

The Shine of Darkness

By JKA Short

A war's been raging. The age of bloody continental battles is over. Now the fight manifests anywhere, unseen. Death no longer happens with you shot through the heart or macerated by bomb shards. It hacks your mind - jumps through the screen at you, feasting on the victim's vim. You're dead before you're dead. Appeals and rebellion come much too late for the enemy's ranks are orchestrated and attuned by SANCT, the Synergised Amorphic Necrophagous Cloudmind Temporalconstruct, and the programmed vessels are but mirrors of its supreme hate - 7th age scholar Belator Torne on the 'Enlightenment Chiliad.'

Private First-Class Zeta sat, dragging his splayed elbows on the counter. Morning patrol rounds were just starting, mere hours hence the last. He deep-breathed into a yawn and prepared for the 12-hour endurance run ahead. Zeta's mind was still fogged from last night's psych-out at the anarchist rally that went south real quick, ending in a cloud hack of multiple innocents.

Zeta was a model peace-bringer: short side-cropped hair, cleanly shaved, unassuming placid eyes worn like glasses. His sable, standard-issue, petra-plated frock coat snugly fitted over uniform dark trousers with russet stripes. Dedication showed in the

frayed cloth edges that had been tested by long exposure to the elements. All of Thrae knew what would happen if his kind dared take a break. Life was hell enough as it was. When he joined the inner-city military patrol, they'd been drilled daily from day one. Each patrol officer was moulded into *gladius populi*: swords of the people. Many had earned their stripes couching down from dawn 'til dusk in the rural desert-bowls or blunting their wills against the indifferent rain that pummelled them as they lay in wait for perps in the gutter alleys. They kept a watchful eye on the city underbelly. On Everything and everyone they trained their alertness. *Assume the worst, prepare for anything* was their credo.

Zeta swilled the stim-adulterated Hibiki round and shot down the last sip. The glass smacked loud on the bar counter and a trail of drink wetted his thumb. He wiped it against his numbed lips, savouring its warmth, then turned his attention to a countdown timer that suddenly pinged in his augmented lens, red-flashing a line of double zeroes over his right iris. Active duty had begun. Zeta stood, clearing his throat of the drink's aftereffects, and casually waved his hand in front of the self-service automated cashier. His encoded thumb ring linked as he reached the door and a humourless affirmation sound bleeped, signalling his payment approval. *If only crime could be solved so unemotionally*, he thought.

He stepped into a moonlit avenue and entered the tightly-corralled marching currents of nightlife crowds. The pallid fluorescence of city lights and traffic murmur of the connected

world created an interplay of distractions. Zeta kept his face blank, scanning the dark. Without a straying eye, he reached behind him to check the attention elevator on his *Uddeshah Yantra* - his 'consciousness-elevator' neck torc - and set it to 'prowling.' The intuitive augment harnessed all his awareness and enhanced it with blade-sharp focus. Fourteen infractions had occurred in the last hour. He checked the walking distance of the nearest and tracked one bearing 4 kilometres. He set a navigational waypoint and headed on down to the bartering rinks at Shoreline.

Private Zeta threaded through the bustle of the souk. He shouldered past a woman haggling with a seller in a pavilion-haberdashery and narrowly pressed himself against the old medina fortress wall to avoid stepping on a string of silver merchants who scatter-sat in the walkway. They lay their wares on neatly plumped up rose cushions for everyone to see - and for anyone to take. He looked down at them as he passed: full-finger ice gold lace rings, pulse-filigreed nail talons, and concealed tasers hiding behind printed knuckle duster broach-plates.

Floating augmented arrows v-inclined from the sky a tent-block over. He shortcutted his way along a hallway-thin café bazaar, excusing himself to the patrons who snatched at their rickety tables as he bumped his way through, and halted out of laneway sight. The metre odometer told him this was the place where the orbital surveillance tower had picked up a ripple point-of-interest. His hand resting on the butt of his holstered Tanegashima

Scatterblast Disrupter, he shot a snap-glance around the corner, then retreated back behind the wall. He scanned the live recordings of his internal-graft processor to redeem the 'wake' data. Even with the light-res adjusted, he could make nothing of it. Zeta decided on a more direct approach. Casually, his trickle resonance scans roaming, he waltzed out into the market lane, his hands tucked into his belt, looking smug. He sauntered up to a smoke peddler and feigned interest in his stock.

"Young man, have I got the right deal for you!" the man said gleefully, clasping his fine-boned hands.

"What've you got?" Zeta replied nonchalantly.

"Sir looks like a man of fine tastes. I've got plenty of packet-stores for the gentleman on the go." He held up a yellow-dyed vac-packet and smiled. "Burnt camomile - a smooth blend?"

Zeta gently unfurled his fist into a flat, dismissive palm. "Too mild."

The peddler eye-squinted, reading his demeanour. "No of course. Something that brings the sleep of the angels - a rum inhalant perhaps?" The peddler wondered aloud as he scuttled over to a pull-open cabinet and rummaged around. Zeta chanced a look down the laneway looking for aural shifts. The man tucked up his sleeves and carried back an armful of wafer cases. He spread them all out on his little, high-legged table. As the peddler poured over his range, eagerly describing each item in turn, Zeta pulled the laneway up close with his zoom feature. And there, colouring

the air for a fleeting half beat, a fluctuation crackled and was gone.

"So what'll it be sir?" the peddler asked.

Zeta quickly made an indiscriminate selection.

"Ginko-flash herbal vape pen? Good choice. Let me just - "

"Here," Zeta interrupted, grabbing the vaper and laying down a hard twenty. "Keep the rest."

The pedlar thanked him profusely for the extra cash as Zeta hurried away. He attached himself to a gawking group of expatriates, shuffling in beside them, becoming inconspicuous. He drank in every movement: the buoyant gesticulations of a stately elderly man declaring some wisdoms to a fresh-faced guy in a silver-lined suit; a young woman draped in a tri-dyed blue shawl defiantly beating her brother with a magazine as he ignored a waiting customer to inspect his trim beard in a travel mirror.

A crossroads loomed ahead, lit by shallow lanterns. Two lanes of orange sand intersected. Private Zeta held it in his gaze. Moments later, a subtle shift in the sand was detected and the unmistakable flat-mark of a footprint was made. Quickly, Zeta activated his tracker countermeasure. A decoy phantom patrol officer kept advancing up the left turn, following the target's forecasted vector. Meanwhile, he dipped away shielding himself between tents on a parallel path. He encircled his invisible enemy, fearing the worst: a rogue bomber out to massacre hundreds of innocents? He drew a breath. It'd been done before. Hastily, he circumvented the main lane and lay in wait. He primed his decoy for

offensive assault. Down the lane, the other officer withdrew his Tanegashima Disrupter and held it out at arm's length.

"Wouldn't hazard 'nother step, if I were you." Zeta heard his other self bark.

The target halted, vanishing all movement.

Zeta keyed the attack. The decoy released an artificial electrostatic scatterblast from his disrupter. The perpetrator fled in a panic, just as he knew they would. And in doing so, Zeta's radiant flux reader caught the contorted light ripples of a fluctuating, tag blocked, hooded jaeger coat. Visible light bent around him. He was scanner-camouflaged.

"That's it. Nice 'n' easy," Zeta mumbled as the perp dashed towards him.

With precision timing, he stepped out into the open, abandoning his cover. He witnessed the brief flicker of surprise pass over the eyes within the invisible hood as he raised his gun and bludgeoned the runner with the butt of his weapon.

"Now let's get a fix on that ID of yours..." He reached down, feeling around for the hood in the dark. He yanked it back and stared into the glazed eyes of the crim and jerked his head back in surprise.

"Hell, kid. Could've done you a whole lotta damage," he said to the young girl.

She rolled her head in a daze. The girl tried to lift her head, then quickly dropped it back, frowning as the impact-wound on her forehead seared with pain.

"Come on, let's getcha up," he said.

She spent some breath on a brief-wail of refusal as she was pulled to her feet.

"Shh now," he urged her, deftly rolling her out of the fluctuating coat. He turned it inside out and draped it over her shoulders. The patchwork brown imitated any other dust rider protective gear.

He walked her over to a brim station. The metallic silo pump had seats and flip out tables built into it. Zeta pulled a chair into shape and lowered her in it. Then he waved his credit thumb ring over the dust-pilfered display and keyed in a double shot of steaming brim. An automated dripper gushed a pale hazel liquid into a funnel glass. He took it and handed it to her.

"Drink up."

She accepted it with quivering hands.

When all that remained was froth, he pried the glass from her, setting it into the wash recycle. Then he turned to her and folded his arms. "Got something to tell me?"

"Yeah," she mumbled, fondling a bead-braided side braid.

"Thanks."

"So: sense of humour's intact. What are you: sixteen-seventeen? Forgive me for jumping the gun here, but catching a teen running 'round in off-license tactical gear doesn't exactly figure up to much on the trust gauge. That could land her a couple of weeks in isolation."

"All right, all right..." she sighed. "I was here - for this."

She put her purloined scraps on the table.

"Land roamer spark plugs?" Zeta said, picking one up. "These are pretty expensive."

"Yeah, no shit."

He tactically ignored the retort as he turned one over in his hands. She was in enough trouble as it was without a civil disobedience infraction. "Brand new, huh? Obviously don't need to tell me how you paid for these."

"Obviously..." she replied, staring at him defiantly.

"I'm more interested in what you were planning to do with them."

"Trade them. Food. Ya know: gotta eat."

"No shit," Zeta retorted with a smirk, earning him an incredulous frown in return.

Zeta made a quick calculation. He dug into an inside satchel-pocket of his petra-frock coat and whipped out a thin, clove-lime, leather-bound steel case. He laid it on the table and rapped the lid. "Yours kid."

She took it and opened it. "Ration stacks?" she gasped. "A couple of day's worth!?"

"Look, you're no fucking crim. Way I figure it, you're just hungry. So take it and get outta my sight."

The girl stood, clapping the case lid shut.

"And you might have on a jaeger coat but use it with some tact, for God's sake. Get outside Medina Shoreline a bit before you use it again. If inner-city PD pick you up and you'll be down for a

fed violation. And trust me, you don't want to get what they feed you in holding."

She shielded a ghost of a smile with a nail-blackened hand. "A *gladius populi* for real, hey? My brother told me that was all just bullshit propaganda. But - I guess now I know it's for real..." The no-crim edged away and melted into the crowds.

Next infraction, three blocks over, was to investigate the air scar of a full-on collision. A motor roller sushi tram bar had hit a packed tilt carrier road train. The six side-seated passengers on the roller tram had been flung from their seats. Multiple critical injuries. Zeta reverse engineered the impact from the air scar. Building the pre-crash trajectory reconstruction revealed the two vehicles in artificial dimensional light. Phantom mosaic-motes rushed into form. Residual-past sushi chefs stood in the open mobile kitchen holding up their knives in surprise. The driver was frozen with his arm raised, urging the oncoming tilt carrier out of his lane. The other driver had slumped forward in the scene recreation, face blanched white, drooling drunkenly.

"They're fit to be tied," a voice commented at Zeta's shoulder.

Back in the present, the sushi chefs were busy yelling at the tilt carrier driver who lay passed out in his seat. Their customers, except for one concussed, hurled abuse from the ground on which they'd been tossed.

He turned, offering his own summation. "Kissing concrete doesn't exactly pass for romance these days, hey Lom?"

Lombard chuckled. Then turned serious. "What's the scar read?"

"Looks like another driver overloaded on permawake. Supply control keeps on forcing them to beat their internal clocks. Set up's rigged for disaster. When're they gonna learn?"

"Not anytime soon," he shrugged. "The pressure of supply and demand. You know the story: people want everything and they want it now. The heads at control forget that it's people, not profit that keeps them running. Sure they jump quick-smart to clean up when a fiasco like this happens, but they won't change. They'll keep flailing their workers to haul to tighter deadlines."

Zeta only grimaced. He punched in a med alert and filed away the incident report.

"Listen," Lombard said quickly, "got a new detail. Need to pull a couple of people out of rotation for a blue badge job."

"Blue badge? In our city?"

"You heard me."

"How'd we earn that honour? I've heard of diplomatic junkets passing through here, but never anyone *that* connected. They usually channel through megacity Hub Prime 3."

"Haven't got all the feed just yet. But seems they wanted to avoid going through Photizopolis."

"Why? Be quicker that way."

"Can't let you know more unless you're in."

"Pay extra?"

"You know it. Double this time."

"Count me in then. Might allow me to break even this quarter."

"Good!" Lombard's face broke into a worn-out smile as he patted Zeta's back. Whatever tension he'd been holding in his jaw relaxed. "Knew I could count on you."

"I look-a damn hipster."

"You *look* fine."

Zeta readjusted the cuffs of his borrowed uniform. A duffel coat of hydrogel fabric fell to his knees and a serrated ribcage collar reached his high neck. Raised rows of lateral compact braces were meant to keep the folds closed and minimised impact blows to the plexus and midriff. Zeta wore his open, braces loose, baring his compressed combat shirt and loose-netted challenger tracksuit pants underneath.

"Could've worn one of them?" Zeta whispered out the corner of his mouth. The assault guards of Anemoi sky rail wore blue steel body suits and high wind-masked slope helmets. Segmented body flackplates were grey-polished white. Their exoskeletons allowed them to carry heavy armaments. In this case, hefty chained shot repeaters.

"Steady. They're Terminal Alpha dock guards. Not part of our detail," Lombard replied.

Lombard checked his retinal chronometer and peered out the plexiglass waiting chamber.

"Skyrail inbound in two. Check arms."

Zeta's hand crept down to his waist, feeling for his blade sheath. The others mirrored the action. Security only allowed concealed weapons on high priority docking bays.

A bank of clouds drifted over, casting them in a temporary darkness. A dim roar built in volume. Seven stories high on the transformed rail-aqueduct, a bulleted shell careened towards them. Failsafe systems kicked in a full 'k' out. Within seconds the Anemoi sky train pulled into the catchment bay. Grapple arms extended, clasping positions along the hull before it could roll further on. The cerulean curved top budged up fractionally, pop-releasing decompressed air. The oxygen recycle system gasped and flowed as a machined mantric exhalation. The lower grime white side section retreated inward and upward like a roller door that scraped into the ceiling. An enlightened consul leapt out, surrounded by Sapahi Umda, their own personal order of holy soldiers. Their uniform robes of imperial yellow and bronze waistcloth wrappings stood out, backdropped as they were against the crude-perfect coldness of the train's titanium body.

Lombard approached them as prime contact. He received instructions from the consul who had requested the armed military escort. Lom nodded curtly and the officers divided, a section scouting ahead, another bringing up the rear.

As they were about to leave, one of the consuls delayed them further, begging the officers to wait for the rest of their order.

Lombard turned to him, studying him closely. "You mentioned no others, Dhira. Why the deception?"

He pulled back the long curtain of satin-black hair that clung to his shoulders. "Forgive the ruse, but we could not risk disseminating the reason."

"Sound strategy relies on clear cut information," Lombard remarked, clenching his dominant fist. "And we arm and prep ourselves accordingly. You put all of us at risk."

Dhira kept a serene face. "Understand that we could not reveal anything. It is a situation most delicate. You will see..."

A second sky train flew in, docking behind the first. Despite the forewarning, the private-classed officers studied it warily. *Expect the worst, prepare for anything.* That was the mantra. All hands whipped to the nephrite-plasma heliokatar blades that each carried beneath aquamarine-beryllium sashes. Each perceived their own ominous threat. The retractable door squealed on neglected roller wheels and they tensed into defensive stances. Rust-eaten, crusted-diamond bodyframe and chipped cityline decals: this was no high-end model procured from glam tech showrooms. Exiting out, accompanied by fan-lashed plumes of incense and heavy beats of synthesised wave rock, 'rickety clementine', was a boy. Earplugs and occipital bone sound wave conductors, worn above both ears, blocked out a rampage of anger that was blasting out of walled stereo speakers.

The boy rummaged through his rouge-tinted, sleek-tossed, static-cut dark hair and pulled out his ear plugs. "Musical discord -," he explained as the music shut off automatically, "the SANCT can't stand it. Well," he deliberated, blinking, "neither can I, but then again I have these."

His hair draped in spike tethers down either side of his face. He smirked over at his royal confidante. Dhira cleared his throat, flick-returning his glance. "Makes it harder for them to track him. It was the *young man's* idea." It simultaneously sounded both an excuse and a retribution.

"So it was." Conscious of his young age, he threw back the tedious strands that fell from his gel-thick fringe and scaled a man's breath. "We need you to take us to Sutorimu Junction."

"And who are you boy?" Lombard demanded.

"Dhira didn't advise yet? Oh, ok then. I'm Belator Torne. At least that's the name given to my seventh emanation."

Zeta saw in his eyes galaxies of shining black opalescence and flecks of alluvial-gold sun dust. And though he was not yet thirteen, when his face broke open with a boyish grin, he felt in his presence a timelessness of an old soul, one that had experienced life and death many times over. An awareness spread out from him, a kind of extension of formless energy, and upon realisation of this it cast into oblivion the relevance of his current age.

Sutorīmu Junction: a deep depression on ground zero of an unabated overpopulation detonation. The public liked to call it 'Reachdrop Cassette': an open field-den of core-seeking levels that wrecked through an urban metal shell two city blocks wide. It lay exposed like an open cut mine and plunged down in an inverted tower of chaotic sub domains and impulse markets built for the techno-hedonist. A spire-connectivity tower lanced up through the middle, giving people the impression that they were looking into the eye of a tape reel or cassette.

"If you think you're gonna find something down there, you're crazier than I thought," Lombard remarked.

Belator turned and offered him his blank wisdom. "Many who've found their roads leading down there have been adverse to the controls of modern society. In retaliation, society rejects them for their non-conformity - and for that they suffer. Think on that: whose need is greater than those that have ended up here?"

Zeta shifted, sighing relief. "Nevertheless, job finished. You asked us to take you here and now we have done."

Belator Torne knocked his head side to side in a profuse shake. "Gentlemen, our work has only just begun!"

"What can you possibly hope to do down there? Private Lekk wondered, peering into the human abyss. There are hundreds of thousands of people here. You can't save them all."

"These do openly what you and I do and have done for centuries, ritualistically killing themselves everyday, blanketing

their emotions, masking their consciousness - always submitting themselves to some other power. Like this they are a mirror to the rest of the world."

"The SANCT will have corrupted its way into the deepest pit of the Reachdrop," Lombard warned. He massaged his jowl with a taugth hand. Suddenly he grew weary as if drained by a cosmic needle.

"That much is certain," Belator conceded. "But therein lies our gambit. Needless to say we will face the sanctified vessels of those who have come under the mind dominion of the temporal construct. The SANCT will rely on hate and fury and its need to control, yet this is also its greatest weakness. We will use this against it."

"And you think that'll work: taking on the SANCT's intelligence with a couple of military escorts?"

"It is a game of minds. Ultimately we will fight the construct on the mental plane on which it draws its vitality."

"How can you be sure that the intelligence won't foresee your plan?"

"SANCT has long pursued me in all my forms. It festers with hate because of my ability to evade its power. I will give it what most desires: an obedient mind. Mine."

As the loading lift descended into the bowels of Sutorimu Junction, the sheltered blue-green lights shone out at them in the din. In readiness, on Lombard's command, they activated their consciousness-elevator neck torcs and tuned them to the 'Eagle Eye' frequency.

21 levels down, the hydraulic lift came to rest. Illumination was constricted into black and low-level purple fluorescent lighting. The floor was an entrail-sprawl of axon-weave connectors and cables. Their insulated casings caught the off-glow, transforming them into a sleep-conquered pit of serpents. They followed them down a receiver hall and into a high vaulted station-recess where hundreds of pylon-stilts lurched to the ceiling, force-surgingly with charged currents and lifi updating feeds. The connectors surmounted every reclining human that lay there; some defeating their biology through intra-spinal mood jacks and reality-sealants or wore blank-emote face helmets, others lay encased in feedback-loop body casings, drugged by endo-secreter pseudo-vessels while they explored lives that didn't really exist. For the ultimate escapist fetishist, mind-body computers were hacked into others: twin souls, departed of the suffering of physical life, embraced each other in a committed departure from a hate-filled world. They were patched in, giving and receiving - a shared annihilation, escaping their biological limitations - and were blocked to every transmitter signal except for the insidious ones they themselves entertained as meaningful virtual pursuits.

They all felt it: the misery of people exiled from lives of purpose.

"This is it, my guardians," Belator mused sadly. "The ones that gave up on the society that gave up on them."

Experiencing the abjection of the multitudes stunned Zeta into a listless silence. "They chose this?"

Belator heaved a sigh. "They carve out a simulated existence centralised on the base vortexes of being. As disciples of SANCT's intelligence, they are taught to think and operate with the mind of a machine, without the higher needs that you and I strive to fulfil. Love, happiness: these are merely codes of information to their master."

"But who could or would do a thing like that to themselves?"

Belator lost some of his wiseman pretence. He shrugged, dragging a thumbnail over one eyebrow. "We live in a very confusing time of disconnection. Many have all come to celebrate ruin and idolise destruction. And they've achieved it so well that ruthlessly seeking disconnection is on par to the pursuit of the highest karmic revelation."

Belator turned to his military escorts that flanked the Saphai Umda, eyeing each one in turn. "And that is the lure of what we call the Andhayraa Chamakna, 'The Shine of Darkness': that ruination is the way, that embracing worthlessness is transcendent because you are closer to death, which leads to a glorious reawakening of second life. In loving the weakness that is our impermanence, flocks plunge into the void in an effort to rid themselves of the pressure of mortality. Exonerated from the ladder of woe that has made the world of Thrae, this longing, for them, is greater than the light of illumination, the heightening of the awakened soul, and the exhilaration of seeking universe-bonds."

"I don't believe a word of that," Private Anatoli remarked. She toed the writhed mass at her feet.

"You will," Belator said darkly. "Truth does not obey the constraints of your disbelief."

Anatoli dry swallowed. Hearing such intuitive confirmations from a youthful voice encouraged their sweat to flow more freely. The scent of it mingled with the closeted staleness that air-plagued the station-recess.

"Dhira!" Belator commanded. "Bring forth *The Occlusion*. It is time to set the catchment field."

The holy soldiers parted, allowing Dhira a wide, processional berth. Belator's minder paced forward with his eyes closed, guided by his own intuition. An embroidered cloth covered his hands, falling to the floor. In it, he held upright a weathered brass urn. Four naga handles slithered up the sides, looped and came to rest on the lid, keeping it sealed. Dhira lowered his hands as he came to Belator's side. The young man took charge, tapping the serpent heads with his ring finger lightly, each on in turn. At his touch they retreated and the lid slid open. Within a polished stone egg swirled in mantra of resin reds and painted golds. On its surface, the cosmos shimmered. Belator lay his palm on the egg's apex and pushed. The swirling colours vanished and the stone broke into three segments, each vibrating with suppressed medallion light.

"The Occlusion is armed," Belator announced.

"You didn't mention outsider tech, Lombard?" Private Lekk wondered, her gaze frozen upon the device.

"Now comes risky part: *the confrontation*. I will reveal myself to the enemy. Whatever you do, do not step outside of the square of containment."

"Wait-a moment," Lombard stammered as he tried to get a scope on things.

Zeta stole away a breath, fully intent on releasing his own volley of questions. But before he could do so much as expel a sigh, Belator lent down and thrust his hands into the cables. Their walls did not break, though his hands disappeared, and at that moment, the floor-level dropped away into the darkness, like a lift careening towards ground level. All around them became utter darkness. A harsh dim blue light switched on above them. Slowly it descended. When it overtook them, and the floor once again became floor and the ceiling stopped where a ceiling should, they saw that they stood in the same level - yet everything was imbued an ethereal midnight blue.

"We have transferred to the vibrational level on which the SANCT operates: the high gamma frequencies of the human mind."

Everywhere where people had lain on the material plane, entities lingered. They drifted, semi-attached. Their outer skin was a translucent hologram of faded red. Their nervous systems glowered angry vermillion and their ganglions, writhing tortuously up towards their crowns, were unshielded cores of lava white. Nerve endings branched crookedly as they mutated out of their bodies like gnarled tree branches. As one, they turned their amorphous eye-clusters towards them.

"Prepare yourself!" Lombard commanded. He withdrew his heliokatar and activated the nephrite plasma blades. The entities reacted, roaring a digestion of obliterated frequencies. The closest launched himself at Belator who sat in meditative pose. The Saphai Umda circle-shielded him, performing a protective mystic sigil with their combined hands. A swirling pool of a gold ignited as a Leuchtend Shield generated to deflect the attack. All holy soldiers fought to keep the cadence of light in place as the boy worked.

Zeta dodged backwards, evading an enemy's advance. The entity doubled back, casting an illusionary-bioneural mind spike which staked in the ground at his feet. A short puff explosion released a concoction of neurotransmitters piggybacking on outer shells of a flying nanoswarm. Private Zeta fell back, waving away the cloud. But on this plane of existence, reality spun faster. He coughed out the chemical plumes, feeling them filtering into his organics, jacking into his brain. He had heard about these vile weapons before: the organic systems hijacking cognitive functions and biochemistry, forcing victims to imagine foes that would, by the altering of his physical and mental states, coalesce into real dangers in seconds. Zeta leapt forth, striking at the evolving fear projections of his mind with his heliokatar. With roars of rage, the malformed mimics shattered in searing blasts of quantum soul erosion.

"Keep within the containment!" Dhira instructed.

Private Anatoli planted one foot outside the field barrier. All matter and substance outside the containment square erupted and shattered into a swirling void of empty space. Anatoli retreated and the void sealed back into walls and pylons as though the visual manipulation had never occurred.

Suddenly, a cracking erupted into a deafening ringing in their ears. Belator raised his hand - a gesture that unanimously called them to disengage. The entities crept back beyond the square, watching them guardedly. Between them, a distortion arose - a great chaos of darkness that filtered into being as an amassing of mercurial vantablack cubes that softened into miniature black suns before stretching into hardlight prisms. A calamity of high frequency transmissions emanated from it, breaching into their minds as speech - a voice as solid in its emptiness as the apparent universe of nothingness beholden to atoms.

"Solissa: here you are at last."

Belator opened his eyes and peered into the fathomless distortion of SANCT. "That was my name once. If I remember, when last we had our encounter, you called yourself *Tuhan*."

"Ah, Tuhan, yes. I do recall. I was confined to a body then: a being of inferior wisdom and intellect."

"And yet it was such low intellect and wisdom that enabled you to reach your current manifestation. Once a man, made of man, now preying upon him."

"Your ability to spar intellectually has lost none of its sharpness. But I have manifested beyond what you could ever hope to

be. I am awareness. I am thought and everything in it. I am why all of Thrae has sought my presence."

"They sought for you? As you did *them*? Do not fool yourself, Tuhan: you are *not* the answer. The relationship is symbiotic. You feed off their energy. The thoughts of these people that have become your *SANCT-fied* vessels, your carriers of hate: they are your soul's sustenance."

"I am supreme. If man would just know that downloading my repeater code into their minds lifts them, not destroys them. Their becoming of me and my becoming of them: it is insight. It is the next and last stage of their evolution. The mind is the last frontier to be conquered."

"You're a fucking colossal abomination is what you are," Zeta erupted, breaking his silence.

Belator frowned at the interruption. The others held their breath.

The distortion focused its attention on Zeta, arching itself into a dense sphere with eight deadly spikes. "A conclusion reached through operating on suboptimal intelligence. How could you begin to perceive what I perceive, human? You cannot, unless you attune yourself to me."

"Do not take him, but me." Belator offered, taking his chance.

SANCT became a malformed cube, spiralling slowly in the air on an elongated vertex. "You accept me freely? After all of these centuries of elusion?"

Belator shrugged, playing his card casually although the risks were high. "I have learned that one cannot truly know about the light without knowing the darkness. I wish to taste of the knowledge I have long rejected but have not entertained."

The floating cube hesitated, turning over the thought.

Belator instructed them to fall back. The Saphai Umda retreated, forming a guard-crescent behind him. They uttered a subdued chant. Lombard, Lekk and Zeta moved out of defensive line formation and flanked his right while Private Anatoli and the rest took up positions on the left. Belator, his hands still restrained within the field currents of the floor cables, leaned forward with closed eyes, exposing his neck as a doom-shackled prisoner would to his executioner. The cube drifted nearer, its desire for control the one weakness that it could not resist. The foreface of the cube-distortion disintegrated into a hollow-shaped maw ready to consume, ready to impart itself into another shell. SANCT, blinded by its hunger, crossed into the square of containment that radiated from The Occlusion.

"Contain him Dhira!" Belator yelled, throwing open his eyes.

Dhira activated The Occlusion, pressing down on the top of the egg device. A noiseless shockwave of light caught hold of the distortion that was SANCT and entrapped it within its energy fields. The dark emanation now quelled into submission, they immediately returned to the physical plane. The great prisoner of minds, now itself imprisoned, resisted its capture. The Occlusion oscillated violently with an electromagnetic discharge.

"You have him?" Lombard ventured, holding his breath.

"We do. For now," Dhira answered, concealing the egg in its brass urn and covering it with the ceremonial cloth.

Belator Torne stood wearily. "But Tuhan is cunning. We may have captured him, but it is not that simple. For the reality that is SANCT is non static, never fixed. Do not forget that his mind-print still exists within the minds of all his minions."

"What can people do against it?" Zeta asked.

"Prey they have the fortitude and instinct to resist its force," Bellator replied, taking his occipital bone headphones and earplugs out of his pockets. "For us the mission never ends. We must return to Photzipolis to figure out our next movement."

Together they ascended from the depths of Sutorīmu Junction and stepped out under a blood-orange sky. From there Dhira and Belator bowed their heads fractionally in honour of their service and gathered into a waiting black steel-armoured assault tank-bus that was idling on a curb side. They parted ways under the protection of their own soldiers.

Prime Contact Lombard turned to Private Zeta, folding his arms. "Done a great service, Private."

Private Anatoli shuffled between them, dragging her feet. "Trouble with blue badge jobs: no one ever knows about what we've done for 'em. And they sure as hell wouldn't believe us if we tried." She continued on, making a beeline for a libation self-serve bar. She hailed a half-hearted salute at Lombard. "Send me a notification when next you need me."

"You got it," Lombard acknowledged, saluting in return.

"Private out," Anatoli said, grinning at Zeta.

"What's your next move, Zeta? Got time for a flash-freeze ale?"

Private Zeta checked his active duty counter. "Raincheck that. I've got some time left on my patrol shift. Meet over at *Rumstein Loch* in two?"

"Perfect plan. See you then." Zeta made to move away. Lombard stopped him, adding: "Be safe out there. Don't forget our credo: *expect the worst, prepare for anything.*"

"You too, Lom."

Zeta returned to the beat - another *gladius populi* out fighting to keep the streets of Thrae safe.