



# VIGILUS ABLAZE

THE VOICE IN THE SPIRE

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As the Valkyrie vanished into the impenetrable cloud of smog, the squad of the 52nd White Kestrels assembled along the narrow gantry. The wind clawed viciously at the speckled feathers sewn into their uniforms. Above them, the spire rose another several hundred feet, although they could not see more than a few storeys. Far below, through rare gaps in the fog, they caught glimpses of the great hivesprawl of Hyperia stretching across the planet's surface, nothing more than a dark stain lit by the glow of fires that burned in the war-torn streets.

The gantry they stood on was just a few feet wide, and with the wind howling so fiercely, it was a dangerous vantage point.

'Secure safety lines,' Sergeant Matius ordered.

The squad hastened to comply, affixing the sinuous cables to the spire's twisting architecture. Fitted to a robust body harness, these cords were designed to prevent accidental fall, which Matius was convinced had been the cause of the disappearance of the squad they had been sent up to find. There was certainly no sign of their presence here, and the wind could easily have carried their falling bodies far across the city to end up in a pile of corpses indistinguishable from any other.

The squad they sought had been sent up to investigate reports of great, bat-winged creatures nesting in the spires. Fanciful tales, Matius had thought, and there were certainly no beasts of that nature to be seen in this smog-clad hellscape.

'Not even any birds,' the sergeant muttered to himself.

Nevertheless, as he glimpsed the angry maw of the Great Rift through the

clouds, he couldn't ignore a nagging voice of doubt. Something didn't feel right.

The Valkyrie had been unable to drop them off any higher due to the screaming winds, so they were forced to make the perilous climb, hand over hand, to the upper heights of the spire. At frequent junctures, they cast off and reattached their safety lines, the process tortuous and slow.

The building at these altitudes was barely solid, just limbs of rigging held together with a tangled web of cables that whipped and shook in the storm. More than once the squad was forced to press themselves against the structure and cling blindly for what felt like hours as a raging blizzard swept across them. More than once a guardsman was hurled from their precarious position and out into the wide white nothingness below – only to be hauled slowly back by their line.

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As the first night fell, the oppressive presence of the Cicatrix Maledictum pressed down on them.

‘Avert your eyes, guardsman,’ Matius barked, catching Humbolt gazing into the sky.

‘Sorry sarge,’ the young guardsman said, obeying. ‘It just feels so much closer now. I can't seem to stop...’

They had all been trained not to look up at it, but even Matius was finding it difficult to ignore. Perhaps it was just the proximity at this altitude, but he could feel it clawing its way into his thoughts. He sensed some dark thing at work, although he could not determine what.

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On the second morning, strange sounds were carried to them on the wind. A disconnected voice drifted through the grey sky, its words indecipherable. It came and went, just on the edge of hearing, so that none of them could be sure they had really heard it at all. It mingled with the howling of the gale and the creaking of the spire, so that it soon seemed like just another feature of this terrible, unending place. They could no longer see the world below them, and the spire above was just a mirage, an unattainable goal towards which they were destined to climb forever. They were alone, completely, each man and woman a captive of their own mind.

The voice spoke to them, louder now and more insistent. It formed words they could hear, but not understand.

‘What is it?’ whispered Forster.

‘Sounds like a vox transmission,’ replied Perfew. She checked her set. ‘But it’s not coming over any of the normal channels.’

‘It’s more than that,’ Humbolt said, hugging himself tighter to the bulk of the spire, as if it might somehow protect him from this ethereal menace. ‘It’s like it’s in my thoughts. Like it’s always been there.’

‘Less talking,’ Matius snapped from above.

The Kestrels fell silent, but the voice did not.

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As they rested on a narrow promontory, Matius noticed Humbolt standing with his back to the squad, his hands up near his face, working rapidly at something. As he approached, the sergeant could make out a whimpering sound, a voice distinct from that which had been haunting them since dawn, and yet forming the same indecipherable language. He spun the guardsman around, then staggered

backwards in shock, almost stepping off the ledge. Humbolt, his arms now slack as if all life had left them, had taken his combat knife and chiselled spidery runes all across his face, the wounds seeping blood that ran over his cheeks and down his neck into the collar of his uniform. When he looked upon the sigils, Matius felt a revulsion that turned his stomach, and yet he could not look away.

The rest of the squad were sheltering just around the curve of the tower. They had not yet seen the desecration of Humbolt's face – and Matius had no intention of letting them. Some evil was at work here, and he would not allow it to spread. Breaking from his trance, he took the knife from the guardsman's quivering hands, then quickly and decisively cut through Humbolt's safety rope and pushed the young man over the edge. Humbolt emitted no scream as he fell through the white cold cloud – he merely looked up at his sergeant, whom he had followed for three years, with unflinching, bloodshot eyes.

'Check your safety lines!' Matius shouted, running around to the rest of the squad. 'Humbolt's just sheared right through.' He paused for a moment to compose his face to one of sorrow. 'He fell,' he said, and the rest of the squad stared at him with haunting expressions.

'He's gone, sarge?' Denning said, peering down into the mass of cloud. 'Just like that...' Her tone sent a chill down Matius' spine. There was something in it that was closer to fascination than to the grief she should be feeling.

'Check your lines!' Matius repeated, dismissing the notion.

Perfew began reciting the prayer of blessed affixation as she looked over her connections. The others followed suit.

Night fell, and the disembodied voice came once more, louder and clearer again. Still Matius could not understand the words, but still they made his skin crawl with fear. There was no sleep to be had, and the four remaining guardsmen sat frozen on the ledge, not a word passing between them but for the feverish muttering of protective wards.

The following day brought no solace. Just more wind, more climbing, and the voice. There were no dragons in this spire, no earthly horror that they could fight with bullet and blade. Just the constant terror and doubt of their own thoughts.

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It was Denning who next succumbed, her face etched with the unintelligible scrawl, her eyes betraying a soundless scream. This time there was no keeping it from the rest of the squad – they all witnessed it. But when Matius flung her from the rafters, no one protested.

‘We should go back down, sarge,’ Perfew ventured, her voice shaking. ‘It’s not right up here. It’s not natural. There’s only three of us left.’

‘We do our duty,’ Matius said, as if reciting a liturgy of conscription. ‘We keep climbing.’

‘Shouldn’t we report this?’ she pressed.

‘We’re out of range,’ he replied, although he wasn’t sure that was true. These events should be recorded, he knew, but he found he was unable to summon the words to do so.

‘Keep climbing,’ he said.

Forster led the way, putting up no argument.

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When they reached the next ledge, Matius knew what would happen, but felt powerless to prevent it. The voice was almost a scream now, a fever pitch that clawed at the back of the eyes. It was Forster who turned, those red welts almost forming words in the flesh of his face.

Matius and Perfew evicted Forster’s quivering body together, then sat staring into the white void, neither able to meet the other’s gaze.

‘I think I’m starting to understand,’ Perfew said, after a long and hollow silence.

When Matius looked at her with incomprehension, she explained, ‘The voice. I’m starting to understand what it’s saying.’

‘Don’t,’ Matius said quickly, as if denying its existence would rob it of its power. ‘Don’t speak of it.’

‘It’s not going away,’ she said. But he turned his back on her and drew his greatcoat collar up about his ears. He could not admit that he was also beginning to make out some of the words.

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He must have slept, somehow, although he couldn’t remember doing so. But as he came to, dawn had come again and he was alone. There was no sign of Perfew. Her safety harness lay in a crumpled heap beside him. The clouds broke for a moment, and a glimmer of sunlight spilled through onto the place where he sat. For the first time in memory, he felt contented, and he smiled. A voice spoke to him of the coming of the end of all things, and he understood. As he turned to continue his climb towards salvation, he caught a reflection of his face in the polished steel of the spire. Written there in the flesh were red words of sacred profanity – the instructions for his unholy ascension. He obeyed.

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