

WARHAMMER
40,000

DARK SON

Gav Thorpe

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A giant of iron and fire lit the shrine, bathing the walls with flickers of orange and red. Its eyes were dark embers, its flesh flame beneath cracked metal skin. Seven figures stood bathed in the light; armoured in plates of dark blue and black, heads covered with ornately horned helms. In gauntleted hands they held their long, broad blades, the edges of their klaives gleaming in the ruddy glare. Behind them in the shadows lurked others, pale flesh and flashing eyes half-glimpsed in the darkness.

Another entered. She was clad as the others, though her armour was more ornate, her chosen weapons a pair of curving demi-klaives that glittered with energy.

'Fear,' said the klaivex, her voice issuing as a low whisper from her helm.

The word hung in the air as she paced back and forth in front of the immobile warriors. Seven pairs of eyes followed the klaivex as she strode from one end of the line to the other. They watched for any pause, for any moment of hesitation, fingers curling on the hafts of their weapons.

'Fear drives us. Our entire existence is now predicated on a dread so utterly damning that we cannot name it. Our scattered kindred, each are driven by this fear, even those who live in the Dark City below.'

The klaivex, Naremun, stopped at the centre of the line, three strides away from seven deadly fighters seeking the merest moment of weakness. She was directly in front of Kolidaran, staring straight at him. Her words seem directed at him and he wondered if she knew of the ambition in his heart. Of course she knew, for it had been her own ambition and was shared by any that became incubi.

'We do not refuse fear. We cannot forget our fear any more than we can forget to breathe the air. It is part of us.'

Naremun started to pace again, almost but not quite turning her back on her incubi followers. Kolidaran sensed Jurathi beside him tense but the warrior made no move. Like Kolidaran, Jurathi knew that the time was not yet right. Naremun was not truly unaware; she was simply testing them, teasing them. Three strides was a short distance, but not great enough to attack and strike a clean blow uncontested.

And it would take a single killing blow to defeat Naremun.

Kolidaran had seen her fight, as had the others. He had seen the way she had cut down Siamnath and Laghinuir and Norrianar. He had seen the klaivex butcher her way through orks and humans and fellow eldar.

There would be no second strike.

He could wait. Life amongst the incubi taught nothing if not patience. The time would come when Naremun was truly vulnerable and then he would make his move. Not before.

'To face fear is true strength.' The klaivex faced her followers once more, her tone conveying disappointment at their inaction. 'We must embrace the fear and become one with it. An age ago our ancestors created a terror so profound the galaxy still shakes in dread. The faithless, the cowards, ran from that terror and hid themselves away on their craftworlds. Our kin in the Dark City cower no less, using the pain and dread of others to mask their own.'

She paused again, silhouetted against the burning idol of Khaine. For a moment her dark outline was swallowed up by the flames and smoke, seeming to become invested with the image of the war-god.

'We do not shirk from our fear. Let the misguided seek to shackle the gifts Khaine gave to us. We do not shy away from our fear: the fear that we are creatures of deep hate and irresistible anger. This is not our dread. Our dread is to be meaningless. What we fear is the passing of a life without achievement, without import. To die and be consumed by that terror we created, without first making a mark upon the universe, that is failure. That is fear.'

Naremun stepped away from the idol, her demi-klaives still raised to the guard position.

'None of you are worthy,' she snapped. 'None of you dare to challenge me. Your fear of death overpowers you. It makes you weak.'

'To die on your blades is failure,' said Aneathuin. 'Wasteful.'

'Yet if you are to succeed, if you are to become klaivex and gain your place and glory, you must dare it. Success cannot be gained without risking failure. Victory is the twin maiden of defeat. Death is the father of life.'

The klaivex shook her head and her blades lowered a fraction. When she spoke again, Kolidaran thought she sounded tired but knew this was also a ruse, a feigned show of weakness.

'Is there none who would dare to step forward? Do you not feel the hunger?' Her voice became a rasping shout. 'Do you not hate me enough?'

Empty questions, Kolidaran knew. They all wanted to be klaivex. They all felt the hunger gnawing inside them, the source of that existential fear that Naremun spoke of. And they certainly hated her. Her berating, her bullying, her sarcasm and loathing were enough to wake hatred hot enough to burn like the idol of Khaine. Her barbs to the pride of her warriors were a constant agony. But as the deaths of Siamnath and Laghinuir and Norrianar had demonstrated, Khaine did not reward those who struck out in blind fury.

Amongst the flame and smoke, Khaine's heart was ice. The Bloody-Handed demanded the slaying to be cold and calculating. Kolidaran would die no other way.

'Embrace the fear and make it your own. Become the terror. Step into th—'

Something struck Kolidaran in the back of the head.

He rolled with the blow, tumbling forward and turning at the same time. His attacker leapt forward and Kolidaran caught a glimpse of Khissareth's face beneath the hood of his acolyte's cowl, the fire lighting up his snarling face and wide eyes. Khissareth kicked out, aiming not for Kolidaran but the haft of his klaive.

The weapon flew from the incubi's grasp and spun above his head. Kolidaran jumped to his feet, but too slow. The acolyte snatched the spinning blade out of the air. With quick steps Kolidaran retreated a few paces, staying on the balls of his feet, ready to move again.

'I have your weapon,' crowed Khissareth. He brought the klaive up to the attack position, elbows out, right foot forward. 'Now I am incubi.'

'You have it,' said Kolidaran. 'Can you keep it?'

Incensed, Khissareth lashed out: a wild blow that Kolidaran easily ducked. The acolyte stabbed towards Kolidaran's midriff but the veteran warrior had expected the attack and sidestepped with a laugh.

'You should not have wasted your victory with gloating,' said the incubi.

'I shall be the last who laughs,' snapped Khissareth, lunging again.

Kolidaran backtracked, dodging the tip of the klaive by a hair's-breadth. He cartwheeled to his left as Khissareth came again. Stab and sweep and thrust all missed their mark by the finest margins, Kolidaran always a moment ahead of

his attacker. The clatter of Kolidaran's boots and Khissareth's grunts were the only sounds to break the stillness.

Eyes fixed on his opponent, the incubi lowered his left shoulder as if about to move in that direction. A momentary look of triumph gleamed in Khissareth's gaze as he swung the klaive to intercept the dodge. It was a feint, a simple one at that, and Kolidaran shifted his weight and span to the right, moving past the end of the blade.

He arrowed his straightened fingers into Khissareth's throat. As the acolyte gave a choked cry and stepped back, Kolidaran followed, grabbing hold of the klaive's haft in his left hand. The incubi drove an armoured knee into Khissareth's gut and brought his foot down into the side of his foe's knee in one motion, wrenching the klaive from Khissareth's grasp as he fell.

Another kick sent the would-be-incubi sprawling to his back.

'Fear drove you to act in haste,' said Kolidaran. He relaxed, the klaive held to one side. 'The fear that no opportunity would come forced your hand too early. The klaivex's words bit deep, did they not?'

'I regret nothing,' said Khissareth but his expression made his defiant words hollow. His eyes shone with tears as they fixed on Kolidaran's blade and his jaw trembled as he spoke. 'No success without failure. Just end it.'

'Not so easy, not for you,' said Kolidaran. 'You are the first to try to take my klaive since I pulled it from Nathrikh's dead hands. May you be the last.'

He looked at the other acolytes who were still hiding in the shadows. Turning, he handed Jurathi the klaive – there was no incentive for his fellow incubi to take advantage of his disarmed state, the klaivex was the object of their ambitions.

Further words would only cheapen the lesson, so Kolidaran advanced on Khissareth in silence. The acolyte tried to turn and run but his shattered knee failed him. Kolidaran stooped over his fallen foe, driving his fists into the acolyte's back, breaking ribs and bruising organs.

Snatching up Khissareth by his robe, Kolidaran turned the youth to face him. With a few simple moves the challenger was sent to the floor again, wailing, his broken arms trembling uselessly. Another flash of hands and Khissareth's right eye was gone, a bloody hole in its place.

The acolyte's screams echoed harshly around the chamber.

'Take him,' snarled Kolidaran, pointing towards the door. His anger was not directed at Khissareth, not now that he had been punished. Kolidaran's ire was reserved for himself; for appearing vulnerable to the acolyte. 'Dump him in the

undercity where the ur-ghuls will make sport of his flesh.'

A trio of acolytes emerged from the darkness and dragged away the screaming youth.

Kolidaran retrieved his klaive and turned to Naremun. He raised the blade briefly to his face and then bowed. As he straightened up he did not raise the tip of his klaive, but left it pointing at Naremun.

He looked straight at her and though it was impossible to see his expression his intent was clear enough. She knew open challenge would never be made, and because he had stated his purpose – though the statement was silently made – she would have to be on her guard. It could be so tiring, waiting for that moment when another's ambition overcame fear, and she would make a mistake.

Kolidaran was patient. He could wait.

'Apologies for the interruption, klaivex. You were labouring some point about fear, I believe. Please feel free to continue.'

The grand hall of the starship *Astheakh* rang with raucous laughter and terrified screams. From his vantage point at the head of the stairs leading to Shyadysis Hierarch's chambers Kolidaran watched the warriors from the Kabal of the Ascendant Spear making sport of their slaves. Some were made to fight for the pleasure of their captors, chained together and armed only with blunted knives to prolong the combat. Others suffered the attentions of Likha, Shyadysis's haemonculus; she was busy inserting slivers of metal beneath acid-scarred flesh atop a bloodstained table at the centre of the chamber. The least sophisticated simply beat and whipped their living possessions, creating a chorus of wails and howls with their blows.

To Kolidaran's left, while the incubi ensured no interloper could enter the private rooms at the top of the stair, Shyadysis watched the proceedings from a throne made of bones and black marble, his favoured courtiers sat on the steps that led up to his dais. The hierarch was dressed in a long robe of dark blue, hung with charms and jewellery made from the same materials as his chair. Shyadysis regarded the spectacles being put on for his benefit with an affected smile, his thin lips coloured black against pale skin, eyes rimmed with kohl. His eyes never stopped moving, though whether he was keeping vigil for signs of treachery or was merely distracted by the numerous displays Kolidaran could not tell.

At the right shoulder of the hierarch stood Naremun, head turning slowly from one end of the hall to the other as she kept watch, her demi-klaives in her hands

ready to counter any attack. Few were allowed drawn weapons in the presence of the hierarch but the incubi were above the squabbles and politics of the kabal.

The crack of whips, the moans of the slaves, the jeers and cheers of the audience was a pale reflection of the torment being inflicted. Kolidaran could feel the real pain and fear and desperation of the slaves like a slick beneath his skin; a palpable, slithering aura of agony. Here in the webway, just a dream's sliver away from the raw Chaos of the warp, the pulsating energy amplified the sensation, making the incubi's flesh tingle gently.

'Do you miss partaking in such entertainments?' asked Jurathi, standing on the opposite side of the sweeping stairs. 'The raw joy of pain and death?'

'No,' said Kolidaran, keeping alert for any untoward movement below.

'Not even a little?'

'No.'

'Sometimes I wonder what life would have held for me if I had not come to the shrine. Perhaps I would be a hierarch by now.'

'You would most likely be dead, or some fawning minion in the lesser ranks.' Kolidaran looked at the mass below and sneered inside his helm. 'I detest them. They are no better than the beasts that they torture. Look at them, Jurathi. See them for what they really are. They are animals, driven by their base instincts, masquerading as eldar. Strip away the veneer of civilisation, the ranks and customs of the kabal, and they are simply low creatures vying for scraps, debasing themselves to survive.'

'I can see why you left your kabal, if you think so little of life in the Dark City.'

'I had no kabal,' Kolidaran replied softly. 'Not even the scraps from an archon's table to feed upon. My first memories are of Low Commorrhagh when my mother, a slave-bitch who escaped from the Corespur, gave her life to protect me from a prowling ur-ghul. I strived, Jurathi, and fought tooth and claw just to elevate myself to the slums of Sec Maegra. I feasted on the decayed fruit of Khaides to survive.'

'Such an able fighter would surely have found swift acceptance by a kabal,' said his companion. 'Many recruit from the fighting dens of Sec Maegra.'

'What do I want for the charity of some hierarch or archon? Pets, nothing more, even those that call themselves warriors. No, I wanted no part of that life. I crept and killed my way through Sec Maegra and dared the territories of the hellions in the Middle Darkness looking for something with more purpose.'

'Then why did you not seek sanctuary in the Wych Cults of the Bone Middens? A natural fighter such as yourself would have quickly risen in reputation and

power. You could be a wolf of a hekatrix now rather than a cur snapping at the heels of Naremun.'

'I considered it only briefly,' admitted Kolidaran. 'I feel no shame to confess that the dire shadows of Aelindrach threatened too much of a hazard, and so I moved up through the city and came upon the shrine. Perhaps it called to me.'

'Your climb has stalled of late, Kolidaran.'

'Nor have I seen you show the slightest inclination to challenge the klaivex. Neither of us is a fool.'

'But it burns you, does it not? To be told by another where and for whom we will fight? To see Naremun stand beside an archon as bodyguard? I see now why you took Nathrikh's klaive so readily. We all have ambition, but you have something else to prove. You are gutter scum, Kolidaran, acting the part of warrior. It does not matter how far you stretch, your reach will never extend beyond such lowly birth.'

'Better to outreach one's means than be a contented, ignorant slave. And look, here comes another.'

Kolidaran had noticed a slender female emerge from a small door behind the throne. It was the *Astheakh's* commander, Neastra Daemuis. Naremun raised her blades in the blink of an eye, but the ship's captain lowered to one knee some distance from the hierarch.

Words were exchanged, too quiet for Kolidaran to hear. He did see the sharp look of delight that crossed Shyadysis's face, though. Even as the hierarch stood up and held out his hands for the attention of his subjects, Naremun's voice came from the communicator in the incubi's helm.

'An Alaitocii warship approaches,' warned the klaivex. 'Our employer wishes to attack. Ready yourselves at the hierarch's chambers. We will lead the assault.'

In one of the wider branches of the webway the *Astheakh* came upon the vessel of the craftworld eldar. There was a brief exchange of gunfire, its effects much reduced by the strange conditions of the webway, before the *Astheakh* closed to within range, launching forth barb-like boarding spines to fix the enemy ship in place. While flights of attack craft carried other warriors towards the rear quarters the incubi formed a vanguard piercing the main decks of the craftworld starship like the point of a blade. Behind came the hierarch and his kabalite warriors, adding weight to the precision of the incubi attack.

As the incubi formed the sword-point of the whole force, so did Naremun lead her fighters from the front. It was not unknown for a klaivex to be set upon by

one of his or her followers mid-battle but it was rare; close combat was fraught enough without slaying one's own warriors in its midst.

Kolidaran had no mind to usurp the klaivex at this time and focused his efforts on slaying the eldar of Alaitoc that crewed the starship. The craftworld warship had been taken by surprise by Shyadysis's attack and the hastily-armed foe was little threat.

Fighting just behind and to the right of Naremun, Jurathi further still to his right, Kolidaran cut down those who evaded the attention of the klaivex. They were few in the confines of the gun chamber where the boarding had started, but enough to wet Kolidaran's blade. He stepped to his left as a crew member aimed a laser pistol at him, the blast of white searing past the incubi's shoulder. The craftworlder did not get a second shot; Kolidaran's klaive cut the head from the Alaitocii with a single sweep.

They breached the corridor beyond the gun deck and turned left while kabalites spilled to the right. The high walls of the corridor were topped with narrow windows beyond which could be seen the swirling rivulets of the webway. The mournful wail of a warning alarm echoed around Kolidaran as he and the other incubi advanced towards the prow of the starship.

The alarm faded but the silence lasted only a moment. Fighting had broken out behind the incubi; raucous shouts from the kabalites alerted Kolidaran to a craftworlder counter-attack.

'We return to the fight, follow me!' snapped Naremun, pushing back through her group of warriors. Close behind, Kolidaran followed back down the corridor to where half-clad wyches were cutting their way through a press of Alaitocii crew, the hierarch's kabalites fanning out through the surrounding rooms and galleries around them.

Past the swirl of swords and half-naked flesh Kolidaran saw a sight that sent a shudder of pleasant expectation flooding through him. Warriors were assaulting the wych cultists, armoured in overlapping plates of dark green, purring chainswords cutting, shuriken pistols rending. Striking Scorpions, Aspect Warriors of Khaine who followed the teachings of the coward Karandras.

Here was a true test of Kolidaran's martial skills and a chance to prove himself worthy in the eyes of his companions. Kolidaran could see the prize he sought on the chest of each warrior; a precious spirit stone that would absorb the essence of the Striking Scorpion when he or she was slain. Kolidaran would take the soulstone of one of the dead Aspect Warriors for himself, break it and corrupt it to create his Tormentor and secure himself true rank and position within the

incubi.

Cutting down the last of the Alaitocii crew around him Kolidaran chose his prey. An Aspect Warrior caught his eye as the craftworlder met sword-to-sword with one of the wyches, catching her twin daggers on the flat of his chainsword. She fought more swiftly, but his armour bore the brunt of her strikes, sparks of energy flying from her blades as they struck. He brought up his pistol to her face and she ducked, to be met by the rising point of his chainsword. Her face split in twain, the wych fell to the ground, her beautiful features now a gory mess.

'Death comes for you, little scorpion!' Kolidaran snarled as he launched himself at the Aspect Warrior, seeking to cut him down before he recovered from his duel with the wych. Before he could strike, the Striking Scorpion saw Kolidaran coming and threw himself at the incubi with equal determination.

The Aspect Warrior's chainsword plunged towards Kolidaran's head. The incubi swayed back, his klaive rising to deflect the attack. Spinning, Kolidaran delivered a kick to the Striking Scorpion's midriff, sending him staggering. His foe's chainsword flashed up to ward away a strike towards the chest, sending the klaive's gleaming head screaming past his shoulder.

The pair parted and circled, feinting and jabbing with their weapons. The Aspect Warrior's eye lenses glinted red as if filled with rage as he launched another flurry of attacks, the mandiblasters mounted on the sides of his helm spitting las-shots, chainsword weaving left and right. Kolidaran dodged the mandiblaster attack, ducked and swerved aside from each blow, the tip of his klaive carving figures of eight in front of him.

His chance for a swift kill had passed and Kolidaran's frustration grew. He parried each incoming strike, waiting for his moment to despatch his enemy with a decapitation blow but no opening presented. Kolidaran's patience snapped and he risked a hasty lunge, only for a chance salvo from the Striking Scorpion's pistol to catch him in the thigh. As Kolidaran's leg buckled the craftworlder followed up with a blistering series of strikes towards head and throat, forcing Kolidaran to catch the rasping teeth of the chainsword on the haft of his klaive, razor-bladed fangs spitting sparks from the metal.

Kolidaran saw the Striking Scorpion's right shoulder dipping. Ignoring the pain in his leg, he straightened to bring down his klaive in the killing blow, seeking to part the warrior's neck.

A sudden change of direction and a twist to the left sent the klaive stroke wide. It was the same move Kolidaran had employed against Khissareth.

His surprise turned to horror a moment later as the Aspect Warrior's chainsword

bit into Kolidaran's lower back, slivers of torn armour spraying to the floor.

Hissing in pain, Kolidaran lurched to one side only to be caught by a backward sweep that struck a glancing blow to the side of the head, shearing away part of his armour, splintering the eye lens on the left side of his face. He staggered and fell, the klaive falling from his numbed grasp, a gasp ripped from his lips.

Kolidaran looked up at the looming Aspect Warrior with a knot of terror in his gut. The Striking Scorpion drew back his chainsword, ready for the killing blow. There was no defence but Kolidaran threw up a warding hand out of raw instinct.

The Striking Scorpion had no time for the death-blow; Naremun attacked from the right, her demi-klaives sending the Aspect Warrior reeling back as the incubi and kabalites pushed onwards. Red tinged the edge of Kolidaran's vision, the scene becoming darker as he watched the melee moving away, leaving him helpless amongst the dead and wounded, his legs devoid of strength, his klaive out of reach.

Moving in and out of consciousness, Kolidaran only dimly viewed what was happening. The fighting around him dissipated, the counter-attack of the Aspect Warriors driving the hierarch's warriors back to their boarding craft. A figure appeared to his left, a long two-handed chainsword in its hands. Fear returned as the apparition loomed over him and the incubi recognised the heavier armour and trappings of the Striking Scorpion Exarch, poised to attack.

Kolidaran closed his eyes, awaiting the blow.

After several agonising heartbeats Kolidaran opened his eyes to see the exarch still waiting.

'You face, at my hand, a choice.' The exarch's voice had a steady tempo and rhythm to it, the language not dissimilar to the ancient tongues spoken in Commorragh. The Striking Scorpion raised his blade, assuming a more defensive stance. 'Without prejudice, free from threat, an offer. Choose life, surrender your will, or death.'

Not quite believing what he heard, Kolidaran blinked back tears of dread and pain and squinted up at the exarch.

'For truth?' He laughed, slightly manic. 'You stand with blade ready and claim no coercion? What conditions do you place upon my capitulation?'

'Your life, and your fate, to me. Your blade, and your loyalty, to Alaitoc. Your rage, and your hate, to Khaine. Natural warriors, such as you, are rare. More yet, you will learn, from me. A promise, upon my word, of peace. No fear, no more

doubts, no doom.'

Kolidaran pondered the meaning of the words for a moment, trying to unravel the exarch's intent from the florid phrases.

'You offer to bring me into your shrine? To abandon my Path for yours?'

'Just so, it will be done, without prejudice.'

The fear brought on a sharp pang of the hunger that ate at Kolidaran's spirit. The ebbing away of his essence, combined with the pain of his wounds, made him feel dizzy. He could feel his heart beating hard in his chest, but growing weaker. As his pulse slowed, the hunger grew. She Who Thirsts waited for his spirit and was but a breath away from claiming her prize. The terror of that thought leant strength to Kolidaran's words.

Survival outshone pride or loyalty every time.

'I accept! Save me from this eternal doom, my life and spirit in your hands.'

Waking, feeling warm sheets beneath and upon him, Kolidaran kept his eyes closed, enjoying the comfort of half-sleep. He could not remember when he had slumbered so deeply. The moment passed quickly, giving way to vulnerability. He was without armour or weapon – they had been taken from him before he had been brought to the starship's halls of healing – and instinct of a life spent under threat made him yearn for such protections. In the incubi shrine he would not have survived without such measures.

A quiet voice, female, spoke close by.

'Rest easily, you are safe.'

Something rested on his arm beneath the sheet and Kolidaran opened his eyes to see the healer, Naroami, standing over him. Her left hand was upon him, and in her right she held an amulet studded with four diamond-like jewels. A tiny star of blue glowed in the heart of each gem.

They were in a small room – isolated from the crew Kolidaran had noted – with the single bed and a low cabinet topped with a marble-like counter. Various crystals of different sizes, colours and shapes were arranged on a rack atop the cupboard and there was a tray of medical implements beside them.

'Your body responds well to your will,' she said. 'You have a strong spirit.'

'It has been honed by long adversity.'

'And how do you feel?'

Kolidaran moved slightly, flexing muscles. He grimaced as pain flared up his spine.

'Stiffness everywhere,' he said through gritted teeth, 'and my back feels as

though it is on fire.'

'You misunderstand the question. I am fully cogent of your body's ailments. Your physical injuries will heal. It is your spirit, your thoughts, which I seek to understand. How do you *feel*?'

'Why?'

A slight frown of confusion wrinkled Naroami's brow, the healer surprised by the question.

'Tissue can be knitted together, fractures set, but the damage to your spirit is beyond simply reconstruction. If you are not well of spirit, the healing of the body is pointless.'

'Typical craftworlder drivel! You said yourself that my spirit is strong. I have endured worse in my life.'

Naroami looked long at Kolidaran, and he sneered at the compassion that filled her eyes. He met her gaze with a hard stare.

'I do not desire your sympathy and your pity is offensive.'

Naroami looked away, distracting herself with the crystal device in her hand. She did not look up when she spoke.

'Bitterness is to be expected. You have been touched by such darkness and you do not understand the full extent of your peril.'

'Peril? It would be pointless to heal me and then slay me; even craftworlders are not that stupid. When my body is repaired, what is your intent?'

'I have no intent. Nor does any other. The bleak lens through which you view the universe taints your perception, seeing enemies that do not exist.'

'The exarch, he said my fate would belong to him. That would be intent.'

'Kenainath, exarch of the Hidden Death. He brought you to me, naked as you are now, and said nothing of how you came to him nor of any bargain made.'

'Then his words ring hollow. He promises me peace and then abandons me.'

'He can do nothing for you as you are, but now I understand his meaning. As an Aspect Warrior you can learn to control the anger and hate that defines you. You are Commorraghan, that much is clear from your speech and attitude. Why Kenainath spared you, I do not know, but it is not under the auspices of an exarch that you will begin to find peace.'

'If I understand right, do not craftworlders excise their Khaine-given rage in the Aspect Temples? It would seem Kenainath would do the same for me.'

'You cannot become an Aspect Warrior. You are not ready.'

'I assure you that my skill is beyond question, and you must know that I have slain many foes before. My whole life has prepared me for battle.'

Naroami shook her head, saddened. She turned her back on Kolidaran for a moment; when she returned her gaze to him her expression had hardened, her face set.

'You are damned. Even now, the Great Enemy lays claim to your spirit. One such as you can never find peace while the fear of She Who Thirsts and the hunger of that grip consume you.'

'So what am I to do? Am I prisoner here?'

'Not by force, but by circumstance. We return to Alaitoc, but you are free to leave at any time. No constraint is placed upon you. Yet, where would you go?'

Kolidaran thought of the matter for a few moments.

'I cannot return to Commorrhagh,' he said, scowling. 'My position at the shrine is forfeit and I would not crawl begging to the kabals.'

'It would be a terrible waste of the opportunity that fate has presented you. Guided by whatever hand, Kenainath has granted you a moment to pause and reflect, to see the paths laid out for you to follow. Simply to return to your previous existence would be unwise.'

'Fate?' Kolidaran laughed cruelly. 'I will tell you what fate means. It means facing the fear every moment of your life, knowing that one day all will fall to doom. Fate does not decree the path I take, only my own will.'

'And what does your will tell you?'

'There are other employments for one trained in the craft of battle.' There was disappointment in Naroami's expression, almost the pity she had shown before. It pierced Kolidaran's bravado and he deflated, shamed though he did not understand why. 'I am a death-dealer, not a healer. I kill or I am killed. Do you think I would be content within your craftworld? Shunned, perhaps despised, though your kind oft-claim not to hate us as much as we hate you. My spirit is awash with the blood of innocents, you cannot cleanse it. You cannot change what I am.'

'You are right.' Naroami smiled and once more laid her hand on Kolidaran's arm. She squeezed gently. 'I can do nothing. You... You have the power to be whatever you desire, if you could shed the darkness that fills you.'

'And what would you do to free me from the doom that waits for me? Would the Alaitocii send armies into the Womb of Catastrophe to destroy the Great Enemy for me? Is that how you would see me free?'

'Always it is battle you turn to, but you might consider an alternative.'

'Become a Harlequin, perhaps? Yes, I could swear my life to Cegorach and hope that the Laughing God chooses to snatch my spirit from She Who Thirsts

when the time comes. But alas, my singing voice is poor and I have no liking for dance.'

The healer's hand moved to the silver chain of a pendant and pulled forth an oval ruby-coloured gem from within her robe. Kolidaran sensed warmth and protection emanating from the jewel.

'You proudly display your spirit stone, as if that could give me reassurance. You mock me, surely? To show me a shield I can never bear. Yes, you might think yourself safe from cruel attentions after death, but it is too late for me. No such comfort for such as me. A pirate, a mercenary, that will be my fate. You were bonded to that stone at birth.'

'It is our way,' said Naroami. 'The best way. But it is not the only way.'

Seeing the earnestness in the healer's eyes, Kolidaran was intrigued. More than intrigued, he felt a brief glimmer of hope birthed within the hunger of his spirit; a tiny star amidst a universe of darkness.

'Another way? I could have a spirit stone? Do not give false promise, or I will kill you now and seal my doom without regret.'

'It is not a simple thing, for it requires you to be reborn. For one who has lived a life such as yours the experience will be painful, and the pain might madden you past all reason.'

'Insanity? It seems little risk, for if I am to go mad I will not know what has befallen me.'

'If the rebirth takes such a toll, there is only one outcome. For your own sake you would be euthanised.'

'And finally here comes the threat. You would kill me if I fail?'

'It would be a mercy, believe me.'

Kolidaran did believe her, such was the sincerity that radiated from the healer.

'The choice is wholly yours to make. I offer only an option, not a sure cure.'

Kolidaran's lip twisted in scorn, but it was more for show than keenly felt. The choice the craftworlders offered, what Kenainath must have known would be presented, was tempting. More than tempting, it offered salvation and the thought of it grew in Kolidaran's mind, growing stronger, and in growing it soothed the hunger in a way that his cold ambition had never achieved.

'Insanity and death on the one hand,' he said. 'On the other, a violent life doomed to end with damnation and my spirit devoured for endless torment.'

The fear returned as he spoke, like a chilling fog that crept out of his heart and caused his limbs to tremble. If he was to attempt the rebirth and fail, he would hasten eternal agony. But if he risked that...

Suddenly, he understood his terror in a different way. The lectures of his former klaivex returned to thought. Even as he had sought standing and greatness it had merely been distraction from the dread in his heart. He realised how shallow, how empty, his existence as an incubi had been. He had learnt to survive, but in doing so had given up any chance to truly live.

'Better a slim chance than none. I accept your offer, healer.'

The arrival at Alaitoc had been inconspicuous. Naroami had taken him to the exarch, Kenainath, after the other warriors and crew had left. In the company of the shrine-leader he had been brought before a small kabal of other Striking Scorpion exarchs. The debate had been short and to the point.

'He must be accepted, pupils are not turned away – it is not a choice.' Kenainath stood in the Chamber of Autarchs with the five other Striking Scorpion exarchs. Beside the Deadly Shadow exarch stood the former incubi, eyes downcast, demure and silent. He wore a plain white robe from the Halls of Healing, several spirit-aligning gems hung about his person to aid his recovery.

'He is the enemy, one of the dark kin. He cannot be one of us!' The exarch, introduced as Kadonil, was vehement.

'This is no debate, I have made my final choice, I will not change it.'

'What you say, it is true, he is yours,' said the female called Liruieth, her voice quiet but firm. 'Watch him close, tell no one, work him hard.'

'He will be silent, none but us shall ever know, a Scorpion's secret,' Kenainath assured them.

Kadonil whirled away in disgust. Aranahra stalked off without a word. The remaining exarchs nodded in compliance, and departed.

'That went well,' said Kolidaran.

'You will be silent, speaking to no other but me, until we are done,' the exarch said sternly. Kenainath turned away. Kolidaran took a step to follow and the exarch stopped to look back at him.

'You will remain here, another will come to you soon, prepare for rebirth.'

With an exasperated exhalation, Kolidaran sat on a bench and watched Kenainath depart. He looked around, his annoyance quickly dissipated by interest in his surroundings. The craftworld, like the starship, was utterly unlike Commorragh. Here there was light everywhere, sometimes dim and pale, but ever present. There were no shadows, he noticed. No dark places where mandrake or ur-ghul might lurk.

The chamber was not large, a small hall with arching ribs that formed a dome

above him. Hemispheres set into the spars spilled their yellow light upon him, gently dappled to oranges and white that slowly moved and split and coalesced.

It was quite calming, in a way, but the feeling of naked vulnerability returned as Kolidaran awaited the arrival of his next captor.

He did not have to wait long before the portal sighed open and a heavily robed figure stood in the doorway. She wore many rune-talismans on necklaces and bracelets over her dark red robes, green-and-white tinted hair drawn back in an elaborate topknot to show a face that was slightly too narrow, the cheekbones too high to be considered beautiful even by Commorraghan standards.

Kolidaran stood up as the seer entered, for such she clearly was.

'I am Shyladuril, I will be your guide for the rebirth.'

Kolidaran nodded in acceptance of this fact.

'You have no words of greeting for me?'

'The exarch bade me speak to no one.'

'A wise precaution, but you will speak with me, for I know already who and what you are.'

'You are a farseer?' The possibility intrigued Kolidaran. The psyker could see the threads of fate and would be able to tell him whether his rebirth was an attempt at folly.

'Your fate is uncertain,' said Shyladuril, answering the question before it formed on his lips. 'Many are the knots on our threads when the future is yet unfolding. The decision is made but the outcome not set.'

'You have no guidance for me? I thought farseers were meant to be advisors.'

'I offer no words of encouragement, but I have no words of warning either. Both you have heard, from others and within your thoughts. I will ask you, at this time and place, as we stand upon a branching destiny, is it your will, alone and without coercion, that you wish to do this thing?'

'Without coercion?' Kolidaran laughed, bitterness adding a sharp edge to his humour. 'The horror unleashed by our forebears coerces me. The fate sealed for all of us when the first temples fell and the Great Enemy screamed his triumph motivates me upon this course.'

'You are astute, and your fear is not without just cause. It was your misfortune that fate placed your spirit into a body born into the darkness of Commorragh. Rare is the second chance fate has given you, and rarer still those who can accept it. Almost unique are those who survive to enjoy its full benefits.'

'Others? Commorraghans who have been bonded to spirit stones? It really is possible!'

'Of the kin of Commorragh, I do not know. Perhaps they live on other craftworlds – there are none like you on Alaitoc. I speak of those eldar born beyond the craftworld, unexpectedly or in secret, not to be blessed with the spirit stone at their birth. If we get them as children, it is not so difficult. As adults...'

Kolidaran did not like the silence that followed.

'I will do it, nevertheless. Cast what runes you must and let us begin.'

'Haste will see you doomed, so first temper your impatience.' Shyladuril produced an oval grey stone from one of the pouches at her belt. Compared to those he had seen bonded to the craftworlders it seemed dull and inert, lacking the spark of life at its core. The farseer held it out on her palm. 'Take it.'

Hesitantly, Kolidaran reached out. He jerked back his fingers a moment before they touched, fearing what contact might bring.

'Take it, it cannot harm you. Simple possession of a Tear of Isha does not begin the process.'

Emboldened by Shyladuril's words, Kolidaran plucked the spirit stone from her hand. It was cold to the touch, the surface as smooth as silk. He held it up, watching as amber light reflected from its curve.

'Where did it come from? I hear that the Tears of Isha can only be recovered from the crone worlds at the heart of the Womb of Destruction.'

'Even in Commorragh there are some truths. This tear was wept upon Naimashamenth.'

The name meant World of Glittering Falls.

'I have not heard of it,' confessed Kolidaran. The stone was warmer now, though whether from his touch or some inner energy he could not tell.

'It does not matter. Regard the stone. It will become part of you. It will become you. See it. Hear it. Smell it. Feel it.'

'Smell it?' Kolidaran chuckled as he lifted it to his nose, doubtful. At first he detected nothing. 'Stone does not smell.'

'Open up your senses to your spirit, for that is what you must seek. Do not sense the stone as it is, but as it will be.'

Vexed, Kolidaran sniffed once more, closing his eyes to focus on his sense of smell. Again, at first, there was nothing. As he was about to give up he caught a scent: the unmistakable fragrance of fresh blood. As he absorbed this a distant sound came to his ears, of cries of pain and blades clashing. He started to tremble, moved by the recollection of battle. The spirit stone grew warmer and then pulsed.

Such was his shock, he almost dropped it.

When he opened his eyes, he found that he was alone in the chamber, the lights dimmed to twilight. He did not know whether he had spent a moment or an age with the stone, but it was there still, gently throbbing between his fingertips.

Kolidaran moved across the chamber to lay on one of the benches, his surrounds slightly dream-like and unfocussed. Resting his head against the unyielding seat gave him a sense of place, of solid reality. He closed his eyes and brought the spirit stone up to his chest, resting his hands one on the other on top of it.

The blood smell came back, stronger than before. The noise of war and weapons grew to a clamour. The spirit stone pulsed quickly, his heart racing in time with it.

The first memory is little more than a flash. A chainsword lashes against the side of his head. Terror fills him, wrenching out his heart and freezing his mind. Death is certain. The hunger consumes him, burning up his existence from within like a flame crawling along paper, leaving the ashes of damnation.

Another battle. Humans scream and shout as the incubi break into their hovel. He leads the attack, cutting the head from the first woman and gutting the second. Too old and weak to be any sport for the hierarch desiring prisoners for the fighting pits. The children are left for the kabalites that follow in the wake of the shrine-warriors. A male adult wearing the oil-stained clothes of a labourer swings a bulky metal tool at his head. He swerves from its slow arc, the blade of his klaive slicing through the wrist of the man. He smashes the butt into the human's throat, knocking him to the floor, gasping and coughing. An armoured boot to the side of the head silences the man's choking.

The incubi sell their skills for the goals of others, but it is unsatisfying to subdue rather than kill. He wants to see the splash of crimson that signals the swift, efficient kill. He wants to witness that moment where life becomes death, when animate becomes inanimate. This battle is empty, only the panic of the humans providing a momentary cessation of the gnawing feeling in the base of his skull.

Another has found an arcane-looking pistol and fires. A solid slug of metal ricochets from his armour, and cracks into the low, poorly plastered ceiling, showering motes of dust. The human hastily reloads, cracking open the breach of the pistol, fumbling with clumsy hands at the bullets in his pocket.

He wants to kill. The man is armed; it would be justified. He holds back, his bloodthirsty spirit raging against the colder, higher functions that turn the killing

blow into a sweep that topples the man from his feet, the pistol spinning from his grasp. Klaive held in one hand, he activates the shred-net launcher attached to his forearm. Clinging, thorned tendrils envelop the scrabbling human. The prey tries to writhe free but his movements only make the shred-net constrict. Soon the barbs digging into the man's flesh, tipped with paralyzing toxins, cause him to fall still rather than suffer more pain.

He moves through the household, but it is empty of more prey. Disappointed, he breaks a window at the rear, climbing into an alley. Above him a pall of smoke spreads across the night-shrouded sky, blotting out the stars.

Faster and faster come the memories, of old battles and midnight raids. His is a life awash with blood, of lives ended to the symphony of crackling blades, breaking bones and screams cut short. They come so fast they become a blur, a nauseating strobe of violence and mayhem.

Nathrikh is lax, paying more attention to Asanakit than to him. Asanakit has been too obvious of late, prowling like a caged animal, watching every move of their incubi masters with starved eyes. Nathrikh turns her back to him to keep an eye on Asanakit while the other acolyte polishes the trophy badges hanging from the ceiling on strips of tanned alien skin.

He strikes, using the moment of vulnerability to ram a spike of bone into the back of Nathrikh's right knee. Just as he planned while he sharpened the stolen femur in his cell, thinking and dreaming and waiting patiently, Nathrikh buckles. In a moment he has his arm around her throat, wedged tight between chestplate and helm. With his free hand he catches the haft of her klaive as Nathrikh tries to swing it over her shoulder. A kick to her injured leg causes her to fall further and he twists, wrenching the weapon from her hands even as his arm tightens on her throat.

He jerks her head to one side, feeling vertebrae cracking, her windpipe collapsing. Letting go, he steps back to watch her die. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Asanakit take a step, but the other acolyte is too slow; the tip of the klaive rises towards him and Asanakit retreats into the shadows.

Fingers clawing at the stone floor, Nathrikh tries to crawl towards him, hacking and retching inside her helm, limbs weak and trembling from the damage to her spine.

It is taking too long. Though the ebb of despair that flows from the defeated incubi is like a gentle, cooling breeze soothing the hunger within, he wants that moment of death. With a casual flick of the klaive, he parts the artery at the side

of her neck and watches as rich blood spurts onto the floor he had been scrubbing only moments before.

He raises the klaive above his head in triumph. He will clean floors no more. He is a slayer. He is incubi.

The archway is forbidding, but no greater obstacle than those he has already overcome. Inside is sanctuary. The ancient runes above the portal mean nothing to him; he cannot read or write. Yet there is something in the other designs, the blades and flames and burning skulls, that makes it clear that sanctuary will not be granted easily.

He crosses the threshold, the pain in his gut, the gnawing and churning of the hunger like acid in his veins.

He is swallowed by shadow for a moment and presses on. Three steps more, he forces himself out into a broad courtyard. Three hooded and cloaked youths confront him.

'You are not welcome,' says one.

'This is a hall of pain,' says another.

'Turn back,' says the third.

'No,' he manages to whisper through cracked lips, his tongue and gums as dry as ash.

He can do nothing as fists and feet pummel him to the ground, pounding into flesh, bruising and breaking. All he has to do to make it stop is crawl out into the archway again.

He cannot. He will not.

The beating stops after an eternity of mind-numbing pain.

A shadow falls over him and he looks up to see the klaivex, her blades drawn. She smiles, the expression more sinister than anything he has ever encountered before. She steps aside and points one of her demi-klaives towards the door on the other side of the courtyard; a silent welcome.

The gnawing of starvation in his gut is nothing compared to the wrenching abyss within his spirit, but he must eat. The sluggish waters of the Khaides gurgle past, swirling into eddies beneath the piles of the bridge. From the darkness he sees what he needs washing along on the current. It catches on the line he has strung beneath the span and gently turns in the water, coming to rest against one of the ornate pillars holding up the bridge.

He waits, checking the darkness with ears and nose as much as sight. Ur-ghuls frequent these parts.

There is nothing. He steals from his lair and drags the corpse out of the water. It is good. A human, body marked by lash and brand, tossed from the heights of the towers above the black river. He cannot light a fire to cook it without drawing attention and such is his famished state he cannot wait to drag the body to a safer den.

He sinks his teeth into the raw flesh.

And finally a single tableau etched deep into his memory, buried so far beneath the blood and pain it had never before surfaced.

His mother stands over him, her knife rammed into the mouth of the rearing urghul. The creature's scent-pits flare while dark blood cascades across her pale skin. From her back jut three sword-like claws and her life-fluid sprays down upon him.

It is here that the fear begins. It is here that the pit in his essence opens up, revealing the doom that awaits. Death. Damnation.

There is no innocence lost, for he was condemned at the moment of his birth.

With recollection comes a haunting feeling, worse even than the starvation of spirit that has plagued his life. It is like a thousand daggers in his mind, a thousand razor edges slicing his thoughts, a thousand despicable deeds reflected in each shining blade.

Despair. Hate. Anger. Lust. All are washed away as his life flows from the wounds to be replaced by an excruciating ache.

Guilt.

White, brilliant light blinds him. The daggers turn to shards of crystal in his spirit, their touch like the frozen wastes of the void.

Like a healer drawing venom, the crystal splinters soak up the guilt and the pain. And the fear.

But the pain is too much. He is lost. Without the hunger, without the dread, he is nothing. He does not want to be obliterated but the crystalline hooks in his essence will not release him. Like the shred-net they grow tighter the more he struggles.

He pauses, gathering his strength for one last effort, to rip himself free from the terrifying claws that rend him. In that moment he finds clarity. There is more than war and hate and pain. There can be peace.

He must surrender to it.

He has never surrendered in all of his hard life. To live is to fight, to exist is to

know agony. He cannot succumb, but he must.

He feels sorrow. A sorrow so deep it would drown worlds. The Tears of Isha, raining down upon a doomed civilisation. A goddess mourns for the loss of an entire race, her children dragged into damnation by their own greed and desires and selfishness.

It is then that he understands. He knows why a she-bitch of a slave would give her life for a mewling infant that is more burden than boon. He knows why the hunger can never be sated by blood and why the pain will never remove the stings of his doom.

And then he gives up, setting his mind free, letting his spirit soar into the light, allowing himself to relinquish the fight. He capitulates entirely, trusting to the love of a mother and a goddess.

Opening his eyes, Kolidaran found that the chamber was filled with light again.

The stone upon his breast was warm to the touch, filled with a deep blue light that gently waxed and waned with the beating of his heart. And then he felt it; or rather did not feel it. The emptiness, the hunger and pain had gone.

He cradled his spirit stone like a child and wept.

When Shyladuril returned, Kolidaran was sat with the spirit stone in his lap, entranced by its ever-shifting patterns. He was rapt by the thought that this stone could protect him from the hunger, from the doom of the eldar.

'You are whole and sane, I see,' said the farseer.

'Your sight is not in error.'

'How do you feel?'

Kolidaran had to think for a moment.

'Content, but strangely restless.'

'The rebirth is only the beginning of your new journey. That which we have practised since childhood, the control of memory and emotion, the exercise of discipline and order, will have to be learnt. But it is a good start.'

The farseer sat next to Kolidaran and handed him a silver brooch, the centre inset to take his spirit stone. He accepted the gift without word, slipped the stone into place and pinned the brooch upon the breast of his robe.

'From here you will go to the Shrine of the Hidden Death, and receive teaching from Kenainath to take power over your hate and anger. When you have trodden the Path for the first time you will be truly of the craftworlds and this life will begin anew, refreshed with each new Path you tread.' The seer gave him an intent look. 'Your past life is gone, and your Commorraghan name with it. The

individual that you were is no more. You need a name by which you will be known on Alaitoc.'

He had already considered this. Kolidaran was a creature of his memories, another person entirely, though they shared a past. Yet something of that Commorraghan love of irony remained and influenced his choice. He had heard Naroami use it several times while he had been convalescing. It meant Spirit on the Wind, and was a craftworlder term for those that died without a spirit stone to guard them.

'I shall be Bechareth,' he said.

Kenainath had been very specific: Bechareth was not to leave the Shrine of the Hidden Death. Until he had learnt properly to don his 'war-mask' the ex-incubi was considered a threat to the craftworlders. His silence was similarly enforced even with those of the Hidden Death. He had spoken at length with Shyladuril about this matter, but she had been adamant. If his history became widely known he would no longer be welcomed by the Alaitocii, for all their espoused tolerance and love of harmony.

It was difficult to think of himself as one of the Alaitocii yet. Their life, the concept of the Path, was so very different. However, he had been born again, gifted a fresh start that few ever had. His memories, the blood-soaked past that he had ignored for so long, were still there, but his rebirth had washed away all association with them. It was if he looked upon another when he delved into his recollections; watched some other gutter-child drag himself up from the filth to become a savage killer.

The disassociation was not total, so he had been warned. His hate, his anger, the things that had shaped Kolidaran still drove Bechareth, though his detachment now allowed him to see their influence and the destruction they had wrought upon his spirit.

Yet such emotions still had their uses and when the Hidden Death had been called to war, Bechareth had been called with them. So it was that he found himself again in the midst of strife and death. Clad in new armour he now stalked the galleries of a human ship, killing all in his path as he had done countless times before. Now he fought alongside Kenainath and the Hidden Death, a member of a team not a group of individuals, and it felt good to share in the slaying.

It seemed strange, to wield the chainsword and pistol of the Striking Scorpion rather than his klaive, but many of Kenainath's lessons in battle-craft had echoed

sentiments first delivered by Naremun: the swift attack and quick kill; the superiority of feints and misdirection; the supremacy of the hidden strike. All that was required was to master the same techniques with these new weapons.

The humans were unwittingly transporting worshippers of the Dark Gods, he had been told, and posed a threat to the future of Alaitoc. As he slashed his chainsword across the face of a flat-nosed crewman Bechareth did not care for the reasons why he was here, only that he could give vent to the nascent hate that still resided within.

He had feared that the spirit stone would have robbed him of his zeal for slaughter, but now he was given free rein, to unleash the bloodlust with the full force of something he had never felt before: righteousness.

As he cut down another human he knew that he was far from finding peace, but at least there was no more fear.

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