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40,000

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A CHAOS SPACE MARINES SHORT STORY

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‘Vorenus.’

The voice calling his name barely penetrated the shroud of concentration with which he had covered himself. For many years, the warrior had practised meditation. It granted him the ability to remove himself from the bickering presence of his companions for long periods at a time.

It was an art he had not really perfected, something that continued to irritate him. Failing to achieve perfection was anathema to his basic principles. He had been, after all, a legionary in the ranks of the Emperor's Children. But that had been a long time ago. For decades, he had fought his battles in desecrated armour that marked him as one of the Red Corsairs.

Vorenus knew he would never ‘belong’ to Huron Blackheart, the Tyrant of Badab. He preferred to think that he had *chosen* to offer his services to the Tyrant and, seeing an opportunity to prove his superiority, had taken it. He had been unprepared for the uncouth nature of the brigands and scum who made up the majority of Blackheart's forces. For the most part, they repelled him – physically and psychologically. They were careless in the prosecution of their battles and were it not for Blackheart's extraordinary gift for strategy, Vorenus fully believed that the Red Corsairs should have died in the Palace of Thorns.

Thus he kept himself apart from the others, adopting an air of affected aloofness that ensured he was distrusted and disliked. It was of no concern to a son of Fulgrim. He neither wanted nor needed companionship or brotherhood amongst this disorderly rabble. So he turned to meditation, balancing his humours and turning the ever-smouldering rage into something he could use effectively.

‘Vorenus!’ He knew the voice well as it carried through the open archway of his cell. It belonged to Ilkon, one of the few Red Corsairs for whom he had formed any sort of respect. Forced into fighting alongside the other warrior on the battlefield, Vorenus had grudgingly acknowledged a fellow master of

warfare. What the two shared was far from friendship. Vorenius was intelligent and gifted with inordinate levels of cunning. He saw in Ilkon a potential ally.

Demonstrating exaggerated irritation, he unfolded from his seated position on the floor to face the archway. Flakes of ferrocrete occasionally trickled from its once-splendid relief, little puffs of the deterioration that was rife in this place. Although he stood some distance from the debris, Vorenius nonetheless brushed invisible specks of dust from his surplice and glowered at Ilkon.

The two warriors were stark contrasts. Like most of his Red Corsairs brethren, Ilkon was stocky, powerful across the shoulders and in possession of a perpetual sneer that marked his scarred and burned face. He ran a rough, calloused hand over his shorn pate as he spoke. Vorenius was a fine specimen: taller than many with a rangy leanness to his genehanced muscles. Although his skin remained alabaster-pale, he bore similar criss-crossed and puckered scar lines to Ilkon, marking injuries received in an unnaturally long and less-than-illustrious career. But where Ilkon was thuggish, Vorenius's scars barely detracted from what had once been considered attractive features – sharply defined and angular.

Once, he had conceded vanity to a full head of ghost-fine pale hair, but that had long since been shaved close to his head for reasons of battlefield practicality. A quarter of his skull had been replaced with steel and his right eye had been removed. Now he glowered out at the world through an augmetic, chosen for its delicate and ice-cold shade of disdainful blue. The optics whirred quietly as he focused on Ilkon.

‘What do you want?’ Vorenius’s voice was a pleasantly modulated, aurally pleasing tone, nothing like the animalistic growls that marked those he fought alongside.

‘The Tyrant is back,’ said Ilkon. ‘And the Champion is dead.’

His wargear was ancient, even more so than he was. Even when he had taken ownership of it in a long forgotten age, back when he had still fought with the Emperor’s Children, it had been ancient. Suits of beautifully maintained power armour were handed down through generations of warriors. Vorenius knew every previous owner of the armour; each had inscribed their name on the breastplate. He had undertaken the ritual of ownership himself, over a century ago, inscribing the name of his one-time captain. In time, his suit would have passed to another and the name of Vorenius would have been carved into the ceramite plate for all to see. In such a way, he would always have been remembered.

The true heart of the armour was still visible through the reds with which

Vorenius had repainted on its surface. Once a hue of purple-pink, it had been buried beneath the reds and blacks that the Tyrant demanded as visible proof of his allegiance. But the austere re-painting was certainly not without its own aesthetic; Vorenius had chosen a variety of different shades, from the blazing scarlet of the helm down to the deep arterial crimson of the boots. He ran a hand across its immaculately maintained surface, his fingers tracing the lines of the flowing script that listed the names of its previous bearers. He was, and would always be, a son of Fulgrim.

One of a handful of warriors who had escaped extermination during the Battle of Gregoras Prime ten years earlier, he had barely made it into the relative sanctuary of Hell's Iris. The escape shuttle that he had commandeered was as lacerated and damaged as the Emperor's Children warrior it contained. The hull was breached in several locations and it was only due to the combined efforts of the daemons of luck and chance that Vorenius had survived at all.

Recognising the work of the Emperor's Children, Huron Blackheart offered the assistance of his Apothecaries in return for Vorenius's service. Vorenius readily accepted. He was not yet ready to embrace death. When his delirium had passed and he was ready to find passage from the Maelstrom it had been too late. The cost of his continued existence and of the Tyrant's hospitality was his sworn service.

Ultimately, the deal suited them both. Huron Blackheart acquired a valuable ally and Vorenius was able to fulfil his driving lust for battle. Grudgingly, he acknowledged that the price paid had been worthwhile.

Ilkon accompanied him to the arming chamber, and as Vorenius allowed the servitors to bolt him into the ancient wargear, he listened with intent alertness to the deliciously pleasing story of Taemar's fall during the battle for the Gildar Rift. Over the sounds of the machinery that locked him tightly into the blazing ceramite, Vorenius heard the fast-spreading rumours of how the once-revered champion of Huron Blackheart was now looked upon with mockery and ridicule amongst the survivors of the battle. Taemar and Vorenius had shared the curse of being outsiders amongst the Red Corsairs. It was for that reason alone that Vorenius was filled with arrogant reassurance that there was every chance the Tyrant would select a warrior of the Emperor's Children as his new Champion.

The servitors stepped back as the last rivet tightened and Vorenius shrugged his shoulders, welcoming the familiar weight of the armour surrounding his body. He reached out and took up his finely-honed blade. He was competent with most blades but always claimed that axes were for barbarians and chain-powered

weapons were brutish and unsubtle. He would have fought with an axe had it been the only weapon available to him, but he made his claim to annoy those amongst the Red Corsairs who favoured them. Such idle superiority gave him the distance he desired.

Vorenius's weapon of choice was a traditional straight-edged spatha, an exquisitely worked weapon with ornate engravings on the hilt and blade. His weapon had earned him no small amount of derision when he had first sided with the Red Corsairs, but his unquestionable skill soon stopped the naysayers in their tracks. He decapitated two Red Corsairs and came close to disembowelling a third before his point had been made.

In battle he fought alone, seeking out what he referred to as the warrior's perfect moment: a duel to the death with an enemy he considered worthy. He had sought that battle for centuries and had yet to find satisfaction.

Vorenius had once commanded a squad, but his sergeant's rank meant nothing here. Based on his observations, the Red Corsairs were too much of a ravaging horde to hold to a structure. They would obey a leader during an incursion or a boarding action, but unless the Tyrant himself or one of his chosen were at their head, they were little more than a rabble.

Taemar had once tried to order Vorenius and in return, had been treated with the contempt that Vorenius felt it had deserved. That contempt now showed itself as fine judgement. Taemar was dead. The Tyrant would need a warrior to fill the Champion's role. It was the very moment that Vorenius had been waiting for.

In the cracked, but highly polished surface of the arming chamber walls, he studied his reflection critically. His mirrored image displayed his form back to him as a warped and twisted thing clad in ceramite plates. The cracks and buckles in the walls distorted his shape, but it mattered little. Vorenius looked past the mirage and saw exactly what he desired.

'Perfection,' he said. In that reflected image, he saw Huron Blackheart's next Champion staring back at him. The confidence instilled in him was iron-hard, absolutely unshakeable.

The walk to the throne room did little to break Vorenius's resolve. They strode through blighted corridors of a once-great star fortress that had fallen into terrible disrepair over the years. Bared and frayed cables sparked and guttered in their wake; once pristine walls were now greasy and spattered with blood and countless other bodily fluids. Weapons had left their scars on the surfaces: here a ragged tear where a chain weapon had missed its intended target, there the

scoring burns of bolter discharge.

The Red Corsairs never stopped fighting even outside of campaigns. Driven by an urge to prove themselves, they fought amongst one another without care or regard for their surroundings. Those who were not fully trusted were persecuted, usually unto death. Bodies would often lie in corridors for days before servitors finally disposed of them.

By stark contrast, the throne room of the Tyrant of Badab was a thing of exquisite beauty, despite the creature whose bulk and presence dominated the room. Where the corridors displayed damage and neglect, the Tyrant's throne room was immaculately preserved and despite the lighting being kept low, Vorenius appreciated the differences with aesthetic integrity.

The vast space was seemingly empty of all but the five warriors who had presented themselves to the Tyrant, but Vorenius knew there were more Red Corsairs present. Ilkon had slipped away on their arrival and was now standing somewhere in the shadows around the edges with innumerable others who had attended this gathering.

Whenever Vorenius had been this close to Huron Blackheart – and such times were few – he marvelled at the Tyrant's permanent bloodied and battered state, looking always as though he had just walked off a battlefield. His body was lacerated, broken and largely replaced by mechanical and metal parts. The Red Corsairs may have been blind to it, but Vorenius saw the Tyrant as little more than a mind held together with the aid of excellent augmetics and tireless attention. Even now, apothecary servitors buzzed around him, attending to the seemingly endless twist of cables that fed him with nutrients and painkilling stimulants. They swarmed around the Tyrant like ants, catering to his physical needs without question.

Behind the throne stood Lord Garreon, the Corpsemaster. The gaunt Lord Apothecary oversaw the flock of adepts and servitors without comment. He turned tawny, suspicious eyes on the line of warriors who had presented themselves for consideration and Vorenius caught, in that momentary gaze, the hint of disdain and disapproval.

Vorenius knew all of his fellow challengers. He had always made it his business to know his enemy, especially when that enemy stood in the same battle line. Straom would get no further. A belligerent idiot of a warrior, Vorenius found the Red Corsair's personal hygiene, or the lack of it, one of the most vile things he had ever encountered.

To the immediate left of Vorenius stood Szear and Feddeus, twin brothers

whose prowess in battle was the stuff of legends. Or at least, Vorenius thought to himself, the stuff of their *own* legends. They were competent enough, certainly, but they relied on one another too much for comfort.

At the far end of the line was a young warrior by the name of Dolosus; a warrior about whom Vorenius knew annoyingly little. Until today, he had been just another face in the crowd. Even the vile Straom had proven his worth in battle, catching Vorenius's attention. It irritated the former Emperor's Children warrior that he knew so little of this potential rival.

'What makes you all so sure I even want to appoint another champion?' The Tyrant's voice was marked with a drunken-sounding slur as his vocal chords strained to get the words past his metal teeth. 'I find your presumption interesting.' His cold expression moved down the line, assessing the warriors with indifference. Vorenius stood straight as an arrow, his eyes meeting the Tyrant's own with a bold arrogance. A twitch of a smirk contorted the lipless mouth.

'Ah, Vorenius,' the Tyrant said in that grating voice. 'A peacock amongst the poultry.' There was a ripple of laughter from the shadows and Vorenius tried not to let the insult show in any way on his face. 'What makes you think you are important enough to present yourself before me?'

'My loyalty to you, Lord Blackheart,' responded Vorenius immediately. 'I have served with you now for many years and I have proven that loyalty again and again. You know my abilities. You know my skills. I am the only warrior who could replace Taemar.'

'Taemar's appointment was a mistake, my lord.' The interruption came from Straom. The thrice-cursed idiot never knew when to keep his mouth shut and even as a warning tic began beneath Huron's left eye, he continued. 'You were wrong to pick him. You should have chosen one of your own.'

Blackheart's emotionless face turned to him. 'I see,' he said gravely. He gave a mirthless chuckle. 'Be assured that I will heed your advice in this matter, Straom. My thanks for illuminating the error of my ways.'

Emboldened by the Tyrant's words, Straom kept poking at the sore.

'He was not an Astral Claw. He may have taken the colours of the Red Corsairs, but his heart beat forever executioner. Your error lay in not choosing one of your own.'

A slow smile began to spread across Vorenius's face. He had not expected whittling down the competition to be so easy. He watched as the Tyrant rose from his throne and took three steps forward. The cables that attached him to the

machines, feeding his broken body with the necessary nutrients it needed to recover, snapped free. One remained deeply embedded in the back of his neck, effectively tethering him in place. The others flopped loose, tendrils with no purchase, fluid dribbling out of their abandoned ends. When the liquid hit air it vaporised, turning instantly into a sickly-smelling gas that clung around the Tyrant like a cloud. Black goo welled up in the sockets where the cables had been connected and oozed thickly, sliding down the Tyrant's bared skin.

Straom took an involuntary step backward. Vorenius watched with interest. He could see where this was going and looked forward to it with cruel delight.

'Your tongue has run away with you again, Straom,' Blackheart growled, spittle flying. He ripped the remaining cable from his neck and closed the distance between himself and his underling.

'My lord, you still need longer. You must...' the gaunt-faced Corpsemaster began, but was stopped in mid-flow by nothing more than a brisk wave of Blackheart's free hand. 'You are not fit to be any kind of champion,' continued the Tyrant. 'You are barely fit to be one of my warriors at all. Again and again you presume to tell me the error of my ways and yet I live still.' He let out a deep, throaty chuckle. 'I have tolerated your repeated transgressions out of recognition for your worth on the battlefield. But my numbers continue to grow.' The massive power claw that served as his right hand fizzled with energy and before Straom could even begin or hope to defend himself, Blackheart ripped open the unfortunate Space Marine's armour and torso with a vicious swipe.

He drew back his hand and thrust forward, piercing the warrior cleanly through both of his glistening, exposed hearts. Straom's eyes opened wide in an idiotic death stare worthy of his folly, and he stared at his master stupidly for a few moments before letting out a gurgling breath. Blackheart let the dying warrior slide from his crackling digits, and turned back towards the throne trailing bloody vapour. Seating himself once again, he turned his attention to the remaining would-be champions.

'You stand before me now in your certainty and I know each and every one of you.' Huron Blackheart's tone was mesmerizing. 'I know your strengths, your weaknesses, your competencies and your basic drives: Szear and Feddeus, the twins. True blood brothers who fight as one.'

Two identical shorn heads bowed respectfully. Except for the different scars they wore, the twins were totally identical in all respects.

'And Dolosus, your reputation as a duellist is second only to your reputation as a strategist. You consider yourself worthy of this honour?'

The mockery in the Tyrant's tone was unmistakable as he listed off the candidates and their perceived strengths. It grated on Vorenius's ears, but he kept his expression neutral. He must listen; he must gain any competitive edge gleaned through idle detail that he could manage.

'I do, my lord,' replied Dolosus coolly, not wavering beneath the Tyrant's hard stare. He took a step forward, exaggerating the lift of his foot to clear the corpse of his former battle-brother.

Finally, Blackheart considered Vorenius. A flicker of whatever passed for a smile lifted his mouth once again.

'And Vorenius. Not even born of the same blood as my brothers and I. Happenstance brought you to fight by my side. Tell me what it was that made you stay?'

'Honour, my lord. And an understanding of your drive and ambition.'

'I see.' Saliva briefly drooled from Blackheart's teeth and he wiped it away. 'And what would an outsider claim to know of my ambition?' His eyes flicked to the dead Straom and the hint was less than subtle.

Vorenius chose his words with care.

'A legion, Lord Huron. An army so vast and terrible that it will drive the slaves of the Imperium before it. We...' He corrected himself smoothly, never missing a beat. '*You* will sweep from system to system, reclaiming the galaxy for its rightful children. What *true* warrior would not wish to be a part of that?'

Huron leaned forward slightly as though he would rise from his throne.

Vorenius did not move. 'My lord. You must remain seated. We must recommence your treatments.' This time, the Corpsemaster's tone invited no discussion and Blackheart considered Vorenius a moment longer before waving his hand idly. As the adepts and servitors bustled around reconnecting his lifelines, the Tyrant nodded.

'The four of you have the audacity to present yourselves, and believe you are worthy of the honour of being my champion. So be it!' He looked beyond the challengers into the shadows beyond. His hideously maimed features twisted into a mockery of a smile. 'The trials begin now.'

The soft underlying sounds that had been the backdrop to the scene in the throne room became a resonant murmur. 'Explain to our... eager challengers what they have volunteered for, Garreon.'

'As my lord commands.'

The Corpsemaster stepped forward, his gaunt face ethereal and horrible in the semi-darkness. 'Those who seek to fill the position of the Tyrant's Champion

must face one another deep in the heart of this station. When you leave here, you will be escorted to the beginning of the area known as the Shift.’

Vorenius’s perfect eyebrow arched. The Shift? He had heard of the place. He had presumed it to be an execution zone. He had certainly not expected it to be a testing ground.

‘Once the four of you enter the Shift, you do so in the knowledge that only one of you will leave. You may take your favoured weapon and your wargear. Everything else is up to you. The challenge is a chance to prove not only your martial strength, but also your cunning and intelligence. The tradition was introduced by our Lord Blackheart many years ago and there is no better way to earn his favour and the honour of becoming his Champion than by winning the competition.’

‘The competition? Are there rules?’

The question came from Dolosus and it resulted in a wave of mocking laughter from around the room. The Corpsemaster held up a hand for silence.

‘I will take that as a pathetic attempt at humour rather than a demonstration of your ignorance, Dolosus. There are only two rules that apply. The first is that whatever alliances you form whilst you are in the Shift must be broken before you exit.’

‘Alliances with one another?’

‘*Any* alliance. There are things down there with which you can barter continued survival.’

Vorenius glanced up at this, noting the use of the word ‘which’ rather than ‘whom’.

‘When you step through as the victor of this contest, you must swear allegiance to me and *only* me. Anything other than total loyalty is unacceptable.’

This last came from the Tyrant, a slight slurring to his voice making the words difficult to understand. Whatever chemicals being pumped into him through the snaking hoses were taking effect. ‘The second rule is that only one of you can leave. That is all you need to know.’

More than half of Hell’s Iris was a mystery to even the longest serving of Blackheart’s warriors. The huge former Ramilies-class star fort had been the central hub of the Tyrant’s operations from within the Maelstrom for a long time, and it was claimed even the Blood Reaver himself knew only a fraction of its secrets.

The Shift was a section of the vast fortress sitting firmly in the heart of the

Maelstrom. It was a place where the fine mesh between the warp and reality was stretched to its tearing point and the slightest error of judgement could see it rip asunder. The rest of Hell's Iris was protected from encroaching horrors by a solid barrier forged of plassteel which was in turn tightly warded against incursion. Psykers, both human and post-human who served in the ranks, were expected to spend some time involved in the rituals and necessary work required to hold the warp at bay.

But despite its omnipresent threat, there were parts of the Shift that were worth exploiting and the Tyrant was swift to utilise them. What better location to test the mettle of his warriors than in a place where the warp bled through? For them, the wards would be lifted long enough to enter. For the survivor, they would be raised a second time to allow exit.

Despite his own status as a Red Corsair, the rangy Lord Apothecary seemed a fragile and miniscule thing walking ahead of the fully armoured warriors. The fact that the Corpsemaster led them suggested a certain honour; when Huron Blackheart was in residence at Hell's Iris, he rarely allowed Garreon to leave his sight. The Apothecary didn't speak as they walked, allowing the warriors to think and to observe – two things that Vorenius excelled at.

The first thing Vorenius noticed as they walked further into the heart of Hell's Iris was the smell curling around them all. It was an acrid, sickly scent combining blood, decomposition and countless other foul things. He hesitated before putting on his helmet, enjoying the sensation of the flavours that filled his senses. The deeper into the ship they travelled, the more overwhelming the smell became until sense overrode bizarre desire. Vorenius pulled on the helmet, softly locking it into place and allowing the filter to shut out the heady olfactory mix.

This deep into Hell's Iris, the condition of the ship showed further signs of deterioration. In places, panelling was torn from the walls, exposing the ship's superstructure. Hatch doors hung loosely from their broken hinges, swinging in an ethereal draft.

The group continued onwards, deeper and deeper into areas so badly maintained that Vorenius fervently admitted to himself that he was grateful for his helm. The light level was non-existent and although he would have been able to utilise his enhanced vision without the benefit of his armour, its senses came as a welcome aid. The Corpsemaster went bare-headed, and yet his steps never once faltered.

At the end of a long corridor, they were presented with another hatch, well maintained and free of contamination. The Corpsemaster crossed to it, turning

the wheel until the seal hissed softly. The door swung outwards and Garreon gestured the four warriors forward. They moved, in single file, into the room beyond.

The room was circular, with no pillars or other structures of any kind. Wherever you stood, you could see everyone else. You could watch their every move, assess their every threat. Directed by Garreon, the four warriors took up separate points. Vorenius noted that the ground was covered in a fine surface layer of dust or sand, the treads of their armoured boots marking their passage. It looked as though the room had not been used in years.

‘I will not demean this by wishing you any kind of success,’ said Garreon. ‘Regardless, be sure to prove your worth once you enter the Shift. The Tyrant has little use for the weak.’

Having so spoken, he exited the room and pulled the hatch closed behind him. The sound of the lock turning was clearly audible, as were the disappearing footsteps of the Corpsemaster as he left them.

All those present were now wearing their helmets but Vorenius was certain he could still easily tell them apart. Dolosus was distinguishable from the pattern of nicks and grazes on his armour. He had always favoured close-combat fighting and the toll of that showed in the damage to his wargear.

Perhaps laughably, the twins had matched their damage blow-for-blow. Even in their armour, Vorenius could not help but note they were indistinguishable. Which was which? Vorenius could detect no difference between them. Their heat signatures were perfectly in synch, their stance identical... There was nothing to mark one from the other. Vorenius sneered to himself. What did it matter? Kill one, kill the other. They were little more than prey now.

He cast his eyes over the competition appraisingly. Without question, the twins – regardless of his disdain – were the greater threat. Vorenius suspected that should the situation arise, they would prove too spineless to kill one another. They frequently extolled the virtues of their close bond of brotherhood. It was a weakness that the warrior of the Emperor’s Children would have no trouble exploiting at the first given opportunity.

Vorenius let his eyes flicker across the walls of the highly domed chamber. There were words etched into them, and he brought them into sharper focus. No, not just words. Names – the names of those who had passed through before them. Just as with his armour, their names would remain here for all time. He scoured the walls with super-human speed. To the best of his knowledge, which was minimal, the names were only those of former champions. Clearly they

returned here after their trial to mark their success. Yes. There was Taemar's scrawl.

He pictured himself emerging victorious and scratching his name into the ferrocrete of the walls, and his confidence swelled even further.

Time passed. His internal chron told him so. His sense of impatience reinforced the fact. Time passed and still nothing happened. He glanced around and felt a moment's concern that none of the others seemed annoyed by this. Forcing down the feeling, he began to move away from his spot against the wall, running his hands along the smooth surfaces.

'You are seeking a way in?' One of the twins moved to mirror him. 'Why would you do that?'

'We were told to enter the Shift. I plan to do that. You can stand there like a fool if you wish. I have a point to prove.'

'Ah, so literal, son of Fulgrim,' said the twin. 'So very literal and ignorant of the truth.' Now the two of them moved together but in separate directions, approaching Vorenius in a mockery of a pincer movement.

Only Dolosus remained where he was. He stood so motionless that he might as well have been a statue.

'And what truth is that?'

'Access to the Shift is the first part of the trial. It is a realm of chaos and disorder. It invites those whose hearts beat with its uneven rhythm.'

Vorenius drew his blade free of its scabbard and nodded. 'So we fight here,' he stated. 'A shame you will not get to see what lies beyond.'

'His presumption and arrogance is laughable, isn't it, Szear?' In so speaking, the twins identified themselves. Vorenius turned his head towards Feddeus, the speaker. 'We seek to prove ourselves to Lord Blackheart. You believe I would want to rid myself of the frailest threat first?' His prowling gait became even more predatory and feral. Vorenius felt the muscles in his body tense, ready for the inevitable battle. But it never came.

'Only the strongest survive.'

With those words, Feddeus flung himself towards Vorenius, his bolt pistol drawn. Anticipating such a move, Vorenius sidestepped, twisting his upper body so that he could bring his blade round in response. It had been an ugly and clumsy attack and a snide comment formed on his lips.

It became apparent that Vorenius had misjudged the brothers. As the power of his lunge carried him forward, Feddeus squeezed the trigger of his pistol. The mass-reactive shell struck Szear on the shoulderguard and he staggered

backwards. The projectile detonated with an explosion that was grossly amplified and distorted by the chamber's acoustics.

Vorenius felt the old hunger creeping up on him: a driving lust for battle that he ached to feel. It was present in him constantly like a lesser human needing food and water, and the sound of the pistol discharging excited every muscle in his genehanced body. His muscles contracted and tensed, singing as a cocktail of stimulants pumped through him. Exerting all of his self-control, he held back from joining in.

He had not anticipated the twins attacking one another in this manner. Regardless of the outcome, it would do him a favour. The comment that he was not the greater threat stung a little though, offending his sensibilities in a way he hadn't known in years.

The brothers fought with a ferocity they usually reserved for their enemies, and there was only going to be one outcome. With an upward swing of his power axe, Szear caught his brother a stunning blow to the helmet that fractured the ceramite. The jaw piece swung for a moment before clattering to the chamber's stone floor. Feddeus held steady as his opponent drew back for another blow.

Dolosus had still chosen to hold his spot, although Vorenius had noted a change to the other Red Corsair's stance – a certain readiness for battle that he recognised well.

The axe's lethal head chewed into the stunned warrior's helmet. Vorenius heard the telltale sounds of wet flesh parting before the blade's thrumming power field and the crunch of bone as it connected with Feddeus's skull.

He grunted in pain, slumping to his knees. His brother kicked out with his booted foot and the injured warrior fell in a clatter of ceramite. Blood drizzled from the shattered helmet, pooling beneath him. The axe raised once more, this time for the killing blow.

'Only the strongest survive,' repeated Szear in a low voice. 'You disappoint me, brother.'

Before the axe could fall, there was a grinding sound as ancient mechanisms awoke. The floor beneath Vorenius's feet shifted violently, knocking the standing warriors off-balance. Vorenius braced himself.

'What...' he began, but his question was drowned out by another discordant crunch of steel and another bone-juddering shudder.

'The Shift,' said Dolosus. 'It is ready to embrace us.'

Eager to enter the battle arena and end this farcical ritual, Vorenius looked around eagerly for the portal that had been opened.

Then the floor disappeared and he dropped into nothing.

The plunge was not a long one, but the landing was hard and unexpected. Despite his massive frame and his enhanced physiology, Vorenius had the breath knocked from him. His helmet was damaged irreparably in the fall. Nothing but static filled his vision and ears and so he tore it off, tossing it to one side. He scrambled to his feet, snatching up his blade.

Wherever he was, it was dark and he was alone. There was no sign of the others, a fact which suited Vorenius well. His nerve endings and muscles were still vibrating with the chemicals coursing through his veins, but he remained focused. He breathed deeply and concentrated on analysing his immediate surroundings.

As he regained his senses fully the room around him began to resolve. Even without his auto-senses, everything was touched with a hint of scarlet. For a fleeting moment, Vorenius entertained the notion that the Shift was blood-tinged. He raised a gauntleted hand to his head: no injury there for blood to have dribbled into his eyes. No, he told himself. *It is* nothing more than a notion.

And yet the coppery scent of blood was there. It lingered on the air. Vorenius sniffed warily. It put him in mind of an apothecarion after a battle when the wounded were being treated. The thought and the evocative sense brought a shudder of pleasure and so he embraced it, allowing it to drive him. Death was close. Death that he would deal. He licked his lips hungrily and brought himself to cold focus.

He stood in a small chamber, barely a fraction of the size of the one he had just left. In one dark and musty corner was a pile of human bones. They were too small by far to have belonged to Space Marines and Vorenius felt his lip curl into a sneer. There were undoubtedly things down here that demanded pacification. It was typical of Blackheart to utilise his cultists in such a way. The Tyrant of Badab was not the kind of master to dish out extravagant rewards. Not to be sent down here was clearly reward enough.

Vorenius allowed his fingers to wrap easily around the hilt of his weapon and took a few steps forward. The only sound he could discern was that of his own heavy tread, reverberating around the chamber and his own breathing, amplified even without his helmet. He moved up against the wall and started as it undulated where he leaned against it, a spongy, pliable mass that bent to his body-shape. He reached up to press into it and his fingers disappeared into its surface up to the knuckles. He withdrew his hand immediately then pressed his

blade against it.

Nothing but a solid wall.

Vorenius paused at the pile of bones and crouched down, picking up a femur. Ragged, rotting strips of flesh still hung from it and he let it drop with a dull thud to the floor. He had no idea what to expect in the Shift, but whatever it was clearly fed off human flesh. He didn't doubt for one second that it would be delighted to sink its teeth and claws into an Adeptus Astartes as well.

He walked on, exiting the chamber into a long dark corridor, his booted feet ringing on the stone floor. Of the three warriors who had entered the chamber with him, there was no sign. Feddeus was likely incapacitated beyond his ability to endure if he wasn't already dead. Szear's blow had been true and he had most likely cut his twin's thread of life free with that strike.

A whispering caused him to pause in his stride and he came to a halt, standing as still as a statue as he listened to the noise. It was unintelligible muttering for the most part: a sibilant whisper in a language he did not know. He thought he saw a flicker in the shadows and turned his head.

There was nothing there.

The whispering continued. It was a maddening sound and although Vorenius could not understand the words, he somehow found that he knew they were trying to tempt him.

Any alliances...

Despite having no ability to translate it, he recognised the whispers. They were sounds that had always reverberated around the training decks and arming chambers of the Emperor's Children vessels. The eternal promises of daemons charmed him, luring him to a greater life – a finer destiny than that of being beholden to a still-mortal, albeit clearly chosen, warrior of the world of flesh.

There would be time for that he determined, and closed off the part of his mind that was susceptible to them. He had to maintain control of his senses. The position of Tyrant's Champion was the best he could hope for in this strange new existence.

He moved on, but the whispers did not stop. If anything, they grew more insistent, gathering around him like intangible wisps. So strong was the feeling that they were no more than curling smoke, he automatically reached up to brush them away. His gauntlet came up against a strange resistance, as though he were dragging his palm through tar.

A proximity warning flashed at him and he whirled around, his blade up and ready as Szear ploughed into him with a scream of murderous fury. Like him,

Szear had discarded his helm. The two warriors came together with a clash of ceramite plate and Vorenius was pushed backwards towards the corridor wall.

They fought ferociously, pressing against one another with their mutual brute strength. Szear was bigger and stronger, but Vorenius was more determined. They staggered for a moment, both losing their balance and tumbled to the ground, locked in each other's grip.

'Time for you to die, peacock,' said Szear in his grating voice. 'I cannot begin to tell you how long I have waited for the opportunity to do this.'

'You have not succeeded yet, Szear,' retorted Vorenius, finally breaking free of his opponent's strong grip. He leaped to his feet and danced lightly out of the way as Szear scrambled back up. 'We have only just begun.'

They were in another chamber – more or less the same as the first but for the fact that this one had none of the odorous reek of old, dried blood. Instead, there was a lingering chemical stink of promethium and engine oil. It was easy to forget that Hell's Iris had once been a starfort, filled with well-honed, immaculately maintained machinery and a legion of bustling crew members. Now it was something else entirely. It was a battleground. It was a place where warriors honed their skills ready to defeat enemies.

Szear's power axe crackled with energy and, with Vorenius out of his close range, the Red Corsair swung it over his shoulder. His feet were nimble and light but Vorenius continued to move, refusing to present a static target for his enemy to strike. All the while, his eyes ranged over the Red Corsair, gauging, assessing, and looking for the flaw in his technique that he could exploit to his own ends.

'Fight, damn you!' Szear said, clearly irritated that Vorenius had not begun the duel. 'What is stopping you, son of Fulgrim? Do you fear me so? Is it the knowledge that I am more worthy of this prize than you?' With a grunt of effort, he put his entire weight behind the power axe and struck at Vorenius, who dodged the clumsy blow with ease.

'I am not afraid of you, Szear.'

'Then fight me.'

Then fight me.

The echo of Szear's words reverberated around the room, picked up by unseen things. They were repeated into infinity, wrapping around one another into a screaming pitch of unintelligible noise.

*Then fight me. Then fight me. Fight me. Fight me. Me. Me.
Memememememe.*

It reached a high-pitched shrill screech that caused Szear to back away from

Vorenius, his hands clamped over his ears.

Vorenius felt the pain brought by the psychic scream, but did nothing to resist it. It was painful and for a loyal son of Fulgrim, there was deep pleasure to be found in that pain. The noise continued to rise in pitch and Vorenius felt the first trickle of blood from his ear. He could not put up much of a fight against a psychic attack of this magnitude and he could feel a terrible pressure building in his head. Soon, his head would explode; his skull would shatter and fragment and his brains would decorate the walls. Despite the pain, the ultimate pleasure he would experience drove him onwards, ever closer to the next stage of a madness that had claimed him decades before.

Szear, not designed to deal with intense sensations in the way the Emperor's Children were, stumbled backwards, then reached for his axe and ran from the room – once more passing through the wall as though it didn't exist.

Vorenius's voice rose into a scream that he was certain would not be heard over the daemonic echo.

'Coward!'

He tightened his hand around his blade and charged out through the wall into the corridor. Almost immediately, disorientation reached up to snatch at him. His perceptions shrank and expanded in a rapid attempt to ascribe some kind of reality to the fact he was now standing at ninety degrees to the floor. He came up short, the sound of his own breathing heavy in his ears. The tangled geometry of the new hall repulsed his senses: portals yawned like gibbering mouths at impossible angles, stairs climbed into blank walls and bridges spanned the open spaces both upside down and inside out. It was the architecture of an insane mind made real and forced into a space smaller than it could occupy.

He heard a distant *pitter patter*, a skittering sound that put him instantly in mind of a tyranid nest. He had fought enough of the monsters to know what they sounded like, but they could not possibly be here on the Tyrant of Badab's starfort. Regardless, he tensed every muscle in his body and, breathing deeply, forced himself to accept his new position as truth. Up became down, left became right and, slowly but surely, his mind accepted the impossible physics of his new position. Even as he processed it, things resolved to whatever passed as normal here. The floor was once more the floor. A brief wave of nausea, something he had not felt in countless centuries, washed over him and he drew in a deep breath.

Disoriented by the unnatural, physics-defying geometry of this forsaken place, Vorenius could not get his bearings. He tried etching a symbol into the wall to

mark his passage, only to see it dissolve before his eyes. He turned right at a junction end only to come up against an impossible place where paths led off in every conceivable direction – including vertically up and down. His brain was beginning to ache with the continued strangeness of the Shift.

From time to time, things normalised enough that he could make some sort of advance. At least... he *believed* he was advancing. He no longer had any idea of distance or direction. The walls and the ceilings – when they were at their more acceptable angles – were a uniform shade of dull grey and there was nothing to distinguish one corridor from another.

‘I am *not* walking around in circles.’ The warrior made the assurance aloud, his voice sounding strong and calm in the silence.

Szear was nowhere to be seen, but Vorenius now had the measure of him: a weakling and a coward who had fled at the first hurdle. His face turned to scorn – he would take great pleasure in despatching the man.

The deep-seated lust that drove him to commit murderous acts of violence was beginning to make itself known. For many of his brothers, satisfaction came from unnatural acts with warp-bound creatures, or from endless sessions of torture that they had both inflicted on them. But Vorenius could only find release in slaughter, in the dizzying race of stimulants that raged through his body when he faced an enemy on the battlefield.

Szear’s flight had robbed him of the opportunity to sate that lust, and now anger crept in. He would hunt down the Red Corsair and he would gut him. He would slit open the soft skin of the other warrior’s belly and take wanton delight in the joy that comes hand-in-hand with evisceration.

The blood dribbling from his ears had ceased now that the shrill shrieking had stopped and the drum of his twin hearts slowed to normal levels. The usual level of ambient whispering had returned, an ever-present drone that he barely noticed after a while. If anything, he found it strangely soothing.

Once again he could hear the skittering of tyranids, or insects or... *something* in the distance.

Ignoring the sworn promises of immortality, Vorenius strode on through the red-tinged, impossible world in which he had found himself. Some walls yielded like the ones he had encountered earlier. Others moved before his very eyes, slamming together to seal apertures that he could otherwise have stepped through. Once, he found himself claustrophobically trapped as one wall wrapped itself around him, locking him in a circular room where he could not even move his arms. Vorenius bore it all stoically, but the madness within him was rising.

Of his two opponents, there was no sign.

They are working together to rid themselves of you, came the suggestive whisper. The voice in which it was delivered was smooth and spoken in a threatening undertone. Vorenius ignored it, but not its message. After all, there was probably some truth in what it said. Paranoia wrapped its chilly fingers around his thoughts and refused to let go.

He walked on.

Fifteen paces through the next corridor, his reflexes pulled him up short as the toes of his boots dangled precariously over a dark chasm that yawned before him. The pit was pitch black. Any light in the area seemed to fall into it and be swallowed up. It stretched the width of the corridor, barring passage forward, and although he could see the other side, a quick calculation of distance and his own abilities suggested that jumping it was not an option. He cursed and turned around to head back the way he had come, his sword held before him.

Twenty paces later, the ground beneath his feet began to twist and boil in the most unlikely of ways as a gravity well began to form beneath his feet. In seconds, he was held in its grasp. Struggling to free himself from the whirlpool in the ground, Vorenius gripped tightly to the sides of the well. His hand let go of the sword and it was immediately sucked into the very heart of the whirlpool trap, disappearing in an instant. Vorenius cursed roundly and scrabbled desperately to keep hold of the edges. His fingers could find no purchase and he was dragged downwards into unending darkness.

He could not properly measure distance or the rate at which he was falling, but it seemed to go on for a long time. The concept that this might well be a bottomless pit, that the rest of his existence would be spent falling into nothing passed his mind, and he lashed out in anger. His fists connected with something solid and he lashed out again and again. Finally, his ceramite fists exploded through the infinite darkness and he burst out into another room. His sword lay on the floor a few feet away and he stooped to pick it up, brushing ferrocrete from himself as though nothing had happened.

Vorenius walked. There was little else he could do. His mind had finally dulled to the changing geometry. No longer was he fazed by floors and walls that curled and warped around him. No longer did long, endless corridors that curved gradually upwards until he was walking upside down affect him. Staircases that formed beneath his feet, carrying him upwards only to then drop him from a great height into new areas, became expected.

Vorenius barely noticed the phenomena. All that he could focus on was the sound out there in the distance.

Skitter.

Claws scrabbling for purchase somewhere in the distance, always just out of his full range of hearing – a suggestion of the horror that was waiting for him when he reached the end of this increasingly infuriating journey.

Of his fellow challengers there was no sight or sound. The only thing to accompany Vorenius on his trip through the Shift were his own thoughts and heightened senses, tuned so tightly that he could feel them straining. It came as no surprise, therefore, when the creature attacked him. Vorenius was ready for defence in less than a heartbeat, his attuned senses having alerted him swiftly. As his attacker's bulk swung out before him, fists flying, he retaliated without a pause.

It was not much of a battle and Vorenius felt disappointment welling in him even as his sword pierced the jugular vein in its neck and dug deeply, lacerating the throat open and leaving his would-be attacker with a second, toothless grin leering beneath its first. Its death gurgle was a vile noise: discordant and pathetic. After it had ceased its wailing and thudded to the ground then, and only then, did Vorenius step close enough to inspect it.

As tall as a Space Marine, the thing he had slaughtered also had the familiar bulk of his kind – the oversized muscles that strained beneath the flesh. The skin tone was alabaster white, paler even than Vorenius's, and every vein could clearly be seen, some still pumping slightly as the last shudders of the thing's heart pushed the blood out of the terrible wound in its neck.

Crouching beside the inert being, Vorenius inspected it. Countless cables were plugged into sockets in its skull and the back of its head had been removed entirely. The brain was exposed, a soft fleshy grey mass that had yet to cease pulsing.

Vorenius knew about creatures like this. He had heard the whispered discussions amongst the Red Corsairs. Things that had once been Space Marines but had undergone endless experimentation at the hands of the CorpseMASTER; and things that were no use to the Tyrant in active service, but could continue to serve in the depths, prowling for invaders or the unwary. They too were champions in their own warped way.

As evidenced by its death, this one had been weak. Its demise had required barely any exertion and it had not even put up a fight. A fleeting moment of shame for its pitiful mewling crept into his thoughts, quickly subsumed by

hatred. It had done nothing to satisfy his need to kill. It was imperfect and pointless and he *hated* it. He drove his blade once again into its already tortured skull and gained some small satisfaction from the crack of bone.

The sound of gunfire drew him out of his petty sadism and he snatched back the blade, heading towards it. He stumbled as he walked, the ever-changing corridors of the Shift undulating and lurching as if they were alive, trying their hardest to throw him off balance and send him flying to the ground.

He heard the roar of battle pulling him along, luring him with its promise of glory and once again he experienced that familiar surge of power to his limbs. He visualised opening up the helmets of his dead enemy as though cracking open a nut.

He edged closer to the sounds of battle, his fingers clenched around his sword. Dolosus stood perhaps six metres away from him, engaged in a firefight with an unseen enemy. The Red Corsair was facing down the corridor and Vorenius entertained for a brief moment the concept of spearing the unwary warrior through the back. But that would be the way of a coward, the one thing Vorenius had always prided himself on *not* being.

Dolosus slammed a fresh magazine into his bolter; judging from the number of spent shells surrounding him, there were precious few left to waste. The sound of returning fire echoed through the corridor and Vorenius strained to see who or what it was that Dolosus was fighting. He could hear a strange noise threading through the sounds of explosive shells: a high-pitched whining that put him in mind of engines on a Thunderhawk, or the retro-rockets on a drop pod just before it impacted on a landing site. Other than its similarity to those things, he could not connect it with anything at all in his capaciously eidetic memory.

Seemingly ignorant of Vorenius's presence, Dolosus resumed firing on the unseen foe, his bolter on semi-automatic. Shells stuttered down the corridor exploding against whatever he aimed at, but he did not cease fire.

Vorenius crouched, eager to establish whether or not he would be facing a worse enemy if he killed Dolosus now. Perhaps it would be best to return here after he had dealt with Szear.

'Vorenius!' Dolosus spoke. He had risen from the kneeling position he had adopted and had spun around. Vorenius sprang back to his feet, fully ready to engage in combat and then hesitated. The front of Dolosus's helm had been ripped clean off, leaving his face exposed. Dark stains ran down the warrior's cheeks as though he had been weeping blood and Vorenius realised with a mix of disgust and fascination that this was exactly what had happened to the Red

Corsair. Where once his eyes had been were now empty sockets: gaping holes of darkness. Had Dolosus been blinded by whatever he was fighting? Or had his evident madness driven him to tear his own eyes out?

What a delicious sensation that would be, the inner voice deep in Vorenius's soul whispered. Imagine plucking each eyeball from its socket. The pain... the exquisite pain...

'Vorenius!' Dolosus called his name again, dragging him out of his moment's perfection. 'I know that is you. I recognise your stench.' He levelled the spent weapon, his aim exact and his intention clear.

'Do not come closer, brother.'

'I am not your *brother*, Dolosus. I never have been,' said Vorenius.

His opponent's eyes may have been gone, but there was an aura of madness surrounding him. He was threatening Vorenius with an empty weapon and his chainblade had long ago been discarded. From the front, Dolosus was in poor shape. There were dents and gashes in his red armour. Whole sections had been torn away and his thickly corded muscles were visible beneath. 'I am your executioner.'

'Stay your hand, Son of Fulgrim. Dolosus's death is not yours to savour.'

The new voice came from somewhere over Vorenius's left shoulder. Not wishing to take his eyes from the pathetic figure of Dolosus for too long, Vorenius shot a swift glance behind him. As he suspected, Szear moved towards him. Like Dolosus, Szear had sustained injuries of his own: dried blood traced a line from a wound in his skull down his face, streaking his pale skin with trails of scarlet. In his increasing detachment from reality, Vorenius marvelled at the stark contrast of the colours. Crimson on white. So *beautiful*...

'Szear?' Dolosus's hand swung in the direction of the newcomer's voice, his finger squeezing repeatedly on the weapon's trigger. Nothing discharged from its still white-hot muzzle. There was nothing *to* discharge. He shuddered visibly and Vorenius's attention was momentarily caught by a glut of blood that pumped from his belly, a wound too deep for his enhanced biology to control. He would die slowly with an injury like that, especially down here where no help would come to him.

Vorenius could feel no pity for the dying Space Marine. His death was merely another mark on the list of reasons he had been an unsuitable choice for the position of champion. Stepping back, Vorenius put himself equidistant from the two Red Corsairs. Szear moved towards Dolosus and there was clear revulsion in his expression. Vorenius recognised the look. He wore it too.

‘Brother,’ said Dolosus and there was peculiar urgency in his voice. ‘Brother, please. You must succeed. For me. For Feddeus. For the Tyrant. Do not...’ The words became a gasp and then a bubble of blood burst soundlessly on his lips as Szear’s combat knife drove deep into his neck. With an easy wrench of his blade, Dolosus’s savaged and ruined head tore from his body, crashing to the ground. It could have been a mercy killing, but the wild hunger on Szear’s face told another story entirely.

‘Two down,’ said Szear, tossing Dolosus’s head to the side with contempt. ‘One to go.’

Skitter, skitter, skitter.

A sudden high-pitched screeching interrupted the impending battle and both warriors turned to face down the corridor. A vast figure moved towards them with a peculiar gait. The creature, the daemon, the failed experiment... whatever it was, stood almost at their height and was a uniform shade of grey.

The noise it made was perfectly in keeping with what Vorenius had heard before. Whatever Dolosus had been fighting was coming for them. His instincts working on reflex, he drew his own bolt pistol and fired steadily at the oncoming creature. Briefly united by facing a common enemy, Szear’s weapon joined in moments later. Shells kissed the thing’s body, sending up sprays of red mist where the projectiles found their mark. But it did not appear to suffer unduly and simply continued its ponderous advance.

Then as suddenly as it had appeared it broke into numerous pieces. The floor seemed to be alive – a heaving, shifting surge that Vorenius realised were thousands upon thousands of bloated insects. There were enough to carpet the floor of the corridor, bringing the surface itself to life in front of his eyes. The insects swarmed over the head and torso of Dolosus’s corpse and began burrowing into his exposed flesh with dozens of tiny mouths. There was something more ominous and unsettling about the fact they were devouring his flesh before Vorenius’s eyes in silence than if they had made any sort of noise.

It was there, struggling to maintain balance on the seething carpet of insects that Vorenius and Szear had their final showdown.

It rankled Vorenius that it was hard to say who the greater warrior was out of the two of them. He had never fought against Szear in the training cages, preferring always to fight against the machines. He discovered rapidly that Szear was every bit his equal and in fact, there was a possibility that he was outclassed.

Beneath their feet, the insects continued to surge – the hall spewing forth

endless quantities of them. Beneath the feet of the battling Space Marines, countless numbers were crushed, only to be replaced by ones that continued to bleed from the walls and the floor. Before long, the battle was being fought in a shin-deep sea of scrabbling insectoid lifeforms.

Szear had lost his power axe at some point during his skirmishes through the Shift, and faced Vorenius armed only with a long-bladed combat knife. Somehow, the bladesman found that even more galling. How *dare* this pretender to the title of Tyrant's Champion mock him? He drove forward with his blade gripped in both hands, despite it being a perfectly balanced one-handed weapon, and was rewarded with the pleasure of it drawing a cut across Szear's dark-skinned face. Blood dribbled briefly before the Larraman cells in the other warrior's blood clotted the wound.

The combatants circled one another and it was Vorenius who broke the stalemate by hurling himself with a furious scream at the Red Corsair. The suddenness of the attack did not startle Szear who maintained his balance with easy agility. The blade and the knife came together with a shriek of metal on metal and sparks flew.

The insane geometry of the Shift did little to help. Because of the way it constantly altered, sometimes they were fighting normally, and other times they were facing one another at peculiar, impossible angles. Vorenius was struggling to maintain a mental map of his terrain. Never before had he been forced to fight in an arena that reshaped itself around him. Whoever had named this place the Shift had been right to do so.

Szear drove at him mercilessly, pressing his attack with all his might. Vorenius was powerful and agile, but Szear was every bit his equal, and the very concept of that brought him great displeasure. He swung the sword in a curving arc, aiming to deliver damaging blows to the abdominal section of the other warrior's armour, but Szear danced free from the biting edge of Vorenius's blade.

With a roar, Vorenius brought the blade up and over his head, intending to bring it down on Szear's exposed head. He visualised the adrenaline rush that cleaving the other's skull in two would bring him and gave voice again to his anger. He roared again and drove forward with all his might. When Szear did not dodge the blow, when his sword lodged in the skull, Vorenius was so startled that he almost lost his balance. Adrenaline, rage and determination flooded through his body rendering him near insensible and it escaped from his lips in a laugh.

A stupid grin spread across Szear's face and blood spurted from his mouth. He sank to his knees and stared into nothing. Vorenius slowly withdrew the blade,

savouring every moment of the feel of metal on bone, and the dead Space Marine pitched over on his face into the glut of insects. He was lost in another swarm of them and Vorenius staggered clear, passing through one wall and colliding with another, scrambling to be free of the carnage before he was parted from his own sanity forever more.

Cold logic settled over him like a mantle. They were dead. He had succeeded. He had murdered his opponents. All that remained was for him to leave this place and present himself to the Tyrant.

A hunger and lust for killing gripped him and he forced himself to self-control. He would find the exit from this labyrinthine place, and would kneel before Huron Blackheart and swear his allegiance. The other Red Corsairs would bow before him, the Tyrant's Champion.

Another bubble of laughter broke his lips.

'The Tyrant's Champion,' he said aloud. 'Bow down before the Tyrant's Champion.' He walked on, acutely aware that nothing threatened him. The walls remained walls and the decks did not move beneath his boots. The place seemed to have stilled, and he found himself remembering how they had gained access to the Shift in the first place. Conflict opened the pathway to this nightmare world and stirred up the daemons within.

Now they were subdued, like the hearts that had beat in the breast of his former comrades in arms. It was a pleasing analogy and Vorenius walked on, exalting himself and his deeds. He saw the bulkhead door before he recognised it for what it was: the exit from the Shift to the main sprawl of Hell's Iris.

Vorenius dropped to one knee, leaning on his sword as he murmured reverent words of thanks to Fulgrim for seeing him through this far.

I will not fail you now, my father, he thought.

Several more paces forward brought him to a vast archway and he stepped through into a room that perfectly mirrored the entrance vestibule that he had departed... however many hours or days earlier. It was the twin of the one that he had left in every single way and for a while, Vorenius wondered if he had ever left at all.

He crossed the room and put his hands onto the hatch wheel, turning it easily and swinging the door open.

Standing in the entrance was a warrior clad in dented and chipped red armour. In his hands was a power axe and Vorenius stared, his feet slowing him to a halt.

'Feddeus?' The moment of startled surprise quickly gave way to something more primal. Rage coloured Vorenius's features, his pale face filling with scarlet

fury.

‘No,’ came the reply. ‘But I am presuming that you killed him. This pleases me greatly. I had no wish to kill my brother, but we agreed that one of us must exit victorious from this place.’

‘*Szear?*’ And there it all fell into place. Szear had *wounded* his brother during the fight in the antechamber. He had not killed him. Vorenius had. It had been an assumption that had cost him dearly, and now the Red Corsair was the last thing standing between him and his deserved victory.

‘Come no closer, Vorenius. You have lost. All that remains for you is to bow down before the Tyrant’s Champion.’

‘No!’

With a strangled cry of outrage, Vorenius lunged forward.

Szear unclamped his bolt pistol and fired. The shots blasted chunks from Vorenius’s armour, forcing him back. Szear’s laughter echoed around the walls, wrapping around him with their mocking tones.

‘Do not look so vexed, Vorenius. As a mark of gratitude for being such a good sport, I will not end you, not now. Instead...’ Szear took a step backwards into the antechamber. ‘Instead, given my new role as Champion, I have certain liberties at my disposal. Thus, I give you to the Shift. Join the other creatures and things that linger here. Within days it will have consumed your mind, if not your body. But imagine what a challenge you will be to those who follow us.’ A smile flickered across Szear’s pockmarked face. ‘Perhaps you will find that perfect duel you so desperately seek. Farewell, brother.’

Such venom in that final word. Such hatred. Such revulsion and rebuttal. For a scant second before Szear slammed the bulkhead door closed and Vorenius heard his resonant chuckle from beyond, he could do nothing but stare in disbelief. The sound of the lock wheel turning from the other side snapped him from his introspection and his reactions returned to him.

‘No,’ he said aloud, shaking his head vigorously in denial. ‘No! This cannot be! *I* am the Tyrant’s Champion! It is *my* honour, not yours!’ He flung himself at the bulkhead door, hammering furiously at it. He howled in perfect harmony with the metallic ring of his gauntleted fists on the metal of the door. He hammered and he pounded, but not even a dent appeared.

He hunted around his immediate vicinity for something he could use as a weapon, but there was nothing to pick up. Instead, he repeatedly threw himself at the door. The futility of it was high in his thoughts as his body was juddered and jolted against the resistance of the barrier between this place and the real world.

Perhaps this *was* the real world?

It may have only been minutes that Vorenius continued in this manner. It may have been hours. His sense of time was long gone. He had lost nearly everything since stepping into the Shift. Time, perception, grasp on reality... The only sense he had fully remaining was his sense of self.

I am Vorenius Avidius. I am a son of Fulgrim – a warrior of the Emperor's Children. And the honour of Tyrant's Champion belongs rightfully to me.

His burning fury spent, Vorenius sank slowly against the bulkhead door, tearing at his face with maddening distress. Even as his anger died, the light in the chamber died with it.

Blackness. All is dark.

I am Vorenius Avidius. I am a son of Fulgrim.

He repeated the mantra over and over; a desperate bargain with unknown and unseen powers to remain in control of himself. A peace stole across him and he rose to his feet.

There was something in the Shift that called to him and he stared into the impenetrable gloom. There was something there. A possibility. Something that *could* be. Szear had abandoned him to a fate worse than death and yet in that fate there was a promise. A promise of a chance to fulfil a destiny.

I am an eternal warrior. The Shift is an eternal battleground.

As Vorenius moved away from the door, striding into the unending darkness, a shiver of pleasure flowed through his veins.

I am a son of Fulgrim. And I am...

Somewhere in the distance, he thought he could hear a now-familiar noise.

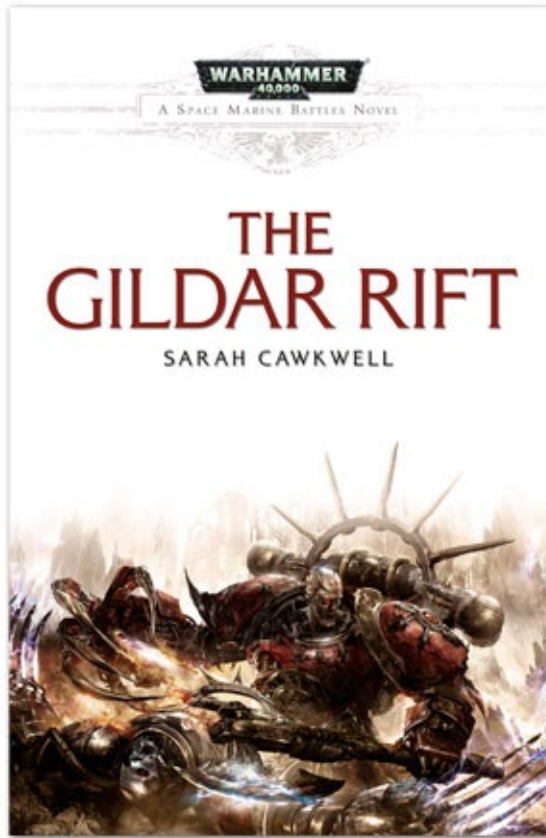
Skitter.

Vorenius smiled. It was the maniacal smile of the insane – a sanity he could never hope to reclaim and he gave himself over to it.

'Bow down before the Tyrant's Champion,' he whispered as he strode into the blackness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Published in 2014 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

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Cover illustration by Paul Dainton.

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ISBN: 978-1-78251-279-0

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