

# LEGACY

A Warhammer 40,000 novel by Matthew Farrer

Shira Calpurnia • Book 2

ROGUE TRADER CHARTERS are Imperial warrants of great antiquity, which can bring their bearers wealth and power barely imaginable. Now that Rogue Trader Hoyyon Phrax is dead, his charter is being brought to the great fortress-system of Hydraphur to be ceremonially bequeathed to his heir, and already the vultures are circling.

Shira Calpurnia does not want the charter, but she has been appointed to ensure that the will and testament of Hoyyon Phrax is carried out according to Imperial law. And that means that when the rival heirs decide that due process be damned and go all-out for their prize, it's Calpurnia and her Arbites who must don their armour, take up their weapons and get ready for action.



**Matthew Farrer** was born in 1970, has spent most of the subsequent period in and around Canberra, Australia, and is a member of the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild. He was shortlisted for an Aurealis Award in 2001.

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### *from LEGACY*

#### **The Avenue Solar, Outskirts of Bosporian Hive, Hydraphur**

THEY WALKED, THE arbitor and the priest, in an amiable promenade beneath the great shoulder of the hive. Cool moist breezes set the cages overhead creaking on their chains, and the occasional shower of excrement pattered down around them.

At this end of the Avenue Solar, the footbridges connecting the towering urban stacks had grown together into a roof over the crowded truckways below. It was ungainly and hump-backed, following the arch that most of the footbridges had originally been designed with, a jigsaw of rockcrete, gritty asphalt, flagstones and tiles. Here and there were odd-shaped gaps where the space between intersecting bridges hadn't quite been worth covering over and, even at this distance, Shira Calpurnia could hear the never-ending rumble of traffic beneath them.

A splat against the cloth over her head reminded her that it was not what was beneath their feet that concerned her today, and she looked up. The canopy was embroidered with devotional scenes and Ecclesiarchal livery, held above them on poles by six impassive Cathedral deacons. A thick blob of muck had landed on a panel showing an angel of the Emperor blessing the battlefleet. It was taking more and more effort for Calpurnia to keep the disgust from her face.

'We'll be clear of them in a moment,' Reverend Simova told her, anticipating her thoughts. 'It's a little uncomfortable to see, but then a citizen who behaved as they should wouldn't be up there in the first place. Soiling a sacred image is simply one

more thing that they will pay for.' As they moved toward the edge of the bridge the deacons shuffled away with the canopy and they looked at the scene above them.

Calpurnia could see why the Eparch had chosen the Avenue Solar for his display. It was a place for awe. Here at the foot of the Bosporian, the capital city-hive of the world of Hydraphur, the towers of the sprawling lower city were the highest and most forbidding, rearing into the copper sky towards the pale band of the orbiting Ring. Classical Imperial architecture had a pattern and a purpose: it existed to symbolise implacable might and everlasting grandeur, and the sky-scraping towers to either side presented sheer cliffs of wall, intimidating overhangs and the stern gaze of statues to cow anyone who looked up at them. The design had been repeated all the way back down the avenue, making it a great deep canyon full of engine-noise that boomed off the high buildings.

And then in front of them, greater and taller still, the sloping side of the Bosporian itself, tier after tier of wall and buttress, glittering windows and polished statues, the steep zigzag of the Ascendant Way climbing up to the walls of the Augustaeum at the mountain's crown. From here the paired spikes of the Monocrat's palace and the Cathedral of the Emperor Ascendant were invisible, but the great mass of the hive was sight enough.

With that sight to arrest the eye, the cages shrank to an afterthought, a cluster of flyspecks. They were strung like party-lanterns on great swoops of black chain, each link so large that Calpurnia could have put her fist through its centre without touching the edges, held up by girders that Ministorum work crews had driven into the skyscraper walls. The metal was still smooth and shiny, the rivets and padlocks on the cage doors bright and new. The Eparchal decree that had ordered the cages strung up was less than a fortnight old.

'There seems to be something about this tradition that brings out the very worst in some of the penitents. I was with the Eparch during his tenure in the Phaphan subdiocese, and we had exactly the same problem. Hence...' he made a gesture with a red-and-grey-sleeved arm. Calpurnia looked off to her left.

A narrow set of bleachers had been set up at the foot of the arching bridge and when Calpurnia looked at them, she had to rein in a smile. Thirty Ecclesiarchal officers in dark red and

bone-white cassocks, Wardens of the Cathedrals Ordeatic Chamber, were crammed in ten to a bench, packed almost shoulder to shoulder, their poses identical: hands laced demurely in laps, faces staring ahead in earnest concentration. By each man sat a little tripod bearing a brass casing no bigger than a pistol-clip, and from each casing a single unblinking metal eye stared. Each was fixed on a different cage, and every man on the bleachers had had their right eye replaced with a receptor for the cable feed; the flesh around the sockets was still raw from the newness of the graft. She suppressed a smile again – as soon as she had seen them she had thought of a row of birdwatchers, all sharing the same cramped hide and now fixated on a flock of some rare specimen preening itself in front of them.

‘One for each cage.’ Simova expanded his gesture to point at the chains and cages behind them. ‘The mechanical eye keeps a pict-record – that’s kept in the Cathedral permanently – but the controlling elements are members of our own clergy, not servants. That’s important. Before anyone in the cages is deemed absolved and brought down, the Warden watching his cage has to confirm that they have not compounded their sins in any way. That’s how whoever was pelting us with filth is going to be made to pay. I wish I knew what it was about this punishment that makes people do that.’

Calpurnia didn’t respond immediately. She was looking at the cages, hands behind her back, face expressionless. In the near cages the penitents were visible, some grasping the bars to peer down at them, some rocking back and forth and setting their cages swinging, some slumped down, the occasional arm or leg hanging through gaps in the floor-bars. One, the nearest, whose cage was hanging above the most soiled stretch of paving, was crouched over the little slop-bucket bolted to the bars and busily scooping something up in its fingers. Higher up the figures were just grimy, ragged silhouettes against the distant hive wall; the furthest cages were no more than dots. She took off her helmet and squinted at the highest, hanging in the centre of the street, but it was impossible to see what, if anything, the person inside it was doing.

It seemed there was still some time left, and keeping Simova talking was as good a way of passing it as any. She pointed to

where a knot of junior deacons stood donning rubberised cloaks.

‘What exactly are they listening for? A particular chant or prayer? Or does it vary?’ As if on cue, the priests began their procession under the cages and the penitents above them let off a chorus of shouts and howls. The one who’d been grubbing in its slops leapt to the cage bars and began scattering filth out and down onto the ground. The priests kept their hoods low over their faces and walked impassively beneath him.

‘It varies with the offence, as you imagine. That determines what they have to make heard as well as where their cage is positioned. The ones down the bottom have committed trivial offences – careless misconduct during a religious service, minor disrespect to an officer of the clergy, you can guess the sort of thing. All we require from them is a short oath of contrition. Most of the time they’re able to call it out to the priests’ satisfaction on the first pass and they’re down from the cage within a couple of hours. A little longer for the ones who are tongue-tied or have trouble speaking up. There was a throat-fever in Phaphan one season, and I remember that even the most lightly-sentenced penitents spent days in the cages before the priests reported that they had heard contrition.’

‘And that was considered acceptable?’

Simova gave the Arbitor Senioris a sharp look. The cries from the cages and the deeper rumble of engines under their feet floated through the silence between them for a moment.

‘The answer to that is the whole premise of the cages, Arbitor Calpurnia. You people deal with the *Lex Imperia* and a traditional system of penalties, but the traditions of trial and sentence by ordeal are almost as old. They remain in the cages until their oath of contrition is heard in full. That’s the law of it, pure and simple.’

‘You’re saying that there’s no such thing as being sentenced to six hours in a cage, or a day, or what have you.’

‘Exactly. It is not for any lowly servant, no matter how pious, to judge whether a sinner’s contrition has outweighed his crimes. That is decided by the Emperor and by the infallible natural moral order that flows from Him. The ordeal simply reveals the truth to our own lesser eyes so that we can act on it.’

'So if someone in the cages has a throat disease and can't make themselves heard, they might spend a month in the cage for stumbling on the altar steps during a temple ceremony.'

Simova gave a polite anything's-possible nod.

'And, hypothetically, someone who'd stood on the High Mesé for an hour screaming blasphemies against the Emperor and all the Saints and primarchs while giving the fig to the Cathedral spire with one hand and wiping his behind on the Litanies of Faith with the other—'

'—would be confined in the highest cages,' Simova finished, pointing at the speck that Calpurnia had been looking at herself earlier on.

'Where it wouldn't actually be humanly possible to be heard at all, I'd think. I can barely even see them up there, and didn't you tell me that the cages on Phaphan were hung even higher?'

'The ones we used for the most serious of crimes, certainly.'

'Was anyone ever heard from those highest cages?'

'Not during my own tenure there.'

'And that to you demonstrates...'

'...that the Emperor looked into their sinning hearts and saw fit not to give them the voice to make themselves heard so that their penance could end,' Simova finished smoothly. 'The received tradition of the Ecclesiarchy teaches us that the blasphemer and the heretic may find absolution in death, and so we may observe that death was the absolution that the Emperor required of them.' Simova's voice had taken on a ringing, pulpit-style quality, and the thought caused Calpurnia another inner smile. The man's tonsured head and broad chest were unremarkable, but where his ribs began the reverend bloomed into a great swell of fat in all directions which held the hem of his cassock well clear of his legs and feet. A ringing voice was not inappropriate for a man who so resembled a bell.

She looked up at that furthest cage again, squinting as she followed the lines of the chains back to the walls. The chains were invisible by the time they reached their anchor points, but she could just see the metal catwalk that ran along the girders that held the chains up. She thought of taking the magnocular scope from her belt to look in more detail, but that could wait. Best to play it safe and dumb until things were under way.

'You have nothing to worry about the construction of the cages, Arbitor Senioris,' said Simova, who had followed her gaze and misinterpreted it. 'The girder supports are driven an arm's length into the rockcrete. I'm told that we could safely hang one of the holy Sisterhood's Rhino tanks up next to each cage. You don't have to fear anything falling on you. Well, except for...'

He gestured to the filth splattering the walkway. The priests had left tracks through it as they walked about to listen for confessions.

'So this whole array was put up under direct Ecclesiarchal supervision?' It was hard to see, but there seemed to be some kind of disturbance on the catwalk where the uppermost chains ended. Calpurnia felt her shoulders tense.

'Of course. I will not say there isn't much to admire about the Hydraphur Ministorum, but this is not a religious practice that ever took root here. The Eparch wanted to make sure when he instituted it here that it would be done properly.'

'Really?' Calpurnia strolled towards the bleachers where the wardens sat and stared upwards. The identical expressions on their faces had not changed.

'And done properly it was, arbitor,' said Simova, pacing alongside her and once again misunderstanding her interest. 'The only significant blemish on the whole affair was one particular inhabitant of the upper stack levels, who insisted on an above-market rate of payment as well as the granting of Ecclesiarchal indulgences in exchange for the privilege of driving our bolts and rings into the walls of his building. You can see him in that cage there, the one third from the edge.'

Calpurnia made a small polite sound, but she wasn't looking. Two Arbitores were walking up to the rows of benches, one with an adjutant's badge and carrying a compact vox-case, one in the brown sash of a chastener.

'I trust this isn't the call of duty just yet, Arbitor Calpurnia?' asked Simova, misreading things again. 'I had hoped you would have time to see the priests arrive back from walking beneath the cages. I'm sure that at least one of the prisoners will have had their full contrition heard, and it's instructive to see the whole process of—'

He broke off. Arbitores helmets could make it difficult to tell where their wearer was looking – it was part of the design – but it had become very obvious that the black-armoured figures

were staring over his shoulder. Simova gave a disapproving frown and turned.

The blimp coming down the avenue was about fifty metres long, bulbous and dirty. The metalwork along its scooped nose was a clumsy attempt to duplicate the lines of an Imperial warship's prow, and clusters of auspexes and magnoptic emplacements jutted from the long gondola. Its engines were a loud, insectile buzz that counterpointed the seismic rumble of the traffic below.

'How singular,' Simova said. 'Is that an observation gallery built into it there? The Cathedral certainly was not notified of anything like this. I think we shall have to have words with the Monocrat's court. I'm assuming that it's his propagandists who are behind this. Look, you can see the pict-lenses. They must be capturing the cages. Don't you agree, arbitor?'

'No.' Calpurnia's voice was distracted rather than snappish, but it was enough to annoy Simova.

'I'm sure I'm correct. Although I wish they had—'

'The identification numbers on the sides there are from the nautical traffic directorates down past the lagoon. It's one of the blimps they use to monitor sea traffic off the coast and report to the harbourmaster. Haven't you seen them out over the bay?'

'I suppose I must have, arbitor, but what's such a thing doing flying up to the hive like this? Throne preserve us, look! It's barely above the level of the cages! What if it drops?'

'Not *exactly* the problem I'm anticipating,' Calpurnia said calmly. Simova, wrong-footed, gulped air and watched her unholster, check and arm a stub pistol that looked impossibly large for her slender arms.

The arbitor holding the voxer tilted his head as it broke into a terse series of staccato messages. 'East and west teams report that anchors are seized, ma'am,' he said after a moment. 'Repeating that, both anchors are seized.'

Simova looked around and upwards.

'What anchors? What are you talking about? I see no anchors, the things... wait, do you mean... Yes, it's lowering a chain, look! How dare they? Where's... Emperor's eyes, there should be a deacon on duty here, where... you. *You!*'

A nervous deacon, who'd been gawping up at the blimp from several metres away, hurried over. 'Give me a magnoc, or bring

up a reader so we can look at what that idiot in the blimp is—What? Emperor's light! You improvident lackwit! There is *always* supposed to be a sighting device available at the cages for members of the priesthood to—'

'Use mine if you wish, reverend.' Calpurnia passed across a stubby tube, smaller and plainer than the ornate Ministorum devices Simova was used to. He conscientiously said a small benediction for its machine-spirit and put it to his eye.

It was not a chain that the blimp was lowering but a cable and hook, from a heavy winching scaffold on the rear of the gondola. The blimp lurched back and forth as the pilot tried to keep it in one position in the cross-breezes, and the hook swung in wilder and wilder arcs as it descended. The ragged figure in the cage was standing with its back to Simova, gripping the bars, watching the hook descend. The sheer enormity of what he was seeing stopped the words in Simova's throat for a dozen seconds, and it made an undignified squeak of the voice he eventually managed to find.

'The man's being *rescued*. Golden *Throne*, don't these people realise what they're doing? Have they no idea of the *consequences*?' It took a moment for him to realise that he was talking to himself — the Arbites were conferring with one another and with the rustling voices of their companions on the voxer.

'Anchors cutting, repeating, ma'am. Anchors cutting, both sides. Mast on the move, ETA four minutes.'

'Do we see Helmsman?'

'Tentatively placed with Mast, but not confirmed.'

The hook swung over the top of the cage. The magnoc made it look almost close enough to touch; it was odd when there was no audible clank when the back of the hook bounced off the top of the cage bars. Simova started as the sound of traffic-alert horns blared up through the gaps in the rockcrete.

'I take it someone's going to tell me what that was.' Calpurnia's voice had only the tiniest traces of an edge.

'Mastwatch reports in, ma'am. Mast has developed engine difficulties, probably fake. The horns were from the traffic backing up behind it. They hit their mark exactly, though.'

'I'd expect no less,' said Calpurnia. 'Anchors? If they're too enthusiastic up there then they may save us having to be involved at all, although I'm not sure I'd call that satisfactory.'

Her words crystallised Simova's suspicions, and he rounded on her.

'This is not a surprise to you, is it, Arbitor Calpurnia? What do you mean by allowing this to go ahead? Do you plan on intervening before these prisoners are all loaded up and flying to saints-know-where?'

'I'll have my magnoc back from you, reverend, if you're done with it,' was her reply. 'I'd like to see if that hook has found purchase. Culann, raise Anchorwatch please.'

'Both anchors still cutting. They're... wait... Anchorwatch reports anchors away! Repeat-'

'Thank you, Culann, no need.' She was not looking through the magnoc, but up at the building walls. Simova realised with a sick sensation in his gut what 'anchors away' must have meant. One of the chains had been cut. He watched it curl and flap loose down the rockcrete face of the stack, shattering a row of gargoyles and gouging chunks out of the ledges and balconies it lashed against on the way down. Before it had landed he jerked his gaze back to the distant cage, but Calpurnia had been right: the hook had found purchase and the cage now swung back and forth from the blimp. But the cage was not being raised, as Simova had expected, but lowered.

'Mast still in position,' reported Culann. 'Confirming just one vehicle. No definite sightings of Helmsman. We're having trouble intercepting their vox-bands so we haven't placed his voice yet either.'

'Keep everyone back, Culann. I don't expect anyone to see Helmsman until Captain is... you know, I think we can dispense with the code-name. I didn't like that one anyway. I don't think Symandis will pop his head up until Ströon hits the ground.' Simova gaped.

'That's Ghammo Ströon? That's his cage? Damn, from this angle I didn't...' The curate remembered where he was, and rounded on the ranks of Wardens behind him.

'Who is monitoring Ströon's cage? How is... what...'

'The penitent Ghammo Ströon has not been heard to express contrition,' came the toneless reply. 'My humble judgement records forty-eight offences before the sight of the Emperor and by Eparchal decree, for which penitence must also be made.' The man was silent for a moment, and then corrected himself: 'Fifty-

one.' Calpurnia looked through her magnoc: the figure in the cage was making an indistinct but definitely obscene gesture in the direction of the Cathedral spire.

'The... why have...' Simova was trying his hardest, but discouraging about punishment in the abstract in the Chamber of Exegetors had not prepared him for seeing action first-hand. He stepped forward to try and lay a hand on Calpurnia's shoulder but the chastener, who was a head and a half taller than Simova with shoulders as broad as the curate's waist, stepped forward and silently blocked his way. Simova finally managed a sentence:

'This rescue must be *stopped!*'

'Mmm.' Calpurnia folded the magnoc with a snap and stowed it back at her belt. 'I don't see Mast yet, but it won't be long.'

'Mastwatch and Noose are still standing by, ma'am.' Culann's voice was showing an edge of tension.

'Thank you.' Calpurnia had donned her helmet again. 'The cage is on the ground, and I can see Ströon at the door. They had to know that there would be alerts by now. When they move, they'll move fast.' She drummed her fingers against her leg for a moment. 'I think we need to be closer.'

At her words Culann began stowing the voxer in his harness while the chastener gestured to the Arbites who had been waiting in the pavilion that Simova had put up for the Ecclesiarchy's own staff. The curate's mouth went dry as he watched them move up: more chasteners, massive and broad-shouldered in heavy carapace armour, hefting shotguns and grenade launchers. The tramp of their boots was countered by the metallic *tik-tik-tik* of cyber-mastiff feet as the dog-like attack-constructs paced beside their handlers, and the last two chasteners carried shining steel grapplehawks in their heavy launching-frames, the suspensors in their ribcages whining as they warmed up.

As he watched their armoured backs spread out and move towards the hanging line and the beached cage, Simova felt eyes on him. It was the little delegation of priests who had been walking under the cages to hear the confessions. There could not have been a lot to hear: the other penitents had all fallen silent as the shadow of the blimp had passed over them.

Curate Simova did not consider himself a coward. His duties had taken him to more cloisters than battlefields, but the

Adeptus Ministorum was at its heart a militant church and its doctrines never shied from violence. Nevertheless, at that moment he felt glad to have the line of Arbites between him and what was about to happen. He snapped his fingers for attention and beckoned the priests over.

'Join with me in raising your voices,' he told them. 'The Adeptus Arbites need our battle-prayers.'

SHIRA CALPURNIA HALF-HEARD the little chorus of plainsong from behind them, and it soothed her. There was always a need for prayer – to believe otherwise was prideful and sinful. The stranded cage was still a good four hundred metres away, and she upped the pace a little.

She flexed her left arm and shoulder and felt a sharp twinge run through her. It had been more than half a year since it had been rebuilt after her shattering injuries atop the spire of the Cathedral, and Calpurnia knew she was healing quickly as such things went. Quickly, but not yet completely. She unsnapped the power-maul from her belt and gripped it tightly in one gauntleted fist.

Three hundred and fifty metres. There were more figures around the cage now, busily working at it. Her detectives had reported that the clique had bought an oxy-cutter with false credit and doctored authorisation, and stolen breaching-charges from a shipment to the Monocrat's personal militia. She had personally suspended the investigations into both crimes: if Symandis had suspected that the Arbites were onto rescue preparations he might have become suspicious.

Three hundred and ten metres. Vox came in, simple and coded. Anchors both locked. The saboteur teams that had blown the chains loose had all been rounded up. That was where most of the breaching-grenades had gone, she would bet. The four teams represented almost the clique's entire field strength, and all of its best, and with the teams codenamed 'Anchor' taken out two of those teams were down.

Two hundred and sixty metres. No one had been able to give her a sure guarantee that the bridges would take the weight of a Rhino, so the strike force spread out on foot, the cyber-mastiffs on the flanks, the grapplehawk tenders in the centre. Two hawks, one for Symandis, one to recapture Ströon. Easy. There

was a chastener at each of Calpurnia's shoulders, and it took an effort of will for her to slow her pace to allow the line to overtake her.

Two hundred and twenty-five metres. The targets' discipline was excellent. They had to have seen the force of chasteners, and she was sure they knew the saboteur teams had been taken. But they bent to their work still, and Calpurnia could see the glare of the cutter at the bars of the cage. Let them try. All she needed was for–

'Helmsman!' cried Culann from a pace behind her, but they were close enough now that the vox-torcs in their carapaces had picked it up as well. 'Helmsman! All Arbites, we have Helmsman and Captain! Helmsman and Captain!'

'Maintain pace, please, don't speed up. Remember your orders.' Calpurnia kept her voice level, expecting any moment to have to interrupt herself with the next order. If both Symandis and Ströon were confirmed as being ahead of them, then she didn't think she had long to wait.

A couple of the men around the cage were shooting panicky looks over their shoulders now. They would not have expected the Arbites in such force or so soon, perhaps not at all. Calpurnia gritted her teeth. Their orders were not to open fire until her mark, and she trusted her Arbites to hold that order absolutely, but she hoped that the rescuers would not start shooting before–

There was a blue flare ahead of her – not the steady pinpoint of the cutter but the flicker of a power weapon. It flared twice more and the side of the cage fell away. Ströon was free.

'Captain's free!' Calpurnia barked. 'Ströon's free! Close the noose. Go!'

And then everything happened. The chasteners sped up into a run. Lead Chastener Vayan boomed through his vox-horn for the men to surrender to righteous judgement and overhead four krak missiles drew sharp white trails from the building heights. Their impacts blew out the blimp's engines and it began a slow, undirected drift; the cable, still attached to the cage, grew taut and dragged the cage away. And then, after a moment, the cage dropped and wedged itself tight in the gap through which the rescuers had climbed, blocking it and anchoring the blimp in place.

And so the Emperor shows His hand for His servants, Calpurnia thought with only a little smugness, before she called into her torc again.

'Mastwatch, the hole is blocked. The cage fell into it. Our targets are trapped, no need for main force in disabling Mast. Take as many alive as you can.' And then, heeding the warning twinges from her arm, she slowed to watch the chasteners close.

Symandis's own little taskforce was armed too. They carried punch-daggers, home-machined blades, little foldaway laspistols and stubbers you could hide from the crude traffic-control auspexes if you knew the trick of it. But the Arbites' armour was tough and their wills were tougher: they began weaving as they ran to spoil placed shots to armour-joints and held their guns in a high shoulder position that kept an armoured vambrace over the half of their faces the helmets didn't cover. Not a man so much as staggered as they ran towards the crack and pop of the enemy's small-arms, and then two grenade launchers chugged and the fire stopped completely even before the heavy double-*wham* of the shock grenades. The people they were facing knew more than enough to take cover when they heard launchers.

Not that they had any intention of making a last stand. The burly figure of Symandis was already running up the slope of the pavement. Calpurnia didn't need to give the order: the first grapplehawk went screeching out of its frame, weaving on its suspensor as its handler thumbed the studs on the controller to steer it forwards. It only took a few seconds for its cortex, patterned on the preying instincts of the Avignoran black eagle, to lock onto its prey, and then send it swooping with metal hooks and taser-spikes unsheathed.

Calpurnia swore as Symandis spun at the sound of the suspensor and shore it in two with a stroke of a crackling power-axe.

'Culann! Stohl! Even as the words were leaving her mouth she was in a flat run, champing her jaw shut and ignoring the warning tautness in her shoulder as her power-maul sizzled and spat. She jinked to the left and around the wedged cage, barely registering the shots and sirens echoing up from the roadway below as the stolen scaffold-truck they had code-named Mast was stormed by Arbitor Odamo and the Mastwatch teams.

Symandis had taken a moment to draw a bead on her, but his snub-barrelled pistol could not give him the range – the shot didn't even pass close enough for Calpurnia to hear it hit the paving. Then he was running again.

'Mastiffs! Two mastiffs on Helmsman, breaking left. Two mastiffs *now!*' She hated to take strength from the fight behind her, but Symandis was just as much a target as Ströon had been. The whole reason they had let the cage be lowered was to make sure Symandis was there before they moved. 'Mastiffs on Helmsman!'

With a clatter of claws two of the hunter-constructs loped past, narrow metal faces fixed with inhuman intent on the criminal ahead of them, their handlers racing to keep up. Running ahead of them, armoured boots sparking off the pitted and uneven paving, Calpurnia resisted the urge to draw her pistol: the mega-bore rounds would wipe out any hope of capturing the wretch alive. The grapplehawks were supposed to have achieved that – where the hell had Symandis got a power-axe from?

The handlers must have directed a secondary attack pattern: when Symandis whirled with a low sweep of the axe timed to decapitate the lead mastiff, they both shied away and passed one to either side of him. Suddenly Symandis was between the two mastiffs and the Arbites. When he realised this he tried to break right and make for a different paving gap. One mastiff darted in and there was a sound like metal shears as its mechanised jaws snapped the air behind Symandis's heel, a microsecond away from severing his Achilles tendon. The other ducked under a stroke of the axe and managed to rake its teeth along the side of Symandis's knee before he knocked it scabbling with the axe haft and put two rapid bullets into the side of its torso. It lurched drunkenly away as Symandis backpedalled, sweeping the axe to and fro pegging two more quick shots towards Calpurnia.

As the first bullet whistled overhead, something crashed into her from behind, shoving her to one side. She growled and tried to drive an elbow back until she realised...

'Damn it, Culann!'

'You were under fire, ma'am, I was trying to interpose myself!'



She opened her mouth, but this wasn't the time. The two mastiff handlers and Lead Chastener Stohl pelted past her after Symandis and as she stood she took a moment to look over her shoulder.

These were no hysterical rioters or brainless slum-thugs. Ströon was weak from three days in the cage, but a circle of his men were bearing him in the other direction as fast as they could, trying to make the most of Symandis's diversion and the way the chasteners had to sight through or fight past Ströon's own men: they had obviously worked out the Arbites were trying to take Ströon alive.

Mast was crippled, and there was no way they could get down through one of the other gaps without the fall splattering them across a busy roadway... but Calpurnia saw in her mind's eye Ströon clambering down his followers as they made a groaning human rope of their interlocked hands – it would only need to hold for ten, twenty seconds – or simply having them hurl themselves through a gap to form a soft pile of bodies on which to land. However unlikely, she wasn't going to take the chance.

'Anchorwatch, do you see captain and his guard? I want you to put a missile in his path every time they make for one of those gaps. Frag load. Well ahead of the pack, we're trying to deny him ground, not kill him.' She nodded with satisfaction at their confirmation – missile launchers were certainly not regular Arbites field kit, but the gunnery teams were turning out to be well worth the trouble she had gone through to borrow them off Arbitor Nakayama's armoury echelon.

The first missile boomed on the rockcrete in the middle distance as she advanced on Symandis again. He was staggering now, on the defensive, unable to face two groups of enemies at once: the Arbites moved in further every time he swung his power axe at the mastiffs, and the mastiffs lunged for his legs every time he tried to snap a shot at the Arbites. One mastiff was missing a leg, and Stohl was bleeding from a bullet-crease to the side of his arm, but Symandis's legs were gashed in half a dozen places and he was treading his own blood into the ground at every step.

Calpurnia shot another look back. Ströon was being forced towards one of the sheer building walls, pressed by the chasteners, hemmed in by cyber-mastiffs and carefully-placed missile explosions. She would be needed there soon.

She doffed her helmet, switched her maul to her other hand and drew her pistol.

'Are we going to play this out to its finish, Symandis? I can kill you now, or we can take you apart piece by piece. Or you can—'

'Or I can surrender and go to exactly the same fate in your cells that I'm ready to meet here now,' he panted. His voice was hoarse. There was sweat on his eyeglasses and sweat slicking the dark curly mop of his hair. 'You want me alive so you won't shoot me. You'll keep trying to knock me down while I make sure I damn well take as many of you as *uhhh—*'

The sentence finished halfway between a grunt and a scream as the mastiffs took advantage of his distraction to scissor through the backs of Symandis's knees, collapsing him to the ground with his hamstrings severed. The hand with the pistol waved in the air and Stohl clubbed it down with an efficient swing of a gun-butt. The power-axe swung wildly and Calpurnia swung her maul in an elegant twisting stroke that came in behind the axe-blade, blew the circuitry in the haft and knocked the weapon flying. Then the mastiffs clamped onto his wrists, razor-teeth retracted but jaws as powerful as ever, and that, finally, was that.

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