

WARHAMMER QUEST™



THE
WARP'S CURSE

A BLACKSTONE FORTRESS SHORT STORY

MICHAEL J HOLLOWES

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THE WARP'S CURSE

By Michael J. Hollows

The Imperium burned. Flame licked at the periphery of her vision, threatening to cloud it, to overwhelm it. Everywhere she looked was fire. She tried to scream, but no sound escaped her mouth. She closed her eyes, but the flames were always there, a bright ethereal warning. The fire brought death, and there was nothing she could do.

Her surroundings were like smoke, intangible. Somehow she was outside the fortress, outside herself. In the void of space the battle raged around her. She saw untold death, the terrible destructive power of the fortress.

The Imperium burned.

Ships launched munitions at the fortress, but it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. Torpedoes and energy beams, the heat glare of shipborne lances, dissipated against its cold, unforgiving, matt-black surface. Scorched sections folded back into its shell to be replaced by pristine layers of unblemished obsidian. Imperial vessels fell in waves, their existence blinking out in explosions of plasma and debris. Others threw themselves against it in a desperate last-ditch defence.

Nothing could stand in its path. Untold numbers cried out in terror as stone cracked under immense forces. Every one of them called for the Emperor's help, but for them it was too late.

'Witch?'

The voice snapped Aradia Madellan out of her vision. She continued her stride onto the Blackstone Fortress, the tap of her stave on the floor echoing back. Her eyes refocused, no longer looking inward. As soon as her boots had touched the deck of the fortress her warp-sight had flashed into life, showing her a vision. The vision had disappeared as suddenly as

it had come. She uttered a mantra, words she had taught herself years ago, when she had been trapped and alone. Part of her training as a psyker, it was designed to calm her mind, to give her focus and steel her against the warp. The psych-reactive collar around her head flared with ethereal blue light, bathing the obsidian deck around her. It was an alchemical glow, tinged with a black light on the edge of her perception. It dimmed as she calmed, reciting the words over and over.

I am in control.

The vision still lingered on the edge of her memory, tempting her to fall back into its embrace. She focused her mind on reality, away from the unreality of the warp. The closer she came to the Blackstone Fortress, the stronger the visions were. Now that she was standing on the fortress itself, it had been even more vivid than before. She had felt as if she were there, witnessing the destruction of the Imperium, one planet at a time.

She reached now for the Emperor's light, but out here His presence was distant and cold, a muted hum at the back of her mind. Even with the explorers at her side, the primaris psyker had not felt so alone in a long time.

'Witch?' Taddeus spoke again, his voice clearer, more distinct this time. 'Is something wrong?' he asked. His cassock was lined with shadows in the black-lit gloom, and the relic at his broad chest glowed with a faint blue light like Aradia's stave. She knew that his concern was not for her, but for himself. Since joining forces, he had shown no regard for her abilities. Like many in the Imperium he saw Aradia as something other, an outsider, a threat. His eyes bored into hers, judging every second of her existence. His ruddy face was even more flushed now than it had been before.

'I'm fine,' she lied, ignoring the term he had used. He would not be the last to call her *that*. She could only have been out for a second, but it had been long enough for him to notice. There was no way she could tell him what she had witnessed. As she had learnt in the schola, a half-truth was always better than an outright lie. 'The Blackstone Fortress has... changed,' she said, waving a gloved hand at the aperture. 'Something is different.'

'We should go,' Taddeus said, stepping off the alighting ramp of their vessel, Pious Vorne close at his heel as always. She wore red robes under fire-blackened armour, and like Aradia her head was completely bare,

shaven of all hair.

‘The God-Emperor’s holy mission can wait no longer. I have seen our path.’ Taddeus hesitated, then lifted the heavy leather tome that hung at his waist. ‘The code is here. It is all the God-Emperor’s will.’

Taddeus was hiding something, she could feel it. There was something there in his mind, just below the surface. The amount of time that Taddeus had spent in the fortress had only strengthened his convictions, and increased his piety. The priest was like many of her teachers back at the schola, overweight and self-important. He clutched a heavy power maul in one bionic arm. Aradia had been threatened by similar weapons in her youth.

Aradia couldn’t understand why Murad, her superior, had made her seek out the priest when she had been tasked to lead this expedition, but he was supposed to know more about the Blackstone Fortress than anyone else. Aradia hoped that the rogue trader had been right.

From here, Aradia could look back through the aperture into the void and see the star field beyond. The tiny pinpricks of light that showed the core of the galaxy. Within that small view, thousands of Imperial worlds spun through the darkness of space, each containing billions of souls. Aradia could almost feel them, almost reach out and sense them, but that would be impossible. Her psionic powers could never be that strong. Every one of those worlds was threatened by the existence of this fortress. They would all suffer if she failed.

‘Why are we waiting?’ Taddeus asked, looking at Aradia from the corner of his eye. His contempt was barely masked, a slight snarl turned the corner of his lips. ‘Have you lost your wits?’ Aradia didn’t answer.

Vorne lifted her two-handed flamer and glared at Aradia. There had been a beauty there once, but like most things it had been ravaged by hate. Aradia could feel the hesitation in the young zealot. Vorne wanted nothing more than to do the Emperor’s work, and she would let nothing stand in her path, not even another servant of the Emperor. Especially not a *witch*. Aradia fancied she could feel some kind of kindred there, deep down in Vorne’s psyche, but above the rebreather that covered her mouth like a muzzle the zealot’s eyes burned with disgust. Aradia would have to watch her back while that one was around.

She looked about, taking in the area. The aperture was vast, revealing a glimpse of the fortress’ interior and allowing their small vessel a space to

land. Many other explorers had come this way, and even now other ships sat waiting. Some of them looked as if they had been there for years, like barges of the dead, waiting for explorers that would never return.

Aradia sensed a presence. A figure appeared out of the gloom. Underneath a green cloak, polished, bone-white armour shifted and warped like light, until a lithe figure became fully apparent. Aradia could taste a faint metallic tang as her mind reached towards the aeldari. Pain flared in her temples, and she recoiled. There was a barrier there, and knowing that mind would come at a price. She had the sudden feeling that if Amallyn Shadowguide did not want to be seen, then they would never have known she was there.

‘You came,’ Aradia said. It wasn’t a question. The Blackstone Fortress drew them all, whether they wanted it to or not. Even so, she had not fully expected the ranger to honour the deal.

‘We had an agreement.’ The soft voice emitted from some kind of vox-caster clamped around her mouth.

Aradia turned back to Taddeus, and saw that the preacher shuddered with barely suppressed rage.

‘Xenos filth!’ he shouted, pointing an accusing finger at the aeldari ranger. ‘You sully our holy mission!’ The servo-stubber attached to his shoulder cycled, its automated feed rattling. Aradia felt the slight static discharge of his power Maul activating. To her credit, Shadowguide didn’t flinch. The ranger stood, impassively regarding the preacher with cool, intelligent eyes. Had Aradia sight of her mouth she imagined she’d have seen a superior smirk there.

‘I have ventured into the Talisman with the false prophet before,’ Amallyn said, her voice a soft purr. ‘Were those endeavours not holy enough for you?’

Aradia tentatively reached out to Taddeus’ mind, thinking to use her telepathic powers to calm him. Something intangible held her back. The look of hatred in his eyes was enough of a warning, and a deep scowl crossed his features.

‘Get out of my head, witch,’ he said. ‘I can feel your abominable itch in my skull!’

Aradia switched tactics. ‘Stop, Taddeus! Stay your weapons.’ Her voice wasn’t quite the commanding boom she had intended. She was used to following orders, not giving them. ‘If we are to clear the fortress in the

Emperor's name then we will need help. Your faith is not in doubt, but it will not be enough. We need to work together.'

Taddeus glared at the ranger, his weapons still active. Then he sighed and let the mace fall. 'We will work together for now, *witch*,' he said, not taking his eyes from Shadowguide. 'While we do the God-Emperor's work. But you will not always be part of His plans. Only those that can see His truth will earn His protection.' He bared a row of off-white teeth. There was a cruelty there that Aradia hadn't expected. He marched towards the maglev transport, Vorne following in his wake.

Aradia took one last look back over her shoulder at the abyss of space, before plunging on into the darkness of the fortress. She had to trust the priest and the aeldari to aid her in her task. If not, they were all doomed.

The maglev ground to a halt. It had passed chambers and corridors in a blur, silently taking the explorers further into the depths, before stopping without so much as a change in pitch to indicate they were slowing. They could travel for years, forever at the whim of the maglev platform, never able to take control. How many explorers had simply starved to death on this transport system no one could map or truly understand?

It had stopped in a gloomy and forbidding place, ambient light faintly illuminating the black crystalline material of the chamber. Aradia couldn't see to its far wall, but as she stepped from the maglev the echo of her footsteps gave her a sense of its space. The sound reverberated back as if she were in some kind of underground cavern. There was a damp quality to the air, and the sense of a ceiling nearby that she couldn't see in the dark. Even with her powers, she couldn't quite comprehend the vastness of the Blackstone Fortress.

'We're here,' Taddeus said, stepping from the maglev after her. 'We're on the right path.' The golden eagles on his shoulders bobbed with the motion of his step. They reflected what light there was back into the chamber, giving him a blue aura. Pious Vorne came after, always in his shadow, the flaming brand on her backpack helping to illuminate the scene. Not for the first time, Aradia wondered at the logic of having an open flame so close to a tank of promethium fuel.

'Where is here exactly?' Aradia wondered out loud, walking ahead of them and not expecting an answer. 'Have you been this way before?'

Taddeus did not respond and walked off into the gloom.

‘For a preacher, he does not inspire confidence,’ Amallyn whispered as she joined them.

Every surface of the chamber was black, made from a glossy obsidian crystal that had so far managed to confound any analysis. There were faint strands of grey etched through it in random patterns like marble. It reminded Aradia of the scholastica psykana facility where she had been trained, and she half expected one of her tutors to appear out of the darkened cloisters at any moment, to chastise her with a shock maul. She could still feel the old wounds.

She snapped herself out of the memory, focusing on the task at hand. From here she could no longer see the stars. There were no external windows, and they were shut off from the Imperium, alone and trapped. If the maglevs did not return them, then they would be here for the rest of time. There were innumerable tales of explorers venturing into the Blackstone Fortress never to return. She would not allow herself to be amongst that number. She had a purpose – not just the mission, but something else; something equally important.

Aradia needed to understand her visions.

The explorers set out, Aradia leading. Taddeus had trouble keeping his eye on both her and the aeldari, so walked to the side. Vorne stepped behind him, her feet scraping along the floor as if she were clad in chains. Her beady eyes looked one way then the next, seeing threats everywhere. She followed Taddeus like a child, always seeking approval. Despite the Ecclesiarchy’s rules against it, Aradia wouldn’t be surprised if Vorne was actually his daughter. She made a mental note to find out later.

Shadowguide kept to the rear of their group, her long rifle useful for picking off any dangers at a distance, but Aradia suspected there was more to it than that.

‘I cannot concentrate with the xenos creature at my back,’ Taddeus said, almost stopping and looking over his shoulder.

‘I have no quarrel with you,’ the ranger replied.

‘I don’t care—’

‘Remember we’re all here for the same reason,’ Aradia interjected. ‘To find some way of controlling the fortress.’

Despite what she’d said, Aradia couldn’t shake the feeling that they were all following their own path. Why Shadowguide had decided to join them, she had no idea, but she was thankful for the ranger’s presence. The

Imperium depended on them finding some way to understand and control the fathoms of the fortress. Aradia depended on it. That was why Murad had her recruit the preacher. Aradia would not let her down. Aradia admired Murad's singularity of mind; it was one of the many reasons working with her had given Aradia purpose. She had helped Murad to find the Blackstone Fortress, and now she was fulfilling her true calling: finding a way to control it. If she needed the preacher then so be it. Along with his zealot, he was one of the only denizens of Precipice who had explored the Blackstone Fortress extensively and lived to tell the tale. Looking at him, she didn't know how, but she was about to find out, one way or another.

'This way,' he said, pointing with one plump finger and consulting his book.

'How can you be sure?' Aradia asked, looking around the vastness for some sense of location. 'What do you have in that book?'

'The Emperor's will. That is all you need to know, witch,' he replied, pointing again. He waited for Aradia to lead them, falling in behind her. She had to trust that he was sending them the correct way.

After some time they came to a floor that lifted and lowered like the cogs of some great machine. Parts shot up into the heights of the chamber, while other surfaces simply slid back and forth like switches. There was no sound, nor the oily musk of engine grease. Aradia waited, watching one of the walkways slide towards her and away again. They would have to carefully time their paths across, or be crushed by the machinery.

'I'll go first,' she said, knowing that she had no choice. 'Watch what I do and follow my exact steps.'

She jumped onto the walkway as it came to her side again. She was tempted to call on her powers, but the others would need to follow by normal means. As she took another step, following the momentum of the walkway, another piece of the machine shot out of the darkness, almost clipping her and whipping her coat up around her waist. She dropped and rolled with the motion as another almost decapitated her. A moment later she was on solid ground again. The stress made it feel like an eternity, but within seconds the others were by her side.

As they travelled further, parts of machines and other equipment lay discarded about the cavern, no one piece matching another, seeming to come from a myriad different cultures and races. Some had fused with the

floor, as if it had melted, trapping them and then solidifying again. There was a wall to their left, running away from the nearby maglev platform. Its surface was smooth and glossy. It reached off into the dark, out of sight. The wall glowed with an ambient light, seeming to pulse with Aradia's heartbeat. It was almost mesmerising in its rhythm.

Aradia reached out for it, sensing nothing from the dark but an endless void. Apart from a faint background hum, there was nothing here that registered as life. Veins of different colours intertwined their way through the metallic sheen of the surface. It was as if the fortress had been manufactured by some vast entity, melding together different elements collected from across the galaxy. Aradia ran a gloved hand along it, trying to sense where it had come from. She felt a movement beside her.

'Be careful, mon-keigh!' Shadowguide hissed through the emitter of her faceplate. The ranger stepped back, raising her long rifle and bracing, both legs splayed to balance her weight.

Something jumped from the gloom, a flash of reflection. A triform shape landed on Aradia's outstretched arm, clinging on to her hand. It whirred then emitted a pulse. There was a stab of pain as something cut through her glove. Aradia grunted and shook her arm, trying to dislodge it. Three metal legs clamped her arm in a fierce grip that was utterly unrelenting. Its domed head was intent on her as if it were feeding, supping on her blood to fuel its machine core.

Other shapes poured out of the darkness, as if they were coming from the walls themselves. Single purple beacons glowed in the blackness like hundreds of alien eyes. The noise was a scratching – like rodents' claws skittering on metal plating. The hairs on Aradia's neck rose as if she could sense them crawling over her. Taddeus' servo-stubber clicked as it tracked targets and she heard the pilot light of Vorne's flamer burst into life.

She gripped the object boring into her free hand and pulled. She let loose a roar of pain as it dug deeper and her hand slipped away, wet with blood. With a lunge, she smashed the back of her fist against the obsidian stone. At first nothing happened, then with another motion the glasslike dome of the drone splintered and shattered. Losing whatever life force powered it, it turned inert and dropped to the floor, smashing into even smaller pieces.

She didn't have time to reflect as the first wave of drones hit her. Those that found her in their path tried to claw at her. She kicked the first away and spun on her heel. The other drones went for her companions, a sea of

angry machines. The things didn't cry out, or make any sound other than the click of their legs on the stone floor. Aradia couldn't feel them; they were nothing, a void. There was nothing alive in them, no anger, no hope, no fear. Somehow they were all part of one entity, something bigger than themselves. They attacked as one, swarming over the explorers. Shadowguide's rifle pulsed as bright beams of energy smashed one drone after another to pieces.

There were too many of them.

Taddeus roared oaths as his servo-stubber opened up, and lunged about himself with his maul at the drones that clung on to the dirty hem of his robes. 'Couldn't you see them coming, witch?' he shouted, forcing his way into the melee.

Vorne's flamer roared and fire filled the gloom. Aradia felt the familiar tang of a vision coming on, the iron taste of a migraine, but she forced it back. Now was not the time. If she didn't do anything to stop the drones, then they would overwhelm her and her companions, pulling them down to oblivion.

Grinding her teeth, she put one foot forward and raised her arm. With barely a thought she pulled forth the eldritch energy of the warp, focusing it through her hand, as if grasping for something. The blood burnt away as a flash of actinic light burst from her palm, meeting the oncoming drones. They were smashed back against the force of the blow. Some were crushed to pieces, but others rushed on. She felt down inside for another attack, knowing that to do so would sap her strength, and instead something else rushed up to meet her.

Flames flickered at the corners of her eyes. Everything was fire. The flames rippled down her nerves, washing through her veins. The darkened chamber was replaced with something altogether worse. Something on the edge of sight, a phantom image out of reach, yet strong and vivid.

She was fixed in place, a silent observer. The stars were in turmoil, pulsing with an angry, turbulent light. Planets were dying, billions and billions of Imperial citizens wasting away as their homes burned. Thousands were dying every second, their end brought about as ancient energy weapons focused on them. The fortress was a dark cloud that ravaged the heavens. Every Imperial citizen looked up and saw their own doom.

Reality tore open as uncontrollable forces ripped apart one planet, then

the next. Unreality bled into the mortal realm, growing in strength with each passing second, a purple fire blossoming into a ruinstorm and obscuring the stars.

Nothing could stop it now. Voices whispered through the warp, tantalising, the words just out of earshot.

They promised so much. They promised power, the power of the gods.

She pulled back, reeling from the vision. It was almost too strong, and she felt fatigued as the energy left her. Her body sagged, drained, but her mind was still sharp. She had known since she was a child that her mind was her sharpest tool, and since then it had also become her sharpest weapon.

She was in control.

It had only been seconds, but it was too long. The visions had changed, and they were taking over. Her proximity to the Blackstone Fortress was more dangerous than she had initially realised. The feeling in the pit of her stomach did not abate and she swallowed, trying to push it away.

The nearest drones had disappeared in the wash of warp flame. There were a number of silhouettes, all surrounded with trails of black ash, and the floor was scorched and pitted.

‘Don’t do that again, witch!’ Taddeus glanced at her in between lunges with his maul. The hem of his cassock was frayed and blackened from the blast of warp energy. Soot coated his face. ‘In the God-Emperor’s name, if you do, I will kill you myself!’

‘I was trying to help you!’ Aradia yelled above the sound of his stubber.

‘I don’t need your help. I have His faith,’ he replied as the weapon tore around and released a volley of shells into the next wave of drones, disintegrating them into alien dust.

‘He will never understand, mon-keigh.’ Shadowguide’s expression was completely impassive, but Aradia could sense some new-found wariness there.

Aradia could no longer pull on her powers, for fear of what they would bring. Thankfully, the schola had not just trained her mind, but her body too.

She braced, flexing the muscles of her shoulders, and raised her stave in one hand. The other unclasped the laspistol at her back. She was glad that she’d had the foresight to bring it with her. She took aim at the nearest drone, squeezing the trigger.

The beam reflected from the glass dome, disappearing into the expansive ceiling. The drone barely recognised the attack, skittering across the floor on its tripod. It rocked forward on two of its legs, preparing to jump.

She fired her laspistol again, more wildly this time. The first shot went wide, but the second hit true. Glass shattered across the floor as the bright red beam met its target. More shapes followed, like a carpet of glass baubles come to life. There were hundreds of them, all intent on the invaders, as if they were some kind of viral infection. Aradia didn't know how they would defeat them all, even with the barking of Taddeus' stubber, the *whoosh* of Vorne's flamer and Shadowguide amongst the drones, cutting this way and that with her power knife.

Aradia twisted, pushing down with the flat metal end of her stave. A drone was caught between it and the obsidian floor, smashing into pieces of strangely reflective glass. She allowed the energy to dissipate from her stave, fearing what it might become. The warp was her curse.

There was a break in the wave of drones and Aradia spun around. Shadowguide was by her side, power knife raised ready to strike. She was staring at the ground by her feet, a frown across her pale brow. A drone picked itself up, rolling and forcing itself onto two legs to right itself. Instead of attacking the ranger, it skittered past.

'I do not understand,' the aeldari said, just loud enough for Aradia to hear. The drones ignored the ranger, only those that couldn't avoid her pouncing in attack. She swatted them away with a lightning-quick strike. The horde was moving past them.

'Where are they going?' Aradia asked. She stepped out of the path of the drones, and they skittered past with tripedal motion. They no longer showed an interest in the explorers. Some of the fleeing swarm poured over a ripped piece of cloth, burning it to ash with their pulse lasers, as their kin ran past. Everything dead was absorbed back into the fortress.

'They're fleeing,' the ranger answered.

Shadowguide was right. No matter how much of a threat the explorers were, there was something else here that was worse. Aradia finally realised what the feeling in the pit of her stomach was. The growing sense of dread was not something her psyche had manifested. It was coming from the drones themselves. They were running from something else.

Drones still appeared from the darkness, but their numbers had dwindled. Where the others had been agile, many of these were broken and

incomplete. One dragged itself past Aradia, forcing its way forward on its damaged foreleg.

The explorers ignored the drones, not wasting their energy on things that had no intent to harm them. There would be enemies aplenty ahead. They still had to find what they were looking for, some clue as to how to control the fortress itself. They continued into the chamber. Aradia was unsure where they were heading, but Taddeus held up his book and nodded, apparently satisfied. Sweat ran down his face, darkening the collar of his cassock.

The further they delved, the more humid it became. Another wall appeared from the right as they got closer, identical to the one they had been following. It tapered towards the other wall, forming the corner of a triangle.

They came to a curved archway. Filigree covered its great brass plating, like the entrance to some regal palace. The warp pulled at her, and voices whispered, unintelligible in the depths of her mind. She had been trained to resist temptation, and the circuitry of her psychic hood was covered in warding runes, but the draw of the fortress was so strong she could barely fight it back. Aradia looked to Taddeus for confirmation, but the priest was flicking through the pages of his book. Each page flapped as he moved to the next, never dwelling for more than a heartbeat.

‘Not here, not here,’ he muttered to himself. It was clear he was lost.

The ranger stepped ahead of them, observing the archway. They could not see through the oily black portal. ‘If we do not go on, we will not find what we came for,’ Shadowguide offered, her voice an artificial lilt.

The aeldari was right; they had nowhere else to go.

Aradia made up her mind. She tentatively pushed one hand through, then, steeling herself, stepped over the threshold. She was immediately hit by the smell of blossom, a sweet flavour on her tongue as it washed over her senses.

Inside, it was beautiful. The chamber was adorned in gold and jewels. It was as she had always imagined the Imperial Palace to be, where the Emperor sat upon His Golden Throne. Everything glittered, creating a hue of bright light that framed her sight. Lilac draperies surrounded a dais at the centre of the chamber, which could be reached by a number of steps from the side that faced Aradia. The cold, inhuman nature of the Blackstone Fortress was nowhere to be seen. The floor was a mosaic

carved in precise detail from white marble. Twin braziers framed the central dais, the white smoke giving off the relaxing blossom scent. Aradia felt as if she were back in the Imperium, returned to civilisation.

But something was wrong. Aradia couldn't immediately put her finger on it. There was a darkness at the periphery of her vision that disappeared every time she moved her head. Her suspicions melted away with the shadows. The scene demanded her attention, and she couldn't look away. Her eyelids drooped, relaxing. She could feel a vision coming on, the migraine-pressure pushing at the back of her eyes, but she no longer feared it.

Two figures ascended the dais in front of her, surrounded by a golden aura. Patrician features looked down on her with an air of quiet confidence. The vibrant purple robes covering their long frames shimmered in the glow of the braziers, like an image of the Emperor Himself. They stood tall and proud, welcoming her to their home. One smiled at her, while the other simply nodded. The smile was warm, fatherly, a memory of something she hadn't experienced in a very long time.

'Welcome, Aradia,' they said in unison. Their voices were like the singing of astropathic choirs, harmonically pleasing, a chord of joy. She wanted to sing with them, to feel the warmth of the music. They reached out to her, beckoning for Aradia to join them on the dais. 'We've been looking forward to your visit.'

'Who are you? What is this?' she asked as she took a step forward. The shadow crossed her field of view again, but she ignored it. She placed one boot on the first step, noticing the way the veins in the marble shifted with each footstep. There was a power here beyond her imagining.

'We are your purpose,' they said again, still in perfect harmony. 'The Inquisition has always controlled you, dampening your power, limiting its use. We will free you from their jealousy. Look.' They pointed manicured fingers.

From the dais she could see a viewport, as found on the bridge of a voidfaring vessel. It showed her the stars. Stars she could control, if only she was brave enough.

The two figures came to stand in front of her, one still smiling.

'All of this could be yours.' The twin voices were like silk in her ears, calming and reassuring. 'You need not fear it any longer. Allow yourself to

become what you were always destined to be.'

The image shifted like the surface of water, showing her a figure she recognised. Aradia's shaven scalp was gone, replaced with long, flowing locks of hair. She was no longer restricted by the psych-reactive collar at her neck, which pierced angry, sharp neural inhibitors into her scalp. The symbols of her station were absent. A purple gown replaced her brown jacket and the eye of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica on her cuirass.

Someone screamed, a howl of utter terror. The darkness at the periphery of Aradia's sight flared again and she looked for its source.

Pious Vorne was on her knees at the bottom of the dais, hands clasped to her head, her eyes rolled back into her skull. Taddeus was nowhere to be seen. He was jealous of her. He had always hated her kind. Vorne rocked back and forth, seeing some invisible horror. Aradia couldn't understand what was happening.

She used her powers to reach out to the zealot.

Vorne's mind was a barrier of raw emotion, awash with fear and hatred, the result of years of punishment. The images refused to coalesce, distant, angry and distorted. As soon as one source of pain tried to form, an ugly fight or a punishment, it was replaced with another. The only real sense inside the zealot's mind was that something was deeply wrong. Vorne fought an invisible assailant in a battle she could never win.

Aradia searched for the others, slipping from one mind to the next, losing control. Random thoughts flooded her senses, emotions piercing her skull like daggers. The visions in their minds could not be seen, but everything was seen all at once. All was contradiction, a clash of images and colours. Crimson clouds formed a vortex of hot, cutting pain.

Taddeus was trapped somewhere, fighting his own battle. His entire being was pain, the God-Emperor rejecting his every approach, spurning the preacher and condemning him to an existence where nothing he held sacred was true. Taddeus cried out in despair, rejected by the one thing he believed. In his mind he blamed the witch.

Explosions crashed around inside Aradia's skull, like suns blinking out one by one. The warp called to her, and it sung with a substance she couldn't fathom. Reality and the warp were as one, each giving truth to the other. Without each other they could not exist, as she could not exist without them. Without reality she had no form, and without the warp she had no purpose. By fusing them together, she could become stronger than

she had ever imagined, stronger than the Inquisition had ever feared. They controlled her and sought to bring her down, to make her weak. She would not be stymied. No longer. She would be all that the warp promised her.

In the maelstrom she found a mind utterly alien and unfamiliar. She should destroy it, but her new-found power urged her to explore it, to see what secrets were on offer. It was anathema, but it drew her in.

She found pain. It was a pain she could not comprehend. A vast ship appeared, its hull shattered, venting gas into the abyss. Shadowguide wept for all her kind who had suffered so terrible a fate, to be drawn into the warp as playthings for the gods. The Blackstone Fortress filled Aradia's view, flames licking at the corners of her eyes. She was in control of the ancient vessel. The ranger turn—

+This is not your future.+

She was trapped within her vision. Somehow the aeldari was communicating with her. The broken craftworld pulled back, rushing through everything she had seen before until it was all gone. All that remained was a black abyss. Amallyn Shadowguide appeared, striding, and reached out towards her. Then in a heartbeat she was gone.

Aradia tore her mind away from the warp, urging the others after her, hoping they would hear her call.

The scene crashed down around her, showing it for what it truly was. The golden filigree was a distorted brass etching in the pattern of various beasts, affixed with arrows that changed when she looked upon them. The migraine-pressure was stronger now, not just from the vision she had crudely ripped herself from, but also from the abstract dimensions, which hurt her eyes. The chamber was some kind of shrine, with a device of twin circles bisected with a crescent hammered into the far wall. It pained her to look at that symbol.

It was all a lie. This time the vision had drawn her in without her even knowing. Even as she had stepped over the threshold she had been within its grasp, she had been its pawn. The two figures in front of her were not scions of the Emperor. Their skin was pale with blistering growths, and malformed horns broke out of their temples, a haunting image of the horror the warp could manifest.

They wanted her to join them. They wanted her to be like them. The face of the nearest man was stretched into a rictus grin, distorted and corrupted. 'Heresy,' Vorne hissed, rushing towards them. Released from her vision,

the zealot fingered the trigger of her flamer. ‘The enemy are everywhere. They infest the fortress like rats!’

Aradia jumped from the dais as a plume of flame rushed across the black stone, engulfing a pair of traitors in a wall of fire. She braced, fearing what was coming. The whizz-crack of las-fire filled the chamber and the bark of Taddeus’ servo-stubber rose to meet the onrushing traitors. Aradia wasn’t afraid of death. Ever since the Black Ships had stolen her away from her family, she had considered her life to be over. Growing up under the constant supervision of the Inquisition, she no longer held any fear of death, and her abilities had given her another kind of life.

Rictus-Grin grasped for her. In one hand he carried a stave topped with an eight-pointed star, a gross reflection of her own weapon. He reached out a bulbous hand, his overgrown and distended head throbbing in time to the ambient noise of the fortress. The stench of the warp was strong around him, to the point that Aradia almost gagged. The sweet smell of blossom had been replaced by an acrid tang. It was sour and soporific, but she was no longer susceptible to its effects.

There was a pulse of light and the rogue psyker snapped back, disappearing behind the now fire-blackened dais in a cloud of blood. Shadowguide rushed from a doorway Aradia had not previously noticed. She nodded at the primaris psyker, then set upon a warrior with crude barbs stitched into his skin.

Men and women poured into the chamber, each wearing the uniform of the Astra Militarum, but with the icons removed. Vorne had been right, they were surrounded by traitors. One of them, now more beast than man, rushed at Aradia with a chainsword raised in both hands above his head. The roar was guttural, mindless.

Aradia raised her stave two-handed across her chest in a guard stance. The razor-sharp teeth of the chainsword dropped towards her, clumsy and uncontrolled. Aradia blocked the blow, the metal of her stave sparking as it resisted. The chainsword slipped, grazing her shoulder, and she cried out in pain.

She didn’t drop her guard. Instead she forced the head of her stave up, driving the chainsword away, then switched, bringing up its base to crash into the traitor’s stomach. He fell back, winded, and Aradia gave him no chance to recover. She forced the end of her stave up, smashing the cold metal into his face. His nose broke with a splatter of blood, and she

allowed a small amount of warp energy to conduct through the stave. It was only a slight amount, but still she felt it calling to her, taunting. The weapon amplified the energy, the crystal embedded in the centre of the golden aquila glowing an angry purple. The traitor's bones were crushed by the unnatural force.

She was in control.

She flung her stave forward, connecting with another traitor as he rushed past. There was a sickening crunch as his head snapped back, pulped by the sheer force of the blow. She didn't wait to see where the body fell, moving on to the next, tracking a traitor officer with her laspistol and squeezing the trigger. She realised then that she was screaming, the raw emotion of battle finding a way out of her mouth.

Taddeus had found his way into the shrine. His pale skin flushed with sweat as he defended himself, swinging his maul into the jaw of a bestial figure, pulverising flesh and bone. He was surrounded. Vorne tried to keep them at bay with her flamer, but she couldn't get too close to the priest, lest she burn him alive. Aradia had to help, and she would need to call on her powers.

She braced herself against the ever-corrupting influence of Chaos. They wanted her to reach out to the warp, and through it they would control her. The Imperium had always controlled her, stifled her, but now for the first time in her life she truly understood why. If she did not control herself, then Chaos would. Without the priest and his zealot she would not make it out alive.

She flung out her hand, letting a cry of anger escape her lips. Etheric fire flew from her fingertips as she ran towards the priest.

A traitor had only a second to look up before being blown back by the force of her power, to crash against the wall. She kept pushing, not caring from where the power flowed. The energy ripped reality, bathing them in an unnatural light. The traitor's bones were crushed against the wall and his body fell limply to the floor as she focused her attention on another.

She was in control.

Using her mind she picked up a traitor attacking Taddeus and threw them across the room. The priest's stubber opened up, rounds thudding into the shape as it moved through the air. She came alongside Taddeus, whose grimace showed his relief. It wasn't thanks, but it was enough for her. Back to back they battled the traitors, as blood dripped from her wounds.

It ran into the lines of the floor, disappearing into the fortress, but Aradia was too preoccupied to notice. She crushed a renegade with a blast of energy, then disabled another with her stave.

‘We have to go,’ she shouted over the din. ‘Or we’ll die here.’ She had survived it all. Survived being dragged away from her family by the Black Ships, the constant and gruelling training under the ever-present gaze of the Inquisition. She had survived the fear, the doubt and everything the warp could throw at her. She had survived it all to get here, to find the Blackstone Fortress, to attempt to control it. She would not die now. She had to report back to Murad. ‘Fall back towards the archway.’

A shape in a tattered and stained purple cloak floated towards her, overconfident and arrogant. The rogue psyker reached for Aradia with an outstretched hand. His palm was upturned, one finger curled as if beckoning her. A sickly, rotten smile crossed his lips as he pulled on the warp. She felt reality distort as the air around him started to glow with a pale amethyst aura. The traitor was a warped version of her, his skin distended and bulbous. One eye glittered with dark power, while the other was blinded and unseeing.

She was ready. She held her stave out in front of her as the blast of pure warp power crashed against her. There was a bright flash of light as the psych-reactive circuitry of her stave responded, softening the blow. It was blinding in its intensity, but she would not look away. She took it all in, using her stave to absorb the power. It was raw and corrupt, but with a flick of her wrist she forced it back at her attacker.

The smile fell from his lips as he realised what was happening. The force hit him in the chest, and threw him back, but he was stronger than she had realised. He picked himself up, and reached out again.

The next blow hit her wounded shoulder, and blood splattered across her coat, blending with the brown fabric. She forced the cry of pain back down and took a step forward. Raising her stave, she let the power of the warp flow through her.

With each step she flung a blast of energy at her enemy, cutting the air with her stave like a two-handed sword. Each blow knocked the rogue psyker back towards the dais. He was losing control, the flesh of his head distending even further as the warp tore him apart. He fell to one knee and reached out a hand, pleading. Aradia raised the stave above her head and brought it down in one swift motion, crushing him under the blazing eagle

at its crest. Blood splattered the floor in an eight-pointed shape, and the Dark Gods laughed.

She took a moment to take in the scene. Many of the traitors had been dispatched, but there would be more. The psykers that had sought to control her were gone. Her mind finally felt free of the visions that had afflicted her since she had become aware of the Blackstone Fortress.

‘We must leave, witch!’ Taddeus was standing by the archway, waiting, the others alongside him.

Aradia reached out one last time, grasping what warp energy she could and flung it towards the shrine. The ground between her and the dais erupted in a wall of flame, burning white-hot. The image burned into her retinas. She turned on her heels and ran, leaving the shrine behind.

They had found a cancer at the heart of the Blackstone Fortress.

She would return, with a larger force, and excise it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael J Hollows is a writer, lecturer and researcher from London. He has written in various genres, but has always loved science fiction and fantasy. He fell in love with the Warhammer 40,000 universe when he was young, and when not writing tries to work out how time might be stretched so that he can paint that ever-increasing pile of models. He researches creative writing, lectures audio and writing, and lives in Liverpool. His first story for Black Library was 'Ashes of Grinnir'.

An extract from *Blackstone Fortress*.



How they would have wept to hear him. All those years of brutal tutelage, so many prayers meted out with an unsparing stick, and not one of their aphorisms had stayed with him – all that cant wiped away by the savagery of the war. Only one simple phrase, whispered to the rhythm of his breath, had kept him alive. *Through the needle's eye*. He could see it in his mind – a sliver of sanity, surrounded by a galaxy of madness. *I live or die*.

In place of a sky, it seemed Sepus Prime wore a dirty, sodden cloth, stained the same feculent shade of dun as the mud below. It sagged low over the fly-clad marshes, bleeding a desolate rain, crushing the mounds of dead and billowing around a shame-faced sun. Glutt waded through the filth, a slight man weighed down by a heavy coat. His face was a mask of dark, viscous mud, and his mouth was hidden by a rebreather. Only his eyes were visible – flashes of white beneath a peaked cap, scouring the trench for the shot that would finally kill him.

‘Through the needle’s eye,’ he whispered, risking a glimpse into no-man’s-land, using his staff to haul himself over a broken trench wall.

Fumes lay heavy on the swamp, crawling lazily over shattered gun emplacements and crook-backed trees. Even through his rebreather Glutt could smell the chemical stink of enemy weapons. How many of the regiment were still alive out there? Betrayed. Clawing at their throats, calling for loved ones, begging for the help they were promised. The reinforcements that never came. They *never came*. They had all been fools, but he would be a fool no more. Anger fractured Glutt’s thoughts, dangerous and raw. He recited his mantra with vehemence, clinging to his mind, weighing it down with words.

He pulled out a map and wiped it clean, tracing a finger over the gridlines, counting the miles. He was close. Another few hours and he

would see the barracks. He had no desire to rejoin the regiment now, after all that he had seen, but where else could he go? He had no vox and he dared not risk any other method of communication, and this side of the valley seemed to have been forgotten. The earth shivered beneath a mortar shell rain, but it was a distant sound, like the echo of a storm.

An image flashed through his mind, so vivid he gasped – pale, ruptured flesh tearing over a clinker-black shell. He drove the vision down but it coiled beneath his thoughts, waiting for his guard to slip. He had seen it countless times over the last few months. It was horrific, but part of him was also fascinated. It was so clear. What did it mean?

He was about to drop back down into the trench when he saw movement in the smoke – half a mile away, near a bombed-out gun emplacement. He grabbed his laspistol and peered through the scope.

‘Sorov?’ he whispered, catching a glimpse of red sash.

There was another blur of movement, then nothing. Only the lolling, yellow fumes and the sporadic grumble of mortars. He had not seen a soul for two days. Perhaps he imagined the shapes? Then he heard a faint crackling – not the rattle of gunfire, but the white noise of a vox-unit. It came from the gun emplacement.

He dropped into the bunker, his breath coming in snatched bursts. Insurrectionists were everywhere. Snipers haunted every gully, masquerading as corpses, lying patiently beneath cold limbs, waiting for some fool to break cover. Again he heard the crackle of vox traffic, muted by the fumes but unmistakable.

He peered up over the scorched embrasure, looking through the gunsight again, trying to guess where a sniper might hide. There was a rusted tank chassis, halfway to the gun emplacement, jutting from the mud like an unearthed fossil: a Lemman Russ, one of its sponsons still visible, pointing defiantly at the leaden clouds. Just the kind of place a sniper might wait. He looked in the other direction. There was a trench, parallel with his, about a hundred feet away. It had caved in, sporting a crest of broken joists and blast-warped girders. Again, exactly the kind of place snipers might hide. There were cadavers in the razorwire, swaying in the breeze like abandoned marionettes. It looked as though they had been thrown clear of the trench by an air strike, but he had seen traitors adopt that pose, then lurch into movement at the first sign of a target.

‘Lieutenant Sorov?’ he whispered. Could he still be alive? And if he was,

why would he be here? The push on the civitate had started. Sorov always led from the front. Why would he be back here, so far from the front line? The thought that the lieutenant might still be alive shook Glutt's resolve. Sorov had stood by the men. He alone in all the regiment seemed worthy of trust.

Glutt hunkered in the trench, crippled by indecision. The image of torn flesh washed through his thoughts again, but he crushed it with his mantra, determined to think clearly. What if it was Sorov out there? Could there still be another route for him, even now?

Glutt bolted up the trench wall and ran through the smoke, head down, flicking his pistol from the tank to the corpses. His footfalls rang out through the smog. *Slap. Slap. Slap.* Flies whirled around him, drawn by his blood-black coat. Sweat pooled in his eyes. He tried to sprint, but his legs were wasted from lack of food and the mud gripped his heavy boots, leaching what little strength he had left.

Minutes passed until finally the gun emplacement reared up before him, brutal and angular, a slab of pitted rockcrete shattered by artillery. One side was intact, but the other was gone, leaving the surreal sight of a furnished room, split down the middle and hanging in the air. The furniture was undisturbed: a neatly made bunk, metal plan chests, a small dining table; all perched in the clouds, washed clean by the endless rain.

Glutt had almost reached the walls when he heard someone snap the safety off a lasgun.

He staggered to a halt, his heart thudding as he tried to pinpoint the sound.

'The savant?' The words were spoken quietly, but they echoed across the swamp, eerie and dislocated.

'Lieutenant Sorov?' gasped Glutt, still crouched, staring at the shifting clouds.

'Throne,' said Sorov, striding into view, flanked by Guardsmen, their lasguns trained on Glutt.

'In,' he snapped, waving for Glutt to approach.

Glutt staggered forwards, into the arms of the Guardsmen, who grabbed his filthy coat and hurled him inside the ruined tower.

As Glutt lay panting on the floor, Sorov and the others stood over him, scowling.

Sepus Prime could not touch Lieutenant Sorov. He shrugged it off like an

idle threat. He was one of those officers with the inhuman ability to look clean, fresh and unperturbed as the galaxy went to hell around them. His hair was immaculate, oiled and gleaming beneath his cap, and the buttons on his coat flashed proudly as he moved. An old scar curved from the corner of his mouth to his ear, but even that looked deliberate – just another military honour. He studied Glutt through half-lidded eyes.

‘Where is the rest of your detail?’

‘We never made it to the front lines, lieutenant. The insurrectionists were on us before we reached Tadmor Ridge. I was able to—’ He hesitated, noting the wary expressions of the Guardsmen. ‘I was able to *disable* some of them, but there were too many.’

‘You’re a psyker?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You abandoned your men?’

‘No.’

‘They’re dead,’ said Sorov, his expression blank, ‘and you are not.’

‘I did everything I could, lieutenant.’

Sorov studied him in silence. No one helped him to his feet.

The silence was broken by the crackle of the vox-unit. There was another trooper crouched a few feet away – a comms officer, hunched over his vox-caster.

‘Ten minutes until contact,’ said the Guardsman, with the handset held to his ear. There was a tremor of excitement in his voice. ‘Everything went to plan.’

Sorov closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again he looked back at Glutt. ‘Tell me, Glutt,’ he said. ‘If you were a traitor, why would you have stumbled over here and revealed yourself, rather than using your talents to kill me from a safe distance?’

Glutt struggled to keep his expression neutral. *Traitor*. Sorov had pinpointed the doubts that had haunted him for weeks. All he saw on Sepus were pitiable fools and callous, inhuman orders. His faith was gone. What did that leave?

‘There is no reason,’ said Sorov. His expression softened. ‘You’ve done well to last this long, soldier. Not many have.’ He nodded to his men. ‘Pick him up. And keep an eye on him. He’s a sanctioned psyker. Don’t let him ruin this.’

As the Guardsmen dragged Glutt from the mud, Sorov headed over to the

comms officer.

‘Korbol,’ he said, glancing up at the shattered floor of the room above their heads. ‘Anything?’

‘Nothing, lieutenant.’

Sorov nodded, and then glanced back at Glutt. ‘Over here.’

Glutt tried to brush some of the muck from his coat as he rushed after Sorov, but it had dried into a thick crust. He moved with the clumsy, awkward steps of an automaton.

‘Get me Kapek,’ said Sorov to the vox-officer.

There was another burst of static, then a voice came through the speakers, ghostly and hazed by distance, like an old recording.

‘This is Sergeant Kapek. We have—’ The voice was cut off by a series of pops and whistles. *‘We are no closer, lieutenant. Heavier losses than anticipated. The aerial strikes failed to knock out the lascannons. They’re cutting us down.’*

Sorov grabbed the handset. ‘Ten minutes, sergeant.’ His voice was an urgent whisper. ‘Ten minutes more.’

There was a pause on the other end, but it was not static this time; they could all hear the sergeant breathing. *‘Ten minutes?’* he said finally, sounding shocked.

Sorov raised his voice, despite the risk of revealing himself. ‘Throw everything you have left at them for ten more minutes. It’s working. He’s headed your way.’

This time there was no pause. *‘Ten minutes, lieutenant. We’ll do it.’*

Sorov looked pained and seemed on the verge of saying more, but he held it back.

‘Lieutenant,’ came the voice again. *‘Are you still there?’*

‘Sergeant.’

The voice sounded defiant this time, all trace of doubt gone. *‘It was an honour, lieutenant.’*

Sorov’s expression tightened. When he spoke again, his voice was as rigid as his face. ‘High command will know, sergeant. Commander Ortegal will know what happened here today.’

Another series of pops and crackles hissed through the speaker.

‘Kapek out,’ came the reply, then the line went dead.

Sorov stared at the handset for a moment. Then he took a deep breath and handed it back to the comms officer, turning to face the other men. ‘I give

them five minutes, but it will suffice. By the time the insurrectionists wipe them out we'll have hit our target.' Sorov looked at the comms officer. 'Federak. These are the *exact* coordinates?'

Federak was wiry and short, with the slabby, knocked-about face of a prize fighter. 'This is the right emplacement, lieutenant,' he said. 'If Gorny got his maths right, the shuttle will pass right overhead.'

'Good.' Sorov looked around the group. One of the Guardsmen was carrying a rocket launcher over his shoulder. 'If you get even one clear shot, you'll be lucky.'

The trooper nodded. 'Sir.'

Sorov stared at him. 'We've thrown everything into this. There are a few hundred men left at the barracks, but you saw the state of them. There will be no more chances. This is it.'

The man saluted. 'One shot will be enough, sir.'

Sorov nodded, then waved at the damaged upper floor of the tower. 'Into position.'

He glared at the rest of the troopers. 'Am I so pretty you can't take your eyes off me? Watch the damned trenches. Keep yourselves alive for a few minutes and you might even get off this rancid planet.' He caught sight of Glutt. 'You keep out of the way.' He leant closer, tapping the eagle-shaped head of Glutt's staff. 'I'm no fan of witches, sanctioned or not. Throne preserve you if I catch you trying any parlour tricks.'

Glutt saluted.

Sorov nodded to the pistol at Glutt's belt. 'You know how to use that thing. Join the others and watch the bunkers.'

Glutt saluted and rushed to stand beside the comms officer.

'What are you doing out here?' he whispered, once Sorov had climbed up into the room overhead to join the trooper with the rocket launcher.

Federak gave him a suspicious look. Glutt felt like proving his suspicions right, showing him what a psyker could *really* do, but he thought of the needle, biding his time. He had no clear plan. He no longer believed in the regiment, but what did he believe in?

'The governor's going to pass over this way,' muttered Federak, waving his gun at the clouds. 'He thinks he's won. He's racing to Tadmor Ridge to deal with Sergeant Kapek and the rest of those poor sods. Sorov got a man into his inner circle. The pilot. We know the exact route he's taking. He's going to pass over this spot in a few minutes.'

Glutt could not believe the lies people told themselves to try to stay sane. ‘You’re going to take down the governor? What difference will that make? They’ll still massacre the rest of the regiment. The insurrectionists will still control the whole coastline. We’ve still lost.’

Federak forgot his wariness of Glutt for a moment and laughed. ‘Not destined for high command are you? Think. Before Governor Narbo took control of the insurrectionists, what were they doing?’

Glutt bit down his rage and shrugged.

‘Killing each other,’ Federak elaborated. ‘Always killing each other. Why do you think they used to be so easy to control? They all think *they* should be in charge. None of them will follow the others. It’s only because Governor Narbo executes his opponents that they’ve become an army. There *was* no insurrection until Narbo lost his mind and pulled them all under one banner.’ He nodded at the trooper with the rocket launcher. ‘We’re about to remove the glue that holds them all together.’

‘But we’ll have nothing left either.’

Federak shrugged. ‘Once Narbo dies, the insurrectionists will turn on each other. They’ll become a mess of squabbling warbands and high command will send us home with a chest-full of medals.’

‘Sorov knew this would happen,’ muttered Glutt. He looked up at the lieutenant. Maybe there *was* still a man worth following? Maybe he was making a mistake? No. One true man in a legion of liars was not enough.

‘Of course,’ said Federak. ‘I don’t know what Governor Narbo was smoking when he decided to join with the insurrectionists, but he should have known Sorov would never let him get away with it. The man has balls of steel.’

Glutt was about to reply when Federak frowned and looked up.

‘Hear that?’ he muttered.

There was a low, shuddering rumble drifting through the clouds – the unmistakable drone of promethium engines. Overhead, the lieutenant and the trooper with the rocket launcher shifted their position.

Everyone in the tower held their breath.

The sound grew louder as a dark smudge appeared in the mustard-yellow clouds. The lieutenant whispered something and the trooper raised his rocket launcher. The shuttle thundered right overhead – so low Glutt could see its markings.

A deafening blast rocked the tower and the sky turned white.

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