

WARHAMMER
40,000



REBORN

AN ASTRA MILITARUM SHORT STORY
NICHOLAS WOLF

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REBORN

Nicholas Wolf

I

He's dead.

He's dead, and I killed him.

I slowly back away from the convulsing, gasping form of my commissar, my serrated bayonet sliding from his chest. I lock eyes with him, truly meeting them for the first time. He's angry, yes, but beneath the pious rage, I finally, after years of watching him shoot men in the back for cowardice, see human fear.

He knows his life is over, and all that's left is to die.

As soon as my blade rips free of his heart his knees buckle and he slumps to the ground, splashing face first into the gore-soaked mud. In my moment of clarity I've transformed Commissar First Class Vasili Grudenov from a vicious, pitiless executioner to a banal hunk of flesh, no more righteous or terrifying than a slab of grox meat.

'I'm not dying here,' I growl to the corpse. 'None of us are.'

My lasgun falls from my hands, joining the body at my feet. My fingers are shaking, not with fear or rage, although I feel both beating hot through my veins like combat-stimms. No, they're shaking, *coursing*, with...

...hope.

I'm no longer Acting-Captain Andrik Petrov of the 224th Kelbran Janissaries, insignificant cog of the Astra Militarum, abandoned to die by an uncaring Imperium on this forsaken battlefield. I'm something greater.

'You saved my life.'

I reluctantly tear my eyes away from the body at my feet. Private Nikyta Povich, who a moment before had been staring down the barrel of Grudenov's

bolt pistol, slowly opens his eyes. Urine trickles down his leg. Despite the horrors of war he still looks not a day older than sixteen. He may not be.

I can't think of anything to say. I hadn't been thinking of Nikyta. Not really. I'd been thinking of myself, because I knew it would've only been a matter of time before I was the target. I nod and make a face that I hope looks hard and stoic, like Captain Luvchenko made. I probably just look tired.

The silence in the bunker stretches on, punctuated only by the drumming boom of artillery and the chatter of gunfire, both growing closer.

'You killed a commissar,' someone says, stating the obvious.

'You heard what Grudenov said – the war for Tarshish is over. The heretics broke our lines, we aren't getting reinforcements, and we aren't getting evacuated,' I say quietly, feeling rage aching in my chest even as I say it. 'The Imperium left us to die, and he was here to make sure we bought enough time for them to evacuate the more important assets off-world.'

'Yeah, but–'

I round on the speaker. He's young, just a little younger than me. His ill-fitting blue jacket says 'corporal' but I'm guessing he took it off a corpse. 'Do you have anyone back on Kelbra, soldier?'

'What do you mean?'

'Do you have anyone back on Kelbra?' I ask. 'Anyone waiting for you?'

He looks confused, like I'd just asked him to recite the *Uplifting Primer* from memory. 'Of course.'

'You, Aleksandr, you've got a wife and three children,' I say, pointing to the men of my old squad. 'Sava, how many more years do you think your old father can work in the factorums so your mother doesn't go hungry? Do you even know if he's still alive?'

I let my words sink in, watching as familiar face after familiar face nods in solemn understanding. 'Who else has family waiting for them?'

A hundred ragged, bloody hands rise.

I caress the swollen curvature of Misha's belly, so warm even in the pre-dawn chill of our hab. Little Nicolai is already awake, kicking and squirming. I wonder if, somehow, he knows what's happening.

Why did he have to be late?

I stop. The boy I'd been when I left Kelbra would've cried, but that part of me died long ago. I still feel my throat closing though, my eyes stinging. 'I have a son waiting for me who I've never met. No one, not even a commissar, is going to stop me from getting back home to him.'

I see realisation slowly dawning in their eyes, an awakening. I think all of us at some point stopped truly believing we were ever going to see home again. How *had* I envisioned it, all those years ago?

It's been so long I don't even remember.

'So... what do we do now?' someone else asks, breaking the silence.

'I...' I stumble, grasping for words that just aren't there. 'I don't know.'

I hear an ominous hum behind me.

'I know what we do.'

I slowly turn, staring down the barrel of a lasgun.

Sergeant Mikhail Velkov, grizzled face set in a lopsided snarl, glares at me. 'We shoot this traitor right now.'

I glance at my own lasgun at my feet. I'd never make it. 'Stand down, soldier.'

'You're not my captain,' he growls back from the vox-caster built into his throat. 'You're only wearing that rank because Captain Luvchenko is dead.'

'I said stand down,' I repeat, firmly. I keep my hands visible though. He's standing too far away for me to grab his weapon.

He spits at my boots. 'You just killed your commissar. You're nothing to me now.'

'This war is over, Mikhail, you heard it from Grudenov himself! He was going to make sure you died, right here in this damned bunker, because General Volsk decided our lives weren't as important as munitions and tanks!'

He blinks. Slowly. 'I swore an oath to the Emperor, boy.'

Something breaks inside me, a brittle dam overflowing with hate. 'And where was the Emperor, Mikhail?' I scream. 'Where was the Emperor when the heretics bombed Forward Command? Where was the Emperor when those... *things* massacred the eastern front? Where was the Emperor when Tarshish Hive went mad? Seventy million people slaughtering each other, Mikhail! Where was the Emperor when the commander we spent the last four years fighting for sent a commissar to make sure we didn't run when we figured out we'd been left to die? Where? *Where*, Mikhail?'

I see him wavering. 'I... it's not that simple. The Emperor protects.'

'No He doesn't, Mikhail,' I shake my head angrily. 'You can die for the Emperor, but I won't. Put the gun down.'

The barrel drops. Slightly. I can see his hate melting away.

'Think about your family, Mikhail,' I say softly. 'Don't leave your children orphans. Not for them. Not for this. The Imperium doesn't deserve our blood.'

'We... we can still rejoin the rest of the battle group before they leave Tarshish.'

Say you shot Grudenov and we shot you. Volsk would take us back.'

I take a slow step towards him, still keeping my hands up. 'Volsk was perfectly content to let us die here. He'd cull the 224th to make an example, just like Grudenov would've done to Nikyta.'

'You don't know that!' he yells, vox-caster cracking. 'We can... we can try... we have to...'

I take another step towards Mikhail. He's almost close enough for me to grab his gun. He's no longer pointing it at me. He's not even looking at me. 'Put the gun down, Mikhail. Let's go home.'

'You're insane...'

Bzzrt.

Mikhail Velkov stays standing for just a moment before he notices the hole burned through his face. My gorge rises at the scorched-bone reek. The betrayal in his eyes is too much. I can't look. His gun brushes my fingers as it slips from his hands. His legs crumple. He's dead before he hits the ground.

Sergei Meglev, my trusted lieutenant and oldest friend, slowly lowers his laspistol. 'Andrik... er, Captain Petrov is right. We aren't going back.'

There's something frightening in Sergei's eyes, something I've never seen before, not as boys growing up on Kelbra, not as men fighting on Tarshish. I'm torn between thanking him for saving my life and screaming at him for shooting a scared, innocent man.

But I've been his friend far longer than I've been his commanding officer, so I simply offer a solemn nod. He doesn't return it. He's glaring at the rest of the 224th. His finger is still on the trigger. No one moves.

Nikyta finally breaks the fragile silence. 'So... what are your orders, Captain Petrov?'

That damned question. I've never really known how to answer it, not once. Poor Mikhail was mostly right: the only reason I'm a captain is because I was better at surviving than my predecessors. Sure, I'm resourceful, I can fight and I can plan well enough, but I never felt a desire to lead, beyond a vague understanding that I could probably save more of my men than someone who thought of them as a resource to be spent.

What *are* my orders?

I block out their imploring eyes for a moment while I think, but in my heart I know there's only one answer. Only now do I see it clearly, my oath to the Emperor washed away in Grudenov's blood. In my mind I hear a voice, a silent symphony of new thoughts subtly playing beneath my own. Whispers.

Strange. I've only heard it before in my private, darkest moments, the jittery half-sleep between artillery barrages. I thought they *were* thoughts, but now, in the brittle silence of this pivotal moment, I'm actually... hearing them.

I look at the 224th: gaunt-faced and hollow-eyed, blue uniforms caked with so much blood, sweat and grime that they look like corpses. These men gave everything they had for the Emperor, and received nothing but abandonment for their reward. My heart breaks for them, because my only idea sounds like madness, even to me.

But it's the only choice we have.

'Anyone who wants to throw themselves on Volsk's mercy, I won't stop you. Anyone who doesn't can follow me.'

Before I can talk myself out of it I throw open the door to the bunker and walk out into the ashen waste of Tarshish. I half expect someone to shoot me in the back.

With every step I take towards the approaching enemy I feel the quaking in my hands stilling, the tightness in my chest loosening. With every step I take away from the Imperium I hear the whispers growing ever so slightly louder in my mind. Strengthening my steps. Strengthening my limbs.

I walk beyond the blood-soaked trench line and wait. My men appear through the dust beside me, first in ones and two, then the whole of the 224th. They look at me with terrified, searching eyes, but I say nothing. Somehow I know, without even knowing how or why, that I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

And then I see him.

The monstrous figure emerges from the choking miasma of gun smoke and ash, his Stygian silhouette impossibly huge, regal, commanding, carrying a spiked mace bigger than me. His crimson armour is etched with runes that hurt to look at, and streams of parchment rustle around him like vulture's wings. I swear I feel the ground tremble with his footsteps, but it might be my legs quaking. I force myself to face him as he approaches. I have to, or I'm dead.

His visage is a horror of stretched skin and erupting bone, corpse-white with cruel eyes that burn like embers. But beneath his mutations is a patrician mien, the macabre reflection of the Emperor's Angels of Death.

The ones the priests on Kelbra preached about.

The ones they promised the Emperor would send if I prayed hard enough, but who never appeared.

'Kneel.'

His voice is bloodstained gravel and rusted blades, death-rattle whispers and

grinding bones. I realise now I've heard it so often in my most desperate moments that it's as familiar to me as my own voice.

I drop to my knees and my loyal regiment kneels beside me. I feel words slithering painfully through my chest, bubbling up in my throat, words I've heard whispering through my mind ever since I came to this world, and can no longer choke down.

'Death to the False Emperor.'

II

Misha. She's afraid, heartbroken. The time has come. I brush back her long, black hair and kiss her cheek, praying to the Emperor this won't be the last time I see her face.

'Lord Jarak requests your presence.'

My eyes snap open.

A revolting mutant, decayed face bloated in a lopsided lamprey grimace, looms over me. I stifle my instinctual scream. A clawed hand yanks me upright faster than I can respond.

'Now.'

The towering creature turns and stomps away without turning to see if I'm following. I have to run to keep up.

I sprint down gangways and walls, through sewage dumps and throbbing reactor chambers. Here tentacles flail blindly from warped steel walls, there a mound of corpses writhe as obese worms bigger than hounds devour them from the inside. Everywhere I look something is eating someone, or someone is praying to something, all of it caked in blood and filth and misery and darkness. Everything we encounter scurries away at the sight of the enforcer.

I rub my eyes. I don't know how long it's been since Tarshish, how long my men and I have been on this cursed ship, sailing the warp. It feels like years.

I can't remember the last time I slept without being awakened by horror.

The mutant suddenly opens a door and stands still until I take the hint and walk through. The bulkhead slams closed as soon as I do.

The Dark Apostle's chamber is nothing like I expect.

Everywhere I've been on this vessel of the damned has been a hideous amalgam of metal and flesh, blood and stone, the baroque bones of whatever it once was suffocated by the horror of what it's become. This room is still a nightmare of bony protrusions and veined walls, but there's no trace of malady

or madness, only order within chaos; a monk's sanctum within hell itself.

It's as palliative as it is bizarre.

The Dark Apostle paces around me, impossibly huge, exuding malignant nobility. I only vaguely remember kneeling before him on Tarshish, my body betraying a lifetime of indoctrination, uttering words I could never have voiced, much less thought.

The heretic demagogue finally speaks; his voice is the sound of rusted gears slowly grinding bones. 'What is your greatest desire?'

That voice. When I first heard him speak to me on Tarshish I thought it was his voice I'd heard in the bleak darkness. I now understand it was merely one of them.

Whispers haunt the very air on this accursed ship. I realise, abruptly, that they're louder in his dark presence. Despite myself, I'm compelled to stand closer to him, to bask in it.

His question.

Suddenly I'm back in a burning trench with blood pooling around my ankles, clutching my dead lasgun, desperate prayers to the Emperor guttering in my rebreather. Unbidden, the answer slithers through my exhaustion and infects my parched tongue.

'Before I die,' I say, throat closing on a familiar sob, 'I want to meet my son. Just once.'

The Dark Apostle's mutated visage twists into an expression I can't characterise. His transhuman face already appears subtly wrong, like a crookedly hung painting, but the smouldering horns erupting from his corpse-white flesh destroy any semblance of humanity.

'We do not pretend to understand the sentiment, but we understand strength,' he intones. 'The strength of your desire is written upon your soul. We swear by the Pantheon that you shall meet your son before you die, Andrik Petrov.'

He knows my name. Somehow, this neither surprises nor frightens me. Perhaps the absurdity of conversing with this walking abomination has exhausted my sense of incredulousness.

'You lie,' I sigh. I won't surrender to hope. Not here.

'We do not lie,' he growls, zeal flooding from his forked tongue. 'Truth is all that matters in this universe.' His eyes burn like embers in the darkness. It physically hurts to stand beneath his gaze.

'What do you know of truth?'

His baleful eyes narrow, slowly. He's going to kill me, and I can't bring myself

to care. My eyes flick to the cruel mace sheathed across his back, longer than I am tall.

For the hundredth time since boarding this damned vessel I close my eyes and wait to die.

‘Have you ever heard the story of Yggdrasil?’

I blink, twice, and slowly shake my head.

The monster paces his lair, gore-stained boots clumping rhythmically on the ossified floor. ‘It’s a story from Old Earth. The earliest human cultures spoke of the Tree of Life, the root of all things, both good and evil. We had a similar story in the Old Faith on Colchis, before the coming of the Emperor.’

‘I... don’t understand.’

‘Your Imperium was founded upon a lie, human. Its Tree of Life was poisoned from the moment the Emperor uttered His first falsehood.’ He speaks slowly, as though educating a child. I should feel insulted, but I’m not; I’m... entranced. ‘That is why the Imperium is weak, dying: truth is the only foundation upon which an empire can be founded.’

‘What lie did the God-Emperor speak?’

Embers ghost from his fanged mouth. ‘Do you know why you believe the Emperor is a god?’

It’s such an obvious question, and yet one I’ve never been asked. My tongue is silent; I know what I want to say, but the thought of voicing it before this terrifying, ancient, majestic *thing* seems... juvenile.

He takes my silence as my answer, and seems to have been expecting it. ‘Ten thousand years ago our gene-father, the primarch Lorgar Aurelian, wrote the *Lectitio Divinitatus*, misguidedly declaring the Emperor’s divinity. We do not expect you to know the Urizen or his works,’ he adds. He must have seen my mouth hanging open. ‘The Imperium buried all knowledge of the primarchs who turned from the Emperor’s lies.’

‘The Emperor’s sons didn’t betray Him,’ I say slowly, unable to reconcile how preposterous the notion of a primarch turning traitor even sounds.

The Dark Apostle inclines his horned head. ‘There were nine who embraced the truth of the Pantheon, human. Lorgar was the first, chosen by the Dark Gods to liberate humanity from the False Emperor’s lies.’

It’s unfathomable. I remember the statue of the noble Guilliman in my village square, hearing the stories of steadfast Dorn from the local priest. I’ve celebrated Sanguinala since I was a boy. To even imagine nine dark parallels to these mighty heroes, cast in the horrific image of the Dark Apostle, makes me want to

vomit.

The wrongness, the defilement of such beauty...

The demagogue is speaking again, demanding my attention merely by existing. 'After Horus slew the Emperor, the Imperium's corrupt hegemony needed a way to continue mankind's enslavement, but how could they, small, petty men, compete with the living, breathing gods that had nurtured our species since we'd first stepped beyond our caves? They turned to the *Lectitio Divinitatus*, a book of worship forbidden by the Emperor Himself, to form the Imperial Cult, posthumously deifying the Emperor.'

I hear hissing like a thorny worm wriggling in my ear. It hurts.

'You said the Emperor... forbade His worship?'

'We do not pretend to have known the Emperor well, but twice we shared His company during the Great Crusade, once on Monarchia, and once on Terra. He knew He was no god.' He sounds almost... disappointed? 'Powerful, yes, and captivating in an inescapable way, but the Emperor was nothing but a man, jealous of the strength of true divinity. That's why He tried to hide the Pantheon from mankind.'

The room spins. Cold sweat drenches me. I can't speak. The whispers grow louder.

'Your Emperor perished ten thousand years ago, human. Think of everything you suffered on Tarshish, every poor soul you watched die in His name – it was all so that cruel men could lord over the bones of a rotten empire just a little bit longer. Nothing more.'

Cold horror floods my mind.

Ripped-open bodies.

Dying soldiers wailing for their mothers.

The insane feeding on the living and the dead.

Misha as I say goodbye, thinking I'm never coming home no matter how many times I promise her I will.

Grudenov calmly informing me that the entire 224th is going to die on Tarshish.

My hands clench into shuddering fists. It's not possible. Even now, after the unspeakable things I've seen aboard this ship, it can't all be for a lie.

'You know that we speak the truth,' the demagogue rumbles, loud enough to drown out my frantic breathing. 'Think of how many times you prayed for the Emperor to save you, and what did you receive? A butcher ordered to shoot you in the back if you didn't obediently die for your Imperial masters.'

The moment swims to my buzzing mind: the click of Grudenov's bolt pistol

cocking at my back, the wet slurp of my bayonet ripping out of his chest, the whimper that escaped his lips.

‘I... just... wanted to go home,’ I hiss through clenched teeth.

‘Lies.’

‘Lies?’

The heretic fixes me with his penetrating stare. I can feel my doubt, my insecurity, burning away. ‘You killed him because, in that moment, you finally realised how completely the Emperor had failed to save you from the horrors of the galaxy. And for the first time in your life you called out to something else for salvation.’

‘The Pantheon answered,’ I breathe.

‘We too had such a moment, ten thousand years ago, when we rejected the lies of the False Emperor, spat out His poison, and turned to the truth. For one brief, shining moment, Andrik, you were strong. Strong enough,’ he hisses, monstrous face cracking in a too-wide parody of assurance, ‘to see your son again.’

He reads the dawning horror on my face and nods slowly. Patiently. ‘The Imperium has deceived billions, human, including the greatest of the Emperor’s own sons. Do not chastise yourself unduly, we were once deluded too.’

His words are relief and agony, like having a rotten tooth ripped out. I’m confronting a lie I feel I’ve known ever since I set foot on Tarshish: I hadn’t been praying to some divine, righteous guardian; I’d been talking to myself because it made me feel safe, and I was afraid to die without seeing my son.

It all makes the most sickening sense, and a bleak universe grows somehow bleaker.

‘Why me though?’ I ask, reluctantly voicing the splinter in my mind. ‘I’m nothing to somethi— er, someone like you.’

His hideous face contorts in what might be amusement or something else entirely. ‘You truly wish to know?’

I don’t, but some desperate part of me overwhelms my exhausted body. I nod.

‘Even our gene-forged mind is unable to count how many mortals we have killed across the Long War, and never once did the gods stay our hands,’ he intones. ‘But on Tarshish they did.’

My mouth hangs open. The Dark Apostle seems vaguely amused.

‘The faint whispers you hear are but a fraction of what graces our ears,’ he says with no trace of arrogance, only a statement of fact. ‘Did you not wonder how we knew where to find you on Tarshish?’

‘I... I guess I hadn’t.’

The towering demagogue fixes me with his burning gaze. ‘Though some call the Pantheon “Chaos” we believe it to be a misnomer, as it implies randomness and disorder. The gods do nothing idly. They led us to you so that you could fulfil a purpose.’

‘What purpose?’

The Dark Apostle holds up a clawed finger. ‘When the time is right, Andrik. For now be content with our grace, and repay it by leading your men in battle against the Imperium that betrayed you.’

I fall to my knees, pressing my head against the floor.

‘I swear it, my lord.’

III

They’re retreating. A few fools lay down desperate fire from the last remaining gun emplacements, but it’s an anaemic defence at best and a morose ceremony at worst.

The Imperials of Corvan III were dead long ago, only now are they finally dying.

‘Advance! Let none survive!’ I snarl through my rebreather vox as the echo of artillery fades.

The 224th charges from the ragged trench line beside me, pouring fire into the shell-shocked defenders as their courage finally breaks. Too late the Imperials try to scurry from burning trenches and overrun foxholes, trailing shredded entrails, dragging wailing comrades, floundering in the blood-soaked chem-snow with eardrums ruptured by shells and grenades and worse. A scant handful stand their ground. We kill them first.

Hundreds of bodies jerk like marionettes as the 224th ruthlessly cuts them down, ending the fight in minutes. My lip curls as we slowly march through the frozen aftermath of the battlefield, prodding corpses, shooting anyone unfortunate enough to still cling to life.

It’s getting easier.

‘It’s done,’ I say to my men as they finally gather to me. ‘You fought well. All of you.’

‘Did we?’

I turn, although I already know the voice. How could I not, after all these years? ‘Speak plainly, Aleksandr.’

I see the hesitation on his face, guiltily hidden behind a soldier’s scowl. I

remember seeing it before, on Tarshish, when I'd stood over Grudenov's corpse.

'What did we accomplish here, captain?' he asks. 'These men. We cut off their reinforcements weeks ago, all their supplies. They probably had a commissar at their backs keeping their guns pointed at us, same as we had. And we slaughtered them.'

I'm tempted to make a speech but as I look down at the dead boys at my feet, gaunt faces frozen in anguish, I can't. I place a comforting hand on Aleksandr's shoulder. 'I understand how hard this has been, private. I didn't want to believe it either, but it's the truth.'

He shrugs me off. 'How do you know it's the truth, captain? How do you know we haven't been tricked?' His voice is raw with sudden anger. 'Because that... *thing* told you?'

For a moment the question takes me aback, because no one from the 224th has ever asked me before – not when I'd emerged from Lord Jarak's chamber, not ever.

But the eyes of my regiment are on me, and they're asking now.

Why *do* I trust Lord Jarak? Why did I kneel at his feet?

How long had it been since I'd left the Dark Apostle's sanctum? How long since I'd shared the horrific revelations with the 224th?

It already felt like it had happened a lifetime ago, to a different person.

Because I *had* been a different person. The Andrik Petrov I'd been before hadn't died on Tarshish, he'd died aboard the *Enduring Truth*, prostrated before an ancient creature wiser than I can fathom.

But that's more than I can convey, right here, with all of the 224th watching me. 'On Tarshish you trusted me, Aleksandr,' I say firmly, loud enough for my voice to carry over my men. 'I ask you to trust me now.'

'Not all of us did.'

'What do you mean?'

The soldier shakes his head. 'We didn't have a choice. Sergei would've shot anyone who didn't follow you, just like he murdered Mikhail.'

My eyes flick to my trusted lieutenant, hunched over like a ghoul, knife drawn, staring hungrily at the dead. He turns from his grisly reverie at the sound of his name. His rebreather hides his face, but the rage in his eyes is unmistakable.

I shake off a shudder that has nothing to do with the cold.

'I didn't order Sergei to kill anyone,' I say slowly. 'He would've done no such thing.'

Aleksandr chuckles, as though mocking a bad joke. 'At least Grudenov had the

guts to execute people himself.'

I slowly pull off my rebreather. The air reeks of boiling blood and scorched flesh, but I need them all to see my face. I need to end this.

But Nikyta ends it for me. He lumbers up, swollen musculature bulging through his ripped uniform, covered in blood from another front line charge.

'Regardless of what happened on Tarshish, Captain Petrov has led us and kept us alive,' he calls over the 224th, his voice now a wet, canine growl. 'I ask you, brothers, will you still follow him?'

Assents and concurrences bubble up from the soldiery, snatched by the wind.

'No.'

I turn slowly, avoiding the inevitable a moment longer.

Aleksandr looks at me with tears running down his face. 'I followed you out of that bunker on Tarshish because it was the only way I stayed alive. But this...'

he says, gesturing to the thousands of corpses cooling at our feet. 'I can't do this any more.'

A deep, deep sorrow settles in my chest, and I can't help but think about his wife, his three children. I wonder how old they are now? How old my son is now?

I sing a lullaby to my wife's stomach, in hopes that one day he'll recognise my voice.

'I see. Does anyone else feel the same?'

For a long moment no one moves. Then, by ones and twos, then by tens, hands start to rise.

I sigh. It's more than I'd hoped, but less than I'd feared. A hollow blessing. 'Very well. Kill them.'

Too late the doomed realise what they've done. They fight back against their brothers with las-bolts and bayonets, fists and feet, biting and thrashing and cursing and kicking, but they're gravely outnumbered.

Within moments it's over, but for the wailing of the dying.

I pull my old friend aside as the echo of the last las-bolt fades into the wind.

'Sergei—'

'Did you really think they were going to follow you back on Tarshish because of a speech?' he snarls, cutting me off.

'Did you threaten them?'

'The only reason the 224th gives a damn what you have to say is because you killed Grudenov. Death is the only strength that matters,' Sergei growls. 'I figured you would've learned that by now.'

‘I’m not a tyrant,’ I snap, cutting him off. ‘And shooting an innocent man is not strength.’

Sergei’s gaze hardens, his pupils contracting into points. ‘Mikhail would’ve killed you, you know.’

I resist the urge to shake him, to scream at him, to hit him. ‘You don’t know that,’ I whisper, choking down my anger. ‘We’re not butchers, Sergei. We’re better than that.’

My old friend pulls off his rebreather and cackles. There’s something strange about his mouth. It’s wider than it should be. Much wider.

‘You think yourself above this, do you?’ he sneers, spreading his arms to encompass the men we’ve just massacred.

Misha smiles at me. She loves seeing me in my uniform. She thinks I look handsome. She tells me she hopes Nicolai has my blue eyes.

‘We *have* to be, damn it, otherwise we’re not better than the Imperium we left behind!’ I shoot back. ‘We have to be better. For Kelbra. For our families.’

Sergei stares at me like he’s meeting me for the first time. I have the strangest sensation that I’m meeting him for the first time as well. ‘Why he chose you I’ll never know.’

Before I can say anything else Sergei turns and stalks off across the battlefield.

I know this isn’t over, but right now I have to deal with my men, who have just murdered their brothers. Some look physically disgusted, some look stoic, and some look ecstatic. All three bother me.

‘What we once were we are no longer,’ I announce aloud, feigning a surety I hope reaches my voice. ‘On Tarshish we forged our bonds of brotherhood in blood. So too have our new bonds been forged in blood. This is the law of the universe, the truth of the Pantheon.’

‘We are the 224th Kelbran Janissaries no longer.’ I say it loud enough for every man to hear. ‘Today we are reborn!’

Thousands of cheers, howls and war cries rise up from my Reborn.

Beneath my jacket, beneath my skin, I feel something like worms writhing. My hand starts to ache.

The whispers grow louder in my mind.

IV

I’m... changing.

I gaze in wonder at my hand, examining every thorny knob of chitinous skin. I

snap closed my huge fist: the joints crack like muffled gunshots.

I remember when I first noticed the change. I'd been scratching at the scales pushing through my skin and my fingernails had fallen off. At some point my fingers had lengthened and hardened, the flesh peeling away to give birth to something new. My new arm began to bulge with pulsing muscle to accommodate the mutation. I tried cutting away my sleeve to make room, but eventually had to abandon my blue uniform jacket entirely as I swelled.

At first I was horrified, but slowly the compulsion to hack off my arm and scrape off my skin faded.

I am strong, stronger than I've ever been before.

And my men are changing too.

I have come to realise that time is meaningless within the warp, even less so within the stifling, perpetual gloom of the *Enduring Truth*. Sometimes I wake and my soldiers are as I remember them when I fell asleep. Sometimes I wake to faces twisted by jutting tusks or dotted with eyes, men I'd trained with on Kelbra transformed into hunched, snarling beasts.

Once I dozed off talking to Anatoli Kivar, the 224th's chief medic. I woke up next to a pile of screaming meat.

There are millions of mortals crammed into the lower decks of the *Enduring Truth*, a thousand petty kingdoms ruled by a thousand petty warlords, ravenous for blood and plunder. We fight for food, for clothing, for trophies, for artefacts, for narcotics, and, for those who didn't openly worship the Plague Father, medicae supplies. In the end, though, weapons are the only commodity that really matters, because with enough weapons, and the blessing of the Dark Gods, you can have anything you want.

I try to keep the Reborn together, as much as a warband here can be. Though we sealed a new pact in the spilling of fraternal blood I can still sense their sickness, their unease, their horror. I feel it too sometimes, the animal desire to turn from a burning light rather than stare into it.

But time passes, and the pain of betrayal has become the anger we need to survive. As soon as we returned from Corvan III I led the Reborn in carving out a territory in a chemical sump near the plasma cores, forging a domain we called the Sanctum. We march to war time and again, each time growing stronger, even as many began to drift.

And some have drifted further than others.

Sergei strolls through an enormous bulkhead into the Sanctum, a cohort of his

fiercest lackeys sauntering behind him.

‘Andrik?’ he bellows, rasping voice echoing through the cavernous chamber. ‘Andrik, my old friend, where are you?’

I sigh. ‘Bring him to me,’ I command wearily. Kiril, one of my honour guard, grunts and obeys.

My old lieutenant, my old friend, has changed as much as the rest. His left arm has mutated into a wriggling, barbed tentacle, and his face has taken on the leering image of a rodent. The Holy Octed is carved into his forehead, matching countless runes gouged in his leathery skin. Blades jut from sheathes cut into his flesh. Rotted fetishes hang from rusted chains.

Some had taken time to adjust to life on the *Enduring Truth*. Not Sergei: he’d seemed unabashedly thrilled, as though he’d been waiting for an opportunity to shrug off the trappings of decency and immerse himself in the violence of the mortal decks.

And immerse himself he did.

I still remember when I understood I was truly losing him, after Corvan III. We’d just finished carving out our refuge, and I’d realised I couldn’t find Sergei. At first I thought maybe he’d fallen in the fighting and I hadn’t seen it happen. Then, when I couldn’t find his body, I thought maybe he’d been carried off by one of the myriad horrors that haunted the shadows of the *Enduring Truth*. Then I’d asked the sentries, and they said he’d left.

He’d returned some time later, drenched in clotted blood, hands and ears and tongues dangling from his belt.

Sergei had said not a word to me as he pushed passed me, not then, and not the countless times he’d gone out since then. Eventually his hunts had grown longer, bloodier. He started returning to the Sanctum changed, his body warped. Then he started returning with outsiders, warriors whose loyalty he’d won in blood-duels against their former masters.

There are countless ways to worship the Pantheon, and murder is by far the most common, but still the unbridled glee Sergei took in inflicting suffering left me horrified. After Corvan III I felt like a hypocrite. After all, I am responsible for the deaths of more men than I can count. What made Sergei’s grisly hunts so different to the men I’d shot and stabbed and choked and strangled to stay alive?

So I said nothing, because I didn’t know what to say, and he drifted further and further into the monster he was becoming. Worse, I sense more and more of the Reborn falling to the nihilistic, bloodthirsty madness that lurks on the edges of our enlightenment.

I sigh as he swaggers into my throne room, his rotted-blood stench preceding him. I knew this day was coming. I wish it hadn't come so soon.

'Ah, there you are, Andrik,' he sneers. His mouth stretches up to his ears, which he's cut off. 'I thought you might've been sleeping.'

My honour guard rise at his voice, hackles raised, hands tightening on weapons. I extend a placating hand; I can't antagonise him, nor can I show weakness.

'Sergei,' I nod warily. Slowly. Casually.

His eyes narrow in annoyance, but it never reaches his lips. 'I hear we'll soon be deploying again.'

I nod. 'I relish the opportunity to bring the truth to another world.'

Sergei flicks out his forked tongue. 'I can almost taste the blood we'll spill,' he says. His warriors snigger. One, a wiry, rawboned killer, pulls out a knife and starts absently etching fresh runes into his skin.

'You seek murder without purpose, brother,' I say for the hundredth time, trying not to sound patronising. 'Some may revel in slaughter, but that is not the way of the Reborn.'

'And who says it's not?' he hisses.

I set my brow, hoping he'll back down. 'I say.'

'And why should what you have to say matter?'

'Because I lead the Reborn.'

'And why do you lead us?' he spits angrily, neck-frills shaking.

'Because I am your captain, Lieutenant Meglev,' I reply, low, dangerous.

Back down, you fool. Don't make me hurt you.

Sergei laughs, an ugly, choking gurgle. 'Your captaincy was granted to you by the slaves of the False Emperor,' he cries, lifting his voice for all assembled to here. 'It's worth less than dung here.'

Nikyta, my fiercest and most fervent guardian, shoves himself in front of me. He's changed more than the rest of us: not even a shadow of the scared boy he once was remains beneath his hunched, mutated bulk.

'You dare insult the captain?' he roars, tusks bared, swollen mass throbbing with rage. 'I'll tear your heart out for that, insolent wretch!'

Sergei smirks. 'You've always enjoyed licking his boots, haven't you? I always thought of you as a dog, even before you looked like one.'

'Captain Petrov saved our lives on Tarshish!' he roars.

'I would've done the same!'

'But you didn't!' Nikyta barks, slamming his shaggy paw on the floor. 'You would've stood there like the coward you are while Grudenov shot me, and then

you would've died at your post.'

Sergei flinches. Nikyta voiced what I'd secretly suspected was lurking in my old friend's heart since Tarshish.

'And what about you, you gutless cur?' Sergei sneers. 'I'm the one who shot Mikhail while you stood there pissing yourself!'

Nikyta gives a chuffing laugh. 'You only acted when you thought it was safe, just like now.'

'Do you think yourself safe?' Sergei hisses, drawing a knife.

In an instant every gun in the room is trained, every blade brandished for blood.

'Enough, Nikyta!' I shout before it comes to violence. 'Enough. If Sergei wants to settle this the old way, he'll have his wish.'

His tentacle slides a second rusted dagger out of his skin-belt. 'I wouldn't have it any other way, Andrik.'

A huge crowd of my warriors gather, baying for carnage; blood-duels are as common as bullets on the mortal decks, but I've done my best to limit them within the Reborn. I wonder who they're cheering for. Out of the corner of my eye I see onlookers congregating near the bulkhead at the mouth of the sump. Sergei's followers or otherwise, I can't say.

Maybe they're just waiting to see who dies.

I pull out my own weapon, a serrated Adeptus Astartes blade taken as a trophy from Corvan III. He circles me like a serpent, barbed tentacle twisting and curling, looking for an opening.

'I have no wish to kill you,' I say, and part of me, the part that remembers us enlisting in the Janissaries together, fighting shoulder to shoulder on Tarshish, means it.

But the rest of me, the part that remembers Lord Jarak's promise, doesn't.

Sergei's lopsided face cracks in a drooling smirk. He kicks ash into my face and lunges. The Reborn scream.

I blindly raise my arm.

Snap.

I stagger back and smear the burning chem-dust out of my eyes. As my eyes clear I see Sergei's broken knife lodged in my armoured forearm. I barely felt a thing.

'You'll die for that, Sergei,' I promise.

I bellow and charge him before he can find another blade. Sergei is strong but the gods have made me stronger. I barrel him to the ground, but he slips away before I can grab him.

I feel a knife stab into my shoulder, deep enough to notch bone. He's fast. Faster than me.

I slash wildly with my blade as he scampers away. His tentacle lashes at me like a whip. Barbs slice through my scaly flesh. I grunt through the pain. I have to get close.

'I've waited a long time for this, my old friend,' he sneers.

I lunge forward to cut his throat. It's the mistake he was waiting for.

My hand spasms as Sergei stabs his knife deep through my bicep. He moved so fast I didn't even see him dodge me. My blade clatters to the ground.

His tentacle wraps around my neck.

With a twitch of muscle it tightens. I dig my bloody fingers into the rubbery muscle but it's tough as iron. Tighter. I gasp out my last breath. My chest heaves. I can't breathe in. The sinews in my neck crack. My eyes darken.

Misha makes me swear to the Emperor I'll come back. I whisper it in her ear over and over again as we hold each other one last time.

I power my chitinous fist into his shoulder like a battering ram.

Bones crack. Sergei screams. His grip loosens enough for me to suck in just one more breath. I punch again, harder. He tries to stab me, but can't. His tentacle spasms. I swing again. He drops his own knife and tries to block my fist.

Fool.

Every bone in his arm shatters with a wet crunch.

Sergei's eyes go wide with agony. His human arm is a bleeding, twisted wreck of ruptured flesh and jutting bone. I tear myself free of his barbed tentacle as shock overcomes him, then with a roar rip the mutated limb from its socket. His knees buckle. He tries to cradle his ruined arm with an appendage that isn't there.

The sump descends into silence, but for the wet flopping of his severed tentacle refusing to die.

'It didn't have to be this way, Sergei.'

Sergei looks up at me, rancid blood leaking from his mouth. I can see the echo of my lieutenant in his watering eyes, but nothing more.

'It can't be,' he gurgles out. 'They promised... I was... I was promised the Reborn...'

'The Reborn are *mine*,' I hiss as I slowly grasp his head in my mighty claw. 'Mine!'

My fist unhurriedly squeezes closed. Sergei's defiant scream becomes a piercing squeal, then a gurgling crunch.

‘We are the righteous!’ I roar to my men as I lift Sergei’s corpse up for all his followers to see. ‘We are the vindicated! We are the Reborn!’

The Reborn, and those who will soon call themselves the Reborn, erupt with cheers.

‘Hail Andrik!’ Nikyta roars. ‘Andrik Gorehand!’

Thousands upon thousands pour into the Sanctum, screaming *Gorehand, Gorehand, Gorehand*. The whispers thunder in my ears. I thrust my hand upwards and howl in victory.

Crackling power burns through my veins like envenomed needles. My body violently swells, raw muscles ripping through flesh before scabbing over in a chitinous shell. Bloody horns burst through my carapace, through my knuckles, through my forehead. My hand runs like wax and bursts apart in strings of writhing gore, becoming a barbed pincer. It hurts more than anything I can imagine, and it’s wonderful.

My war cry becomes a deep, wet, tumorous roar.

V

Another war, another world. I don’t know what it’s called, nor do I care so long as I help to kill it.

I stare across the smouldering morass of churned earth and shredded corpses, razor wire and tank traps and blood-soaked craters, at the Imperial fortifications protecting their precious artillery. Row upon row of trenches stretch before me. Heavy weapons platforms stud the battle line. Armoured pillboxes squat at every switchback. Two companies of Guardsmen lurk within, armed with lasguns, grenade launchers and flamers.

And looming at its apex is a brutal ferrocrete battlement, bristling with heavy bolter turrets and sensora to direct the Basilisks. For years that damned edifice has taunted me.

Today it dies.

‘For the Pantheon!’ I roar, thrusting my sword high. ‘Death to the Imperium!’

Twenty thousand throats howl for blood. Twenty thousand zealots scream their loyalty to the Dark Gods. Twenty thousand warriors roar bloody oaths of vengeance. I savour it all for just a moment, for I feel in my bones that it is the death knell of yet another world.

The Reborn, ranks swollen by blood-duels beyond even my counting, charge the enemy trenches in an unstoppable tide of remade flesh.

Gunfire slashes into us the moment we scale our trench, as it has countless times before. Hundreds are blown apart in seconds. Artillery rains down moments later, throwing shredded bodies into the air on wings of dirt. The Reborn scream in agony, in rage, in horror, in sorrow, as war punishes us. The weak flounder, scurrying for cover as they wail in terror. The strong surge forward into the jaws of death.

But Lord Jarak's command was clear: this line must break today, and his immortals are engaged in the void against the Imperium's lapdogs.

I will not fail him.

The blood-soaked ground shakes as the riot of shrieking flesh thunders past me. The thing that was Nikyta, howling from a dozen fanged mouths, crashes headlong through the razor wire ahead of us. I remember the day he became a spawn of Chaos as clearly as though it were yesterday, the way he screamed as his body revolted against reason, and yet I'm still in awe of the Pantheon's awesome transformative power.

The charging Reborn cheer as the unleashed spawn hits the trench line like a meteor, smashing through a ferrocrete pillbox, spewing acid and warp fire. For a precious moment the fire slackens as every bolter, lasgun and flamer turns towards the towering storm of claws and tentacles and fangs and beaks and spikes and wings tearing through their line. I sprint for the narrow breach torn in the defences. A krak missile ploughs into Nikyta ahead of me. Stinking blood and shredded bodies rain down on me.

The spawn buys us a few seconds before the deluge of gunfire finally blows it apart, but it's just barely enough. I think I can hear Nikyta among the voices screaming in ecstasy as his mutated flesh dissolves into trashing sludge.

I vault into the trench for the first time, one of only dozens to survive. My sword, a jagged shard of Chimera armour, rips into the stunned Guardsmen. They collapse around me, clutching ruptured bellies and spurting limbs, shrieking. I sprint down the trenches knee-deep in Nikyta's writhing remains, killing enemy after enemy. Gunfire and shrapnel rattles off my chitinous blessings. Chunks of armour chip away but the Dark Gods' gifts protect me.

More Reborn drag themselves into the trenches, bloodied, bellowing with rage. I howl to them as I chop men in half, and they roar back.

The Imperials are reacting, trying to plug the gap with heavy bolters like they have every time before. I tear krak grenades off my bandolier and hurl them as fast as I can in every direction. Detonations throw columns of mud and bodies into the air. More of my warriors pour in, hacking apart the fleeing defenders.

The heavy stubber bolted to my arm roars until it clanks dry.

I glance back over the trench. The horde is decimated. The killing field is choked with thousands of dead Reborn. Many are still braving the onslaught but the Imperial heavy bolters have turned the sole breach into a deathtrap. Maybe one in twenty has made it to the trench line.

There will be no reinforcements.

‘To me! Rally to me!’ I shout to anyone who can hear me. ‘We go as one and take that command centre! Bleed them! For Chaos!’

Trench by trench, yard by yard, we fight the Imperials. Those who can still hold firearms shoot until their weapons go dry. The rest stand in front, tearing through the enemy soldiers with claws and fangs. I lead the charge, my stubber empty, bathing in gore. We go fast, like a knife stabbing into flesh. We’re outnumbered dozens to one. We can’t let the enemy react.

I steal glances back down the distant trench line below. There’s a second breach now. Maybe a hundred Reborn have made it through.

‘Keep going! To the bunker!’ I scream over the gunfire, pointing at the ferrocrete monstrosity presiding over our slaughter. ‘Murder the non-believers!’

We push higher towards our objective. We fight like daemons born of pure rage, massacring the Imperials, smashing their bunkers, sowing chaos and fear. When they pin us down one of us offers our body to soak up gunfire while the rest advance. I hear the Dark Gods whispering to me as I tear men apart with the gifts they gave me.

And finally, somehow, we’ve fought our way to the command bunker.

I’m bleeding from a dozen wounds. My blessed claw is cracked and oozing. Less than a dozen of us remain, clutching spurting limbs and ruptured bellies.

‘We... made it...’ Sava grunts in pain.

‘By the grace of the gods,’ I nod. ‘Now we just have to get in.’

BANG!

Ears ringing I wrench aside the melted door. Las-bolts spew through the smouldering breach. I unhinge my jaw and vomit a stream of acid onto the stunned defenders. I relish their screams for a brief moment before we charge through and hack the shrieking survivors to pieces.

Those of us still capable of holding weapons gather up their lasguns and explosives. ‘Gorehand?’ Sukov asks, ‘How many inside, you think?’

I sling a bandolier of krak grenades over my shoulder. ‘Not enough,’ I grin.

We charge into the heart of the command centre.

I arm the krak grenades all at once. ‘Death to the Corpse-Emperor!’ I bellow as

I hurl the bandolier inside.

The fight is fierce, but quick. Tech-priests and vox-operators scramble to grab their weapons and crouch behind whatever cover they can, but cogitators and holo-terminals provide little. We sweep through the room like a wildfire, shooting, stabbing, ripping. The Imperials die at their posts, pleading for their dead god to save them.

And suddenly, finally, there's silence, but for the muffled chatter of gunfire beyond the bunker.

'We did it!' Sava exclaims. 'The bunker is—'

His horned face explodes into a gory crater, splattering me with brains and bone.

I shake the gore from my eyes. An Imperial officer leaps from cover behind a burning cogitator. His bolt pistol barks out round after round into my three surviving warriors, bursting their bodies from within. His power sword slays the wounded before they can rise.

My tongue roves over my dripping fangs. A captain, chest bedecked with medals. Truly the Dark Gods have blessed me.

'Slave of the Emperor!' I bellow, throwing my arms wide. 'Come and face your death!'

He tosses his empty bolt pistol aside and stalks towards me.

'Prepare to die, heretic,' he says. I see the cold anger etched in his face.

I'm going to enjoy this.

I scrape my sword across my chitinous fist, drawing sparks. He charges me. I swing to chop him in half, but my blade clangs against the ceiling of the bunker. He sneaks in close. Pain blossoms down my side as he slashes me.

I grin, relishing it. 'You're fast, slave.'

He says nothing, charging me again. This time I'm ready. I block with my shoulder. He cuts deep, reaching the meat beneath my bony armour, but the blade snarls. I swing at him again. I hit him in the face with the flat of my sword.

He staggers back, but stays standing. He spits blood and a broken tooth.

Then the pain hits.

Somehow he cut me again. I look down. I can see my ribs poking from blackened, scaly flesh.

I roar as I put every iota of my ascendant strength into an overhead blow. The captain raises his sword.

My blade clatters to the floor, chopped cleanly through.

The captain advances on me, power sword sparking. He thinks he's won.

But the gods have made me a weapon. My blessed right hand can crush a man, and flesh is harder than iron. I need no weapons but those that the gods have blessed me with.

I vomit a spray of acid and charge. He ducks before a blow that would have splattered him. Ferrocrete rains down on us. He slashes me before I can wrench my fist free. Viscous blood leaks down my side.

I charge again. Another wound. I throw another punch. Another cut. And another. And another.

I stagger back, sucking in burning air. Blood and ichor leaks from my mouth with each agonising breath. He's faster than me, and though it pains me to admit it, I'm getting slower with every cut. I can feel darkness prickling at the edges of my vision.

But this whole fight I've been cornering him, trapping him. He can't escape. I lower my head and charge.

I expect him to flee. Instead he charges me. I reach for him, but miss.

Agony burns through me as his power sword rams through my body and bursts out my back.

And I laugh in his righteous face.

I laugh because I remember the last time I thought I was going to die, fighting my old lieutenant for the soul of the Reborn long, long ago. This hurts, but it's not enough to kill me. Not even close.

The Dark Gods have made me strong.

My pincer snaps closed, leaving his sword and arm dangling from my stomach.

The enemy captain stares at me, his disbelief matching my exultancy.

I ram my pincer completely through him, pinning him to the wall like the insect he is.

He coughs hot blood into my face. I breathe deep, tongue roving to savour it. It's... *wonderful*.

'You know,' I growl, drawing him close. 'I was once a Guardsman. Like you.'

'I'm nothing like you,' he gurgles out in a blood-slick growl. 'I'd never spit... on my oath... to the Emperor.'

I almost chuckle, to think that I once was so assured of my delusions, so zealous despite my ignorance. I'd pity him if I thought he hadn't had countless opportunities to turn to the light, only to willingly remain in darkness.

'Your blindness has made you weak, slave,' I proclaim, twisting my claw in his gut. 'Had I remained in my ignorance, worshipping a corpse, I would've died long ago.'

The light is leaving his eyes, his flesh greying with blood loss. He forces his dying face into a defiant scowl. 'Death... doesn't frighten me... heretic.'

Pathetic.

'And why is that?' I sneer back.

Blood dribbles from his slack mouth. 'I'm not afraid... My father was a Guardsman... He died... fighting scum... like you...'

At that moment I suddenly realise he's wearing a blue jacket. I know that jacket...

I know the name on the lapel.

I chose it.

Nicolai Petrov.

I'm...

No, no, no, no, no.

By the Pantheon...

...I'm on Kelbra.

I suddenly see the captain's face clearly, as if waking from a nightmare. Had I been blind? Why hadn't my eyes been working? Why?

It's me. Or half of me. Of what I was.

The captain looks up at me. Blue eyes, grown old too quick. Black hair, like... like Misha's. The face of a boy grown into a man, twisted in anguish. He can't be older than I was when I'd gone to Tarshish.

He knows his life is over, and all that's left is to die.

'S-son?' I try to say.

I search his face, desperate to see some spark, some sign that my son recognises me. But there is nothing but disgust in his eyes, pure, righteous hatred burning through the agony.

'Die... monster...'

I try to speak again. Nothing but stringy bile leaks from my ruined jaws.

The light fades from his eyes.

'No!'

I wrench my claws out of my son's belly. His eyes close as he collapses.

I can only howl as I try to gently cradle him, but my arms, my hideous, warped arms, can barely hold him. Acid tears burn down my face.

'I'm sorry!' I scream. 'They promised me! They promised!'

The door to the command centre bangs open. More Kelbrans flood in, guns drawn. They fire. Bullets, beams, bolts rip through me, blowing me apart. It hurts worse than anything I've ever felt, and I wish it were a thousand times

worse. My arms go weak. My boy slips from my grotesque hands. I try to crawl to him, but I can't.

Misha takes my hand, guiding it to where Nicolai's kicks are the strongest.

Darkness devours my eyes. I see suffering and horror beyond imagining. For the first time since Tarshish I hear the voices clearly.

I hear laughter.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicholas Wolf is an author, artist, and occasional musician. He's written science fiction for several publications and 'Reborn' is his first Black Library story. He lives and works in Arizona, with his family.

An extract from *Honourbound*.



Commissar Severina Raine slides a fresh magazine into her bolt pistol with a hard click. She has replaced the eight-round magazine four times. Thirty-two shots fired.

Six of them to execute her own troops.

Raine has fought many wars on many fronts across the Bale Stars, and almost all of them have been against the Sighted, or their splinter cults. She has seen the way they turn worlds with whispers and false promises. The way they set workers against their masters, and guards against those that they are meant to protect. It's what makes them dangerous. When you battle the Sighted, you battle the people of the Bale Stars too. Scribes and soldiers. Priests and peacekeepers. The poor, the downtrodden, the ambitious and the reckless. For some of those that serve with her, that knowledge is too much. For some it is just fear that means they find the trigger impossible to pull. No matter the reason, they will find themselves looking down the barrel of her pistol, Penance, in turn. Just like Penance, Raine is made for the act of judgement. For the instant before the strike of the hammer and the burst of flame. She understands what it means to pull the trigger, and what it makes her. She is not driven by anger, or malice. That would undermine her purpose, which is the same no matter the crime.

To eliminate weakness.

Raine crouches down and takes Jona Veer's ident-tags from around his neck. They will not be sent back to Antar as with the honoured dead. They will be disposed of at the end of the fight on Laxus Secundus. His name will go with them, to be forgotten in time by everyone but her, because Raine never forgets the dead, honoured or not.

'Commissar.'

The voice belongs to Captain Yuri Hale. It's rough-edged, like he is. The captain of Grey Company is tall, like most Antari. Three deep, severe scars run down the left side of his face from hairline to chin. The Antari call him lucky

because he managed to keep his eye. They say he must have been graced with that luck by a white witch, or by fate itself. Raine doesn't believe in luck. She believes that Yuri Hale survives the same way the rest of them do.

By fighting for every breath.

'More power spikes from the inner forge,' he says.

Raine puts Veer's tags in her pocket, where they clatter against the others, then she gets to her feet and looks to the dust-caked screen on the auspex kit Hale is holding. When the regiment first entered the forges, more than six hours ago, it was registering soft spikes. Now the peaks are jagged, with the regularity of a great, slow heartbeat.

'Whatever the Sighted are doing in there, it's burning hot,' Hale says, and he frowns. 'Kayd's been picking up enemy vox too.'

'On an open channel?'

'Aye, it's as if they don't care if we hear it.'

'Anything of use?' Raine asks.

Hale's frown deepens, and it pulls at the scars on his face. 'The words were Laxian. Kayd reckons they said something like "it draws near".'

Despite the arid heat of the forge, Raine feels a distinct chill at those words. The tactical briefing two days prior had been clear. The primary forge on Laxus Secundus is an invaluable asset, both tactically and logistically, and not just because of the super-heavy tanks built there, but because of what waits in the inner forges. High Command did not disclose the purpose of the machines that Raine and the Antari would find there, only that they must not fall into Sighted hands. That for the enemy to use them successfully would be catastrophic, not just for the battle inside the forges, but for the war effort across Laxus Secundus and the crusade front.

'We are running out of time,' Raine says.

Hale nods. 'And support too. Blue Company are pinned down on approach to the Beta Gate, and Gold have yet to reach the inner forges. I'm calling the push now, before the Sighted can send whatever *draws near* against us, or we lose everything we've bled for.'

'Understood, captain,' Raine says. 'We will not fail.'

Hale glances to where Jona Veer lies dead. Raine knows him well enough to see what he is feeling by the set of his shoulders, and the way his eyes narrow. Hale is disappointed. Ashamed, on the boy's behalf. Raine also knows that, despite all of Veer's failings, it is hard for Hale to accept judgement against one of his own.

'Is there anything else?' Raine says.

Hale looks back to her. 'No, commissar,' he says. 'Not a thing.'

Then Hale gets to rounding up the Antari, voicing orders to the rest of his company pushing up through the machine halls. They have orders to fulfil, traitors to silence, and those machines to retake.

And her judgements are something that Yuri Hale knows better than to question.

Lydia Zane can feel the touch of death on every inch of her body. It makes her ache, skin to bones. The Sighted are doing something in the forges that casts a long shadow. Something that echoes in the immaterium like a scream. It has been the same for Zane since the moment she set foot on Laxus Secundus, death's long shadow clinging to her.

Like that damned hateful bird.

It is sitting there now, talons crooked around the rim of a girder. It is so very still, that bird. She has not yet seen it blink. It never cries, or ruffles its feathers. It just sits still and stares.

On the pillar below the bird's perch is a symbol, daubed in blood. The smell carries to Zane even over the heavy stink of smoke. The symbol is a spiral surrounding a slit-pupilled eye. The mark of the Sighted. The rings of the spiral are just a hair off perfectly spaced, and it makes the breath in Zane's lungs thinner, looking at it. The Sighted who painted the symbol lies broken at the foot of the pillar. So very broken. He is clad in fatigues and feathers, his skin inked with iridescent, metallic tattoos. The Sighted was one of the flock hunting Jona Veer through the machine halls. Zane caught sight of him slipping into the shadows between the half-built tanks during the gunfight. He thought himself hidden, but he was wrong. There is no hiding from Zane, because she does not need footprints or line of sight or even sound in order to hunt. She followed him into the darkness by the stink of his traitor-thoughts and came upon him painting the spiral and the slitted eye.

And then she broke him.

Zane winds her fingers tighter around her darkwood staff. The psionic crystal atop it hums. One at a time, bolts pop out of the pillar and join the objects floating in the air around Zane. Tools. Rivets and screws. Empty shell casings. Splinters of bone. They drift around her absently. The floor tremors under her feet as the panels start to bend upwards. Zane tastes blood, running thick over her lips. Blood on the pillar. Blood that makes up the painted eye at the centre of the spiral, unblinking.

Just like the bird.

‘Zane.’

She turns away from the bird and its black eyes and the way it never blinks them. Commissar Raine is standing there with her pistol drawn, but not raised. A threat in waiting. Zane finds she cannot speak. It is as if her lips have been sealed by all of that blood. The objects circle her like a storm, with lightning arcing between them. Raine does not flinch.

‘Control,’ Raine says, the word carrying clear.

The pistol does not move. The barrel is round and dark, like the eye painted in blood. Like the eyes of the bird. Like Raine’s eyes, unblinking.

‘Control,’ Zane slurs.

More blood finds its way into her mouth.

‘Tell me about the tree,’ Raine says.

‘About the tree,’ Zane says, her voice a rasp. ‘The singing tree.’

‘And why is it called the singing tree?’ Raine asks.

Zane blinks. Against the back of her eyelids she sees it. The singing tree standing on the cliff’s edge, the roots curling over it like the bird’s talons around the girder. The bone-white branches reaching up to meet Antar’s thunderhead sky.

‘Because that is where we would go to sing to Him on Earth,’ she says. ‘Because it was as close as you could get to the heavens.’

‘And He spoke to you there,’ Raine says.

‘In the rustle of the leaves,’ Zane says.

‘What did He say?’ Raine asks.

Zane feels the ache in her bones lessen. The objects orbiting her begin their fall to earth.

‘That I will be tested,’ she says. ‘And that I must never break.’

Metal objects clatter off the metal floor, and it sounds like a storm.

‘Lydia Zane,’ Zane says, finishing the ritual words. ‘Primaris psyker. Graded Epsilon. Eleventh Antari Rifles.’

The cables connecting to her scalp click as they cool. Zane wipes her hand through the blood on her face, painting a red streak up the back of it.

‘Apologies, commissar,’ she says, bowing low. ‘It is this place. The darkness in it.’

‘The Sighted?’ Raine asks.

‘I know the shape of their darkness,’ Zane says. ‘This is different. Things are changing.’

‘If you see anything, tell me,’ Raine says.

Zane knows that she means *foresee*, not just see, but it still feels like a cruel joke given the bird. The bird that she has been seeing for months now, since she walked the crystal tunnels on Gholl. The bird that she will speak of to no one, especially not to Raine, because to do so would be to invite death.

Because Zane knows that, like every instant of her life so far, the bird is just another test, and that she will not break.

Sergeant Daven Wyck waits until the commissar has gone after the witch before he fetches Jona Veer’s rifle. He knows better than to do something like that in front of her. That it’s better not to draw her eyes at all if he can help it. Around him, the rest of his Wyldfolk are securing the area at the end of the assembly line, watching for Sighted movement in the smoke. They tend their rifles and replace spent powercells and share out grenades and charges. Clean their bloodied combat blades on their fatigues. Wyck slings Veer’s rifle over his shoulder by the strap, then takes his knife and his grenades too. Veer hadn’t used even one of them. So stupid, not to shoot, or act at all.

Even more so to get found out.

‘Really, Dav?’ Awd says.

Wyck gives his second a look. The sort that says *shut up*.

‘He isn’t going to use them, is he?’ he says.

Awd looks as though he’s smiling, but it’s just the way the burn scars tug at the skin of his face. His eyes aren’t smiling at all.

‘You’d truly leave him with nothing for where he’s going?’ Awd asks.

Wyck looks down at Veer’s body and remembers the way he spoke, with that lilt of the Vales. It’s the same place that Wyck grew up before he was tithed to the Rifles, all deep black lakes and tangled forests. It’s a big place, with the people spread thin. Wyck didn’t know Veer then. He didn’t know him now either, not really, but he was kin all the same. Even if he was a coward, and a stupid one at that. Wyck stoops and puts back the knife. Awd’s right. He can’t leave Veer with nothing for when judgement comes.

‘There,’ he says. ‘Now it’s up to him to answer for his deeds.’

Awd nods. ‘As we all will, in death.’

Wyck shakes his head. ‘Death will have to catch me first,’ he says.

That makes Awd laugh so hard he starts to cough, a wet hacking sound from deep in his chest. It’s the flamer he carries that makes his lungs rattle that way. All the ashes from the fuel and the things he burns.

‘Death will have to be lucky,’ Awd says. ‘Sharp soul like you.’

Wyck smiles, but it doesn’t go deeper than his teeth. He curls his hands into fists. They ache from fighting. From every trigger pull, every swipe of the knife. From throwing punches and breaking bones. That ache doesn’t stop him wanting to fight, though. To cut and shoot and kill. If anything, it makes him want it more.

‘Wyck.’

He turns to see Hale standing there. The captain definitely notices the extra lasrifle and the grenades, but he says nothing about either. Wyck has known Hale a long time. Longer than he’s had to call him captain.

‘We are pushing the Gate,’ Hale says. ‘I need your Wyldfolk up front.’

The order is no surprise. Wyck runs his twelve-strong infantry squad fast and sharp, so Hale always puts them in the teeth of it.

‘Aye, sir,’ Wyck says. ‘I wouldn’t be anywhere else.’

Hale claps him on the shoulder and for the sparest instant Wyck’s instinct is to react as if he’s been hit. He has to consciously stop himself from throwing a punch at his captain and force himself into stillness. It’s the adrenaline, mostly.

‘Fire and thunder,’ Hale says.

Wyck thinks about the way his blood burns and his heartbeat rolls like a drum and the old words seem almost funny. He has to stop himself laughing, just like he had to stop himself throwing that punch.

‘Fire and thunder,’ he says, instead.

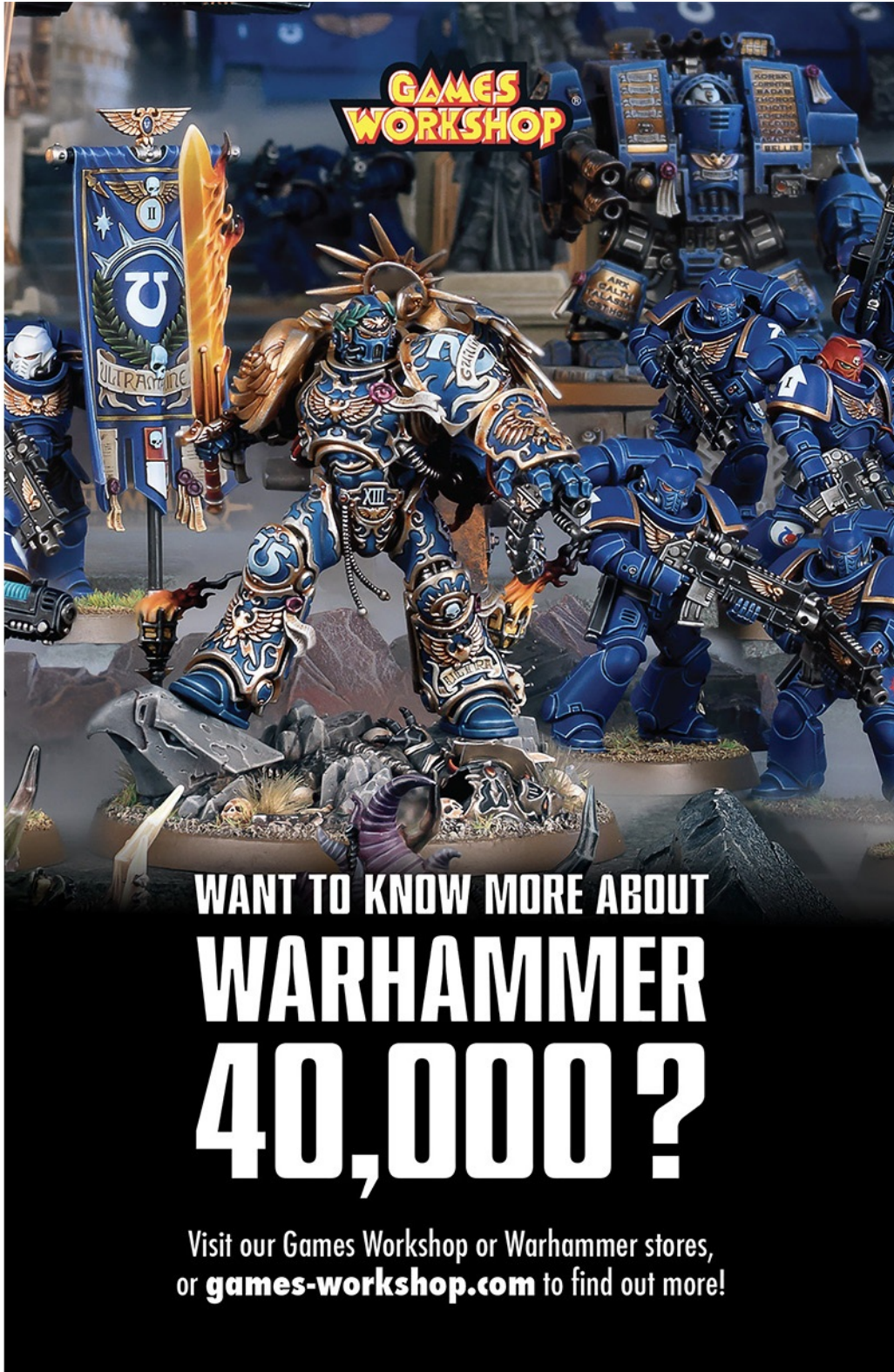
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