

The rapid *crack-crack-crack* of bullets impacting the armour of the crawler sang out, loud even against the ever-droning roar of the Eye. Carson threw his carbine over the hood of the vehicle, muzzle pointed at the vague shapes dotting the dune in the distance as he squeezed the trigger. Even through the nightshades protecting his vision from the harsh ever-present sunlight, he could see the puffs where his rounds crashed into the soft sand. The smell of propellant filled his nostrils, bitter and acrid. He welded his cheek to the stock, trying to control his breathing, fighting the adrenaline that flooded his body and made his lungs skip. A wave of rifle fire poured out toward the dune from the hunched shape of Ander's crawler, just ahead in the column. But still their enemy persisted. The stock of his weapon kicked into Carson's shoulder as he squeezed shots, carefully, trying to pick each one. He smiled grimly as one of the shapes buckled and fell.

"Hah, the Belje are running!" Veers crowed over the comm, using a Rimke word for the bandits. Carson could see the cloaked shapes of the Belje as they fled, piling into their scrappy technical, scrambling away, abandoning their fallen in their haste. "Shall we follow?"

"Negative," Anders replied. "Disengage. Move to secure the excavator."

The team moved across the sand, weapons raised, closing the distance between themselves and the gigantic mining vehicle that dominated the horizon ahead of them. Carson could hear the chundering of massive gears as the automated machine dug greedily into the dunes, devouring the sand by the tens of tonnes as it searched for valuable dysevrium. The sun was scorching and he could feel it even through the light, loose-fitting cloak that he and the others wore. His movements were sharp and precise as he moved forward, letting his rifle lead him, his boots sinking into the soft sand.

"Duo-ke belje here, then one more over there". Veers pointed with his rifle toward a bundle of dark cloth with its edges flapping in the desert wind, lying halfway down the dune where it had rolled. Anders nodded, grunting. "Check them."

"Wait for me!" A thin voice came from behind them. A slim man came up from behind the group, his neat combat uniform and pale, clean-shaven face contrasting oddly with the weatherbeaten figures of the contractors. Tobias. A Kompanie man. *Outsider*. The late arrival paused, panting after his struggle with the climb in the soft sand. "Wait – oh!" He surveyed the remnants of the firefight. "Oh. Ah. Well – well done, gentlemen."

Veers had reached the last bundle. Kneeling down, a pistol ready in gloved hand, he pulled the figure's mask away from its face. "A live one, Anders."

A boy's face glared up at them, dark eyes stark against his olive skin. He couldn't have been older than a teenager. Hate and fear burned from the Belje's eyes as he glared at them wordlessly. Carson looked on dispassionately, but put his boot on top of the boy's fallen rifle anyway, keeping it firmly out of his grasp. He noted the brightly coloured decorative braid that the boy had tied around the stock of the rifle. *For good luck*. It obviously hadn't worked. Veers cocked the pistol, placing it against the boy's forehead. The Belje struggled weakly.

"Wait!" Tobias shouted out, "Kompanie policy says – "

Veers turned his head, regarding the company man with barely disguised contempt. Without looking, he pulled the trigger. Even against the droning rumble of the excavator the single gunshot was a

thunderclap, echoing in its finality. The boy's head jolted then fell back, lying still. Carson winced, but said nothing.

"Gods, Veers..." Anders muttered, but didn't move.

Veers rose to his feet, eyes still locked on Tobias who stood motionless in horror, transfixed. Veers stalked toward him. The hulking contractor was already much larger than the little company man, but with every step Veers seemed to get larger and Tobias smaller.

"Policy hey, Kompanie man!" Veers spat, his face inches away now from the other man, so close their nightshades were almost touching, the dark leather of his skin and unkempt beard stark against the milky white of Tobias' cringing face. "Yah, yah, policy, we should all sit down and suck Belje cock so you can go and have another *shareholder meeting*," he sneered, "and tell them all about what good friends you are with the locals."

He stepped back, arms outstretched, embracing the desert that surrounded them for tens of kilometres in every direction – and on every side, the raging storm of the endless hurricane that towered upward into Erichthonius' azure sky. "There is no policy here, there is no Kompanie!"

"There is only the Eye!"