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WARHAMMER
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THE BLOODIED ROSE

DANIE WARE

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THE BLOODIED ROSE

DANIE WARE



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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of His inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that He may never truly die.

Yet even in His deathless state, the Emperor continues His eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in His name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

CHAPTER ONE

The things were still out there.

On the altar steps, Sister Felicity stood waiting for them. Her red armour was stained with gore, her black-and-white cloak in tatters. At one hip rested her now-empty bolter, at the other, her silent chainsword.

A small, upright figure in the heart of the broken cathedral, Felicity stood alone.

Before her, scattered about the cathedral nave, the tech-priest's servitors lay dead, their haphazard defence overwhelmed, their repairs all brought to an unready end. Jencir had commanded them to protect, and they had done so with utter brutality, hurling rubble and using their mechanised limbs to horrific effect – yet the incoming numbers had just been too many. Overcome by the rising tide, they had fallen as they had fought – mindless to the last.

In a ruined state, around the base of the steps, lay the five Sisters of Felicity's squad, their last stand thrown down. They too had fallen fighting, blade and bolter, fist and faith, savage to the last woman.

In her head, she bade them farewell: *blessed be their memories*. She would not be able to give them their Last Rites, but they had perished with courage, and they stood now at the hand of the Emperor.

With them lay the tech-priest Jencir, his back ripped open as he'd tried to flee – not an act of cowardice, but a failed attempt to reach the exterior vox-transmitters. And finally, slumped against the ruined wall, the missionary Lyconides was too broken to stand, his last breaths now rasping bloody, his lasrifle still gripped in his hand. His other hand was in his lap, as if trying to stuff his steaming bowels back into his belly.

She respected the man's courage – he was no soldier, but he'd given his best.

As Felicity listened, his final prayer drifted like a ghost across the emptiness,

and was gone.

'Requiescet in lumine suo,' she whispered softly. *Rest in His Light.*

The missionary toppled over sideways and lay still.

Down in the nave, the things yammered.

They were coming closer now, skulking and sneaking – she could hear their claws scraping on the ancient stone. They were circling round to her sides, lurking in the hot, ruined darkness of transept and cloister. She could feel them pacing, feel their presence like a crawl of sweat across her skin. She didn't know if they were taunting her, waiting to see if she would falter, or if they were simply awaiting commands – but she knew that there were dozens of them.

Hundreds.

She drew the chainsword.

If she stood fast against the beasts' onslaught, she thought, she may yet get a strike at their master...

Before she died.

Slowly, Felicity walked up the final steps. She looked back at the fallen Jencir, his eye-clusters and mechadendrites hanging damaged and broken, his red Mechanicus cloak spread about him like a pool of blood.

She reached the high altar, and stopped before the final step.

Above her, the great window was missing, fallen from its stone frame thousands of years before; the new electro-candles, bought as a promise of reconsecration, burned with a tiny and defiant light. Despite the creatures behind her, she took a moment to bend one knee, her free hand tracing the fleur-de-lys on the front of her armour.

'A morte perpetua. Domine, libra nos.'

And then she stood up.

And turned around.

The Sisters had not known.

Felicity's directive had come from Ophelia VII, direct from the canoness of her Order, Ianthe herself – and she and her squad had been sent all the way across the segmentum to this tiny world, this sweat of overgrowth and jungle. The previous deployment of Sisters had declared the location secure – they'd driven back the marauding orks, and had cleared the area enough to allow the tech-priest in. Felicity had come as security, and – more importantly – to ensure that the cathedral stayed within the ownership of the Order of the Bloody Rose, and of the Convent Sanctorum.

An icon of Saint Mina, or so it was rumoured, still lay within this building – and her Order were not about to relinquish it.

But their restoration had been interrupted.

Jencir had raised the alarm – his deployed servitors, seeking to understand the extent of the repair, had ventured into the crypts. They'd detected movement, and the Sisters had gone down on reconnaissance.

The first encounter had been small, and easily defeated.

But they'd had no time. Even as they'd regrouped, taken a tactical defence position at the head of the crypt's steps, more of the creatures had come.

And then more.

A welter of horrors, surging up from the depths. The servitors had been overcome in moments; the incoming beasts had seethed like nightmares, like a surge of teeth and blood. Outnumbered, surrounded, the Sisters had been cut off from their makeshift, modular habitations, and from any hope of off-planet communication.

They'd done the only thing they could – they'd fought back. They'd retreated, defended the altar with every prayer, with every breath, with every last expended round... and they'd *sung* with the fury of it, their voices raised to the cathedral's roofless, ruinous silence.

But the things had just kept coming, mindless and slaving, attacking from every angle. Krak grenades had slain hundreds of them, brought walls down in cascading rumbles of broken stone; the creatures hadn't cared. Felicity had seen her squad fight and fall, one after another, had watched the things dismember them, watched the creatures drag her Sisters' limbs away in their teeth and worry at them, gnawing on them like old bones. They'd scattered the women's remains in some deliberate pattern, some vile act of blasphemous worship.

It was too hot in here, close and suffocatingly still. Under her blood-scarlet armour, sweat slid down her spine. Her gauntlet tightened on the hilt of her still-silent chainsword.

Noli timere, she told them silently. *I do not fear you.*

Felicity did not know why she still stood while the others had all perished, but she suspected that the things had some greater purpose for her, more than just their thirst for her life.

Calmly, she recited the hymnal.

'That Thou wouldst bring them only death,

That Thou shouldst spare none,

That Thou shouldst pardon none

We beseech Thee, destroy them.

And the creatures heard.

They were creeping into view, now, letting her see them. They came down the aisle, and around the bases of the headless pillars; they rose up over the rubble like the slow advance of some thick, red tide. They came patiently this time, almost as if they savoured it; they came sniffing and snarling and licking, their long teeth bared and their spiked shoulders slinking low.

They were taunting her, and she knew it.

She raised her blade. She wanted to go down there, punish them for the deaths of her Sisters; she wanted to hack them to gobbets, pick them up and throw them against the walls, slam them into the cracked and weed-grown floor until they howled in pain and their bones broke and shattered—

But she was the Emperor's Daughter and her thoughts were clear.

She stood where she was, His light at her back.

The things came on, closer, closer. Their eyes were sharp as fangs, yellow and glinting. They reached the foot of the altar steps, and more and more came in behind them until the whole floor of the cathedral was alive, a writhing mass of red and glistening bodies.

With a rasping snarl, she started the chainsword. The sudden roar echoed through the building, and the things leapt forwards as if goaded. They bounded up the steps, baying with impatience, jumping for her throat.

'Mori blasphemous fui!'

Die, blasphemer!

She cut the first two clean in half, caught another on the backswing and sent it flying, its ribs half pulled from its body. Blood slicked her already-red armour. They were all round her in moments, worrying at her cloak, their teeth and claws scraping over ceramite and plasteel. She kicked with her boots, hitting skulls and spines; the things snarled and yelped. Her free hand grabbed a leaping creature; she snapped its neck with a jerk of her wrist and threw it aside.

The chainsword rasped its way through more.

Her blood and voice *sang*.

But still, they just kept coming. The cathedral was full of them, the whole floor rippling with spike-shouldered motion. They surged round her to get at Lyconides, and at the remains of the tech-priest. They threw themselves at her bodily, one after another, trying to knock her from her feet. She fought them off with knees and elbows and head-butts; she sawed into their red flesh, she kicked and stamped at them. Her free hand grabbed them by their collars and tossed

them aside. But they had no regard for their own lives; they were driven by a bloodlust that burned from their skin.

Ten more died, exploding into mist and gore.

Twenty.

Twenty-five.

They just kept coming.

Piles of crippled creatures grew around her, slowing their advance. One sank its teeth into her vambrace and hung from her forearm, the weight dragging at her shoulder. But she was still fighting, still singing the words of the hymnal, still defiant and exultant, still burning with her faith that was every bit as powerful as their craving for blood—

They stopped.

She staggered, suddenly bereft of resistance. The one on her arm hung limp; she had no recollection of having struck it. She sawed it off at the neck, watching the body detonate before it hit the floor.

Recoiling almost reluctantly, the things shrank away. They growled at her, baring gore-smeared, yellow teeth. Coiling like curs, they slunk to the bottom of the steps and then stayed there, snapping at each other and pacing, restless.

They watched her as they did so, their eyes burning.

Felicity felt a rush of pure zeal; the Emperor was with her. She was still alive, still on her feet, still fighting. Her armour was scarred but intact.

And she was still singing, her voice loud in the vox though there was no one left to hear it.

But her discipline was strong – this was not victory, not yet. Those hounds were not beaten, they were waiting for something. She'd proven that she could best them, and they'd been called off...

By something bigger.

By something that wanted to face her itself.

Not victory – but perhaps the single highest purpose of her life.

Felicity was a Sister Superior of the Order of the Bloody Rose, here to reclaim this cathedral in the name of Saint Mina, and of the God-Emperor Himself.

She had failed.

Nevertheless, her final task was clear.

Her bloody chainsword in one hand, she laid the other on the very last of her krak grenades.

Whatever this warp-spawned horror may be, it did not daunt her. And she would take it down as she offered her life to the Emperor.

Defended by the high walls of the Convent Sanctorum, Sister Superior Augusta wore her padded scarlet underarmour and a chasuble of black and white. Her steel-grey bob of hair fell forwards over her face as she bowed her head. Murmuring the Litany of Cleansing, she knelt upon the cold stone floor of her chamber, and she cleared her mind, her soul and her heart.

Augusta was a warrior, a Daughter of the Emperor and the fighting fist of His Imperial Creed – but these ritual moments were just as sacred as the bloodshed and the battlefield.

On the floor before her, laid out on its familiar red cloth, was her Sabbat-pattern ceramite armour, each piece positioned correctly, as illustrated in The Accords of Deacis VI. Her chainsword, stilled and silent, lay down one edge; her bolter, stripped and cleaned, on the other. The arrangement was as much a part of her as her litanies and the fleur-de-lys tattoo upon her cheek.

Coloured light tumbled from her tiny, narrow window, catching the scarlet curve of her helmet and making it shine.

It was dawn, and this was Lauds, and the ritual that came with each morning.

She recited, *'Et promissa – daturum adversus vires hostium Arma omnium qui oderunt nos.'*

He promised that He would grant us strength to face our enemies, the weapons of all who hate us.

As she intoned the words, she picked up the armour, piece by piece. She checked its fastenings, its purity seals, its strength and integrity; she studied it for damage, for cracks and dents, for uncleaned bloodstains.

A Sister's wargear was her second skin – one of the first battle-lessons Augusta had ever learned. 'Every Sister walks with the Emperor,' her tutor had told her, many years before. 'But she must also depend on three things – her armour, her weapons, and her Sisters that surround her'.

It was a lesson that Augusta had never forgotten.

Continuing her recitation, she picked up her vambrace to check its inbuilt chrono-compass, her pauldrons, and then her breastplate to examine its semi-hidden fleur-de-lys blade. Then she laid the last piece back upon the cloth and sat back on her heels, head bowed.

A familiar, armoured footstep sounded at the chamber doorway. Without turning, Augusta knew who it was, standing in the outer cloister and waiting for her to finish her morning devotions.

'Sister Superior,' said Sister Jatoya respectfully, as Augusta raised her head. 'I did not wish to interrupt.'

In one smooth move, Augusta came to her feet and turned around.

Her second-in-command stood waiting in the cloisters' biolume, her head bare, her helm upturned under her arm. Her dark skin gleamed, but there was expectation in her stance – she was here with a request.

Or an order.

‘You’re early,’ Augusta said. ‘Do you not have a class this morning?’

‘Aye,’ Jatoya said. ‘Teaching the schola’s novices the finer tricks of open-handed combat.’ She gave a faint smile, and the light from the window lit her face with the reflection of the Saint, and with the deep colours of the Bloody Rose. ‘But Canoness Ianthe has requested our presence, Sister. When our devotions are done, we’re to report to the Order chapel.’

A rush flickered through Augusta’s skin. ‘Do you know why?’

‘No.’ Jatoya shook her head. ‘I’m not privy to such knowledge, and the servitor was little help.’ The smile spread, then faded. ‘But for the summons to come before the morning begins...’

Jatoya let the implication speak for itself. A personal summons from Canoness Ianthe was rare – in twenty years, half of them as the Sister Superior of her squad, Augusta had responded to maybe a dozen... and every one of them a call to war.

The rush grew stronger, but it was instinctive, recognisable. It was the touch of her faith, that so-familiar flare of passion and hope.

She looked up at the Saint in the window, at the holy light that haloed her stern, sword-bearing form, and gave a moment of thanks.

Jatoya said softly, her tone amused, ‘I feel the nature of our devotions is about to change, Sister.’

It wasn’t Jatoya’s place to speculate – but the two women had known each other for more than a decade. They’d stood side by side against the orks on Lautis, the aeldari at Mis’bah, the tyrannid invasion at the war-ravaged cities of Yulzond Cross. The trust between them was battle-honed, and strong.

‘You may be right.’ Augusta began to pick up her armour, donning it piece-by-piece – breast- and back-plate, cuisses, greaves. She closed her gorget around her throat, slung her blade at her hip, picked up her bolter and snicked the sight and magazine back into place. Then she opened the breech, sighted briefly down the barrel, and closed it again.

‘Very well,’ she said, holstering the bolter and picking up her helmet. ‘It would hardly do to keep the canoness waiting.’

They walked through the cloisters together, the huge drop of the convent's outer walls to one side, the black rise of the Hallowed Spire to the other. The great, stained-glassaic windows ran with rain, and the blur of starships – the war vessels of the Imperium, the cargo and transport ships of the Ecclesiarchy – moved across them like shadows.

The Chapel of Saint Mina was a later addition to the Convent Sanctorum, built by Deacis VI some two and a half thousand years after the ascension of Sebastian Thor. The Order of the Bloody Rose was young, but as warlike as its Saint had been, and no less militant.

Walking past the votive candles and the floating cherubim, past the statues of the Saints and the engraved prayers, Augusta murmured the Litany of Mettle like a reflex, words of hope and strength.

Beside her, Jatoya echoed each line.

Age and faith surrounded them. Since the days of Thor himself, the Sisters of Battle had carried the flame of their devotion to all corners of the galaxy, had waged a ceaseless war against the Emperor's foes – every witch, every mutant, every heretic, every xenos, every trace of Chaos wherever it could be found.

As if eager, Augusta's sword rattled against her thigh. She placed her hand on the pommel. Her squad been cooling their heels in the convent for almost a month – studying, practising, teaching the arts of war to their less experienced Sisters.

It was rare for a veteran of Augusta's rank to be at rest for this long, and peace was not in her nature. She missed praising the Emperor with bolter and blade.

From the convent, voices began the morning hymnal, the verses immediately lifting into crystal-pure, four-part harmony.

Gooseflesh prickled down Augusta's arms.

Jatoya said softly, 'I will be glad if this hiatus is at an end. By Dominica's eyes, if I have to spend another evening playing Tall Card...'

'Only because Sister Caia always wins.' Augusta chuckled, but briefly. 'But beware, Sister Militant. You may say those words to me, but in the presence of the canoness, you will show the proper respect.'

'Aye,' Jatoya agreed. 'I understand.'

She was nervous, Augusta realised – curious, as Jatoya had never once shown fear in the face of an enemy.

'But...'

Jatoya made a final comment as they neared the chapel doors. 'Tell me you don't long for a new mission.'

They knew each other too well, and Augusta did not need to speak her answer

aloud.

CHAPTER TWO

The heavy doors creaked, loud as a declaration, and the servitor clicked as it checked and reported their presence.

Ignoring it, Augusta paused in the open doorway, a draught stealing over her armour.

The chapel seemed empty.

It rose before the Sisters in a long hollow of pale grey, pillared and chill. Twin lines of banners, red and black and white, depicted the fleur-de-lys and the Bloody Rose of their Order. At its far end, flooding its emptiness with light, the great window portrayed the Emperor Himself, His gauntleted hands gripping the hilt of a huge, upturned blade. Sol rose behind Him, haloing Him in wonder, and the star's bright yellow illumination slanted all the way down through the nave, and warmed the walk to His feet.

Electro-candles burned upon the altar, outshone by His Light.

In two decades of service, Augusta still could not enter this building without a catch in her throat.

She lowered her gaze and murmured a prayer. She heard Jatoya again echo her words.

'Sister Superior, Sister Militant.' One of Ianthe's novitiates, robed in grey and her blonde head down, had appeared soundlessly beside them. The girl was flanked by two more servitors, each of whom carried a wide brass tray. Observing the proper respect, both women relinquished their helmets, then unclipped their bolters and laid them aside. More slowly, Augusta drew her blade and placed it, too, within the servitors' care.

She felt bereft without her weapons, but you did not enter the chapel bearing arms.

The servitors retreated.

‘In the name of Saint Mina and the Golden Throne,’ Augusta said. ‘We are the willing daughters of the God-Emperor. We come at His command, and to do His bidding.’

‘The canoness is waiting for you, Sisters,’ the novitiate said. ‘Come.’

She beckoned, and the two women followed her up towards the chancel. They passed beneath the organ’s lofty hollow, the tall lines of brass pipes that rose glittering towards the vaulted roof. They passed beneath the armoured statue of Saint Mina herself, her sword at her hip. From the window, Sol’s yellow illumination brought a touch of gentleness to her austere features.

They came to the foot of the altar steps.

Here, both women dropped to one knee and traced out the lines of the fleur-de-llys on their armour. Then they rose back to their feet and stood smoothly at ease, feet apart, hands behind their backs, their chins lifted and their heads bared to the light.

At the foot of the pulpit, Canoness Ianthe was waiting for them.

‘Your eminence,’ Augusta said. ‘You wished our presence.’

The canoness said nothing. Tall and pale and bone-lean, her chill gaze raked both women head to foot.

‘I did,’ she said, when her examination was complete.

Neither Sister reacted. Ianthe was a stern disciplinarian who kept her Order under tight control – and they both knew when not to speak.

She snapped a command, and both women stamped to attention, hands to their sides, feet together. She nodded at their efficiency. Her steps quiet, she stopped before them, hair ice-white, her face lined and her tattoo faded to blue with her age. She inspected their wargear as if they stood upon a parade ground, her gaze pausing on the multiple beads on Augusta’s chaplet – her many medals of merit. Augusta had faced foes across every segmentum of the galaxy, and had never once flinched from the fight.

Both women continued to stare at the steps.

‘At ease,’ Ianthe said at last.

With a simultaneous stamp, they returned to their original stance.

‘Sister Superior.’ The canoness’ words seemed like an announcement. ‘Sister Militant.’ She paced before them, her rigidity uncompromised. ‘I understand that you are both becoming...’ she spun on her heel, ‘... restless... with your studies.’

‘Yes, milady.’ Augusta answered honestly, though her gaze didn’t waver. ‘We

miss the hymns of the battlefield.’

‘I have some sympathy with your agitation, Sisters.’ Ianthe spun back again, and nodded at them, her face almost smiling. ‘These walls are holy and no foe would dare assail them. Yet it is a Sister’s place to hunt and slay the foes of the Light, wherever they may be found.’ She stopped, eyeing Jatoya, the moment of amusement gone. ‘But I take it that you comprehend your hiatus?’

‘Yes, milady.’ Augusta said. ‘We have a new Sister in our squad, replacing Sister Kimura. Blessed be her memory.’

‘Blessed be her memory.’

The litany was returned, and all three women observed a moment’s quiet.

Ianthe said, ‘Certainly, you must be familiar with your new recruit.’ Something in her voice seemed to hint that Augusta had missed the point, but she went on, ‘You must trust her with your lives, know that you can rely upon her, know that she will praise the Emperor fearlessly, with battle, blade and bolter, just as you do.’ She spun, paced again. ‘You need to know her as well as you know all your squad.’

‘Yes, milady,’ Augusta said. ‘Sister Akemi is young but wise. Her skills are extensive. And this hiatus has enabled her, and us, to learn a great deal about each other.’

‘You say “wise”, not “strong”.’ Ianthe paused, looking from one face to the other. ‘Do you consider her battle-ready, Sister Superior?’

Augusta knew her canoness well enough to realise that the question was a test in itself – an examination of her expertise, and of her knowledge of her squad. If she answered ‘yes’ simply to secure a new mission and to bring their hiatus to an end then she was not worthy of her command.

But Augusta had long experience – she had been tested before and would be tested again. She answered, evenly, ‘I judge her battle-ready, milady. She shows both strength and insight. Sometimes the latter can be a strength of its own.’

‘Just so,’ Ianthe agreed. ‘And you, Sister Militant?’

Jatoya answered, ‘I, too, would trust her with my life. She is a worthy addition to the squad.’

‘Good.’ Ianthe said, nodding again. She resumed her pacing. Despite the location, the canoness wore her armour like a confrontation, like some constant challenge – and her own numerous merits told tales of that challenge fulfilled. Ianthe was a formidable warrior, and not one of her Order would question her.

‘Then, Sisters,’ she said, ‘I have some news for you – perhaps news you will even welcome.’ She spun on her heel and paused in front of them. ‘Your hiatus

has reached its end. I have a mission for you that may test even your...' she glanced at Augusta, '...considerable mettle.'

The last words were faintly edged; they carried implications that Augusta didn't quite follow. 'Milady?'

The canoness gave a faint, humourless smile, and continued her pacing, making them wait. At last she said, 'How well do you remember Sister Superior Felicity Albani?'

Felicity!

The name was like a shock – sudden and unexpected. Augusta knew Felicity, had known her for years. She remembered the woman from the schola, small and dark and determined, and one of the single finest swordswomen that the Order had ever seen.

Carefully, she said, 'I know Sister Felicity well, milady. We studied together.' She paused, catching up with the implications, and then said, 'And she commanded the squad—'

'That took your place. Upon *Lautis*.' All signs of levity gone, Ianthe turned to face them and stopped dead, her hands behind her back. Her tone was cold, now. The light from the window made her red shoulders gleam.

Caught, uncomprehending, Augusta could only stare straight ahead and say, 'Yes, milady.'

'The world,' the canoness continued, 'which you and your squad had reported *secure*.'

The word was an outright accusation. Augusta felt Jatoya almost flinch, but both Sisters held themselves still.

'Yes, milady.'

Ianthe came forwards, glared into Augusta's face.

She went on, 'In your final report, you declared that the ork tribes upon Lautis had been slain or broken, and that the area was secure enough for the Adeptus Mechanicus to begin their analysis – and repair – of the discovered cathedral. Do you *recall* this report, Sister Superior?'

Still staring straight ahead, Augusta said, 'Yes, milady.'

The canoness continued to glare. 'You slew the ork warlord?'

'Not I, milady,' Augusta told her. 'The warlord was slain by Sister Viola Taenaris.'

'But the warlord was slain by your squad?'

'Yes, milady.'

'And with the beast dead,' Ianthe said, 'you considered the task completed, did

you *not?*'

'No, milady,' Augusta said. Her voice was level, betraying nothing. Yet the light from the window seemed too bright; she could not have raised her gaze to Him even if she'd been permitted. Instead, she offered the contents of her report. 'After the death of the warlord, we remained upon Lautis for fifty-seven days. We sought, and discovered, the landing point and the established base of the Crossed Axe ork tribe. Without strong leadership, we found them scattered and easy to defeat—'

'That was not the question, Sister.' With an inhalation like annoyance, Ianthe resumed her pacing. Her shadow moved across the floor like an accusation. 'I'm asking you whether the area was, indeed, secure.'

'To my knowledge, milady,' Augusta said, 'the area was secure.'

Ianthe continued to watch them, narrow-eyed and gauging. Above, the cherubim circled as if they were recording every word, preserving the data for the Order's records.

An error, never to be forgotten.

The canoness said, 'As of Compline yesterday, we failed to receive Sister Felicity's regular report – and all our subsequent attempts to reach her have found only static. It has been seven days since any communications have come to us from Lautis. Attempts by the Adeptus Mechanicus to reach Jencir have been likewise unsuccessful.'

Prevented by stern discipline from doing anything else, Augusta waited for the canoness to keep speaking.

'I need,' Ianthe said, 'your assurance that your reconnaissance was thorough. That there was no ork, or xenos, or taint of Chaos, remaining upon Lautis when Sister Felicity was despatched to take your *place*.' The lash of her anger was strong, now. 'Because if I discover that you were in error, Sisters, I will see you *both* among the Repentia.' She had stopped again, her red shoulders seeming to fill the grey space of the chancel. 'Do I make myself clear?'

'I gave the order, milady,' Augusta said. Her mind recalled the cathedral ruins upon Lautis, the battle with the orks, the sweaty heat of the jungle-marsh and the poverty of the townspeople. 'Sister Jatoya is blamele—'

'Silence.' The word was not loud, but it brought Augusta to an immediate halt. The canoness flexed on her toes, her armour creaking. She said, 'I understand that you do not always insist upon your squad's... strictest discipline, Sister Superior. Am I correct?'

'Milady,' Augusta said. 'Upon the battlefield, our discipline and unity are

without question. And, as it was my decision to execute the missionary Tanichus for his deception of the Adepta Sororitas, so it was my decision to declare the Lautis cathedral secure. Sister Jatoya is blameless in this.'

The canoness said nothing; she seemed to be considering. Above them, the Emperor watched, seeing all.

'Very well,' Ianthe said, at last. She gestured at the novitiate, who scurried for the doors. The girl's place was taken by one of the servitors, who offered the canoness a data-slate.

'Stand easy,' she said, allowing both women to relax. She scrolled through the data, then said, 'Sisters, your service records are flawless, both of you. You've served Throne and Emperor with courage and faith for more than thirty years between you, and I've seen you both grow from girlhood into warriors of whom I am extremely proud. But this...' she brandished the slate, its surface glittering, '...this is Sister Felicity's final report. She states that their base had been established, their perimeter defences set up. She states that the missionary Lyconides had made beneficial contact with the local town, and that the reconstructive assessment of the cathedral was commencing on schedule. The Adeptus Mechanicus have released information which corroborates this, and they add that the tech-priest's servitors had commenced the initial works.' Ianthe looked up, her expression cold. A warrior to her core, Augusta had little patience for politics, but she had learned at the schola that there was a strong and long-term bond between the followers of Saint Mina and the Adeptus Mechanicus.

'Something has happened to them, Sister Superior,' the canoness said. 'Whether an electromagnetic storm has damaged the transmitters, or whether an unseen foe has arisen, we do not know.'

Jatoya said, 'Permission to speak, milady.'

'Granted.'

'Is there still a ship in orbit?'

'There is not,' Ianthe said. 'The *Tukril*, the ship of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and its escort, the Imperial warship *Kyrus*, have already returned to Mars, carrying requests for Jencir's additional supplies. They're not due back into Lautis' orbit for another eighty-two days.'

'And you want us to go with them.' Augusta spoke the understanding aloud. 'Milady.'

Ianthe smiled at her, her expression cold.

'No, Sister Superior, I do not.' The words were final, icy. 'The Adeptus Mechanicus cannot risk more resources on a world so bereft of either wealth or

merit – not until their security is assured.’ Her tone was razor sharp. ‘Sisters, you will secure the area. And, this time, without a *mistake*.’

Augusta still stared straight ahead, though she felt the Emperor’s Light above her, His gaze that saw all. The implication was clear: if something had happened to Felicity’s squad, then she, Augusta, was responsible – by accident, by omission, by inadequate information – and the standing of her entire Order had suffered because of it.

Her squad were being sent to Lautis not because of their experience or their efficiency but to rectify that error, and to cleanse the name of the Order of the Bloody Rose.

She felt Jatoya flick her a tiny, sideways glance, and realised that her second-in-command had understood the same thing.

‘Of course, milady,’ Augusta said, raising her chin. ‘This is my responsibility, and I will take it willingly upon my shoulders.’

‘I’m glad you see this my way, Sisters,’ Ianthe commented dryly. ‘Very well then. Muster your squad, Augusta. Report to the docking bay for Matins tomorrow morning.’ She held up the data-slate. ‘And may I suggest you take the intervening time to study Felicity’s report and the information offered by the Adeptus Mechanicus. Memorise the maps, Sisters. You will be needing them.’

‘Yes, milady.’ The Sisters responded together, watching the servitors with their brass trays as they whirred down towards the doorway.

‘Very well then,’ Ianthe said. ‘You are dismissed.’

Both Sisters came back to attention, stamped a smart about-turn and marched back down the aisle. Above them, the floating cherubim watched them go, their cold, augmetic gazes recording every step.

‘Lautis?’ Sister Viola’s freckled face showed pure surprise. ‘Again?’

The squad were gathered round a small table in the refectory, a votive candle flickering at its centre to which to offer Grace. Augusta had called them for a briefing before they attended midday prayers and then went back to their respective classes.

‘Be mindful, Sister,’ Augusta told her. ‘This is not just a reconnaissance mission. The honour of our Order is in jeopardy.’

Viola grinned. ‘But – we get to kill more greenskins?’

Augusta checked a sigh. The squad’s best shot, and field-promoted to the use of its thrice-blessed heavy bolter, Viola had returned from Lautis with a foolhardy streak that verged on overconfidence. She had never questioned her orders, nor

taken an uncalled-for initiative, but sometimes Augusta wondered if she had been entirely ready for the advancement.

‘Lautis is at the outermost edge of the segmentum,’ Augusta reminded her. ‘We may find bigger things than orks.’

Viola’s hand strayed to her hip, and found her empty holster. Unlike the bolters of her Sisters, her own weapon was too bulky – and too sacred – to be casually carried. She rattled her fingertips in annoyance.

Caia and Melia, one pale and with hair like bronze, the other dusky-skinned and dark-eyed, exchanged a glance. As close as blood-kin, they had come up through the schola together and had fought under Augusta’s command for almost as long as Jatoya.

‘May I say something, Sister?’ The squad’s newest member, Sister Akemi, still spoke with a slight hesitation, her novitiate habits hard to leave behind.

‘Of course.’

‘I’ve spent many years studying.’ Her eyes darted from face to face with a faint nervousness. ‘And I know that Lautis has little resource. Explorations onto its moon have found promethium deposits, but nothing worth the expense of mining. As a world, it has little or no value—’

‘It has the kynx and lho-leaf that brought the orks in the first place,’ Melia commented. Caia chuckled.

Augusta was not amused. ‘All the more reason to be wary,’ she said. ‘If something does dwell upon Lautis – and that something has faced or defeated Felicity Albani – then we will need to be on our guard.’ Her gaze travelled sternly round her squad.

‘My apologies, Sister Superior,’ Melia said. ‘I fear this rest-interval has made me cranky.’

‘That will be rectified soon enough,’ Augusta told her, with a hint of amusement. She pushed back her chair with a loud scrape and stood up. ‘Pre-dawn muster, Sisters, at Matins, at the landing pad. And in full wargear. I will speak to the quartermaster and requisition our off-world equipment.’ She glanced up at the refectory window. ‘May we walk with the Emperor and carry His light into the very darkest reaches of the galaxy.’

CHAPTER THREE

The shuttle's cargo bay was cold.

Strapped into her seat, her back to the cold metal wall, Augusta cast an eye over their requisitioned gear – Phaeton-pattern reinforcement kits, field generators, new vox-antennae, everything they would need to secure the basecamp.

They were thirty-seven days out of Ophelia VII, and this trip down to Lautis' surface was the very last leg of the journey.

She spoke into the internal vox. 'Shipmaster, how long?'

The commander of the Imperial vessel *Sorex*, now in parked orbit about the planet, had insisted upon piloting the shuttle personally – perhaps to ensure that the Sisters were delivered safely, and that he'd discharged his responsibility without mishap.

His voice came back to them. *'Two minutes 'til we drop below the cloudline, Sister. Twenty-three to the landing point.'* The shuttle's interior screen showed a continuous, passing rush of grey, soupy cloud. *'Current data shows climate conditions at sixty-eight per cent humidity, atmospheric temperature at twenty-nine-point-five degrees. It's a swamp down there.'*

Caia muttered, 'We know.'

'Any communications?' Augusta said.

'We're just getting static. Full surface scan commencing as soon as we hit optimum range.'

Jatoya asked, 'Signs of hostility?'

'Nothing that doesn't belong,' the shipmaster said. *'Life signs are minimal and all fully indigenous. Just the local predators, Sisters, nothing you're not expecting.'*

The screen showed more clouds.

‘How long before we’re in visual range of the town?’ Augusta asked.

‘*Fourteen minutes,*’ he said. ‘*Will keep you updated.*’

‘Thank you.’

Viola, her heavy bolter now rested across her lap, voiced a curse. ‘I’ll be glad when we’re off this blood boat.’

‘Blood boat?’ Akemi asked her, puzzled. ‘What is a blood boat?’ The newest Sister had a little fetish that she toyed with constantly, a tiny, silver feather that she flicked endlessly between the fingers of her left hand.

‘Old Imperial slang,’ Augusta said. ‘It means a cargo ship that travels a very long way, usually to secure grox-meat or similar.’

Frowning, her small, pallid face ever-serious, Akemi nodded. Augusta could see her twisting the little feather and filing the information away, every last detail where it belonged. Akemi had a remarkable memory; she had almost taken her Oath to the Convent’s Order Dialogous, the Order of the Quill. Now, fielded for the first time as a sworn soldier and a member of the Bloody Rose, her tension was becoming apparent.

Yet Augusta had no doubts about the young woman’s readiness. The Sister Superior had spent the five weeks of their interstellar journey running her squad through endless pattern-drills and live-fire training manoeuvres. They’d jogged round the gantries, morning and night, in full wargear; they’d practised skirmish exercises until they knew and could anticipate each other’s reactions. And they’d observed their rituals of daily prayer – Matins, Lauds, Vespers, Compline – in the *Sorex*’s tiny chapel.

The screen showed a brief flash of Lautis’ bloated, orangish sun, and Akemi’s little fetish glinted in the light.

As if suddenly aware of her habit, she slipped it back into the cuff of her vambrace, then leaned back against the wall. Augusta could see her lips moving as she prayed.

Throughout their journey, the Navy crew had stayed well away from the Sisters – too intimidated or awed by their presence, or by the legends that accompanied them. Sometimes, greatly daring, they’d watched from the farthest walkways, and once, goaded by mocking colleagues, a young officer had called a lewd remark at Akemi’s armoured back. The shipmaster had slung the man in the brig and had reminded the crew that the Sisters were servants of the God-Emperor, and soldiers like themselves. They were not saints to be iconised – the thought was outright blasphemy – nor objects to be ogled.

Once the young man had been released, Sister Akemi had spoken to him face-

to-face. Augusta didn't know what she had said, but the man had left with his skin ashen and his knees shaking.

And so, Augusta had thought, do the legends perpetuate themselves.

But still, it had allayed any flickering doubt: Akemi had courage. The Emperor had called her to be a warrior, and a warrior she would be.

'Reaching optimum range now, Sisters,' said the shipmaster. *'Scan of township commencing.'*

The clouds had thinned to wisps and were parting completely as the shuttle dropped below their cover. The screen began to show a dull, greenish atmosphere, heavy with rising steam and trapped heat. Augusta studied it carefully, remembering an identical scan from their initial reconnaissance trip, now almost a Solar year before.

Her hand touched the fleur-de-lys on her breastplate.

'Lautis.' Caia, sat next to her, gave a faint groan. 'Not somewhere I *ever* needed to see a second time.'

Melia said, 'At least we know what to expect.'

'Do we?' Caia answered her. Always the sharpest of the squad, Sister Caia missed little. 'Do we really?'

Her words were met with silence as their import sank home.

The shuttle slowed, descending further, and the passing seethe of jungle became more visible. There were the familiar festoons of creepers, and the marshy deceits of the underlying swamp. There was the dark, volcanic rock, jagged and pitted with holes. There was the rising outcry of the indigenous wildlife, the loud and colourful birds and the lurking monsters of the stagnant water.

Eyeing the waiting mire, Augusta's belly tightened with the descent. Like Caia, she had not expected to come back here.

The area was secure, she reminded herself. We slew the warlord. We hunted down the scattered remnants of its tribe. We offered the town our protection.

She wanted to try her vox, to try to reach Felicity on the Order's private channel, but she was still out of range. Data flickered across the bottom of the pict-screen, showing the angle of the planet's rotation, its climate and weather systems, its twenty-two hour day. She reminded herself of the information as she studied the passing rush of the native flora, and searched for the particular pattern that marked the town itself – the habitation closest to the ruined cathedral.

'Threat level green,' the shipmaster said. *'You're in the clear. Requested landmark becoming visible in three... two... one...'* There was a faint note of

relief in his voice as he said, *'And there we are, right on schedule. Final approach now. Praise the God-Emperor, Sisters, we're safe and sound.'*

Augusta undid her straps and stood up, her back stiff. With one hand on the shuttle's roof to steady herself, she came forwards to scrutinise the screen.

And there it was: the looming, crumbling mass of the cathedral's ruin, and, slightly closer, the square, black shape that was the town's ancient ziggurat, its icon, temple and government. Around it spread the familiar mosaic of dark, stone buildings and odd, right-angled roads. To one side, there was the brief, rippling flash of moving water.

Her belly lurched again as the shuttle slowed further.

That was the same town, the one they'd saved, the place for which Sister Kimura had given her life. They'd given Kimura her Last Rites in the ruined cathedral, but the townspeople had celebrated her memory and their own gratitude. They'd raised firebrands to the Emperor's name, singing hymns of local tradition.

Carved into the stepped sides of the great ziggurat, Augusta remembered, there were armoured warriors, their features blunted, their weapons and armour stylised, but recognisable – symbols left over from the Great Crusade. Lautis was older than the Order, older than the Sisters themselves. And yet the town's priest – she remembered the woman clearly – had understood the Sisters' faith and their love for their Emperor. She had pointed at the ziggurat's carvings and talked about their local legends–

'No life signs,' the shipmaster said.

What?

The comment stopped Augusta dead. Uncomprehending, she studied the screen. Though they were still too far away, she found herself searching for movement, for some way to deny the man's words.

Behind her, her squad were suddenly tense. Viola's hands tightened on the heavy bolter; Akemi's fetish was back in her fingers, turning over and over. Surprise and concern shot from Sister to Sister along the inside of the cargo bay.

Augusta said, her tone grim, *'Scan again.'*

'Aye.' Side-rockets fired. The floor tilted as the vessel turned, and Augusta caught at a rivet-studded upright to keep her feet. After a moment, the shipmaster said, *'Scan radius expanding. Two miles from grid one-niner-seven by three-forty-five.'* There was a longer pause, and he repeated, *'No life signs, Sister. Nothing. Not even the predators.'*

'But...' Viola sounded as shocked as Augusta felt, *'...there's a whole town*

down there.’

Felicity’s final report had said nothing about the town being threatened, nor about any incoming force or foe.

Augusta said, ‘That township’s home to over three thousand people.’

‘*Sister.*’ The shipmaster’s voice held respect, and complete certainty. ‘*There’s no one down there.*’

‘Can you get a signal?’

The others were standing up now, checking weapons and wargear. The first flickerings of combat-readiness were stealing through the inside of the shuttle.

‘*No communications, Sister,*’ he returned, his tone even. ‘*Even this close, there’s no response from the basecamp. Will keep trying.*’

‘Rotate frequencies,’ Augusta said. ‘Try every Imperial channel.’

‘*Trying all Imperial and all known Mechanicus frequencies, Sister. There’s no response.*’

Akemi dropped her fetish and leaned over to pick it up. In the faint, green light, her small face was etched with worry. Viola’s fingers traced the carvings and the purity seals on the Godwyn-pattern heavy bolter.

Aware of their tension, Augusta still watched the screen. The absence of the townspeople was a significant shift in their mission parameters – and removed almost all possibility that Felicity’s silence had been caused by some errant storm.

It also meant that the townspeople could offer them neither information nor supplies.

The Arvus was slowing still further now, dropping below the canopy; it smashed through the jungle, dense and green. Brackish, noxious waters reflected the vehicle’s belly-lights, and the pitted, dark stone of the town’s outer walls grew closer.

Akemi’s gaze flicked back and forth, reading the scrolling data. Melia’s hand touched her fleur-de-lys, while Caia fiddled with the sight on her bolter, clicking and unclicking it, again and again.

In the metal walls of the shuttle, the noise was oddly loud.

The shipmaster’s voice said, ‘*Do you wish to return to the Sorex, Sisters?*’

‘We do not,’ Augusta said. ‘Our mission is very clear. Take us to the landing point, shipmaster, and drop the hatch. Once our gear is unloaded, I want you out of here. Upon your return to the *Sorex*, please upload what we have found so far. We do not know what waits for us, but I wish the canonesse to be aware of the situation.’

She didn't need to add: *In case we cannot make that communication ourselves.*

'Yes, Sister,' the shipmaster said. '*Landing point ETA, two minutes.*'

The screen became murkier as the vessel passed into the treeline. The cargo bay seemed suddenly very dark.

Caia's clicking stopped.

In the faint, greenish light, Augusta looked at her squad.

'Very well.' She was alert now, her mind sharp and working – they were in the field, and this was no time for doubt or hesitation. 'Listen to me. When that hatch comes down, Viola, out and on point. Caia, Melia, you'll take back up. Jatoya, Akemi, with me – we'll need to unload our gear and let this shuttle get back into the air. It's vulnerable, and I need it safely away.'

'Yes, Sister.'

'And once we're down, our first priority is to secure the basecamp. Jatoya, take Viola, Caia and Melia. Do a full sweep and establish the perimeter. Akemi, with me – I'll need you to access the camp's records.' She glanced at the young woman, her black hair shining. 'You read machine dialect, yes?'

'A little, Sister Superior,' Akemi said. 'My training was very basic.'

'Good enough. See if you can get into Jencir's records as well as Felicity's.' Augusta's smile was grim, humourless. 'You never know what you might find.'

'Yes, Sister.'

'I'll take the field emitters and the gun emplacements, make sure everything is rearmed and fully operational. And once we're secure, we're going into that town.' She was still watching the scan, watching the rising blur of stone that was the ziggurat, now looming close. 'From this point, Sisters, we assume that Felicity's squad has passed into the Emperor's blessing, that the area is hostile, and that this is a full combat mission.'

'Yes, Sister.' They saluted her, fists to chestplates.

'Helmets on,' Augusta said. 'And may His light be with us all.'

Akemi dropped her fetish back into her vambrace. She picked up her helm, dropped it over her head, and twisted the seal closed.

'*Approaching the landing point,*' the shipmaster said. '*Dropping speed-flaps now. Thirty seconds.*'

Augusta could feel the vessel lowering, slowing to a hover. Her ears popped, and she lifted her own helm and snapped it into place. She flicked off the safety on her bolter, checked its ammo for the fourth time, and laid her other hand on her chainsword.

From plague, deceit, temptation and war...

The alarm on the rear hatch started to blare. The lock released with an audible clunk. Hydraulics whined.

Like uncoiling ribbons, light and steam stole down into the cargo-bay.

Viola was already on her feet, heavy bolter in both hands.

To Augusta, she looked like she wanted to fight.

The Arvus hovered, jet engines thundering. The air reeked of promethium fuel and shimmered with oily heat. Bright belly lights showed the landing area – an open surface of cracked, dark stone that bordered the town on one side.

...Our Emperor, deliver us.

Under the engines' noise, the words of the Litany of Battle flowed, steadying them. Line and verse wove from one voice to the next over the vox – where one Sister paused, another would take up the words, and the prayer rolled through and around them all, reminding them that this was His work, that they were here in His name.

Here, upon Lautis.

Again.

Perhaps, Augusta thought, they were hoping that Felicity would hear them.

The shuttle door lowered more fully, and the thick mist of the jungle flooded the back of the vehicle. Looking out at the swamp, the Sister Superior felt a pang of unease.

She came to the side of the ramp to see more clearly, and saw that the rock of the landing area was speckled with green. There was only a tiny amount, but gentle, curling fronds of jungle vegetation had crept between the slabs, up through the various cracks. Small, perhaps, but with enough time, they could shatter the rock asunder.

Obsessive to a fault, no tech-priest would permit such carelessness – no one had been out here in weeks.

The lowering hatch thunked to a stop.

Viola was already moving, boots crashing down the ramp, heavy bolter to her shoulder. She jumped from the ramp's edge, landing in a combat kneel and moving her weapon in steady arcs. The heat of jet and jungle would confuse the preysight in her helmet, but Viola had the vehicle at her back and a clear field of fire – if anything moved, she'd see it.

Nothing moved.

Caia and Melia followed at a low run, dropping from the edge of the ramp. They crouched to offer Viola cover as she dashed forwards again.

The Sisters' skirmish-deployment was perfect, a smoothly functioning combat-machine. Their voices came back over the vox, now together, united in a quiet, steady chant of the hymnal – not the harmonised rage of full-on warfare, but the calm, clear caution of routine scouting.

The still-firing engines drowned other noises out. The Arvus dangled in place, three inches above the stone ground, waiting.

'Jatoya!' Shouting to make herself heard, the Sister Superior instructed Jatoya to take the position at the ramp's foot, flamer covering the approach. Then she gestured for Akemi to give her a hand with the gear.

One by one, the two women threw the heavy cases out of the back of the shuttle. Silently cursing the absence of loaders, Augusta kept her bolter and chainsword holstered, and gestured to the side of the landing area, where the walls of the township could be clearly seen.

'Over there! Stack it by the watchpost!'

The cathedral, further back and on the other side of the town, had faded to a shadowy blur, drowned in the planet's noxious mist and the colossal overgrowth of flora.

'Viola! Advance and secure the basecamp area! Caia, Melia, with Viola. Jatoya, Akemi, with me! Let's get out of here!'

Breathless from the heat, ducking the noise of the Arvus and its hot convection winds, the Sisters picked up their gear and ran for the camp.

Once they were clear, the shuttle lifted to the top of the canopy, its lights bright. It hovered there a moment, almost as if it were waiting for something, then it turned, and was swallowed by the trees.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sister Akemi crouched at the corner of a dark and moss-grown wall, her heart pounding. The wall was basalt, and carved in lines and patterns that still glowed faintly, as if with a bioluminescence all of their own.

Five paces ahead of Akemi's position, Sister Viola crouched with the heavy bolter covering the roadway. Her armour glistened scarlet with condensing mist. Behind Viola's shoulder, Sister Caia had her bolt pistol in one hand, and her auspex in the other.

'The shipmaster was right,' Caia said, over the vox. 'There's nothing out here.'

Akemi had read the reports, and she knew what the Sisters had been expecting. There should have been people here – hunters, foragers, crafters, builders. There should have been farmers, and the strange, pot-bellied livestock they called 'paru'. There should have been soldiers, coming to welcome them, or to warn them away. There should have been the local priest, the leader of her people.

But there was nothing.

With its eerie, patterned gleam stretching outwards into the swamp-mist, the entire town looked empty.

From plague, deceit, temptation and war...

The words of the hymnal were warming, familiar.

... Our Emperor, deliver us.

'Be sure.' Augusta's tone was calm.

'I'm sure, Sister,' Caia told her. 'There's nothing moving, not so much as a beetle.'

'Very well,' the Sister Superior said. 'We remain in skirmish formation and proceed into the town. Viola, on point. Caia, on scan. Be alert, we cannot miss anything.'

‘Aye.’ Viola moved forwards five paces, then crouched, again, to cover the roadway.

Behind them, they’d found the basecamp empty. Allaying some of the squad’s initial fears, the fusion reactor and chemical batteries had been untouched; the interior lumens had shown pods and corridors in all their reinforced plasteel glory. Akemi had not known what to expect, and she’d found it oddly severe, carving its place out of the jungle with electro-fences and gun-emplacements, all still fully operational. The field emitters had even kept the flora at bay.

Jencir, Augusta had commented, had extended the original camp – enlarged the area to accommodate his servitors, and the equipment he would need.

But Jencir had gone. The servitors had gone. Felicity and their Sisters had all gone. The tiny chapel had been deserted, the pods echoing empty. The food in the storage units had been rotting in the heat, the water purifier all congealed with a thick, local moss.

Even the tech-priest’s little brass cogitator had been left all alone, standing in his workshop with its metal beginning to corrode.

While the squad had moved to secure the area, Akemi had studied the thing, trying to understand Jencir’s precisely noted analysis. But even from the tech-priest, there had been nothing – the reconnaissance of the cathedral had commenced on schedule, and the parts of his records that she could read had been chemical compositions, structural assessments, and endless, *endless* lists.

She had tried to read more, struggling with the mist-rotted printouts, and she’d listened to Augusta’s attempts to make contact over the vox, listened to the bristle of static that was her only answer.

The basecamp had been deserted.

And now, the town was exactly the same.

What had happened to the people?

From the scourge of the kraken...

Suddenly, the silence seemed huge, and full of waiting. Her flesh crawling, Akemi fine-tuned her preysight. She wanted to see down the misted streets; she scanned the doorways and the windows and the tops of the walls. Surely there must be people still here somewhere, out in the farmlands, or standing by the odd, obelisk-shaped fountains and collecting the water that flowed down their sides?

But even the water was stilled now, choked by the moss.

The mist seethed, mocking, and she shuddered.

...Our Emperor, deliver us.

Augusta said, 'Keep moving.'

'Aye.'

Following Viola and Caia, Akemi ran to the next point and crouched again.

This time, she'd ducked down beside a square, open-fronted stone building. Outside, a stylised figure, familiar armour crudely depicted, stood with its arms outstretched. Against it leaned a dozen electro-spears, their points scattered with rust, and glinting with moisture.

From behind Akemi, Melia breathed, 'Where did those come from?'

'Jencir, I would think – or Lyconides. A gift for the town.' Augusta picked one up and thumbed the switch. The weapon fizzled and died. She put it back against its stone support, and said, 'But I do not understand why the weapons are abandoned. If the people have left, then why are these still here?'

'Cross the jungle unarmed?' Jatoya commented, from the back of the line. 'Unwise, even without the orks.'

'Perhaps they're all dead,' Viola commented.

'Then where are the bodies?' Caia's answer was bleak.

'I dislike this.' Even the Sister Superior sounded tense. 'I want every building checked, every road, every corner.' There was something in her tone that made Akemi's fear rise again – Augusta usually seemed so indomitable. 'Whatever's happened here, we need to know, and we need this location secure before we move on to the cathedral. I'm not leaving our backs open.'

'Aye.'

They moved on. The hymnal was a breath now, almost subvocal as the squad listened to the silence of the town.

From the blasphemy of the fallen...

Another zig-zag crossroads, another fountain. The ancient stone patterns gleamed in green, all blurred by the mist.

But nowhere was there movement. Not a bird cawed as it fled their advance; not a beetle scuttled as it escaped their boots. Even the surrounding jungle was utterly silent, as if the festooned loom of the trees was as bereft of life as everything else. Despite the environmental protections of her armour, Akemi was beginning to perspire. She had a sense of darkness and pressure, of rising claustrophobia; she felt like her helm had been breached, somehow, like she was inhaling the sweltering closeness of the atmosphere, the tightness of the sweat-thick air.

...Our Emperor, deliver us.

But none of the internal breach-warnings had been triggered, and sternly she

told herself to breathe more deeply.

Slowly, the moss grew thicker. It clustered in the corners of the walls and blotched the roadway like an infection. Desolation stretched out around them, endless and soundless. Side-road after side-road showed nothing – only the patterned lines in the dark stone.

From the begetting of daemons...

They crept onwards, even more slowly now, watching in every direction. The hymnal faded to almost a thrum, a steady rhythm that offered strength and faith, and the town gradually opened out into a sequence of wider, more regular crossings, many of them offering odd, metallic sculptures at their centres. These were huge and angled, impossible creations that rose high above the buildings and that defied Akemi's comprehension.

Jencir had recorded these, his drawings exquisite and exact – but she had not understood his extrapolations.

Now, the moss had covered and blurred the metal. Thick and dark and rust-red, it clung to the sculptures, and to the stone, and to the fountainsides. It choked the waterflow, and it suffocated the flowers in the untended gardens. It swelled from the windows as if the very buildings were clogging from the inside.

Surely, there had not been time for the moss to grow that thickly?

Even the air felt thick, infecting their very breathing. Akemi could almost feel it, growing in her lungs.

...Our Emperor, deliver us.

Augusta, however, showed little interest in the metalworks – she had seen them before. Instead, she gave the gesture for the squad to move on. Again and again, Akemi saw Viola kneel and watch, saw Caia pause to use the auspex, straining to find something – anything – some ghost of motion, some hint of life.

And every time, she responded in the negative, and she and Viola ran on.

'Where are they all?' Melia asked, her words soft with horror. 'Where did they go?'

Like Felicity, the entire population of the town had simply...

...vanished.

Akemi shuddered, sweat still sliding over her skin. She remembered running the gantries of the *Sorex*, the endless, repetitive drills. They'd been training missions to make her combat-responses reflexive, she knew that – but out here, the safety of the clattering metal walkways seemed very far away.

'I feel like something's watching me,' Melia went on. 'Or like something's growing—'

‘We walk in His light,’ Augusta said, her voice like steel. ‘With me, Sisters. *From the curse of the mutant...*’

‘...*Our Emperor, deliver us.*’

Slowly, the buildings grew taller, more decorous. As they turned, at last, into a wide and ornate plaza, Akemi paused, surprised.

More of the metal sculptures loomed here, brass and rust and steel – and these were even larger, stretching upwards into the mist. There was a circle of them, like twisted dancers, all fathomless and extreme. And they looked... wrong, somehow, their angles distorted, their struts and cogs and pipes a mystery and all covered in rot.

With an odd flicker, Akemi understood that the other sculptures, the smaller ones, had all been part of the same construction and shape. Pieces of the same thing, perhaps?

Jencir had drawn this one also, his recreation meticulous.

‘Wait. Sisters, wait!’

Augusta paused. As the Sister Superior nodded, Akemi moved to study the closest, to walk around it until she found what she was looking for...

Writing.

She blinked. Jencir had drawn this too, and the symbols were unknown to her. They seemed to writhe across the metal rather than being engraved within it.

For a moment, the fear in her throat almost threatened to choke her.

‘What does it say?’ Caia asked her, auspex still in hand. The scanner was flickering, and its green light played on the sculpture’s metal.

‘I cannot read this, Sister,’ Akemi said, apologising. ‘It is not a language I comprehend.’

‘Is this not machine dialect?’ Augusta asked, surprised. ‘We had concluded that these came from Mars, from the Ring of Iron. As the town and the ziggurat were first built by the Great Crusade, so the machines of the Mechanicus...’ Her voice faltered, and it was enough to bring Akemi out in a fresh sweat.

Seeking reassurance, she said, ‘Sister, Jencir showed much interest in these... creations. They captivated him. But if this is – was – a machine, then its spirit is long, long dead.’

A ghost seemed to pass across all of them – a shiver of something other, something beyond their experience or comprehension. Melia was nervous, restlessly checking the empty roads; Caia was studying the auspex, as if puzzled by its behaviour.

‘What did his notes say?’ Augusta asked Akemi. ‘Exactly?’

‘I’m sorry, Sister,’ Akemi said. ‘I could not read his records very well.’ She had an urge to reach for her fetish, dismissed it. ‘He speculated a twenty-nine-point-eight per cent possibility that the machinery had been for mining, a thirty-four-point-two per cent possibility that its purpose had been construction. Those percentages... are not very high.’

The notes had gone into painstaking and unreadable detail, but Akemi paused as Augusta commented, ‘Then what would be the purpose of such devices?’

‘I do not know,’ Akemi said. She offered her ignorance hesitantly, as if she expected a reprimand.

But Augusta tapped a boot, thinking. ‘Did he offer speculation? A source – or purpose?’

‘No, Sister,’ Akemi said. ‘Not that I could read.’

Restless, Viola kicked at a stone and sent it scuttling across the plaza.

‘Desist.’ Augusta snapped the order at the impatient younger Sister, and turned back to the metalwork. She considered it for a moment longer, then moved as if she’d made a decision. ‘Thank you, Sister Akemi. We will keep this information for the future. For now, we cannot make use of it. Jatoya, hold this point. Akemi, with me. There’s something else here that I need to check.’

‘Aye.’

Jatoya commanded the squad to a compass defence, watching every approach; Augusta directed Akemi to the building beside the sculpture. It was the largest one they’d seen, the patterns on its walls more elaborate than the rest, and it was almost smothered in the thick, rusty lichen, creeping from its insides like decay.

Her blood thumping, her mind still reciting the words of the litany, Akemi moved to the door.

And stopped, her heart suddenly in her mouth.

‘Throne!’

Her exclamation was involuntary, and she knew Augusta was behind her, and she knew the drills. Controlling her initial shock, she dropped to one knee, her bolter covering the mess.

Augusta swore, her words vicious enough to almost make Akemi blush.

This building had a much larger living space, a room big enough to accommodate a group – maybe a town meeting or council. Its interior walls were carved in incredible patterns, and they lit its inside to a thick, green light.

Behind her, Augusta’s voice was grim. ‘So, there was fighting here after all.’

In the living space, there were signs of a struggle. The furniture had been smashed and scattered, the rugs torn from the doorways.

Augusta's chainsword, still silent, pointed past Akemi's shoulder, and the younger woman looked down.

The floor-rug was shredded, as if by frantically scrabbling hands. Pieces of bright fabric were scattered across the black stone, alongside what looked like a familiar votive candle.

But they were not what Augusta had indicated.

Beside the rug's remains, there was a long, rough smear, harder to see against the rock.

But it looked like something – or someone – had been dragged from the building. Dragged, and fighting all the way.

Following the line of the marks, Akemi found herself looking at a stain on the bottom corner of the doorway, right by her foot.

One that looked very much like fingers, grasping at a forlorn and final hope.

'Kawa Koumu lived here.' Augusta named the priest who had governed her people, who had fought the orks as best she could, and who had welcomed the Sisters as protectors. 'She was a good woman, strong in her faith.'

The Sister Superior stepped past Akemi and into the room, her armoured shoulders rigid with anger, and with tight, personal control. She picked up the candle and put it in its niche on the wall.

'Sister,' Akemi said. 'Whatever took her, it took her out towards the ziggurat.' She used the muzzle of her weapon to gesture at the lines on the floor, how they curved when they passed the doorway. 'She did not go willingly.'

'I doubt she would have,' Augusta said, her tone bleak.

'But why the priest?' Akemi asked her. 'This is the only place we've seen fighting. Why would she, alone, offer resistance?'

Augusta had crouched and was inspecting the stains.

From behind them, Jatoya's rejoinder was dark. 'Perhaps because she was the only one that could.'

Akemi caught her breath, stopped herself from cursing.

Gesturing for Akemi to remain in the doorway, Augusta moved carefully through the debris, shifting it with the end of her chainsword.

But though they searched every corner, there was nothing else to find.

They left Kawa's home, and turned at last into the centre of the town.

Here, close and looming, stood the ziggurat. It was huge and stern, its dark flanks stepped, its head and shoulders rising high above the levels of roofs and trees. The mist curled round its sides, making the stone gleam with moisture;

carved warriors decorated its sides and two armoured figures stood like twin guards at the foot of its long flight of steps. And, at its peak, a lone figure waited, His chin lifted, His head haloed in light-rays.

Akemi paused. The others may have seen this before, but this ancient depiction of the God-Emperor was new to her, and wondrous. She touched one gauntlet to the front of her armour and bowed her head.

But the ziggurat, too, was blotched in moss.

Viola muttered, her tones vicious.

Here, the stains seemed a travesty, a confrontation – and the sight of them prickled the hairs on Akemi's neck. And it wasn't just at the moss, not just its blasphemous invasion of the stone; it was the creeping, suffocating anxiety that had been with them from the moment they'd left the Arvus. As Melia had said, it felt like they were being watched, like there was something lurking in one of the moss-splotched buildings, or in the surrounding streets. It was something dark, something inhuman, something hidden in the hot mist.

Something that had all of them in its sights.

But they had, at least, found the population of the town.

Under the ziggurat, there lay bodies.

At first, Akemi didn't realise what she was seeing – the people lay in a wide half-circle, almost as if they were sky-gazing. Foolishly, she thought at first that they were unwell, and that she was seeing some sort of outdoor valetudinarium.

And then she realised that the faint blur to her vision was not the smear of heat in her preysight.

It was the flies.

'Dominica's eyes!' The curse was Melia, quiet with shock.

'Sister?' Augusta's bark was subdued.

Melia said, 'They're all dead. Have been for some time.' She sounded shaken. 'Whatever killed them must have laid them out like this. Done it deliberately.'

Akemi knew what would happen to a corpse, left outside and in this heat. She paused, her fear clamouring at her; she raised her eyes to the ancient God-Emperor as if asking Him for help.

'Viola,' Augusta said. 'Follow the outside of the plaza until we get full visibility. If something has left this here intentionally, it could well be an ambush.'

'Aye.'

'Akemi!' Augusta's bark was sharp in her vox-bead. 'Move!'

Akemi jumped, did as she was ordered. They moved onwards, more cautiously now, circling the bodies and the lined grey-green of the plaza itself. It seemed almost that the blood-rust moss had started from here, had flowed outwards from the ziggurat's foot and had spread like corrosion through the deserted streets.

And then, Akemi saw something else.

Every single one of the dead townspeople had been...

'Where are their *heads*?' Viola voiced her exact thought.

Akemi faltered, stopped. The moss was in her lungs and she couldn't breathe, couldn't breathe, couldn't...

A morte perpetua...

'That's not the only problem,' Caia said. 'Sisters, the plinth...'

'Hold this location.' Augusta's command was almost unnecessary; the Sisters had halted in a combat half-wheel, their backs to the nearest wall. They bristled bolters in every direction, waiting for that lurking foe, for that darkness that had stalked them through the town.

...Domine, libra nos.

Akemi, holding to the litany like she'd held to her little fetish, looked over at the single basalt plinth that occupied the centre of the plaza, and the foot of the ziggurat's steps.

A single figure lay upon it. It was arched backwards, chest thrown out, as if it still struggled, but it had been dead for many days. Its flesh had bloated and blackened, and it had started to decay.

The flies hovered over it, fat and lazy.

Its head, too, was gone. Its ribcage had been cracked open and parted like doors; its internal organs were liquefying in the heat. Black stains covered its robes and had spread down the sides of the plinth – black stains that now swelled with the thick, rust-red moss.

She caught the stench and gagged.

'Kawa,' Augusta said, the word a breath, grieving. The Sister Superior dropped to one knee, touched one hand to the front of her armour. 'Fighting to the last. Walk in His light, my friend.'

The Sisters repeated, 'Walk in His light.'

Stretched out in some barbarous and heretical sacrifice, the town priest had lost her battle against whatever had dragged her from her home. Beneath the ziggurat, beneath the ancient stone gaze of the Emperor Himself, she had been executed – and in some vile act of mockery, in some rite of blood-worship that Akemi could not understand.

But she made herself look, think.

Kawa's wrists and ankles showed no signs of restraints. It suggested that she had been rendered incapable of fighting, or that something – *some things* – had been holding her down.

And around her, her people lay headless, their blood staining the stone.

Augusta said, 'That Thou wouldst bring them only death, that Thou shouldst spare none...'

Reciting the litany, her chant grew in tension, and her voice trilled with tightly controlled fury. Akemi knew the squad's history – the priest had been their friend and supporter, had welcomed them, as she'd welcomed Sister Felicity.

'...That Thou shouldst pardon none, we beseech Thee, destroy them.'

The squad answered her. Viola's voice seethed as she shaped the words. Jatoya's deep tones were soaked in a low throb of pure wrath.

Augusta looked up at the ziggurat as though she made her promise to the Emperor Himself. 'Whatever did this, we will find it.

'And we will be its ending.'

CHAPTER FIVE

The Lautis cathedral was not as Augusta remembered it.

Walking down the ruined aisle, the building hollow and roofless over her head, the Sister Superior let her boots ring from the stone. Kawa's fate and the desecration of the town had left her tight with anger, and she walked bolter in hand, the weapon issuing an outright challenge to whatever was lurking here.

With her, her squad walked in double-file.

But they could not reach the steps.

Unlike their previous visit, the nave was filled with rubble – tumbled pillars, collapsed walls, smashed pieces of fallen buttresses. Augusta knew the pattern of krak grenade debris all too well; she recognised the scars in the stonework where the ammunition of her Sisters had chewed chunks from the rock.

She halted, Caia behind her, auspex in hand.

'Full suppression bursts,' Caia said. 'Bolter and heavy bolter alike.' She paused, studying the spreads of the scars. 'They fought a retreating action, backwards, up the aisle.' Turning slowly, studying the instrument in her hand, she pointed. 'There!'

From beneath the rubble she saw a single, augmetic foot, grip-talons extended as if in some final act of rage or pain.

Scatters of warm rain misted across the air.

Augusta knelt, carefully moving the rocks. 'Common construction servitor.' The thing was smashed to a pulp, the flesh parts of its face rotting and the cogs in its skull all starting to corrode.

'Melia?'

'Been dead longer than the townspeople.' Melia dropped to one careful knee beside the Sister Superior and turned what was left of the head with a red-

gauntleted hand. ‘Flesh doesn’t last in this climate – there’s nothing left but tools and circuitry.’

‘Jatoya, watch our backs.’

‘Aye.’

They moved more of the fallen stone. The heap groaned and shifted; scatters of dust and pebbles rolled down its sides. Slowly, they exposed more of the thing, its chest a disintegrating mess of cybernetic organs, its left arm ending in a heavy, stonecutter saw.

Its right arm was completely missing.

‘It was fighting something.’ Melia tapped the dried stains on the sawblade.

Augusta nodded. ‘They must have been surrounded, or overwhelmed.’

‘But what could do this?’ Melia asked her. ‘What could move with this sort of swiftness? Overwhelm a squad of our Sisters and a contingent of fully-equipped construction servitors?’

‘And was it the same thing that emptied the town?’ Augusta’s question was rhetorical; she was still moving the rubble, searching. ‘I do not yet comprehend this, Sisters, not this place and its mysteries, and not this foe. I fear that there are darker things here than orks.’

Melia said nothing. The other four had deployed to a compass defence, covering pillars and archways; Caia still moved her auspex in careful arcs. Augusta’s mention of the orks had returned the memory of their previous battle, and the squad had no intention of being caught a second time.

The Sister Superior moved more of the pile. It shuddered and shifted, exposing a second, semi-human body, this one with its face all but missing.

She looked down at it, gauging. Servitors could put up a hard and nasty fight – there were worse melee weapons than heavy construction tools. And, like Melia, she did not understand what could have overcome them so swiftly.

‘Very well,’ she said. ‘We scout by twos, roll call every ninety seconds. Melia, with me. This puzzle requires an answer.’

The squad deployed as it had done once before, spreading out to explore what was left of the transept and cloisters. Augusta kept Melia with her, needing the woman’s medical training – Melia was not a Hospitaller, but her field knowledge was excellent.

What they found were pieces.

The dismembered remains of the servitors were spread throughout the nave – almost as if some predator had gone on a hunting rampage and had scattered

leftovers in its wake. Not one of the corpses remained intact: many of them were missing heads, or limbs, or tools, or tracks. Many more had been disembowelled and their internal organs spread out around them.

Yet they found no sign of Jencir himself – and nothing to show what had happened to the Sisters.

Melia picked up a servitor's detached clamp-arm and turned it over. 'This was bitten,' she said. She held it out. 'What can bite through plasteel?'

'Very big teeth,' Augusta commented, taking the limb to examine it.

Over the vox, Viola said, '*There were gun-servitors in the east transept. There's no sign of whatever took them down.*'

'Which way are they facing?' Augusta asked.

'*They're a mess,*' Viola commented. '*But my instincts say the attack came from the nave.*'

'Understood,' Augusta said. 'Keep looking.'

'Aye.'

Picking their way past the fallen stonework, pieces of it as large as an immolator tank, Augusta and Melia reached the bottom of the steps. Electro-candles had been left here, one on each step climbing towards the altar, but they stood rusting and lightless, now – forgotten.

But still, not a single flash of scarlet armour.

Bitten.

A suspicion was starting to grow in Augusta's heart.

Over the vox, Jatoya's voice said, '*West transept clear, proceeding into the cloisters. Looks like the repairs started as scheduled, Sister, there's a full support framework out here, platforms and scaffolding.*'

'What of the defences?'

'*Gun-servitors here, too,*' Jatoya said. '*Weapons are still half-loaded. Whatever took them down was fast.*'

Augusta's suspicion was solidifying with every word Jatoya said. She paused before the top step. The drop to her knee was as much a part of her faith as drawing breath, but this time, she stayed standing.

And her hand tightened on her bolter as the anger surged in her soul.

On the Emperor's high altar, there sat a skull.

Just the one.

It was – or had been – human, but its plates and eyestalks and mechadendrites identified it easily.

Jencir.

It had been flayed of all skin and placed in the altar's centre, exactly where the Holy Aquila should have been. To one side of it lay a rosarius. To the other, a single fleur-de-lys blade.

All three items were stained with dried and flaking blood. It had been poured lavishly over them. It had streamed from Jencir's eye sockets; it had covered the top of the altar, coated its sides and spread out across the stone like a stain.

A flicker of sweat stole across Augusta's skin – like an echo of a dark disquiet.

I know this...

Melia had stopped at her shoulder.

Softly, the Sister Superior murmured a prayer – for the tech-priest, for the profaned altar. She spent a long moment looking, then she stepped onto the top step, the Holy of Holies. With a surge of anger and the slam of one armoured fist, she knocked the skull sideways. It clattered across the chancel and rolled to a stop.

'Noli timere,' she said. *'Feruntur Lucem.'* The words were soft, aimed at the bloodstains, at the dark and eerie creeping in her skin. *I do not fear you. I carry the Light.*

Carefully she picked up the blade and the rosarius and tucked them into her belt. Then she turned around and drew the chainsword with a rasp that echoed down through the nave.

'Sisters,' she said. *'To me. We are played.'*

Melia had put her back to the altar stone, was covering the approach with her bolter. *'What do you mean?'*

Augusta's suspicions had become a certainty, cold and hard. *'This was a gift,'* she said. *'A taunt.'* She stood still, framed by the desecrated altar, by the empty window where the Emperor should have been, resplendent in glassiac and glory. *'All of you, to me.'*

'Aye.' Jatoya's tones were dangerous; Augusta could hear the squad moving, running for the steps.

'I have faced this foe before,' she told them. *'Witnessed the depths of the horror it brings. It thirsts for blood, and for warfare. It haunts my dreams, and it wakes me in a cold sweat.'* The admission was a warning, not a weakness. *'And it knows that other members of the Order must come, seeking their Sisters.'* She turned to look through the nave, searching. *'It has been waiting for us.'* Then she snapped, *'Like that!'*

Unsurprised, she used the blade to point down the steps, indicating a curl of red

flesh that crept around the base of a pillar. The motion was sinewy and horribly familiar. It brought a mouthful of anger and bile, echoes of images she could never forget. But her faith burned fiercely and she held herself still, her flickers of fear and fury absolutely controlled.

She said, 'What has teeth that could bite through plasteel?'

Melia cursed. 'What in Dominica's name is *that*? It looks like it's been...'

'Skinned alive.' She knew these things, these things that brought terror like a herald, like a rush of sickness to their hearts.

'There.' She pointed the blade again, at another one, a second slide of hot, red skin. 'And there.'

And at another, around the pillar opposite.

At a fourth, a fifth.

Blade still in her hand, she raised her bolter, and began to recite the Litany of Mettle.

'Et Tu quaeris tibi fortitudinem stare coram nobis...'

We stand before You and ask for Your strength...

And more and more of them crept into her line of sight.

Augusta knew exactly what the creatures were, had faced them before. On the industrial world of Hephaestus, down in the heart of the ash-choked mines, too much death had summoned them, and they had come.

Come *hunting*.

The things were quadrupedal and *big*; their spiked and sloping shoulders were the height of Augusta's hip. They had long, yellow fangs, and eyes that burned with unholy light, bright as bloodlust and cruelty. Some had horns on their muzzles; others had back-ridges that spread like batwings. But every single one of them was as red as glistening gore, as red as a newly flayed victim, as red as the Sisters' own armour.

As they crept forwards, they stared, unblinking, at the women.

'Flesh hounds,' Augusta said. 'Denizens of Ruin.' She held the gaze of the lead beast and stared it down, confronting the fear, the memories. Her heart pounded as the litany trilled through the vox. 'They can tear through flesh and bone and metal. Overwhelm servo-skulls and servitors alike.'

Beside her, Melia had bolter in hand, but her aim was trembling as she watched the things slink low across the floor. They moved like blood, like the rise of night, and the fear came off them in a wave. Augusta raised her bolter, but she did not fire, not yet.

She watched.

She watched as more and more of them came into view. They skulked behind the rubble-piles; they lurked in the half-light. Their eyes glowed with hellish colours, and steam rose from their backs.

She felt like she was struggling to breathe, like there was a knot of tension in the top of her chest.

‘Single shots,’ she said. ‘Aim carefully and conserve your ammunition – there may be more. Hold steady, my Sisters. The fear is but an illusion, a trick of the dark. His Light is with us.’

‘Aye.’

Melia raised her bolter and shot a creature in the face. It shook its head and growled at her, teeth bared. Saliva sizzled as it hit the stone.

At the sound, the others started to snarl, a low, bubbling rasp. It echoed throughout the ruin, rising in volume and fury.

The air grew thicker still. Augusta’s grip tightened on blade and bolter both.

Then she heard Jatoya, ‘*A morte perpetua!*’, saw the fierce whoosh of fire as it leapt in an arc from one side. Two of the creatures exploded into flame; one of them staggered. It voiced a horrific, hollow howling, a sound that almost tore the litany from the air...

...and then it detonated, a nightmare banished.

The flames flickered in its wake.

The second beast, its flesh burning, turned and threw itself at the women.

Beside Jatoya, Akemi hesitated for just too long; the beast landed full on her chest, knocking her over. Eyes and skin afire, its sharp, slavering teeth went for her gorget. Frantically, she scrabbled backwards, her bolter lost, both panicked hands reaching for the thing’s bronze collar.

Jatoya leaned down and picked the hound up, one-handed, almost without effort. With pure, physical strength, she slammed it bodily against the nearest pillar.

Augusta heard it crack.

It fell to the floor, twitching, burning.

Firmly, Jatoya brought her boot down on its skull. It exploded with a force that sprayed blood across armour and stone.

The flicker of the remaining flames made the building dance with shadows.

Jatoya reached her gauntlet to pull Akemi to her feet. ‘Never freeze in battle,’ she said. Her voice was firm but carried no judgment. ‘You know this, Sister. There is no fear. The Emperor is with you.’

‘Aye.’ Akemi’s tone was full of failure.

‘Say it, Sister Akemi.’

‘The Emperor is with me.’

Nodding, Jatoya raised the Litany of Battle and Augusta saw Akemi raise her head; she felt her own blood surge in response. She saw Viola stop by a headless pillar, check her field of fire and then take down a single creature with a short, precise burst.

Caia called, ‘My auspex is broken, I think. But there are more incoming, Sisters. They’re everywhere!’

Augusta said, ‘To me, all of you. We will hold at the altar!’

They ran.

Behind them, the growl rose in volume. It sounded *eager*, like hunger made manifest, like the creatures of the darkest teachings brought to snarling life. But Augusta knew this, remembered it – she held to the words of the litany and took aim on a skulking hound. Beside her, Melia fired careful, single shots, her breathing tight with fear.

The creatures’ snarls grew louder; they were coiling to spring, and any minute now...

‘Viola!’

The other four sisters had raced up the steps. As she reached Augusta’s location, Viola turned, raised the heavy bolter and cursed. ‘All the rubble’s in the way...’ As Augusta had done, she took the final step, right up to the altar, and turned around.

‘Now.’ Viola grinned, the thrice-blessed heavy bolter in both hands. ‘*Sentio de ira Imperatoris!*’

The weapon roared into full life. With it, she thundered the words of the litany.

All through the nave, the hounds reeled under the suppression. They shuddered and twisted and crumpled under the impacts. They tried to flee but instead whimpered and detonated, vanishing back to the warp. Some staggered sideways, leaving red smears on the floor, others broke into a full lope, leaping forwards with froth on their chests and their teeth bared. Still more, further back, tried to duck behind the rubble, but Viola’s elevation meant they had nowhere to hide.

Music and gunfire boomed from the headless walls.

Stone rumbled, and the remains of a pillar cascaded down over the aisle, crushing the hounds beneath. A red mist rose in their wake.

Augusta shouted, ‘Hold!’

The bolter was silenced, and the quiet was deafening.

Dust blew through the air.

‘Caia.’

Caia said, ‘The screen keeps glitching, I can’t read it properly.’

Viola went to move, but Augusta held up a hand. ‘Stay there. Reload.’

Unmoving, almost unbreathing, the Sisters watched the nave. Augusta watched the auspex in Caia’s hand. Its light flickered and danced.

It showed nothing.

No motion.

No life.

The whole cathedral seemed to hold its breath, waiting.

And then...

One blip.

Two.

Five.

Ten.

All clustered down by the main doorway.

‘Where are they *coming* from?’ Akemi asked.

‘From the crypts,’ Augusta told her, watching the auspex. ‘Viola?’

‘Aye.’

‘Hold until I give the word.’

More of the red shapes were coming back into view now, creeping up the ruined aisle. Augusta said, ‘Jatoya, guard our backs. Akemi, that one, there.’ She pointed her chainsword at the nearest snarling hound. ‘Shoot it.’

‘Sister?’

‘Shoot it, Sister Akemi, and then keep shooting. Single shots, to the head if you can.’

‘Yes, Sister.’

Aware of Akemi’s tension, Augusta took up the litany once more, and felt the younger woman steady. Akemi raised her bolter in both hands, sighted on the bared teeth of the lead hound and pulled the trigger.

She hit it clean in the face. Its skull exploded with the impact; the body twisted and was gone. More gore splashed across the stone.

‘Good,’ Augusta said. ‘Like that.’ Augusta shot another, and another. She kept speaking over the barking of the weapon, over the rhythm of the litany. ‘For every stain they’ve made upon this cathedral, we’ll make one of our own. For every death brought by Chaos, we’ll bring a death for the Light of the Emperor. Keep firing, Sister Akemi, and feel His Light as you do.’

With Viola still standing above them, heavy bolter in her hands and waiting for the order to resume, the Sisters of the Order raised their voices to the broken walls and shot at the incoming hounds.

But the air was still thickening, still choking them. The beasts surged forwards, and Melia fell back.

‘Sister! I... can’t...’

‘I said keep firing!’ Augusta’s order was a sharp bark. ‘Switch to short bursts, these things cannot be permitted to reach the altar!’

Impossibly, their numbers were still swelling; a seething mass of scarlet that covered the floor of the nave and flowed higher and higher over the rubble.

Augusta could feel Viola’s tautness – feel her itching to open fire.

She shouted, ‘Now!’

Again, the heavy bolter roared and the beasts smashed backwards in the sudden blast of destruction. But there were too many of them – as the ones in the centre exploded, one after another, there came others, surging at the flanks. Caia cried out as one bounded up at her, teeth bared and hellish eyes glowing. As it opened its jaws, she fell back, tried to put the bolter muzzle in its mouth.

But it was too close, and its teeth closed on her elbow.

She cried out. Her armour splintered as the thing bit down, and her voice hit a crescendo of pain. She couldn’t use her bolter, but then Melia was beside her, shouting, clubbing the thing on the head with her own weapon, over and over and over again, finding a release for her fear in the sheer fury of the action.

Augusta barked an order. Both women fell back as the heavy bolter turned its suppression towards that side of the steps.

But the weapon clunked to a stop as the magazine emptied. Cursing, Viola reached for another.

Augusta turned and beheaded the closest hound, but they were still coming. Still snarling.

And the fear was still clamouring in her chest.

The Sister Superior knew that Sister Felicity Albani must have done this.

Exactly this.

Faced these monsters, this onslaught.

And Felicity had surely fallen.

But her squad would not. Could not. As Viola replaced her magazine and opened fire once more, as the full suppression drove the beasts back, Augusta prayed aloud.

Because she knew, as Felicity must have known, that these were only the

vanguard. Somewhere, they had huntmasters, monsters that drove them on.

Like the flesh hounds themselves: *daemons*.

Her hand tightened on the bolter.

Daemons that had ripped their way through the mines of Hephaestus, driving the people to madness and screaming death. Daemons that had profaned this altar, this place of the Saint and of the God-Emperor.

Daemons that had slain her Sisters.

Viola gave a shout of defiance and victory – the tide was beginning to falter. Augusta gave her the command to drop back, but still the Sister Superior did not lose her focus.

She raised her own weapon to blow the last of them away.

But the fight, she knew, was only beginning.

CHAPTER SIX

The hounds had left no corpses.

Daemons of the warp, they had exploded, they had twisted and folded and faded. And like the echoes of bright lights on closed eyes, they had left red smears across Augusta's vision.

Caia stood with her hand wrapped over her elbow, blood oozing between the fingers of her gauntlet. The wound was deep, but Melia was beside her, surgeon's tools ready. 'Witch bane and tetraporfaline,' she said. 'This will cleanse and heal the wound. Can you move your elbow?'

'Not very well,' Caia said. 'I feel foolish, letting it get that close.' She turned to Augusta. 'What did you say these were?'

Neither Sister had been there upon Hephaestus; they'd never seen these beasts before, never felt their hot breath, never witnessed the destruction they could bring.

'They're flesh hounds,' Augusta said. 'Khorne's *pets*.' Her voice was tight with anger. 'They hunt us, test our mettle, wear us down.'

'Sister Felicity fought these things?' Viola asked.

'I would think so,' Augusta said. 'But these are not the things that slew Kawa, nor emptied the town.' She paused, then said, 'No, somewhere, these things have a master. Something with *purpose*.' Her boot tapped, restless, on the stone. 'And whatever that purpose may be, we must prevent it. Sisters, we have been called here for this, *exactly* this. We carry His blade, His bolter, and His name. The forces of darkness cannot withstand us. And we do not fear.' Augusta placed her gauntleted hand on Akemi's shoulder.

'*Confidunt in Eo*, Akemi. Believe.'

'I believe.' The young woman's response was fervent. Her bolter had taken

lives now, and it had not left her hand. And she had not hesitated again. ‘He is with me.’

‘Always,’ Augusta said. She let Akemi go, then pulled the data-slate from her belt to call up the maps that Felicity had left them. A wash of pale light bathed their armour.

‘We will progress into the crypts,’ she said. ‘Here.’ She pointed, then indicated various other lines on the map. ‘They’re simple, underchapel, valetudinarium, reliquary – we observed them upon our previous reconnaissance.’

‘The shipmaster said there were no life signs,’ Viola commented.

‘The density of the stone could have defeated the scans,’ Caia told her. ‘The Sister Superior is right – these beasts must have come from below.’

Jatoya commented, ‘They always come from below.’

Jatoya had been there, upon Hephaestus. Like Augusta, she remembered the screaming.

The fire.

The hooks.

‘But...’ Viola studied the map, confused. ‘There’s not enough *room*. How can they?’

‘A breach in the warp, perhaps,’ Jatoya commented. ‘Though such things are relatively rare.’

Augusta said, ‘Or simply enough bloodshed, somewhere beneath this building... The false gods of Chaos can manifest wherever such deeds are performed, even if it is not in their names.’

‘I have a suggestion.’ The voice was Akemi’s, surprising Augusta slightly, but she let the young woman speak. ‘During the Great Crusade, the cathedrals of the Emperor were often built upon older, local sites. Perhaps this is true of the town?’

‘Just so.’ Augusta placed the data-slate back in the pack. ‘It may perhaps explain the town’s metalworks – dead things, left over from the Age of Strife.’ The thought made her pause as something in her mind caught on the presence of the tech-priest. Jencir had volunteered for this mission to Lautis, and now she found herself wondering why. She considered for a moment, then banished the thought in favour of more practical matters. ‘I suspect the crypts are not as we remember them.’

Viola snorted, counting her remaining ammunition. She pulled the half-empty magazine from the heavy bolter and replaced it with a full one, slamming the thing home with a noise like pure defiance. ‘Whatever’s lurking down there,’ she

said, ‘we will send it straight back to the hell it came from.’

‘We will cleanse this place,’ Jatoya told her.

‘By His Light,’ Augusta said. She sheathed her sword almost regretfully. ‘Viola, on point. Jatoya take the rear. Akemi, stay by me. We fear neither rift nor daemon.’

The crypts were high and vaulted, their ceilings and pillars all swarming with dark clusters of roots. Navigating by jury-rigged strips of lumens – more evidence of Jencir’s explorations – the Sisters came to the bottom of the dipped-smooth steps.

Before them, stone sarcophagi lay in a silent circle. Some bore recumbent, robed statues upon their lids, each with his or her hands still crossed in the sign of the aquila. They had been swept clear of dust, and candles left upon them. By the dates on their sides, these were the cathedral’s builders, more recent than the Great Crusade.

But something had changed.

The air down here should have been still, thick with age. Last time, there had been a single, root-clogged exit – a gap that opened out into an old oubliette – but that had been all.

Now a hot wind blew past them like the exhalation from a planet-core forge.

‘No motion,’ Caia said. Her wound had been bound and treated, but the vambrace of her armour was in pieces, and they could not afford to go back for a replacement. Her left gauntlet was missing completely, her hand and forearm bandaged, but bare. ‘But the air’s at thirty-three degrees, and the humidity’s fallen significantly.’ They held a defensive formation while Caia continued to scan.

Then she said, ‘It’s coming from the valetudinarium.’

And there it was – the error that Augusta had made. Something so simple, and something that the tech-priest must have found so easily.

The room had changed.

Augusta remembered it as small – a hospice to serve the people of the town. Now, it stretched outwards, far beyond her memory of it and back into the dark – a huge stone chamber, crumbling with age. Augusta could see where the rubble from the previous wall was tumbled at the room’s edges; the marks of Jencir’s servitors were still visible in the stone.

Beside her, Caia watched the auspex. She shook her head as Augusta glanced around. ‘Nothing.’

‘Look,’ Akemi said, pointing. ‘What’s that?’

Amid the tumbled stone at the wallside, there were fragments that looked different – curves like carved armour.

‘I recall no statue,’ Augusta said.

‘Perhaps it was on the other side?’ Caia’s suggestion drew no answers. Akemi was already kneeling by the pile, finding more of the pieces.

‘It’s not very big,’ she said, finding another, and another, and fitting them like parts of a puzzle. ‘It must have been recessed into the wall.’

Viola stifled a grumble. ‘Do we have time for this?’

‘Wait,’ Augusta said.

Fragments laid out on the floor, the statue was coming together.

‘Sisters...!’ Akemi sat back on her heels.

Augusta stared.

The statue was familiar – a female figure with her sword held aloft. The blade itself was still missing, but the armour was just like their own...

Augusta touched a hand to her fleur-de-lys, but said nothing. She watched as Akemi picked up the final pieces: the statue’s boots and plinth.

Akemi said, ‘There’s an inscription.’ As the Sister Superior looked at her, she went on, ‘*Fluxu sanguinis vitae nostrae, Et in supplementum it et liber: De quomodo eraserit magos et quod, Velint beatificare illos quasi impotens!*’ She brushed at the dust. ‘It’s an older verse, and it means “our Blood and Sacrifice”, but it could... it could be translated in other ways. It could mean “bleeding for survival”, or “blood for our lives”... It must have been a part of the fallen wall.’

‘Blood for our lives,’ Augusta repeated.

The statue was the Saint herself, of course it was, but Augusta could make no sense of it. Why had she not seen it before? Why had it been on the other side of the wall? And in her head, she was remembering Hephaestus’ daemons – creatures of greed and laughter and cruelty. They’d slavered in the mines’ darkness, roared with flame and blood. Their appetites had been more than human, more than–

Blood for our lives...

She found herself shuddering, and stopped.

‘The curiosity of the Mechanicus is often their undoing,’ Jatoya commented. She indicated a fallen servo-skull, apparently crushed by the tumbling rock. ‘Whatever they loosed in here, it slew them all.’

Her words brought silence as they contemplated the darkness. Fear yammered at them, taunting at the edges of their awareness.

The screaming.

The fire.

The hooks...

‘We are missing something,’ Augusta said. ‘Some piece of the history of this place...’

‘Sister?’ Akemi stood up, curious. ‘I studied Lautis in some detail, and there is nothing—’

‘Our answers lie ahead of us,’ Augusta said. ‘We will proceed.’

‘Aye.’ Viola flicked on her suitlight.

Jatoya said, her voice soft, ‘From the begetting of daemons...’

Taking up the prayer, they stepped out of the crypt’s illumination, and into the unknown.

As they walked, the construction of the walls began to change. The stone became rougher cut, as if the work had been left somehow unfinished, and the air became steadily hotter and thicker. Augusta was not surprised to see the devices of the sanatorium: the suspended cages, the steel chairs with their swing-down bridles, the tiny cells set back against the walls.

But – and the question loomed large in her mind – to whom had they actually belonged?

Here, the symbols of the Creed had gone. They had been replaced with odd, geometric designs that looked more like the unnamed machinery in the centre of the town.

Augusta stopped, struggling with her memories, with screams that, once again, were echoing in her mind. The town’s machines had come from the Age of Strife, but her understanding of that fact had been academic. Now, she found herself trying to encompass what that really meant.

That this had been a godless world, a world of no faith.

The concept made the place seem suddenly, horrifically empty. It was a vacuum, bereft of hope or purpose or meaning.

Blood for our lives...

Blood for the Blood God.

For a moment, the horror threatened to bring her down. She longed for a warship – for the armaments to eradicate this hell-planet, once and for all...

But she did not have that power, or that choice.

She had her faith, and that was enough.

The far end of the room opened out onto a balustrade, a walkway that circled the

smooth edge of a pit. In the faint illumination of the Sisters' curious suitlights, it seemed to stretch downwards to the planet's very heart. When Augusta picked up a stone and dropped it over the edge, there was no sound of it hitting the bottom.

About her, the squad had drawn together, tension in their voices as they recited their prayers. Akemi's fetish was back in her fingers, and even Viola seemed subdued – her grip on the heavy bolter was vice-tight, as if the weapon was the focus of her courage.

On the far side of the room, across the yawning threat of the pit, there waited five – six – other entranceways, each a carved arch in the rock. They were crumbling, layered with moss and roots and vast age.

Too regular for mining tunnels – but it no longer mattered. The squad needed to progress, to face their fears, and to find the masters of the hounds...

'Catacombs.' Melia shuddered. 'I wonder what's down there.'

No one offered an answer.

With no choice, they ventured onwards.

But Caia's sense of direction was as sharp as her wits. Despite the still-flickering auspex, she directed them carefully and they moved downwards, always downwards. They passed rusting doorways into more cells, many of them empty. Some showed cold firepits, or elaborate metal frameworks, each sized to hold a human body. Several bore faded red tally marks, hundreds of them, decorating every wall – and leaving them with images of prisoners, abandoned and rotting in eternity. Sometimes, the squad encountered rockfalls or dead ends, and then had to loop back on themselves to try another route. And sometimes they paused, confused, convinced that they had explored this tunnel before.

But at last, wordlessly weary, they stumbled into a second open space.

And stopped.

Here, the roots could no longer penetrate – but eight sarcophagi stood about the walls, each one bearing a grotesque face, its tear-ducts caked with fluid. At the room's centre, there was a pool, stained to darkness with a layer of desiccating flakes.

The chamber offered two further exits, each one carved in the shape of an open mouth.

Still on point, Viola's breathing was harsh.

'Which way?' she asked, paused at the entranceway, her head bowed. 'Or are we just going to get lost again?'

‘You try navigating,’ Caia answered her, tone sharpening.

The Sisters were tired, and the fear of this place was strong – but such behaviour was not to be tolerated. ‘That’s enough.’ Augusta’s order brought silence. ‘This is frustrating, and I understand. But our faith is tested in many ways – and *patience* is one of them.’

The words were a warning, and the younger members of the squad fell silent.

‘Let us rest,’ Jatoya suggested. ‘And pray. Clear our minds and our hearts. We have good lines of sight and a defensible location. Fifteen-minute rotations for trail rations and water. Viola, Akemi, you first.’

‘Aye.’

While Melia took a longer look at Caia’s injury, and Jatoya prowled restlessly, flamer in hand, the two chosen Sisters sat on the raised lip of the pool and removed their helmets. Viola’s red hair and freckled skin were sticky with sweat; with a slight shock, the Sister Superior saw that the young woman was more afraid than she’d realised. Viola was hiding it well, but her reactionary bravado was the only thing that was keeping her on her feet. And it may yet get her, and the squad, into trouble. Beside her, Akemi’s pale face was drawn and worried, her shining black bob of hair a curtain as she bowed her head.

Augusta came to sit beside them. ‘Pray with me, Sisters,’ she said. ‘For courage to face the darkness. *Ego veritatem tuam. Vos ipsi nos docuit non timere, quia tu omnia superare.*’

I hold to Your truth. You have taught us not to fear, for You have overcome all.

Leaving Caia to study the sarcophagi, Melia broke out the flatbreads that were their ration packs – condensed, super-nutritional foodstuffs that tasted like solidified gruel. As Augusta finished speaking, she handed one to each of the younger Sisters. Viola, her helmet in her lap, pulled a face.

‘Might be easier to starve.’ Her quip sounded almost like relief.

It made Akemi laugh. The sound was so unexpected – and so utterly out of place – that Augusta turned away, hiding a smile. In the midst of all this horror, a prayer could still bring strength and joy.

‘Eat it,’ Melia said, her tones amused. ‘You cannot battle monsters on an empty belly.’

Caia had paused at one of the sarcophagi, frowning.

‘These are hollow,’ she said. She tapped the metal sculpture and then used her fleur-de-lys blade to prise the front of it open.

Akemi leapt upright, spitting her rations across the stone.

Augusta stared, her memories suddenly moving, curling like smoke...

The screaming...

The fire...

The hooks...

From inside had slumped a body, run through with two dozen metal spikes. The corpse was recent, dried out like old grox-leather, and still in the garb of the town.

‘The townsfolk came *here*?’ Caia said. Her voice was soaked in dismay. Wordless, Jatoya pointed her flamer-muzzle downwards, indicating the floor.

At the sarcophagus’ feet, there was a gutter in the rock, a straight line that led to the pool. It, too, was caked in the now-familiar flaking darkness.

‘More blood,’ Augusta said. She was tense, shaking; her head echoed with remembered cries of pain. ‘And more blood. The taint of Chaos is strong here, and it lured them from their homes.’

‘Perhaps it has been here from the beginning,’ Jatoya said, her tone bleak. ‘Soaked into the stone.’

Melia said, ‘Perhaps that’s why the wall in the valetudinarium was constructed. When the Great Crusade came to Lautis, the people wished to embrace the Light, to forget the bloodshed of their past—’

‘The cathedral is younger than the Crusade,’ Augusta reminded her. ‘It was built many centuries later than the town.’

‘Then perhaps it was built to convert the more reluctant,’ Caia said, ‘and then walled off when it was no longer of use. Either way—’

‘Either way.’ Augusta said, her tone like steel. ‘We will cleanse this holy place of the presence of Chaos.’

‘Maybe we should feed them some of this – it’s guaranteed to kill anything.’ Viola stashed the last of her rations, and clicked her helmet back into place. She picked up the heavy bolter, checked its ammunition.

Jatoya said, ‘We will cut the rest of the break until we have a better location. Sister Caia?’

A glimmer of green bathed Caia’s faceplate.

‘Scanning.’

Augusta’s preysight could see the faint blur of warmth that came from each entrance, the constant, exhaled sigh that was the hot breath of Chaos. But they both glowed the same, neither brighter than the other. Caia shook her head, shrugged. ‘I’m sorry, Sister, I still have no reading. We could walk down here until we perished from exhaustion. Which way do we choose?’

The squad remained silent, oddly reluctant. Augusta could feel the darkness as

if it blurred the sharp edges of her mind.

She whispered, *'Domine deduc me mi Imperatoris.'*

Guide me, my Emperor.

'Contact!' Caia suddenly said, her voice like a pulse of alarm. 'Left-hand tunnel.'

The prayer of thanks was a rush, a touch of His grace in the silence of this sweating hell. She said, 'How close?'

The light from the auspex glittered green. 'Five hundred yards,' Caia said. 'And closing.'

'Defensive formation, we'll hold back from the doorway. Jatoya, watch the other exit.'

'Aye.'

'What is it?' Viola's tone was sharp. 'More hounds?'

Caia said, 'Too slow for hounds. Moving wrong.'

Then Augusta saw a faint flicker of light from the far side of the chamber.

In the tunnel mouth opposite, there was a figure, a brass firebrand raised in one hand. It moved slowly, but the sight of it was completely unexpected.

She stared.

It was an ork, its bolt-on steel jaw pitted with rust-red moss.

Viola raised the heavy bolter.

'Wait!' Augusta said, puzzled.

Behind the ork came a second greenskin, this one smaller and slighter. Both creatures had great, carved scars in their hides, spikes of brass embedded in their skin. And then, behind them, came a woman in the garb of the township, her clothing torn and bloody, her eyes torn out. She carried an orkish axe in one thin hand.

More figures closed in behind her, their flesh ripped open, their faces scarred with staples and stitches. And all of them stared at the Sisters with teeth bared and gazes that burned like fire. Like fanaticism.

Every one of them, orks included, had the same symbol upon the flesh of their foreheads, etched there in dripping black fluid.

Khorne.

Tightly, Augusta let out her breath.

The townspeople had not been slain – they'd deserted their homes and farms and workshops, left everything behind them. Kawa, the priest, had resisted, had fought and been executed – the headless bodies in the town plaza must have been those with the strength to have followed her. But the rest had faltered from

their faith, drawn by some ancient, buried bloodlust that had stirred in their darkest hearts, in their deepest ancestry.

Khorne.

It made her wonder about the town's strange machines – had they somehow been made of the darkness here, inspired by the long presence of Chaos?

More figures were assembling now, eyes flaming with madness. Like the daemonic hounds, they had no sense; they were hungry, thirsty, greedy. Their teeth were bared in skull-grins.

For an instant, everything was still.

And then, howling, the horde came at them.

The people had no weapons, no armour, no technology. They carried the occasional axe, left over from the orks' raids, or farm tools brought from the town itself. Some bore pieces of Jencir's fallen scaffolding. But they had nothing to face, or to resist, the Sisters' bolters.

'Viola!' Augusta ordered.

The first suppression cut them down in their scores.

But they didn't care; they threw themselves over the dead and the dying, and they just kept coming.

Augusta knew what this was – knew what they were doing. This was just more blood, more lives, more fuel, but there was no other choice. If they did not defend themselves, these people would do their best to tear the Sisters to pieces.

And they were heretics, and deserved no mercy.

On another command, Viola fell back to reload and the other four bolters opened up.

Melia chanted the litany in the vox, her voice angry. Always the gentlest of them, this was not how she saw her faith, and Augusta knew that she did not wish to do this.

Yet still, she was a warrior to her core, and she fired without hesitation. A large, balding man pushed to the fore, a ball of flames seeming to burn in his overhanging belly. She took him down with a single shot.

Somewhere, Augusta thought she could hear laughing, deep and harsh and exultant.

'Hold!'

Viola had slammed another magazine in the bolter. 'Sister?' She raised the weapon, unsure what the Sister Superior was doing.

'Hold your fire.'

The furious barking of the bolters stopped.

The people kept coming, clawing over the top of one another. Their hands were covered in the blood of their fellows; they picked up fallen weapons and left their friends to suffer and die. They had no awareness of themselves, or of each other, or of what they had been.

Or of the occasional greenskin, no different to the rest.

‘Cover me,’ Augusta said.

Viola nodded. ‘Aye.’

The Sister Superior clipped her bolter back to her belt, drew her blade, but did not start the mechanism. She stepped in front of her squad and began to recite, her voice ringing from the stone.

‘Quod haereticum de prioribus surrexit. Videt Imperator non est Lux...’

The heretic has risen, he sees not the Emperor’s Light...

Behind her, her squad joined the words of the Litany of Banishment, the strength of their faith fighting back against the mad eyes of the incoming villagers.

But it was not enough. If Augusta had hoped to stop the people by the power of her faith alone, she was failing – the grip of the bloodlust was too old, and too strong. As they reached her, she slashed at first one and then another with the still-silent chainsword, then stepped back and gave the order for Viola to resume firing.

The heavy bolter cut the people down and covered the stone in more blood, and more blood. Slowly, the runnels and the pool filled with it.

Melia shook her head, but she raised her bolter and shot again.

And then they saw something else.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In among the people of the town, there was a face Augusta knew.

An older face, male, lined with sun and smiling – she remembered his name as Subul.

He had been one of Kawa's followers, strong in his faith.

Now he had the symbol of Khorne carved deep into his forehead, and his own blood was caked dark around his eyes.

'Hold!' She commanded the squad to cease fire.

The people were stopping. They looked like the hounds, snarling and straining, but Subul seemed to be their leader and their voice, and they paused to let him come forwards.

'I knew you would come back,' he said to her. *'Sister.'*

His voice was deep and layered with power. He wore horror like a cloak.

He raised his chin, facing her down. Around him, the villagers stared, their eyes full of lunacy. A single ork stood with them, as daemon-crazed as the rest.

'It was you,' Augusta said. 'You led them here.'

'Of course.' He grinned. 'They followed me, and willingly. They dragged Kawa from her home, and offered her to the oldest god of all, the god of our past! Some offered their skulls, others... still wait for that honour.' He spread his hands like a conjurer. 'Witness,' he said. 'Innocent lives – the lives you once swore to protect and save. What will you do, Sister? Will you gun them down?'

'They have turned from the Light,' Augusta said. 'Forsaken the Emperor—'

'Emperor, Emperor, Emperor.' Subul snorted. 'What is your Emperor but a corpse? What is your Emperor but a rotting excuse for your barbarous acts? How many times have you witnessed his punishments, the horrors done in his name – they all lurk here, Sister, you have seen them! We are the same, you and I –'

soaked in the blood of innocents.’ He was staring at her, his expression livid, intense. ‘Join us, Augusta. Join us as your Sisters did.’

What?

That stung. Her hand tightened on her blade and she stood to her full height, inhaling the hot stink. ‘Felicity would not surrender her faith. She is a member of the Order, a follower—’

‘Of Saint Mina?’ His laugh was harsh, mocking, laden with implication. ‘Felicity saw the truth, Augusta. Saw the truth of your Order’s history, its thirst for blood. Saw what you red-clad women *really* are.’

‘You will perish by my hand,’ Augusta told him. ‘By my faith.’

‘You and your false God.’ Subul grinned, the expression savage and somehow wider than his face. His teeth were sharp and coated in gore, in shreds of flesh. ‘Do you not know where you are, Sister Superior, where you have blundered in your ignorance and your blind faith? You have your eyes so fixed on Terra, you cannot even see your boots.’

‘I do not play these word games.’ Augusta snorted. ‘You are a heretic, and I am done speaking with you.’

The people were chanting now, rhythmic and soft. It sounded almost like the Sisters’ battle litany, but the words had been warped, twisted.

That we wouldst bring them only death...

That we wouldst spare none...

The villagers began to move forwards again, their eyes afire, their hands outstretched. They passed Subul and spread outwards into the chamber.

Augusta stepped back, allowing her squad their field of fire.

‘Then gun them down,’ Subul said, as they surrounded and concealed him. ‘They are weaponless, defenceless. Gun them down and fulfil your warlike cravings!’

‘You cannot assail my faith,’ Augusta said. ‘They are heretics. I shall not suffer their lives.’

Behind her, five bolters cocked ready with a noise that rang from the rock.

The people of the town died.

Despite Subul’s taunting, Augusta had no doubts – the people had followed falsehood, and their lives were forfeit so that their souls might still be saved. They had no hope facing the Sisters’ weapons, and they fell and they bled and they died, and their lives leaked slowly into the filling pool.

As the bolters finally silenced, as Caia and Melia walked among the dead,

Augusta found herself staring at the floor.

The blood was soaking into stone, spreading out through the rock by some strange osmosis, some chemical effect that she did not fully understand.

Soaked into the stone, Jatoya had said.

The truth of your Order's history...

An odd, cold chill went down her back – something she was missing, something else that was happening here...

Not just the daemon, something more.

Akemi, her armour splattered in blood and her bolter still smoking, said, 'He made us take the daemon's lives for it.' She was beside Augusta, staring at the now-full pool, and her voice contained the first hints of anger, new and jagged. 'He made us *feed* it.'

'These people, Akemi,' Augusta told her, 'have been saved twice. They walk in the Light.'

Akemi looked around at the destruction, the twisted spread of death that the Sisters had wrought. 'I understand that,' she said. 'But I... I dislike being a game piece.'

'Hold to your anger, Sister,' Augusta told her. 'It a gift from the Emperor and it brings you courage, and resolve. But...' she paused, holding Akemi's gaze through her visor, '...control it. *Never* let it master you.'

The vox crackled as the responding channel opened, but before Akemi could voice her answer, Augusta heard something else.

Something moving.

Something *big*.

The vox-channel closed again as all six women stopped to listen. The corruption was moving, out there in the tunnels. It felt like power, like cruelty, like hunger, like anger. It seemed to pulse through the very stone.

'I cannot see Subul,' Jatoya commented.

Augusta looked round at her second-in-command. 'We must find him.'

'He is not among the dead,' Melia said. 'He must have used the people to cover his escape. Though where he was going...'

'Can we not follow him?' Augusta asked. 'I suspect he will lead us to the heart of this complex.'

The truth of your Order's history...

Do you not know where you are?

What had he meant?

But she dismissed the thought – she had no time for speculation. Akemi was

right, somewhere, the hounds' masters were gathering power, sucking in the blood and the souls that had been shed within their auspice.

As if it had heard her, the sound came again – deep laughter, mocking and rich and hot. It came with a flare of pure greed, a craving sense of fury and appetite that made the sweat slide down Augusta's back.

We are the same, you and I – soaked in the blood of innocents...

Viola raised the heavy bolter. She indicated the far side of the chamber, and the doorway that Caia was now scanning with the auspex.

'We can follow him,' Caia said. 'If we move swiftly, and he stays within our range.'

'Good,' Augusta said. 'Let us not release him from our sight.'

Viola stood up, heavy bolter reloaded and ready to take point, but Augusta held up a hand.

'No, Sister,' she said. 'Walk rearguard and ensure nothing is following us. Jatoya, take point.'

'Aye.'

The squad's second-in-command came forward to take Viola's place, and Viola moved as ordered – but Augusta did not miss the resentful flash in the younger woman's bright green eyes.

They headed further into the maze.

Here, the walls of the tunnels were studded with skulls in the manner of an ossuary, bleached-white bones in elaborate patterns, streaked with blackened and ancient blood. In places, the angled and leering spirits of the Age of Strife were etched into the stone, their obsidian and mica covered with long-congealed gore.

The Sisters' suitlights moved across the patterns of the dead. Between the bones, silent archways opened in every direction, caked with the rust-coloured moss. Behind them, endless corridors led away into the darkness.

The Sisters had no idea where they were. Augusta found herself fighting for breath, fighting the sensation that the weight of the rock above her was pressing, down, down upon her shoulders, that she would falter and fall, and the darkness would rise to swallow them as it had done upon Hephaestus.

Beside her, Melia had stopped. She was leaning against the wall, trying to reload her already loaded bolter. Augusta put a hand on her arm.

'Stop. The weapon is ready. It holds the faith of our Order and its own strength. Remember to pray, Melia, the Litany of Truth. It will clear your mind of the darkness.'

Melia said, her voice shaking, *'Ego veritatem tuam.'*

'We must go on. Cleanse the core of this place.'

Do you not know where you are?

A curl of fear was growing in Augusta's heart. She knew that they should check every tunnel, that they should ensure their exit route, and not leave the possibility of enemies at their backs. But she also knew that they could not let Subul get too far ahead of them. And her instinct told her to head down, always down, that the thing they sought lurked somewhere in the catacombs' bowels.

And that they needed to reach it before Subul assaulted them again, and its power grew.

At last they came through the final skull-framed archway and turned down a wider, stone tunnel that was precarious with its sharp descent.

Here, the moss was even thicker. It made their footing soft and slippery, and it filled the air with spores that seemed to hover like insects. It also interfered with their preysight, and further confused the auspex in Caia's hand.

But still, they headed steadily down. Side exits became smaller and more uneven, and many led upwards, back towards the light; tiny rooms offered stone beds that indicated cells, these ones empty of devices. At some point, people had lived down here.

But those people were long gone – now, there was only the darkness. And the more they progressed, the more Augusta could feel it, that hot, close pressure that seemed to condense in her chest, making her breathing thick and heavy.

She began to recite the Litany of Mettle, feeling the others steady as she did so.

They moved on, Jatoya's quiet strength at their head.

As they advanced, the hot wind became stronger, blowing in their faces from something ahead of them.

From the place, Augusta was sure, where the daemon would be manifest.

But when they reached the end of the tunnel, even the Sister Superior stopped to draw in a breath.

The tunnel opened out onto a walkway, a flat and narrow span of stone that crossed a chamber like some vast and bottomless pit. Jatoya had paused in the cover of the tunnel-mouth – her flamer was a shorter-range weapon and of little use unless they were attacked upon the bridge.

Augusta came forwards to look out over the drop.

Beside the bridge and stretching down into the darkness were eight titanic, carved figures, hundreds of yards tall. They bore masks with gruesome, tooth-

filled grins, carried blades or great whips in iron and brass and volcanic stone. And at their feet, somewhere far below, there was the faintest glimmer of flame.

Augusta's certainty was absolute – the Emperor had guided them. This was exactly where they were meant to be.

'We will find a way down,' Augusta said. 'Caia?'

'Subul has turned away from the main passage, and is still ahead of us.' She indicated the last of the side-tunnels, a maw into darkness. 'If we want to keep him in range, we'll need to follow him, and swiftly.'

'There is corruption below us,' Augusta said. 'I can hear it, feel it. We must face it.'

'Is the bridge secure?' Jatoya asked.

'The density of the stone is unchanging, Sister,' Caia said. 'The bridge is secure.'

'Good,' she said. 'Sister Superior – what is your decision? Do we pursue Subul, or do we cross?'

Augusta came to the very edge of the tunnel and looked out over the drop, her belly lurching. The floor was too far to see, but the flashes of firelight were unmistakable.

'We cross by twos,' she said. 'Jatoya, Caia, you first, and secure the far side. The rest of you, watch and give covering fire. If anything moves, shoot it.'

'Aye,' Jatoya said. She paused to eye the open expanse of the bridge. 'On the double, Sister Caia. Ready?'

The two women timed themselves the count of three and then ran, tiny red figures in the expanse of the chamber, their black and white cloaks snapping behind them as they raced across. Caia slipped and Jatoya paused to steady her companion, but they reached the far side without mishap.

'Melia, Akemi.'

Two more red figures ran.

At the rear, Augusta glanced at Viola. She had left them until the last deliberately, and now she put her hand on the younger woman's shoulder. Over a private vox-channel, she said, 'Steady, Viola. You are strong, and you've come a long way from the young woman who shot the ork warlord.'

Viola said only, 'Aye.' She seemed to think about it for a moment, then added, 'I wish this were that simple.'

Augusta chuckled, the sound one of long years of battle experience. 'One thing the God-Emperor teaches,' she said, 'is that no two fights, no two foes, are ever the same. Trust in His wisdom and remain strong.'

Viola nodded, looked as though she was about to say something further, but a cry across the vox made them both look up and across the chasm.

'Sister!' The voice was Jatoya. *'You need to bear witness!'*

Augusta gave Viola's shoulder a brief, tight grip, then let her go.

And they ran.

Augusta was not wild about heights. She wasn't afraid of them, exactly, but they made her queasy to the pit of her stomach – of all the tests of her faith, drop-pod missions were about her least favoured. But, as ever, she pushed the nausea aside – she could not indulge such things. As she ran, though, she was still painfully aware that they had no cover, and that if anything shot at them, there would be nothing they could do – even if a bullet did not penetrate their armour, the impact would be enough to make them fall.

Down, down into the depths...

They reached the far side safely.

As they crossed once more into the security of the surrounding stone, Caia was there to meet them, her injured arm cradled to her, her breathing harsh. 'We found the others.' Her voice caught. 'But Felicity...'

The weight of the sentence was enough.

Augusta pushed past her and into the last room, the final room of the complex that was not the lurking pit below.

'By the Light!'

Dropping to her knees, she touched the front of her armour, her heart in her mouth.

Another mockery, another taunt.

In here lay the remains of Sister Felicity's squad – shattered armour, rotting and dismembered limbs. They had been arranged in a pattern, deliberate, some ghoulish mockery or design, and five flayed skulls sat in a pile in the centre, all of them covered in blood.

Five.

Not six.

Felicity herself was still missing.

Viola had stayed by the exit and was still watching the bridge. The rest of the squad joined the Sister Superior, kneeling to the members of their Order, now lost to the darkness.

'Blessed be their memories.'

They stayed like that for a long moment, repeating the prayer. Then Melia

pulled a small candle from her kit and placed it upon the floor, lighting it with a prayer of her own.

‘We will not let this pass,’ Melia said. She, too, was beginning to sound angry. ‘We will finish this.’

‘Aye,’ Augusta told her. ‘We will. And then we will place the monster’s head upon the altar of the cathedral itself.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

Akemi knew it was there – she could feel it.

Like the choking density of the town's air, she could feel the presence of Chaos, feel it whispering in the back of her mind. It knew they were coming; it wanted them. It hungered for their company and for the blood-games that would follow. And they would scream before it was over.

The thought of it pulled her breath from her lungs.

Sister Akemi had never doubted the change in her calling, the shift from her novitiate classes in scriptology and linguistics to the lessons of bolter and blade. It had been a matter of faith, and unquestioned.

But this was her first real mission, the first time she had ever left the quiet security of the Convent Sanctorum for longer than her Trials of Ordination. And here she was, descending the last of the circling stone steps to the very bottom of the pit – the dark hole in Lautis' heart.

She was a warrior of the Order, and she knew she should not be afraid.

But she could not help it.

'Tenebris,' Augusta said softly.

The Sisters' suitlights went out.

In the sudden plunge of darkness, the walls offered a familiar glow. The same eerie green gleam that had lined the town lurked also down here, jagged patterns that glittered like veins, calling them onwards.

Akemi felt the shift in angle that was the bottom of the steps.

And a voice in the blackness spoke to them.

'Ah, my Sisters. So at last you have come.' With a boom like the command of a general, it said, ***'Let there be light.'***

A rush of flame flared round the walls.

The protections in her visor prevented her from blinking, but Akemi took a step back, almost unable to stop herself from crying out.

Now, conjured to hot and flickering life, a huge firepit occupied the centre of the floor. It was piled high with skulls, the ones at the top recent, the last of their flesh now burning, the ones at the bottom so old that they were all but dust. Brass spikes ran around its outside, all pointing inwards and downwards – anything that was cast into that hole would have no way to escape.

The thought of it made her shudder.

But that was only the beginning.

Around it, the bases of the eight stone statues stood like monstrous pillars, their dancing shadows cast upon the walls behind. Before them, sconces stood in the stone, all of them bright with a rich, blood-red fire. And everywhere, the carvings ran with the blood from the pool above, the red seeping into the green. The ancient figures seemed to glint with hunger and glee.

But even that was not what made Akemi stop.

Before the pit itself stood three creatures, each one horned and scarlet-skinned. Their legs were back-bent, their arms heavily muscled, ending in outstretched hands and the talons of a predator. They made her heart shake in her chest – the fire and blood-walls limned them in power, in a slavering rage of cruelty.

They reminded her strangely of the hounds, and she did not need Augusta to tell her that these were their masters, the leaders of their hunt.

Each one carried a blade that shone with the same, unholy glare. Like a splinter of Chaos itself.

The voice said, *‘Welcome, Augusta. Your martial reputation precedes you – you are a true warrior of your Order.’* Its laugh rolled from the walls. *‘Now,’* it said. *‘Show me.’*

Long tongues extending, the things licked their teeth.

‘Move!’ Augusta barked the order. ‘On the double. Let’s give ourselves some range, an open field of fire. We don’t want these things close!’

Skidding, her hand gripping her bolter and her boots going from under her, Akemi ran. Somewhere, something in her heart wanted to just keep running – to flee this place, flee this horror. Flee the writhing, shimmering colours of these creatures’ eyes and swords...

Confidunt in Eo, Akemi.

She believed.

Augusta was still shouting. ‘That statue – that one – put it at our backs!’

But behind them, the creatures, too, had broken into a run.

They were faster than Akemi had expected; they covered the ground so quickly that she barely had time to reach the statue, then turn to raise both bolter and litany like the twin flags of her faith.

But the incoming creatures didn't care – they slowed down and bared their teeth at the Sisters, as if sneering. The squad fired and wounds appeared in the beasts' chests and shoulders, mists of blood and steam pouring from their skin.

They did not stop. They came on like a promise – like they would tear the Sisters' hearts out and cast their skulls into the pit.

In response, Augusta's shout came over the vox. *'Viola! Fire!'*

'From the begetting of daemons!' With a shout of defiance, Viola loosed the full power of the thrice-blessed heavy bolter.

The creatures juddered under the full suppression; they shook and they staggered, but that was all. Furious, Viola kept firing, kept singing the litany so the words, too, would drive the creatures back.

One took a round in the leg, blowing it apart. It faltered and fell, hissing at them, daring them to go closer.

'Leave it,' Augusta barked. 'Viola, concentrate your fire, one target at a time. The one on the left!'

'But, Sister! I can kill—!'

'Follow the order!'

Flinching at Augusta's tone, Viola switched targets, letting the left-hand creature take the full force of the weapon. The things were getting close now, and Akemi wanted desperately to quail away from them. She could feel the tension in her throat rising – she wanted to scream to release the pressure.

She kept singing.

Augusta shouted, 'The rest of you, take out the injured one!'

Gunfire and harmonies rang from the rock. Akemi resumed shooting, trying to hit the injured creature's weak points – its joints, its eyes. Beside her, Caia shot with her uninjured hand, holding her auspex in the other. The wound in her elbow was swollen, and the auspex flickered and flared.

She cursed the thing, slung it back on her belt, and concentrated fully on the bolter.

But the closest creature was almost on them now. Eyes burning brighter than the fire, it raised the blade as if to cut them down. Panicked, Akemi felt a powerful urge to switch targets, to shoot it before it could reach them, but she knew she had to follow her orders, focus...

With a rasp, Augusta started her chainsword and stepped out to meet it.

Over the vox, the litany came from her in a low, angry rumble – like a threat of incoming thunder. Akemi had admired Augusta’s steel resolve, her unwavering faith, her utter fearlessness – but this... to stand blade to blade against this creature of Ruin, against such ferocity and rage...

The creature paused. It splayed its talons and bared its teeth; its tongue curled and rolled. The sword in its hand glowed like red hell; as Augusta brought her own blade up to cut the thing open from hip to shoulder, it parried, and hard. Sparks sizzled on the stone.

‘Akemi!’ The command was Jatoya, and it made Akemi jump. She raised her pistol once more.

Beside her, Viola had the heavy bolter braced against her shoulder. Her target creature was moving through a mist of its own blood, still taking round after round – it had slowed under the onslaught, but that was all. And Viola’s anger was as high as Augusta’s, raging completely and without limit. The litany roared from her, and Akemi could *feel* it – the surge of it in her heart and her soul, the pure zeal of the Sisters’ rage.

She found herself joining the shout, both furious and praising, as if daring the fear to come back. She shot, and shot again.

The injured creature snarled at her. Struggling to stand, it looked up and met her eyes. And then, suddenly, she couldn’t see – only the darkness, only the brass hooks, embedded in her skin, only the seething writhe of Chaos. She cried out, unable to help it – her shouts torn down like a dropped banner. The flash was too strong, overwhelming–

Jatoya’s gauntlet struck the side of her face – not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to make her jump. ‘Your orders were to keep firing!’

‘Aye!’ She aimed her bolter at the thing’s other knee and pulled the trigger. She saw the round strike its flesh – blow the back of the joint clean out of its leg.

It stumbled further and spat in pain; a drool of saliva ran from its teeth.

‘Domine, libra nos!’

Akemi found the litany coming from her mouth in celebration, now, in harmony to the thundering rage of her Sisters. Facing the daemon, her courage and anger were annealing, fusing suddenly into something new and bright. It felt like a forging of her faith into a new weapon, a new light. She was a Sister of the Bloody Rose, a follower of Saint Mina, a Daughter of the Emperor, and *this* was why she’d been called.

Beside her, Viola was still shouting, still shooting; smoke was starting to come from the heavy bolter. But Viola’s aim was good; she dropped into a kneel,

leaned back, braced the weapon against her shoulder...

Akemi saw the weapon start to overheat, saw the rounds hit the thing clean in the face. And she saw the daemon finally waver – too much damage, too many wounds. It staggered to its knees, then toppled, twisting in the air in the same way that the hounds had done, becoming a spiral of detonating blackness.

And then it was gone, and the red mist was all that was left.

Smooth and swift, Viola turned the smoking bolter on Akemi's injured creature and blew its head clean from its shoulders.

Another detonation, and it, too, was gone.

Akemi wanted to raise a prayer of thanks, or relief – but the fight was not over. There were still two struggling figures, silhouettes against the firepit.

To one side of them, the last of the creatures was circling the Sister Superior, swift and light on its feet, and grinning through razor-sharp teeth. As Akemi watched, Augusta spun her blade one-handed and struck at it, once, twice. And each time, the creature's blood-shining sword parried the blow with a harsh, metallic crash.

The chainsword scraped and grated. Sparks flew.

Over the vox, Jatoya said, 'Remember Hephaestus?'

Puzzled, Akemi glanced at the others.

No one moved.

Only Jatoya.

As Augusta shifted, forcing the daemon to turn to face her and expose its back to the Sisters, the second-in-command dropped one shoulder and broke into a run.

She hit the creature full-on.

It tried to keep its feet, failed. And as it hit the floor, Augusta stepped forwards and took its head straight off its shoulders. The resulting detonation covered both women in gore – but it, too, had gone.

The chamber was silent.

Nothing moved.

Only the running teeth of the chainsword.

Only the dancing crackle of the flames.

And then, the voice began to laugh.

Rich and deep and dark, the laughter came from all around them. Akemi could not see the owner of the sound, but she realised that the creatures they'd faced were just more minions.

There was something else down here.

Something bigger.

‘Impressive,’ said a voice. ***‘A display like that is almost worthy of a Champion of Khorne.’***

‘Coward!’ Augusta shouted the word to the stone. ‘Come out and face me yourself!’

The laughter twisted, the sound harsh and unpleasant – whatever it was, she’d made it angry. It snarled, its voice now layered with many tones. ***‘Stay your tongue, wench. I’ll deal with you soon enough.’***

Muttering over the vox, Jatoya commented bleakly, ‘Wench, is it? I’ll pull out its lungs and make it eat them.’

Augusta made no comment. Instead, she shouted, ‘I’ve cut down your hounds, creature, your bloodletters, your cultists. What else can you bring me?’

‘Very well.’ It sounded amused. ***‘I think you’ve earned your boon.’***

With a rumble, the wall before them came down.

Akemi was on the floor, scrabbling frantically away, her mind shrieking something that might have been a prayer.

The thing filled her vision, her head, her thoughts. It choked her with the reek of blood and death; it kicked its way through the rubble as if the rock were nothing but sand, and it paused on the far side of the fire. She had understood that these beasts existed, but had never believed, never even begun to *imagine*, what that could actually mean.

The thing was almost as tall as the chamber, its matted and filthy fur clad in brass that flashed in the firelight. Great wings framed it in darkness and power. In one hand, it bore an axe, the notched blade longer than Akemi was tall. In the other, it bore a huge, brass-spiked whip. It lashed the thongs around its head, the harsh noise snapping from the walls.

Akemi was dimly aware that the rest of the squad had fallen back, that the hymnal had faded from the air. Her mind screamed only terror and absolute, utter incomprehension.

And then she heard a voice.

Augusta’s voice.

‘Et Imperatoris nomen, non vereor vobis.’

In the Emperor’s name, I do not fear you.

Her tiny, armoured figure silhouetted by the monster, the Sister Superior had stood her ground. Unflinching, she took up the hymnal once more, her words

cold and strong.

They came over the vox like a blessing, and Akemi realised that she'd fallen. Ashamed of herself, she scrabbled upright, her bolter still in her hand. Other voices were joining the recitation, now; she raised her own, striving to remember her electric rush of faith from before.

But the monster only laughed at them. The noise seemed to come from all around it, from out of the very rock. *'Are you Mina, little girl? I think not. Greater warriors than you have faced this death, Augusta,'* the voice said. *'Greater swordswomen than you have failed. They faltered, and they fell, and they begged for their lives.'* It hissed at her, mocking. *'And they were drained, blood and soul, and their skulls cast upon the flames. And now, Augusta Santorus, you think yourself the equal of your betters? You will die screaming.'*

Beside Akemi, Viola was still on her knees. She was reciting the hymnal like a woman demented, the same words, over and over and over. She seemed to be fiddling with something held across her lap. As Akemi leaned to see, she saw that she was reloading the heavy bolter with shaking gauntlets.

Jatoya had moved to stand at Augusta's shoulder, another silhouette against the enormity and the flame. Caia and Melia were further away, but back on their feet. They faced the thing together, weapons in hands.

The daemon took a step forwards, and the whole chamber shook. It leaned down, teeth bared, its spread horns almost as wide as the firepit, and said, *'Look at you, Augusta. At your bloodlust, at your fury, at your red armour all soaked in gore. Are you not just like us, Sister Superior? Are you, too, not a creature of warfare and death?'*

She said, her voice flat, 'I fight by the Will of the Emperor, and by His command—'

It laughed again, blasphemous and scornful. *'I can feel it in you, Sister! I can feel your anger. Let it go. Revel in it! Like your saint before you, like your whole blood-armoured Order, you revel in rage, in the pure fury of the battlefield. You belong here! Lose your foolish faith, and join the darkness!'*

Still reciting the hymnal, Augusta didn't move. 'That Thou wouldst bring them only death...'

The creature exhaled, a hiss of spittle and flame. *'You still do not understand, little one. Did you not come here seeking truth? Seeking artefacts and icons? The building above us, that you so revere, was indeed raised in the name of your Saint. It is her statues that you have seen. It has shed blood in her name.'*

Blood, to punish the heretic, blood to convert the unbeliever, blood for those who failed your Emperor, blood for those who did not bend their knee quite fast enough...

‘That Thou shouldst spare none...’

‘But she did not build it, Augusta, nor did her followers.’ It paused, almost grinning. *‘We did. We have used her name to further the ancient powers of this place – we have made sure that every sacrifice made in the Emperor’s name fed us, kept us, strengthened us. That every act made in the name of your Saint has been what you would term a “blasphemy”. And for thousands of years.’* It was celebrating now, exultant in rage and power. *‘We hold a vial of Mina’s own blood here, taken from her last stand upon Hydraphur. That is the artefact that you first came here seeking. Do you want it?’*

‘That Thou shouldst pardon none...’

‘We are the same, you and I. Linked by blood. Celebrate your skills, Augusta. Rejoice in them! Set yourself free from the bondage of your foolish faith!’

‘We beseech Thee...’

‘Stubborn as ever.’ The daemon sneered, scornful and angry.

‘...Destroy them.’

‘So be it,’ the creature said.

It raised the whip.

Listening to the daemon, Akemi had realised something else.

It had taken her a moment – in the first shock of terror, she had not known what was happening, but now her mind was back at the schola. She could see her old tutor, the text on the data-slate; she was scrambling after old information, after a half-forgotten novitiate class, so many years before. She faced the daemon, trying not to blink, watching its mouth as it spoke...

Or didn’t.

Its teeth were as long as chainswords, but that was not what she was looking for.

She was having the oddest sensation that the daemon itself was not speaking.

That its voice was coming from somewhere else.

She found herself scrabbling to remember – something. There was a piece of information that she needed, that she knew she had...

...but the daemon was filling her *head*.

Akemi clung to the words of the hymnal, and tried to clear her thoughts.

The whip coiled and snapped again, the sound sharp and harsh.

Remember, I must remember... Emperor, help me, help me clear my mind...

She was staring at the symbol on the beast's armour, the symbol of the Blood God, the same one that had been engraved in the skin of Subul's forehead...

Augusta said, quite clearly, '...destroy them.'

'So be it.' The beast stood upright, its bass laughter thundering like a rockfall.

But yes, Akemi realised, she had been right – it was not the beast that was laughing. Its huge fangs were bared, but the laughter was not coming out of its mouth–

And then, the memory hit her like the long ruler of her one-time novitiate tutor...

'Sister!' She shouted out loud and over the vox, desperate to make Augusta hear her. 'Sister! I think... I think we may have a chance!'

CHAPTER NINE

Watching the monster, Augusta listened to Akemi's frantic outline, her memory of her lesson from the schola.

The Sister Superior had faced daemons before, and she knew the truth of what Akemi was saying.

'Sister Akemi, you are truly blessed with wisdom.' Augusta inhaled, made her decision, gave her orders, soft and urgent. 'Go. Take the others with you. Find him. Jatoya, stay with me.'

'I would not be anywhere else,' Jatoya said.

The touch of her second's strength and friendship was powerful, a touch of faith in the clamouring dark.

She heard the others scabble as they crossed the cavern floor. The colossal might of the daemon laughed ever harder. ***'So you flee, little Sisters? So much for your devotion.'***

'We have *devotion*, daemon!' The voice was Viola's.

A flash of pure adrenaline shot through Augusta's nerves.

'Viola.' Her words over the vox were swift and quiet. 'Follow your orders.'

She didn't turn, couldn't take her attention from the titanic, looming height of the monster, but she could still hear the bootsteps as the younger Sister walked across the floor of the cavern.

'I am a Daughter of the Emperor,' Viola called. 'A Sister of the Bloody Rose. A follower of Saint Mina. And I do not fear you, daemon, any more than I fear orks, or any other denizen of the darkness! I defy you!' Her voice was shaking with outrage – but Augusta could hear the truth of it. Viola's boldness was pure swagger; under the pressure of the daemon's presence, she had a need to prove herself worthy, to live up to the thrice-blessed weapon that she bore. 'And I will

send you *back!*'

'Viola!' The Sister Superior's bark was stronger, this time. *'Follow your orders!'*

But Viola did not reply – she may even have turned off her vox. She came forwards into Augusta's peripheral vision, an upright figure in blood-soaked scarlet, her cloak blackened by flames, her single merit-bead flickering in the firelight.

The heavy bolter was raised, nestled against her shoulder.

'***Child,***' the daemon said. Its voice was soaked in scorn. ***'I will peel every inch of skin from your body.'***

'Try it,' Jatoya muttered.

Whether it heard her or not, it raised the whip, curling its thongs upwards and over its head. Augusta knew that one lash from that weapon would break Viola in half, armour and all.

But as it came down, Jatoya was already moving.

Akemi scrambled across the floor of the cavern, away from the monster and the firelight and towards the bottom of the staircase. Words tumbled from her as she ran.

'Subul,' she said. 'We need to find him. And *fast.*'

The others followed her as ordered, their confusion not voiced aloud. She replied to it anyway. 'Think about it,' she said. 'There has been so much bloodshed here, and for thousands of years – from the Age of Strife, and in the cathedral's valetudinarium... Sister Jatoya was right – the blood-worship is soaked into the very stone here.'

'What about the town?' Caia asked. 'They embraced the Emperor, welcomed the return to their faith of the Great Crusade...'

'Many embraced the Emperor, certainly,' Melia said. 'But the darkness has always been here, twisting and lying and deceiving. This whole world is a battleground.'

'Then we will win that battle,' Caia said, simply. 'Once and for all.'

'Aye.'

'Kawa tried to fight,' Akemi said, still thinking aloud. 'Maybe Subul used her death as a summoning ritual, maybe the summoning itself was accidental – just too much bloodshed – I don't know. But...' she paused, turned round, 'Subul bears the mark of Khorne, and if we can find *him...*'

'We will banish the daemon?'

‘We will banish the daemon.’

Caia had her flickering auspex in her hand and was trying to understand the endless tangles of tunnels, the erratic distant blips of motion. They raced back up the long curve of the steps to the last side passage, and the direction that Subul had taken.

But Caia shook her head. ‘The signal’s gone. This place is like a nightmare. How do we find him in all this?’

Akemi controlled her rising impatience, resisted the urge to grab the auspex and look for herself.

Then Melia pointed, ‘There.’

On the stone ahead of them: a tiny smear of red.

‘Quietly, Sisters,’ she said. ‘Let us take this carefully and not let him know we’re coming.’

Akemi wanted to point out that they didn’t have time to spare – but she also didn’t want to doubt the strength and faith of the Sisters now below them.

Then Caia suddenly said, ‘Where’s Viola?’

The crack of the whip sent a sharp detonation through the air.

The stone shook.

Augusta did not move. She saw Jatoya slam Viola clean in the belly, taking the younger Sister off her feet. The whip curled over Viola’s head just as the pair of them hit the ground.

They rolled back upright in seconds. In defiance of her orders, Viola was again raising the bolter.

Augusta would discipline her squad member later.

Now, she bellowed, ‘To me, both of you!’

Both Sisters started to move, but the descending clang of the axeblade was too close, and it sent them sprawling. Snarling, the daemon raised the weapon just enough to crush both of them where they lay–

‘Wait!’ Augusta stepped forwards, bellowing up at the thing. ‘You’ll face me, daemon, not them.’

‘What are you *doing*?’ Jatoya asked. The squad’s second was pulling Viola to her feet, but the younger Sister was struggling to rise. She was chanting the same line of the litany, over and over again.

From the begetting of daemons... the begetting of daemons...

Augusta said, ‘Giving Akemi time.’

The daemon hissed through long, stained teeth.

‘Why? I could kill all of you with a flick, with a finger. I could hold you over the fire and flay you while you still lived.’

Because the error of this place was mine, and they should not pay for it...

‘You don’t *fear* me, do you?’ Her shout rang from the stone, mocking. ‘Do you fear to lose?’

Caught, the thing mantled its wings and hissed, stooping forwards to study her. Its head was bigger than she was, its eyes like pits of fire and death. As it came close, Augusta felt her throat close, her blood turn utterly cold.

The screaming...

The blood...

The hooks...

But she could also see a red Sabbat-pattern helmet, bloodied skull still within, that was hung about its neck like a trophy. It was the one that had been missing from the previous chamber.

Felicity.

And her anger came flooding back to her, her faith and her strength. *‘A morte perpetua. Domine, libra nos.’*

The monster snarled. ***‘You foolish women are all the same.’*** Its breath was caustic, polluted. ***‘So proud, so eager to die.’***

‘I will take you with me.’

That made it laugh again, a deep rumble like falling stone. It stood back upright and threw back its head...

...but now, Augusta could see that Akemi had been right – the voice did not belong to the creature.

‘Your Sister said exactly the same thing,’ it said, but the words were posturing, empty.

And hope unfurled like a flag in her chest.

Three scarlet figures slunk along the edge of the wall.

They had no need for the auspex; they could hear the movement, now, hear the voices from ahead of them.

Hear the many-layered bass boom that was Subul, the summoner.

Akemi was beginning to understand that the daemon had always been here, that the blood shed down through the generations had called it back to the stone, again and again. And she could remember the stylised illustration in the schola’s manuscript – the cult leader with his symbol, his arms raised. They needed to find and slay him, and end this ordeal.

Then they could return to the cathedral, and to the town, and they could begin their work anew.

Or raze the building completely.

The three Sisters turned the last corner of the tunnel.

Ahead of them, there was light. It was the same rich, red light that came from the fire below – as if the flames themselves were somehow thick with blood.

It had all come from here.

The chamber was bright with flame – it had an open viewing port that allowed its occupants to see down into the pit. Down there, Augusta would face the daemon and she would try to give Akemi enough time...

But Subul was not alone.

One of the smaller creatures stood with him, flanking him like a guard, its hooves tamping restlessly on the rough stone floor. About its ankles curled another three of the red-skinned hounds.

And Subul himself.

He stood before an angled metal machine – a smaller thing, but a thing that looked exactly like the dead sculptures of the town. This one, however, was very much alive – and it defied her vision, its corners impossible, its edges bright with a hot, brass gleam. Writing writhed about it, seething in the air, and it contained an outline like some ancient mirror, a thing that roiled with mists of scarlet.

It did not reflect the room, nor the figures within.

Not a construction device, as Jencir had first guessed, but a portal.

In its presence, Caia's auspex flickered, guttered and burst into flame.

With a startled curse, she dropped it.

At the sound, the summoner turned around, the vortex in the mirror haloing him in pure, Chaotic power. Subul's grin was unchanged, and the symbol on his head still ran scarlet with his own blood.

The flow had blinded him completely, but his sightlessness was not a hindrance and he laughed the bass laugh of the daemon.

'Ah,' he said. 'You are wise indeed, little Sisters.' The hounds curled at his feet, bristling and snarling. *'But you are not nearly strong enough. I can call forth endless foes, an army to walk over your corpses and to own this planet entire. And when your canoness comes – which she will – I can take her shuttles, and her ships. I can access the moon, and the fuel that it bears. And then, I can be freed from this rock.'*

'So that's it,' Melia said. 'You want the warships.'

'Your Mechanicus are easy bait, and your Order both warlike and prideful.'

You are simple to lead, and simple to slay. And this will be your ending, once and for all. His grin broadened, wider than his face. *‘Fitting, that Mina’s Order should make its last stand here, facing its oldest foes. And I... I will be free to leave. To carry the power of the Blood God across the galaxy!’*

Melia made no response. She raised her bolter and pulled the trigger.

But Subul was no longer there. Somehow, he’d slipped sideways and the round hit the flaming, churning, seething mass that was the centre of the mirror.

The daemon hissed as if it were laughing.

And the hounds leapt forwards.

Down her long years of combat, there were many times that Augusta had been thankful for the care and attention she gave her armour, for the faith and training and discipline that kept her wargear immaculate.

As the impossibly huge axebled crashed to the floor just beside where she’d been standing, this was one of those times. The armour would not have stopped the blow, but it moved fluidly despite its weight, and it allowed her to dodge and roll.

She came to her feet, blade still in hand, the Litany of Battle rumbling in her throat like a growl.

But, defiance aside, she also had a solidly practical understanding of the might of the daemon – if that axe hit her, she would not get up again.

And she had to give Akemi time.

Facing the thing, she fought to banish its darkness from her mind, seeking a weak point, an advantage. She had better reactions, more manoeuvrability – yet its words had caught her, like a hook in her skin.

Like your whole blood-armoured Order...

This beast had slain Felicity. Dismembered her squad. Peeled the skin from Jencir’s skull and soaked the high altar in his life. In her head, she could hear the tech-priest, screaming like the Hephaestian miners...

Snarling denial, she roared, *‘Mori blasphemous fui!’*

The whip-thongs circled and snapped over its head, the noise of them deafening. Brass spikes sparked with flame.

But as the baffles in her vox-bead kicked in, she became aware of Jatoya’s deep voice, urgent words in her ear.

She softened the litany to a whisper, fierce and quiet.

‘His hand has guided us, Sister. He has shown us the way.’

‘What do you intend?’ Augusta said. ‘Quickly!’

She threw herself backwards as the whip snapped at her again, an inch from her gorget. The detonation of it almost made her stumble.

‘Viola!’ Jatoya barked the order.

The roaring bark of the heavy bolter was familiar, a relief. Viola couldn’t take the monster down, but she could slow it, keep it back.

The daemon juddered under the impacts. It paused, mouth open, hissing in frustration. ***‘Are you such a weakling, Sister? Tumbling and fleeing?’***

Augusta ignored the goad, kept moving.

‘The statue!’ Jatoya said. ‘You must observe this for yourself!’

The bolter hammered, flashes of rounds impacting from the daemon and from the surrounding stone. The creature was closer now. It raised a foot, stamping at the Sisters as Augusta had once stamped at the gretchin in the cathedral above, then slashed the axe at them, snarling.

Fire flashed from the blade. Seeing it coming, Jatoya moved, but she was not fast enough; the edge of it caught her full in the chest, lifted her from the floor and slammed her back into the wall.

The crunch of ceramite was unmistakable, like the cry in the vox that was suddenly cut short.

She slid to the floor, broken.

‘Jatoya!’

Viola was shouting, raw and wild.

But the crumple of armour lay still.

Wrath rose in Augusta’s heart – the sort of anger that burned from her skin, her weapons, her voice. She drew the chainsword, started the mechanism. She may not be able to kill this thing, but she was a Sister of Battle, a Daughter of the Emperor, and Jatoya was her second and her friend.

The creature peered downwards. ***‘You foolish little woman.’*** The words were an accusation, a goad. ***‘You think you can fight me?’***

Augusta tightened her grip on the chainsword and the litany rose in her heart like the bells of the convent itself.

But revenge was personal, prideful, and a sin. She was the faith and fist of the Imperial Creed – she fought in the name of the Emperor, not in her own. This thing was daemon and defiler, and she must stop it with whatever means she could muster...

She had a mission to complete. She cast her gaze around and saw what Jatoya’s plan had been.

In one of the colossal statues, the huge pillars of carved stone that stretched all

the way to the roof of the chamber, there was a crack.

A long crack, a fault-line that split the thing almost to the top.

And in it, she had placed a krak grenade.

The falling rock may well kill all of them, but it would slow the monster enough.

‘Truly,’ Augusta whispered softly, ‘you are blessed with wit as well as weaponry.’ Then, over the vox: ‘Akemi,’ she said, ‘how much time do you need?’

But it was Melia who replied, ‘*Sister! We are under attack!*’

There were only the three of them – no heavy bolter, no flamer, no chainsword. Subul stood with the impossible brass mirror behind him, its roil and seethe surrounding his flesh with the raw, hot churn of Chaos. They could hear the daemon, its voice interwoven with Subul’s, mocking Augusta for her cowardice; they could feel their own rage, but they were focused upon the advancing hounds.

Shoulders low and bellies slinking, the beasts approached the three women, savage and eager.

Melia’s orders were calm, clear. ‘Short, focused bursts. And *sing*, my Sisters, for the Emperor is with us!’

The hounds’ daemon master snarled the order to attack.

Three bolters barked; one of the beasts twisted and faded, its essence sucked back towards the portal. But two were still moving and their master came with them, blade shining red in the light.

‘Again!’ Melia’s order was unnecessary; a split-second later, the bolters barked a second time.

But the beasts were close now, too close.

Akemi heard the conversation in the pit, the words in the vox. She heard Jatoya’s cry. Then one of the things was upon her, leaping for her throat.

She went backwards, grappling for its collar. The daemon driving them was snarling and hissing in a language that made chills chase along her skin. And the beast was right in her face, yammering at her. Its teeth were bared and its breath was making her visor steam over; she couldn’t see, couldn’t think, couldn’t move. Panic rose in her heart. She heard Caia swear, heard Melia bark another order but the creature was *right there* and the words were lost in the chaos...

Chaos.

Another flash of memory: her brief studies of the Ruinous Powers, in the

schola, all of them strictly supervised. She had opened the scrolls and read the words and felt her flesh crawling in response.

But the memory was gone again, lost under the weight of the thing, under the horror of it so close and the smog of its breath in her visor. It stank like sulphur; its jaws were either side of her gorget, and she could feel it, straining to bite down. She remembered the litany, the words rising almost reflexively. Her frantic hands found the thing's collar and dragged it away from her face. It scrabbled, claws scraping on ceramite with a noise that set her teeth on edge.

She gripped it in one hand, brought the bolter up in the other.

With its bared teeth no more than a smoky smear, she put the bolter against its skull, and pulled the trigger.

Red splattered, blinding her completely. The creature's weight was gone. She came up to her feet, shaking, her gauntlet scraping the blood from her face.

In the chamber, only one of the creatures was still upright, coiling at its master's hooved feet. The bloodletter had raised its blade and was facing the three of them.

The glow of the portal shone from its eyes.

Akemi felt Caia and Melia as they pulled together, felt the strong bond of her Sisters.

Subul, furious, was roaring, his many-layered voice half-chant, half-outrage. The colours at the centre of the mirror had changed hue; they were fierce and bright, rich with the tones of brass and blood. And there were noises coming from it now, echoes of screams and warfare, of clashing weapons and gunfire, of massive, rumbling engines.

Instinctively, Akemi knew that there were more of the creatures coming.

And then more, and then more. They would never end; the portal would spew them forth in their thousands.

'We have to stop him!' She raised her bolter, unaware she'd said the words aloud.

Subul's chant grew higher.

And then, with a thunderous roar, the whole chamber shook.

The detonation knocked Augusta from her feet.

Above her, the statue trembled, tottered and fell. One side slid clear, a cascade of heavy stone that hit the daemon's shoulders and rocked it on its hooves; the other side stayed upright for a moment, then followed it down. It went over sideways in a single piece that struck the thing an immense, heavy blow.

The daemon faltered, stumbled.

Its axe hit the floor with a crash.

But even as it was getting up again, reaching for the weapon, Augusta barked, ‘Viola! Target its *hands!*’

The heavy bolter roared, its full rate of fire aimed at the monster’s whip-hand.

It wasn’t enough – even under the repeated impacts of the heavy bolter, the daemon seemed to shrug off the damage. It came back to its feet, rocks sliding from it; it reached to pick up the axe.

Its anger was tangible, now; it filled the air. The steam that poured from its shoulders was thick, ropes of it rising to the roof of the cavern, boiling like the jungle’s mist.

Teeth bared, it roared at them, inarticulate and furious. The hate was like a fist in the face, a punch in the gut – only the bright flame of Augusta’s faith was keeping her on her feet.

‘I do not fear you,’ she told it. ‘In the Emperor’s name, we finish this.’

The concussion had knocked the bloodletter from its feet.

It was scrambling back upright even as the detonation faded, but it was not fast enough. Melia was after it in a moment, kicking its blade away from its hand, finishing the last hound with a single, accurate shot. Behind her, Caia placed one boot on the daemon’s chest.

Even as Akemi was gathering her wits, Caia snarled a war-prayer, and shot the thing in the face.

Gore splashed; the creature snarled and struggled. But Caia kept firing, and kept firing, one round after another, again and again, her voice rising to a paean that was almost a shriek.

The thing finally detonated and she stumbled forwards, falling to her knees.

She stopped, her shoulders shaking, blood leaking down her injured arm.

But Akemi had turned to Subul, and to the mirror.

The summoner was snarling his chant, his face distorted. The symbol on his head pulsed with blood and light; its red glare lit the walls. He was savage, furious, and the daemon’s roars were echoing out of his mouth.

Steam was starting to steal across the roof of the chamber, but it was too late.

Subul may have the voice of the daemon, but he was only a man.

Only a heretic, who had dared to risk his soul for the false powers of Chaos.

‘I do not fear you.’ Akemi repeated Augusta’s words. ‘In the Emperor’s name, we finish this.’

She aimed her bolter at the symbol on his forehead, and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER TEN

The daemon exploded with a horrific, echoing howl.

The sound shook the cavern; rubble rumbled from the toppled statue.

Then: silence.

Viola loosed a battle cry, raising her voice in a hymn of thanks.

Augusta felt relief unfurling in her soul, the release from the stink and rage and pressure of the daemon's presence. For a moment, she felt almost weightless.

Truly, the Emperor had blessed them.

But the mission was not yet over. Walking to where Jatoya had fallen, she said, 'Sister Akemi?'

Akemi's voice came back over the vox. *'Praise the Emperor, Sister. Subul is dead. The gate is closed.'*

'Be sure.'

At the base of the wall, the heap of red armour was crushed, cracked and splintered by the strike of the axe.

'Oh, we're sure.' The voice was Caia's, her tone dark and lethal. *'We have placed grenades, ready to collapse the machinery. If we can.'*

'You and Akemi hold that location,' Augusta said. 'Sister Melia, I need you here.'

Carefully, she turned Jatoya's helm to check the life signal.

'Sister?' Viola joined her, her voice filled with concern.

Augusta stood back, breathing hard. It took a moment before she could speak, and when she did her words were heavy and soft. 'She walks at His feet. Blessed be her memory.'

'No.' Viola's breath caught on a sob – a sound that was as much exhaustion as grief. 'Blessed be... blessed be her memory.'

‘This place is accursed,’ Augusta said. ‘Too many Sisters have laid down their lives.’ She watched the crumpled form for a minute, then said, ‘Sister Viola.’

Viola raised her chin. ‘Sister Superior.’

‘You disobeyed my order, Viola.’ Her words were flat, somehow empty of all feeling; suddenly, she felt very tired. ‘When commanded to leave with the rest of the squad, you stayed to face the daemon. I do not need to remind you of the schola’s most basic lessons – that we must all rely upon the unity, courage and the trustworthiness of our Sisters. An order disobeyed can spell death for a squad in the field.’

Viola flinched, looking at the broken armour beside them.

‘Yes, Sister.’

‘Not only that, but you acted out of a purely personal need – a need to prove yourself. You did not act for the good of the unit, nor for your love of the Emperor. Do you have anything to say to me, Sister?’

Viola paused. She inhaled, as if searching for the right words, then her shoulders sagged once more. ‘No, Sister. I wanted–’

‘What you “wanted” is irrelevant. Your need for personal merit overcame both your training and your orders.’

Viola said, her voice quiet, ‘Sister, you could not have held back the daemon without me, and without the heavy bolter. I disobeyed the order because I feared for the failure of the mission.’ She paused, then said, ‘I will accept whatever discipline you feel is necessary.’

The Sister Superior drew in a breath. Jatoya’s death had not been Viola’s doing, but still, a splinter of anger was caught in Augusta’s heart.

With an effort, she mastered it.

‘Disobeying a direct order should see you among the Repentia,’ she said. ‘Or at the very least your badge of merit removed.’

‘Yes, Sister. I understand.’

Augusta considered her. The young woman’s head was bowed and her attitude contrite. Her lone adamantium bead glinted – the award she had received for the death of the ork warlord.

‘I feel, Sister Viola,’ Augusta said, ‘that you were unready for your field promotion, and you have been daunted by the expectation that it has laid upon your shoulders.’

Viola looked up, her expression wary.

‘Yet you have faced your task with courage and you have learned to use the weapon with great speed, great skill and great accuracy.’

Viola watched her, still unspeaking.

‘We will undertake suitable atonement,’ the Sister Superior said, her decision reached. ‘We will retrieve our fallen Sisters. We will carry them back to the township where we will raise a pyre to Sister Jatoya, to Sister Felicity and her squad, to the tech-priest Jencir and the missionary Lyconides, and to Kawa Koumu and the bravery of her warriors. We will cleanse both the cathedral and the shrines of the town, and we will grant a final blessing to those who have attained the Emperor’s side.’

‘Sister?’ Viola’s tone was surprised. ‘You—?’

‘I must accept responsibility for my decisions,’ Augusta said. ‘I made the choice to promote you to Sister Kimura’s role. And by my failure was Chaos loosed within this place.’ She glanced at the smoking daemon flesh strewn across the floor, at the last of the skulls in the firepit. ‘This planet has seen me err too many times – the blame for all of these deaths is mine. And may the Emperor accept my penitence.’

In the thick night of the Lautis jungle, the flames burned high.

Behind them, the twin guards of the ziggurat flickered in the light, and its stepped, dark shape angled upwards into the sky. At its peak, the ancient depiction of the Emperor looked out across the empty town.

Watching the hot, bright fire that consumed the figure within, Augusta had removed both helmet and gauntlets. The night air was heavy and warm, but its comparative freshness was welcome.

She looked around the gathered squad, all of them bare-headed and weary. Their armour was scratched and dented, their cloaks stained and filthy – but she was proud of every one of them. Even Viola, despite her insubordination.

‘I have transmitted the report,’ she told them. ‘And there are enough supplies within the basecamp to sustain us until the *Tukril* arrives from Mars, the *Kyrus* with it. Our mission, Sisters,’ she tried to stop the bitterness in her tone, ‘has been a success.’

‘How long will we be here?’ Melia asked.

‘Sixty-five days.’

Her response was met with a dismayed silence – she knew full well that her squad did not wish to stay here, never mind for two Solar months.

But she was not finished. ‘But be warned – we are not on hiatus, Sisters, and we must maintain our guard. Where Chaos has manifested, it may yet still return – and it is up to us to ensure that the cathedral and its tunnels remain free

from any taint. The patrol work may be tedious, but it is as much a part of our calling as the banishment of the beast itself.’ She paused, but her squad still said nothing. They only stood listening to the brief. ‘And we must not err.’

Beside her in the firelight, Akemi said, ‘What of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Sister? With the *Tukril* returning...’

She let the query tail off into silence, but Augusta understood. The daemon had said that they were easy to lure, implying that Jencir had known of the machinery, and had come to Lautis not to rebuild, but for reasons of his own. The curiosity of the Adeptus Mechanicus, as Jatoya had commented, was often their undoing.

‘We will greet them upon their arrival and discover the parameters of their mission. I await the orders of the canoness – it may well be that the cathedral and the town will be destroyed. Certainly, it would be the most secure outcome.’

On the far side of the fire, Viola stared down into the flame, her armour gleaming. She had been very quiet on their careful retreat from the cathedral’s undertunnels, retrieving Jatoya and the gruesome remains of the fallen squad and obeying every command without question. And there had been no further sign of her outspoken bluster.

At Augusta’s words, she glanced up.

‘Permission to ask a question, Sister?’

‘Of course,’ Augusta said.

‘Why is it that the Adeptus Mechanicus have such a tie to our Order?’

Akemi, standing at the fireside and flicking her little fetish between her fingers, glanced up as if eager to answer, but Augusta said, ‘You know the legend of Saint Mina, Viola. It was the very first doctrine you studied when you joined this Order.’

Viola nodded, ‘Yes, Sister.’

Augusta said, ‘Saint Mina was martyred upon the Mechanicus planet of Hydraphur. She was slain at a small shrine and her body was drained of all blood. Yet still, her blade slew hundreds of her foes.’

‘Then perhaps Jencir’s curiosity was not just the machinery,’ Viola commented.

‘Perhaps,’ Augusta said. ‘The Mechanicus have been political supporters of our Order for many centuries.’ She let herself smile. ‘If Akemi can read enough of his notes, we may even find out.’

Akemi made a face.

‘But – what about the vial?’ Melia said. ‘The daemon Subul mentioned a vial of Mina’s blood. Do we believe that such an artefact really exists?’

‘Subul was playing games,’ Augusta said. ‘Games of words. He was taunting and provoking us and trying to make us falter.’ Her smile was grim. ‘In drawing a comparison between ourselves and the bloodlust of the followers of Khorne, he was calling everything we are into question, the entire history of our Order. But we have faced his mockery, Sisters. We have faced the minion of Chaos, faced blood and fire and death. And while we may know rage and warfare and the pure anger of the Emperor’s wrath, there remains a difference between our desire for battle and theirs.’

The others watched her; her gaze stopped on Sister Viola.

‘We fight in the Emperor’s name,’ Viola said. ‘We have purpose.’

‘Just so,’ Augusta agreed with her. ‘And we fight with control. We embrace the rage, but we use it wisely. It never commands us. And that, above all things, is why our discipline matters.’

Viola flushed, understanding all too well the point that Augusta was making.

‘As to the vial,’ the Sister Superior said. ‘Daemons are the masters of deceit. We cannot know if such a thing exists.’

‘But,’ Melia said, ‘in the days to come, we will have time. We can search for it while we patrol.’

Caia said, ‘I will find it.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ Melia told her.

From somewhere, a cawing cry split the darkness, and made them jump.

Akemi said, ‘The wildlife of the jungle – it’s coming back.’

Caia looked ruefully at her broken auspex. ‘I suppose we had better set a watch.’

‘I will watch,’ Augusta told them. ‘And I will pray. Take the rest, my Sisters, you’ve earned it.’

She moved away from the firelight to find a vantage.

As her weary squad settled to watch the flame, she stood like the warriors of the ziggurat, silent and on guard.

Watching the Sister Superior leave the firelight, Sister Akemi flicked her little fetish between her fingers.

She had survived. She had faced her fears, faced the powers of darkness. She had spilled blood and taken lives, and seen the slaving maw of Chaos itself. She had felt the pure rage of her calling, the rise of defiance, exhilaration and courage that was the signature of her Order.

And she had understood why it was different.

She flicked the little silver icon, watching the light on the metal.

It was precious to her – the symbol of the Order of the Quill. She had always kept it with her, despite her change of calling.

The cawing rose again, now further away.

Sister Akemi flicked the item one last time, and leaned forward to place it, carefully, in the flames.

She had no regrets as to the decision she had made, and she needed the item no longer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danie Ware is the author of the short story *Mercy*, also featuring the Sisters of Battle. She lives in Carshalton, south London, with her son and two cats and has long-held interests in role-playing, re-enactment, vinyl art toys and personal fitness.

An extract from *Steel Daemon*.



The Wrathful Song hung inert in the twisted void that existed both within and beyond reality. The malignant and unpredictable tides of the Eye had consumed the vessel for the briefest of moments, an instant swallowed by a roiling wave of colours that were not colours. Within that moment its light, seen by all the covens of sorcerers and psychic choirs in thrall to the warband, was extinguished. The Wrathful Song emerged a changed thing: a pitted and dark shape like a corroded blade wreathed in clotted blood.

Those inquisitive minds that reached out to it recoiled at what they found. The most powerful suffered agonising afflictions, while those who could not claim their strength sloughed away into steaming pools of viscera, burst into incandescent flame, or became hosts for malignant entities that stalked the Sea of Souls. All the while, every one of them screamed, across a hundred languages of man, beast and daemon, the same word.

Hunger.

And so the Relentless sent Hakaron to learn what had become of the Wrathful Song. The master of the Crimson Slaughter understood better than most how a moment of corruption could bring about an eternity of damnation.

Hakaron and his cohort waited in silence within the boarding ram. They had been summoned from the depths of the warband's labyrinthine fortress, the Lost Hope, where they had been whetting their blades in a purge of its lightless lower decks. Mutants, debauched tribes of savages and inhuman monstrosities were rife within the hulk, and the Crimson Slaughter routinely descended to butcher its foul denizens when not reaving through the Eye. With fresh blood upon their armour, their minds drew the closest they ever could towards serenity outside of battle.

Still, Hakaron's mind was not wholly his own. The whispers, dulled by the bloodshed as they were, still caressed his thoughts, like silk catching on pitted steel. The renegade Space Marine saw the tics and twitches rippling through his

warriors, limbs jerking beneath mismatched armour scavenged from their endless wars. Fingers spasmed irregularly, tightly clutching stolen weapons. Hakaron began to wish that the Wrathful Song had fallen to the malign entities of the Eye, that they would find the crew and warriors possessed rather than simply butchered. Daemon or flesh, death was the harbinger of tranquillity, fleeting as it was.

Hakaron's grip tightened around his chainaxe. Whatever awaited them, he would not return to the Lost Hope without the prize the Wrathful Song had carried within its holds. Precious few of them remained, and few prices were too high to be paid to keep them.

Contact with the Wrathful Song's hull came with a wrenching clang, rocking the silent renegades in restraint harnesses that had long ceased to be entirely mechanical. It was when the melta torches began liquefying the plate between them and the ship's interior that Hakaron first heard his cohort. Low growls slipped through clenched teeth and the blackened plugs of iron that replaced them, issuing from decrepit vox-grilles as an inhuman bass chorus. Snarling helms tilted and twitched. They pierced the gloom with glowering eye lenses of crimson, sapphire and jade, some flickering unevenly or dark altogether from disrepair. Virulence exuded from every movement as they thrashed free of the harnesses and crowded before the egress hatchway. Even in the short time since emerging from the depths of the Lost Hope, their affliction had returned enough to sway their minds.

The air the traitors swarmed into from the boarding pod was stale and freezing. Steam curled from their back-mounted power packs. Reality was as thin as the air. Twisted corridors spiralled out before them, the iron of their forging given way to fleshy carapace and blackened horn.

Flickering wraiths trailed behind the warriors, clinging to them like cloaks of damnation. The souls of Umidia and beyond, torn from life by the wrath of the Crimson Slaughter, forever hung over their murderers, visible within the semi-real realm of the Wrathful Song. The blood-maddened traitor Space Marines paid them no heed, yet twitched and spasmed in response to their incessant whispers and condemnations.

Hakaron pressed deeper into the corrupted vessel, focused on reclaiming some of a dwindling number of anchors back to a time before they had cast aside old names and older allegiances.

Hours stretched by, trekking through the darkness, before Hakaron's cohort found life within the Wrathful Song. Huddled wretches deep within the ship's

darkness recoiled from the renegades, before debasing their pathetic forms in submission. They dragged themselves forward, emaciated and blind, clutching at the traitors' boots with gurgled prayers leaking from malformed lips. They were weakness made manifest, far beyond even the twisted slaves that had thronged the vessel's decks hours before. These were the culmination of centuries of degradation, puppets to the unknowable whims of the warp.

Hakaron had neither the time nor the inclination for them. Muffled cries were cut short as the wretches were crushed beneath ceramite boots. The traitor Space Marines did not even break their stride.

The vile things had been clustered about a massive gateway, its pitted iron blackened with ash and daubed with blasphemous runes painted in human grease and dried blood. It had all the marks of a pagan shrine, one that had been tended for centuries.

How much time had passed within that tidal swell of psychic energy? thought Hakaron. How long had things been disintegrating here, and what could still remain?

The Crimson Slaughter set to the gateway with melta cutters and chainblades. Within a short time, Hakaron's cohort had managed to pry the gate open wide enough to admit them one by one into the darkness beyond. Hakaron ground past the ancient metal, geneforged eyes piercing the gloom.

The chamber he entered was cavernous. The blackness that consumed it was not merely an absence of light, but also the existence of something ancient and bladed. Though he had no capacity for sorcery, Hakaron could sense a titanic presence of unfathomable cruelty dwelling in the dark.

Cruelty, and hunger.

Broken slabs of armour plating littered the rusted deck, scoured of the scarlet enamel that had once conveyed its allegiance to the warband. The cohort moved swiftly, adopting the piles of rent iron and ceramite as cover while they advanced. The barrels of bolters made haphazard circles in the air as they panned across the emptiness surrounding them.

The loss was galling to Hakaron. An entire host of battle tanks and Rhino assault carriers gone, their ruination scattered around him like carrion left stripped of its meat by howling scavengers. He had led these war machines into a hundred battles across the hellspace of the Eye and beyond. Hakaron was wondering what manner of beast could bring such destruction to these vaunted machines, when the author of their demise made itself known at last.

A cacophony of screaming engines ricocheted from the walls with deafening

force. A gargantuan form slashed from the oppressive shadow, smashing renegades to ragged lumps of meat and crushing them beneath its bulk. A caustic pall filled the frigid air like dragon's breath, reeking of promethium and charred blood.

Within seconds, half of Hakaron's warriors were dead. He hurled himself aside as the beast skidded past, the spikes of iron and horn protruding from its scarlet flesh-metal tearing deep gouges in his armour. A building electric whine set Hakaron's teeth on edge, as beams of heliotrope purple wreathed in silver lightning blasted the remainder of Hakaron's cohort to mounds of burning ash.

The flashes at last illuminated the beast as Hakaron rolled to one knee. He had prepared himself for this, but still fought back hesitation as his dread became reality.

'Rhoghon's Blade!' bellowed Hakaron, driving the butt of his chainaxe into the deck with a resounding clang.

The beast stilled, shivering with the pulse of its massive engines as the fresh blood caking its hull glistened in the sorcerous twilight.

'Heed me!' Hakaron rose, plodding towards the monster.

With a squeal of iron tracks, the beast turned to face the renegade Space Marine. Slowly it began to resolve from the blackness. Angled plates of dense ceramite that had reknit itself as carapace and raw muscle adorned its hull. The warband's icon of a grinning horned skull had manifested life, its jaw clacking as it moaned a silent dirge. The Land Raider Rhoghon's Blade had made war since before the fall of the Crimson Sabres. Now, like the Crimson Slaughter, it had become something else, a warp-spawned apotheosis that burned with the blood and breath of daemons.

The Land Raider's forward assault ramp slammed down, edged with concentric rings of lamprey teeth as it exposed what had once been the tank's crew bay. Deep within the possessed machine, a twitching form hung cocooned within a matrix of cables and fleshy mechanisms sheeted with black oil. With lidless eyes it stared at Hakaron, the bulky armour of its former station betraying its identity as Lorvyk. He had served alongside Hakaron through the armoured wars of the Crimson Slaughter, tending to the battle machines of the warband with fanatical zealotry.

'Hunger!' the corrupted warpsmith wheezed, reaching with trembling biomechanical tentacles towards the butchered remains of Hakaron's troops.

Hakaron reached up to the collar seals binding his helm in place. A thin translucent skin tore away from the parting ceramite as he twisted the snarling

death mask from his head. He was one of a rapidly diminishing number among the Crimson Slaughter who could still remove their armour. Most had become fully merged and entombed within the twisted war-plate, the immaterium's malignant whims forbidding them from ever being anything but killing machines.

Hakaron placed a gauntleted hand, slick with blood and oil, upon the hull of the Land Raider that had forever ceased to be Rhogon's Blade. He had marched to war since the beginning, before Umidia. He had watched himself and his brethren fray and succumb moment by moment, choice by choice, to bring them to this. He accepted his fate, and embraced his damnation without regret.

Hakaron watched, his features unmoving and stare unwavering, as the living tank devoured the ragged corpses of his brothers...

Hakaron's mind fled from the memory. It returned to the blackened deck upon which he stood before a monolithic gateway. A pair of hulking praetorians flanked the portal, the snarls issuing from their Terminator war-plate more alike those of a deep jungle predator than the buzz of servo fibre bundles. They were armoured in flawed gold-edged ceramite plates so dark that light did not escape their surfaces. The eightfold star of Chaos adorned their barrel chests, with an unblinking eye at the centre. The so-called Bringers of Despair, a loathsomely pretentious moniker if ever Hakaron had known one. The personal bodyguard of the Warmaster, as if such a being required sentinels.

The warrior to Hakaron's left was silent and unmoving, the twin barrels of his Reaper autocannon angled at the deck in a practised grip. His comrade stared at Hakaron, the blades of his lightning claws scraping against one another in a tortured chorus of abused metal. The shadow cast behind the Black Legion warrior sketched a silhouette of curling horns and spreading bat-like wings, revealing the truth belied by what the naked eye saw of his form. With a screech of ripping metal, the warrior's helm tore at the jawline, grinning at Hakaron with jagged fangs of ceramite strung with mercury saliva.

Coming here was a mistake, and Hakaron had voiced this opinion to his lord. Had he borne command of the Crimson Slaughter, Hakaron considered that he might have acted differently, to set the warband upon a different course, though further idle speculation was pointless. Kranon had chosen, and, for good or ill, none rejected a summons from the Despoiler without consequence.

Hakaron stood in silence before the gateway, ignoring the taunting sneer of the Black Legion Terminator. He had never set foot upon this vessel, the Warmaster's infamous behemoth known within the Eye as the *Kruk'al'Righ*, and

to its prey as the *Planet Killer*. The power to annihilate entire worlds thrummed beneath Hakaron's boots. The chieftain of Horus' remaining sons certainly made no concession for subtlety.

A sliver of greater shadow swelled through the gateway, slowly blooming as the massive doors parted with the thunder of immense cogwork. Hakaron's hold tightened on the chainaxe he carried low against his hips, the worn steel and leather of its haft creaking in his grip. He could not see into the audience chamber beyond the gateway, though whether that was incidental or by some sorcerous design, Hakaron could not say. All that could be seen as the slabs of black iron peeled back was the figure of his master as he emerged from parlay with the lord of the Black Legion.

Kranon the Relentless strode from the unnatural dark like a war deity dredged from ancient myth. A cloak of silver fur and hide hung from ornate armour of deep arterial red, flensed from a beast that could never exist within the bounds of reality. Sapphire eyes twitched and blinked across the warlord's plate, ensconced in riveted brass. The Blade of the Relentless hung across Kranon's back, the hilt of the massive longsword angling behind the twin horns that thrust from the crown of his leering mask.

The portal began to shut as soon as the warlord stepped through, opening only wide enough to grant him passage. Hakaron turned, keeping a step behind and to the left of Kranon as the warlord marched unabated from the closing gateway. The master of the Crimson Slaughter was unreadable behind his helm, and his stride gave no inkling of his mood.

'We return to the *Lost Hope*, my lord?' asked Hakaron.

A thin breath hissed from Kranon's vox-grille. 'I have pledged us to them. They stand poised to begin their new crusade, and we shall lend our blades to the slaughter when they do.'

'My war machines are ready, lord,' said Hakaron. 'We shall drown their hulls with the blood of Cadians.'

'No.'

To Hakaron's credit, he did not falter in his stride as the Relentless pressed on down the corridor.

'Will we not move with the Black Legion as it assails the Cadian Gate?'

Kranon's horned helm tilted fractionally, regarding Hakaron. 'Ours shall be a different path.'

The next words to pass from the Relentless stirred the voices within Hakaron's mind to a frenzy of bladed wailing.

‘Tell me, do you remember Regallus?’

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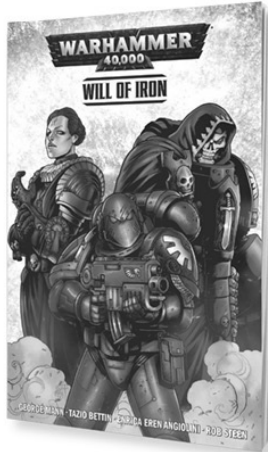
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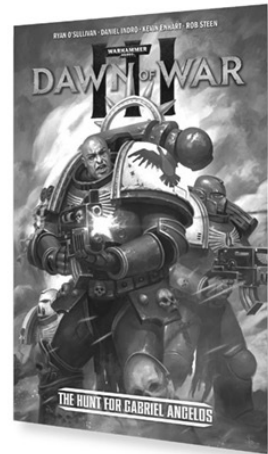
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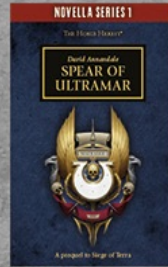
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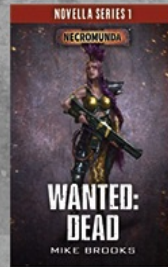
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COLLECT THEM ALL

To Liz, Judith and Jane, my Sisters of Battle.

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