

EXTOR – WORKING TITLE

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Man knew fire as he was made from it. In the cold he wrapped himself in it, and in time made worlds of it. The challenge became to find the coldest places, those furthest, darkest, most unexplored places, to bring its light. There was where the gods went as man chased them.

The peacekeeper speared out of the night sky. Arran was dressed for business. He came into the faint radiance shimmering greenly off the algae fields, angling his descent into a swoop over the water that brought ripples across its surface. He hovered. A humid waft of salty marsh air greeted him. There was no sound besides the low hum of cyclers working over the crop. He spotted a place to land and observe, taking a perch on the tall slope of a pond wall, and looked out over the farmyard spread across the pane. A starry landscape above, below, everywhere beyond the range made the fields glow. The stars spread out forever.

Fine rockdust crunched under his boots. He studied the farmyard and listened, crouching to lower his profile. It was still. No-one lurked about the warehouses, the machinery, or the industrial pumps with their sluice-pipes snaking between the wide ponds. Hunkered in the open space ahead the broad, gulled hull of Odelford's shiny new starship made its owner's quiet declaration of sovereignty.

One of the warehouse doors was open and light spilled out from the entry. His quarry was in there, waiting for him, no doubt prepared. He pushed out of his crouch and stepped off the pond wall. The force sent clods of dust rolling down the slope behind him.

He landed beside the ship and walked around it. He rounded its belly and reached up to touch where its burnished prow sharpened to a point. It stung. The craft was one solid piece from end to end, from the point at its fore to its scaled wings and the burners at the rear. The whole thing was cast in a fine, bronzy sheen. It was impressive, but still, Arran didn't want to see it still docked here, not in this town, not a day longer. He went over and stood in the light from the warehouse.

The men inside were playing a card game. A table was set up in the middle of the warehouse, messy with betting chips and cards, and they sat around it. Overshadowing them, tied-down empty biotanks filled shelves reaching as high as the vaulted ceiling. The owner of the ship parked outside was facing the doorway, his proud face blank. Odelford put his cards down. The rest of them noticed the change in his mood. Heads turned.

Cigar smoke hung over them. There was a bottle, and each man had a glass except for the one who was smoking. That man wore a tidy, dark suit, which rumbled at the shoulders as he turned and saw Arran next. He knew them all.

Arran leaned up against the doorframe and folded his arms. 'Vikram, I didn't pick you for a gambler. Who's winning?'

Vikram chewed down on his thick cigar, scowling, and looked at Odelford.

Odelford spread his palms on the table. 'Bold of you to come by, Arran.' His booming voice rumbled off the walls. 'I wouldn't say I was expecting you, but more of a shame to think you wouldn't feel welcome regardless.' He beckoned. 'Come, come now, make yourself at home.'

Arran nodded but stayed at the doorway, giving the wall a tap with a knuckle. No metallic rap came from the other side. 'Hello, fellers.' He nodded at the other men at the table. Some returned the nod, still surprised.

The hair on Arran's neck pricked. Odelford's son, the swollen freak, glared at Arran weirdly from below a mess of thin hair. He was on his father's right side, tense with pubescent zeal. His mottled complexion darkened with a rush of blood up from the neck of a loose white singlet. He hunched meaty shoulders down over his betting chips and glowered, the wan of his skin piggish. The weirdness came from his eyes, which didn't focus.

Arran averted his gaze, trying to pay him no mind. He said to Odelford, 'Well, I figured you'd be expecting me, considering our talk earlier.'

Odelford had adopted the freak to assist his more experimental work, the concern of which was private. His boy was mute. What designs Odelford practiced upon him in the backrooms of his residence were of their witness alone, and would not be repeated. The ill signs it left on the boy's physical form gave rise to enough rumour, though rarely was it Odelford's son left the farm at all.

They were visibly dissimilar in every way, he and Odelford. His father was tall, broad, and regular. His dark hair was combed. He leaned back in his seat, thumbing the straps of his suspenders, and spoke through a stiff moustache. 'No! Oh. No, not at all, I only thought of that as something of a disagreement. It is good you are here, but we might have to wait a moment to discuss our matters. I am with friends, obviously.'

The farmer made a gesture with his hands that acknowledged the men around him. 'Our table is full, but as I have said, do not feel unwelcome.'

Arran entered the warehouse, sniffing the air. He smelled volatiles, maybe tarylase. This was where he prepared the mixtures. It was no bother now, though. That ordnance wasn't going anywhere.

Arran stepped slowly, keeping an eye on those tall racks. There was plenty light between tanks. Odelford wasn't hiding any men. He had his protection in front of him.

Odelford kept talking. 'You must be acquainted with most here, I think these are several of our local business bureau,' a big, flat hand indicated those seated.

'I am.' Arran acknowledged them. Seated here was one member of council, a shipwright, and two men in the mass trade. Arran knew they each pocketed more in a day than he did in a month. 'Are they aware we've seized your transports?'

Odelford was a good liar. 'Mine are all docked for harvest, peacekeeper.'

Arran sighed. 'Gentlemen, while I don't strictly have anyone detained this evening, I do ask that you mind those pockets for a few minutes. I'll have some business of my own then you can all get back to your evening.'

'Arran,' Carrow began, but his eyes implored more than he would say.

Odelford's voice harshened with bluster. 'This is really not an appropriate time.'

'I'm kinda wondering what you're still doing here, Odelford. Last we spoke I remember I asked you to leave by a time that is passing as we speak. Your new bird is tied up right outside, and yet here you still are.'

Odelford harrumphed. 'Arran. I am the largest producer of convertible biomass in this sector. Harvest is coming up soon, which will be vital for this town. It is me and my centuries' worth of experience that brings the solutions our civilisation needs to survive in these very cold and uncertain times. I will not be spoken to like a rowdy drunkard. I mean something around here.'

'I can see that,' Arran said, stopping short of the table. 'It'd be a shame to see all that knowledge and experience go to waste. Best it goes somewhere else.'

Arran's words lingered in the air, the threat in them settling heavy across their shoulders. Vikram ashed his cigar and pressed his temple. 'I knew something was off,' he said. He pushed himself away from the table, keeping his angered gaze down. 'I'm going home. I will not be your stooge, Odelford. This is all yours.'

Vikram put on his coat and left into the night. By Arran's measure the town's illustrious council usually would step out of immediate and pressing matters they couldn't manage by committee, which was most of them. He wasn't surprised hearing the the sound of the alderman's footsteps tapping away behind him.

'Looks like a seat opened,' Arran said, slumping into it. He stretched his legs out and rested the heel of one boot on the top of another. He checked Vikram's cards. He didn't have much. 'Smart,' Arran said, resting his hands in his lap now.

The freak's sullen glower deepened. His father spoke. 'You were not invited to this game, peacekeeper. I suggest you go on home.'

Gart, sat on his left, watched with amusement. Arran sat in the middle facing Odelford. Carrow, on his right, shut his eyes and turned his head to the ceiling. The other mass trader tried to conceal his worry. He might need to stay worried, but if he was smart he'd let Odelford's chips fall first and do some thinking.

Arran shook his head. 'You must be about the stupidest criminal I've ever met, Odelford. We've found your shipments, all three.'

He was interrupted by more bluster. 'Stop, Arran!' Odelford groaned and looked away. 'Criminal? You come into my place of business and think to level these accusations at me? I'm a pillar of this community.'

Arran shrugged up onto an elbow and pointed at him. 'Not even, Odelford. You're new money. Your family's been here, what, fifty years? Some around here've been here since foundation. Those are pillars. Strong ones.' He looked at Carrow. 'Your family's foundation, isn't it?'

Carrow nodded but didn't open his eyes. 'Yes, they are.'

Odelford spoke. 'Such foul words! My algae contributes valuable business, not only to the people but the industry as a whole. I have shared my techniques with my peers, as is custom, and given rates on tools and equipment when required by my fellow man that were reasonable, and kind.' He sniffed. His palm turned up in a gesture for support from the table. 'Is this not so? Do we not altogether build history on this furthest of frontiers?'

The mass traders made pained groans and looked away. Gart chuckled. He folded his arms and the commission tattoo showed out from the bottom of his sleeve. It was marked with ten notches, one for each rank he had climbed to get to the head of the shipwrights union. He knew his title was above repute. No event that occurred at this table would ruffle him. He was steadfast by nature and profession. It was little wonder how Odelford had got that nice new cruiser.

Arran drew a short breath. 'You've got one minute to head on out to that shiny new starship of yours and move your business along.'

That palm slapped on the table. Stacks of chips tumbled and fell.

Odelford shook his head. 'No. Your commission is to be cancelled by sun-up, Arran, I'll make sure of that. I will not be moved along under your wild auspices. I have a business here. A family, a life for my son.' He took his son by the shoulder and gave him a small, proud shake. The crop of thin, wispy hair off his son's

head shifted, but his vague, angry disposition didn't change. Odelford straightened. 'I will not hear your accusations.'

Arran looked at the freak then away, wincing. 'These aren't accusations, Odelford.' He was losing patience. 'That was six hours ago. This is enforcement.'

'The insancity of this. In front of my colleagues, my son. Disgraceful.'

'That's correct. Fifty seconds.'

Now he huffed. 'I am not going anywhere. What is your problem with me, Arran? You know I'm innocent.' He smiled, drawing out the implication behind his innocence. They all knew Arran hadn't processed a guilty verdict in decades. Carrow looked down, shrugging away from Arran.

Arran grit his teeth. He felt old anger spark at the back of his mind. Deep biological cogs in there turned at each other and stuck in familiar configurations. He sat up. 'Do you remember Doug Graney?' he said.

Odelford feigned a sombre affect. He nodded. 'I don't remember him much, but he worked for me. Yes. Is that what this was about? A regrettable loss?'

Arran kept his voice steady, but he felt his temper rising. 'Regrettable is leaving your girlfriend and your best friend alone with a case of homemade wine. Killing a boy because he heard too much and lost his cool is past regrettable. Clock's ticking, Odelford.'

'And once it stops?'

Arran fixed his stare harder. 'What'd Doug hear while he was down there, where you had him tinkering with that old fuel line? Someone so small would hardly go noticed below a man so important. Why'd you get rid of him? I've been wondering.'

The table shook as Odelford launched to his feet. Chips fell. 'You are sounding to accuse me! I will not be besmirched for the death of that boy!'

Odelford stopped. The mute freak beside him was making a strained gurgle. A swelling expanded the musculature of his shoulders. They cracked. His neck distended outwards, cartilage popping, as a tumorous bulge rose from deep within. Everyone at the table stopped to look at him but his father, who kept a tight grip on his son's shoulder and waited for the fit to pass.

The boy worked to choke it down, saliva flecking from the corners of his mouth, his jaw raised, making retching gasps keeping the mass from birthing out his mouth. His eyes rolled back.

The swelling subsided. His body reformed. Soon he settled, weakened and breathing hard. His thin hair was slick with sweat.

Arran was disgusted. He looked back at Odelford and exhaled. 'Innocent is a broad term, by the way, Odelford. Thirty seconds. You're doing well, you've gotten up from the table.'

Odelford slammed his hand down again. 'This is where I am building my future, you will not remove me from it.'

'You'll go, or I'll shoot you.'

'You will not. I am here tonight with several members of our town's bureau. I have an excellent relationship with local council, and hold the papers for several-' he balled his free hand into a fist and emphasised his speech banging the table with it. '-fundamental trade routes that keep this station, and many like it, functioning out in the wilds. Tens of thousands of souls depend on my product. You will not – *shoot* – me and make a mockery of my life over the regrettable passing of one *foolish* boy.' Arran too

Arran kept his gaze locked but the corner of an eye watched the hand holding his son. 'I kinda will, though. Ten.'

Odelford raised taller. 'I am an unarmed man.'

Arran sucked air through his teeth. 'No, you're not.'

Odelford stopped talking. Gart wasn't smiling now. The others probably hadn't breathed since Arran sat down. The algae farmer stood straighter.

'Five,' he said.

Odelford balked. His hand slipped behind the freak's shoulder and he mightily shoved himself away from Arran's line of sight, putting his son between them. The freak made a strained porcine squeal and lost his balance, his heavy arms swinging out and scattering the table setup, his ungainly form next falling over it completely.

Chips scattered into Arran's lap. With a kick Arran pushed back in his chair, sliding out from under the table. He shifted his weight with the momentum and oriented the chair straight towards Odelford, him making a break to Arran's left, drawing a piece from inside his dark hypwerwoven coat.

Too slow. A heavy gunshot boomed from Arran's hip. A thin ray of light opened through the centre of Odelford's forehead. Ahead of it, a hot slug ripped through the back of his skull and blasted chunky brain matter into the air. The ray drew a straight trace behind the slug tearing a hole through the ceiling.

The farmer froze in place, his fearful eyes and mouth consumed with bright, glowing heat before the light blinked out, and a thin trail of smoke came from the hole cut through his skull. Odelford fell on his face.

Metal slid into leather as Arran holstered his sidearm.

The freak seemed not to notice his adopted father on the ground beside him. He picked himself up off the table and brushed a sweaty hand down the front of his singlet. He looked confused, and dumb. He stared at the corpse and blinked.

Gart spoke. He opened his arms and rose from his seat, going to the dead Odelford and looking away, at the circle burned through the warehouse roof. 'I can't say I expected all this tonight.' He looked at the freak. 'Come on, boy. We'll get you reset.' He tried to rest a hand on him, but the pain was fresh and the gesture too close in memory. The freak flinched away.

What wild, experimental sciences Odelford had practiced on his son's body were of a nature Arran could only imagine, and had little curiosity regarding. Terrible abominations had been wrought upon him, and whether they were all of Odelford's doing was none of his concern. What horrors humanity wrought upon itself was only an issue to him when it violated the law.

After all, what difference was Arran, himself?

Arran let out a long sigh and looked away. Life on the prism never seemed to be what humanity was promised, at least not when men like Odelford remained to stand over them.

Arran grit his teeth and turned away from the table, forcing down an anger he couldn't solve. There was more work to do now. 'I have to go process a soul,' he said. 'A team will be here to audit the body in a few minutes. You may all leave now, if you wish. No statements are required.'

Carrow finally put his cards down on the table. He scrunched his eyes shut in annoyance, the wrinkles on his brow angling deeply downwards before he opened them and that annoyance focused on Arran, leaving. Carrow blinked. 'You are aware you've fucked this up, right? Odelford's right, you'll lose your commission by sun-up. You'll be lucky they don't dust you, too.'

Arran shrugged. His footsteps rang loud and sharp across the floor. He stopped in the doorway and turned, pointing at the wall, or more the invisible field inside of it. 'Soundproofing tech for a card game's a bit suspect, isn't it?'

Carrow had no answer. He gave a wide shrug. 'You cannot think this was a good idea!'

Arran stepped out into the night. 'Life on the prism, baby,' he said, looking up.

Above him the station splayed out against the close presence of barren Huon. Each of the twelve faces of their protective sky, upon one of which Arran now stood, together enveloped humanity from the void of endless space.

His view of the featureless brown planet through the panes was split and obscured by the sweeping edges and exact vertices of the dodecahedral construct surrounding him. It all served to shelter the jumbled township floating there, clustered at its core, and the trade route, the Hollow, that fed it. As the station revolved in lazy orbit around Huon its protected township also took nighttime in its shade.

The Hollow formed a wide channel cutting through the township built on the flat, and met each opposing end of the prism. No more than empty space, it spanned the diameter of the station between massive gates in the panes and allowed passage for the great ships of distant civilisations, though it had seen little use in recent years. Besides the odd freighter they had seen only starwatchers, wanderers, and furtive salesmen for some time.

Considering the errant pilgrims that had made their way to Extor drew Arran's attention to his next stop.

At the flat's eastern end was the astral church, both stately and spindly, impressive with its heights drawing over the town's other rooftops, its presence so it seemed to sic on it like a tick grown larger than the beast it fed off of. The church was dark, always brooding. Its bulk was hidden behind some other buildings built on the flat, but the angular spires and raised balconies where servants sometimes came out to practice their arcane rituals were always distinct.

Most of the town was darkened but for twinkling light from the windows of distant houses and businesses. People still milled around outside, heading home from choring or enjoying the nighttime scene. They crossed through the Hollow, far enough away to be small, unrecognisable, passing through pools of light between the halved town. Personal carts carried groceries and wares along the Hollow and slid off into darkened streets and alleys.

Arran's boots lifted off the ground. Below them and through the thick panes of perfect crystalline glass making up each face of the prism was the endless blackness of space, and stars dotted bright and distant. The moon was peeking out behind Huon.

He had to enjoy this short flight and the peace it would bring before he returned to the office. This evening was just beginning.

It was not every day a God was killed in Extor.

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The church's hooded acolytes were arranging in chorused rows before the elder at the pulpit. The one Arran just spoke to slipped amongst other acolytes, their figures as maroon shadows resolving from hidden alcoves

into yellowy torchlight fooled by the folds of their robes such that it still rarely reached their faces, and then only at angles that accentuated their paleness. The evening service was about to begin.

Arran sidled along the back wall and crossed his arms, waiting for the Elder to notice him. His attention was focused down at his materials, bathed from below in torchlight. It was cooler here by the door. The air fresher. The chapel was kept hot and pungent with aromas of burning wildstalk and red weave and several others he could not place. A breath brought sharp tangs of intermingling warmth and earthen bitterness. Chambered incense smouldered hanging from the ceiling by fine chains. Smoke swirled in shadow. Altogether the chapel was hot, stinging, and it disoriented him. He'd stay near the vestibule until he was called.

Brushes of the wooden plants emerged from polished vases gleaming in the low light, their dense maroon flowers the same shade as the acolytes' robes. Moonrise had come and its glow came up faintly through the chapel floor. The acolytes arranged above it. Arran leaned back and rested his chin down and exhaled through his nose.

A woman with her back to him waved at her face with a hand fan. She was one of a few others watching, a sparse congregation sat alone on pews below rows of dark arches steeppling the chapel nave, a long throat before the voice of the enclave.

A cough came from the pulpit. Elder Finlowe lowered his hood. A smooth, bald scalp gleamed above imperious features made more graven by two wide, black lines tattooed back from his forehead. They travelled down each side of his neck and into his robes, visible again emerging from his sleeves at his wrists.

The bony, slender fingers he used to draw back the hood featured two gold rings, one with a red gem, the other fixed with a green one, and now wrapped around the front of the pulpit as he leaned over it to deliver his liturgy. The gems in his rings caught a low reflection of the warm torches below the pulpit.

'Good evening, brothers and sisters. Diametric equinox approaches, and we stand today in the shadow of its profound transit,' he said, his low voice settling those attending. 'Tonight we wait expectant of the truths that will soon come into focus. Cirus moves into the house of Laxapris. Milvant into Forne. It is a time of hierophany. For us, it means a time of reserve, of meditation, as our holy matrices become apparent, and our minds become ready to observe them. Remember that our Axis always guides us through the dual nights of the soul.'

Arran's acolyte reappeared drifting near the elder to pass a whisper into his ear. Finlowe cocked his head away from the words spoken into them. His eyes came sharp. They pierced through the semidark chapel and found him as a shape against the wall.

Arran crooked at the hip and leaned into nearby torchlight. He gave a thumbs-up.

Finlowe's expression returned staid and he looked down his nose. He continued. 'As we must, each day we remember when man walked the heavy earth in toil and sought to rearrange the constellations of his heavens.'

The Elder met his eyes. 'Be it not up to us to remove the constellations, no more than we would remove the light from each other.'

Arran grimaced.

'Look upon the stars that give us their light as guiding markers, who frame us as peers amongst them. Let them show you the way. Observe our simple lien of their will, now.'

At a wave of his hand a faint bluish aura swirled around it, a concentration of electric particles that reacted immediately with a great orb that hung on the wall behind him, hung overhead from a golden chain by a rood-pin and a heavy clasp. The orb flared brightly, coming alive in a flash of blinding white.

Others in the congregation shaded their eyes as the burning intensity cast the room in sharp relief, and the Elder stood with his arms aloft, basking in its rays. So intense was the light its heat baked even at the back of the chapel, and spread their silhouettes long across the pews, the aisle, and up the walls.

Behind the orb the light reflected off a circular plate matching the starmetal, etched with the radials and markings of the church. The bearing-plate's silver cast shone in the full light of the orb as the Elder made one last ritual gesture, lowering his arms. As he did the orb tolled against the plate and a long, deep peal rang out, amplified by the recessed architecture of the chapel.

It was said the depth of its tone sustained all who heard it. It had a connection to the spark that bound them wholly, that from the most febrile connection of matter in bodily form to the civilisations of man hung in void that all humanity was strengthened by its toll. The servants here saw it as a healing-bell. The sound travelled far outside the church. The people heard it ring down the Hollow and bounce off the panes and rattle the superstructure each solar night.

For most it was the sound that rung out the day. Arran blinked as the chapel star lost its brilliance and returned to its usual opaque silver.

The ceremony was over. The Elder gave a short bow. The woman with the hand fan set it aside to give him a few short claps that seemed muted in the ringing hush left after the bell's toll.

Finlowe lowered his hands. 'Thank you all, brothers and sisters. Until tomorrow.' He cleared his throat again and shot Arran a look as he left the pulpit. Arran was to follow him.

He almost lost the Elder in the mix of acolytes separating but saw his bald head sweeping under a dark archway at the back, going into its workings. Arran followed into the fat abdomen of the church.

Burning torches marked each corner. Here, too, were vases of brushstalk and the lingering trails of its incense. The floors were bare by tradition and the narrow, smoky halls steep enough for overhead travel. He followed in silence as was expected of visitors. They passed a few acolytes, themselves deep in hooded contemplation who gave no regard to Arran or the Elder.

Finlowe brought Arran past the reading room and the meditation chambers where the floor enclosed from moonlight and they went by only the odd torch lit in the church's less-visited fundamentals. The air was still.

Arran followed the Elder down a set of stairs and along a short hall. At a junction with a wide double door of smooth slate Finlowe stopped. Arran paused, looking with some foreboding at the entrance to the undercroft.

Finlowe turned, face unreadable, and beckoned at Arran's gun with a ringed hand. There was silence while he waited.

Arran sighed and unholstered the ancient gun. He took it by the grip and passed it overhand so he gave it to the Elder by its heavy, reuleaux-cut barrel.

Finlowe took it and slid it away into his sleeves. 'Go ahead, brother. I shall wait for your return.' he extended that same hand now to usher Arran into the undercroft. The door split inwards at his wave. Inside was gloom. This part of the church was hidden from the stars.

Arran descended to the ground and stepped under the low ceiling. He took a deep breath as the doors slid closed behind him.

Finlowe spoke. 'Do not be long about the ossuary.'

A heavy click. Darkness, so deep not even his augments could see into it. The heat of the church was gone and he was cold. He stepped forward.

Silver dishes atop pedestals on either side of him came alight with bursts of green flame. The gloom was kept back by it, and Arran proceeded along a stone walkway towards the dais. On the dais was a simple paper journal, open in the middle. It was a receptacle of souls.

Below the pedestals there was no floor Arran could see and no bottom to it either. Each pedestal was sentinel above it. He dared not look down into that emptiness for too long and walked the stone path to its end, proceeding into the gloom.

A third flame ignited, this one bigger and central to the dais. Beyond it the gloom stretched endlessly, held back but always present. His skin pricked, though he knew he was only here to perform a simple rite and no horrors lurked in the dark.

Arran took a deep breath and spoke into the journal's blank pages. 'Odelford,' he said. 'He had a boy killed. I know his mother.' He reached down to the bonemeal paten and drew a thumbprint of chalky grey he touched from his bottom lip to the step of his chin.

The ossuary came over him. He threw his head back, mouth agape, lost in a moment of consciousness. His eyes, wide, glowed brightly green and the flames on the pedestals burned brighter. He felt it there, the cold, creeping hand at the back of his mind plucking the experience from him and dragging the memory out and scratching it into dark accounts. Rushing, violent whispers in his ears. He wanted to scream but he could not. His blood pumped cold.

The dais received his internment and the central flame went out. Once again, though not for a long time, the dead grip of the ossuary left him. Perturbed, Arran made no point of staying to pay respects. He left the dais and the creeping gloom behind him.

The door slid shut. Arran was alone. Finlowe had sneaked off with his gun. He became angry at the violation, it rising like heat. That gun was not his to take. It was forged in the warren city of al'Thor and belonged only to Arran and the ancient tendrils of Fate that assembled it. One thousand years had passed since the heat of its cosmic origin. Profane interference faced stern judgement.

He went back, cursing his own shortsightedness and Finlowe's guile. The reading room was empty, even the heights where light came in from stained glass windows and acolytes sometimes sat.

He navigated the halls considering the reason Finlowe might have wiled him. He caught a glimpse of an acolyte slipping hurriedly towards the meditation rooms. He keened an ear down that way. Faint voices were causing commotion. Trouble, then. Perhaps not guile. It was confirmed by a bloody scream bouncing down the halls. He kept pace behind the acolyte and came out to find a panic.

Finlowe had his sleeves up around his elbows. Flames burned from hanging drapery and he and the other acolytes worked to put it out and control a writhing acolyte held flat on a wooden table.

The young acolyte's hair was matted and wet from terror and agony. The acolytes lost him as he kicked one off. He screamed through bared teeth and contorted. He raised off his back which bowed outwards and they pushed him back down. 'Where are the salves?' one asked, panting.

A torch was downed where the young acolyte had burst from a meditation chamber and knocked it into the curtains. Flames licked higher, engulfing a run of fabric and blazing in Finlowe's face. He balked from it. 'Pull that down!'

An acolyte left his side and ascended to snatch at the eyelet. He gripped it and with a tear ripped it off the rod and went off with it. Flames whipped the air. Ashes of charred maroon went whirling.

'Did you try inglewood?' Finlowe asked the one who had spoken of salves.

'The ambry is empty,' he responded. He looked to the other side of the room, spotting a cabinet in the corner. Atop it an incense-well fumed.

The tormented acolyte's head thrashed. He let out a strained gasp, teeth grit hard, eyes bulging, his whole body making retching, convulsive spasms while the others fixed over him.

Finlowe, pinning the acolyte by the shoulder, used an elbow to barge another away making to grab his head. 'Don't do that or he will snap his neck! Find the salves!'

'Brother neglected to decouple,' another said, binding a wrist tighter. His eyes blazed in the fires around him. 'Damn fool!'

His rebuke was punctuated by a scream. Spit came out of the acolyte's mouth. 'No! It's gone!' The voice came harsh from his throat and ended with a pained noise. He wrested his right arm free and rolled on his side, his scream raising in pitch as he punched again and again at his own skull. 'It's gone! Where has it gone? Where's it gone?' his voice broke and the acolytes piled on him again to control his anguish.

Finlowe let out an exasperated gasp and left the acolyte's side, flying across the room to the ambry. He stopped his flight with a hand on the cabinet and flung it open. 'They must be here!'

His searching was in vain. He spun back around, raising an arm to direct one of his acolytes about. 'There's mush of inglewood in-' Arran couldn't let him continue.

The distance between them snapped away in a blur. He sprung between Finlowe and the acolytes, stopping between them before the elder could return to his flock. Finlowe stopped.

Arran looked down at him, his breathing still and measured, but standing firm. 'Gun.' He held out his hand and upturned a palm worn through by lines. Such was the shape of its grip you could look at Arran's hand and know each part was made for the other, the same way a nut is for a bolt. Finlowe's eyes flicked to the side, where the acolyte's ravings became unintelligible and run through by fevered accusations. The elder let out a harried sigh and passed it out of his sleeve. The dark yellow sigil embossed into the deep blue of its grip there showed plain. Finlowe made sure he saw it.

'I am waylaid. My apologies. Pleasant evening, Arran.' Finlowe said.

'It's not your place-' he began.

Finlowe recoiled out of annoyance, shook his head and dispelled the words between them. 'No, no it isn't. Get out of here, this is no place for you.' He slid around Arran and back to the acolyte's side. 'Sister, go, inglewood in the offering-box.' He pointed and sent the acolyte from the room.

'Hurry!' he called after her.

Arran folded his arms and studied the acolyte. He talked in gibberish, of words Arran knew but understood little about. None of them seemed connected, but he spoke them with eyes wide with the truth of fear and madness. He spoke of dark comings and stars gone out. At once he saw the elder and seemed to recognise him.

'What happened, boy? You're going to be alright, just wait, the ringing must settle.'

All the while the young acolyte's mouth worked soundlessly. He drew short breaths that grew shorter as he failed to breathe back out. His eyes rolled back white again. Before he fainted Finlowe slapped him across the face. He started back with a hard spasm that wracked his whole body. He foamed at the mouth while the other acolytes struggled to hold him down.

Finlowe nodded. 'Good! Your brain will bleed! Remember your training!'

Arran took his exit. Outside he passed the acolyte returning from the chapel with a small golden crucible held in both hands and brushed past him. Her expression became dismissive at Arran having seen her face. Arran shrugged. She was pretty.

He nodded to her and continued down the way she had come. He saw no one else in the halls and floated on above the stars wondering what could have happened to have unsettled that acolyte so. Arran had not been trained in religious studies. What infinity spread out below him offered no way of enforcing the law, so he ignored it.

The young acolyte's tormented screams became a fading echo as he returned to the chapel. He descended. His bootheels twisted against the threshold of the vestibule. His weight settled into his hips and he cracked his shoulders.

With only one stop left Arran pursed his lips, becoming aware of the church's heavy presence around him. Finlowe was right. This was no place for him. Centuries of unending violence were buried deep in his biology. He was programmed for justice. He would be glad for settling this business with Odelford entirely.

* * *

A low hum marked the transit of the weathered Obel rising wide and grey over the bulwark Hall of Justice. Deep, thumping *wubs* from the goliath passing overhead drummed pressure into his ears. Every six hours the Obel made a deliberate transit and deep inside its plain exterior was always sewing formless energies that ebbed and flowed.

These it guided outwards, weaving subtle forces into gyroscopic tension to keep gravity stable on the panels, and shape the necessary internal rotation that kept the township upright.

This was Buerl, the timekeeper, some called it. There were two others, Donte, and g'Ndou. The late brothers, because they held orbits that came after Buerl. All three balanced the forces between them. They moved in a coordinated ballet around each other, the town, and the panes, never meeting, never interrupted, steady watchers of the range.

Buerl droned through the night sky. Fuzzy, mossy growths bloomed from pitted scoring across its alloy faces, corrosion worked there by the stormy flares of a tempestuous sun. Cosmic radiation lashed across it eroding holes, over time, for blooming clusters of wispy mold that drifted in soft trailing motions around the Obel's lower reaches. In the mornings the spidering tangles of emerald sparkled with dew.

The humidity before harvest season always got the station this way, when the blooms spread off the fields and through the station's air. The townsfolk could smell it in the mornings, a faint musty odour. It would be gone when the air from the cyclers turned over dry.

Arran went up steps worn to a patina by the footsteps of generations of townsfolk seeking to unburden themselves of the rough, disagreeable matters of their days. Here time and nature also weathered the metal and weedy vines with broad, waxen leaves rambled through the railing. Vines went up into a parapet overhanging shuttered upper windows and broke the straight profile of the rooftop. The slowly beating judicial heart of the station had a lit stoop and a bench outside.

From far out on the panes was a deep boom, a percussive blast that made the hair on his neck stand on end.

'Searcy,' he said, looking in the direction of Odelford's farm.

There, in the distance. An expanding speck. Spiralling outwards, fast. Coming to see him at a breakneck speed. On the flat and all along the Hollow people were turning to watch.

Word travelled fast from the mouths of Gods.

Mayor Searcy's authorn cloak streamed blue below the scowled clench to his jaw. Arran braced, inhaling. Rushing air pushed the Mayor's greying brown hair flat against his head. One shoulder drew back, big hand balling into a fist.

'Oh shit,' Arran said. 'We're dancing.'

The air broke into thin, white jetstreams from the edges of his burly physique. Arran didn't stand a chance.

The blow hit his jaw, breaking it. The force knocked him off his feet. The Mayor's winding trajectory added speed and angle to the blow, sending Arran glancing ragdoll off the Hall's fronting and flying wild into the air instead of directly into the wall. The Mayor would have punched him through it.

His senses spun. Arran took a moment to recover. He blinked. Searcy was inverted bearing down on him, rough hands reaching for his throat.

Arran descended, slipping out of Searcy's reach. Searcy spun around. Arran righted himself, using the transfer of weight to throw a kick towards Searcy's side. With a free hand Arran grabbed his broken jaw and shoved the bone back into place.

Searcy blocked the kick. 'You utter fucking malcontent, Arran.' He came right around, facing him.

The bone jut hard into the socket. Arran's throat made a wet click. It would take a few seconds for it to come good. Searcy launched forward, both hands raised now to grab Arran by his lapel. He was twice Arran's size. If the Mayor wanted he could rip him in half down the middle and drench the town below in his entrails. It was fortunate, then, that he only drove Arran straight out of the sky and hard into the roof of the Hall of Justice, denting its weathered roof inwards with the force of the impact.

Arran had the wind knocked out of him and blood coughed out with it.

'I told you, Odelford was off-limits. We were going to pursue him by the racketeering case. You had absolutely no right to go in there, what, fucking guns blazing? Like you're a lawman again? What is the matter with you, Arran?'

His jaw was set, but his back was broken and he was pretty sure most of his insides were bleeding. He'd be fine though.

'I had every right.'

Searcy let out an aggravated grunt. He still held Arran by his collar. He pulled the peacekeeper out of the dent and slammed him back into it, the metal ringing at the blow. Broken, jagged rib bones minced through his organs.

Arran groaned, fingers twitching. Searcy stood up and away from him and went over to the rooftop door a few feet away.

'When you're ready, dickhead.'