



# VIGILUS DEFIANT

THE THREE-ARMED GUNFIGHTER

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Gedder Khole's chest burned and his legs threatened to give way beneath him at any moment, but still he ran on. He could hear the thunder of boots behind him, and the shouted orders of Arbites enforcers. Only terror kept him going. He knew what they would do to him if they caught him, if they saw the glow of lumin paint splattered across his coat, staining his fingers.

'Halt, deviant!' someone roared. There was a deafening crack, and a hole was blasted in the wall mere inches from Gedder's head, showering him with shards of rockcrete.

Ahead, the alleyway tightened to barely the width of a man. Gedder was a scrawny creature, but even he had to dodge and twist his way through the burnt-out skeletons of refuse troughs. He was certain this path opened onto Glaive's Row, and beyond that were the slum-markets, likely empty at this hour save for a few vagrants and chem-heads. His only chance to slip away.

Too late he saw the black-armoured figure step out in front of him. The impact of a heavy baton in his chest sent him into a sprawling half-somersault, and he landed on his neck on the rockcrete, skidding across the street and tearing the flesh from his back. Agonising pain enveloped him. Each breath dragged heated knives across his ribs. He rolled over and vomited blood, his vision swimming.

'Did you see him fly?' said his assailant, his voice filled with good humour. 'Little scum-rat near took off.'

A vice-like grip closed around Gedder's shoulders, and dragged him roughly about. Through blurry eyes he stared into the black, full-faced visor of an Arbites enforcer.

‘Defacing the Arc of Penitence with heretical symbols?’ growled the huge man, dragging Gedder to his feet as easily as if he were taking a baby from its cot. ‘Public execution. You’ll burn for this.’

‘If he’s lucky,’ came another voice. The two enforcers who had pursued Gedder through the streets of Tartak Subsprawl emerged from the alley, both carrying huge, drum-barrelled riot guns. ‘There’s worse fates for filth like this one.’

Gedder had never thought of himself as a brave man, but a strange fearlessness came over him then. He smiled at his captors through bloodied teeth.

‘You think death scares me?’ he said. ‘I’ve got the glowlung. Twenty years in the chem-pits and that’s all I’ve got to show for it – a body that’s falling apart piece by piece, and a skull that aches so bad I can’t sleep or eat or stand without spitting blood.’

A mailed fist crashed into his jaw, sending him spinning to the floor once again. Gedder felt shattered teeth spill from his mouth.



‘Shut your mouth,’ said the Arbites enforcer. ‘Talking comes later. Trust me, when you’re nailed to a shock-rig you won’t be able to stop. We know you’re not the only one who’s been painting the image of the three-armed mutant across these streets.’

‘The Hero of Hyghan,’ slurred Gedder, swaying as he hauled himself to his knees. Each choked-out word sent ripples of agony through his battered body. ‘The one who put a bullet between Arbitrator Drau’s eyes, just as the old rat deserved. He fights for us. Not your priests, not for the bluebloods, safe in their high spires. For the people.’

‘Grak,’ cursed one of the Arbites, gesturing with his riot gun at the wall of

Sumphouse Core, rising over the slanted roofs of the hab-blocks to their left.

On the highest stacks of the anvil-shaped building, scrawled in rad-green luminescent paint, was the image of a cloaked, three-armed figure, each hand clutching a heavy pistol.

‘You can kill me, but you can’t douse the spark,’ said Gedder. ‘The fire is—’

A kick to the gut shut him up. As he folded over in pain, he felt the muzzle of a riot shotgun jammed roughly against the back of his head.

‘We’ll find this mutant scum,’ snarled the enforcer who had struck him. ‘Even if we have to burn this damned hole to ashes and drag every filthy hive-rat in the district to the cells for questioning. We will find him.’

‘You already have.’

The voice was utterly calm. Gedder raised his eyes, and through a bloody blur he saw a figure standing atop the hood of an overturned conveyor, watching them through coal-black eyes. The man’s long cloak fluttered in the wind, but otherwise he stood as motionless as a monument, most of his face hidden by a bandana wrapped around his jaw. Gedder could just make out the glint of a silver autostub barrel at the figure’s left hip.

The enforcers froze. Time stood still. There was a creak of leather as the biggest of them tensed and unclenched one meaty fist. The glowing light of lumin paint was briefly reflected in the distant gunslinger’s unnerving orbs.

Without warning, the spell was broken. The enforcers’ riot guns came up with practised speed, but the cloaked figure had already cleared his holster. A thunderous crack echoed across the street, and one of the enforcers was hurled backwards to slam into the wall, blood spurting from a ruined chest. Spinning with impossible speed, the gunslinger drew a second pistol, and shots rang out so fast that for an instant Gedder thought a heavy stubber had opened up. The bodies of the two remaining enforcers simply came apart, their mesh armour bodygloves disintegrating in a hail of slugs. Blood spattered across Gedder’s face, and a corpse fell across him, pinning him to the floor.

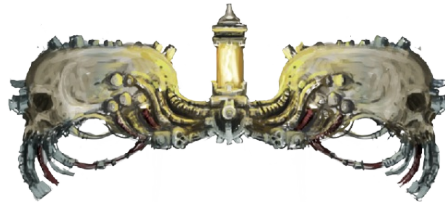
An engine roared. Drawn by the gunfire, a combat bike sped into the street from an adjacent alley, the enforcer atop it raising what looked like a bolter as he gunned towards the cloaked figure.

The gunfighter swept his cloak aside, revealing a third arm that clutched an additional heavy autostub. Another shot rang out, and the bike's fuel rig detonated in a blossoming fireball, sending the vehicle and its unfortunate rider spinning through the air. The gunslinger took a single step to the side as the burning wreckage flew past him, lighting a great shower of sparks as it tumbled and scraped across the street.

The entire fight had lasted no more than a few seconds, yet four hardened agents of the Adeptus Arbites lay dead. Not one of them had even fired a shot in answer.

'B...by the Emperor,' muttered Gedder.

The gunslinger twirled his three pistols, slamming them back into their holsters one by one. Then he turned, moving with unhurried grace, as the burning skeleton of the enforcer's bike hissed and spat goutts of flame. He approached Gedder, still squirming under the corpse of the fallen enforcer. With surprising ease, the cloaked man hauled the dead body aside.



'Your Emperor is a lie,' said the figure, standing over Gedder, silhouetted against the sickly night sky. 'But I can show you the truth, old one.'

He extended a hand. Its fingers were long and thin, almost spider-like. Gedder reached out and took it, gritting his teeth as he clambered to his feet.

The gunslinger led him into the shadows of a nearby alley, where a river of grey-brown water seeped from a rusted grate.

'I always believed the tales,' he said, hearing the tremble in his words. 'I always knew you were real. That you would lead the great uprising and save us all from tyranny.'

'I'm no saviour,' said the gunslinger, bending down and tearing the grate free. Wire-roaches hissed and spilled from the mouth of the opening. 'Just a messenger, bringing the word of the star saviours to those who need to hear it.'

He stepped aside, and gestured into the outflow pipe.

Gedder's brow knotted in confusion, but he bent down and stared into the darkness. Gingerly, he entered the opening. He heard the skittering of limbs, and a host of lambent eyes peered back at him. He had an impression of obscene, alien wetness, of writhing chitin and drooling strands of saliva.

'What is this?' he said, overcome by a primal sense of dread.

He turned, scrambling to get out of that terrible place, but the grate slammed shut in his face. The face of the gunslinger appeared, illuminated by a strip of moonlight. It no longer appeared the face of a saviour. Its flesh was waxy and pallid, and a bony ridge ran down the centre of its skull. Those eyes, those black eyes, no longer reflected the light of rebellion. Now they offered nothing but cold, alien indifference.

'Let me out!' Gedder screeched, his voice rising as panic seized him. 'There's something... moving in here!'

The gunslinger did not answer. Something closed around Gedder's ankle and pulled with terrible strength. The last thing he saw before he was dragged into darkness was his own terrified face reflected in those pitiless eyes.

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