

# BLADE AND BONE

Paul McAuley

**Paul McAuley's latest novel, *Beyond the Burn Line*, which is an exploration of our legacy in a post-human, post-Anthropocene Earth, was one of the *Guardian's* books of the year, and short-listed for the Kitschies' Red Tentacle Award. Of "Blade and Bone" he says, "This isn't my first trip to Mars. One of my early novels, *Red Dust*, was set on a version of Mars under Chinese hegemony and Gollancz recently reissued my near future bio-thriller about the contamination of life on Earth by life on Mars." This new novella is a deep-future outcrop of his Quiet War series of novels and shorter fictions: a story about lives shaped by stories that trace an unexpected journey across the battle-scarred face of the Red Planet.**

Konstantinov's Company found the hostages just a few hours after setting out on the trail of the True raiders who'd taken them. Leaving behind the tar sands mine, its extraction plant, and the smoldering ruin of its tank farm, the fresh graves and ramshackle defenses got up by grim survivors. Crossing the level plain of the crater's floor, passing the stinking lagoons of tailings-waste ponds and the terraced pits of the mine workings. Climbing a long grade to the notch cut in the rim by the catastrophic floods that, several centuries ago, had deposited layers of mud and sand and carbon chondrite tars. The company's raptors had already surveyed the notch and the outflow channel that the flood had carved through the chaotic terrain beyond, but it was one of the company's scouts who discovered the hostages, what was left of them, in a stand of whitebark pines at the outer edge of a bend in the channel.

Eight people had been taken by the raiders: there were eight severed heads impaled on a row of stakes. Necks cleanly cut under chins, mouths gaping, eyes upturned in their sockets. Bloodied clothing hung from tree branches like macabre flags. A burn pit brimmed with ash and bone fragments.

After Colonel Konstantinov and the agent who'd paid a fee to join the hunt had inspected the remains, the colonel gave a short speech. He was seated atop his strider, a lean, handsome, bronze-skinned young man with an engaging manner, cold wind stirring his blond mane, his sharp blue gaze ranging over the twenty-two mounted troopers as he told them that this flagrant display of cruelty was why the barbarians they were hunting deserved no less than swift and lethal justice. That when action came, as it soon would, they should not hesitate to dispatch those responsible.

"So-called Trues and associated extremists and outcasts have for too long bismirched our planet's reputation. Mars will be an infinitely better place without them," the colonel said, and he raised his trademark silver fusil firearm above his head, and the troopers raised their fusils and needlers and yelled their battle cry.

A brief report on the fate of the hostages and the coordinates of their remains was sent to the mining camp, and the company moved on, grim and alert. The agent rode at point with Colonel Konstantinov, perched on a saddle strapped to the shoulders of a mute, bare-chested giant whose limber trot matched the pace of the colonel's strider. He was a small person, the agent, dressed all in white and perched on the shoulder saddle with a fusil cut down to his size slung over his shoulder, the bell of its muzzle flaring like a funerary blossom above his white, wide-brimmed hat. His feet, in boots of black buttery leather, stuck straight out either side of the flat-topped head of his mount.

The raiders, who had been harassing settlements and farmsteads along the northern border of the Blight for more than sixty days before they attacked the tar sands mine, were led by a warrior priest accoutred with bones and a broken vorpil blade plundered from the tomb of a descendant of the agent's maker and master. When the mining company had contracted Konstantinov's Company to find and rescue the kidnapped workers, the agent had joined the hunt. His master was one of the disincorporate tankies who haunted the information space of the Memory Hole, a stony asteroid in orbit around the L5 point between Earth and its Moon; in addition to the usual fee, he'd offered a handsome reward for returning the stolen relics of his descendant to their proper resting place. Despite the colonel's fine words about delivering justice for the murdered hostages, this was now the company's primary objective.

At the rear of the column, behind the three autonomous utes that carried supplies and spare ordinance, Lev Vacrescu turned in the saddle of his strider for a last look at the massacre site. The impaled heads like grotesque blooms under the low canopy of the trees. Thin plumes of ash unspooling from the burn pit and dispersing on the wind.

Hanna Šegrt, riding alongside him, said, "If you're wondering why the devils murdered hostages they could have ransomed, it's likely because they know we're on the hunt. Wanted to rid themselves of anything that would slow them down."

"Seems to me it could be meant to provoke us," Lev said.

He was one of the company's new recruits; this was his first action under Colonel Konstantinov's command, and the man's call to arms had made him uneasy. The youngest son of a famous campaigner, the colonel possessed formidable charisma and it was clear that his troopers loved him, but he lacked experience and had a reputation as a braggart and risk-taker, and Lev believed that he had overlooked or ignored the possibility that the raiders might be trying to lure their pursuers into an ambush. The kind of confrontation that had ended in the massacre of Lev's old company.

"We've tangled with Trues twice before," Hanna said. "And both times they suffered a hard reckoning."

She was a tall, wiry woman, her helmet's visor darkly reflecting Lev and the other new recruit, Maks, who were both likewise helmeted and perched on the saddles of their striders, boots in stirrups, hands shoved into the sleeves of control yokes, dressed in one-piece combat suits whose sliding patches of color matched the tawny sands and black rocks of the channel. Hanna had been riding with the company for a little over a year, was deeply loyal and ever eager to assert her seniority over the latest recruits, and hoped that this action would promote her from support hack to fully-fledged trooper.

"Things might go differently if they lead us into the Blight," Maks said.

"Desert or mountains, farmlands or the Blight's jungles, it makes no difference," Hanna said. "Trues are crazy fierce, but they always fight the same way. And die the

same way, too, as you'll soon see."

"Want to make a bet on who makes first kill?" Maks said. "Knowing the Blight as I do, reckon I've a sounder chance than you or anyone else in this outfit."

He'd signed up with the company at the same time as Lev, a skinny, scrappy street kid, all corners and edges, tight curls cut close to his skull, with a woolly fringe that hung over his forehead. He'd run away from some hardscrabble settlement on the northern edge of the Blight and caught Colonel Konstantinov's attention when he'd been employed as a runner during the company's last job, putting down food riots in the regional capital, but as yet hadn't once mentioned his family, and if he had a last name he'd never divulged it.

"That kind of wager is liable to get you killed," Lev told him. "Or worse, get one of us killed."

"Listen to the man," Hanna told Maks, surprising Lev, because she rarely agreed with him. Perhaps, despite her upbeat attitude, she also had a bad feeling about this job.

"Man who barely survived an ambush by a bunch of potato farmers?" Maks said. "He's the one should be listening to me."

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For the rest of the day, the company followed the tracks left by the raiding party's horses, crossing rippled stretches of sand and fans of gravel, snaking around tumbles of boulders and teardrop islands where outcrops of harder rock had resisted the scouring floods, passing scattered pavements of crustose vacuum organisms, the first of their kind Lev had ever seen. Black or blue-violet, some smoothly rounded like spills of ice, others dissected by wandering crevices or breaking into leafy lobes at their edges or sprouting clusters of stiff filaments. Outliers of the Blight's weird jungles.

They weren't plants or fungi, these growths, but artificial organisms with pseudocell structures woven from congeries of nanotech machinery. Tech developed and deployed by Outers so that they could live off the land on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn, and on asteroids and comets and kobolds. Here, the vacuum organisms grew on deposits of primordial tars that had spattered across a vast swathe of these southern highlands when the remnants of comets and carbonaceous chondrite asteroids, mined for water and gases during the great terraforming projects of centuries past, had been deorbited.

Toward the end of the day, the company turned east and climbed out of the flood channel and made camp on a tabular rise with views across the shattered country they had yet to cross. A herd of scaly bipedal creatures strutted past in the near distance, some kind of gene wizard mash-up with powerful backward-bending legs and tiny heads on long necks sinuously moving from side to side or dipping low to snap up some trifle. Harmless and no good to eat, the top sergeant said over the link, so save your shots and let 'em be.

Guards were posted, augmenting the flock of raptors and the pair of long-range drones that loitered overhead; troopers powered down their weapons and checked their striders, gathered wood from bushes growing in fissures and other sheltered spots, and built and lit campfires and broke out rations. The familiar comradely clatter eased Lev's misgivings. Two troopers were working on one of the striders, dismantling a troublesome knee joint; a woman with a lamp strapped to her forehead was field stripping her fusil; a man was sharpening a tactical knife on a leather strip stretched taut between boot and fist, the blade flashing in firelight as he turned it back and forth. Laughter from the group around the biggest campfire, where a dice-and-draw game was in progress.

The agent had been eating with the colonel and his sergeants, and now he was standing up and making some kind of speech. His white, quilted longcoat and white

hat glimmered in the firelight. His mount squatted behind him, sucking on a pouch of nutrient gel, the same stuff that fed the musculature of the striders' legs, skull trimmed flat above deep-set eyes.

"Look at that fool," Maks said. "Paying good credit to put himself in the way of danger, and got up like this is some kind of a costume party."

He and Lev and Hanna were sitting around their own small fire, with the outer dark at their backs. The double star of Earth and its big Moon was low on the western horizon, sinking into the afterglow of sunset. Overhead, Phobos's bright fleck was slicing through the rigid patterns of the stars from west to east. Its track was higher here, just a little way south of the equator, than Lev, born and raised far to the north, was used to.

Hanna said patiently, "The real client is the tanky who made him and his mount. Our costumed friend is just the hand and eye of the ghost of a man long dead, sent here to find and take back those stolen relics and record the doing of it. If you'd been paying attention to the briefing, young Maks, you'd know that."

The kid, who'd arrived at muster late, with a hangover and a black eye from some street brawl, ignored the put-down. Saying stubbornly, "I know what he is. And I also know it's bad luck, having him tag along."

"Set your mind on what you need to do instead of worrying about our guest," Hanna said. "Nothing else matters now we're in the zone."

"Won't the colonel want to make sure he keeps out of trouble?" Lev said, wondering if they were going to end up babysitting the agent.

"As I understand it, whether or not his agent survives the adventure has no bearing on the reward the tanky will give for winning back the blade and bone," Hanna said.

"The agent being no more than an appendage," Lev said.

"Exactly so," Hanna said.

"An appendage who most surely likes the sound of his own voice," Maks said.

The tanky's agent was still talking, smiling, and making extravagant gestures as if acting out a tale of some kind of grand adventure. A few troopers had moved closer and Lev drifted over to listen in too, discovering that the agent wasn't telling a story, but was musing about history. How Trues hiding out in the Blight and elsewhere were the last remnants of an empire that once upon a time had ruled most of the Solar System and had even reached out to several of the colonies established in the planetary systems of near stars. How the rise of that empire reflected an earlier clash, when an alliance of three powerful nations on Earth had sought to constrain the development of the communitarian politics of the Outer settlements and cities on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn, and appropriate their biotechnology.

Earth had won that war, the agent said, but lost the peace when the Outers' stubborn passive resistance inspired popular revolutions in Greater Brazil and elsewhere, and the True Empire had traced a similar rise and fall. It began as a kind of eugenics cult that touted the superiority of the original unedited human gene line, and expanded its following and influence by exploiting those dissatisfied with or fearful of the pancultural pacifism of its age, subverting and capturing democratic politics on Earth and in the asteroid belt and the Outer System, dominating much of the Solar System for more than two centuries. A last attempt to constrain human evolution and adaptation that at last was torn apart by warfare between factions that each claimed to represent the pure, original ideals of their cause.

"My master, a dispassionate observer of history, says that the past is never past," the agent said. "And that's certainly true on Mars. Elsewhere, nations, clades, and politics coexist in relative harmony—the so-called thousand flowers of the ideal. Here, your patchwork of city states are frozen accidents of history, reflecting the antique politics of the very first settlements, which were shaped by the prejudices and

whims of the countries and kleptocrats that founded them. And above all else, your world is the last refuge of the concept of might makes right. Where war is an extension of politics, and gangs of hireling soldiers, such as your good selves, are employed to quell rebellions, settle disputes over resources, and police disputed territories where pirate gangs of Trues and other outcasts roam.”

“You might have noticed that resources are somewhat in short supply here,” Colonel Konstantinov said. “Which is why disputes sometimes arise.”

He was lounging on the saddle removed from his strider, long legs crossed at the ankles, and seemed to be amused by the agent’s version of history and not at all discomforted by the implied insult to his trade.

“Resources are in short supply,” the agent said, “because the terraforming projects that once united Mars and the Outer System were abandoned.”

“Because those projects gave outsiders too much influence over our affairs,” the colonel said.

“Or because your forebears, out of ill-judged pride in their so-called independence, drove off the Outer System consortiums. And without a common enemy began to squabble amongst themselves.”

The colonel dismissed that with a lazy flick of a hand. “There’s nothing wrong with pride. Or loyalty. It binds people together. Helps them face down adversity.”

“Your planet is dying, Colonel,” the agent said. “Growing ever colder and drier as it reverts to what it once was. What use is your pride, if it at last renders your home uninhabitable?”

“At least it keeps us in work,” the colonel said. “The same line of work as this descendent of your master’s.”

She’d been one of the so-called Knights of Cydonia. Roaming, freelance fighters who, four centuries ago, between the end of the Quiet War and the rise of the True Empire, had fought for whichever of Mars’s fractious patchwork of city states, commonalties, and pocket republics would pay them. She had been killed in some obscure border war and buried with her weapons, as was the tradition of her kind, and the raiding party had no doubt violated her tomb and stolen her bones and her vorpal blade because Trues prized such relics, believing that their warrior priests could use them to channel and wield the virtues of those long-dead knights.

“We should not be held responsible for the choices of our children,” the agent said. “Or in this case, my master’s great-great-grandchildren.”

“Yet here you are, riding with us to retrieve her bones and her blade.”

“Someone has to protect the dead, since they can no longer protect themselves.”

“And you claim that we’re the ones who are infatuated with the past,” the colonel said, and this time the agent laughed.

“Yet my master’s interest in history and its consequences keeps him plugged into the happening world.”

“Your master is our client, and you’re our guest,” the colonel said genially. “We’ve agreed to do what we can to help you find those bones and that blade, but it’s purely a commercial arrangement. Afterward, when terms have been met, you’ll be gone, and we’ll still be here, living on our own terms, free from the interference of outsiders.”

“What were they talking about?” Hanna asked, when Lev returned to their campfire. She was alone; Maks had been rostered for guard duty.

“Ancient history, mostly. How we Martians can’t escape it, or don’t want to.”

“That’s two-faced of him, given he serves the copy of a man who died long ago.”

“Still, he might have a point,” Lev said. He was thinking of his own circumstances. How his plans to give up soldiering had been wrecked by the ambush; whether he’d made the right choice when he’d signed up with this company. Not that he’d really had much in the way of choice. His little cache of credit had been exhausted by the bills for

his medical treatment, he'd been too long a soldier to suit any other trade but low-grade security work that would barely pay his living costs, and all the other companies he'd approached had turned him down because he was too old or because the slaughter of his old outfit had marked him with the ineradicable taint of bad luck. So here he was, riding with the servant of a revenant from deep history, with its own agenda, and a young colonel who, thanks to his family's storied history of soldiering, had the reckless confidence of one who believed that he possessed a hero's invulnerability.

"I was born and raised in the Tharsis Sovereignty," Hanna said. "You ever been there?"

"Not yet."

"I don't recommend it. Small place. Townships and farmlands. Not much else."

"I know the kind of thing," Lev said, thinking of his own upbringing.

"Same three families have ruled there for what seems like forever, and there are all kinds of ceremonies and customs and laws to maintain the rightful order of things. A lot of ordinary people like it, or say they do, because they know their place and can lord it over those with less status, though the differences are so slender an outsider would have difficulty telling one from the other. People spy on each other, eager to report the smallest infraction, and the borders are closed. Export and import trade are done in a special little walled-off zone only a few officials are allowed to enter. Ordinary folk don't know anything of the rest of the world. And most don't want to know."

"But you did," Lev said.

"And I got out," Hanna said. "And if I could escape a place like the Sovereignty, I don't see how yonder popinjay can claim we're all of us stuck in the past, with no hope of change."

"I was raised on a farm," Lev said. "Was planning to go back to that line of work, buy a parcel of land and retire to it, when rebels dropped the hammer on my company. They left me for dead, badly wounded as I was, and getting fixed up wiped out my savings. What I'll earn from this, if things go right and we find those relics and get that reward, it won't buy me as much as I hoped, but it'll suffice."

"Did you tell the colonel that, when you signed up?"

"You think he would have taken me on, if I had?"

"But you're telling me."

Lev looked at her. "Are you thinking of tattletaling?"

"Of course not," Hanna said, affronted.

"Then I guess I was right to trust you."

"Was that some kind of life confession because you think you might not get through this?"

"Maybe I'm trying to explain that I have something to live for."

They fell silent for a few moments, both of them watching the flames of their little fire.

"What kind of farm?" Hanna said.

"Birds mostly, I guess. On account I can only afford a small place. Chickens, quail. Some hydroponics."

"Sounds nice."

"I reckon it'll do for me. How about you? Got any plans?"

"Get through this, move on to what comes next."

"You aren't ready to give up soldiering."

"I've hardly started," Hanna said, with a flash of fierce pride that reminded Lev of how young she was.

Presently, Colonel Konstantinov and his top sergeant, Anye Abbas, made the rounds, asking questions, sharing jokes, banging fists, moving on.

"How are things shaking down for you, old-timer?" he said to Lev.

“It’s all very familiar,” Lev said.

“Good man. I said to Sergeant Abbas, after your interview, there’s someone who deserves another chance. I was glad to give it to you, and I know,” the colonel said, treating Lev to the full wattage of his smile, “that you won’t disappoint me.”

“I’m more than ready for action, too,” Hanna said, and might have said more, but the colonel didn’t seem to hear her, was already turning away.

The top sergeant, Anye Abbas, lingered, asking Lev how his strider was shaking down.

“No problems so far,” Lev said.

The biomechanoid was a reconditioned model much older than Lev. The target acquisition system of its chain guns was a clunky antique, and it was a trifle slow and stiff on steep or uneven terrain, but moved sweetly enough on the level and hadn’t yet thrown any serious glitches.

“It’ll do for you as long as you don’t try to push it too hard,” Anye Abbas said. “Which you won’t need to, seeing as you’ll be in the rear with the gear.”

She was a stocky grey-haired veteran with a direct manner, seconded from the company run by Colonel Konstantinov’s mother. When Lev had signed up, she’d reminded him that he was no longer a sergeant but had been born again as a humble clean-sleeve trooper; told him that the colonel had his own ways of doing things, but as long as he remembered his place in the chain of command he shouldn’t have any trouble fitting in.

“Happy to serve in any way I can,” Lev told her now.

“Saw you listening to our guest’s little speech.”

“He likes to talk, don’t he.”

“Just keep your mind on the mission and the reward his master promised.”

“Hard to forget something so generous.”

Anye Abbas studied him, stone-faced, as if judging his sincerity, then lowered her voice and told him he could do her a solid by keeping an eye on Maks. “The colonel has a weakness for stray dogs, but sometimes they need the leash.”

“Hanna pretty much has him under control.”

“She’s capable. But a little backup wouldn’t hurt.”

“Understood,” Lev said, pleased by the implication of trust. Really and truly, all he wanted was to keep his head down, fit in, and earn his share.

Anye Abbas studied him for a moment more, then nodded and moved on.

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The company rose at first light, broke fast while standing over the ashes of last night’s fires, and checked their weapons and mounted their striders and set off. Colonel Konstantinov marching at point with Sergeant Abbas and the agent, the troopers following in spaced pairs, Lev and Hanna and Maks bringing up the rear with the utes. Everyone on the swivel as they followed the tracks of the raiding party along the flood channel, surveying the cliffs along its southern edge, watching feeds from the raptors and the pair of drones.

Lev’s spine had stiffened overnight, jolted by yesterday’s long march, and the combat drugs he’d patched before mounting up had lit a smoldering fire in his belly and lent him a weird otherworldly clarity, as if he was observing everything at a slight angle to reality. After a couple of hours, the column turned north and east as the raiding party’s track cut away from the flood channel, winding through the mazy channels and potholes of a scabland pockmarked with the elongated ovals of secondary craters created, according to Hanna, by debris thrown from impacts some way off to the south. Most of the craters were filled edge to edge with pocket jungles of vacuum organisms, splashes of stark black dotted across a stony chaos that faded into the ochre haze that obscured the horizon. Lev had once flown in a transport

above an arc of the ancient seabed of the great northern plains. Here was the same sense of the planet's vast curve. Its essential emptiness, despite centuries of human colonization.

Every so often a pair of troopers broke off from the column and circled north or south and returned with nothing to report. The only activity spotted by the drones was a herd of long-necked creatures feeding around the edges of a stand of funnel growths, and some kind of large cat-like creature with a pair of long fangs curving under its snout that threaded a path across a talus slope at the base of the ridge and disappeared into a tumble of enormous boulders.

Toward noon the column halted and the two scouts drifted in and consulted with Colonel Konstantinov and the agent, whose white costume and ridiculous hat were immaculate despite the heat and dust of the hike. After a few minutes the scouts headed back the way they'd come, swiftly passing out of sight, and the column resumed its march, circling the edge of a dry basin, climbing a long slope, and entering a canyon that cut through a flat-topped mesa. Tall cliffs reared up on either side, hemming a narrowing strip of pink sky, and Lev's spacy detachment was displaced by unease, like floodwater rising in a basement. Despite coverage by drones and raptors, it was the perfect spot for an ambush.

At last, the turn of a sharp bend revealed the scouts waiting in the middle of the True campsite they'd discovered. The ashes of a big fire, a litter of discarded food cans and cannisters, and the butchered remains of several horses, bones and stinking mounds of viscera attended by clouds of black flies. A tattered banner hung from a tall pole, displaying a skull grinning atop wings of bone and tattered skin. Slogans in dripping red letters declared the Trues' hegemony over this land and promised a variety of agonizing deaths to trespassers.

After another brief consultation, the scouts rode off down the canyon and Colonel Konstantinov snatched up the pole and banner and threw it like a javelin into the fire's ashes, and the column formed up and followed him, ever more watchful.

The canyon widened, its walls fell away, and there was a curving range of low hills at the horizon, ghostly in the haze. The rim of an ancient crater containing one of the Blight's largest vacuum organism jungles, according to the topographic map; the colonel reckoned that it was a good hiding place and likely destination for the True raiders, according to word passed across the comms.

The troopers moved on through a scrub of grease bush and engineer grass and clumps of vacuum organisms—tangles of black wire, dark purple growths like fat trumpets or melted candles, stands of glassy black blades taller than a person. They hadn't gone far when the feeds from the raptors cut out. Everything gone across the board, leaving only the views from the drones. Colonel Konstantinov ordered the column to halt; while he consulted with the tech sergeant, pairs of troopers turned left or right to scry the land, weapons drawn, radar and augmented optics up.

Lev, watching from the rear with Hanna and Maks, the butt of his fusil resting on his thigh and a window showing the feed from the motion detector of his strider in a corner of his vision, felt something tighten in his chest. It looked like the Trues had found a way of jamming the feeds from the raptors or knocking them out, maybe the prelude to an attack, but for a long time nothing else happened. All around, the spare landscape shimmered in the afternoon heat, silent and still. Rocks and stretches of gravel and rippled sand and dry grass. Clusters of black growths. Nothing moving until a shadow flickered across the column. One of the drones, flying low and level and heading in the direction of the tracks left by the raiding party, dwindling into the distance toward that big crater.

"Maybe the scouts found themselves some live Trues," Maks said.

"We'll know soon enough," Hanna said. "Hold your position and keep your optics



wide open.”

Far off and high up, the drone began to turn in wide, lazy circles.

“Definitely found something,” Maks said.

Hanna told him again to hold his position. Anye Abbas and two troopers were moving out, heading at a fast pace toward the place the drone was circling. Lev felt the kink in his chest tighten further, and felt a touch of excitement, too. The familiar mix before combat. Dread and anticipation and impatience. The feeling that any kind of action was better than waiting. The feeling that something was about to happen, but not knowing what it was.

But there was another long wait in the shimmering heat and steep silence until at last the colonel broke silence and ordered the column to form up and move out. Telling them that there were two people down and they were to stay alert and ready for contact.

“The scouts,” Maks said. “Has to be.”

Neither Hanna nor Lev bothered to reply, because it was so damned obvious.

Colonel Konstantinov called another halt as the column neared the spot where Sergeant Abbas and the two troopers were waiting. Lev had a distant but clear sight of a pair of bodies lying side by side on a patch of gravel. Stripped of armor, it looked like. Arms stretched back above their heads and hands fastened together. No sign of their striders. He didn’t feel the need to enhance the view, but Maks clearly did, saying that he hoped the poor saps had died before the Trues cut them up like that.

The colonel swung down from his strider and inspected the bodies and consulted with Anye Abbas, then lifted off his helmet and walked back to the column, his strider obediently following him, halting when he halted and addressed the troopers. Telling them that it was clearly a coordinated attack: they had lost contact with the raptors and the scouts at the same time. The drones hadn’t been in position to scope what had happened, and although the agent had kindly granted access to a feed from a satellite, it had also missed the moment when the Trues had struck.

“I promise you that we will avenge the death of our friends and comrades, Lo Eril and Adan Solacu,” the colonel said, and raised his silver fusil. “Blood for blood!”

The troopers raised their various weapons above their heads and echoed him.

The bodies were tenderly bundled into shrouds and laid across the flat top of one of the utes. A sweep of the area turned up several recently dug scrapes where True cutthroats might have lain in wait, but nothing else, and the company reformed its column and moved on.

“They definitely know we’re on their tail,” Maks said. “Maybe some’ll want to try their luck against us again. I hope they do, because it’ll save us the trouble of having to find them.”

“You’d better be ready if it comes to that,” Hanna said grimly. “Because they’re clearly ready for us.”

The company was chastened by this reversal, its mood a mix of subdued anger and heightened vigilance. Troopers turning to and fro in their saddles, little chatter on the common feed as, with the pair of drones flanking them overhead, they made for the shore of one of the small lakes fed by groundwater draining from the crater. They’d overnight there while the drones surveyed the vacuum organism jungle that filled the crater edge to edge, and the next day they’d set out and track down and confront the Trues. Without the eyes and guided munitions of the raptors, that was going to be a lot chancier than they’d expected.

They made camp in the prickle ash and red willow scrub at the edge of the lake. In the last of the westering light, the colonel led a brief ceremony to honor their dead, and the scouts were buried side by side in shallow graves. Everyone in the company took a turn to set a stone in place over the mounds of dirt, watched by the

agent who stood beside his mount, his face obscured by the shadow of his hat brim.

The ramparts of the crater loomed against the darkening sky, less than five clicks away, hiding who knew what. Striders in autonomous mode were deployed along the perimeter of the camp, and sensors and static cameras were set out; Anye Abbas marked up guard positions with overlapping fields of view and drew up a roster.

Lev was selected for first watch. Maybe it was a little reward for doing his best to fit in, or maybe it was because the top sergeant didn't want to give him any real responsibility, didn't yet quite trust him not to screw up—as far as he was concerned it didn't matter. It had been a long day, and he was grateful for the ease of duty.

He shared his position with a taciturn trooper half his age who asserted his authority by setting up in a clump of rocks and trees, taking charge of the feeds from cameras and sensors, and telling Lev to go walk the line. Lev didn't mind that, either. It was a chance to stretch out the ache in his lower back kindled by the day's march. He was definitely getting too old for this shit.

There was a chill in the air, and thin scarves of mist were adrift above the surface of the lake, which in Lev's enhanced optics gleamed like hammered steel. Ordinary plants were like pale ghosts of themselves; the umbrella trees and other vacuum organisms burned as brightly as the balestars of the campfires. No sign of movement along the curve of the shore ahead of him; nothing showing on the microwave motion sensor, which could pick up a mouse's heartbeat fifty paces away. But when Lev reached the far end of the arc guarded by his position and turned back, he saw two figures at the water's edge. His first thought, driving a spike of adrenaline into his blood, was that Trues might have somehow evaded the tricks and traps of the perimeter. He keyed his comms and reported a possible contact, unshipped his fusil and edged closer, and realized, with a flush of relief, that the figures were the agent, dabbling at the water's edge like a child at play, and his mount.

Lev keyed his comms again, saying the intruders were two of their own, it was okay to stand down; the young trooper told him, with fine contempt, that he'd never stood up.

"Could see who it was on one of the camera feeds. Next time double-check them before bothering me."

The agent didn't seem surprised to see Lev, shrugging off his suggestion that he might have put himself in danger, saying, "Switch off your night vision, and you'll see what I see."

"How do you know I'm using my optics?"

"You're on patrol at night, aren't you? Indulge me, you won't be disappointed."

Lev clicked off his enhancements and saw faint pale lights glowing along the margin of the lake's dark flood. Ribbons of milky luminescence seething in the ripples that washed the shore; puddles and rings further out, expanding and contracting as the water softly breathed.

He said, "Is that something to do with the Trues?"

"Is that all you can think about?"

"It's why we are here. Nothing else matters. Especially after today."

The agent looked up at Lev, his smile a faint glimmer under his hat brim. "You are one of the new recruits to Colonel Konstantinov's warrior band. Yet also older than any other trooper. Before this, you served under Colonel Sokal. A sergeant, a rank befitting your experience, until the unfortunate defeat at Hergest's Hope, when your company was destroyed and you were badly wounded. And here you are now, starting over."

Lev, feeling seen, pushed back, saying, "There's a point you're trying to make?"

"I believe that we are somewhat alike, you and I. For we both serve at the command of another, and cannot conceive of another way of life."

“The difference being, I volunteered to join this outfit,” Lev said, still bugged that the agent knew why he was here. What had happened. The colonel must have told him, or one of the sergeants.

“I don’t mind admitting that I was made and shaped to serve my master,” the agent said. “Even so, I can spare a little time to discover enchantment in the strange land where my duty has brought me.”

“You’re talking about this foxfire in the water, or whatever it is.”

“The Blight is unlike anything else on Mars,” the agent said. “A biome based on artificial organisms that grow on the remnants of comets and asteroids deliberately crashed during the terraforming era. A laboratory where the creations of gene wizards have evolved, and are still evolving, in strange and unique ways. Some are large, like yonder umbrella trees. And some are very small, like the myriads of microscopic organisms that light up the lake water. Here, why not see for yourself?”

The agent held out a small rectangular slab. Lev pulled up his optics, saw droplets of water sitting in cavities in the slab’s glassy surface.

“Either a gene wizard seeded this lake with their creation, to mimic the displays of bioluminescence made by certain single-celled organisms on Earth, or it evolved by chance,” the agent said. “Whatever its origin, it is very beautiful.”

He pitched Lev an image of a restlessly jostling crowd of skeletal spheres, each containing clusters of blunt rods whose ends glowed with faint blue light, told him that they were free-living vacuum organisms. Colonies of nanotech pseudocells that were, perhaps, nourished by the hydrocarbon soup dissolved in the lake water, or were photosynthetic, like regular phytoplankton, manufacturing carbon compounds from light, water, and carbon dioxide.

“Or perhaps they are capable of both modes of energy acquisition. Why not?” the agent said. “In any case, these little colonies turn some of that energy into light. Certain phytoplankton in the oceans of Earth do something similar to attract predators of the tiny organisms that graze on them, but so far I haven’t found any other life forms in the lake water. So the reason for their glow remains a mystery. Perhaps it is merely a side effect of some metabolic process, but it is nonetheless beautiful.”

“It’s pretty enough, I guess.”

“That famous Martian utilitarianism!” the agent said. His smile showed teeth small and gapped as a child’s. “What is it you troopers say? If you can’t eat it, fuck it, or kill it, what’s its point? You live hard lives, and you’re raised to survive as best you can, with no room for sentiment or wonder. All the human feelings that you must ruthlessly police, for fear they’ll weaken you.”

“I heard you lecturing the colonel last night,” Lev said. He believed that the agent was trying to provoke him and was growing short of patience. “About how we’re stuck in the past. Living in ways everyone else has long ago given up. But that’s why people like you come here, isn’t it? People who want a taste of things you can’t get elsewhere. War tourists, we call them.”

That was the polite term. Lev knew others more cutting and scabrous, but despite the agent’s provocation didn’t want to directly insult a client.

“You are familiar with such people from your former employment, no doubt,” the agent said.

“We allowed one or two to ride with us on occasion.”

“And they paid you well for it.”

“No more than you paid Colonel Konstantinov.”

The war tourist trade had brought in some useful credit to Lev’s old company, but none of his comrades had much liked earning it. Outsiders possessed some interesting weaponry, but were too eager to use it. Were too often reckless, ill-disciplined, and casually cruel.

"The dangers and reward of adventures like this are certainly part of what my master calls reconnecting with the real," the agent said. "A way of grounding himself. Of avoiding dissolution in nirvanas and other traps of the untethered mind."

"You don't mind risking your life by serving as one of those connections."

"I was made to serve. Of course I don't mind."

"Is your master watching us now? Am I talking to you, or to him?"

Lev had heard of people beguiled and overmastered by minds that could deploy centuries of knowledge and experience against ordinary people. Minds that were once human and were now something else; minds that were never human to begin with.

"My master receives regular updates, but chooses not to interfere. I am his servant, not his puppet. I am free to do as I will and as I must to bring my assignments to a satisfactory conclusion."

"What about your big friend?" Lev said, meaning the mount, which had all this while been standing motionless behind the agent, seemingly indifferent to the conversation.

"We were made to serve in different ways," the agent said. "And both of us know what we are, and why we are here, while you have to puzzle that out for yourself. Which is better?"

\* \* \*

The next morning, Colonel Konstantinov mustered the troopers and told them that although the trail of the True horde had been lost after it entered the vacuum organism jungle inside the crater, the drones had spotted signs of activity in an old atmosphere plant on the lower slopes of the central peak. He pitched aerial images of square buildings overgrown with creepers and things that looked like giant black sunflowers, a short clip of infrared images of human figures moving ghost-like inside the upper floor of one building.

"This may well be a trap," the colonel said. "And we will exercise all due caution as we approach. There'll be a bonus for the first person to capture one of the enemy alive, so we can put them to the question, find out what's what, and give the rest what they deserve. Blood for blood!"

"Blood for blood!" the troopers shouted dutifully.

"And please keep in mind the bonuses I have pledged," the agent said, looking out at the company from his perch on his mount's shoulders. "For the capture and return of the bones of my master's dear dead great-great-granddaughter and her vorpal blade, and for the head of the barbarian who stole them."

The column of troopers formed up and moved out, following the trail of the Trues toward the ramparts of the crater, a slanting, mostly flat-topped ridge curving away north and south and glowing red in the light of the newly risen sun. Riding behind the utes, in the rear with the gear, Lev told Hanna and Maks about his encounter with the agent.

"I told him that I chose to join the company. And he said that choice had led me the same place as him, implying that I was no better. He might be a servant, made for the task and bound for life, but he has a slippery mind. And with the hostages dead, we're serving him, like it or not."

"No reason why we can't make the Trues pay for what they did to our comrades as well as retrieving what they stole," Hanna said.

"I'm looking forward to what that little man has to say after I find and kill their warrior priest and lay those old bones and that old blade at his feet."

"Remember what Colonel K. said about the atmosphere plant," Lev said. "That it's most likely some kind of trap."

"We've taken on Trues twice before," Hanna said. "Both times we came out on top."

"Previous throws of the dice don't predict the next," Lev said.

"We been what to expect, is my point," Hanna said. "How it went those past times,

the youngest fighters would try to distract and intimidate us by riding up and down our line, whooping and hollering, making fake charges, attempts to strike us with clubs and canes and whatnot that pulled short at the last moment. Their way of testing themselves and showing their contempt. Meanwhile, the rest worked themselves into a frenzy. Screaming their battle cries. Blowing horns and beating drums. Cutting themselves until they were drenched in blood. Making themselves mad with rage until they couldn't hold back, and rode and ran straight at us, regardless of the consequences. All we had to do was keep our heads and stand our ground, take down as many as we could as they charged, and mop up the rest."

"You make it sound easy," Lev said.

"It wasn't easy, but we did it twice and we can do it again."

"As long as the Trues oblige."

"Trues are Trues. They have their traditions, and even if most are stolen from indigenous peoples who lived on Earth in centuries past, they like to cleave to them. And there probably isn't a better option than meeting them head on. Be hard to hit them from a distance without our raptors, and besides, we need to retrieve those relics if we're to claim that reward. Can't risk blowing them to atoms."

"So we have to put ourselves right on the line because of some old bones and a broken blade."

"You having regrets about signing up for this?"

"I never thought it would be easy."

"Sounds like there's nothing to it," Maks said. "Trues think they can out-crazy me, they'll soon learn different."

"We'll beat them by standing together. Fighting as a unit, one for all and all for one," Hanna said, putting a little steel into her voice. "You break the line, go wild-cating in the mistaken belief you're some kind of hero, you'll likely get yourself killed."

"Listen up, kid," Lev told Maks. "This is good advice you're getting for free."

It was one thing he'd yield to Hanna. That she had experience of taking on Trues and he did not, having never before ventured south of the equator, where Trues mostly ranged. But her description of their tactics, such as they were, and the thought of close quarter fighting, kicked his apprehension up a notch and heightened his prickling mindfulness of the company's present vulnerability as it marched toward the crater. The drones hadn't spotted any suspicious movement along the crater's rim, but that didn't mean a sniper wasn't watching from some spider hole, or a gang of young Trues weren't nerving themselves up to make a challenge, and there wasn't much cover to be had around and about. Only knee-high scrub and clumps of boulders, secondary craters too small and shallow to be of much use, or cupping pools of oily black water with spongy finger-like growths poking through the surface like the hands of drowned corpses. But nothing happened, and nothing continued to happen as the company followed the tracks of their quarry along a narrow trail that switchbacked up the flanks of the ramparts, and nothing moved on the steep slopes apart from skirls of dust lofted by gusts of wind, rock mice raising up atop boulders to watch the troopers stomp by on their striders, and coneys bolting for their burrows. At last, the company passed through a cleft in a ridge, and the cleft opened out to reveal a panoramic view of the interior of the crater below: spires and needles and domes in every shade of black, close-packed and seemingly impenetrable, stretching away toward the horizon and the bare slopes of the crater's central peak. A jungle that could easily hide an entire army.

Lev straightened his aching back and saw a glint way off in the pinkish sky, twinkling close to the rounded top of that central peak. One of the drones, it had to be, loitering high above the atmosphere plant that the Trues appeared to have occupied. He pulled up its feed, saw square rooftops of buildings and a cluster of tanks linked

by mazy pipework. There were infrared and radar images, too, showing the ghostly shadows of human figures rendered in fuzzy shades of white and grey inside one of the buildings. No way of telling if they were the raiding party the company was chasing or another gang, or even if they were real, weren't some kind of spoof. After the raptors had been taken down, anything seemed possible.

Hanna pointed out the drone to Maks as the three of them waited for the column to unspool down a track slanting into jungle that lapped against the stony slope like the edge of a bottomless sea.

"We have to make it through more than five clicks of dense jungle before we reach that plant," she said. "It'll give the Trues plenty of opportunities for an ambush, so stay alert. No slacking. Watch your three-sixty every second of the way."

"You worry about yourself," Maks said. "I'm not planning to die this day or any other."

At last the troopers immediately in front of them began to move, and Lev and Hanna and Maks followed the utes as they lumbered downslope, into the jungle. It was dark and warm and moist under its canopy, stalks and spikes and funnel-like growths thickening in every direction, deep shadows slashed by thin slants of sunlight, sinuous scarves of mist drifting under the caps of parasol trees. The funnel growths expanded and contracted like gently breathing sleepers, swellings pulsed up the stalks of parasol trees, and there was a general deep, drowsy hum, reminding Lev of the beehives his grandmother had tended on the ranch before the long droughts had ended all that, the bees and sheep, orchards and crops. Reminding him that this was more like a factory than a true jungle, that the vacuum organisms were intricate colonies of microscopic machines that manufactured useful organics, oxygen, and water vapor from tar deposits. Motion detectors were futzed by their activity, and they were generating heat, too, whiting out thermal optics.

The company was following the remains of a road that, surfaced with poured concrete, cut a straight line through the jungle toward the central peak and the atmosphere plant. The concrete was broken and crumbling where it wasn't overgrown by clumps of scaly whips and rolling hummocks of black, mossy growths. Once, it intersected a trampled swathe cut through the jungle on either side, the track left by giant animals called slow bears that, according to Maks, browsed on the parasol trees.

"They're mostly harmless, unless you get between them and their cubs," he told Lev and Hanna cheerfully. "It's the critters that prey on them you got to watch out for. Specially the saber-toothed lions. They run in packs, can outrace a horse and rip a man in half with one bite. I knew people who hunted them. People from my town. Toughest sons-of-bitches I ever met. Was too young, back then, to go hunting with 'em, but they taught me a lot about these jungles from 'em. Colonel had any sense, he'd have me riding point."

"Colonel K. knows what he's doing," Hanna said. "Meanwhile, how about you mute the chat and concentrate on keeping watch. Shout out if you see anything you think shouldn't be there."

A little further on the mists thickened, greasy droplets pattering Lev's helmet and beaded on his combat suit, and the road sank and gave way to marshy ground. The striders splashed through mud and black water easily enough, but although the utes jacked up their suspensions, one managed to get itself stuck in a slough, digging itself deeper as it struggled to free itself until Hanna commanded it to halt. She and Lev unspooled hawsers from the other two utes and used manual control to rock the trapped machine to and fro, Maks keeping watch on his strider, the stock of his fusil jacked on his hip, until at last, with a tremendous sucking noise, shedding sheets of water, the stalled ute pulled free of the muck.

The rest of the company had moved on, out of sight. Lev's feeling of unease grew as they followed its trail through the marsh. His head was on the swivel, his back

tingled like a target, and he cradled his fusil as he steered his strider by leaning this way and that, trusting it to avoid obstacles. At last, the ground became drier and they picked up the road again. The road steepened, rising out of the edge of the jungle and climbing the lower flanks of the central peak between clumps of stunted parasol trees and tumbled blocks of stone splashed with crustose growths or shrouded with scrambling purple-black creepers, at last leveling out with cliffs stepping down to the jungle on one side and rocky slopes rising into the sky on the other.

The company's column was a couple of clicks ahead, moving in banners of dust kicked up by their striders, disappearing around a high bluff of red rock rounded like the forehead of a giant buried statue. When Lev and the others followed, a broad apron of dusty rocks spread out before them and they saw the buildings and tanks and pipework of the atmosphere plant, small as toys beyond a ragged line of parasol trees that marked the edge of a ravine. The column had halted some way before the treeline. As Lev the utes toward it, the feeds from the drone, tucked in one corner of his visor's screen, dropped out. The aerial view of the atmosphere plant, the fuzzy infrared and microwave images of figures inside one of the buildings: all gone. A sudden babble of voices across the common feed was cut by Colonel Konstantinov's order to stand to and assume a defensive position.

Lev looked at Hanna, and she said she didn't know what had happened, but they needed to move on, they were a little exposed out here.

"The Trues took out the fucking drone is what happened," Maks said. "Just like they did the raptors."

"We don't know that yet," Hanna said sharply.

"Maybe not. But something's going down."

Up ahead, troopers were dismounting and finding cover, and two figures were coming back along the road—the agent on his patient mount, and Sergeant Abbas on her strider, telling Hanna that she was to keep their guest safe until the area was cleared.

"I explained that I can look after myself, but she was adamant," the agent said. He seemed more amused than annoyed.

"There's a bridge across the ravine," Anye Abbas said. "Colonel's sending a squad to check it out. If all's good, we'll use it to get across. If not, we'll have to make a long diversion. Meanwhile, we'll hold the line here. See that line of boulders, just back of our position? Make for it. We'll call you forward if we need resupply, otherwise lay up there until everything's done and dusted."

Lev asked her if she knew what had happened to the drone; she said that the tech was still trying to find out. "Maybe Trues fucked it up, maybe it's just a glitch. We're bringing in the backup right now."

"Permission to volunteer for the scouting party," Maks said.

"Permission denied. Get to it," Anye Abbas said, without so much as glancing at him, and turned her strider and trotted back to the column.

As they followed, Maks said, "Everyone else gets a chance at the Trues while we babysit the gear? I don't think so."

"If the Trues find out where the gear is parked, we'll most likely get a chance at them, too," Hanna said.

"You can be certain of it," the agent said. "This raiding party is not a mindless rabble. They have a plan. It's all very interesting."

"Doesn't it bother you in any way that you are here for your master's entertainment?" Lev said.

"I'm here to retrieve the vorpal blade and the bones of the knight who once wielded it. If that makes a good story, it's a bonus. But not my primary purpose."

"You need any help taking down the fucker has your prize, I'm your man," Maks said.

"I am pleased to hear it. And don't worry! I've been made to seem harmless, but I can fight as well as you. As can my friend," the agent said, patting the flat top of his mount's head.

They were closing on the rest of the company. Three troopers were riding their striders into the shadows under the parasol trees. The rest were sprawled behind rocks and sand ripples and clumps of wire bush on either side of the road, camouflaging them invisible to the unassisted eye, superconducting threads thrown out by their combat suits soaking up their body heat and creating fake thermal images. Lev's optics floated tags above each trooper; otherwise he would have had a hard time spotting them. Striders stood in pairs, weapons everted. Lev spotted Colonel Konstantinov, helmetless, blond hair loose, standing in the middle of the road, looking toward the treeline and talking to the tech sergeant, who was kneeling beside him, a shadow flickering across them as the backup drone passed overhead.

It flew low and slow above the trees and the ravine, and as it turned to make a second pass a cloud of small black shapes puffed up from the tree line and streamed toward it. Lev zoomed in, saw that it was a flock of raptors, perhaps the ones the company had lost, turning in precise synchrony as the drone jinked hard right, enveloping it. The drone angled up, spinning around its long axis as it gained height, perhaps trying to fling off its attackers, but the raptors were burrowing in, the drone was shedding a glittering trail of debris as they tore away its skin and attacked its air frame, and its rotors cut out and it fell straight down and disintegrated in a flash of white flame when it struck the ground.

"Hoo," Maks said, with a kind of awed reverence. "That's seriously fucked up."

It had all happened in less than a minute. Most of the raptors had been destroyed in the explosion, but a few were winging toward the company's position, and a riderless strider emerged from the treeline along the edge of the ravine, moving at a shambling but steady pace.

"Take them down, take them all down," the colonel said over the common feed, and there was a crackle of gunfire and threads of red and green light stabbed out as the troopers poured on fire. Raptors exploded in midair or arced to the ground, trailing smoke, the strider disintegrated in a ball of flame, and behind it horse riders materialized from shadows beneath the trees.

There were a little over a hundred, according to the tally of Lev's optics, far more than had been in the raiding party. All men, it looked like, which was how Trues were, dividing tasks according to gender, their men hunters and warriors, their women tending hearths and children in small steadings hidden in burrows and lava tubes. These warriors were dressed in a motley of uniforms and civilian clothes and rags, like feral children got up as soldiers. Many were bare-chested and some wore tall stripwood masks cut with narrow eyeholes and painted rust red and decorated with white dots and circles and spirals. Lev saw hair flowing down backs or greased into spikes or wound into pyramidal coils, saw necklaces of thorns and necklaces of flowers and woven grass. Saw fusils and chainguns, crossbows and thermal projectors and hook-bladed snickersee knives, shoulder-slung missile launchers and double-headed axes. Saw leather and beaten metal plates armoring the withers and rumps of horses, and big hounds likewise armored, their slavering maws crammed with spikes, and large hook-beaked birds perched on shoulders and gauntleted fists.

"If you got anything that'll give our side an edge, now's the time to tell us," Hanna said to the agent.

Although the rest of the Solar System was supposed to be a peaceable place, there were all kinds of tales about weird and powerful off-world weapons brought to Mars



by smugglers and war tourists. Gravity benders. Distortion fields. Molecular disrupters that turned everything in their path to atomic dust. Even if only half of those stories were half-true, anything like that could give the company a crucial advantage, but the agent said that all he carried were the weapons Colonel Konstantinov had issued him: a fusil, a bolt pistol, and a sawknife.

“Also, my mount has his axe.”

“Seems your master handicapped you,” Hanna said.

“I’m not privy to his thinking,” the agent said. “But no doubt he believes it to be more sporting.”

“Sporting?” Lev said. “Like it’s some kind of game?”

Colonel Konstantinov was ordering the company over the common feed to close up and get ready. “Remember Lo Eril and Adan Solacu. Blood for blood!”

“Damn right,” Hanna said, and the utes began to move forward, autocannons rising from slots in their backs.

Lev urged his strider to follow them, an adrenaline spike kicking up his heartrate, his skin clammy, a tremor in his knees as they pressed either side of the strider’s saddle. That familiar queasy anticipation on the precipice of combat. Everything sharper, more particular. Sunlight burning through dust kicked up by the utes as they slogged relentlessly onward. Starry glints of sunlight reflected from the piecemeal armor of the Trues along the edge of the trees. The flutter of banners that topped poles fixed to their backs. They were about a kilometer away. Lev reckoned that if they charged full-tilt it would take them two, maybe three minutes to reach the company’s line, told himself that there would be plenty of time to take them all down.

Here and there, horses and riders broke out from the True line and galloped toward the company. Young men displaying their bravery, just as Hanna had told it, brandishing axes and clubs, whooping battle cries, shooting off colored flares and streams of pyrotechnic stars that burst into showers of sparks when they struck rocks and striders. Colonel Konstantinov was shouting that it was only fireworks, ordering gunnies to take the riders down. Single shots cracked out and two Trues toppled and fell. The rest swung their horses around, perhaps planning to cut around the far end of the company’s line, and Hanna yelled a warning as a volley of small missiles streaked out from the treeline, some striking striders, others passing over the line of troopers and converging on the utes and their escorts.

Lev heeled his strider hard left as the utes’ autocannon began to fire. Ragged blossoms exploded in the air; a moment later the machines vanished inside plumes of dust and smoke and red flame. Lev’s strider staggered as the scorching shockwave rolled over him. A hail of debris clattered down. One of the utes lurched out of the pall of smoke, its shell scorched and riddled with shrapnel, but after a few steps its legs gave out and it pancaked, spitting flames from broken seams. Up ahead, the Trues were heading toward the company’s line, moving from a trot into a gallop, hounds racing ahead of them. Men and horses falling as the troopers and the surviving striders began to fire at will, and then the ragged wave of hounds and horses and riders smashed into the line and it was everyone for themselves.

Maks’s strider went past Lev at a lumbering trot. The agent’s mount was pushing up to hands and knees, massive head hung low; the agent sprawled a little way off, hat gone, blood soaking the back of his white blouson. Hanna had swung down from her strider and was running toward them; twists of dust spouted around her and her helmet visor shattered and she fell headlong. The mount was on his feet now, knuckling his eyes, blood running from wounds in his back and muscular legs, vivid against his pale skin. Lev saw that both Hanna and the agent were dead, shouted at the mount, telling him to join the fight, and chased after Maks.

The kid was moving fast, leaning forward in his saddle and firing his fusil from the

hip as his strider pounded toward the battle, either not noticing or not caring as rounds kicked up spurts of dust around him. Lev was being targeted, too. Rounds sang and shrieked through the air; a quick tattoo rattled off his strider's left hip; something punched him hard in the chest. He shot back, firing in groups of three, but he couldn't see who was shooting at him, and his strider was yawing badly, one leg dragging as hydraulic, clear fluid leaking from a ragged hole.

He saw riderless horses galloping in directionless panic, troopers fighting toe-to-toe with dismounted Trues in clouds of dust, saw Sergeant Abbas aiming her pistol at a warrior who slammed his club into her helmet before she could get off the shot, knocking her on her back. A warrior rode past Maks, the kid ducking as the warrior reached out and tapped his shoulder with his club and rode on, turning now toward Lev, who shot at him and missed, shot at him and missed again. The warrior raised his club high, clearly not trying for a playful tap this time, and Lev shot him in the chest, knocking him from his saddle, and snapped his harness open and reached out as the horse went past and grabbed its bridle and swung sideways, landing on its withers. Lev scooted backward onto the wooden saddle, snatching up the reins and hauling the horse around by main force and urged it toward Maks.

The kid was on the ground, kneeling over the body of a True, looking up when Lev yanked the reins of the horse and it danced to a halt. The dead True was an old man, bare-chested in leather trousers, ropes of grey hair splayed around his face and eyes open and blank to the sky, blood on his mouth and beard, blood leaking from two neat holes in a chest painted chalk-white. Maks was holding a broken blade in one hand, a slim glass cylinder trailing the ends of a broken chain in the other.

"I spotted this fellow before they charged," he said. "Marked him out, saw where he fell."

"Hanna's dead," Lev said. He was breathless from the ride and the punch to his chest. "The agent, too."

The kid didn't seem to hear him. He was looking toward the last of the fight. Trues were riding up and down the broken line, picking off surviving troopers one by one. Others were dispatching wounded troopers with clubs and short spears, morning stars swung in vicious trajectories. A warrior was turning his horse in tight circles, brandishing Colonel Konstantinov's silver-plated carbine above his head. Lev had the giddy thought that the agent's master would have relished this antique spectacle of slaughter, had the agent survived to record it. There was a sharp ache high in the left side of his chest, under the shoulder bone, and when he touched the place he felt something sticking out, the shaft of a kinetic spike that had punched through the breastplate of his combat suit. The fingers of his glove were wet with blood, and he felt a sudden sharp pulse of pain, asked the kid if he was hurt.

Maks shook his head. Several Trues had noticed them and were taking potshots. Most fell short, but one round cracked past Lev's head, and he told Maks to climb up before the shooters get the range.

"Don't need no ride, I got my strider right here," Maks said.

"When they've finished down there, they'll track down anyone trying to get away on a strider," Lev said, not knowing or caring if it were true. "And their horses are faster and nimbler than striders, too. You want to live, get up behind me."

Maks squinted up at him. "You said the little fellow's dead?"

"Him and Hanna. His mount was still breathing when I left him, but you want to sell those pieces you found, he won't be any use. Get on up now."

Lev reached down with his right arm to help Maks scramble up behind the saddle, pain stabbing hot and white in his shoulder and down his left arm.

"I forgot my fusil," the kid said.

"I'll get you another. Hold on."

“Where are we going?” Maks said, leaning into Lev’s back as he urged the horse toward the treeline and the ravine.

“Away from here, fast as we can.”

\* \* \*

They overtopped the rimwall of the crater close to sunset, after riding helter-skelter down the ravine, following a swift river between walls of black jungle, and reaching the crater floor and eventually striking a smashed path made by slow bears. Maks had told Lev that he could tell which way the animals had been moving from how the broken parasol trees lay, and they followed the path in the opposite direction and at last Lev had seen the rounded crest of the rim wall through the trees and turned south and east toward it.

Now they rode down the backslope onto a dry broken plain and rode on past sunset and the dying of the light. No one seemed to be following them, but Lev told Maks it was too early to be sure that they’d gotten away free and clear. So they kept going under the cold canopy of stars, Lev trying to ignore the pain in his chest and shoulder, and the dull insistent ache at the base of his spine, until at last the horse slowed from a trot to a walk and began to stumble, and Lev and Maks climbed down and led it under the stars and a single fugitive moon flinging itself from west to east until they reached a marshy outcrop of vacuum organisms growing around a scatter of pools.

Lev rigged a tether line by one of the pools, secured the horse so it could drink and graze, if it could find anything edible to graze on, and took off his helmet and switched on the torch clamped to one side and tucked his chin into his shoulder and examined the spike embedded in his breastplate and flesh as best he could. It appeared to have struck below his clavicle and above his ribs, missing bone, and there wasn’t as much blood as there might have been; his combat suit had pinched hard there, closing the wound. But his arm hurt all the way down to his fingertips and the dull pain of the wound dialed up when he tentatively tested how firmly the spike was embedded.

“I need you to pull it straight out,” he told Maks. “Try to do it along the angle it struck.”

“No problem,” the kid said.

“Then hit the snaps of my suit and peel it open quick as you can, so I can put pressure on the wound.”

Maks gave him an appraising look, eyes shadowed in the torch’s glare. “You think you might die?”

“Not if you do it right and do it quick.”

Lev sat with his back against a rock, a sterile pad clutched in one hand, and Maks stood over him, one boot on his chest. A hard twinge of pain as the kid grasped the shaft of the spike.

“Do it on the count of three,” Lev said, bracing himself as best he could, but as soon as he said “one” the kid pulled the spike out straightaway, smooth and quick. Lev felt the barbs along its point ripping flesh and whited out for a second, came back as Maks flipped the snaps of his suit, and pressed the pad over the wound, held it there as it wriggled and shaped itself until the flow of blood stopped.

Lev jabbed a syrette of painkiller as close to the torn muscle as he could, and injected a dose of nanobots into his arm; they’d multiply in his bloodstream and help his body to fight off infection and repair the wound. Maks used his helmet to scoop water from the pool and they drank from it with filter straws. There were sticks of dried mystery meat in the stolen horse’s saddlebag, but neither of them liked to touch it; instead, they ate squeezes of cheese-flavored paste, and Maks snacked on pale cottony tufts plucked from a stand of spikes. When he offered some to Lev, Lev said that he’d see if it made him ill first.

They were sitting side by side in the darkness, a shrapnel of stars scattered across

the black sky, peepers peeping in the pond, something grunting somewhere in the bush.

"I'm getting nothing on any of the company's feeds," Maks said.

"Neither am I," Lev said.

"Think anyone else got away?"

"You saw what the Trues did to the hostages. They'll do the same to prisoners of war," Lev said, and in his mind's eye saw Hanna sprawled on the ground, blood behind her shattered visor, felt a deep sorrowful pang pass through him, told himself that at least it had been quick and clean.

"Those Trues know how to fight," Maks said.

"They definitely don't care if they live or die."

"You see how one of them just barely touched me? It was like an acknowledgement. Like he knew me. Almost as if he knew I deserved to find the blade and bone."

Lev didn't want to rile up the kid, so didn't remind him of what Hanna had told them, that faking a blow was an expression of contempt for the Trues' enemies.

"Talking of which, check it out," Maks said, and held up the small glass cylinder. Dangling from his fist on a broken chain, it turned clockwise and anticlockwise in the torchlight. The small segment of bone inside cast a shadow on the glass.

"Is that a fingerbone?" Lev said.

"Or maybe a toe bone," Maks said.

"The agent seemed to think the Trues stole more than that."

"This is what I found. And I searched that dead fucker thoroughly. All he had was this little bone, and the blade," Maks said, pulling it from his belt.

It was wrapped in a length of black cloth and broken off short, barely a handspan left, but its latticework handguard and carven skull pommel were intact. Lev told Maks that he'd seen an unbroken one once upon a time, on display in the headquarters of the Second Tharsis Company.

"It was incised with a verse from the Tharsis Gospels. Something about pain being a necessary condition of life. One of the mottoes of the Knights of Cydonia. Blades like that had edges sharpened to an atom's thickness and the ability to change their length and shape. And they could vibrate at ultrasonic speed, too, singing death songs as they were swung. But only if they were swung by their owners, being bonded to them. When a knight died, their blade was broken. Buried with them. So the one I saw, because it was unbroken, it had never been bonded to anyone. Had never been used in anger."

"Unlike this beauty," Maks said. He swung the truncated blade crosswise through the torchlight, said that if he had the credit he'd have it remade, but the only way he could earn enough was to sell it. "What I believe they call a paradox."

Lev believed that it was more like irony, but kept that thought to himself, saying instead, "If you want to sell it, I can help you."

Maks halted the blade on the backswing, looking at Lev down its truncated length. "You an expert on these blades all of a sudden?"

"Who are you planning to sell it to?"

"The agent's master, who else? The tanky."

"And how are you going to contact him, given his agent's dead?"

"His mount wasn't, when we took our leave."

"He most likely will be, by now. And even if he somehow escaped being killed or captured, and we manage to find him without the Trues finding us first, he's dumber than yonder horse. The agent was the one with the link to the tanky."

"Then I'll think of some other way of reaching out to him."

"Point I'm trying to make, I know how to do that," Lev said.

\* \* \*

They slept as best they could in hollows scraped in the damp sand. The night was frosty, but they were Martians, tweaked to cope with cold. Lev laid his fusil along his flank and wrapped the sling around his good arm and held his pistol tight. Maks had said that his plan sounded good and agreed to cut him in, but Lev didn't trust the kid, wouldn't put it past him to decide that the blade and bone wasn't for sharing, sneak over in the night with his utility knife.

That thought and the pain of his wound meant that he didn't get much sleep, and he raised up at first light and woke the kid, and they set off after a scant breakfast of water and paste and cotton tufts. Lev discovered that the tufts dissolved in the mouth, intensely sweet with a lingering chemical aftertaste that water didn't quite wash away.

He was grainy and lightheaded from lack of sleep, and the muted throb of his wound sharpened whenever he moved his arm, but he insisted on taking the reins of the horse. Maks climbed up behind him, saying after a little while, "I'm still getting nothing on any of the feeds."

"Me either. On the other hand, there's no sign of any Trues."

Lev wasn't sure which was the worst danger—the Blight, the Trues, or the kid. And they had sixty or seventy clicks to go before they reached their destination: a little lakeside settlement, Drifftown, and the ferry that would take them back to civilization.

He said, wanting to remind the kid that they were in this together, "As soon as we get back to civilization we'll hook up with the broker I told you about. Discuss how she'll get the best price for your loot."

"She'd better be as good as you claim. Because I don't aim to go back to soldiering after this."

"I'm with you there."

They rode all day, crossing a broad plain spattered with small craters and dotted with clumps of black spikes and funnels and whips, crazed stretches of pseudolichens like fragments of the streets of a lost city. Once, a creature the size of one of the Trues' warhounds, blunt-snouted and clad in flexible bands of black armor, crashed away from them through tangled brakes of wirebush. Once, far off in the dusty distance, a herd of antelope bounded along in high arcs, propelled by the stiff prongs of their back legs. Lev paused and scried the land behind at regular intervals, but couldn't see any sign of pursuit. Maybe they were going to make it.

Late in the afternoon, a range of rounded hills rose above the horizon, the rim of the big crater they needed to cross, floating on glassy waves of heat shimmer. A few hours later, near sunset, they were following a narrow path along the edge of tall cliffs that fell straight to the floor of a sinuous canyon carved by meltwater. Lev was leading the horse, and Maks forged ahead, disappearing around a ragged outcrop of bare red rock. When Lev caught up with him, the kid was squatting on a slab that jutted over the cliff edge, putting a finger to his lips as Lev drew near, then pointing straight down.

Lev dismounted, stiff and saddle sore, and crept up beside the kid. Far below, a tiny figure was wading steadily through the shallow flow of the river cutting through slopes of boulders and scree. It was the agent's mount.

"How did that fucker track us, dumb as he is?" Maks said. He was bareheaded, having long ago taken off his helmet and hung it from the horse's saddle. His cheeks and forehead were daubed with dots and circles of red dust he'd painted himself with when they'd stopped to refill their water sacks at a pool.

"If he'd found our trail, he'd be up here, not down there," Lev said.

"Don't tell me it's a coincidence."

"His master must have figured out that we'd likely head to Drifftown. It's the nearest way back to civilization. Closer than the mine."

Maks thought about that and said, "If the tanky's controlling it, we could maybe go down there and talk to him right now."

"We're still in the Blight, and without the company's comms we don't have any way of calling for help. He could order yonder puppet to kill us and take your trophies, and no one would ever know. Best stick to our plan."

"Your plan."

"The plan we agreed on last night."

"Before I knew the big fellow down there was following us."

"It doesn't change anything," Lev said, trying to sound confident. "The best way of making a deal with his master is to get back to civilization, reach out to the broker, and let her take care of everything."

"And let her take a cut of the profit, too."

"She negotiated good terms for the contracts my old company made with war tourists. She'll do the same for you. Make sure the tanky honors the contract he made with the colonel and pays the bonus for recovery of the bone and blade in full. And make sure it's all legal, too, so there'll be no comeback."

"But first we got to reach this no-account town. What if the big guy gets there before we do? What if he's waiting for us?"

"What can he do? There's law in Drifftown. He tries to steal what you rightfully took from the Trues, he'll be the one'll be in trouble."

"If you lend me that fusil of yours I can pick him off easy," Maks said. "Or you could do it yourself. Then we'll be certain he won't give us any trouble. And like you said, out here no one would know."

"The tanky would know something fatal had happened to his creature. And would likely guess it was us, which would put an end to trying to make a deal with him."

"Then I'll sell the blade and bone to someone else."

"The tanky'll pay the best price, so there's no sense in doing anything that'll turn him against us."

Lev was also thinking that if the kid killed the agent's mount, he might well get it into his head to kill him, too.

He said, "And besides, that fellow won't get ahead of us by following the river. It doesn't cut through to the crater, and up here we're in easy reach of the top of the rim. After that, it's a straight shot to Drifftown. By the time he gets there, we'll be on the ferry, free and clear."

\* \* \*

They rode on past the head of the canyon, where the source of the outflow was hidden in a chaos of broken rocks the mount would have to somehow negotiate, and as the last light faded from the sky they crossed the bare top of the rim and picked a way down the shallow backslope to the crater floor.

It was around a hundred kilometers across and, like the crater that contained the vacuum organism jungle, predated the impacts of terraforming debris by more than two billion years, a shallow, ancient dish mostly buried in deposits of volcanic basalt overlaid by sedimentary material. After it had been flooded by meltwater created by those recent impacts, most of the water had drained away and left patches of vacuum organisms growing on tar deposits, and marshland that was slowly turning back into desert. As night deepened all around, Lev, with Maks leaning into his back, flogged the horse into a canter across a dry salt pan, and at last, when he was satisfied that they'd put enough distance between them and the mount, they halted and pitched camp amongst red willows growing along the edge of a muddy lagoon.

They didn't light a fire because it would be visible for kilometers in the dark flat land. Instead, they dialed down their helmet lights and by that dim red glow ate the last of their basic rations, washed down with filtered water that tasted of iron and silt, and Maks helped change the dressing over Lev's wound. The puncture was seeping a thin clear plasma and the flesh around it was sore and inflamed. Lev hoped

that meant the nanobots and his body's defenses were fighting off any infection, and stuck a painkiller patch on his arm and curled up and almost immediately fell asleep.

In the pale cold hour before dawn Maks shook him awake, said he'd heard something. Lev followed him to the edge of the willows and they crouched amongst tall grass and studied the salt pan they'd crossed last night. Lev saw nothing moving out there, heard nothing but the rustle of grass and willow leaves in the thin breeze; then Maks gripped his arm and pointed west, toward the crater's rim and said, "There. There it is again."

A faint human call, too far off to make out any words.

"Fucker must have walked through the night to catch up with us. And he's found his voice," Maks said.

"Or his master is using it to flush us out." Lev was cold and stiff and his shoulder was troubling him. He said, "We should get going."

"Still think we can outrun him?"

"We can but try."

They saddled the horse and rode until the first light of the sun flared above the level horizon behind them, and halted and studied the empty land and saw and heard nothing and rode on, splashing through a shallow reach of water glittering like beaten gold in the new light, stirring up a flock of pink birds with long skinny legs and beaks like upturned scoops that leaped into the air in an uncurling wave and flew off in low formation, silhouetted against the small disc of the sun.

"He'll see that," Maks said.

"If he does, he won't know it was us who raised them."

"I know he won't give up the chase."

"We're still a good way ahead of him. That's all that matters," Lev said, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

Shadows shrank into themselves as the sun rose higher, its light incandescent in the dusty air, and the day grew hot. They hadn't topped up their water pouches before setting off and soon drained them, and the pools they passed were ever smaller and shallower, ringed with salt deposits and stinking windrows of black algae. The stands of spikes and tangles of wirebush and tufts of engineer grass thinned and petered out and they rode on across a dry lakebed of crazed mud patched with pale stretches of salt and drifts of small, crescent-shaped dunes.

Presently, they came across a trampled trail of hoofprints and the wandering lines of wheels that cut across the flats. As he turned the horse to follow it, Lev told Maks that it might be the path the True horde that had ambushed the company had taken to the vacuum organism jungle, some days ago.

"I don't care where they came from," Maks said. "Long as they didn't fuck up where we're headed."

The kid had a point: the trail stretched away south and east, roughly in the direction of the lake, and Drifttown.

Lev said, trying to sound confident, "If we follow their tracks it might make it harder for the mount to follow us. And the Trues must have taken on water before crossing these flats, so it's our best chance of finding a source."

The horse needed little guidance as it plodded on. Heat and light beat down from the sky and the air above the flat land shimmered and roiled. Lev's wound and a growing headache pulsed in synchrony. His mouth was clogged with dried saliva and astringent dust coated his lips and face and stung his eyes.

Late in the afternoon, they came across a pair of large snake-necked birds picking over the skeletal remains of what might have been a goat or a small sheep, the birds hopping backward from their meal with a stir of dusty black wings as the horse and

its riders passed, watching them with unblinking, red-rimmed eyes, perhaps calculating when and where these intruders might capsize. A little further on they passed a sparse litter of household goods discarded by the side of the trail. A broken stool, a plastic bowl and a bright scatter of cutlery, broken bottles, clothes that stirred in the hot wind like tethered ghosts.

At last, a line of hills surfaced amongst the shimmering layers of air at the horizon. Low and rounded and tawny, narrow coverts of green trees stuffed into the folds between them. The ground began to rise, a long shallow slope of sandy turf cut by the trampled track. The horse was stumbling now, blowing hard and almost done, and Lev and Maks dismounted and walked beside it, halting when they reached the crest of the rise.

The reverse slope cupped a steading of small fields enclosed by drystone walls. The fields were dug over or scorched black and beyond them was the wreck of a small house—low fieldstone walls pierced with slit windows, roof burnt and half collapsed. A line of trees behind it raised carbonized branches against the white sky. A tall wooden pole had been cut down and its bouquet of dish receivers hacked about.

A well close to the house was choked with rubble and the stinking corpse of a goat, but there was a square open tank of water by the first of the fields, half-empty and mantled with ash that Lev and Maks stirred aside so that they could drink. They were scooping up handfuls of water and splashing their sunburnt faces when a fat-tired tricycle and its rider banged over the crest of the slope and slewed to a halt. The rider was an old man, aiming a chain gun at them, telling them to lay down their weapons.

Lev raised and spread his hands, explained that he and Maks were the only survivors of a company ambushed by a True horde. "Likely the same one that passed through here."

"Set down that fusil all the same," the old man said. "And anything else you're carrying."

Lev laid his fusil and pistol and bootknife on the ground and looked at Maks, hoping he wouldn't think of trying anything foolish. The kid shrugged and stuck his saw-bladed utility knife in the dry soil and stepped back and folded his arms with a defiant look.

"What's that tucked into your belt?" the old man said to him.

"Nothing that concerns you."

"Maybe so, but best if you set it down all the same."

The old man hadn't moved from the saddle of his tricycle, tall and skinny and stoop-backed, dressed in a sleeveless red denim jacket and canvas shorts. The fat barrel of his chain gun rested on the fork of the tricycle's handlebars.

"Do as he asks," Lev said. "Show him we don't mean any harm."

The kid glared at him, then pulled the broken vorpall blade in its wrapping from his belt and set it beside his knife.

"Trappings on yonder horse looks like True gear," the old man said.

"I stole it when we escaped," Lev said. "We're heading for Drifftown. Planning to take the ferry back to civilization."

"Would any of those Trues be following you?"

"None that we know of," Lev said, deciding not to mention the mount, or why he was searching for them. It would only complicate matters, raise questions that would be hard to answer.

"We killed enough of them they won't want to get in another fight for a while," Maks said.

"Then you don't know Trues, son," the old man said. "Fighting's what they live for."

"I know more than you think," Maks said. "I killed their warrior priest, took his sacred shit. You don't believe me, unroll that cloth there. See what's inside."



“Why don’t you unroll it for me, son,” the old man said.

Maks knelt and did it with a flourish, pushing to his feet with the broken blade in his hand, looking up at the old man with a smile that had no warmth in it. “This here’s a vorpul blade. What’s left of it, anyhow. I have a fingerbone of the person who owned it, too.”

“A Knight of Cydonia,” the old man said.

“Exactly so. Powerful hoodoo for the Trues.”

The old man swung off the tricycle, stiff and slow, cradling his chain gun in his arms.

“There’s a tomb of one of those knights round about forty kilometers southeast of here,” he said. “Might be that’s where those devils found these relics. Some of them came through here six days back. Looted the place, as you can see. Killed my goats, stole what they could carry, burned the rest. You say they killed your friends?”

“We’re the only ones who escaped,” Lev said. “And need to be on our way.”

“You’re hurt, aren’t you?”

“Slightly.”

“Saw you wince when you raised your arms,” the old man said. “Why don’t you sit down before you fall down? I don’t have much, just a couple of sand conies and a mess of wild greens, but I’m happy to share.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Maks said, and moved suddenly and quickly, stepping up to the old man and pushing down the barrel of his chain gun and aiming the vorpul blade’s jagged stub at his face. “We’ll take your food and take your trike too, seeing as our horse has about quit on us.”

The old man didn’t flinch. Staring into the kid’s face, saying, “I thought you better than this.”

“We’re trying to be,” Lev said. “Stand down, Maks. We aren’t thieves.”

“I’m not stopping here while that fucker is after us,” Maks said.

“He might not have found our trail.”

“You said he must’ve figured out where we’re heading. Or his master has. Come with me, or stay, I don’t much care which.”

“You won’t be taking anything of mine,” the old man said, and wrenched the chain gun from Maks’s grip and cried out as the kid jammed the vorpul blade into his belly.

For a moment, the two of them stood toe to toe, the old man grasping the kid’s wrist, blood dripping from their hands. Then Maks pulled the broken blade free and the old man’s legs gave out and he sat down hard, and didn’t resist when Maks snatched up the chain gun.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Lev said.

Maks looked at him, eyes narrowed, mouth clamped in a hard thin slot. For a moment Lev thought he was about to stick or shoot him.

“He was about to kill me,” Maks said. “You coming?”

“I won’t be a party to murder.”

“It was either him or me.”

“You know it wasn’t.”

“Stay here then. And when that big fucker finds you, give him my regards,” Maks said, and kept the chaingun aimed at Lev as he picked up the fusil and the pistol, jamming the pistol into his belt and slinging the rifle over his shoulder before swinging onto the tricycle and turning it in a smooth arc and accelerating away downslope, past the line of charred trees.

\* \* \*

Lev told the old man to stay as still as he could, keep pressure on his wound. “I have a medical kit. I just need to fetch it.”

He looked around, but the damn horse had wandered off somewhere.

The old man focused on him. Pale blue eyes watery. "Can it stitch up my guts?"

"I can stop the bleeding and seal the wound. Ride into town if I can't raise anyone on the comms. Get help."

But he knew it was hopeless, and so did the old man, who pushed to his feet by slow degrees, holding himself in with one hand.

"Don't bother, son. I know he killed me. You want to help, get me to the top of this hill."

It took a while. A few steps, a rest, a few more. Halfway there, the old man sat down and Lev wasn't sure he'd get up again, but he did. Breathing heavily, collapsing onto a flat stone when they reached the crest of the hill. Lev sat beside him, light-headed and feverish, his shoulder giving him some trouble. The two of them looking out at the tawny slopes below, the level empty land beyond.

"I'm Rhame. Rhame Bambanek Pyong Minnot," the old man said, after a while. "What it's worth."

"Lev. Lev Vacrescu."

"A Martian."

"Yes."

The old man said that he was a Martian, too, but he had been born on Dione, one of the moons of Saturn, in the famous old city of Paris.

Lev nodded, although he had never heard of it.

"I left Dione and set to wandering the Outer System at age fifteen. Around seven of your years. Made my way out as far as Uranus, then worked my way sunward and ended up here and met and handfasted with my life partner. And that was that, for my wanderjahr."

They'd made their home here, Rhame said. Raised a son who had taken advantage of his father's citizenship and taken to wandering himself. And was wandering still, he said, without any bitterness.

"My partner, she died last winter. Died here. Buried here. We built this place together. The house, the fields, the irrigation system."

He paused, wincing at some internal crisis, breathing quickly and shallowly.

Said, "Maybe you can reach out to my son. Tell him what happened."

"What's his name?"

"Bryn. Bryn Pyong Minnot. Last I heard, he was on Europa. But that was a while ago. Probably moved on by now."

"I'll find him."

"My partner had family in Maja Valles. They might help."

"Okay."

After a pause, Rhame said, "Those trees the devils burned. We grew them from seed we planted our first year here. Planted trees in the sheltered dells, too. Ferns. Moss. Built step dams to trap rainwater. Could just about live on what we grew and what we hunted. Milk and cheese from the goats. Survived sandstorms. Droughts. Attacks by critters straying from Blight jungles. Then the Trues . . ."

He paused again, looking inward, clutching his wound.

"I'm sorry that I brought more trouble," Lev said.

The old man either didn't hear him or chose to ignore him.

"We'd had trouble with True raiding parties before. Then, six days ago, there was a warning on the local net. About a big group of them. Had a weather cam up on my comms mast. Told it to keep watch. Which is what saved me. The horde was about ten clicks off when the cam spotted them. Tried to raise my neighbors, but my comms were jammed. Maybe the Trues knew what I was. Where I came from. Maybe not. Either way, I knew they wouldn't take kindly to someone like me. Someone violates their so-called norms. My ancestors helped bring down the True Empire. Those

devils, they aren't even true Trues. Just criminals who garb themselves in a doctrine of racial purity. Unite their gangs by groupthink. Excuse their atrocities with the old hatreds. The old lies.

"I had just enough time to turn my goats loose and get to a hiding place," Rhame said. "Stayed there until they were done with trashing my place. Until they moved on. When I spotted you, I thought you might be a couple of them come back for a second go-around. I guess I wasn't much wrong."

"I should fetch my kit," Lev said. "It won't take me more than a minute or two. It has painkillers. Good ones."

"I should have let your friend take what he wanted."

"I should have stopped him."

"He probably would have killed you, too."

"I don't know why he didn't," Lev said. "Maybe because I saved his life, when the Trues attacked our company. I won't make that mistake again. I promise I'll find him and make him pay."

"He won't get far on the trike. Its battery isn't what it was. But if I were you, I wouldn't try to catch him. I'd just tell the law. In Drifftown. Let it take its course. One way or the other."

"Okay," Lev said, trying to sound like he thought it was a good idea.

"Promise you won't do anything foolish."

"Okay."

"Those old tombs? Ones south and east of here? People say they're cursed. Maybe it's a story got up in old times. To stop them being plundered. But if it's true," Rhame said, and paused and breathed for a little while.

"Damn," he said. "That was a bad one."

Both of his hands were laced across his belly. The front of his shirt and the waist of his trousers were soaked in dark blood. His forehead was beaded with sweat.

"You don't have to talk," Lev said.

"What was I telling you?"

"The old tombs."

"Yes. How they might be cursed. If they are, anything taken from them is cursed, too. Including that blade. And blades like that, they were bonded to their owners."

"I know."

"It may have its own wants and needs. Old things like that sometimes do."

"You think it may bring bad luck for anyone carrying it."

"I suppose I'm hoping your friend'll get what he deserves."

"That's fair."

They were silent for a short while. Rhame breathing quickly and shallowly, looking out across the old lakebed. Lev thinking about fate, thinking about what he had to do.

"This is my favorite view," Rhame said. "We'd oftentimes come up here. Me and my partner. Look at the hills. That we quickened together. The land all around. The emptiness of it. The simplicity. All it is, is all you can see. That and only that. Hasn't much changed for billions of years. Hasn't been much changed by us. It's Mars as it was. The old Mars. The true Mars. Before we arrived."

He paused again.

"It doesn't rain much here," he said. "But when it does you can see it coming all the way from the horizon. Smell it on the wind."

"I know that smell," Lev said. He started to tell Rhame about the ranch where he had been born and raised, but the old man was dead.

\* \* \*

Lev found the grave of Rhame's life partner in a dip in the slope below the hilltop, and scraped another beside it as best he could. Despite a patch of painkiller, his

shoulder gave him some trouble as he dug, more trouble when he dragged Rhame's body to the spot. He found a blanket near the ruin of the house, cut away the charred portion and wrapped the old man in it and rolled him into the shallow pit. Stood over him in the thin bitter wind, searching for the right form of words, at last telling him that he was sorry that they'd met as they had, he would have liked to have got to know him better, and covered the body with sandy soil and trampled it down.

The sun was setting inside shells of pale nacreous light, a glory utterly indifferent to his plight, as he walked back to the house. It would soon be too dark to follow the kid, he told himself. And besides, he needed to rest up, was too tired to search for any food the horde might have left in the house or in the little fields, those that hadn't been entirely burnt. Too tired to search for the horse. He sat down at the top of the slope overlooking the ruin, spent and hurting, gripped by powerful spasmodic bouts of shivering, the machinery of his body stuttering, and presently he lay down where he was and dropped straight into sleep.

And woke to find someone, the agent's mount, standing over him. The fresh light of the newly risen sun bathing both of them, warm on Lev's face. He wasn't surprised, or especially afraid. It seemed inevitable.

The mount, silhouetted against the paling sky, did not move as Lev sat up cautiously. Small dark eyes watchful under the shelf of bone that ran straight back across the top of his skull. Arms thicker than Lev's legs. Legs like tree trunks. A long-barreled hunting rifle slung over one shoulder looked like a toy. It was some kind of antique, the rifle, its stock and forestock carved from a single piece of wood, fitted with a fat sniper scope whose tube and objective bell were crudely daubed with red and white blotches. No doubt taken from a True; it wasn't the kind of weapon carried by anyone in the company.

"You are hurt," the mount said.

His voice was a melodic tenor.

Lev squinted up at him. "Who exactly am I speaking to? You, or your master?"

"I have been repurposed to act on my master's behalf."

"Did he give you a name, your master, when he repurposed you?"

"I am his agent, now."

"Your master put you and your little friend in harm's way, and didn't bother to give either of you a name?"

"Agent will do. Your friend is not here."

It seemed more like a statement than a question, so Lev didn't respond.

"There is dirt on your clothes and under your fingernails," the agent said. "And I found a fresh grave close by. I assume that you dug it."

"What if I did?"

"Who lies there?"

"It isn't Maks."

"That is not what I asked."

"But that's who you're looking for."

"If I dug up that grave, or if I forced you to dig it up, who would I find?"

"You'd despoil it to satisfy your curiosity."

"Not mine."

"Your master's then. I don't see a difference."

"I do. You would find digging hard work, I think. Wounded as you are. Much easier to tell me who lies there."

"The man who built this place, if you must know," Lev said angrily, feeling forced into a corner. "I buried him next to his life partner."

"Did you kill him?"

"Would you believe me if I said I didn't?"

"I know you did not set fire to the house, or to the fields. The ashes are cold, burnt out days ago. And the True horde seems to have passed this way. Did it set the fires, and kill the person who lived here?"

"Think what you like."

"I prefer to know the truth."

"I don't have what you're looking for. That's the truth, plain and simple."

"I know you don't."

"You searched me while I was asleep?"

"I can see more than you can see. Where is your friend?"

"I wouldn't call him my friend."

"Where is he?"

"He moved on. Left me here."

"To dig a grave."

Lev didn't reply.

"After he killed the owner of this place."

Lev didn't feel the need to reply to that, either.

"Where was your friend going, when he left this place?"

"He didn't tell me."

"Drifftown, no doubt. Does he have the blade and the bone?"

"By now he's probably sold them. I hope he got a good price. And I hope he took the ferry across the lake, heading for someplace you won't ever find."

Although the kid had stolen his fusil and pistol and abandoned him after mortally wounding Rhame Bambanek Pyong Minnot, Lev felt a stupid residual loyalty toward him. They were both troopers. Both Martians. And defiance was the only weapon he had left, all he could deploy against this strange giant, who was probably considering whether or not to kill him.

"Nevertheless, I must find him to make sure," the agent said. "And find the person to whom he sold the blade and bone, if that is what he has done."

"Good luck with that."

"It was not luck that led me here."

"I guess you followed the horde's trail, too."

The agent didn't reply to that.

Lev, thinking of something Rhame had told him, said, "Are you sure the horde isn't following you? Because, being what you are, how you were made, you're exactly the kind of person they don't have much liking for."

"You need not worry about the horde. Most are dead. And I killed those few who tried to follow me when I followed you."

Lev already knew the answer, but he had to ask anyway. "And the company. Any of them survive?"

"Just you and your friend."

"We should never have agreed to help you."

"Colonel Konstantinov understood the terms and conditions and was happy to accept the fee. And his troopers knew what they had signed up for, too. Including you."

"The colonel was a fool. Was too proud and stubborn to give up the chase. Placed too much trust in his luck."

"If he was a fool, what does that make you?"

"No less foolish. You didn't try to save any of them?"

"When I fought my way free, the others were by then either dead or dying. The Trues were not interested in taking prisoners."

"And all you ever cared about was retrieving those damn trinkets. Well, I'm in no condition to try to stop you."

"It would be sensible if you did not try. And besides, I have no quarrel with you,

Lev Vacrescu.”

“What will you do, if you get them back? Take them to your master?”

“Do you still think this is only about the blade and the bone?”

The agent didn't smile, but Lev thought that there was a trace of a smile in his voice.

“I guess you mean it's also about the adventure. The thrill of the chase.”

“It reminds my master that there is a world above and beyond the worlds where he walks now. It reminds him of what he once was.”

“An awful lot of people died so he could be reminded of that.”

“The off-worlders who rode with your previous company. The war tourists. Why did they come here?”

“At least they were risking their own lives. Your master's putting your life at stake while risking nothing of his own.”

“As I told you before, it is what I was made for. I enjoy it as much as your war tourists enjoyed their adventures. More so, because you made sure to keep them from harm, while the risks I take are mine alone.”

“You being autonomous.”

“Within the parameters of my task.”

Lev didn't know exactly what that meant, and was too angry to ask. Thinking of Hanna and everyone else.

He said, “I hope you don't find out where the kid's gone. That you never get those stupid trinkets back.”

“I will not stop until I do.”

“It's possible, isn't it, that he might kill you.”

“It is possible, but unlikely.”

“He's wiler than you think. And he has the vorpil blade, which might have its own agenda,” Lev said, remembering what Rhame had said. “It might be using him, just like your master is using you. Maybe it likes to be out in the world, after all this time rusting away in a tomb. Out in the world doing what it was made to do.”

Wondering briefly if it had been the blade or Maks that had killed Rhame. No, he'd seen the kid's look just before he'd done it. His anger and frustration. But possession of the blade had enabled him to act.

“You think that the blade may also be autonomous,” the agent said.

“I know it doesn't owe you or your master anything.”

Lev watched the agent's face, impassive under the heavy ridge of his brow. Impossible to know what he was thinking—Lev didn't even know where his brain was, or if he was running on something else. Cloud gel or even old-fashioned silicon or vitrified DNA. A simulation, like the long-dead tanky whose fucking fault all of this was.

“It could be,” he said, riding on the story as it unfolded from somewhere inside him, like one of those pellets of paper that after it's dropped into a glass of water unfolds into a flower or a fish, “that it wasn't your master who started all this. Maybe the blade called to that warrior-priest who was carrying it. Called out from the knight's tomb. It might have thought the Trues would fix it up and put it to use, but found instead it had become a sacred object, a fetish. And then Maks came along and took it, and he was a better fit for what the blade wanted. A new champion. Right now, who knows, maybe he's paying someone to have it reforged.”

“Even on Mars, stalled and stunted though it is, few people fight with bladed weapons these days.”

“But it's something more than a blade, isn't it?”

Another silence. The agent's face impassive as a statue's. Eyes as inhuman as a shark's.

At last, he said, “It's an interesting story, if nothing else.”

“Even if I’m wrong, you could still end up dead,” Lev said. He felt emboldened, was pretty sure now that the mount didn’t intend to kill him. “But hey, maybe that’s an ending to the story that’ll please your master.”

“I must do what I need to do.”

“So you’re not really all that autonomous, are you?”

“I know who I am, and why I am here. Can you say the same?”

“Your predecessor asked me something similar. I didn’t have an answer for it then, but I do now. Part of being alive is finding that out for yourself. Maybe I’m the one who’ll get to tell your master how this ends. What happened to the blade and bone, after the kid killed you.”

“I have no quarrel with you, Lev Vacrescu. As long as you do not try to stop or follow me, I will let you live.”

Lev watched the agent walk swiftly and surefootedly down the slope, following the trail left by the True horde, the trail that Maks had taken. When he was certain that the giant wasn’t going to look back, that he’d been dismissed as harmless, Lev pushed to his feet and went to look for the horse.

\* \* \*

He was about five clicks out from the ruin of Rhame Bambanek Pyong Minnot’s steading, riding through a desert of sand and stone, engineer grass and vacuum organisms, the usual spikes and wirebushes, and clumps of hollow drums tall as a man and randomly pierced with openings that hummed and hooted mournfully as wind blew through them, when the tire tracings of the stolen tricycle and the oversized footprints of the agent split away from the trampled track of the horde. Turning directly toward Drifftown.

Around noon, he spotted the trike lying on its side, the agent’s footprints all around it. Lev sat on the horse, sucking on a tube of paste and studying the land ahead, failing to see any sign of Maks or his pursuer, riding on. The sun was dropping toward the horizon when he reached a broad road raised on an embankment. In the middle distance, it passed through a cutting in a low ridge, and a thread of smoke bent into the sky beyond the ridge’s crest.

On the far side of the ridge, off to one side of the road, a boneyard spread about the remains of an abandoned tryworks. Big boilers and storage tanks and pipework were shrouded in curtains of some kind of red-leaved vine; segments of a tall steel chimney lay like giant knucklebones across the ground; one of the buildings at the far end of a string of low, flat-roofed offices, workshops, and storehouses was burnt and blackened and still smoldering.

Lev leaned on the horn of the wooden saddle and studied it and the other buildings, his optics detecting no sign of life there and no sign of life around the tanks and pale mounds of the boneyard either. He urged the horse into a slow walk. Passing a scattering of intact skeletons half-buried in sand—the broad ribcages and horned skulls of feral aurochs that had once grazed on vacuum organisms, digesting the raw fullerenes and organics in stomachs that were essentially reaction chambers seething with bacteria, hunted to extinction for their meat and insulating slabs of fat that tryworks like this had rendered for oil. Passing pyramids and mounds of skulls and vertebrae and femurs, piles of brittle, cracked hides infiltrated by layers of blown sand. Vacuum organisms stood here and there, clusters of fat spires like enormous half-melted candles, darkly glistening in the westerling light, and Lev discovered the body of the agent sprawled behind one such cluster. The hunting rifle lay beyond his out-flung arm. His face was turned sideways in a pool of drying blood and his small dark eyes were half-lidded. The familiar sly look of the recently dead, as if they’d discovered a secret in the moment of their passing. Some revelation forever withheld from the living.

“You aren’t any different from any other dead person I’ve seen,” Lev told him, and

as he swung down from the saddle, planning to take the giant's rifle, something spanged off one of the fat spires. Fragments of fullerene flew; the sound of the shot came a moment later. Two hundred meters off. Maybe two hundred and fifty. The horse stepped about uneasily as Lev ducked behind the spires and eased sideways, glimpsing the blink of a second shot behind a sprawl of oil drums to one side of the smoldering building, hearing the round crack through the air above his head.

He cupped his hands and called out the kid's name, asked if he was all right.

"That you?" Maks called back.

"Thought you might need some help dealing with the tanky's servant. Guess I was wrong."

"I got him when he raised up and threw a bomblet at me."

Lev risked another peek at the barricade of oil drums, calculated angles, and slithered backward and grabbed the hunting rifle by its strap and eased back to the shelter behind the cluster of spires. Feeling better now he had a weapon, although he hoped he wouldn't have to use it.

He hailed Maks again, asked if it was okay if he came in.

"Better stay where you are."

There was a hitch in the kid's voice. As if he was straining to catch his breath.

"How badly are you hurt?" Lev said.

"I'm good. Was knocked about some when the bomblet blew up the damn building, is all."

But the agent looked like he'd been dead a few hours and the kid hadn't moved on, so Lev reckoned he was somewhere on the wrong side of good.

He said, "You need any patching up and a ride to Drifftown, I'll happily oblige."

"Don't think of coming near me, old man. I'm not hurt so bad I can't take you down. You always were slower than me, and I bet your shoulder's still fucked up."

It had been bothering Lev on and off during the long ride, but not as much as the day before. He said, "I thought we were partners. What with saving your life and all."

"Well you thought wrong. And if I ever owed you anything, I repaid it by killing that monstrosity. You ride on right now, I'll let you go. One time offer."

"I've been riding most of the day. Think I'll sit here a while," Lev said, and was answered by another shot. The round knocked up a spurt of dust close to the horse, which had been grazing on a patch of engineer grass, and it startled and cantered off a little way, reins trailing.

"It doesn't have to be like this," Lev said.

"You aren't going to take it from me."

"You mean the blade, I don't want it. The old man told me it was a fell thing. Cursed."

"How is he? The old man?"

"His name was Rhame. Rhame Bambanek Pyong Minnot. I buried him yesterday."

"He was going to take it from me. Same'll happen to you, you try anything stupid."

"I told you I don't want it."

Another round shattered the top of one of the vacuum organism spires.

"Just keep away," Maks yelled.

Lev didn't see the point of returning fire. He settled his back against the base of one of the spires and told the kid what Rhame had told him. Where the blade had most likely come from, what old things like that could sometimes do to the people who dug them up or stole them from their long-dead owners. He told the kid that his best option was to return the blade to the knight's tomb, or to bury it somewhere.

"This place was abandoned after folk hunted aurochs almost to extinction. If you stick that blade in the middle of one of these bone piles, no one will ever find it."

"You made that up," the kid called back. "About the curse. Because you want it for your own self. Want to sell it. So you can get out of the soldiering biz. Buy yourself a



farm. But it ain't yours to sell. And never will be."

"If it isn't cursed, why are we arguing?"

"Last chance, old man. Ride on and leave me be. Or don't, and see what happens."

Lev thought about that. Riding to Drifftown. Selling the horse and the saddle and the hunting rifle. They weren't worth much, but he reckoned they'd fetch enough credit to cover the ferry fare and a train ride to the nearest city. Where he maybe could sign on with another company, although it wasn't likely. Given his age. Given this was the second massacre he'd survived. That would be hard to explain. His survival. Hard to convince anyone that it wasn't due to anything other than plain and simple cowardice. And besides, he doubted that Maks, desperate as he was, would keep his word about letting him ride on.

He called out to the kid again, saying, "I'm not about to give up on you. Let me come over. Check you out."

"See what happens if you try," the kid called back.

There it was. Nothing Lev could do but wait it out, see what happened. For a while nothing much did, apart from a potshot the kid took when the horse strayed back into range. He missed by several meters, but Lev lost sight of the horse when it cantered off amongst the bone piles.

The sun went down and as light drained from the sky stars began to pop out and Diemos's small faint disc swung up out of the east. Lev hunkered down against the growing cold, ate his last tube of paste and threw it into the open patch of ground beyond the vacuum organism cluster, followed it up with a fist-sized rock, and then another. When Maks didn't react he called out, asked him how he was doing.

No reply.

Lev counted out five minutes and called again, said he was thinking of coming over. This time he was rewarded with a gunshot, although it didn't hit anywhere near him. He knew he should wait all night, but he couldn't. Told himself that he had to save the kid if he could, though it was anger and impatience more than the nagging of his conscience that got him to his feet.

He took a circuitous route, using the deepening shadows and bone piles and a pylon shrouded in red vine as cover. Resting the barrel of the rifle in the crook of his arm so he could raise it up and snap off a shot if necessary. Getting behind the kid's position and walking as quietly and quickly as he could to the rear of the half-burnt building. Its wall, built from heavy blocks of sandstone, still gave off a faint heat; the stink of smoke parched Lev's throat and prickled in his eyes as he nerved himself up to make the final dash.

The shadowy figure by the oil drums lifted an arm and tried to point Lev's own pistol at him. He jinked sideways, bracing for the impact of a round, but the arm dropped and he dared to step closer.

"Well, this is flat-out pitiful," he said.

Maks sat with his back against one of the drums in a pool of blood, his head turned away from Lev as if he was ashamed. He'd pulled his combat suit to his waist and used his undershirt to wrap his left leg below the knee. The undershirt was dark with blood and it looked like most of his foot had been blown off. One hand lay on the ground, holding the pistol; the other clutched the broken vortal blade to his chest. He'd unwrapped it, and its broken fang gleamed in the twilight.

He allowed Lev to pry the pistol from his hand, but when Lev tried to take the blade his grip tightened and he looked up with a grimace that might have been defiance, might have been simple pain.

"Just don't stick me with it while I take a look at your leg," Lev said.

"I got him and he got me," Maks said.

His voice was tight, his breathing as quick and shallow as Rhame's had been, at

the end. There was something wrong with his face. It was misshapen. Swollen. His hair was stiff with blood and there was a kind of bib of blood dried on his chest. His lips peeled back from his teeth when Lev started to peel away the wrapping, stiff with dried blood, from his leg, but he made no noise.

"I can give you painkillers," Lev said. "But I'll have to leave you for a little while, go find the horse."

"Stay," the kid said.

He let go of the blade and reached out and Lev gripped his hand and held it.

"Don't bury me here," Maks said.

"I won't."

"Don't want to be left amongst all these damn cow bones."

"Don't worry about it," Lev said.

Maks roused up a little, as if he wanted to say something more, but settled back. His chin drooping to his chest. His last breath rattling in his throat.

Lev couldn't find the fucking horse, it didn't come when he whistled or startle out of a hiding place when he fired a shot into the air, so he found a plank and tied Maks to it and dragged him past the tanks and pipes and the mounds of bones and buried him in a scrape off to one side of the road and set the plank at its head.

It was fully dark by then and his shoulder was troubling him badly and he was too tired to move on, so he rested near that poor excuse for a grave, the second he'd dug in two days. Sitting with his back against a rock, hunched into himself against the growing cold, hands wrapped around his knees.

Somehow, he slept. And dreamed of a woman dressed in mirror armor so finely polished her head seemed to float above a shattered reflection of the graveyard in which she walked. Her face deathly pale under a cap of black hair, her eyes dabs of deep shadow. As in many dreams he was a bodiless point of view, following her past tombstones inset with little windows where the faces of the dead peered out, climbing a small hill to the black cube of the mausoleum that crowned it. High above, something huge and on fire arched across the night in a terminal orbit, and beneath that death star an army marched in double file, led by a man who was somehow himself, seated on the shoulders of the giant who'd been turned into an agent and was now a mount again, even bigger in the dream than in life, his flat-topped head raising and half-turning as he spoke in an urgent whisper Lev couldn't quite catch.

He woke in the dark and the cold, clutching the hilt of the vortal blade. He'd swaddled it in its square of cloth before sheathing it in his belt, but it was uncovered now and the wire wrapping of its hilt bit into his palm. He dropped it as if it was a viper and jerked to his feet, fear surging through him.

The land all around was black and still. Shoals of stars overhead. A faint glow at the horizon to the north and east that must be his destination.

Working more by touch than sight he bound up the blade and laid it on the ground and sat a little way off. Sleep was impossible. He was too cold, too shaken by the dream and Maks's death, and something was tugging at him, as if he were the tip of a trembling compass needle drawn to the only fixed point in the turning world, and he knew, although he did not know how he knew, that it was the knight's tomb, somewhere south of Drifftown's fugitive glow. He could return the blade to the desecrated bones of its owner, if the True horde had left any bones behind, but what if someone, a traveler, a prospector, another True warrior priest, found it? What if someone took it up again, and the whole thing started over, turning on the blade's need to do what it had been made to do. Round and round. No beginning and no end . . .

As the first cold light seeped into the eastern horizon he gave up on sleep and rolled up the blade in its wrapping and shoved it into his belt and set off down the

road. He walked all day, trying to ignore the insistent tug in the middle of his head. His empty stomach contracting into itself. The day growing hotter. The empty land shimmering like a myriad broken mirrors.

It took him most of the day to reach the town. There wasn't much to it. Maize fields and greenhouse strips and a wind farm on the outskirts. Walled compounds painted in cheerful primary colors gathered around the four arms of a crossroads. A ragged waterfront. The ferry, a flat deck slung between two narrow hulls, was moored at the longest jetty. Small fishing boats were coming in, anchoring close to a beach of black sand.

Lev sold the hunting rifle at a chandler's and bought a ticket for the ferry, which was due to depart in a couple of hours, and fresh shrimp from one of the fishing boats. For a minuscule payment, an old woman de-shelled and deveined the shrimp and broiled them on a skewer over an iron hotplate and wrapped them in strips of water lettuce. Lev ate slowly, pausing between little bites. They were the juiciest, tastiest shrimp he had ever eaten.

With time to kill he sat on a mooring bollard at the edge of the dock, tawny water slopping a couple of meters below, seabirds wheeling around the spikey forest of fishing boat masts, the green and red running lights of the ferry glimmering in the gathering dusk. He could still feel the tug inside his head. That absolute sense of direction. A need that wasn't his.

He'd hung the vial that contained the fingerbone around his neck. Now he pulled the chain taut and cupped the vial in the palm of his hand and studied the shadow of the little bone inside. In two or three days he could be in Puerto Ares. Talking to the broker, arranging a deal with the tanky. Assuming the tanky didn't try to cheat him. Assuming Colonel Konstantinov's family didn't raise a dispute about ownership, have him arrested for desertion, or worse. And he couldn't help thinking of the poor damned kid, and Hanna, and all the other people who died for these old trinkets. The blood price for blade and bone. Couldn't help wondering how he'd live with that. If he could live with that.

Presently the ferry's horn sounded, low and mournful, raising a scatter of white birds along the edge of the water, echoing out across the dusty little town. Lev sat where he was, watching as a handful of foot passengers boarded and the ferry cast off and backed away from the jetty and turned in a wide, slow circle and headed north. The sun was setting and a cool wind got up, blowing off the lake. At last Lev pushed to his feet and walked back into town. There was a rooming house where he could spend the night, and the next day he'd set out the way he'd come, and do what was needful.

\* \* \*

He was working in a fold of woods at the southern edge of the fields, setting snares for sand conies, when the weather cam alerted him. He briefly studied its feed, and hurried toward the house.

When the visitor arrived, Lev was standing on a flat-topped rock below the house, holding his rifle in one hand, down by his waist. Watching as the man dismounted from the fat-tired trike and stripped off his goggles and mask and fastidiously beat dust from the wings of his black leather longcoat before starting up the narrow path that wound among layered outcrops. Halting when Lev told him that was far enough.

"I've come a long way," he said. "May I beg a drink of water?"

He was a tall slender man about Lev's age, standing with an easy grace, thumbs in his belt, one boot resting on a rock. His smile seemed natural, unforced, but his gaze was cool and steady, the wings of his longcoat were pushed back to show the pistol holstered at his hip, and Lev's optics revealed enhancements in the long bones of his arms and legs and no doubt there were others Lev couldn't detect.

"I don't know where you've come from, but I have a pretty good idea about why you're here and who you're working for," Lev said. "Did he make you or hire you?"

"I'm a Martian, like you."

"You have a name, then."

"Dion LaValle Espinasse," the man said.

"How did you find me?"

"You made some kind of private agreement with the owner of this place. No contract. Nothing registered. But it wasn't hard to trace and unscramble the messages you exchanged with him."

Rhame Bambanek Pyong Minnot's son had made it clear that he wasn't interested in taking over the steading, had said that despite his father's death he wouldn't be returning to Mars for a long while. If ever. He'd agreed that Lev could act as caretaker until such time etcetera, and Lev had settled in for the long haul.

"I was expecting someone like you to come visiting," he told the man. "Though you took your time."

"My client was otherwise engaged. But he is eager, now, for closure."

"You've come a long way for nothing. I don't have what your client sent you to collect."

"I know you didn't sell the items in question."

"No, I didn't."

"That's good. My client offers a generous reward for their return."

"Yet you want me to know that you're carrying a pistol. And you've put up a pair of raptors, too."

"The offer is genuine."

"All I have to do is hand over the blade and the bone."

"And take the reward, and use it to improve this place. Or buy a place of your own. It's a good deal."

"Except it would be blood money."

"It's the best you can hope for."

"If you want the fingerbone, it's back where it belongs. My deal is, you can go look, see I'm telling the truth, and don't bother me again."

"You returned it to the tomb."

"Put it with what was left of your client's great-great-granddaughter. There wasn't much. The Trues pretty much ripped out the place."

The tomb hadn't been like his dream. Wasn't a mausoleum, wasn't in a graveyard. Just a narrow cleft hacked into a low cliff, a shelf for the body and a niche above for a lantern, fronted by a wall of stone blocks and a low door of sand-etched wooden planks that the Trues had smashed down, an inscription in old English above the lintel. Fresh hack marks had erased the knight's name, but the brief inscription was still readable. *She died as she lived.*

"And the blade," the man said. "The vormal blade."

"That's gone."

"And where did it go?"

"Do you believe that dreams have weight in the real world?"

"That would depend on the dream, I suppose."

"Your client, others like him, live in worlds they've dreamed up. And as far as he's concerned, our world is just another dream. But unlike the dreamworlds he manufactures, what he does in this one has actual consequences."

"You mean the people who died in the course of the search for the blade and bone. Your comrades in arms. I understand why you feel loyalty toward them," the man said. "But is that really sufficient reason to turn down my client's offer?"

"It wasn't just my comrades. There were any number of Trues, the miners they kidnapped and butchered, and the man who carved this steading out of the wilderness.

Like every story, this one has a beginning and an end. This is pretty much the end of it, and it's pretty much what I've been expecting. But it took me a while to realize where it really began. It wasn't when your client found out that a True horde had stolen relics from that tomb. He already knew that long before he hired Colonel Konstantinov's company to find them. He knew them, because he steered that horde toward the tomb. Because he set everything in motion. Got up the search for the blade and bone not because he wanted to avenge the desecration of the tomb of his descendant, but to entertain himself."

"You have had plenty of time to think about what happened, living out here alone as you do," the man said. "But perhaps you have overthought it."

His expression had not changed, but his stance had shifted very slightly. Tightened up in anticipation of any move Lev might make.

"What bothered me was how the tanky could have known about the desecration of a tomb set on its own in a remote part of this planet," Lev said. "His agent claimed it was because miners who survived the raid saw the relics carried by a warrior priest, but being what he is, and where he's housed, how could he have heard of the miners' story? And even if he had, how could he have known that the blade had been taken from that particular tomb? There are many such blades, and most of them in tombs housing the remains of Knights of Cydonia. Hard to think how he knew that it was the blade of his descendant, unless he directed the Trues to steal it in the first place. And probably gave them some help, too, to even the odds. They were armed with smart missiles, which they maybe could have stolen from somewhere, but I can't think how they could have acquired the know-how to capture and repurpose our raptors without someone instructing them."

"Even if that's true," the man said, "we still have to resolve this matter. You took the blade, and my client wants it back. One way or another."

"Like others of its kind, the blade possessed a degree of intelligence, which helped it to bond with its owner. It wasn't a passive object. A prize people in the story wanted for different reasons. It had agency, and it wanted to get back to where it belonged. It may have affected the True warrior priest who stole it, made him careless, more likely to be killed. It definitely affected the person who took it from the warrior priest's body. The man who owned this place was killed because of it. And the person who took the blade, he died, too. Along with almost everyone else who was caught up in the story your client confected. So I decided to put an end to it."

"Are you saying that you returned it to the tomb, along with the fingerbone?"

"I'm saying I put it out of reach, so it wouldn't infect anyone else."

"You destroyed it."

"I drowned it. Took a boat out onto the lake and dropped it in deep water. It wasn't easy to let it go," Lev said. "It already had set its hooks in my mind. But I did."

"That doesn't mean it can't be found," the man said, after a pause.

"Good luck with that. It's a big lake, and I'm not going to tell you where I sank the blade. I don't have but a rough idea anyway."

"I could find the people who took you out on that boat."

"I hired the boat, but I didn't tell its owners why I needed it, and they didn't come with me. I knew someone like you would come looking for me one day, and I didn't want them hurt or killed."

"I didn't come here to kill anyone," the man said.

"Unless you have to," Lev said.

The man didn't reply. Lev wondered, if it came to it, who'd be faster. Most likely not him.

"You came here because your client wanted an ending," he said. "I don't suppose this is the ending he expects or wants. But it's the only one he's going to get."