

A Hunter's Absolution**Chapter 1 – The Compound**

CRASH

A black magnebike that had gone out of control with the driver still attached violently slammed into the burning slave den, the blackened remains now providing a morbid wall decoration for the collapsing building. The harrowing melody of blades clashing and bullets tearing into bodies was deafening to the innocents trying to flee, slaves and prisoners. The compound looked like it was being swallowed in a pit of fire, as if a devil had come to pass judgement upon the poor souls taking refuge there.

Well, not exactly a devil.

Smoke billowed in the distance as two dwarves scampered into a small room. The charred, broken door slammed behind them as they rushed to hide under a filthy table. The small wok, resting on a now dead firepit, swung slowly, gently. They desperately tried to stay silent; the screams outside had drowned away into nothingness. As one of the dwarves tried to peek through a hole in the wall to see what was going on, he was met by nothing but smouldering remains.

'Where the fuck is he?' one of the dwarves whispered, shaking uncontrollably whilst clutching his miniature crossbow tightly, as if letting go of it would expose him to what was out there.

'I can't see him,' the other man said, carefully moving away from the hole, being cautious not to make a noise after what they had just witnessed, 'everyone... why everyone? I'd have guessed that Snow was his target, but why did he have to kill the rest of us?' he whispered in a shaky voice.

'Get it fucking together, Sleepy, the others are dead, gone, and if we don't stay quiet, we'll be as well.'

Thud

Footsteps could be heard outside. Determining whether they belonged to the man was impossible, but they were heavy, steady footsteps, with the sickening sound of bone cracking underboot and the squelch of blood that followed. Footsteps not of prey but of a predator. The dwarves looked at the floor, still slick with blood, and looked at each other, almost pleading with each other or for some higher power to save them from their sins. Fires crackled as the remains of the compound outside could be heard crumbling to pieces, as the footsteps outside grew louder.

Thud

They were getting closer to the dwarves hiding place. They clutched their weapons tighter as pure terror drew itself across their faces. But then the footsteps stopped. For however long it was impossible to tell, maybe ten seconds, maybe ten hours. Fear is a useful way to make time incomprehensible for one caught in its claws. The silence became deafening; one of the dwarves, from sheer curiosity, leaned toward the hole in the wall to see if they were safe and if they'd been spared by the predator. Leaning forward ever so gently, he did not see his crossbow coming loose.

As the bow clattered to the floor, a metal arm tore through the wall the dwarves were hiding by and ripped it away with ease, akin to the way one would open a gift. Before the two tiny,

terrified figures stood a man, if a man is what he could be called. Robotic arms and a cybernetic eye integrated into his scarred face, with pitch black armour that had been fused to his skin, covered by a black overcoat not nearly concealing the vast arsenal of weapons adorned beneath. To the dwarves, this being was fear personified.

‘Evening, lads,’ the man jovially chirped as they backed away in terror.

Sleepy hastily reached for his crossbow, and as his hand touched the wooden handle, he froze. He glanced up to see the nano carbon blade protruding from his own skull as blood trickled from his wound to his nose and stained the wood he was clutching so tightly, just before his body shut down and slumped over as the other dwarf looked on, pale with petrification. The man retracted the blade with such force that brains from the dwarf splattered his friend’s face, causing him to freeze in sheer terror and disgust.

‘Right,’ said the man, projecting a wanted dead or alive hoopsters from his metal arm with a few names and faces on it. ‘S. White and seven dwarves whose names I can’t be bothered to read wanted for the crimes of operating a sex trafficking ring, murder, cargo ship robbery and last but not least, adultery. Guess Prince Charming didn’t enjoy the idea of his wife running off with seven men,’ the man chuckled.

‘Please,’ the dwarf pleaded, ‘I never wanted this life. After Doc started sleeping with Snow, we were all pressed into this. We didn’t get a choice. I swear I was always the one who spoke out against it. I wanted an out!’ He yelled, streaming with tears.

The man couldn’t help but find it slightly amusing as he watched the little creature betray his own family, his own kind, in an attempt to save his life. His face could only be described as a mixture of pity and disgust for the little creature.

‘A contract is a contract. I’m not here to pass judgement, only to deal out punishment and as much as I could bring you in alive, it’s easier to transport eight corpses than it is to transport eight prisoners. Either way, 50,000 Lumins is the reward, so I have no incentive to keep you alive.’ The man chuckled.

That pity was soon snuffed out by the dwarf quickly turning around and attempting to break away to freedom. The little man ran for all he was worth.

The fleeing dwarf screamed in pain and immediately felt the cold embrace of the gravel as his body failed shortly after starting to run and seemingly hurled itself to the ground; he glanced down and saw a small hole in the centre of his body. He was unable to move his legs, paralysed from the waist down. The man holstered the still-smoking silver revolver that had shattered his spine and grinned menacingly as he sauntered over the shivering body of the small, terrified man.

‘Bit of an idiotic move to run from a hunter,’ chuckled the man, sadistically enjoying the dwarf’s pain.

As the man held his hand over the dwarf’s head, preparing to finish his assignment, the dwarf made one last struggle to move before succumbing to fate.

‘Fucking hunte..’ the words trailed off as the wrist blade from the man’s metal arm retracted back from the dwarf’s skull.

The man stood and brought his chrome wrist to his mouth.

'Hunter Ares reporting in, S. White gang, contract complete,' he uttered as his cybernetic eye glowed crimson, scanning the burning wreckage for any signs of life he would need to wipe away. None.

Ares turned his back on the mass of fires, confident of another day's work finished, as he mounted his own black and purple magnebike and tore away as the sun rose on the dilapidated city of Chromadawn.

## Chapter 2 – The Cult

'Last call!' A bartender said as he rang a rusted bell, and the patrons of the bar groaned, realising they would have to sober up and face the approaching morning.

'Oi, did you hear me?' He said as he approached the large man slumped against a banister at the end of the bar, 'If you're sober enough to sit upright, you're sober enough to leave. I'm not dragging your big arse out of here.'

Ares looked up at the elderly balding bartender.

'Just taking a quick rest, old man. It's been a long day's work, won't need to kick anyone out.'

The bartender caught a glimpse of Ares' cybernetics and looked shocked.

'You're a hunter, aren't you?' The bartender said cautiously whilst cleaning a tankard, 'What's one of your kind doing here? We're a peaceful lot and have been for a long time. We don't need you abominations here causing mayhem.'

Ares let out a laugh.

'No trouble from me, mate. I'm here on a job, and as of a few hours ago, that was completed. I'm just waiting for payment, then I'll be out of your hair, or lack thereof.'

The bartender grunted something under his breath before returning to serve the final drinks.

The public held a general disdain for hunters, heavily cybernetically enhanced humans who were mainly employed to deal with criminals and beings deemed too much for regular authorities. They were seen by most as former men and women who had given up their humanity for power and didn't have the best track records when it came to using that power. Stories and rumours of hunters tearing through armies for fun were commonplace, be they exaggerated or not, and over the years, a general consensus of fear and disgust harboured toward the hunters had become the accepted perception.

Suddenly the door to the bar slammed open, the burning rays of the risen sun providing a painful and sharp awakening to the half-drunk patrons. A group of men, heavily clad in black armour and carrying a holo projection of a flag with a large eye surrounded by red talons, entered and shut the door behind them.

'We are esteemed agents of the Cult of the Watcher,' the lead man announced, 'we have come to this place to bring the good word of our order and find new recruits to join our ranks. Many of you here have been wasting your lives away serving the interests of Dumas, the current lord of

this land. We are here to offer you real purpose in your miserable lives and join our growing movement.'

Some of those in the bar laughed.

'Piss off!' one man said whilst finishing his drink.

One of the cultists broke formation and approached the man, and as quickly as he could realise what had happened, sliced the hand that was holding his drink off with a fluid motion; the cultist's blade, a kukri with a plasma edge, cauterised the wound as the man fell to the floor screaming in pain. This display of extreme violence shocked and sobered the other people in the bar as they could do nothing but sit in their seats and wait for the cultists to finish their business.

'Fucking cultists,' the bartender mumbled, 'first a hunter and now these clowns.'

The head cultist began to walk around, inspecting the patrons of the bar before noticing Ares.

'You there, you're clearly not one of this usual lot; how about you come with us to our encampment? You're clearly a fighter of some kind, and we need people like you in our ranks.' He said, approaching Ares.

'Think I'll just remain here, waiting for someone.' Ares replied with a stern tone.

The cultist stopped, then turned and signalled to his fellow agent, the one who had just dismembered the previous man who had spoken against them.

The agent, now brandishing a second plasma-edged kukri, approached Ares.

'You sure you want to go ahead with that?' Ares chuckled, his back still turned from the cultists, circling his finger around his now room-temperature drink.

The cultist continued his approach toward the hunter. As he got to within arm's reach of him, Ares ceased his finger movements along the rim of the glass and waited. The cultist again went to swing for the hand of his target, clearly a favoured method of punishment and intimidation. However, as the cultist swung the glowing blade, Ares' hand disappeared so quickly it seemed like a trick of the eye, and whilst the cultist's blade was still above his head, five long claws shot through his body, cleanly piercing his chest and protruding from his back.

The cultists recoiled and readied their weapons as Ares flexed his hand, and the man's body was shredded into multiple pieces. He stood up from his seat as the long claws retracted into his fingers. The hunter, now covered in the blood of the cult agent he had just killed, turned to face the rest as his cybernetic eye scanned them all, looking for weaknesses and preparing for a battle.

'Wait!' The head cultist shouted as the others stopped, looking confused, 'you're a hunter. Your codename is Ares, isn't it?'

'Right on the money, what do you want?' Ares said, his body still in a battle-ready state.

'I believe we're the ones you're waiting for,' The man said as he handed Ares a credit chip.

Ares inserted the chip in a port on his temple, and a holo projection from his forearm showed a transfer of 50,000 Lumins to him. He removed the now spent chip and crushed it underfoot before once again turning to face the cultists.

'Whilst we don't want to push you into our services, we do actually need you to come with us, our chapter leader is the one who hired you for that White job, and he wants to hire you for another.' The head cultist said, the other members looking at each other, nervously still clutching their weapons.

The bar turned to look at the hunter, their disgust amplified by the fact that he had been working for the cult that had just brought such violence to their doorstep.

'I don't tend to do second jobs for people, especially nutcase cultists,' Ares laughed, 'no offence.'

The cultists looked at him with hatred.

'Be that as it may, our chapter leader is willing to offer you 250,000 for this job, five times what he paid you before.' The head cultist said, hoping to hook the hunter and prevent more bloodshed.

'Quarter of a million,' Ares said with new interest, 'must be a dangerous job, why me?'

'It's a simple extraction, but the nature of it is something we can't have regular agents doing, and your reputation as a hunter is well known. We need someone with your skillset and cybernetics to get the job done; we need you to come with us so our chapter leader can fully explain the job to you in person.'

Ares considered it for a bit before deciding the money alone would be worth the risk. No regular human would try to double-cross him.

'All right then,' Ares said, 'got yourself a deal, which way is the camp?'

The cultists all breathed a sigh of relief as they would not have to face this juggernaut of a man. This relief was mirrored by the patrons of the bar as they would not have to worry about being caught in the crossfire.

'Just outside of the city limits,' the head cultist said, 'it's a temporary encampment whilst we push forward into the city itself. Your clearing out of the White gang was needed for us to expand our influence around the city.'

Ares' coat billowed in the wind as he exited the bar and approached his magnebike, the cultists, in turn, approached the much larger magnebikes they had arrived in, signalling for Ares to follow them as they left the bar.

Inside, the bartender huffed as he began to clean up the viscera that remained.

### **Chapter 3 - A New Contract**

As the bikes pulled up to the cult encampment, Ares took a moment to observe his surroundings. It was an understatement to call this a temporary settlement; many large tents had been set up, housing seemingly hundreds of cultists, with automated turrets guarding the perimeters. A large fire burned in the centre of the camp, with the cult's flag flying high above it. Just above the fire at the bottom of the flagpole were the charred remains of people, presumably those who had betrayed or gone against the cult in some way.

Ares followed the group he had arrived with into a large tent filled with older men in robes adorning the same symbol from the flag standing around a table with a large holomap of the region

displayed atop it before being brought before a well-built man with jet-black hair and a cybernetic prosthetic where his mouth had once been.

‘This is the one?’ The man said, his voice a deep, distorted groan coming from his prosthetic.

‘Yes, Elder Ballard,’ the head cultist said, ‘we had some trouble at the bar we got him from, though Agent Junji is dead.’

‘Was he the instigator of the conflict?’ Said Ballard.

‘Yes.’

‘Then our friend here has done nothing except defend himself, begone now.’

‘Yes, Elder Ballard.’

The other cultists from the group left the tent, clearly angry at the decision made by the elder.

‘I’ve requested you here because I require you for a special kind of extraction job, hunter.’ The elder continued, walking around the map table.

‘So I’ve heard, I’ve also heard you’re offering a pretty penny for my services.’

‘Yes, 50,000 now and the other 200,000 upon completion of the job, you see something was stolen from me, and I need it back; what do you know of manticores?’ The elder stopped in his tracks.

‘Lion scorpion human hybrids said to be born when a sinner’s soul is rejected from the afterlife, very hard to kill,’ Ares replied, realising what his target was.

‘Correct, the item I need you to extract was stolen by a traitor within my own chapter, we tracked her to a mantichore cave where she entered to hide, but we suspect she was killed by the mantichore. The item she stole, contained in a silver box, is still in there, or so we believe.’

‘You need me to kill the mantichore and retrieve whatever treasure is in that cave?’ Ares sighed.

‘Correct.’

‘Well,’ Ares said, ‘where’s this cave?’