Beyond Kaerograd and the fertile plains, where the northern country rises into the maw of winter, there is a place called Namgorod, which men held for a long while until the holding of it became too hard and they let it go into the wilds. Even in summer, the northern country is no friend to man: the steep, flinty hills, the ragged forests, the deep glens where streams are frozen in their beds for three-quarters of the year. In winter, the north coughs up snow upon the place, as a consumptive coughs up blood, and the region is a mortal enemy to anything warm and alive. Men knew this when they built Namgorod, knew it every winter as they tried to hold on, and when they left it to the ministry of the ice and snows, they understood that winter was its true master.

Tegget came to Namgorod on the eve of glittering winter. He could taste it in the air, like a cold stone in his mouth, and smell its sharp edge. Tegget was a catcher of men, and the northern country sheltered its fair share of outlaws, absconders and fugitives in the summer months, so he knew the trails well enough. But it was six weeks past the end of catching season, and those fugitives that did not intend to die of cold had already tried to flee across the plains: most of them into the waiting clutches of professional men like Tegget.

A catcher of men, especially one so honed and experienced as Tegget, had no business coming to the north so late in the year, but Tegget had good reasons. The bounty was one; more than he could make in three decent seasons. The loan of an expensive, self-heating bodyglove was another. Most of all, it was the nature of the request. By dint of his profession, Tegget was an outsider to the finer echelons of society in Kaerograd, tolerated as a necessary evil by the grandees and nobles of that city. For the Regent himself to make the request, well that was a wonderful thing indeed. Tegget anticipated prestige, an elevation in rank, perhaps even a royal commission. ‘Lowen Tegget, Catcher of Men, by appointment to his Excellency the Regent.’

Tegget worked alone. He had explained this fact to the Regent, and it seemed to suit. The Regent, speaking somewhat indirectly to Tegget, as if a bad odour had invaded the private chambers of the Regency, had emphasised the delicate nature of the matter. It was to be kept ‘close’. If rumours of it got out, Tegget would find his prize money forfeit. Other punishments were hinted at, and stipulations made.

Tegget had never been one for talking about his work. He just did what he did. He imagined that was why the Regent’s people had sourced him. That, and his reputation. Though Tegget didn’t talk about his work, others did, and Lowen Tegget was known

for his wetwork, and the remarkable extent to which he messed people up.

Tegget rode his transport, a fat-wheeled AT-bike, to within a kilometre of Namgorod, then killed the drive and continued on foot. The bike's engine had a mute-shield, which had cost him plenty on the black market, but he didn't want to push his luck. He buckled up his armoured jack, slid his hunting las from the bike's saddle boot, and threw two of his best psyber lures into the air. The metal blades of their wings opened as they ran free, and they circled the treetops with gentle beats. Both of them were small aquila-form: artificial kestrels wrought from steel and compound ceramics. Tegget pressed his left cheekbone, and the occular implant in his left eye-socket began to display, split-screen, the view from the lures.

Namgorod was quiet. Flaking black ruins, the largest a great shell of ribs open to the wind. There was a light dusting of snow on every surface. The sky was hard and dark, like smoked glass and, in the west, the first, bright winter stars had just appeared like lanterns.

'Where are you?' he whispered.

'If I'd–' Pavlov Curtz, Regent of Kaerograd, cleared his throat, trying to compose himself, 'If I'd had some notice of your visit, great lady, I would have prepared a rather more–'

Olga Karamanz held up her hand for silence. 'Do not exercise yourself, Regent. I require very few things of you, and a formal, ceremonial welcome is not one of them.'

Curtz shrugged. 'Forgive me, great lady, but the Cauldrus system is a backwater, most often overlooked. State visits are rare, especially from such an august personage as the Canoness of the Order of the Martyred Lady. The Ecclesiarchy will wish to schedule conference with you, to discuss matters of faith, and the–'

'This is not a state visit,' said the battle-sister standing to the left of the canoness.

'As has been specified,' added the other, waiting by the door, 'this is a private matter.'

Curtz opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, and sat down. The minute they had arrived and been announced, he had realised something was wrong. A canoness like Olga Karamanz did not make an idle visit to a place like Cauldrus Prime. Nor did she come so secretively, hurried in through the back doors of the Regency, attended by just two sisters. There was no entourage, no massed escort. The three women were dressed in veiled black robes, which only slightly betrayed the armour beneath.

From what he could see of Canoness Karamanz's face behind the veil, she seemed surprisingly young. Her features were slim and very fair, almost adolescent in their

purity. He could not guess her age, though her voice was soft and dry as if it was a thousand years old.

‘You know what this concerns?’ she asked.

Curtz nodded. ‘The… uh, the matter of the miscreant.’

The battle-sisters attending the canoness were both considerably taller and more robustly made than the great lady herself. Faces invisible behind the veils depending from their starched black headresses, they stood with their hands clasped in front of them. The canoness had introduced them as Sister Elias and Sister Bernadet, though the Regent had lost track of which was which.

‘The miscreant,’ said Elias or Bernadet.

‘You saw fit to report the incidents discreetly via ecumenical channels,’ said Bernadet or Elias, ‘which tells us you understood the sensitivity.’

‘I… yes,’ said Curtz.

‘Yet you are surprised to see us?’

Curtz cleared his throat again, and rose to his feet. He crossed to the sideboard and retrieved his half-drunk glass of amasec. He had been called away from the end of a trade dinner for this unexpected event. He was still wearing his formal robes and the ridiculously ostentatious badges of the guild and union offices he was patron of. He took a sip and let the sliding warmth of the liquor stiffen his resolve.

‘I expected a response,’ he said. ‘Perhaps an envoy, perhaps even a sister ambassador. Someone to smooth things over and see that things were done properly. Not… not the canoness herself.’

He looked round at them. ‘I’m so sorry, may I offer you a–?’

Olga Karamanz shook her head on behalf of all three of them.

‘You are put out, Regent,’ she said. ‘My apologies. We were already in the vicinity at the request of the Most Holy Ordos. And, well, we want to make sure that this is handled… properly, don’t we? Why don’t you begin by telling me exactly what happened?’

Curtz nodded. He thought, in a sudden, uneasy flash, of Tegget, and wondered if he had done the right thing in hiring him. Throne knew, he had no wish to anger a canoness.

Nor any wish to send a man to his death.

Even a piece of scum like Tegget.

The great hall of Namgorod loomed over him like the bones of a whale. Flakes of snow were falling, silent and soft and almost luminous, out of the night, and the wind had dropped. The air-chill was savage.

Lowen Tegget had known hardship. He was ex-Guard, ex-stormtroop elite. He'd seen some living hells, and dreamt of them still, some nights. This cold was just a trifle.

He moved in through the ruins, all the while rubbing the powercell of his hunting las with his heated glove to keep it lively. There was something here. Signs of heat residue, a cook fire, the gnawed bones of small animals. And something else: a presence, a shadow that lurked just out of reach in the silent ruin.

He knew what he was supposed to be tracking. The fact didn't scare him, but it made him particularly alert. 'The miscreant is a dissembler,' the Regent had said. 'It wants us to think it is something, and it is most certainly not that thing. God-Emperor, Tegget, I'd not send you up there if I thought there was any truth to it. This is a matter of pretence, and blasphemy.'

Blasphemy. That was a word to conjure with.

Namgorod had been the first township built by the settlers when they had reached Cauldrus Prime centuries before. They had raised it here because it was a site adjacent to their initial landing zone. The great hall he was presently creeping through had been built from ribs and girders scavenged from the wrecked colony ship that first winter. Later, the colonists had realised that other parts of the planet offered more decent and habitable conditions, but Namgorod, as the first coming place, had persisted out of respect for a long time, until it had become untenable.

Untenable. Untameable. Such was the northern country. The people of Cauldrus Prime, Tegget's ancestors, had abandoned Namgorod, because it was too wild, too inimical to human life.

Something wild was with him now. He could taste it as surely as he could taste the snow.

He checked the view from the lures. They were circling the hall, their vision boosted by cold-light and night-fibre arrays.

Tegget heard something. A tiny mouse noise in the darkness to his left. He raised the

rifle, panning it slowly.

There was a blink, and his lure-sights went dead. First one, then the other. He tried to re-cue them, but the links were flat. He felt his pulse rate elevate.

Something hit him from behind so hard, so fast, that he had no time to cry out. He saw his rifle spinning in the air. He saw the world upside down as he was somersaulted away from the collision.

He saw blood in the air, jetting arterial blood, and knew it was his own.

‘I strove, more than anything, to protect the reputation of the order,’ Curtz said, resuming his seat. ‘There were three incidents, mass-killings. The perpetrator made a great effort to suggest they were the work of a battle-sister.’

He paused, and looked at the canoness and her guards. ‘A battle-sister of the Order of the Martyred lady,’ he emphasised. ‘A battle-sister… corrupted.’

The three veiled women remained silent.

‘I knew this was impossible,’ Curtz went on. ‘Absolutely impossible. Your kind – forgive me, great lady – your kind are incorruptible. I made a careful study of the archives to reinforce my opinion. History shows us many horrors, but never a battle-sister fallen. That was when I realised it was a sham. Lunacy in fact. I suspected that it was matter of blasphemy. You are no doubt aware that the Pyrus Reach is greatly conflicted of late. Terrible times, and the poison of it, I’m glad to say, is slow to reach us. Sometimes being a backwater has its benefits. I supposed that some miscreant desired to stain the order’s name by committing these crimes, to engender unrest and panic. I sent the reports to alert you to the defamation.’

He paused. Still, the three women remained silent.

‘Now… now, I’m not so sure.’

‘Because?’ asked the canoness.

‘Because you’re here.’

‘What did you do?’ asked Elias or Bernadet.

‘I hired a man. A fellow of decent reputation as a catcher of men. I hired him to hunt down the miscreant, so that the matter might be settled and the good name of the order cleared.’

The canoness rose to her feet. ‘You sent a man after this… as you said… miscreant?’

‘A good man. A capable man.’

‘Regent,’ she said. ‘You have signed his death notice.’

‘I made provisions,’ Curtz said quickly. ‘The man was no fool. Very capable, very sly. He will keep his mouth closed.’

‘Forever,’ said Bernadet or Elias.

‘Now look–’ the Regent began.

‘You look, Regent,’ snapped the canoness. ‘I have to know where the man went, and on what clue. This must be contained.’

‘Are you telling me–’ Curtz began, astonished by the realisation of what they were saying.

‘I am telling you nothing,’ the canoness said. ‘It is better that way. Throne knows, for all of us. Tell me where this man went.’

‘I can do better than that,’ the Regent said, his voice tiny and terrified. ‘I can show you. As one of the terms of his employment, I insisted he carried a tracker.’

‘Report?’ whispered the canoness into her vox. The night was moonless, and flakes of falling snow stuck against the dark gauze of her veil.

‘Trace is clear,’ Battle-sister Elias replied.

‘Advancing,’ voxed Battle-sister Bernadet.

Two of the best, the canoness thought to herself. Bernadet and Elias, two of the most profoundly gifted warriors in the order. They were long since out of sight, but she could picture them. Elias with her storm bolter, Bernadet with her power sword and flamer. Two of the best.

Then again, the canoness thought, Miriael was the best of the best.

The canoness walked down an avenue of black trees through the falling snow, her hand upon the haft of her mace. Her gown was unheated, but the armour beneath it protected her from the hideous cold. This cold has been sent by the Emperor, she reasoned, and thus was mortifying and uplifting.

Her lander had put them down two kilometres from the place called Namgorod. The Regent had begged them to wait until morning, at which time he would have been able to summon a significant force of PDF troopers from the Interior Guard to support them.

Not appropriate. This had to remain a private matter. If anyone found out, if word spread–

Olga Karamanz stiffened in dread. This whole matter was unthinkable. Unbearable. Better it was finished now, quickly, under the silent folds of a bleak winter night. Miriael. Miriael.

They had found the AT-bike up on the track, and followed the tracer signal down towards the ruins. The Regent's man – Tegget – was undoubtedly hours dead, but the tracker had been a smart idea. His corpse might be cooling, but the device was still alive and signalling.

'Something–' Elias voxed.

Then, 'No, nothing. Just a dog-fox. Area's clean.'

Karamanz raised her tracker handset. The signal from the poor unfortunate's body was still clear, and stationary. Ahead, in the ruins of the great hall.

Where are you, Miriael, Karamanz wondered? That wasn't the real question. The real question was: what did they do to you?

What did the vile powers of Chaos manage to do to you when they held you in their clutches? Verdicon. That's where it happened. Miriael Sabathiel, sister superior, had been reported as missing in action during the vicious fighting against the unholy Emperor's Children.

And then this. Back from the dead. Back, but changed. Changed in ways no other Sister of Battle had ever been changed.

Second only to the mighty Astartes, the Sisters of Battle were the most perfect fighting mechanisms of the Imperium of Man. Unlike the Astartes, none of them had ever fallen to corruption. What a trophy for Chaos. What a twisted champion.

'Canoness?' It was Elias.

'Speak, child.'

'The outbuildings are empty. I'm coming west on your flank.'

‘Close in.’ Karamanz drew her mace and ignited it. It hummed blue in the snowy dark. ‘Bernadet?’

‘East of you, approaching.’

The canoness stepped into the great hall. Snow sifted down like flour through the bare rafters, tie-beams salvaged from a long-defunct starship. The trace was just ahead of her now. She paced forward, mace by her side, anticipating the sight of Tegget’s corpse.

There was no corpse. Just a spatter of blood across the black flagstones.

A spatter of blood and small, blinking device…

Karamanz’s mind turned quickly. ‘Beware!’ she voxed.

Her warning came too late for Sister Bernadet. Clambering over the slumped, snow-dusted rubble of the east transept, Bernadet turned and raised her weapons as she heard a whirring. The psyber lure, beak and claws to the fore, whipped down out of the night and punched through her veil, through her face, through her skull. Bernadet staggered, clutching automatically at her ruined head, her discarded sword and flamer bouncing off the loose stones around her. A half-noise burbled out of her ruptured throat.

She fell dead on her face.

Elias heard her fall and ran to her. She was ten paces away when Bernadet’s fallen flamer somehow misfired all by itself. The firestorm hit Elias like a hammer, and burned off her robes, her veil, and the skin of her face. She stumbled, on fire, screaming in fury. She raised her bolter in a hand dribbling with molten fat and tissue.

A las-round, a hot-shot from a hunting weapon, burst her cranium and felled her.

Twisted and still, her corpse continued to burn.

‘Elias? Bernadet? Sisters?’

Silence. The crackle of the dead-link vox. The crackle of the flames. The sigh of the winter wind.

‘Miriael?’

Karamanz turned in a slow, wary circle, her mace ready.

‘Was I so easy to find?’ asked a voice from the dark.

‘Miriael?’

‘Was I so easy to find?’

‘Yes!’ Karamanz hissed.

‘Good.’

‘Miriael, please. I want to help you.’

A shadow disengaged itself from the night. Just a shadow, hunched and puppet-like, its long, shaggy hair backlit by the glow of the snowfall.

‘I knew you would come looking for me,’ the shadow said. ‘I knew you would hunt me forever.’

‘I want to help you.’

The shadow laughed.

‘By the power of the Throne, and the God-Emperor–’ Karamanz began.

‘Shut up! I won’t listen to that any more.’

‘Miriael…’

‘There are so many things I want to do. So many things I need to do, but all the while you are hunting for me, I can’t be free. I needed this.’

‘This?’

‘Oh, great lady, why do you think I made it so easy for you to find me?’

Olga Karamanz froze. Her grip on the haft of her mace tightened.

‘I wanted you to come, so we could be done with this.’

The shadow stepped closer. It wasn’t Miriael. It was a rough-set woodsman in an armoured jack, swaying and pale, wounded. He held a hunting las across his chest, but made no attempt to raise it.

‘Miriael!’

‘My lord Balzaropht has plans for me,’ the hidden voice said. ‘But I can’t accomplish them all the while you’re hounding me. So I called you here, so this could be done with.’

Canoness Olga Karamanz swung around and raised her mace into the third quarter defence. The sword, its blade as bright as the snowlight, was already inside her guard. It ripped through her gown and plate armour, and opened her body to the spine.

She fell, pouring hot blood into the cold floor. Steam rose. Behind her veil, her mouth opened and closed uselessly.

‘Hush,’ said the voice. ‘We’ll speak no more about it.’

‘I’m cold,’ said Lowen Tegget. He sat down, and hunched his head between his knees. He was tired. There was a dreadful stench of blood in the air of the great hall, like hot iron.

‘Cold can be ignored,’ said the shadows.

‘Says you. I’m cut here. You cut me.’

Miriael Sabathiel emerged from the darkness, sword in hand, and bent down beside him. ‘You’ll heal. You’re mine now. Daemon princes sing and my pulse quickens. Soon yours will quicken too.’

‘Throne,’ Tegget sighed. ‘Am I cursed? Have you cursed me?’

‘You were the invitation, Lowen. You helped me defeat my enemies. I’m showing my gratitude by sparing your life… and sharing with you the wonders I’ve seen.’

Tegget groaned.

Miriael Sabathiel straightened up and held out her arm. The two kestrel lures swooped in and perched there. One was dripping with blood.

‘I like you, Lowen. I like your toys. They please me. You could serve me.’

‘How, lady?’

‘Oh, Lowen Tegget. By being you. You are a cunning man. A fine killer. See, tonight you did for two Sisters of Battle. There is nothing you can’t do.’

Tegget smiled and shook his head sadly.

‘I’m just a catcher of men, lady,’ he said.

She reached out her hand and began to stroke his shaggy hair. ‘You’re so much more than that, Lowen,’ she said. ‘You’re my friend, and you’re an instrument now. I’d like you to walk with me and serve at my side.’

He looked up at her, his face pale and frightened. ‘Is this what corruption feels like?’ he asked.

She nodded, still stroking his head.

‘Feels good,’ he admitted. ‘Where will we go?’

‘Ah, now, my little hunter,’ Miriael Sabathiel said. ‘How are you at hunting eldar?’