

Sibellus Noir

The Tower of Saint Orithiel

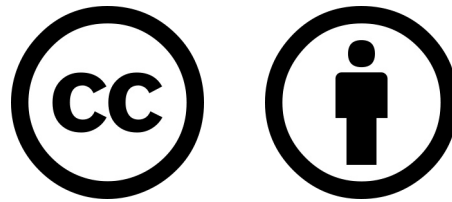
Being an outline of events taken place upon Scintilla of the Calixis Sector in the 9th century M41, involving agents beholden to the dread Inquisition. This is a tale of men and women fallen from grace, enmeshed in conspiracies, and compelled to serve.

“No-one but the Emperor knows the steps of your path, for mere words cannot carry the essence of the soul’s action from one heart to another—we are all of us alone beneath His gaze. You will be judged upon your innermost truths when you come before Him, though, mark me well.”

- Pius Mefonte

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Imprimis

The backdrop to this tale is the populous hive world of Scintilla, administrative center of the Calixis Sector in late M41. Narrowing the view, we might look to the vast and sprawling Hive Sibellus, which spans two thousand leagues and a continent from Lucid Palace to Voltis Spires. Its crushed depths are a half-league below the citytop, its spire peaks a league above. To the uncounted billions who live and die within its walls, Sibellus is the City, a crowded world unto itself, its piled structures and layered institutions built across a span of more than 8,000 years. For priest, manufactory worker, and renegade, there is nothing worth thinking of beyond the City.

The Least and the Ignorant

This is a record of damaged men and fallen women who live at the dark, conspiratorial outskirts of the Inquisition, bound to the hive-city of their birth, and compelled to serve as mere cogs in machinations that tower beyond their vision. These lesser servants are known as agents. The demands of the Inquisitorial machine grind upon them as they struggle to find their way through darkness and ignorance.

Nicknames are Shields

To bury a true name is to shield yourself from its meaning and power. Everyone with something to hide reveals their greatest fear by cloaking its source in a nickname. Agents compelled to serve the fearsome Inquisition have better reasons than most to try and obscure their fears. Thus they speak in euphemisms: they serve "the Man," rather than an Inquisitor, and attend "the Pit," rather than the Invisible Bureau. Hive Sibellus becomes "the City"—for every agent has a dark and squalid history hidden somewhere in the hive.

Noir as an Imperial Genre

Noir is a natural genre for tales that take place within Imperial hive-cities. The central triad of Noir is formed of death, treachery, and eroticism—and Hive Sibellus upon Scintilla, the City, is a teeming madhouse built atop this foundation. Murder, conspiracy, and sex are everywhere entwined, from the lowest sumptowns to the highest noble spire. Agents blackmailed into serving at the tattered edge of the Inquisition are consummate products of this environment: scar-faced men with dark pasts,

deadly femme fatales, and would-be betrayers left twisting on the hook of a greater master of that art. Some of the common tropes of this genre follow.

The tension of sex, death, and betrayal:

One or more of this triad are never far away, providing a tension of anticipation for the next terrible act they inspire. Jealousy, joygirls, women scorned. Revenge, brutal thugs, men wronged. The hammer will fall upon someone, somewhere. This is the nature of the asylum that is a hive-city.

Amidst low-life:

The thronging masses are colorful, black hearted scum. Those who stand above them as nobility, appointed leaders, or political adepts are clawing, would-be traitors. Everyone is out for advantage, and true nobility of the heart is so rare as to be unheard of.

The City as a character:

She is a treacherous woman, or a one-time friend that stabbed an agent in the back. An agent cannot bring himself to leave the City behind, but hates it for all the memories it holds. In brooding recollections, the hurtful actions of the past become the actions of the City herself—an old lover who strikes out at those she once embraced.

Darkness, haze, and rain:

Dark nights, dark places, and the chemical haze that hides the distance. The chill, acrid rain that falls on the wicked and the virtuous alike.

Corrupt officialdom:

Power corrupts, and corrupt petty bureaucrats and militant leaders are the norm. They use their positions to feather their nests and further their own agendas, inflicting misery and trouble upon those who try to stand up to them.

Cancerous, dysfunctional organizations:

Where men at every level of power have their own agendas, organizations grow cancerous. No-one is sure of their allegiance, sub-groups act against one another's interests, and the original goals are lost in secrecy and infighting.

Beaten down by the asylum:

The City will take everything you have, and then break you.

Agents are betrayed and bitter women, hard men past their prime, regretful betrayers of trust, and the once-incorruptible now slowly rotting inside.

The distant God-Emperor:

Faith is fragile and provides little real hope to anyone capable enough to be an agent. It is a facade, the Saints and the Emperor too distant to hear prayers. Agents are agnostics, laymen without any real faith, or apostates: pitied or cursed by both the masses who cling to belief and the zealots who rule over them.

Lho-sticks, tranq, and amasec:

The drugs of the masses are prominent in the lives of agents; a little false comfort to ward against cruel reality. The rituals of smoking, the act of drinking to forget, and the ever present addicts who remind agents of the eventual cost of self-destructive habits.

Hidden hooks and dark secrets:

Every agent serves the Man because they are compelled; the hooks dig in deep, and the personal secrets must never be revealed. If there is any possibility of redemption, it is remote indeed.

The City is all there is:

Nothing beyond Sibellus is well defined, much spoken of, or at all important to agents. The City is all there is, for all practical intents and purposes.

Brooding internal monologues:

Self-reflection and self-awareness is one amongst many curses bestowed upon an the agent beholden to the Man.

Fresh From the Landing Fields

The battered mirror above the cleanser is laughing at me, the scars upon its metal face a mocking reflection of the ridges upon my own. Been a long time since I looked myself in the eyes, a long time away from mirrors. Not sure I like I what I see now. Can't blame the Man for that, though Throne knows I want to. Emperor damn him.

So here I am, my reflection and I. Beaten down again by years and what the Man demanded from me. Still standing.

Still got the job done. Still coming back to the City. I don't punch the mirror like I want to, like some kid would. Instead I splash the water on my face, turn on the heat unit. Make an effort. Damned if I know who for.

A Processional—And Dreams of Freedom

The events described herein form a processional, a clearly defined path with a beginning and an end for those agents who traverse it: what matters is not the destination, for that is predetermined by fate, but rather what is done upon the way.

What is freedom, really, and what value does it have in this dark age of mankind? Each agent is compelled to follow the orders of his distant master, a victim of some dark secret or unbreakable hold over the heart. Yet these agents will be distant from temporal and spiritual authorities during much of the processional, and thereby comparatively unchained whilst upon their journey. So long as the agents remain upon the allotted path, they may do as they will. Yet a dreadful lesson lurks in this: in the City, freedom can be the greatest curse, for the enemy is within—corruption and darkness stems not from what is done to you, but rather from what you yourself choose to do.

Beholden to the Man

Agents

Agents are the lowest of the Inquisition's servants; often unwilling, often unaware of the full sweep of whatever conspiracy they are involved in. Agents live enmeshed in the treacheries of both the hive masses that spawned them and the Pit that controls their lives.

The Man

An agent might have seen the Man, or seen his trusted servants—once upon a time, memories that he would rather forget. But never again. The Man pulls upon an agent's hooks from a far distance now, through many layers of adepts and coordinators, and neither knows nor cares of an agent's fate.

The Pit

The Invisible Bureau, known to agents as the Pit or the Hellmouth, is a nest of suspicion and secrets. It is a complex, shifting hierarchy of adepts who direct agents beholden to many different Inquisitors in their duties—and their conspiracies. Funded by hidden coffers, its inhabitants engaged in hidden activities, the Dicasterium Invisibilis of Hive Sibellus occupies lesser, outer reaches of the dread Tricorn Palace, a sprawling Inquisitorial fortress. Agents sent to serve the Pit soon find good reasons to fear it and its occupants: death and treachery are commonplace, and the masters of the Pit care not for their servants.

The Few Beneath the Lumen

Many and varied are the agents who live and die at the edge of the Inquisition. May these few illustrate the multitudes.

Nethin Callehan

A scar-faced, intimidating, taciturn bruiser possessed of an augmetic arm and a cynic's dark thoughts. An enforcer by training, he is equally skilled with his fists or a large-cal pistol—but parting sinners from their secrets whilst seated across a table is his true calling. Nethin's past is in some way entwined with the City Magistratum, a history that would seem him dead or worse should its specifics ever come to light. This blade over the agent's neck is now held by the Man.

Lady Ve

A poised murderess, a dancer with blades, and a human mirror of Imperial society. Cool and collected, she plays the high noble lady just as adroitly as the joygirl from the depths, hiding her true origins behind a dazzling array of masks and accents. Ve was once a Sister Hospitaller, committed to life within a convent—and that itself is secret enough to bring damnation. But dark and treacherous deeds brought an end to that past, and give the Man the power of life and death over this agent.

The Processional's Commencement

The Abyss, Viewed From the Spire Flank

Sibellus. City without end, layered hive of mankind, asylum for billions struck ignorant and mad by its walls. I've been gone a long time, to far, sickened places. Long enough for me to forget—if I had wanted to. Long enough for a generation of newborns to be crippled, struck dumb, made sinners. But the City has its hooks into me, just as it does them. So I remember everything.

It's been five years by my ticking clock, and twenty by the booming beat of the City. The Man sent me away, and now the Man brought me back. He thinks he is the one whose devices and secrets have the hold over me—but the City is a cruel moll, and she wields the sharpest implements of all. No man can ever forget Sibellus, not in his heart, no matter how much he wants to.

I look out upon the City from this dizzying mid-Spire vantage, lit lho-stick dangling half-dead and dying, swapped between lips and my clicking, metal off-hand. Those invisible hooks set firm in my flesh, unseen puppeteers tugging like the demented. My feet are upon the edge of the precipice, hard-shod in the Magistratum gray I have no right to wear, up against the buzz of the imagefield that cloaks this jutting landing platform. Beneath and beyond spreads the crying citytop, as far as can be seen, its artificial hills and valleys draped in chemical fog—a hopeful shroud for the massed mad wished dead, pierced only by towers and gigantic statues of forgotten paragons. From this height they look like beaten-down men, small and insignificant in a misted landscape. The sun struggles with the haze, a dull yellow glow somewhere near the horizon. Left and right, above and below, run the walls of the Spire, baroque with saints and gargoyles, their scowling faces and the Spire wall-plates that support them gilded in this half-light.

The imagefield denies the winds that would drag me to the same fate as awaits the lho-stick; I chew it over, look down. Long fall. Very long. Plenty of time on the way down to think about how it will end. I flick the lho-stick, the ash drifts slowly beyond the field - and is torn from sight in a heartbeat by the spire-gale beyond. A sudden end, unexpected, without warning. No chem-shroud for the spire. It isn't cold within the field, but I pull my plated shot-coat closed and hold it that way. Too many

memories trapped down there in the asylum. Sibellus. I work at killing the lho-stick.

The Moll

The spire-moll is beside me, sudden, soundless. I lose the lho-stick, flip it outwards as a benediction to the city below. The moll is out of her high-caste gown and trail assemblage now, dressed instead like a joygirl murderess: sleek, gaudy, knife-edged, dangerous. Blades upon thighs and across her back. It fits her better. She walks away along the landing platform edge now that she has my attention, fingernails of one hand out over the abyss to brush ripples in the imagefield. Each careful step sliding her supple form in ways that cry out. I try not to notice, and fail. Think instead about the hooks the Man has in her, and what rots inside her heart in mirror to my own.

In a heartbeat, the moll turns, flickers. My metal hand in front of my face to catch what she threw before I'm past my own thoughts. Getting old, too easily distracted. It's a lho-stick, Moross Below sigil upon the yellowed paper. The bitter scent of it stops me, trigger to an ambush of memories; I realise my flesh hand is under my shot-coat, on the grip of my 17-Cal. I let it go. The moll half-smiles, a brief twist to the face of a fallen angel of the Emperor, perfectly poised upon the edge. I passed.

I fumble for my flamebox, light the Moross Below. Take three steps back from the abyss, turn my back on it. Ask the moll her name.

Backdrop

The Endless City of Stone and Crystal

The City is vast in its extent: near two thousand leagues of continent-spanning cityscape separate the coastal Lucid Palace from Voltis Spire Secundus. Entire mountain ranges were leveled across millennia in the construction of the City, their stone employed in the construction of imposing hab-vaults, noble manses, temples, towers, and vast statues. While forge-metal, pressed plasteen, and ceracrete structures are found everywhere in the City, they merely fill the gaps between towering stone edifices and paved avenues lined by gargantuan statues. It is age-worn stone that dominates: structure piled

upon structure, century after century, level upon level, until the depths were little more than crushed ruins.

If stone is the City's flesh, it must be supported by bone. Long ago, lost secrets of the Machine Cult were used to compress earth and soil into tecrylite crystal, a dull, matt material of immeasurable strength. Behind the City's stone facades, and beneath paved streets enclosed by vaulted ceilings, lie massive, branching support struts made of tecrylite. Pillars of crystal support the City's spires, the massive prime spirebase, and looming hills: cathedrals, vaults, and dwellings built far too high.

Countless billions live within the City, from noble houses of the towering spires, to merchant guilds of rich manses upon the citytop, to the masses who toil and teem within labyrinths crushed and buried by later structures. So it has been for time immemorial, for the City is ancient beyond measure; some say that fragmentary, dead scripts eight thousand years old are inscribed upon temple stones in the deepest ruin-crushes. No one person could ever see more than a tiny fragment of the City's ways with his own eyes. Many never see the sky, living enclosed by stone labyrinths from birth to death.

Spirebase and Spires

The stepped Spirebase is a the greatest of city-hills, a plateau built by men that rises high over the surrounding cityscape, fifty leagues in breadth. Buried within are vast Administratum palaces, league after league of scribe-runs and libraria, grand Machine Temples, and the gargantuan bureaucratic engines of the oldest City institutions.

From the center of the Spirebase rise Spire Primus and the five Spires Secundus: this is the dominion of noble houses, servant clades who number in their millions, and the refined industries that accompany staggering wealth. The flanks of these vast edifices are richly set with buttresses, chem-pitted gargoyles, armored statues of Imperial saints, and ornate vox-arrays. The Spires tower high above clouds and chem-smoke, high above the haze. The upper reaches of Spire Primus are leagues removed from the Spirebase below.

The Citytop Landscape

Away from the Spirebase, seen from the high vantage of a spire edgewall, the city-top is a seemingly endless landscape of ridges and rolling hills cast in worn, chem-darkened stonework. These are hills built by men, not nature; temple piled upon shrine piled upon tower piled upon manse—a half-league from

crushed undercity to crenellated citytop. Where the City's materia has succumbed to the passing of millennia, or where strong tecrylite support is lacking, the crush of time and reluctance to build has formed vales. Above larger support struts or vital, deep emplacements such as City Legion fortresses, the City has grown upward into ranges of man-made hills and stepped ridges.

Upon the highest points of the citytop stand vast towers, vox-array masts, and looming macrostatues of saints and forgotten heroes. Surrounding them are the peaks of cathedrals, leaning manufactory flues, and corroding guildhall spire-vanes. Between these largest citytop structures wind broad avenues, jagged streets like deep knife-cuts, and stepped avenues of age-cracked stone. Upon these ways the City masses move and crowd, wearing masks and cloth against the chem-haze. From a high spire vantage, these masses appear no more than swarming insects or fluid tides, rivers of humanity—where they can be seen at all through the haze of distance and manufactory chem-reactants.

By night the citytop glows with a billion points of light: lumens and floods upon the avenues and cathedrals; plasma torches billowing atop the greatest of Imperial constructions; blue gas-fumes of alchemical plants; stab-lights sweeping from Magistratum barracks.

The Skies Above

The skies of the City are fogged by a haze of alchemical compounds and manufactory byproducts. On some days, thick chem-clouds fog the citytop, running like white rivers through the slump-vales. On others, the tainted skies are comparatively clear: crowds atop hill-structures can see for leagues, distant towers and close-packed stonework fading into a yellow haze. When darkness falls, the sky glows a dull yellow and orange, the ever-present chemical haze reflecting the lights of the City.

Large drogue-craft lumber across the chem-yellow skies. The Spirebase is orbited by a fleet of Magistratum vox-relay drogues, each bristling with comm-arrays. Away from the Spire Primus, most drogues are Moving Guild bulk lifters, sedately carrying materials across hundreds of leagues. Powered airframes of many different tech-patterns cut through the haze above the City, sweeping stab-lights and flashing nav-beacons. Amongst their number are roaring thrust-engine Vastigans of the City Legion, noble house lift-wings, darting rotory-aerovessels of the missive guilds, heavy Adeptus Arbites troop transports, and others besides. Flying craft are the tools of great wealth and mighty organizations; the crowds of the citytop do

not look up, for the passage of fliers is a matter far above their station.

Overview

The agents were called by representatives of the Man to meet in an empty, gilded spire manse. The summons carried them unmolested through spire regions far above their station, a shield against guardians set to keep the lowly from the vaults and plazas of power. The path ended high above the City masses in opulent but deserted rooms—their disuse a greater statement of wealth and power than any gilded decor.

Setting the Scene

It is evening, the sunlight yellow. The quarter-height marker of Spire Secundus Merrow is a half-league above the stepped spirebase mass that rises from the endless City, well above the shrouding chem-cloud layer. This is the dominion of nobility and wealth, the privileged few who stand far above the massed billions.

The manse is set against the gleaming outer spirewall, one structure amidst a maze of noble holdings, the ways and stairs within patrolled by the elite of the Spire Magistratum. The manse halls stand empty, but walled and vaulted in blue vein-stone, imported at ruinous expense from far worlds, and the floors a polished gemstone mosaic. Crystal windows look out upon a private landing promontory that juts from the spirewall, discretely shielded from nearby structures by holo-projectors. The view is staggering: a rugged landscape of citytop hills and valleys, structure piled upon structure, built up across millennia. Their details are all but invisible beneath yellowed haze. A Magistratum vox-relay drogue drifts a kilometer away, lift-wings flit above the chem-clouds, and the trails of orbital lifters cross the high skies.

A Course of Events

The agents eye one another, exchange terse words: efforts to seek common ground, test allegiances, or establish whether any one of them knows more than the others. They share poor quality lho-sticks on the landing platform, and hide their suspicions.

Behind the Curtain

The agents are less than nothing to the Man, entries near the

foot of a long, long ledger of blackmail and unwilling servants. They would not be the first to overestimate the Man's interest in their actions and punishments. Middling factotums of the Man's conspiratorial organization recently decided to balance one small account of favor and influence by pledging a token resource—the agents—to the Invisible Bureau. Scrolls were amended and data-vaults etched with new sigils. The matter was then set in motion, dismissed, and forgotten.

Dark and Errant Paths

If corpses remain behind in the manse, no-one will ever hear of it or care. What is one more murder in the City? Other faceless servants of the Man or fearful spire factotums will discover the bodies and dispose of them, hiding away all evidence for their own fearful reasons.

A Descent Into the Pit

An Unwelcome Arrival

The lift-wing breaks from the sun-glow chem haze, floats into the landing. Noise of burning engines and hot wind breaking through the imagefield like a roaring wave. Wings shifting like it wants to clutch at empty air, red eyes of the machine-man pilot glowing bright behind the front glass. Another place, another landing wells up unbidden—a betrayal, the chug-crack of wing-cannon, a man burst in tumbling pieces. Memories. I tell myself they're just memories. Force my face to relax, my flesh hand to unclench.

Ve, a moll dressed for murder, stands on one leg and a light touch of the other foot, perfect hips tilted, balanced like the lift-wing downdraft is nothing. Doesn't move back. Makes red-eye dance the wings and set down where he didn't want to, closer to the edge. I decide to like that. The last wind-rush of landing kills my second Moross Below. I drop the smoking remnant, grind it under a heavy boot. A distraction to kill a few heartbeats, doubting I'll much like what comes next. The seal on the lift-wing cracks, the hatch and stepway peel out like an insect's opening shell. The fatman, Falis, emerges, damp and dead-faced in his creased, spire-wrought finery. I'm right. This I don't like.

"Callehan! How perfectly repulsive to see you again!" The fatman doesn't false smile to match the false cheer. His pallid, fleshy lips work the words like he's rehearsed them, and the skull-drone floating behind him clacks its pict-device as through possessed.

I feel the fatman's diseased presence, even twenty paces away in the engine backwash. Like a scar in the heart that itches to beat him bloody and dead. Maybe I'd give in and do it this time—if I didn't know he'd enjoy it. Would mean he'd won, he'd got to me. Instead I grunt, scowl, cover up what the fatman's presence does to everyone. Wrap the shot-coat tight against the hot wind, and head for the lift-wing. Might as well get this over with.

Five paces. The fatman works for the Man, sees things I can't imagine. His dead eyes watch me. Ten paces. I eye the moll sideways, once. She's hiding the urge well. But I can tell. She wants to gut the fatman, throw him into the abyss—and that idea's like hard drenn buzzing in my veins. I keep it circling another ten steps, grab the airframe at the hatch, haul

myself into the velvet luxury inside. Smile at the fatman like I'm going to tear him limb from limb. Then there's nothing to do but sit back on cushions that are too soft and yielding for my taste, pour a double of amasec uninvited, and wait for the punchline.

A Long, Silent Flight

The moll and I had time to talk on the landing platform, before the lift-wing. Said her name was Ve, chose her words the way she chose her steps, each a right choice perfectly placed. She asked me my story. The Man, the City, I said. Shrugged. Tough guy act. She arched an eyebrow, not buying it. Didn't give me anything in return. So we sparred a while, word by word, telling each nothing. Classy dame.

But no-one's talking in the lift-wing. Only the crackle-hum from red-eye up front to compete with the muffled engine-noise. The City whips by, a million stacked lives come and gone in a heartbeat. To the left, corroding structures built into an impossible hill, to the right a vast statue of a forgotten saint. The flyer cants, banks about a lesser spire where machine-men crawl and build. That's outside. Pretty and ugly by turns.

Inside, now, it's a tomb waiting to happen, a plush wake with overstuffed finery—two real people and one sweating animal pretending to the role. The fatman's eyes are all over Ve, close as her joygirl bodysuit, never missing a movement. The skull-drone clicks off another pict any time we breathe deep. Easy wager that the moll's dreamed up ten ways of cutting up the fatman before he knows it, laying it out in her head, move by move. Maybe the fatman thinks she's crazy enough to do it, and that's why the silent treatment. Never turn your back on a dame with a blade.

I think about all of that while the amasec warmth spreads out a way from my gut, liking the vision. Putting off thinking about where we're going. The Pit.

Backdrop

Crucis Pattern Lift-wing

An ancient tech-pattern brought to the City in the Angevinian era, a lift-wing is a small passenger atmospheric craft with

variable wing topology, propelled by powerful, adjustable thrusters. The wings flex, hinge, and extend when needed, like an avian when coming in to land in a tightly enclosed space. A lift-wing is not fast in comparison to Imperial warplanes, but can hover and land in small, enclosed spaces.

The lift-wings plying the chem-clouded skies above the City are owned by noble houses and other enormously wealthy concerns. Each is large enough for a handful of travelers and the sound-shielded interior is luxuriously outfitted to suit the taste of its owner. These craft are piloted by a servitor emplaced within the forward cockpit machinery, made able to fly routes between a few select destinations by Machine Cult tech-adepts. Noble passengers have no more control over a lift-wing than the ability to specify the destination, usually via a simple tech-device, such as an gilded dial or lever.

Pledge Key

A small cipher device often used by representatives and servants of the Man to identify themselves to one another. A common form is a icon of Saint Castor the Obviate whose wounds must be touched in a certain order to express a cipher: bearer and then reader must enter the correct cipher and response to cause the pledge-key to show true. Such devices are used within the Pit—when confirming that a newly pledged agent is who he claims to be, for example.

Scint-Parchment Charm

A faith charm of the Qualmiarch districts of the City, where subtle, remnant signs of ancient and pre-Imperial heathen faiths remain. The poor of deeper City layers use heated hammers to flatten scint coins into small, irregular metal sheets. Apprentice scribes painstakingly engrave miniscule scripture upon the scint-parchment so produced, and the resulting charms are sold to pilgrims and penitents. Extracts from the works of Pius Mefonte are a popular, common choice.

The Catechism of Pius Mefonte

Even an apostate of the City knows a few lines of the Catechism—it is one of the Superlative Screeds preached in every Calixian shrine and cathedral of the Imperial faith. That part of the Catechism most often quoted follows the question "What then is the form of life?"

Overview

Adept Falis, an unpleasant individual in service to the Man, arrives at the spire manse by flyer. He informs the agents of their fate, which is to be bartered so as to in some way meet the Man's obligation to the Invisible Bureau—the Pit of conspiracies that occupies an outer reach of the Tricorn fortress. The agents are provided with a Pledge Key and conveyed to the Tricorn entrance known as the Court of Hollowed Fanés, enduring a most unpleasant flight.

Setting the Scene

A Crucis-pattern lift-wing emerges from the haze below and ascends to arc onto the landing promontory, reconfiguring its wings, and flaring engine thrust to cushion the landing. The passenger within doesn't stand on ceremony; the hatches open while the thrusters still roar, hot air and backwash buffeting the waiting agents.

A Course of Events

The lift-wing arrives, and the agents board, wrestling with their reactions to Adept Falis. The flyer carries the group across the City skies, above the rolling City landscape of artificial hills and vales, lesser spires and crush-slumps, wealthy enclaves and manufactory barrens hidden under chem-haze. While the lift-wing powers through the skies above the cityscape, Falis stares at the agents, or makes disconnected statements that might be related to questions answered or matters he has been instructed to disclose.

At some point during the flight, Falis provides the agents with the Pledge Key they need to enter the Pit: it takes the form of an embossed pict-slate bearing an image of wounded Saint Castor. Attached to the Key by wax are a scint-parchment and pennon scroll bearing well-known words from the Catechism of Pius Mefonte, starting with "what then is the form of life?"

It takes a few hours of flight for darkness to fall, and for the citytop below to become a patchwork of flares and lights, the hazed sky a dull glow in reflection. The lift-wing descends to the Court of Hollowed Fanés upon the citytop, an entryway to the Pit.

Behind the Curtain

Adept Falis is enmeshed in the Man's service at a level of trust and responsibility far greater than the agents—but still merely

a cog in the greater machine of conspiracies. He knows less than the agents might assume. The adept has been tasked by shadowy coordinators to convey the agents to the Pit and provide the Pledge Key for entry to that reach of the Tricorn. Falis neither knows nor cares of the agent's arranged fate, and is displeased by having to undertake this duty.

The scint-parchment charm accompanying the Pledge Key is of a particular design that can be recognized by someone who knows what to look for. Gaps in the lettering form an identifying cipher. This is one way in which those sent to the Pit by the Man can identify one another—provided they are careful about it.

Adept Falis

A bloated, fleshy man dressed in unkempt and dirt-strewn fineries. Falis is a victim of his own dark gift, a psychic untouchable whose very presence is an irritant to ordinary humans and brings pain to psykers. His nature as a psychic dead zone would make him an outcast—if it did not also make him valuable to the Man. Falis is dead-faced, dead-eyed, a blank slate who exhibits none of the little quirks and tells that make even the worst of men in some way comprehensible. For all his capabilities as an adept, there is little sign of a sane mind behind his flabby, expressionless face, nor of any real emotion behind his ill-timed but carefully practiced statements.

Falis lives by routine, and despises interruptions or events that require him to change his plans. In conversation he tends to speak over others, answer questions late or not at all, use a tone of voice completely inappropriate to the present remark, break off into silence, and stare into empty space or at someone other than whom he is actually addressing. He otherwise ignores—or is oblivious to—normal conversational cues.

Disturbing in both appearance and disregard for social graces, Falis earns the loathing that would otherwise come naturally as a result of his dead psychic aura.

Dark and Errant Paths

Were Adept Falis to be murdered and left on blood-soaked finery in the lift-wing, and the pilot-servitor instructed to journey to one of its distant set locations, it would be a long time indeed before the lowest reaches of the Man's organization turned to think of the agents. No-one cares for the outermost and least servants. Their deaths become small marks in a large datavault, a matter of little concern.

Similarly, were the lift-wing to remain at the Court of

Hollowed Fanes, a corpse within, the Black Troops would make a report and dispose of craft and remains. Another mark buried in the depths of a great library of accounts, and a long time, if ever, before anyone gave it the slightest attention.

The Court of Hollowed Fanes

The Gauntlet

I took the key to the Pit from the lift-wing just like I took the fatman's amasec; it was there, and I could. The difference: the pledge key was intended for the moll and I. But the fatman wasn't going to offer it. Drop us in the Court without a key, then a dead-face pretence of amusement amidst plush finery, watching in ascent while the gauntlet shredded us to blood and tatters. The end, curtain closes, fade to black. A way out, a way to damn the Man. But I took the key, a device-box and saint's pict, prayers on parchment ribbons. The fatman said nothing, stroked his damp, fleshy fingers, kept his empty eyes on Ve.

Landed and hatch open, roar of thrusters deafening again, and out into the chem-laden night air. Like a bad lho-stick, alchemical, harsh on the back of the throat. I put some space between my hands and the fatman's murder-itch, the moll doing likewise beside me, blade-laden and beautiful. The lift-wing roars as it ascends, thruster heat whipping my shot-coat, the moll's jet hair, making the prayer-pennons of the key dance. Scribed by a dead man, telling me how to live a good life, lashing at my arms and chest. There was a kid a long time ago, a cold stone bench in a City shrine. He listened to the catechisms, but didn't hear them. Throne knows it's too late for that good life now.

Instead this: the Court, the landing zone, the gauntlet. Myself, the moll, and a hundred weapons pointed at us, enough to shred the landing deck and every last living thing on it. Stab-lights, bunkers, glowing markers, the waiting squad backlit at the yellow paintline, the machine-men turned into weapons, crawling and clinging on tall stone cathedral ruins. The saints in ancient lumen-alcoves, chem-worn faceless, accusing stares without eyes.

"Been here before?" I ask the moll. A prelude to a warning. She gives me the look, the one that says I'm just a dumb enforcer, a walking muscle, I know nothing about how it really is. An array of small, dark Magistratum rooms, a parade of joygirls across the table from me. The look from each of them. Memories. I shrug it off, tell myself it doesn't matter. Let the moll keep her secrets, and I keep to myself whatever I was going to say. We go to meet the real walking muscles, squinting against the roving stab-lights.

The squad is black on black, masked faceless as the saints

above, armored. Every weapon pointing at Ve. I hazard a guess that she has been here before, that it wasn't pretty. Might as well be a walk on the avenue, a common crowd, for all she shows. I hold up the key for the head faceless, but it's not for him. He just needs to see it - the machines in his head need to see it. He makes a sign and they frisk us: a bad joke, a rebellion.

They don't care about us, they're not even men. To be a man needs choices, thoughts the machines can't hear. They're cogs in the Black Legion, each looking for a way to be something that isn't a cog for a few heartbeats. So they frisk us, and take their time with the moll, hoping that makes them men. So one tries to keep my flamebox: iridium, sigils, and a gift from someone worth a hundred cogs, far away and gone now. I close my metal hand over his glove and flesh. Squeeze, just enough to get two hellgun snouts pressed right up close against my chest, and a kick-rush in the blood like bad drenn. I look at the head faceless, ask him if he knows what happens to guard-raques that bite the wrong gangers in the low City. Thin lectoknife, behind the left ear, stir things up, makes the raque settle right down. That needles him. Faceplate up, a scarred snarl and white surgery lines. I get punched in the gut, go down hard. The cogs get to feel like men, I get the flamebox back. Everyone wins. I get up, pained. No big deal. I've had worse.

The machines in their heads tell them to let us go, to feed us to the gate into the Pit. The marker-lights glow on the path, and Ve is already walking, lithe and ready like it was nothing. I follow, and enjoy the view while I can, while the blood's still buzzing.

The Smoker

Under the citytop now, and into the stone vaults of the upper City, inside the canker of the Man that spreads from the Tricorn spires. I light up, lho-smoke to take off the edge I'm running from the cogs, the edge from the chem-haze. The hard echo of my boots rings from time-blackened, dead pictwalls, drowning the click-click of Ve's joygirl steps. The hanging lumens are dim and old, failing for centuries, trailing insect-threads. An old place, a dead place between guardians. Left unkempt, unwatched.

"Kaja," says the moll, low-strata Voltis slang, and a poverty accent that wasn't there on the spirewall. "Was here before." Shoots me a glance, eyes lingering on mine a

heartbeat. I watch her walk, remind myself about dames and blades, for all the good it does. Not the place for small talk.

Ahead looms the gateway to the Pit, imposing and arched in the darkness, owned by men ridden by machines. Machine-cant noise bursts in staccato, and the first machine-man emerges from the gloom, a hunched form swathed in red and a halo of twining metal vines. A sick-sweet mix of obscura and oil from metals beneath his stained, heavy robe. Familiar scents. I recall a man, laced lho-stick dangling from the corner of his mouth, younger then, a giggling addict. I recall the machines that consumed him, made him what he is now. A tendril of iron flexes forward to take the lit Moross Below from my metal hand, conveys it to the shadows beneath the man-machine's hood. The ember-end glows. A vox-static blurt that might be a laugh. More twisting dendrites claim the key, writhing over it like rusted serpents. Another arches and points, its unblinking eye watching *Ve*.

Other machine-men move in the shadows, twist-shaped slaves to forge-metal mysteries. The entryway glimmers in purple, hums like a choir of generators, and my metal fingers bend unbidden, as though wanting to pull me into that dark servitude. My skin crawls. Hidden machines and invisible touches, nerve-twinges as they probe for secrets. But this is the door to the Pit: the machine-men let the damned in, secrets or not. I grimace, watch the smoker work upon my Moross Below. Make like this is nothing, keep the tough guy face as the lie, a racing heart and punch-bruised ribs as the secret.

The moll whisper-exclaims a bad word from Voltis Low I haven't heard in a decade. Not cut from whitestone after all. Looming from the upper gate, a witch-monitor emerges from shadow; a withered machine-man lost amidst blades and humming engines, forge-metal and paltry flesh circled round the urge to kill. Like a master come unexpected amongst errant servants, it surveys us with reddened eyes, finds us unworthy, and retreats into the gloom. Machine-cant noise, and machine-men move to tend to their charge. I let out my breath, unclench my hands. The gate passes us.

More machine-speak, like voices rusted away to mere static. A sliding rust-tendrill returns the dying stub of my Moross Below. It stinks, an extra layer of stained, rune-marked paper wrapped around it. I put it to my lips anyway, suck it up. The smoker and the secret passed. Just like old times.

The Pit beckons.

Backdrop

The Tricorn Palace

The Tricorn Palace is a mighty fortress of the Inquisition. It has taken root across millennia like a cancer, spreading though the City layers beneath its three black-armored spires. The masses that throng upon nearby citytop avenues see the Tricorn spires through the chem-haze and shudder in fear at what they represent, but the fortress expanse beneath the citytop is far greater and more complex than the visible signs of its presence. Much of that hidden structure lies empty and forgotten. No maps exist of the Tricorn's sprawling vaults, and no-one can claim knowledge of every last sealed vault, hidden library, or dust-covered warren.

Court of Hollowed Fanels

This is a tertiary entry to the outermost labyrinths of the Tricorn Palace, most often used by those pledged to the Invisible Bureau, or by other lesser conspirators compelled to serve the Inquisition. The Court is a walled depression set into the citytop a league from the Tricorn spires. Tall stone arches, pillars, and forlorn buttresses thrust upwards from within the hollow, remnants of some great Imperial cathedral of centuries past. These relics rise through gaps left in a raised forge-metal deck of a design rarely seen in this City of paving and stone. Statues of saints and Imperial heroes, chem-corroded from an age of exposure, stand in alcoves set into the looming stonework.

Bulky weapon servitors cling and crawl high upon the stone ruins like insects or feral primitives, their heavy cannon mounts and glowing eyes pivoting to track any new arrival. A squad of black-clad, face-shielded Black Troops stand ready to escort new arrivals to auspex-bearing tech-adepts for verification and purity assays. More of the impassive Inquisition soldiers keep watch from gun-nests, ceracrete bunkers, and heavy weapon platforms set throughout the Court.

The only entry to the Court is from the sky: by lift-wing, Vastigan-pattern craft, or similar flyer capable of a controlled landing in an enclosed space. The landing zone is marked by red lumens and fading lines painted upon the scorched forge-metal. A clear pathway runs through the cathedral ruins and into a vaulted stonework tunnel—the way down to the under-structures of the Tricorn.

Black Troops of the Tricorn

The Tricorn is defended and secured by an oversized regiment of Inquisitorial stormtroopers: the Black Troops. They are drawn from the best of the Legio Hereticus and militant survivors of Ordo actions. Black Troops are all mind-conditioned to some degree, many implanted with volitor neuroaugmetics or repeatedly mind-wiped. The regiment's militant resources include weapon servitors, heavy weapon teams, and flights of Vastigan-pattern combat lifters. Common troopers wear unmarked black uniforms and are equipped with full-face helmets, carapace shot-armor, and hellguns. Larger Ordos actions undertaken in the City usually draw upon the Black Troops for combat support.

Witch-Monitor Servitor

These monotask servitors are employed by the Inquisition to watch allied psykers in places where heavy psychic dampers cannot be used. A witch-monitor is assigned to follow a psyker, whom it will immediately execute should its psy-devices detect the use of warpcraft. Many different patterns of Witch-Monitor exist, such as retooled combat servitors, floating blade-lined coffers within which the psyker must lie, and skull-drones equipped with poison-dendrites.

Overview

The agents exit the lift-wing and pass through a gauntlet of troops to gain entry to the Pit that lies at the outskirts of the Tricorn fortress. At the gate to the Pit, the agents meet with a tech-adept who was also once an agent of the Man—a potential tutor to the ways and conspiracies of the Pit.

Setting the Scene

The lift-wing slows and swoops to a hollow in the citytop, wings flaring. A painted metal landing deck is outlined by glow-markers, lit by the sweep of stab-lights from the flyer and the Court. The stone cathedral ruins loom tall as the lift-wing sinks below the Court walls, balanced on its thrusters. Weapons track the descent: from bunkers, gun-nests, and bulky servitors clinging like gargoyles to the ruins. The servitor pilot sets the lift-wing to rest, keeping the thrusters live and ready for takeoff. The hatch opens to let in the acrid citytop air and buffeting engine-roar. A squad of black-clad, face-shielded Black Troops jog forward to meet the agents, whilst others

watch impassively from their emplacements.

A Course of Events

The agents are pressed by the first of the Black Troops as the lift-wing ascends, buffeting all with heated, chem-burned air. The soldiers step too close, and are rough in searching the agents. They make a show of claiming a small personal item, and resistance is met with the butt of a hellgun. The Captain-Assignate stands back from his men to watch.

One way or another, the agents work their way through the gauntlet of dangerous and errant Black Troops. The weapons of the servitors above track the agents until they exit the Court and descend into the citytop. Their way is dimly lit by biolumescences, the passage through vaults of stone and grimy metals ending at a vast gate—the entry to the Pit, guarded by tech-devices and their Mechanicus attendants.

The agents are enveloped by device-fields and threatened by witch-monitors. The tech-adepts of the gateway pay no heed to the agents, save for one, who examines their Pledge Key. This tech-adept, Sa Orven, uses the formal interaction of the Key as cover to slip a small rune-parchment to the agents: it contains a subtle hint that the agents and the tech-adept share the same Lord, and a straightforward request to meet at a given location within the Cell Warrens of the Pit.

The gate yawns wide and the agents pass within the Pit.

Behind the Curtain

There are no hiding conspiracies here, for all that the suspicious will see plots in every face, act, and shadow. The Captain-Assignate and his Black Troops are simply following their nature, trapped in their fate and raging against it. Sa Orven has placed himself at the gate to the Pit watch for those who serve the Man, to better his position through connections, but he has no foreknowledge of the agents' arrival.

Captain-Assignate Morcelis

Like most Black Troops assigned to the Tricorn, the Captain-Assignate is conditioned and implanted with volitor-augmetics that control his thought processes. He is efficient, near-monomaniacal, and has no opinion on anything outside his focuses—one of which is finding ways to subvert his conditioning, just to feel whole for a few moments. The authorities of the Pit care little about what happens in the Court, and so corrupt acts of rebellion are commonplace there, usually directed at agents and other arrivals who have little

influence. Lesser violence, theft, solicitation of bribes: conditioned soldiers should not be able to accomplish any of these transgressions. But they possess a great deal of time and human frustration, and where there is a will, ways will be found.

Tech-Adept Sa Orven

An obscure user whose addiction and human cravings survived his initiation into the Machine Cult, Sa Orven is caught in the Man's lines and hooks, just like the agents. He quickly outlived his immediately usefulness and was sent to the Pit many years ago. Since then he has eked out a thankless existence, an outcast trapped amongst outcasts. He is a mind-rusted, poor tool to the Mechanicus pledged to the Inquisition, and an untouchable to the adepts of the Pit, a part of these organizations in name only. What little common ground and human contact he can ever hope to forge is with lesser agents snared in the Man's schemes—and even that goal must be accomplished with caution, for conspiracies and lies are everywhere.

Dark and Errant Paths

There is danger in the Court of Hollowed Fanes for agents who do not accept that they are weak in the face of overwhelming power. No-one will avenge them or even care should they resist or provoke the Black Troops greatly enough to be left charred, steaming, and dead from hellgun fire upon the Court deck. The Court is a test, and those who do not recognize what sort of test it is will struggle.

Whether or not the agents accept Sa Orven as an ally at the gate is irrelevant to the course of the procession. His aid will ease the difficulty of later events within the Pit, and place another face within the gallery of suspicion that all agents carry in their hearts, but that is all.

Catechism of Pius Mefonte, XIV.33-38 c. 340.M40

XIV.33 What then is the form of life?

Life is a holy processional of great ceremony and antiquity, started from the marshalling ground of the cradle, and proceeding towards the Cathedra of Death and the God-Emperor's arms thereafter. In this way beginning and end are known, and all men are pilgrims.

XIV.34 Who leads this processional?

The Lords of the Imperium are grand marshals of the life-processional, and Ecclesiarches of the Imperial Cult stand at each waypoint to guide the faithful. In such a way is the path shown true for all. Bow to the Lords and guides, and offer them fealty.

XIV.35 Where is challenge and adversity if the way is known?

The Holy God-Emperor of Mankind judges our mortal souls upon acts within the life-processional. Consider two men: the first stumbles through the processional borne by intoxicant fumes and blasphemy, toiling not, and reliant on his betters to keep him to his feet. The second prays at each tenth step and robes himself cleanly in the pilgrim's garb. He pays humble respect to marshals and guide-men, thanking them for their great efforts. He looks ahead to see stones upon the way, and moves them diligently that those of lesser strength might not falter. Both men are judged in the Cathedra of Life's End: one found wanting and one lauded.

XIV.36 Speak further upon challenge.

Consider that men are imperfect and frail, tempted by the Archenemy and Unbelief at every step. Challenge lies in rightful action upon the processional and refutation of temptations—but further, it lies in standing forth as the pilgrim's exemplar. It is clearly true that there are greater men and lesser men: the God-Emperor's blessings fall upon those whose will to holy toil raises them above their fellows.

XIV.37 And what more of adversity?

Adversity arises from men given in to temptation, who curse guides and marshals, and who raise their hands against true pilgrims. Adversity rises from the road betwixt cradle and Cathedra, upon which stones fall and mires form. It is adversity that gives the need for greater men, the God-Emperor's blessed, that the processional way is made clear, and the tempted sent ahead to their judgment.

XIV.38 The labors of faith lie in how we go, not whence we go?

In certain truth! The God-Emperor crafts the way between cradle and Cathedra to best cast His light upon our souls. We are blessed of all beings in knowing our processional, laid out before us in pennons and prayer. Whether a man is ascendant or damned within the Cathedra of Life's End is upon his faith, his acts, the heed he paid to scripture and his fellows. Did he rise to be a great man in traversing the way clearly marked, or did he fall?