



VIGILUS VICTORIOUS

# VIGILUS DEFIANT AMIDST THE FLAMES

# AMIDST THE FLAMES

Storvhal  
Sub-quadrant 3  
Thermo-refinery Beta/Deltax/887/K  
03:47 Hours

Overseer Second-class Cullam Drebs had had enough.

He stomped along the metal corridor with a face like thunder. His heavy work boots clanged on the mesh decking while the auspex in his hand emitted reedy warbles and pings. The bulky handset was made for miners and pipe-menials, and Drebs had run a cable from its exload port directly to his audio augmetics in order to hear its output over the omnipresent rumbling of the volcano. He needed to be able to make out what his trusty device was telling him, even if the effort was making his head pound.

It was the only way he would catch the miscreants in the act.

The corridor Drebs stomped down was part of Transfer Zone Deltax-Omnis-XV, a tangle of macro-piping, corridors and thermal exchanger shrines driven deep into the volcano's flank. The strobing yellow lumen that illuminated it indicated that this zone was currently undergoing a high burn cycle. It was off limits to all but the Magi Geothermis who tended to the fiery heart of the magmatic extractors.

'As if you couldn't tell from all the Omnissiah-dratted steam,' Drebs muttered sourly, looking accusatorily at the alarum lumin. He had pulled rubberised robes over his overseer's armour and dragged the thick, goggle-lensed cowl over his head to ward off the scalding jets that burst from pressure valves all along the

corridor. Being buffeted and blinded by jets of superheated vapour was not a pleasant experience. Some of the Tech-Priests would have considered it a holy blessing, he supposed, to be bathed in the mingled breath of divine machine and blessed pyre-mountain. It just left Drebs mildly scalded and angrier than ever. Doing his best to blink away the sweat that blurred his vision, the overseer paused to peer at his auspex screen

‘Whoever you are, I’ve got you now,’ he snarled triumphantly. Thrice in the past work-cycle Drebs had detected unauthorised signifier contacts moving through this zone during high burns. To his immense frustration they had always slipped away before he could catch up to them.

This time, though, they didn’t look to be moving. There were more of them, too; maybe twelve or so, though the blessed electromagnetic utterances of the thermal reactors made it difficult to get an accurate reading.



The unauthorised contacts were one level down, according to his read-out. Who were they, he wondered? You got rogue Servitors occasionally, units whose cognitive functioning had degraded and left them roaming feral. They could be dangerous, but you never saw more than one or two at a time. Magma labourers, perhaps, attempting to up their quotas by slipping into forbidden zones to toil outside of their rotation?

Drebs felt an unkind smile spread across his features at the thought. He moved his free hand to his belt, making sure that his shock truncheon and autopistol were both holstered where they should be. If the disturbance was due to unauthorised labourers, he thought, they were going to have a lot more to worry about than lagging quotas soon enough.

Muttering a quick prayer to the spirits of his auspex, his gun and his truncheon, Drebs punched an access code into a nearby shaft-hatch. The chevroned metal barrier slid up to reveal a ladder set into a claustrophobic metal shaft. The rungs climbed out of sight to higher levels, and also plunged away into the fiery depths below.

Drebs hooked his auspex to his belt, gripped the rungs and began to climb down. He felt the heat of the metal even through his thick gauntlets. He offered up a prayer of thanks to the Omnissiah for the blessed thermo-raiments he had been furnished with, a glance at his heat cuff warning him the air outside his suit was hot enough to sear flesh.

Thanks to the rumbling of the volcano and the hissing shudder of the pipes, coupled with the increasingly agitated beeps of Drebs' auspex, he didn't hear the chanting until he was almost at the next shaft-hatch. Drebs paused. He frowned.

He knew the binharic cant of the magi, and the prayer-dirges of the labour gangs. This didn't sound like either. It was jagged, impassioned, the sound of hoarse and fervent voices spitting words that crackled like dancing flame. It brought to mind the fanciful tales of fire-dancing beings that his more superstitious comrades liked to bandy about.

Drebs' heart beat faster. What was this, he wondered with a fresh surge of anger. Some form of heresy?

'If so, we know how to deal with that, don't we?' he muttered, thinking of the autopistol at his belt with some relish. 'Can't take any chances. There's a war on, after all.'



Meaning to surprise whoever was doing the chanting, Drebs took one hand from the rungs of the ladder, popped open his holster and thumbed his pistol's arming rune. He took a deep breath. He tensed, then hit the hatch release and turned as quickly as he could in his bulky garb to lunge out of the hatch.

A length of pipe hit Overseer Second-class Drebs square in the face. His goggles crazed as their plexiglass shattered, and pain exploded through his skull. He tasted blood, and something else hit him hard in the back.

The ground, he thought groggily.

He had fallen.

Drebs tasted blood. He coughed inside his hood and spattered red matter across his crazed lenses. Panic surged through him as he felt hands grasp him roughly and haul him to his feet. The next instant his panic redoubled as someone tore the cowl from his head.

The pain was instant and excruciating. The heat seared his skin, turned his breath to hot ashes in his throat and made his eyes water.

‘Wha... what...?’ he coughed. Through tear-blurred vision, Drebs took in the figures clustered around him. They were magma labourers as he had thought, but Overseer Drebs hadn’t expected anything like this. The lunatics had stripped to the waist and their hides were blistered red raw from the heat, yet they didn’t seem to notice. Some had weird and unsettling devices tattooed into their flesh. Others wore metallic avian masks that looked crudely forged, perhaps from stolen ore scraps and metallic waste.

One, larger than the rest, prodded Drebs in the chest. Drebs dragged in a burning breath and his eyes widened as he realised the brute’s skin showed the scaley stigmata of mutation.

‘Knew you was coming, overseer,’ sneered the big man from behind his strange bird mask. His voice was muffled and tinny. ‘The flames showed us. You shouldn’t have come down here.’

A sense of unreality had stolen Drebs’ strength but now, as the mob of labourers dragged him unceremoniously down another corridor, he tried desperately to muster some authority.

‘Unhand me at once,’ he said. ‘I am your superior! You’ll all be flogged for this, you’ll have your quotas annulled!’ He had meant his threats to sound menacing, full of the anger he had come storming in with. Instead Drebs realised he just sounded scared. His captors’ cruel laughter told him they heard it too.

‘Nothing’s going to happen to us,’ said the big man from right behind Drebs’ left ear. His breath was wet and sour-smelling. ‘Because no-one is ever going to know you was here.’

The reality of the situation finally crashed home at that, and Drebs fought madly. He pulled one arm from the grip of the man on his right, surprising the tattooed heretic. He flailed that arm, landing a glancing blow on one of his captors and then fumbling madly at his belt for his shock-truncheon. If he could unhook it and thumb its activation rune he might—

The pipe hit him in the small of the back this time, and with unnatural force. Even through vulcanised robes and flakweave armour the blow was agony. Drebs screamed. He would have fallen had not his captors snatched him with fresh ferocity and dragged him onwards. Tingling jolts shot along Drebs’ limbs from where the pipe had struck. His truncheon was ripped from his belt and flung away.



Through a haze of pain, Drebs realised that a fiery glow was growing around him and that the blistering heat was growing more intense by the moment. Holy terror suffused him at the thought that they were bearing him into the forbidden and most sacred heart of the reactor. He felt as though the fluid was boiling off his eyeballs. Drebs tried to take shallow breaths, and to avoid picturing his skin curling like burning parchment.

‘Are you mad?’ he croaked. ‘We have to get out of here! The wrath of the holy machine... the heat...’

The heretics just laughed.

‘We don’t fear the holy machine,’ sneered the big brute, now striding ahead to the edge of an observation gantry. He stood amidst a swimming haze, his skin visibly scalding and blistering in the furious heat, and gestured over the edge. ‘We have other gods now. Much more powerful than that cold and distant thing on Mars.’

Drebs’ heart thundered as they dragged him to the edge.

‘Please,’ he gasped. ‘Please, I... please no...’

The vast chamber rang with the dragon’s breath whoosh of steam venting, the whine and clangour of machinery and, below it all, the menacing rumble of the lava channel flowing through the ironclad depths. Drebs whimpered in agony as the heretics pushed him to the very edge so that he was looking down the hundred foot drop into a river of molten rock and dancing flames.

‘See them, Offering,’ hissed the man at his left shoulder, and Drebs shuddered at the fanaticism in his voice. The man grabbed his head and pushed it down so that the overseer could not help but stare into the flames far below. He screwed his eyes up against the glare and the pain...

...then frowned. Drebs stared, blinking away boiling tears.

There was something down there. Something in the flames. Figures, he thought, dancing, cavorting, glowing figures. But how could that be? He felt an unholy curiosity consume him, despite his awful situation, a need to know that seemed to come from somewhere outside of his mind entirely. The heretics were chanting now, but as Drebs locked eyes with the glowing beings far below him the words seemed to fade into the distance, to become irrelevant in the face of some greater revelation yet to be had.

If he looked a little longer Drebs was sure that he would be able to make out precisely what he had been missing all this time. The thing below him leered hungrily.

The blow between the shoulder blades came so suddenly that Drebs was over the edge before he had even realised. By the time his body burst into flame and hit the lava at the base of the shaft, he was already dead.

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British Cataloguing-in-Publication Data. A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library. Pictures used for illustrative purposes only.

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