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The Ghosts of Rage

Absence stops me from going any farther. Emptiness. A lack of echoes. There is nothing at all in the cell before me. But the nothing seizes me. Its contours mean something.

'What do you see, Chaplain Lemartes?' Corbulo asks.

So often a test, this time the Sanguinary High Priest's question is genuine curiosity. My grip on the Rage is solid, and Corbulo knows this. The quiver of anger is a low tremor. I hold the visions at bay, watching the corridors of the Blood Angels strike cruiser *Crimson Exhortation* and refusing to see Horus's *Vengeful Spirit*. Time and space are not in flux. We are departing the orbit of Phlegethon. Soon we will make the leap into the immaterium.

I see Corbulo. His golden-haired, noble countenance is the echo of the Angel himself, the embodiment of the hope of our Chapter. I see in him my opposite number.

I am the curse. My armour is black, my helmet a skull, and that is my true face, not the mask of flesh beneath it.

I see things as they are. I see clearly. My state is as stable as it ever becomes. Yet I have stopped before the cells. This is where the Death Company were held during the voyage from Baal to Phlegethon. The prison designed to hold the worst of traitors became the means of containing the martyrs of the Black Rage. I do not resent the indignity of barred doors. I accept the need to encase the supremely faithful in the same spaces that have held the foulest souls, and so are tainted beyond any purification ritual's power. The madmen must be kept from harming themselves and others until the moment they are unleashed to their certain deaths.

I accept all this. Before our arrival on Phlegethon, and before the destruction the Death Company visited upon the daemoniac before being itself overcome, I marched past these cells without stopping. I walked past the howls and struggles of my brothers, and did not stop. There was no reason why I should do so.

But now I did.

What did I see?

'Nothing,' I say to Corbulo.

His face, that model of purity, the reborn image of Sanguinius, is puzzled rather than troubled. 'If there were truly nothing, we would not be having this conversation.'

'*Nothing that I can see*, Brother Corbulo,' I correct myself. 'I am *called*, though.'

'*By what?*'

'*I do not know.*'

Tombs without bodies. Memorials without names, races without origin. Echoes with no cries. These are the shapes of the troubling void in the cells. My brothers were here. They are gone now. The howls of their madness and their wrath scarred the walls of the *Crimson Exhortation*. They died on Phlegethon. Their deaths have meaning. In a war of rages, ours was victorious. The Blood Disciples and the daemon Skarbrand unleashed fury that altered the face of the world and killed millions. It was not enough. Our Rage is righteous. Theirs was tainted by the guilt of betrayal. We smashed the enemy. Our sacrifices were nobility itself.

The lost of the Death Company found the peace of duty's end. I have shepherded so many hundreds of my brothers to that peace.

The pain never dulls. It is as acute and as endless as the Rage itself. But there is acceptance. I understand my destiny. I know of its importance. And this is not the first time I have walked past newly empty cells.

Does *potential* have an opposite? Not an absence coiled in anticipation of all its possible presences to come, but a lingering, still coiling, still anticipating, long after all presence and possibility has been extinguished. Rage was here. It is gone. But the absence is perverse.

Corbulo opens the nearest cell door and enters the small space. He turns around slowly, eyes sharp, observant, but discovers nothing. He frowns, frustrated.

Because nothing is all there is to discover.

'Are we under attack?' he asks me.

'I am not Mephiston, brother, but...' I hesitate. 'I do not think so.'

Am I merely reacting to my own sense of loss? I do not believe that is the case either. The absence *does* have a shape.

Corbulo glances toward the end of the prison hall. The interrogation cell there is where he has performed his exploration into my condition, seeking a cure, a salvation. A fruitless quest. The cell is also where my stasis tank has been placed. On the journey from Baal to Phlegethon, I remained conscious. There was war to be planned. But now the war is won, the toll has been paid. I am a danger. It is time for me to be contained. I have not earned rest - that is impossible - but I am due a period of oblivion. True rest is the reward of death, once all duty is done. 'Perhaps we should wait,' Corbulo says.

'Perhaps.' I stare at the cells. I wonder now if even death will offer respite. In the tragically brief periods between the extinction of the Death Company in battle and its replenishment as the Black Rage consumes new victims, there is the promise of peace in death. But at this moment, I wonder if even that is true. I wonder if the Rage burns after death.

The absence gathers definition. I recognize it. Soon there will be an echo.

'Something is happening,' I tell Corbulo.

I speak those words, and a *jolt* travels through the *Crimson Exhortation*. Its violence hurls us against the corridor wall. The vaulted ceiling cracks. Stone powders down to the deck. Tocsins shriek.

Without a word, Corbulo and I race toward the bridge. That blow was enough to break the bones of a ship, and *the Exhortation* has already suffered many injuries during the war. When the Prophet of Blood grasped Phlegethon's swarm of moonlets, striking the surface of the planet with thousands of meteor strikes, the Blood Angels Fourth Company's ship was battered by the storm. Its hull is damaged, its void shields far from their full strength. Many gun turrets are smashed or offline. As for Fourth Company itself, the Knights of Baal are weary. The losses on Phlegethon were high. The psychic damage caused by the entire

company succumbing to the Red Thirst has yet to be measured.

We are not ready for another attack.

Though we will confront whatever form our foes have taken, and we will crush them.

We reach the bridge, entering at the level of the strategium. Captain Castigon stands ahead of us at the lectern. His aquiline features place him in the same noble lineage as Corbulo. He stares forward into a blaze of writhing madness. The *Crimson Exhortation* has entered the immaterium, but this should not be. We are nowhere near the Phlegethon System's Mandeville point.

There was no warning to announce an imminent jump. The state of the vessel's Geller field is uncertain. And the oculus is still open to the destructive sights of the warp.

The rest of the Knights of Baal are converging on the bridge. I advance to a few steps behind Castigon. Below us, the mortal crew of the *Exhortation* has turned from the oculus. The serfs have reacted quickly and donned their blinders. They remain at their work stations and perform their duties while shielding their minds from the fatal madness beyond the ship.

'Why have we jumped, brother-captain?' I ask Castigon.

'I don't know.' He does not turn from the oculus or order it shielded. There are times when we must look upon the warp, when we must absorb its attacks on sanity in order to know the nature of our struggle, to see the face of the enemy. 'The augurs detected a sudden thinning of the materium. In seconds, we were pulled in.'

'The barriers in the Phlegethon region are weak,' I say. 'The war has weakened them further.' Pillars and seas of blood. The rain of moons. These have been days of evil wonders.

'Agreed,' says Castigon. 'But this must be more than chance.'

'Yes.' We have been battling prophecies and fate, and distorted mirror images of rage. The galaxy cannot contain such reservoirs of randomness. 'There must—' I begin, but then a flare of anger, blinding in its darkness, bursts in my head.

'There,' Corbulo says at the same moment. He points.

My breath grates with effort as I hold my hands in check. The flicker of the bridge was brief, a shard of a second where I was surrounded by the forces of the arch-traitor Horus. I know where I am. I hold fast to the material weight of the ship and the presence of my battle-brothers.

I look out the oculus. The shifting, shrieking convulsions of the warp part. The drawing of a curtain of flesh, the fading of a mist of delusions. A world appears. It is no passing dream of the immaterium. It is a coherent entity. A daemon planet. The perversity of Phlegethon acquires a dark logic. The improbable cluster of moons on the other side of the veil are the remains of this world's material form. The warp distorts but it also reflects. Before us is the truth of the Phlegethon System. The monstrous warp power leaking in to the materium is the result of this great spectre. It haunts the system, its orbit a track of horror and of the impossible summoned into being. And now we are in its path.

'Helmsman!' Castigon shouts.

'I see it, Lord Adjudicator,' the helmsman shouts.

I feel the strain of the engines. The laws of planetary physics do not apply in the warp. Space and time are lies here. But we must react, and we have no alternatives but to respond to the information assaulting our sense and our augurs. We are on a collision course.

We must evade. And we must hope the actions we take will have their analogues in the warp, and be our salvation.

When the daemon world appeared, it was perfectly centred in the oculus. As it looms closer, vaster and hungrier, it begins to shift down and to starboard. I cannot tell if the course change will be enough. Ipos shouts for more power. The deep hum of the strike cruiser becomes louder. It rises in pitch, as if the machine-spirit of the *Exhortation* were about to scream.

The planet's being is an attack. It appears at first like a gas giant, covered in an atmosphere of permanent storm and the colours of boiling hate. Now its truths reveal themselves, cancerous, the only kind that exist in this unholy realm. There is no atmosphere.

The storm is the surface. Continents twist like serpents. Oceans rise as a single geyser, then plunge into an abyssal crater only to emerge on other side of the globe. I see mountain chains squirm and burrow, then shape themselves into snapping teeth.

Closer yet. The strike cruiser vibrates in its agony. Castigon, Corbulo and I stand silent and still. Ipsos is at war. The battle is his.

We cannot assist, only interfere.

New truths now, new horrors. The planet reaches out for us as we brush against what would be its atmosphere. The mountains become tendrils of stone, a tangling forest. The smallest thread could crack the hull in two. They envelop the *Crimson Exhortation*.

The noose tightens.

'Down and port!' Ipsos yells. The collisions appear imminent, but size and distance (*all lies*) are deceptive. The slender strands are kilometres thick. (*Lies.*) The bow of the strike cruiser dips slowly, so slowly. The ropes of granite imagination draw closer yet.

Ends like crooked claws descend towards the hull.

There is movement on the tendrils. A stirring. A boiling. Closer still. What name can there be for the things in frenzy on the length of the strands? They are angles and lines. They are blackened bone and ropes of the flesh. They have claws and teeth, yet nothing in their forms can be called arms or heads. There is no consistency from thing to thing. Each is unique, and they are all from the same species. Their movements are jagged, ecstatic, stabbing. A dance, a revel, a seizure, an attack. They are fast. Their gestures are blurs, yet each must be hundreds of metres tall.

'Throne,' Castigon mutters. 'In the name of the Angel, what are those?'

Closer. Closer. Ipsos has aimed the ship at a gap between two widely separated strands. The *Crimson Exhortation* is sluggish as it reorients. Its mass is as slow in its manoeuvres here as it is outside the warp. The planet's ropes come close to brushing against the superstructure. The frenzy becomes even clearer.

Castigon winces and looks away from the beings of abstraction and muscle. My gaze is held. I cannot look away. Pain lashes out from behind them. It is lightning against my nerves and mind. Each sharp, savage gesture is mimicked in my nervous system.

Pricked, the Rage grows. It is given wind and energy by the dance, by the stabbing of prey.

I stare at the abstractions and absorb the way their clusters of limbs cross. They are a geometry of blood and form other angles.

A recursion of aggression. New beings coming into being, expanding from the tips of others. I understand that process of creation. I realize what these beings are. They are crystals of rage.

The *Crimson Exhortation* passes through the gap. We escape the crushing net. But not cleanly. A tendril touches the port side of the hull. Clusters of the crystals detach themselves from the stone and scuttle onto the prow. They continue their dance on the ship.

Movements of broken glass, rhythms of hatred, a spreading of virulent meanings. They pound the hull, seeking entry, seeking purchase.

'Do not look at them!' Corbulo cries. 'They bring madness.'

'They bring wrath,' I say.

'Yes,' he says. 'Both. The same.'

As if fighting a trance, Castigon reaches to his right, to the controls next to the lectern. He shuts the oculus. My last sight of the immaterium is of rage multiplying on the surface of the hull while the planet pulses below us. The crystals' dance resonates through the ship. Something is knocking to get in. Something is seeking purchase.

'Ipos?' Castigon asks.

'Collision averted, Lord Adjudicator,' the helmsman says. 'We are still in orbit. I

will free us.'

'I have faith you will.' Castigon turns around to look at us. 'How do we fight those?'

The pounding is closer. The crystals are attacking the superstructure.

'They will be difficult to target with our batteries,' the captain continues.

'No,' I say. I speak through a jaw clamped tight as an iron vice. 'Do not fight them.'

'Chaplain Lemartes?' Corbulo is surprised. Castigon must be as well. When have I argued against combat?

'They are rage,' I say. 'Do not feed them.'

'This is wisdom,' Corbulo agrees.

The pounding is inside my head. My perception of the bridge wavers. I deny the uncertainty. I deny the effect of a mindless embodiment of wrath. A snarl builds in the back of the throat as I grasp pride. There is nobility in the Black Rage. There is honour as well as tragedy. We are as afflicted by purpose as we are by anger. We will punish treachery.

I walk a dangerous line. If I become consumed with the need for justice, I will fall. I will lose my grip on the present.

I am steadfast in purpose. I am Lemartes, Chaplain of the Death Company. I am not on Terra. Nor am I on the Vengeful Spirit.

The pounding in my mind recedes. One rage retreats before the heroic form. The crystals find nothing to shape in me.

Then the thought comes: There is a chink in our armour.

The cells. The absence, the anticipatory trace of anger. All the howling and madness of the Death Company in those walls. The contours I sensed were on the verge of coming into being.

'There is something I must do,' I tell Corbulo and Castigon.

'What is it?' Corbulo asks.

'Let no one follow me,' I reply. I must do this alone. Instinct, premonition, reason: they urge me to isolate the cells. The rage outside seeks a conduit. If it finds it and spreads to my brothers, a plague will be unleashed. I am already infected. This is my fight as much as the vessel's fate is in the hands of Ipos.

I don my helmet and leave the bridge, descending the staircases of the superstructure and drawing the Blood Crozius and my bolt pistol. I race to the depths of the *Crimson Exhortation*. Serf or battle-brother, all who see me step aside. I know what they see: a black spectre, swift in wrath. I am the reminder of the doom that comes for the Blood Angels. Who in the Chapter can claim never to expect the day when Astorath will have to grant me the final mercy?

I arrive at the prison hall and close the door behind me. I seal it and start down the corridor. My steps are measured. There are cells in both walls. I stop just before the first pair on either side of me. The air has changed since Corbulo and I left for the bridge. It is charged with gathering potential. The pounding of the crystalline dance is louder here, even though I am much farther from the vessel's exterior. The effect is of a knife plunging deep into the body of a sacrificial victim with every blow. What matters is not proximity or contact, but receptiveness. The prison is very receptive. The absence has become potential. The walk, the deck, the bars in the doors, even the Chapter banners hanging from the centre of the vault - every stone and thread is haunted by the Rage of the Death Company.

Gradually, the echoes form. The howls reach my ears as if from the depth of a vast well. They rise. They gain strength. They are no longer distant. They swirl from cell to cell, circle me in accusation and fly to the vaults. Trapped, they fall back and grow louder yet.

The torches in the wall sconces flicker. The light fades. The air changes. I taste smoke through my helmet's grille. It comes not from the torches, but from the centre of the cells. It is a dirty smudge at first, born of the echoes, then it spreads out, thickening, reaching its fingers through the bars.

Absence, potential, new presence. And still nothing I can fight.

The smoke thickens further. Its taste is foul. In the cells and in the corridor, nuclei form. One, then three, a dozen, a score. More.

The grey becomes red. There is a sudden contraction of smoke around each nucleus, and where there was air, now there is flesh.

Daemons fill the prison. They are winged and taloned, their heads narrow. They stalk towards me with a hunched gait. Their jaws hang open and they growl with idiot hunger, idiot desperation, idiot rage. They are furies, and they are Legion.

I raise the Crozius. 'By the Emperor and by Sanguinius, come and be purged from my sight.'

They do not understand. They barely have selves, but they have purpose. They are built around the ghosts of my brothers' Rage, and their hide is the red of the Blood God. The clash of anger that tore Phlegethon apart is not done with us.

They rush me. I fire, sweeping the barrel of my pistol in a wide arc before me. Shells slam through the bodies of the furies. On Phlegethon I fought Skarbrand. These beings are mere wisps in comparison. Every shot is fatal. The furies cannot hold their integrity when the mass-reactive rounds explode. They burst apart, daemonic ichor turning back into smoke.

The greater mass of the furies closes with me. I keep firing and bring the Blood Crozius down and across in powerful sweeping blows. Its aura crackles and flashes with the crimson light of purifying wrath. The holy relic will not suffer the daemon to live. I smash one fury after another, crushing heads and torsos, striking with enough force to snap spines in half. Furies shriek and fall. Their talons scrabble against my armour. I destroy them for that temerity.

They crowd about me as if eager to be destroyed. I oblige.

They have desecrated the memory of the lost brothers of the Death Company. The outrage stokes the fires of my anger.

I have been butchering the furies for over a minute, losing count of how many I have destroyed. But their numbers remain the same. I am too caught up in the moment of the kill. I must think clearly. I am more than a machine of slaughter. I look up and appraise the battlefield.

The daemons keep forming. Every fury I kill becomes smoke. A few moments later, the smoke condenses back into a fury. The cycle seems perpetual. I, however, am not. The individual daemons can do little against me. Collectively, they are more effective, waves eroding granite over time.

I reload my pistol, bracing myself as the furies hurl themselves against me. I start shooting again, putting multiple shells into each daemon. I bring the Crozius down with greater force on one fury at a time. I destroy them with greater violence as if they could be annihilated beyond the hope of return.

Bursts of smoke, then the rebirths. I cannot break the pattern.

Enraged, I fight harder, with yet more violence.

At the back of my mind, I see another pattern. I see its danger.

Castigon speaks to me through my vox-bead. 'Chaplain Lemartes, internal augurs are warning of a daemonic incursion in the prison.'

'Yes.'

I kill, and I kill, and I kill. I will outlast the abominations.

'Reinforcements are on their way.'

'No!' My reason bursts through the growing darkness of anger. No other Blood Angel must set foot here. 'Rage is aboard this vessel, brother-captain.' Every syllable another blow, another shot. 'I am already among the lost. This is a trap.' Every fury is a vector of plague. At their core, they carry the Black Rage. I will not replenish the Death Company in this way.

'Do you understand?' I ask Castigon.

'I do,' he says, after a long pause.

'If you ignore my warning, you are dooming the entire company,' I tell him.

'What about you, brother?'

'Do you think I have not been doomed long since?'

I am barely aware of my final words to Castigon. I do not know if he responds. The furies make a concerted rush. They fly at my head, clutching at my legs. They pummel me with their fists, and wings wrap around my helmet. I am blind. My ears fill with the snarls. The daemons attempt to bury me with their numbers. They finally manage to pierce my armour. Their claws sink into my flesh, drawing blood.

Into my mind.

My soul.

They summon my furies. Before my inner sight, a monolith of stone rises from the ocean of madness, glowing black with heat.

It is carved from despair. Should I ever falter in my duties or my faith, should my will fail me, this terrible stone waits to shatter my identity and let me drown in the Black Rage.

There is no hope, the stone whispers. There is no cure. You hold back the inevitable and become a monster.

'No!' I cry. I smash the stone with the Blood Crozius. The column disintegrates. Its pieces fall back into the sea of the Rage.

The tide takes me too. I am still fighting, but what?

What is this war?

Horus.

Yes, Horus has betrayed us all. He has killed the Angel.

I curse his name. I will rip his ship apart. I will avenge every death caused by this atrocious heresy. I—

No. No. No. No.

Not Horus.

I pull back. I am Chaplain Lemartes. I am not fighting Horus. I am fighting

minor daemons that refuse to be dead.

They seek to drown me in my own wrath.

I respond with still greater rage.

The waves lap higher.

And I hold them back.

I am Rage, but I am also Will. The curse has worked for my destruction since I fell. It claws at my rationality every second of my consciousness. I deny it victory. I turn the Black Rage against itself. I am reason in the depth of madness, and so I guide the lost.

The battle to see the real is renewed moment by moment by moment. Each victory leading to nothing but the eternity of struggle. No rest, no surcease, no pause.

But still victory.

I roar and with a swing of the Crozius, I crush and incinerate the furies who smother me in darkness. I can see again. Now I charge them. They are contemptible. They are weak facsimiles of true Rage. They are constructed from the memories contained by the walls of the cells, the memories of true anger, and these ghosts are flawed. The nobility of the Black Rage is absent, and so too is its true power. The curse is not temptation to corruption. It is an immolating need for justice.

I holster my pistol, using Blood Crozius only, and strike the daemons with the fury of righteous vengeance. The horror of the Angel's death pervades my being, and my wrath is more terrible than the pallid anger of these weak beings. I bring the crozius down on the nearest fury as it tries to stab its claws beneath my gorget. The relic blazes. The daemon bursts into smoke, and the smoke burns. I march through the flames and shatter the next fury. It too burns. The fires spread. I am the purging violence. My anger burns more brightly than that of the daemons, and it is a rage brought into being by the machinations of Chaos. I transform the prison into an inferno, but I do not fall beneath the surface of the Rage. Fury and Will are entwined. I am the darkness of death and the fire of the sun.

The moment comes when there is nothing left for me to strike. The fires smoulder, diminish and vanish. There is no smell of smoke. Everything has been consumed.

I stand in the middle of the hall, forcing myself to lower the Crozius. I take three breaths. The Rage does not diminish. It never does. But I suppress its actions. I look to the left and right. I am not seeking enemies, but imposing stability on my surroundings. I tell myself what they are, and what they are not. What millennium this is and which it is not In the cells now, there is truly nothing. But as I leave the prison, there are still ghosts. They walk with me. They are the memories of every member of the Death Com pany. The

doubly lost: first to the Black Rage, then to death. There are other ghosts too, but they lack form. They are anticipatory. They are the ghosts of the lost yet to come. The Blood Angels who do not know their fate will see them in my fatal care very soon.

The ship still vibrates with strain. I know its pain. But the clamour of the tocsins has ceased. On the bridge, the oculus is shut.

The activity is calmer. The urgency has passed.

'I have dealt with the incursion, brother-captain,' I tell Castigon. 'The ship is cleansed.'

He looks at me as if he would ask something. He decides against it and nods. 'We are all grateful, Chaplain Lemartes.'

'The daemon planet?' I ask.

'We have broken free of it,' says Corbulo.

'Though we are still in the immaterium.'

'We are,'

So be it. The *Crimson Exhortation* is warp-worthy, at least for now. The ship is a rigid manifestation of order cutting through a sea of madness. As am I.

At least for now.