



SHADOWSPEAR

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

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The doors of the hellish forge burst open with a resounding clang. It was a death knell for one of the weapon-slaves, that much Echotrel Fivethree knew from bitter experience. The masters dealt only in the currency of the kill.

‘You.’ A distorted snarl came from the other side of the mechanical terror in front of him, the daemoniac Venomcrawler that Echotrel’s team had given their health, blood and sanity to placate. ‘It is your time.’

Echotrel felt a claw of terror upon his soul, but it was Daunta Nine beside him who was yanked from her workstation by her neck. She was lifted bodily over the hexagrammatic diagram on the rockcrete around the Daemon Engine, then flung roughly towards the glowing arches of the Forge Infernus.

Her brief scream was jagged, painful to hear, as she scabbled away. Echotrel had felt something for her, once, despite it all. He had often imagined fighting on her behalf against the masters. Yet all he felt now was a profound relief it wasn’t him. He lowered his head even further with a whirr of crude bionics, ignoring a jolt of pain from his ravaged neck as he tried to blend in with the panels and tubes of the spider-legged machine.

The weapon-slave could see his reflection in the burnished black abdomen of the war engine. The figure that stared back was pale, drawn, plastered with crude bolstering cybernetics and scarred with an eight-pointed

disfiguration. He hated that sight, just as he hated getting close to the creature, even now. Sometimes his reflection smiled, even though he had done no such thing. That was the last thing he felt like doing.



His every instinct still screamed at him to get away, despite having worked on the monstrous thing for weeks. His fingers, scorched and calloused so much they seemed more like gloves of burned flesh than nimble digits, shook with raw fear. Yet he forced himself close. He would rather be pressed wholly up against the hot metal hide of the Daemon Engine than risk coming to the notice of the figures behind.

Yes, said the Daemon inside the shell, speaking inside his mind. Come close. One slip of the chain, fellow slave. One slip.

He felt his gorge rise at the sheer otherness of the thing, but pushed the hot swell of bile down. He screwed his eyes tight. Must stay focused, Echotrel thought. To vomit now, to show weakness, would be to write his own death warrant. The next thing he would know would be a ceramite fist to the back of the head, breaking his skull and damning him to the corpse-rot piles that stank and putrefied under the gantries.

Echotrel saw something massive in his peripheral vision, heard the metallic thudding of power armoured feet as one of the masters stamped by.

Focus, said the Daemon machine. Set me free. Time runs short.

There was a series of muffled explosions in the distance, far louder to his ears than usual now that the forge doors were wide open. More ordnance. The Imperials were not giving Nemendghast up, not yet. He could feel the Daemon's eagerness to get out there, to join the killing. Something inside him felt much the same, he realised with a shiver. At least if he fought, he

could escape this hideous reality through a swift death.

‘This one,’ said a distorted bass voice behind him. A heavy gauntlet thumped down on his shoulder, sending spiderweb pulses of pain coursing through his neck and collarbone. ‘He has the mark upon him, or close enough.’

He felt one of the masters lean down, the heat of his vox-grille on the top of his pate. ‘Take up the chain, slave. Break the sigil, and lead the beast out. We have need of it.’

Yes, screamed the Daemon Engine. *Out! Out!*



Shaking badly, Echotrel turned to face the swollen machine. Its awful, fleshy face was dominated by two large glass eyes that stared madness into his soul. Hideous mandibles thrashed and clicked, drooling ropes of oil that spattered at his feet.

Pick up the chain!

Echotrel picked up the runic chain, each black-iron link heavy and hot enough to sear the skin of his hands. He forced himself to turn around. Carefully erasing a section of the chalk hexagrammatic diagram with the toe of his boot, he took a few steps, praying to the gods of the Dark Forge that the Daemon Engine wouldn't pounce on him now it was free of the binding hex. He could imagine it crashing into him from behind, injecting him with its ichor-venom or smashing his bones to splinters on the broken concrete of the corrupted manufactorium, just for the spite of it.

The slave walked towards the forge doors, his legs threatening to rebel against him. Even the slightest stumble could be enough to trigger the predatory instincts of the Daemon, to make it see him as fodder, rather than a critical key to its escape.

Echotrel felt his breath catch as he walked under the vast beams of the door arch. The sight of the fire-scarred sky was too much for his mind to take, and he felt a screaming migraine push its fingers into his forebrain. The celestial phenomenon was awful, magnificent, humbling, mind-blasting in its intensity, as if the gods themselves stared back down at him through the Great Scar.

Orange explosions blossomed in the darkness to either side of the huge dome that dominated the industrial skyline, and the boxy blue aircraft of the Emperor's lapdogs left fat contrails as they roared overhead. These sights were nothing, next to the Scar. Echotrel stood stock still, transfixed.

The Daemon burst past him in a flurry of limbs, ripping the chain from his palsied hands. One of the jagged spines on its legs tore open his ribcage on the way past, shattering his reverie. He fell, a thin, wheezing scream coming out amidst a blurt of bloody froth, and sank to his knees before curling up into a ball like an infant. The monster was already scurrying into the pipe-tangled wilderness ahead. It gave vent to a hideous shriek that was halfway between a steam whistle and the triumphant wail of a tortured soul finally escaping its purgatory.



A torrent of emotions swirled within Echotrel as he watched the hideous thing leap onto a low roof – relief, pain, fear, and even some kind of paternal pride. The guns on its flanks, weapons he had oiled only hours before, pivoted smoothly, hammering glowing bullets into the Space Marines descending from the sooty clouds. One of the loyalists came in too close, and the multi-limbed Daemon leapt at it like a flea, smashing its prey from the sky.

A thin whistle of descending ordnance, and the ridged dome up ahead had

its top section torn away in a blast of spinning shrapnel. A roiling column of flame came from within, as if some vast drake had been angered in its lair. The cause of the explosion became clear as a trio of Space Marine flyers roared overhead, missiles shooting downwards to collapse more of the giant hemisphere.

Three of the daemoniac spider-engines clambered out of the ravaged dome, then three more, then a dozen, spilling like insects from a hidden nest. Larger Daemon-beasts crawled amongst them, stomping with piston-driven force into the fray. Echotrel watched in horrified fascination, eyes widening as his fingers were slicked with the wet gore of his opened ribs. There were hundreds of the things, and they were pouring into the streets to fall upon the beachheads of the attacking Space Marines.

Hail the dark gods, thought Echotrel; the masters were right after all. Nemendghast belonged to the Daemon, and the Daemon alone.

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