

# CROSSFIRE

THE BUSTLING DOCKYARDS of the Hydraphur system are home to the mighty Imperial warfleets, which dock, rearm and repair in an endless cycle of war. Newly assigned Arbites officer, Shira Calpurnia, finds herself in the thick of the action when she investigates a series of assassination attempts. With the corruption and double-crosses of the Hydraphur elite dogging every step of her investigations, Calpurnia must survive the crossfire, and bring her faceless enemies to justice.



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**PUBLISHED BY THE BLACKLIBRARY**

Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK

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UK ISBN: 1 84416 020 3

US ISBN: 0 7434 4366-7



*This is an excerpt from CROSSFIRE by Matthew Farrer,  
published by BL Publishing, 2003.*

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## *from CROSSFIRE*

THE MECHANICUS ZIGGURAT rose above them in precise geometrical ratios and burrowed into the side of the Bosporian Hive underneath them, but everything that Sanja would need to deal with his visitor was here in the chambers ahead. As they walked across the forechamber, the servitor-sentries built into the lintels of the inner doors singing a benediction in binary, Sanja saw that his guest had taken her helmet off and was looking wide-eyed at the tech-arcana around her. Sanja nodded with approval: she was impressed, and was paying him the compliment of letting it show. As the song finished and they moved up the steps into brighter light, he studied her a little more closely.

She was a head shorter than he, with an easy, confident way of moving. Her features were even and her green eyes chilly but bright with intelligence. Dark blond hair fell to just below her ears, tousled from the helmet, and there were the first suggestions of lines around her mouth and eyes. Her expression was stern – when those lines came, Sanja thought, they would not be kind ones. Three parallel scars, long healed and barely more than pink lines, started in her left eyebrow and ran straight and neat up into her hair.

They passed through the inner doors into the broad cloister that ran to the heart of the tower and branched into stairs at each side. Here the walls and floor were stark grey rockcrete and the contrast with to the richly ornamented forechamber seemed to unsettle the woman somewhat; she fell a pace back as they walked up a long slope of stairs and turned into the passage to the genitors' devotory. Her face was composed and dutiful and he realised she was unsure of whether she was allowed to speak.

Deciding to be a courteous host, Sanja dropped back also and walked alongside her.

'We have prepared the fundamentals of the ceremony while you were on your way to us, my lady justice, so we will be ready to begin at your word. However, your trip here was... somewhat less serene than this quarter normally is. If you wish to clear your mind and prepare yourself before we begin, my junior will show you to our chapel. It is small, but quiet.'

'My thanks, master genitor, but I am prepared. That affair outside was irritating, but not fatal to the equilibrium, I think.'

'Dignity and composure are admirable qualities. I commend you on them, Arbitor Lucina. This way.'

'Calpurnia.'

'Your pardon?'

'Arbitor Calpurnia. My apologies, Master Sanja. An act of carelessness on my part. In formal greeting I use Ultramar protocol. The family name is second, the private third. Here I am Shira Calpurnia as you are Cynez Sanja.' She gave a small, contrite smile. 'Once again, I apologise. I intended no slight.'

'No slight is taken, Arbitor Calpurnia.' He saw her relax and then, to his private amusement, tense again as she followed him through the lacquered double doors of the Devotory. The narrow little chamber, its walls red-panelled and ceiling dancing with holo-sculptures of amino-acid molecules, had been prepared just as Sanja had said: two rows of servitors carrying medicae flasks formed an aisle to the little kneeler cushion before the shrine. The relics on the crimson altar-cloth – centrifuge, injector-glove, inscriptions of the gene-codes of Mechanicus saints etched into scrolls of paper-thin steel – reflected the mellow golden lamplight.

Calpurnia saluted the altar from the doorway and then walked to the kneeler without further hesitation, unclipping her half-carapace as Sanja faced her from the far side of the altar. Chaim took and held her armour as she unfastened the top of the uniform bodyglove, holding it against her chest but shrugging it down to leave her shoulders and back bare. Her composure was still good, but Sanja was looking at her now through the eyes of the luminants as well as his own, and in the mosaic of images being fed into his augmented cortex her apprehension showed in her breathing, her body temperature,

the acidity of her skin, her brainwaves. The luminants moved down the row of servitors, dendrites clicking as they took and loaded the vials of biotic fluid and extended their injectors, then glided silently to station themselves behind Calpurnia's shoulders, dendrites extending a glittering fan of needles.

Sanja murmured a brief High Gothic blessing, then switched to machine-code and guided the luminants down. Calpurnia's breath caught for a moment as the hypodermics went home, and then the luminants rose into the air again and it was done.

'Walk with me.' Sanja was already stepping down from the altar-dais by the time Calpurnia had stood and fastened her bodyglove back into place. Chaim came forward with her carapace and she turned, shrugged into it and clipped it closed with barely a wince, then fell into step again as Sanja led the way back out through the antechamber, to the gallery that ran around the temple's central hall.

'We shall pace a while.' he told her. 'The movement will help the anointments to integrate faster. Chaim will have given you the tokens—' She held them up. 'Good. The Iron Wheel and the Caducal Helix are strong talismans of the Mechanicus. Grip them well and they will make your blessing a powerful one.'

They walked in silence for several minutes: out of the Devotory, past the stairs they had come up, around a circular chamber full of doors where the half-skull-half-cog crest of the Mechanicus gazed inscrutably down from one wall, back past the stairs to the Devotory doors and so through the circuit again. The skitarii and servitors followed them for the first circuit, then Sanja ordered them away. Calpurnia gave an occasional surreptitious half-shrug, trying to get the armour comfortable on her needle-tender shoulders; Chaim silently trailed them with her helmet. They were halfway through their third circuit before Sanja spoke.

'I would venture to suggest, Arbitor Calpurnia, that this was not the first time that you have had a rite of vaccination performed. You seemed to know your part in it as well as I did.' She smiled.

'My career has taken me through postings across the Ultima Segmentum and now to here, magos. Most of those moves have been across sufficient distances for me to need fortifying for my new position, although the ceremonies were never this

involved. They were usually done on board the Arbites ship by one of our own Medicae staff, with a junior genetor overseeing, and they did not involve these...' she gestured behind them with her head.

'The luminants? They are relics as well as servants, perhaps not common on smaller worlds with less distinguished Mechanicus traditions. The honour of continued service to the Machine God after one's organic death is not earned every day.' He gestured behind him. 'That one is the skull of Clayd Menkis, the chief adept of this shrine just after the overthrow of the Apostate Cardinal. The other is Bahon Sulleya, my immediate predecessor and mentor. I had the great honour of preparing her skull for its mechanisation myself.' Calpurnia shot the luminants another, slightly uneasy look.

'They can act by themselves?'

'I am appointed as their instructor as I am the instructor of my servitors. That privilege accompanies my rank here. The luminants assist me with my work and my studies. Their precision and senses are all that one would expect of idols of the Machine God. Normally such a rite as yours would not require more than one, but for you to have come so far and to a world like Hydraphur, to which viral and bacterial strains from all across the segmentum are brought, you needed a far more rigorous treatment and I called both of my luminants accordingly.'

'And they are also monitoring my chemical spoor and behaviour to make sure I am who I say I am and that I carry no psychic or hypnotic taint to cast doubt upon your safety in admitting me.'

Sanja snapped his head around to stare at her and she laughed aloud.

'I said that the practices here were different, magos, not that I had never had dealings with your priesthood before. Admission to your shrine is a great honour, and humbling – but when I passed into this shrine with no searches, no weapon-checks or security vigils, I started to wonder how it was that you were making sure I was no danger to you. I'm Adeptus Arbites, remember. We enforce the Emperor's law, pass the Emperor's judgement and enforce the Emperor's peace. We get into the habit of thinking about things like this. You don't need to confirm it if you'd rather not.'

'You are as sharp as my own luminants' needles, lady justice,' Sanja told her, not sure whether to be angry or amused. 'I am sure the arbitor majore will not regret sending for you all the way from, Ultramar, was it? A long journey. It's a compliment to you.'

'I grew up on Ultramar. Iax. But my last post was at Ephaeda, north-west of there. But still across a lot of space. I'm a long way from home.' A sombre note had crept into her voice and they walked in silence for a few minutes more. Every so often the bio-augurs on one of the luminants would buzz or click, recording some detail of how the arbitor's metabolism was responding. It did not take long for Sanja to be satisfied, and he led the way to the doors back into the forechamber.

'Am I done, then? Have the luminants given the word?'

'They have, and I have confirmed it through their eyes and spirits. You have not reacted adversely to our anointments, and their eyes show that your body is accepting the inoculations. The preliminary rites and treatments you had before your arrival here laid the groundwork well. My arts are more sophisticated than those of the medicae, and the process will have completed itself within a day or two more. An envoy of mine will visit you tonight and instruct you in the correct prayers and readings to close the day and open the morning tomorrow to ensure this. There should be little problem, arbitor, in your taking your place at the Mass of Balronas and the Sanguinala.'

'Good. I'm looking forward to them. I read Galimet's *Pilgrim's Letters* during my journey here and he describes the mass in spectacular terms. I'm certainly expecting it to be a little more edifying than *that*.' She nodded toward the outer doors as they reached the forechamber again. 'Galimet gave the impression that the period leading up to the mass was one of self-denial and penitence. The dossier I was sent said the same thing.' As if on cue a quick syncopated bass thump came through the walls. 'But I have to say, magos, that if that display outside is Hydraphur's idea of penitent reflection, I'm further from home than I thought.'

Sanja smiled without humour.

'Your first lesson in Hydraphurn behaviour, lady arbitor. Part of the ritual of the season nowadays is the Ministorum's plaintive attempts to have the aristocracy conform to the more gen-

eral ideal of pious behaviour, but when the nobility assemble and reach a certain critical mass, as they've done here, they obey rules of conduct all of their own. I am given to understand that among less rarefied circles the Ecclesiarchal dictates on behaviour are more strictly followed, if that brings you any consolation. This should blow itself out in another couple of hours.'

'I'd like to have it cleared out before then,' said Calpurnia with a scowl. 'I got caught in the middle of the damn thing when they all started pouring into the area and it was too late to double back to fetch a transport, but I'm sure riot squads will have mobilised from the Wall by now... What?' Sanja was regarding her. 'I mean, apologies, magos. Did I speak out of turn?' He shook his head.

'To speak candidly, Arbitor Calpurnia, although I am part of an order known for its detachment from the day-to-day affairs of the Imperium, I can't help the thought that the workings of Hydraphur are just a little less straightforward than you perhaps perceive them to be.' Before she had the chance to ask him what he meant, the doors swung wide and once again the din of the party piled in.

The fog was thicker now. The still, warm evening air filled with a soup of coloured ornamental smokes and perfumes and some kind of refractor mist that made lights and colours sparkle unnaturally; Calpurnia hastily took her helmet back as Sanja lifted a filter-veil over his face. There was no sign of the girl Calpurnia had struck, and the other revellers were only visible now as a boil of movement through the mist. By the sounds, the party's momentum had not been dented.

'Any further trouble, Bannon?'

'None.' Calpurnia and her deputy had to shout over the noise. Somewhere out beyond the ramp, pyrotechnics were starting to flash through the fog: showers of glowing confetti and miniature starshells flashed and cracked over the heads of the crowd, leaving hazy trails and puffs of hot smoke. Calpurnia fell in with her squad, then turned to salute Sanja in farewell.

The first bullet hit her shoulder at a bad angle, whirred off her carapace and struck a spark off the temple wall, a single tiny chip of black ceramite stinging the chin of the arbitror next to her.

Her reflexes had taken charge before she realised what was happening, sending her darting down the ramp and to one

side. The second bullet struck her helmet over the right eye, not penetrating but cracking the armour and staggering her backward in a daze. The third whipped past her ear as her squad pelted down the steps after her, unlimbering shotguns and shields and firing loud bursts over the heads of the crowd.

The movement began like a ripple in grass as a strong wind springs up. The nearest partiers shrieked and ploughed into those further away, until the crowd thickened too much for anyone to force their way through. The mob rebounded off itself, swayed and broke in three directions at once as the Arbites split into two squads and closed around Calpurnia. As she lurched to her feet, groggy and shaking her head, their shields juddered under two more shots and one pitched over backward as a third shattered the cheek-guard of his helmet against his jaw.

Calpurnia tried to will the ringing in her ears away as things seemed to swim around her. It took an age for her to goad her legs into action and another to get into formation behind her guards' shields. They held the foot of the ramp in a textbook Arbites firing line: one row kneeling, shotguns locked through the gunports in their shields to pump out a steady, suppressing fire; the second line standing behind them firing more carefully, aiming shots over their heads. They were aiming high for the moment, trying just to drive the crowd back, but the answering bullets kept coming.

'Bannon! What can you see? Place the shots!' The beat over the vox-horns had fallen silent, and the tumult of the crowd was something the Arbites were more used to shouting over.

'Nothing! We can't spot any shooters, no weapons, no sounds, no flashes!' Bannon's voice had an edge of fear in it. A party-goer, leering with terror, stumbled toward them and two of the squad sent him sprawling with expert shoves of their shields. As that movement parted them for a split-second a third bullet whipped between their shields and scraped Calpurnia's carapace with an impact she felt all down her ribs. She swore and back-pedalled. The shots were coming in flat, somewhere at ground level, not a sniper up high. No one she could see had been anywhere near the angle to make that shot. They—

There was a crash from off to her left, a perfume-brazier going over. She glanced at it, registered only a couple of frightened partiers running away, no guns with them. She hung low and



kept moving, sideways across the ramp to the left-hand pillar-plinth. The Arbitrators broke their shield-wall into a more fluid line for a mobile firefight, some covering Calpurnia and two on guard over the man who'd fallen. A bullet cracked into the armour on her shoulder and she staggered and cursed; the bastards were all around her. She ran the last couple of paces to the plinth and—

But there was nobody in that direction. This was small-calibre ammo, handgun slugs. And there was no one remotely in handgun range.

The plaza roared with the riot the party had become as they surged back and forth trying to find a safe way away from the shooting. But there was nobody to her left, nobody around where the brazier had been knock—

Bannon leaned out from the plinth for a quick glance beyond it and a bullet smacked into the edge of his shield and ricocheted past Calpurnia's ear so that even through her helmet's padded earpiece she could hear the whine. She grabbed Bannon's shoulder and yanked him back in as a second bullet clipped the rim of his shield.

No. Not possible. Nobody could plan a ricochet shot like that. Could they?

She had to move.

'Go. Fan out towards that overturned brazier. Cover every single side. Assume concealment by the enemy. Now!'

They rounded the plinth and raced forward. The space in front of them was empty, the crowd shoving away to the sides.

'Nothing here!' She was whirling on the spot, trying to—

Was that movement?

She ducked to one side instead of standing to shoot and it saved her life. The bullet gouged the side of her helmet and knocked it askew – a second earlier and it would have punched through her top lip. She wrenched off the helmet and scampered crabwise away from the others. Whatever it was, a moving target seemed to give it a little trouble.

With no polarising filters over her eyes the refractor-fog set every light to glittering and sparkling. She narrowed her eyes and almost saw—

She sprinted two steps to the side and vaulted an upended table as two more shots skewered the air behind her. A third

smacked into the heavy wood and she put three booming stubshots through the space where she thought she might have heard firing. She had been careless about placing her feet and the recoils slammed her through almost a quarter-turn; as she turned it into a backward jog to regain her balance there was a roar as three shotguns opened up to support her.

Nothing. Mist and light, echoes and sobs from partiers sprawled on the ground. Her head was throbbing – one of those head shots had hurt, even through the helmet, and it was catching up with her. She willed herself to stay on her feet.

An eddy in the mists. She put a bullet through it as her squad caught up with her, kept her gun high and moving back and forth in front of her face, wanting a shotgun but painfully aware of the momentary lapse in her guard that a weapon-swap with one of the arbitrators would mean.

The giant-bore stub pistol she had been issued with was a commander's weapon, a shock-and-terror weapon, something for a senior arbitor to use for great, ruinous shots at high-profile targets to terrify a crowd of rioters, showing Imperial authority in brutal terms while other Arbitrators and sharpshooters did the actual combat shooting. Calpurnia was becoming bitterly aware of its limitations in a straight firefight. She kept moving, dodging, reversing her direction. The lack of a helmet made her almost nauseous with nerves.

A woman lying on her back nearby gasped and twitched, and Calpurnia came within a hairsbreadth of shooting her on reflex. It took her a moment to realise that it had been not panic but physical shock, as though someone had stepped on her. She tucked her body down towards her boots, crouching into a foetal ball and sending two shots over the prone woman, aiming high in a last-moment hope that the rounds would pass over any bystanders beyond and letting the recoil roll her over and put her back on her feet.

Bannon sent a shot-burst through the same space a split-second later and the little dark-haired party-girl seemed to decide her time was up. She shrieked and scrambled to her feet, frightening the people around her into doing the same, and suddenly a score of people were rising up out of the smoke and running for their lives. The mist between them roiled as if...

As if there were another person there, a shape pushing its way through the crowd, displacing air and bodies.

Calpurnia skittered to one side. The ringing in her ears was turning into a yammering that fought against the screams of the crowd. There was a distant crash as one of the parade-floats went over. She hunted for signs, half-saw them. Smoke moving the wrong way here, there a tremor and backflow in the mob as the moving crowd snagged on nothing she could see. It was moving around the edge of the retreating mob, and she could almost feel its gunsights crawling over her.

Her squad was frantic, desperate for a target. There was no time to instruct them – by the time she explained she'd be dead. She'd have to rely on them to follow her fire when she spotted something. It could be moving into position now, or...

She knew what she was looking for now, and had her pistol ready to bear. The stampede in front of her was wavering, the crowd parted and one man stumbled against something unseen. *Now.* Running on nerves and reflex alone, with barely a conscious moment to aim, Shira Calpurnia put a slug through the clear space and straight through the assassin's heart.

Follow the story of Shira Calpurnia as she battles to  
uphold Imperial Law on Hydraphur in  
CROSSFIRE

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