

RED

STAR

RISING

Book 1: The Bottled Time Series

by

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Dedication:

To the First Founders of Asclepius:

Sam Rush

Sasha Stephens

Mike Warren

Bertie Nichols

Lupus pilum mutat, non mentem.

~ Proverb

“I make no claim that I once stood side by side with such colossi at the dawn of time, yet I shall claim that I witnessed their works!

As such I gift these words to perpetuity: they wished nothing more than to achieve the impossible, for they had found entropy itself was bent on robbing them of their power. And in their folly they did indeed unleash the power they craved.

Yet at what price? For such great potential there must be paid a toll, and that toll would be their whole world.

With its sundering they were gifted humility. Those who survived, in penance, wrought great celestial discs that pinned the fragments of the old world to the axial spine of the Aether.

So were the floating lands born; tethered to the axis and made stable.

And what became of these first beings, you ask? Would that I could tell you the whole story, but it shall suffice to say that they faded, and even as they became nothing more than whispers on the winds, so did new life come to find a home upon the myriad isles that sailed on and on as testament of their failure.”

Excerpt from “The Path of Ages”

Anon

Prologue: Birdeater

Cigarette clenched between his teeth, the doctor took a breath and hurried into the room with his burdens. It clicked shut behind him and he stood, peering into the sour, smoke ridden office of the gang leader Harlech Truckle. The man sat at his desk, illuminated by lamp-light falling across a sweat-beaded rictus of control. He was not beyond his middle years, yet the pain had aged and withered his already lean frame.

“Ah, doctor,” Truckle licked thin lips and took a lungful from his water-pipe. “Here.... at last.”

He exhaled and smoke curled about him. The doctor gave him a nervous smile.

“Did you... find it?” Truckle asked.

“Yes sir,” the doctor replied. He held up a cage draped in black cloth.

“You see,” Truckle said, speaking to a man who the doctor had not noticed. “I told you.... he would not fail me.”

The stranger stepped forward to regard the doctor. He was a professional, well groomed and crisp from head to toe. He scrutinised the doctor and did not attempt to hide his conclusion: the sweat soaked shirt, the sallow complexion and red eyes said everything.

“You trust this man?” the stranger asked with some scepticism.

“Don't let the good doctor's..... hobbies misrepresent him,” Truckle said with a smile. “Now, if you please doctor.....”

Truckle beckoned. The doctor crossed the room, but faltered. A cloaked figure lay sprawled on the floor to the left, half covered by a fallen curtain. Blood had pooled from beneath the hem, darkening the carpet. It also appeared to have..... to have a.....

A small tic passed over the doctor's face, and the cigarette teetered on his lip.

“A problem, doctor?”

“N-no, no,” the doctor said and shook his head to clear the image away. Without another glance he crossed the room. In his experience of working for Truckle it was safest to ignore any difficulties and focus on the tasks required. It was a tacit agreement that you

didn't ask questions. Beside, it was more likely that what he'd seen was just a mild side effect of prolonged stimulant use. He'd settle for that, so he set down his medical bag and the cage, stubbed his cigarette out and rounded the table to inspect Truckle's leg. The trouser had been torn to above the knee and a bloody rag now bound the wound. Venting professional contempt for the mess, the doctor set to work.

“As I was saying,” the stranger said to Truckle, “You were lucky.”

“You call..... this luck?” Harlech hissed, face contorting as the doctor worked.

The stranger shrugged. “You're alive, aren't you?”

Truckle scowled and took a lungful of smoke. “And is that all you've come to say, Greve?”

The stranger, Greve, returned a polite smile. When he spoke next it was with paternal patience. “I thought you would appreciate being told in person that you have been given another chance.”

“Ah, so am I to be treated –” Truckle bit his lip, held back a gasp, “– like a disobedient child?”

“You raised your hand against us,” Greve replied. “Insulted him! Considering your treachery you should be thankful for the expediency of letting you live.”

“Expediency?” Truckle sneered. “Some might construe it.... as leniency, as a show of weakness.”

“Not at all,” said Greve. “Imagine if you had been killed. It would have prompted a gang war. No one wants that.”

“Didn't Savarin think of that before he sent his assassin?”

“Oh, don't imagine that he acted rashly,” Greve shook his head. “Your actions insulted the Fium'Orbu. They were offended, Truckle. If Savarin had not acted immediately they would have kept coming until you were dead.”

Truckle swallowed and glanced at the dead body. When he looked back, Greve wore a knowing smile.

“Does he not..... control them?” Truckle asked in a near whisper.

“They are a mystery even to me,” Greve replied. “All I know is that they worship him.”

“But why?”

“Who can say?” Greve said. “Thankfully he has enough influence over them that

they have agreed to relent. For that, you should be grateful.”

A moment passed in silence. The doctor continued his worked.

“Why take the chance?” Truckle asked. “Why not.... pass the task to Quesillo? Or Enebro?”

“A good question,” Greve nodded. “The thing is, Truckle, they are loyal to you. Loyalty is something that Savarin values above almost all else. You were once raised from the street, and in turn you raised men like Quesillo – the man who just saved your life. It is hoped that the dividends of such loyalty will convince you to behave with the appropriate respect in the future.”

The doctor began to apply a fresh bandage, studiously not hearing any of the conversation. Truckle and Greve stared at each other until Truckle's countenance darkened.

“And what of Sakura?” he asked.

“Forget about her,” Greve answered.

“I want to know,” Truckle pressed.

Greve sighed in annoyance. “An example has to be made.”

The shadow of a snarl passed across Truckle's face. He held it in check. “And?”

“And what Harlech? I said forget her.”

“But – ”

“No!” Greve snapped. “There is nothing more to say.”

“Of course,” Truckle grated through clenched teeth. “I understand.”

“I knew you would,” Greve said and turned for the door. “Now, if there is nothing else, I shall leave you to the ministrations of your doctor. Good day Harlech.”

Truckle reached for his water-pipe. His eyes followed Greve to the door, and even once it had shut, his gaze might have burned a hole right through if not for the doctor's nervous cough. Truckle unclenched his jaw and exhaled a cloud of roiling smoke.

“Apologies doctor.”

“Of course,” said the doctor, and for a split second he forgot the tacit rule and asked, “Who was that man?”

“You might prefer not to know,” Truckle replied and took a mouthful of smoke. He exhaled over the doctor and grinned. “He is the hand of Brillat Savarin.”

“B-but h-he's just – ” the doctor swallowed.

“A story?” Truckle's eyes twinkled. “Believe me, Brillat Savarin is no mere fable.”

Another small tic passed up the side of the doctor's face. “B-but.....”

Truckle grinned. “Doctor, please relax.”

The doctor swallowed. With a tremulous hand swept his lank hair from his eyes. He needed a cigarette and Truckle waited as he fumbled out a packet of Bonchesters. A moment later the doctor, having mustered as much composure as possible, was ready to address his patient. “Well, the wound is clean. However, it will require regular attention as the effect of the toxin continues. As for the pain, I can get you – ”

“No! I am done with pain killers.”

“But – ”

Truckle's expression brooked no argument. He nodded towards the cloth draped cage. “Just show me.”

The doctor removed the cloth with something like ceremony causing a flurry of commotion. Truckle eyed the occupant.

“So, this is it?”

“Yes sir.”

“And I have to.....?”

The doctor gave him a grim nod. Truckle's face wrinkled in disgust, and he took a deep draw on the water-pipe. Inside the cage was a small bird with cheerful red plumage, the only creature known to have resistance to the voracious venom of the yellow banded mountain huntsman. It was a spider, and an ambush predator. The irony was not lost on Truckle as he glanced at the body beneath the drape. It was a traditional venom used to coat knives: first came paralysis, shortly followed by the slow dissolution of the flesh. The pain might tempt a man to madness, even to take his own life before the poison killed him. Greve had been right; Truckle was lucky that the blade had only scratched his leg before his lieutenant, Quesillo, had killed the assassin.

Truckle opened the door, reached inside and carefully drew out the small bird.

“I can do this,” Harlech said between clenched teeth. “I've done worse.”

There was no other choice. Generic antivenoms were too weak, and a real antivenom could potentially take months for the doctor to concoct. Truckle would need to singe the feathers off, then consume the bird before it had time to die of shock. The venom would be arrested, yet he would always be a man half way to dying, forever

dependent on the life of a small, insignificant creature.

“We should be grateful,” Truckle cooed to the chirping bird, “That your colour and delightful song make you such so popular in the markets.”

He scrutinised it, then caught the expression on the doctor's face.

“A grisly repast is it not?”

The doctor gave a mute nod.

“Leave me,” Truckle growled and waved the doctor away. Without hesitation medical supplies were swept into his bag and a moment later the doctor was hurrying for the door. As he passed the corpse he spared it another glance. It sent a shiver through him and he rushed on. Whatever it was, it had a tail! A naked, pink tail!

Like a..... like a.....

He lunged for the door and was quickly on the other side of it, breathing hard. From his pocket he drew a small glass pipe and a lighter. The tall, dark haired man on the door watched him with an amused smile.

“Something amiss doctor?”

The doctor stalled with an upheld hand, hunched over and piped up. It didn't take long for the shakes to pass off. With a sigh of relief the doctor turned his red-eyed gaze to Quesillo.

“What was that thing?” asked the doctor.

Quesillo shrugged. “I've heard them called Fium'Orbu, but it means nothing to me.”

“It had.....” The doctor swallowed.

“It did indeed,” Quesillo nodded thoughtfully, then slapped the doctor on the shoulder genially. “Probably best not to dwell on it, eh? Not when there's work to do.”

The doctor nodded, picked up his bag and a moment later he was gone.

PART 1:

Roll The Dice

“There are those who have claimed that the Founding is nothing more than a fabrication intended to gloss over some aspect of history known only to the Guild itself. Yet I am disinclined towards the notion that the tale is an endeavour purely at deception. On the contrary, there is no reason to believe that either narratives – neither Flight nor Founding – are not based on real, historical occurrences.

Therefore we can safely assume that the First Founders were indeed real people forced to flee persecution, and in their exile eventually chanced upon Svecia and its deserted city. With them they brought their fickle deity of good fortune whom they must have perceived to have indeed been smiling upon them. That the Guild of Navigators and Cartographers was then established in order to explore and exploit the abandoned gateway system is an entirely reasonable result.

To instead attribute to them some eternal quality of residency stretches the credibility of anyone who would try to paint the Guild in such a fashion.”

Flight and Founding

Speculations on the History of the Guild

Tomme de Bargkas

I: Choices

One table, one chair, one window.

Five people.

Somewhere, a fly buzzed in the expectant silence as the willowy youth called Shale waited. Frustration gnawed him. Beside him the gneblim Scamorza scratched behind an ear with tired resignation.

Shale ran a hand over his shaved head and studied the three people opposite him.

All three wore suits with red feathers in their lapels. Seated at the table, Monte Enebro, ursine and thick necked like he'd been chiselled from stone. Standing either side of him were the Juust twins: Kadaka, lithe with short bleached hair and ear piercings, and her brother Eesti who was nothing more than a slab of muscle under slicked back hair.

They shifted impatiently as, with slow deliberation, Monte Enebro took a card from the Deck of Paths. He threw a glance at the dishevelled pair stood opposite, flipped the card up before his eyes.

Shale grit his teeth.

Enebro placed the card down and when he spoke it was with the slow, deliberate tones of resignation.

"Someone," he said, "Fucked up."

"What do you mean someone fucked up?" Shale shot back. "What happened to our money?"

"Your money," Monte Enebro fixed him with a look, "Was lost."

"Lost where?"

"Our shipment," Enebro explained, "Was intercepted before we could retrieve it."

For a moment no one spoke. The fly circled, then bumped against the window.

Shale glanced at his friend. Scamorza shrugged and the youth turned back to Enebro. "You got to be joking. It took us over a year to put that money together."

Enebro shrugged. *Not my problem.* He drew another card, cocked his head as if

bemused at what he saw there, and laid it beside the others. The twins grinned, thinly veiled cruelty twinkling in their eyes.

“But you understand,” Scamorza said, “That was everything we had, right?”

“And my heart bleeds,” Enebro replied as he put the cards down and sat back in his chair, “But that’s life in the big city.”

“So you fuck up and we have to take the hit?” Shale barked as he shrugged off Scamorza's hand. He gripped the table and stared at Enebro. Twins tensed up, hands on the pistols beneath their jackets, all too ready to clarify things for those too thick headed to understand. “You can't do this!”

“I assure you that I can.” Enebro grinned to reveal his gold teeth. “If you feel unfairly treated, perhaps you'd like to take it up with the Birdeater himself?”

“Maybe I will,” Shale shot back.

Enebro shook his head and laughed. “You've got some balls, I'll give you that, but as for brains, well.....”

“You guys don't frighten me,” Shale sneered.

“How old are you lad?” Enebro asked.

“Mid twenties?” Shale shrugged. He wasn't completely sure.

“That's good,” Enebro growled, his voice a gathering storm. “Means you got plenty of time to get over it, so listen up. We're in the business of making money *outside* of the law. You understand that difference, I assume, between the Guild and the Undervine?”

“I understand, but – ”

“Good!” Enebro snapped. “Because when you invest with us two things can happen: either you get double, or you get nothing. This time the Oltermanni found the shipment. It's a bust. You. Get. Nothing.”

He leaned forward and picked up his cards.

“You fuck!” Shale twisted free of Scamorza's grasp, and slammed his hands down on the table. Enebro didn't so much as flinch, and Shale found himself face to face with a pair of quickly drawn pistols. Enebro grinned again.

“Easy now little pup,” Kadaka chided. “No need to get excited.”

Scamorza pulled Shale back, the youth's face flushed with barely suppressed rage. Kadaka and Eesti leered.

“Now, if you know what's good for you,” Enebro growled, indicating the door, “You'll leave before I have to get nasty.”

“Wait, wait,” Scamorza said, holding up his hands. “Look, isn't there something we can arrange? Something to get some cash going for another investment?”

Monte Enebro eyed the pair for a moment. He rubbed the stubble on his chin and shrugged. “I suppose we might be able to find something, but you'd have to start at the bottom.”

“No fu – ” Shale started, but Scamorza elbowed him in the ribs.

“And just what does that mean?”

“Tell them what it means,” Enebro prompted the twins.

“It means,” Kadaka smiled, “That the toilets will finally get cleaned.”

“Toothbrushes come as standard,” Eesti said as he performed a little scrubbing pantomime. Scamorza barely stopped his friend from jumping the table. Shale shrugged him off, but the hatred didn't cease to burn in his eyes as Enebro held up his hand for decorum. The twins snapped back to silence, pistols lowered, but the smug glint in their eyes said it all.

“So we start at the bottom,” Scamorza acknowledged. “What then?”

“Well, if you can swallow your pride,” Enebro replied with a meaningful look at Shale, “Maybe, just maybe, we can find more interesting jobs for you to do.”

“Fuck off!” Shale spat. “You think I'm gonna scrub toilets until you find some meat-grinder to throw us into?”

“It's that or nothing,” Enebro replied, eyes drawn to where the fly had come to land on the table. His hand slapped down so fast that the pair jumped.

“The choice,” he grinned with a flash of gold teeth, “Is yours.”

* * *

Ejected into the warm light of the waning afternoon, Shale made his feelings abundantly clear to the three laughing Birdeaters as they slammed the door in his face, then he and Scamorza brushed themselves off and straightened their threadbare clothes with as much dignity as they could muster.

Meanwhile, the curious eyes of the Pelardon Hills inhabitants were giving them

both a once over. Their audience were mostly ordinary folk killing time with gossip while a few played street dice, but a couple of toughs who had been leaning against a wall straightened up in interest.

Scamorza grabbed Shale's arm, but the youth shrugged him off and spat, then marched off across the street towards Pelardon Garden's leaving a string of curses in his wake.

"Hey, it's no good being pissed," Scamorza called after him.

"Like I can help it," Shale retorted over his shoulder. "I ain't cleaning toilets for the fucking Birdeater."

Scamorza trotted after his friend as they entered the Gardens through a neglected gate that was rusted open, the 'gardens' being nothing more than the bald crown of the hill fringed with sparse, wild undergrowth and a scattering of lonely benasque trees. Not far from the entrance stood a solitary bench, only partially vandalised and which looked out to the north. Shale took a seat and fished out a packet of Bonchesters, proffering one to Scamorza as he caught up and took a seat.

They smoked in silence.

"Well," Scamorza sighed after a time, then tried to sound upbeat, "At least we got a choice about it, eh?"

"Not really," Shale snapped and tapped out another cigarette. "Did you have a choice when your people kicked you out?"

The gneblim winced, ran a hand over his face at the sudden, bitter memory. "I screwed up. It wasn't about choice."

"Neither is this."

"But at least we'd have a foot in the door."

"I don't want to join the Birdeater's, Scar."

"Well, we got to do something," Scamorza replied. "We gonna start over?"

"Pfff! Life's too short. We gotta get something quick or I'm gonna lose it."

Scamorza didn't bother to refute him and for a while they sat smoking, each to their own thoughts. Shale's foot tapped in agitation as he looked out over the Bierkase. It was the home of innumerable workers and their families, along with all manner of low-lifers, gangers and small time businesses. Sure, it wasn't the worse place to live but the low grade poverty was a long way from what the city could offer.

If only you are blessed with enough good fortune to grasp it, Shale quoted to himself. It was from some Guild blurb he'd heard on the radio the other day. His eyes responded by moving north, past the Bierkase, past the vast encircling highway of the Svecia Ring, and towards the centre of Asclepius. Within that ring lay the warehouse district of the Parenica that swarmed with transports ferrying goods back and forth across Lake Charolais. They were like lines of ants carrying vast fortunes of goods and materials, endlessly swallowed and regurgitated by the Guild portals on their bastion anthill island of Panquehue.

The centre of Asclepius. The hub to a hundred different worlds.

Even at such a distance the Guild's towers dwarfed all else. The greatest of them, the Iona Cromag, speared the sky to catch the last rays of the setting sun. Its flanks were burnished gold. Thus was Asclepius known as the City of the Shining Spires; a place where fortunes waited to be made if only Sveciaost, the deity of good fortune, were smiling.

If only.....

Shale squinted and tossed his cigarette butt on a collision course with the Iona Cromag. His eye followed it, past the tower and down the slope to where a lone figure was entering the bottom of the park. Shale sighed and stretched out the knots in his shoulders, then tapped out another cigarette as he pushed his thoughts around. As they circled they returned again and again to one, clear option.

He wanted to dismiss it because Scar would never go for it, but what else were they going to do? Find a job? Hustle up another batch of money? They had worked so damned hard to make that cash only for it to evaporate because of someone else's incompetency.....

"Fourteen months," Shale opined. "Fourteen fucking months! You'd think they'd have paid off the Oltermanni or something."

"Maybe they did," Scamorza mused, then brightened. "Why don't we go back to Squirrel and ask if there's anything we can get?"

"You serious?" Shale shook his head. "You know he's one superstitious bastard, right? He'll say he can smell the bad vibes on us, avoid us like we had some disease."

Shale sighed and ran a hand over his head.

Together they watched the figure Shale had spotted earlier labouring up the hill

toward them.

“Well, it could be worse,” Scamorza said for want of anything else to say.

“Are you gonna keep it up with the platitudes Scar?”

“That's a nice, long word Shale. You even know what it means?”

“It means that you're trying to deny the situation.”

“How so?” Scamorza frowned. “Sure, we lost our money. We can start over.”

Shale shook his head and muttered, “There's no going back.”

Scamorza eyed him sidelong as he asked slowly. “What does that mean?”

“I quit,” Shale sniffed.

“Quit? Quit what?” Shale glanced at Scamorza, and the gneblim knew. He was incredulous. “You quit your fucking job?”

Shale shrugged. “I thought we weren't going back.”

“Well, go back and – ”

“Not going to happen, Scar. Besides, they probably already got a replacement in.”

Scamorza clamped his mouth shut and Shale could tell he was trying to compose himself. On their right the climber had reached the brow of the hill, and as she came closer they saw that it was an old woman. She sent them a smile that was more gaps than teeth. Shale's own smile was pained. The old woman shuffled off along the path towards the centre of the park as the pair carried on their conversation.

“We need to think of a plan or it's back to the soup kitchens,” said Shale.

“Good job I like soup,” Scamorza grunted.

“Yeah, well, if I have to eat it for *another* fourteen months then I'm going to kill someone.”

Scamorza nodded. “You sure you can't just ask your old boss – ”

“No! He'd never take me back, not after what I said.”

Scamorza rolled his eyes. “And just what did you say?”

Shale elaborated on the opinions she had given to her former employer and the directions she had given him with regard to where he might insert his job.

“Ah, quite the imagination you have,” the gneblim remarked. “Maybe you could put it to use now and think of something to get us out of the shit we're in.”

Shale was about to reply when he spotted the old woman returning. She passed them, giving them a mysterious smile, and headed back down the hill.

“What was that all about?” Shale wondered. Scamorza shrugged and was about to speak, but Shale was up and walking. The gneblim followed. Up behind the trees they discovered one of the many local shrines that dotted the city, all nondescript and undedicated; you could make an offering to any god you liked, and so it contained melted candles, feathers, an old coin and a faded photo. Shale guessed that the old woman had left the fresh flower, wedged as it was in the cracked surface.

“You gonna make a prayer?” Scamorza asked.

“Who to?”

“Sveciaost perhaps?”

“Fucker didn't do us no favours, did he?”

“Perhaps cuz you didn't offer him a prayer?”

Shale's expression darkened as the gneblim laughed as he quoted, “That's life in the big city.”

“Seriously, you want a punch in the face?”

“Hey,” Scamorza held up his hands, “Take it easy.”

“I can't,” Shale ground out, then put his hand on the gneblim's shoulder and looked him in the eye. They were two of a kind, outcasts who had found each other on the street and become friends for the past handful of years. Together they had hustled and scraped every credit they could, only to have it go sour and lose everything. And when you came up empty in the big city, what was left?

Shale's mind turned again to the unthinkable. “Double or nothing,” he said.

“What?”

“Double or nothing, Scar.”

Scamorza's eyes widened. “You mean....?”

Shale nodded.

“No!”

“Come on Scar, what else?”

“Anything but *that!*” Scamorza stepped out of his friends hands. “Sixteen Hells! You can't be serious?”

Shale nodded. Scamorza stared in disbelief and Shale could tell what he was thinking because no one in their right mind would sign up with the Guild, no one but the foolish and desperate would take a dive through one of their portals in the hope that the

roll of the dice would come up with a winning number. While 'double' might mean a find that would make you wealthy beyond your dreams, 'nothing' meant most likely dying in some unimaginably horrific manner.

And everyone knew: the odds were sorely in favour of 'nothing'.

"I'm not signing up for a suicide mission," said Scamorza. Shale rolled his eyes and made a face, ready to goad Scamorza, but the gneblim cut in. "You know that guy over in the Pultost I used to live with?"

"Sort of..." Shale waved it aside, not really knowing. Or caring.

"I heard all they brought back was his skin, like everything inside had been sucked out."

Shale laugh was cavalier. "Sure sounds like a way to go."

"But – "

"You got a better plan?"

"How about *anything* but take a dive?" Scamorza shot back. "You know how many people come back?"

"About half?" Shale guessed.

"Half?" Scarmorza was almost incredulous, "*Half?* And how many get rich?"

"Yeah yeah, not many, but listen," Shale pressed on with a gleam in his eye, "It's gonna work. We're destined right?"

"I thought we were cursed with bad luck a minute ago?"

"Well," Shale shrugged, "That was before I prayed."

"You did? When?"

"Right then."

Scamorza snorted.

"Listen, maybe that's what the bastard wanted! That's why we got screwed, because we're meant to do it!"

But Scamorza wouldn't consider it, and he made it quite clear that there was nothing more to say. They returned to the bench and smoked the last of Shale's cigarettes. Far to the north-west the sun finally touched the tops of the Penamallera Mountains and as it sank the twilight edged in. The Shining Spires faded to dull copper.

"That," Shale nudged his friend, "That is where our destiny lies."

Scamorza rolled his eyes, shook his head. "Sure."

Shale sighed, dejected. "Is this because you don't believe in Sveciaost?"

"You know I don't," Scamorza sighed. "And neither do you."

"That's beside the point."

"And what is the point?"

"Well, we gotta do something. There's got to be a way for us to get some credits."

"But Shale, a dive? You understand me? It's no good if we die in the process."

"So, you want to do it?"

"I already said. No!"

"Come on Scar, what you got to lose?"

The gneblim cursed under his breath, shook his head. Shale wouldn't relent, and that was for the worse. Once his mind was made up there'd be no end to it.

"I'll think about it," Scamorza said.

"Great."

"How about getting a drink?"

"Even better."

* * *

Above the entrance to the Gamonedo hung a sign which bore a heroic profile framed in silhouette against the rising dawn, noble features seeking the sky: Gamonedo, the revered hero of the Flight and Founding, the slayer of the great monstrosity Kachokabaro that dwelt in the catacombs beneath Panquehue.

The back-light fizzled and went out.

Shale and Scamorza paused on the steps and looked up at it. It flickered with a splutter of current, then popped back to life. With a shake of their heads the pair pushed on through the door and into the gloomy interior where less-than-heroic faces turned from their revels to stare. At the far end of the bar a screen replayed the day's punishments in the Kopanisti, the screams and cheers suddenly loud in the silence. There were muttered remarks and the as it was quickly established that the newcomers were just another pair of nobodies and the denizens returned to the task of escaping sobriety by whatever means they could afford.

Awaiting them was the mustachioed and tattooed barman, Goya. Wide as he was

tall, he had plenty of muscle beneath the fat. He'd lost an eye in a story he kept to himself, and for all that it was missing, the intensity of the other never failed to unsettle. He gave Shale and Scamorza the benefit of its regard, then held the glass he was polishing up to the light before placing it beneath a tap.

“Always good to see my two best customers,” he remarked as he pulled.

“If only it were true,” Shale said, taking a stool beside Scamorza.

“You wound me to the core,” said the barman as he filled a second glass.

“Uh huh. Thing is, you say it to everyone who comes in.”

“True, but I don't like to show favouritism.” He gave them a wink, “And you two do look glum today.”

He put down the two glasses, yet did not relinquish his grip on them.

“Put it on the tab,” Shale said.

“You gonna pay it soon?” Goya asked.

“Of course,” Shale replied.

Goya relented, reluctantly, and went back to polishing glasses.

People came and went. Another round was sunk as they avoided the issue and idled away the time with aimless chat. Goya served another round, and then was it the fourth or the fifth? Shale couldn't be sure. He shook his head, straightened up to find that they had reached the point where you find that time had grown fuzzy around the edges. At some point the view screen had gone off in favour of soft background music.

And his glass was empty. He tried to order again but Goya shook his head.

“You were good for it before,” he said, crossing his arms, “But I want to see some credits. Now.”

“We was fuckin' robbed,” Shale grumbled, then slammed his fist on the counter and a string of curses slurred forth.

“Easy lad,” Goya said. His moustache bristled. “What's the problem?”

“We're broke,” Scamorza stated.

“Scar, shhh!” Shale nudged him in the ribs *meaningfully*.

“You have no money at all?” Goya asked.

Scamorza glanced at Shale, shrugged, and repeated the statement to the barman. Goya stared at them for a moment, then reached slowly under the counter. Together they tensed as a long, notched bludgeon was drawn forth and Goya held it up to survey its

majesty by the neon bar light, his expression nostalgic. He ran a hand down its length like it was an old friend.

“This has been in the family for generations. My father told me that it was once wielded by this bar's own namesake.” He shot them a look and they nodded like chastised children. “Gamonedo! Who fought Kachokabaro in the catacombs of Panquehue. You know the story I'm sure, that when all else had failed it was this trusty club that he used to deal the creature a mortal blow.”

Goya sighed, then turned his eye upon them. “I'd hate to have to use it for an unpaid bar tab, hmm?”

Shale and Scamorza quickly nodded again.

“So,” Goya continued genially, “How do you propose to fix this our problem?”

“Dunno,” Scamorza said and scratched his head.

“Sure we do,” Shale said, brightening. He slapped the gneblim on the back. “Just gotta grow some balls is all!”

“What?” Scamorza and Goya replied in unison.

“We gotta plan, right?”

“You better,” Goya growled. “I'm listening.”

“We're gonna take a dive,” Shale said and turned to Scamorza. “Innat right, Scar?”

“Have you lost your wits as well as your money?” Goya spat. “That's a one way ticket.”

“That's what Scar says,” Shale replied.

“I do?” Scamorza mumbled, trying to catch up. “What we doing?”

“We gotta pay the fucking tab,” Shale said and put an arm around the gneblim.

“We do?”

“You do,” Goya stated.

“I see,” Scamorza nodded slowly. “And so we're talking about taking a dive to pay for it?”

“He doesn't sound very convinced,” Goya said as he leaned over the bar and fixed Shale with his eye. “You know how many people come don't make it back, right?”

Shale waved it aside.

“And what happens if you're one of 'em?”

Well.....” Shale searched for the right answer. It took a moment. “Ah, well, there's

a basic payment for volunteering.”

Goya nodded. *Yes, and?*

“We'll get 'em to forwa – ” Shale burped, “Forward it on to ya. You know? Last of kin and all that.”

Goya brightened. “Well, in that case, allow me to get you two another round to celebrate.”

“That's the spirit!” Shale slapped the counter enthusiastically.

“Wait a minute,” Scamorza interjected, “When did *we* decide this?”

“Just a minute ago,” Shale explained, “When we found we couldn't pay our tab.”

“Ah,” Scamorza nodded as he tried to piece together the conversation, but it was all just components that he couldn't assemble. He tilted his empty glass up and watched the dregs of foam sliding across the bottom as he settled on the one thing he knew. “Yeah, we got shit all.”

“That much has been made abundantly clear,” Goya replied as he put down two fresh glasses, “But thank Sveciaost for the Guild, eh?”

* * *

Inbar stood on the dark pavement, a rock in the stream of bustling pedestrians, and stared up at the façade of the local Civic Administration office. It was clean and white. Functional. Open day and night. In the window hung an illuminated sign offering citizen's advice, application and permit services, and guidance for foreign visitors.

It was also where you went to sign up for a dive.

The technical term for it was a 'Prospecting and Exploration Transfer', and although it was purely a Guild project, out here in the city all the paperwork of recruitment was handled by the C.A. and its bureaucratic machinery.

And Inbar was about to place himself in those hands, all for a chance to explore the unknown and find the unbelievable. At least, that was how the Guild pitched it to those desperate enough to give it a roll of the dice, but deep down everyone knew what it was; a gamble, pure and simple.

The only question for him was what did he have to lose?

He rubbed the stubble on his face as he pretended to search for an answer, but he

knew he was just stalling. The answer was the same as it had been yesterday, and the day before that when he'd spent the last of his credits getting shit-boxed in a back street bar. This was the bottom, and at the bottom there were no choices, so he pushed open the door and stepped into the sudden warmth and light of the Civic Administration's domain, ready to pledge his body to the service of the Guild.

It was quiet inside. The secretary at the counter looked up and smiled with typical business formality, and Inbar was about to approach when he noted a statue set into a small wall niche on his right. It was a bird, an image of Sveciaost in the form of a pyengana. He eyed it, sighed and then muttered a prayer. Propitiation made, he walked to the counter and exchanged greeting with the secretary.

"So, how's it work?" Inbar cut to the chase.

"I assume that you want to pledge?"

"Not much choice really," he sighed.

She nodded as if it was the answer she expecting.

"There's a few details I'll need to go over, but we can begin if you'll just swipe your citizen's card," and she gestured to the reader. Inbar found his ID and for a split second his hand hovered, then slashed the plastic through the reader. There was a small bleep of recognition and no turning back now. The secretary began tapping on her terminal as Inbar leaned on the counter and scanned the impersonal waiting room behind him. A human youth and a gneblim were stretched out on a bench, sleeping.

"What's with those two?"

"They came in earlier," she replied, and with a hint of what might have been disapproval added. "They were drunk."

"Oh," Inbar replied. They were in a pretty sorry state. The youth was wiry and freckled with a shaved head, his pale skin like up in the mountain towns of Imsil or Mohant. There was something about him, something not quite right. The gneblim on the other hand was certainly what he appeared to be: scruffy, rough and dog eared. *Weathered*, thought Inbar.

"Sir?" the secretary said. Inbar turned. "There are just a few things that I need to cover before you're accepted."

"Sure," he smiled.

"You will be required to pass a psychometric and physical examination before

mandatory basic training – ”

“What kind of physical examination?” Inbar cut in.

“The kind where you show the Guild how good at running you are,” said the secretary, hardly concealing her peevish tone. “Are you good at running?”

“All my life,” Inbar joked.

Her face showed no sign of amusement as she continued. “Upon completion you will be provided a dive suit and basic equipment, and agree to transportation to an undisclosed location via the gate system. For this you will receive a basic payment of two hundred and fifty credits.”

He nodded.

“You also understand that the Guild takes no responsibility for any injuries you sustain from hostile elements?”

“Elements?”

“Environmental conditions, life forms, or any other non-specific threats.”

“Oh, right.”

The secretary continued. “And that you will also be the primary beneficiary of any discovery you make that is deemed profitable to the Guild and its interests.”

“Got it,” he nodded. “Guess that's the bit most people understand.”

She gave him a flat smile. *Of course it is, sir.* “You may of course elect another beneficiary who, in the event of a non-return, will receive your pay. Typically this will be your next of kin but can be any elected individual or institution.”

Inbar shook his head. “There isn't anyone.”

“In that case the Guild will retain payment.”

“Sure,” Inbar sighed. “Not like I'll be needing it, right?”

“Indeed,” the secretary agreed. “All I require now is for you confirm your ID card again and take a seat with the other volunteers.”

Inbar took a space across from the two drunks and waited as the secretary made a call, and judging by her disgruntled expression no one was picking up. Inbar listened as she left a terse message. Then she checked her watch and shuffled her papers. Across from him the other volunteers were snoring softly.

He studied the two volunteers and allowed himself a grim smile.

Yeah, right.

Inbar could sympathise; they were probably just chancers like he was, out of options. He'd hit the booze too, knowing that he was likely to turn up dead if he stuck around the Bierkase. He'd pissed on the wrong toes, lost all his money and it was either run to the slums of the Kesong Puti or disappear where they couldn't find him. It was suicide to stay, slow death in the slums or get lucky and get rich.

So yeah, he was a *volunteer*.

Time passed. Inbar dozed, woken a little later when a door opened and a young man in white overalls – a Guild mediator – sauntered his way into the waiting room trailed by two assistants. He exchanged quick words with the secretary, then made his way over and looked Inbar up and down. “You seem healthy enough.”

Inbar gave him a lopsided smile, shrugged. “Guess so.”

“You on anything? Got any problems?”

Inbar shook his head, glanced at the pair up the bench. The mediator followed his gaze and grunted. He prodded them both but they were unresponsive.

“They're unconscious,” he observed. He rubbed the light stubble on his chin in thought and turned to the secretary. “Were they anywhere close to their right minds when they came in?”

“Is anyone who volunteers in their right mind?” she replied.

The mediator sighed. “Did they understand what they were doing?”

She tilted her head for a moment in consideration. “Well, they were quite clear that if they didn't return then we should arrange for their pay to be forwarded to the barman of – ” she consulted her notes “ – the Gamonedo. Name of Goya. They were concerned that they hadn't settled their tab.

“They signed up to pay a bar tab?” Inbar asked, then laughed.

“Does that count as being in their right minds?” the secretary asked the mediator.

“Sounds like as good a reason as any,” and he shrugged. “They look healthy enough.”

“I don't think it's a good idea to pass them, do you?”

The mediator considered, shook his head. “I'll take what I can get when it's quiet like this. At the end of the day they're all just meat for the grinder.”

“They're still people,” the secretary pointed out. Inbar shifted awkwardly.

“And thank Sveciaost they keep turning up,” the mediator said with a smile, “Or

I'd be out of a job, eh?"

He signalled to his assistants to fetch trolleys for the sleepers, then beckoned Inbar. "You can follow me."

As Inbar passed the secretary he saw her face wrinkled with distaste.

What he didn't catch was the small prayer she whispered on behalf of himself and the other two, just as she always did for all the other volunteers. She'd seen the whole range in here, drunk or sober; the wannabes and the toughs, the brave and the foolish, almost exclusively impoverished. Gamblers and fools, the lot of them, but then there was no way to know just what dire straits might have lead them to the door.

So she whispered a small prayer to Sveciaost for them all regardless.

Good fortune!

* * *

Basic training, as far as Shale was concerned, was all basic and not much training.

Once they'd been cleared by the mediator they were put on a Guild transport and Shale had wormed his way to a window seat. As it soared over Lake Charolais he was awed by the expansive view of the city. For a moment he felt the giddiness of something like destiny as they swept over the pleasure barges of the Kashkaval and on toward Panquehue. In the shadow of Iona Cromag they set down on a landing platform and were unloaded, processed and taken via elevator into the bowels of the island.

The training began in earnest that afternoon. Shale had been increasingly uneasy at the prospect of a physical examination, but there had been no turning back, and as it transpired there was nothing to worry about. All it comprised of was some running around, some star jumps, and then they had their eyes and ears tested before being fed and allowed to rest.

The next day they were introduced to the shooting range, and a day after that they were fitted for generic dive suits, utility belts and given a final shake down on the dive procedure that could have been easily condensed down to: "play it safe at all times."

When the third morning came they were given a light breakfast before being told to suit up, and it wasn't long before the dive party ascended the translation platform,

about to be flung through a portal into the unknown.

Shale took a deep breath as the light began to rise.....

II: Bottled Time

A pinprick of light bloomed in the darkness, the tiny blue-white star instantly mirrored by a twin upon the rippling surface of a wide, circular platform. Ancient machinery hummed and power fed into the burgeoning star.

The twins swelled and the radiance touched long dormant photoreceptive organisms which responded with a pale green phosphorescence. Bioluminescent light spread like an ink stain across the mishappened undulations of time tilted machinery organised in tiered, geometric rings around the platform.

The darkness retreated.

Slowing, the stars field tautened, crackled, then burst with an incandescent pop! to reveal ten arrivals dressed in white and black dive-suits. Their first movements sent a ice crystals drifting down from their suits into the water at their feet. With their torches ready and pistols poised, they scanned the vicinity, but nothing moved in the eerie spectral wash.

The party collectively eased and, without any immediate threats, took a moment to orientate themselves. They were in the vast, circular chamber, and their arrival had triggered the photoreceptive glow all the way to the periphery. Above them a huge, domed ceiling rose up to a dim apex where a deeper patch of darkness revealed a ragged hole open to a night sky.

And still nothing moved; no alarms were given, no calls of surprise. Deep breaths were taken, muscles relaxed a little more, and environmental data was checked.

“Says we've got clean air,” the party leader confirmed, “But probably best if you keep suited until we find out if this stuff is safe.”

There was general chorus of agreement.

“Okay, we're on the clock so let's get started. And keep alert! See anything – *anything!* – then call it out.”

The party descended the platform and fanned out to investigate the huge,

obscured shapes which lay with a faint promise of secrets long forgotten. Gloved hands wiped away swathes of the glowing, organic matter to reveal cream coloured surfaces etched with rows of geometric symbols. With each moment that passed came an increased sense of safety as they settled into the labour of scraping and clearing the organism encased hulks.

All except one.

Shale stood on the lip of the platform with a disconsolate air as they scurried about below him. In his split second review of the situation Shale had concluded that this place had about as much potential as his kitchen sink. It certainly had something growing in it. Just what did they think they were going to find in this derelict shit-heap?

“Fuck me,” he muttered to himself, annoyed that his packet of Bonchesters would have to stay inside his suit.

“You coming down?” asked Scamorza.

“What's that?” Shale replied, pretending to cup an ear. “Need my help Scar? Take it easy, there's almost too much to cart off!”

“Ha ha. And what else you gonna do now you got us here?” said the gneblim as he followed after the others. “Might as well make the most of it.”

Damn, he's still pissed, thought Shale and sighed. Scar had barely said a word during basic training. He couldn't blame him, and with a shake of his head, Shale descended to the uneven floor. He prodded it with a foot. It seemed stable enough, so he followed the line of black footprints left in the team's wake until he came up alongside Scamorza. The gneblim was using a small shovel to scrape the glowing life from whatever lay beneath. Shale watched until Scar stood back to examine his efforts.

“What is it?” Shale asked.

“Alien tech,” sniffed the gneblim. “Doesn't look like we'll be able to move it or even break it down. Pity, cuz it's obviously advanced.”

“Obviously,” Shale replied flatly.

“Doesn't look mechanical though...” the gneblim mused, hands on hips. He fiddled some more as Shale stood in silence, watching as the team around him carried on clearing the derelicts to no avail. He blew out a breath and turned away. Not far from him a lone team member was digging into the side of a low mounds situated outside the perimeter of buried machinery. Bemused, Shale nudged Scamorza and wandered over

with the gneblim in tow.

“Find something new?” Shale asked.

The man glanced up and Shale recognised Inbar's face. He shrugged and flung a shovel load to one side. Beneath was a dark, mud-like slurry.

“Just thinking,” Inbar said as he worked, “This heap's not like all that machinery stuff. Might be something different under here. Who knows, maybe some small bits of tech or something we can actually – ”

His shovel caught on something hard. Curious now, Shale unfolded his own shovel and helped while Scamorza focused a torch. From the slurry Inbar pulled a large oval shape which he wiped with a gloved hand, then held it up to the light. He dropped it almost immediately as if stung, wiping his hands frantically down the front of his dive suit.

“A fucking skull! A fucking – ”

“Fuck's sake!” Shale snapped as he bent down to pick up the skull. “Get a grip or turn your comms off.”

The bone was stained black-brown. Shale turned it in his hand and they saw that it had a high, elongated cranium with large eye sockets, a double row of small teeth and tall nasal cavities. Shale passed it to Scamorza.

“Well, certainly not human,” Scamorza noted, “Or gneblim.”

“Glad we could get your expert opinion professor,” said Shale.

Scamorza ignored him as he turned the skull over in his hand and peered into the hole at his feet. “Doesn't look like there's anything valuable here.”

“Yeah, and there was me thinking we hit the jackpot.”

“Keep poking Shale,” Scamorza said. “At least Inbar was using his head. You never know what might be under this stuff.”

“Yeah? So why don't you keep digging and find out?”

Scamorza rounded on Shale with a wicked smile. “And you got anything better to do?”

Their eyes locked from behind their visors, then Shale gave the gneblim a sardonic grin. “Second time you made your point, Scar.”

Together they unfolded an extra shovel and began to clear more muck from the hole. Five minutes later they stood back, breathing hard.

“Just skulls,” Shale wheezed, “Skulls all the way down.”

“Definitely not good,” Scamorza remarked once he'd got his wind back. “Looks like a massacre or something.”

“Doesn't mean anything, Scar. They could have died any number of ways. Perhaps a plague or something.”

“Plague?” said Inbar and held up his hands for inspection.

“Relax. The scanner said we were clear,” Scamorza replied, then to Shale, “And I suppose as they were dying of pox they just neatly piled up their own heads?”

Shale shrugged. “Okay, so they all got the chop. Big deal. We ain't getting paid to solve any mysteries professor.”

“You're the one wanted to go on this insane ride,” Scamorza shot back, and with a shake of his head he bent down and picked up a random skull. “Just think, these guys probably worked here, or used the gate back in the day.”

“You think they might be worth something?” Inbar asked hopefully.

“Maybe to some egg head researcher,” Scamorza shrugged.

“How much do you think they'd pay?”

“For this.....” Scamorza pretended to think for a moment and Shale could guess at the big grin growing on his face as he said, “You'd certainly get enough to pay for a couple of rounds of drinks when we get back.”

“Is that all?” Inbar was crestfallen.

“Remember what they told us? It's only worth something if the Guild decides it's profitable. I'm guessing that most of the Guild's eggheads only get paid if they invent something useful. And this guy here,” said Scamorza as he waggled the skull for emphasis, “Well, all they'll probably be able to do is write some papers guessing who he was. Or maybe just use him as a novelty paperweight.”

Irreverently he threw the skull back into the hole and together all three of them turned around to watch the rest of the team working on the derelicts around the platform.

“How long we got?” Shale asked.

“Still a couple of hours.”

“Well,” Shale's voice grated, “This is fucked then. There's nothing here.”

“You can't say that for sure,” Scamorza replied. “It only takes a little luck to find something.”

“Pfff,” Shale waved a hand, agitated. He was about ready for a smoke as he watched Inbar wander back towards the heaped rings of ruined machinery.

“All just the same shit, Scar,” Shale continued. “They aren't gonna find anything. This place is dead.”

Scamorza had nothing to say to that, and it was several moments before he realised that Shale had moved off in the opposite direction to Inbar.

“Hey, where you going?” he commed.

“To take a look around.”

“You don't know what's out there.”

He saw Shale pause, then the shoulders shrugged and he carried on walking.

“Moody bastard,” muttered the gneblim.

“I heard that,” buzzed the comms.

Then Scamorza heard a small, mute click as Shale turned it off.

* * *

Shale wandered across the glowing carpet and towards the perimeter, passing several suspicious mounds that suggested more gruesome repositories. He had no wish to investigate, of a mind that he was just killing time until the gate was fired up for the return trip. So, for want of anything better to do, when he came to the wall he wiped a hand through the algae. He was faintly surprised to find alien inscriptions. Absent mindedly, he ran a finger over the symbols. Was everything here covered in these hidden writings?

Shale sighed.

It was nothing more than the left overs of a dead civilisation, just like the heaped skulls were. Scar had said something about it all being *advanced*, but Shale's reaction was a sneer of derision. Obviously not advanced enough that they were still around; just food for the life-form that was the only thing prospering in this forgotten shit-hole. Shale nursed the bitterness that he had come all this way to nowhere, rolled the dice and found nothing. He could hear it now, the words that would be offered in sympathy: “*Well, at least you didn't get yourself killed.*”

It was small compensation when Destiny decided to rip you off. He'd damned well

prayed, and what had Sveciaost done for him? It wasn't meant to be like this. He and Scar were meant to find something big, something that would put them on a luxury pad on the Charolais.

And on top of all that he couldn't even have a smoke.

“So much for good fortune.....” he mused.

He set off walking, a gloved hand trailing through the glowing fungus, the grooves of the alien writing sensed as bump after bump after bump. To his left he saw an occasional search light slice up into the air, revealing a haze of particles that might have been spore.

Shale stopped.

The surface beneath his glove had tripped with a sudden static. He swung the torch up to a blank, exposed surface in the wall. As he peered closer a layer of rime prickled to life on the exposed surface.

A tingle of excitement shot through him.

It didn't take long to uncover the extent of the surface, an arch seemingly sealed with a strange membrane. When he pressed against the surface, it gave like a viscous liquid rubber, then sprang back. The ice crystals curled like oil on water. Fascinated, Shale pushed harder until it gave abruptly. He sprawled to the floor beyond, immersed in darkness, and in a panic jumped to his feet and swept the torch around. The light revealed a long, empty corridor. At its far end he now saw a distant, soft illumination. Behind him, Shale could see the search lights in the chamber as if through a frosting of glass and the thought popped into his head: *Can I get back?*

With a careful push the mercurial barrier ripple, as pliable as before. Shale braced himself against the sudden pull and let his arm move through, then withdrew it as he smiled to himself. Pistol ready, he set a quick pace toward the distant light. Eager fantasies of fabulous loot blossomed in his mind, and he had covered more than half the distance before he thought of Scamorza. He switched the comms back on.

“Scar? You hear me?”

Dead static answered. For a moment he was torn, but it was further to return than to go on and they only had limited time.

I'll check it out first, Shale told himself. *After all, might be nothing.*

Yet deep down he could feel a thankful prayer to Sveciaost forming as the light

ahead of him resolved into another arched barrier. Prepared this time, Shale pushed his way through with pistol poised. He swept for targets, but the place was deserted.

He stood in an antechamber, and through this he moved into the centre of a circular, domed hall. It was perhaps forty paces across with cream coloured walls and graceful stanchions supporting tiered platforms. Elegant staircases and walkways connected the platforms while the illumination came from some indeterminable source, a radiance that suffused the room and the tunnels leading away from it at regularly spaced intervals. Shale could see far rooms, each as warm and bright as the one he was in.

“Wow,” he breathed, then spun, pistol ready. He could have sworn he heard a voice.....

Nothing moved.

Just his imagination, perhaps?

He shrugged off the unease and moved on. In basic training they had mentioned dive hallucinations, that alien environments and stressful situations took a toll on the mind. The place was certainly eerie, as if it had been abandoned only a moment before Shale's arrival. It was so tidy, so clean. Shale ran a finger over a large table, but there was no trail left where dust should have settled.

And this time he didn't imagine it. Someone laughed, so close that Shale cried out in alarm and spun around, pistol shaking as he sought a target.

Nothing.

“W-who's there?”

Greetings traveller. The words formed in Shale's brain, bypassing his ears.

“Show yourself!”

There was amused tittering as Shale's heart hammered in his chest. He swept in a full circle, but he was alone.

The voice spoke again out of nowhere, it's tone edged with mischief, **I am sorry if I startled you.**

“Where are you?” Shale demanded.

Perhaps the question should be 'when am I?'

“And what the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Shale snapped.

There was a pause as if the voice were thinking, then it asked, **From whence**

do you hail?

“What? Whence I what?”

There seemed to be a sigh and the voice spoke again, **Where have you come from?**

“Uh-uh,” Shale said with a shake of his head. “Show yourself first, then we talk.”

I am here, it said as if it were obvious.

“Where?” Shale snapped. “I don't see anyone!”

My my, you are a feisty one.

“Keep talking shit-head,” Shale said, breathing hard.

Are all your kind so rude?

“Not all of us,” Shale replied. “Why don't you come out and we can talk about it.”

As I said, I am present.

“There ain't nothing here but an empty room.”

Ah, I comprehend the misunderstanding. I am the room.

“Well, that clears that up,” Shale said without relaxing. “What are you? A computer? And how come I can hear you in my head?”

Computer? the voice chuckled to itself. **I suppose that will suffice as a description, and my purpose is to oversee the operation of this facility. With regard to our mode of communication, to that end I have made a connection directly to your mind.**

“Not sure I like the sound of that....” Shale said, easing up with his pistol. After all, there was nothing to shoot at. For now. “So you can hear my thoughts?”

'Hear' is a rather crude term, and it chuckled again, **Much like your thoughts.**

Shale grit his teeth. “So what am I thinking?”

You are thinking something rather impolite. Forgive me. I did not mean to overly offend you.

“And now?”

You wish to consumer a 'cigarette' in order to calm your nerves.

“Big wow,” Shale could almost laugh. “That's pretty messed up.”

You may smoke if you wish. This medical facility's sterile field is operational.

“What?”

You will find the environment quite safe.

“Right.....” Shale rolled his eyes, his wariness returning. “So I remove my helmet and then what? I get some face melting plague on me, and the last thing I hear is you laughing?”

As crude as your company is, the voice explained with a wry note, It is somewhat preferable to loneliness. I must say you are a most cynical creature.

“Well, I'm from the Bierkase,” Shale said with a shrug, “And here I am, alone with a strange computer. Who knows what might happen.”

I see your point, but rest assured, it is against my protocols to harm a living being.

Protocols?

“Ah, so you are a computer then?” Shale said.

As I said, of a sort, although I was once organic. Your simplistic language is insufficient to explain.

“Yeah? And how comes you can speak it anyhow?”

We are communicating via the facility's medical field. It is rendering meaning directly to your brain.

“Well, that explains that,” Shale sniffed.

Ha! Sarcasm.

Shale thought of the cigarettes and wondered just how far the voice could be trusted. Whatever it really was, it appeared to be all too amused by her, and it so far had shown no sign of any hostile intent. He checked his suit's environmental readouts. It confirmed that the atmosphere was green. He came to a conclusion and holstered his

pistol.

“Fuck it.”

Shale unclasped the locks on his helmet, releasing it with a hiss of air. He took a tentative breath and waited in anticipation of sudden agony. When he didn't die screaming, he unzipped his suit and fished out the packet of Bonchesters. A moment later he blew smoke and watched in fascination as the smoke curled, turned in upon itself and disappeared.

“Weird.....”

In my capacity as a medical adviser I should probably warn you of the damage to your health with prolonged use.

“Go ahead if it makes you happy.”

There was a pause.

One should not waste time speaking to those without ears.

Shale shrugged and started walking, the excitement returning now the initial shock had worn off. This place certainly had a damn sight more promise than all the crap back in the arrival chamber.

Ah, so you arrived via the gateway system then?

“You reading my thoughts again?”

I do not 'read' them. You are effectively talking out loud. You arrived in the transit chamber, but if I understand you correctly, it is in a state of disrepair.

“Yeah, you could say that,” Shale chuckled, “If you mean it's a total ruin covered in glowing fungus.”

I should not be surprised. It has been..... some time since there were any inhabitants here. I assume, therefore, that your kind has claimed one of our gatehouse cities.

“Gatehouse? Guess that makes sense,” Shale nodded. “We have a story about the Guild. They found the city abandoned with all this tech lying about, so they claimed it as their new home and got the gates working.”

I see.....

Shale stopped at the icy edge on those words.

And what do they name *their* city?

“Asclepius.”

The voice didn't reply.

Shale wandered on through a series of high ceilinged chambers like the first, all with multiple levels reach by stairs and walkways. Certain of these contained smaller rooms. In one Shale found beds wreathed in an alien apparatus resembling finely wrought golden cages. Beside one of these sat a trolley loaded with implements. Shale picked one out at random: What did it do? Was it valuable? Shale was no engineer. How was he supposed to know?

Medical equipment, the voice explained.

“I guessed that,” Shale replied. “But what does it do?”

Would it amuse you if I were to explained?

“Why, is it amusing?”

No, but I detect that the motivation of your questioning lies outside of simple curiosity.

“You got that right.”

But to answer your question: Our physiognomy, although not necessarily dissimilar as biological creatures, required specialised instrumentation due to a certain condition that afflicted us. Most of these items were designed to probe the details of that condition.

Shale put it down. “So, not much use to me.”

However, if it is value that you seek, then perhaps I can guide you to something a little more interesting.

Was it Shale's imagination, or did the voice sound ever so slightly sly? He stubbed his cigarette out in an oddly shaped dish and lit another.

“Yeah?” he asked. “Like what?”

A means to an end.

“Would that be a means to lots of cash?”

Ah, you of course refer to mere coin. It chuckled to itself.

“Nothing wrong with mere coin,” said Shale, blowing smoke.

What I have in mind will certainly assist you in its accumulation.

“And what did you have in mind?”

Well, did I mention that this facility houses a great treasure?

“You shitting me?” Shale stopped. “Why didn't you say so?”

Please define 'shitting me'?

“It means, er.... that you're making a joke.”

Oh, I think you'll find this is far from a joke.

“So, where is this great treasure?”

* * *

Guided by the voice Shale cut through the complex, and five minutes later stood before a pair of imposing doors set within a grand arch. Upon the surface of the doors were etchings of long-skulled figures performing in collage of epic scenes.

“So that's what you guys looked like,” Shale remarked as he traced a finger over the depictions, but it was only an absent thought as his mind raced with just what such an epic portal might be erected to protect. The fact that the doors might have been solid gold wouldn't occur to him until years later. “How do I get in?”

As if prompted the doors parted in silent grace, swinging open to reveal the chamber within.

Behold! the voice breathed with reverence.

Shale scanned the room.

“Behold what?”

The water of life!

“So you *were* shitting me,” Shale sighed, deflated and ripped off.

Ha! You have no idea what it is, do you?

“Should I?”

I suppose not. But let me enlighten you! This! This is the greatest

achievement of my people.

“Uh huh.” Shale stared up at the chamber's centre piece, a colossal tear drop suspended in a geometric tapestry of gold filigree that was reached by a wide stair that lead to an encircling gantry. and Shale guessed it contained a liquid from the faint crystalline radiance, and the occasional bubbles which percolated through it.

Of course, you could always ask me what it is.

“I can see what it is. It's a giant bottle of water, right?”

The liquid is but a medium.

“This is what you brought me here for?” Shale entered the room. “Your largest water urn?”

You requested great treasure.

“Yeah, and what do you do? Lead me all the way here for a drink of water!”

I think that you will find the experience..... fulfilling, to say the least.

“Not unless it's going to magically make me rich!”

Well, that was what I had in mind.

“Oh, so it's *magic* water.”

Ha, sarcasm again. It chuckled to itself, and Shale sensed that the voice could barely contain its glee as it spoke again. **Once you have acquired immortality I imagine that you'll have all the time you require for the acquisition of material wealth.**

“Wait? What?” Shale shook his head. “Did you just say *immortality*?”

Yes. That is exactly what I said. Immortality. Life everlasting.

“I know what it means,” Shale said. “I just thought you were shitting me.”

A joke? Oh no. No joke. All you have to do is drink.

Shale shook his head. “Not until you explain.”

What more is there to explain? It is bottled time.

“Bottled time?” Shale stopped at the bottom of the stairs and ran a hand over his head.

Why do you hesitate?

Shale considered the tear drop, shrugged and took a step onto the foot of the stair.

“I'm just not sure I believe you.”

You doubt me?

“Wouldn't you?” he replied, climbing.

I am beyond doubt. I once drank of the water and lived a thousand lives.

“Yeah, right..... So how come you're just a voice haunting this place?”

Maybe I'm just a ghost.... the voice whispered. Then it wailed mournfully.

“Funny,” Shale replied as he reached the gantry. He circled to the left, staring up at the huge container, then almost tripped over a body that lay forlorn upon the platform. Its head had been cut cleanly from its shoulders, but there was no blood, not even on the robe that the corpse had worn. The head rested on its stump not far away, eyes open and staring. Shale shivered. It looked so fresh, as if it were simply waiting to be reattached.

“What the fuck?” he hissed. “Who's this?”

The voice affected to clear its throat. **That**, it said sadly, **is me.**

“You?”

Indeed. Not the end I had in mind of course, but unfortunately it had become something of a necessity.

Shale took a deep breath, wanting to turn those staring eyes away, but instead moved gingerly past it.

“What do you mean anyway,” he asked, “A necessity?”

I was..... ah, afflicted by a rather curious ailment.

“One that could only be cured by decapitation, huh?”

Something like that.....

Shale was about to probe this mystery, but as he rounded the gantry he came across a large pile of dust, out of which protruded an ornate red cylinder. It was banded and capped in finely worked bronze.

“What's this?” Shale asked as he crouched down. It certainly had the prospect of value about it.

That is the Hand Of Eskelephos.

“Can you be a little clearer?”

It is a weapon of..... mercy.

Shale reached out to pick it up. “A weapon, huh?”

Do not touch that!

“Wow, don't get pissed! I'm guessing that it must be worth something.”

Are you not content with the gift I have presented to you?

“Gift? A drink of some old water that's been here half of forever?”

Ah-ha! I sense that you do not believe me when I say that the water will grant you immortality. It is rebirth, the greatest of gifts. You will be made anew and have a span of years undreamed of by mortals.

“Uh huh. I think you're probably still shitting me.”

I do not 'shit' you at all. Why are you so suspicious?

“Just seems too good to be true,” Shale replied, keeping his mind on the conversation as he surreptitiously stashed the cylinder into a satchel, albeit with a nervous glance at the head in case it was watching.

I suppose it does, the voice conceded. **If I were in your position I too might be too simplistic to believe that the greatest medical achievement of an unknown people could heal with one drop, could rebuild a mortal frame in an image of perfection, and bestow upon them the gift of life everlasting.**

“Yeah, that about sums it up,” Shale replied, his eyebrows arching. “After all, you and everyone else appears to be dead.”

Dead? Dead! It was mercy!

“Mercy? Now you're really making me nervous,” Shale said with a frown. It was damned double talk, that was what it was. Still, the idea of immortality wasn't something to be sniffed at. A long, *long* life would certainly give him enough time to make a lot of money. He finished his circuit of the container and his eye came to rest on what was obviously a spigot. He put a finger to his lips in contemplation.

Bottled time.....

Could he possibly be that lucky?

I told Scar that we were destined, didn't I?

You have nothing to fear. I promise you that I have nothing to gain by deception.

Shale nodded slowly. What was there to lose? There was nothing else here that was going to make him a fortune, and nothing waiting for him back in the Bierkase but that two hundred and fifty credits.....

That and the recollection of Enebro's smug face.

“You say it only takes a drop?”

You have but to consume a small mouthful.

Bottled time, Shale thought and his face lit up in a smile. He found a sample flask from his belt and filled it from the spigot. Living forever was one thing, but living it with unimaginable riches was another. How much would they give him if it all turned out to be true? He and Scar would no doubt need several life times to spend all the riches that a bottle of eternal life would earn them back home.

This was it. This was their destiny.

Shale tucked the sample flask into his belt and laughed aloud for the sheer thrill of it all, then bent to the spigot and took a long draw on the cool liquid. It tasted faintly salty, but clean.

“Is that it?” he asked.

Is what it?

“Am I immortal now?”

Yes.

“Funny, I don't feel any different.”

It is working on you already, deep in your core, in your blood.

“How can I be sure?”

Take your knife, cut yourself, and you will see the truth of it.

Shale considered as he lit another cigarette, then pulled the knife from his belt and removed a glove. He nicked the end of a finger. Blood quickly welled.

Wipe it.

He did so. The cut was gone.

“How the.....?”

You will not age, nor can you be killed by mortal wound or poison.

“But I can still die?”

Certainly, but it would require extreme trauma, such as incineration in a furnace. The healing process would be arrested enough to end your life.

“Well, I wasn't planning on getting into a furnace any time soon,” Shale laughed, barely able to contain his excitement as he punched the air and cried out, “This is gonna be worth the fucking mother-lode when I get back!”

Please define 'mother-lode'?

“It means a lot! More money than I can count! This is my ticket out of the Bierkase.”

Ah, we are back to the topic of mere coin once more.

“What else is there?”

I suppose we will find out, the voice replied. **I sense that you must leave.**

“Shit!” Shale checked the suit's timer and sped off without another thought, down the stair and back through the door, pulling on his gloves as he went. The voice said nothing more. Shale retraced his steps, pelting through empty rooms until he was finally back at the barrier. He pulled on his helmet and fastened. With one last glance over his shoulder he offered the facility computer a thank you.

No need to thank me. I was happy to assist you, although no doubt you will one day come to regret your decision.

“What? Why?”

Shale felt a chill as the voice replied. It seemed to be speaking to itself, **After all, everyone else did.**

Then it laughed, and a creeping wave of unease ascended Shale's spine at the

approaching hysteria in its tone. Shale tarried for a moment, told himself that he didn't have time, and stepped back through the barrier and into the passage. The laughter died abruptly, leaving only a startling silence punctuated by the sound his own breathing.

He set of at a jog, turning the voice's words over in his mind. Yet what was there to regret? His future was a done deal. He slowed to a walk, pulled out the flask and held it up to his visor; this, this was a dream come true! So he thrust the unease from his mind and let the excitement carry him down the tunnel, back to his friend.

For sure, Scar was going to flip when Shale told him what he'd found.

* * *

“Scar? You there?”

“Shale? Where in the six hells have you been?”

“Take it easy,” Shale replied, trying to contain his glee. “I was just exploring.”

“Fuck's sake! The team's been calling you for nearly two hours. Recalls' in ten minutes,” then he heard the click as Scamorza changed channel. “It's okay, he's here.”

“Thank fuck,” said the party leader. “Didn't want to have to explain that when we got back.”

“I'm touched by your concern,” Shale snorted as he came jogging back, bursting with the excitement of seeing the look on Scar's face. They would get back, sell this miracle to the highest bidder, and live the rest of their lives out on the lake with all the other super rich bastards.

Closer now, Shale could see the team milling about the platform, could sense the general dejection of the team. They were all bare of any obvious finds. A few waved as he came up.

“Find anything?” someone asked.

“Just more junk,” said Shale with a shake of his head. “What about you guys?”

“Sweet fuck all. Just these machines, whatever they were.”

“Dive's a bust,” someone complained.

“Still, at least we're all alive.”

“Pfff,” Shale snorted. “That's not much good if you're gonna end up back in the

Bierkase, right?”

“I can request another dive for us all,” the dive leader offered.

There was a general chorus of reluctant agreement.

“Okay, well, everyone ready? According to my timer we’ll be jumping in a fraction over two minutes.”

While they waited Shale turned aside and gave Scamorza a surreptitious signal to switch his comms to private.

“Won't need another jump Scar.”

“Why not?”

Shale lifted the flap on his belt-pouch, careful not to let anyone see the faint glow of the flask, and pulled up for Scar to see.

“What is it?” asked the gneblim.

“Something that will make us low tier Kashkaval.”

Behind his visor Shale could see the gneblim's eyebrows rise in incredulity. “Glowing water? What's it do – quench your thirst?”

“Ha! Funny!” Shale shot back. “You'll be kissing my arse when it buys us a luxury pad on the Charolais.”

“Sure.....” Scamorza nodded. “So what is it?”

“On the far side there was a door to a some sort of medical centre. There was a computer, some sort of automation that told me – ”

A flurry of activity made them turn. Someone was pointing into the dome and Shale switched to an open channel. Anxious warnings were cutting through the chatter. As he looked into the purpled sky beyond the hole a swarm of creatures came floating through, tendrils twitching and lashing languidly beneath great bulbous sacks like nightmare balloons. They descended rapidly. The first shots rang out without any obvious effect.

Panic set loose around them. More shots. Someone lurched into Shale and the flask was jolted out of his hand. It bounced and rolled through the veneer of water. Cursing, he pulled his pistol and fired blindly over his head as he gave chase.

Shit shit shit!

The flask was nearly within reach as Shale spared a glanced at the creatures overhead. A tentacle was curling straight for his face and with a cry of fright he threw

himself down into the shallow water, rolling onto his back and firing up. Beneath him a faint tremor ran through the platform.

The jump point was about to activate.

Dissuaded, but apparently uninjured, the creature hovered as a blue-white pinprick came to life, the coruscation of a miniature star rendering the horrors about them in brilliant relief. Water droplets began to rise past Shale's face as he rolled and scrambled to reach the flask.

A scream cut directly into his head, slicing over the comms. One of the things had Scamorza, its tendrils lashed about his helmet, tearing through the fabric to reach the skin of his face, absorbing flesh and blood, pulsing up the side of his head.....

No!

The platform shivered, the star expanded, and Shale leapt for the one thing that would be the difference between unbelievable riches and abject poverty, all sound and motion in the world reduced to the background. He hit the platform, his hand closing –

....a flash.....

– and he was lying prone, arm outstretched alongside other divers in disarray, all at the business end of Guild carbines. Scamorza was still screaming, his cries mixed with shrill alien keening as the creature was cut to pieces in a hail of bullets.

Slowly, Shale turned his hand over and his fingers uncurled.

Everything became periphery.

And for a time there was nothing in the world but the sight of his empty palm.

III: Remember Me?

A hand quested blindly for the pack of cigarettes on the bedside table, tipping an empty wine bottle into its neighbour. Together they clattered to the floor. Shale rolled over and drifted back into a half sleep of tentacled nightmares, hands reaching for something that sparkled in the darkness.

Someone screamed.....

Shale pushed the horror as far to the back of his mind as he could, and as much as he'd tried to smash the recollections to pieces with booze last night, they were now pushing back with undiluted vividness. Cold sweat was soaking his t-shirt, and it was pinching under his arms.....

From somewhere Shale thought he heard Scarmorza's speaking.

"You owe me Shale."

The veil of slumber lifted further and an awareness crept over him. Something was.... *different*. Hair tickled his face. He wondered why he didn't have a raging headache as he brushed the strands aside, muttering to himself.

Then he bolted upright.

"What the fuck?"

He reached up and ran fingers through long, lush curls of red hair. As he did so awareness dawned of a rather more alarming and pertinent issue; the surprising weight of his chest. Looking down his eyes widened. His t-shirt was on the verge of exploding with a pair of..... of.....

There was a reality to be faced, but Shale didn't want it. He dived under his blanket and shut his eyes even as all those years of growing up on the streets evaporated in a rising panic. All the years of growing up on the streets began to evaporate in a rising panic; the years of shaving his head, of tucking a rolled up pair of socks down his trousers, all the times he had been made aware that it was safer to be a boy than a girl. He'd made a life in disguise, a life that could be lived as inconspicuously as possible.

These..... *developments* were anything but inconspicuous, and no amount of hoping or wanting could dispel the obvious. His mind churned. What was he going to do? Panic tightened in a circlet around his thoughts, choking off avenues of action, rendering options implausible and possibilities as slippery as greased soap. Shale clasped his knees to himself and rocked to and fro, suddenly lost on a dizzying tide of isolation, and despair.

Upstairs someone dropped something heavy.

The swirl of his mind stopped as Shale strained an ear in primal reaction.

He could hear the argument going on above him with surprising clarity. With a final exchange of harsh words the husband stormed to the door and slammed it behind him. The clump of his feet dwindled, and as Shale listened he became aware that he could hear so much more; the words of people talking in the street, the music from the radio playing upstairs and tenants doing everyday things in their apartments. Somewhere a baby cried with persistence until comforted, and in the skirting board he detected the skitter of tiny insect legs.

Shitshitshit! I'm going crazy!

Shale clasped his knees to himself and rocked to and fro, suddenly lost on a dizzying tide of sensations. He lurched sideways and sprawled on the floor, assailed by another wave of dreams and memories, but within the turmoil were cold facts that he could grasp: his best friend was dead, and acknowledging it brought tears. Shale wiped them savagely, scratching his face with fingernails that hadn't been there before.

The pain bought a moment's clarity and he dug the nails in deeper as he wonder how destiny could have fucked up so bad? It wasn't meant to have happened like this! They should have been rich!

Scar never believed all that destiny shit anyway.....

How could he have? He had been ostracised by his own, banished for the kind of mistake that came with getting a big head. Back then he was one of the 'unmade', the closest gneblim had to priests, tasked with building augmentations to replace biological elements of gneblim physique. The more replacements, the higher it elevated them towards the pinnacle of existence. His reputation had grown quickly, his skills attracting a big client – a real deal breaker – who wanted something special. It was going to be the start of a brilliant career until the client died through a 'miscalculation' (as Scar had called it). His career was over, and so he had abandoned even tinkering with any tech. For

gneblim it was tantamount to abandoning god, a heresy.

And into that void Shale had stepped to become his only real friend. Together, they had each other's backs, sharing the trials of the Bierkase.

Shale sat against the bed and closed his eyes.

Why had he never told Scar the he was really a woman? By extension *she'd* never told the gneblim her real name either. Perhaps it was just a small thing, but what might have once been a trifle now seemed to eclipse everything, and despite the fact that it had never mattered to their friendship it was now an aching wound in Shale's heart.

It was Shale the woman who regretted, Shale the woman that had lost her friend, Shale the woman who was..... immortal?

Shale blinked away tears and stared.

Immortal?

Like a seed the notion had been buried in chaos and grief, then watered with alcohol. In the dark it had waited until the light of day. Now its meaning was taking root, sprouting through the disorder of Shale's thoughts. Tension coiled in her chest. She hugged her knees tight and drew a deep, steadying breath.

Then Shale reached out and grabbed the pack of Bonchesters off the bedside table. With a shaking hand she lit one and waited for the smoke to take the edge off, then stood and went to the cracked mirror in the hallway.

Shale's mouth dropped open, cigarette tumbling to the floor as a statuesque beauty stared back. She was taller by far, and what had been a baggy t-shirt was stretched tight around the top of an hourglass body. Her legs were long and shapely, while her once androgynous features were now altered and refined to heart shaped beauty, framed in a cascade of red curls. The line of freckles over her nose remained, underlining blazing emerald eyes. She stripped off the t-shirt, tearing it as she did so, and regarded the extent of her transformation.

Damn! If ever there was a body to be immortal in, then this is fucking it!

It didn't kill the ache of grief eating at her heart, but with a body like this Shale was suddenly feeling a lot less apprehensive about the days ahead. A new body, a new start, and although she'd certainly have to be careful, new avenues of opportunity were beginning to open up.

And Shale had all the time in the world to make good on them.

What she needed to do was get her head straight and figure out how to get the ball rolling. There was no time for sulking about shit gone wrong, and Scar would have understood. He'd have been quick to remind her that if you were sitting still in the Bierkase you were either old, drunk or dead.

She closed her eyes and bit her lip, and whispered an apology to the aching hole in her heart that was her lost friend. Everything had been against them, hadn't it? Shale had forced the issue, and that moment on the platform, the light and flask rolling away.....

Would it have made a difference?

The answer was that Shale didn't know, but to survive in the Bierkase you had to grind or you went under. There wasn't time right now to consider it. She needed to move on, one step at a time, and so not a minute later Shale was vaulting the tenement staircase three at a time to come knocking at the door of the only other person she trusted.

The tread of heavy feet approached the door. It opened a crack, the small chain not as much a hindrance to entry as the colossal bulk of a dendrosymbrae, two symbiont life-forms entwined together: one was small and brain-like, living inside a nook of the larger, heavy set body which resembled a walking tree trunk. Twin sets of eyes gave the woman on the doorstep a quizzical up and down.

"You might want to put some clothes on my dear," it observed.

"Akkawi, it's me! Shale!"

The eyes went up and down again without any hint of surprise.

"Perhaps," it rumbled, "You'd better come in."

* * *

Akkawi lumbered over to place a huge mug in front of Shale. She stared at the dark, steaming liquid within.

"Sorry, I didn't have any human sized cups."

"Tea?" Shale asked and, took a sip. It was thick and bitter, and whiplashed through her nervous system. Everything came into sharp focus. It was perception on the knife edge of the moment, like waking from a dream.... or a nightmare. "What the fuck is this stuff?"

“A herbal remedy,” the symbiont replied. It regarded her and smiled. “It's concentrate is offered for the loss of a symbiont's partner.”

“How can you.....?”

The symbiont shrugged. “It is obvious.”

Loss.

Like a missing tooth Shale could feel the size and shape of the absence, and although there was still pain, the ache had been dulled into simple acceptance: Scar was gone. She could acknowledge that. They had taken a gamble and lost.

“How did you come by this new body?” Akkawi inquired. “It is certainly more robust than your previous one.”

“My body?” Shale blinked. The facts hadn't changed, but somehow they had more clarity than five minutes ago. What had been miraculous was now almost mundane. When she looked at Akkawi, the symbiont was watching her, waiting. Shale took a deep breath and, in fragments, told her story: the dive, the chamber and the strange voice, the tear shaped vessel of bottled time.

Akkawi digested this for a moment, then asked slowly, “So, you are immortal?”

“That's what it said,” Shale said, taking another sip. “Mind if I smoke?”

Akkawi shook its heads and pushed a used plate across the table as Shale tapped one out. Once lit, she continued. “So I had a sample of the liquid – we were going to be rich – but then these..... these *things* came floating down and..... and Scar.....”

The events played again in her mind, the noise and the light, Scar's screaming and her outstretched hand. The flask was so close, the light building to its flashpoint..... but now it was far away, all part of some other life.

“Scar's dead,” Shale said.

“I am sorry to hear that,” Akkawi said carefully. “He was a good friend.”

Shale nodded.

“What happened next?”

“I..... they.... they took him away on a trolley. The medics were all shaking their heads, saying it looked bad. Real bad. They wouldn't let me go after him, just kept asking me questions about what happened.”

“And you told them you were immortal?”

Shale shook her head. “I wasn't even thinking about it.”

“So, the Guild doesn't know?”

“No.” Shale gave a small laugh. “The medics scanned us but they didn't find anything. Said I was in perfect health, and then they let me just walk out of there with my credits and this huge fucking secret, but all I wanted was to go and see Scar. I waited and waited outside the hospital, and eventually they told me that there was nothing they could do for him.”

Tears started down her cheeks, and Shale cupped her face in her hands. A faint tremor ran through her, but it was as if the pain didn't hurt enough. She tried to force it, aware of the dendrosymbrae waiting. “*Patient as a tree*” as the saying went. After a minute Shale took a deep breath, blew it out and wiped her cheeks.

“What will you do now?” asked Akkawi.

“I have no idea.”

“Well, your life, it continues, yes?”

Shale stared at the dendrosymbrae.

“Is that what they say when part of a symbiont dies?” she replied with more bitterness than she meant.

Akkawi shrugged, unphased. “Life might continue for one or the other, it is true, but we are symbiont, two halves of one being. You are not. You are capable of independence.”

“Independence?” Shale snorted. “And just what am I going to do by myself?”

Akkawi's next words invoked sage advice. “*Does the spider await the fly, or does the fly seek the spider?*”

“And just what the fuck,” Shale asked, “Is that supposed to mean?”

“It is an old proverb from your city. It asks whether you are patient and wait to see what life brings you, or whether you will seek an answer, for good or ill.”

Shale made a face. “Surely the fly's looking to get eaten.”

“In a way that answers the first question; a fly might come your way at any time. But it also suggests that by seeking, the fly will learn whether it is destined to be food or if it will survive. One way or the other it will come to an understanding of its destiny.”

“So, it's a gamble then?”

“Is that not what our relation to destiny is all about? The question is, will you wait for destiny to come to you, or will you seek it out?”

Shale thought it made a certain kind of sense. She and Scar had agreed to a roll of the dice on long odds, had gone seeking the spider and she had survived while he had not.

Was it really her fault?

In detachment she saw it all again with cool clarity. There had been nothing she could do for him. The creatures barely responded to gunfire. She had emptied half her bullets into one and it had simply backed off for a moment. There had been a window of mere seconds to act, and she had chosen the one that would make the most difference. It had been a moment of desperation, and she had lost her friend and her fortune.

And now here she was, immortal and solo, ready to start afresh.

So, spider or fly? Shale didn't need to think twice about the answer to that riddle.

"Guess I'm not the waiting around kind," said Shale. "I'll have to be the fly, but where am I going to start?"

"Well," and the symbiont gave her two crooked smiles, "You might want to start by finding some clothes."

Shale stubbed the cigarette out on the plate and stood. "I'm gonna have a hard time finding anything that fits," she said.

"Can you not buy some new clothes?"

"I guess –" Shale stopped.

"What is it?"

"Money," Shale said.

"You have some?"

"Yeah....." but Shale wasn't thinking about the small amount of credits she'd just earned. She was thinking about the money she and Scar had worked so hard for to invest, the money they'd lost with nothing more than a half-arsed excuse.

She could hear Enebro's words: "*Someone fucked up*".

Shale's eyes narrowed. She recalled that smug grin on Monte Enebro's face when he'd fobbed them off. If there was one person who was a spider, it was Enebro's boss Harlech Truckle, him and his merry little band of thugs and wannabes sitting up there on their pile of credits in Pelardon Hill. They'd screwed Shale and Scar over, left them so broke they couldn't pay a damned bar tab, and that was the moment Shale knew.

"Son of a bitch must pay!" As she said it the cup in her hand cracked and exploded. Akkawi barked in astonishment. Shale opened her hand, fragments of cup

falling to the floor. Blood was welling from a dozen lacerations, running and dripping from her hand for a few moments before they healed.

“That was impressive,” Akkawi remarked.

“I’ll fix this,” Shale said as she went to the sink and washed the blood off.

The symbiont chuckled. “I don’t think the cup can be put back together.”

“Ah, no. Guess I’ll have to buy you a new one.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I have to go.”

“I can see that. You have the look of someone who has resolved to do something.”

Shale nodded. “I just worked out who my spider is.”

“I almost feel sorry for them,” Akkawi replied, picking up fragments of cup. “Can I give you anything?”

“No, it’s okay. I should have enough cash to get started.”

“What do you plan?”

“I need to find someone.”

“After you put some clothes on?”

“Yeah, after that,” Shale laughed, then thought of something. “There is one thing.”

Akkawi cocked its head. “Yes?”

“Have you got any duct tape?”

* * *

“Typical,” muttered the attendant as he checked his watch, then smoked another cigarette just to pass the time.

The rear of the Guild medical facility was quiet. Workers came and went. The occasional transport dropped off supplies.

He waited some more, checked his watch, glanced at the cloudless sky, then checked his watch again in absent minded impatience. Beside him a trolley of bagged cadavers awaited collection. The bodies, parts and organs, were destined for any number of medical facilities where they would be dissected and analysed, assuming that the collection detail actually arrived to pick them up.

He went to check his watch again, but the squeak of a trolley wheel made him

turn. A dark stain had begun to puddle at the lip of the trolley and he gave a world weary sigh. "Oh, fucking marvellous."

The pick up guy would have a shit-fit if he saw one of the bags was leaking. The attendant flicked his cigarette butt into the gutter and rechecked the bags.

Someone probably forgot to zip it all the way up or something.

He found the leaky bag, partially unzipped.

Fucking amateurs.

Inside he could see the face of a gneblim. It was a bloody mess. Attempts had been made to patch him up, but they looked like they must have failed.

Probably bled out from those weird lacerations.

Somehow his arm seemed to be caught on the zip.....

The body moved minutely and the attendant gave a cry of surprise. Embarrassed, he glanced around to see if anyone had heard, but no one was paying him any attention. Relieved, he leant closer, assuring himself that it was just a post mortem spasm, probably an electrical impulse from one of the augmentations that gneblim invariably applied to their bodies.

A bloody bubble swelled, popped. The attendant peered closer only to have his attention drawn away by the sound of an approaching transport.

"Finally," he said, and thought to quickly reseal the bag. He reached out to the zip.

The fingers moved quickly, clamped tight about his wrist. The attendant gave a panicked shriek and drew back, but the hold was strong and the whole trolley jerked after him.

"What the fuck!" the attendant shouted as he tried to pry the hand loose. Behind him the skimmer door slammed shut and the driver sauntered over, oblivious as he checked his paperwork.

"Alright mate?"

"Help! Get someone! Quick!"

"W-what?" the driver looked up from his clipboard, bewildered. The attendant cursed and continued to struggle, but the hand was like a band of steel. He opted to shout to anyone else in hearing. "Get me some fucking help!"

"Is that normal?"

"Normal? Are you fucking joking?" the attendant was incredulous with panic and

rage. "This fuckers' alive!"

* * *

"**Y**ou three!" called a stunning red head, her t-shirt bound in black tape. "You can piss off. Now!"

It had taken a pair of ten credit chips and a broken nose to find her quarry, and now it appeared that Shale wasn't alone in that quest as she strolled into the garbage strewn alleyway. Three thuggish faces turned from their victim, and their piggy-eyed surprise became trouser tightening anticipation. The small, well dressed man they were accosting began to inched his way along the wall, his hand clasped around a brace of trinkets at his neck.

"You! Squirrel!" Shale commanded, nailing him in place with a pointed finger. "Stay the fuck there!"

Her attention flicked back to the three muscle bound goons advancing on her like wild dogs on a morsel.

"Okay boys," Shale said, planting her feet and crossing her arms. "I'll give you one last chance to leave. You're done here."

They made no move to depart, faces leering.

"Deaf, stupid *and* ugly huh?" Shale smiled, green eyes flashing. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

All three shared a horrid guttural sound that might have been a laugh.

"What's the matter?" Shale chided. "Lost for words?"

"They, er.... they're the..... the Tounjski Brothers!" Squirrel called over the broad array of their shoulders. "They've all had their tongues cut out!"

"Ah," Shale said with a nod, bracing herself. She rolled her shoulders, raised her hand and gestured: *Come get some!*

Her first punch broke a jaw and sent a brother into the garbage, then she danced out of a grab, lithe as a cat. The two brothers circled, brows furrowed. One lunged and he went down a moment later, doubled over and unlikely to be fathering any children. The last brother caught Shale in a bear hug from behind. Before he could lift her, she had already crushed his toes with a stamp of her boot and shrugged him off. He landed on his

backside, then a moment later was hoisted up by shirt and belt. Shale dumpstersed him in flurry of disturbed flies, then dusted off her hands.

She turned around with a satisfied expression and Squirrel, wild eyed like a cornered animal, watched as she saunter toward him, tapping out a cigarette.

Shale gave him a sweet smile.

“Hello Squirrel. Remember me?”