

ONE

‘Gabion.’

Luc turned to see Marroqui stabbing a finger at him from across the hold, his face dimly visible within his helmet.

‘Close your visor, Goddamn it,’ said Marroqui, his voice flat and dull in the cramped confines of the hold. ‘Depressurization in less than thirty seconds. We’re landing.’

Luc reached up and snapped his helmet’s visor into place, ignoring the smirking expressions of the armour-suited Sandoz warriors arrayed in crash couches around him. They were crammed in close to each other, bathed in red light.

An alarm sounded at the same moment that the lander carrying them began to jerk with abrupt and sudden violence. Marroqui had warned him about this, explaining that the lander had been programmed with evasive routines designed to reduce the chances of their being shot down by hidden ordnance. Even so, the breath caught in Luc’s throat, and he pictured the craft slamming into Aeschere’s pockmarked face at a thousand kilometres an hour, scattering their shredded remains far and wide. But the shaking soon subsided, and he finally remembered to exhale, although his hands appeared unwilling to release their death-grip on the armrests of his couch.

The lander lurched gently, and the alarm stopped as suddenly as it had begun. They were down.

A ceiling-mounted readout showed the air pressure in the lander dropping to zero. The rumbling sounds of the craft’s internal

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workings soon faded away, leaving Luc with nothing but the sound of his own half-panicked breath.

Their harnesses parted all at once, sliding into hidden recesses as one wall of the hold dropped down, becoming a ramp leading onto the moon's surface. Thick dust, kicked up by their landing, swirled into the hold as the suited figures surrounding Luc climbed out of their couches, looking like an army of armoured bipedal insects as they moved down the ramp with practised efficiency.

The hydraulics in Luc's suit whined faintly as he followed, stepping onto the dusty floor of a crater about thirty kilometres across. He glanced back in time to see the lander leap upwards before its ramp had time to fully snap back into place, quickly receding to a distant dark spot against Grendel's cloudscape.

Luc hastened to keep up with the Sandoz warriors hustling towards the wall of the crater just a few hundred metres away. All around him he could see dozens of black hemispheres scattered across the crater floor.

Several black spheres thudded into the dust not far from him, dropped from orbit by some unmanned Sandoz scout ship. He saw one crack in half like an egg, disgorging a metal-limbed mechant barely larger than his fist. The machine span in a half-circle until it had acquired its target, then rushed ahead of him in a flurry of fast-moving limbs.

Being this up close and personal with a Sandoz Clan reminded Luc just how little he'd enjoyed the experience on every previous occasion he'd had the privilege. It was like bathing in an ocean of testosterone and barely suppressed rage. He saw the way they looked at him: a mere *Archivist*, for God's sake, some kind of jumped-up librarian from one of SecInt's less glamorous divisions and, worse, a civilian.

It was a common fallacy. He could have pointed out that rather than being a librarian, he was instead a fully accredited investigative agent, and that rather than being some minor part of SecInt, Archives was in fact that organization's primary intelligence-gathering

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resource. But it would just have been one more opportunity for Marroqui to bitch about having him tag along.

He had to remind himself that the Sandoz Clans looked down on everyone, not just him. Each Clan operated more like a family than anything resembling a traditional military unit, borne as they were out of a strange amalgam of religion, gene-tweaking and asceticism. They all spent their formative years training in the combat temples of Temur's equatorial jungles, and took advantage of instantiation technology otherwise reserved for members of the Temur Council. That, plus their unwavering and very nearly fanatical devotion to Father Cheng, made them close to unstoppable.

Luc's CogNet informed him that sunrise was less than one hundred and eight seconds away. Marroqui was cutting it close.

He stared ahead towards the crater wall, and the monastery entrance set into it. His eyes automatically moved up to regard the crater's rim, already incandescent from the approaching dawn. Grendel rose above Aeschere's horizon to the west, thick bands of methane and hydrogen wrapped around the gas giant's equator, glowing with the reflected heat of the star it orbited at a distance of just a few million kilometres. The sight of it made his skin crawl.

<Mr Gabion,> Marroqui scripted at him, <unless you've ever wondered what being cremated feels like, I wouldn't linger.>

And fuck you too, thought Luc, picking up the pace and racing to catch up with the rest. Grey dust like funeral ashes puffed up with every step.

It had all started with Luc's discovery of an insurgent data-cache in a vault on Jannah, an uninhabitable world of perpetual storms in the Yue Shijie system. Finding it had taken months of careful work, requiring the assembly of a team of specialists with experience in Black Lotus cryptanalysis. Before long a horde of Archivists had descended on the vault, and the information contained therein had led Luc finally to Grendel and Beowulf, two Hot Jupiters in the New Samarkand system.

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He remembered running through Archives and almost colliding with Offenbach, the look of confusion on the Senior Archivist's face changing to one of delight once he realized Antonov had finally been cornered.

Within days, Father Cheng had ordered Sandoz forces to Grendel and Beowulf. They found Black Lotus weapons fabricants seeded throughout Grendel's sixteen moons, and machine had fought machine in a terrible war of attrition lasting months. Black Lotus's own fabricants had been unable, however, to produce defensive mechants in sufficient numbers to stand against a nearly endless stream of Sandoz hunter-seekers.

Luc was close enough now to the monastery entrance to see that its airlock had been blasted open, debris from the explosion fanning out across the crater floor. A long time ago, the complex on the far side of that airlock had been nothing more than a research installation. Much later, during the turmoil of revolution, it had been a prison, and finally a Lamasery in the peace that followed. The monks had called it *Wutái Shan*. Following that, it had been abandoned – or so it had been believed, until very recently.

<Sunrise in less than one minute,> Marroqui sent over the CogNet. Luc thought he sounded preternaturally calm, given they were seconds away from being burned alive. <Is the airlock definitely clear?>

<Mosquitoes demolished it,> someone else replied. <Whole upper level is depressurized. Mosquitoes report nothing moving on the next several levels down, either.>

<And below that?>

<Can't confirm, sir. Some 'skeets stopped responding. It might be solar interference with our comms, or they might have run into something unexpected. Can't say otherwise until we get inside and take a look.>

<Fine,> Marroqui replied. <Everyone in, on the double. Sunrise in just over thirty seconds.>

Luc's suit carried him through the blasted airlock with long, loping strides, then down a shadow-filled corridor. A few seconds

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later incandescent light flared behind him as 55 Cancri finally rose over the crater's lip.

Luc's CogNet displayed the passageway in bright false colours, making the mandalas carved into the walls on either side appear lurid and disturbing. As he made his way further along, he saw that the mandalas alternated with blank-eyed statues set into recesses. Behind him, the corridor grew sufficiently bright that his suit's filters were nearly overwhelmed. The outside temperature had just jumped by several hundred degrees.

Dead bodies loomed out of the dark, frozen in their final death-spasms, mouths open to the vacuum. Luc saw they had died just short of a pressure-field stretching across the passageway. Its soap-bubble surface trembled as he passed through it and into pressurized atmosphere.

He found Marroqui and the rest inside a derelict prayer hall. A golden-skinned Buddha sat cross-legged on a plinth at one end, holographic clouds drifting around its feet. A lotus blossom shimmered and unfolded in the statue's outstretched hand. Dusty prayer wheels still stood in their holders, listless tapestries hanging on the walls. The air appeared to be a standard breathable mix, with no detectable toxins or phages.

Marroqui was the first to retract his visor, soon followed by the rest. Luc breathed in freezing-cold air underlaid by a hint of sulphur. It wasn't hard to imagine the hall as it had been, filled with droning chants and the scent of sandalwood. Marroqui addressed his Clan-members in a Slavic dialect far removed from Luc's native Northam, his CogNet earpiece seamlessly auto-translating everything.

Luc meanwhile called up a three-dimensional map of the entire complex and saw it was composed of nine levels, each portrayed as a flat grey rectangle connected to the rest by cylindrical shafts of varying length. A pair of shafts located at opposite ends of this top level linked it to the next two down, while a second and third pair of shafts laced the middle and bottom three levels together respectively.

Luc dismissed the map once Marroqui had finished speaking to

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his troops. 'Can the mosquitoes tell us if Antonov is still alive?' he asked the Clan-leader.

Marroqui turned to regard him with undisguised irritation. 'They haven't given us visual confirmation one way or the other, if that's what you mean. Are you sure he's even here?'

'Quite sure,' Luc said stiffly.

Marroqui half-turned to look at his fellow Clan-members with a raised eyebrow and an expression of frank disbelief. Luc heard someone snicker.

'Well, what the mosquitoes *can* tell us is that we hit this complex a lot harder and faster than either Antonov or any of his Black Lotus fighters were clearly expecting,' said Marroqui, turning back to face Luc fully. 'Chances are we stepped over his corpse on the way in here. If you really want to be of help, you should stay behind and see if one of these bodies is his. The rest of us meanwhile can scout out the lower levels, and maybe figure out where those missing mosquitoes went to.'

Luc felt his face colour. *You can stay behind and clear up the litter while we do the real work*, was what Marroqui really meant.

It didn't take a genius to figure out he was desperately unwelcome. His temporary promotion to expedition leader had, he gathered, gone down very badly with Sandoz Command. But without his presence here, SecInt's role in tracking Antonov down would be reduced to not much more than a footnote.

And that would never do.

'Isn't assuming Antonov's already dead something of a dangerous assumption?' asked Luc.

'Haven't you *seen* how badly the 'skeets tore this place up?' Marroqui protested. 'Look – even if he somehow survived the initial assault, he's powerless. All his men are dead, and we've shattered his defences. Whether he's alive or not, you need to stay back here, and let us take care of things from here on in.'

Luc fought to keep his voice steady. 'You weren't at Puerto Isabel. I was there, with another Sandoz Clan. We had Antonov cornered, along with several Black Lotus agents. I made the mistake

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of listening to someone just like you telling me to step back and let them take care of things.'

Marroqui stared back at him with dagger eyes. 'And your point is?'

'That he *got away*,' said Luc, enunciating the words as if speaking to a recalcitrant child. 'I'm not going to make that mistake a second time.'

'If I'd been in charge of that raid, there wouldn't have been any screw-ups.'

'That's funny, because I'm getting a powerful sense of *déjà vu* every time you open your mouth,' Luc spat back.

'You're not seriously suggesting Antonov could *escape*?'

'Master Marroqui, I've spent half my damn life trying to find Winchell Antonov, and there's no way he'd wind up here without *some* kind of an exit strategy in place. Right now, my guess is that your missing mosquitoes have something to do with it.'

Marroqui's expression became incredulous. *Exit strategy?* Luc could almost hear him thinking. *Exit to where?* Snoop hunters hid in Aeschere's shadow cone, ready to challenge anything emerging from the moon's surface, while a fat-bellied intercept platform orbited above Grendel's dark side, its deep-range scanners sweeping the whole of 55 Cancri's inner system. And that wasn't even counting the autonomous units scattered throughout the rest of Grendel's moons.

And yet the fact remained that Antonov had managed to evade capture or assassination for nearly two centuries. Luc wanted desperately to be the one who finally caught the Tian Di's greatest fugitive, but the defeats and setbacks he had suffered over the years had taught him the value of caution.

'That's ridiculous,' Marroqui said quietly. 'Of *course* we can't hear from all of the 'skeets; solar storm's fucking our comms up.'

Which was entirely possible, and yet Luc couldn't avoid a nagging doubt that lingered in the pit of his stomach. It might have been safer for all concerned to pull back to the intercept platform and wait the storm out, but Luc felt sure that Antonov, if he *was*

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still alive, was waiting for just such an opportunity to slip past them. They had to make their move sometime in the next twenty hours, then escape before the storm reached its peak and lashed Grendel and its moons with fiery whips billions of kilometres in length.

It was Luc's call, of course, as expeditionary leader. If he was wrong, he'd pay for it with his career.

'It's going to be most of a day before the storm reaches its peak,' said Luc. 'If we've hit him as hard as you say, then we still have time to figure out why we're having comms problems before we go any further.'

Marroqui stepped up close enough to Luc that their noses were almost touching. 'You're just a bureaucrat,' he said, his voice soft. 'No, less than that: a glorified clerk. I have the safety and the honour of my Clan to consider. *I* say we go ahead and clear this damn place out *now*.'

'If you go against my orders,' Luc replied, 'you're going to find yourself in a shitstorm of trouble.'

'Like I give a damn,' Marroqui snapped, turning back to his soldiers and ordering them to split into separate teams, each to make its way down a different shaft before meeting up again at the reactor room.

Most of the soldiers voiced their affirmatives and made their way back out of the prayer hall, while a few stayed behind. Luc's hands tightened into fists by his sides, the frustration pooling inside him like a hot lava tide.

'How many of our 'skeets are primed with explosives?' Marroqui asked his second-in-command, a pale-skinned woman with a scar on one side of her nose.

'We've used up two, but we still have three left,' the woman replied.

'Fine. Once we've established line-of-sight with those missing 'skeets, let's send those three all the way down to the bottom and have them focus on taking out any automated defences or hunter-killers Antonov might have left waiting for us.'

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Marroqui glanced back at Luc. 'You'll wait here, Mr Gabion. Someone has to monitor the uplink with the lander.'

'Your mosquitoes can monitor things just fine without my help. I'm coming with you and your men.'

Marroqui regarded him with distaste. 'You're from Benares, right?'

Luc stared back at him. In that moment, he finally understood the reason for Marroqui's unrelenting hostility. It had nothing to do with the rivalry between the Sandoz and SecInt; it was because he came from Benares.

'I don't know what they taught you in those combat temples they trained you in, Master Marroqui, but coming from Benares doesn't make me a traitor.'

'I never said—'

'So you can either take me down there with you,' Luc continued regardless, 'or take the risk of having to explain to our superiors why you let Antonov escape a *second* time, right on the eve of Reunification. Your choice.'

A muscle in one of Marroqui's cheeks twitched. For a moment Luc thought the Clan-leader might strike him, but instead the other man nodded curtly, his face impassive.

'You follow *every* order I give you while we're down there, instantly, and without question, until the moment the lander comes back to pick us up. Is that clear?'

Luc nodded. 'As crystal.'

'Shit. We've lost another mosquito,' said Marroqui's second in command, waiting by the entrance. 'No, hang on . . . that's another three out of contact, all in just the last minute.'

'What about the rest of the 'skeets?' asked Marroqui.

'They all check out,' she replied.

'We'd better get moving,' said Marroqui, abruptly businesslike. 'Anything out of the ordinary' – and with this, he glanced reflexively towards Luc – 'report it *immediately*.'

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The entire complex turned out to still be pressurized. By the time they reached one of the shafts, mandalas and statues had given way to rough undecorated surfaces barely visible in the near-lightless gloom. Luc's IR filters showed an open elevator platform dead ahead, ringed by a steel rail. According to the map, the shaft went straight down for almost a kilometre. A faint breeze drifted up from below.

'How come these are working when the power's out?' he asked.

'They run on localized emergency power supplies,' said Marroqui. 'They have to, or there's no way out during a power failure. We shouldn't have to worry about getting down or back up.' He nodded to another woman, with chestnut skin, who had bent down on one knee to examine the interior of a control panel embedded into the wall close by the rail. 'How's it looking, Triskia?'

The woman made some final adjustment and snapped the panel shut before standing once more, her suit's servos whining faintly. 'It checks out, sir. No sabotage. We're good to go.'

Luc tried not to think about the Stygian depths beneath them as he followed Marroqui and four others onto the elevator platform. Even so, his heart nearly skipped a beat when the platform began its descent with a sudden, jerking motion.

Halfway to the next level down, updates from the mosquitoes flowed in through Luc's CogNet interface. His maps automatically reconfigured themselves according to their incoming data, displaying rooms and corridors that had clearly not been part of the original complex.

'Any idea what Antonov might have been building down there?' Marroqui asked, referring to the new layout.

'Your guess is as good as mine,' Luc replied.

'Could be weapons caches,' suggested the woman called Triskia. 'Maybe he's still planning on fighting his way past us.'

Marroqui shook his head. 'I don't think so. He'd need bigger fabricants than the ones our mosquitoes have seen so far. If he's still alive, he's down to light weapons, nothing more.'

'Two of the other teams just called in, sir,' said one of Marroqui's

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men. ‘They’ve reconnoitred at the reactor room, so they should be able to get the power going any—’

As if in answer, rows of lights stretching the length of the shaft blinked into sudden life. Luc squinted, bright phantoms chasing each other across the back of his eyelids. The next time he managed to open them properly, Marroqui and the rest were grinning and chuckling. As far as they were concerned, this was going to be a cakewalk.

The platform slowed, and Luc felt a tightening in his chest. He had the uncanny sense they had passed beyond some undefined point of no return. He glanced down through the metal grille beneath his feet, seeing twin rows of lights racing to meet each other in the shaft’s murky depths.

They disembarked into a corridor leading deep inside Aeschere’s bowels. Something whirred past Luc, and he jerked around in time to see a mosquito come to a nimble landing on the floor a metre or so from him.

As he watched, translucent plastic wings retracted into the machine’s carapace. It turned this way and that, its movements jerky and curiously comical.

‘It’s one of ours,’ he heard Triskia say. ‘Why’s it—?’

Triskia never got to finish her sentence. Luc watched with horrified anguish as she staggered, blood and bone misting the air as the back of her helmet exploded outwards.

Luc kicked out at the mosquito with one booted foot, sending it crashing into a wall. Marroqui screamed an order, and the air filled with noise and fury as his remaining men opened fire on the machine. By the time it was over, the mosquito lay still, its mirrored carapace blackened and ruined.

Marroqui knelt down beside the dead woman’s prone form, swearing under his breath. He passed a finger over her forehead and muttered something that sounded like a prayer. One of the Sandoz’s endless rituals, Luc guessed.

‘Shig,’ said Marroqui, looking back up at one of his men, ‘what the hell just happened? *Was* that one of our ‘skeets?’

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‘It was,’ Shig replied, his face pale with shock. ‘I don’t understand why it . . .’

His voice trailed off.

‘It doesn’t make sense,’ said Marroqui, standing back up and looking around. His previous swaggering bravado had all but deserted him now. ‘There’s no way Antonov could have compromised our comms encryption . . . is there?’

‘It might explain why you lost contact with some of your mosquitoes,’ said Luc, his voice cracking slightly.

Marroqui’s hands twitched spasmodically at his sides. ‘Impossible.’

Luc nodded down at Triskia’s still form. ‘Ask her if she agrees.’

‘Ramp up your personal countermeasures,’ said Marroqui, his voice edged with steel. ‘Fire on *anything* that comes within range.’

‘I think,’ said Luc, ‘this might be a good time to reconsider falling back. We can work out a new strategy—’

Marroqui turned to regard Luc, his nostrils flaring. ‘No, Mr Gabion. We’re Sandoz. Turning back at this point isn’t an option.’

‘Even if it means refusing my orders again?’

‘Even then,’ Marroqui muttered, hoisting his weapon and motioning to his Clan-members to move on.

Luc recalled what little he knew of the Sandoz credo, especially their refusal to surrender. It was going to be the death of them all.

Within the space of a few moments, the shadows and long, bleak reaches of the tunnels beneath Aeschere’s surface had become infinitely more menacing. They passed shadowed cells, the walls around them marked with ancient graffiti. Despite the occasional distant buzz of plastic wings, the mosquitoes kept their distance.

Communications with the rest of the Clan, scattered throughout the complex, became increasingly sporadic. At one point they all heard a momentary burst of static from their comms, interspersed with screaming and what sounded like heavy weapons fire. After that, silence.

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Marroqui still refused to turn back. They moved rapidly, reaching the fusion plant just a few minutes later. Once there, Luc almost stumbled over the corpse of another of Marroqui's men. The rest lay scattered around, their bodies and the walls surrounding them blackened from plasma fire.

'I still can't raise anyone else,' said a man with freckled skin, looking pale and terrified. Alert symbols drifted on the periphery of Luc's vision as he spoke.

'Is there *any* way we can reboot communications?' asked Marroqui. 'Or maybe reroute them?' His voice had become flat and emotionless, and Luc suspected this was the first time the Clan-leader had ever tasted defeat.

The other man laughed shrilly. 'Sure – standard operative procedure in a scenario like this is to route all our comms through the mosquitoes, but I don't think that's such a good idea.'

'One of us could still head back up top,' suggested one of the others. 'That way we could try and contact the lander by line-of-sight and ask for help.'

Marroqui shook his head wearily. 'It's a good idea, except that you'd have to wait for nightfall, and that isn't due for a few more hours.' He glanced at Luc. 'On the other hand, Mr Gabion, you really might be better off out of this. I could have one of my people escort you back up there and you can wait it out in that prayer room. I can't make any guarantees it's going to be any safer up there, but it might.'

Luc shook his head. 'I have to be there when you find Antonov.'

The Clan-leader's face reddened. 'The situation's changed, can't you see that? We're professionals, we know how to deal with this kind of situation. If you get killed down here, you're dead forever.'

'Doesn't matter,' Luc replied, holding the other man's gaze until Marroqui finally looked away, shaking his head.

'The control room for the entire complex is right below us on the next level down,' said one of the soldiers. 'Before they dropped out of contact, the 'skeets reported Antonov was using it as a command hub.'

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‘If someone’s controlling our mosquitoes, that must mean there’s someone still alive down there,’ said another.

‘Not necessarily,’ said Marroqui. ‘We can’t rule out the possibility they’re just running on automatic.’

‘Or maybe your mosquitoes were compromised from the moment we walked in here,’ Luc suggested.

They all stared at each other.

‘Fuck it,’ said Marroqui, breaking the silence and stepping over one of the blackened corpses on his way back into the corridor. ‘There’s only one way to find out.’

They made for another elevator platform, checked it for possible sabotage, and then climbed on board, riding it down in silence before disembarking on the next level down. Luc glanced over at one of Marroqui’s squadron, hearing him mutter something repeatedly under his breath that sounded a lot like a prayer.

Marroqui had Luc keep to the rear as they advanced down a high-ceilinged passageway lined with tables and benches. They saw the bodies of more Black Lotus fighters, slumped across tables or curled up on the ground as if they were sleeping. The first wave of mosquitoes had killed them all.

They crowded through a narrow doorway and into the control room. An isometric plan of the entire complex hovered above a dais at the room’s centre. All it took was a quick glance to see that it matched the updated version they had received from the mosquitoes.

The bodies of more of Marroqui’s men were scattered around the dais, their faces contorted in death. Luc tasted the acid rush of bile as it surged up the back of his throat.

He glanced down, seeing through the steel grid flooring on which they stood that another room lay immediately below this one. Just visible were cryogenic pods of a design he recognized, lined against a wall: emergency medical units, designed for deep-space retrieval; almost tiny spaceships in their own right. Their

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status lights were dark, indicating they were empty. Clearly, Antonov's men had been slaughtered with such rapid efficiency, they had not even had time to place any of their injured inside the units.

They all heard the faint echo of something scuttling along the corridor beyond the control room entrance. Luc watched as Shig ducked outside for a look.

'Here they come!' Shig yelled, pulling the lower half of his body back around the door frame, then leaning out into the corridor and opening fire. A moment later he made a grunting noise, his feet giving way beneath him as he flopped backwards in the low gravity, red mist staining the air behind him.

Luc twisted around in mindless desperation, searching for another exit. He glanced back down through the thick metal grille and saw a ladder reaching down to the floor of the room below. Dropping to all fours, he peered through the grille. The top of the ladder terminated somewhere on the far side of the control room, hidden behind tall banks of equipment.

He ran past the dais and around the side of a tall steel cabinet in the same moment that Marroqui and his surviving Clan-members opened fire on something behind him. Set into the floor above the ladder was a flat metal hatch, but before he could reach down to pry it open, something picked him up and slammed him against the nearest wall.

He hit the floor a moment later, ears ringing, and felt it lurch beneath him like the deck of a ship caught in a storm. He had just enough time to work out there had been an explosion before the steel panels comprising the floor came apart from one another, sending him tumbling down into the room below, along with the contents of the control room. He just barely managed to scabble out of the way of the steel cabinet before it landed on him. Someone's torso, still encased in plastic and metal armour, rolled and bounced as it hit the ground, coming to a halt just centimetres from his nose.

When he looked back up at the ceiling of the ruined control

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room, he saw several mosquitoes gazing back down at him with insect-like eyes.

Managing to pull himself upright, he stumbled towards dim light spilling through a nearby doorway, squeezed past the dais from the upper floor, which had landed on its side, then ran blindly down a passageway until he stumbled across another elevator platform. He slammed the control panel with his fist and gripped the railing like a man adrift in a storm as it carried him down to the lowest level.

The platform came to a jerky halt at the bottom of the shaft, two rough-walled tunnels angling away from it in different directions. Luc headed down one at random, but didn't get far before more mosquitoes emerged from the gloom, tick-tacking through the still silence towards him. He retreated back the way he'd come and headed down the other tunnel instead, with the uncanny sense that he was being herded in one particular direction – proof, if any were still needed, that Antonov must still be alive.

'I'm here, Antonov!' he shouted, and heard the hysteria creeping into his voice. Grabbing a metal bar from a pile of junk, he wielded it like a weapon, then laughed at the ridiculousness of it. He couldn't possibly defend himself from mosquitoes while armed with nothing more than a chunk of scrap metal, but there was something comforting about the feel of it gripped in his armoured fist nonetheless.

More mosquitoes emerged from the gloom up ahead, but they scuttled backwards at his approach, clearing the way.

'Are you there?' Luc shouted again. 'Show yourself, Goddamn it! Show your fucking face!'

Turning a corner, he found himself at the entrance to a cavern dug out of the rock, a deactivated digging machine at the far end sitting next to a mound of excavated rubble. He swallowed in the dry air, then set his eyes on something that took his breath away.

A transfer gate, embedded into one wall of the cavern.

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At first Luc couldn't quite convince himself it was real. A thick metal torus surrounded the mouth of what might otherwise have been nothing more than the entrance to a passageway, leading him to wonder if it had only been tricked up to *look* like the mouth of a transfer gate. Any other conclusion meant accepting the notion that Black Lotus now had access to the kind of technology that permitted the construction of stable, linked wormhole pairs – the same technology that enabled passage between the worlds of the Tian Di.

He stepped up to the gate and saw it consisted of a short cylindrical passageway, no more than a couple of metres in length, a metal walkway suspended over its floor. He gazed into the interior of a room on the far side. The floor of the room was at an angle with respect to the cavern in which he stood, indicating that the gate and its opposite end had not been correctly aligned. Dense metal plating hid the wormhole's horizon, the tori ringing each mouth of the gate shielding a core of highly exotic matter without which the wormhole could not exist. And if all that wasn't evidence enough, he could feel the hairs on his arms and scalp standing up, an epiphenomenon caused by inadequate shielding on the containment fields.

It was real, all right. That room might be located in another part of the complex, or might be light-years away, in some entirely different star system. There was, after all, no limit to how widely separated the two mouths of a wormhole could be.

Luc stepped onto the walkway and felt even Aeschere's minimal gravity drop away once he was halfway across, meaning the far end of the gate was almost certainly on board a spacecraft of some kind. He stepped off the walkway at the far end, drifting through the air until he came to a stop against the wall opposite.

This, then, was Antonov's exit strategy. Luc couldn't help but feel a little awed at the scale of the man's planning.

He heard laboured breathing from behind, and turned to find Winchell Antonov propped against a bulkhead to one side of the gate entrance, one of his hands pressed over a dreadful chest-

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wound, his skin pale and waxy. His breath came in long, drawn-out gasps, and his thick, dark beard glistened with sweat.

'I'm impressed,' he grunted, fixing his gaze on Luc. 'Really, I am.'

Winchell Antonov: once the Governor of Benares, later the leader of Black Lotus, the single greatest threat the Temur Council had ever faced. In that moment he looked small, despite his nearly six and a half foot frame.

'It's over, Antonov,' Luc heard himself say, his voice ragged. 'It's time to give up.'

Antonov chuckled, then drew his breath in sharply, squeezing his eyes shut and clutching at his wound.

Something click-clacked from nearby. Luc turned to see that several mosquitoes had hopped onto the walkway bridging the wormhole, their tiny needle-like weapons aimed towards him.

'I fear,' grunted Antonov, 'that we find ourselves at a mutual impasse.'

'There's nothing left to fight for,' said Luc. 'Even if you kill me, the Sandoz are going to tear this place apart until they find you.'

Antonov squinted up at him, one corner of his mouth twitching upwards in a grin. 'Aren't you the least bit curious why you're still alive?'

'You want to know what I care about?' asked Luc. 'I'm from Benares. Black Lotus carried out an orbital assault on Tian Di forces stationed there on *your* orders.'

'Ah.' Antonov nodded. 'The Battle of Sunderland, you mean.'

'That decision wiped out half a continent. My parents, my brother and sister – they all died in that attack, along with almost everything I'd ever known. Since then, the only thing I ever really gave a damn about was finding you. You took my life away.'

'Then you might be interested to know that Black Lotus never carried out that assault,' said Antonov, his voice growing weak. 'Father Cheng ordered that attack, and blamed it on us.'

Luc wanted to tear that deathless smirk off Antonov's face with his bare hands. He was the devil made flesh, the Prince of Lies

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embodied in a man who'd been on the run for longer than Luc had even been alive.

Again, the metallic click of a mosquito manoeuvring on some surface.

He glanced up to see his own face staring back at him from the mirrored carapace of a mosquito clinging to the ceiling overhead with needle-like limbs.

Something stung his neck and he reached up to slap it. A moment later he felt a sudden, numbing coolness spread across his chest, quickly penetrating his skull.

The room reeled about him, his legs giving way beneath him as he collapsed.

Luc opened his eyes to the harsh actinic glare of overhead lights and found himself bound by a length of cord into a chair on the spacecraft's bridge. He had been stripped of his powered suit, and wore only the thin cloth one-piece overall given him by Sandoz technicians prior to boarding the lander. Projections hovered in the air all around him, and when he tried to move, his body obeyed only with extreme sluggishness. Whatever drug he'd been shot full of was clearly still working its magic on him.

Antonov stood by the chair, one hand still clutched to his injured chest as he gazed down at Luc. Even so, Antonov didn't look nearly as weak as he had in the moments before Luc had lost consciousness.

Behind Antonov, Luc could see a single mosquito, balanced on a railing on the opposite side of the bridge, peering back at him with mindless intent.

'What are you doing?' he demanded through lips that were half-numb.

'Quiet now,' Antonov muttered, leaning in towards him. Luc saw for the first time that the Black Lotus leader was clutching something in his free hand that squirmed as if alive. 'This is going to be tricky.'

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Antonov lifted his other hand away from his chest wound and winced, then used it to tug Luc's head back against the chair's headrest, holding it there. Luc found himself staring almost straight up at the ceiling of the bridge.

Breathing hard, afraid of whatever it was Antonov was about to do to him, Luc twisted his hands and feet in their restraints to no avail. However, he had the sense that whatever paralytic Antonov had hit him with was slowly starting to wear off.

'Careful now,' Antonov warned, giving him a reproachful glare. 'I can knock you out again if you keep struggling, but you really need to be conscious during this. Otherwise there's a serious risk of brain damage.'

Brain damage? Panic tightened Luc's chest. He could just about see the squirming thing in Antonov's hand from out of the corner of one eye, struggling to escape. It was clearly a mechant of some kind, not unlike a segmented worm in appearance but barely the length of a finger. Its body glittered in the light.

'What the fuck is that?' Luc managed to gasp.

'This,' said Antonov, with apparent pride, 'is a delivery system for the greatest gift I could possibly give you.'

Luc had a sudden intuition of what Antonov might be about to do to him, and tried to twist free. The heavy cord binding him to the chair creaked loudly, but did not give.

Antonov slapped him hard across the face, and Luc grunted with shock.

'I told you,' said Antonov, 'keep still. For your own sake, do not struggle.'

Antonov next stepped behind Luc, wrapping one meaty forearm around his head and rendering him more thoroughly immobile. Luc's nostrils filled with the scent of the other man's unwashed skin, and he wondered how a man so badly injured could still have so much strength.

Something cold squirmed against Luc's upper lip, then jammed itself hard inside his right nostril.

The pain that followed was indescribable. He could hear a sound

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like chewing, as if something were forcing its way through the gristle and bone of his skull. He screamed, jerking and twisting in his restraints, jaw locked in a rictus grin of terror.

As terrible as it was, the pain faded to a numb ache after another minute. His body spasmed a few times, then became still. Sweat cascaded across Luc's skin, his chest rising and falling with the nervous energy of a hummingbird.

Antonov stepped back in front of him, looking noticeably paler than he had a few moments before. 'I suppose you're wondering just what a transfer gate's doing here,' he said, and let out a weak chuckle. 'That's the understatement of the year, right? Well, now that we're the only ones left alive down here, I don't see any reason not to tell you why.'

Antonov moved to lean against a nearby console, his face very nearly bone-white. 'We're on board a spaceship, as I'm sure you've guessed by now. We kept it in close orbit around 55 Cancri, since the photosphere of a star often proves to be a good hiding place. Once we knew the Sandoz were on their way here, we plotted a course to slingshot this ship towards the outer system, but even that wasn't enough to give us the velocity we needed to get out of range of your intercept missiles. They're chasing us right now, and they'll catch us sooner or later.'

'Where' – Luc swallowed, feeling like he hadn't uttered a word in a thousand years – 'where are you taking this ship?'

'We have other redoubts,' Antonov replied, 'scattered throughout this system and in others. We would have severed the wormhole link once we were all on board except now, it appears, I'm the only one left alive.'

'Then it's over,' Luc managed to croak. 'This isn't how you want it to end, Winchell.'

Antonov shook his head with evident amusement. 'What's the alternative? Surrender myself to you, so Father Cheng can orchestrate my execution on the eve of our glorious Reunification with the Coalition? I'd rather choose my own fate – and with that in mind, you might care to know I've set the ship on a course that

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will send it plunging back into the heart of the star it so recently orbited.'

Luc stared at him, speechless.

'Now, I don't know just how *au fait* you are with wormhole physics,' Antonov continued, his face twisting up in pain as he spoke, 'but they're surprisingly robust under certain conditions. Once this ship's descended far enough into 55 Cancri's photosphere, the shielding will give way and the transfer gate linking it back to Aeschere will be destroyed. However – and this is the theory – the wormhole *should* maintain coherence just long enough for a great deal of superheated plasma to come rushing into the complex.'

'Why? Why not just . . . surrender?'

'For many reasons, Mr Gabion, but chiefly because Cheng would never let me live, knowing the things that I know.'

Luc shook his head in incomprehension. The inside of his head felt as if it had been hollowed out. 'What things?'

Antonov chuckled. 'You need,' he said, 'to make your way back up to that control room where you left your friends, back on the other side of the transfer gate. There are cryogenic units there – do you understand?'

'No. No, I don't.'

'Oh, but I think you do. Get yourself inside one of those units, and you should have a decent chance of surviving the inferno.'

'But *why*?' Luc demanded. 'Why—'

But before he could say anything further, Antonov reached out to touch the side of his neck with something cold and sharp, and he lost consciousness once more.

Listen to me, Luc. You're still asleep.

Antonov's voice sounded like it came from everywhere and nowhere. Luc found himself afloat in a dreamless void, unable to determine where he was, or how long it had been since he had been knocked out. His limbs felt like a distant memory.

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You're going to wake up soon, he heard Antonov continue. There's a lot you don't understand yet, but you will, given time. But first, you must deliver a message for me.

What message? Luc tried to say, but he couldn't feel his lips or his tongue.

The answer came a moment later:

After they come and rescue you, I want you to access Archives through your CogNet link. Then open a record with the following reference: Thorne, 51 Alpha, Code Yellow. Do you understand?

No, Luc answered. I—

Once you've done that, add the following statement to the text file contained within it: 'I'm calling in my favour.' Five words, Luc. That's all I ask.

I don't understand, Luc shouted into the abyss.

Someone did something a long time ago they shouldn't have, said Antonov, his voice slowly fading. And now they're going to repay me for keeping it quiet all these years. Remember what I said, Luc: 'I'm calling in my favour.'

As if a switch had been thrown, Luc had control of his limbs once more, and could feel something hard beneath his back. His eyes flickered open in the same moment he realized his CogNet link was live once more, and he discovered more than four hours had passed since he had first entered the complex in the company of an entire squadron of Sandoz. Night would by now have fallen across the crater, meaning it was safe to go back out onto the surface.

Even more importantly, he was free. The tangled loops of cord that had bound him now floated loose around the chair in which he was still slumped.

Reaching up, he tentatively touched his head, exploring the contours of his skull. There had been something dreamlike about the whole encounter with Antonov, as if it hadn't really happened, but when he touched fingers to his nose he found it crusted with dried blood.

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Updates flooded in through his now-active CogNet: he learned that two more Sandoz squadrons had already entered the complex's top level, and were working their way down towards him without meeting any resistance, machine or otherwise.

Luc pulled himself out of the chair, then stopped, seeing Antonov slumped against the railing on the far side of the bridge, head bowed forward. Luc kneeled before him and touched fingers to the rebel leader's wrist. Dead.

Then he glanced towards the main display and felt a chill form around his heart.

<This is Luc Gabion,> he sent via the CogNet. <Can anyone hear me?>

<This is Master Siedzik here,> someone replied. <You're the only one whose vital signs are showing, Mr Gabion. Where are Marroqui and the rest of his Clan?>

<They're all dead,> Luc responded. <I'm the only survivor.>

Siedzik didn't reply for some time, and Luc guessed he was conferring with his superiors on the orbital platform.

<Where exactly are you?> Siedzik sent back. <We can't get a location fix on you.>

That, Luc knew, was because he was no longer beneath the surface of Aeschere, but on board a starship some millions of kilometres distant. The only reason they could converse at all was because the ship's communication network was automatically bouncing his CogNet link back through the connecting gate. But there wasn't the time to try and explain all that to Siedzik, even assuming he'd believe one word of the explanation.

<I'm on the lowest level,> Luc replied after a pause. <Antonov compromised our mosquitoes and set them to attack Marroqui and the rest of his Clan. Antonov's here, but he's dead. I don't know if that means the mosquitoes still down here won't attack you, but I'd urge being *extremely* fucking cautious one way or the other.>

<Stay where you are,> Siedzik commanded. <We'll be with you shortly.>

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<No,> Luc sent back. <You need to head back up to the surface. I think Antonov's set some kind of a booby-trap.>

<What kind of—>

<I'll let you know when I find out,> Luc replied, cutting the connection before Siedzik could demand any more details.

He pulled himself into a navigation booth surrounded by interface and astrogation gear. The ship linked into his CogNet just long enough for it to work out he didn't know how to operate the navigational systems, and replaced most of the scrolling data surrounding him with a series of simplified questions and help menus.

It didn't take long for Luc to work out that Antonov had not, in fact, been lying: the ship had already dipped into the turbulent upper reaches of 55 Cancri's photosphere, and the external temperature was already a couple of thousand degrees beyond the craft's design parameters. He had minutes, perhaps only seconds, before it shattered under the strain.

He stood jerkily, skin clammy with sweat, and pushed himself towards the exit from the bridge. It took another couple of minutes of fumbling and swearing in the zero gee before he managed to navigate his way back to the bay containing the transfer gate.

Luc sailed through the gate and back into Aeschere's hollowed-out heart, sidestepping millions of kilometres in the blink of an eye. The little moon's gravity took hold of him as soon as he was through, tugging him down towards the dusty floor of the cavern. Without the benefit of his spacesuit, it was numbingly cold, every breath filling his lungs with icy daggers.

An icon blinked in the corner of one eye: Siedzik.

<Gabion. We've got a fix on you now and we're on our way to your current location,> Siedzik sent as soon as Luc activated the link. <Stay right where you are.>

<Get out,> Luc sent back. <I told you to head for the surface. You need to get out *now*.>

Luc caught a brief flash of Siedzik's visual feed, and saw Siedzik and several more Sandoz warriors making their way towards an elevator platform at the far end of the complex.

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<I am *not* of a mind to accept orders from civilians,> Siedzik responded. <So when I tell you—>

<Screw your stupid fucking rules! I said this place might be booby-trapped, and it is. It's going to go up any minute.>

He stumbled back the way he had come, towards the nearest shaft and another elevator platform. His legs were still half-numb from Antonov's paralytic, making it hard to run, and he caught sight of several mosquitoes lying inactive in the dust, their legs neatly folded beneath their tiny bodies.

The air misted white as he panted for breath, the cold sinking deeper and deeper into his flesh. It was almost funny; even if he managed to avoid being engulfed in white-hot plasma, he'd still be running a serious risk of hypothermia.

Reaching the platform, he slammed its control panel with one hand, then collapsed onto all fours, hooking his fingers through the metal grille as he was carried back up. It clanged to a stop a minute later, and Luc ran as best he could, until he was back at the control room where Marroqui and his Clan-members had died.

At the same moment he reached the threshold of the control room, the ground beneath his feet began to tremble, at first gently but then with greater violence. A deep bass murmur rolled up from the depths of the complex.

He was out of time.

Most of the cryogenic pods that hadn't been buried beneath falling debris had clearly suffered massive damage from the explosion that had devastated the control room. Only one appeared to have escaped unscathed – unlike the rest, its control panel still glowed softly in the dust-filled darkness.

Luc headed straight for it, the rumbling all the while growing louder and closer. He tore the lid open and climbed inside, listening to the exhausted rattle of his own breath as he lay back.

The lid clicked back into place above him. An internal light came on, low and red. Icons and menus appeared around him, filling the coffin-like space.

He selected an option marked Critical Emergency, bypassing

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everything else. A soft hiss began from somewhere just above his head, and he became drowsy within moments.

The roaring grew in volume. Hammer blows began to rain down on the pod at the same moment that a deep chill spread through his bones.

He tried to take a breath, and then another. On the third try, the breath froze in his lungs, and for the third time that day he sank into bottomless darkness.