this one wasn't even smart enough to change her clothes. She wore a garish green shirt and a dirty pair of pants, and had a polka-dotted scarf wrapped around her brow. *Not exactly inconspicuous*, Tyni noted. She spat at the ground. She still recognized the woman, too. You didn't slap someone across the street and forget them easily.

She was getting hungry, though. Hiding in her shack waiting for the sneaking old hag to get tired was not going to work. Sighing, she dragged herself out into the evening light and headed toward the food tent. Dirty chickens and dirty children alike were underfoot. Not bothering to be discreet, she checked her back.

It was almost comical. The old woman actually looked around in panic for a hiding spot, and dove behind a pile of torn sheet metal. Tyni snorted. *Hope she gets tetanus.* That metal didn't look friendly.

The food tent was filling up as the sun vanished and the sky filled with stars. Khalid was there, and that annoying dealer. Raj wasn't there, of course. He never came to the tent; he always had food to cook on that hill of his, somehow. Tyni sighed. She really didn't feel like talking to the dealer, but she wasn't going to let him keep her from her friend.

"Khalid," she said in greeting, looking straight past the dealer.

"Tyni! I have heard a rumor about you. Is it true? You are Permanent?" Khalid looked both excited and worried at the same time.

She smiled at the huge man and ruffled his dark curls playfully. She had to stand on her tiptoes to do it, but it was fun. She ducked his playful punch, placing her knife point over his heart as she straightened up. "I win," she said with a smile.

"So you do," he admitted. His smile faded. "Be serious a moment. Are you now Permanent?" he insisted.

She sighed. "So boring. Yes, I think I am Permanent."

He nodded. "So Raj has told us. This is a hard thing to imagine, but the truth is stranger than a story, they say."

She shrugged. "It will make my trips into the City easier," she said.

"Are you sure it's the same kind of Permanent? Yours was one of those creatures, from all Raj has told me. The Citizens had technology to make themselves Permanent."

Tyni elbowed him softly. "Relax. It's the same effect, isn't it? What does it matter?"

Khalid sighed. "I suppose you're right. If you notice anything strange, if you don't feel well, come to me right away. Promise?"

"Of course," she said. *I'll think about it, anyway.* She preferred to handle her own problems. "Now, let's see what sort of slops we are eating today."

Dinner was the same fare as usual, only someone had managed to kill a pair of rats, so there was meat of a sort in the depths of the soup pot. Nobody there was squeamish; you couldn't be, and survive in the slums for long. She was just happy that she had a skill other than cooking. Hunting through garbage for rats was not something she wanted to spend her time doing. When she spooned the last of the soup down, she headed back outside. Night had fallen while she was eating, but it was still hot. It was always hot.

She sighed, staring up at the stars. She wasn't looking forward to the pile of rags she called a bed, but somehow, if she was tired enough, she always managed to sleep soundly. She found herself yawning in spite of herself. When her breath came out, something snaked around her neck and yanked her literally off her feet. She found herself on her back, looking up at the sky. The old woman was leaning over her.

"Surprised? I'm not as old as I look. A bit of facial surgery, some aging of the vocal cords, and nobody notices me anymore." The voice was incongruous with the strength.

Oddly enough, Tyni didn't find herself scrambling to breathe; the something around her neck felt rubbery, tight. It hurt, but somehow she wasn't dying. It just made it hard for her to move. She tried to get back to her feet, but her attacker pinned her down with a knee and put a knife blade to her throat.

"Elijah would love to see this; a pity that he won't. I don't have anything against you personally, but what you did..." The old-looking woman shook her head. "It's unnatural. You won't be the first Heretic to lose your head to this blade."

Tyni tried to speak, but it was useless. The cord had crushed her larynx. She couldn't even scream as the knife blade bit into her neck - not that she had air in her lungs to make a sound anyway. She tried to struggle, but the assassin held her down easily. She could feel the blood spilling out. A strange thought hit her, and she realized that she still didn't *need* to breathe. Still, as the knife bit deeper, she knew she was going to die. The injustice hit her. *It's too soon! I've only been Permanent for a day!*

Suddenly, the knee was gone, and the knife blade. She heard a

snapping noise, like a row of sticks being broken all at once, and an old woman's voice screamed for an instant and then went silent. Tyni opened her eyes, her hands going to the cord around her neck. She could feel the cut in her throat healing, the severed muscles and skin re-knitting, and the crushed cartilage and muscle in her neck inflating back to their normal places. Nauseating cracking noises vibrated through her skull. She took a shuddering breath, in and in again, trying to breathe all the air in the world at once.

A shadow crouched over the assassin, then turned to her. As her mind cleared, she realized that it was the dealer. She tried to clear her throat, even though she had no words to say.

Snik stayed crouching a few feet away, studying the body.

"Interesting," he said.

She just stared at him. "That's all you can say?"

"It isn't dead, you know," Snik pointed out. He nudged the assassin with a fingertip. "Completely paralyzed, yes. But not dead."

"Can she hear us?"

"Of course. It's not even unconscious." He poked the figure on the ground. "Are you?"

"Fuck you," came the reply in that old woman's voice.

Snik casually punched the assassin in the nose. "Not very polite, is it?"

Tyni got to her feet, backing away. "Why me?"

"How about it? Who would send a hitter after a slumrat girl?" Snik asked, jabbing at the woman's injured nose.

"She is a sinner... Elijah wants her dead!" the old woman snapped. "There would be a reward if you killed her."

Snik rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Is that so?"

"Yes! Ahh!" Snik was prodding that broken nose again.

"I believe her," Snik said. He was assembling some sort of weapon, using pieces stowed away here and there in his boots and coat. Tyni backed away uncertainly.

"I need medical atten-" The assassin's voice was cut off as Snik fired the weapon into her head. He stood up, sighing.

Tyni shuddered. "What is that?" She pointed at the weapon.

Snik was already disassembling it. "This?" He shrugged. "Standard sonic eggbeater. It uses sympathetic infrasound to completely scramble everything inside any sealed or mostly-enclosed cavity." He looked at the body on the ground. "Like a skull," he said, tucking away the barrel of the weapon inside a coat sleeve. Tyni shuddered again, and he noticed.

"If it's a Permanent, keeps the victim from regenerating quickly. If it's lucky, it will have a recent neural backup. It won't remember what hit it, though," he said. "If it doesn't have a backup, then it will be amnesiac permanently." He nudged the body on the ground with the toe of his boot. "This one isn't Permanent. It won't be regenerating." He looked around him

carefully. Then he laughed shortly. "I forget that nobody here notices the dead, or the living for that matter." He grabbed the body and tossed it onto a pile of garbage, not bothering to hide the action. He stood a moment, staring at it. "Elijah... That adds a new twist to things."

Tyni was still shaking. The cut on her neck was already closed, but she couldn't stop touching her throat. "If I hadn't been Permanent--"

"You'd never have been attacked in the first place," Snik pointed out. "Elijah wanted to make an example out of you. I'm not sure that this will be the last of it." She shivered, not entirely from cold, and he noticed. "No, I doubt anything else will happen tonight. I'd suggest that you get some sleep."

She nodded, and stumbled down the path to her hut. She looked back as she stood outside; he was still watching her, a dark silhouette against the starlight. She went inside, feeling the darkness wrapping around her. Somehow, she managed to fall asleep despite the shaking.

Chapter Fourteen

Snik watched Tyni as she walked away to her hut. He squatted down, scanning the dark alleys for more threats, the dim starlight enough for his lenses to show him everything in bright relief. He could make out a hand from the dead hitter sticking out from behind the garbage pile he'd tossed its body into. Nothing else was of interest; a dog ran across the alleyway, but he ignored it, even when it was sniffing hungrily at the corpse.

He frowned. Hitters were unusual. They had heavy modifications, the kind of stuff that only a good biohacker could come up with. Elijah had a few biohackers, but only one good enough to modify a teenage girl and make her into an old woman edition of a hitter.

Hitters were...distasteful, somehow. Snik couldn't bring himself to respect them enough to think of them as human. They didn't stand up and fight you fair; they snuck up on you in the dark, pretending to be harmless, and tried to kill you before you knew they were there.

It wasn't the fact that they killed that bothered him. He'd killed dozens, hundreds even; but his victims had all been looking for a fight, or at least warned in advance. He spat in the general direction of the hitter's corpse. *That's just unprofessional.*

He stood up, walking back along the trail that headed out of the Warrens to his shack in the old junkyard. It was a fairly long walk, a half hour. Nothing to see but the moonlight, the trees in the Preserve, the distant glow of City lights and the landing lights of rising and falling cargo ships. The good thing was, out here it was quiet. The lack of noise gave him time to think, and plan.

Obviously something would have to be done about the hitter. Where there was one, there could be more. He had terminated this one completely and scrambled it, so at least he'd have time before the Funkars missed it if they were tracking it. And they wouldn't be extracting any information from it if there were other spies around to recover the corpse.

When he opened the gate to his shack, metal clanking sounds immediately responded. He just waved a hand; the attacking robot skidded to a halt a foot away, blades whirring. "Good dog," Snik said. He brushed past the robot, ignoring the blades, and the robot barely arrested the spinning in time. "Go patrol," Snik said, and the blade dog scampered away. *Gotta keep my back covered.*

The shack was pretty much as he'd left it. A quick check of his security system indicated that a few potential customers had driven or walked up to the gate, but they left as soon as they realized he wasn't there. Once, years before, a desperate Citizen had tried to break into his place for modjects while he was out. Snik had given him to the dog to play with. A recording of the screaming mess that was left of the Citizen served to warn

anyone who got too insistent with the gate now. He'd had no more problems with Citizens since then.

He pulled out a food bar and stared at it, hardly seeing it. He wasn't sure why he'd bothered to save that slumrat girl, Tyni. They didn't need her to carry out the plan. He opened the food bar, ignoring the dusty crumbs as he gnawed on it. The face of the hitter floated up in his mind. *That thing was good enough motivation.* He did hate hitters.

He yawned. His trip to the shanty town had been fruitful. The slumrats were up in arms over this whole Funkar business, which was just as well. Neither group of losers helped him put food bars in the locker. Or to get one step closer to his bigger goal. He vaguely considered worrying about Raj. Only for a moment. *That old bastard can look after himself better than me.* No, Raj would be fine.

Snik wrinkled his nose as he drank from an old canteen. The water it contained was safe enough, but had too many minerals in it to be properly tasteless. *Maybe I can talk Gina out of this virus business.* He didn't really think he could, but he needed more information. That he could get from her. It had been a while since he'd been a Funkar Soldier. *Maybe it's time to join the army again.*

He pulled out a cloak from under the floorboards. This one was crossed, like the one he'd worn before, but the crosses were black and red, thin lines alternating. Touching his thumb to a keypad opened the weapons locker in the back corner of the room. Snik chose two small cylinders from a shelf near the bottom, and a nasfilter that he placed over his nose. The filter made a small whining noise as it settled into his skin just below the surface. It stimulated the skin to produce a layer over the top of the filter; in minutes it was invisible.

The two cylinders were useful; one emitted a paralyzing agent that would render anyone in a room immobile within seconds, and the other reversed the paralysis. It was perfect for interrogation, as it didn't immobilize the mouth. He always found that it was good to let people talk; more often than not, they hung themselves, given enough rope.

He re-armed the security system, patted the blade dog on its titanium rump, and headed out again. He pulled on the crossed cloak before he was at the Enclave Gate. This time, he wasn't so polite when the sentry hailed him with the usual, "State your creed!" A mere sentry was not something to stand in the way of a Soldier of Gord.

"The Puppet Master take you, and all who stand in the way of a son of Gord!" The sentry seemed to wilt at each word. Snik chuckled inwardly; the key, as usual, was confidence. "I have business with Elijah. You would do well to remove yourself from my way."

The sentry almost groveled. Not quite; Snik had to give him that much credit. He didn't have to give respect, though; he deliberately scuffed up dust with his foot as he passed, leaving the sentry in a coughing fit.

Childish, but it made him grin.

The sun was coming up now, so he didn't bother skulking in the shadows. As soon as he could slip unobserved into a dark doorway, he turned the cloak inside out, so that he now appeared as a dirty beggar. He was careful to leave the main streets and head for the back alleys leading to the biohacker's lab. He'd heard that the Vangel could be awfully quick to wield a sword of "justice" against a beggarly hand found on the main roads. Snik was rather attached to his own hands. Not that he would be begging, and not that anything less than an army could take his hands, but there was no point in tempting fate.

It didn't take long for him to locate the ultrapaint marker. In the daylight, the place was no easier to find than at night. It was simply another dirty doorway in a row of dirty doorways, noteworthy only by the absence of ragged clothing hanging on some improvised clothesline like most other doorways.

He didn't go in immediately. He double-checked his nasfilters, and pulled out the paralysis canister. He glanced around to make sure no one saw him, not that anyone other than a Vangel or a Solder would be bold enough to ask questions of a stranger in these back alleys of the Enclave. Satisfied, he turned back to the wall next to the ultra-marked door. He slid back a small panel on the paralysis canister, revealing a little control panel. He pressed a button, and the end of the canister began to heat up. He held the canister firmly against the wall until it held itself in place.

He always liked this part. The little can was smarter than it looked; it would latch on and melt through almost any surface, then release its payload after it had penetrated the wall. He leaned back and crossed his arms, listening. Two thumps inside a moment later told him what he wanted to know, and the two short beeps from the can confirmed it. The guards were down.

The lock was a joke; he picked it almost without looking and shouldered his way inside. The two guards were slumped over against the door, looking as if they'd just fallen out of their chairs. The biohacker was fussing over them, looking quite upset. They'd fallen facing away, so they couldn't see him, which was just as well. He ignored their swearing.

"Gina," he said by way of greeting. She probably had nasfilters herself; he wasn't surprised that she hadn't collapsed. If she had a weapon, he didn't see it.

"You? I expected Elijah, but not you. What do you want?"

Expecting Elijah? He filed that bit of information away as he shrugged. "The usual. Information."

"We had an arrangement," Gina said pointedly. "There was no need to hurt my men."

"Circumstances change," he shrugged again. He looked around at her columns and screens. "Besides, they're not hurt. Looks like you've been

busy. How's your little poison plan working?"

She looked suspicious. "What does it matter? I think you should go."

He shook his head. "I disagree with that. Who was the hitter?"

"The hitter?"

"The old one. Well, not really old. She looked old, but she was probably only seventeen or eighteen. Too young to get killed botching a hit."

"Everybody dies," Gina said. Her hands were in fists, the knuckles white.

Snik nodded. "Hard to find a truer statement. But she said Elijah sent her. And only you can make a young girl look like an old woman. Nobody else in New Byzant is skilled enough. It takes an expert." *Laying it on thick, are you?* he told himself.

Gina seemed to buy it, though. She relaxed in spite of herself. "So why are you bothering me about it?"

"I just want to know if there are any more hitters," he said, suddenly thumbing a knife blade. "I don't like hitters."

Gina swallowed visibly. "I only made two more. As far as I know, they both died in missionary trips to the City. I can't speak for any other hackers, though."

He made the knife go away. "And this nonsense about killing all of my clients?"

"Your clients?"

"The Citizens."

"The Heretics, you mean," Gina spat at him. "I intend to see them dead. My client is paying me well, and I have no love for these 'Citizens' anyway. What do I care if they all die?"

He leaned against her wall, inspecting his fingernails. "You should care, because I will take it out of your skin if I lose all my customers."

"You can rot for eternity," she said calmly. "You're too late. In a fortnight, there will not be one Citizen alive out of fifty." She smiled at him. "There is nothing you can do about it."

He just stared at her. "Are you completely insane?"

"Why do I have to be 'insane' to help make the world a better place? It's not like those bastards ever lifted a finger to help me. I say let them all rot." She looked completely serious.

"Who's the carrier?" he demanded.

"You'll never guess," she said flatly.

He studied her for a moment. *That Vangel has gotten to her,* he decided finally. *This is pointless.* "Do what you have to. If my customers die, I am coming back for you."

He didn't even bother to say farewell; he just kicked the fallen guards on his way out, surreptitiously discharging the anti-paralysis canister as he passed. There was no point in letting her know how he'd taken down her muscle - she could suspect all she liked.

He found himself swearing as he walked back to the gate. Gina had moved faster than he'd expected, and he was completely unprepared. He never expected her to actually create a genocidal virus. She'd threatened, yes - but what sane person would actually carry out that threat? Hopefully she would change her mind before she actually gave this virus to the Funkars. Except, she claimed a carrier was already loose.

He clenched his teeth. The biohacker had left him no choice; he would have to go to the City himself to see if he could stop this virus before it wiped out his source of income.

Chapter Fifteen

Antoin found himself coughing as he headed out to the CfeX building. It was a novel sensation, that rapid expulsion of air. He felt as if someone was incessantly tickling his throat. For the first hour after he'd gotten home, he'd been blissful at the novelty; now, after twelve hours of the cough, he was feeling annoyed.

Wendi was there, interfacing with some sort of mineral-coated creature in the specimen cages. "Antoin!" she called melodically. He suspected she was happier to see him than he to see her. He walked over to observe. "What's that?" he asked, pointing at the armored creature.

"It's a Betel creature," Wendi said. "It's fascinating. The clones say it is biologically harmless."

Antoin stared. The creature was as long as his arm, crawling around rather blindly. Its skin was smooth and slimy, and the creature oozed out little tentacles that seemed to be searching for food. He looked away from it and coughed.

"What was that?" Wendi asked. She looked puzzled, one eyebrow raised at him.

"I didn't say anything. I - I seem to have a cough," Antoin said.

Wendi frowned at him. "Drink some water!"

A coughing fit seized him, and when he straightened up again he nodded. Wordlessly, he made his way to the small kitchen area of the lab. He filled a small glass with water and swallowed it down quickly, but only managed to spray the wall with water as another coughing fit took him.

Wendi leaned in from the doorway. "You aren't choking, are you?"

Antoin shook his head. "I think it's just an irritant in my throat." He coughed, but tried to suppress it; it came out as a croak that shook his chest.

"Maybe you should do a diagnostic on your immune system?" Wendi suggested. She looked worried.

"That's silly," Antoin said. "I think I just need to go for a walk. Fresh air might do me some good. It must be dusty in here."

Wendi brightened. "Okay. Don't stay out too long, though. I want your opinions on this creature. I think it might have potential as a delicacy, if we show it to the right chef."

Antoin waved a hand in her general direction in response, and stumbled to the doorway. The cool air outdoors filled his lungs. It did seem to sooth the irritated feeling. He decided to take a walk, coughing now and then. It earned him strange looks from passers-by, but he didn't care.

For a moment, he found himself worrying that those primitive Funkars might have managed to give him some sort of illness. That bitchy woman had tried to do something to him, that was certain. But it was impossible

that the Funkars could do anything to him. The efficiency of his immune system was several thousand times improved over unmodified cattle like the Funkars. He chuckled at his own fear. No Citizen had died of disease in a hundred and fifty years. No, even if that hacker had managed to give him something, there was nothing to worry about. He started whistling. It was something he'd never been good at, and he tended to spray saliva around when he did it, but it made him feel better. It also distracted him from the itchiness in his throat. Passers-by on the sidewalk darted aside from the spray as much as the noise.

He headed back to the CfeX building, feeling his mood improved. Wendi looked concerned when she saw him, but the cough seemed to have gone away, so she smiled and turned back to her work.

"Try some of this," Wendi said. She was taking a small slice out of one of the creature's tentacles with a very sharp knife. She popped it into her mouth, ignoring the wiggling as she chewed. "It tastes almost like a fish." The creature flinched away from the knife as the blade touched a tentacle. Wendi ignored it and cut another slice for Antoin.

Antoin eyed it skeptically. The flesh was rank, and there was a brilliant yellow ooze on the surface. *A job is a job*, he thought, as he popped it into his mouth. The meat was slightly salty, with a definite fishy flavor. He nodded. "I think you're right," he said. "Mark it as a potential edible."

Wendi's hands floated through the air as she interfaced. "Done," she said.

Other creatures waited to be cataloged. There was an ammonia-based blob that seemed to have adapted an ability to fire small thorny projectiles at its prey; a flying, fanged animal that fed on the blood-analogue of an ice-rat; even a strange insect-sized creature that seemed to swarm around some of the outer asteroids feeding on frozen gas particles. All were sorted and marked.

A small chime inside Antoin's head reminded him. "Wendi, I have to address the Councilors. I'll see you tomorrow," he said. He headed outside again, coughing as he went.

The Council Hall was not far from the CfeX building, so Antoin decided to enjoy the walk. Away from Nido Street, there was more life to the city. It still amazed him that people were reproducing; some Citizens must be amazingly rich, to be tapping into the remaining stockpiles of the Medical Convertors. *But now we may have another source*, Antoin reminded himself. That was, after all, what he was going to address the Councilors about.

The Citadel rose up over the City's central square, a slender tower that rose in a steep angle a thousand meters overhead. It cast a sharp shadow over the City; clever architects had actually built it as the gnomon of a giant sundial. Descending travelers from the cargo ships could see the time of day. *A waste of energy*, Antoin thought for the thousandth time.

Still, many people seemed to like it. He coughed, and went inside.

When he reached the thirty-seventh level, he ignored the receptionist and walked straight into the Councilors' room. Robert and the other Councilors were already there, going over mundane business matters of the City. Antoin stole in, taking a seat near the back. Robert noticed him.

"Ahh, Citizen Makler. I believe you have a report for us."

Antoin nodded. "The creature is quite effective. I've started to procure-" He coughed. "Excuse me. I've started to procure more of them, but I took the liberty of introducing the first few into the Funkar Enclave."

The Council room immediately burst into shocked voices. Robert raised his over the clamor. "Quiet, everyone." He turned to Antoin. "You did what, exactly?"

"I simply went into the Enclave and released the creature."

"And you got away that easily?"

Antoin looked embarrassed. "I was captured, actually."

Robert frowned. "Why, then, are you not dead? We know what the Funkars do to us 'Heretics.' They don't let us go."

Antoin shook his head. "I'm not sure. They tried to brainwash me, and I went along with it." *It's for a good cause*, he thought. He didn't like lying to the Councilors, but they would be paranoid if he told them that a biohacker was experimenting on him.

Robert let out a deep breath he'd been holding. "Brainwashing. You're lucky they didn't kill you. You were told to gather more of the creatures, not to play hero."

Antoin found himself angry. "The Council takes too long to move. I saw an opportunity and I took it." He stared at the Councilors, daring them to challenge him. They did, of course.

"You dare to go over the authority of the council?" Robert roared.

"Who do you think you are? You aren't even a tricentenarian yet!"

Despite himself, Antoin shrunk away from the outburst. "I was just-" He was unable to finish the sentence, due to a burst of coughing that left him doubled over. The Council members looked at him strangely. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I was just doing what is best for the city."

"You overstepped your bounds," Robert said flatly. "You are risking your appointment as CfeX director by your actions, you realize."

Antoin nodded, coughing again. Something came up in his throat, thick mucous. The slimy saltiness was novel, and disgusting. He coughed again, noting that the coughing was starting to hurt; still, it was nothing compared to some of the modjects he had tried. He found himself enjoying the pain.

Robert looked annoyed. "Drink some water, will you," he said. It was an order, not a request.

Antoin grabbed a glass from the table sitting in front of one of the

other Council members. He poured it down his throat; it didn't soothe the itch, but it did wash down the mucous. "Sorry," he said, clearing his throat. "It can be dusty when you're working at CfeX. Dust-dwelling creatures, you know."

Robert nodded impatiently. "In any case, you may have done us a favor by infecting those Funkars, but now we must step up our patrols along the perimeter. I don't imagine that the Funkars will take this lightly. Vance, I'll need you to pull together some processing centers for the new Citizens we'll be receiving shortly. As for you," he said, turning back to Antoin, "get more of those creatures." His face hardened. "This time, if you overstep yourself, you will find that you are Director of a single street-sweeping machine. I suggest you remember that."

Antoin flushed, which added embarrassment upon embarrassment. He had always worn his emotions on his face, and Robert looked pleased at his discomfort. Antoin rushed out, coughing again as he went. He could feel the Chief Councilor's eyes on his back as he left.

Ordinarily, on a nice day like this one, Antoin would have gone back to the lab. There was certainly enough to do. Somehow, he didn't feel like it this time. *It's just the recent adventures*, he told himself, puffing his chest out as he walked. After all, it wasn't every Citizen who could say that he'd single-handedly penetrated the Enclave and lived to tell the tale. *That ought to be worth a few drinks at the Red Demi*, he told himself. The thought actually made him smile. *But one thing at a time. First, sleep.*

When he finally managed to make it to his humble abode, he didn't even shower. He went immediately to bed, and was asleep before the lid closed over him.

Chapter Sixteen

Elijah was furious. The Child kneeling before him on the cold marble floor was gibbering nonsense about furry little creatures that sprouted teeth and devil horns. And more, he had the nerve to claim that these devil creatures had turned him into a Heretic against his will. Oh, the Heretic part was true enough. Elijah himself had sliced into this Child-Heretic's face with a blade, and watched the wound close up like the Puppet Master was invisibly stitching. He kicked the Child again. Not for a moment did he believe in furry devils. The Child was an old man, but age provided no respite from Gord's wrath. Besides, this old fool had distracted him from study of the Gordword.

"Tell me the truth, and I will intercede for you, that Gord may take you into his arms and spare you the torments of the Puppetmaster," he exhorted again, longing to get this over with and go back to the ancient book. The Child was sweating, but not bleeding. He healed too fast. Two strong Soldiers were holding him down.

"Your Holiness, I have told you everything!" the man sobbed.

Elijah sighed. Tears were nothing. Even dogs cried if you beat them. This Heretic - *yes, a Heretic at heart... I see it now* - this Heretic was playing him for a fool. He made a little gesture with his hand and the barrel-chested Soldier on the left of the Heretic snapped the arm he was holding. The Heretic screamed.

"You see," said Elijah, "the pains of the flesh may be sharp, but they are temporary." He gestured again, talking as he did so. "Pains like this," -snap- "are torment enough, but imagine that scream you are screaming now enduring for all of eternity. The torments of Stan will have you screaming until your lungs want to tear loose from your chest. Confess your sin, and I will absolve you."

The Heretic didn't say anything, just continued to scream. "Gord damn you, confess!" Elijah shouted at him, kicking him in the throat. The Heretic made a gagging noise.

Elijah beckoned; a small boy carried a bowl of water to him, careful not to look at the Heretic. Elijah dipped his hands in the water, then backhanded the Heretic across the face; the prisoner's nose broke. The nose only bled for a few seconds, the blood mixing with the water streaked on the Heretic's face and running down his cheeks the faster for it. "Your sin is on your own head," Elijah intoned. He made another gesture, a hand sweeping across his throat.

A third Soldier efficiently beheaded the prisoner, placing the head on the floor. He cut off the Heretic's hands, as well, placing them on the head. A moment later, Elijah stared incredulously as the severed wrists grew new skin that started to merge with the scalp, fusing seamlessly into a mockery

of Gord's perfect design. "What demonic monstrosity is this? Take this and burn it!" he shouted. *Even the corpses carry the Heresy ingrained!* The Soldiers did as he bade, dragging away the corpse. The water boy emptied his bowl over the bloodstains, and two servants hurried to mop the Temple floor clean. Another pair of Soldiers were already dragging another Child in.

"Smail!" Elijah yelled. The Commander came at a run, dropping to a knee.

"Your Holiness," Smail barked.

"What is going on in my fold?" Elijah demanded.

Smail looked uneasy. "Your Holiness, it seems that the Heretics have created a devilish creature..." He paused, licking his lips, before carrying on. "It is able to spread the Heretic abomination to anyone it bites."

"Bites? This creature dares to pollute the skin of the Children with its foul teeth? I want it killed!"

"Yes, Your Holiness. It shall be done," Smail responded, bowing again. He turned on his heel and ran out.

This new Child was also old, a woman this time, though. She was babbling about a creature, furry with hooked claws and fearsome eyes. "Did you tell her about this creature?" Elijah asked the two Soldiers. They both shook their heads, not daring to look at him.

"Why is it that only the old have seen this creature? I smell the work of the Puppetmaster, urging those Heretics to make deals with the feeble-minded. 'You can live forever,' he tells them, and they are afraid of dying, so they weaken." He glared at the Child. "Is that not the truth?"

"I was bitten!" She held out her arm. Tiny scars were fading as she spoke.

"How dare you try to fool a Messenger of Gord!" Elijah roared at her. "I am no child, to think that self-mutilation of the body is unthinkable." He spat on her outstretched arm. "You pile sin upon sin, woman!"

Reflexively, she pulled her arm in, staring. "I am touched by a Vangel," she said, a tone of wonder in her voice.

"A wolf, wearing sheepskins. You cannot dodge your crimes so easily, play-acting the role of a faithful Child of Gord," Elijah warned her. She looked up, frightened. "Yes, you are judged and found guilty. You are a Child no longer, but a Heretic, to be judged as are all such spawn of the Puppetmaster." He drew a finger across his throat, and a Soldier drew a knife across hers. Elijah stepped back from the spray of blood. "Take this and burn it," he ordered. "If you encounter more of this madness, do not waste my time further. You have seen how to handle it."

He turned back to the podium, staring down the Gordword open before him. Flipping through its well-worn pages, he sighed. The ancientness of the paper made him relax. He'd just started to absorb himself in reading when Smail came back in, clutching a golden ball of fur with an armored hand. There were scratch marks on the steel, where something

sharp had tried to gouge through. The ball was still wriggling.

"Your Holiness, I think this is the Abomination."

Elijah stared at it. There was no way to tell which side was up; the creature had multiple appendages and strange large eyes that stared at him. Oddly, the thing didn't seem to be afraid. Its claws started scratching again at Smail's armored fist.

"I wore armor so that it could not touch me, if the curse is true," Smail said, bowing his head.

"Did I not order this thing killed?"

"It did not die from being stabbed or shot," Smail replied.

"Bring in a beggar from the street. I will provide absolution if the curse is true," Elijah ordered.

Smail snapped a finger and a trio of Soldiers rushed out of the temple. Elijah called for a cage, and Smail forced the creature inside, ignoring its struggles as it scraped through the too-small opening. Smail snapped the door closed. He studied the armor on his hand.

"This demon is very strong," he said, tracing one of the gouges. He pulled out a knife, stabbing it at the armor on his hand. The blade bounced off without leaving so much as a scrape.

Elijah frowned. Truly this "demon," as Smail called it, was horrific. And what else could it be besides a demon? No creature such as this was ever born naturally on Gord's earth, that was certain. Despite the horrors in the waste outside the city, at least the Afflicted still resembled the creatures they had once been. This demon resembled nothing Gord had created.

Small children and even some Soldiers gathered around the cage, staring and pointing at the demon. Elijah stood back and let them gawk. It was good to show them how evil could be caged - and destroyed. Oh yes, he would show them the destroying part too.

The trio of Soldiers came back, dragging a middle-aged man in rags. The beggar's eyes darted around fearfully. The Soldiers forced him to his knees before Elijah.

"The cage," said Elijah.

Smail flexed his hand inside the steel glove, checking that it was secure before he went near the creature. Then he dragged the cage over before the beggar.

"Open it," Elijah ordered.

Smail nodded, opening the cage. Elijah didn't hesitate; he grabbed the beggar's arm and thrust it inside. There was another spray of blood as the creature's hooked claws sliced into the man's hand. He screamed, of course.

After a few seconds of unpleasant slicing and crunching sounds, Elijah released the beggar's arm. He stepped back as the man crumpled to the floor, crying and cradling his maimed hand. Elijah sneered. "Look, he is bleeding like a dog. This creature is an Abomination, a demon truly, but it is not the spread of the Heresy." He turned back to his Gordword. "Burn the

creature, and wrap up this beggar. Give him food; he has been useful and deserves to eat today." A flurry of activity behind him told him that he was being obeyed. "Smail!" he called.

The Commander rushed to kneel before him. "Yes, your Holiness."

"We cannot have the Heretics tempting our people." He raised his voice. "Today, we end the heresy!" His Soldiers raised their fists in a shout, and he started toward his quarters. "Follow me," he said to Smail.

Smail looked curious, but followed him anyway. Elijah ignored the servants in his way as he went, nearly knocking some of them over. He strode into his quarters, flinging the door open, and he pulled out a crate from under his bed. It was full of biosprays. Elijah pulled out a cylinder and passed it to Smail.

"What is this, your Holiness?" asked the Commander.

"Gord has seen fit to provide us with an answer to the Heretic blasphemy. It is time for their Stronghold to fall. Many of us will die, but we will triumph." He touched the cylinder in Smail's hand. "This will kill any who have partaken of the Heresy and will not touch the Faithful or the ignorant Lost Ones. Have your Soldiers coat their weapons with the contents, and carry the remainder in the cylinders with them. You will purge the Heretics from their own dens. The Avenger will spread from Heretic to Heretic after it has entered their bodies. The Soldiers will help it spread faster. Do you understand?"

Smail raised a fist in salute. "It will be done. The Heretic Stronghold shall be purged." He took the crate and headed out.

Elijah let his knees fold, sitting down abruptly on the bed. *It has come, Gord. The time when those who have scorned You shall pay the price for their pride is here.* He reached under his bed again, pulling out a chest. He brushed the dust from the top of it, pressed his finger against the lock. With a muted beep, the lock released, and he eased the lid open. Inside, carefully folded, was a suit of armor; not the medieval plate armor, but a special suit of ordinary-looking clothing made of an impenetrable fabric. It was Heretic technology, but he had blessed it. He began to undress, his mind filled with thoughts of the Heretics he would soon slay.

Chapter Seventeen

Since the Funkar assassin - the "hitter," Snik had called it - had tried to kill her, Tyni hadn't gotten much rest. She rubbed her eyes; they were sore, not sleepy. Sighing, she dragged herself to her feet and rinsed her face in the dirty sink. She dug out the little locked box that contained her loot, grabbing enough odds and ends for breakfast.

As she walked along the dusty path leading to the food tents, she passed a small clearing between several shacks and stared at the new fence that had gone up. Inside, a mass of golden fur seethed in the morning sunlight. Dozens of those little creatures were moving about, and the funnel mouth of a copier was spilling more of them out as she watched.

Shaking her head, she went on, grabbing her breakfast and taking it back to the clearing. She stared at the creatures for another moment, watching them tumble over each with hooked claws and wiggly eyes, then went off to find Raj.

He was on top of his hill, as usual. Today he was holding a strange posture, balancing on one foot while he arched backwards and touched the other foot to his head. She had watched him do that before, and it never ceased to puzzle her. One thing she'd learned, during her trips to watch Raj's strange routine, was never to disturb him. It wasn't that he would yell at her, or throw things. She actually worried that he might hurt himself. That posture looked painful.

"Tyni," he said, greeting her without moving. She thought she could see that glow around him again.

"When are we taking those creatures in?" she asked without preamble.

"I think," said Raj, twisting into another strange position, "that all is ready this night. We will have our fun before the sun goes down. Already some have made themselves Permanent, like you."

As much as she'd expected that, she found herself a little jealous again. She shrugged it off. "What about you? Will you do it?"

Raj chuckled, the sound warped by the fact that his head was stuck behind one of his legs. "I have thought of it," he admitted. "But not a neuron either way since now. And what hurry?"

"Are you going to go with us to spread the Permanency?"

"Indeed," he replied.

"What if you are injured? If you are Permanent, then you don't have to worry about that."

He only laughed. "Why would I? No one lives forever. Not even the Permanents." His face grew faintly more serious. "Not even you, Tyni. All of us, we have our time. If it is mine, then all the Permanence will do me no good. Squish! I will be lemonade." He pulled himself to a normal standing

posture and smiled at her, showing very white teeth. "For the moment, I will enjoy the morning." He picked up a stick and stirred his ever-present fire.

In the evening, she made her way back to the creature copier. The pen was crowded now; slumrats gathered around, some deliberately picking up creatures in order to be made Permanent. Some didn't survive the attempt. If the creatures sliced a major artery with those hooked claws, they bled to death before they could go through the change. She shuddered at the bodies of the unlucky ones lying around. She hadn't realized that it was so dangerous when she had first touched the creature. She remembered it clearly; soft golden fur shining in the sunlight. It had looked so harmless.

Well, it clearly was not so harmless - it, or its myriad brothers here. Not that she knew whether "it" was male or female. Maybe it was genderless. She looked around for something to place a creature in, and a stack of wooden cages lined up near the fence provided an easy solution. Ignoring the pain as the creature sliced into her hands, she picked up one of the wiggly furballs and locked it into the crate.

A crowd was gathering on the outskirts of the slums. Tyni found herself floating on the edges. The mob was disorganized, but everyone knew the final goal. Every slumrat had it drilled into his head: "Get them before they get you." Still, there was a more important reason that she was here, she knew. The disorganization made her impatient, but she would go even if she had to go alone.

One of her earliest memories was of her father pacing in the living room; she didn't remember what he was saying, but she remembered the switch he carried in one hand, and the Gordword in the other. It had been a slumrat raid that freed her from the Enclave, when she was too young to remember. Her parents were too ensnared to leave, so she'd been rescued alone. Many of the slumrats in this crowd had not been so lucky; they were freed late, or had escaped on their own. Now, there was a chance to help other children do the same.

Besides, there was loot to be had in the Enclave; no slumrat would venture in alone, but the idea of a mass attack on the Enclave had brought out more than a handful of would-be looters. She could tell the difference; the looters carried no creatures, and skulked around in the shadows. Most of them actually seemed afraid of the creatures.

Just when she had made up her mind to leave by herself, the crowd hushed. A greenish glow drifted through the crowd; it was Raj. He was playing around, as usual, juggling six colored balls in his hands as he strolled away in the direction of the Enclave. A cheer went up from the crowd, and the mass began to string out as the crowd slowly organized into a column with Raj at its head.

The moon was rising overhead. The stain on the lunar surface was visible, as it always was, where extensive farming had turned a section of

the satellite into massive greenhouse-covered fields. Tyni had heard all about it, of course, but she'd never seen images of it, and certainly she'd never been. The moon was just another impossible dream dangling just out of reach of slumrat hands. Not even most Citizens could afford to go there, from what she'd heard. Still, it provided a soft light for them to approach the gates of the Enclave after an hour's walk.

She was near the tail of the crowd, so she heard the deaths of the sentries at the gate instead of assisting. The slumrats poured into the Enclave, throwing the creatures at Funkars as they encountered them. Torn bodies on each side of the gate greeted her as she walked through; the faces stared at her blindly.

She didn't run, even though many around her did. She walked into the Enclave, looking around curiously. She'd been into the City, but never the Enclave. With a thousand or more slumrats tonight, it was almost a safe place. Especially now that many of those slumrats were Permanents. The houses here were better-kept than the shacks she was used to, neat affairs of brick and tile. If a bit decayed, they were still strong structures. *How can they be so wealthy?* she asked herself. She'd thought only the Citizens were able to have houses.

As she stopped and *really* looked around, she began to understand. Unlike her slums, this place was stratified. There were beggars on the side of the road, people moaning for handouts. They didn't seem to care much that the slumrats were strangers, or that they were carrying strange clawed creatures. They just wanted food.

The poverty made Tyni shudder. Things were bad in the slums, truly, but nobody starved. If you couldn't work, you'd be fed. If you could work but weren't, you'd be shamed into doing something useful - and then you could eat. There was always something to do. The jewelry she'd paid at the kitchen went to purchasing the bulk leavings of the food that the Citizens no longer required. Here, it was different. Here, some Funkars were fat and others were emaciated. Tyni shook her head, wondering.

She stole a glance inside one of the houses. A veiled Funkar woman shouted at her as she intruded, picking up a metal dish of some sort and shaking it at her by the handle. Tyni just smiled, and went inside. She tossed the creature at the woman, who was ready for her; the dish sailed through the air and batted the creature across the room. That seemed to annoy it; it charged the woman and sliced into her leg before running away.

Tyni sighed. The veiled woman was sitting on the floor now, cradling her injured leg and moaning. The creature had crawled into a corner underneath the stairs. Ignoring the creature's hooked claws, Tyni stretched an arm under and grabbed it, pulled it out despite its vigorous resistance. Her arm was sliced to hell when she withdrew it, but the creature was in her hands. She looked around the house.

On almost every wall, a portrait of a white-clad Funkar hung. One was

captioned: "Elijah, Vangel and Defender of the Faith." The other portraits lacked captions, but they shared the Vangel's face. She found her skin crawling as she looked at the Vangel; even on paper, his eyes seemed to glare at her malevolently, like he hated her. She couldn't imagine living in a place under such a gaze.

Upstairs in a side bedroom, she found a small girl hiding under the bed. The girl looked frightened, a scared, tiny face framed by dark curls. "Come out," Tyni said gently. The girl shrank back. Tyni tried to reach under and grab her, but the child kicked and screamed and bit her hand. Tyni recoiled. "Have it your way. You can't keep me from helping you, though."

She didn't hesitate; she flung the creature underneath immediately. She found herself shrinking back at the little girl's screams. *It's for her own good*, Tyni told herself unconvincingly. After a moment, when the only sound was sobbing, she leaned over, staring under the bed again. The tiny face was blood-smearred; there was blood all over the floor, running out in a fierce red puddle. The sobbing was growing quieter. The creature waved its eyestalks at her from behind the girl's head. Tyni felt the nausea grow in her stomach. *I can't take this*. She gritted her teeth and reached over the girl to grab the furball, then ran downstairs. The woman - Tyni assumed it must be the little girl's mother - was still sitting on the floor, rocking back and forth. Tyni tore her eyes away. If there was loot in this house, she wasn't going to stay around to find it.

She stumbled through the door back into the street outside. She could hear screams now, and there was blood everywhere. She could see it, but she could also smell it, metallic and sickly-sweet. It filled the air, and the streets, running underfoot in little rivulets. Some of those beggars were dead now; others simply looked shocked.

She shuddered, looking back at the house. The creature wriggled in her hand; she looked at it. It stared back at her with those strange eyestalks, flexing its hooked claws. It had blood on its fur. Some was hers, but she wasn't worried about that. *I heal*. Some of the people lying around her weren't going to heal.

She steeled herself. *It's for the better*. These people were trying to doom what was left of humanity to short, miserable lives. She told herself that every time she passed a bleeding body crumpled or crawling on the street.

Increased shouting told of greater resistance to the south. The noise came from the direction of a tall building, with massive columns. She could see blood splashed on the columns from where she was. Raj was nowhere to be found; she darted from alley to alley, looking for him.

She turned a corner and found herself in another alley; it was quieter than the street, so she headed deeper inside. On the other side it met a laneway that ran behind the house she'd just left. *Maybe I can wrap around*

to that temple without being seen. She couldn't see a reason not to try.

The laneway grew darker as she walked. A dog barked at her. She walked past several darkened houses, some that didn't touch each other, but she couldn't find another alleyway back to the main street. She could hear the fighting coming from the east as she walked, then from the northeast as she went further south. She realized she'd walked past the temple now. *I need to see*, she thought. She tossed the creature onto the roof of the nearest house, and climbed up a gutter on the side. She slid and scraped and nearly fell once, but she made it. She stood, balancing awkwardly on the ridge of the roof. The Enclave was spread out before her.

She could see the fighting now. Some sort of soldiers were there, wearing crossed cloaks. *Must be Funkars.* She winced; they seemed to have access to guns, and too many slumrats were down. Not that the losses were all one-sided. She could see more than one body wearing a white cape, and none of those were getting up, even though she watched for a moment. Suddenly, from the direction of the temple, she saw a greenish glow. *Raj!* She scanned the laneway desperately for a route. *There!* To the south, a gate led back to the main road; it was set into a wall, like the door to a house. She would have walked past it without noticing. The glow was heading toward her. *Perfect.*

She turned to the creature. It glared at her woefully, so she kicked it off the roof. Lying on her belly, she let herself slide feet-first off the roof; hanging for a moment by her hands at the edge, she let herself drop. The shock was hard on her knees, but she stood up again quickly. She dusted off her hands and turned to get the creature. A blade pricked the base of her skull, just enough to break the skin. She stood very still.

"Raise your hands," said a voice. "You Lost Ones do not know what you do here this night."

She complied, slowly putting her hands into the air. She started to turn around. "Who-"

The blade tightened against her neck. "His Holiness has ordered that only Heretics and those who have partaken of the Abomination shall die," said the voice. *Abomination?* Her mind flashed back to the jagged shard of glass she'd driven into her thigh, to the way that the wound closed up without a scar. Oh, she'd drunk deeply of the Abomination.

The voice continued. "Do you submit to the authority of Gord, and will you allow yourself to be tested? Refusal to submit to Gord is death, as is partaking of the Abomination."

"I will submit," she said. The blade did not leave her throat; she had not expected it to, but she did not want to die. She could hear footsteps shifting around her.

"Check her," said the voice.

"Yes, Commander!" A white-cloaked soldier came to stand in front of her. "Your hand," he demanded, drawing a long knife from its sheath.

She stretched her hand out, shaking. The soldier grabbed it, turning it palm up. The knife bit swiftly into her palm, but she refused to whimper. The soldier raised an eyebrow at her silence - then both eyebrows shot up and his jaw dropped as the cut began to close.

"She's a Heretic!" he shouted.

"Quiet, fool!" the Commander hissed. "A horde of untrained Lost Ones can take a platoon!" The Soldier looked chastised. "Enough of this noise," the Commander continued. His voice hardened. "You know what to do."

The Soldier nodded, raising a fist to his forehead. "Lost-, er... Heretic! You have been judged guilty of a crime against Gord, and hereby are sentenced to death in accordance with the Law of Gord." He drew back the knife, grabbing her hair in his other hand and yanking her head back so that her neck was exposed. Tyni squeezed her eyes shut. She remembered; not even a Permanent could heal a severed head without assistance. *I'm going to die.*

"It be a nice night. A warm night, though. One to sit and sing at the stars, and drink lemonade to soothe a burning throat," observed a familiar voice. Tyni opened her eyes. *Raj?* The Soldier about to execute her froze, his arm holding the knife in the air; he looked silly, Tyni thought.

"Who's there?" barked the Commander's voice.

"No one of any importance; a friend of the light-hearted, some call me. It be a good night for a walk, yes?"

"No Child of Gord would be out. If you serve Gord, go to your home and lock your door, Child," the Commander said flatly.

"Gord. I know of Him, but His Child I am not," Raj chuckled. "I have lived well, and too long to be a Child now. My bones, they are quite old!" Tyni turned her head slightly; he was standing in the shadows, but she could see the glow. "Why do grown men be hassling a woman in the dark? My mother, she would spank you good."

"This woman is a Heretic. It is no business of yours. Go, or suffer the wrath of Gord for your disobedience, Lost One."

Raj came forward, tucking something away under his clothes. He was blinking in the light of the electric lanterns carried by the Soldiers. He fumbled around again in his shirt and pulled out his six balls. In a heartbeat, they were floating through the air in a slow shower, each ball a different color. They coruscated in the lantern light. The thief in Tyni automatically analyzed them - *must be diamond-nanoplated*, she noted.

"Home, yes..." Raj blinked and nodded. "A good place for the night, when it is cold. A fire, and a warm companion-" He paused and smiled slyly at the guards. "Yes, a warm companion to add pleasure to the night. Shall we not go home?" His eyes met hers briefly.

The Commander shifted irritably; even the Soldier with the knife turned to stare at Raj. "Look, fool," the Commander started - and Tyni let herself fall sideways into a roll and the knife passed over her head. She

came up running for the shadows. She glanced back over her shoulder in time to see Raj disassembling the shower of balls, each one thrown forcefully at a different Soldier as it landed in his hand. There were only four soldiers and the Commander; she cried out as the first ball hit and exploded in brilliant light that pierced her eyes. The world flashed bright four more times, and then she couldn't see a thing, only hear moans behind her. An arm grabbed her elbow. "It be time for us to leave, Tyni."

"Raj," she said gratefully. "They were going to-"

"Fear makes animals of us all," Raj shrugged. He was pulling her along quickly.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

"There be a monster of a Funkar in that temple. He thought that a glowing 'Lost One' would be a prize. I disagreed. The alley beckoned, and inside I saw you." He smiled. "Even the fates love lemonade."

She had to agree. She was happy to be alive, but Raj gave her little time to think on it. She was surprised at how quickly he could move. Since her transformation, she'd hardly lost her breath even running, but he was making her move fast enough that she started to breathe hard. She didn't lose her breath, but she felt the pace. They broke out of the alley into the street. The slumrats were starting to fall back as the Soldiers organized.

"Let's go home!" Raj shouted, waving his arms to catch attention. The slumrats around him took up the call. "Fall back!" They all carried loot of some sort; one ambitious man had wrapped a rope around one of the market stalls and was trying to drag it along after him. Others carried clothing, or tools stolen from a kitchen or a workshop. And, of course, the children - many slumrats were carrying one, or else shepherding the young Funkars who had ran to them on their entry. Tyni was one of the few empty-handed. She put the thought of the little girl under the bed out of her mind.

"Help someone," Raj said. She nodded; it was unusual for Raj to give an order, but this one made sense to her. There were injured slumrats crawling toward her between the overturned market stalls. She grabbed one under his arms, lifting him over her shoulder. The man was leaking blood from a slash running up his side, underarm to hip. Raj was already heading toward the gate with a limping woman leaning on him for support.

We're not all making it out, Tyni noted. She could still hear screams, and as the slumrats streamed out of the gate, she saw the white-cloaked soldiers marching in a line toward the gate, weapons firing. "We've got to hurry," Tyni said to her charge. The man groaned every time her shoulders dug into his ribs, but he didn't complain.

Back in the shadows, Tyni's creature wiggled its eyestalks, blinking as it looked around. It scratched at the dirt at few times with some of its hooked claws, walked in a circle, and started to crawl crab-like over the ground, heading for the Temple.

Chapter Eighteen

Antoin was worried. He'd been coughing for days now, and the coughs were getting worse. He stood in front of the mirror in his little apartment, looking at his face. He looked drawn, tired. He coughed again; a fine mist of blood splattered on the mirror. His eyes widened. *I don't believe it.*

He reached a finger out to touch the blood, leaving a smear on the glass. A thin hiss sounded as the mirror fogged itself with nanobots that ate it clean again. Antoin ignored it. *How can I be bleeding?*

There was nothing he could do. Once, he'd heard, people went to doctors when their bodies were malfunctioning. There hadn't been doctors in New Byzant since the Medical Conversion had been developed. There was no need; the traumabots took care of traumatic injury, the antibots ate viruses and bacteria and particles foreign to the body, and trollbots went around optimizing cellular functionality. Antoin had never heard of a malfunction. And yet, he seemed to be malfunctioning. He coughed again, ignored the hiss as the mirror cleaned itself. There were scanners to tell you if your immune system was malfunctioning, but what use were they without doctors?

He was beginning to feel more panicked. How could he go anywhere coughing blood? He was sure to be noticed. Nobody went around spraying blood. The Council would be sure to hear, and UrbPat would pick him up. What then? Quarantine?

He went into his living room and dropped into the recliner, blinking slightly as the beams of the Immersion system hit his eyes. He sat there mentally flicking through the infostreams until he hit the City news feed.

"MUNICIPAL OVERRIDE: Funkar Attack Underway" was the headline. The message was repeating over and over. The hovernews bots were streaming their feeds simultaneously; he blinked through them, watching as the 'thopters blasted at the Funkars running into the City proper from the valley outside. He coughed again.

"PERSONAL OVERRIDE: Medical Conversion Vulnerability Suspected" flashed onto the screen. Antoin swore. The Immersion system was intelligent, flashing anything it deemed relevant before his eyes. Municipal overrides took priority, of course, but personal overrides came before anything else. Antoin hoped that Immersion did not track personal overrides. He straightened, watching the feed.

UrbPat streams were showing coughing people on the sidewalk, and a few were spattering blood. *Blood!* Antoin wasn't sure if he felt better or worse to know that he wasn't alone. The feed switched to one inside the Council, where several councilors were coughing. One actually passed out as Antoin watched. A constant narrative was droning on: "...some sort of malfunction in the Medical Conversion system...not everyone is currently

affected...City archivists are searching the History Archives for pre-Three War knowledge on epidemiology...anyone believing himself to be affected should report to the nearest UrbPat center..."

Even the Chatterbox was flooded, paranoid Citizens bleating their concerns and wondering if they were infected.

Antoin shut off the Immersion system, his heart beating faster. Turn himself in? He wasn't about to do that. No telling what they would do; maybe they would decide to euthanize any afflicted Citizen. No, he needed another alternative. The only problem was, he couldn't think of any alternatives.

A wild idea hit him. *The biohacker*. She'd done something to him. There was a chance that she could fix him. He felt anger rising. If nothing else, he could kill her for doing this to him. He'd never killed anyone before, but he was willing to try, in her case. He could feel himself weakening by the hour. If he was to do anything, it had to be now. *Not enough time*.

Antoin went to his personal infocenter. "I need location replay," he ordered, rubbing a thumb over his wrist. He could feel the tracking implant under his skin, the one that every Citizen had. They were quite useful, and only linked to his personal infocenter. History said that once, there was a global tracking infocenter, but that was before Antoin had been born.

"Please state a time frame or a location," the system requested.

"From three weeks ago until now, any locations in the Enclave." He had been so disoriented then; his head had been fuzzy. If he had been himself, he would have remembered the location without any need for assistance.

The infocenter flashed a map on the wall. He fast-played until a flashing marker traced his entry into the Enclave. Antoin waited patiently as the marker tracked him around the Enclave. *Where was I held?* The movement told him nothing - *there!* He watched the timer count hours. It was in the western part of the enclave, just south of the wall. Suddenly the marker was moving again, tracing him to the gate. He touched the wall and the map froze.

"Trace completed," the system informed him. Antoin turned away; he had already transferred the trace into the computer on his wrist.

What else? He needed weapons, and he had none in his house. No Citizen needed weapons, but he would be a fool to go into the Enclave unarmed. He had been a fool to go in at all. *What was I thinking?* He was not given to impulse. His head hurt as he tried to remember, but his mind stayed empty. He sighed. *Weapons*, he reminded himself. No time to wonder.

Only the Guard and Urbpat had weapons. The Immersion broadcast echoed through his head - "...report to their nearest UrbPat center..." No, UrbPat was not an option. They would quarantine him, like he did to creatures newly arrived at CfeX. It would have to be the Guard.

He dressed hurriedly, careful to wear his CfeX uniform. He ordered his 'sport to take him to the Guard headquarters, staring morosely at the droplets of blood he kept coughing over the console along the way. For once, he didn't bother looking around.

The headquarters building was old, a long, squat affair designed for practicality. A few trees dotted the lawn outside, hemmed in by the street. Lawns were a luxury in the City, but all Antoin noticed was the blood he kept coughing onto the grass. A sentry posted in the door ignored him as he placed his hand on the scanner at the door. "Antoin Makler. Citizen Identity confirmed. You may enter," said a computerized voice. It was male, authoritative. The door swung open.

Inside, several halls led away from the lobby. A sign hanging from the ceiling clarified things. Arrows marked out the hallways: Recruiting, Public Relations, Militia Commander. He picked the last one.

The officer in charge in the main militia office looked harassed. He was wearing a comset, which was chiming incessantly at him. "Yes sir. I'll get on it, sir." "No, Citizen, the Funkars have not breached the City." "Yes, Citizen. Report here immediately." He looked up as Antoin moved into his view. "Citizen. State your business."

"Reporting for Militia duty."

"One moment," the officer ordered. He gestured in the air, flipping through a virtual roster. "You're pre-cleared. CfeX director, it says. Huh, you must see a lot of weird creatures."

"Yeah, I do," said Antoin. "You should drop by the center someday. Where's the armory?"

"Armory?" The officer looked distracted for a moment as another chime went off. "Through that door." He jerked a thumb at an arch behind him.

"Thanks," Antoin said, but the officer was already ignoring him. Antoin headed for the door; as soon as he was sure that the officer was distracted, he covered his mouth with his sleeve, coughing violently. He tried to stay as quiet as he could, which made the coughs rack his body that much harder. When he drew away his sleeve, it was damp with blood. A faint glow flickered over the material; the blood dried instantly and fell off in a dusty red shower. *Thank goodness for self-cleaning material.*

The Armory was empty, except for another officer sitting behind a window. "You're Citizen Makler. Pre-cleared. You have a few choices here. An exploder - it's ballistic, limited number of projectiles. It's heavy. Long range, though, and can take out a small crowd. You only get six shots." He smiled gleefully, waving another weapon at Antoin. "I have a plasma blade if you want it; it's light, but you have to be willing to get in close. And here's a standard hand-laser, if that's your preference. Bit of a compromise. You'll only take down one at a time, but you don't have to worry about running out of charges."

"I want the H-gun. Do you have a knife?"

The soldier grinned. "Do I have a knife?" He waved an arm behind him. "I got knives. Swords. Kitchen knives. Combat Knives in two flavors - grip'n'rip, and sushi. I got lots of knives."

"Sushi?"

"Yeah, slices really fine. Like a chef's sushi knife, but capable of cutting metal. The blade is nanotreated; nothing will stick to it, and it won't get bound up in bone. The ripper will corkscrew when it penetrates, and take a lot of meat with it when you take it out again. Which is better depends on how you prefer to fight."

"The sushi blade," Antoin said. He didn't know if his stomach could handle something that made a big mess.

"You got it," said the armorer. He slid a small H-gun over, and tossed the knife at the ground before Antoin's feet. It landed point-down an inch from his toes. "Careful with that blade. It will cut through metal, like I told you. The fighting is at the southwest gate. Have fun." The man was grinning still. Antoin shook his head. *Crazy people.*

He left, heading for the southwest gate. He had to stop several blocks away as the fighting grew. Debris choked the road ahead, where a building had collapsed over the street into the building across from it. 'Thopters flapped overhead, lasers zapping down into the smoke ahead of him. He could hear screams and shouts, and the crash of explosives. Things were getting rough. *So much for not breaching the city.*

Antoin stepped out of the 'sport. "Go Home," he ordered, and the little vehicle backed away. He headed for the debris barricade, climbing up carefully. He stuck his head over the top of a torn sofa lying in a pile of brick and peered around

A sea of bodies was pressing through the gate. Funkars, they were. Antoin could see the cloaks through the smoke, and could hear them shouting, "Gord will prevail!" They were chanting as they tried to advance, firing away at the Urbpat officers. They seemed to be relying on old ballistic firearms, but somehow, impossibly, there were UrbPat corpses out there, and Citizen bodies. From the mess, it looked like the Funkars had penetrated the city at least once, but been pushed back and were now attempting a new assault.

UrbPat officers were methodically firing and advancing on the gate. They were literally walking on Funkar bodies, now. Antoin could smell burned flesh. One of the officers got too far ahead of his fellows; four Funkars rushed him. He killed two of the fanatics before the others reached him and relieved him of his head. Antoin turned away at the sight.

He wasn't going to get through that gate. That much was obvious; he was no suicidal hero. He looked around, trying to think of a better plan. Another cough racked him, and he didn't bother to wipe away the mist of blood this time.

His eye climbed up a nearby tower, apparently home to a Councilor or a merchant, given its opulence. And at the top, a bird-like wing hung over... *Yes!* Without hesitation, Antoin set out for the building. A 'thopter was just what he needed. He knocked at the door.

"Yes?" answered the door's automatic greeting system.

"Antoin Makler. Please inform the house master that I wish to speak with him."

"Councilor Edwin is out at the moment," the door informed him.

"Would you like me to connect you with him directly?"

Antoin swore under his breath. He kicked the door open - or tried to. It was harder than he'd expected, and he found himself on his ass. Not bothering to stand, he leveled the H-gun at the door and burned the locking mechanism apart.

Wearily, he climbed to his feet and kicked the door again. This time it flew open and slammed against the wall inside. He looked around as he stepped through, feeling envious. An alarm system informed him at great length about the consequences of his intrusion. He ignored it.

His own place was comfortable enough, but the Councilor obviously came from a much longer line with greater investments. This house was a museum. Antoin was no art connoisseur, but he was sure that some of the paintings hanging on the wall were from pre-War times, maybe even from the dawn of civilization. He sniffed the air; there was a stale feeling to the place. For all his wealth, the Councilor didn't seem to be home much to enjoy it. That, or he never washed.

You're not here to gawk, he reminded himself. He stepped onto the autolift pad, which whisked him away to the top floor. It braked to a whisper-soft stop, even more smoothly than the one at the Council building itself. Antoin found himself in a small lounge, with white leather couches and a plass door to the 'thopter pad outside. Antoin stopped halfway to the door as another of those coughing fits took him. When he straightened, there were blood spatters on the white leather. Funny enough, there didn't seem to be any bots in the couch; the red droplets stayed where they'd fallen. *Guess he can afford to hire a slumrat to clean it for him, the bastard.*

He pushed the door open and took a deep breath of fresh air as he walked out to the edge of the roof. The air hit his lungs and made him cough. Something inside his chest seemed to tear, and the pain doubled him over. He forced himself to breath evenly, letting his eyes wander over the city. Smoke was still rising from the south gate, and he could see figures running through the streets. It looked like some of those Funkars had gotten loose inside the City. He watched the little ant-like figures chasing down other ant-like figures; strangely, it didn't seem like the Funkars were actually killing very many people, although they were dying themselves in large numbers.

Antoin turned his attention back to the 'thopter. Stepping aboard, he

glanced around. Everything seemed to be in order. Taking a deep breath, he placed his palm on the kickoff panel. "Antoin Makler, requesting transport under the Fair Travel bylaw." It was a fairly well-known bylaw, he reflected; even the less affluent Citizens were allowed to use any transportation machine, so long as they were willing to have the use logged and reported to the City Council. The policy had worked well, tending to discourage overly-trivial usage - or using machines for the commission of illegal activities. Few Citizens wanted to have to justify to the Council that yes, they really did take a 'thopter from a busy Councilman for a joyride over the Enclave boundary or a flyby of a boyfriend's home. Or worse, that they kept a Councilman from doing his duty so that they could misappropriate someone else's property. In any case, the computer didn't seem to oppose his request. He had been worried that it would note that he was trying to use the machine from a place he shouldn't have access to, but it didn't appear to be that smart.

"Your Fair Travel access has been granted. Please note that all variables of this trip will be monitored, including start and destination coordinates, speed, and precise route taken. Is this acceptable?"

"It is," Antoin confirmed.

"One moment," the 'thopter intoned. "Confirming your Citizen identity." That last, Antoin knew, was to keep a slumrat or a Funkar from stealing valuable City property. "Identity confirmed," the 'thopter said agreeably. "Destination?"

"Enclave, by the most direct rout. I want you to fly west of the gate, and then south over the wall and hover just above ground level in the first clear space you can find."

"Orders accepted and logged. This course is plotted. Please hold tightly to the guiderails." The 'thopter's wings began flapping, and the contraption leaped into the air, gliding down from the tower in a steep dive before leveling out a few meters above the rooftops. Antoin swore softly; they were going to fly right over the fighting at the gate. *Can't be helped*. He just hoped he'd live through it. He crouched down, still holding on to the railing.

A few Funkars took potshots at him as he flew by. More than once he heard the crack of a bullet flying by his ear. He closed his eyes, but it was only a moment before the commotion faded behind him. He peeked out cautiously.

Other 'thopters were out, mostly making a mess of Funkars below them. Antoin's eyes widened as he counted the Funkars; they were out in force. Columns of them were still streaming out from the distant Enclave gate. *Looks like you really made them mad*, he told himself. He couldn't help a short, unhappy laugh. *Not that I know why I did it*.

The Funkars scattered whenever he flew over any part of that column. No more bullets came anywhere close enough to scare him, and after the

'thopter passed the gate and winged westward along the wall, there weren't any more Funkars. He could see some smoke rising up inside the Enclave; it puzzled him.

The 'thopter dipped into a long banking turn, flapping lazily over the wall of the Enclave. There were only three sentries on the wall; they all scattered at the sight of the 'thopter. The ground rushed up at him as the 'thopter dropped, angled toward the sky to lose speed before it bounced softly on the ground. "Destination achieved," it said cheerfully.

"Thanks," Antoin grumbled. He jumped out before the thing decided to flap away with him inside it. "My Fair Travel request is ended."

"Acknowledged. If an audit of your activity is required, you will be notified at your residence."

"Understood," Antoin confirmed. The 'thopter stretched its wings and leaped back into the air, flying off toward the City. Taking a deep breath, Antoin looked around him carefully. He was in a back alley of some sort, faced by the back doors of dozens of blocky buildings which all looked alike. He could have asked the 'thopter to drop him directly at the final coordinates, but he didn't want to be too obvious. He tapped a query into the wrist computer and got an answer. *400 meters*. He started walking despite the pain in his chest, the computer flashing a directional arrow. Following the arrow got him to an unremarkable door; he wouldn't have picked it out from the others for any reason. This was the location, though.

He pulled out the H-gun and paused, taking a deep breath. The air made him cough, and the pain made him clutch his chest. *Something's falling apart in there*, he realized. The coughing brought more blood. *You can do this*, he told himself. He had to. The alternative... He imagined himself lying in a pool of blood, dead from a disease! That was not a Citizen's death. He leveled the H-gun at the door and fired.

The silent blast of light fried the lock. He could see smoke trickling from a hole where the door handle had been. He kicked the door open and stepped inside. The smoke clouded his vision. He waved a hand in front of his face to clear it, but the fog got worse. Soon, everything was black.

Chapter Nineteen

Viktor and Pedro stood over the fallen intruder, weapons aimed. "Scrawny, this one," Pedro observed. Viktor nodded agreement, prodding at the body with his foot. The H-gun lay on the floor a few feet from the intruder. Viktor and Pedro both pulled the filters from their noses. Gina did the same, her face tightening. *I'm getting tired of people breaking in.* She rubbed her nose; the filters weren't very comfortable.

"Turn him over," Gina instructed. "Let's find out who this is." She came to join the two bodyguards. They rolled the intruder over easily. His face came into view, bloody for some reason.

"Why the blood? The gas renders unconscious. It doesn't injure," Viktor pointed out.

Gina recognized the face through the blood. "It's the Heretic," she said, frowning. "The one we infected. Why would he come here?" She straightened. "Close that door," she said to Pedro. He obeyed instantly, of course. Not that anyone would walk by the alley, Gina reflected, but there was no point in taking chances.

"Make sure he doesn't move," Gina said as she walked over to her computer. He didn't seem likely to move; Gina had never seen anyone recover from that particular gas without assistance. She was proud of it; it was her own invention, one she'd nicknamed The Sandman. She pulled up the antidote on the computer and sent it to fabrication. As soon as the unit chimed, she pulled out the biospray and went back to the intruder. "Wakey, wakey," she muttered, injecting him.

It took longer than she expected for the antidote to take effect. As soon as his eyes opened, he was coughing violently, more blood leaking from his mouth. Gina looked him over critically. He was starting to bruise all over. His eyes slowly focused on her, and then he was up on his feet, charging at her. "You!"

He didn't get far. Viktor's arm snaked around his neck and jerked him up to his toes before he'd taken two steps. "Not so fast, little doggy," Viktor said. His teeth were showing as he tightened his arm around the Heretic's throat; it was a smile of sorts, but a bloodthirsty one.

"What did you do to me?" the Heretic gasped at her. He was coughing again; the arm was too tight around his throat.

"Careful, Viktor," Gina ordered. That arm loosened almost imperceptibly. She spat in the Heretic's face, and he flinched. "How dare you come here, dog?"

"My name is Antoin, not 'dog'," the Heretic managed to say. His breathing was a loud whistle; there was still blood bubbling up around his mouth. "What did you do to me? And to the others?"

"Others? Then it's spreading. Good," Gina said. "I hope it hurts."

Antoin tried to respond, but fell into a coughing fit and would have fallen. As it was, he was hanging himself on Viktor's arm.

"Let him go," Gina said. Viktor shrugged, releasing Antoin onto the ground, where he curled into a coughing ball.

"He is making a mess," Pedro pointed out. There were blood smears all over the floor now.

"What...what did I do to you?" Antoin gasped at Gina.

"What did I do?" Gina mocked him. "Your kind is responsible for countless deaths, too many ruined lives to remember, and you pretend to be innocent?"

"I'm a xenobiologist," Antoin said. "I study animals. That's all!"

Gina suddenly realized that she'd never actually spoken to a Heretic before. Somehow she expected them to be demonic, eating children and enslaving people. Studying animals was not something that she had ever thought of a Heretic doing. Still, she tried to remind herself, that didn't mean he was innocent.

"You have the abomination in your blood," she pointed out. "If you were innocent, the Avenger would have passed over you and you would not be dying on my floor, making a bloody mess."

"Abomination?"

"The 'ageproofing,' you call it," she said with distaste.

"You mean that this disease only hits people with a Medical Conversion?"

"Of course. It would not touch an innocent Lost One or a true Child of Gord."

Antoin shuddered. "Why would anyone make something like that? That's horrible. It's inhuman."

Gina couldn't help herself. "Perhaps you Citizens should have thought about that before you went about abandoning children instead of giving them your precious Medical Conversion."

Antoin looked puzzled. "But we can't," he said. "There isn't enough-" He started coughing again. It took him a moment to stop. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "There isn't much of the Conversion left. I think we may have fifty biosprays in the City Vaults. Every Citizen knows that. That's why most Citizens don't have children. You'd have to be a Councilor or a merchant to be able to afford one of those biosprays."

Gina was taken aback. She'd always assumed that the Citizens were just holding out from spite or malice. The idea that they simply didn't have much of it left had never occurred to her. "But why don't you make more? You Citizens have all the technology," she said pointedly. She knew she sounded like a child.

"We lost the technology to do it after the Three War. The planetary archives were destroyed by the Moosies," Antoin said. "We have some stuff in the Historical Archives, but not that. We've been searching for ways to

make more of the Conversions, but so far nothing. Except-" he started, and then he shut up.

"Except what?" Gina demanded. "If you hold out on me, I will have Viktor torture you until you die. You are in no position to withhold information."

Antoin coughed again. "Except that I recently discovered a creature - a Spican creature brought to the City by traders - that seems to be able to mimic a Medical Conversion. Except instead of injecting nanobots, it alters DNA. It's a better design than we came up with," Antoin admitted. He sounded proud. Then he was coughing relentlessly, curling up at the pain. "What did you do to me?"

"The Avenger attaches to the bots in your bloodstream in order to infiltrate cells. It mimics natural blood proteins until it penetrates a cell, then it changes and causes your antibodies to attack the 'infection'. Essentially, it will make your body destroy itself one cell at a time," Gina said. She was proud of it, no matter what the consequences. The work had been elegant.

Antoin didn't answer. Gina raised an eyebrow and Pedro went over to the Heretic, searching for a pulse.

"He's still breathing. Just passed out," Pedro said. Both he and Viktor were staring at her questioningly.

Gina nodded. She looked again at Antoin, and the blood on her floor. *He studies animals*. And she hadn't realized that the Citizens had lost the Medical Conversion technology. She sat back against the wall, staring at him. Viktor and Pedro watched her silently. Finally, she stood up. *Hell*, she thought. *I can't do this, not for Elijah*. She stomped back to her computer and set to work.

Viktor and Pedro exchanged satisfied glances, then walked back to their normal spots at the door. Viktor started repairing the door, and Pedro fixed a watchful eye on the man on the floor.

* * *

Elijah backhanded the servant so hard that blood sprayed and the boy flew through the air, crashing against one of the candle-holders that framed the throne-like pulpit. The gloved hand of his armored suit only made the blow harder. "Fools!" Elijah raged. "You have all failed Gord. You should all die, like vermin! I should kill you myself, to purify this transgression before Gord!"

Not a person was standing. The servants were on their knees; even the Soldiers were on the floor with their heads down. No one dared look up, not at the Vangel, and especially not at the empty spot where the original, authentic Gordword had lain for generations.

"You allow the Lost Ones to come unopposed into the Temple of Gord Himself, and to steal His Word without a challenge. You are all weak, cowardly fools! If Gord does not strike you down, you will count yourself

blessed forever, even if you become starving cripples, or if the Heretics themselves come and skin you alive. Dogs!" He slammed his fist down on the empty pulpit and shouted in incoherent rage.

Elijah could not remember a time when he had been so furious. This was beyond an insult. The Gordword missing - it was so preposterous that he did not even know where to begin to focus his anger.

"Smail!" he shouted. The Captain was there almost immediately, kneeling with bowed head.

"Your Holiness," Smail greeted him.

"The Lost Ones have gone too far this time. I will not stand for any more insolence from them. Gather the Soldiers and all of our Witnesses. We will bring the Lost Ones into the fold, willing or not. I cannot tolerate their sinfulness being flaunted in my face any longer."

"Your Holiness. What shall I do about the Soldiers already attacking the Heretics?"

"Let them continue. I have sent out a call. More Soldiers will be arriving at the Enclave from the outlying areas. Gord will not accept these continued provocations from His enemies. We will flood the Lost Ones with salvation, and the Heretics with death and damnation." Elijah stopped, out of breath. He turned to the kneeling people, his face going purple at their laziness. "Gord *hates* idleness!" he shouted. They scurried to their feet, careful to avoid eye contact with him. He took deep breaths as they melted away, and the normal, busy atmosphere of the Temple resumed.

A thought struck him. *The demons*. "Smail. Are the demons still in my fold?"

Smail nodded unwillingly. "Your Holiness, we have killed hundreds, but many have hidden themselves under houses or in alleys. It will take time to find them all."

Elijah pounded his fist on the lectern. "And meanwhile, my sheep are falling to these demons."

"It is worse than that, your Holiness. Some of the Faithful who have been attacked by the demons are banding together. They are trying to spread a new Heresy within the very heart of the fold. They say that we can use the 'gifts' of the demons to spread Gord's word to the Lost Ones and to the City itself."

"You will stop them," Elijah said calmly. He felt furious, not calm. "Kill them, as painfully as possible, and in sight of the Faithful. I want no such parasites in my flock."

"I understand, Your Holiness." Smail saluted and hurried out.

Elijah stared again at the empty lectern. He could see a faint outline where the Gordword had lain, the wood darker where the light had never touched it. It was an outrageous insult.

Still seething, he made his way back to his little room, nearly trampling some of the servants as he went. *I need good news*. He

remembered the biohacker - she had an Immersion link. She was a temptation, but he could resist that. He took his cloak from a hook near his bed. *I want to see for myself the effects of the Avenger.* Gord would be pleased at the vengeance he had set in motion. A bit of good news would help him to breathe easier.

He snapped his fingers on his way out, and two Soldiers fell in with him. Stepping outside, he took a deep breath. The brightness of the afternoon sun made his eyes blink. He headed out into the market.

There were still stains on the ground, dark patches where someone had bled. And more than one of those demons, crumpled on the ground with holes through their bodies. Whatever sorceries they were able to place on the Faithful did not work on themselves, no matter what Smail had originally thought. Burn enough holes in them, it seemed, and they died. Elijah snorted, and one of his soldiers glanced at him. He ignored the man. Every Vangel knew that Stan was weakest in his own affairs; the Puppetmaster could not sustain his own demons. Stan was a giver of death, not life. *Gord always triumphs.*

Women and children paused to stare at him as he walked by. The opportunity was perfect for an object lesson in the inferiority of evil to the forces of good. "See how the demons have fallen," he shouted to the Children standing around, with a wave at the demon corpses. The Soldiers nodded respectfully. Some of the Children knelt in the dust, muttering prayers of thanks to Gord. Elijah nodded and walked on; here, at least, things were as they should be.

He easily picked out the usual alley; it was all dark shadows despite the brightness of the day. He waited for a break in the traffic, greeting returning Children as they limped in from the Enclave gates. As soon as it was clear, he stepped into the shadows, his soldiers following him. Strangely, one of the men grunted as if hit. Elijah looked back, but neither Soldier's face showed anything amiss. He dismissed it and headed on to the seventh door to the right. He nodded to the Soldier on his left; the man pounded on the door. It was tradition; no Vangel would soil his hands without reason.

After an unnecessarily long moment, the lock clicked and the door swung open. *Odd*, Elijh thought. It looked as if that lock had been replaced recently. He frowned as he went in.

"Are you hiding something from the eyes of Gord, that you must replace your locks?" he demanded, taking in the room. The biohacker's two bodyguards were on either side of the door as usual. He ignored them. The biohacker herself was fiddling with her columns, her back to him. She turned as he came in. Elijah ran his eyes over her; she wore black today, black pants and a tight shirt that pulled his eyes to her- *That is no thought for a Vangel*, he reminded himself.

"We had a break-in," Gina said.

Elijah nodded. *Of course. The recent invasion.* "I wish to use the Immersion system. Let us see how your Avenger has decimated the ranks of the Heretics. Gord delights in their destruction."

Gina seemed annoyed, but gestured at the Immersion chair in the corner. "Go ahead."

Elijah felt the excitement despite himself. Vangels were not supposed to appreciate worldly entertainment, but the Immersion was simply awe-inspiring. He slipped into the chair, wincing as the beams struck his eyes. His left hand fumbled for the controller. He flipped through the channels. Off-world news. Market reports. Ancient "kartoons." Oh, this was interesting. A half-naked woman was dancing, stripping out of the rest of her clothes. He watched for a second, entranced - and then blushed and hurriedly pressed the selector again. Ah, the City information feed.

"MUNICIPAL OVERRIDE: Unknown epidemic in progress. Is the Medical Conversion failing?" Yes. This is what he'd come to see. The hovernews bots were circling. He could see the Heretics up close, their eyes beady and their guts fat with sin. They looked awful, stumbling about. Some were bleeding. A bot circled in front of a coughing Heretic, and he could see the spray of blood in the air. He actually found himself giggling. The report continued. "Some Citizens are at risk of death. Three have died already. The infection seems to progress more slowly in some than others. Sub-Conversion genetic differences may be responsible." Only three? That was disappointing. Still, the dying had only just begun. Elijah felt the silly smile on his face, but he didn't care.

"MUNICIPAL OVERRIDE: Funkar attacks ongoing. The attackers have made little progress against the Urban Patrol." The hovernews bot was floating over the streets. His Children were exchanging fire with the Heretics. Handfuls of the Faithful were being slaughtered before his eyes. The smile faded, to be replaced by angry tears. "I will avenge this," he swore. He slammed a finger on the STOP button, rubbing his eyes as the beams flickered off. He was temporarily blinded, as always.

He stood up again unsteadily. The image of the dancing woman floated into his mind unbidden, and he pushed it away. The biohacker stared at him uneasily. *She knows!* something nagged at him. He frowned at her. "You have guilty eyes," he said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she shot back at him. She had a temper, it seemed.

He ignored her. A temper could be a sign of guilt, or of innocence. "Are the Avenger sprays still being produced?" he asked.

"Of course." She seemed impatient, like she wanted him to leave. Her eyes kept darting around the room.

Elijah stared around him. Nothing seemed out of order. The two bodyguards were watching his Soldiers. There was a bed, a small washroom to the side, her computer area and those strange columns - nothing amiss.

Elijah stared hard at her for a second, and she dropped her eyes. Finally, he shrugged. *Gord will reveal her sins in time.*

"We are leaving," he said to his Soldiers. They fell in behind him as he went to the door. He glared at the bodyguards as he passed them. When he was outside again, just before the door closed and the lock clicked, he could have sworn he heard coughing, a sound like death. First the soldier grunting, and now the cough. He was hearing things.

He shrugged the feeling off and headed back to the Temple at a fast march. His lead bodyguard was nearly to the steps of the Temple itself when the Soldier behind him suddenly collapsed, shivering. Elijah spun around. "What is this?" he demanded.

The Soldier shivered for a moment, trying to speak. "The-the alley, Y-your Holiness," the man stammered. He was rocking on the ground.

"What about it?"

"Something b-bit me." He tried to gesture to his foot. Elijah leaned over; a clean line sliced through the man's boot was edged with blood. The leather was too thick to leak easily, but he was clearly bleeding badly.

"Demons!" Elijah raged. He didn't hesitate; he grabbed a knife from the other Soldier next to him. He pulled back the fallen Soldier's head and cut his throat. "Gord will have mercy on your soul. The Puppetmaster will not take you," he said gently to the body, ignoring the spilling blood spreading toward the gutter. He tossed the knife back to his remaining bodyguard and stormed off toward the Temple.

Chapter Twenty

Tyni huddled in one of the tunnels that led from the slums to one of New Byanzt's elevated highways. Her heart was pounding, but only from fear, not exhaustion. She felt bad for Khalid. The big man was actually lying on the ground, panting like a dog. She would have said that the run was good for him - but running for your life was never a good thing.

The Funkars had hit the Warrens hard. She could still hear the explosions outside, accompanied by screams of pain. She smiled grimly. "The Warrens will take a bite out of them," she said quietly.

Khalid opened his eyes for a moment to smile. "Cleaning up after this will not be pleasant." He closed his eyes and resumed his panting.

Tyni nodded. She looked back at the entrance, clutching the antique handgun tightly. The gun said "Desert Eagle" on it, she noticed, and wondered why. She'd never seen an eagle. Another explosion went off, shaking dust from the roof of the tunnel.

Almost no corner of the Warren was without booby traps that could be quickly armed in the event of an emergency. Even her own little shack had a nasty bit of slicewire rigged to take the head off of an intruder. It wasn't that she had anything to protect, really. No, it was just principle. She steadied the gun, eyeing it warily. It kicked hard, she'd been told.

A scream sounded, coming from somewhere above the tunnel mouth. She glanced at Khalid; his eyes met hers and he smiled encouragingly at her.

"They'll regret it if they actually get in here," he said.

"I hope they won't make it this far. There are enough traps up there to kill at least three men. More, if they aren't careful." She'd set them herself, after Khalid had run in. The mouth of the tunnel was concealed under a pile of tin leaning inside a storage shed. She hoped it would be ignored.

"Why are they even here?" she asked. "It's not like them to attack us. They just want us to go back to their 'Fold.' We're not the Permanents."

"You're young," Khalid said philosophically. "The Rounding Ups happen occasionally. We didn't expect it so soon, but it is not unprecedented. I think that we provoked them this time, if it is a Rounding Up" He didn't seem displeased.

"Provoked?"

"It's Raj," Khalid grinned. "He was showing it to me before we realized that they were coming. He took the Gordword. The original copy, from the High Vangel's lectern in the Temple itself."

"The Gordword? Why would Raj take that?" It didn't make much sense to her.

Khalid shifted himself to a sitting position. He seemed to be breathing easier now. "He was upset. They have possibly taken away any chance of

Permanence for any of us with their virus, and he wanted to hurt them back. What better way than to take away something they value more than life itself?"

Tyni couldn't help smiling, even as she switched the gun to her other hand. "Raj is always a clever one."

"And a fearsome enemy, it seems." Khalid was smiling too.

She turned back to the entrance. It sounded quieter outside, but she was willing to wait a while before heading out. Khalid didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave either.

After an hour had passed with no explosions or screams, she finally tucked the gun away in her belt, and held out a hand to Khalid. "Shall we?"

Khalid nodded and took her hand; together, they managed to haul him to a standing position. He seemed cramped. She stretched, realizing that her own muscles were full of knots.

She released the traps and slid the tin aside warily, pulling out the gun again and following it out of the tunnel. She winced; a body was lying half across the tin. "Funkar," she said immediately. The camouflage and black vest with the swirling Funkar symbols made it plain. Still, she felt some pity. A face full of nine-inch nails was not a pleasant way to go. Khalid was already ahead of her, grumbling.

"I can't look at that," he was saying. She tore her eyes away from the body. She wasn't sure that she could look either.

They stepped out of the shed together cautiously. Other slumrats were emerging from their own hiding places. Some were bloodied, but most seemed to be okay. Still, Tyni couldn't shake a feeling that something was wrong.

It only took a couple minutes more to realize the problem. "Khalid," Tyni said softly. "Where is everyone?"

The slumrats gathered round were only a handful. Normally the Warrens would be bustling. Even given that the Warrens had just been attacked, she was only counting one person in ten. And the most important person was not there. "Raj!" she called. Others took up the call.

The hill? she asked herself. She ran through the Warrens as the shouts of others filled the air. Raj's hill was steep, but she wasn't even winded as she reached the top despite running as fast as she could. Raj's fire was out, and he was nowhere to be seen. She stomped a foot in frustration. "Raj!" she shouted again, but only the wind answered.

Khalid was waiting for her as she made it down to the bottom of the hill again. "No one has seen him," the big man told her. "He was telling people to hide when the Funkars came, but no one remembers seeing him hide himself."

Tyni brushed past him. She couldn't stop looking. If something had happened to him- She didn't want to think about that. The man was like a father to her. She dug into every hiding spot she could find, disarming traps

almost without thought, taking injuries from ones that she failed to spot. After an hour, she'd only found a child, and a few frightened dogs that were happy to see her. She continued to look, ignoring the tears that were looming in the corners of her eyes.

"Tyni!" She turned; it was Khalid. He looked grim.

"Raj?" she asked, wiping her eyes quickly so that he wouldn't see.

"The others are saying that the Funkars were taking people. It was definitely a Rounding Up. People say that the Funkars were shouting something about the time of Grace being over, and that the Lost must return to the Fold. It has been a dozen years since the last Rounding Up." He spat on the ground. "They took Raj. One of the cooks saw it; they were looking for him especially, she says."

Tyni turned and walked away, heading for her hut. "Where are you going?" Khalid asked her.

"I'm getting my stuff and going to the Enclave."

"Are you insane?" Khalid asked, panting slightly as he tried to move his massive bulk to her pace. When she didn't respond, he ran ahead to stand in her way. "Tyni, you'll be killed."

"Raj practically raised me. I can't let him disappear without trying to free him. Those Funkar bastards will kill him." She looked Khalid in the eye. "You know it's true."

Khalid sighed, the escaping breath making him seem to deflate before her eyes. "What can we do? There are too many of them. They are like locusts."

"I'm going anyway," she insisted.

"I can't stop you," Khalid said, throwing his hands in the air. "But I must stay here. We must regroup. Some of the slumrats will escape, and they need a home to come back to. And there will be more children. There always are. Committing suicide will make it worse for everyone."

Tyni nodded, then suddenly threw her arms around him. He shrank away, startled, but then awkwardly put his arms around her and patted her back. She let herself be comforted for one minute, then pushed him away and walked off.

Chapter Twenty-one

Snik had to hand it to the Funkars. The bastards knew how to create a mess. He stood under a morning sun on one of the elevated highways leading into New Byanzt, looking down on a gate that separated the City proper from the residences outside. Most of the residences he could see from his perch had clearly been sacked. Snik sunk down, squatting on his heels as he studied the chaos below. It looked like UrbPat officers had forced most of the Funkars out, but there was something odd going on. He'd seen a number of Funkars running as far into the City as they could, ignoring the UrbPat guards who were sniping them down even though they passed close enough to tangle hand-to-hand. It didn't make sense. A Funkar would not usually pass up an opportunity to plant a knife in a "Heretic's" blasphemous throat. Snik studied the City for a few more moments, then stood suddenly, stretching to get the knots out of his muscles.

"I hate this part," Snik told himself. There was nothing for it but to get closer. Much closer. He walked straight out into the highway. A 'sport screamed to a stop so suddenly that the Citizen female driving it almost catapulted out of the opened top. Only the emergency netting that shot out over the 'sport from a compartment in its dash kept her from being ejected. She stared at him in shock.

Snik pulled a small H-gun from his pocket. He'd taken it from an UrbPat officer he'd dispatched in a back alley of the City a year before, when a client had refused to pay him and tried to turn him in. He had disposed of the client, too, literally - he'd rigged the man's personal waste disposal by breaking the disposal safeguard, and shoved the client in headfirst. Not all of him had gone in, to be sure, but enough of him was vaporized to make sure that he wouldn't be regrowing and coming back again. "No refunds," Snik growled to himself as he headed to the 'sport. "Time for business." He stepped up onto the front of the 'sport and grinned as evilly as he knew how. The woman inside looked terrified.

Snik squatted on his heels and stuck the gun in her face. "This pretty much fucks you up permanently, Permanent." He had his free hand behind him, fingers wrapped around the hilt of a knife just in case she knew some hand-to-hand combat techniques and was naive enough to try to take him. Most Citizens were helpless, but you never knew which ones might have studied something martial for fun.

If she did know something, she was too frightened to use it. She climbed out of the 'sport readily. "Don't hurt me," she pleaded. "How can you do this? Nobody does this anymore. It only happens on old Immersion programs!" She was babbling. Other Citizens were staring as they passed, not that there was much traffic. Snik didn't care either way, as long as they stayed out of it.

Snik shrugged at her. "One more thing." He gestured at the now empty 'sport. "Override it." The gun was still aimed directly between her eyes. When she didn't immediately comply, he moved his finger onto the trigger, staring straight into her eyes. He made himself look demonic. "Do it now."

Her mouth clicked shut and she started shaking. After a second, when he gestured with the gun again, she nodded. "Request manual override," she managed to say, her voice shaking.

"Voiceprint confirmed. Manual override activated. Stress patterns detected in voice; coercion suspected. Alerting UrbPat dispatchers and engaging City tracking module," said the 'sport.

Snik sighed. "Anything else?" The 'sport was silent, so he decided it must be finished. "South Residence Gate," he ordered. The 'sport obliged. The woman standing in the road stared after him, looking stunned.

That was the way these Citizens did things, he reflected. Track this, monitor that, alert those people. He shrugged. It never bothered him much. The Citizens assumed that anyone trying to steal inside the City was a slumrat, and that only Funkars were an actual threat. They usually just sent UrbPat officers to physically overwhelm the suspected slumrat thief, or to shoot the Funkar - no questions asked. Brute force worked well, except when they were facing dealers. Not that there was another dealer in this City. Others popped up occasionally, and tried to move in on him. He quickly disabused them of any notions of competing, and usually of any breath in the process. No point in taking risks. In any case, he didn't think UrbPat would be worrying about ordinary theft with Funkars running around in the streets.

The 'sport glided through the streets of New Byanzt. The traffic was strangely subdued; no one walked along the sidewalks. The emptiness didn't make the trip any faster; the City's traffic routing system was efficient enough to keep traffic flowing even under peak stress, so the travel time was the same either way. Still, the ride was more peaceful with the extra silence. Snik found himself relaxing as the wind rushed past his face.

A few minutes away from the gate, Snik suddenly sat up straight. "Stop!" he ordered the 'sport. The vehicle obliged, and he got out.

The vehicle began to whistle, and the computer blared at him. "Your egress has been reported. Do not attempt to evade the Urban Patrol. Violence is useless against any Citizen. It is recommended that you-"

Snik walked away, ignoring the computer. He could see bodies lying in the street ahead. "The Urban Patrol has much bigger problems today," he muttered.

He crouched over the first body he came to, studying it. It was an UrbPat officer. The head was a few feet away, and the eyes were staring at him. He started to stand, and the eyes followed him. He sighed. "Fine, this is your lucky day." He grabbed the head and positioned it so that the

severed edges of the neck touched the torso. "Don't expect me to do this for all of you bastards. Clean up your own mess." The sound of gasping breath told him that the parts were knitting themselves together as he walked away.

The other bodies nearby were all Funkars, with the trademark camouflage vests. They were sprawled limply on the ground, lying in pools of blood and worse. Most had old automatic rifles in their hands, or dropped near their corpses as they'd fallen. Something small next to one corpse caught his eye.

This Funkar hadn't been carrying a rifle. Snik leaned over the object; it was a small cylinder. "A biospray," Snik said softly. "Fucking hell. The biohacker bitch is dead." He meant it, too. "I'll kill her myself."

It struck him that the Funkar had died very close to the man he'd just helped. He looked back at the UrbPat officer. "I guess it's your time to die after all." The man raised a hand toward him in supplication, but Snik turned away. The officer was doomed if he'd been exposed to the biospray, whether or not Snik tried to help. No point in wasting time.

He started walking back to the 'sport. Every few steps he swore. His business was ruined. Gina was very, very good. That meant that the virus would be very good as well. Which meant that these Citizens were, to put it bluntly, fucked. He swore again.

He needed help. Ordinarily, he'd make his move alone, but Raj owed him favors. If he could get a few slumrats to create a diversion while he headed into the back alleys of the Enclave, it would make his revenge much simpler.

He ditched the 'sport just outside of the City core, and jogged toward the walkways through the Preserve. Birds twittered in the trees; he wanted to shoot them. Another half hour of running and then he was walking up the gravel pathway to his shack. What was left of it.

The place had been flattened. It wasn't just torn down, it was leveled, like several thousand people had trampled over it a few times. The center of what had been his shack was a molten pool, still glowing visibly red despite the sunlight. And corpses were scattered around, no doubt caught in the path when his place self-destructed. He didn't even need to approach them to identify them. His lenses zoomed in and he could make out the Funkar swirl. "What the hell?" he asked nobody in particular. "The bastards cleaned me out." He let out his breath in frustration.

A lesser man might have thrown a fit. Snik refused to do it. He turned on his heel and strode away, heading for the river. When he reached it, he walked along the riverbank toward the shanty town until he reached a part where the dirty water took a sharp bend, undercutting its own bank. He didn't hesitate to jump in.

He waded underneath the overhang, digging below the waterline into the soft mud until his fingers met something hard. He grunted and pulled

until a small, waterproof case came free. He swirled it in the water until it was rinsed free of mud.

Glancing around to make sure that no slumrat children were playing anywhere nearby, he climbed back out onto the bank. He knelt on one knee, flipping the case open.

He pulled out several grenades, tucking them into his belt. A collapsible amp rifle was inside the case as well as a folded coat. He stripped and pulled on the preloaded black bodysuit. The knee-length coat he draped around his shoulders, turning it so that the Funkar symbols were on the inside. No point in alarming the slumrats if they saw him from a distance. The rifle parts he stowed away in the inner lining of the coat, on fabric hooks that could be accessed regardless of which side of the coat was turned inwards. There wasn't much else in the kit, only a few food bars and a tiny first-aid kit which he tucked away in his coat pockets. He closed the case and tossed it in the water. It had a passive beacon on it that he could scan for later if he needed the case again.

He stood up, brushing the dust from his pants. "Better," he said to himself. *Now for the slumrats.*

Snik followed the riverbank, heading toward the shanty town. As he got closer, the quiet struck him. It was odd. Not that he visited the slumrats often, since they couldn't really afford his wares, but every time he'd gone previously it had been a noisy place. The kind of place you could hear from far away. The quiet was unusual.

The shacks stood silent as he approached them, along the little path that led up to Raj's hill. Snik didn't have to wonder for long. As he rounded the first bend that disappeared among the huts, he could smell death. There were bodies here and there, Funkars bodies.

"Fucking zealots," Snik muttered. He moved warily now, stalking through the dirty town. He could distantly hear voices, and he decided to be cautious.

"Hello!" he shouted. The voices died, then resumed, louder. No point in surprising them. People who had just been attacked would not appreciate surprises. He kept his hands open and visible. A couple of slumrats in dirty overalls suddenly appeared, and another pair stepped out from between huts behind him. They all glared at him with obvious suspicion.

"What are you doing here?" one of the men demanded. Snik mentally dubbed him Mole-face; the man was covered with the brown marks. All of the slumrats carried knives, and two held automatic firearms pointed at him.

"Raj. I need to see him," Snik said carefully.

Mole-face didn't soften. "He's not here. Go away."

"Not here?"

"That's what I said." The man's voice was becoming markedly hostile. "Leave."

"Khalid then," Snik suggested.

Mole-face relaxed slightly. "Khalid. Okay, but we're watching you. It hasn't been a good day." The guns didn't lower an inch.

"I can see that," Snik said dryly. He brushed past Mole-face and headed up the hill without waiting for instruction.

"He's on the hill," Mole-face shouted behind him. Snik didn't bother turning around. "Arrogant bitch," Snik heard him mutter to the others.

He ignored the insult. It wasn't worth getting shot at over. He could see Khalid as soon as he crested the hill. The huge man was standing in Raj's usual spot, staring up at a sky growing overcast. Raj's fire was lit, but the man himself was conspicuously absent. "Khalid," Snik said in greeting.

Khalid didn't look down. Snik frowned; the big man seemed distracted. Snik folded his arms and waited patiently. Eventually, Khalid took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh.

"It was a Rounding Up," Khalid said gloomily.

Snik said nothing. He already knew about the Funkars' occasional Rounding Ups. The Vangel in charge would occasionally decide that the Lost Ones had been given enough chances to Convert peacefully, and that they should be taken back into the Fold by force. It happened every ten or twenty years. Snik had seen it twice before, but Raj had never been taken, and he was sure that Raj had seen it many times before.

"You know about this, of course," Khalid said. "This time, Raj was taken. They went for him specifically. They took others too, but they wanted Raj most."

Now that's something new, Snik thought. Usually the Rounding Ups just took whoever couldn't get to the tunnels quickly enough. The Funkars had little heart for facing booby traps and possible death. Once the first handful died, the others simply dragged back whoever they'd caught so far. Snik had never heard of someone being targeted in a Rounding Up. "That's unusual," he offered.

Khalid nodded. "It has never happened before, that I know of. But Raj, he stole the Gordword."

Snik whistled. *So that's why*. "Why'd he do that? The Vangels would never let that go."

Khalid shrugged. "No man is perfect. Raj was angry, and he had the chance."

Snik nodded. It was a stupid move, but he could see the appeal. He couldn't imagine a better way to rile a Funkar. Raj had nerve. "He did a good job of fucking things up," Snik admitted.

"So he did." Khalid sighed. "Now, we have to move on."

"Did the Funkars get the Gordword back?" Snik asked. "Just professional curiosity."

Khalid smiled. "Raj burned it, one page at a time. I watched him do it."

Snik grinned. "He has style." He knelt near the fire, rubbing his hands near the flames. *No beating around the bush.* "I need some men to go with me to the Enclave. I need to kill a person there."

Khalid looked confused for an instant at the sudden shift. "It can't be done," he after a moment. "We have few enough hands as it is now."

"Raj owed me a few favors," Snik sighed. "I understand, of course. There's nothing you can do about it." He stood up again. "I'll just have to take my chances." He went to stand by Khalid, and gripped the big man's shoulder. "The Warrens will be fine again, under you." They stood there a minute, staring up at the sky. Finally, Snik nodded and set off down the hill.

"One thing," Khalid called after him. Snik stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "Maybe you remember Tyni, the one who was first made Permanent," Khalid called. "She left a couple of hours ago, for the Enclave. I tried to talk her out of it, but she would have none of it. She intends to try a rescue, I think. If you see her, maybe you can help her?"

"More favors?" Snik complained, but there was a light note in his voice. Maybe he'd have his backup after all. "I'm a businessman!"

Khalid grinned and waved at him. Snik lifted a hand, and walked away, shaking his head and smiling. *Slumrats!*

Chapter Twenty-two

As soon as he got clear of the carnage, Snik activated the tracking lenses again. He flipped through his Prey database until he located the file on Tyni, and the computer pulled her footprint and DNA information into the tracking module. The overlays came up, analyzing probable paths and recent impressions in the ground. It only took a couple of minutes for the computer to tell him, with 98.2% probability, that Tyni had headed straight along the river toward the Enclave. He could pick out her footprints with his naked eye, but the tracker overlaid them with a soft red glow.

"Damn," Snik said softly as he ran along the riverbank. Even at his running pace, he was only closing the distance at half the speed he was used to. She must have been running full speed. After he'd been running for half an hour, Snik slowed to a walk. He'd just have to catch her in the Enclave. Even though he was gaining on her, there was no way that he would catch her before she got there. "Permanent freak," he muttered without any real venom. Now that he thought about her, he supposed that she was rather attractive, for a freak. He chuckled at himself.

Another ten minutes of travel took him to the wall of the Enclave. There were no 'thopters flapping along the wall, which didn't surprise him. What security the Citizens had would surely be drawn back to the City core, to make sure that the Funkars did not break through again. The 'thopters would be back in a day or two. Something smacked him on the hand, something wet. It was starting to rain.

He pulled a hood from inside the coat, and set it over his head. Ordinarily he'd have to take it off at the gate, but this time he didn't intend to bother. He stopped in the bushes a hundred meters from the gate and began to assemble the amp rifle.

The weapon could be fired in a sniper mode, from the shoulder, or from the waist, and Snik was proficient with all of three modes of fire. It only took him a minute to assemble the weapon, and he wrapped the cloak around him, keeping the rifle barrel-down at his side. He kept his finger away from the trigger; he was no amateur, to risk shooting his foot off in slippery, gloomy weather. The glowing red footprints were brighter, and they led right through the gate. He couldn't be more than five or ten minutes behind.

Snik edged up to the gate, keeping his back to the wall. He raised the rifle to waist-level, prepared to take out the two sentries after a distracting greeting, but there was no need. The computer in his lenses highlighted bloodstains on the near guard's chest, and the far guard's wide eyes weren't seeing anything. *Seems like the girl has steel.* Snik lowered the gun, scanning through the gate. There were a few Funkars moving around, but no Soldiers that he could see. The rain was keeping everyone indoors, which

was just as well. Snik wrapped the cloak tighter around himself and strode through the gates. No point in looking suspicious. As soon as he was through, he turned into the nearest alley, standing close to the wall under the eaves. Most of the water missed him on its way down.

He could still see Tyni's tracks when he peered around the corner at the main street. She had ducked into another alley up ahead. He couldn't be far behind her. "Decisions, decisions," he muttered to himself. Should he kill the biohacker, or catch up with Tyni before she got herself killed? The indecision only lasted a moment. The biohacker would keep, and maybe he could get his backup. He hung the rifle inside the coat again, not bothering to disassemble it. He didn't plan to be spotted. He launched himself out into the rain again, shrinking as far back into his cloak as he could.

After following for a couple of moments, Snik was relieved. Tyni might be impetuous, but at least she wasn't going to try to go through the front door. Her tracks led south, deeper into the Enclave. She was obviously heading for the back of the Temple, where a grove of scrawny bushes that the Funkars must be pretending were trees provided some cover.

Snik let his breath out after he picked her up visually. She was pressed against the back wall of the Temple, near a door that seemed to be a servant's access. "Good girl," he murmured. Now, if only she would give up the whole idea. It was very unprofessional of her. Still, she showed promise. It was training that she lacked.

Snik peered out of the alley, glancing up and down the side road that led off into the heart of the Enclave. There was no traffic, not even the small merchant carts that trundled off into the Wastes from time to time. Snik had been through the Wastes before; there was a reason that no sane person ventured out of the City without a damned good reason. "Bleeding Funkars are like a plague out there," he muttered. Those in the know used the Races instead - long, enclosed tubes that ran from City to City, sealed off from the Funkar hordes. Unfortunately, New Byanzt's only Race gate was here in the Enclave. The Funkars stayed away from it, though, and with good reason. Snik pulled his thoughts back to the girl; she seemed to be preparing to rush through the door. Snik gritted his teeth. "Lovely."

He looked both ways one more time, but no one was around, so he darted across the street and into the bushes. He was on Tyni before she saw him, one of his hands covering her mouth so that she wouldn't scream, and the other waving a warning finger in front of her eyes. "Don't speak out loud," he whispered. Her eyes were wide as they would go, but she wasn't struggling - yet. When he was satisfied that she wasn't going to, he took his hand away.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed at him.

"Quiet!" he whispered. He doubted the Funkars had any technology capable of picking up voices, or otherwise tracking intruders. But he didn't want to risk it. "I know why you're here," he said.

"Raj." She didn't say anything else.

Snik nodded. "He's already dead. We can get revenge later. Now is not the time."

"I am not leav-" she started to shout, but she got his hand clapped over her mouth again for her troubles. He didn't say a word, just looked at her with a perfectly reasonable face until the taut muscles around her eyes relaxed. He took his hand away again. She whispered this time. "I'm not leaving until I find his body."

"I really don't think that's a good idea," Snik said helpfully. Inwardly he was resigned. Young people were inevitably impetuous, and Tyni would be no different. She opened her mouth and he sighed. He was right. *Like I always am.*

"I don't care what you think. I'm not just going to stand around and-"

They both froze as the servants' door next to them opened. An oblivious young man in white appeared, carrying a heavy bucket full of dirty mop water which he proceeded to dump right on top of Snik's foot. The water quickly mixed with blood, and the servant slumped to the ground, his white pants turning a dirty red. Snik wiped the knife on the man's shirt and pocketed it. Tyni was staring at him, her mouth hanging open and shock plain on her face.

"What?" Snik asked impatiently.

"You killed him! For spilling water on you!" She was plainly shocked.

"No, I killed him because he saw us. Now help me move him." Snik was already grabbing the dead man's ankles and dragging it away from the door into the shadows. She didn't move. *She'll learn*, Snik said to himself. He wiped his hands on the man's coat and went back to the still-open door, listening carefully.

He didn't hear anyone, so he pulled his H-gun. Before he went inside, he pressed a button on his wrist computer, starting a timer. Tyni raised an eyebrow, but he just ignored her and went through the door, weapon raised. She hesitated only a moment, then followed close behind. He smiled to himself.

"Why are you helping me?" she whispered over his shoulder.

"Khalid," he said without turning. He was too busy scanning for trouble to be any more elaborate. They stood inside a large cleaning room, where mops and pails and cleaning fluids lined the walls. Dirty towels were tossed in a pile in the corner, and a small pile of clean towels was stacked on a shelf. He wasn't willing to touch them. Clean or not, the Funkar concept of cleanliness wasn't necessarily his own. A door at the far end stood ajar, and he peeked through. *Only one way to get her to give up the idea.* Once she realized Raj was dead, she'd have no choice but to leave with him.

He seemed to be in some sort of residence area in the back of the Temple. Cell-like rooms lined the hallway he was peering out into, and

Soldiers stood at the far end of the hall, facing away from him. Snik sniffed quietly. *They only think about the obvious threat.* He slipped out into the hall, heading deeper into the back of the Temple. Tyni learned quickly; she walked backwards behind him, covering the Soldiers in case they turned around. Snik was amused at her weapon; it was an old firearm - one of the more powerful ones, to be sure. The thing was basically a handheld cannon with a projectile that would punch through anything in its path and keep going; not really practical, but surely intimidating. He wondered if it actually worked.

The hall terminated in a set of stairs, going up to the second level and down into a dark basement. "Funkars have no imagination," he pointed out to Tyni, and started down the basement stairs. "If they have him, he'll be down there," he whispered up to her as she followed. The steps creaked, which made him nervous. They were old, wooden, and probably not very strong. He kept his fingers crossed until he stepped on concrete at the bottom. Tyni was behind him, and not creaking at all. He smiled wryly to himself. *The disadvantage of being big.*

Of course, his size would pay off shortly if things went hand-to-hand. The landing of the stairs was closet-sized, with a doorway to the right; it gave precious little space for stealth. Snik held up a hand; Tyni stopped behind him. *Smart girl.* He took a breath, steadied his hand on the H-gun, and leaned around the corner. He had time for a quick scan and pulled his head back in. She was looking at him questioningly.

"It's not pretty," he said grimly. Not that he was given to grimness, but no one liked to see a man being torn apart, especially not a friend. He couldn't tell if the man was alive or not. There were at least half a dozen Funkars in that room, too. Raj was at the back, behind the Funkars. Snik weighed options in his head, but only for a moment. He pulled one of the grenades from his pocket and armed it. A gas started hissing into the air.

He quickly tossed the grenade into the room and pointed Tyni up the stairs. "Go!" he urged her, keeping his voice low. She headed up the stairs noiselessly; he followed, cursing himself at the squeals from the steps and counting down in his head. *Four...three...two...* There was a muffled thump from the room downstairs, a vibration that he could feel through the floor, and for a moment the stairwell was filled with rushing air as the brief explosion sucked air down into the basement. He counted two more seconds and went back down to the basement, not bothering to be quiet this time.

The room looked like a tomb, with the Funkars sprawled around in their cloaks. One was actually still standing, although rocking unsteadily and blinking tears out of his eyes as he fumbled for the closed door at the far end of the room next to Raj. Snik shot the Funkar without hesitation, burning a hole through his head, then spent another ten seconds making sure each of the other stunned Funkars was dead. He shot each one point-blank, even the ones who weren't moving. No point in leaving things to

chance. *I hate Funkars*, he thought, firing into the last one's skull. Not for the first time, he was glad that the H-gun was a near-silent weapon - and that Tyni had left the shooting to him. That cannon would have been an alarm bell.

Tyni had already ran past him to Raj. She was crying softly, he could tell. He straightened his coat and turned to the tortured man.

It was bad, Snik could tell instantly. Raj was still alive, but not much else good could be said. He'd been tied to a table, and the whole thing propped up against a wall. Snik ran a practiced eye over the man. Deep lacerations in his arms and legs. Skin entirely removed. A punctured lung, if the frothy blood Raj kept coughing up was any indication. Marks in the wood indicated that they'd used him for target practice at knife-throwing. He was missing fingernails. *Someone is sophisticated*, Snik noted. Burning wood splinters had been embedded in Raj's skin. The bruising said he'd been badly beaten. Snik winced at the sight of the man's chest. The grenade hadn't helped; the concussion had probably crushed what ribs the Funkars had missed. "Looks like you'll need more than one glass of that stuff you're always talking about," he pointed out. Raj chuckled weakly.

Tyni was already untying him, and when the last knot came free, she barely caught him before he collapsed. "The lemonade, it ran out," he managed to say, breathing hard against the pain.

Snik crouched down next to him. "Won't lie. It looks that way." Raj nodded. "That creature, the age-proofing one," Snik started - but Raj waved him off.

"Either I will recover myself on my own, or I die. I am Raj, not a lab guinea pig!" The man was surprisingly forceful given his condition. He paid for the outburst with blood that he coughed onto the floor.

"We should go," Snik pointed out. It had only been a little over sixty seconds, but someone was bound to have noticed the explosion, and better to be gone before they figured out someone was after their prize. He grabbed the table and wedged it against the doorway by the stairs; there were bound to be other exits. "Carry him," he ordered Tyni, pointing a finger at Raj. The man wasn't heavy, and he knew she was stronger than she looked.

Snik was proud of her; she didn't hesitate or question, just hoisted Raj over her shoulder. She hadn't stopped crying, but at least she wasn't letting it get the best of her. Reaching the H-gun, Snik opened the closed door carefully and stepped through, weapon covering the hallway. It was empty. And better yet, there was a window, a low basement skylight in the temple side. He jumped up and grabbed the ledge, pulling himself up to peer out. *Perfect*. The window looked out into bushes. He couldn't have asked for better. He smashed the glass with his gloved fist; the sharp-edged fragments were no match for the nanofabric. He ripped out the rest of the window frame through sheer strength and lowered it halfway down the wall

inside before dropping it to the floor. The softened crash was still loud enough to make him cringe. He froze for a moment, listening, but all was silent. He dropped down to the basement floor again, smelling the rain that was still falling outside. "Up," he ordered Tyni, taking Raj from her. "Fuck," he whispered, looking at the blood running down his arm onto his coat. "You're a bloody mess, Raj."

"Literally," Raj said with a trace of his old grin. His breathing was decidedly labored.

Snik turned back to Tyni and offered her a hand. She put her foot on his palm, and he half-threw, half-lifted her up to the window ledge. She pulled herself through easily and wriggled around, hanging half inside and reaching down for Raj. Snik glanced at the timer; they'd been in the temple for two and a half minutes now. It was too long. A sixth sense was starting to buzz in his head; he hated when that happened.

A crash in the direction of the stairs and boots echoing on the floor notified him before the Funkars came into view, and he dropped onto one knee, aiming at the end of the hall. "They've gotten through the table," he said grimly. Tyni had hooked her knees outside the window, leaning down to grip Raj's wrists. She started to haul him up just as the first Funkar rounded the corner at the end of the hall.

Snik opened fire with the H-gun, the silent laser flashes burning into the Funkar's head. The man dropped, but more were coming into view. They were using ballistic weapons; Snik felt the first projectile slam into his chest. He calmly returned fire; as long as they didn't hit him in the head, they were ineffective. The cloak he wore functioned as body armor, and the bodyshell *was* body armor. The nanofabric stiffened under the impacts and transmitted the shock around his body. The shocks ruined his aim somewhat, but at this range he didn't have to shoot perfectly to take down Funkar Soldiers. The impacts weren't what bothered him. It was the noise of the Funkar weapons. Those cannons would be bringing more Soldiers. More bullets cracked the air around him.

Behind him, Raj took four hits, and sagged in Tyni's grip. She screamed. "Raj!"

Snik fired again, killing another Funkar. "Let him go!" he shouted at Tyni. She didn't listen. He shot a few more times, backing up each time until he was in range to use a knife-hand strike against Tyni's wrists. She screamed at him angrily, but her hands were numbed and refused to obey her. Raj slipped from her fingers.

The bodies were starting to pile up at the end of the hallway, those shots certain to be calling out more Soldiers - and there were a lot of Soldiers in the Enclave. "Time to go," Snik shouted. He shot another Funkar whose head showed above the pile of bodies at the end of the hall, then turned and shoved Tyni back out of the window before jumping up and pulling himself out. He spared one last glance for Raj. The glow that always

surrounded the man seemed to be fading; he was motionless.

Snik pulled his head out of the window. *Want to get it shot off?* he scolded himself. Tyni was still screaming. *No time for that!* He pulled another grenade from his cloak and armed it in proximity mode. He pressed the gecko-pad on the side of the grenade against the window frame, grabbed Tyni's hand, and ran, dragging her with him. As they broke from the bushes, Snik was relieved to see that the streets were still empty. The rain was falling heavier, making visibility worse. It was perfect; he sprinted over the dirty concrete and into the alley across from the window, into the welcoming darkness.

Tyni's screaming made his first priority obvious. He slapped her hard, knocking her against the wall and cutting off the screams as she stared at him, stunned. "Shut up!" he hissed at her. "I don't want to hurt you, but you'll get us both killed if you keep howling like that!"

She stared at him, shocked out of grief into anger. Anger was useful. "We could have saved him," she started - but then the grenade went off across the street and Snik grabbed her hand again and they were running.

As they ran, Snik scanned the houses. *There!* A low, single-story building adjoined a two-story concrete block with an overhanging roof. It was perfect. He pointed, and Tyni nodded. They both ran for the lower house, leaping high to grab the eaves and pulling themselves over onto the top. From there, they pulled themselves up onto the taller building and dropped flat on the roof so as not to be seen from the ground.

The rain was falling still, heavily. Snik found himself staring up into angry storm clouds that swirled overhead. There was some lightning, which didn't help to make him feel comfortable, but better lightening than Funkars. He'd take his chances. Tyni was coughing.

"Why did you make me drop him?" she asked again, rubbing her arm against her eyes to wipe away the rain and tears.

"You already know why," Snik said. He avoided looking at her.

There was silence for a while, except for thunder. "I know we couldn't have made it, but I still feel like we should have tried," she said finally.

Snik nodded soothingly. "And we'd all be dead." Lightning flashed overhead again, and even he cringed slightly. "Not that we are guaranteed to live through the next few moments."

Chapter Twenty-three

When the distant explosion of a grenade echoed through the alleys, Pedro and Viktor immediately took up defensive positions next to the door, as they always did at any sign of trouble. Gina looked up from her columns. She had to admit that her confidence in her bodyguards was slightly shaken; they'd handled the Heretic - or whatever he was - quite well, but that dealer had taken them out before he even came into the lab.

Still, she couldn't really fault them. They were devoted to her, and would die before letting anything happen to her. The dealer had just had the advantage of superior technology. Elijah's rabble was only superior by virtue of numbers, not by skill or tech.

She turned her attention back to her columns. She was very, very close to her goal; the simulation showed a near-complete reversal of the Avenger's effects. Injected now, it would halt the Avenger's progress, but any of the pre-Avenger Medical Conversion effects would not be restored. She sighed. "Never easy," she muttered.

In the corner, the Heretic moaned. He was still unconscious, and the Avenger was progressing rapidly now. He had started to leak blood; Gina shot a worried glance at him and focused back on her columns. The noise outside seemed to be louder; the thunderstorm that had been distracting her all day was supplemented by gunshots that echoed through the streets.

Gina managed to focus back on her columns, but only another minute or two passed before a loud noise distracted her. This time, it was pounding on the door. She stiffened, glancing at the Heretic. There was no time to hide him. Viktor and Pedro looked grim.

"Shall we?" Viktor asked her calmly.

Gina nodded. If they didn't, and it was Elijah, he might shoot his way in. Pedro touched the door control panel. The door clicked and unlocked, and was flung open. Five Soldiers marched in, their boots tracking mud on the floor. They looked around angrily.

"What's that?" the leader asked, a young man who seemed barely old enough to know one end of his weapon from the other. He kept it trained on Gina well enough.

"A Heretic specimen I am monitoring for my research," she replied, trying to keep her annoyance out of her voice.

The Soldier went to the Heretic's body, prodding him with a foot. "This is a Heretic!" he shouted at the others. He leveled his weapon at the body. The other Soldiers started swearing. More weapons came up.

"Wait!" Gina screamed at them. "Elijah will not be pleased if you ruin this project!"

"Elijah?" The young Soldier turned back to her, his eyes growing fanatical. "The Pure One knows of this Abomination inside the heart of the

Fold?"

Gina nodded. "The Heretic is sick, suffering for his sins. Look at him, the bruises and the bleeding. He will be dead soon enough, and his death will give us the key to slay more."

The Soldier glared at the fallen body for another moment, then turned his attention back to Gina. She didn't like the way he was looking at her. *None of these dogs have manners*, she thought with disgust.

"If the Pure One has commanded it, then I will not interfere. Be assured that we will inform Him. If you lie, we will return. For now, we seek two Lost Ones who desecrated the Temple," the Soldier snapped. "Have you seen any such?"

"No," Gina said truthfully. The Soldier's eyes bored through her, but he didn't oppose her statement. He stayed silent for a moment, studying her.

"Gord will torment all liars for eternity," he said finally. "If you see these Lost Ones, you will kill them or capture them. Either will please Gord greatly."

Gina nodded. "Of course."

"Walk with Gord," the Soldier said. He took another glance at the Heretic on the ground, and his weapon actually started to rise, but he controlled himself. The other Soldiers seemed to fare little better, all of them glaring at the Heretic until they were through the door.

Gina stared at the door after it closed behind them. She always found herself uneasy at the level of the Soldiers' zeal. She had been raised in the Enclave, true, but she had had few encounters with the Funkar Soldiers until she had taken up biohacking.

"Torment for eternity?" she muttered to herself. "Makes me feel loved." She had never been fond of Gord and his rules, but she owed her life to the Funkars. It was a strange web of obligations, and she had to make the best of it. But genocide? Her eyes fell on the Heretic again. He would only last another couple of hours. She went back to her columns.

An hour went by quietly. Gina smiled; she could see the end of the chain she was constructing. She moved another DNA link, and the door blew off its hinges. She started to stand, and by the time she was on her feet, the room had filled with Soldiers.

I was wrong, Gina thought as her eyes blurred slightly with tears. There were at least ten Funkars down. *Five each, not three*, she thought sadly. It didn't matter; Viktor was slumped in the corner, and Pedro had fallen across the doorway, his head outside and his feet in. There were another ten Soldiers in the lab now, and Elijah himself, with his white cloak about his shoulders. He was wearing a strange suit underneath, like armor. Gina shrank against the back wall. *Be brave*. She forced herself to step forward and stand proudly. "What are you doing?" she demanded. She was proud of how steady her voice was.

Elijah glanced at her woefully. "Child, you are sheltering a Heretic under your roof. How can you commit such an Abomination under the very eyes of Gord? No!", he said, seeing her start to speak, "No, don't deny it. My Soldiers have told me that he is here, and I see him now with my own eyes."

"I am studying the Avenger's progress," Gina protested.

"Yes, I see it has developed nicely. He is falling apart. You did your work brilliantly," Elijah assured her. "Gord was well-pleased." For some reason, his reassuring tone didn't make her feel better at all.

"But why," continued the Vangel, "did you bring this Heretic under your roof again? Did you not have simulations you could use to finish the work?"

"It is most efficient to study an actual subject," Gina said. She was on firm ground here; it was undeniable. Her voice was still steady.

The Vangel smiled patiently, holding a hand out to a Soldier next to him, who passed him a handgun. Without bothering to look, Elijah fired three shots into the Heretic's head. Antoin shuddered once, and didn't move again. Gina winced at each of those shots. "Gord hates Heretics," Elijah intoned. The Soldiers bowed their heads solemnly for an instant, then stared up at Gina again. "Marcos!" Elijah called.

A Soldier in the back trotted up to Elijah's side, dropping on a knee. "Yes, Your Holiness."

"You have some training in the mysteries of life itself, do you not?"

"Yes, Your Holiness," the Soldier affirmed. He was somewhat grizzled, but his eyes were quick enough.

Gina was confused. Elijah had just executed her patient. Now she had no one to test the antidote on. "What's going on?" she asked. "I want to check on my bodyguards."

Elijah raised a hand to cut her off. "Patience, Child." He turned to Marcos. "I want to know what she was working on so intently when we arrived," the Vangel said quietly.

Gina felt her heart jump. That calm voice was a death sentence. Marcos nodded and walked over to her columns, studying them carefully. Gina's mind was screaming at her. *Run! Do something!* Marcos was right in front of her. She could probably take his weapon. She tensed, waiting for the inevitable verdict.

Marcos finally stopped examining the columns, and turned toward Elijah, bowing his head respectfully before the Vangel. "Your Holiness, she is constructing an antidote to a virus, a particularly nasty virus that attacks the bloodstream of one with the Abomination. Her antidote should be able to save a man so afflicted, even though he be halfway into Hell."

Elijah nodded and regarded Gina gravely. She stared back at him for only an instant before she leaped for Marcos' gun. The Soldier started to turn as Gina tugged it from his holster, but it was too late; she leveled it at

him and fired point-blank into his back. Marcos fell, his eyes widening as he looked over his shoulder at her. As the Soldier's body dropped away, Elijah came into focus. Gina didn't even have to aim; she pulled the trigger, but something slammed into her. Not soon enough; she watched exultantly as her bullet exploded into Elijah's chest - and simply ricocheted off of that strange armor. More bullets punched into her. She fell to her hands and knees, staring down at the floor. She felt sick suddenly, a coating of fear sliding over her. She didn't feel pain, but she could see a pool of blood spreading beneath her, growing to meet the other pool from Marcos.

A pair of boots stepped almost onto her hands, but she couldn't look up to see whose they were. One of those boots prodded her backwards so that she was sitting against the wall, looking up at Elijah. The Vangel actually looked sad, damn him! "It was wrong," she said weakly. She didn't feel pain; she only felt weak, and nauseated.

Elijah crouched in front of her, sweeping his cloak around him to prevent the white material from dragging into the blood. *My blood.* "The Will of Gord cannot be denied. Your limited understanding could never comprehend the plans He has laid for His people, or the punishments He has decreed for the wicked." He reached out to touch her face, and she flinched back.

"Don't touch me," she hissed. She was starting to find it hard to focus; everything seemed to be growing distant. Still, she didn't think she would ever get far enough away from the Vangel.

"So be it. You will not have the mercy of Gord. Burn in hell, whore." The Vangel's face had taken on a mask of monstrous hatred for a moment, but he relaxed it almost instantly as he rose and turned to his men. "This evil has been cleansed. We have much to do."

Elijah walked through the door, and Gina watched him go. Not a single Soldier glanced back at her, not even when they stopped right in front of her to pick up Marcos. She wondered vaguely if he was dead or merely unconscious. Then they were all gone, and she was alone.

It was so silent. Daylight streamed in from the broken door. The rain smell was fading. Gina could hear the faint musical tones coming from her columns. She fancied that they were growing louder, that they were swirling around her and that she was dancing. She wanted to see if Victor and Pedro were still alive, but she was so weak. She wanted-

Chapter Twenty-four

Elijah marched away from the Fallen Child's lab. He was angry; he'd hoped to one day bed her, not to kill her. *Gord forgive me for lustful thinking*, he thought automatically, but it did not make the thought less true. Yet her death had been necessary; she had killed one of the Children. *She tried to assassinate me!* Gord had been looking out for him, to have him wearing the armor today. The biohacker's arrogance was almost unthinkable; the Children had provided her with everything, yet at the end she had thrown it away. *Diamonds tossed to the pigs are wasted*. He turned into the alley leading back out to the main streets and the markets, his face stony. The eaves overhead were still dripping rain that ran down into the gutters.

A sharp pain shot through Elijah's left foot, and something scuttled off among the leaves in the gutter, vanishing into an ancient sewer-grate. "Gord!" Elijah swore without thinking. His men stared at him; he had killed the Faithful for swearing before. "Thank You for the victory over evil!" he finished smoothly. It wasn't perfect, but these men would give him the benefit of the doubt. They would die for him.

By the time they reached the Temple doors, Elijah could feel a strange burning in his leg, and a tendril of fever-heat reaching up toward his spine. He dismissed the Soldiers immediately, going straight to his room. The bodyguards at his door greeted him, but he waved them off.

One persisted. "Do you require any assistance, Your Holiness?" Elijah simply glared at the man; the Soldier dropped his eyes in short order and stiffened his back against the door. Elijah slammed the door and slid the lock shut.

He went over to his bed and started to sit - but suddenly he was collapsing onto the luxurious mattress. Some part of him was congratulating him for making it back to his room.

"Gord, what has happened to me?" He could feel the presence of the Divine around him, like a warm, swirling mass of colors. The colors enveloped him. His foot still throbbed - no, his entire leg throbbed. He could hear angels singing somewhere, a thousand choir voices. *Demon*. There was the scent of flowers in the air.

He curled into a ball, moaning slightly. Gord was certainly visiting him. He could see the glowing words of the Gordword floating in the air, in letters of fire. The words scrambled, spinning off and blending together to form a single word. DEMON, they spelled. "Gord protect me from Stan, the Evil One," Elijah breathed, genuflecting before the Holy glow of Gord.

"DEMON," a voice growled. Elijah started, cowering down to the ground. "Gord save me in the Valley of Stan," he began, but he was drowned out as other voices joined in.

The voices were louder, angrier, more insistent now. "DEMON! DEMON!"

Elijah looked around fearfully. There was no one there. "Demon? What evil is this? Gord will cast you all out of His Temple," Elijah threatened. The voices raced around him, faster and faster - and suddenly cut to silence. Elijah found that he was holding his breath. Everything slowed to a crawl-

"It was a demon," his mother's voice whispered in his ear.

The silence was long. Elijah opened his eyes, blinking. *I'm cold*, he realized. There had been something - "Mother?" Elijah looked around him weakly. He was still alone.

He remembered something suddenly. *I need to get a Healer to work on my foot*. Not that he was challenging Gord's ability to heal. *It's just that Gord helps those who help themselves*, he reminded himself.

He rolled up to a sitting position. He hesitated only for a second before rolling up the armored leg of his pants to examine his left foot and ankle. There was nothing amiss; not even a scratch. He pulled the cuff down again, not noticing the tear running along the seam. Maybe he'd just imagined the pain earlier. *I must be tired*, he thought. Being the High Vangel was draining, yes. He had too many responsibilities. He was not sleeping enough. He would be sure to go to bed earlier tonight.

He stood, grabbing his cloak and wrapping it around himself. *Just bad dreams*, he reassured himself. He pulled open the door. The two guards turned quickly as he went out, worried looks on their faces. He nodded at each of them; they seemed to relax at seeing him up and walking.

His mood soured as he reached the open hall of the Temple. The Children had rescued many of the Lost Ones from their iniquitous den, but the Gordword had not been recovered. The skulking little servant of Stan who stole it had been recovered, though. A shame he had been killed before he could reveal where he'd stashed the gains of his sin. The empty spot on the lectern gave Elijah a pang in the heart whenever his eyes fell on it.

"Smail!" he called. The struggle went well, he thought as he waited for his Commander. The Avenger had been spread deep into the Heretics' hearts, and the Lost Ones had been recovered to the Flock, as many of them as could be found.

Smail marched up, saluting as he approached. "Your Holiness," the man growled.

"I want to inspect the progress of the Children in the Heretic City. Arrange the usual escort," Elijah ordered. Smail nodded, then paused.

"Your Holiness, I do not recommend that you go beyond the Fold. Even the Fold itself has dangers; a Lost One who has not been fully reintegrated might make an attempt on your life. Or one of the new Heretics here. We can guard you here, but beyond, no Soldier can assure you of complete safety."

Elijah kept his voice patient. "That may be, but Gord assures my

safety. As He does that of every Child of His.”

For an instant, Elijah thought he detected doubt in the man's eyes. *Does he truly doubt the power of Gord?* Still, Elijah admitted, that was what made the man such a good Commander. He left nothing to Gord, or chance. In any case, Smail simply bowed and headed out to arrange the escort. Elijah was pleased.

He stared at the empty lectern for a moment longer, then made his rounds of the Temple. He greeted all, great or small, with the same benevolent tone. For the adults, a kind word or a hand in blessing; for the children, he carried a bag of sweets. He kept a small copy of the Gordword from which he dispensed advice with the sweets, the copy that had been so valuable since paper had become rare so many years ago. Not even Elijah's grandfathers had known paper to be cheap, and so the little Gordword with its frayed edges was almost as valuable as the one that had been ripped from its rightful place on the Temple lectern. Now, as one of the only remaining copies, it was priceless.

All of his Children greeted him with respect, which was as it should be. He had long ago instilled the fear of Gord into these simple people. They respected him, their High Vangel and Defender of the Faith, and they honored him.

He finished his greetings and then headed for the door. The bright sunlight surprised him; he had not bothered to check the time, but he had been certain that he had slept only a few hours. This was an early afternoon sun, not a morning one. Blinking slightly, he stepped outside.

His escort was waiting. Smail barked a few last-minute orders at them and walked away at Elijah's nod. There was no point forcing the Commander himself to take on escort duties. Smail had other duties, like coordinating the total razing of the Stronghold, the City of Evil itself, by the forces of Good. Yes, that would be something to see. Elijah smiled and greeted his four escorting Soldiers briefly and then set out, one of the men trotting ahead to take up point.

The streets were bustling, mostly women and children. About half the men were missing, out fighting in the Heretic dens, but that was an honorable thing for them to be doing. Any Child knew that a death in Gord's service was paradise. Even small children knew that. No parent would refuse their child the opportunity to give a life in the service of Gord, no matter the pain it might cause them in this woeful life. Elijah nodded to himself. All was as it should be.

He limped a bit as he walked down the main street through the market. His leg felt tender, but he was sure it was...what was the word? *Psychosomatic*. “I defy you, Stan,” he said firmly under his breath. The busy stalls were crowded as usual, but there was a calmness in the air. Some of the women seemed to be worried, and Elijah actually stopped to lay a Hand of Blessing on the occasional tense forehead. A word or two to remind a

woman that Gord would grant her untold riches for the sacrifice of her husband's company, and the tense lines melted away. It made his heart light to do it. Gord was surely with him this day.

The Gates were more bleak. A constant stream of wounded men were straggling back through, their camouflage stained black with blood and dirt. Most were only burned, not bleeding; it looked like the Heretic warriors were using their demon rays rather than honest lead or steel. Elijah frowned. Those implements of evil would need to be destroyed when the Heretic city was Purged. The thought of a good fire made him smile again as he grasped the hand of a Child beaming up at him.

He started to walk through the gate, but the Soldier on point halted, raising a hand in warning. "Your Holiness! The Commander advised that it is not safe to leave the Fold!"

Elijah nodded impatiently. "The eyes of Gord are on me, Soldier. And on you as well. None will come to harm, unless He so wills it. We will only go a short distance and then return." He waved them on impatiently. The Soldier hesitated only a moment longer before walking on, weapon ready now.

The crowd of returning wounded was thicker outside the gates, and there were men down who would not make it back into the Fold even so close. Still, Elijah felt his spirits soar at the line of men trotting out toward the Heretic stronghold. Those men had been rounded up from the Wasteland and beyond, from other Folds a hundred miles away, all coming to the support of their Brethren. "Thank You, Gord, for Your never-failing watch on Your Children," Elijah recited softly. He passed out benedictions to the returning wounded as he ventured further away from the gates.

A distant shout rippled through the men, taken up by those closer until it reached Elijah. "Demon bird!"

The point Soldier froze, then spun around. "Down!" he said sharply, pushing Elijah off the dirty road and into a ditch that ran aside.

"My cloak!" Elijah fumed, but it was too late. Dirty water was already seeping into the white, staining the purity of the fabric with foulness and evil filth. Abruptly, he stopped fuming, staring at the sky. Demon bird, indeed.

The Heretic bird flapped its way across the sky, ridden by two Heretic warriors. Elijah winced; he knew what to expect, and the knowledge did not make the beams of demonic power lancing out to stab the hearts of brave Children any easier to take. And there were demon eggs falling, too, spewing fire across the road - a burning, clinging flame that adhered and scorched as it burned through flesh and bone with equal ease.

"The waste of it," Elijah murmured, his eyes only on his tortured Children as the bird flapped closer. He actually shed a tear for his Children. Yet, more would come; these Heretics did not replenish a tenth so easily as his flock, and it was only a matter of time before the Children prevailed.

Something made him look up. "Gord save us," he said, startled. The bird was coming for him. He knew it somehow, with certainty. Mechanical wings flapped overhead, the avian shadow obscuring the sun and then it was gone. And overhead, a demon egg hurtled lazily down toward him.

The point Soldier glanced at him, and something he saw in Elijah's eyes made him look up. Horrified fascination flooded the Soldier's face, a look that Elijah knew his own face echoed. And then the egg landed opposite the Soldier, so that his body stood between Elijah and the white flash that faded out to blackness.

Chapter Twenty-five

Tyni nudged Snik, trying to wake him. The dealer had been sleeping for hours on end, straight through the night and into the afternoon. The distant explosions still echoed endlessly, but now there was a relentless afternoon sun instead of a cloudy blanket, and the roof had grown hot. The dealer had simply pulled his cloak over his head, tossing her a spare that he kept rolled in a tube sewn into his pants around his calf. She shook her head, nudging him again. "Snik." He didn't move.

She sighed, studying him. The man's bodyshell contained more pockets and tubes than her entire hovel had held. Every time she thought he'd pulled the last thing out, there was another hidden pocket or concealed opening that he could extract another technological marvel from. She poked a finger into his ribs, harder this time. "Wake up!" she said firmly - but quietly, so as not to have her voice heard in the streets below. She'd heard voices in the laneway a few times as they rested; Snik may have been able to sleep, but she could not.

The dealer spoke, muffled under the cloak, but he didn't sound sleepy at all. "I'm awake. We'll leave soon."

"Do you have food?" Tyni asked anxiously. Her stomach was growling. If it got any louder, she wouldn't need to worry about her voice alerting the Funkars. Her hunger would do the job for her.

Without moving the cloak from his eyes, the dealer pulled a foodbar from a pocket on his thigh. He held it out.

"Is that all you have?" Tyni eyed the bar with distaste.

"It's efficient," he said quietly. "Eat."

She huffed a little at the thought of a dry foodbar, but took it anyway, if hesitantly. She did need to eat something. It was a strange feeling, eating food that she didn't pay for, but she managed to get it down despite the dryness and the strange feeling. *Food is food*. She dusted her hands off. Snik was rising next to her, fastening the cloak around his neck. His face was still smooth, despite the fact that he couldn't have had a chance to shave. Tyni met his eyes for an instant; the lenses made them an unreadable black.

"How are you?" Snik asked her quietly. To hear actual concern in his voice, however slight, startled her.

"I just wish we could have-"

"We couldn't do anything," Snik said flatly. "Raj made his choices, and we did more than I would have thought possible." He fumbled in a pocket for a food bar. "Put it behind you. The past is the past. There is another issue to handle now." He tore into the packet, crunching through the dry food.

"Another issue?" Tyni didn't like the sounds of that. She just wanted to

go home. She felt drained.

"There is a woman here, a biohacker. She hates anyone who's Permanent." Snik tilted his head to swallow, making a face. "Like you. She has created a virus which will kill only those who have been converted."

"Why would she do that?" Tyni asked. It didn't make sense. The Funkars needed the Permanents, if only to acquire technologies that they couldn't develop themselves.

"Maybe she feels that the Permanents have wronged her somehow," Snik shrugged. "I asked her once, but she wouldn't say. I didn't feel like beating it out of her."

"You know her? Why didn't you stop her?"

"I didn't think she'd actually go through with it." Snik nodded before she could say anything. "Yes, I miscalculated."

Tyni shuddered. She was now Permanent, after all. "So it's in my interests to stop her. But why do you want to stop her?" she asked. Now that she thought of it, she wasn't sure she wanted to be anywhere close to a woman who created viruses that might just kill her. It sounded too dangerous. "And if you're going anyway, can't I just wait here?"

"Because she's cutting into my profits," Snik said. "And no, you can't wait here. Someone might see you. You can't sit still. You're like a damn child."

She barely restrained herself from sticking her tongue out at him. She had sat still all night, despite being unable to sleep. "Profits?"

"The Permanents purchase modjects from me," Snik reminded her patiently. "If the Permanents are dead, no one will want modjects."

"So what are you going to do? Get her to make an antidote," Tyni suggested.

Snik shook his head. "It's too late for that. Gina's 'Avenger' is already spreading in the City." Clearly the idea was distasteful to him.

Avenger. So that was what it was called. And Snik was going to drag her to its Creator. *Wonderful*. No, she didn't want to be anywhere close to a virus-creator. Then it hit her. "Too late? You're going to kill her!"

Snik nodded, dusting crumbs from his hands. "I am. Sooner is better. Let's go," he said, already turning away. He wormed his way to the edge of the roof without standing up, and looked over the edge. "No one down there." He lowered himself, holding on just long enough to hiss at her. "Follow!"

Tyni lowered herself over the roof as well, her fingers slipping a little on the dirty gutter. She hung her full length for a moment before letting go, falling easily to the ground below. She marveled for a second at how easily she shrugged off a fall that once would have broken her legs. Snik was already moving off, long strides toward the north and staying in the shadows. She had to trot to catch up. She wasn't ready to let go of her questions, though. "If it's too late, what good will killing her do?" she asked.

Snik glanced at her and then looked ahead again. After a minute of silence broken only by crunching gravel underfoot, he cleared his throat. "I warned her. And I keep my word."

"Is that all there is to it?" Tyni asked. She found it hard to imagine that he didn't have something personal against a potential victim. She didn't think she could kill in cold blood.

"Isn't it enough? If word got out that I was soft against someone who ruined my business, I might as well give up and run to the slums or become a Funkar. My dreams are bigger than that. Bigger than this trash heap called New Byantz."

Tyni looked at him, interested. "What dreams?"

He shrugged without missing a step. "Getting off this planet again." He pointed toward the City, at the red laser guide that shot straight up into space, still visible despite clouds of smoke drifting up alongside it. It seemed to be flickering. "One day I will be riding one of those out of here." He looked at her. "Haven't you ever thought of it?"

"Sure," Tyni said. She had, of course - jus not at any length. When you were busy trying to get enough to feed yourself at the end of the day, there wasn't much time for daydreaming. "Everyone knows that the only people who get on one of those freighters are Permanents. No one else."

"If there are ships leaving the planet, there is a way to get onto one. I had a way. Not anymore, thanks to the woman I'm about to kill." Her lack of comprehension must have showed, because he launched straight into an explanation. "Two things. She killed my customers, and do you really think that New Byantz will be getting many shipments from offworld now? The City is doomed. Avenger will kill almost every one of these Citizens, and the offworlders will quarantine the City to make sure it doesn't get out. No pilot is going to want to make deliveries here. If it wasn't for the Races being closed, the problem would be even worse. If the Race gate was open, you'd be getting containment squads from Londis coming in."

"The Races?" Tyni had no idea what he was talking about, but she still shuddered when he mentioned the Avenger. *I'm Permanent now.*

Snik looked surprised. "You don't know about those? They're sealed passages from one City to another. They were built just after the Three War. The walls are shielded to keep out radiation. They're hardened to most explosives. Pretty convenient."

"So why haven't I ever heard of them?" Tyni asked. "I've spent a lot of time in the City. Surely I'd have heard someone mention that."

"The Race gate is in the Enclave. It's southeast of here, a couple of clicks. It's hard to get to now. And when you're in, it's heavily trapped. Bones everywhere. Mostly animals, but some people too. Most Citizens in New Byantz have pretended that it never existed for...for at least fifty years now." Snik was assembling something as he walked. It looked like a weapon, but Tyni couldn't see it clearly enough to be sure.

She thought of something. "You said that before this woman messed everything up, you had a way out of here."

Snik nodded without looking up, his hands busy assembling what Tyni could now see clearly as a weapon. "I was intending to buy a freighter. I have - no, I *had* contacts in the City who owed me favors. Fucking nice of her to kill them for me." He spat. "One of my contacts arranged an account for me in the Financial Network. At least I still have that. Now, I have to get to Londis if I want to leave." He snapped the final piece of some sort of rifle in place and resumed his full walking speed. "These Funkars have wiped out everything else. So before I leave, I am going to send a message. Rumor travels far faster than feet. When I get to Londis, I expect to have respect waiting for me when I walk through the Race gate. I want the local dealers running on my arrival." He glanced at her. "That means there is one more kill after the biohacker, you know."

Tyni found herself slightly surprised, but she knew that if he considered it to be of interest to her, it had to be... "For Raj."

Snik shook his head. "For me, but you can think of it as being for Raj if it makes you feel better. For me, Elijah's little 'Rounding Up of the Flock' cost me my home and most of my supplies. It's more important than Raj. I look weak if the Funkars don't pay for that. So Elijah will pay personally. Besides, this hacker bitch is working for him." Snik stopped in front of a small, unremarkable house, frowning. "We're here, but this isn't right. Look at the door."

The most remarkable thing about the door was that it looked to be leaning askew in the door frame, completely unattached to the wall. The door itself was scorched heavily, and cracked, like someone had blown it open and then put it back in place. She looked to Snik for instruction.

"Wait here," he ordered. He had that rifle out, covering the door as he edged against the wall and placed his ear to it. Tyni backed against the wall as well. There was no point in taking chances, especially when the dealer was willing to take them for her. After a moment, he straightened with a frown. "I don't hear a thing except for her equipment," he said softly. "Just have to take a chance."

He glanced up and down the dirty alleyway to make sure no one was watching, and then kicked the door aside. He didn't go in right away, watching intently for any reaction. She waited, finding herself somewhat nervous.

"Doesn't seem to be trapped," he said to her. "Come on inside."

The smell, and a stream of muttered swearing from Snik, assailed her as soon as she entered the inside of what had once been a laboratory of some sort, from the looks of the tubes and equipment lying shattered everywhere. From the outside, the place looked like a Funkar house but the inside was clearly full of Permanent technology. Strange, misty columns obscured her view of the back of the room. Surprisingly, not much of the

equipment seemed to have been badly damaged, but there were three bodies on the ground and marks where more had lain. Snik was swearing in a steady stream.

"Looks like someone else got here first," Tyni said, to break the silence. Somebody had to point out the obvious.

"Elijah," Snik spat. "Damn him to Hell."

Tyni walked around, avoiding the sticky pools of blood. The two bodies next to the door were huge; they must have been bodyguards, and from the looks of it they had died fighting. Something caught her attention about the body lying against a side wall. "Isn't this the puppet?" she called to Snik, kneeling down to study the man. He didn't look good, even discounting the holes in his body. She stretched out a finger to touch the pale skin, but something knocked her backwards before she touched the body. Caught by surprise, she lost her balance and fell.

"Don't touch him!" Snik snapped at her, looming over her. "He was a Citizen, remember? And those bullet holes should not have killed him. Are you fucking insane?"

Tyni sat up indignantly. The dealer was right, though. He was crouching over the body, studying it but not touching. "The virus?"

"Now you stop to think," Snik said dryly. "Avenger," he nodded. He was already moving away. "Strange that he died in this lab, though, and not at home in the City." He was tinkering with the computer now.

Tyni moved among the strange columns at the far end of the room, looking at the colored symbols on each one. They were quite pretty, but she had no idea what any of them meant. When she went around the last column, she found another body. This one was a woman, and she had been shot multiple times. "The biohacker?" she called to Snik.

"Gina, her name was," he responded without looking up. "And it looks like she was working on a cure." There was an odd note in his voice, almost respectful, but not quite. He sounded at least a little puzzled. "Would have been easier if she just didn't make Avenger in the first place."

Tyni frowned down at the corpse. "Why would she be making a cure for a virus she created specifically for genocide? That doesn't make sense."

Snik shrugged. "Maybe it has something to do with him," he said, jerking a thumb in the direction of the Citizen's corpse. "He might have paid her more than Elijah, or maybe she just felt bad for him." His voice said he doubted the latter. He walked away from the computer, and went to the wall next to it, hands feeling for something.

Tyni raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"There should be - ah, yes." There was a soft click and a panel in the wall swung open. A machine with a little door was in there; Snik opened the door and extracted several biosprays. "I have a feeling these will be very, very valuable someday not far away." He passed Tyni, handing the biosprays to her on his way around her. "There might be something useful

lying around while we're here anyway; help me look around." He paused and looked back at her. "It goes without saying that you don't want to accidentally use one of those on yourself. You wouldn't like it."

She dropped the biosprays into her pocket, and joined in Snik's search. There wasn't much in the lab that was unrelated to the biohacker's work; she must have purchased mundane items like food only as they were needed. Still, there were a few foodbars stashed in a cabinet. It would do for the moment.

"A bit of good luck," Snik called from the other end of the lab where he was digging through a closet. He turned, holding a Funkar cloak in his hand. "Wear this," he ordered, tossing it at her. She stared at the cloak. "Wear it!" he repeated. "There's no point in standing out. It will just make it harder for us to move around. If you want a chance to pay these Funkars back for Raj, wear it."

Tyni took the cloak reluctantly. Snik was right, of course. She might stand out without some sort of obvious Funkar insignia. Plus, what better way to hide her weapons? She wrapped the cloak around her shoulders, feeling faintly violated, but she resigned herself to wear it. Snik was breaking down that rifle again; it took him only a moment. She was impressed by how adept he was with the weapon.

Snik pulled something from his coat, and looked around. Finally he sighed. "We should go. Go to the other side of the alley and stay in the shadows. I'll be a minute behind." He held up the grenade in explanation.

She pulled out her gun and nodded. She didn't need to be told twice. Snik winced for some reason as she checked the gun's action. She raised an eyebrow.

"Try not to use that...cannon," he said, his lips tightening distastefully. He pressed his thumb against the activation pad on the bottom of the grenade. "Ten seconds."

She one last look at the grenade and fled. She spun around as she entered the alley, one whirlwind pass with raised gun to make sure that nobody was watching, and ran for the darkness at the opposite side of the alley. Two seconds later, Snik darted out, heading for her at a dead run. Behind him, the doorway vomited flame. Strangely, there was no explosive noise, just air rushing, but she clearly felt the vibration of an explosion under her feet. Snik grabbed her arm roughly as he reached her, his momentum carrying her along. She ran, the flames making a crackling roar behind her.

They stopped in the shadows half a kilometer away, looking back up the dirty lane. A Soldier ran into the lane from an alley, headed for the flames. People were starting to come out of their houses. Snik and Tyni kept to the shadows, heading deeper into the Enclave.

"Why the fire?" Tyni asked, as soon as they slowed down enough that she didn't feel like her jaws were being pounded with every step.

"Call it spite," Snik said, slowing down into a walk. He didn't seem to be breathing hard. "You noticed that they hadn't damaged the equipment? Probably wanted to put another biohacker there after they cleaned up the place. Not if I can help it. Plus, it feels good. Those bastards fucked up my place. Not to mention the entire City. Revenge, you see." He was smiling. It didn't make him look softer, not one bit.

"So what now?" She hated asking so many questions, but she was feeling swept along. The man hardly stopped; he seemed to have a plan for everything. She decided to be assertive. "I want the Vangel responsible for Raj."

Snik seemed amused at her. It made her feel like punching him. "That was exactly what I had in mind," he said. "It's just a matter of finding him."

She just stared at him, not willing to give him the satisfaction of asking where to look. His amused look turned into another smile. This one actually did make him seem human.

"I see you're being stubborn. Fine, I'll tell you. The Identinet is still working here. I think the Vangel knows about it, too. Except he doesn't really know how to use it." He looked more serious again. "Which is a good thing." He scanned the streets as they walked.

"Identinet? What's that? I never heard about it in the City."

"They don't have a terminal. Many things were destroyed in the Three War. But the old networks are still running. Most of the sensors are still good. You just have to know where to look for a terminal. The Enclaves had a few of the old security offices. The Funkars built their Temple on one; there have to be others." He glanced back at the Temple rising up over the distant buildings.

Tyni looked around her at the buildings rising up near the alley. "These are all residences," she pointed out, "and I don't think they were ever anything else."

Snik nodded. "You're right." He abruptly ducked into an alley, and Tyni followed. A moment later, they emerged onto a busier main road, where Funkar farmers were dragging produce on bicycles and animals toward the market at the north end of the Enclave.

It seemed to Tyni that there was a Funkar Soldier at every corner. Most of the streets here were lined with crumbling or abandoned buildings, but the odd standing structures were filled with Funkar families. Where there was clear ground, it sprouted garden plants - vegetables mostly - and some scraggly fruit trees. After wandering for another half an hour, pretending to be occupied the whole time, Snik stopped her in the shadow of what had once been a bank. The once-impressive structure was now a decaying crumble of steel and concrete columns topped by a precarious roof. The few remaining shards of glass in the window frames had been standing so long that the sharp edges had been weathered visibly smooth in places. Tyni followed Snik into the ruin.

"There is an Identinet terminal here?" Tyni asked.

Snik shook his head. "No, there." He pointed across the street. What had once been a security station was now as much a wreck as the bank, but there was enough faded paint left to show a blue star symbol on the cratered facade of the building over the street. Snik was frowning at something lower.

Tyni saw the problem immediately. Two Funkar Soldiers were planted in front of the station, casting a hard eye on the few passers-by. Gord was not exactly subtle about keeping His children in line, it seemed. Tyni pulled out her gun, crouching down to steady her arm on a fallen block of concrete. She stared down the barrel, sighting the nearest Soldier's chest.

Something blocked her view, knocking the gun aside. "What are you-?" she started to protest.

"Throw that cannon away," Snik snapped. "Do you want every Soldier for a klick around to hear you?"

Tyni felt herself growing embarrassed. The gun *was* loud, she'd been warned. She stared at it, feeling frustrated. "If I throw it away-" she started, but Snik was already passing her a smaller gun. She recognized it as an UrbPat weapon. "How'd you get this?" she asked, reluctantly tossing the Desert Eagle aside and taking the H-gun.

"Seemed like a good trade for a biospray a few years ago. I would have picked up some extras in the City yesterday, but I couldn't risk it. They could be contaminated with the Avenger." He was pulling out the rifle pieces again, putting it back together smoothly. "That H-gun has an effective range of a hundred meters. If you can see your target's face clearly, you can kill it."

Tyni started to aim the weapon at the Soldiers across the street, but Snik shook his head. "Not yet," he said. He edged up to the concrete rubble that faced the old security station and peered out carefully, so as not to draw attention. Then he slowly backed in again. "The streets are clear. For now. This is going to be messy any way we do it." He stared at her gun for a second, pondering. Then he nodded and reached out a hand. "Switch." He held the rifle out to her with his other hand.

She did so. The rifle was surprisingly light, and conformed to her grip comfortably.

"What I want you to do right now is absolutely nothing. I am going to take care of those two, and you are going to watch. I just need you to cover my back. If more Soldiers show up, that rifle is enough to make them hide long enough for me to get out. You'll throw down cover fire. Understand?"

Tyni nodded. "Sounds easy."

"The amp rifle kicks a bit, but you should be able to handle it. The important thing is that it fires a visible beam. Hopefully you won't have to use it. If you do, I don't care if you hit anything as long as you don't hit me." She looked at him sharply, but he was smiling playfully.

"Go," she said, placing her back against a concrete pillar. It wasn't comfortable, but it would keep her back safe, unless Funkars could walk through walls. She didn't think they could.

Snik cast one more measuring glance at her, and then nodded and stepped outside of the bank on the side street. Tyni watched, surprised, as he walked straight up to the two Soldiers, his Funkar cloak draped around his shoulders. She couldn't make out words, but his body language was fairly clear.

He gestured toward the inside of the security station, and the Soldier on his right seemed to be uncertain. The other Soldier shook his head after a moment, but stepped aside. Snik went straight in, as if he belonged there. After a moment, the two Soldiers huddled together in conversation and one of them positioned himself at the door while the other trotted off down the road. "Not good," Tyni told herself. It seemed like she'd get a chance to fire the amp rifle after all. Hopefully that Soldier had a long way to run.

Chapter Twenty-six

Snik stood in front of the Identinet terminal, dusting cobwebs off of it. Fortunately, it still responded to touch. If anyone had used it in the last hundred years, though, it certainly didn't show. The terminal was obsolete even for a hundred years ago; it still used a physical display. He had seen Identinet interfaces that were holographic; he preferred them, as they weren't prone to getting dusty. He swore at the dirt on his hand; wiping it off on his pants absent-mindedly, he focused on the terminal.

It was going to be difficult to track the Vangel down, since nobody had updated the Identinet database in decades. At least, not that he knew of. It was possible that the Citizens were still using it, but perhaps not. He'd been surprised before by what the Citizens had forgotten. The name labels would be long missing; he'd have to guess based on traffic patterns. He twisted the his hand on the zoom wheel slightly and the map flashed into view, centered on his current location. Eighth Street Security, a tiny label indicated. Snik had to squint to see it. It was tough to pay attention and keep an ear out for trouble. He had to hurry.

Another twist of the wheel, and the map altered, little glowing points of light popping up here and there. Darker points were familiar to the system; the only bright points in this area were himself and Tyni. The yellow tint to their points indicated that they'd been seen elsewhere in the Identinet, but not near this particular location. What Snik needed was something else. He turned the wheel again.

The map changed, this time showing the traffic patterns he was looking for. He scrolled the map until it showed the Temple in the north end of the Enclave, and studied it for precious seconds, trying to sort out which trails would be Soldiers and which would be the Vangel himself. He presumed that the Vangel would always head back to the Temple, and only head out accompanied by Soldiers. After another minute of searching, he found two people who fit the bill. "Fuck," he muttered. One was headed straight toward a point marked as Eighth Street Station, and the dots around him indicated that the target had brought company. At least five or six men, probably Soldiers. The dots were brightening as they moved across the terminal toward his position. Well, at least they didn't know this terrain any better than he did; that glow meant that they didn't come here often.

The other person seemed to be wandering in the old warehouse district to the east, and the Identinet noted that the solitary travel pattern was an abnormality for that individual. Snik made a quick mental note of the location on the map and snapped the terminal shut with one last glance at the approaching cluster of dots. They were only a couple of blocks away now. He pulled out the H-gun and started back to the exit. It was as he feared; a Funkar at the door had his gun out and leveled at his head the

moment he came into sight at the exit.

"Get down on the ground very carefully and stay there, Child. The Commander will want to question you. Any sudden moves, and Gord will place your blood on your own hands." The man sounded excited; at second glance, Snik placed him as little more than a boy. *Probably going to piss himself, he's so pleased for some action.* Well, if the Funkar wanted action, he'd get it.

Snik nodded and sank down to his knees, leaning forward as if to lie down. He did so happily; it was easy to shoot from the ground. He wasn't sure if everyone found it so, but the H-gun in his hand burned a silent, smoking hole through the Funkar's head before the guard even realized that Snik was armed. As the body crumpled, Snik was already up again and running full-tilt for the bank. He gritted his teeth and dove over the ruined wall, clearing jagged glass and coming up in a jarring smash against a chunk of concrete and rebar that had once been part of the ceiling. It almost knocked the wind out of him - but not quite. He could feel a bruise coming up on his leg, though. He swore again, wriggling through the glass-strewn rubble on the ground until he was sitting next to Tyni. She'd had the good sense to sit down. He yanked the amp rifle from her hands and passed her the H-gun again. She looked disappointed, which made him grin inside, but the grin never touched his face. He couldn't afford to have her relaxing.

"They will be here inside of two minutes. We'll have to make a stand. We could try to run, but they could be coming around the corner for all I know. I counted seven, but it should be easy. Oh, and watch out for the big one in the cloak with the cross if he shows. That will be the Commander." He was already setting up, leaning the amp rifle on the chunk of rock that Tyni had picked out earlier. She had a good eye, he admitted. And, speaking of eyes, she was easy on his, too. No matter that she was covered in grime from a few days on the run. Hell, he wasn't clean himself. He forced himself to focus on the street again.

"The commander?" Tyni asked. She'd obviously missed the stress when he said it. "Did you find Elijah?" she asked, and he didn't have time to answer because the Funkars came around the corner, headed for the station. They took up lazy positions - at least, they looked lazy until one of them noticed the body of the guard Snik had killed. Shouting filled the street, and Snik could see wariness filling them, almost tangibly, like water in a glass. Another time, it might have amused him. Right now, he was busy pulling another grenade from his pocket. *Inversion time*, he muttered to himself. He waited for the soft beep as his thumb covered the activation pad, and then he tossed the grenade as hard as he could, holding his breath until he was sure that it cleared the ruined bank walls. The grenade bounced once in the street and Snik dropped behind his chunk of fallen roof, pulling Tyni down with him. There was a solid thump in the street beyond, and the air suddenly filled with shrieking wind, ripping at his cloak.

The inversion grenade was brilliant, Snik freely admitted. It created a miniature super-firestorm, one that burned so rapidly that it sucked the air and everything loose in a five-meter radius into a solid clump at the center. The fire itself vanished almost immediately, choked by its own suction. The debris made a huge clump that fell to the ground when the vortex vanished, rocks and glass and Soldiers all tangled together in a heap. From here, all Snik felt was a bit of wind. He almost felt bad firing his amp rifle into that mess, but not quite. The green pulse of energy lanced out three times, each shot making a minor explosion. It was almost too easy. Someone screamed after the second blast, but the third silenced the scream. Snik dropped back behind the concrete, listening. Not hearing anything, he flipped the lever to automatic and popped up, laying a withering blast of green fire over the road. Just when he was about to call it clear, a well-aimed shot slammed into his body armor, knocking him backwards. Tyni was quick, sending five shots back at the sniper before Snik regained his feet.

He checked his armor. It was almost unscratched. Ballistic weapons packed a punch, but not much could defeat a bodyshell. He sighed. This was going to take a few minutes. "It's some Funkar Commander, not Elijah. And I didn't expect to get him with the first grenade. We're going to have to do this carefully," he said to Tyni, popping up and firing over the wall under the shelter of another grenade. He caught a flash of movement in the doorway of the security station. "Bastard," he muttered. He turned to Tyni, switching weapons again quickly. "Keep him busy!" In the street, the frag grenade he'd thrown vomited fire and razor-edged shrapnel.

At least Tyni seemed to know how to lay down cover fire. She threw a wall of green energy at the security station, more than enough distraction for Snik to wriggle through jagged pieces of steel and out to the side street again, H-gun ready. From there, he crept forward on his belly, trying to keep an eye both on the street behind him and the security station just ahead on his right. He could see the amp rifle firing silently from the wreckage. "Not so rhythmic!" he whispered. Not that she could hear him -- but he was relieved to see that the pattern changed in another second. In the meantime, he had his own task to focus on. Another tense minute, and he was at the wall of the security station, only a few feet from the door. He fished in one of his pockets, swearing. He'd meant to organize the bodyshell better, but never seemed to get the time to do it. Now, he wished he'd made time.

His fingers finally closed on the shaped charge and he smiled grimly. This battle was about to be over. He could see Tyni now, keeping up a steady barrage. The only difference now was that some of those blasts were scorching the wall only a couple of hands away. He could feel the heat. He ignored it, inching closer to the doorway. Occasionally he could hear the Commander's footsteps scuffing on the pavement as the bastard sent return fire back at Tyni. Snik ignored him, placing the charge against the wall and

carefully aligning the blast target inwards. A final check, and he pressed the arming tab with his thumb; a soft digital beep confirmed that he was authorized to arm the weapon. He edged away, then ran. He deliberately made as much noise as he could short of yelling.

The plan worked predictably. The Commander might have been good, but he was not good enough to resist poking a head out of the doorway and trying to aim a snapshot at Snik's back. Of course, the charge went off then and the Commander was now in two pieces.

Snik dropped flat at the explosion, and rolled onto his back so that he was covering the doorway. The Funkar's head was in the street, but the rest of him had stayed inside the security station. All in all, Snik preferred his Funkars that way. He stood, brushing himself off. The whole place was a mess; there were enough bodies in the street leaking blood to paint the whole dusty surface red from one side to the other. The flies would congregate soon. As would more Soldiers. *Time to get out of here.*

"Let's go," he called to Tyni. She nodded and picked her way out of the ruined bank carefully. Snik found her caution amusing; she was a Permanent, so why would she bother worrying about a few pieces of broken glass? He supposed it was habit.

Tyni fell in beside him as he hurried away from the security station, and the bodies. He kept the amp rifle ready. The Vangel was northeast of the security station by at least a klick, but to get to him, they needed to get clear of any reinforcements coming to look after all the noise. Snik took the first east-heading street he found, directly away from any reinforcements. His caution proved sound; only a moment after they cleared the intersection, Funkar Soldiers ran past. Snik backed up against the wall of an ancient office, his extended arm pressing Tyni back as well. When the Funkar shouts died in the distance, he moved out again, taking a final glance at the building they'd sheltered next to. It had been a doctor's office, it seemed, before the Three War. If the faded lettering was to be believed; it just looked like an old office. To be fair, it was looted now; there was no door and every window was smashed in so long ago that the protruding fragments of wood in the frames were starting to rot. *Guess doctors aren't needed anymore even here.*

Tyni had been quiet for a few moments, so it was no surprise at all to Snik when she finally spoke. Nor was it a surprise that she was asking a question. He was starting to feel like a babysitter.

"Where are we going now?" she asked.

"The Identinet says he's north and a bit east of here."

"He?' The Vangel?" she asked.

"Of course. It took a bit of deduction to be sure, but it's him." Snik was proud of his Identinet skills. He'd taught himself to use the Identinet quite a long time ago. It was something that he didn't think anyone else in New Byantz knew as well as he did. At least, anyone not on the City Council,

and they hadn't had Identinet stations in years anyway. Besides, most of the Councilors would be dying by now, which made him the resident expert. The thought didn't make him feel bad in the least. He had to admire Gina's work. *Just wish I could've killed her myself.*

The Enclave abruptly changed character after they crossed what must have been called Second Street. At least, it was about six blocks from the Eighth Street Station. Snik had no idea if the numbering was referring to the north-south or east-west streets. All of the street signs had been torn down by vandals long ago. In any case, the warehouse district was marked as clearly as if there were a line drawn north and south. East of that line, there were no more tall tenements; there were only rows of low warehouses, sprawling affairs that covered entire blocks each. Most of them were full of gaping holes and not even suitable for Funkar beggars to live in. None had escaped looting.

"He's here somewhere," Snik told Tyni. "I'm not sure where. It's north of here. I am going to go one more block east; wait for me. We'll go north at the same time. With any luck, we'll corner him between us."

Tyni nodded, gripping the H-gun tightly. Snik frowned. She seemed quite ready to kill. Hopefully she wouldn't lose her nerve facing a Vangel. Still, he had to admit that she hadn't lost her nerve when they were facing those Funkars half an hour before, or on her way into the Enclave. She was stronger than she looked. Not that she was weak anymore, if she ever was, being a Permanent. Snik shook his head and darted off to the next street. He stared around him warily. The warehouse district was creepy. Mostly because the wind liked to howl through those gaping holes. At least it was still daylight.

When he reached his street, he looked back to be sure that he could still see Tyni. She was waiting for him, looking eager to go. "Perfect," he muttered. He waved a hand forward, barking a command to his lenses. Tyni nodded her acknowledgment, and they both started north with weapons ready.

The streets were empty as they walked past. Snik would have liked to know their names, but he focused on searching them as he walked past each one. He made sure to stare through the gaps in the warehouse walls as he walked by, just to be sure they were empty. His infrared sensors picked up the odd small animal, probably dogs or cats, and he could vaguely make out Tyni walking parallel on the next street. Four, five, six streets passed. Nothing.

Suddenly his ears perked up, and at the next intersection he held up a hand, hoping Tyni would see. He didn't want to yell at her. He was lucky; she saw and stopped immediately, then crouched down, keeping an eye on both the street and him.

At first all he heard again was the wind, but then there was something else, something that the filter in his ears picked up on and sharpened. He

grinned. It was definitely the Vangel.

"Gord, I have served You faithfully for years..." The voice droned on and on, and a directional arrow flickered on Snik's right lense, appearing to float in front of his eye. He murmured a command, and the arrow turned red as it locked on to that voice. The Tracking module would not divert for any other targets, although it would not fail to alert him that others were nearby. For the millionth time, he admired the efficiency of that system. He doubted there was another one like it on this planet.

He beckoned Tyni over, listening as he waited for her to reach him. The Vangel was still going on. "How could You reject Your Child, one who has given You the souls of thousands, who has waged war against the Heresy? Is there no justice now? What sin have I committed against You?" The Vangel's voice was raised higher now, wailing. How he could spout such drivel endlessly was beyond Snik.

A soft chime from the tracker told him that the Vangel was moving, but not fast. Tyni placed a hand on his shoulder; she had moved up while he was distracted. He looked up at her. "We've got him. He's east of here. Something is off though. He's babbling."

Tyni actually laughed quietly. "When are the Funkars not babbling?"

Snik grinned and stood. "True. Follow, but stay back slightly. Don't forget to keep an eye out for Soldiers," he warned.

"I've got your back," Tyni said, and raised her weapon menacingly.

Snik kept a straight face, but when he was safely facing the darkening streets again, he let himself smile slightly. She wasn't good with that weapon, so he wasn't really counting on her to help. *Not yet, anyway*, he reminded himself. She could definitely be trained. He had no idea if she was willing to let him train her, but she had the makings of a first-class dealer. Hell, she could probably be an true assassin, and the Permanence would be a huge advantage. He wondered if her creature-conferred Permanence would show up on a nanoscanner, one of those machines installed in the doorway of every Citizen Security Office, he'd heard. Supposedly they could detect non-standard nanoimplants, in order to filter out people who might try to slip a suicide bomber into a building. Ancient suicide bombers used dynamite. These days, bones were laced with plastics and blood with nitro and the bombers injected with a mix of nanobots carrying enough oxygen and ATP to keep them from toppling over despite the systemic poisoning, at least until they reached their targets. One of those bombers could level an entire block, or so he'd heard. It sounded plausible to him, and there would be no way to detect that sort of bomb by eye alone.

He turned his mind back to the task at hand. It wasn't really difficult; the Tracking filters were soon unnecessary, as the Vangel's ranting was audible over the wind before they'd gone much further. The Vangel was certainly upset about something. He was somewhere to the northeast, only a block or two. Northeast was good; it meant another block further away

from the Temple barracks and whatever Soldiers might be encamped there.

"Gord, take this affliction from me, and restore to me my purity and honor!" The Vangel's voice was wailing like the wind. "Do not let my enemies triumph over me, nor allow the Faithful to be deceived by the snares of Stan!"

Snik rolled his eyes. He wondered what Tyni was thinking, but he didn't have time to ask her. The Vangel was showing up on infrared now; he was pacing back and forth in front of the collapsed doorway to an old lumber warehouse. Snik's lenses showed him that the Funkar had an audience of sorts; the rats in the building were cowering, probably afraid of running into the bastard. Snik ran his hands over the amp rifle quickly as he walked, making sure that none of the component parts was loose. Nothing ever was, but the day he forgot to check would be the day that the weapon failed him. He held up a hand again, hearing Tyni's footsteps fall silent behind him.

"He's just ahead, a right at the next intersection. I want you to cover him, but don't kill him. I want to talk to him first. Something's up, and I'd like to know what it is. If he tries to fight, then you can shoot him. But only then."

"I'd rather just kill him immediately," Tyni said.

"So would I, but wait until the time is right." Snik frowned. "Don't get itchy with that," he said, tilting his head at the gun.

She sighed. "Fine, I will try to control myself." Snik studied her for a moment; she was just joking, he decided. She must be. He nodded.

"Good. I'm going to wrap around in front of him. After I've got his attention, come up from behind, but stay a few feet away. I don't want him to have a chance to take that H-gun from you."

"Yes, sir."

Snik was pretty sure she was mocking him, but he decided to let it go. He checked the amp rifle one last time from habit, and doubled back to the last street they'd passed. He broke into a run, staying as quiet as possible, until he'd reached the next street east. If the wall rising up on his right was any indication, there was no more east; beyond was rubble and wasteland. He didn't particularly like being on a border street, but there was no help for it. He stopped running and switched to a walk going north; when he reached the street that the Funkar was on, he slowed to a cat's walk, soft and measured. The Vangel hadn't stopped ranting. He was going on about his soul now. "Hope it rots," Snik muttered. He readied the amp rifle and walked quietly around the corner.

The Vangel was facing the wall, his head pointed up at the sky. Snik was happy with that arrangement; it gave him time to walk right up to the man without being seen.

"Hi," Snik said without ceremony.

The Vangel jumped, turning around so fast that he almost fell. His

hand darted inside his cloak for a knife, which he whipped out as he dropped into a crouch.

Snik's finger tightened on the amp rifle trigger as he saw the knife. He wasn't afraid of a rush, only a throw - but even in the dusk the Vangel's knuckles were a couple of shades lighter from his grip on the blade. Snik relaxed. The Vangel wasn't throwing that knife anywhere, not without taking his hand along for the ride.

The Vangel stared at him. "Who are you? How dare you point a weapon at a Vangel of Gord?"

"Brave, I like that," Snik said. "I don't like you, though. Never had much use for Funkars."

"Gord has forsaken us," said the Vangel bitterly. He made a sudden movement with the knife; it slashed through his palm, splattering blood on the ground. The Vangel cut again and again, not just his hand but his forearm. His cloak was shredded and dripping crimson.

For a brief instant, Snik was tempted to rush in and stop the man, but it occurred to him that he did, after all, want the Funkar dead. Of course, he still intended to deliver the *coup de grace* himself. Although he wasn't planning to be graceful about it.

Tyni was moving up on the Vangel's other side silently, and he didn't seem to notice her. He spat on the ground. "Yes, Gord has forsaken His Children. He has withdrawn His protection, so that we are weak and vulnerable. Never before has the Puppetmaster been able to invade our very veins." He punctuated his last few words with slashes of the knife, ripping through the flesh of his left arm. It must have hurt, but he gave no reaction that Snik could see.

"You're Permanent," Snik said. It was not really a question at this point; the slashes were closing up. Slowly, because there were so many cuts, but they *were* closing.

The Vangel looked genuinely sorrowful. "I have failed Gord. My sin was apparent to all who beheld me. The Heretics dropped their devil eggs onto our heads, their birds laying waste with flame and fire the bodies of the Children, and when the flame cleared, my body was burned and bleeding like the others. Until Stan reached into my heart with fingers of abomination and quenched the bleeding, even as he does now. And where are the burns? Gord, why do You withdraw Your protection?" the Vangel wailed, shaking his knife to the sky. Blood was dripping from the blade, spattering onto the ground.

"No idea," Snik said as he spun into action and the blade of his hand crushed nerves on the inside of the Funkar's wrist. The knife clattered to the ground, and Snik kicked the side of the Vangel's left knee, sending him crashing to the ground.

"Think you can run, Tyni?" he asked. His boot was grinding into the Vangel's neck. Tyni still didn't know what he had in mind; hopefully she

would keep her nerve when the time came. The Vangel was not even paying attention; he was still ranting at Gord. At Tyni's name, he looked up.

"I can run," she nodded. The Vangel was staring at her. "What?" she spat at him.

"Tyni?" the Vangel said, a questioning note in his voice. "From the Lost Ones?" A dangerous glint entered the Vangel's eyes. "You were the first to consort with the demon creatures. You did this to me!" He tried to rise, took a step on his knees toward her.

"No, you did this to yourself," Snik said, kicking the Vangel in the head as hard as he could. It took two hits to make the man lose consciousness, and Snik had to tune out groans as he delivered the second one. "Fucking Permanence." He glanced at Tyni. "No offense." Still, it was nice to shut the Vangel up. Snik was tired of hearing that oily voice.

He grabbed the Vangel's right arm. "Get the other arm," he said. He started walking back toward the Temple. With any luck, he wouldn't have to go all the way there.

They walked in silence, the only sound their footsteps and the Vangel's body dragging on the gravel. Dusk was approaching; the sun was starting to fall to the edge of the western horizon. Snik could still see the glow of flames coming from the City. That meant that the fighting was ongoing; fires were easy to suppress if there was nothing restricting the Citizens from engaging them.

A small beep sounded in Snik's left ear, and he raised a finger to catch Tyni's attention. "Funkars," he said softly. He could see flickering infrared outlines a few blocks away. The flickering resolved into solid figures as they got closer. Snik stopped after one more block, dropping the Vangel to the ground and shouting at the Funkars as if for help.

It only took a moment for a few Funkar women to show up. "Get Soldiers," Snik snapped at them, and all but one ran off to comply. "You should have gone," Snik told the remaining woman. He pulled out the amp rifle and held it at his waist, pointed in her direction. He looked around; he was closer to the Temple, and these buildings weren't so badly damaged. A Funkar woman was peering out from the top floor of one of the tenements; she ducked back behind the curtains when she realized that he saw her. Snik gestured with the rifle toward the building. "Against the wall," he said to the woman on the street. She just stared at him until he jabbed her with the rifle barrel. Not a move to use against a Soldier, but he could kill this one with his bare hands if necessary. She backed up to the wall, shaking slightly.

It only took a couple of minutes for a group of six Soldiers to run up in their camouflaged pants and vests. "What's the trouble?" the one in the lead asked Snik as he approached. The Soldiers looked wary.

"Lost Ones!" the woman against the wall yelled, and launched herself into a run, away toward the Temple. Snik shot her in the back and she

flopped to the ground. Beside him, Tyni gasped. *Might as well get this started off on the right foot.* The Funkars immediately pulled out guns and started to raise them, but Snik dropped to one knee with the barrel of his gun against the Vangel's throat.

"You know who this is!" he shouted at them. It was not a question.

One of the Funkars took a closer look. "It's the High Vangel!" he shouted to the others. They looked uncertain, but kept their weapons trained on him.

"Good, I have your attention," Snik said. He deliberately adopted a lecturing tone, and the barrel of the amp rifle did not waver a bit. "Ready to run?" he whispered at Tyni. She looked furious, but nodded at him.

Snik raised his voice again. "Your 'High Vangel' has interfered with the business of a dealer. You know what a dealer is, right?" From the sour looks, he guessed that they did. "You all know that a dealer will not tolerate interference. Your High Vangel has cost me my customer base in the City. More to the point, you fucking animals trashed my house on your way to 'Round Up' Lost Ones." He nodded his head in Tyni's direction. "I believe she has a grievance as well."

"Raj," she said. "You bastards killed my friend!" She had the H-gun out, leveled at the Vangel. Snik grinned without taking his attention from the Funkars.

"In accordance with the dealer code, then, your High Vangel's life is forfeit. Got that?" he said as coldly as he could. He hoped it came out like death. From their faces, he'd say it had.

"You won't harm him," one of the Funkars said, stepping forward. "He is protected by Gord, and every Funkar in a hundred clicks will clamor to personally shed your blood."

Snik shrugged. "Too bad."

"Gord will damn-"

Snik pulled the trigger, cutting off the protest and the Vangel's head at the same time. Tyni burned some holes of her own in the Vangel's body. The Soldiers stood there stunned. Before they could recover, Snik spoke again, quickly.

"You might want to think twice about putting that head close to the body again. Your High Vangel is afflicted with the Abomination. Guess he must have failed Gord." He kicked the head, sending it rolling end-over-bloody-end against the tenement wall. He could have sworn the Vangel's eyes were still moving, but he didn't have time to look. "Check the body if you don't believe me." He held them all with his eyes, daring them to move. A few seconds passed, then one of the Soldiers blinked away from the body on the ground and started to raise his gun. Without taking his eyes away, Snik said a single word to Tyni. "Run." Then the shooting started and Tyni wasn't the only one running.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The starlight cast a faint glow over the ruined rafters of the warehouse, throwing bars of shadow as wide as a man into the already-dark interior. Tyni stood panting in one of those shadows. Snik was there, lying on his back; Tyni wasn't the only one breathing hard. She tried to listen for Funkars over the sound of her own breathing.

She'd taken a hit - only one, as it seemed the Funkars were particularly poor shots - when she ran, but the wound was already knitting itself up. The feeling was strange, like a million ants crawling in her skin and the tissue itself writhing back into realignment. She shrugged uncomfortably.

Her clothes were a mess, she decided. Dirt everywhere, and her pants had blood splashed over the calves. The Enclave was not the cleanest place in the world; she'd rarely gotten so dirty even in the Warrens. She took a deep breath, feeling her breathing return to normal. Her Permanence was not invulnerability; the shot had slowed her down.

"Do you think he's dead?" Tyni let herself slump down as she asked the question. No point in standing up when she could sit.

"Should be. I don't think those Funkars would want to touch him. They're stupid, but they can hardly fail to notice his Permanence healing those laser burns. He is pretty thoroughly Abominated, if you ask me." Snik was grinning; he seemed to enjoy the thought.

"Why the woman?" Tyni asked. Snik nodded as if he'd been waiting for the question.

"I told her to wait at the wall. If she had, she would still be alive."

"You shot her in the back," Tyni pointed out. She wasn't accusing - not really. *Maybe just a little*. The slumrats did not shoot people in the back. Killing was no problem for most of them, but every slumrat faced her opponent fairly.

"If I had let her get away with running, those Funkars would have decided that I didn't mean business. Maybe they would have started shooting right away. As it was, they were shocked into doing nothing, which is exactly what I hoped for. It gave us the edge."

Tyni sniffed, a bit proudly. "I have never shot someone in the back," she said.

Snik smiled at her as if she were a particularly amusing child.

"There's a first time for everything."

She didn't feel like arguing with him, so she closed her eyes instead, listening carefully for Funkar footsteps. There was still nothing, of course. When she opened her eyes again, Snik was standing up. She hadn't hear him move. "Nice trick," she said.

He smiled at her. "Child's play."

"Were you a slumrat?" she asked him abruptly.

The question made him laugh briefly, and he almost choked. "I'm not from anywhere around here," he replied. "Not the slums, not New Byanzt."

She waited, but he didn't seem to be volunteering information, so she asked the obvious. "Where, then?"

He sighed, a quick one that she almost missed. "Offworld, Barnard's Colony originally," he said. "Why do you think I want out of here so badly?"

"Offworld," she repeated wonderingly. "How did you end up here? Who would anyone come here deliberately?"

"No one that I know," he said wryly. "It was a business deal gone wrong. I was dropping off a freighter of asteroid-mined platinum in Toyko and a local official decided that the landing permit fee needed to be augmented. When I objected, he introduced me to a squad of bought UrbPat. My freighter stayed in Toyko and I was kicked through the Races with my access to Toyko revoked at the Racegate." He shrugged. "That was nearly twenty years ago. I got sidetracked with local intrigues and it wasn't until last year that I started feeling the wanderlust again."

"You don't learn to fight like you do by piloting freighters," Tyni said pointedly.

Snik shrugged helplessly. "Local intrigues," he repeated. "And now New Byanzt has gone to hell. So my freighter will have to be acquired elsewhere. That means the Racegate." He sighed again, rocking up onto his feet easily and holding a hand out to her. She took it and stood up, brushing dust from her clothes. She didn't believe a word of it. He must have been UrbPat, or military. Maybe from Londis, although she had never met anyone who had successfully crossed the Wastes. Although he did seem to have modifications that she had never seen before. She cleared her throat.

"What about me?" she asked, embarrassed slightly. She went on hurriedly, before he could respond. "I don't want to go back to the Warrens. Raj isn't there, and the Funkars will come again, like they always do. Maybe one day I won't make it to the tunnels in time. I don't know about going offworld, but anything is better than staying here," she finished.

He looked at her thoughtfully, his lenses flashing tiny digital orange sparks. She wondered again what those lenses might be showing him. Normal Permanent lenses just helped you to see in the dark or through smoke. And none of them sparked in the dark.

Snik finally spoke, looking away from her at the walls of the warehouse. "To be honest, I was hoping you'd want to come along. I think you might be a great help, and there is much I could teach you. If nothing else, you can keep my back covered."

She thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Deal." She wasn't sure she wanted to be a dealer, but learning more ways to kill Funkars was appealing.

He chuckled for some reason. "Let's go," he said, moving already. She

pulled out the H-gun again, keeping it pointed at the ground. Snik didn't bother to pull out his amp rifle, but she would take the guarding seriously enough for them both.

The gravel crunched underfoot as they stepped out of the warehouse, climbing carefully through a hole in the jagged tin wall. "They'll still be looking," Snik said quietly, "so don't make too much noise. And don't shoot unless you have to."

"I understand," she said. She followed along closely, trying to watch her own back as they slunk through the darkened streets. More than once she almost tripped over some piece of debris fallen from a building. The starlight was only so useful when trying to move quickly.

Snik headed east, toward the border street. Tyni found herself relieved that they were not heading toward the Temple. She was still not sure how to react to Snik's act of... Was it murder? Execution? She turned it over in her head as they walked.

"Border street," Snik said. The wall rising to the east over their heads underscored that. The shadows were darker here, and it made Tyni nervous. Snik glanced around once as if to get his bearings and then headed north. Tyni followed, hearing nothing but the occasional scratching of a rat moving through dead leaves at the base of the wall.

A few blocks north, the buildings changed character again, and the wall seemed to flow seamlessly into a tangled pile of rubble that the street barely managed to squeeze through. "What happened here?" Tyni asked. She found the wreckage unnerving; there were too many crannies where someone could be hiding. It was impossible to watch all of them, so she settled for making an occasional full spin.

"Will you stop that?" Snik said finally, after she spun for the hundredth time. "I'll hear if someone comes up from behind," he said.

She stopped mid-spin, feeling foolish. "You could have told me that," she snapped at him. She felt bad for snapping, but then she decided that if he was going to withhold information, it was his own fault if he got snapped at.

She couldn't be sure in the dark, but he seemed to be trying to hide a smile. "We're almost there," he told her. Another block, and a street penetrated the ruined east wall. Snik followed the new street east, but stopped almost immediately, pressing Tyni back against the wall. A pair of Funkars were patrolling; she could see torchlight reflecting from something polished at the street's end.

"This is only exit past the border. I'll take the one on the right," Snik said. He aimed the amp rifle without waiting for her reply and fired. The green glow briefly lit the entire street like a lightning flash. One of the torchlights wobbled, casting crazy shadows on the ruins, dark flickering shapes that shifted and danced, then extinguished suddenly as the Funkar fell on top of it. The light in the street was cut by half, and then grew

brighter as the remaining Funkar shouted something incomprehensibly furious and ran at them.

Snik just stood there, and Tyni found herself trying to level the H-gun for a shot. She'd killed before, but not with one of them charging directly at her. Her brain was telling her arms to move, but she was shaking. The Funkar was closer now; she could see his camouflage and leather vest, the assault rifle coming up. The tip vomited flame and something cracked past her head, many somethings that she knew were bullets. *You're going to die*, she told herself. *Why isn't Snik helping?*

The Funkar was too close now, and one of the bullets slapped the side of her leg. Suddenly the paralysis vanished and she had the H-gun up and firing. The Funkar dropped from view and the noise went away. She found herself panting, adrenaline coursing through her. She turned to Snik, who was laughing at her. "You bastard!" she said, dropping the gun and launching herself at him.

He evaded her easily, stooping to pick up the dropped gun before she recovered from her lunge. "You don't want to lose this," he said, dangling the weapon in front of her between his thumb and forefinger. She stood up, then stalked over and snatched it away from him angrily.

"I could have been killed!" she said furiously.

"You weren't," he replied. He stood watching her, exuding patience. It infuriated her even more.

"You arrogant son of a bitch. You think this is funny!"

"It is," Snik agreed. He was looking up and down the road warily, but then his face relaxed as he turned back to watch her again.

She felt her anger drain as her eyes fell across the body of the Funkar on the ground. He'd fallen only a few meters away; his assault rifle was dug into the ground, propping his upper body partially into the air. It was almost obscene; she kicked the man down so that he was lying on his back. She didn't know why she felt that was more respectable. Dead was dead. She took a deep breath, staring up at the stars, faint as they were.

"Next time, you won't hesitate," Snik said behind her.

"You think I was afraid?" she asked him, daring him with her eyes to say yes. She would show him what being afraid felt like.

He shook his head. "It's natural to hesitate the first time you realize someone wants you dead. It's overwhelming. Back there," he pointed the way they'd come, "with the Funkars at the security station, you had my lead to follow. Before, at the gates, you wanted *them* dead. Here, you had to take responsibility to defend yourself. And you did well. You saved yourself without my help this time."

Tyni did not give him the satisfaction of a response, but she knew he was right. She remembered the old woman in the Warrens - no, not old, she reminded herself. That hitter had tried to kill her and she'd frozen up. It did feel good to have defended her own life for a change. She'd been ready to

try in the Warrens when the Funkars came for them, but now she realized that she might well have frozen up and died there in the tunnels. Or been carried into the Enclave; that might have been worse.

Snik was strolling leisurely toward the end of the street, and she caught up with him, pocketing her H-gun as she walked. He stopped at the end, just a few paces shy of a metallic wall.

"The Racegate," he said calmly.

Tyni rolled her eyes. "Make it sound more exciting," she said. "Our escape! Anything. Don't you ever get excited?"

He didn't look upset; he just stared at her for a moment. "I'll get excited when I get off this damned rock," he said. "You know, you can't really understand how it feels to be trapped on a single planet until you've been offworld." He was examining the metal as he talked, scanning top to bottom in an orderly pattern. "It's almost claustrophobic, like not having access to the infostreams." He trailed off for a second. "I suppose you've never had access to the infostreams or the Immersion network in the first place."

"No," she said. "I've seen Immersion systems while I was in the City but never had a chance to try one."

"You feel isolated," he finished. "Maybe one day you'll understand it. Although I'm not sure it would be doing you any favors. There's something to be said for contentment in ignorance."

"You don't really believe that."

"No, not really," he agreed. "It's a nice thought though." He stepped back from the gate. "I think I'm going to have to wreck the damn thing," he said. "It works on a transmitter that Citizens would have had implanted when traveling between Cities. Obviously neither of us has one." He stared at the Racegate a moment longer. "This isn't going to be pretty," he said finally. "Go back to the corner and stay there. Do not stand in the middle of the street! Stand against the wall. You understand?"

"Okay," she nodded. She pulled out the H-gun again, which he seemed to approve of. She started to walk, but he wasn't finished.

"When the Racegate comes down, don't move until I call you. And then run like hell. The Funkars will hear this in the Temple basement. Hell, they might hear it in the City."

She nodded, then turned and ran for the corner, H-gun out. The streets were empty in all directions, as far as she could see. Not that she could see far in the faint starlight. Not for the first time, she wished she had the Citizen lenses which amplified starlight and sensed infrared. She'd heard that there were more sophisticated lenses with entire data repositories and tracking tools on them, but she'd never known anyone to have that. It might be a rumor, for all she knew.

Still, she was close enough to watch Snik's shadow, at least, as he moved around the Racegate. He seemed to be searching for a suitable

location to place a charge. Another rat scampered through leaves somewhere, and a cat yowled, making her turn her head involuntarily. The noises gave her chills, despite the warmth of the calm night air. She looked again at Snik. He was hunched over, studying something. Then he moved back swiftly and pressed himself against the wall. Tyni moved closer to the wall behind her.

A muffled thump vibrated through the ground, and then there was silence. The Racegate looked the same for a moment, and then the metal fell away in a circle. Oddly, the mouth of the Raceway itself was glowing softly, a muted red light that didn't break her night vision. She stayed still, remembering Snik's instructions. Absolutely nothing happened. She could hear wind brushing against the leaves now, and somewhere a shout echoed over abandoned rooftops from the direction of the Temple, but nothing to be worried about. Another cat yowled. Snik was reaching to the ground, and then he straightened, tossing something toward the entrance. She could hear a stone rattling against metal. Still nothing.

She was growing impatient, and increasingly nervous. She didn't like standing still in the middle of nowhere. Snik had said to avoid the middle of the street; maybe she could slide along the walls to get closer...

Just then, Snik moved suddenly, launching himself across the entrance and firing an amp rifle blast into the mouth of the Raceway. Something threw him back like a puppet; he managed to turn a nasty fall into a roll and came up on his feet, staggering to the far side and pressing himself against the wall. As he did so, the roar reached Tyni, along with a blast of heat that made her recoil around the corner. The noise cascaded through the empty streets, ricocheting from tin walls and concrete rubble like a runaway percussion section of a Citadel marching band. She found herself trembling.

"I think you can come out now," Snik called wryly. "The Ambusher has done its job. The mouth is going to close. We have to run."

Tyni stepped out cautiously, looking through the darkness for Snik. She couldn't see a thing, but she could hear him.

"Run!"

She ran for the red glow, jumping through the Racegate mouth. Something tripped her and she fell hard, grunting as her chest smacked the ground. She almost lost her wind, but not quite. She rolled over painfully to sit up, looking to see what she'd tripped over. Snik's extended leg told the story.

"You bastard!" She stood up, brushing tiny fragments of rock from her skin and clothes. "What was that for?"

"That entrance bomb isn't the only trap in the Races. You go running off like a crazy person and you'll be dead before five seconds have passed." He frowned. "Looks like the mouth is closed. Until the power runs out, anyway." He pointed out the gate itself.

The opening was filmed with a sheet of red light. "Holographic," Snik

said. "But it probably has lasers embedded in there. I wouldn't want to run through it. In any case, if we stay here, the Funkars can shoot through it easily enough. Might cut bodies but it won't stop bullets. Let's move," he said. "Stay behind me."

She wasn't about to argue that. If Snik wanted to get himself killed, that was his choice. She abruptly realized that the fragments of rock on the ground were not fragments of rock; there were bones here, old bones. Some of them were largely intact, but others were sliced through cleanly as if by a giant pair of scissors. She shuddered and turned away.

The Raceway turned north abruptly only a few steps from where they stood, and Snik headed toward the turn carefully. Tyni followed; she could hear Funkar shouting in the distance behind. She didn't want to be the one staying behind to meet them.

When she rounded the corner, she almost bumped into Snik. He had stopped, studying a panel embedded in the wall. The Raceway floor changed just past the corner; it seemed to be jointed somehow. "It moves?" Tyni asked, pointing at the floor.

"If I can manage to bypass the security to start it, it does." He didn't move a finger toward the panel. "If I press the wrong control, the slicewire will stay deployed. Slicewire is bad. Run into that while you're on the walkway and you'll leave your body in four pieces before you know you were cut. It's almost invisible." He laughed slightly. "Not even you would heal from that, unless someone pushed your pieces together again."

Tyni pulled off the Funkar cloak and tossed it aside, taking off her own coat underneath. "I know about slicewire. I can help," she said.

Snik looked amused. And as if he enjoyed looking at her. "How?"

She almost blushed. *Almost*. "Watch," she said. She dangled the coat by the collar and pressed a button woven into the right shoulder. The coat stiffened; she set it on the jointed floor and it stayed upright. The coat was nanocoated to turn aside almost any human-powered assault from, say, a knife. She turned and pressed a button on the panel at random, before Snik could stop her. The Raceway came smoothly to life, zipping the coat away. She would have to run to match that pace. Suddenly the coat stopped a dozen meters away, the jointed panels sliding under it but failing to move it. Strain her eyes as she might, she couldn't see the slicewire holding it back.

"There's your slicewire," she said.

Snik nodded, impressed. "Good thinking." He pressed another button at random on the panel. The coat didn't move.

There were only a handful of buttons, though, and within five minutes he had managed the proper combination. The coat zipped away into the tunnel.

"I think that did it," Snik said.

"I'm all for sitting down on that Raceway just in case there are some neck-level slicewires still active," Tyni pointed out. "That coat isn't very

tall.”

Snik nodded. “Let's do it.” He stepped out onto the Raceway, pulling her with him. As the momentum grabbed him, it almost yanked her from her feet, but they both steadied themselves and then sat down, eyeing the Raceway roof uneasily.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The walls of the Raceway were transparent, if streaked with dust on the outside, and Tyni stared out at the landscape as they moved. She'd never seen the City from this vantage before; the Raceway moved outside, running uphill and spreading out the entire City before her - Warrens, Citadel, and Enclave. Only starlight illuminated it, and flames from the Citadel. There were smaller fires here and there throughout the Enclave, and the Temple seemed to glow even from this distance. The Warrens were a shadowed mass against the distant hills.

"It's strange to be outside," she said. She knew her eyes were wider than usual.

Snik shrugged. "It's the Wastes out there. There are people still living out here, you know. All Funkars. I don't think the Funkars let anyone stay alive out here if they haven't Converted."

"How do you know so much about the Wastes?" Tyni asked.

Snik grinned at her, his teeth white against the shadow of his face. "When I was put out of Toyko through the Races, I never made it to the next City. The UrbPat bastards were waiting for me halfway through, and kicked me out into the Wastes through a service exit."

"You Converted?" The thought surprised Tyni. Snik didn't seem to be the type of man who would go for religion.

"Sure, or so the Funkars thought. You do what you have to in order to stay alive. Plus, I learned how to move around in Funkar territory without being stopped."

"Where does this Raceway go?" Tyni asked.

"Londis."

"The Remnants," Tyni said softly. "I never thought to see it." She'd heard of the Remnants in Londis before, the huge metropolis that had managed to stave off the Funkars and maintain some semblance of normality after the Three War. Londis was supposedly a hundred miles square, teeming with the descendants of all the surviving Seculars who could make it to safety after the Three War. If it was true. Raj would have known. The thought made her sad.

Snik seemed to pick up on her mood change. "I spent some time in Londis before I came to New Byanzt. You will feel like a child there. Thousands of people. Not a place to make your fortune, though. If you don't have old money there, and you're not Permanent, you will get a house and a food allowance every month, and nothing else. They say the suicide rate is high in Londis. At least in New Byanzt, an enterprising slumrat could make a small fortune." He seemed satisfied with himself. "Dealers could make more. I've got a few small fortunes now. It's enough to get off this rock again if I can find a freighter in Londis. This," he said, pointing to the

burning Citadel rapidly vanishing in the distance, "is just a minor setback."

Rattling noises came from somewhere back in the Raceway. Tyni whipped her head around, scanning the darkness but not seeing anything. Snik frowned, cocking his head and listening.

"Bastards. Must have blocked the lasers long enough to get inside. They're maybe ten minutes behind," he said after a minute.

They rode in tense silence. The Raceway had accelerated now, and the landscape outside was whipping by, wherever dust hadn't piled up against the tube. They passed an entire mountain range in less than two minutes. Once Tyni saw the bones of several people flash by, leaning against the tube half-buried by sand, as if they'd taken refuge against the wind and died there. She felt herself growing increasingly uncomfortable. "Do you think they'll catch up?" she asked, pointing back into the tube.

"With any luck, you're right about the upper slicewires still being deployed, and they're too clueless to sit down," Snik shrugged.

"Otherwise..." He patted the amp rifle cradled in his arms. "We'll be through in another quarter hour, in any case. Look, we're slowing already."

It was true. The landscape was gradually slowing its blurring dash past her eyes, settling out so that she could make out details again. The land was different here; there were trees, enough to be considered a forest, and once she was sure she caught a glance of a lake too big for her to see across. As the Raceway continued to slow, they passed directly underneath a Funkar settlement that had been built on top. Tyni could clearly make out the cloaks on some of the figures walking overhead. And some of them were...*digging*? "They're trying to break in," Tyni said. "That can't be good."

Snik nodded. "It's not. If they get inside the Raceway there's nothing to keep them from getting into Londis. And speaking of Londis." Snik pointed over her shoulder, and she turned around to stare as the Raceway cut through a hill and emerged onto a flat plain and the walls of Londis came into view.

"Near-frictionless," Snik said, gesturing at the walls. "You won't climb those without serious technological help." The Raceway aimed directly through one of the walls, the tube merging seamlessly. "Only another minute or two."

Something slapped into the wall next to Tyni, and Snik was already firing back down the Raceway. Tyni could make out a pair of Funkars shooting at her, far enough back to look tiny. She didn't hesitate to pull out the H-gun and start shooting back.

"This will be fun," Snik grunted, the amp rifle kicking a green flash of light past the Funkars' heads. The two Soldiers were keeping themselves flat on the ground now. A bullet smacked into Snik's bodyshell, hard enough for Tyni to hear it. He simply ignored it. "Those diggers, and now this," he said again, firing another blast. "We'll have to do something."

The Raceway slid them off to a smooth stop against a gate. Four

UrbPat officers were standing in front of the gate facing away, their weapons holstered. They were obviously not expecting company. Snik did a smooth roll backwards out of the gate, coming up on one knee to fire again into the Raceway as Tyni did her best to scramble out of the gate. She swore as she did so. The bullets cracking over her head were not helping her concentrate, but she managed to get clear and dive to the side in time to see some of those bullets take an UrbPat officer in the back. She risked a peek back into the tunnel, then jerked her head clear as more bullets ripped through the air where her head had been. Snik glanced at her. "Four more," she said.

"Thought so. No, not us, you bastards!" he shouted at the UrbPat officers who were drawing H-guns on them. Tyni covered them with her own weapon. "The Funkars!" Snik was firing into the Raceway as he shouted.

The UrbPat officers looked confused momentarily, but had the sense to duck out of the way of the gunfire coming from the Racegate. One of them actually managed to return fire into the Raceway. Tyni frowned. These UrbPat were different than the ones she was used to; they didn't look like men accustomed to fighting. She focused on the Funkars and realized that she was getting more return shots in than the UrbPat officers were. Another Funkar fell to her fire, and Snik was pulling something like a folded sheet of paper from another fold of his cloak. The amp rifle was lying on the ground beside him. "What're you doing?" Tyni shouted at him.

Two more UrbPat officers ran up. "What's going on here?"

"Funkars," Snik muttered at them as he folded the paper down into a compact bundle. "Keep shooting back, damn you!" That last was directed at her, Tyni knew. The dealer had no respect. But he was right, and she kept a steady return fire going.

Another minute, and two more Funkars were down, but more of the fanatics were showing up in the Raceway tube. Snik fished around in his cloak and pulled out a microchip of some sort which he stabbed into the block of folded - well, whatever it was. *Explosives*, she told herself. Not much else it could be.

Snik met her eye and she nodded. She notched up her rate of fire, giving him time to press a thumb to the chip and get the soft digital activation tone before he tossed the entire bundle deep into the mouth of the Raceway. Before she could stop firing, Snik dove into the Racegate, rolling to the control panel in a sinuous movement. She barely missed hitting him. The Raceway reversed at the press of a button, whipping the bundle away. Snik immediately rolled out again, taking another bullet in the side of his arm as he did so.

"One minute!" he shouted. "That will give it time to get outside of the walls." He was already shooting again with the amp rifle.

Tyni cringed a bit at the bullets flying through the air, but the Funkars

were already having to run forward just to stay in view, and with the UrbPat officers firing in earnest now, they quickly dropped back out of sight.

An UrbPat officer who seemed to be in charge rounded on them, lowering his weapon warily. "I'm Captain in this precinct. What the hell is going on --" He stopped abruptly as Snik raised a hand with a look that called for silence. Then looked startled that he'd done so.

"Listen," Snik said. He smiled. Tyni suppressed a grin. She was starting to recognize that smile.

An instant later, a deafening roar crashed back through the tunnel. "That would be the collapse of the Raceway," Snik informed them. He looked satisfied; the Captain, on the other hand, looked stunned.

"You had flexplosives? Where'd you get them? And the Raceway? You blew it up? What the hell?" He seemed angry at the loss of control, but was clearly unwilling to attack people who killed Funkars.

"Don't worry about it," Snik said. He jumped back in the tunnel, holding a hand for Tyni. She hesitated a second, then jumped up as well. "Let's make sure we did the job right."

"Wait a minute!" the Captain shouted, but they were already moving into the Raceway. Tyni could hear him shouting orders to his men behind them.

Tyni winced as she picked her way through Funkar corpses, eying Snik as she walked. He didn't seem to be bothered in the least; he glanced at each body with a professional eye and moved on. Deeper in the tunnel, there was a cloud of dust thick enough to obscure the light from the tunnel walls, and the Raceway itself was no longer moving. She supposed that it had been damaged by the explosion. One of the Funkars twitched, and she killed him without hesitation.

Another few moments of walking and Tyni could see the blockage in the tunnel. The diggers had been digging farther out, away from the city walls. This cave-in was just past the wall itself, and thoroughly done. The diggers would have to start over, close enough to the walls to be shot at. The bomb had thrown up earth from beneath the Raceway, the smell of burned soil filling her nose along with the smoke of the explosion itself. She studied the blockage; it didn't look like anyone would dig through that easily. But then, there were a lot of Funkars to do the digging. "They should keep a guard on this tunnel," she said.

"I agree," said Snik, looking over the collapse critically. "But I think we're safe for a month or two, at least." He turned back, already striding to the Racegate mouth. "Piece of cake."

Tyni followed, happy to head back to cleaner air. The UrbPat Captain was waiting for them, his men examining the Funkar bodies.

"What you did here was helpful, but you destroyed a Raceway! That Raceway is irreplaceable. I'm taking the two of you into custody. You'll need to be interviewed by the Council," he informed them both. To her ears, he

had a strange accent, slightly soft.

"We'll be along shortly," Snik assured him. "You can have your men watch us, if you want." He turned his back on the man without waiting for an answer. "So, it seems we made it out," he said to Tyni.

The Captain's mouth dropped open, but he hesitated for a moment and then walked away. Tyni stared after him for a moment, until Snik's voice called her attention back. "Well?"

She looked at the Racegate, then at Snik. "Well, what are my choices?" She laughed softly. "I can try to blend in here as a Permanent, live out my life normally and hope nobody ever finds me out - or I can tell them the truth about what happened to me. Maybe they'll give me a place to live."

"Or maybe they'll study you like one of those CfeX lab creatures. You have another choice. Stick with me." He shook his head at her. "No, not like that. Strictly professional. Help me get off this rock. You can have your own quarters on my freighter when I get it, maybe get one of your own ships eventually. See the solar system, and maybe then some. What do you say?"

She didn't hesitate. "It beats being stuck down here."

Snik grinned. "Come on. We have some politics to take care of first. Then we're outta here." He strode off and she followed, tailed by four UrbPat officers. She looked back once at the ruined Raceway, then turned away, her eyes wide as she looked ahead toward the soaring towers of Londis.

Epilogue

Raj opened his eyes, staring out into near darkness. Something cool and wet touched his eyes. He tasted mud in the water. *So, the river.* The Funkars lacked imagination, and were too lazy to bury him. The river was as convenient a disposal site as any, and much easier than digging a grave. He convulsed in a silent laugh, no bubbles leaving his water-filled lungs. His body was protected well enough to make the Citizen Permanence seem primitive, if in a slightly different way. He stood under the water, then walked up the riverbank and stood on the scraggly, dripping. Frowning, he bent over so that the water could drain out of his lungs. After some coughing, he managed to take a deep breath. "Much better, this is," he observed to a fat crow that was walking along the water's edge.

He looked back toward the city, where rising columns of smoke created a cloud that hovered over the walls and obscured the tops of the Citadel of New Byanzt. He was pleased. He'd never expected the City to last as long as it did, really, and it had always been expected that breaking the Funkars would require sacrifices. New Byanzt would recover.

It was past time to be done here. He had done well, bribing those guards in Toyko so long ago, and stealing the Gordword at just the right moment. The Game was played on the timescale of years, and he had played his latest moves well. He headed out into the Waste, unconcerned. Londis beckoned. It was his move again.

About The Author

Nathaniel has been writing stories and novels in various genres for the past fifteen years. Growing up online - first bulletin board systems, then the internet - has caused him to spend much of his life pondering the ways in which technology has infused every aspect of existence in modern first-world nations, and to spend as much of it daydreaming about the ways in which we might be changed by it in the future.

Nathaniel works in software engineering and knowledge management consulting, and holds a master's degree in sociology. In addition, he holds an undergraduate minor in fine arts (painting and drawing) and art history, and has trained in various martial arts, including aikido, tai chi ch'uan, and taekwondo.

When he's not writing, Nathaniel creates electronic music, digital and analog artwork, and various types of software that he is happy to distribute freely on his website (www.natesimpson.com).