



The Last Guardian

An Deathwatch Audio Drama Script (2016)

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Gallius gestured to the other four Space Marines in the troop hold of the Corvus Blackstar gunship, as he addressed the much smaller figure, seated in the darkness at the rear of the compartment.

Balthasar: "How many times must we go through this, Novamarine?"

Balthasar inclined his head.

Balthasar: "Inquisitor Shriver will brief us when the time is right. Just as she did on Ingremex Prisum and every other mission this kill team has undertaken. So, why don't you sit down, return to your meditations and leave the rest of us to do the same?"

(Tolgar laughing out loud)

Balthasar: "Something amusing you, pup?"

The Dark Angel fixed his bareheaded Space Wolf comrade with a harsh stare. But the Fenrisian continues to snigger in derision.

Tolgar: "Tolgar thinks it funny that the Dark Angel is advocating the keeping of secrets".

Though the enmity between their two Chapters had stood for millennia, Balthasar and Tolgar had been able to set their prejudices aside to form an effective duo. Each of them had lost count of how many times they had saved the other's life, but any sense of loyalty was reserved solely for the battlefield.

Balthasar: "I think Tolgar should wear a helmet. To protect what little brains he still has!"

Tolgar nudged the battle brother, sitting alongside him, with his elbow.

Tolgar (snorting and giggling): "Shall I tell you some of the Dark Angels' secrets, brother?"

The other Space Marine clad entirely in black, even where normally his Chapter icon would remain exposed, ignored the Space Wolf.

Tolgar (hardly keeping laughter): "It is said on Fenris, that when the Dark Angels have fled the battlefield and returned to the Rock, they go about the place naked, and cover their bodies with oil and..."

Kuth (interrupting): "Please, brother, do not continue".

In the time that the kill team had fought together, Kuth had remained an enigma. Only Shriver knew from which Chapter he was drawn though his prowess in battle made his Deathwatch brothers all the more eager to learn of his past. In spite of that Balthasar had always felt ill at

ease around Kuth. There was something about him that made the Dark Angel uncomfortable. It was in the way that he carried himself, in the way that he spoke, in the way that he never lost his cool. In the entire time that Balthasar had fought alongside him, those words spoken to Tolgar, were the angriest he had heard Kuth utter.

The fifth and final warrior stood.

Korrika: “Yes, Tolgar, spare us the depraved fantasies of you and your Fenrisian elp”.

The deem red lighting of the troop compartment reflected off the silver of his right pauldron, for white skull insignia turning the color of fresh blood. He motioned for Gallius to retake his seat and the Novamarine obeyed without question.

Shriver (slowly approaching): “It is time, captain Korrika”.

The live Inquisitor Shriver emerged from the shadows, and took up position alongside the Doom Eagle, though the top of her head barely reached Korrika's elbow. She did not waste time on pleasantries or unnecessary ceremony.

Shriver: “For some months now I have been attempting to locate a dead Eldar craftworld by the name of Kher-Ys. Three days ago I received intelligence, that it had been detected on the very fringes of Segmentum Obscurus”.

For the most part, the Inquisitor had very little interaction with the kill team outside of missions, allowing them free reign of the lower decks of her inquisitorial vessel "Iron Will", but now her natural authority rose to the fore.

Shriver: “Seven hours ago visual confirmation was sent from an Ordo Malleus observation craft”.

The five Space Marines looked to each other. Tolgar arched an eyebrow.

Tolgar : “Ordo Malleus?”

Shriver ignored him.

Shriver: “Kher-Ys is drifting lifelessly through the void. Its dormant infinity circuit no longer capable of powering the sub-light drives. But although the craftworld has been dead for centuries, its treasures have yet to be plundered”.

Gallius: "Treasures? Is that what we are here for? To rob an alien tomb?"

Shriver bristled. The lens of her augmetic right eye shrank as she diverted her focus solely on to the Novamarine.

Shriver: "The Ordo Xenos seek an artifact known to be on board".

Gallius: "Craftworlds are vast. It could take years for us to find what we seek".

Shriver: "I have very specific intelligence regarding its location. Our insertion point is very close to the artifact".

Gallius: "When why don't you send the observation cruiser in to retrieve it? The craftworld is dead after all".

Shriver: "There are... complications".

Shriver smiled. The massive scar tissue surrounding her mouth and the chick bones puckering, to give her a sinister aspect.

Shriver: "Kher-Ys fell to the predations of the Ruinous Powers".

Shriver did not have to utter the name of the wanton deity responsible for the destruction of the craftworld. Slaanesh, the prince of pleasure, had long hungered for the souls of the Eldar race. An entire craftworld would be the jewel in centerpiece of his crown.

Shriver: "Though the craftworld is bereft of all life, those from beyond the veil still linger".

Kuth sat, rose off this, like a canine picking up a scent of blood. But it was Gallius that spoke.

Gallius: "Why don't the Ordo Malleus send their Grey Knights to claim the artifact? Aaaahhh... they don't know we're here, do they?"

Shriver: "The nature of the artifact makes it desirable to both Ordos. Naturally, I believe that it would be safest under the protection of the Ordo Xenos".

Gallius: "Protection? You have no desire to utilize this artifact then".

Shriver: "I have no intention of using it".

Tolgar: "But how will we know what we are looking for?"

Shriver: "I will be there to identify it".

The kill team looked to each other once again. In almost a decade Shriver had never accompanied them physically on a mission, choosing

to command them from orbit or a safe distance from their target. It was not that the Inquisitor was afraid of combat. It was that she recognized her strengths lay in planning and coordination. Korrika was the field commander and had brought his Deathwatch brothers back safely time after time. The sense of unease amongst the kill team was palpable²² nonetheless.

Gallius: "Why now, madam Inquisitor? Why do you choose to lead us on this mission?"

Shriver: "Because, I have been to Kher-Ys before".

* * *

(sounds of a battle)

Tolgar was the first among them, the roar of his chainsword matched by the howl of his jump pack. Demon limbs tumbling to the ground as he flew through the gap, blasted in the shell of the craftworld by the Corvus Blackstar. Three of his Deathwatch brothers followed, their bolter fire covering the close assault. Bizarre gangly things charged at them, simultaneously hideous and beautiful, enticing, yet lethal.

Shriver: "Keep moving! Do not let them overwhelm you!"

The Inquisitor glided in through the rent in the outer fabric hurled aloft by her own jump pack. Her carapace armor was one of the most brilliant gold, with vicious barbs running along the length of her forearms. Though none of the kill team had discussed it openly, each of them could not help but notice the similarity to some unknown xenos war gear.

Kuth strode into the heart of the battle. As he went, he bathed the area before him with fire, gouts of promethium spilling from his heavy flamer. A throng of demons flooded into the space vacated by their fallen brethren but Kuth was already safely away. A confused enemy seemingly oblivious to what had happened.

Gallius rose high above the throng of Neverborn and rained down death, before he turned in to the ground and engaging survivors with his power sword. Korrika fought beside him, corralling the spawn of Slaanesh in tight area and dispatching with impunity. From a distance Balthasar covered them both with punishing bolter fire, picking off any

demon that got too close to, or tried to outflank the two sons of Guilliman.

Korrika: "Beware! Reinforcements".

The sickly stench of charred demon flesh gave way to ammoniac tang. The air filled with static charge, and in an eye blink, the kill team was surrounded by newcomers to the fray. Clawed things, slender and nominally female in form birthed from the Immaterium, lashing out at the Space Marines as they came. The first wave fell quickly. The Deathwatch guns taking their ungainly legs from beneath them, but more Daemonettes clambered³¹ over the corpses to reach their mortal prey.

Tolgar: "Tolgar fights xenos for so long, he forget how good it feels to slay demons!"

The Space Wolf grinned broadly, thick strands of saliva dripping from his fangs. He crossed his chainsword impaling two of the creatures at once punching out with other arm to collapse the ribcage of another.

Korrika: "I am astonished, you can even remember your own name, Space Wolf".

Tolgar was about to fight back, when his chainsword snagged, the pair of Daemonettes hanging limply from its cutting edge. The Fenrisian, shook the weapon vigorously trying to dislodge the corpses, so he could deal with the trio of fresh foes. Wicked claws snapped at him. But he was already gone, a heat haze in his wake, as he launched upwards on his jump pack. He held his chainsword point downwards, gravity pulling the slain Daemonettes from it to crash into the melee below.

(corpses falling down)

Still unseen by the demonic horde Kuth stalked at the fringe of the battle, jetting forth controlled bursts from his heavy flamer, never letting any single member of the kill team become isolated. Though it was far from over, the enigmatic warrior had put them in the position where victory looked inevitable.

Shriver: "Finish that!"

The Inquisitor Shriver's golden armor had lost its sheen. Purple and green ichor coating the dented breast plate and greaves. But her zeal was undiminished. And she fell half a dozen more of the spawn with her plasma pistol, before taking down a Daemonette ready to strike at

Korrika's exposed back. The rest of the Kill Team followed her example. One final crescendo of withering fire, turning the chamber of the craftworld into a maelstrom of bolt shells, plasma and flame.

(sounds of the battle, bolter shells and screams of the demons)

When the firing stopped, Shriver looked to Kuth, offering a barely perceptible nod. The other four Space Marines picked their way through the ruined forms of demons scattered in horrific repose across the ornate wraithbone floor.

Gallius shouldered his hammer and listened intently.

(weird noises in the distance)

Gallius: "What is that noise?"

The others stopped what they were doing.

Shriver: "It's the craftworld. When the people of Kher-Ys's fell, so to do did the world itself. It has been corrupted to its very core and to the Eldar race that is the fate worth than a thousand deaths, to survive yet be enthralled to the enemy they fear most. The craftworld screams because it is in a state of perpetual torture. Every instant of its existence is unimaginable horror, made worse by the knowledge that there is no release. It's suffering shall be eternal".

Korrika: "If we were to destroy it, would that ended suffering?"

The kill team turned to face their leader. They had followed Korrika for years and had slain countless xenos under his command, but not a single one of those deaths had been euthanasia.

Shriver: "Ours is a mission of recovery, Captain. Not mercy".

She holstered her pistol.

Shriver: "However, there is no guarantee that during the course of our mission..."

(unable to finish due to something attacking her, Inquisitor gasping)

Kuth's warning came too late. A Daemonette, feigning death among the bodies of its vanquished brethren sprang forth from where it been hiding and clasped the Inquisitor around the torso with one of the fiendish claws. Shriver struggled in its grip, the androgynous creature trying to shake the life from her and preventing the Space Marines from firing upon them both.

Daemonette (hissing in a high-pitched voice): “Yesssssss... Such an untarnished soul. Arrrghh... I am alive with anticipation at gorging up all her perfection. Yeaahahaha!”

The Daemonette lifted Shriver closer, the Inquisitor writhing between impossibly strong pincers. The creature flicked out its pointed tongue and caressed the Inquisitor’s cheek. Shriver’s flesh burned under the acid touch, but she gritted her teeth.

Daemonette: “Aaahh, would you want to be pleasing to the Prince, would you, duplicitous witch? Do your black armored minions know that your true loyalty...”

(a laser shot, Daemonette moaning and unable to finish)

A shot rang out, Shriver slipped from Daemonette’s grip, hitting the floor at the same time as the Neverborn’s twitching corpse. The Inquisitor tucked and rolled, drawing her plasma pistol as she did so, and pointing it in the direction of an unseen savior.

Shriver: “Contact!”

Korrika: “I don’t see anything. Wait. There! Green armor. Eldar warrior batten”.

A second shot flew towards Balthasar, but the Dark Angel shifted his weight and a the razor sharp disk whipped past.

(Tolgar groaning)

Tolgar stood motionless for what seem like an eternity. A thin red line across his forehead gradually thickening, as blood trickled from a fatal wound where the shuriken had struck him. By the time his body hit the floor, Shriver and the rest of the kill team were already in pursuit of his killer.

* * *

(walking footsteps)

Though each Space Marine had already noted the doom inflicted upon the craftworld, it wasn’t until they drove deeper into Kher-Ys, that the true extent of its degradation became apparent. Halls, once laced with pristine ivory wraithbone, had turned unnaturally black, like damage from a fire that had burned inside glass walls. Formally smooth surfaces bristled with spines and nodules, while thick veins bulged from the floor and ceilings circulating garish liquid around the vast, artificial world.

And the screaming... Always, the screaming...

Shriver (screaming from pain): "Aaahgghhh, maintain pursuit".

Korrika: "What about the mission?"

Shriver: "The parameters have changed. Pursue and capture the Eldar for questioning. Break off only if it deviates from the route of our mission".

Korrika, at the rear of the hunting pack, turned to see that Shriver had fallen back and was still speaking. Instinctively, the Doom Eagle link clicked through vox channels, but each of them was silent. The Inquisitor was communicating with someone by an encrypted link,

(several shuriken shots)

The Deathwatch Captain had little time to ponder this, as he rounded a corner to see the green armored warrior standing barely fifty meters in front of him, pinning down his three surviving battle brothers with a torrent of razor sharp shuriken. He raised his bolter, but the xenos reacted a fraction quicker - a graceful half-twist altering the aim of its weapon and sending a dozen more lethal disks screaming along the corridor. With the Eldar's attention now on the kill team Captain, Balthasar, Kuth and Gallius unleashed the barrage of their own. The corridor lit up by flame and muzzle flare. Korrika followed in its wake, shuriken flying past his sprinting form or bouncing off his black armor, cracking the surface of the ceramite.

Korrika: "With me, brothers! The xenos may've survived the horrors of this place but it will not draw breath much longer!"

(Korrika charging with a roar)

The kill team emerged from cover, following their Captain after the Eldar who had ghosted around another corner. The corridor opened into a wide vestibule, four new passages branching off of the pulsating chamber like arteries attached to a dark heart.

Gallius: "Which way now, captain?"

Without breaking stride and with the Inquisitor too far behind to assess the situation, Korrika made the call.

Korrika: "Split up!"

* * *

Korrika slowed his pace, scanning his surroundings of any sign that the Eldar had passed this way. Inquisitor Shriver had provided the kill team with auspex scry maps of the craftworld, but these predated its fall. The gloomy maze at its heart was a construct of its new masters and the Space Marines had to rely on the path finding skills drilled into them as scouts, to navigate its twisted passages.

Korrika: "Be alert, brothers. The Eldar is not the only foe in these tunnels".

(sudden and weird noises emerging)

Two serpentine beasts materialized from the gloom ahead of Korrika. Scales shimmering as if bathed in oil, the things slithered towards the Deathwatch Captain - mouths open wide to reveal needle sharp fangs.

(two bolter shells)

A single bolter round to each beast, sent them back to the ether that had spawned them. Projected onto the interior of his helmet's visor, Korrika noted the identification runes of the three other surviving Space Marines.

Korrika: "Gallius, Balthasar, what is your status?"

Gallius: "My routes converge with that brother Balthasar. We are encountering warp spawn, any sign of the assassin?"

Korrika: "It's moving fast. Follow my marker as soon as you are disengaged. Kuth, you too. Inquisitor?"

Shriver (moaning): "I'm three hundred meters behind you. Continue your pursuit and I will rendezvous with you once the Eldar has been dealt with".

In the darkness ahead, Korrika caught a glimpse of the bright green armor. The Eldar's reflexes may have been quick, but it did not have a stamina for a sustained pursuit.

(several bolter rounds)

Korrika's shots drove the warrior down a side passage.

Korrika: "Gallius, Balthasar, its heading your way I'm on its heels".

Balthasar: "Acknowledged".

Gallius: "Contact. We've engaged the Eldar. Cover me, Dark Angel. I ..."

(Gallius screaming from sudden pain)

On the display inside his helmet, Korrika watched as Gallius's icon blinked out. He rounded the bend, bolter raised just in time to witness Balthasar smashing his fist into the face of the Eldar, the live xenos crumpling easily. Instantly the Doom Eagle was over the prone Eldar, poised to deliver the killing shot. Gallius's corpse lay beside him, his body ruined by a score of shuriken.

Balthasar: "Stay your hand, Captain. Surely the prisoner is more useful to us alive".

Korrika: "I'm only doing what you should have done, Balthasar".

Shriver (approaching slowly): "Balthasar is right, Captain".

Korrika turned to see Inquisitor Shriver with Kuth in tow, his weapon did not move from the Eldar's brow.

Korrika: "You claimed to know where to find the artifact we seek, so the alien is of no use to us".

Shriver (angrily): "This craftworld fell centuries ago yet she still lives. If she knows the safe passages through Kher-Ys, then perhaps we can complete our mission without further losses".

Korrika remain still for a moment, his finger tight over the bolter's trigger.

Korrika: "Very well".

The Doom Eagle relaxed and maglocked his bolter to his thigh.

Korrika: "Balthasar, bring the xenos. Kuth, attend to brother Gallius".

* * *

(voices as if blurred or coming from the distance)

Balthasar (in a blurred voice): "We should just kill her and be done with it. The... killed two of us...".

Korrika (in a blurred voice): "Let not that deaths be in vain. If she can help us find the safe passage to the artifact, than we must use that to our advantage".

Kuth (in a blurred voice): "Why she is even alive at all? You had a chance to kill her but instead rendered her unconsciousness".

Shriver: "The intelligence that this will provide us is worth more than petty revenge, Captain".

Eldar (regaining consciousness and breathing hard): "Uuuuughhhhuuu".

Kuth: "She... stirs".

(Eldar moaning and trying to stand up)

Before the downed Eldar even had a chance to get to her wits and regain her bearings, Korrika was upon her, lifting her from the ground by her throat.

(Eldar choking)

Korrika: "Speak xenos! Who are you and how have you survived among this nests of ... for so long?"

Shriver: "Put her down, Captain. She cannot answer my questions with a crushed throat".

(Eldar collapsing to the floor)

Reluctantly the Doom Eagle relinquished his grip. Kuth regarded her warily.

Korrika: "Can she even understand us?"

Shriver: "She understands well enough, even though her armor's translation circuits appear to have been damaged. The question still stands. Who are you? And how are you still alive?"

Her head lolling as she tried to raise herself, the Eldar's almond shaped eyes blinked rapidly as awareness flooded back. Opening them fully, she snapped to attention suddenly aware of her surroundings and predicament⁵⁵. She reached behind her to where she expected to find a shuriken catapult, holstered at her back. Finding it missing, she began to scramble backwards away from her captors.

Kuth: "Looking for this?"

Kuth held her weapon aloft. The ancient gun looking tiny and delicate in his massive hand.

Shriver: "I shall ask you one more time, before I let Captain Korrika ask the questions. How are you still here?"

The Eldar looked to this way and that, assessing her chances of escape. Determining that she had none, she brushed sweat drenched black hair away from her eyes and stood up defiantly.

Dayen: "I am Dayen, last Fedalier of Kher-Ys".

Korrika: "Fedalier, I don't understand that word".

Dayen: "My armor's translation circuits are indeed malfunctioning. I think you hit me too hard".

Balthasar: "I don't think he hit you hard enough".

Shriver: "It means "guardian", lowliest of the Eldar warrior classes".

Dayen bristled at the Inquisitor's dismissive comment.

Shriver: "But that only answers what you are, not how you've managed to survive this spawn infested pit for so many years. Nor, how you were able to slay two Deathwatch Space Marines".

Dayen: "It was foreseen".

Balthasar: "What you mean?"

Dayen: "It was foreseen. Therefore, it must be".

Korrika: "She speaks in riddles. She is of no use to us. Let us kill her and continue with our mission".

Shriver ignored him.

Shriver: "Was our coming here foreseen?"

Dayen: "Both of your journeys to Kher-Ys were laid bare to our Farseers".

Shriver: "Then you know, what I'm going to ask you next".

Dayen nodded.

Dayen: "You ask for my help. You will ask me to show you the secret ways to the Craftworld's infinity circuit".

Shriver: "And what is your answer?"

Dayen: "The Mon-keigh seek to rend Kher-Ys, of the corruption at its heart. You crave the Ush-Meeran Gealt, and wish to take it from this place. The spirits also desire these things. I would aid you in your mission. There is a condition, though".

Korrika: "You're in no position to bargain".

Dayen: "You are in no position to refuse my aid. Without me your mission fails. That too was foreseen".

(Korrika taking the boltgun)

Korrika: "What about me, pulling this trigger and smearing these walls with your brains, was that foreseen?"

Shriver (angrily): "Stand down! What is this condition?"

Dayen looked to the ground and directly into the Inquisitor's eyes.

Dayen: "When all of this is over, when your mission is accomplished and Ush-Meeren Gealtis yours, you must kill me".

Balthasar: "Is this a malfunction of your translation circuits or do you really seek your own death?"

Dayen: "I am the last of the Kher-Ys Eldar. My people have been dead for centuries and I have been force to exist alone on a world that has been turned into a vile parody of the glorious gem it once was. If I could have died sooner I would have, believe me".

Shriver: "Very well. I agree to your condition. But you had better be able to keep your end of the bargain".

Dayen: "I can get you to the threshold. But the chamber itself is guarded by a powerful entity. I have spent centuries trying to find the way past it. But, no avail. The only way you can access the infinity circuit is to battle your way and pass the sentry".

Korrika: "And was it foreseen? That we defeat this sentry?"

(leaving footsteps)

Without saying a word, Dayen led them from the chamber.

* * *

The hours since they had agreed to follow Dayen had passed mainly in silence and, true to her word, the route they had taken was free of the servants of Chaos. Strange runes and icons adorned the black wraithbone walls. Some had faded, the centuries taking their toll, but others were more vivid and recent. Occasionally Kuth would stop and run his fingers over the outlines of the symbols as if deep in study, before continuing with appointed task.

Korrika leaned towards Shriver.

Korrika: "The Eldar woman cannot be trusted. She's already killed two of our number and her claim that she has survived here for centuries alone doesn't ring true. There must be more of her kind here. She may be leading us into an ambush".

Shriver: "She is merely a means to an end, Captain. Regardless of whether she is a sole survivor of this craftworld or not, she has spent centuries honing⁵⁷ her defenses and securing these tunnels. If she

plans to double-cross us, we shall be ready for it. In the meantime let us be grateful for the respite from the demons”.

The battle to secure insertion point and subsequent hunting of the Eldar had taken their toll on the Inquisitor and the survivors of the kill team. Shriver's golden armor was dented and tarnished, unrecognizable from the pristine suit she had worn when she had swooped aboard the craftworld. Balthasar and Kuth had deep gouges rent into the war plate, but look relatively unscathed when compared to Korrika. Dried blood smeared his torso from a wound that had torn all way down to the flesh.

Korrika: “Be that as it may, when the time comes I'll be the one to put a bolt shell in her skull. For Tolgar and for Gallius”.

Shriver smiled coldly and nodded.

Korrika: “Balthasar, keep a close watch. Her kin could be waiting around any of these corners”.

Up ahead Balthasar nudged Dayen hard with a barrel of his bolter, driving her forwards, and causing her to stumble.

Dayen: “Ahh, Mon-keigh pettler...”

Balthasar: “Lucky for you your translator is broken or I probably would've taken offense at that”.

Dayen (groaning) “Agrh...”

Balthasar: “I have a question for you, xenos. If all of this was foreseen, then why did Tolgar and Gallius have to die? If the entity that awaits us at the end of these tunnels is as powerful as you claim, then surely it would've been better that five brothers of the Deathwatch face it. Rather than just three”.

Dayen: “The explanation is too complex for a mind as narrow as yours. You wouldn't understand”.

Balthasar nudged her hard in the back again.

Balthasar: “Then make me understand!”

Dayen: “You have to think of the universe as a song, each living thing within it part of the choir that sings it. Some voices are louder than others, others just there to provide the harmony. The tempo and timbre may change during the singing but the song is continuous, never ending. Some of those that sing are destined to overhaul eternity, their voices leading the rest of the choir. But for many, their contribution is

only brief, a single note, a bar of the chorus. Those two I killed, their souls had been sound, No place left for them in the choir. I have a question for you, mon-keigh

Balthasar: "You are our prisoner. I will ask the questions".

Dayen sneered.

Dayen: "I may have been the one who silenced their voices, but you could have prevented both of the deaths. So why didn't you?"

Angered, Balthasar was about to reply when he noticed something on the edge of his vision, a barely perceptible glow coming from further along the tunnel. He sent Dayen sprawling to the floor and held his bolter over her.

(Dayen falling and moaning)

Balthasar: "Halt! Light up ahead!"

Korrika and Kuth advanced alongside him.

Korrika: "Inquisitor, remain here and keep watch over the prisoner. Balthasar, Kuth, with me!"

Balthasar lifted his weapon with alarming speed. Dayen rolled away and spanked on her feet, putting herself in front of the Space Marines to block their passage.

Dayen: "I was telling the truth. No ambush awaits you ahead".

Korrika grabbed her by the shoulder and shoved her to the floor behind him. Bolter raised, he and Balthasar flanked Kuth as they slowly crept along the tunnel. Shriver kept her plasma pistol trained on the Eldar, the two of them saying nothing to each other as the Space Marines moved away. After several minutes the Inquisitor's vox bid crackled.

Korrika: "Inquisitor, Inquisitor, you would better come and look at this".

* * *

The smooth darkness of the corrupted wraithbone tunnel had opened out into a wide vestibule, brightly lit by crystal lamps. The walls of the approach were dobed with countless warding sigils, fresh and bold, which Kuth aroused carefully. The Inquisitor and the remainder of the kill team instead focused their attention on the contents of the chamber. Stacked from floor to ceiling with books, pieces of art, planters and other ephemera. Shriver picked up one of the tomes. A thick volume

with an elaborate cover made from some strange alien material and flicked through the pages.

Shriver: "Explain yourself, xenos. What is this?"

Dayen: "We are not far from our destination. Let us leave now, and your mission will soon be accomplished".

Shriver discarded the book and was about to reach for another when something caught her attention at the edge of the chamber.

Dayen: "Please, I urge you to leave now and follow me".

The Inquisitor approached the source of her curiosity and knelt down to inspect it. Bedrolls and blankets were stuffed into a gap. Beneath them, Shriver uncovered stacks of what she took to be pictis. Unlike the two dimensional images she was used to, these had a quality of depth to them, as if a subjects were alive and trapped like flies in amber. Many of them depicted Eldar warriors in full armor and regalia, but others showed the civilian citizens of the craftworld going about their daily duties.

Shriver went through them disinterestedly, but stopped on one in particular. It was of an adult Eldar female with her arm around the shoulders of a male child against a backdrop of fruit bushes, not unlike those growing in planters scattered around the chamber.

Dayen: "Is this you?"

Dayen's brow creased and she turned away. Disinterested, Balthasar kicked over carefully ordered stack of ceramics.

Balthasar: "What is all this, junk anyway?"

Dayen: "This 'junk' is all that remains of Kher-Ys. An entire culture distilled into contents of the single chamber".

Balthasar: "Your people are dead, what use is all this?"

Dayen: "I wouldn't expect you to understand. Your culture is predicated on war and destruction. How can you comprehend the value of any act of creation? The legacy of artistic endeavor?"

Korrika looked up, from where he'd been examining the hilt of ceremonial blade, encrusted with rare jewels worth enough to buy and sell entire worlds.

Korrika: "Is any of this useful to you, Inquisitor?"

Shriver dropped the picts and studied the spines of the books stacked high against the walls, pulling several out for further inspection.

Shriver: "None of this holds any interest for the Ordo".

Korrika: "What should we do with it?"

Shriver fixed Dayen with a cold glare, malice blazing in her eyes.

Shriver: "Do as you see fit, Captain".

Dayen (pleading): "Please, don't do this! This is all what is left of my people, my culture, my family. You are capable of compassion I can sense it. You've seen and felt more than your fair share of grief and desperation. I know you can empathize with me".

Korrika: "Any empathy I may have felt for you died alone with the two battle brothers you murdered. Kuth!"

Kuth: "Yes, Captain".

Korrika: "Burn it. Burn it all".

(Kuth approaching and unleashing the flame)

Dayen (screaming): "No! Nooo! NOOOOOO! Arhagahahahah...."

* * *

(walking footsteps)

Dayen's spirit, already pulled and torn, when the kill team arrived on Kher-Ys, was finally broken. Her body language told its own tale - shoulders slumped, feet dragging. When the tunnel eventually terminated in a flight of steep stairs, she broke her silence.

Dayen: "We are here".

Balthasar ascended the steps to be confronted by a set of double doors very wide enough for the Space Marine to pass through. Once crafted from immaculate wraithbone, the ivory portal had evolved into withered black flesh, its surface glistening with foul moisture. Balthasar pushed at the doors with his bolter and they parted easily to reveal more darkness beyond.

Balthasar (after a pause): "Clear!"

Korrika and Kuth followed the Dark Angel to the top of the stairs. Shriver motioned for Dayen to follow, but the Eldar stood firm. The Inquisitor raised her plasma pistol by way of persuasion, but before she could react, Dayen had gripped the barrel and placed the gun to her

forehead. An eye blink later the three Space Marines' weapons were trained on the sole survivor of Kher-Ys.

Dayen: "Our bargain, Inquisitor, honor it".

Shriver hesitate wieghing up her options. Her decision made, she attempted to lower the pistol.

Shriver: "Until I know that you have led us to the right place, you shall remain alive".

Dayen gripped the weapon tighter pushing the muzzle harder against her forehead.

Dayen: "I do not wish to face what awaits us beyond the threshold".

Korrika: "What do you mean? What awaits us on the other side?"

Dayen ignored the Doom Eagle.

Dayen: "Please, kill me!"

Faster when even the Eldar's reflexes could respond to it Shriver kicked Dayen hard in the stomach. The xenos dropped to her knees gasping for breath.

(Dayen weeping)

Shriver (angrily): "You die when I say you can die!"

Shriver gripped the Eldar by the back of the neck and dragged her up the steps towards what were once doors.

Shriver: "Until then, lead on!"

* * *

What awaited them beyond that fetid gateway, made everything they had experienced thus far on the craftworld, pale like by comparison. Where the tunnels and chambers had at least bore some resemblance to their original state, the one scrambled hall, in which they found themselves, was unrecognizable as an Eldar construct. Grotesque foliage grew all around, lurid⁶⁷ in color and sickening in shape, with pendulous fronds descending from the ceiling. At the heart of the growth, what was once a window onto stars, blinked like a giant eye. Each time it opened and closed, a new scene of debauchery was revealed. A glimpse beyond the veil where the servants of the prince of pleasure coveted and writhed.

(Dayen weeping)

Dayen's attention was elsewhere. She staggered towards a thick section of the mutated plants, holding out her hands in order to grasp one of the strange fruits that waved down spindly71 fingelike branches. She sank to her knees, sobbing.

Dayen (weeping): "What has it done to the gardens? All my live I tended them. And now they had been turned into this? All that care... All that love... Twisted and malformed. (angrily to the Inquisitor) Why did I have to see this? Why couldn't you have just killed me?"

Korrika: "That's all you were? A mere gardener? And yet you killed two of our brothers. The Inquisitor may not to have had a stomach to kill you back there but I have no such reservations".

Kuth: "Halt, captain! I sense something. The Immaterium is about to.. oooaagh!!!"

(Kuth unable to finish)

(horrible goarnings and screamings)

Kuth's warning came too late. Heralded by the tang of scorched ozone, one of the favored of Slaanesh birthed itself into real space, scant meters behind the Inquisitor Shriver. The four-armed monstrosity flicked its black snake-like tongue into the air, savoring the taste and new sensations of the physical realm.

Shriver turned to face the newly formed demon, her eyes growing wide with realization what was about to happen. Her plasma pistol was half-raised, when the Keeper of Secrets struck out with one of its wicked claws, impaling the Inquisitor through the chest, splitting her tarnished golden armor.

(Shriver screaming)

The Space Marines opened fire, but as quickly as it had appeared, the demon twisted sideways and vanished from reality. The cone of flame and bolter shells hitting only afterimage of the beast. Shriver slumped to her knees, then fell forwards into a puddle of her own blood, silently struggling for breath. Balthasar moved to aid the stricken woman, but Kuth grabbed the Dark Angel hard by the shoulder and spun him around.

Kuth: "She is beyond your help, brother. Take the xenos and finish the mission".

Balthasar: "Don't be foolish, Kuth, you can not hope to defeat that thing alone".

Kuth removed his helm, revealing his gaunt features.

Kuth: "My entire existence as a Space Marine has been building to this. I am meant to be here standing alone. Defeating this demon is my destiny. It is what I have been bred to do".

Balthasar: "You do not need to make this sacrifice, brother. No matter how noble it may be".

Shriver (moaning): "He.. he is right. Kuth's place on the kill team was for this, this very eventuality. You must... reach the... infinity circuit. Finish... the mission".

The Inquisitor remained prone, tightly gripping the gaping wound in her torso.

Balthasar: "But how we will know..."

Shriver (interrupting): "Trust me! You'll know it, when you see it".

She closed her eyes wearily. And did not open them again.

Balthasar: "Brother! You do not have to do this alone!"

Kuth: "Once I do, Balthasar, if you and Korrika stay, than three lives are forfeit instead of only one. I am a weapon forged specifically for this purpose".

The Doom Eagle and the Dark Angel looked to each other. On the edge of the chamber the demon stepped once more from the Immaterium.

(demon groaning and bellowing)

Kuth: "Go! Now!"

Korrika grabbed Dayen under the shoulder and hove her to her feet.

Korrika: "The infinity circuit. Can you find it from here?"

Dayen: "You should have killed me. You should have killed me! You should have..."

(Dyaen unable to finish)

Korrika shook the guardian hard.

Korrika: "I shall not ask again, xenos! Can you find the infinity circuit from here?"

Dayen: "I think so".

Korrika: "Show us!"

Korrika turned and nodded respectfully to Kuth. Practically dragging the Eldar, as Doom Eagle set off through the dense foliage at pace. Balthasar placed his gauntlet over his pauldron in a traditional warrior salute, before leaving Kuth to his fate.

Kuth: "Burn, warp spawn!"

Keeper of Secrets rolled under the burst of flame, bringing itself upright with its sword poised.

Keeper of Secrets: "Why can't I see you, Space Marine?"
What confounded sorcery blinds me to your presence?"

Kuth sent another torrent of fire in the demon's direction in response. This time the beast wasn't so quick to react, and its otherworldly flesh blistered in the heat.

Keeper of Secrets: "Rrrgghhh... but I can see that accursed flame. Your own weapon betrays you".

The chosen of Slaanesh leapt and swung its huge sword in a wide arch. Anticipating the counterattack, Kuth had already moved, sending the beast sprawling forwards onto the floor of the debased chamber. It rose near the doorway that the kill team had entered by, it's back to Kuth oblivious to its presence.

Keeper of Secrets: "Kuth! That is what they called you, is it not? That is no name for a mortal. It sounds more like a name taken from the Pantheon, ha hahaaaaa (laughing out loud)! That is why I cannot see you. Your soul is entwined with warp. You are tainted, Kuth! There is an aspect of demonic about you. I can taste it!"

Kuth slowly ventured forwards. The Keeper of Secrets back still exposed. He raised the heavy flamer, the firing stud clicking in readiness. It was the opening the demon needed.

(Keeper of Secrets screaming)

Too quickly for Kuth to comprehend, the Keeper of Secrets whirled around, lifting its enormous claws.

Keeper of Secrets: "Did your brother Space Marines know, that they walked with one who has submitted himself to the touch of the Ruinous Powers, Kuth?"

Kuth (angrily): “Kuth is one of many names I've held, demon filth. I have been Vir, I have been Amda, I have been Voosch, I have been Meare and countless other syllables of the demon tongue but none of them is my real name, my true name”.

Drawing on every ounce of his strength, Kuth turned himself around in the demon's grip, his armor rending as he did so. The black paint scraped from his pauldron to reveal his true livery - a horned skull set upon a red field.

Keeper of Secrets (scared): “Your true name has no power over me, wretch”.

Kuth: “Oh, but it does. I am a son of banish. A proud brother of the Exorcists' Chapter. Since my rebirth beneath the fortress monastery, since my mind was wiped, ridding me of my past. I have been honed as a living weapon with one, singular purpose to vanquish you. I have worn all my former names as a mask disguising my true purpose, useful at the time, but shed as needed. My true name has remained buried deep in the recesses of my mind, protected by the strongest wards, so that it cannot betray me. But I no longer need those shackles. Break your filth of my memories, demon”.

(Keeper of Secrets roaring, bellowing, the screaming in fear)

Keeper of Secrets (scared): “Noooo, aaa... NOOOO!!!!”

The Keeper of Secrets recoiled, losing its grip on Kuth and allowing the Space Marine to free his weapon. Above them, on the other side of the veil, a chorus of demons danced, laughed and coveted in celebration of what was to come.

Kuth: “My true name is your true name, demon. And now, that you have drawn me close, you are certain to hear it. Come, say it with me”.

(explosion, demon screaming in pain)

(body parts collapsing with slurping and sniffing)

* * *

Kuth's icon blinked on the visor display of both surviving Space Marines. One moment it was vivid green, the next - it was gone. Neither Korrika nor Balthasar reacted to their brother's death. The time for mourning would come later should either of them leave the craftworld alive.

Dayen: "This way".

Dayen ran with a newfound energy and they followed her through the vivid plants and bushes, hacking with their blades, never letting the xenos out of their field of vision. A great set of double door as black and tainted as the rest of the craftworld structure, loomed up before them. Without arresting her strike, Dayen rushed towards them and hold at the handles. Without sparing a single backward glance, Korrika followed Balthasar into the infinity circuit chamber.

* * *

Dayen spun on her heel, expecting to find the Space Marines' guns trained on her. It took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, but when they did, she found the two survivors of the kill team were facing away from her. Bolters fixed on a new target.

Korrika: "Is it active, brother?"

Balthasar took several steps forward, cautiously approaching a large structure in the chamber.

Balthasar: "Negative".

Dayen finally saw the object of the Space Marines' attention.

Dayen: "Wraithlord..."

It's wraithbone armor of the same color as Dayen's, the giant Eldar walker stood majestic in the center of the chamber. Two massive fists hanging threateningly by its side. Head bowed as if in prayer. Where once it's spirit stone would've been bright, alive with a soul of great warrior, the gem was dull and empty. A dormant war machine reduced to nothing more than a statue. Alongside it, and just as immobile, stood the blue crystalline form of an Eldar Farseer, arm outstretched and reaching for the stone.

Korrika: "They are all inert".

Balthasar pulled a flare from a pouch at his hip igniting it and tossing it to the ground in one fluid movement. Dayen blinked harshly. The unexpected light momentary blinding her. When her vision resolved itself, she wished the effect had been permanent.

Dayen (shocked): "No... Noo... NOO! This cannot be!"

Dwarfing even the giant form of the Wraithlord, the infinity circuit stretched as far as she could see in all directions, countless spirit

stones bound together in a multidimensional mosaic. All of them were empty. Except for one.

Dayen: "Ush-Meeren Gealt..."

At the heart of the circuit sat a flawless black spirit stone, its smooth surface as dark as the void seemingly drawing in the flares meager⁸¹ light. Dayen started towards it but Korrika stopped her.

Korrika: "I believe we've found our objective".

Edging around the dead Wraithlord, the Doom Eagle went to retrieve their prize.

Korrika: "What is it?"

Dayen: "It is the Ush-Meeren Gilt, the ruin of Kher-Ys".

Dayen could not take her eyes of the thousands of empty spirit stones that formed the lifeless infinity circuit.

Dayen: "The Prince of Ruin devoured them all. Save for this one".

Korrika: "Why did he spare it? I don't understand".

Dayen: "You understand very little, Mon-keigh! The doom of our craftworld did not come from without, it came from within. The Prince of Ruin had long desired Kher-Ys. But all entry to him was barred by the powerful wards placed over the webway portals. The key to which, was possessed by the Autarch Enru. And so it was that when the Autarch's own daughter Enduran came of maturity, one of the Prince's most favored placed a glamour upon itself, transforming into a perfect vision of Eldar beauty. None could resist its guiles, least all the naive girl. And she fell deeply and passionately in love with him, submitting to his will in every way. Including, stealing the key to the gateway from her father.

(distant screams of the demon)

Dayen: "The ensuing war against the invading demonhost was long and bloody. Some of us fought to the very end, Enduran included. Such was her shame to have been tricked in such a fashion, and her desire for redemption, and she would prove to be the final casualty of the battle for the craftworld. Her demon lover entered the chamber of the awakening avatar, possessing the aspect of Khaine and reeking bloody havoc upon the already shattered craftworld".

(distant thunderous noises)

Dayen: "In one final act of desperation, Enduran faced the Avatar alone, her fury at her lover's treachery driving her on. Her body having long since past the point of exhaustion. The demon Avatar pressed on his advantage and ended her life song. May be it was because the stain upon her soul was so indelible⁸³ but the spirit stone in Enduran's breast turned the purest black. The demon avatar torn it from her armor, and he must've placed it here, when he feasted on the souls of my people. One final act of desecration".

Korrika: "What did the Inquisitor want with the soul of a dead Eldar traitor?"

Dayen: "I do not know. Nor do I care any longer. Everything has been taken from me, except my life. And I beg of you that you uphold your end of the bargain and take that from me too".

Korrika (taking out his pistol): "Gladly".

Balthasar (crying): "Korrika! NO!

(gunshot, Dayen screaming and falling)

(sounds of the broken glass)

The Dark Angel's warning came too late. Korrika's shot took Dayen from her feet and into the crystalline form of a Farseer which glowed the most brilliant blue as it shattered into a million of fragments. The Wraithlord stired, its spirit stone shining so brightly even the Ush-Meeren Gealt could not absorb its light.

Balthasar: "You fool! You did exactly what she wanted. All the Wraithlord lacked was a soul to guide it".

(numerous torrents of bolter fire)

The Eldar walker shakily lifted one of its massive fists and swung to Balthasar. The Dark Angel barely rolling under the blow and coming up firing. Enraged Dayen's spirit flew the Wraithlord's other fist around in a clumsy arc, connecting with Korrika's breastplate and splitting it open.

(Korrika moaning from pain)

The Deathwatch Captain somehow remained on his feet, only to be floored by the follow up blow.

Balthasar's aim was true. Each shot striking the newly roused Wraithlord at the elbow. The left arm dropped limp on its side, sparks showering from a mechanism. Undeterred the Wraithlord propelled⁸⁵

the other fist down hard, only to find that Korrika had used the diversion to roll clear, already taking aim to unleash another volley⁸⁶.

(empty bolter clicking sounds)

Balthasar: "I'm out. Cover me!"

Tossing the empty bolter aside, Balthasar reached down to his belt. Coming up on the walker's blindside he dived for the armored leg. The Wraithlord span around, the remaining fist striking Balthasar hard in the midriff and sending him sprawling backwards. Dayen's spirit steadied the xenos machine turning to look down. The detonator on the magnetic charge, clamped to its leg, turned from green to red.

Balthasar: "Down!"

(explosion, chamber collapsing)

* * *

Korrika: "Are you alright, brother Balthasar?"

Korrika held out his hand to the prone Dark Angel. Fragments of charred wraithbone were scattered around them.

Balthasar (breathing hard): "Heh... ah... I've survived worse".

Balthasar accepted the proffered gauntlet and pulled himself upright examining his power armor to see the extent of the damage that Dayen's final blow had caused. His visor had been torn open.

Balthasar: "The spirit stone..."

Korrika put his other hand out towards Balthasar, fist clinched. He opened his fingers to reveal the black gem, completely undamaged.

Korrika: "Perfectly safe".

Balthasar: "Good. Now, hand it over".

The Doom Eagle withdrew the stone, reaching for the bolter slung at his back with his free hand.

Korrika: "No. The gem will be delivered to the Ordo Xenos as per the parameters of our mission".

The Dark Angel stared coldly at him.

Balthasar: "Securing the gem for the Ordo Xenos was never the aim of this mission. It was always indented for the Dark Angels".

Korrika: "Shriver knew of this? No matter. The Inquisitor is dead. Until I know the artifact's power and purpose it will remain in my charge".

Balthasar: "I don't think so".

Korrika: "What makes you so sure?"

Balthasar: "Because the Inquisitor isn't dead".

(bolter round)

Korrika (screaming and collapsing to the ground): "Aaahrrhrhhhr..."

The shot took Korrika in the throat, blazing through his gorget and almost severing his head in a superheated burst of plasma. He toppled forwards on to wraithbone deck. From the darkness Shriver emerged. Her still glowing pistol in one hand, the other held her stomach to contain her innards. Her augmented eye struggled to focus on Balthasar.

Shriver (hardly speaking): "Tell... Azrael... my debt... is..."

(Shriver collapsing to the ground)

Stepping over the Inquisitor's corpse, Balthasar knelt beside Korrika. The black spirit stone was still gripped in his fist.

Balthasar: "Nothing personal, brother. It was an honor to serve under you all these years. But my first allegiance has always been to my Chapter".

* * *

Asmodai: "And the gem?"

Asmodai had remained silent during Balthasar's account, his stern gaze unflinching. The warrior reached for a pouch, slung to its waist, and the Interrogator Chaplain motioned into stand.

(Asmodai standing up, table creaking)

Asmodai: "You have spoken to no one since your return?"

Balthasar: "The only souls who know of my return are the serves who were present in a hangar when I landed. And Master Seraphicus, of course".

Balthasar did not need to elaborate further. His mission with the Deathwatch would remain secret. Even from his own brothers. Asmodai nodded. He tipped the pouch upside down and allowed its contents to fall into his gauntleted palm. He regarded it at length, marveling at

perfect smoothness of its shape. A tarnished luster that brook no reflection, the swirling energy pulsing within it.

Balthasar: "Master Asmodai..."

Asmodai snapped his head up fixing the warrior once more with his gaze.

Asmodai: "You have once again served your Chapter well, brother Balthasar. Your expediency and diligence are duly noted, and will not go without a reward".

The forefinger of Asmodai's left hand traced the horizontal line across his brow. A gesture that Balthasar returned.

Asmodai: "Go now. And return to the Deathwing. Speak not of these past twelve years and your brothers will not inquire of your whereabouts or service. The Lion watches over you, Balthasar".

Balthasar: "As he does you, master Asmodai".

The two Dark Angels nodded their respect before Balthasar headed for the heavy doors that led from the chamber. He was just about to push them open, when Asmodai spoke once again.

Asmodai: "And brother Balthasar".

Balthasar: "Yes, Master?"

Asmodai: "It might be prudent to don your Terminator armor before you rejoin your brothers".

Smirking at the Interrogator Chaplain's rare display of humor, no matter how grim, Balthasar made his exit.

(leaving footsteps)

Asmodai waited along while, contemplating the stone, as he turned it over and over between his fingers.

Asmodai (over vox): "My Lord Azrael, it is done".

Azrael (over vox): "The spirit stone, do you have it?"

Asmodai (over vox): "I do. Balthasar played his role perfectly".

Azrael (over vox): "And are you certain that when the time comes this will work?"

Asmodai (over vox): "My own studies combined with the divinations of Ezekiel and Tibul would suggest so".

Azrael (over vox): "Then all of the pieces are in place: a corrupted spirit stone is ours, the prisoner you took on Sesaba has given us a location, and the girl that Ezekiel encountered on Honoria should already be in possession of the device".

Asmodai (over vox): "What now?"

Azrael (over vox): "Now? Now we'll rescue our long lost kinsman".