

DIRE PERIL



AN
EXTERMINATUS
NOW
FAN-FICTION

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Part I

Syrus “Virus” Zuviel was drunk.

Correction: He was very, very drunk.

Bleary-eyed, he stared at his own dim reflection in the side of his seventh empty shot glass. *Wait, empty?* He didn’t even recall knocking that one back... in fact, he didn’t recall very much whatsoever. The reflection reminded him of a bit—he was a member in rather poor standing of the Mobian Inquisition, a (self-described) handsome brown-furred rat with a shallow gash along his right cheek. The reason he was in rather poor standing with the Inquisition may or may not have had to do with his vastly overdrawn credit account, his massive backlog of now-moot paperwork, his last three failed missions, and/or the Fleshwurm he had “accidentally” released in C Barracks that had coincidentally mauled someone he owed a great deal of money.

Heh, yeah, it probably was the Fleshwurm.

The reason he had a shallow gash along his right cheek bore no apparent connection to any of the reasons why there were currently eighteen petitions circulating through the offices of High Command for his immediate dismissal, arrest, and public beating with a pair of two-by-fours. Actually, quite the reverse: it was part of the reason why at least a few of those petitions were now being fed through a shredder. That very afternoon, he and his faithful Inquisition crew had, by themselves, messily vanquished a pair of Deceptulae that had taken to mind to terrorize a major law firm in a local village. Owing to near-unanimous opinion that divine justice was being served, the foursome with the worst overall record had been dispatched with the fervent hope that the arachnids would devour them along with the lawyers. But, as a great surprise to all, Zuviel and his comrades had given the Patterner’s minions just enough time to reduce the office and its residents to a pile of rubble before swiftly dispatching the dæmons back to their foul maker. For this they all received perfect mission scores and a forty-eight hour leave.

Just wish the bastard hadn’t gotten his damn leg in my face, Zuviel thought, rubbing at the affected area. The powerful venom that the appendage secreted had been nullified by an equally powerful antidote, but not only did it sting like all get out, it was an ugly marring of his beautiful countenance. *I won’t be getting action for the next three weeks,* he mourned. *Not that that’s any deviation from the norm, but...*

Thinking about his wound made him want to forget it. Besides, wasn’t he supposed to be celebrating? He knew the solution to both of those: another shot... no, on second thought, double that. Maybe, with luck, he’d also forget that there was no way in hell he could possibly afford this and that it was going to be somewhat difficult to flee the bar without paying when he couldn’t tell his feet from his kneecaps.

... hey, look, the floor. How did I get down here?

Alcohol was not Inquisitor Harold “Harry” Eastwood’s beverage of choice. Oh, certainly he didn’t mind a drink or two occasionally, but his tastes were far more partial to the pungent bite of a triple espresso or six, blacker than his Inquisition record and loaded with enough caffeine to kill a Cerberus. This insane addiction had more than once landed him in deep trouble, such as the time he secretly traded a plasma launcher to a Hound cult in exchange for a particularly delectable dark roast. The result of this

somewhat poor decision was the annihilation of three of the Inquisition's best planes, all luckily doing unmanned test flights at the time of their unfortunate demise.

Yeah, Eastwood thought, *but you should have tasted that coffee.*

Tonight was no ordinary night, however. Tonight was a night to revel in an overwhelming victory, and thus the gray vulpine had suffered himself to indulge in a single martini. The bottom of that glass came all too soon, though, so he'd ordered another... It wasn't long before the generally sober Eastwood was completely and totally plastered, and feeling rather good about it. He blustered through one of his favorite bar jokes and laughed raucously upon its completion, only to realize that he had been talking to the jukebox. *Not bad conversation, really.*

He soon found that the liquor had emboldened him, too. Staggering down the bar, he collapsed into a seat next to a silver blur that looked vaguely feminine. He smashed his fist on the counter and loudly demanded another drink, then turned to the figure next to him, willing his vision to clear slightly. Luck was with him—after a moment he could make out the stunningly beautiful figure of a snow-white ermine in a gray-striped cami and gorgeous pearl necklace. *Hot damn! Score!* She was looking at him as if he were some sort of filth on her shoe, but, honestly, he'd had worse. He slammed the bar again, with the intent of buying her a scotch and then figuring out just how to slip the little packet of powder in his pocket into it. Regrettably, the force of this blow landed directly on top of the refilled glass that the bartender had just set down next to him.

The girl, now drenched with vodka, began digging through her handbag. *Oh, wonderful*, Eastwood thought, *she's going to buy me another. So good to find a Samaritan in this hellhole of a world.* With the alcohol numbing his brain, he failed to notice that the shattered glass had mutilated his hand, which was now bleeding profusely on the woodwork. He also failed to remember the name of Svetlana Shelekov, the tech officer from the research labs, with whom he had attended Inquisition Training School and who had at least three very official restraining orders with his name written all over them. *There we go*, he thought, as the girl brought forth a red can from her bag, *a nice fresh beer... yeah, that'll go down well.* It never occurred to him to wonder who stored cold beer in their handbag, and just when they had started making it in aerosol cans.

Over the years, Lothar Hex had built up an amazing tolerance for booze, despite the fact that his cyborg status afforded him less of a bloodstream than most to dilute the alcohol. The ebony echidna had proved to easily overcome this factor, however, demonstrating his prowess at drinking games time and time again, often to the chagrin (and hospitalization) of opponents. The small filtering gadget installed in his robotic right thigh that functioned as a second liver was known to virtually nobody except Lothar himself, and half of the time he forgot about it, too. Considering the amount of work it got, it probably would have been advisable for him to have a little maintenance done. And then again, considering the lack of difference between his sober and stoned states, the sucker could have broken years ago, and it was doubtful anyone would have noticed.

If the filter had been working before tonight, however, it was certainly now hopelessly clogged. Lothar sat alone at a table as twenty-four drained beer steins danced in front of his eyes. He wondered whether he was seeing double, triple, or quadruple. *Doesn't matter anyway—if I'm still capable of such a thought I haven't had enough yet.*

If I'm still friggin' conscious, I haven't had enough yet.

With the balance and control installed in him by both a genetically engineered body and many years of practice, Lothar strolled over to the bar and slammed down a fistful of credits. The bartender looked very overworked and hassled as he forked over two more full mugs. *Sucks to be you, buddy*, Lothar sniggered inwardly. He was still laughing as he turned around and ran face-first smack into a brick wall, reeling over backwards and sending liquid sailing across the tavern.

What the hell? he thought, snatching his prized hat out from under him and placing it firmly back on his head. He picked himself up off the ground and wiping the spilled brew out of his face. Upon closer inspection the wall proved to be nothing of the sort—instead, it was a red-furred bruin, an Inquisition security guard who towered at least a foot above Hex and had muscles that put him in mind of a Ravenor's hide. Lothar slowly took a step back to get a better look, but tripped over one of his own dropped bottles, smashing the back of his head against a stool.

The bear laughed, loudly and obscenely, and stepped over the dazed echidna, casually kicking Hex's organic arm with his right foot as he went and seating his colossal bulk on the stool. Lothar rolled over onto his front, trying to clear his head. He felt tremendously sick, but that was nothing compared to his anger. *Does that bastard have any idea just who I am?* His rage drove him to his feet, anticipating that satisfying feeling of flesh giving way under his spiked fists. Spinning around, he balled up his metallic hand and lunged forward, lashing out viciously, missing the back of the guard's head by at least five feet and this time going headfirst into the edge of the counter. Bouncing off, the turbulence finally took its toll on his stomach and he vomited a gallon and a half of semi-digested beer directly into the ursine's fat face before passing out on the floor.

I so meant to do that.

Ryoushi "Rogue" Nekittou sat in a dark corner of the pub, sipping at his pineapple juice and watching the wild antics of the three idiots he had been unlucky enough to hitch up with. *As if they had any right to celebrate, I was the one who did all the work...* Well, that wasn't quite right. The Deceptulae had first been distracted by the rapidly fleeing Harry, and it was Virus who figured out how Lothar could keep the giant arachnids at bay with a constant stream of blasts while Rogue nimbly snuck by and, with his natural feline agility, quickly scaled a wall. He relived the moment now, the thrill of pushing off, sailing through the air, and with two deft strokes of his azure beam sword relieving the Deceptulae of their one-eyed heads. He fingered the weapon now as it hung strapped to his chest. *Oh, yeah. I'm good.*

Though while he had to admit his comrades had their use in battle, he was more than glad to distance himself from them in any social occasion. All three were now lying on the floor in various parts of the tavern. In comparison to Eastwood, who was frantically trying to claw his eyes out as if he'd just beheld the Soulthirster himself, and Lothar, who was bleeding from the head and covered in beer, Virus looked rather peaceful, simply sitting on the floor staring vacantly into space. *Mom always wanted me to be an anesthesiologist*, Rogue thought disgustedly. *But no, I said, daemon hunting is a prestigious line of work...*

He had never intended to strike a contract with the Mobian Inquisition when he had entered the Taika Training School at sixteen. In fact, he had held a notable distaste for the organization, which he viewed as incompetent, reckless, and dangerous. (The time

he had spent since his unintended association had done little to change that opinion.) But after he had been held for ransom on two separate occasions, the Order was not particularly heartbroken to see him leave. They'd also refused to listen to his alibi that he'd been taken while in the bushes with his pants down, on the highly irrelevant technicality that he didn't happen to wear pants. So he'd remained with the Zuviel team, hoping to hone his skills enough to be respectfully accepted back into the Order. Casting another glance at the other three incapacitated members of said team, he shook his head once, bemusedly. *I'll be dragging their sorry carcasses out of the sewers tomorrow*, he sighed. *Again*.

The next sip of juice didn't go down quite as well as its predecessors. Rogue choked once, audibly, and then settled into a percussive series of spluttering coughs that a snare drummer might have recognized as a basic paradiddle without the third beat. He slammed his orange right fist hard into his rib cage, with no effect besides a sharp pain in his sternum. His hand moved up to his neck in the universal choking sign, continuing to cough violently. After twenty more seconds of struggle, he managed to get the liquid back up the wrong pipe and down the correct one. Exhausted from the effort, he slumped onto the table. Another twenty seconds passed before he was able to lift his head and look at the rest of the pub, a good deal of which were staring at him. A few looked concerned; one had even begun to get out of her seat. *Good timing, miss*, he snarled to himself, not considering that it might be his own fault for sitting at the most obscure table in the tavern. Instead of voicing that, he gave a weak smile, chuckle, and wave, which got everyone back to whatever they had been doing before. Returning to his beverage, Rogue took another, less eventful, libation.

When only a trio of half-melted ice cubes remained in his glass, Rogue yawned, interlocked his fingers, and stretched his arms across the table. The cracks felt good. He rolled his shoulders and prepared to stand up. He'd earned a good night's sleep tonight... and perhaps a little catnap tomorrow morning, too...

Before he could reach his feet, he felt one large palm slam across his mouth, smashing the back of his skull into the headboard behind him. A second hand slapped a white rag across his nose. Instinctively, Rogue inhaled deeply... and felt chloroform fumes shoot through his nasal passages. Too late, he realized that by his foolish display, he had not only brought a large amount of attention his way, but had made it so, most likely, nobody would question his being dragged from the pub unconscious. Nobody ever questioned a scenario like that, anyhow... and the three people who would were all likely to be presently dragged out themselves. He'd made himself vulnerable by his seat location. He'd violated every rule in the book, (well, except for the one about defecating in the rec room fish tank. It'd been at least three weeks since he'd done that,) and now he was paying the price. *Again*, he thought, just barely managing to grip the irony of it before collapsing.

Part II

Commander Antonius Schaefer glared up at the wall above his office. Degenerate pranks had been increasing in frequency as of late, despite dire countering measures ranging from mild demotion to public flogging with four-week rotten fruit. The only result of the floggings was a general increase in morale, which Schaefer chalked up to the

general sadistic tendencies of many Inquisitors. Even he had to admit that watching that tomato explode across ex-Inquisitor McNamara's sneering countenance was rather entertaining.

But all such penalties had failed to make any sort of dent in the foolishness. Schaefer shook his head in disgust. *We train the bastards to cover their tracks too damn well*, he thought. Jokes had included a Stormbolt pistol converted into a bubble gun, a pentacle etched into the desk of a high-ranking officer, and a picture of his own head digitally edited onto the body of a porn star, which was then automatically set as the CABAL homepage for every single networking station the Inquisition had. Never had he (or any of the rest of High Command) been able to identify these pranksters, but he knew that now security had to redouble their efforts. Sacred ground had been breached. The golden letters that spelled one of the Inquisition's most powerful messages, one that embodied much of the spirit of the organization and thus the message that Schaefer had chosen to adorn the space above his door where such things usually went, had been tampered with in a way that had sent him into a fit of rage. (After secretly ordering the torture of two captured cult leaders, he felt a little better... just a little.) The work crew was supposed to arrive a half hour ago to erase the blasphemy, but they were still bogged down with the hoard of live slime in the A Barracks showers. *Whatever happened to setting priorities?*

Everything you have been sold, the message now read, *is a pie.*

Sighing in acceptance of an inability to do anything about it, he walked back into his office, slamming the door. What other pieces of business awaited his attention today? He glanced at the top file on his desk and sucked in a deep breath—it was the Zuviel crew affair. Last night, Inquisitor Eastwood, Zuviel himself, and that heathen echidna Hex had been dragged back to their personal barracks, completely wasted and reeking of powerful alcohol fumes. That was perfectly normal. However, what was not was that Ryoushi Nekittou had *not* returned with them. One patron at the bar said that Nekittou had been acting strangely and, upon collapsing, had been hauled away by a stranger in a black cloak. Schaefer knew that, anywhere but a tavern, that would have seemed slightly suspicious. As things were...

This is not going to be a good day, Schaefer realized. It was barely nine in the morning, too. The commander settled back into his triple-cushioned chair and poked at the intercom button. After three attempts, the first time accidentally dialing directory assistance and the second jamming his finger rather badly, he got a hold of his adjutant's phone. "Simmons!" he called into the speaker. No reply. "Simmons! Come in... *Simmons!*"

"Right here, sir," came the bespectacled weasel's voice. He stood in the doorway. "Yes, sir?"

"Why didn't you just pick up?" Schaefer asked suspiciously. "I spent half your vacation pay installing that speakerphone!"

"... sir, with all due respect, why exactly did we need a speakerphone when we have a perfectly functioning holo set?"

"Shut up," Schaefer responded reasonably.

"Yes, sir. However, it would appear that at least fourteen different Inquisitors... well, possibly Inquisitors... people from this base, anyhow... have seen it both fit and remarkably easy to tap the line, as I found out to my displeasure two days ago. Paying off

the blackmail has taken a remarkable drain on my bank account, sir, and I wanted to take all available precautions in case you had something confidential to tell me about.”

Schaefer had stopped paying attention after the fourth or fifth word, having just then remembered he needed to order the newest picture book from the *Hens Gone Wild* series... a fetish he never could quite satisfy. He jotted himself a note to make the call right after he finished dealing with Zuviel’s crew. Zuviel... right, *that* was why he had summoned Simmons. (He sniggered inwardly at the consonance, as he did at least once a week.) “I told you to tell that trio of miscreants to report by 0815 hours, Simmons,” he snapped at the stoic rodent. “Where are they?”

“In your waiting room, sir.”

“What the hell? I don’t have a waiting room!”

“You ordered it built last week, sir.”

“Of course I did. Well, why in Gruss’ name haven’t you sent them in?”

“You said no visitors until that lettering was fixed, sir. In fact, you left me seven e-mails, nine sticky notes, and a carving into my desk saying that exact thing. You also taped up three large posters, shaved it into my right arm, and—”

“Simmons?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Shut up.”

“Yes, sir.”

Virus Zuviel should have been slightly apprehensive about walking into his boss’ office after being carried back from a bar completely unconscious. He should have been even more worried about Rogue. He probably also should have been a bit concerned about the fact that his room had been ransacked while he was away, and his entire supply of adult magazines stolen, (well, perhaps not... he could always just go lift a few hundred of Eastwood’s...) and worst of all, he was missing precious leave time. None of this, however, even passed through his mind. What was passing through his mind was apparently a constant pattern of sledgehammer blows. He wondered why his head was still attached to his shoulders... he hadn’t been this hung over in years.

Even so, he had to (softly) giggle at the handiwork done above his commander’s door. He wondered just who had done it. If he ever found out, he aimed to give the guy an extremely sincere compliment. Shortly afterwards, he would turn him in for both the bonus pay and the decreased workplace competition. *Hey, all’s fair in the rat race.*

Oh, yeah, funny. ‘Cause I’m a rat. Right. Hah. I’m laughing. Gods, my head...

Harry and Lothar followed him into the office, which, it always seemed, had been designed for the sole purpose of intimidation. His amusement died quickly. The curtains were all but glued shut, and the dim bulbs that illuminated the room were stained purple. Virus could almost feel his pupils triple in size as the door closed behind them. Cameras on the wall traced their every move as he and Harry took seats in the two provided chairs. “Sir,” he began, trying to ignore the incessant pounding coursing through his cranium, “I—”

There was a slight delay as Lothar stomped over to Harry, grabbed the scruff of his collar and tossed him ten feet onto the floor. “Do continue,” the echidna said, calmly occupying the now vacant seat and loudly and casually chomping on a piece of gum. Eastwood groaned, but did not get up—although conscious, he seemed to find the floor a

better place than any other at the moment. Virus kept a prudent silence. Lothar was fearsome on any normal day; hung over, the cyborg was downright homicidal.

Commander Schaefer gave the rat and echidna a hard stare across his desk. “I don’t give a damn that you got pig-drunk last night,” he growled. “In fact, I suggest you do it more often—if you got alcohol poisoning, it’d solve a lot of my problems.” He loudly cracked his knuckles, then leaned back in his swirling chair. “But Nekittou... well frankly, I’m quite surprised. Our records have nothing on him being a boozier... quite the opposite, in fact.”

Lothar laughed. “Shows what you know about the fuzball. I can’t even begin to detail—”

“His disappearance is likely to cause significant problems,” Schaefer overrode. Lothar looked both astonished and furious—generally, any fool who had the guts to interrupt him would presently find himself lacking any guts whatsoever. Before he could say anything, though, Schaefer added, “It’s not that I really care about his miserable life. But the Inquisition’s relations with the Dæmon Hunters had been much improved since Nekittou came, and it would be a pity to spoil that. Even a somewhat flawed liaison with their organization is better than none—and they are likely to be less than tickled should Rogue come to a nasty end.” He rubbed at his chin, then glared at Virus. “Damn it, why couldn’t you have been the one to get captured?”

“Body odor might play a part,” Lothar muttered under his breath.

Shut up, Virus thought, not to the echidna but to the timpani players who had so treacherously hidden themselves and their blasted instruments in his skull. In his mind’s eye, he pictured them as dæmons and massacred them with exorcism bullets spewing from his treasured Bouchard 9mm. This, of course, did no good whatsoever. He blinked. That didn’t help either. He wondered if attempted suicide might have an effect. “What,” he asked, slowly managing to grind out each word, “exactly are we going to do?”

“Rescue him,” Schaefer replied. “Preferably quickly.”

Lothar let lose a twenty-five second tirade wherein at least a third of the words were not suitable for public television, insulting nearly everyone from Schaefer’s mother to his third cousin twice removed, and culminated by very directly accusing the commander of engaging in spectacularly immoral acts with frosted donuts. “Daily,” he added upon managing to catch his breath. “You just sit on your fat arse and—and you think you can just say the word—tell us—oh, rot in hell, you bugger!” he spluttered, finally running out of bombast.

Without moving from the floor, Eastwood pointed one finger upwards for attention. “I think, Commander...”

“Did I say you could talk?” Lothar snarled at him.

“... that a slightly greater amount of detail might be appreciated in just how we are to go about this mission,” Eastwood finished. He made a weak attempt to get to his feet, but abandoned it relatively quickly. Virus wondered if his longtime friend was perhaps hurting even worse than he was. Had he been in any state to feel pity for Harry, he was certain that he would have. Conditions being as they were, though, Zuviel’s daily pity allotment was being far too rapidly expended upon himself.

“We do,” Schaefer said, “have a few clues.”

Harry wondered if Virus was perhaps even more hung over than he was. Then he wondered just how he was able to formulate that coherent a thought. Then he wondered what the hell he had just said, which had sounded smart coming out of his mouth. Then he wondered why he was wondering so many things when wondering was beginning to make his skull pound even harder and finally decided that any further wondering would have to take place at a later date.

The tile floor felt cool, anyways.

“None of the patrons at the bar got any good look at the kidnapper,” Schaefer was saying. “He was wearing a hooded maroon cloak, and—”

“Wait,” Virus interjected. “Maroon?”

“Yes, but that’s not import—”

“Why not black?”

“The hell?”

“Well, don’t these sort of people generally dress in black?”

“Maybe it was casual dress day at the National Association of Barroom Kidnappers? Who knows? In any case, nobody got a good look at him, but two did speak of a gold ankle bracelet with four gemstones. Sound familiar?”

“Traditional amulet of an Undivided cult,” said Lothar easily.

I knew that, Harry thought. *If I could only... stand... up...*

“Exactly,” Schaefer said. “Representative of the four Dark Gods, each having equal representation in these cults. They bear the hallmark stones of each vile deity: the Patterner’s nasty topaz, the Hound’s blood-red spinel, the—”

“Skip the history and cut to the chase,” cut in Lothar, this time successfully. “I know all this crap. So some Undivideds got a hold of Fuzzy-Wuzzy. How does that help us save the poor sap’s sorry arse? There must be dozens of Undivided cults...”

Eastwood finally managed to at least sit up off the floor and immediately regretted it. Miraculously (or so it seemed), he managed to hold the position. “Exactly forty-seven,” he announced morosely, “in all Mobius. Unless we’ve taken out a few lately.”

Lothar and Virus stared at him. “How in the gods names did you know that?” Virus asked, wide-eyed.

“I didn’t,” Harry said, and laughed out loud. “Ha *ha*! Oh man! You should have seen the look on—eep!” He had to stop gloating in a hurry, because Lothar was halfway out of his chair, with murder in his non-robotic eye. “No touchie! *No touchie!*”

“Sit down, Hex,” Schaefer commanded, and for a wonder, Lothar did. “He’s actually closer than you might think. We know it to be a fact that Mobius has about forty notable Undivided cults; lately, with the promises of all four dark pleasures, their membership has been soaring. One, I hear, has even struck up a decent t-shirt business.”

“But sir,” Virus repeated, “how on Mobius do you know the precise number?”

“Good record-keeping,” Schaefer replied. “In fact, I would have to say that, with our current records, we could most likely locate every single Undivided cult—any cult, for that matter—in a matter of hours. The Inquisition is powerful, Zuviel... as you would know, if you didn’t sleep through training sessions. I *still* aim to prove you cheated on your entrance exams.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Lothar said with an incredulous laugh. “You’re not trying to tell me that you can find any cult you want to with a flick of a file cabinet? That would be ridiculous.”

“Perhaps I exaggerated a bit,” Schaefer admitted, “but with a bit of work, yes, we can.”

“*Then why the bloody hell are there still cults out there?*” Lothar roared furiously. “*Why haven’t you smashed every last one of the bastards?*”

“Because then,” Schaefer explained patiently, “we’d be out of work, wouldn’t we?”

Lothar looked so dumbfounded that Harry laughed out loud, hard and raucously. Moments later, he was lying down again, his head hurt worse than ever, and he had two large spike marks in the middle of his face. He almost made the mistake of wondering what had hit him, but quite mercifully didn’t remain conscious long enough to do so.

“Okay,” Lothar said. He blew a sizable gum bubble, and sucked it back in with a satisfying *pop*. “You can find the buggers. So who—and where—are they?”

“Which leads us into the second phase,” Schaefer replied, “motive. I don’t think that there’s any cult who wouldn’t like to get their grubby hands on an Inquisition member, and a dæmon hunter to boot. But Nekkitou is an odd choice. Were someone seeking an easy target, Taika has turned out far worse; if they were trying to take out a top-level agent, there are also plenty stronger and more dangerous.”

“You suspect they, uh, had something against him personally?” Virus asked.

“I can sympathize, then,” Lothar sniped. For some reason or another, Rogue had always gotten on his nerves a bit. The echidna liked to believe he had a monopoly on arrogance, and Nekittou was in the habit of treading those grounds all too often for his own good. It wasn’t as if Lothar couldn’t recognize blatant conceit when he saw or heard it. It was just that when it was *him*, he didn’t give a rat’s arse. (Though he generally tended to avoid that colloquialism. It brought back too many nasty nightmares of accidentally catching Virus in the shower.)

“From this, we can most likely narrow it down to one of three cults,” Schaefer said, shuffling through a few papers, “who may have had reason to go after him in particular. The Ionnioc order, centralized about ten miles south of here—Rogue was part of a raid on one of their hideouts back when he was with Taika. The Rikako sect has taken him prisoner before, and they are notoriously fanatical about finishing jobs. And, finally, I also suggest investigating the Nnygugu.”

Lothar had to wait a moment before learning what the Nnygugu had against Rogue, as he noticed in the dim light a large and ugly insect crawling up the back wall. Due to far too many unpleasant incidents involving nuclear radiation and creatures with six, eight, or ten legs (*damn those mammoth lobsters!*), he held a certain animosity towards the genus. This differed little from the animosity he held for most living creatures, except the roaches he killed were somewhat less empowered to return the favor. Schaefer’s eyes widened in horror as Lothar lifted his right arm and pointed it directly at him. The commander stammered something incomprehensible, and then ignominiously dove under his desk just as Lothar fired.

The roach, mercifully, never felt a thing. The wall did. A cloud of black plaster filled the air, sending all three of them (not including the unfortunate deceased) into

apocalyptic coughing fits bearing remarkable semblance to that which their feline associate had performed the previous night. By virtue of either having not been there or having been in a rather undesirable state, however, none of them could have drawn the wholly meaningless parallel.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Lothar said once the cloud had cleared from his third delay of the meeting. Then: “You use *black* plaster?”

“Only,” Schaefer ground out, slowly getting to his feet, “only... if it weren’t... if I didn’t need you, Hex... I would have your head for my mantle, I swear it...”

“You and what army?” Lothar laughed scornfully.

“I could have fifteen trained Inquisitors in here in less than thirty seconds,” Schaefer spat.

“Sixteen,” Virus noted from the peanut gallery.

“I said ‘trained’,” Schaefer growled at him. “But you’re not worth it, Hex. It galls me, but, as I said, I need you right now.”

“Hah!” Lothar scoffed. “You’d just be wasting resources. But to hell with that. Why do you think these Newgeegees or whatever wanted the tabby?” At this point, he was actually beginning to be intrigued. A mission like this promised ample opportunities to wreak large amounts of havoc. The best part about busting up a cult was that he rarely had to care just who he was disintegrating; nobody made a fuss over which heretics got quick deaths in battle and which would later be slowly turned into chunky jelly for interns’ sandwich rations.

“I actually have no specific reason to believe that,” Schaefer said. “You’re investigating them because I said so. Now get the hell out of my office.”

They did, less to oblige than simply to escape. Then, after quick consultation upon his relative merits as a living shield, they went back in and dragged Harry out, too.

The first thing Rogue Nekkitou noticed was that his head was pounding.

That’s not right, he thought, *they were the ones getting stoned off their arses...*

With a groan, he tensed his shoulders and stretched.

The second thing he noticed was a certain amount of difficulty in stretching. Namely, the part that involved moving any of his limbs. Or his flexible spine, which now refused to bend at all. The manifestation of these facts meant that his stretching attempt was rendered a miserable failure. Which meant his body was still all tensed up. That was not a normal feeling for a feline, one he hadn’t known since he had fallen in that vat of wet cement three years ago. He’d learned that day just how quickly the stuff could congeal.

Hmm.

He opened his eyes and then rather wished he hadn’t.

Two torches burned on the wall opposite him, flanking a gothic door which inexplicably bore a shiny brass knob that slightly destroyed the illusion. The other items in the room, which wasn’t much larger than an average prison cell, were a large pole and a goodly amount of rope. Unfortunately, being in uncomfortably close contact with both items, Rogue was in no position to make use of either.

He tried flexing. Had he been a superhero, the ropes would have snapped into a hundred pieces instantly. They didn’t. He was able to conclude from this that he was

indeed not a superhero. He was able to conclude from that that he had no way to get free. He was able to conclude from *that* that he was, in every imaginable way, screwed.

Damn.

Who would have wanted to kidnap him? He remembered now, what had transpired in the bar. *Chloroform!* His mind turned the word into a hideous curse. An enemy? A cult? A *dæmon*? Tax lawyers?

I only cheated on my 1040 a little! I swear!

Whoever had bound him had done a damn good job of it, too. He could barely wriggle a millimeter. His circulation wasn't running particularly smoothly, either. They'd taken everything, too: his boots (*meh, they were a bit too big*), his harness (*standard issue; I can afford another easily*), his pendant (*aw, that was a gift from Mom, you jerks!*), and...

"MMMMPHHH!"

This was the point at which he noticed he was also gagged.

"Mmmph!" he continued anyways. *How dare they?* "Mmm mm mmp! Mph! Mm mmp MMPH mm MMMMPHHHHH!" He'd given better orations before.

The door flew open and Rogue fell silent instantly.

A cloaked shadowy figure strode into the room. Behind the form, a second dark outline closed the door slowly. It creaked loudly as it fell into place. With the only light coming from behind the apparition, Rogue could not see through the hood that covered the phantom's head and face. A flicker of light did bounce off the side of the robe, enough for Rogue to catch the reddish tint. *Maroon? The hell?*

The shape walked towards him, metallic footwear clacking on the cement floor. For a split second, the folds of the cloak pulled back far enough to allow the weak torchlight to gleam off of a shiny gold ankle bracelet. Rogue recognized it, and his blood ran cold. He kept silent, fury and terror fiercely battling for control of his heart. The specter stopped just a few feet in front of his face, close enough for him to see white teeth sparkle in the dark countenance

"Welcome, Ryoushi," came the voice.

"Mmph," he responded.

A white-gloved hand tore the gag out of his mouth. Rogue spluttered for a moment, swallowed, and shook his head. "My beam sword," he spat. "Where the hell is my *beam sword*, you bastard? What the bleeding hell have you done with my—"

The cloaked figure struck him across the face, hard. His head snapped to one side, then back. He felt a tooth loosen, and his head swam. When his eyes returned to focus, he saw a bluish tint in the lower half of his field of vision. The figure had the point of his treasured weapon half an inch from his neck. If he so much as twitched, he'd put a whole new meaning to the term "cleft chin". Every cell in his body told him to scream out against this outrage. *My beam sword!* His brain told him that would be the fastest way to get himself killed. His cells responded with the concise argument that his demise was already pretty much secured and he might as well go with dignity. Before his brain could appeal the case, Rogue snarled, "Get your filthy hands off it, or else..."

"Or else what?" the form laughed. The voice was odd. Rogue's head was still throbbing too much for him to do more than notice. The beam sword lifted a few centimeters, causing him to lean his head backwards until it rested upon the post. A few hairs on his chin sizzled and vanished.

Then the energy blade retracted, and Rogue slumped his head forward in short-lived relief. “Where am I?” he asked, most dignity forgotten. “Why am I here? Who are you?”

Instead of responding, the figure pocketed the weapon, brought two hands to the hood and slowly pulled it off. Bright green eyes shone in a white face streaked with black stripes. Rogue felt a cold shiver as they stared at him, seemingly through him. Thin whiskers graced shining ivory-colored teeth, cuspids acutely filed to a point. Those teeth contorted into a vicious smile as she laughed, not her amused laugh of before, but a cruel, cruel laugh of vicious delight...

... “*She*”?!

Part III

“The Nnygugu are this region’s largest cult, Undivided or otherwise,” Virus Zuviel said as they were attempting to revive Eastwood in Schaefer’s waiting room (which was, for some reason, being taken apart). “I do remember that... although that was only because my teacher turned out to be one of their high priests. Poor Al. He was a good guy. ‘Cept for the whole heresy thing.”

Harry moaned, sat up, and proceeded to expectorate a massive glob of blood onto his own chest. “Gah funkle,” he opined, and rolled over on his side, drooling another sanguine glob onto the carpet. He gave off a few more bizarre meaningless noises and snuffles, then sank back into unconsciousness on his front.

“Did you *really* need to hit him that last time?” Virus asked.

“Of course not,” Lothar replied, “so what?”

Simmons, Schaefer’s little flunky, chose that moment to walk into the room. “The commandant,” he said, “has requested that I give you this packet.” He held out a bulging manila folder held shut with rubber bands. “He believes you will find it of use on your mission.”

“We need a twenty-volume encyclopedia?” Lothar asked sardonically.

“This folder contains information on the three cults we believe most likely to have taken your colleague,” Simmons told them. “Inside you will find lists of known members, locations of major outposts, maps, directions, information on their dæmons of choice, information on their customs, information on their rituals, detailed profiles of their leaders, examples of past cases they are suspected in, and their cafeteria lunch menu.”

He tossed them the packet. Virus caught it and grunted under the weight. “It must weigh thirty pounds!” he exclaimed. “What else is in here, a dead giraffe?”

“We are missing one,” Simmons replied. “Should you happen to find it in there, you know where the Lost and Found desk is.” He turned and strolled back to the antechamber where his desk was, humming a popular and incredibly obscene tune. Three seconds later, they heard a loud crash and then something close to the actual lyrics of the song. Added were a few interesting remarks on the remarkably corrupt sexual preferences of Simmons’ desk lamp.

Virus removed the rubber bands and let them fall on the floor. The first sheet of paper was a letter from Schaefer on Inquisition letterhead. Its message was simple: “DON’T SCREW UP”, and Schaefer’s signature. On the bottom there was a postscript: “By the way, I’ve messaged the armories. You have *temporary* Class D weapons

certification.” The word “temporary” was in triple-size bold italicized font, with three underlines and a few arrows pointing to it for emphasis.

“Class D?” Virus said with amazement. “Class D... Lothar, do you have any idea the stuff we can get with Class D? I mean... we can get railcannons, plasma launchers... And as far as vehicles are concerned...”

“...you will be doing completely nothing,” Lothar responded. “Anyways, we don’t need heavy weaponry. We’re trying to rescue someone, not reduce everything in our path to rubble, you know? Charging in there hell-bent-for-leather is liable to do nothing but get Rogue killed along with everyone else.”

Virus stared at him. “Just *how* hard did you hit your head again?”

“I can see common sense when it’s in front of my face,” Lothar responded, “as opposed to some who wouldn’t know it if I shoved it up their arses. Know why we’ve got Class D for this one?”

“So I can finally drive a Leviathan?” Virus asked hopefully.

Harry muttered something from the ground.

“Plethora zebra in hand knock sass parades?” Virus asked.

Harry repeated himself.

“Pressurized xenon-enhanced Nox gas grenades?” Virus said in disbelief. “Those have been Class A for as long as I’ve been at the Inquisition; in fact, I—oh.” Something occurred to him. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with my little... er... incident... with Professor Cohn’s kids? Over in manufacturing?”

“Yeah, after that his opinion on how his *own design* should be classified took a rather drastic turn. I hear one of those poor first-year students ended up losing a kidney.”

“A kidney?” Nox gas, while highly effective in knocking out large groups of people, was generally not permanently harmful. *I only wanted to see if the Prof really did keep vodka under his desk*, Virus thought. *Seriously, though, I should have gotten some recognition. Some of the stuff I found under there couldn’t possibly be legal...*

“Take a look at this,” Lothar said, passing Virus a sheet of paper.

It was a mission plan designed for the Rikako cult, the base of which appeared to be situated on a complex about ten miles out to sea. The crew was to, according to the stick-figure illustrations, ride a small amphibious vehicle out to the little atoll. Virus stared at the blueprints for their glorious flaming rescue chariot, which was in fact a recreational Zykian—the sort of boat tourists would use to putter around a harbor, fish a little, and in all ways make complete dicks of themselves. The wake from a good Mysticeti battleship setting out to sea could sometimes overturn half a dozen, with the local record being set by an infamous skipper who had laid claim to fourteen at once. Rivals accused him of deliberately departing from port the day of a regatta.

“Eep,” Virus supplied, and read on. The plan didn’t seem to get much better from there on. It was insane, suicidal, poorly-planned, thrown-together, clichéd, and, overall, liable to lead to their untimely deaths long before they had a chance to make the acquaintance of either the Ionnioc or the Nnygugu. In other words, it held the hallmarks of every Inquisition plan ever hatched. Any person with any sense whatsoever would have tossed the folder onto the floor. Anyone with brains in their head would have instantly gotten the hell out of there.

Virus closed the folder. “Well, what next?” he asked.

Lothar sighed. “First, let’s deal with this idiot.”

“How?”

“It’s *Eastwood*, how else?”

Harry was floating. Harry was floating through a vast mist of half-chewed blue pencils. They were friendly. He didn’t know why they were friendly, because neither he nor they had made any efforts towards initiating a conversation. But he liked the pencils, and thus found himself somewhat perturbed when they decided to congregate and mutate into the left half of a football field. When the goal attempted to devour him alive, he came to the conclusion that he had indeed preferred the pencils. The goal, however, was probably preferable to the hail of discarded singing jewelry boxes that began to assail him from above. He didn’t like the goal. But he was pretty sure he liked the jewelry boxes less. He didn’t like the music. He didn’t like the design. He didn’t like how one was spontaneously transforming into shining molten liquid and attempting to force its way down his gullet...

... Actually, come to think of it, he liked that a lot.

Harold Eastwood came back to life with a wild whoop of glee. Said wild whoop had two immediate effects. First, the plastic tube that had been pouring a steady stream of java down his throat went sailing across the room, splattering hot fluid in every direction, drenching Virus and Lothar and short-circuiting the lights. Secondly, about half a liter of the coffee took the fast train to his lungs, throwing him into a hacking fit. He staggered around the room, in blissful elation and wrenching agony.

“Gods *damn*, that—haaaakkk—stuff is—aaaaghhh—*so*—gackkuhkuhkuh—kuhkuh—good!”

“Where’s the damn off switch?!” Lothar bellowed. Coffee was spraying wildly.

“I can’t see a thing!” Virus cried.

“Well, look around!”

“I found something!”

“That’s my blasted *arm*!”

“More! I need—akaaakkk—*more*!”

“Shut *up*, you moron!”

“I found the tube!”

“Well, *point it somewhere else, retard*! Ah, my *eye*!”

“The organic one?”

“Virus,” Lothar replied very quietly. “Yes. It was my organic eye. In fact, that thing is still spraying vile brown crap all over me. And if you do not remedy that within the next five seconds, I swear to every god that ever inhabited Mobius I will *rip out your intestines and shit on your corpse!*”

Ten seconds later, the lights came back on. The entire room, a small recovery ward often used to revive Inquisitors that fell afoul of some minor mishap, was drenched in russet liquid. Virus stood, frozen, with beads of coffee dripping from his matted fur. Lothar, absolutely livid, was blinking furiously with his natural eye in a futile attempt to clear it. Puddles up to an inch deep of java slowly spread across the floor.

In the midst of it all, Harry sat haphazardly on the floor with the plastic tube held full-force up to his mouth, furiously gulping. Warmth and oh-so-glorious caffeine permeated throughout his bloodstream. He forgot his hangover; he forgot his concussion—all that mattered was the golden napalm filling him from within. For a full

minute he drank as if possessed, completely still save for the constant pumping of his esophagus. Virus and Lothar stared in horrified fascination.

“He’s gonna kill himself!” Virus whispered.

“If you want to try and stop him,” Lothar hissed back, “be my guest!”

Finally, the elixir came no longer. The supply had been exhausted. Harry released his iron grip on the hose and lay back on the floor with a moan of pleasure. He accented it with a mammoth belch a Hunter might envy. His fur was no less drenched than that of his colleagues, and his trenchcoat was practically marinated in dark titian mocha. (Not that he minded the latter—he would enjoy the lingering odor, and it might even serve as a mild mask for his own semi-legendary reek.)

“What the hell,” Virus inquired after a moment of silence, “was that?”

In an impossibly fast motion, Eastwood was on his feet. He knew! He knew the answer, and he was willing to share it and share it all and speak on endlessly on the glories of just how much he knew and how wonderful life was at the moment and how lovely the sun shone this morning even though they were indoors! “Th-that was m-me w-waking up!” he stammered merrily. “See? See? I’m up!” He hopped up and down a few times that illustrate. “Up, up, and now we get to go! Go save Rogue, right? Right! Gotta save Rogue! Huh?”

“Yes, Harry,” Lothar said, amusement and scorn fighting for dominance in his voice. “Save Rogue.”

“Exactly! See? I knew it! And I am pumped, baby! I am ready! I am all-fire! What are we waiting for? I feel fine. Fine! See?” He dashed from one stained corner of the room to another, displaying impressive agility in his turns. “Let’s go! Where next? Let’s *go* somewhere, for Grussake! Swim? Jog? Fly? How about decathlon? Anybody up for a deca—waaahhh!” His harangue came to an abrupt end as he slipped on a particularly large puddle and ended up on the floor no worse for the wear. A nanosecond later, he was back on his feet and quivering like an excited puppy.

“Can we please,” Virus asked, “go to the armory now?”

“This place is a mess,” Lothar noted. “Can we just leave it like this?”

“Yeah, yeah, we can, we can!” Harry said impatiently. “Someone’ll clean it up. We’re on a mission, right? Gotta go! Gotta get pumped! Gotta—”

“Harry,” Lothar interrupted. “I happen to have a fair enough memory to know that, to some degree, this whole thing is a result of my actions towards you. However, in the case that you do not shut up this instant, you may find my memory beginning to slip. Very quickly. Very, very quickly.”

Despite his energy levels being off the scale, Eastwood quickly shut up.

The three Inquisitors—more appropriately, two Inquisitors and one bane of the Inquisition’s existence—left the room in a hurry. As they were checking out at the reception desk, they heard a scream emerge from deeper in the building... in fact, from the direction of the revival chamber they had just been using.

The caprine receptionist looked up, startled. “That sounded like the custodian,” he said, stumbling through the swinging desk half-door and hastening into the bowels of the building. “Erik?” they heard him calling. “Erik! Are you okay?”

Lothar looked at Harry. Harry looked at Virus.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Virus suggested.

They did.

Lothar Hex had never expected to go to heaven. He was quite convinced that if any part of where he would spend a hypothetical afterlife was based on the morality of his time alive, he was packing asbestos. When he thought of pearly gates, he wondered how much they'd bring in on the black market. And he would definitely suck at the harp.

However, the Inquisition's central armory came just about as close to cloud nine as he could imagine. Lothar scampered through the aisles like a little kid in a candy shop... though very few kids were homicidal lunatic mercenaries, and very few confectioners boasted such massive assortments of lethal merchandise. He stopped in front of one shelf with a particularly nasty disintegrator, specifically designed to cause as much pain as possible to the recipient. Normally, he wouldn't have been allowed within five hundred feet of such a device. With their new certification, however...

"Lothar!" Virus exclaimed. "Point that thing somewhere else, would you?"

"Hey, don't spaz out," Lothar replied, running an oversized gloved finger over the sleek barrel. "The safety's on." He aimed it at Virus and pulled the trigger a few times. "Psheew! Sheew!" Virus gulped in terror and dove out of the way. Lothar laughed and replaced the weapon.

It was approaching noon, and Harry was finally beginning to come down from his caffeine-induced super-high. "I found the Nox grenades," he called. "We need the small, medium, or large variety?" He held up one of each to display, unfortunately forgetting he only had two hands. The large one slipped and fell; as he bent to pick it up, he lost the medium. Had either of the pins been pulled, the crew would have been somewhat delayed in their mission, if well-rested.

"Take a few of each," Virus replied, looking at the list in his gargantuan packet. "Besides that, we need one power weapon apiece, and a mountable rocket launcher. He looked up. "We're supposed to mount a Wepp launcher on a Zykyan? The thing will sink like a stone!"

Lothar shrugged. "It'll probably ride a little low." He didn't know much about Zykyans; his idea of a pleasure boat already had fifteen five-inch cannons installed. "We can pick any weapon we want?" His mind went back to that disintegrator, although he was never one to choose a gun without examining and testing every alternative. That was a lesson he had learned well when what he'd thought was a Vayyn-style rain gun turned out to be a novelty fishing rod. That hadn't stopped him from eliminating a pair of dæmons with it, though. *Hey, you gotta be able to improvise.*

Something else occurred to him. "Why only one?" he asked. Were it up to him, he'd grab as much explosive power as possible. On many missions, he carried little other than his own arm, which doubled as both blaster and buzz saw. It was a matter of pride. Similarly, Virus and Harry were disinclined to use much besides their Bouchard 9mm and Colt Magnum, respectively. *But hey, orders are orders.* He would follow instructions when they told him to do something fun and destructive, and rarely otherwise.

"Too much weight, too clumsy, etc.," Zuviel replied. "If we even come close to following this plan, we're going to be doing a lot of running. One Class C weapon is probably a good balance."

Lothar shrugged. "Whatever." It didn't matter much to him. He could always fall back on his own blaster; it had never failed him before. He noticed, to his annoyance, that

his gum was losing its flavor. He didn't have another piece. *Damn*. His attention returned to the rows upon rows of deadly toys. It was indeed a difficult choice.

Down the aisle, Harry was already examining a plasma "machine gun"—a very recent model with devastating force. Properly named a Hequor, the slang name of "fire hose" had caught on. The plasma blasts spewing forth did look slightly like drops of water sailing through the air. The only issue with the weapon was the primary issue with most plasma firearms: they overheated very, very quickly. The Hequor came with a pair of insulated gloves, but even they wouldn't hold up for long.

Plasma weaponry wasn't Lothar's forte, anyhow. His own arm cannon got hot enough for him. Instead, he considered rounding out the arsenal with a solid-shot make. Many Inquisitors scorned the models as being out of date, with blaster weaponry packing far more power and recharging faster than a manual reload. But a Knyyfrank automatic—the toy Lothar was now admiring—had some definite advantages as well. It would put a lot more lethal force into the air at a faster rate than any blaster weapon, and heating was not an issue. Also, it wouldn't cauterize. *Whoo, blood*.

The armory conveniently sat directly atop the underground small-arms firing range. The trio spent about five minutes tearing away at the scorched steel wall, angled as to send bullets and blasts sailing upwards into an absorbent cage. Lothar went through three Knyyfrank forty-shot magazines in the space of thirty seconds and fell in love instantly. *My precious...*

Eastwood fired a few rounds with the Hequor, and nodded in satisfaction. He turned six bullets loose from his Colt as well, striking within an inch of each other. Whatever his vices (lechery, sloth, and general lack of common sense to name a few,) the guy could aim. Opponents who underestimated him in that particular area often ended up with severe headaches. Like, the "excuse me, my brain is in three separate pieces on the floor and it kinda hurts, little help here?" sort of headaches.

Virus had adopted a blaster shotgun with a ten-shot "magazine". Like any gun of its make, the Mazzeltorpe had no true magazine or shot, it recharged from a central battery inside of five seconds. It packed the sheer force of a true shotgun with faster loading time and semiautomatic firing. And it was equipped with a special combination of cooling and ventilation systems, and thus nearly impossible to overheat. With two quick blasts, Virus reduced his paper target to sizzling confetti. "I'm all set," he announced.

"We're supposed to report to the vehicle lot in fifteen minutes," Harry noted. "We still need food and medical supplies. Someone has to go take care of Blasphemy. And I, personally, have to piss like a racehorse."

"I'll get the supplies!" Lothar said hastily. Absolutely anything to avoid that psychotic, sadistic, malicious escapee from an orthodontist's nightmare!

"Fine," Virus said, sticking out his tongue. "Blasphemy only likes me anyways."

"Ugly calls to ugly," Lothar remarked back.

"Screw you."

"No, just your sister."

Harry had to grab Zuviel by the collar of his trenchcoat to prevent him from committing suicide, although Virus probably would have termed it "attacking". "Shut up, you two," he snarled. "I'll take the grenades; Loth, grab the launcher. And hurry. We don't have time to waste. Every second counts. My bladder is a time bomb. And plus...

we have no idea what torments some revolting perverts are putting Rogue through as we speak.”

Ryoushi Nekittou stared in open-mouthed astonishment at the manifestation before him. For the last two years of his life, he had been dedicated to unveiling and eliminating cults and their sordid members. He had participated in over a score of raids, each time emerging with new battle toughness as well as a deeper understanding of how the shadowy underworld of Dark God-worship operated. He had seen some horrible things in his line of business, as well as some fantastically hideous people.

This particular cultist did not match his mental stereotype.

She's... she's beautiful.

She was a tigress, snow-white with dark stripes like paint strokes. Her whiskers were fine, neatly smoothed out towards the sides of her face. Her ears were perfectly rounded, and her crown fur was parted in a way almost reminiscent of Rogue's own, except shorter. Her eyes, though... Her eyes were marbles of ice, seeming to penetrate straight through Rogue's body to his very soul. His mind whirled.

She's absolutely incredible!

She's evil incarnate!

Utter perfection, every molecule!

Also ready to stick a pike through your intestines, you dolt!

Yeah, but... but...

“Close your mouth before you choke on a bug, little boy,” the tigress said in a mock matriarchal tone, using thumb and forefinger to do just that. Rogue twisted his head away from her condescending touch. Even so, he found himself completely captivated, helpless even to think rationally. *I think I preferred the nude midget hermaphrodite with leprosy*, he thought. *Or even the Hunter with the lethal halitosis!*

The cult leader (so Rogue assumed she was) did a quick checkup on his bonds, unnecessary, as all were perfectly secure. “All nice and tight?” she asked as she tightened the ropes binding his ankles together. The rough sinews dug through his fur into his skin. He audibly gritted his teeth against the pain. “Oh come now,” she said as she got to her feet, the burgundy shroud sweeping across the floor. “That can't have hurt too much.”

“Who the hell,” Rogue asked, gaining a touch of confidence back, “are you?”

“Oh, did I forget the introductions? How rude of me. You can call me Tirzah.” Tirzah held up a hand as Rogue started to say something else. “No need for you to say anything. I know you, Ryoushi. I know a lot about you. I've been waiting a long time for this.”

A long time? Rogue wondered, sensing hyperbole for the sake of cliché. *I haven't been around that long, and I certainly don't remember this chick. Who did I piss off this time? If those other idiots are playing some kind of prank on me...*

“You're a cultist,” he remarked. On reflection, it wasn't the wittiest comment he'd ever made.

“We prefer the term ‘practitioner’,” Tirzah said. “In a pinch, ‘depraved freak’ will also work. ‘Psycho’, ‘nutcase’, ‘evil lunatic’, pick your poison. I hope those ropes aren't cutting off your circulation?”

“They,” Rogue replied, “are.”

“We seem to be lacking a violin.”

“What do you want? Why am I here?”

Tirzah gave a powerful whistle. A moment later, the door opened. Two shapes, roughly canine in form, stood beyond it. “Naaman, Keahi,” she said to them. “Would you mind getting us some—pardon,” she broke off, turning to Rogue. “Do you take tea or coffee? And if the latter, cream, sugar?”

Rogue stared at her, which wasn’t any change from what he’d been doing since she first entered the room. “Are you joking?”

“Certainly not,” Tirzah said. “You must be parched.”

They’re absolutely batshit crazy, Rogue thought. But for the moment, nobody was actively attempting to kill him. That was, really, an improvement over most of the time he had spent in the belly of cult dens. “Just some water, please,” he said, trying his hardest to seem nonchalant. “Cubes, not crushed.” He grinned weakly.

Tirzah asked for her “usual tea”. *I hope to Tyrus that just means “spearmint”*.

Naaman and Keahi went to go prepare the beverages, securing the door behind them. Tirzah turned back to face Rogue, then paused to yawn. “I’m sorry,” she said around it. “What were you asking about again?”

“Why I’m here? Tied up? With you?”

“Oh, right, that,” Tirzah said. “Well, firstly, I can’t say I’m that sorry. It’s nice to have someone to talk to for once.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder at the door. “They’re all so dull at times. One-track minds. Don’t think of anything beyond the ordinary. Snap your fingers and they’ll follow you. Sheep. Nothing but a pack of sheep.” She paused for a moment. “And then there’s Jayden.”

“Jayden?” Rogue asked, playing along.

“Yeah. He actually *is* a sheep.”

“Ah.”

“They bore me to no end,” Tirzah said. “So I admire independence when I see it. And you quite definitely fit that bill.” Rogue’s superiors back in Taika would have agreed, though not in a complementary way. “You fascinate me, Ryoushi,” Tirzah continued in a slow, seductive voice. “Ever since I saw you, I’ve been obsessed with finding you. Completely obsessed.”

Rogue was now baffled beyond all belief—and, yes, aroused. How could he help it? This was not at all like his past experiences as a captive. *Is this her idea of romance? Or just fetish?* In most of Harry’s magazines—which Rogue had seen *completely* by accident, of course—it was the female counterpart who had been under restraint. But Rogue was always open to new ideas. *You know what? Maybe this won’t be such a bad day after all...*

“Which leads me into reason number two,” Tirzah continued. “In precisely fifteen hours, just after midnight tonight, the four stars of the Dark Gods will align in the sky in diamond shape, a once a year occurrence.”

“*Nox Caliginis!*” Rogue cried out in sudden revelation: *the Night of Darkness! Stupid name, cliché concept, but the central (un)holy day of Undivided cults!* He now at least knew for sure who his captors were. He didn’t know if it would help him, but he aimed to figure out as much of what was going on as possible.

Tirzah raised a dark eyebrow. “You did your homework.”

“But wait,” Rogue said, his mind whirling again. “*Nox Caliginis* is a day... I mean, a night when cults... you guys, you, there’s something...”

“*Sacrificium Quaterna*,” Tirzah said with a grin. “Yes, Ryoushi. Four. Four Gods. Four sacrifices. You may hang out with a pack of idiots, but they’re devoted. They will come to you. They will come to us.” Her grin widened. “Tonight, as the stars form their sacred sign in the sky, the Gods shall drink from the life of their enemies. Tonight, as people worldwide stare at the heavens, your friends will gasp their last breaths as our priests slit their throats.”

Tirzah reached out and stroked Rogue’s left pectoral softly. He flinched. “And tonight,” she finished in a soft purr, “tonight, as the world is plunged into darkness... I will tear your beating heart from your chest and devour it while you watch.”

Oh.

The door opened. One of the canines—Keahi?—set down a tray, bowed, and left. Tirzah smiled. “Drinks are served.”

Part IV

“Oh crap,” Virus Zuviel said. “Not again...”

Blasphemy sat on Virus’ bed, scratching at something behind his ear in a ridiculously doglike fashion. Rather, he sat on what was left of Virus’ bed in the middle of what was left of Virus’ room. The bureau had been torn apart, each drawer opened and its contents shredded. A lamp lay in pieces on the floor. Wallpaper had been torn off in sheets, and there were deep claw marks in the door. Miraculously, Virus’ laptop computer was unharmed.

In the midst of it all, the red Chao sat, scratching himself, with his eternal goofy-yet-utterly-terrifying grin plastered on his face. Once a normal, cute little creature, he had attained his current fearsome form after fusing with the DNA of a Ravenor. Yet here he was, looking for all the world perfectly innocent. He seemed to be saying, *who, me?* His pointed tail wagged back and forth. “Chao!” he exclaimed in a voice that would send a grown man screaming for his mother. “Chao! Chao chao!”

“Blasphemy!” Virus cried in dismay. “Bad! Very, very bad! Bad Chao!”

Blasphemy leapt off the bed at him. Despite all the love he had for the little terror, Virus had to stifle a scream as those eyes and teeth came flying towards his face. He threw up his arms in self-defense, but Blasphemy nimbly skirted them, landing right atop Virus’ head. He began playfully nibbling at Virus’ ear.

“Hey!” Virus said. “Stop that... Blasphemy, hey, that tickles!” He fell to his knees laughing. Blasphemy leapt onto his chest, pinning him to the ground. “You little freak of nature! Alright, alright, I’m glad to see you too.” He *had* been gone for over a day and a half, leaving Blasphemy locked up in his room, so he didn’t really think he could blame him for the mass destruction. Besides, it was hard (and unhealthy) to stay mad at his pet for long.

Still, though, he had left ample food, water, and... “Hey, Blas, what happened to your chew toy? The fifty-pound squeaking doll of Eastwood?”

Blasphemy gave a terrific belch.

I see.

Virus surveyed the room once again. He didn’t think there was much left for Blasphemy to destroy, as long as the few things left intact were relocated. If Virus replenished the food and water supply, the Chao could probably hold out for as long as it

would take for them to complete the mission. *Provided we survive.* Virus darted into the pantry and grabbed three gigantic slabs of lard. Combined, they weighed about as much as he did. He struggled back to his room and deposited them on the floor. Blasphemy eyed them interestedly.

By the time Virus had returned with a full barrel of water, (Blasphemy's thirst matched his appetite,) only a few scraps of the meat remained. He stared at the spot where they had been in dismay. *An eighth of a day's pay, vaporized in a few seconds.* He shook his head in wonder. *Amazing.* He wasn't actually sure how the Chao could devour an amount of food twenty times his own body weight, let alone that quickly. He wasn't sure how that little spiked yellow ball stayed suspended over Blasphemy's head at all times, either. *Some things are better left unasked.*

Blasphemy dove into the water the moment Virus set it down. Literally, he dove. A massive splash sailed up into Virus' face, drenching him once more. "Yaaahh!" he snarled angrily. "The stupid *coffee* was almost dry!"

In the cask, Blasphemy was happily lapping at an incredible rate. Twenty seconds later he frowned, swam to the side of the barrel, and leapt out, shaking himself off. Virus gave him a quizzical look. "Not that thirsty, Blas?" he asked. Normally the Chao would drink gallons. Virus leaned in to have a look at the inside of the makeshift swimming pool, and then started laughing. *Well, at least I know what happens to the water he drinks...*

Having cleared out of the room what possessions remained of any value whatsoever, Virus dropped a handful of 9mm rounds into his pants pockets, and another handful into his trenchcoat, right next to his gun. He also had three recharge batteries for the Mazzeltorpe, plenty to wreak the sort of havoc he was planning on wreaking. Wreaking havoc was more than just fun: it was a requirement for being a successful Inquisitor. Although High Command was somewhat less sympathetic when the havoc was being wreaked in their own offices.

He went back into his room and gave Blasphemy a nuzzle on the head. "I'm going out again, Blas," he said. "You just stay here and be good boy, okay? I'll be back soon." He gave the Chao a final pat, then turned to go.

"Chaoooo!" Blasphemy cried. The whimper—*what freak of evolution created a creature whose sole mode of communication is its own species name?*—stopped Virus in his tracks. There was a wistful note there, one he wasn't sure he'd ever heard before. It was, like everything Blasphemy said, absolutely bloodcurdling. But it was a sad form of bloodcurdling... like that of a vicious monster in the throes of death.

Virus turned back. "I'm sorry, Blas. I *will* be back. But you can't come on this one."

"Chao!" *Well, why not?*, he seemed to ask.

"I know it's not fair. But the mission is designed for us three, and you're just not... well... not one of the three of us! It's complex; I can't really explain." *I'm trying to justify myself to a Chao-dæmon hybrid*, Virus thought. *And failing.* "I just can't let you come. I'm sorry." He turned to go again.

The next thing that Blasphemy said was, as far as phrasing went, no different from anything he had ever said. The tone, on the other hand, conveyed a crystal-clear message: *I have been cooped up in this little rectal cavity of the world for the last thirty-six mother-loving hours and I am not going to spend another minute here. You will take*

me on this trip and you will take me now, or else you will discover both how much extra damage I can do to this room. You will also, upon your return, discover just how much damage I can do to your immediate person. And I promise you, sir, that will be a lot.

Five minutes later, Virus and Blasphemy set out for the vehicle lot, the former wearing a new pair of pants.

“No,” said Harold Eastwood and Lothar together.

“I’m serious!” Virus said. “He’ll be an asset! The more firepower we have the better, right?”

“I would sooner,” Lothar said, “perform a self-castration with a rusty salad fork before I get in a small vehicle with that thing. I would sooner drive hot iron javelins through my liver. I would sooner eat a steaming turd sandwich. I would sooner be tied up and locked in a room with a hideously massive sadistic rapist. I would—”

“What he means,” Harry surmised, “is ‘no’.”

The “thing” in question sat happily atop Virus’ head, looking perfectly content with the world. Blasphemy turned and gave Harry a smile that displayed a chilling set of dental hardware. Harry gulped and stepped back a few paces. He felt a squish underneath his right sole. *What the?* He tried to lift it. It was stuck.

Huh? He stood still and did his best to remain nonchalant.

“If I didn’t know better,” Virus said cannily, “I’d say you were a little scared, Loth. Finally found something to strike terror into the heart of—”

“I’m not *scared!*” Lothar said defensively. “I’m... thinking ahead! I don’t want any liabilities! That thing’s crazy! I, um... I’m looking out for Harry! You know Blasphemy can’t stand Harry!” That wasn’t completely true; Blasphemy would have loved Harry—for an afternoon snack.

“Fraidy cat, fraidy cat,” Virus taunted. “Chicken. Wuss.”

Harry bit his lip. Blasphemy was still staring directly at him. He loathed those yellow eyes, those weird horns. He loathed everything about the little beast. He just wanted it to go away, or at least stop staring at him. He tried to pivot his foot, and found he could barely do that. *What the hell did I step in?*

“I could rend that thing apart if I wanted to,” Lothar snarled.

“Sure you could,” Virus laughed.

“I could! Shut up! I could!”

Harry knew how this would turn out: one of two ways. Virus would either shame Lothar into letting the little bastard tag along, or else resort to his greatest skill: blackmail. It was blackmail that had gotten the Inquisition to ever let him keep Blasphemy in the first place, and blackmail that had bailed him out of many a tough spot with High Command. Harry was sure that no other Inquisitor besides Virus could have possibly gotten away with accidentally dumping hydrochloric acid on the Tyrusian Avenger angel envoy, or rigging every radio in the barracks to play nothing but a recording of fingernails scraping a blackboard. Owing to most Inquisitors’ tastes in music, it took three days for anybody to actually notice.

Knowing this, Harry tuned out the bickering. He bent down and grabbed his shoe, pulling at it as he tried to stand up. The gas expulsion that followed was not his intended result. Embarrassed, he looked around. He didn’t think anybody had noticed. Except for Blasphemy, who was still watching him intently.

Watching him.

Harry tried to stare him down, and failed miserably. *He's just trying to get to me*, he thought. *I won't let him get to me. Not going to let him. Not. Won't. No. No. No...*

"Of course he doesn't mind," Virus said. "Do you, Harry?"

"No," Harry replied.

"See? It'll be fine! C'mon, Blas, let's go find the Zykian!" Blasphemy flashed Harry a final grin, speeding away on Virus.

"Buh?" Harry asked. He closed his eyes and shook his head a few times.

"You just told him," Lothar said slowly, "that he could bring that pint-sized freak show along with us. That same pint-sized freak show with strong designs on your thyroid gland. That same pint-sized freak show—" He suddenly grimaced horribly, wrinkling his nose. "What the *hell?* I did not do that one. I *definitely* did not do that one!"

Harry coughed and flushed, but Lothar didn't seem to notice. "I mean, we have an egg salad case here. I do not eat egg salad. I hate egg salad. I have not eaten egg salad for five years." Harry subconsciously removed a small piece of yolk-covered lettuce from behind a molar with his tongue. Lothar carried right on: "Gouda cheese, you might have a case. Love Gouda cheese. But not egg salad."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, uh, Virus really oughta cut back on that, huh?" He tugged at his shoe again. No success. *Who leaves globs of Superglue lying around a parking lot?* "Uh, Loth... Do you think you could help me with something?"

"Need your shoelaces tied for you?" Lothar asked disdainfully.

"No... Well, yes... Well, no, not exactly, but..." Harry's babble trailed off. He collected himself and began again. "See, I think I wasn't looking where I was walking, and—"

"Hey, guys!" Virus yelled cheerfully from halfway across the lot. "This thing is awesome! Check it out; I'm coming over there!"

Harry looked in that direction. A Zykian amphibious vehicle was speeding across the lot towards them. It was a brown and blue-splotched convertible with inflatable bags on the sides, and for all practical purposes was ugly as sin. Despite being relatively lightweight as far as amphibious cars went, however, the Zykian was still not the sort of thing one strived to place themselves in front of. And this particular Zykian, with Inquisitor Virus Zuviel at the helm, was headed directly for Harry. Very, very quickly.

"Virus, you tard!" Lothar screamed. "Slow down! The brake! Use the damn brake!"

"What?"

"*The brake! The Fernex-loving brake! Hit it! HIT IT!*"

Cake? No, not now! Check out this thing, I—Oh, crap! I can't control it!"

The Zykian was still picking up speed, but now Virus was frantically turning the steering wheel back and forth, weaving the small car back and forth in the thin space between rows of assorted vehicles. Unless he crashed, there was only one direction for him to go—directly over Harry. Or, as the case might be, through Harry. Very, very messily through Harry.

Lothar bolted to the side, between a pair of pickup trucks, and kept running. Harry instinctively tried to do the same, and felt himself held back. He tugged fruitlessly. *I gotta get out of this shoe!* He braced his free left foot against the insole of the stuck one and

pulled with all his strength. He felt his foot begin to come free, but the Zybian was bearing down on him now, only about forty yards away. *C'mon! Come ON!*

I've faced down gigantic demons, psychotic cultists, and possessed coffee machines, he found himself thinking. I've been in outer space, and across five continents. On the eve of possibly my most dangerous mission, I'm about to be run over in a parking lot by a small vehicle driven by my best friend. I'm getting the sense this one won't look too good in the obituaries.

The Zybian drew closer. Twenty-five yards! Fifteen! Ten!

With a small pop, Harry's foot came free. The force sent him diving ten feet across the lot, bouncing off the side of a van and landing face down in an oily puddle. A half a second later, the tires of the Zybian ground his shoe into the pavement. He heard Virus yell something to him, then pulled his head out of the mire in time to watch as the vehicle finally spun out and slammed into a thick light post. A cloud of black smoke erupted from the crushed hood, and Virus went flying forward into the airbag. Blasphemy, who had *not* been wearing a seat belt or sitting in front of an airbag, discovered he could fly. For about forty feet, whereupon he discovered he could also hit the ground.

The Zybian coughed once, shuddered, and fell silent.

The lot had been devoid of people—it was a Saturday—so nobody had witnessed the fiasco. A moment of utter quiet was cast upon the scene.

Lothar broke it, coming up behind Harry, who was still prostate on the asphalt. “Quite a morning so far,” he noted. “You do realize we weren't playing ‘chicken’, right?” He looked at the remains of Harry's boot. “Never actually seen someone jump out of their shoes—er, shoe. Nice one. Here, have it back.” He reached down with his metallic right arm and effortlessly pulled the ruined boot free, then looked at the underside. “Oooh, stepped in some gum. Mine, if I'm not mistaken.”

Harry wiped dripping fur out of his eyes. “Your gum,” he said slowly.

“Yeah,” Lothar laughed. “Pretty sticky stuff. Illegal, actually. Absolute *bitch* to wash off. Lucky you won't be needing to clean it.” A large chunk fell off of the heel of the boot, punctuating the point.

“Sticky,” Harry repeated.

“Uh. Yes.”

“Look, it could have happened to anyone!” Virus protested. “Come on! It's not like this is the tenth time or something!”

“Ninth,” Lothar Hex noted.

“Whatever!”

They were speeding down a forest road, about twenty miles long, which would bring them to the oceanfront. The concrete was covered in dust, and a huge cloud trailed the car. By virtue of the fact that nobody was likely to discover the wreckage they had left in the Inquisition vehicle lot until at least Monday, the crew had simply fired up a second Zybian and taken off. The keys would only work for one type of model, but were not specific to one precise vehicle; another fine example of High Command believing they could to any degree trust their recruits. They hadn't even learned after Inquisitor Jacobs' episode with the six Lybnot armored cars and the thirty-gallon vats of mayonnaise. High Command was notoriously slow to adapt.

The Zykian lurched forward, then back. Lothar swore at Harry, who was driving. “It’s not my fault! Harry said defensively. “I’ve never driven one of these before! And these stupid sandals keep slipping off of the accelerator!”

The yellow and pink beach sandals were the only extra footwear any of them had brought, and consequently what Harry was now wearing in place of his ruined boot. When asked why the hell he had sandals on him in the first place, Virus cited the Okakir Island travel brochure, which had boasted of the island’s sunny beaches on the south side.

Lothar had sensed that the world was becoming stupider by the hour. *Is the cult seriously named after the island backwards? And furthermore...* “What the hell sort of cult promotes a tourism business?”

“One low on funding?” Virus had replied.

“Or sacrificial victims,” Harry had noted.

“Hey, you wanna go barefoot?”

“I wouldn’t *have* to, if you hadn’t...”

The Zykian hit a massive pothole and decelerated twenty miles per hour in about a quarter of a second. Virus, Harry, and Lothar all lurched forward, snapping to a halt as their seat belts took hold. Virus managed to hang on to Blasphemy, whom he was cradling in his arms. The Chao was becoming increasingly disgruntled with his lot in life, which meant that unless things improved for him quickly, a lot of other people would soon also be disgruntled with their lives. Or lack thereof.

“You moron!” Lothar yelled. “Why don’t we just put Virus back behind the wheel?”

“Really?” Virus asked.

“No.”

“They can’t have repaired this road since it was made!” Harry protested. “It’s like navigating an asteroid belt!” He jerked the wheel hard to the right, into the oncoming lane, to avoid a particularly nasty tree branch. “I’m not taking my eyes off the road,” he told Lothar. “What does the GPS say?”

Lothar looked down at the dated CABAL unit installed in the dashboard—so dated, in fact, that it lacked both a voice recognition unit and any speech capabilities of its own. “Four miles to the ocean,” he claimed, “but there’s a sharp left coming up in about... negative thirty yards.” He looked up, baffled. “Did we just do a sharp left turn?”

“I... don’t think so,” Eastwood said. “I would have noticed. What, is the CABAL broken? Give it a knock.”

Lothar gave it a knock.

“Remind me,” Eastwood said, taking one hand off of the wheel to brush plastic shards out of his fur, “never to let you touch anything ever again.”

“Well, just great!” Virus yelled from the back seat, where he was keeping the heavy Wepp rocket launcher stabilized. “No GPS, not CABAL, we might as well be back in the stone age!” That wasn’t strictly true—they still each had their individual cellular phones/pagers. Still, Blasphemy acquiesced with a loud growl. It was downright eerie how often the emotional levels of Chao and master matched—at least, proportional to their normal states. When Virus was calm, Blasphemy was homicidal. When Virus was angry, Blasphemy was very, *very* homicidal.

Virus was a bit angry right now. “Are we utterly lost? Lost less than twenty miles from base. Fine freaking bunch of Inquisitors we are!”

Lothar wasn't an Inquisitor, but couldn't be buggered to correct the mistake. Besides, Virus was annoying him in more ways than mere factual error. "You happened to mutilate the Zykian with the *working* system, you know," he growled at Virus, "so how about you just shut your face?"

"My little pal here would gladly *remove* yours, sir."

"Your 'little pal' is an ugly, dirty, hideous, odiferous..."

"Like an old married couple," Eastwood laughed easily. Zuviel and Hex both glared at him as the Zykian rode over what felt like roadkill. "You two are pathetic. Does technology literally dictate your entire lives?"

Virus and Lothar exchanged a glance. *This from the guy who goes into a catatonic state every time his Spectre is in for repair?* Lothar would have gladly commented on the hypocrisy, but Virus got in first. "Okay, genius, how do you know where the hell we are?"

"I'd say that the ocean is at about two o'clock from here," Harry said, pointing ahead and to the right. "But clearly you can neither hear the seagulls or smell the beach from here. The latter I might understand, though—if you two aren't retching merely from sitting next to each other, you're either anosmic or should *really* get some decongestant."

This time Lothar *did* comment on Eastwood's hypocrisy, loudly and profanely. But in between tirades, he did hear faint caws and could pick up that unique shoreline odor. The road happened to bend right at that very moment, and widened as it merged with a major highway. Visible up ahead was the Inquisition-dominated port of Dagou. Primarily a base for naval operations, Dagou was also a popular vacation spot, with beautiful beaches and a small residential population. The population was likely small only because frequent Inquisition mishaps helped to keep it in check.

"Nice place," Virus commented as the Zykian motored past a house on the outskirts of the town. A small boy playing in the front yard waved at them happily. Lothar returned the wave, except with only one finger. The boy stared, then began to cry. *Consider it a free lesson in the Way of the Lothar, kid*, Lothar thought, feeling somewhat better than he had most of the morning. *I've been your guru for the day. My pleasure.*

As another road combined with the highway, traffic began to pick up, and travel began to slow. Harry snarled something obscene under his breath as the speedometer dropped below twenty. Lothar snarled something obscene that was not under his breath. "These morons are probably on a Saturday beach trip," he grunted. "Don't we have priority or something? Why is there no siren on this thing?" He poked at the fizzing ruins of the CABAL port, prompting it to begin whistling a cheerful and popular ballad in reverse, giving the effect of a satanic chant. Hex left it playing—he liked music that reflected his state of mind.

"Hmm." Harry looked around at the various vehicles. "You guys are buckled, right? Tight, I mean?"

"If I hadn't been..." Lothar began, then abruptly stopped. He gave Harry a suspicious glance. "Why? What are you thinking of doi—whaaaaahhh!"

Spotting his chance, Harry had slipped the Zykian between a pair of sedans that had pulled apart just wide enough for a split second and plunged into the breakdown lane. He slammed down the acceleration and yanked the stick transmission (*stick transmission?!*) into fifth gear. The speedometer needle leapt like an antelope across the dashboard, and the Zykian roared forwards, flying down the highway. Lothar heard

someone scream, then realized it was himself. *I scream? I don't scream. I never scream! Screaming is for...*

The breakdown lane ended fifty yards ahead.

The highway became a two-lane road, straight through downtown Dagou.

Lothar screamed again. To be fair, so did Virus and Harry.

For no reason anyone could or cared to fathom, Blasphemy had fallen fast asleep.

Harry jerked the wheel hard to the left again, and the Zykian skidded onto the sidewalk. The left-side rear-view mirror went flying as the car smashed up against the front wall of buffets, gift shops, (“My friend went to Dagou and all I got was this stupid pentacle,”) and salons. Outer window dressings sailed into the street. So did pedestrians, diving for cover from the rampaging convertible. A rough loud bump and a geyser of water rising up behind them indicated that whoever typically repaired fire hydrants in the city would have an extra job on his hands today.

“Shit!” Virus yelled as a street sign sailed over their heads. Because this style of driving was at least fairly common amongst Inquisitors in a hurry, all Inquisition vehicles were equipped with a super-strength cast-iron front bumper that would hold up to a fair beating. As Virus had earlier demonstrated, however, the Zykian was a reasonably small craft, and far from invincible. For instance, should they happen to collide with that large tree planted along the edge of the sidewalk...

With a yelp, Eastwood careened the car back into traffic. Lothar looked down for long enough to realize that he had been fiercely gripping the emergency brake with his robotic right hand the entire time, proving that emergency brakes could be fairly ductile. Little by little, the second Zykian was being efficiently dismantled.

The ocean was now straight ahead, about a hundred meters away. In front the road ended in a T shape, with a series of docks in between. Expensive yachts owned by rich snobs sat next to fishing boats. One of the latter was having its cargo unloaded. About five or six heavysset guys were carrying bucket loads of fish on ice towards a weighing station, laughing and joking around as they worked.

The jokes quickly stopped as Harry revved the Zykian, wheeled over the curb, and headed straight down the center of the pier. Fish went flying as the screaming anglers dove off the pier into the water. A large mackerel smacked Lothar across the face and fell into the back seat. He wiped fish oil out of his eyes and stared as the edge of the pier approached. “Harry!” he yelled, not even wasting time on insults. “Activate the floats! They have to inflate! Damn it, *do* it!”

Eastwood slammed a hand at what was left of the control panel. Several effects came of this. The freakish music came to an abrupt halt, the windshield wipers sprung to life, and the large yellow bags on the sides of the Zykian ballooned to full inflation. A second and a half later, the vehicle plunged off the end of the pier into the ocean with a massive splash.

For one agonizing moment, Lothar thought they were going to sink. The water level rapidly rose towards the top of the door... then receded. Slowly, the Zykian pulled itself up onto its large, buoyant float. Harry flipped a sliding switch on the edge of the steering wheel, prompting the stern turbines to deploy; a few more seconds of play with the wrecked CABAL had them activated. Slowly but surely, the Zykian pulled out into the open waters of the ocean, leaving the chaos they had wreaked on Dagou behind.

“Rikako, beware!” Harry said cheerfully. “We’re on our way!”

Rogue Nekittou sipped at the straw. He had never been so humiliated in his life, nor had he ever thought that having a beautiful tigress holding his drink while he sipped would be in any way humiliating. But it was that and more. It tore at the very soul of what it meant to be a dæmon hunter, the freedom and independence that came with the danger and responsibility. It was even worse than the locker room hazing he'd put up with as a junior member of the Takian recruits' rugby team. He was quite sure that several of those exercises hadn't *really* been a part of training for the scrum.

"They're saying sixty-four ounces a day these days," Tirzah remarked, casual once again. "Supposed to be utterly essential for the health. Personally, I think it's bunk. But you aren't really going to have to worry about that for much longer, are you?" She giggled like a schoolgirl.

Rogue glared at her defiantly, but in truth he was slightly frightened. He knew that his friends were more than capable in combat. (*Well, okay, not "more than". "Capable" might even be a stretch. But they all at least they all know how to pull a trigger...right?*) But would they even find him in time? And if they did, could they really hold out against an entire cult?

Tirzah might have plucked the thought out of his head. "I wouldn't worry too much about your friends," she said. "You done with this?" Without waiting for an answer—which would have been unnecessary, seeing as no liquid remained in the cup—she set it on the tray by the doorway. "No, I think they'll get here just fine. We left plenty of clues. Really blatant clues. Impossible to miss."

Rogue laughed in spite of himself. "You're talking about the most inept detectives in the whole inept Inquisition," he said. "What makes you so sure? What have you done? I'm not exactly in a position to share any details, you know."

Tirzah pondered for a moment. "Hmm," she muttered to herself. "To be foiled by the Inquisitions own incompetence? Poetic, karmic. Or is it? Who knows?" She tossed her head. "We have plenty of prisoners here, Ryoushi," she said carelessly. "Plenty of people to kill. It would just be so *cool* if we could use a whole Inquisition team for one sacrifice. I mean, seriously. Would that not be one heck of a win for us? How often do we get an opportunity like that?"

Rogue had to admit that it would be.

"Not that it would help you at all, silly," Tirzah laughed. "You're going to die one way or another. The flesh of even one dæmon hunter would still greatly please the Gods. There is great strength that comes from partaking of one's greatest enemy. Great power. More water?"

"I'm good, thanks."

Tirzah flopped down on the floor, the folds of her dark-red cloak sweeping across the floor as she propped herself up against the back wall. She sipped at her tea and sighed. "Whoo, they do make it strong." She took another swallow, then looked back at Rogue. "Your turn to make conversation, kitty."

Dying may possibly end up being the weirdest time of my life, Rogue thought. Even falling in that psychedelic vat made more sense than this, and that made me think I was a Technicolor cherry blossom. The longer that he talked though, he knew, the longer it would be before Tirzah and co. grew bored with chitchat and moved on to shoving molten poker in his eyes, or whatever else they did for fun around here. So he said the

first thing that came to mind: “Why me? Why did you want me, or Virus? Or Harry, or Lothar? Why us?”

Too late, he realized he had missed a chance to direct the conversation towards something more pleasurable, like the symptoms of third-stage syphilis. *Oh well, no going back now.* In fact, he was badly curious as to just what *had* singled him and his group out for specific targeting. He knew they weren’t too near the top of the Inquisition scoreboard; it hung right above the doors to the cafeteria, so he tended to notice about twice a day.

“Oh, that,” Tirzah said, shrugging. “You were available, vulnerable. That’s all.” She took another swig of that frighteningly mysterious beverage.

“Don’t sell me that,” Rogue told her. “You said you’d waited a long time for this opportunity. You knew my full name; I barely use it anymore. Since when do you bother even that much for the poor bastards you regularly murder?”

“It is not murder,” Tirzah snapped back. “It is homage. Had you the intelligence to worship those of power, you would not in the situation you are now. But in your own way, you will serve them. Oh yes. You shall indeed.”

“You haven’t answered the question,” Rogue said.

Tirzah laughed, back in her girl-like mode. She seemed to swiftly fly from one personality to another, from crazy bloodthirsty cultist to scholarly and intelligent to something else altogether. “Okay, okay, you caught me,” she said. “So maybe I do have some kind of grudge. What’s it to you?”

“You tell me. You wanted to talk.” *Hopefully she still wants to.* His mind went back to pokers and other delights. *How am I going to keep this up until those idiots find me?* He knew he might have only fifteen—no fourteen and three-quarters—hours to live. He aimed to spend as few of them in excruciating pain as possible. “So tell your story,” he said again. “Why us?”

“I’ll probably bore you,” Tirzah said, drawing out the “o” in “bore.”

“Your regard for my emotions has thus far been relatively nonexistent.”

“Ooh, big words. Their power compels me. Okay, fine. You recall the day you first met those pathetic hacks you call friends? You’re really slumming with those guys, you know. You could have done so much more for yourself. Particularly had you deigned to join us instead...”

“Tell the story,” Rogue said through gritted teeth. He agreed with the sentiment about his three colleagues, but, dammit, only *he* was allowed to call them “pathetic hacks”. Or “hapless losers”. Or “incompetent morons”. Or any other such fairly appropriate combination of adjective and noun. And *nobody* had the right to tell him he should have been some kind of depraved, soulless follower. He’d hated cults for as long as he could remember.

“I am, I am,” Tirzah said. She stood up, stretching her dark-striped limbs as she narrated. “You had happened to so rudely burst in upon the same innocent hostel—”

“—cruel haven for all that reeks in the nostrils of decency—”

“—as those three, inconveniently at the same time. The backup plan kicked in; a few remained as a distraction while the majority escaped out the back. You don’t think it might be better to try raids with more than two or three people, do you?”

Should I be disturbed that I keep finding myself agreeing with this woman? Rogue thought. Something else occurred to him. “You were there? That was a Soulthirster cult,” he recalled. “But you’re Undivided now?”

“Let me finish,” Tirzah said. “We were supposed to escape out the back, but we had had a larger turnout than usual that evening. It was initiation night. If you like, I could later share some of our wonderful initiation rites. But, anyways. A lot of newbies, a lot of panic, a mob at the door. I was lucky; I got out. Most others didn’t.”

“Good,” Rogue said shortly.

Tirzah glared at him. “You know one of the people who didn’t get out? One of those who didn’t run, who stayed and fought bravely? My fiancé, Trevor. Greatest man I ever knew. Amazing with a sacrificial knife. He had the stroke, the flair. I wanted to stay, but he told me to flee... promised he’d see me in just a moment.” Astonished, Rogue saw tears glistening in the corners of her eyes.

“I found out later, from one of the last to escape,” Tirzah continued, her cold fury mounting. “He had stood his ground even when those around him fell, refusing to surrender or flee. He fought, slowly tiring, until...” She broke off and took a deep breath, slowly walking towards Rogue. “You. You sliced his head open like a godsdamn *pumpkin*. The man who was my world, my life... A pumpkin.” Tirzah was now standing directly in front of him. “That was what the witness said. Like a pumpkin. *Like a godsdamned pumpkin, you asshole!*” Screaming that last line, she began senselessly beating him in the face.

Blow after blow rained down on Rogue, unable to protect himself. His head snapped one way, then back the other. An uppercut nearly drove his chin into his skull. He felt a tooth loosen, then another. Was his nose broken? He couldn’t tell, he—

The door opened. Tirzah spun around with a venomous, “What?!”

Keahi gulped. “Oh, er... just come to get the tray,” he said nervously. “Didn’t mean to interrupt anything, honored one. Humblest apologies.” He bowed so low Rogue thought his jeans would rip. *Jeans? Cultists wearing jeans? How hard did she hit me?*

Tirzah tossed her head. “Ah, don’t worry about it,” she said pleasantly. “We were just having a nice little chat.”

“A chat,” Keahi said dubiously.

“Sure,” Tirzah told him. “A friendly chat between old friends. Don’t get to see each other enough any more, do we? I’m always losing track of past acquaintances. We kill them too fast. Old friends, right Ryoushi?”

“Yeah,” Rogue said, spitting blood out of his mouth. “We go *way* back.”

Keahi somehow still didn’t seem convinced, but he dutifully bowed once more and exited.

Tirzah turned back to Rogue. Her fur was disheveled now, which somehow added to her dark allure. For a moment, he thought she was about to resume the pummeling. But she smiled, and laughed again. “So, yeah. You’re not exactly my favorite person. But it is indeed still very nice to see you again. Funny how that works, huh?”

“Utterly hilarious,” Rogue said, wishing he had an ice pack to put over his eyes. They were going to be so swollen tomorrow...

Oh, wait.

Never mind.

“Well, you *asked*,” Tirzah said with a little pout. “So now you know why this is so, so sweet for me. All four of you... Yeah, I blame you all, but you, Ryoushi...” She smiled again, a smile that was seriously beginning to grate on Rogue’s nerves. “When in—” she drew a watch from her robe— “fourteen hours and thirty-eight minutes, I taste of your still-beating heart, it shall be triply delightful. I shall have my revenge. The Gods will be well pleased. And, it’ll be an oh-so-*delicious* late-night snack. It’s the perfect three-in one!”

She laughed once more—a laugh that did not grate, but chilled Rogue to the bone. For the first time that night, he now began to know real terror.

Part V

The Zykian was a vessel not designed to handle the open seas. Perhaps about a mile offshore was about as far as it was really designed to travel; no further than an average tourist would want to venture, anyhow. In the middle of the ocean, it might have been a twig in a hurricane.

Syrus Zuviel did not like being a twig in a hurricane.

His stomach liked it much, much less.

Lothar let out a low whistle as Virus deposited yet another helping of his guts over the side and into the raging waves. “How can you possibly even have anything left in you?” the echidna asked wonderingly. “You’ve been like a vomit faucet since we left the harbor. Still getting your sea legs?”

“No, I—” Virus’ attempted at a witty comeback was cut short as the Zykian plowed up another swell, then dropped back into a valley. Virus gulped. He moaned. His head pounded, too—this was doing nothing for his hangover, except perhaps removing all the crap from his stomach. He hadn’t even eaten breakfast. *I hate this. I hate this. Hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate...*

From the front seat, Eastwood also commented on the situation, a fairly brown and liquidy comment that swirled with the seawater and dispersed. He swore. His original cheer had vanished quite quickly, right about the first time that a massive blast of salt water had hit him in the face. “Tyros,” he muttered under his breath. “Where the hell are we going?”

“Don’t ask *him*,” Lothar said. “Virus is the one with the map.”

“We wouldn’t *need* a map if—”

Bicker, bicker, and more bicker from the front. Virus looked at Blasphemy, who was perched on the olive-green rocket launcher resting on the back seat. The Chao dæmon was happily munching away at the fish that had dropped into the boat back at the dock, utterly unconcerned by anything around him. Virus felt a strange pride. Then he felt a very different sensation, and had to dive for the railing again.

“How are you *not* affected?” he spat at Lothar, once he had given the sea his latest libation. Lothar was calmly relaxed in the shotgun chair, taking the bumps and jolts in stride. He had even donned a pair of sunglasses, from where Virus had no idea.

“Me? I got a good deal out of my system last night. And I guess I’m just tougher than you. Sucks, doesn’t it?”

“I get the feeling that’s not the whole story,” Harry said suspiciously.

Lothar turned to look at him. “Okay, fine. You want the real story? The year before I first ran into you guys, I was still working as a freelance merc. Some group of rebels rebelling against something or other hired me for a one-month term. They were invading some other place, wherever it was. Some coastline in the south. I spent a week on their ship. Got to know a lot of them, really cool guys. Of course, they didn’t stand a chance in hell; I didn’t know that at the time. Their pathetic little ship barely made it through the mouth of the enemy harbor before it was blown to smithereens. I’m fairly sure I was the only survivor. I swam to land and spent three days making my way through a stifling, boiling jungle to some vestige of civilization—which happened to be in the hands of the guys we were trying to invade—where I posed as a sadomasochistic transsexual named Alice until I could engineer a way back to this continent. That explain things for you?”

Virus felt his brain being scrambled, and it wasn’t the pitching of the boat. “Really?” he asked.

“No,” Lothar replied. “Be interesting if I had, though. Like I said, you’re just a couple of pussies. That’s all.”

Blasphemy burped. Virus turned to look again at his small pet, who had a decidedly uncomfortable expression on his face. “Blasphemy?” Virus asked. “Hey, Blas, you okay?” Blasphemy shuddered and scrunched his triangular yellow eyes, inhaling rapidly, and...

“Oh, *crap!*” Virus screamed, diving across the seat. His fingers closed around Blasphemy’s middle and he thrust the Chao out over the sea. A nanosecond later, Blasphemy too opened his oral floodgates. A revolting-colored fetid jet of raw meat and stomach acid flooded into the water. Blasphemy shook in Virus’ hands violently. *I’m gonna drop him!* he thought desperately. He tightened his grip—unfortunately provoking Blasphemy to gush forth the fruits of his abdomen a second time.

“Nice save,” Harry commented amusedly.

“I’d say he gets the try,” Lothar added. “Four points for the Lions.”

Virus slowly brought Blasphemy back into the Zybian, setting him down where he had been before. Now perfectly content, Blasphemy hugged the barrel of the Wepp for stability and watched the waves go by.

“Where,” Virus asked, for lack of anything better to say, “are we?”

“The ocean,” Harry replied, perfectly deadpan.

“You have the map, right, Virus?” Lothar said. “Where’s the map?”

“It’s in the waterproof compartment, with all our supplies,” Virus replied. “I have a question about that, though... were we planning on navigating by the stars? Because unless you can find any landmarks...” He gestured at the open water all around them. They could still see a small line behind them on the horizon—the mainland—but no view of an island up ahead. “We were supposed to just go straight east for—”

“Hmm?” Harry asked. “Sorry. I heard my name?”

“Shut up and drive,” Virus and Lothar said, almost simultaneously. Virus continued, “We’re supposed to go straight east from Dagou, then just a few degrees north, about eleven miles total. Have you been using a compass?”

“A *compass?*” Lothar asked incredulously. “Do I look like a caveman?”

“Yes.”

Lothar drew his hands into tightly-clenched fists, but managed to restrain himself. A fight in the Zykian would be counterproductive in several ways, unless there was anything anyone could produce while floundering in the ocean. “No. I haven’t been using a godsdamned compass,” he said. “The stupid island is only ten miles offshore. How hard could it be to find?”

“So we have no freaking clue where we are?” Eastwood asked. “I’m driving, I’m driving,” he added hastily, as Virus and Lothar both snarled at him again. “But listen. Virus, take that map out and root through the navigational supplies. There should be a calculator there with the horizon distance formula. Pull it out.”

Virus dug into the supplies and soon procured the items. “Horizon distance calculator?” he asked skeptically. *What on Mobius?* “How will that help us?”

“I get it,” Lothar said. “Dagou is on the horizon right now, so if we know how far to the horizon, we know how far we’ve come. From that, listen, we can tell about how much further we have to go. From *there* we can tell how far away Okakir should be, and how close we have to come to be able to spot it. By using the speedometer—*that* still works, at least—and a stopwatch, we’ll be able to tell when we’ve definitively passed where the island could be. Then, if we’ve missed it, we backtrack.”

“Right, of course,” Virus muttered. *I knew that.* “I’ll have you know I got straight A’s in algebra... aced the final...” He fiddled with the calculator for a moment, confused. “What exactly does this button with the little cross do again?”

“Give me that,” Lothar said, snatching the calculator and converter. He skimmed the little distance card. “Hmm. Which one of us is tallest?”

“I’m one-eighteen,” Harry said.

“... What?”

“... Oh, *sheesh*. The metric system gets *no* respect. Three foot ten, if you must.”

“Three-eleven,” Virus said.

“That makes you tallest, then. Okay.” Lothar jabbed at buttons. “Minus length to eyes, plus floor of boat. Round off at four feet. Divide by point five seven three six and take the square root...” He pressed the equals key. “So according to this, you should be able to see...” He paused.

“See where?” Virus asked.

“... Luxembourg. Shit. Lemme try that again.”

“A little over two and a half miles,” Lothar announced. “And Okakir is the only island within thirty miles of here, except for one that’s just a mile from shore.”

“Hang on one sec,” Harry Eastwood said. “That’s when he’s standing up in the boat. He really shouldn’t be standing up in the boat, especially not...”

“Eh, he only has to stand occasionally,” Lothar said. “Just to check. I’ll keep track of our distance. How fast we going?”

Harry looked at the speedometer. A bit of spray came over the side of the side of the Zykian and splashed in his face. He shook his head and took one hand off the wheel to wipe it out. “Eight miles per hour,” he said. “Any much faster, these waves kill us. Time?”

“Ten-thirty,” Virus said.

“I’ve started a watch,” Lothar said. “At that rate, we should probably start looking for the island in a little less than an hour. Turn a bit north, East.”

“Northeast?”

“No, East. North.”

“Turn north?”

“Yes, East.”

“... You just said north!”

“I did say north, East! North!”

“How far northeast now?”

“Just—there, there, you idiot, right there! Just stay that course!” Lothar flopped back in his seat. “Everyone in the world is trying to *stupid* me to death...”

The Zykian bumped onwards to the east-northeast. Harry kept half an eye on the ocean and another half on the speedometer. The last two halves were looking at something, though he wasn't quite sure what.

Lothar yawned. He pulled his hat over his head and closed his eyes.

Spray came over the bow. Seagulls chirped.

“You know,” Virus said. “If a tsunami should just so happen rise up ahead and hit us, we'd all die. We couldn't do anything about it.”

“Why such cheer?” Harry asked.

“I dunno. I was just thinking.”

“Do you think a tsunami is going to hit us?”

“No.”

“Then why did you say it?”

“I don't know. Okay? I don't know, sheesh. I was just trying to make conversation. We've got to burn a full hour. We could tell jokes, then... here, I've got one. So a guy goes to his a psychiatrist and says: ‘Doc, I keep having these alternating recurring dreams. First I'm a teepee, then I'm a wigwam, then I'm a teepee, and then I'm a wigwam. It's driving me crazy. What's wrong with me?’ And the doctor says: ‘It's simple—you're two tents!’” Virus laughed.

Maybe a tsunami will hit us, Harry thought hopefully.

Virus seemed wounded that his attempt had fallen flat. He was silent for about five minutes. Harry thought about several things that made him quite happy, and would make any normal person quite disturbed. Lothar appeared to be fast asleep, despite the bumps. Blasphemy sat happily on the barrel of the Wepp launcher, rocking with the boat, utterly content with his place in the world.

... no, that rocking was definitely not just with the boat.

“Oh, yuck!” Harry exclaimed. “Virus! Make him stop that!”

“Why?” Virus asked amusedly. “He likes it! What's so bad about a little Chao-on-weapon-of-mass-destruction action? In fact, I could probably get a fair price for this on Ebay. If I had a video camera, that is. Would you prefer I put him up front with you?”

Harry turned his eyes back to the ocean ahead and was rewarded with a fresh blast of spray that came sailing over the windshield. *Why didn't I think to bring sunglasses?* He knew that was illogical; he'd have to clean them every time he got splashed. *Well, how about a higher windshield?* More wind resistance, a slower, more awkward boat; he supposed they could raise the convertible roof, but that gave the impression of a coffin at sea—and if something went wrong, they'd all go down with the ship. *Well, what about... erm...* Harry searched for a solution. *Know what?* he concluded. *Life sucks.*

He tugged at his trenchcoat. It was a warm, sunny day at land, but a little chilly this far out to sea.

“So,” he said, finally hitting upon something to talk about. “Vir. You’ve been keeping the rest of this plan, those papers, to yourself. What are we doing—what’s the deal after we find this place, Okakir? What’s the rocket launcher for?”

Virus reopened the waterproof container. “Tell you in one sec,” he said. “Hand me that calculator and card?” Harry did, and Virus stashed them away, drawing out the gargantuan packet of papers Schaefer had given them, back at HQ. He flipped about a fifth of the way through it and began to summarize. “Okakir is shaped roughly like a lopsided number 3,” he read. “The middle ‘prong’ of the 3 is a large knoll, about a hundred and fifty feet tall. To the north and south are two harbors; on the tip of each is another lookout station, so each harbor is guarded by at least two stations. They are equipped with heavy weaponry, and the high one can cover almost three-quarters of a miles out to sea.”

Harry felt a light bulb go off in his mind. “I guess that explains the Wepp,” he said. “How do we approach?”

“Erm,” Virus said, looking at the next page. “It says we’re to destroy the bottommost and middle stations, then land in the lower harbor and stealthily make our way inland.”

“Stealthily?” Harry asked. Something seemed wrong.

“Well, we can’t advertise that we’re there. This whole mission depends on surprise, don’t you see? Virus spoke with cool confidence. “Nobody will have any idea, until we come down on their heads! Stealthy... like ninja!” He threw a couple of imaginary stars, felling imaginary cultists.

“I suppose,” Harry asked, realizing the flaw, “that this stealthy plan reaches to nobody happening to notice two massive explosions on a two-square mile island?”

Virus opened his mouth to reply—Harry couldn’t see, but he could tell—but nothing came out. Zuviel sat stupidly for a moment before delivering an incoherent, “Auh,” and shutting his trap. He pondered for a moment, then made a smooth transition into sulking. “Well, *I* probably wouldn’t notice,” he said sullenly.

“A ringing endorsement of your noticing abilities,” Harry smirked.

“Well, would *you*?”

“No,” Harry replied, “but my room being next to Lothar’s, I’ve become somewhat accustomed to random blasts. And that’s just the flatulence. So, what happens after that?”

“Well,” Virus said, “after that we have several options... more than several. Oh, that’s good. We’ll have backup plans, in case something goes wrong! It’s nice to see the Inquisition doing something *right* for a change...”

“Backup plans? Like what?”

“Well, there’s... um. After we take out the lookout towers, we... well, we land... and move towards the center of the island. There’s... roads... and a swamp. Yeah. Other than that, though, we have options! We can choose our own destinies!” Virus struck a ridiculous pose.

“So in other words,” Harry said, “‘having options’ means having no plan whatsoever?”

“... Well. Yeah.”

“Awesome.”

In the bouncing, rocking Zykan, Lothar Hex couldn't fall asleep. This ticked him off, because not being able to fall asleep required that he endure the hideously tedious conversations between Virus and Harry. Worse still, telling either of them (or, preferably, both) to shut the hell up would require *admitting* that he couldn't fall asleep. The only thing worse in this situation than not being able to fall asleep would be admitting that he was unable to fall asleep. He pondered this for a while, and fell asleep thinking about it.

When he awoke, the Inquisitors were discussing something else altogether. It was vile, obscene, and contrary to all standards of moral discipline. Lothar would have eagerly joined this conversation, but a stretch, yawn, and quick check of his watch revealed that fifty minutes had passed since he started clocking. "Whoop," he said "We're getting close. Anybody see it?"

"Nope," Harry replied.

"Nothing yet," Virus added.

"Okay," Lothar said. "Virus. Stand up and look around. You'll be able to see farther. Any glimpse of land, tell us."

Virus looked around. "I need to brace myself..." he said slightly nervously. His eyes rested upon the barrel of the rocket launcher. Blasphemy was still happily perched upon the tip. Virus grabbed the long metal tube, steadying himself, and stood. He looked around, surveying the oceanscape. "Nothing," he said. "Some gulls straight ahead, but nothing conclusive."

"The birds will probably be around the shore," Harry remarked.

"Maybe," Lothar said. "But maybe not, too. I got an idea. Vir. Stand up on your seat. You'll be a full two feet higher."

Now Virus looked more than slightly nervous. "Stand up?" he said in a tone that suggested he might rather play dodgeball with maces. "On my seat? I don't think that's the smartest idea I've ever heard..."

"Smarter than any you've *had*," Harry interjected.

"Yeah. I'm thinking I *don't* want to take an unplanned bath."

You pansy, Lothar thought. *Pansy, pansy. What's the big deal?* "Fine," he said, in what he hoped was an appropriately disgruntled, sarcastic, nasty, and callous tone. "East, stop the boat," Harry brought the Zykan to a slow cruise in the water, which, overall, had fairly little effect on the total turbulence. The vehicle bounced up and down upon the rollicking ocean. "Just quickly stand up and look around. Hurry up!"

Virus gulped and looked at the swirling sea. "Screw you," he muttered. "Screw you, screw you." But he swung a foot up on the seat and slowly unbent his knee, keeping a firm grip on the muzzle of the Wepp, rising into the air. *Good*, Lothar thought. *I knew there had to be some reason what I keep him around.*

Virus straightened himself as much as he could while still keeping a grip on the weapon. He held his other hand up to his forehead, surveying the great beyond from their impromptu crow's nest. "... I still don't see any—" he began, then brightened. "Wait! Wait! I see it! I see it! It's vague, but I'm pretty sure I see it!"

"What direction?" Harry asked.

"That way!" Virus said, taking his hand off the barrel to point.

"Great!" Harry said, and gunned the engine.

Virus had time for one startled squawk before he was cast violently off the stern, plunging into the mild waters of Mobian ocean with a sizable splash. He struggled for one moment, then disappeared beneath the waves. A few bubbles rose from where he had gone under.

Harry turned to stare at Lothar, wide-eyed. "Did he just fall off the back?"

Lothar looked. "It seems so."

"Sure?"

"Fairly."

Harry looked puzzled for a moment. Then he hit upon something. "*Man overboard!*" he screamed dramatically.

"Yeah," Lothar said. "We just verified that."

Harry didn't hear him, though. The fox had stalled the boat and literally dove into the back seat, very badly bruising his right kneecap. He scrambled to grab a life ring, tearing it off the rack and impressively managing to accidentally break the world record for binding one's arm to his left thigh. In a further fit of brilliance, he screamed a couple dozen obscenities. Blasphemy regarded him interestedly.

"Lothar!" Harry yelled. "*Do something!*"

Lothar waved his arms a bit.

"Something *helpful!*" Eastwood shrieked.

Lothar sighed. *And me just beginning to enjoy the day, too.* He tossed his hat on the seat. "If this blows away, you're next in the drink," he sternly told Harry, though at the moment Harry wouldn't have even been able to pick his own nose if his life depended on it. Hex climbed over the tethered vulpine and, taking a deep breath to steady himself, plunged into the sea.

He didn't have to worry about his circuits shorting out or anything; those who had created him had developed waterproofing technology for robotics eons ago. That didn't mean, however, that they had managed to decrease the density of solid steel. For all his strength, Lothar began to sink like a rock. *Jumped into the ocean with my own pair of cement shoes,* he thought, half-amused and half-disgusted.

Unlike some hapless mob victim, however, Lothar had an ace in the hole. He let himself sink for about twenty feet in a swan dive, then kicked in his leaping jets. The burners in his feet were not powerful; they could only be used for about two seconds at a time and he seldom used them except when a high jump, usually for escape purposes, was called for. Right now, they would come in excellent handy for a daring rescue attempt.

The jets came to life, sending Lothar hurtling forwards through the water. He quickly made a few mental estimates, and concluded that he *did* in fact prefer pears to oranges. He quickly made a few more relevant mental estimates, and cut his thrusters a second and a quarter after engaging them.

A fish hit him in the face. Rather, he hit a fish in the face. The fish did not like being hit by Lothar's face. It actually disliked the experience of the impact to an extent to which it quickly and painfully perished. Lothar did not fail to note that this was the second time today that a fish had come in contact with his face. *Three more to break my one-day record,* he thought.

"There!" Lothar said loud, though to anyone else it would have sounded like "blub". Straight ahead, Virus was suspended in the water, floating peacefully—eerily

peacefully. His trenchcoat billowed out behind him like a stylish, black cape. A steady stream of bubbles flew from his mouth and sailed up, up, into the light that was life. Lothar fired his boosters again, knowing he was pushing his luck, knowing he would need to use them at least once more. Passing by Zuviel's dormant body at high speed, he hooked an arm around his friend's body and changed directions, towards the surface. He was running out of air, and Virus no doubt was worse off. *C'mon. Push. Push...*

His momentum ran out about five feet from the surface, and he felt himself being dragged backwards, back down into eternity. With one final effort, he sparked his thrusters once more, launching himself and Virus about twenty feet into the air.

"Yaaaahhh!" Lothar yelled in exhilaration and fear combined. He twisted in the air, trying to find the Zykian, knowing he was now definitely out of fuel for his jets. There it was, with Harry back behind the wheel, having spontaneously (and, once again, inadvertently) freed himself in a manner that Houdini would have envied. He sped back and forth, in forward and reverse, trying to predict where the two projectiles would land. *Please, Tyrus, Lothar prayed—though he would never admit it—let him have his stupid contact lenses in today...*

Apparently, Harry did.

The Zykian shuddered as the two flying furies crashed into the back seat. Lothar felt his knee joint drive into Virus' stomach as they landed. Zuviel responded by—once more—spewing a fountain of salt water into the air. He spent the next minute arguing with his lungs, who seemed to think they were malfunctioning airplane engines. It appeared the organs held the upper hand in the debate.

Lothar rubbed at a small bruise in his side. *Damn.* It annoyed him.

"Well?" Harry asked. "Do I get a 'nice catch'? Or would you have preferred I let you finish your synchro diving practice? I don't think a performance like that would earn much better than bronze in most—whoa," he added, getting his first good look at the bedraggled Virus. "Are you okay?"

"... be... fine..." Virus gasped.

"You sure?" Harry said. "Sheesh, you're soaked. You look like... oh, what's the expression. Washed up, petered out... oh, right: you look like a drowned ra—"

"Finish that word," Virus growled through his agony, "and the moment I can use my limbs ..."

"Yeah, yeah, you'll fall out of the boat again. Spare me the detail. You still have your guns, both of ya? Thank Tyrus they're waterproof. Didn't lose 'em? Good. So now—"

"I just realized something," Lothar interrupted. "Without a single encounter with any foe, without even once meeting someone attempting to do us harm, we have all come this close to being killed, some of us," —he motioned to Eastwood and Zuviel— "more than once. Pretty much by our own hands."

Virus and Harry thought about that.

"There's something unusual about that?" Harry asked.

"Not at all. *That's* the damn problem."

"Oh well," Virus said readily. *Bounce-back time from near-death to normal self: 0:00:22.* "Plenty more opportunities to defy suicidal death await." He ran his hands over his head, smoothing down the soaked fur so that he looked positively ridiculous. "What are we waiting for? Okakir ahoy! Onwards!"

Onwards, Lothar thought. *Glee*.

“I’m not a virgin, you know.”

Rogue Nekkitou had hit upon this new idea a moment before, and had spent the last few minutes considering whether or not to espouse upon it. He knew that it clearly would not win him freedom: if Tirzah and company had an issue with that fact, they would likely just kill him now and save the trouble. Some other poor sap would probably end up being sacrificed in his place. And it wouldn’t help Virus, Harry, and Lothar in any way... they would still come looking for him, and still end up just as dead.

So, of course, he decided to go for it.

Tirzah cocked an eyebrow. “Really,” she asked, sounding puzzled. “You’re not?”

“No,” Rogue said, grabbing the moment. To die as a sacrifice to the Dark Gods would be hideously ignominious. To simply be killed by a cult would let him at least save a fraction of honor. “No, I’m not,” he continued. “In fact, I’ll have you know I have committed *several* shameless indiscretions and acts of disgraceful moral corruption. I have soiled my soul before the eyes of all the Gods. I’m a pimp, I’m a whore, I’m—”

“... a horrible liar and an insufferable braggart, most likely,” Tirzah said. “And even if any part of that is true, it doesn’t matter. Such affectations are for the bourgeoisie. Fernex won’t care if you’re ridden with venereal disease. I doubt he’d even care if you were a sodomite. The Soulthirster, on the other hand, would probably consider that a bonus.”

“So I’m to be fodder for Fernex, then?” Rogue asked, though he didn’t much care. Dead in dishonor was dead in dishonor. *Well, I don’t care too much, anyhow*. Cults of the Dark Gods believed that the souls of sacrificial victims became slaves to the evil deities, spending eternity in servitude. Rogue believed in nothing of the sort, but did allow that an eternity of service to the god of machines was probably preferable to said eternity pandering to the god of depravity. However impure he might be now would be thousandfold as slave of the Soulthirster. And he doubted he’d enjoy it.

“Maaaaaybe,” Tirzah teased. “And maybe it’ll be your buddy the echidna. Fernex would love to reclaim his own there. Lothar already half belongs to him.”

“You *lie*,” Rogue spat, furious. *How dare she?*

“How?”

“He’s *not* my ‘buddy’.”

“Oh.”

“But he can be a damn good guy when the situation calls for it. And he serves *no* god, let alone a Dark one.” Actually, Rogue had strong suspicions that had the Patterner, lord of greed, put in a little effort, Lothar could have been swung. One could fit the entirety of Hex’s moral code onto a supermarket receipt from the twelve-or-less items line. But even so, Lothar had demonstrated a contempt for all things occult since Rogue had first met him. “You... how can you possibly think he would belong to one of your vile, stinking orders?”

“Look at this,” Tirzah said, crouching and extending her left leg. Rouge did his best to angle his head to get a good look. The tigress smiled as she spun the gold anklet. Yellow, red, gray, black. Topaz, spinel, hematite, obsidian. Patterner, Hound, Fernex, Soulthirster. Tirzah brought the revolving halo to a halt with the steely hematite.

“Machines,” she purred. “Fernex is lord of all that is mechanical, of intertwining circuits

and grinding gears, of chromium plating and cold, cold steel. All, all that is of such, belongs to him. As does your cyborg.”

“Gruss is lord of machines,” Rogue said confidently, “not your poor little angsty spin-off. Besides, Lothar belongs to nobody.”

Tirzah glowered—the cut on Fernex had hurt. “Tonight, he will belong to—”

“Oh, will you *cut the crap*?” Rogue said, finally losing patience. It really wasn’t so much that he cared about Lothar’s dignity; he’d simply been trying to kill time. But sometimes it seemed like cultists spoke of their gods and rituals with words arranged on a magnetic board. “Lord”, “night”, “dark”, “belong” “devour”. “*You belong to the lord of the night.*” “*The darkness will devour him.*” “*Last night, the dark Belong devoured my lord.*” A Belong was a sizable pachyderm with a temperamental disposition.

“Excuse me?” Tirzah said. She stood and took a few steps forward until her crystal-blue eyes were about twelve inches from Rogue’s face. He realized she was just as tall as he was; she could look him directly in the pupils. “Would you care to repeat that?”

“I said,” Rogue repeated with bravado, “cut the bullshit. I—”

“No, no. You said ‘cut the crap’.”

“... I did?”

“Yeah.”

Rogue pondered this for a moment.

“What the hell difference does it make?” he asked finally.

“I asked you to do something, Ryoushi,” Tirzah said softly, dangerously. “Please repeat what you said before.”

“... I don’t understand.”

“Say it!”

“It.”

Tirzah slapped him across the face. “Moron!” she said furiously. “What the hell is your problem?” She spun away and stalked out the door, he shawl brushing the frame as she slammed it shut.

“You want them alphabetically?” Rogue called after her, feeling proud. Having abandoned most hope of survival, he was throwing caution to the winds. If he couldn’t die in battle, if he couldn’t die with honor, he’d at least die laughing. He aimed to make as big a mockery of his captives as he could. *I will perish by the code*, he thought. *I will be brave. I will be bold. I will show no fear...*

A minute or so passed. The door re-opened. Two other cultists entered: a diminutive, simpering, shifty civet and a much, much larger rhinoceros, carrying a sizable toolbox. Tirzah stood in the doorway with an expression half pouting, half anticipant. The civet flipped the latch on the box, opening it to reveal a smorgasbord of very, very painful-looking accessories.

I’m gonna show some fear!

Part VI

“Okakir!” Syrus Zuviel proclaimed happily as the isle loomed about a mile ahead. “Surfing! Hiking! Playing *Swiss Family Robinson*! The fun never ends!”

“We’re not here to build a tree house, you idiot,” Lothar said, rolling his eyes. “You might recall there are several dozen people on that little atoll that will, fairly soon, be doing their utmost to display our heads on sharp sticks.”

“I think I’ll go swimming first,” Virus continued heedlessly. “No, no, wait. I just did that. I’ll climb to the highest point and look out over the great big ocean... then I’ll go find the snack bar, see if I can meet some hot chicks, sunbathe... ooh, ooh, did you bring tanning lotion? Someone must’ve brought tanning lotion!”

“Virus, you’re a *rat*. You’re *covered in fur*.”

“Well, I can *dream*, can’t I?”

“Hey guys,” Harry chimed in. “See, I might be wrong about this, but according to my observations, we’ve just come in range of the southernmost lookout tower. We might want to be a little more alert.”

“Why are you so sure?” Virus asked.

“Their last shot landed six feet to starboard.”

“Crap!” Virus yelled, scrambling to get a hold of the Wepp rocket launcher. It was obscenely heavy; he could barely lift it. Blasphemy hopped to the floor of the Zykian, irritated at the disturbance. “Where do I mount this thing?” Zuviel added, trying to make sense of the complicated hooks. *Child Safety Lock? I don’t think a nuclear physicist could figure this thing out!*

Lothar looked back over his right shoulder. “There’s a little... thinger there!” he instructed unhelpfully. “Just slide the thingy into the thinger and push!”

“What sort of ‘mounting’ is this, ballistics or coitus?”

“The seat! There’s a lever on the bottom! Look, push the thing out of the way, reach down and pull the lever. Wrong lever. No, that one reclines your seat. That’s the bilge pump... no, that one starts playing a hologram of *Viking Women and the Sea Serpent* on the windshield, why does it even *have* that lever? There! The big black one with the three skulls and the ‘fuck you’ emblazoned on the handle! Pull it!”

Virus pulled it. The seat began to mutate itself, with the leftmost cushion reclining to reveal a chassis perfectly suitable for the Wepp’s complicated base. Climbing back up on top of the seat, he began to shove the Wepp towards the hole. “Are they still shooting at us?” he asked as he shoved. “Did they hit us?”

“Yeah, we’re hit!” Harry yelled back. “With twelve-inch shells, five direct hits on the bow! Didn’t you feel it? No, you idiot, we haven’t been hit, but there’s two stations firing at us now and I can’t dodge them for much longer! Is that thing in?”

The rocket launcher slid into place, locking itself perfectly. “Yes!” Zuviel called. He lifted his head to see another shell scream over their heads and land in the water a few yards behind them. “Should I shoot?”

Lothar whirled. “*No, play a few games of solitaire first, why don’t you?*”

“Is it loaded?”

“Let me back there!” Lothar snarled, vaulting into the back seat and smacking Eastwood in the face in the process. “You didn’t *load it yet*? What the hell have you been doing back here the whole trip?”

“Vomiting. I thought you noticed.”

The Zykian seemed to have an innumerable number of pockets, most of which only Lothar, who had packed a lot of their supplies, knew about. The one holding ammunition for the Wepp was in the back of the shotgun seat. The rockets, packed in

compact rows, were small... but held the potential for plenty of devastation. “Here!” Lothar grunted, throwing five to Virus. “Open the hatch on the side; put these in! It should be obvious where they go!”

Over this, Harry was yelling from the front seat. Zuviel could only catch a bit of it over the splashes and screaming and general panic: “... of range, there’s too much flak, no choice!”

“Evasive action!” Lothar ordered him.

“Are you nuts? I can’t! We gotta bail!”

“We’re not running! Why can’t you? Take the damn rockets, rat! Why not?”

Virus loaded the rockets into the Wepp’s compartment and finally was able to look up at the island. He could see two wooded bumps, knobs of land arising from the sea. *The harbor is between them, we have to go between them.* The main obstacles for this end were the pair of innocent-looking wooden sheds atop each knob. From those wholly innocent-looking sheds were flying much less innocent-looking large shells at the tiny speeding boat. *Gods damn, Virus thought. We’re headed right into their jaws!* He grabbed at the rocket launcher’s aiming mechanism and stared at the scope, trying to draw a bead on either hill.

“Because we’re in a stupid—*shit!*—clumsy undersized crapbox that can’t even turn properly! Like a turtle! Tell a freaking turtle to take evasive action!”

“We are not running away! These guys couldn’t hit a continent! Just charge for the harbor; we’re less than a mile away! Max speed, damn it! We’ll make it!”

“They can’t miss forever!”

“I’d bet they can!”

“... How much?”

“*Our lives, moron!*”

“Hey, um, guys,” Virus spoke up. For a moment, miraculously Harry and Lothar stopped yelling to stare at him. No shells fell. Time seemed to stand still, except that the Zykian continued to plow through the waves. “Y’know, it’s kind of hard to aim this thing when you’re being stupid, so if you could just, for a moment, not be stupid... that’d be great. ‘Kay? No stupid. Thanks.”

It bought him the one precious moment of stunned, outraged silence that he needed to focus, aim the super-powerful scope, and fire five high-powered heat-seeking missiles in fast succession directly at the tiny wooden shack atop the closer of the two lumps of land.

Carlo Gray laughed, looking out the window at the scene below. “Look at them run!” the pronghorn cried gleefully. “Fire off another salvo, Val! I’ve got a hefty bet with Cassani that we’d bring down the next tourists before he and Sakurai do, and I can’t afford to pay, so we’d best hit them first!”

Valdemar Maffeo grinned a bullish grin and let loose with three more shells. It came as no surprise that his grin struck Gray as being bullish, as Maffeo was of the bovine persuasion. He was large, strong, generally silent, and held a passion for inflicting pain upon any who crossed him—in other words, the perfect man for his job. Gray couldn’t have asked for a better gunner.

Well, except for one who occasionally hits something, he amended mentally, watching as not a one of Maffeo’s shells landed within forty feet of the boat speeding

through the harbor far below. A few shells from the second, lower outpost also sailed out, with no more success. “Come on, Val,” Gray whined. “Quit screwing around and sink them. I really don’t want to have to deal with a land breach...”

Maffeo spit a large wad of tobacco-stained saliva onto the wooden floor of the lookout shack. “The *Sacrificium*,” he grunted, which put him over his average daily word allotment. His beady black eyes went back to the sighting system of his weapon, trying to get a bearing for another shot.

“What?” Carlo yapped, confused. “What about the *Sacrificium*? Look, Val, we’ve got plenty of prisoners. We grabbed a half-dozen just off of the Wytatt raid last week. There’ll be blood for the sacrifice. It’ll flow. This blood, that blood, his, hers, who cares, it’s all red and tastes fairly good on fettuccini. Unless,” he added, “it has AIDS, in which case tomato sauce is considered an acceptable substitute in my book.”

Unsurprisingly, Maffeo did not respond, except by launching another two shots, with, if possible, even less success than he had had yet. Gray snarled disgustedly. “Look, don’t try to tell me you’re even trying. I know *numero uno* made a few strange commands, but seriously, are they really going to get pissed at us for doing our jobs? Who’s gonna miss one boat? Hit them already. My chiropractor has advised against taking any prisoners, at least for three months.” He swiveled his cushioned chair away from his monitoring screen and towards the window, sipping at a martini carelessly.

“Orders,” Valdemar muttered, now leaning towards shattering a personal record for vocalization.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Carlo said absentmindedly, staring at the harbor below. “We got orders to let someone through the harbor? That’s ridiculous. That’s not what the orders were. Let me see that... son of the *Hound!*” he screamed suddenly over the echoes of a massive explosion. The martini glass fell out of his hand and shattered on the floor. “Oh crap! Oh crap! It blew up! The godsdamn outpost blew up!”

Even Maffeo couldn’t ignore a noise of that caliber, despite his impressive ability to tune out Gray’s endless babble. His horned head took a quick look out the window at the smoking stain that had once been the secondary firing post. “Shit,” he commented, bordering on an oration.

They’re dead, they’re dead, Cassani and Sakurai, crap, crap, they’re dead, Gray thought wildly, beginning to panic. How the hell did that happen? What is that mongrel packing? Why did I ever take this job? Why didn’t I just do the white-collar thing? They’re dead, dead, crap, crap, crap, should have been a patent lawyer...

Valdemar Maffeo was once again blasting away at the harbor, this time with slightly more focus. The small boat was nearing shore; within another thirty seconds it would land. Gray was back at his computer in a flash, banging away at keys, trying to get a clear shot to recalibrate the cannons. He prepared himself to engage the second weapon—he was an even worse shot than Maffeo, but desperate times called for desperate—

Carlo’s control panel started beeping. Loudly. Lights began lighting up that Carlo did not want to see lit. He banged randomly, terrified, as the beeping increased in intensity. Gray flung a look towards the window in time to see three missiles sailing at high speed directly for his shack. His, Gray now realized, very, very, very vulnerable and flimsy shack.

With a whimper, Carlo Gray threw himself flat.
It didn't help.

"If we survive this," Harry Eastwood told Virus as they leapt onto the beach sand of Okakir Island, "remind me to kill you."

"What, for saving our lives?" Zuviel asked, drawing his pre-loaded Mazzeltorpe blaster shotgun free from his trenchcoat. "You've got to admit those were good shots."

"You called me stupid," Eastwood said, hurt. He already had donned his protective gloves and was charging up the Hequor "fire hose". The air around the odd solar panel-like structures seemed to waver as the particles were absorbed and converted into lethal plasma. "Not fair."

"Hey, come on, East," Lothar said, vaulting over the side of the Zykian onto the beach, Knyyfrank machine gun in hands. Blasphemy hopped out after him. "Give the man some credit, 'cause I sure as hell ain't gonna."

"I *saved your lives*," Virus repeated. "This is the respect I get?"

"I saved yours twenty minutes ago!"

"Yeah," Eastwood chipped in, "and I saved *both* of you from those two crazed killer robots, remember? The ones that were disguised and had you completely in their power? And you were completely helpless, about to succumb? Remember?"

"Eastwood, you shot the girls we were hitting on."

"I told you, that red liquid was their *engine oil*!"

"So remind me again," Virus now remarked as the trio, plus Blasphemy, sprinted up the beach towards a barrier of grassy dunes, wearing their supply backpacks. "Why are we just leaving the Zykian there again? There are roads leading straight to the central complex, and traveling on one of them would probably decrease our chances of contracting malaria."

"Probably," Lothar said. "You can feel free to head back and take the thing if you like. When the land mine in the middle of the road blows you sky-high, though, do remember you promised me that I could have your desk."

"Hey, I never—" Harry cut Virus' asinine protest short with an elbow to the ribs. *Come out, come out*, Eastwood thought. He signaled to the other two to be quiet. He had definitely heard something rustling in the dunes up ahead. *A bird... or a foe? Or a bird foe? Anyone can be a foe. Enemies on all sides. Vigilance, I say!*

"Fan out," Eastwood whispered to the other two as they moved into the long grass springing up from the sand. "Just a little. Stay fairly close, but not bunched up. Guns ready. We've got company." He moved off a little ways to the left, crouched low beneath the grass. *The ninja stalks his prey*, he thought, smiling to himself. *The lion on the hunt. I smell a dirty jackal nearby, and—*

"Freeze, Inquisition scum!" A muzzle pressed against the back of his head.

It's going to be a jackal, isn't it, Harry thought resignedly. *With no deodorant, to boot.*

"Stand up! Up!" Eastwood's captor barked. "Drop the weapon! And the sack!" Eastwood let the Hequor fall in the grass, and his backpack fall from his shoulders. "Hands high, and we might let you live another few hours! Why are you here? What—*hey!*"

“Nice job, though,” Virus pressed. “That was pretty cool, how we all shot at the same time? That was really excellent. Great job, Loth.”

“Yeah.” In Hex’s lexicon, that was a compliment.

“Come on, we did good, right? We did good. Say we did good.”

“Yeah. We did.”

“Right, Harry?” Virus asked. “That was good? That was good, right?”

Harry didn’t respond at first. He bowed his head and closed his eyes, breathing hard. In turn, each of his hands closed into a fist. Slowly, exhaling audibly, he turned to face the others, opened his eyes, and let loose all the pent-up horror of a near-death experience...

“Motherfucker!” he screamed. “Five minutes on land and I’ve *already* got blood on my fur!”

“The entire island knows we’re here,” Lothar Hex said angrily. He rarely said anything describable by any other adverb. “Why am I carrying around these things?” He juggled a pair of Nox sleeping gas grenades in his robotic hand; the other was holding his Knyyfrank machine gun. “They seem like more of a stealth weapon, don’t you think?”

“Well,” Harry replied. “There’s actually a funny story behind that.”

Lothar waited to hear the funny story.

“... which, erm, I don’t exactly know,” Harry finally finished lamely. “Okay, fine, I have no idea. Happy?”

“No,” Lothar snapped, throwing the gas grenades back in his small knapsack.

Happy? I’m here putting my life on the line for a guy I don’t even much like with a plan that I don’t know developed by more guys I don’t like who have to have their secretaries tie their shoelaces for them. I would so be out of here if it weren’t for the perks—namely, the chance to kill a lot of people perfectly legally.

“Why don’t you ask Virus?” Eastwood said. “He’s the one who—godsalmighty, how big do these freaking bugs *get*?”

After disposing of the beach guard, the trio—plus Blasphemy—had managed to make the forests before anyone else could confront them. With their standard weapons drawn and power arms stashed, they had proceeded forward, expecting a speedy bushwhack to the Rikako base building. Unfortunately, only a little ways deeper into the island, woods had abruptly turned into swamp: thick, goopy swamp that restricted traveling speed to that of an energetic slug. Wading through knee-deep grime, however, was almost pleasant compared to enduring the swarms of inch-long mosquitoes, all of whom seemed to have been trained as ninjas in larvehood.

Hex smashed at a bloodsucker on his forehead with his robotic arm and nearly knocked himself out. He woozily spoke in tongues, though it would have been clear to any observer that he was not praising the insect’s agility. *I’m one of the nastiest, most brutal, and most effective mercenaries on this whole damn planet. I’m half-metal. I’m a walking death machine. And I still can’t... stop... damn...* “BUGS!”

Harry laughed. “Oooh, the mighty Lothar Hex, slayer of stuff, brought to his knees by—gah!” He smashed at his ear, then looked puzzled. “Hey, cool,” he remarked. “My ear is ringing.”

“So answer it,” Lothar replied flippantly as he fought to extract his foot from the mire. It came free, bringing with it an impressive quantity of putrid sludge that only

further dulled the once-bright shine of his legs. It would take *weeks* of buffing, shining, and waxing to restore his natural chrome luster after this ordeal. Whereupon, of course, he would make every endeavor to defile himself again as soon as possible. Often the only question was of which viscous substance he'd be scrubbing off of himself *this* week.

Virus, trudging along about twenty feet to Lothar's right and carrying Blasphemy, screamed.

"That's probably not a good idea," Harry commented, swatting at himself for the ten billionth time. "We'd really like to maintain any degree of stealth we have left."

"You think so?" Lothar said, preoccupied with his toilsome march. "To tell you the truth, I think we're fairly safe right now."

Eastwood laughed incredulously. "Of course, perfectly safe. If we happened to be attacked, we can escape by flinging putrid muck at our assailants—gods know we'd have no shortage of ammunition," he added, looking around. "Though, really, what effect do you get by pelting filth with filth?"

"We're safe here," Hex explained as if to an idiot—*as if?*—"because we're the only living creatures on this vile pimple of the universe's arse moronic enough to even consider setting foot—" His run-on harangue was cut short by yet another nasty bite, this time just above his hip. His spastic twist of a reaction quickly transformed into an accidental pirouette complimented by about one quarter of a backflip. He ended with his own arse even filthier than the rest of his lower half, sitting in the fetid grime, swearing loudly.

"Wow, the Ukrainian judge didn't like that one," Harry snorted, then proceeded to perform an almost identical maneuver with a slightly more spectacular splash. "Damn," he commented crossly. "It's a good thing our guns are high-tech, top-grade Inquisition equipment, or we might be in real trouble. I mean, it'd be pretty embarrassing if they should happen to foul up right in the middle of a battle, right? But that won't happen, 'cause they're top grade, and—"

"Getthemoffmegetthemoffthey'reundermypantsmegethemoffmeeee!!"

"Virus," Harry called crossly. "What did I say about screaming? And interrupting is bad form, too. I swear, ever since they made etiquette classes an elective..." He trailed off in mid-sentence. Hex looked over at him. Eastwood was staring at his legs with an expression that he normally reserved for an empty coffee cupboard. A quick look in the other direction revealed Zuviel displaying uncharacteristic agility while continuing to shriek at the top of his lungs.

Lothar sighed. "It's leeches, isn't it."

"Y-yeah," Harry stammered.

Lothar checked himself before standing. His brief tenure with organic material exposed to the hirudinian biome had left him unscathed, and naturally no bloodsucker would care anything for his steel legs. "Alright," Lothar said to Eastwood in his most pacifistic tone of voice, equivalent to a fairly fierce battle cry. "Just stay calm." Hex began making his way over towards his comrade. "You're not gonna lose your head now, are you? You're gonna stay calm? You calm?"

"I'm calm," Harry whimpered.

"How calm?"

"Very calm. Calm. Calm like a crystal lake." Eastwood was shivering.

"You're sure? You've got this under control?"

“I couldn’t be calmer. My tranquility knows no bounds. I’m cool like an iceberg. I’m composed like the *1812*. I’m serene like... something that’s serene. Calm.”

“Okay, good,” Lothar said, relieved, setting a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “That makes it *slightly* more likely you won’t die from massive blood loss.”

Harry wasn’t calm anymore.

“*Offoffoffoffoffoff!!!*”

Amazingly, the muck didn’t seem so much of an obstruction anymore to the two panicking Inquisitors. They bolted off into the nether regions of the swamp at top volume, barely even noticing each other. Lothar groaned audibly, though only barely over the fading cacophony. He flailed away at the unforgiving mud, trying to make any form of headway. Zuviel and Eastwood’s forms were fast disappearing into the forest. Hex snarled and redoubled his efforts, thrusting his legs hard against the thick muck.

Another mosquito bit him. He told it to go perform what was, by all known standards, an anatomically impossible feat.

After thirty seconds of straining, Lothar’s foot found more elevated solid ground, which he employed to lift himself clear of the filth and onto semi-solid land. Casting a quick look back over his shoulder, he fought an urge to retch as a small corpse of... *something*... bobbed some twenty meters away. With no desire to investigate, Hex took off after the frenzied duo he was unfortunate enough to have to call friends.

The worst of the swampland seemed to be past; from here on out, the land only got firmer. Lothar sprinted along as fast as his grimy metal legs would take him, following the trail of crushed underbrush. He stooped once to pick up a single Knyyfrank cartridge that must have slipped from East’s knapsack; Harry was toting most of the spare ammunition, while Virus had the majority of the food and medical supplies. That both their bags were three times heavier than Lothar’s had, of course, no relation whatsoever to who had packed the supplies. Holding the magazine in his organic hand, Hex sprinted on after Zuviel (with Blasphemy) and Eastwood.

Three minutes later, he ran into them.

“You moronic, hair-trigger, spaz-monkey idiots!” he screamed as they picked themselves up off the dirt. “What in Tyrus’ name is the gods damn matter with.... mmpmphMPH!!” *The hell?* Eastwood had slapped a hand over his mouth and was holding a finger to his lips, signaling for Lothar to shut up.

Did he just...

Lothar wasn’t quite sure how to feel about this. Nobody told him to shut up. Ever. That was *his* job, his finest skill. He’d won the national competition for Best “Shut Up” and Nasty Glare thirteen years running. He’d given private lessons. He’d even tried writing an instruction manual on the fine art (which, for some odd reason, no agent had been willing to promote). He decided, as he normally did when emotionally confused, to fall back on anger, which tended to suit him well. While preparing to commence the breaking of Eastwood’s arm, however, he caught sight of the massive building about a hundred yards in front of them.

And the five Rikako guards, all of whom seemed to have been chosen for their profession largely on the basis of their massive ears or hearing prowess. Three were foxes: one fennec, one kit, and one bat-eared; the other two were golden retrievers with dusky-brown fur. All had weapons. All were now pointing them straight into the trees in response to the outburst. Two were firing; luckily in the completely wrong direction.

Finally they stopped, listening for another sound. Hex got the idea that the slightest careless movement would spell death: “p-a-i-n-f-u-l”.

The three invaders drew back deeper into the wetland as quietly as possible.

“You moronic, hair-trigger, spaz-monkey idiots!” Lothar whispered when they finally paused out of range. “What in Tyrus’ name is the gods damn matter with you? If the leeches and those maniacs don’t kill you—nnggh!” he snorted, realizing the futility. “Screw it. Let’s figure this out. Hey,” he added, finally getting a look at the Inquisitors, both of whom were bleeding, but leech-free. “What—”

“Beats us,” Virus said. He still cradled an irate Blasphemy in his arms; Lothar got the impression no leech would come anywhere close to the little dæmon. “They just started dropping off. Is that normal?” He still looked badly shaken by the event.

“I no longer have a definition of ‘normal,’” Lothar replied, confused. Virus’ pants and shirt were stained red, but the flow did not appear to be intense. Harry’s wounds seemed similarly benign. “From everything I’ve heard, leeches don’t let go until they’ve gorged themselves fatter than a professional video game tester.”

Harry snapped his fingers—softly. “Virus? How much did you drink last night?”

“Enough that I should probably be dead—and I wish I were,” he added, holding his head... the migraines still hadn’t fully abated.

“And how small is a leech?”

“Tiny. But that’s neither here nor there, unless you’re saying...” He trailed off, then started laughing maniacally until a blast of fire cutting through the bushes in their general direction shut him up. Blasphemy growled at the loud noises.

I don’t get it, Lothar thought, and said as much.

“Blood, Lothar,” Harry said in an amused tone. “Our blood. They were sucking our blood, which happens to probably still have a terrifyingly high alcohol content.”

“Drunk... leeches!” Virus gasped. “Oh, that’s rich! Oh, let’s go back and find them again! Maybe they have good blonde jokes! Do you think they go home and beat the crap out of their girl leeches? ‘Leeches Anonymous’? Or! Or! There could be—uh oh.”

Oh, look. Lothar thought. The idiots finally decided to stop randomly firing into the brush and come in after us.

We’re gonna die.

“Now, really, let’s be reasonable,” Ryoushi Nekittou said nervously.

“Let’s not,” grinned one of his new friends—the slimy-looking civet.

“No, you see,” Rouge continued anyways, “my plans for today do not happen to involve molten pokers, stretching racks, tarring and feathering, or anything else you might happen to have on you. I’m booked for a painful death at midnight, though. How’s this? Monday morning, I’m all yours.”

The civet only giggled in response as he rifled through his box of tricks, humming a cheerful tune. His clothes were filthy with bizarre stains; his fur was greasy and he looked oddly malnourished. “What’s the lineup for today, Bos?” he asked his quiet horned associate. “Any constraints, or we have free reign?”

The rhino grunted as he gave Rogue a disdainful once-over. “She said no marks,” he said with a tone that suggested he’d rather have made sizable ones. “I don’t get it either; he already looks pretty bad. But her orders, I’m afraid.”

I have to pee, Nekittou thought.

The simpering civet didn't like this answer either. "Damn it, Boston," he snarled, slamming down the lid, "couldn't you have told me this five minutes ago? We got the wrong godsdamn box! Take this one back and get the right one, hurry up! It's the only one without bloodstains. Move!"

Boston lumbered out with the toolbox and a dirty look, slamming the ornate door so hard it shook the foundation and nearly knocked his slimy colleague on his behind. "Dumb oaf," the civet said to himself, aggravated. "What are you looking at?" he asked Rogue. "What is the meaning of life?" he asked one of the wall torches, which refused to answer. "That's right," he said, satisfied. "I thought so." He sat down.

Rogue sneezed. *Damn!* The convulsions of his body chafed at the ropes.

The civet turned to him. "I'm Niko," he said flatly.

"I'm Ryoushi," Rogue replied in the same tone.

"Nice to meet you."

"Can't say I can return that one."

"No, I don't suppose you could, could you?" Niko said with that creepy grin that seemed to be an essential component of any good cultist's education. His tone changed, not in a way that Rogue found to be for the better. "You know," Niko almost purred, "I've never actually been left *alone* with a bound prisoner before. There's something I've always wanted to do..." He stood and advanced upon Nekittou with a gleam in his green eyes.

Fear! Panic! Loss of sanity and I can't even run around screaming! "Your—your friend will be right back," Rogue stammered nervously. "He'd... he'd..."

"Oh, don't worry about *that*," the civet laughed. "This won't take but a moment."

Rogue struggled in vain against his bonds as he watched Niko in horror. The skinny cultist was within reaching distance now. Nekittou could smell his strong musky odor. Smiling innocently, Niko looked his captive in the eyes for a moment, then stretched out a hand and... began patting him on the forehead.

Petting him. Stroking his crown fur in a way not painful but in a way... enjoyable.

"What the *hell*?" Rogue growled, shaking his head free of Niko's touch. "What are you *doing*?" He glared at the civet who was, to Rogue's surprise, cowering on his knees. When Niko looked up, Rogue was astonished to see tears in his eyes.

"Please don't y-yell!" Niko whimpered. "Not so loud! I'm... I'm sorry!" He held his quivering hands to his chest. "I'm so sorry! I just wanted to try it! Three generations of my family have been cultists! Do you know what it's like growing up in a cult? Nothing is normal! No friends! No life! No—no pets! I've never known what it's like to have someone to just know and listen to me! Please, couldn't I just pet you?" His voice was mournfully pleading.

Utterly baffled, Rogue did at least manage to realize that his ticket to avoiding extreme pain might be at hand. If he indulged this weirdo... *Dignity be damned, as if it already wasn't*. "... All right," he said, hating himself, feeling like a house kitten, but recognizing the necessity. "Go ahead. I won't yell."

"And... if I lift my leg up high, would you nuzzle your—"

"Don't push it."

Still sniffing, Niko resumed stroking Nekittou's head. Rogue closed his eyes and held his breath, trying to pretend it was the touch of a stunningly beautiful leopardess

rather than a foul, awkward cultist with severe identity issues. In fact, the caresses were pleasant in touch alone, touching upon primal feline responses to such gestures. And before Rogue knew what he was doing... he'd meowed.

Meowed.

Horrified, he opened his eyes to see Niko's shining with delight. "I can do it!" he said with the delight of a child who has just figured out their urine is supposed to go in the porcelain bowl, not on Mommy's eighty-page handwritten interview essay. "I really can! I can make people happy, not just make them pray for the sweet release of death!"

"That wasn't a meow of happiness!" Rogue snarled. "It was a disgusted meow! It means I hate you and everything your vile little island club stands for! I haven't meowed that angrily since... since never! I don't meow! And you'd better remember that!"

"Oh, really," Niko replied. "I'd imagine that little incident was a bit of a blemish on your pride?"

"At least I have some, crybaby!"

"So I guess we have a stalemate, then," Niko said cannily. "Both of us have a secret now. We're even. So how about this: this never happened. You okay with that? Our secret. Nobody has to know. 'Kay?"

"Whatever," Rogue spat.

"Are we agreed?"

"Fine."

"Pinky swear?"

"Screw you."

"I'll take that as a yes." With telepathic timing, Niko ran a hand through his facial fur; the next view Rogue got of his countenance, the civet's tearstains were blended back into his greasy fur and he was sneering once more. A nanosecond later, faint light streamed into the room as Boston lumbered in, toting another satchel. "What took you so long?" Niko snapped at him. "Move that fat arse of yours! Hound below, I didn't think you'd get back before the *Sacrificium!*"

"And what have *you* been doing meanwhile?" Boston asked, giving Niko a sideways look.

"Just reminding this poor bastard what we're about to do to him," Niko laughed. "We have the cushioned head-crusher in there, right? No marks, intense pain..."

"A personal favorite," Boston grinned.

Reality came back to Nekkitou like a hand grenade hurled at a chipmunk. *But... I thought...* Everything back to how it was before, Niko had said. No sympathy. No mercy. Just a world of pain unlike anything he'd ever known. *To hell with pride! The freak can tell them what he wants to!* "Hey fatty!" he yelled at Boston. "Ever know that your pal here is a complete and total—"

He found himself eating cloth.

"Um," Boston said stupidly. "How is he gonna talk if he's gagged like that?"

Niko yanked the two ends of the rag in opposite directions, practically giving Rogue's uvula a thorough dusting. "Guess he can't," the civet laughed. Rogue gave him a glare of utter loathing. It failed to help.

"Isn't the point of this all to get him to say stuff?" the rhino asked. "So that we stop?"

“Hmm, yeah,” Niko said thoughtfully. Then he shrugged carelessly. “Oh well. Guess we just don’t stop then, do we?”

Boston seemed to like this idea.

Rogue did not.

Niko and Boston spent the next few minutes proving just how little Rogue’s opinion mattered at this point.

Part VII

Ingrained in the basic DNA of any creature capable of making a decision is the most primal of all reactions: the fight or flight dilemma. This choice once meant the difference between looking like a coward or being infected with a hideous pathogen thriving in the saliva of a saber-toothed tiger. In more modern times, however, with the advent of such wonderful technology as sniper rifles, it usually meant the difference between being dead or being more dead.

Syrus Zuviel thus decided not to bother risking a severe stomach cramp by bothering to do either, and decided to simply sit still and perish right where he was. *Oh, gods, make it fast*, he prayed, curling up into a small fetal ball.

Someone kicked him.

It hurt. *This isn’t fast*, he whined mentally.

“Get up, you moron!” someone hissed.

Aw, man, they’re gonna kill me and be mean about it, too? That’s just tacky.

He was grabbed and yanked forcefully to his feet. “I just wanna go home!” Virus sobbed. “I want my mommy! I don’t want to die one some hellhole island in the middle of nowhere! I want to die of sexual overexertion in my own bed, having lived a long and fulfilling life as a rich playboy!”

“Good luck with that one,” Lothar snarled in his ear, dragging him along. “Would you *run* already? We’re going around them, move your gods damn feet!”

Zuviel’s feet moved, and a couple seconds later his head caught up with them. Harry was already fifty yards ahead, following the trail they had randomly bushwhacked in their panic-stricken rampage. Blasphemy was right on his heels, more likely enjoying chasing Harry than fleeing from any danger.

Behind him, Virus heard a clamor of gunfire, unusually uniform. With the wide variety of weaponry available on both the legal and black markets, even the most formal of troops often carried a smorgasbord of firearms, each with their distinctive firing sound. Unfortunately, uniformity didn’t make these any less lethal. Virus sped up.

Bullets tore at the leaves around them. With a bright *ping*, one ricocheted off Lothar’s right arm, leaving a small dent. Without breaking stride, Hex blindly returned plasma fire; there was no way to tell whether or not he scored a hit. Zuviel fumbled in his filthy trenchcoat for his own pistol and nearly fell headlong on the soggy island ground trying to stash the unwieldy Mazzeltorpe. He managed to let loose with a couple shots before being Lothar dragged him, mid-stride, back into the thick underbrush and off the trail.

In a cartoon or comedy movie, the bad guys would have gone sprinting by the point of deviance and the trio could waltz back to the compound unopposed. In cartoons

and comedy movies, bullets always missed, too. Virus didn't care to hang around long enough to find out if his life had been deemed wacky enough for the big screen. He aimed to keep the audience in the theater as long as possible.

Great metaphor, moron, he thought. Keep the audience in the theater. Brilliant. Thank gods I'm not a writer.

The gunfire was fading only slightly, however. Zuviel doubted it would last long. Those ears could probably hear a pin drop at several hundred yards, let alone three gawky idiots smashing their way through what passed Mother Nature on Okakir.

"This way!" Harry yelled. Following Lothar, Virus found himself crossing a small stream of the same breed of gunk he had previously endured. He moved as quickly as possible to avoid losing any more blood. Scabs were beginning to congeal over his wounds, which Virus found odd; he was under the impression that leeches had an enzyme to turn their victims into temporary hemophiliacs. Since he wasn't spraying bodily fluid like a decapitated chicken, he assumed he hadn't taken in much of the chemical. *Hey, I got lucky.*

Wow, "not bleeding to death" is now my definition of "luck". I really need to reevaluate my life...

Virus found himself crossing a small stream of the same breed of gunk he had previously endured. He moved as quickly as possible, to avoid losing any more blood. He found himself crossing a small stream of the same breed of gunk he had previously endured. He... found himself crossing a small stream...

"Lothar?" he asked, stopping suddenly. "What are we doing?"

"Shut up and—" Lothar seemed to snap out a berserker daze. "What *are* we doing?" he asked. "I was just following foxy there..."

Virus stared at Harry, who was still ahead of them... in a sense. A little ways downstream, he was darting across the stream, quickly turning, then splashing back across and repeating. Back, forth, back, forth...

Their pursuers momentarily forgotten, they watched the bizarre ritual.

"What the hell is he doing?" Lothar asked with his usual subtle grace.

"I think he's trying to lose his scent," Virus replied.

"He can *lose* that thing?"

Touché. "Some kind of regression?" Zuviel hypothesized. "Primal vulpine instincts?"

"Whatever," Hex said. "Hey, Reynard! How about we amscray before I find a red coat and horse and join the party?" To punctuate his point, a spray of bullets crashed into the foliage. Virus and Lothar split; the soaked Harry, snapped back to himself, hastened out of the muddy brook after them. Zuviel noticed (to his olfactory displeasure) that the fox's efforts had been wholly unsuccessful.

Tree! Dodge, tree, dodge, tear through more briars, bullets snapping at his heels, tree! Tree, stream, puddle, fire over his shoulder, hell loose on a tiny island! Up ahead, through the thick foliage Virus could see of the cream-colored Rikako building. A horrible thought struck him. *Why on Mobius would a cult color a building cream?!*

Another horrible thought struck him a moment later. "What if they've sounded an alarm?" he gasped to Lothar, who was running alongside him, blasting brambly thorns out of his way and still taking random potshots over his shoulder. "They'll be waiting for us up there!"

“I have an idea!” Lothar yelled back. “We kill them!”

Hmm. “Actually, I kind of like that!”

“Good to hear, because you’re going first!”

Virus had time for only a startled mental *what?* before he blasted straight past Harry and Lothar (who had pulled up short) out into the clearing and was instantly confronted with two very surprised-looking Rikako guards: female caribou. They had probably just been roused by the alarm, and were still clearing slumber from their eyes. Zuviel wondered for only a moment whether they had ever considered that oversleeping would one day be a leading factor in their death. *Nice parable for nagging mothers—wake up or someday someone will kill you!*

He didn’t dwell on it.

Virus didn’t know quite how the Mazzeltorpe had ended up in his hands again, but he didn’t dwell on that, either. It had a sharp, crisp retort, like a rimshot on a snare drum. Rimshots that tore both the girls into a splashes of bloody mist before Virus could even realize he had done it.

He wanted to just stand there, there in that clearing, and ponder what he had just done... cut two young lives shut with twitches of his finger, was it moral, did the ends justify the means? Did it hurt as they fell? Where did they go? Were they damned for being cultists or saved for being brave? How many licks did it take—

Unfortunately, firing a gun seemed to have the same effect on surrounding people as blowing up a defense post. They just tended to *notice* these things. Didn’t they have better things to think about than a heavily-armed Inquisitor who really just wanted to be back home curled up in a blanket, eating pancakes, and watching reruns of *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*? No, they just had to drop everything and come after him.

Virus shrugged, and killed them too.

He’d debate morality later.

“Was that really it?” Harry Eastwood asked. “That wasn’t so bad.”

“Well, no, I guess not” Lothar replied. “You’ve lost a good chunk of the fur from your tail. Virus is probably scarred for life. For some reason, something’s screwed up my blaster mode; it won’t fire. We’re all absolutely drenched in gore. Oh, and I think Blasphemy got shot.”

The miniature dæmon in question seemed unconcerned with the large bullet hole in his flank. Zuviel was inspecting the damage. “He has a fairly high tolerance for pain,” he said. “At least, that’s what I’d infer from the sulfuric acid accident.”

“I’ve got a confession,” Eastwood said. “That wasn’t an accident.”

“Well, I figured, yeah.”

“So, how long did you say we should wait, again?” Eastwood asked, as Virus applied a small bandage from his medical kit to Blasphemy’s wound. They were on high alert, kneeling with their backs to the building, weapons drawn, surveying the carnage they had left in front of them: six guards dead on the ground, not to mention the large-eared quintet that had chased them in a big circle through the forest of Okakir. Blasphemy had doubled back on them once again and dispatched them one by one, quick strikes before any of them could draw much of a bead on the small, agile figure.

What he had probably done *after* they were dead... Harry preferred to focus on the positive aspects of that one: no messy bodies, and a sated Chao-dæmon.

“Two minutes,” Hex replied, “two minutes from the beginning, now about half a minute.” With no further molestation, they had located two ventilation ducts and chucked two of their larger sleeping-gas grenades inside. With luck, they would take out anyone on the first and second floors; Schaefer has assured them that the dungeons of the facility were only two floors down from that. They would have to fight their way down there.

Oh, goody. Schaefer assured us. I’m simply ballooning with bubbly confidence.

“Hey, East,” Lothar said. “Can I get a couple explosive grenades from ya? You know, the things you’re carrying that go boom? Not the gas ones.”

Harry pulled two out of his knapsack and tossed them at Hex, causing the echidna to yelp loudly and dive into the bushes. A moment later, he was trying, and failing, to repair his wounded dignity. Eastwood smiled inside. He got his small victories whenever he could.

“You guys kind of deserted me, you know,” Zuviel mentioned with a slight pout, as Lothar stashed away the grenades, their pins firmly in place. “I could have been killed...”

“Yeah,” Lothar said, “pity about that.”

That shut Virus up for a few seconds. “Gas filters?” was the next thing he asked.

“Check,” Harry replied, donning his. It was a simple design, not to protect from a corrosive gas that would blister skin but simply to filter air going to the nose and the mouth.

“I hate these godsdamn things,” Lothar growled, but snapped it into place anyways. He tried to go on, but, to Harry’s great delight, the filter completely muffled all Hex’s speech. Had the inventor been there, Eastwood would have given him a big hug. Unfortunately, East knew from history class that said inventor had been burned to death as a heretic for thinking of something before the establishment did.

I detest history.

Virus, spontaneously pretending to assume the leadership role he liked to think he held, held up three fingers, two, one, fist. He took off and rounded the corner of the building. Harry followed with Lothar bringing up the lead; without his blaster, the cyborg had his solid-shot Knyyfrank machine gun drawn and leveled. They dashed alongside the wall in the fifty-yard space between the Rikako building and the forest, skirting wires, ducts, ventilators, discarded pancreases, and other such fodder one might find outside a cult hideout.

They had fought the brief skirmish in the back on the building, but there seemed to be no doors other than the front, nor did they have any way to blow a hole in the wall, the vastly preferable option in most cases. The side of the building was about four hundred yards long; nearly a quarter of a mile. Harry tightened his gloved grip on his plasma-blasting Hequor. He hasn’t fired it yet in battle, but eagerly awaited the opportunity.

As they rounded the second corner to the front of the building, they were confronted by a single, picayune sentry, his Rikako uniform prissily spotless. Seeing the three big (relatively, anyways), furious Inquisitors—at this point, did Lothar’s technical classification matter anymore?—bearing down on him, he screamed like a Girl Scout and fled for the woods. Nobody bothered to do the world a favor by cutting him down.

“Mmph!” Virus ordered.

Smartest thing he’s ever said.

Eastwood and Hex followed Zuviel at a sprint up the front steps. Virus gritted his teeth and motored his feet, faster, faster, top step, lowered his shoulder and smashed into the door at high speed. The third law of motion, however, had not been revoked any time recently, and, with an audible bone-crunch, the rat when flying backwards in the direction he had come from. Harry skirted Zuviel's soaring body and tried Inquisition Tactic #2 For Opening The Doors of Heathen Sanctuaries: the doorknob.

It worked, for which Eastwood was profoundly grateful. Tactic #3 involved serious mental damage and the distinct possibility of permanent sterilization.

The main hall was eerily quiet. A receptionist—Harry didn't even bother trying to figure out *that* one—sat slumped over, drooling on her keyboard. Several fully-armed soldiers, no doubt in the middle of responding to the set-off alarms, lay in various interesting positions of slumber. Eastwood poked one.

Heh.

He poked him again.

This is fun!

Business before pleasure, though. Harry swung his knapsack in front of him and yanked out one of the many gadgets they had brought. This particular one measured the level of Nox gas in the air. The agent quickly dissipated after use, and they would need to communicate if at all possible.

The meter registered a safe level. Harry tore off his filter. "Where now?" he asked, looking around. The hall was ostentatiously ornate, with two crystal staircases flanking a glittering elevator, and a four-colored marble design on the floor: red, yellow, gray, black. Several carpeted hallways also lead off in different directions. Unfortunately, the blueprints that Schaefer had given them were based on satellite photographs, and could not detail anything further than the vague shape of the building. They would have to find their own way from here.

It occurred to Harry that they hadn't consulted the blueprints since they left the boat. In fact, they hadn't even brought them ashore. A sheer combination of street smarts and pure bastard luck had kept them alive. Eastwood knew which end of that spectrum had been favored, too.

"Down, I'd imagine," Lothar said. "Unless this happens to be one of those cults that keeps their prisoners in the attic. And sacrifices them by throwing them off the roof into an active volcano." He smiled reminiscently. "Good times."

Harry stared at him. "You were in a cult?"

"No, but I sure love throwing people into—"

"Are you guys coming?" Virus called from the elevator. "Unless you feel like taking the stairs? Come on!" The doors were open; he had a finger on the "hold" button. "It's nearly two o'clock! If we hurry, we can make it back for the 4:00 premiere of *Survivor: Downunda!*"

"Alright, alright!" Eastwood called back. "C'mon, Loth, let's go!"

"Are you nuts?" Hex snapped. "Trust our lives to a machine in this haven of heresy? That thing is probably powered by the hearts of Fernex's slaughtered victims! The controls stained with unholy blood! The cable recycled from days of strangling torture victims! The floor cursed by the souls of the damned!"

Harry thought about this.

"Yeah," he said finally, "but I *really* hate taking the stairs..."

Lothar Hex hated elevators. They were small, tiny, enclosed boxes that reminded him all too much of the seemingly endless time he had once spent in a massive tube full of bubbling fluid. Though that particular experience was likely the origin of his claustrophobia, his experiences since had only fostered the fear. *Next time Virus plays Skywalker and jumps into the garbage compactor...*

But he hated even worse being without his trusty blaster, which had taken a bullet in his brief firefight and now sputtered uselessly. He was sure that Inquisition mechanics would be able to repair it, but for now he had to rely on regular firearms. And, of course, his buzzsaw, which was working as well as ever. It was only useful at close range... but oh, was it useful at close range. Few who had ever found themselves on the wrong end of that vicious spinning blade were still around to tell the tale.

He extended the toothed saw now, then re-morphed his arm to the blaster. No luck—something was busted.

Lights above the elevator door proclaimed that they were headed down underground. A helpful guide on the wall added that they were passing the kitchens, the storage basement, headed down towards the dungeons.

There was music. The music sucked.

“This music sucks,” Lothar said.

The music played on heedless.

We’re getting close, Lothar realized. We’re closing in. Soon this whole damn ordeal will be over with, and we can get back to our weekend off. And just as soon as I save the kitty’s arse, I am going to kick it so hard. So. Hard.

And then the box came to a jarring halt, and the door obediently opened.

An elevator was a really, really bad place to fight from—it left no room for any sort of evasion. It came down, in essence, to who shot first. And in the dim dungeon light, eyes needed a moment to adjust, and aim was difficult. But Lothar, Harry, and Virus still had the happy advantage of the element of surprise.

The four cultists waiting for the elevator did not look like guards, soldiers, or anyone who would present any immediate danger to the three invaders. Two had the appearance of bureaucrats; the others—one female—seemed to be of a more generic breed. A moment later, they were all of the exact same breed: very, very dead, twitching from the plasma bolts riddling their bodies.

Lothar turned to Harry. A wisp of smoke rose from the barrel of the vulpine’s Hequor; a grin was plastered across his face. “You jerk,” Lothar said angrily. “Leave some kills for the rest of us!”

“Be quicker next time,” Harry replied. “Speaking of which—” He raised his weapon, pointed it directly over Lothar’s head. Virus was raising his Mazzeltorpe, too, but this time both were too slow. Hex spun, Knyyfrank already spitting cartridges, in time to drop to the floor two overcurious Rikako guards who came to investigate the gunfire. Unlike Eastwood’s previous victims, these *were* armed, heavily.

A third guard was smarter, or perhaps just luckier. She barrel-rolled across the elevator hallway, a grey-black blur, and had her back against a wall before anyone could draw a bead on her. “Breach!” she yelled, presumably into a radio or intercom. “Breach! Invaders in sector D4, repeat, sector D4, unknown number of invaders, D4, send reinforcements!”

Shit, Lothar thought, *that is going to make our job a lot tougher*. “Keep her head down!” he ordered Virus, who dutifully blue off a corner of the wall with a shotgun blast. If the guard presumed that the Inquisitor would need time to reload and tried leaping out to shoot, Harry was prepared to make her pay.

Perhaps startled by the force of the Mazzeltorpe’s blast, the Rikako guard started yelling again. “Heavily armed!” she cried. “We have casualties! Execute Code Gold starting now, repeat, Code Gold! Heavily armed, reinforcements needed, sector D4, D4, taken casualties! D4! They are heavily armed, of unknown number, we need reinforcements *now*! Sector—”

Would you shut up? I’m trying to focus...

“—D4, breach in D4, number of invaders unknown, execute Defense Plan Code Gold, repeat Code Gold, warning, invaders are presumed to be heavily armed! I need reinforcements under Code—”

Well, now I just really want to kill you.

He began to see about doing just that. As Zuviel let off two more shots, Lothar pulled from his knapsack one of the grenades he had borrowed from Eastwood. In his mind’s eye, he saw a pair of wickets fifty feet away on the floor. With just the right twist... A spin bowler would have laughed at his delivery, but it got the job done. The small explosive bounced once, twice, detonated with an enormous report. Over it, Hex heard the guard’s high-pitched scream. He hadn’t quite finished the job, which, come to think of it, might work in his favor. He sprinted through the smog, coughing: he knew he didn’t have much time.

She was lupine, and badly wounded. Shrapnel had nearly torn off her right arm and left leg. Lothar, who had neither—not flesh—wasted no time on sympathy. He grabbed the she-wolf by the throat, knocked her weapon away, and threw her up against the wall. “Where’s the cat?” he snarled. “Where’s the damn cat?”

Though she was clearly in agony, her eyes widened. “The cat?” she said disbelievingly. “You’re here for that orange *cat*?”

“Don’t judge me, okay? It wasn’t my idea.”

Her yellow eyes narrowed. “Screw you,” she said scornfully. “Go ahead and kill me. I’m not going to give you the...” she winced and broke off... “satisfaction. These are probably fatal anyways.” She indicated her wounds.

Lothar mentally damned her stubborn pride, all the more so because in her situation, he would have done the same. That didn’t mean he was giving up. He shook the guard like a rat (a quick fond memory of throttling Virus flashed through his mind), provoking another cry of anguish. “Fatal, maybe,” he growled, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t make it very, very hard on you.”

Hate blazed in those pupils, quickly turning to something resembling horror as Hex’s robotic hand began to morph. The buzzsaw blade gave off a thin whine as he brought it up to her gut. Trimmed fur began to fall away. “Where,” Hex repeated dangerously slowly, “is the *cat*?”

“You condemn our methods and then use them yourself,” the Rikako wolf spat. “Hypocrite.”

“No, no, no,” Lothar replied. “I love your methods. As to your choice of victims...” He paused. “Well, I can’t really fault that either.” A beat. “But, uh... that’s

besides the point! Like him or not, I'm here to save the damn kitty, and if you don't tell me right about now..." He pressed the blade further into the wolf's gut.

She bit down hard against the pain, but defiance returned as she heard footsteps racing to the rescue. A cruel grin spread across her face. "Here comes the welcoming committee," she laughed. "See you in hell."

The smirk and defiance both vanished as quickly as they had come, as Virus unloaded several pounds of shot into said committee, laying them flat before a single one could fire a shot. For symbolic measure, Harry walked over and urinated on the cadavers.

"You ready to talk yet?" Lothar asked politely.

"... Sector D9. Third cell. Down that hall, take a left, five doors down to the right. And, hey, if you should happen to run into an orange-striped canine geek named Carlson, would you do me a favor and kill him? I've been trying for *years*."

Hex tossed her bleeding body back against the wall and walked away. He heard her radio for medical help, but didn't care too much. "Come on," he told Zuviel and Eastwood shortly. "I know where he is."

They moved at a fast trot down the hallway, which was eerily deserted. Even the widely-spaced cells were empty save for an occasional carcass of either Mobian or dæmon. Spotting one of the latter brought to the surface a question lurking in Lothar's mind. "What's the deal with the dæmons?" he asked on the move. "These places are usually infested with the buggers, but I haven't seen a single live one. Almost miss 'em."

"It's some kind of holiday for them, Undivideds," Virus said carelessly as they took the turn. He held a calm Blasphemy under one arm, his Mazzeltorpe in the other. "They keep dæmons locked up and unsummoned all day, then go nuts at midnight. Parties wild. Sacrifices. Gambling for the Patterner, battles for the Hound, online gaming for Fernex, and orgies for the Soulthirster." He did a mild double-take. "Say, you don't suppose we could..."

"No."

"But—"

"No."

Lothar reflected that it really wasn't a very smart religious philosophy to have a holy day where you removed the strongest defense systems from your home base. *Especially when your backup system consists of a few scattered guards with really bad reflexes racing around corners at top speed.* Hex, Eastwood, and Zuviel each recorded another pair of deaths to their names before they came to Sector D9.

They made Virus go first.

"Nobody there," he reported back. "Kind of dark in here... There's a row of doors, though... I assume those are cells? They're numbered... Look, are you sure about this? How do we even know that that chick didn't just send us into a booby trap?"

Good point. They made Virus go first again.

"Even darker in here," he muttered. Then: "Hey!" Sounds of a scuffle followed. "Take—that—you—dirty—whore!" Zuviel snarled, apparently engaged in combat. Harry raced forward and threw open the door; Blasphemy hot on his heels. Thin light streamed in, enough for Lothar to see that Virus had an elderly bearded owl, dressed in the Rikako uniform, pinned on the floor (*oh, he so stole that move from pro wrestling!*) and that the room was otherwise empty except for a feline figure chained to the wall...

... a bobcat. A fairly young bobcat.

Not Rogue.

Lothar shook his head, looked again. Orange, yes, but shorter, stockier... by no definition Ryoushi Nekittou.

He threw Zuviel off the pinned bird and, as was his custom for interrogation today, threw the cultist against the wall. "Where the fucking hell," he screamed, "is the *other* orange cat?!"

The old owl looked terrified at the sudden interruption to whatever he had been doing. "There—" he stuttered, "there—there—there—there is no other! We have only six prisoners; this is the only—the only feline! We take no more than we need!"

"*Liar!*" Lothar screamed. "*Where's Rogue?!*"

"I know of no rogue cat!" the hoary bird whispered urgently. "We have only the four prisoners for the *Sacrificium!* We—we are meeting tonight with the Ionnioc order; they are coming for the evening festivities! They—" he hacked, and Lothar reluctantly let him have a little more air— "they are bringing four prisoners of their own! For sacrifice! Perhaps your cat is amongst them!"

In his lifetime, or at least that of it not spent in a tube, Lothar Hex had dealt with every form of scum on the planet. He, better than anyone else, knew liars and cheats. He was accomplished and well-practiced in the arts himself. He could tell, by the way the old owl spoke... he was not lying.

And he was doing a mental polygraph test on the guy's pulse, which he could feel perfectly well. He picked up skills here and there.

But one thing was abundantly clear:

This was not the cult that took Rogue. The Rikako were innocent—of this crime, at least.

They had guessed wrong, and it was nearly four o'clock.

If they were right, if Rogue was to be a *Sacrificum* victim, then... only eight hours until...

In the corner, the bobcat finally spoke up in a high-pitched voice: "You're... you're not like these horrible people? You're against them? Oh, praise the gods, you've come to save me! Save me from this horrid place! I was so scared! They were going to kill me! But you... my heroes, my saviors! I will forever be your humble servant! I prostrate myself at your feet! I worship the ground you walk upon! I will—"

They left him there.

"You know," Boston remarked to Niko, "it's really not as satisfying when we can't hear him scream."

"I dunno," Niko replied. "It's kind of a nice change of pace."

If it's any consolation, Rogue Nekittou thought, *I'm screaming inside!*

He had a feeling the two cultists knew that, however. By the calculated way in which they had hooked up wires to places where wires were not meant to be hooked, and the skilled manner in which they were pumping agonizing blasts of electricity through his body, he suspected they knew exactly what was going through his brain.

The next thing that went through his brain was another couple hundred of volts. He jerked against the ropes that bound him; his head flew involuntarily. His crown fur sailed in all directions. If all this wasn't enough, they had to screw up his hairstyle, too?

Did they have any idea how long it took to sculpt each detail, how much spray went into maintaining that perfect sprawl of his tresses? It was downright *criminal!*

Obscenities that would have scorched fur were censored by that suffocating gag. Boston idled, twiddling a bulky, gnarled finger over the switch. “Bad kitty,” he reproached mockingly. “Bad, bad kitty. You shall have no pie.”

“Or shall he?” Niko asked, randomly pulling a blueberry pie out of apparently nowhere and hurling it into Rogue’s face. Syrupy purple filling splattered all over his face, trumping any worry about the merits of his hair. This was quite the comical occurrence in movies. In real life, it hurt like hell, especially when they hadn’t even bothered to remove the pan. His nose, which had just begun to heal from the pounding Tirzah had supplied, began to bleed again; the metal pan slid off his features and clattered face-up on the ground, where Rogue could see a distinct red smear mixed in with the beige and dark puce remnants of the pie. *Well, at least it tastes kind of good,* he thought, licking off his face the goop he could reach with his tongue.

“Hey!” Boston said angrily. “That was my *lunch!*”

“Then you’re lucky,” Niko replied. “I laced it with vomit powder.”

To Nekittou’s credit, he managed to land most of the pie right back in the pan where it had originated.

While the morbidly wacky duo plotted their next atrocity, Rogue shook his head, trying to clear his face of the poisoned mush. He wondered once more what had become of his teammates. Surely they were searching for him; the Inquisition didn’t abandon their own. Were they suffering endless self-inflicted trials in their quest? Were they lost on some bizarre island, having followed a red herring lead to the wrong cult? Had they stared death in the face throughout the day, only to discover it had all been for naught?

No way—even they’re not that stupid...

So when they did get here... Once again, Rogue leaned towards despair. There was just no chance, no way! The best they could possibly hope for was a quick death, spared from having their blood fuel the depraved work of the Dark Gods.

And Rogue himself... well, he really couldn’t say he had lived a full life. There was so much he hadn’t done. He had never skydived. He had never dyed his fur ridiculous colors. He had never found out if Captain Super Guy ever managed to forever foil the mad schemes of Lord I-Hate-Captain-Super-Guy.

But at least he—

He had, well—

There was that time—

...

On second thought, I’m going to cry now.

“Hey, good news,” Niko said, sidling up to him. “You’re going to go down in cult history.”

“Mmph,” Rouge replied dubiously.

“Yeah, actually, you’re going to become the very first person ever to go through our newest procedure. We don’t have a name for it yet, but we’ve heard it’s pretty much like having every bone in your body ripped out through your skin. And it leaves no marks, no scars... no physical scars, at least. You’ll probably be mentally scarred for the rest of your life: all seven and a half hours of it.”

“Mmph mmph.”

“So, this is your last chance,” the civet warned. “Are you absolutely *sure* you don’t want to talk?”

“*Mmph?!?*”

“He means it,” Boston said. “Better start right about now. We’re completely serious.”

“Mmph mm mph mmph!” Rogue protested.

“Oh well,” Niko grinned. “Just don’t say we didn’t give you a chance to be perfectly reasonable.” With that he produced with a flourish a small metallic cap, closely resembling something that would be used in an electrocution. Wires connected it to a small black (of course) box on the floor. *Wonderful*, Rogue thought, *more current. By the time this is over, they should just stick a plug in me and make me the new Dagou power plant.*

Boston wasn’t the brightest ungulate ever born, but torture was clearly his profession and he probably had a good many years of experience reading the facial expressions of his victims. “Oh, no,” he said, plugging several varieties of rainbow-colored wires into the cap, “no, no, no more electricity. This is much, much better. For us. I don’t think you’ll like it as much, though.”

Rogue certainly didn’t think he had just won a Downundan vacation. He made his next “mmph” as inquisitive as possible.

“Well, see,” Niko said, “we’re not even sure quite what it does. Certainly something concerning your mortal soul. Of course we wouldn’t dare *destroy* it, it’s far too valuable to Fernex to be wasted. We’re more sort of going to... *tenderize* it. Improve the *flavor*. The cap does some funky stuff, you suffer in the worst agony a living creature has ever endured, and... yeah, then we have a finger-painting party with your spilled blood. Ooh... I think I’ll draw a *pony!*”

The box’s label read *SoulTenderizer3000 Deluxe*.

Nekittou pondered this. The more he pondered it, the less he liked it. He was really, really, *really* getting sick of having absolutely no say in these decisions. *They should have a “no torture without representation” policy*, he thought desperately. *Doesn’t sound so catchy though... No torture without... borture? Corture? Dorture, forture, gorture...*

“Hey, Nik,” Boston called. “Pass me something sharp?”

“I *told* you, no—”

“Nah, there’s a tag on this thing; it’s fresh out of the box. I hate having tags around, they get in the way.”

“Oh, just use your blasted *teeth*...”

“Look, dickweed, my dentist very specifically recommended...”

“I’ll do it!” Niko snapped, scampering over and grabbing the largest wire connecting the cap to its apparent power source, the box. The civet grabbed the tag by his teeth and yanked, pulling it free. He spat it onto the floor at Rogue’s feet, where the feline dæmon hunter, once he blinked away some of the remaining blueberry goop, had a good look at the wording.

WARNING: MAY PERMANENTLY CORRUPT SOUL.

Underneath that was a second advisory: **REMOVAL OF THIS TAG MAY BE PUNISHABLE BY**—the rest was illegible, covered in some sort of spinach paste that indicated Niko hadn’t brushed his molars in a couple of decades.

Nekittou had little more time to reflect upon this as Boston roughly grabbed his bleeding, pie-soaked head and jammed the unholy device onto his skull, fastening it under his chin with two leather straps. Niko flipped a switch, and a small humming filled the room: the result, Rogue supposed, of the device heating up. His mind flew frantically—he had less than thirty seconds left of normal life! Shouldn't things start flashing right about now? Stuff raced through his mind; Niko and Boston's smug faces swam in his vision; up seemed down, right was left, there was no time left now and—

With horror, Nekittou realized that the last sentient thought of his life was going to be “No Torture Without A Scorcher”.

And then everything went black.

Part VIII

“We have a problem,” said dæmonmaster Ariel Gruszczyński, addressing the emergency meeting of the Ionnioc.

“We know,” muttered a pair of janitors in the front row loudly.

“That's not what I meant,” Gruszczyński snapped. Her voice echoed through the speakers flanking her. “For Fernex's sake, they're just protein stains; use, I dunno, detergent or whatever.”

“We can't use *detergent* on *circuitboards*.”

“I remind you, Edwards, Knox,” Gruszczyński said, thoroughly exasperated, “that this is an Undivided cult. ‘*Powers of the Dark Gods four, shall blend for power evermore*’,” she quoted, bringing out a phrase from the Ionnioc motto. Like most Undivided mantras, it was a variation on a theme. “Unless your faith is wavering—in which case, I can easily order your immediate death—you know damn well that the mixing of rituals for two or more Dark Gods exponentially increases their significance. Alright, so maybe there are better combinations than Fernexian rites and Soulthirster desire. We learn from our mistakes, right?”

Special Covert Agent Jamilla Townsend tried to keep herself awake in her folding chair. The manner in which these cults prepared for their *Sacrificium*—putting away all dæmons and then keeping a twenty-four hour vigil—struck Townsend as being remarkably stupid. Unfortunately, as an Inquisition undercover double agent spying on the Ionnioc order, she had little choice but to comply. Anything else would have provoked suspicion.

And these godsdamn uniforms itch like hell...

“Pay attention, Jami!” Crystal Czyzewski-Cabalquinto, a golden retriever sitting next to her, hissed under her breath. “This could be important!” Using Townsend's real name, even an abbreviation, emphasized the urgency. It was dangerous, especially at this type of gathering. Here, incognito, they were Sue Smith and Lucy Johnson. If anyone around them got even a whiff of their deceit, they were absolutely toast. *They've been on highest security alert ever since that door-to-door elevator shaft salesman had brought the Inquisition the entire blueprints of the cult's main facility.*

The next Inquisition agent had tried the “door-to-door iceberg salesman” approach. His entrails now adorned Gruszczyński's office.

“I know, Blue!” Townsend replied, similarly *sotto voce*. That was even more risky: an abbreviation of Czyzewski-Cabalquinto's code name, the “Driving Bluefin”.

The Inquisition mandated that all agents regularly change their code names for each undercover mission. Jamilla and Crystal had an unfortunate knack for pulling the worst combinations of adjective (or participle) and animal; Townsend suspected High Command's misogyny at work. The "Elusive Camel" was, sadly, one of the better names she had pulled: more recent iterations included "Bellowing Chickadee", "Leather Tarantula", and "Marinated Flatworm".

Today she was the "Projectile-Vomiting Ostrich".

"Much, much bigger problems," continued Ariel Gruszczyński, banging her equine fist (three plated black digits in an odd combination of a horse's hoof and anthropomorphic fingers) on the lectern in front of her. "The Rikako, our hosts for tonight, tell us that they have suffered an Inquisition raid."

This got various reactions out of the assembled crowd. There were exclamations, mutterings, and a few derisive laughs: not everyone loved their island brother cult. Jamilla, on the other hand, was only confused; a quick glance told her that Crystal was just as baffled. "*Inquisition raid?*" she mouthed. Raids on cults were usually planned weeks in advance. Jamilla and Crystal should have known. An unprovoked, hasty attack would only occur in case of a severe emergency: an immediate physical threat, an imperiled hostage, or the death of some High Command secretary's favorite goldfish.

Gruszczyński banged her fist a few dozen more times until she managed to achieve a reasonable facsimile of silence. "The Inquisitors were not today seeking to do any lasting harm to the order, but it seems instead to reclaim an Inquisitor they believed the Rikako were holding," she continued. "Realizing this, and being innocent, the Rikako are temporarily co-operating, if under duress, to find the real kidnappers. The Inquisition—yes, Sue?"

Townsend had been waving her hand in the air. "Exalted Dæmonmaster, pardon the interruption, but approximately how many Inquisitors participated in this raid?" The information would help her figure out exactly what was going on, and what scale of emergency this was for the Inquisition.

Dæmonmaster Gruszczyński scowled. "This—this is a pointless question, Sue. Do not disrupt me again... If I may continue—"

But the gathering sounded off in protest. Nobody, even hedonistic blasphemers, wanted to have information withheld from them.

Ariel Gruszczyński looked about as happy as an armless pianist, but had no choice. "Alright, alright, shut up, shut up," she snarled into her microphone. "They were heavily armed, with the latest in Inquisition technology, and—"

"The retards got owned by three idiots with sleeping gas!" called a well-informed and disdainful heckler from the back of the room. "A rat, a fox, and a cyborg!"

Townsend and Czyzewski-Cabalquinto did a double take. *Zuviel's team!*

"I heard the body count is in the hundreds!" yelled another guy. "They're not even Mobian! They're aliens! They've come to Mobius to drain our life energy and direct it towards the promotion of cheesy soap operas!"

Someone nearby the latter cultist disagreed, with the very strong opinion that the invincible extraterrestrial warriors' preferences actually ran towards reality shows. A heated debate ensued that, moments later, threatened to break out into fisticuffs. Bystanders settled the matter by lighting both parties on fire.

“Shut up!” Gruszczyński bellowed into her mike, and the room fell to a dead quiet save for a touch of frenzied screaming from the rear. She took a deep breath. “Alright, yes, the Rikako were overcome by... not many Inquisitors. But,” she added, regaining a degree of force in her voice, “that is not the point here. The point is that they know their Inquisitor was captured by an Undivided order, and we are one of two remaining prime suspects. As it is the hours leading up to the *Sacrificium*, and we are at our weakest—which is, by the way, the same reason I believe the Rikako succumbed—I, personally, would much prefer to cooperate as well than risk a costly battle—”

“Cowardly bitch!” yelled yet another heckler. “This is what we get when we let women lead!” The five butch lesbians seated directly next to him had something fairly pointed to say about that comment... *with something fairly pointed*, Townsend observed. He collapsed, gasping, in a puddle of blood.

After that, Gruszczyński simply could not go on, though not for lack of effort. Chaos was breaking out in the small auditorium. Vague words permeated through the din: “... tonight... we haven’t... cat... Nnygugu... marmalade...”

Jamilla grabbed Crystal and pulled her close. “Let’s get out of here,” she muttered. “Something’s gone wrong.”

“You think?” Crystal replied, staring at a heavysset gaur who appeared to be doing his utmost to rid a thin falcon of his femoral vein.

“No—back at HQ, I’ll explain...”

They managed to weave their way through the writhing throng of randomly brawling Ionnioc, out the back door and into the blissfully peaceful hallway. “We can’t leave yet,” Czyzewski-Cabalquinto noted as they sprinted down the empty corridor. “They’ve got a ban on all departures; our ship is under armed guard...”

“Yeah, I’ll think of something,” Townsend replied, panting, as they burst through a set of double doors. A sign pointed the way to the aircraft hangers; they took the left that it indicated. “Did you get what she said? Too bad we couldn’t hear more—”

“Sounded to me like she didn’t want to get blamed for having this Inquisitor, I guess... didn’t want to have anything happen to their precious little cult on their precious little holiday. Eep,” Crystal added, suddenly swallowing hard but maintaining her stride. “I bet High Command thinks they’re going to sacrifice the Inquisitor tonight. The *Sacrificium* and all... hence the urgency?”

“Fox, rat, cyborg. The Zuviel crew. Who the hell would send Zuviel’s crew on a crucial rescue mission?” They raced through one last set of doors and into Hanger C-51, where they stored their Astrolander plane. The hanger smelled of motor oil and stale cheese-puffs. Some misguided soul had really believed there was a market for a cheese-puff-powered transport ship. The completed design got about twenty-five feet per bag, thirty on a good day. Jamilla was glad that their ship ran on good, old, reliable oil: she was never impartial to all the bits that stuck to her fingers while handling cheese puffs.

“What if the hostage was someone particular to the Zuviel team? What about that cat? It could very easily be that daemon hunter cat who hangs out with them, couldn’t it?”

“He’s not technically an Inquisitor.”

“Do you think they’d really bother to draw the distinction?”

“You’re probably right, Blue, but—aw, crap, there’s a guard right next to the Astro!”

There was indeed a guard standing right next to the ship. He wore a yellow-orange Ionnioc guard uniform that proclaimed him to be a mid-rank security officer. An Emmee .37 pistol hung from each hip; underneath the banana suit he surely had on full body armor. Townsend and Czyzewski-Cabalquinto were completely unarmed. “Hey!” he yelled as they came sprinting up and skidded to a halt. “Where da hell you think you going?”

“Um... on our ship?” Crystal said frankly.

“Dere’s a ban! Who da hell you think you are?”

“Well, sir,” Jamilla replied coolly. “We *think* that we’re both undercover Inquisition agents who have been posing as Ionnioc cultists for the last month, completely undetected. However, we *think* that since there seems to be a spot of trouble back home, we’re completely blowing our cover and heading back to give a report and to see what this is all about. We *think* that one of our combatants has been kidnapped, and we get the impression that our help could be useful in getting him back. But,” she added, calmly plucking the two guns from the stupefied guard’s holsters, “We *think* that you’re really not going to need to worry about any of that.”

The guard died a very, very confused person.

As much as Harold Eastwood and Syrus Zuviel would have loved to stay as close as possible to their partner during the mission, they also loved being alive, which is why they were currently stood in the corridor, with a nice, solid wall between them and Lothar. The amount of muffled profanity seeping through the stone walls was enough to scare an entire prison population into becoming nuns, and Eastwood prayed a silent prayer of thanks to Gruss that Lothar’s blaster wasn’t functioning.

“How long do you think before he calms down?” asked Virus, the pounding of Lothar’s fists on the walls was doing nothing for his hangover. Eastwood pondered this for a second: *Is Lothar ever calm?* They both looked at each other and acknowledged that they’d had the same train of thought, and sighed simultaneously. Virus winced as another blow to the wall caused his headache to escalate to a migraine. The adrenaline effect of the combat had worn off and left him effectively as if he’d just woken up against his kitchen sink, as was customary after a night at the pub, complete with his brain trying to escape by hurling itself at his eyes.

Eastwood, however, was doing something he rarely did: *thinking*. While the usual height of his intellectual demand was deciding on which relishes to have on his kebab, if the situation demanded it, he could write a thesis on the use of elementary particles to achieve cold fusion. Some might argue that it’s closer to a thesis on the use of chat-up lines to achieve a slap round the face, but he took what he could get. After formulating a conclusion, he turned to face Virus.

“So... Rogue’s bugged, isn’t he?”

The marmalade-furred cat sat in the manager’s office, twiddling his thumbs. He’d heard somewhere that it helped to calm nerves, but it wasn’t working, not one bit. His foot tapped anxiously against the floor as he waited for his future employer to walk back through the door. Looking at the walls, he saw several pictures of people in maroon hooded cloaks, all faces hidden in shadow, with ‘Employee of the Month’ printed in gold lettering below each frame. *Looks a bit sinister for the uniform at Tesco...*

Impatience mixed in with his anxiousness, and the feline began to look through a copy of his CV again to check for mistakes. Name: Jim Corolla. That was alright. *Hang on a second... My name's Ryoushi, not Jim.* He grabbed a pen from the manager's desk and was about to cross it out, when more questions raced through his mind. *Why am I in an office?* He took a glance through his CV again to try and answer. He flicked to the back, at which was the job application form.

"...A supermarket shopping trolley attendant?" he said aloud, trying to make sense of the situation. Rogue stood up and turned towards a large, hanging wall mirror to take a good, hard look at himself. His appearance hadn't changed. He was still an orange cat, wearing his usual boots and torso belt. *And still devilishly handsome too,* he thought, brushing his hand through his neatly-arranged hair. "You wish," the cat in the mirror replied, smirking. "Wake up and smell your unemployed, uneducated and unloved arse."

Rogue was thoroughly taken aback, not by the alternate Rogue talking to him in the mirror, but by the fact that it out-rightly insulted his looks. "No-one but me is allowed to insult me!" he shouted at his doppelgänger. "...wait." The cat in the mirror laughed as Rogue went through what he'd just said in his head. The 'real' Rogue shot an angry glare at 'himself' in the mirror.

"Who are you?!" he demanded through gritted teeth. "And while you're at it, who am I?"

"I'll put it this way. I am you, but you are *not* me... I am the *real* you, *and* the real me. You are merely the part of me and you that doesn't want to accept the fact that you are a nobody."

"But I *am* someone! I am a member of the Taikan Dæmon Hunter Order!"

"Liar." The looking glass shook as both Rogue and his counterpart thumped on the glass. Rogue's anger was building up fast as he looked at 'himself' smirking at his misfortune.

"But... I remember everything! I remember my training, I remember my friends, I remember..."

"Shut up and sit down before you hurt us." He interjected. Rogue folded his arms and turned his chair round to face the mirror. The manager's office reflecting back at him was completely unfamiliar to his memory. *How in the name of Tyrus did I get here?*

"I'll explain to you." The other cat stood up and began to wander round the mirrored office, examining useless desk items. Rogue remained in his chair, arms still folded, eyes still narrowed at the mirror.

"*We* are Jim Corolla, a high-school dropout who is currently on the dole and still living with his parents in a council rented flat. In a desperate attempt to raise some money for them to live on, *we* decided to get off your lazy arse and get a job pushing trolleys round a car park for a little more than minimum wage. Our parents..." (He held up his open wallet with a photo), "...are very proud that we've finally decided to do something."

"You're lying." Rogue muttered. "I *know* who I am."

"Really? Like I said earlier, *Jim*, WAKE UP. Welcome to the real world, not the one that you fantasized about while day-dreaming for the past half an hour. The real world in which you cannot fight dæmons with your make-believe Beam Sword, the real world where you don't go gallivanting off on your little adventures with this 'Inquisition' I kept hearing you say in your pathetic trance, and the real world where you have a *family*

that needs support. *Forget your dream. Forget your 'memories'.* And most of all, *remember who you REALLY ARE!*"

At this statement, Rogue was shocked into a stunned silence. His eyes glazed over as he stared at nothing, while thinking about *everything*. Had he really been daydreaming all that he remembered? Dreams could be incredibly real sometimes, but this reality which he'd come up with was... something else.

"So, what now? Hey, you? Hey. *HEY!*" But the other cat had all but gone, leaving him with the mere reflection of the 'real' him, sat alone in the centre of the office on a single chair. Rogue looked back up at the Employee of the Month pictures, which had changed to show people with their thumbs up grinning cheesily.

The door opened without a sound, and a large polar bear wearing a pristine black suit, complete with a pinstriped tie and silver cufflinks walked in, holding a blue overcoat and a blank name badge. He walked behind the desk, laid the items down on a spare chair, and sat down on another, letting himself sink slowly into the leather padding. He let out a sigh of relief, and turned to face the feline, who had wiped away a tear before turning his chair to face his manager. The bear began to speak.

"Well, it seems that you're perfect for this job. I presume that you can work the regular hours?"

Rogue paused. Nothing he knew had been real. "...Yes," he replied, his voice monotonous.

"Well, that's fantastic news, boy. If you'd just like to write out your name badge, then you can get started right away." He pushed the badge and a marker towards Rogue, who was still in slight shock about losing his life. With shaking hands, he took the marker, and began to scrawl a letter J on the surface.

If Blasphemy had ever been scared, it was now. He'd seen Lothar angry before: everyone on Mobius had, since he'd been dragged on a Sunday morning chat show to talk about his role in Zuviel's team and ended up shooting the hostess in the foot, but this was a new kind of angry. Not the kind of angry where he'd use the Chao in a number of ball sports, not the kind of angry where he'd aim knives at him, but this was the kind of angry that literally made demi-dæmons run scared. This was the reason why he was running full pelt down the clanking ventilation system, far away from the sound of shaking walls, running faster than the floating polygonal orb above his head could keep up. As he approached a corner, his claws skidded on the metal as he tried to slow himself down in order to turn, but the laws of physics won as Blasphemy smashed his head into the side panel (not that any other part of his body was large enough to hit also), and bounced off into a heap on the floor. The yellow, hovering shape morphed into multiple twinkling stars and canaries.

Eastwood yelped and jumped out of the way as the cell door crashed off its hinges, splintering into tiny shards of wood as it was kicked down by a pneumatic boot. The echidna emerged, trudging slowly, looking at no-one, only straight ahead as he stamped towards the exit. East had taken a position hiding behind Virus. Virus was currently fighting the urge to try and make eye contact with Hex, who he could tell by his heavy breathing was either still very annoyed, or just in dire need of a drink. Harry, who had been peering around from Virus' shoulder, whimpered and hid again as Lothar turned his head round and shot a glare at him. Lothar addressed the pair in the most formal tone

he could manage, given the circumstances: "Are you two *bloody IDIOTS* just going to stand there wondering about what a *cock-up* this has all been, or are you going to come with me so we can just *get the hell on with it?!'*"

Eastwood, who had somewhat calmed down, walked from behind Virus and without a word, collected the remaining weaponry they had left. Virus, having drained all the battery for his Mazzeltorpe, was only left with his trusty 9mm and a single Nox grenade. Once the equipment was secure, they went to join Lothar next to the dungeon exit. Virus, however, stopped and turned around. "What is it?" asked Eastwood, hoping his friend hadn't heard more enemies. His fur was already drenched with blood as it was.

"Have either of you pair seen Blasphemy?" said Virus, scratching his head. "He was here a minute ago."

"Who cares," snarled Lothar. "He'll turn up, anyway." *Always does, the little bastard.*

"Dammit." he replied, pacing towards an open vent cover he'd just spotted. "Must've run off. We need to go after him."

"Look," said Eastwood, furrowing his brow. "We're wasting time as it is just standing here. We just can't go off on one to rescue someone who *frankly* doesn't need rescuing. You really think he can't handle himself?"

"It's not that. I just don't want to leave him here." Virus began walking back to the ventilation shaft. Lothar flicked two Vs at him and left, leaving Eastwood with no choice but to trust his cowardly side, which told him to go with the one he felt safest with. Neither Lothar nor Syrus were happy about Harry's choice, as the first didn't enjoy (nay, tolerate) his company and the other was his friend, but listening to the little Eastwood on his shoulder who was dressed as a chicken had gotten him this far.

The dungeon door flew open and crashed against the wall as Tirzah rushed in; her eyes alight with rage and anger. Niko turned round, only to receive a face-full of white-striped fist. "How could you have been so *stupid?!'*" she snarled at him, before proceeding to force the contraption from Rogue's head. Rogue remained dead to the world, with his glassy eyes blank and dark.

Tirzah grabbed Niko by his robe's hood and held his face up to hers. He could feel the heat radiating from her, and didn't dare move a muscle: the tigress could be beautiful when she wanted to, but also incredibly menacing, especially when you were close enough to see individually beads of saliva rolling off her sharpened teeth. He was thrown against the wall next to a cowering Boston. Tirzah paced towards them, her face obscured by the shadow of her hood, but her burning eyes piercing through the darkness. She stood, towering over them, and began to speak.

"Would either of you two care to explain why in the name of *all four* divine deities you have just used the SoulTenderizer on this prisoner?"

Both Niko and Boston pointed at each other. After a few impatient taps of Tirzah's foot, Niko spoke up: "We were... simply following orders from The Officer!" he cried, shuddering with fear. He knew what was done to people who opposed Tirzah, and it usually involved a pair of nutcrackers.

"Oh?" she replied, cracking her knuckles and taking a step towards them. They both instinctively attempted to retreat through the wall, to no avail.

"And if The Officer told you to go and jump off a cliff, would you do it?"

"Well, y..yes..." Boston stuttered. He regained his breath. "Failure to follow orders from a superior cult member is punishable by death, and to be honest, ma'am, I'm actually quite good at diving..."

Niko winced as Boston finished his sentence, expecting for Tirzah to unleash her wrath upon them both. However, she threw off her hood. "Excellent," she said. "At least you still abide by the Nnygugu's laws." She gave a sharp motion towards the door with her hand. "Now leave, before I forget why I'm not ending your lives in a brutal and most gory way."

The pair of torturers scabbled to their feet and fell over each other running to the door. Tirzah smiled softly to herself: she always loved inducing the kind of fear that turned the most cold and cruel of people into mindless idiots. *Not that there's much difference, in this case...*

She slammed the door shut, and turned to face Rogue, whose body was limp, only held up by his chains. A large gob of drool escaped from his mouth and rolled down his fur before coming to rest on his chin. The tigress made her way towards him slowly, gazing deep into Rogue's eyes. *There's nothing in there...* her mind began throwing all sorts of queries at her. *Where has his soul gone? Is he still a valid sacrifice? How can I truly avenge Trevor if his killer isn't even awake to feel the pain?*

She ran her fingers through his hair, and took a hold of the ends. Rolling his head round, she examined the work of the SoulTenderizer. A complete empty shell. The rage she had built up was released in the form of a fist into Rogue's expressionless face, which remained expressionless, and minus two teeth.

"You're probably wondering what to do next." The voice came from the doorway. Tirzah wiped the blood from her hand, and turned to face the wizened old bat, known only as "The Officer". His eyes had been burned out by Inquisition torture years ago (Method #251 in the handbook: Forced watching of poor stand-up comedy), but being a bat, this never bothered him in the slightest. He wore no eye-patches: he considered his appearance to be more intimidating when people could see charred flesh in the back of his eye sockets, and besides, people would annoy him constantly with bad pirate impressions if he did wear them.

"Too right," she replied. "Why did you sanction this... *thing* to be used on him?" she kicked the box across the floor to him. It skidded to a halt at his feet.

"He will be back, my dear. Just not as we know him, and not as *he* knows himself."

"So he's going to believe that he's someone else?" Tirzah eyed the box. Indeed, the label did say 'CORRUPT' instead of 'REMOVE'. Her face twisted into a minacious, evil grin as a plan developed in the back of her mind. *Oh... The Patterner, he loves to play with fate in his cruel, divine way. This will please him so...* "So," she continued. "When does 'Ryoushi Nekittou' awake?" The grin was still there, but she savoured the moment and grinned more, besides, The Officer was blind as a... bat.

"It will only be a few moments from now," he explained. "Then you can resume your... *fun*." He swept his black wing over his head and with a hiss, quickly exited, hitting himself on both adjourning walls before finding the door frame. He left muttering to himself about ruining dramatic moments.

Virus crawled along the tight, metal corridors while wondering why researchers

always used rats in mazes such as this. In his mind, he was also ruing the day the law was passed stating that 'All corporate buildings must be built with pointless ventilation shafts that have no other purpose than to aid escape.' *I guess that's why the Inquisition building's always so cold...* This also meant that Blasphemy could be anywhere in this lair, since the Chao would be travelling a whole lot quicker than he was. He cursed loudly as he banged his head on yet another pipe, and continued shuffling through the shafts.

Silence is awkward. Eastwood mused as both him and the echidna walked briskly back the way they came. The guards at the entrance to the building were still unconscious, although one person had half-regained her head and was currently mumbling unintelligibly to herself about the lack of biscuits in the staff break room. Lothar walked over and silenced her with a prompt whack to the head, then looked towards his partner.

"Have you got a map of this place, or do we need to find the hangar ourselves?" Eastwood raised an eyebrow, and pointed at the incapacitated vixen on the floor.

"Well, I was just about to *kindly* ask the receptionist, but you seem to have removed that option. I'll find a floor plan somewhere." He stepped behind the front desk. After shuffling through leaflets about the medical health plans the cult offered, he found a map of the building, complete with routes for the tour guides to take when showing round primary school children on field trips. He spread it out in front of him on the counter.

"Right," he began, placing his finger on the 'You are here' arrow, and the other on the Hangar, nicely represented by a little jet. East thought about how helpful they were and smiled, shortly before realizing that they were still a cult that worshipped the dark gods. "We just have to head down there, and take the next right, and follow the signposts from there. Seems simple enough."

"Sorry, what?" Lothar stopped arranging the guards into sexually amusing positions and looked up.

"Never mind," grumbled Eastwood, as he rolled up the map. "Just follow me."

The Astrolander was a tiny plane, but good enough to get from A to B without much hassle, unless you'd decided to buy two loaves of bread from the bakery instead of one, then it was a squeeze. This model, currently being occupied by Jamilla and Crystal, had had the centre of the hull hollowed out to fit them both in. The two agents had flipped a coin to see who'd be in the cramped space between the cockpit and tail, and yet again, Jamilla had come out losing. She shuffled about trying to find a comfortable spot to tuck into, but nothing worked well. Crystal was in the only seat, preparing to take off.

"I'm sure you'll agree that we need to head to the Nnygugu cult's base," she told Jamilla, "since Zuviel's team have *somehow* managed to bring down the Rikako, and we know Rogue's not here at the Ionnioc." She strained to turn her neck round to look at Jamilla, who was curled up into a ball. "You okay back there?"

"I'll be fine," she claimed, tucking her legs in further. "You just concentrate on getting us there."

"Alright."

Crystal finished the checks, and started to take the plane out of the hangar. The hunk of metal jerked forward, and the engines died. Jamilla groaned.

"Don't! The clutch on this thing is hard to get used to!" Crystal exclaimed, as she re-ignited the engine in neutral gear, and began set off down the runway.

The lack of security was definitely something that Lothar was worried about. Up until now, there had been enemies at every turning, and now, nothing. It was, however, only seven hours until the *Sacrificium Quaterna* was to take place, and he could only guess that they weren't meeting here to offer the four sacrifices. Eastwood, on the other hand, was thoroughly enjoying the lack of not being shot at, and not a care in the world had gone to where the rest of the Rikako Order were. His dulcid steps had escalated into a jaunty stride, then onto a jolly gallop until Lothar slapped him round the back of the head. Too much cheer in a grim place was not on his Top 10.

The pair reached the hangar, and as the doors parted open with a hiss, it was evident that Lothar's suspicions were true. One lone ship remained in the corner of the vast area: he recognized it as the Ghost class's smaller model: the Ghostwriter class. It seems whoever named them had been lazy with a thesaurus, also hence the Ghost Town and Ghost Train classes. Confident in the fact that everyone had gone, Lothar and Harry started to make their way towards it.

"HOLD IT *RIGHT THERE!*"

The Inquisitor and 'honourary' Inquisitor both jumped and turned round, to be met with a sight that would make any time of the day instantly jump forward to 'brown-trousers time'. From near the huge exit that led to the sunset sky, a single guard was manning one of the huge anti-aircraft turrets and had it pointed straight at them.

Lothar lowered his eyelids. *Why the hell can they point INSIDE the hangar?!* Lothar made a promise to himself to travel find the person who designed the battery guns and personally take a dump on his doorstep.

"NEITHER OF YOU DO SO MUCH AS MOVE A MUSCLE, OR... HEY!" He stopped, as East began to wave his arm about in a silly manner.

PSSSCHOW!!!

The orange-striped German Shepherd on the gun turret had shot the wall a few mere feet from where Eastwood was standing. Suffice to say, there was no wall left, and there was no movement coming from Eastwood as he froze in position.

"DON'T PUSH YOUR LUCK, I'VE GOT THE HUGE FREAKIN' GUN HERE!" He aimed it back at where they were stood.

"Oi!" shouted Lothar back at him. "You must be Carlson! That bitch down in the prison block told us about you!"

"That's right!" He called back, his eyes wild with hatred. "She's my girlfriend, and I just watched you BLOODY *MURDER* HER on camera!!!"

Lothar knew better than to ask him why he wasn't taking his revenge out on them while he had a massive killing machine at his disposal, but he'd just remembered what she had said before throwing her lacerated body against the wall. "She said she'd been trying to kill you for years!"

"*LIAR!* She loved me!"

"It's true!" he shouted across the hangar, at the crying canine. "She thinks you're a proper geek!"

"YOU'RE BLOODY LYING! WE WERE IN LOVE!" He began to charge the turret's supply.

Uh-oh, thought Eastwood, who was still afraid to shift from having his arm in the air, in case the mental dog decided to take another pot-shot at him. *We have a problem.*

The problem, however, neatly solved itself in the form of a brown blur dropping from the ceiling, followed by a clang that echoed throughout the entire hangar. Virus had just fallen around 10 feet from the ventilation shaft, clutching Blasphemy in his arms as he landed straight on top of Lothar and Eastwood's captor, knocking him out cold. The ventilation grate fell shortly after, and smacked the dog in the head, creating a gash that seeped blood out onto the floor. Dazed, Virus clambered to his feet, slurred his words while he apologised to the unconscious guard, and staggered down the steps from the turret's tower, before falling down the last three, landing flat on his face. The re-awakened Chao began nibbling at his ear.

Eastwood and Lothar made their way to the downed rat, picked up an arm each, slung him over their shoulders, and began to make their way towards the Ghostwriter. *Thank goodness he won't ask to drive...*

Rogue surveyed his surroundings. *Whoa. Man. This is freaky. That stuff Eddie gave me sure must have been powerful... Okay. Don't freak out, Jim, but you're tied up and chained to a wall in a dungeon. Wait, who am I kidding? This situation calls for freaking out!* Panicking, his eyes widened as they darted around the room, looking for an escape. He frantically drew in mistimed breaths without giving himself chance to breathe out, before letting out a scream of horror, which slowly subsided to hyperventilating again. He was about to shout for help, but the completely unfamiliar white tigress stood up out of her chair, and held a single finger to her lips. "You're not real!" Rogue cried. "None of this is real... I'm going to close my eyes, re-open them and all of it'll just have disappeared!" He screwed up his eyes, and opened them again, blinking rapidly to try and clear what he thought was a hallucination. "Bad trip, man, bad trip!"

Tirzah smiled weakly, both at the fact that Rogue had completely lost his memory, but also at the more awkward fact that he'd developed a nervous twitch in his right eye. "Hush yourself," she said to him softly. "This isn't a figment of your imagination. We've simply had to... erase your recent memories. For security purposes. Yes." She hadn't had the time to come up with all the details of her plan, but she was sure that he'd believe pretty much anything improvised right now. "Can you tell me your name, and the last thing you remember?" she continued. "We need to know if you've suffered any long-term memory loss as a result of the treatment." *Oh yes. Smooth.*

"Of course I can." he told her. "My name's Jim Corolla, and the last thing I remember is falling asleep in a shopping trolley at work. My manager would kill me if I found out I were sleeping on the job, not to mention..."

"...that's enough, thank you... Jim."

"But... what about my job?"

"That doesn't matter anymore. The Nnygugu have a much higher purpose for you now..."

"The Nunny-Googoo what-now?" Rogue raised an eyebrow and tilted his head. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Of course not," replied Tirzah. "You've just had your memory wiped, *remember?*" She laughed quietly at her own wit.

'Jim' looked puzzled at that statement, and tried to re-order it in his head so that it made sense, but failed miserably. His head was always too full of his own questions to give up time trying to understand what was being said to him, which had probably lead to

the lack of education.

Tirzah continued to talk, while unlocking the chains that bound him to the wall and loosening the ropes that constricted him. "The Nnygugu is one of the several Undivided Cults which aim to please the four Omnipotent Gods, and do their bidding."

"The Impotent Gods?" A grin spread across his face before retreating back into a fake frown as Tirzah stopped untying him and looked him in the eye.

"No, *Omnipotent*. May I continue?"

"Sorry."

Tirzah went back to fumbling about with the ropes near Rogue's feet. "Now, the time of the Sacrificium Quaterna is looming over us. We are to make four sacrifices, one for each God, on Nox Caliginis, in order to gain their favour... This is a very important ritual, and only takes place once every year. Which is why, Jim, we look to you."

'Jim' stepped forward, away from the wall, leaving a pile of rope and chains in his wake. Rubbing his sore wrists, he looked toward the tigress. "I'm not one of the sacrifices, am I?"

Tirzah let out a long, hearty laugh. It was time to deliver to this delusional idiot the final blow in her 'master' plan. She handed the cat a maroon hooded robe, as she explained:

"No, Jim. On the contrary... you are our new Sacrificial Priest."

Part IX

The Astrolander chugged along happily, belching out thick, black smog through its engine exhausts. It had been designed to resemble a classic bi-plane, but although the inside was laced with technology, all the old analogue dials and switches on the dashboard were still there purely to try and give it an authentic look. This was ruined, however, by the fact that none of them ever did anything: each function also had a digital counterpart on the other side of the dash.

The tiny aircraft had been chosen by High Command not through practicality, but it was more a case of 'We can't be bothered to paint another ship to fit in, this'll have to do'. The Astro was the only maroon ship in the Inquisition's aircraft bay, and all that was needed was to paint on the four colours of the four dark gods, in order to go un-noticed in one of the Undivided cults. The particular orientation of the four said colours within the Cults' symbol represented the layout of a video game controller, which had inconveniently caused the mass trial for heresy of a well-known console manufacturer. Despite being the throwaway choice, the plane did its job well enough.

The same could not be said for the other Inquisitors' ship. Lothar thought it was just one of those days where everything he touched broke or fell to pieces, but he realised that this was every day, and continued battling to keep the Ghostwriter in the air. The ship had first been stunted by Eastwood, who had clipped the right wing on the bay's exit while setting off, and then again as he swerved to the right, knocking the tail of the craft. Lothar had then, to use a simpler term, 'sent' him to the rear room. The bruises he obtained while being 'sent' there were just coincidental.

With the pilot's cockpit to himself, Lothar began to check the on-screen computer to see where they were headed. He reached forward to touch the panel, and just before he

laid a finger on the controls, it lit up, and a cobra rapidly shot out of it, jaws wide open, and lunged straight at Lothar's face. The echidna kicked backwards on the dashboard, and yelped as he lost his balance and sent the pilot's chair tumbling backwards onto the floor. He jumped to his feet, grabbing his prized fedora on the way up. The snake remained there, staring Lothar down, eyes glowing red. Combat-ready, Lothar sent an electric pulse down from his brain, spreading out through his nervous system and reaching his arm in a split-second, which began to whirr. The outer shell of his cybernetic hand pushed outwards as the panels retracted, and a rotary buzz-saw thrust out from the casing. The metal shined in the light coming through the front screen, and the light reflected around the room as the blade spun, and became a tool of death. The striped cobra remained still, balancing on the dashboard, neck held high.

Lothar stepped forward, circular saw held at arm's length in front of him. *Strange... Normally they try and move out of the way by now...* Lothar kept edging towards the reptilian beast, until the blade was close enough for his enemy to feel the air it fanned out. The snake still had his eyes narrowed on Lothar's. The cyborg jabbed his arm forward, the saw passing straight through the snake, and ricocheted off the metal behind it, causing the saw to shut off. The snake couldn't keep a straight face any longer: he broke into a smile, and burst out laughing. Lothar growled as he retracted the saw back into his arm, his cyborg hand re-taking its place.

"Seriously," the cobra smirked, the colour of his eyes fading into a bright, pulsing yellow. "You've never seen a 3D hologram before?"

Lothar picked up the pilot's chair, and dropped it in place again, before dropping into it grumpily. "Shut up," he muttered. *Does everyone have to be a bloody comedian round here?*

"I'm sorry," said the cobra. "But you have to admit, it was pretty funny."

"I don't have to admit anything, it's the joys of still having an organic brain."

Lothar took a good look at the hologram, his bionic eye scanning, trying to make sense of it. On the outside, it seemed to be a regular King Cobra, although this one was maroon in colour. It had four stripes running down its leathery scales, each one a different colour corresponding to the four dark gods: Green for the Patterner, red for the Bloodhound, blue for Fernex, and yellow for the Soulthirster.

"You're one of the cult's AIs, aren't you?" Lothar began, folding his arms.

"I'd give you a slow clap, but I appear to be lacking hands."

"Again, shut up. Whoever programmed you must have some nerve."

"What're you going to do, *buzz-saw* me again? 'Oh no! I'm soooo scared!'"

The snake continued laughing to himself, as Lothar rummaged around under the dashboard. The snake's laughter subsided as the echidna came back into his view, clutching a large bunch of coloured cables in his hand, which were notably still only green, red, blue and yellow. The Undivided cults were determined to show that they weren't aligned to a single god at every opportunity. The snake's glowing eyes dimmed as he looked at them, and then Lothar, who was smiling with satisfaction.

"You wouldn't dare..." he said, his voice dropping low.

"Wouldn't I?" The panels on Lothar's robotic arm began to flex outwards.

"...No, you wouldn't. I'm the one actually keeping this brick in the air. You've just been under the impression you can actually fly this thing: all the controls are fake. See?" The flight stick rotated round on its axis, but the ship remained steady. "Without

me, you'll end up on down on the ground, and spread out over a pretty wide area."

"You goit." Lothar dropped the cables on the floor, and resumed his seat in the 'pilots' chair. "So. Where're we going?"

"Oh, you'll see soon enough. You'll see."

'Jim Corolla: Head Sacrificial Priest' was written on the door of Rogue's quarters. He felt more special than he'd ever been, even if the words were just scrawled on in biro. His room was radically different from the gloomy, damp stone dungeon several flights downstairs: the carpeted floors plumed like grass under his bare feet, and he had been supplied with a regal-looking desk, complete with a drawing board. The oak bookcase held several seemingly ancient books on the sacrificial arts, and a couple on cookery as well. There were a few motivational posters on the plastered walls also: one depicted a (presumably fresh) corpse of a Dalmatian, on a stone table. It read - 'Purpose. You don't have to be a cultist to please the Gods.'

Rogue sat in the corner of the room on a cushioned stool, examining his sacrificial knife with utmost delicacy. The blade was around ten inches, and the metal had many curves, and had been engraved with symbols and characters he couldn't make head nor tail of. The hilt's guard had been encrusted with the four jewels that this Undivided cult treasured so much, and the rosewood grip handle seemed to morph to fit his hand perfectly.

The newly initiated sacrificial priest had also morphed to fit his surroundings: he was now dressed in a long, hooded robe, and by the intoxicating smell protruding from it, it seemed they had used red wine in order to dye it. Rogue wondered if it was just an accidental spillage that had formed the identity of the colour of everyone's robes. He ran his fingers back through the hair on his head, which was fashioned into large, side-parted locks. Rogue himself had now dyed black streaks into each of them, both in a vague attempt to look evil, and to try and impress Tirzah.

Jim's personality seemed to reflect Rogue's in one sense or another: whereas Rogue was fairly shy and kept himself to himself, Jim would be the kind of person who'd buy the entire pub a round of drinks because he wanted to get to know everyone, before trying to chat up the barmaid. Now that Jim had taken the driver's seat, he was determined to win Tirzah's heart. The tigress, however, planned to win Rogue's heart in another way.

Eastwood's jaw dropped open as Lothar came through the door to the Ghostwriter's aft room. He lifted his hand shakily and pointed at him. "You're... uh... wait... w...who's flying?!" Virus was already in the crash position, his head between his legs as informed by a handy flight safety leaflet. Blasphemy had tried to do the same, but only succeeded in flipping over onto the floor.

"Relax," Lothar said to the pair. "There's an auto-pilot. However, there's been a slight change in course." He straightened out his fedora, which had been crumpled in the previous fall.

"Well then, where're we going?" asked Virus, rummaging around in his backpack for the map.

"That's the thing," Lothar replied, arms crossed. "He's not telling us."

"*He?*" the two inquisitors said in unison.

"That's right, *he*. Just so I don't have to sit here and listen to the cogs in your brains jar as they attempt to provide function, I'll give you a brief explanation." Lothar took a seat, and proceeded to tell his companions about what had just happened, minus the reason the dashboard now contained a large scrape across it.

"So we're... captured?" began Eastwood. "He's under complete control of us?"

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," retorted Hex, cocking his head to one side. "As for now, all we can do sit back and enjoy the ride."

Virus leant forward in his seat, chin resting on his hand. "Why don't you just ask where he's taking us?"

"Oh! What a great idea! It's a shame I didn't think of that!" The echidna turned to East. "Captain Obvious, meet your new shipmate, Lieutenant Bright-Spark! Of course I *bloody* asked him. He's not telling, not even hinting at it. Just keeps laughing to himself, saying 'My mistress will be ever so proud'." Lothar turned around and trudged back to the cockpit, leaving Harry and Syrus to themselves.

"It had better not be far," said Virus, crossing his legs. "I'm busting for the toilet."

Jamilla sat on the park bench, wearing the blue dress she loved. The flowery design wound its way upwards from the lower hem, before stopping below the waistline, at which there was a white silk ribbon tied in a bow round the back. She laid her head back and looked towards the sky. Not a cloud in sight, and the gentle wind made the day pleasantly cool. She smiled as a pair of ears, eyes, then a full head moved into vision. Jamilla lifted her head and turned around on the bench to see the grey arctic fox giving her a warm smile.

"I picked these for you," he said, and held out a bunch of roses. "They reminded me of our first date."

Jamilla took the roses from him, and took a deep draught in through her nose. "They're beautiful, thank you, dear."

She shuffled along the bench, allowing her date to sit down next to her. He put his arm round her shoulder. "I've really missed you..." he began. "I've looked at the photo of us every day since I was sent out, wishing us to be together... and now we are again."

Jamilla placed the roses delicately next to her. The petals rippled in the light breeze. "I've missed you too, Harry."

They gazed into each others' eyes, still focused on each other as their lips drew closer, and closer... and closer...

"Get the *hell* off me, you... *barbarian!*"

Jamilla was jolted awake by the sound of Crystal struggling in the cockpit. How she had nodded off in the tight, cramped space was a mystery to her, especially with the loud engine right next to her.

"Get... off! ...Urgh!" Thuds vibrated through the metal structure to Jamilla's compartment as her fellow agent kicked and banged against the Astrolander. Her shouts became quieter and quieter as she was carried away, but Jamilla knew she had to stay put, no matter how much she wanted to go out and help Crystal. An undercover agent becomes near-useless when their cover is blown.

She waited, curled up in her position. She was wondering how they had discovered Crystal was an inquisition agent, but strangely enough, her dream was more

on her mind. She would have shuddered, but it didn't feel... wrong. *That wasn't Eastwood... it can't have been. He was... caring, and seemed sincere. Besides, he was looking at my eyes, not my chest.*

All was quiet outside, so Jamilla carefully unhooked the latch on her makeshift hideaway, and opened the door a fraction, just enough to get a glimpse out of it. Pressing her head to the gap, she could just about see past the pilot's seat, out of the front screen. She was in a different hangar than they had left from: that was a good start. A banner hanging from the ceiling confirmed that they'd made it to the Nnygugu's site. "Welcome to the Nnygugu" was written in around twenty different languages across the maroon fabric, in the four colours that Jamilla swore never to wear together again after they'd gotten Rogue out alive. Despite the comedic grammatical errors in some of the translations ('We all sleep in the Nnygugu'), Jamilla admitted that the cults she'd visited weren't as bad as people made them out to be. She'd already gained some coupons to use in various theme parks simply by being a member of the Ionnioc for a few days, and her weekly review earned her a pay rise if she had attended early morning prayer each day.

Stay focused! She slapped herself on the head. *Even if you do get paid more here than in the Inquisition, they're still a cult!*

Satisfied that there was no-one about, she opened the door wide enough to roll out, and flopped onto the cockpit floor. She was still wearing her disguise, even if it was incredibly creased; it still made her go practically un-noticed. The Emmee pistol that her and Crystal had taken from the dead guard was holstered under the robe on her belt, behind her back. Jamilla searched the cockpit for the other gun, but everything had been taken. *What cheek.* She thought to herself. *They've even had the nerve to take the change from the glove box.*

She exited the Astrolander, and made her way quickly down to the stairwell entrance. *No trail of breadcrumbs, then. Guess I'm on my own for finding both of them...*

The dungeon cell was now empty, apart from Tirzah, who paced up and down the barren room. Rogue's unoccupied chains and rope un-nerved her slightly, although The Officer had ensured her that he wouldn't return to his original mind, she couldn't help but feel worried about what would happen if he did. It was for this reason that his Beam Sword was locked safely in the Armouries, along with his belt, boots, gloves and pendant, where he had no access to them. She was afraid that even a glimpse of one of his possessions would reverse the effects of the SoulTenderizer.

However, this was not the reason she was currently pacing. The tigress had just been informed of the downfall of the Rikako's base, by a mere three person squadron; a fox, a rat, and a cyborg; the very three inquisitors she had tried to lure to the Nnygugu to use as the three other sacrifices. *I promised the almighty ones that four of the Inquisition's forces would be given to them, and now I may only have one...*

She would have been filled with anger at this fact, but the messenger who was currently pinned to the wall via various knives had been enough to calm her temper. Now all that was left was worry and anxiousness. The trap she had set for them was no longer set: since the now brainwashed Rogue had been removed from the dungeon cell, the armed response guards had gone on a break, having grown tired of waiting for the fools to actually turn up at the correct cult. Tirzah banged the wall in frustration: she had left more than enough clues to identify which cult had taken Rogue... but they had all been at

the bar. Unless the clues had been at the bottom of their first pints, they wouldn't have found them, even if the word "NNYGUGU" was lit up in neon signs everywhere they looked. For once, someone had *overestimated* the Inquisition, and paid dearly for it.

The door creaked open, and a young ferret tiptoed in, head hung low. He gave out a short gasp as followed the trails emanating from the pool of blood, and saw the previous messenger against the wall, and began to sweat even more than he already was. "Y... your E...Excellency?" he stuttered, croaking out words as if someone had given him a throat sedative. Tirzah turned and tried to look him in the eye, but the poor bringer of news was resisting eye contact at all costs.

"Please don't make up titles to try and please me, it'll only make my mood fouler than it currently is."

She knew that her mood had subsided, but she believed that fear at an early stage in employment encouraged harder work: she had first-hand experience under her belt. The ferret's legs were shaking, but he still managed to get his words out. "We have one of the inquisitors, in the cells... if you'd just like to step this way..."

But the messenger was left talking to no-one but the punctured corpse: Tirzah had swept out of the door before he'd even gotten started on the bad news. He wiped his brow, and set off in the opposite direction of the dungeon.

The cobra had slunk back into the luminescent panel, so Lothar took the opportunity to have a better look around the cockpit without the AI bothering him. He shuffled through the papers in the navigation console's drawers, but they were just full of digits and figures, no information. He'd have gotten a better idea of where they were going by flicking through the in-flight gossip magazines back with his partners.

"I'm still watching, you know," a voice rasped. Lothar almost flinched, but he was somehow expecting to be apprehended. He turned round to see the snake hovering out towards him, looking disappointed that he hadn't gotten a reaction. "I knew that..." Lothar said with a slight inflection. "Are you having fun, or is your mind simply programmed to gain a grim satisfaction from other's misfortune, because that's what I'm for round here."

"Slightly yes, ...and slightly no. Why do you assume that I'm not a person too?" The hologram created a fake tear and wiped it away. Lothar slumped back down in the pilot's seat.

"You just told me that you were an AI!"

"Please. You think they can be *this* advanced?"

"So," Lothar continued. "Who do I have the *pleasure* of speaking to? Since you're obviously loving controlling this hologram, I'm imagining you're just some fat nerd behind his desk, who spends most of his time role-playing his opposite gender in an online game, and has never had a girlfriend that's not stuck inside a computer monitor."

"You're good," the hologram replied, its eyes now glowing red. "But that probably isn't the best way to talk to the 'nerd' who's flying your jet as if it were a mere remote control *toy*."

The camber of the floor began to steepen: the plane was pulling up. Lothar's eyes widened as the cobra opened its jaws wide and let out a hideously evil cackle. The secondary officer's chair rolled back: he wasn't going to level it out. Lothar ran to the door, opened it and shouted to Eastwood and Virus to strap themselves in before running

back to the cockpit and doing so himself. They stopped mourning the collapse of their card tower which now occupied the floor, and scrabbled for their seats.

Virus buckled his eight-point belts across his chest and lap, and turned to Harry, who was sweating, frantically messing around with two leather straps. East's pupils shrank with fear as he turned to face his friend, and pointed down at his belt. Virus' face warped into one similar to one at a lemon-eating contest, as he saw the frayed, ripped lap belt: and there were no chest harnesses to be seen, either.

It was too late. The Ghostwriter was still pulling up, and was almost vertical. Eastwood jumped from the back of his chair to a supporting post and clung onto it, wrapping his legs round it and whimpering.

Lothar screamed at their captor, who was still laughing manically. "ARE YOU INSANE?! YOU CAN'T LOOP A JET!!" The cobra stopped dead, and shot towards Lothar's face. "Just watch me!" All the echidna could see through the front screen was sky as the dashboard's instruments went haywire, and the open drawers began to empty their contents, falling through the air as Lothar's legs became higher than his head.

Virus was left powerless to give Harry any help as the room upended itself. Blood rushed to their heads and red error lights began flashing, coupled with the sound of a wailing siren. Cards, magazines and a coffee cup rolled about on the ceiling as the ship managed to fully turn upside down. A half-empty packet of mints and a sachet of instant coffee fell from Eastwood's pockets, as his trenchcoat failed to defy gravity and flopped down, leaving East's legs flailing in the air, his arms still hugging the post. Virus sniffed blood back into his nose.

Blackness crept into Lothar's vision from all sides as he started to black out from the pressure. "Enough!" he gasped. The cobra raised an eyebrow. "As you wish." The Ghostwriter's wings flexed and the hull rattled uncomfortably loud as the machine barrel-rolled back to its rightful position.

In the back room, a mini-fridge clattered to the floor and opened, and a very dizzy Blasphemy flopped out. "Blas!" cried Virus, who quickly unbuckled his belts and ran to hold the little chao, who was currently spewing up masses of stomach lining.

"Oh, I'm fine, by the way..." growled Eastwood, sprawled out on the floor, rubbing a new lump on his head. He stood up and proceeded to give himself another injury by kicking his dysfunctional seat.

The hologramatic snake turned to a nauseous Lothar, its eyes flashing yellow. "Now I'm having fun."

There was a faint smell of pine in the air, as the hooded penguin sat in a queue at the Nnygugu's reception area, waiting in line for her visitor's pass. Two brightly toned notes came from the PA system, and a female voice began to make an announcement. "Could the owner of a maroon ship please report to the hangar, you are currently blocking another ship's exit. Thank you!" The same two notes echoed, and around 50 people rose slowly from their places, all grumbling and muttering to each other about the so called 'artificial *intelligence*' that took care of notices. Jamilla smiled along with the remaining few in the queue and shuffled to the front. The receptionist beckoned her to the desk.

"Name?" asked the swan, her tiny pair of spectacles balancing on the end of her beak. Jamilla recognised the regal, aristocratic voice, and almost instinctively said "Townsend,

Jamilla", but held herself back after almost slipping, coughing instead. "Not a hard question..." said the swan impatiently, tapping her fingers on the desk. The receptionist was the Elaine Cygnia, the Inquisition's head librarian, someone Jamilla regularly visited in order to further her studies. The librarian she knew was trusting, kind and caring; but by the current tone and look of the receptionist, this was obviously not the case. *Has she been spying on us all this time?*

Jamilla cursed her own ineptitude at almost revealing her identity, and pulled the hood further down her head, as not to be recognised. "Sue Smith", she replied, deepening her voice.

The swan raised a white eyebrow before scribbling down the agent's assigned name on a badge, and sliding it across the desk to her. "Just peel it off and stick it on," she said, pushing the reading spectacles back up her beak as she did. "Move along, everyone else waiting here are not going to let themselves in." Jamilla slipped the sticker in her cloak pocket, and quickly made herself scarce before she was recognised.

Once round the corner, she retrieved the visitor's badge from her pocket, and began to peel off the sticker, when she noticed some handwriting on the back. She peered closer at it.

'You're not the only undercover agent here, Ms. Townsend – Rogue is up in room 231, second floor. Go. ~Cygnia.'

Jamilla smiled, and slapped the badge into place, before tearing up the note and disposing of it in a waste bin. She knew better than to go back and give the swan a wink, so she kept going towards the stairwell.

Room Two-Three-One. This was it. Jamilla placed one hand under her robe on the Emmee at her belt, and took a hold of the door handle, but was wrenched inwards as someone on the other side opened the door quickly. She brushed past another cult member who had been holding the other side of the door, and fell awkwardly onto the floor. The coyote helped Jamilla to her feet.

"I'm incredibly sorry," he said, letting go of her hand. "I'm a bit nervous, it's my first time being the knife-bearer... guess they shouldn't have picked me if I'm *this* clumsy." The brown coyote spoke with a broad accent that Jamilla didn't recognise.

"Knife-bearer?" Inquired Jamilla, brushing herself down, as a ruse to check the Emmee hadn't slipped.

"Yes," he replied, brandishing a plump, multi-coloured cushion, which was covering something on it with a black silk sheet. "I'm the one who looks after the knife and takes it to the priest at the time of the Nick's Cognis, or whatever it's called. I'm not allowed to touch, or even *look* at the knife though... Tirzah says it would taint it or something silly like that. I don't believe anything weird like that what she says, I just have a family to support, and being here pays the bills, you know."

"I see," said Jamilla. "And where might I find the priest?"

The coyote gestured towards the desk with his head. "He's right over there, is Brother Corolla: I've just had the knife from him. Now, if you'll excuse me miss, I must get going." He left in a hurry, almost tripping over the hem of his own robe. Jamilla glanced over to the desk. The large black chair was turned away from the door, and someone was sat in it, humming to themselves.

Jamilla waited until there was no-one outside, and closed the door behind her. Where was Rogue? Was he stuffed into one of these wardrobes perhaps, or shunted under

the desk out of sight? She edged closer to the large chair, and stopped in arm's reach of it. "What have you done with Ryoushi Nekittou?"

"Who, darling?" came the reply. The chair turned slowly, revealing Rogue, who was now drumming his fingers on the arm of his executive chair. Jamilla relaxed herself and smiled.

"Come on, you, let's get out of this place." she said, offering the cat her hand.

"...Why? I don't have to watch those awful videos on "Sacrifices and You" again, do I? ...and who's Ryoushi? Is he the old priest?"

Jamilla stood there, hand still outstretched towards him, expecting him to break into a grin and laugh. But he didn't. He just sat there, looking puzzled and bemused at her gesture. Jamilla felt a ray of hope shine through as he reached out and grabbed her hand, but it was instantly blocked out again as he simply shook it. "Well, it's great to meet you too. So where're we off then?"

"N...nowhere." She retracted her hand. *It's definitely him alright. But... it's not. What have they done to him?*

"Oh, that's okay," he replied. "Though if I see you again, mind if we go out for a drink?"

Seriously, what have they done to him?! Jamilla left the room without saying another word, ignoring Jim asking for her number.

Tirzah strode out of Rogue's old cell, and headed to the cell where the inquisitor was being kept, turning corners on her heels. The Officer was waiting by her destination, his hand set on his large ring of keys, folding through them slowly. Being blind was no handicap while waiting for Tirzah: the sounds of her pushing other cult members into walls to clear her path was enough as the sign of her arrival.

Tirzah appeared, and tapped on the solid wooden door. "So, is it the fox, the rat, or the cyborg?" she asked. "It's a shame there was only one, but anything greater than zero is surely a blessing."

The Officer stopped toying with his keys, and faced Tirzah. "It is neither the fox, the rat, or the cyborg. We have captured an undercover agent, currently going under the name of Lucy Johnson. She was with the Ionnioc, and claims to be working for a freelance agency, but we have now found that she was with the Mobian Inquisition."

"Did you torture her, or did you extract the information from her in another way?" Tirzah's face slipped into a devilish grin as she imagined the cries of pain.

"No, actually. Her name and company were sewn into the label of her cloak." He carefully unwound the key from its place, and placed it in the lock. The mechanism churned as the bat turned the key, and ended in a satisfying clank. The heavy wooden door opened, scraping along the uneven stone floors, to reveal Crystal, bound to the wall via four chains, one for each limb. She was still wearing her imitation Undivided Cult cloak. She glared at Tirzah as both her and The Officer walked towards the golden retriever.

She opened her mouth to speak, but Tirzah clamped her hand over her muzzle, silencing her. "I'll be doing the talking round here." She released her hand and stepped back before Crystal could bite her. Tirzah wagged her finger. "Now, now. No need for that, or we'll have to get you a restraining device."

"You can take your restraining device and shove it up your..."

"...my where, dear?" said Tirzah, producing a plastic hilt from the inside of her cloak. She pressed a button on the side, and a long, metal rod flicked up, buzzing and flickering blue. Crystal stayed silent.

"That's what I thought," continued Tirzah. She turned to The Officer, and leant over and began to whisper in his ear. "This one-" But the bat shrieked, jumping backwards and then staggered, hitting his head against the wall. "Not so loud!" he shouted at the tigress, who smiled, baring teeth.

"No doubt she would have heard anyway." she said, drawing closer and closer to the chained dog, until one face was a hair's length from the other. Tirzah tipped her head slowly. "This one," she repeated, now close enough to her prisoner that they could feel each other's warm breathing. "Will be easy." The room darkened as The Officer closed the door behind them both from outside. The only thing left lighting the room was Tirzah's shock-stick, which illuminated Crystal's fear-filled eyes.

The airy pine smell returned as Jamilla re-entered the reception area. She stood at the back of the (now full) queue again, and tried to attract Elaine's attention by using a signal taught to all undercover Inquisition agents. The previous, subtle signal the Inquisition had used had scrapped after being adopted by the public as a rude gesture, leaving Jamilla stood in line ungracefully holding one leg and flapping her arms about. A few people stared, including Elaine. A groan from the entire waiting line went up as the swan noticed, and placed an "Out to Lunch" sign on the desk before retreating from her post. As everyone was too busy complaining that it wasn't even lunchtime, Jamilla quietly followed the other agent into the secluded room, and shut the door behind her.

"Yes, Agent Townsend?" inquired Elaine, once she was sure that no-one else was in the room with them.

"I've found Rogue," said Jamilla. "But something's wrong. He's been... brainwashed, or something. He's wearing one of these robes, and he's been convinced that he's the sacrificial priest."

"Ah. That'd be the SoulTenderizer, but I felt sure that Tirzah wouldn't actually use it on him."

"...Tirzah? I've heard that name before."

"Yes, Tirzah's the head of the Nnygugu Order, and she's also the one who kidnapped Rogue in the first place. From what I can tell from her memos, she wants revenge on Zuviel's team for killing her husband."

"So why not kidnap all of them? Surely it's easier to take three drunk, unconscious guys instead of a sober one who's armed with a Beam Sword."

Elaine shrugged. "Don't ask me, it's her plan. She was meant to lure the other three in using Nekittou as bait, presumably for her own self-satisfaction, but they went to the wrong place."

"Yeah, I heard about that back at the Ionnioc, which is why we've come here... But Crystal's been captured, and Rogue's not himself; everything's gone wrong."

"Not everything: the Inquisition's been using SoulTenderizers for years: it's just been kept under wraps. Every street sweeper, trash collector and PE teacher you see used to be a captured cult member; they've just been brainwashed by these devices. Of course, there is always a way to reverse the effect."

"Then let's get started."

“It’s not as easy as going in there and saying a magic spell, Ms Townsend. We’re going to have to return his personal belongings to him: his personality has become locked within the objects he keeps close to him every day.”

“Sound like a bad fantasy novel idea to me.”

“Well, it was created with someone who had a very romanticised, poetic mind. Anyway, the reason it’s not that easy, is that Rogue’s personal items have been locked away within the Armouries here. You’ll have to get everything out of there before you can give them to him. The Armouries are located...”

“Quick question,” interrupted Jamilla. “How come you know so much about what’s been going on here?”

Elaine tapped her nose. “I’m the receptionist, dear. I’m told of what’s going on at all times, on every day, in every week: Tirzah practically relies on me to keep her life in check.” Jamilla was instantly reminded of Schaffer and Simmons: the weasel pretty much ran Schaefer’s life: he could have scheduled him to jump off the Inquisition building at mid-day and the great bear would have done it without question.

“Anyway, if I may continue,” said Elaine. “The Armouries are located on the second underground floor of this base, and they span the entire floor. I don’t have access to it, since it requires a retinal scan, but I’m sure you won’t have trouble finding someone who’s ‘willing’ to help. It’s your decision how you go about getting Nekittou’s things back; just don’t be too brash about it.”

“Okay; but what happens when I give them back to him, and where is Crystal?”

“It might take a while for him, but he’ll snap out of it, and be restored to his own personality again. As for Crystal, she is being held in the dungeons, which is on the basement floor. Anyone has access to them, and from what I know, the prison officer is blind, so I’ve made arrangements for her to be transferred to different cells every 10 minutes. I know you’re smart, Ms Townsend, so you should have no difficulty whatsoever in fooling the blind bat, and rescuing your partner. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an ever-increasing queue of visitors to deal with. The *Nox Caliginis* is a very busy event... they should really start charging an entry fee if this cult hopes to go on any further...”

Elaine and Jamilla both left the room, and parted ways. *Now for the tricky part...* thought Jamilla, throwing her hood over her head again. *Actually doing it.*

Part X

The electric blue of the shock-stick drew closer and closer to Crystal as she flexed about in her chains, trying to back further and further against the wall to avoid it. ‘Avoid Torture’ had been high up on her ‘Top 100 things to do before you die’ list; she was very intent on keeping it fulfilled. Tirzah raised the rod high above her head, and was just about to bring it swinging down onto the golden retriever, when a loud banging came at the door. Tirzah growled with discontent as she trudged back towards the entrance, and opened the flap.

“What is it?” she snapped. The Officer was stood outside, holding a piece of parchment. He ran his fingers over the bumps protruding from it, and dictated the words to an impatient Tirzah. “It says here,” he began, “That your schedule denotes you have a

speech to make to the cultists about the *Sacrificium Quaterna*. Also, the prisoner is to change cells, for reasons that elude me."

Around the corner, Jamilla peeked round and looked up from under her hood, smiling. She was just in time for the first change. Tirzah opened the dungeon door and strode out. Jamilla shrunk back into the wall as the tigress swept past her, before passing out of sight through a series of corridors. The Officer entered the cell, and Jamilla knew that she only had a few moments to think of a plan. She couldn't just go in, pistol blazing without attracting the attention of the entire building: she needed to play the bat's blindness to her advantage.

Crystal and The Officer emerged from the room, the bat gripping her arm tightly. The agent remained in handcuffs. Time was running out, and there was no-one else around. However, fate smiled upon Jamilla as a single cultist holding a clipboard appeared from one of the nearby cells. She reached under her cloak and drew the Emmee from her belt.

"Don't move." The other cultist dropped the clipboard with a clatter, raised both hands in the air and turned around slowly to see the Inquisitor with her pistol levelled at his head.

"P...p...please don't shoot! I'm only an intern!"

"And no-one will get hurt if you play along and *keep quiet*. Get moving." She nudged him with the barrel, and he lurched forward. The pair kept moving towards Crystal and her captor. They kept walking, closer, and closer, until they were walking side by side. Crystal looked to her left around The Officer, and her eyes lit up when she saw her partner. She was about to speak, when Jamilla pressed one finger to her own lips, and Crystal nodded, closing her mouth before saying anything.

Jamilla grinned, and raised her hands to the bat's enormous ears. Smashing her hands together, she let out a thunderous clap, which rang hard, pounding through The Officer's skull. He screamed and fell to the floor, writhing about, clutching his head in pain. Jamilla waved the gun at the captured intern, and then towards Crystal, and the pair swapped places. The Officer regained his feet, and grabbed the intern's cloaked arm.

"Don't *ever* do that again!" he rasped at the cultist, who was now close to tears. Jamilla still had her Emmee pointed at his head, and signalled at him not to talk. He nodded jerkily, and was dragged away by the oblivious bat, who was telling his prisoner about the *world* of pain that "she'd" enter into once Tirzah was back. Both Jamilla and Crystal couldn't help but feel a tad sorry for him, as he left a trail of urine in the floor behind him.

Jamilla pulled one of the pins from her hair, and quickly unlocked the primitive shackles that bound her partner's hands together. Crystal rubbed her wrists in discomfort. "Let's get out of here." she said to the other agent, and pulled down her hood to hide her face. "Thanks, by the way."

"Don't mention it," said Jamilla. "Now, we need to go and rescue Rogue." They made their way back to the stairs, while Jamilla explained all that had happened while Crystal had been held prisoner.

Back on the Ghostwriter, Lothar was getting restless. He paced back and forth the rear room, which was now strewn with playing cards, magazines, and more vomit than he'd ever hope to see again in his lifetime. Blasphemy had stopped throwing up, and was

now laid on Virus' knee, occasionally belching. Eastwood had found a kid's joke book underneath his chair, and had taken to reading out the bad puns to the others, much to his own amusement. "Hey guys, here's one." he said to the others. Lothar clutched his head. "I swear, if this is another lame Knock-Knock joke, someone's going to get hurt, possibly *neutered*."

"What's black, white, and red all over?"

"I dread to think..." droned Virus.

"A penguin with sunburn!" He began to chuckle to himself, before sighing and flicking through the book to find another.

Lothar held his head in his hands, and slumped down onto the mini-fridge. Virus went back to comforting Blasphemy.

"Hey guys!" repeated Eastwood. "What yellow and dangerous?"

Lothar couldn't be bothered to even say anything. He had channelled all his effort in resisting the bad jokes into trying to make Eastwood spontaneously combust by willing it to happen.

Virus continued to pet the ill Blasphemy. "I don't know Harry. Why don't you tell us?"

"*Shark-infested custard!* Isn't that hilarious!" He kept giggling to himself as he turned the pages.

Virus placed the chao onto a table, and took Lothar aside into the cockpit. The snake had disappeared, apparently annoyed by the constant telling of jokes.

"What do you think is up with Harry?" asked Virus. "I think it might be withdrawal symptoms, or something."

Lothar peered back into the room where Eastwood sat, laughing at the children's joke book. "Withdrawal from *what*, exactly?"

"I don't know, but I just refuse to believe he actually finds those *tolerable*." A quick burst of laughter came from behind them. Lothar closed the door.

Virus looked at him. "The reason I took you in here, is that I have a plan that could get us out of here."

"Oh?" said Lothar. "And why doesn't *he* need to know?" he nodded towards the door.

"Well, because..." Virus shuffled his feet and looked at the floor. "It maaaaay involved us slightly... crashing. You know how East is with things like that. He'd have a heart attack if we told him how the engine in his Spectre actually works."

"I see what you mean. So, spill it. How do we get out of here?"

"Hold on a second, *what?*" The cobra had re-emerged from its panel, eyes wide, and glowing green. "You can't possibly think you can *escape*, do you?"

Virus folded his arms. "Actually, yes. We can." He turned back to Lothar. "You know how you can't use your blaster when it's overheated?"

"Yeah." he replied. "But you know why: it's not that it doesn't function, it's that it'll knock out all my circuitry if I try."

Virus smiled. "*Exactly*. EMP - an electro-magnetic pulse that should hopefully knock out whatever's controlling this thing."

The snake looked worried. "No, you can't! You'll crash, and then Tirzah'll never be able to..."

Lothar looked at him. "Never be able to do what?"

The hologram drew up to Virus. "Well, why do you think we captured your precious feline friend in the first place? *Nox Caliginis*, duh."

Virus looked disconcerted. "Wait... the night of four sacrifices? That means..." he looked up in the air, pondering. His eyes widened as he realised where they were going. "No!"

"Yes." said the cobra. "And you're not going anywhere, except for on a stone table to die horribly while my mistress exacts her revenge upon the team of Inquisitors that killed her husband."

Lothar shrugged. "I hate to say it, but for once I actually agree with this guy. If I set off the EMP, it'll disable my arm, legs, and I'll only have one eye left working. On top of that, we'll crash and most probably die, and I'd much rather take my chances by fighting our way out of whoever tries to tie us up when we touch down. Sorry mate, I'd rather just wait."

"Hey guys!" Eastwood shouted from behind the door, and banged twice on it. "Knock knock!"

"Ahh, screw it." muttered Lothar, and began to charge his blaster.

The great hall buzzed with excitement as hundreds of maroon-cloaked cultists gathered to hear Tirzah speak. Around the great hall, there were stands set up with useful pamphlets on the history of the Nnygugu Order, and of the Undivided Cults' moral code and laws, for newcomers, along with merchandise stalls, selling postcards, baseball caps, commemorative stamps and t-shirts that read: 'I sacrificed an innocent person, tore out their heart and ate it, and all I got was this lousy t-shirt'.

The white tigress stepped out onto the speaker's platform, and tapped on the wood to get the hall's attention. The crowd hushed in an instant. Tirzah cleared her throat, and spread her arms wide.

"Welcome, my friends, to the twentieth celebration of the *Nox Caliginis*, here at the Nnygugu Order's wonderful home on the hills!" Her voice boomed through the huge hall, amplified by the half-dozen microphones that littered the lectern. The cultists cheered, some trying to throw their hats into the air before realising that they wore hooded cloaks.

"Now!" spoke Tirzah. "The *Sacrificium Quaterna* is drawing ever closer, and I am delighted to inform you, that this year, the four sacrifices will be of our mortal enemies, the wretched do-gooders that continually attempt to thwart our worship of the great gods. I speak only, of course, of the *Mobian Inquisition!*" Another roar of approval came from the crowd, baying for the Inquisitor's blood.

"We have two of them among us as of this hour! One is a so-called 'undercover' agent who had infiltrated the Ionnioc, and the other, I have cleverly coaxed into the tool of the other's demise, to make their painful, glorious deaths all the sweeter! The one known as 'Rogue' is now under the farcical delusion that he is in fact, our Head Sacrificial Priest!" Laughter erupted from her audience.

"As for the others, there are the three Inquisitors who invaded the Rikako Order. They are en-route to us at this very moment, being flown against their will by our very own technical genius, Bill!"

A round of applause filled the hall as a huge, lardy bear lumbered clumsily onto the stage. Bill wandered over to Tirzah sheepishly, and whispered in her ear. "My mistress, I'm afraid there has been a problem."

Tirzah looked uneasily at him, but then returned to a fake smile as she addressed the cultists. "Be patient, my friends, for tonight, the divine ones *will* receive their blood!" She thrust one fist into the air, before turning away and striding off stage, leaving the gathered cultists to talk to each other. Bill waddled up beside her.

"I'm so sorry, mistress," he began. "But the Inquisitors have managed to disable the ship's controls... now I don't have power over them... but... neither do they. At the rate they're falling, I'd say they have about... two seconds before impact?"

A huge thunderous smash rippled through the hall, shaking the building at its roots. The chatter in the hall ceased and stayed silent. Tirzah ran back onto stage. "The Inquisition has... arrived. I will be taking my team with me to recover them. Nnygugu, take your positions for if they somehow manage to break free, although we should be able to handle them." Half of the hall sprang into action, five of them joining the tigress at the front, while the rest headed out and towards the Armoury, amidst whom were two Inquisitors who couldn't believe their luck.

Hundreds of feet thundered into the Armoury as the Order members rushed for their weaponry. As the two Inquisition agents stepped inside, they were stunned at the vast walls, covered from ceiling to floor with guns, knives, swords and explosives. The aisles went on, and Jamilla was sure that the Inquisition's Armoury didn't contain *this* amount of destructive force.

They walked past the cultists, some excited, some scared, and some just laughing insanely, hyperventilating as they grabbed more and more from the shelves, trying to load their belts with more than their body weight of weapons. No-one even flinched as an explosion erupted from a few aisles to the right of where the undercover agents stood, with cultists on fire running from the burnt area. Bodies already littered the floor as people tried out their new weapons on each other. The idea of a targeting range had been denied by Tirzah. If people were accidentally killed, she wouldn't have to pay their wages.

The scene was absolute chaos. *Perfect.* Thought Jamilla, as she watched a knife fly through the air and bury itself in the wall next to her. *This should be easy.* She turned to Crystal, who was replacing her empty holster with a new Emmee from the rack. "Something tells me that Rogue's equipment won't just be shelved like the rest of this stuff."

"That's true," replied Crystal. "Let's have a look round the back. Follow me, and make sure you don't get burned, shot, or anything else that you wouldn't be too happy about." The pair ducked low and made their way to the end of the aisle, pushing past cloaked figures. A small raccoon tried to reach the top rack to grab a plasma cannon, but was crushed underneath the gun as he tugged the barrel and it fell, leaving his arm twitching, but still giving a thumbs-up. Jamilla spied a door marked 'Level Two Clearance', and grabbed Crystal's arm, leading her towards it and out of the way of a jet of fire.

"Damn," said Jamilla, looking at the retinal scanner. "Don't suppose you can get us past this?"

"Sorry Jami, nothing I can do here." Crystal tapped the box that protruded from the wall. "Wait a second... I'll be right back." She dashed back into the aisle. The area was slowly emptying of cultists who had gotten their gear and decided that they wanted to live long enough to use them properly. Jamilla stood looking slightly bewildered, occasionally ducking to dodge the odd knife being thrown by the two cultists waging war from the ends of the Armoury.

After a few seconds, Crystal emerged from the aisle, dragging the dazed raccoon by his legs. Jamilla realised what she was up to, and dashed to help her. They hoisted him upright, and jammed his head into the scanner. The box clicked and whirred, emitting a few blue flashes, before the door swung open. The young cultist staggered back from the scanner, and a knife whistled through the air and pierced him through the leg. He gave another dazed thumbs-up as he collapsed on the floor, leaving Jamilla and Crystal to escape the madness through the door.

The night grew ever darker as silhouettes darted from tree to tree. It was around three hours to the *Sacrificium Quaterna*, and as far as Tirzah knew, she only had two sacrifices.

"If you see any signs of movement," ordered the tigress, "Do *not* shoot. I will negotiate." The leader of her guard, code-named 'The Maroon Five' gave a sharp, hard hand signal, and the armoured squad moved forward through the forest, brushing through the grass and foliage. Tirzah herself had not changed her robe to anything more suited for action. She always wore a bullet-proof jacket underneath the robe, both because she knew the Undivided Cults were prone to sudden (and stupid) action, and to enlarge her bust size. She swept through the woodland, close behind the five.

The group approached a swamped area, the ground trailed off into a murky mass of mud, leaves and fungus. Amidst the bubbling mud was the Ghostwriter, which had crashed, carving its way through the treetops, before throwing up several tonnes of soil on its landing. The wings were no longer there, leaving huge gashes down each side of the jet, and the front screen had been smashed. The Maroon Five began to search the wreckage and the surrounding site.

"We've got a live one!" shouted a member of the guard, who was standing around 100 feet in front of the ship's nose. Lothar had been the one who had broken the windshield, and had been thrown from the ship. He was still conscious, but thoroughly disabled. The EMP had left him with only one limb operable, and he was currently trying to drag his body away from the approaching soldiers, but failing miserably. There was no way he could haul all his mechanical body without his cybernetics. He gave up and rolled onto his back to look at his captors. All five had their rifles lowered at his head.

"Easy, easy!" said Lothar, pushing one of the gun's barrels out of his face. His face cringed as tried to say the two words he'd never loved to, apart from "I'm sorry."

"...I surrender."

Tirzah walked up to the crippled echidna, and nudged his disabled arm with her foot. "You must be the cyborg."

"Oh.... Whatever gave you *that* idea?"

"Shut it, smartarse." She turned to two of the squad members. "You two. Carry him until we find the other two members of his team."

Lothar shrugged with the only arm he could. "What other two members?" he said innocently. Tirzah kicked him again, but this time, it was hard, and in the head. Lothar's prized fedora flew off, and he snarled.

"Give that *back*."

"What are you going to do, bite my kneecaps off?" Tirzah walked over to the yellow hat, and put it on. "Does it suit me?"

"If you're going for the 'pillock' look, then yes."

Tirzah kicked him in the head again, and signalled to the guards to pick him up. They slung their rifles over their shoulders and grabbed an end each. Lothar snickered as they struggled to lift his legs even an inch from the floor. Tirzah growled in annoyance. "Maroon-Three, you guard him, and radio back for a jeep. Make sure he tries *nothing*. Any sign of him regaining functionality, you knock him out. Understand."

"Sir, yes sir!"

Tirzah sneered. "I'm not a *sir*."

The soldier shuffled his feet, and re-snapped the salute. "Ma'am, yes ma'am!"

"Better. Now, let's go find the others."

The Level Two section of the Armoury was a massive change from the aisles in Level One. The ruckus from the previous 'shopping centre of doom' had become muffled through the stone walls, and the scenery had now changed to one similar to a large bank vault. Dozens of safe deposit boxes lined the edges of the room, and a single guard sat behind his desk. He was an surly old wolf, with the four colours that gave the cult its identity dyed into his left arm's fur. He looked up from the book he was reading, and cleared his throat.

"Can I help you two ladies?"

"Uh... no thanks, we're just browsing." Jamilla realised that she hadn't thought about the possibility of Rogue's equipment being locked away further than it already was.

"Just do it quietly, will you? I'm trying to read here."

Crystal was wandering round the room, checking the tags on each safe-box to see which one contained what they were after. She signalled to Jamilla that she'd found the box.

"Excuse me..." said Jamilla. The wolf sighed heavily and placed a piece of paper inside his book.

"What is it?" He glared at them.

"Could we possibly have the contents of box... uh..."

"53." continued Crystal. "It's got something in it that could save lives."

"You can't just expect to take it without a note from a person in authority here," he stated. "Honestly, do the new recruits keep getting thicker and thicker? Hound only knows how much mess I'll have to clean up on Level One later..."

Jamilla wasn't paying attention to his ranting, she was busy looking at the book he was reading. It was one of her favourites - 'The Glass Chalice', a murder mystery novel with more twists than a library full of Dickens.

"Say," she said, addressing the book with a nod. "Have you finished reading your book yet?"

"No, I'm about 20 pages from the end. Why on Mobius would you ask that?"

"I think it was just brilliant when Herman stopped that motorcycle using the wire, don't you?"

"*What?* That... that hasn't happened!"

"Whoops, sorry! I just can't help myself... I just think it was utterly fantastic when Jessica managed to stumble in on the murder scene..."

"*SHUT UP!*" Shouted the wolf. "I don't want to hear *any* of this!"

"Oh really? Don't you want to hear about how the killer escapes using only a paper clip, a balloon and a copy of the Sunday Times?"

The wolf had his hands over his ears and his eyes screwed up tight. "Lalalalalala! I'm not listening!" Crystal snatched the keys off the desk, while Jamilla continued to keep the guard occupied with the amazing feat of how Herman had killed of the entire cast of a sitcom using only his ears.

The box was open, and Crystal emptied its contents into a satchel she'd found in the corner of the room. Boots, pendant, gloves and Beam Sword, all there.

"Okay, let's go!" The pair hastily left the room, leaving the guard with his eyes closed yelling at the top of his voice as not to hear the spoilers.

A flashlight shone against the wall as a member of the Maroon Five stepped into the wrecked hull. The ship's lighting flickered and died as the team made their way into the cockpit. Strapped into the pilot and co-pilots' chairs were Eastwood and Virus, both unconscious. Lothar and Maroon-Three were visible through the shattered viewport, and Tirzah waved to the echidna, before taking off the hat and tearing a tiny rip in the rim. Lothar gave her a swift middle digit before she replaced the hat and turned away to examine the other two.

"They fit the bill: rat and fox. Pick 'em up and let's get back."

Two members of the squad moved towards Eastwood, one with handcuffs, and the other with his rifle raised, the barrel pointing at the fox's kneecaps. The pair bound him without any problem, and soon Eastwood was slung over Maroon-Four's shoulder, still out cold.

The squad leader walked up to the pilot's chair, which had toppled onto the floor during the crash. He grabbed the back and righted it.

"Aghh!" Virus had woken with a start. He was still strapped to the chair, and frantically tried to free himself, muttering nonsense and missing every belt clumsily. He stopped, and looked up at Tirzah, who was still wearing Lothar's fedora. Virus gazed at her.

"Loth... tha' y-you?"

Tirzah smiled. "That's right, you wretched piece of vermin. It's me, your buddy... 'Loth!' I think you're a complete arsehole, and I hope to see you someday dead in a ditch while I laugh at your mangled body."

"Ohhhh, it *isch* you. Get usch out of here, will yuh?" Virus slurred his words dozily, before a rifle butt smashed into the back of his head, knocking his brain back and forth in his skull, causing him to black out suddenly and painfully. Maroon-Two unbuckled his seatbelts and hauled Virus over his shoulder.

"Right," said Tirzah. "Let's get back to the Order." She swung back her cloak, and exited the cockpit. The Maroon-Leader saluted.

"Yes sir...uh... ma'am!" He gave the signal to his team, who began to file out of the ship, and made their way to the 4x4 that awaited them.

From behind a mini-fridge, a small hovering exclamation mark morphed back into its jagged crystalline shape, and a set of glowing yellow eyes emerged from the darkness in the corner.

Room 231. *Time to get Rogue out of here.* Jamilla thrust the door open, and her face sunk. He wasn't there. His empty desk had a slip of paper on it. Crystal picked it up and read it aloud. "Out preparing sacrifices, be back in two hours."

"Two hours?" sighed Jamilla. "The *Sacrificium Quaterna's* in two hours..."

"It's *never* easy, is it?" said Crystal, throwing the note back on the desk. "What're we going to do now? The next time we see him will be when he's plunging a knife into Zuviel's team."

Jamilla's eyes glazed over as a plan suddenly rushed into her mind. "Plunging a knife..." she said, thinking aloud. "Plunging a knife... Of course!"

"What?" asked Crystal.

"He's not allowed to have the knife before the *Sacrificium*, it was being kept hidden on a cushion by some guy I met earlier!" she raced out of the room. Crystal ran out to catch up her.

"You're going to switch the knife?"

"Exactly."

"But what about the other stuff in here?" Crystal indicated towards the satchel. "He's still got his boots, pendant and gloves in here. Even an idiot would know something was up if they saw those poking out."

"Well, the gloves and pendant can go with the sword... they're small enough."

"We still need a way to get the boots to him though..."

Jamilla stopped walking and looked at Crystal. "What if the person giving him the stuff wasn't an idiot?"

"...then we'd easily get caught, fail the mission, and get killed brutally while that tigress eats our insides."

"No, what if one of *us* posed as the knife-bearer?"

Gods, my head... Lothar woke up to find himself laid on a cold, stone floor, and gagged and handcuffed with restraints that would keep a Rhinocer locked up. They had been travelling back to the Nnygugu base in the 4x4 when he'd managed to get his arm, legs and eye back online, and hidden it carefully. He might have managed to escape, but the regained usage of his eye meant that he had to keep staring at one spot to keep it from moving, as not to arouse suspicion. Unfortunately, this spot had been the crotch of one of the guards. After receiving a few worried looks, the echidna then received a blow to the skull, knocking him out for the rest of the trip.

There was no-one else in the cell with him. He sat for a short while contemplating escape, until a short rap came on the door, and the flap opened. A bat's face appeared at the hole, with empty, flesh-ridden eye-sockets sunken and hollow. "This is one of the sacrifices, my priest," he said before disappearing from view. Indistinguishable muffled sounds came from underneath Lothar's gag as Rogue appeared at the flap.

"Mmmhmm." said Rogue, surveying his prisoner. Lothar continued to try and speak, but the gag was too tight and thick. Rogue turned to The Officer. "How should I go about the arm and legs?"

"However you please. Orders from Tirzah are that they should feel as much pain as possible before their death." Lothar gave a muffled shout again and struggled towards the door.

"That's quite enough," said the bat, slamming the iron flap shut, leaving the imprisoned echidna helpless to ask Rogue what was doing with the cultists.

The reception area was completely empty; the cultists had had to go and put back their weaponry. Elaine Cygnia was sat at her desk, sorting files. She spied the two agents.

"You can stop doing that ridiculous signal now, I assure you there's nobody around."

The pair stopped flapping their arms and walked up to the receptionist. Crystal sat the bag on the desk, and opened it up. "We've gotten all of Nekittou's things, but we need to masquerade as the knife-bearer in order to get them to him."

"Unfortunate timing, I must admit," said Cygnia, again pushing her spectacles up her beak. "Very well. The current knife-bearer is upstairs, in Room... 243. I assume you know where the sacrifices will be taking place?"

"How could we *not* know..." said Jamilla, looking around the walls. The walls had been plastered with promotional posters for the *Nox Caliginis*, both here and back at the Ionnioc Order. The twentieth *Nox Caliginis* was taking place atop Burghammer Hill at the stadium, around half a mile's walk north of the Nnygugu building. The stadium had been rented out to the cult especially for this date, leaving the 'Lads and Dads' Sunday-league football without a venue this week.

"Thanks again," said Jamilla, before both her and Crystal headed back to the stairwell.

Just one look. It's only a look.

But I can't! What if she finds out?

How's she going to know? It's only a little peek.

She said it'll get tainted somehow!

The maroon-cloaked coyote walked nervously up and down his quarters, the item of his temptation hidden beneath a single sheet of silk. He drew slowly towards it, reached out a hand, but snapped it away again.

No, no! I can't, I shouldn't!

He stepped back from the desk, and began pacing anxiously again. Just under two hours until the *Sacrificium*... He could. It was right there. He edged towards it, wary, as if there were a sleeping serpent underneath the sheet. With finger and thumb, he gave in, and gently lifted the jet-black silk away from the cushion he had been guarding. The knife was beautiful. The curved elegance, the tinted shine that emanated from the smooth metal... the cultist stood in awe at the craftsmanship.

A small thud. From the corner. The coyote panicked, and rushed to re-cover the knife. He jerked his head round, and saw a small pair of yellow eyes in the shadows. Falling backwards onto the floor, he scrambled backwards hurriedly on all fours. "I'm sorry, almighty ones! I... I didn't mean to look!"

Blasphemy emerged from the darkness, baring his teeth in a grin. The coyote had reached the wall, and cried out in sheer horror as the chao took another step towards him.

"P-p-please... great ones... have mercy! Spare me! I.. I'll never do it again!"

Blasphemy began to stomp towards him menacingly, loving every second. The coyote was reduced to sobbing as he clawed helplessly at the wall, screaming for his life. The demi-dæmon opened his jaws and ran at the terrified cultist. The coyote was silenced mid-howl.

Jamilla knocked, and walked into the room, but was greeted with what looked like the contemporary art section of the Inquisition's Academy Museum. Red came in splatters, trails, pools and smears around the room, and even though she knew it had to be blood, she still prayed that someone had just gone wild with the decorating. Her heart stopped as a large belch came from behind the desk... whatever had done this was still in here. She signalled outside to Crystal, who came in, pistol drawn. The two agents flanked the desk, both ready to...

Jamilla looked down and sighed. "Now how did *you* get here?"

She lowered her Emmee and raised an eyebrow at Blasphemy, who was looking up at her, as innocently as an evil dæmon could. The coyote's head was under the desk with him, his face still transfixed in morbid horror.

"You know this... *thing*?" Crystal also holstered her pistol, but kept one hand on it.

"Yeah... this is Zuviel's... pet, 'Blasphemy'. I'm not sure how it happened, but he's just a chao that's been infused with dæmon DNA."

"Eeesch," said Crystal, looking at the floating orb above the chao's head. "My friend had a chao once, and he also managed to mix some DNA in... from some plants. Now all it does is half-bury itself in his back garden, drinking the sprinkler water."

Blasphemy belched again. "*Chao...*"

"At least that's an easier job made for us," said Jamilla. "Now all we have to do is disguise you as the knife-bearer."

"*Me?*" said Crystal in disbelief. "This was *your* idea!"

"Listen, I already know that Tirzah's had interaction with this guy, so she knows what he looks like. We just need to paint you black, that's all."

"*That's all?*" Come on, Jami, that'll take weeks to get out!"

From underneath the desk, Blasphemy made a sexist comment, unintelligible to the two Inquisitors.

Jamilla folded her arms. "Do you swear loyalty to the Inquisition, or to your make-up bag?"

"...The Inquisition..."

"And would you rather have Rogue die than have a little bit of paint splashed on you?"

"...No..."

"Then it's decided. I'll go back to that store closet we passed and get it. They're bound to have some; they love dank colours like that here."

"...Jami?" Crystal walked over to her, and whispered in her ear. "Please don't be a while... he... scares me a bit." The pair looked back at Blasphemy, who was smiling

devilishly at Crystal. Jamilla winked, patted her on the shoulder, and walked out of the room.

The golden retriever pulled up the only chair that hadn't been bloodstained, and sat down, not taking her eyes off the chaos.

From deep down in the dungeon, The Officer opened the slat in the cell door, and spoke softly through it.

"It's show time."

Part XI

He couldn't see anything. Nothing, nil, nada. All he had to guide him was the rope around his neck that led him onwards, occasionally jerking him a few paces forward before slackening again. Eastwood's feet stumbled around on the rocky terrain as he and the other sacrifices walked up the path to the stadium. Harry had asked why they had to be gagged and sacks placed over their heads if they were going to die anyway, and the location was hardly a secret, but had only gotten a shrug from the cultists before tasting a foul, sweaty sock and smelling the sodden, damp cloth over his head. *Never mind*, he thought, before stubbing his toe on a large stone. *Virus'll come up with something, he always does.*

Eastwood could no longer hear the constant muffled sobbing sound coming from the prisoner in front. Crystal's 'replacement' hadn't been recognised as one of the cultists, and had been taken from his cell, and then gagged and tied up like the three Inquisitors, thus becoming the fourth sacrifice. The intern still hadn't shut up after being tazered several times by his annoyed guards, so they'd solved the problem by bricking the prisoner over the head and carrying him.

Lothar, who now had restored full functionality to his bionic eye, was keeping himself occupied by watching a pirated film he'd downloaded earlier. He had tried breaking out of the cuffs once, but as soon as he was spotted doing so, he'd received a sharp shock from his neck; Tirzah had ordered that he should be implanted with an inhibitor against escaping. His smug guard now had a habit of occasionally pressing the button and watching the cyborg's head twitch to the side, something which he found amusing each and every time it happened. The large bull's snorts of laughter sounded like a car stalling as he held the tiny remote in his hands. Lothar chewed the gag. *You'd have thought by the twentieth time it'd stop being funny... you can never underestimate the 'small things for small minds' theory, can you?*

At the head of the line, Virus choked as his leash dragged him to the floor. His tied hands were useless to aid his fall, and his head cracked against the stony ground. *Why's it always my Godsdamn head?* He lay on the ground for a second, pretending to be unconscious before being jerked to his feet with a sharp pull upwards by his neck. *Urgh... East'd better have a plan. He always does.*

Jamilla glanced back and forth between her fellow agent and the dead coyote on the floor. One dripping with black paint, the other with blood. Crystal retched from the

smell, but was careful not to open her mouth too wide as to avoid getting more paint where she especially didn't want it.

The sacrificial dagger had now been replaced under the sheet with Rogue's beam sword, gloves and pendant, the latter of which was to be worn for 'traditional purposes'. His belt and boots, however, had to be sneaked up to the stadium under Crystal's robe. The belt was perfect, worn under the robe, but the boots were going to be a problem.

"I'm a size six, not a nine!" Crystal had said as she tried them on before being painted black. She clumped around the room, tripping over her own feet as the boots knocked around loosely. "Now pass me that spare robe." Jamilla handed the one behind the desk's chair.

"Now just to let the paint dry for a little while..." said Jamilla, sitting down on a chair. Crystal remained standing in the maroon robes, arms out by her sides: if she'd gotten any paint on the material, her disguise would become more suspicious. The story they had decided to use to explain the smell was the release of a new aftershave; "L'eau de Créosote", although they had yet to think of an explanation to the question "You shave?".

"Are you sure we've got time for waiting?" asked Crystal. "Everyone's leaving, it's getting close!" This was true; Jamilla had seen cultists walking towards the exits, asking one another if they could sneak their own snacks to the Sacrificium or if they'd have to buy them there, as if they were going to a sort of gory theatre production. Jamilla sat there wondering what it'd be called if it were adapted as a screenplay, but was interrupted just as the words 'I Know What You Did Last Sacrificium' floated through her mind. Three successive sharp bangs at the door made the room seem more quiet than it already was, and the two agents stared at each other, daring not to move.

"Come awn Stan, Oi know you're in dere!" called a thick-accented voice from outside the room. "What'choo doin' in dere, any'ow?"

Crystal coughed, and called out in an accent similar to his: "Don' worry yerself, mate! Gimme a tick to get aht o' here!"

Jamilla shook her head violently. "He doesn't speak like a bad soap character!" she hissed under her breath. "Make it more posh, more refined!" She tucked the pendant and beam-sword further under the silk, and held it out to Crystal, who was frantically flapping her hands, trying to dry the paint.

Futile: the paint was still moist, and although it had stopped dripping, it was still going to wipe off onto anything she touched. "Right, time for some good adlibbing," said Crystal, as Jamilla placed the cushion onto her open arms. Just before the blackened retriever could turn to the door, the handle jerked downwards, and the door swung round, smashing into the wall, sending plaster sweeping through the air.

"Oh... sorry 'bout dat." said the large moose, as he stepped inside, antlers hitting the doorframes as he turned his head. "You ready ter ship off den, Stan?"

He glanced around the trashed room, which now contained an overturned desk, an open tin of paint, and on the floor, a mixture of Stan's blood and the black paint. "Wass goin' on in 'ere, den?"

In situations like this, females have an instant mental bond with each other, and unlike males, can put together an incredibly complex lie in a matter of seconds. It was for this reason that the two undercover agents selected to rescue Rogue had been female, and it was also for this reason that Virus and Eastwood had gotten banned from borrowing

items from the Inquisition's library, after coming up with a story which involved more freak occurrences than a mediocre daytime sitcom, all to try and avoid returning a video. Crystal began. "We were thinking of redecorating."

"Yeah," added Jamilla. "New colour on the walls..."

"...maybe some new pictures..."

"...a few ornaments here and there, just the usual."

"Anyway, we had just opened this tin of paint here,"

"...when the cult's Feng Shui Advisor rushed in, and started giving us tips on how to position the furniture."

"After a bit of a lecture, we decided that the desk made the room's harmonial balance work better,"

"...if it was sideways on the floor. Do you feel that way?"

The moose shook his head. "Stan, I reckon yeh've gone a bit soft, if yeh ask me."

'Stan' started again. "Well, it doesn't matter. Let's go. Perhaps you could introduce yourself to my friend here before we leave?"

He gave a brutish smile and a clumsy wave. "Hi, lady. Name's Ernest." Jamilla gave a short wave.

"I'm Kate."

"Righ' then, Stan," he said, turning back to Crystal and knocking a file off the shelf with his antlers. "We'd best be off. The killin's about teh start."

Crystal nodded and walked past Ernest, who waved again at Jamilla before clumsily struggling to get his head out of the door. "Wait fer me, Stan!" He called after Crystal, who was already astride, halfway towards the elevator.

Blasphemy tumbled out of the desk's cupboard, landing with a squelch in the black and red mixture that was slowly congealing on the floor. Jamilla sighed, and looked out of the door again. She pitied her friend, not for being stuck with a seemingly dim-witted companion, but for that paint; the smell was beginning to disgust her more than the person who chewed his popcorn loud and openly at the Ionnioc's orientation video screening, and besides, it'd take months to get it all out.

She looked back at the overturned desk. Blasphemy was rubbing himself against one of the surfaces, trying to clean the paint off of himself, but more noticeable was the sacrificial knife. She had forgotten that in switching the knife with the sword, she had gained a nice, new weapon. Jamilla tucked the sacrificial knife under her belt, and headed back out into the corridor.

"Why aren't yeh up fer talkin' much, eh Stan?" asked Ernest loudly in the otherwise empty lift. Crystal wanted to risk as little talking as possible.

"Dunno." She replied in a fake gruff voice, then went back to staring at the buttons, trying not to listen as the moose wondered aloud about whether the sacrifices appeared in the gods' oven as they're killed, whether they found the sacrifices tasty, whether they had them with vegetables, whether these vegetables also had to be sacrificed to send them to the gods' oven, and whether there were vegetable Undivided cults as well as regular ones. The unemotive drone of the bad elevator music hummed to them both as Ernest went on about how annoying it was, not realising that *he* was actually the most annoying thing present.

Gods, thought Crystal, after receiving more ranting about elevator music than Lothar might on a bad day as he journeyed to the top of the Inquisition building. *Why is this lift going so slow? We're only going two flights down...*

She turned to Ernest, and held out her hand to silence him. He stopped and looked at her. "How about this," she began. "If you can stay silent until the Sacrificium is over, then I'll give you my entire life savings." If she was only pretending to be this guy Stan, she had a lot of bargaining power in her corner.

Ernest burst into the word "Really?" and caught himself after the first syllable. Miming a zip across his mouth, he smiled smugly that he'd just saved himself slightly, and Crystal mimicked the smile. This journey had just gotten a lot easier.

The place where they sat had been drastically changed from the friendly, atmospheric stadium's home-side changing rooms to a shadowy, dark and dank preparation area. The walls were stained with what Virus hoped wasn't real blood, and no matter how much the stadium's board of directors had pleaded, the cults still had painted over the Channelbury United team's crest with the four colours of the Undivided Cults. Eastwood, Virus, Lothar and the intern were lined up on the cold benches, still tied by the feet and hands, though their gags and blindfolds had been removed. The intern was still unconscious, and his handler had a baseball bat on hand to make sure he stayed that way. The three inquisitors sat in silence, each waiting for a *deus ex machina*, but it never came.

Instead, the door to the changing rooms creaked open, and in walked the tigress, Tirzah, followed by Rogue. Lothar tried to shuffle out of his bonds to get at him, but his handler once again guffawed as he pressed the red button on his remote, sending another jolt of electricity through the echidna. Lothar found it curious that every time he got an electric shock from the device, his bionic eye seemed to pick up the local TV station for a few seconds. He'd purposely gotten himself shocked a few times on the way up to the stadium just to find out if he'd won the lottery.

Tirzah swiped the remote control off the rhino. "That's enough," she snapped. "If I wanted his heart cooked before I ate it, I'd use an oven." The rhino put on a glum face, huffed and sat on a spare bench, which creaked under the strain. He sighed again and promptly stood back up. Tirzah turned back to face the four captives. The intern's head lolled backwards, some spittle escaping from his mouth. "No doubt you've already met your sacrificial priest for tonight; Jim." Rogue nodded under the hooded maroon robe. Lothar bared his teeth at him. He'd have given anything to be in Rogue's situation right now. The whole 'not having your heart cut out and eaten' thing would be nice, and being about to kill Virus and Eastwood while having an acceptable reason for it would have just been a bonus.

Tirzah began to pace the line. "As you know and have hopefully come to terms with, you are about to have your hearts cut out and devoured in the names of the four greatest gods, which we all should serve. Since you are about to be my meal, it only seems fair that you should have a last meal, it seems only dignified. Any requests?"

Virus spoke up. "What about..."

"...If you say '*your* heart', Inquisitor Zuviel," interrupted Tirzah, "Then you shall be no wittier than the last 10 groups of sacrifices who tried that line." Virus' voice trailed off into silence again, and he looked down at his feet. Nobody else spoke.

"Good," said Tirzah. "Whatever I put into you will just be dug up again in a matter of minutes anyway. Quite painfully, I might add..."

She grabbed Eastwood by the scruff of his trenchcoat. "I will take an unusual pleasure in your sacrifice, Harold." She let him go sharply, sending him backwards against the wall. "I will thoroughly enjoy taking my revenge on the one who took Trevor's life, and thus a part of my life, away from me."

East glared at her. "You're scum, all of you. Every single cultist here is complete *scum*." He spat on the floor. Both Virus and Lothar turned to him and blinked in disbelief. East looked at each of them blankly for a few seconds, and then gave a small high pitched yelp when he realised that he'd just said something heroic. Tirzah's shadowy figure loomed closer over him. The stint of heroism he'd gained quickly turned back into raw cowardice as he squirmed backwards into the wall.

"Some say it's bad luck to spill a sacrifice's blood before the event..." said Tirzah, with a crooked smile. Her hand flashed from her belt and across Eastwood's chest in a split-second. "I don't believe in luck." Eastwood clenched his teeth, and looked down at the shallow yet long wound.

Tirzah re-sheathed the blood-stained knife, and strode out of the changing rooms. Rogue followed her, slamming the door behind him.

Crystal began to lament her decision to make a bet with Ernest that he couldn't keep quiet as she watched him flail about clumsily, trying to convey information. They had gotten to the staff gate at the stadium without a hitch, and now she was stuck outside, claiming that she'd forgotten the password. Ernest was pointing at things, drawing letters in the air, clapping his hands, pulling faces, anything he could to get it across to her without speaking. She shrugged. *I'm covered in paint, wearing boots far too big for me that are starting to rub, and I'm stuck outside my target because some idiot can't play charades properly. Screw this.*

Crystal balanced the cushion on one hand, and pulled her Emmee pistol from underneath her robe with the other, taking aim at Ernest. The moose froze mid-pose, in what looked like a martial-arts stance which could only be described as 'The One-Legged, Jazz-hands Monkey'. Crystal's hand remained steady. "Tell me the password." Ernest was scared, but was still resilient and shook his head, convinced this was another ploy to trick him into uttering a word. "I'm being serious, Ernest," said Crystal calmly. "Tell me the password."

Again, the moose shook his head, harder than last time. The inquisitor clenched her teeth, and fired a shot left of his head, scaring a flock of birds from a nearby tree, and causing a shocked Ernest to fall to the floor. He still remained perfectly frozen, still posing as he lay in the mud, and Crystal's gun still remained pointing at him. She needed him, but he was too stubborn. Stalemate.

"Damn it!" Crystal muttered, after giving up and re-holstering her gun. "I'll go get you a piece of paper." She trudged up to the metal door, and rapped on it with her knuckles. The sliding pane near the top shifted open, and a single eye peered through the gap.. "Yes?"

"Have you got a pen and paper?" Crystal sighed. "My mate out here knows the password but I made a stupid bet."

The cultist's eye squinted, and the panel slid shut. Crystal could hear muffled voices from behind the metal. "Uh, guys? Any of you got a pen and paper?"

"Nah, mate."

"Sorry, never keep one on me."

"Left mine back there."

The gap re-opened. "Sorry lady, we haven't got any here."

Crystal growled and turned away. "Wait a second..." she said in a deeper voice than she'd been using. She whipped back round. "You think I'm a *girl*?"

From in the dark, the single eye widened. "Eep!" he said squeakily, before slamming the panel shut. "Uh, guys, is it wrong that I just found a guy attractive?"

"Yeah, kinda."

"Totally."

"Keep talking..."

"You think I should... wait, *what*!?"

Crystal walked back over to Ernest, who was covered in mud. He tapped her on the shoulder, and then pointed down at the ground. There it was. The password. While Crystal had been gone, he'd had the ingenuity to write it in the mud. Happy that she'd finally gotten the password, but gutted all the same that she'd been out-thought by a moose with the IQ similar to that of a cheese and ham toastie, she strolled back to the door, and tapped on it once again. The panel slid open with a metal grinding, and another set of eyes appeared, and scanned Crystal up and down. "Hmm, I *do* see what Ryan was on about now..."

"Hmm?" said the Inquisitor.

"Oh, *nothing*," he replied. "What do you want?"

Crystal folded her arms. "Password: 'Swordfish'. Now let me in." Whoever had come up with the password had been fairly uninventive, but then again, Crystal's induction assessment at the Mobian Inquisition required her to be called 'Codename: Veronica'.

"Fine," said the voice belonging to the eyes. "Hey," he said, as he opened the door. "Is that guy with you?" Ernest was trailing closely behind 'Stan' as 'he' finally entered the stadium's VIP entrance. Crystal looked back at the moose.

"Never seen him before," she said coldly, and continued walking. Ernest's jaw opened as he was about to argue, but he caught himself again. Their agreement was until after the *Sacrificium* was over, and he'd be damned if he was going to forfeit Stan's life savings... Head hung low, he dragged himself back outside, and sat on a bench.

The first *Sacrificium Quaterna* Tirzah had performed had been exciting, fun, and all those other emotions that sprang to her mind when she thought about tracking down and killing the people who made those gods-awful car insurance adverts they insist on showing in the breaks. But as time had gone on, she had found them to get a bit... 'samey'. Last year's had been the same as all others, the four had been brought out, strapped to the same old stone tables, the same old knife had been handed to her, she'd recited the same old passages, blah, blah, blah. Knife in, knife out, eat the heart, smile devilishly. The usual. In all honesty, but in total secret, she *hated* the taste of a person's raw heart,

especially when the sacrifice was cold-blooded. A few years back she'd been unable to finish when a cow had been brought to the *Sacrificium*.

But this time was different. A *good* different. Tirzah sat in the empty director's box surveying the procession, as three Inquisitors were escorted to the centre of the field by the guards, with Rogue in the lead. Unbeknownst to her, however, there was a fifth Inquisitor on the pitch. Crystal Czyzewski-Cabalquinto was trailing behind the four, laden with Rogue's equipment both under the cushion and on her person.

The director's box was empty on Tirzah's demand. She wanted to be alone to witness their downfall, both because she felt that the rest of the cultists were imbeciles and would ruin the moment, and that she could actually speak her internal monologue out loud for dramatic effect, without being self-conscious about it. She got up, and walked towards the glass pane.

"That's right, foul beings! Walk to your deaths, all of you, for soon I shall have my revenge!"

"Are you alright, your excellency?"

"Damn it!" cursed Tirzah under her breath. She'd forgotten about the two-way com-link she'd given to 'Jim', in case things got out of hand. "Yes, I'm fine." she muttered, before re-taking her seat.

The box was nowhere near sound-proof, and the roars of the crowd were far from annoying this time, as the group reached the centre of the field, where the four stone blocks had been laid out facing inwards to each other. Lothar, East and Virus were each lead to an individual table, and their gags removed. Harry struggled to run back towards Rogue. "Oi! Rogue! What the *bloody hell* do you think you're..." But his sentence was cut short by a swift blow to the stomach with the guard's baton. Winded, Eastwood gave in and was picked up, flung onto the stone and chained up. The other two knew better than to try and escape, and the still unconscious intern couldn't even try. Once satisfied that the chains were tight, the guards tightened them harder on Tirzah's command, and then left to stand by the sidelines.

Acting classes had always been a part of undercover agent's training, and unfortunately, Crystal was about as naturally adept at acting than Lothar would be to threading a needle. She realised that every time she had spoken while pretending to be the late Stan, she'd used a different accent and tone of voice, so she was either very bad at acting, or very good at acting if Stan had happened to have had a severe case of multiple personality disorder. Either way, this didn't matter right now; what mattered was that she needed to do some damn good improvisation as not to arouse suspicion. The lapel-microphone attached to her robe didn't instill her with confidence, however.

"...Hello? Is this thing on?" She tapped the small microphone, which sent a ringing feedback throughout the stadium, which seemed to quiet everyone down. She coughed and settled back into a faux-male voice. "Good. I, er, welcome you all to the *Sacrificium Quarterly!*" The crowd remained dead silent, apparently unimpressed. A beaver in the stands slurped his drink before being told to be quiet by the wolf next to him. Crystal turned awkwardly to Rogue. "Now you must accept the, erm, *Super-special Sacrificial Items of Sacrifice!* Yes, that's it." She fumbled around with the strings around her robe and opened it up. A small section of the crowd cheered, having thought the

leaders had hired a stripper-gram as a joke, but sat down again and sighed after they saw she still had clothes underneath.

Tirzah blinked twice and stared. She hadn't sanctioned any 'Super-special' items for the *Sacrificium!* She clicked the button on her com-link, and it was then that she felt the knife at her throat.

"Tell him," said Jamilla, "That everything is *fine*."

Tirzah growled. "...Everything's fine." she snarled down the com-link, and it clicked off again.

"Now disconnect your radio."

Tirzah pulled out the wire from the transceiver in her pocket.

"Very good," said Jamilla calmly. "Now sit down, and explain to me everything." The tigress sat down, and the knife was taken away from her neck. "Well," she began, "Once upon a time..."

"Stop being a smart-arse. I'm the one with the upper-hand here." Jamilla walked round the row of chairs, and stood in front of Tirzah, still brandishing the knife at her.

Tirzah raised an eyebrow and folded her arms. "Don't you already know why I did all this?"

"Yes, but it's just more satisfactory for me to get you in a clichéd situation like this."

"Screw you," replied Tirzah. "Who's the girl doing a very poor impression of a guy down there?"

"She's my partner. We've been hanging out in the Ionnioc for a few days now, until we found you'd brought Rogue here. And yes, that *is* a bad impression."

Tirzah smiled slightly. "She's fooling all the imbeciles I work with though..."

Jamilla relaxed the knife. "Gods, don't even get me *started* on those four down there... They're complete idiots, yet they keep gett-ah ah *ah!* I see what you're trying to do there..."

She threatened Tirzah with the knife again. "Just be quiet and watch."

"And lastly... take from the cushion... *The Blade of Sacrificing Things!*"

She knelt down on one knee and held it out to Rogue, who was now un-robed, and back to his old attire, though the black streaks in his hair still remained. Virus and Lothar remained silent, not knowing what to make of the situation. Eastwood cursed the fact that he was on the stone facing the wrong direction.

Rogue reached out his hand slowly... this wasn't the knife he'd been examining in his office before. "Something's wrong," he said, and clicked his com-link. "Tirzah, should I take the knife?"

No answer.

He looked round, then looked Crystal in the eye. "Who are you?" he asked. "Where's the *real* knife?"

"Ah, for the gods' sake, just have it!" shouted Crystal, and picking up the beam sword, threw it hard at Rogue. The handle hurtled through the air and impacted hard with the side of his head, and fell to the floor.

The cat stood perfectly still, with his arms at his sides, eyes glazed over, staring at nothing but the space in front of him. Crystal walked up to him, and waved her hand in front of his face. "Are you alright?"

The large polar bear attached the nametag, and held out the blue waistcoat to Rogue. "Welcome aboard, Jim." Rogue stretched out his arm, hand open to take the jacket from the manager, and seal his future with a job in the real world. As he took it, the room seemed to ripple slightly, but he thought no more of it. Taking the jacket's edges, he slung it over one arm... and realised he was wearing a belt over that arm already. *Huh. Why am I wearing this? And what is this...?*

Rogue had looked down, and blinked, awestruck. There was a *beam sword* at his side, holstered onto the belt. A glimmer caught his eye as light reflected from a pendant hanging from his chest. He looked at the jacket that was still hanging half-heartedly off his arm, and then back at the beam sword.

This isn't who I am.

Rogue pulled off the blue waistcoat, took the unfamiliar sword from its sheath, and examined it. The smooth, metallic handle fit his hand perfectly, as though it were an actual *part* of him.

"Jim, are you alright?" asked the suited bear from behind the desk. His fingers drummed on the wood, tapping out an impatient pattern.

"My name's not Jim," answered Rogue. He held out the sword's handle, an instinctively switched it on. The blue light roared from the hilt like a raging fire, forming a beautiful but deadly edge. The cat flung the jacket into the air, and deftly sliced it in two perfect halves, leaving the material to fall to the floor.

"My name," he said, sheathing the sword, "is Ryoushi Nekittou." Rogue looked to his side, to the mirror in which he'd first seen his nemesis. Jim was there, bashing the mirror with his clenched fist, while Rogue stood, watching him. But something was wrong. The mirror was physically moving with every blow Jim took in the parallel room. Jim backed off to the other end of the mirrored room, and Rogue knew what he was trying. He drew his sword once more, as Jim began a running charge at the mirror. The alter ego ran faster and faster, and broad-shouldering, leapt at the mirror.

The fabric of reality seemed to scream in pain as shards of glass were sent flying through the air, and the walls of the room rippled violently as the cat crashed into the room with Rogue.

Jim stood up. "If I can't control you, then you must be exterminated!"

He snapped his fingers, and two curved, six-inch knives wove themselves into existence in the air. Jim snatched them, one in each hand, and adopted an offensive stance. The blades glowed red in his hands as though he was channelling his hatred for the un-co-operative Rogue through the metal. Rogue raised his beam sword in front of him, the light blurring his view through the air which it passed. As the pair circled each other, the room and everything in it unravelled, leaving them both still circling in a meadow, the sound of water in a brook close by. The trees shed cherry blossom in the wind, scattering it across the grassy field.

"Remember this place?" snarled Jim. He grinded the two knives together, but his eyes remained on Rogue's.

“Of course,” answered Rogue, not taking his eyes off his nemesis’. “It’s the place I grew up in.” Jim’s eyes seemed to burn, a thousand Fahrenheit of white-hot fury.

“How poetic!” shouted Jim, and spat on the ground. “It’s also the place you’ll die in!” He ran towards Rogue, brandishing the knives. Rogue angled his sword, and with a bright flash and a clang of metal, glanced Jim off. Jim countered his momentum quickly, and took another lunge at Rogue. This time, his blades met their target: Rogue was unable to stifle his yell as one of the knives was dragged up his back as he deflected the other. The cut wasn’t deep, but it stung badly and bled.

“You are weak,” forced Jim through clenched teeth. “Stand up straight. I want to hear you scream for your life after this one.”

Rogue got up off one knee, and adopted his original defensive stance. The alter-ego took at run at him, blades crossed. It happened too fast. Rogue screamed out in pain as Jim slashed clean through his arm. The ginger-furred hand dropped to the floor, the beam sword fizzled out, just the handle left resting on the fingers. Rogue looked at his bleeding stump, pain rushing through his nerves, a lightning storm in his arm.

Jim spun back round to face the wounded cat, and threw one knife to the floor. In his free hand, he picked up the cripple, and him by the neck against a blossom tree. “This is the end for you.” He spat, tightening his grip on Rogue’s throat. “Your mind is *MINE!*”

Hang on. Thought Rogue. YOUR mind? This is MY mind! We’re in MY MIND!

He focussed on that single thought, concentrating hard as he could, still held high by his nemesis. The pain stopped. The bleeding stopped. His hand began to weave itself back to his forearm, and the sword with it. The wound on his back pulled itself together, and Rogue thrust out the fire-blue blade through the unwanted visitor in his conscience. Jim’s face became expressionless, and he slumped to the floor, freeing Rogue from his grip.

As Jim lay on the floor, desperately trying to somehow close the gaping hole in his chest, Rogue stood over him, watching the fabric of his being come apart strand by strand. The cherry blossom fell heavier, and heavier, and eventually Rogue stood triumphant in a blinding torrent of petals. He closed his eyes, and the blossom storm scattered away, bringing him back to the *real* reality.

Rogue stood in the stadium. Everything was silent. The crowd waited in eager anticipation: the thousands of pairs of eyes transfixed on the centre field. Rogue looked behind him at the fallen maroon robe, then at his beam sword, and then at the sacrifices. His three friends were bound flat to a large stone table by iron cuffs, each wearing a different expression. Lothar, of complete disbelief: and Rogue was sure that he’d finally labelled him as ‘enemy’ on his bionic eye’s target system. Virus was struggling unsuccessfully to get out of his bonds, but eventually gave up, only to turn his wrist in order to give Rogue a flick of the Vs. Eastwood just looked like he was about to piss himself out of anxiety.

It was just as Tirzah had told him: four sacrifices, revenge for Trevor. But why was he in the priest’s role? ...*Time to improvise.*

Rogue put on a devilish grin, flung his arms wide, and activated the sword. The crowd paused for a split second, and then finally roared with shouting, baying for the

blood of the Inquisition. Rogue looked down, and noticed a clip-on microphone attached to his chest. *Perfect.*

He turned round slowly, addressing the entire crowd. "My friends! It is of the highest honour, that I am given the opportunity, nay, the *privilege*, to sacrifice these Inquisition *scum* to the four *greatest* gods!" The stands gave their instant approval, cheers went up from every side of the stadium, while some drunken cult members in the front row fell out of their seats, and over the advertising boards. Crystal's face sank.

Rogue gave a hearty laugh. "I think, my friends, that it seems appropriate to give the cyborg's life to the almighty rule of machines, *Fernex!* Am I right?!" Rogue didn't think the crowd could get any louder, but they erupted with more cheering, which echoed round the field, as Rogue swept towards Lothar, who struggled more urgently against his shackles on the stone.

The crowd continued to make noise and throw four-coloured streamers as Rogue deftly spun the blade in his hands. *If I'm here, I might as well show off a bit...*

Lothar watched Rogue, still not knowing what to think. "Finish me already, unless you haven't got the balls," he snarled under his breath. Rogue continued to entertain the crowd with his blade tricks, while edging slowly towards Lothar.

He spoke quietly to him: "When I free you, you get East out, I'll get Virus. Use your saw."

"You complete *prick*," said Lothar, holding back a grin. He couldn't help but feel glad, although he was still fairly annoyed about how much Rogue had put them through. "We thought they'd brainwashed you."

"They had," replied Rogue. "But I'm back now. Ready?"

"Yeah," said Lothar, already beginning to send more power to his arm. "Welcome back, mate."

The crowd cheered deafeningly as Rogue performed a back-flip across the section of stone where Lothar was held... until they realised he had sliced perfectly through the iron cuffs. The cheering quickly turned to shouts of disbelief as the cyborg sat up, and sawed through his ankle-bonds, and the pair made a dash for their fellow Inquisitors. East was still laid on the stone after his shackles had been cut, whimpering. He gave a quick maniacal laugh as Lothar took his hand and pulled him to his feet, out of the wet stain he'd been creating on the rock. Crystal drew both her Emmees from their holsters, and joined the four, passing one of the pistols to Virus. Eastwood looked around desperately for some sort of weapon, but found nothing.

The five now stood backed into a circle, and Eastwood resumed his leak as he watched every single cultist out of the 35,000-seater stadium pull out various knives, swords, or any blunt object they could find, and begin a full-crowd pitch invasion of the floodlit field. One of the drunk cultists tried desperately to keep his can vertical as hundreds rushed past him, but with no luck. He threw a clumsy punch at the one who'd knocked it over, but was quickly knocked out by a baseball bat. The huge horde of maroon swept their way slowly down the stands, and over the advertising boards to surround them.

The four backed closer into their tight circle, apart from Crystal, who preferred not to bundle up with a group who had spent the best part of a day in damp, dirty prison cells. The cultists had surrounded them completely, each one toying with their weapon, waiting for someone to make the first move.

Up in the director's box, Agent Townsend and Tirzah surveyed the scene. "It seems your seemingly infinite supply of luck has run out." Tirzah smiled cruelly at Jamilla, who smiled back.

"You're forgetting something," she said. "It might be a tad cliché, but this time they *are* actually surrounded by idiots. Now wipe that smirk off your face and pass me your com-link."

Back down on the ground, a crackling sound came from within Rogue's ear. "Rogue, tell them to drop their weapons."

Rogue looked round for the source of the voice, but saw nothing. The others' expressions told him that they hadn't heard it either. "No, up here." He browsed the stadium stands, but every seat was empty. "Just look a little to the left. No, wait, *my* left. Oh, forget it." Jamilla kept the knife pointed towards Tirzah as she edged round, lifted the latch of the front window pane, and pushed it wide open. "UP HERE, YOU IDIOTS!"

Rogue yelped and scrabbled at his ear before tearing the earpiece out and throwing it on the floor. "Oops, sorry!" called Jamilla, as the cat nursed the side of his head and turned to face her, along with the rest of the angry mob. Jamilla re-addressed the crowd. "Right, you idiots! I have your leader up here and *I'm* holding someone hostage for once! Now everyone drop your weapons, else I'll slash her throat!"

Hundreds of small thuds came as the cultists let go of their weapons, and a few yells followed as they were dropped on feet. Virus whistled casually and hoped no-one noticed as he picked his pistol back up off the ground.

"Okay! Now, I want all of you to step back from the Inquisitors, and give them a clear exit out of the... A CLEAR EXIT OUT OF THE... HEY! COULD YOU KEEP THE NOISE DOWN!" Jamilla's voice was being drowned out by the increasingly louder sound of helicopter blades. A small fleet of five helicopters roared over the stadium, but these were different; there were no sign of the four Undivided cults' colours on them. The grass flattened as one of them decreased altitude. Sharp feedback of a megaphone came from the side-bay.

"This is Inquisitor Cygnia of the Mobian Inquisition, and you are all being charged with the kidnap and holding of Inquisition agents!" Armoured soldiers carrying rifles came pouring from the helicopters via rope, and soon the cultists had been rounded to one side of the stadium. A small group of soldiers headed towards the five Inquisitors in the centre of the field. Eastwood took his time to find a new firearm; the pitch looking like a Transformer had exploded.

Jamilla gazed out of the window happily, as her fellow Inquisitors were escorted to one of the landed carrier helicopters.

"...So, you think you can take Her Excellency hostage, do you?" Jamilla turned round sharply. The Officer was there, holding a .357 calibre revolver in front of him.

Tirzah raised an eyebrow. "The agent's over there, numbskull. Point it at *her*."

"Oh, right. Of course." The blind bat switched targets. "Now then, the excellent thing about these ears," he continued, "Is that I can always hear when I'm being *deadly silent*."

"Well done *you*." droned Jamilla sarcastically. "You know, with all the shouting, helicopter propellers and occasional gunfire down there, you *must* have been silent to get into here."

"*Shut up!* I'm the one with the upper hand here!" The Officer rasped as he clicked back the revolver. "Now drop that bloody knife and put your hands up."

Elaine Cygnia stepped from the helicopter's bay and walked towards the other Inquisitors. Blasphemy took a quick peek out of the helicopter, saw Virus, and bolted out and across the grass towards him. A few of the soldiers snapped their rifles up to their sides and aimed at the chaos. "Stand down!" called Elaine, as she approached the group. Blasphemy leapt up into Virus' arms, while Lothar cursed under his breath that the thing had made it out alive. "It was a good thing I recognised your chaos, Zuviel. It warned me about the danger." said Elaine. Virus was about to ask how the hell she had understood its single-worded vocabulary, but she continued talking. "Now, we have... Czyzewski-Cabalquinto, Zuviel, Eastwood, Nekittou, Hex... where is Ms. Townsend? Oh, and Inquisitor Eastwood, you can drop all that equipment. I'm sure you'll find it all in the armoury later." Harry panted and dropped the huge stack of guns he'd been collected as they walked across the field, while moaning about Hammerspace not being invented yet.

Rogue holstered his beam sword. "Jamilla was up there in the stands last time we... ah, crap." They had just looked up at the director's box only to see Jamilla with her hands up, facing away from the window. The five started to run towards the stand block, along with Blasphemy. Virus re-equipped his Emmee. "And here's me thinking this was all over..."

Tirzah now stood beside The Officer at the end of the room, pointing a pistol square at the back of Jamilla's head, who had been disarmed of the sacrificial knife, and forced down on her knees. "Now," said the tigress, "You know the one thing I'm not expecting?" Jamilla turned her head round, but was pistol-whipped back to facing forward.

"Not a bloody clue." she said.

Tirzah pressed the gun harder against her head. "I don't expect it to start raining lager, while everyone down on the pitch suddenly spontaneously combusts. However, I *do* expect the Mobian Inquisition to come charging through those doors."

Outside, Virus had his ear pressed to the door. "No setup this time," he said, and stood up. "Looks like we'll have to do the gag another time." Eastwood sighed.

"I just want to see the look on someone's face when we finally get it..."

"What the hell are you guys on about?" whispered Crystal, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, never mind." breathed Eastwood, as he stepped forward, and checked his .44 he'd kept from his small stockpile back on the field. Full clip. Virus and Eastwood nodded to each other once, and on three, kicked down the double doors. The five rushed in and drew their weapons. Virus and Crystal holding an Emmee each, Eastwood with his .44 pistol, and Lothar holding a 12-gauge shotgun in replacement of his arm cannon. The soft blue light from Rogue's beam sword cast their shadow on the floor behind them.

"Hand her over, and no-one gets hurt," said Crystal calmly. Lothar turned his head to face her, shotgun still ready.

"And no-one gets hurt?' You think she cares about a bit of pain?" He turned back to Tirzah. "Oi! Give her back, else we'll make the next twelve minutes of your life more agonising than the pain Eastwood felt when we mixed in elephant laxatives with his coffee!"

"That was *you*?" Eastwood shouted across the line. "You complete *bastard*!"

"See what I mean? Now hand her over, you've got nowhere to run, anyway."

Lothar pumped the shotgun.

"You would rather risk the life of a fellow Inquisitor to get at me? You fool."

Tirzah pulled back the slide and pushed the barrel back into Jamilla's head harder than before.

Eastwood shrugged. "Well, yeah. Plenty more where she came from." Jamilla snapped her head up to glare at him. "Yeah," continued Eastwood. "She's just one more undercover agent we don't need to keep rescuing." Jamilla huffed, and attempted to glare harder. Harry turned to Virus and winked quickly at him.

Virus acknowledged, and cleared his throat. "Go on," he said calmly. "Kill her, she means nothing to us. It'd actually be better if she were dead."

Tirzah sighed. "Don't think I didn't see you wink, Inquisitor. With eyes as big as yours, it probably isn't the best 'secret' signal you could have done."

"Even *I* saw that," chimed The Officer.

"Damn it!" cursed Eastwood. "Okay, Plan B!"

In a flash, Virus whipped a small remote from inside his trenchcoat pocket, flicked it open, and clicked the button. Instantly, the windows behind Tirzah and The Officer shattered as a series of small charges detonated, propelling glass inwards. Tirzah yelled and misfired her pistol's remaining clip randomly around the room as shards of glass shot into her back. Jamilla had fallen to the floor to take cover from the explosion, and had soon gotten up to tackle the bat next to her, trying to wrench the knife from his grip. The Officer flailed about as the sound's echo rang in his ears, and soon let go of the knife to cover them.

The five Inquisitors moved their arms from shielding their eyes. Tirzah was sat with her back against the wall, desperately trying to reload the weapon as the blood pulsed out of her and seeped across the floor, around her legs. She breathed faster and faster as they promptly surrounded her, and Rogue kicked the pistol from her quivering hands before slicing it in two with his beam sword. Crystal went over to Jamilla and helped her restrain the bat.

"I just wanted some *BLOODY REVENGE!!!*" She cried, trying to back into the corner before crying out in pain as the glass shards were pushed further into her back.

Virus lowered his pistol to her head. "You want revenge? You got it." Tirzah looked bewildered. How had she? She was the one being bleeding and being held at gunpoint. Lothar pointed the shotgun's barrel towards her. "You made us come into work on a day off, *and* while we were hung over from the night before."

"And *that*," said Eastwood, as he too aimed his weapon at her, "Is the worst torture you can *ever* put anyone through. I hope you're pleased with yourself."

Rogue looked at the three in disbelief. "You think yours was worse than the torture *I* had to go through? I got painfully electrocuted and poisoned, as well as having my *soul removed* for gods' sake!"

The other three turned to look at him. "You've never been drunk, nor had a hangover, so you can shut up," said Eastwood. "Now let's just finish her off, I want to get back, my head's killing me."

They looked back at Tirzah... who had gone. Nothing remained in her place but the blood splatter, and a small trail of red that lead up the wall and out of the shattered

window. Virus swore loudly, and rushed to the edge. The helicopters were still hovering over the field, waiting for the Inquisitors to return, but it was apparent that no-one had been watching the director's box. He looked to the left, and to the right, but there was no further sign of a blood trail. They'd lost her.

Back on the field, the Guard had finished up collecting the spare weaponry, and only one helicopter remained to take the Inquisitors back to the city. The stadium was empty, and the six Inquisitors stood around the stone tables with Blasphemy and Elaine, ready to leave.

"Well, that's it. She's gone," sighed Eastwood, and scuffed the floor with his now quite ragged boot.

"At least we're all out safe," said Crystal. A few of the others nodded in agreement.

"I think we've all learned a lesson here," started Jamilla. "That we... um... uh... screw it. This has been a dead loss for all of us."

"Not entirely," said Virus, and grinned. From his pocket, he produced another small remote, with a large red button.

Lothar's eyes widened. "No, don't you fuc-argh! Godsdamnit!" Virus tapped the button a couple of times, sending a few jolts of electricity through the cyborg.

Eastwood snatched the remote off him. "Now, now. Let's use it sparingly. Only a couple of times every second, for instance." He clicked the button a few times.

"Agh!! Bloody... stop... IT!" Lothar ran forwards to grab the remote, but jerked sideways to the floor as his legs spasmed while Harry hammered the button.

Jamilla snatched the control from Eastwood. "Give me *that*. You're all a bunch of immature boys." The echidna got to his feet, but Jamilla sent him back down with a quick zap. "Surprisingly satisfying, though."

Lothar flipped open his buzz-saw. "Joke's over," he muttered, before snatching the remote, and tearing through it with the whirring blade. "Now let's just get the hell back."

One by one, they made their way across the flattened grass to the transport helicopter, and clambered aboard. The craft rose smoothly into the air, and left the stadium behind as it soared off through the starlight.

Virus put his feet up on the opposite chair, and his hands behind his head. "Elaine just told me that we've all just earned the next week off; so I don't know about you guys, but I'm really up for going down the pub. Who's with me?"

"Aye," replied Eastwood, and Lothar gave a quick nod.

"Right then," continued Virus, as Blasphemy curled up on Virus' outstretched legs. "It's settled, we're all off for a good booze-up."

"Except me," said Rogue, sitting forward.

"No, no," said Virus. "*Especially* you. Time for you to finally have a good night out for a change."

Rogue looked at his friends, who had braved hell to rescue him. Battered, bruised, and bloody, but still up for anything. He smiled, and clicked the pilot intercom. "*To the pub!*"

Epilogue

Gusts of arctic wind blew across Ryoushi Nekittou's goggles and through his orange crown-fur as he carved between two moguls, barreling down the snowy mountainside. He swerved around a tree like a slalom gate so close that the branches tickled the end of his tail. Fresh granular parted before his brand-new snowboard, which he'd purchased five minutes ago for about the same price as a small ocean liner.

Love that prisoner-time pay. Bloody Inquisition gets something right, anyhow...

The pay had indeed been very good, although he'd had to devote another significant chunk of it to medical expenses and psychological testing. Though Rogue had protested that he had now shed all inclination towards cutting the hearts out of fellow Inquisitors, High Command had ordered him to visit a shrink, on the grounds that their last employee brainwashed into a trolley assistant had murdered fourteen people in their sleep. With a banana.

They'd also ordered a CAT scan. *Which is someone's idea of a gut-buster, I'm sure.*

But, having passed all tests, Rogue, along with his teammates, had been granted a generous leave, which they took to get as far away from home as possible. Adielan Mountain was the highest peak this side of the Floating Island, and boasted Mobius' best in both alpine skiing and gonorrhea treatment. The civil engineer who designed the place had been quickly fired—then reinstated when a surprising number of patrons ended up requesting package deals.

Rouge pulled to a slow parallel slide and looked back up the mountain. Above, Virus was slowly inching forward with his skis in a triangle and a terrified expression on his face. Harry, with slightly more experience, turned in slow, meandering curls before catching an edge—which quickly produced a spectacular yard sale of skis, poles, boots, goggles, and Harry, none attached to any other. Lothar (who had given Rentals fits trying to fit him before finally managing to adapt his bionic legs to a pair of short children's skis) had spun out of control and was apologizing to the border he had just nearly delimited. A Lothar-style apology was delivered via blaster, close-range.

Nothing's changed, has it? Rogue thought bemusedly. Not a thing. After all that, I'm still the competent one—and who'd want it any other way?

He kicked his board forward and, maneuvering with feline grace, aimed for a nearby rail and ramp jump. He pictured the trick in his mind... noslide the rail, flip off the end, 720 Wildcat to the mosquito grab... *wave to all my adoring fangirls, maybe slip in a wink...*

It was about the moment he'd decided on the wink that he hit the first meerkat.

The second meerkat, who probably could have been the first's twin, was also snowboarding towards the rail at the same moment, and also got hit. The result of this was that, in the three-millisecond span he had to react, Rogue had to detach one meerkat from his face and another from his legs before reaching the end of the rail—whereupon his board promptly decided it was abandoning this travesty early.

Airborne, boardless, and cursing meerkats, Rogue twisted himself around in the air, looked for a fat person, and found one. The hippo (actually a hippo) yelped in surprise as Rogue came crashing down on top of her.

“Sorry,” he panted to the hippo as he disentangled himself and headed in search of his board. “You were the best padding around.” The hippo likely would have taken offense were she still conscious.

(Incidentally, Rogue would find out six months later that the entire episode had been caught on tape, setting off a new craze among extreme-sports enthusiasts. The number of unemployed meerkats and hippopotamuses around Adielan would soon hit a record low. The same was true for the job satisfaction of the newly-employed.)

By the time he’d finished retrieving and reattaching his board, Virus, Harry, and Lothar had all passed him. They were waiting at the bottom of the mountain. “You never saw that happen,” Rogue hissed. “*Never.*”

Harry laughed. “Are you kidding me? I’m going to be replaying that in my head for *months!*”

Virus shook his head. “Anything. Think we’ll ever be able to do *anything* without leaving a trail of havoc behind us?”

“Not if I can help it,” Lothar grinned.

“Rogue’s right, though,” Harry added. “We shouldn’t go too hard on him. He *has* managed to stay un-kidnapped for an entire week.”

“*About* that,” Virus said. “I just got a message from HQ letting me know that the Nnygugu cult base was effectively blown clear off the map this morning. With plenty of members still inside.”

“Crying shame,” Rogue said, removing one paw from his snowboard.

“Also,” Virus went on, “they vaporized the Ionnio. And the Rikako.”

Rogue looked up. “But *they* didn’t take me.”

“Yeah, they know” Virus said. “The stated reason was, ‘for the hell of it’.”

A silence fell. They were about to board the lift. Harry looked around at the team. “So, that’s it? We’re home free? We can really just enjoy this time off?”

“For now?” Rogue said. “Yeah. I think we can.”

Closure to another adventure, and a vacation at last. Hearts firmly in their chests where they belonged. Another victory for the Mobian Inquisition, and a failure for the Dark Gods and their evil followers. *Nothing to worry about at all*, Rogue thought happily, sitting on the chairlift beside his three friends. He scooped a small pile of snow onto his board as the lift began to rise.

Thirty feet below them, a cloaked figure stood on the hillside and glared hatred upwards.

There they are, she thought, fury raging in every muscle of her body. *Look at them, sitting there on a chairlift—four pathetic pawns of the Inquisition, triumphant, enjoying their vacation. Their vacation!*

“Well, Inquisitors, you’ll get no *vacation* from *me*,” she hissed softly.

Already new plans were in place. Already the wheels had begun to turn again. The forces of the Dark Gods could not be set back so easily. And she, she would be at the heart of it all. Once again, she swore a soft oath of vengeance, her skyward eyes never leaving the four figures now approaching above her:

She would have her revenge. However long it took. And not just the cat anymore, no... the cat was a mere fraction now. Rat and fox and echidna... all now had a debt to pay. And they would pay in blood.

The chair was getting very close now. She could see them clearly. Ryoushi was looking straight at her—no, he could not see her face, but she could see his. The hate she had for that face... for all those faces...

The faces that killed her fiancé...

The faces that destroyed her cult...

“It’s not enough, Inquisitors!” Tirzah screamed at them. She was sure they could not hear, though they were now almost directly above her. “You took it all, but not me! You haven’t taken *me*! You haven’t heard the last of *me*! I know you, you scum, and I will find you, every one of you, and I will *personally* make sure that every last one of your hearts ends up bleeding on a—”

A cascade of snow hit her in the face.

Virus turned to Rogue.

“Nice shot,” he remarked.

- THE END -