

EXTOR – WORKING TITLE

MITCH DAVIS

www.akickintheteeth.com

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

The peacekeeper speared out of the night sky. Arran was dressed for business. He came into the radiance shimmering greenly off the biofields, angling his descent into a swoop over the agricultural yards. He hovered. Marshy air rose from the tiered ponds, faintly tingling his exposed skin, creasing his eyes.

It was quiet but for the low hum of cyclers working over the leaflike array of pools layered up and down the vast seam. The monitoring units buzzed to and fro, drawing zigzagging patterns over liquid roiling thick this close to harvest, their lower antennae sampling, testing, constantly attending the hot algae – the precious biomatter.

A starry landscape spread out beyond the panes. The sky was split by the seam sweeping vertically through the night, one broad metal edge of the station's protective shell. Those panes and the seams between were the station's only balance against the emptiness of space.

This was Odelford's farm, his biomatter the station's main produce out here on the fringes of civilisation. That made Odelford somewhat important.

Anticipation sharpened his senses. He overlooked the courtyard, the landing pad, the bulkhead doors of the storehouses. He listened. No one lurked. The coast was clear. The observation level of the complex was unattended, its windows dark, but a wide storehouse bulkhead below was open. Yellow light spilled out. The peacekeeper's quarry was in there, waiting for him, no doubt prepared.

It might as well have been an invitation. The algae farmer's shiny new starship was still parked there, making its owner's quiet declaration of sovereignty. Some part of Arran had expected a more violent welcome. He was, after all, arrived to drive the algae farmer out. Surely Odelford could rustle up a few men.

The whole complex inside could be rigged with traps, Arran guessed. He descended to the landing pad making no more noise than a breath of wind, cautious.

He landed beside the ship. Fine regolith, asteroid dust, crunched under his boots. Some of it clung to the ship's hull. Someone had been outside the station. He walked around the ship. He rounded its broad, gulled belly and reached up to touch where its prow sharpened to a point. The silver craft was one solid piece from end to end, from the point at its fore and to its scaled wings and the burners at the rear, which were cold. It had not recently returned. It could have been hours, or days, since it had flown.

The ship was impressive, but still, the peacekeeper would not see it docked here a day longer. He went over and stood in the light from inside.

The algae farmer and several others were playing a card game. A table was set up in the middle of the storehouse, messy with betting chips and cards. They sat around it. Overshadowing them, tied-down empty biotanks filled shelves reaching as high as the vaulted ceiling. No gunfire yet.

The owner of the ship parked outside was facing the doorway, his proud face blank. Odelford put his cards down. Heads turned.

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

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

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

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

Arran stayed at the entryway. ‘Hello, fellers.’ He nodded at the other men at the table. Some returned the nod, too surprised to suppress it. Half the town’s business bureau had been caught off-guard.

The hair on the peacekeeper’s neck pricked. Odelford’s adopted son, the swollen freak, glared at Arran weirdly from below a mess of thin hair. He was on his father’s right, tense with pubescent zeal. He felt Arran’s eyes on him and his mottled complexion darkened with a rush of blood up from the neck of a loose white singlet.

He hunched meaty shoulders down over his betting chips and glowered, the deepening wan of his skin piggish. The weirdness came from his eyes, which didn’t focus.

Arran averted his gaze, trying to pay the freak no mind. The boy couldn’t speak. He was entirely mute, whether by one of Odelford’s misfired experiments or some previous error of his refactored condition. The station’s inhabitants only spoke rumour of the boy who rarely left the farm.

The peacekeeper said to Odelford, ‘Well, I figured you’d be expecting me, considering our talk earlier.’

‘No! Oh. No, not at all. I only thought of that as something as a disagreement.’ The algae farmer was tall, broad, and regular. His dark hair was combed. He leaned back in his seat, thumbing the straps of his suspenders, and spoke below a stiff moustache. ‘It is good you are here, but we might have to wait a moment to discuss our matters. I am with company, obviously.’

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

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

Odelford kept talking. ‘You must be acquainted with most here. I think these are several of our local trade magnates,’ a big, flat hand indicated those seated.

‘I am.’ Arran acknowledged them, acknowledging the farmer’s indulgent flair. Seated here was one member of council, a shipwright, and two men in the goo trade. Arran knew they each pocketed more in a day than he did in a month, but to call them magnates was excessive. ‘Are these fine men aware we’ve seized your transports?’

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

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

‘This is really not an appropriate time-’ the algae farmer began.

Arran had already given him a specific time. ‘I’m kinda wondering what you’re still doing here, Odelford. Last we spoke I remember I asked you to leave by a time that’s nearly passed. I see your new bird is tied up right outside, and yet, here is where you’ve waited.’

Odelford harrumphed. ‘Arran. I will not be spoken to like a rowdy drunkard. I am a man of industry. There’s a harvest coming up, and things like these are critical for the longevity of this station. I mean something around here. We need biomass. Without it, humanity stops.’

Arran shrugged. ‘It’s time to leave, one way or another. Time’s almost up.’

Vikram ashed his cigar and pressed his temple. ‘Yes. I *knew* you were pulling something,’ he said. He pushed himself away from the table, keeping his angered gaze down. ‘I’m going home. I will not be your stooge, Odelford. This mess is all yours.’

Vikram put on his coat and left into the night. By Arran’s measure the town’s illustrious council usually would step out of immediate and pressing matters they couldn’t manage by committee, which was most of them. The alderman’s footsteps rang out behind him.

‘Looks like a seat opened,’ Arran said, slumping into it. He stretched his legs out and rested the heel of one boot on the top of another. The freak glowered at the personal intrusion.

He checked Vikram’s cards. A pair of twos. ‘Smart,’ he said, his hand dropping to his side.

Odelford watched the peacekeeper’s hands go below the level of the table, out of sight. He shifted uncomfortably. ‘You were not invited to this game, officer. I suggest you go on home.’

Galt, sat on Arran's left, watched with amusement. Arran sat in the middle facing Odelford. Cadow, on his right, shut his eyes and turned his head to the ceiling. The mass traders tried to conceal their worry.

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

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

'Now, that just isn't true. You're new money, if ever I seen it. You've been here what, fifty years? And now you're pushing ordnance?' Arran sniffed the air, but he'd noticed the odour when he came in. Tarylase. 'You think I don't know what volatiles smell like?'

Odelford spoke. 'What? There are no such additives in my crop. I cultivate only the finest biomass, me, with my compatriots here. And you too, might I add. We are all in this together.'

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

'I don't have any issue with them, Odelford. You've got two minutes to head on out to that new starship of yours and move your business along.'

Odelford brought his palm slapping down on the table. Stacks of chips tumbled and fell. He shook his head. 'No. Your commission is to be cancelled by sun-up, Arran, I'll make sure of that. No. I will not be moved along under your wild auspices. I have a business here. A family. A life for my son.' He took his son by the shoulder and gave him a small, proud shake. The crop of thin, wispy hair off his son's head shifted, but his vague, angry disposition didn't change. Odelford straightened. 'You will take your accusations up with the council.'

'These aren't accusations, Odelford.' He was losing patience. 'That was almost six hours ago. This is enforcement.'

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

'That's correct. You're running out of time.'

Odelford huffed. 'I am not going anywhere. What is your problem with me, Arran? You know I'm innocent.' He smiled. They all knew Arran hadn't processed a guilty verdict in decades. Galt, closest, looked down. The bastard was right.

Arran grit his teeth. He felt old anger spark at the back of his mind. Deep biological cogs in there turned at each other and stuck. Part of him was glad. He'd come for a fight. He sat up. The others inched away. 'I decide your innocence, and your sentence. You know this is about Doug Graney.'

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

Arran kept his voice steady, but he felt his temper rising. 'Regret should be the first thing on your mind. Clock's ticking, Odelford.'

'And once it stops? What do you think you are going to do? Here. Tonight. With all these people around.'

Arran fixed his stare harder. 'My divine responsibility. What'd Doug hear while he was down there-'

The table shook as Odelford launched to his feet. Chips fell to the floor. 'You are sounding to accuse me! My name will not be besmirched over the loss of that boy!'

'-shut up-' the anger boiled. '-You vented him! You had him tinkering with that old hydro line knowing what'd happen. You killed him, Odelford! What did he hear? Did you vent that boy because he heard about your transports? His life was just beginning, you bastard! I know you don't care about that fucking... thing you made- but some around here do!'

The mute freak sprung to his feet to stand alongside his father. His unshapely bulk quivered, trembling with rage. An attempt to speak came out as pained, hacking bleats. It forced something up.

Odelford kept a tight grip on his son's shoulder to reassure him. 'No,' he said. 'Don't.'

At once the freak was choking. His shoulders were changing. They cracked, breaking, snapping. His neck distended outwards, cartilage popping. A tumorous bulge expanded from deep within his chest. Those at the table stopped to look at him but his father, who waited for the fit to pass. Arran realised his hand was on his gun and lowered it.

The boy worked to choke the bulge down. Saliva flecked from the corners of his mouth, retching gasps keeping a mass from birthing from it. His eyes rolled back white against a face swollen purple.

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

Arran was disgusted. The peacekeeper looked back at Odelford and exhaled. ‘Innocent is a broad term, by the way, Odelford. Thirty seconds. You’re doing well, you’ve gotten up from the table. Take your weird son and go.’

Odelford leaned over the table and shook his head. ‘This is where I am building my future. You will not remove me from it.’

‘You’ll go, or I’ll shoot you.’

‘You will not. I am here tonight with several members of our town’s bureau. I have an excellent relationship with local council, and hold the papers for several’ he started to rap the table with a fist. ‘-fundamental trade routes that keep this station, and many like it, functioning out in the wilds. Tens of thousands depend on my product. You will not *shoot* me and make a mockery of my life over the regrettable passing of one *foolish* boy.’

Arran kept his stare fixed. ‘I kinda will, though. Ten.’

Odelford raised taller. He refreshed his grip on his son’s shoulder, bringing him closer to his side. ‘I am an unarmed man.’

Arran had seen the gun when Odelford stood up, stuck behind his armpit. He sucked through his teeth. ‘No, you’re not.’

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

‘Five,’ he said.

Odelford flinched. His hand slipped behind the freak’s shoulder and he mightily shoved himself away from Arran’s line of sight, putting his son between them. The freak made a strained porcine squeal as his ungainly form went scattering over the table setup.

Chips scattered into Arran’s lap. With a kick he pushed back in his chair, sliding out from under the table. He shifted his weight with the momentum and oriented the chair straight towards Odelford.

The farmer broke to Arran’s left and reached for his sleeve. Too slow.

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

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

Metal slid into leather as Arran holstered his sidearm.

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

Galt opened his arms and rose from his seat, going to the dead Odelford and looking away. He stood by the freak. ‘I can’t say I expected all this tonight. Come on, boy. We’ll get you reset.’ He tried to rest a hand on him, but the pain was fresh and the gesture too close in memory. The freak flinched away.

What strange and experimental sciences Odelford had practiced upon his son’s body were of a nature Arran could only imagine, and had little curiosity regarding. It was none of a peacekeeper’s concern. What horrors humanity wrought upon itself only became an issue to him when it violated the law.

After all, what difference was Arran, himself?

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

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

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

Arran didn't look back. 'We'll see,' he said.

Cadow's voice came from behind him. 'You cannot think this was a good idea!'

'Life on the prism, baby,' the peacekeeper said.

Arran went outside. He wondered who'd buy Odelford's starship at auction as he crossed the courtyard and went to the rail.

From the observation level a cycler came clicking out of a hatch, its sensor lights blinking. The small jellyfish-looking mechanism descended to the yards.

He stood on a vantage between two panels that was separated by a broad seam. Dozens of glowing vats were cascading up and down its length, positioned like broad leaves off a stem.

Above, the massive dodecahedral station splayed out against the close presence of a featureless brown planet. Barren but for thin white clouds in the atmosphere, Huon filled his view above the twelve glassen faces of their sky. Beyond that planet was their sun. As the station revolved in lazy orbit around Huon it also took nighttime in its shade.

A vast prism formed of exact vertices and sweeping edges held those expansive panes in place. It was a superstructure crafted by a generation of humanity that had, by their accumulated earthly knowledge, planned a habitat among the distant stars and harnessed their sun to forge it. They had wrought their own skies into it.

That was long ago. All Arran knew of earth was being buried under it. A permanent blazing sun scorched those skies and churning industry polluted them, forcing whole cities underground, into tunnels and caverns dug by great engines. Desperation and greed forced them ever deeper into the heart of their world. It was a world devouring itself. Its people devoured each other.

He hunted those grimy, blackened tunnels no more. No, Arran had made his choice to live in the open sky. It did not get any more open than Extor, a station launched deep into the frontier, where the sky was endless.

The station served well to shelter the quiet township floating at its core, separated by the trade route, the Hollow, that fed it.

Subtle gravitational waves buoyed the two halves of the town known as the flat. The Hollow was the wide channel cut straight through it. It was no more than empty, gravity-less space that spanned the station's width. It met the panes on either side at massive gates. The Hollow allowed passage for the great ships of distant civilisations to stop, refuel, trade, and continue on course further into the infinite beyond.

The flat was built to harbour them. Extor was a point marked out for far transit for those ships, though from Arran's memory it had been considerable time since any had come by. There had been no colonists, no explorers. No flags. Besides the regular trade freighters they had seen only starwatchers, drifters, and the odd furtive salesman.

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

There on the eastern quarter of the upper flat was the religious hub, headed by the astral church at the square. He saw the stately building and its impressive dark spires drawing sharply over the other prayer houses. It cast such a presence at night that it seemed to sic on the town, like a tick grown larger than the beast it fed off of.

Even during the day the church was brooding. A wide, empty distance was between Arran and the township, but the narrow spires and balconies where servants sometimes came out to practice their esoteric rituals were a constant feature of the upper town's backdrop.

Most of the upper flat was quiet at this time of night. The civic centre and the religious hub were less popular than the vibrant lower flat or the crooked nooks of the underflat.

Arran's boots lifted off the ground. Beyond the yards and through the thick panes of perfect crystalline glass making up each face of the prism the moon was peeking out behind Huon. The peacekeeper was right on time. The church awaited.

Odelford's sacrament was one more unpleasant matter of business before returning to the office, and after that, the peacekeeper was unsure.

Arran did know his evening was only just beginning.

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

* * *

Arran sidled along the back of the chapel and crossed his arms. The church's hooded acolytes were arranging in chorused rows before the elder at the pulpit. The one Arran just spoke to slipped amongst other acolytes, their figures as maroon shadows resolving from hidden alcoves into yellow torchlight fooled by the folds of their robes such that it still rarely reached their faces, and then only at angles that accentuated their paleness. The evening service was about to begin.

Finlowe's attention was focused down at the stand, the robed figure obscured behind a heat haze murmuring orange and yellow from torches wrought to the edges of the pulpit. His head was down, his hood concealing his features. He drew a sleeved hand in a line across a page. He hunched over his materials and scanned them closely.

It was cooler here by the door, the air fresher. The chapel was kept hot and pungent with aromas of burning wildstalk and red weave and several others Arran could not place. A breath brought sharp tangs of intermingling warmth and earthen bitterness. Chambered incense smouldered hanging from the ceiling by fine chains. Smoke swirled in shadow. Altogether the chapel was hot, stinging, and it disoriented him. The acolytes thrived on the dense environment, the smells of alien plants, the warmth. It helped them focus. Arran thought they were mad. He'd stay near the vestibule until the service was over.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finlowe's expression returned staid and he looked down his nose. He continued. 'As we must, each day we remember when man walked the heavy earth in toil and sought to rearrange the constellations of his heavens. Be it not up to us to remove the constellations, no more than we would remove the light from each other.'

Arran grimaced.

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

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

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

The Elder's silhouette stood out strongest, borne long across his congregation.

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

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

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

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

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

He almost lost the Elder in the mix of acolytes separating but glimpsed his bald head flitting under a dark archway at the back, going into the church's workings. Arran went after him into the fat abdomen of the church.

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

Finlowe brought Arran past the reading room and the meditation chambers where the floor enclosed from moonlight and they went by only the odd torch lit in the church's less-visited fundaments. The air was still. He could sense the Elder's displeasure. He snapped around the next corner.

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

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

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

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

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

Finlowe spoke. ‘Do not be long about the ossuary.’

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

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

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

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

Arran took a deep breath and spoke into the journal’s blank pages. ‘Odelford,’ he said. ‘He had a boy killed. I know his mother.’ He reached down to the silver paten and its heaped bonemeal offering and drew a thumbprint of chalky grey he touched from the point of his forehead to the step of his nose.

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

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

The door slid shut. Arran was alone. Finlowe had sneaked off with his gun, and violated their sacred tradition.

That gun was not his to take. It was forged in the warren city of Carnegie and belonged only to Arran and the ancient tendrils of Fate that assembled it. One thousand years had passed since the heat of its cosmic origin. Finlowe should have known better.

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

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

Finlowe had his sleeves up around his elbows. Flames burned from hanging drapery and he and the other acolytes worked to put it out and control a writhing acolyte held flat on a wooden table. ‘We mustn’t let him harm himself!’ he said.

The young acolyte’s hair was matted and wet from terror and agony. The acolytes lost him as he kicked one off. He screamed through bared teeth and contorted. He raised off his back which bowed outwards and they pushed him back down.

‘Where are the salves?’ An acolyte asked, panting.

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

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

Finlowe spoke to the one who had mentioned salves. ‘Did you try inglewood?’

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

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

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

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

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

Finlowe let out an exasperated gasp and left the acolyte's side, flying across the room to the ambry. He thumped into the cabinet and flung its door open. 'They must be here!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Hurry!' he called after her.

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

'What happened, boy?' Finlowe said, patting the acolyte's cheek. 'You're going to be alright, just wait, the ringing must settle.'

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

Finlowe said, 'Good! Your brain will not bleed! Remember your training!'

Elder Finlowe. Now, there was a pillar of the community. They met eyes. Each nodded to the other, understanding of their shared sacred duties.

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Word travelled fast from the mouths of Gods.

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

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

The air itself split into thin, white jetstreams from the corners of his squared physique. Arran didn't stand a chance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Searcy tightened his grip on Arran's collar and stuck his face close. His breath was hot. He growled. 'I told you, Odelford was off-limits. We were going to get him by the smuggling case. You had absolutely no right to go in there, what, fucking guns blazing? Like you're a lawman again? What is the matter with you, Arran?'

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

'I had every right.'