



VIGILUS ABLAZE

AQUA SANCTUS

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Destimus Tanyon stood at the fringes of the crowd that had amassed in the debris-strewn square. It was the largest gathering he had seen in Hyperia since the outbreak of the war. Until now, most common-folk had stayed indoors when not at work in the manufactorums, for fear of getting caught up in the fighting. But now they were driven abroad by their thirst, and they thronged angrily against the doors of the Ministorum building, clinking their scavenged vessels loudly against the ancient stone.

It would come to nothing, Tanyon knew. The aqua subterra was all but dried up, the underground wells from which it had been drawn long ago poisoned by the xenos menace that had infiltrated Vigilus society. The aqua gladius no longer came into Saint's Haven, the ice-mines of Kaelac's Bane now overrun by raiders. And with Megaborealis under constant siege, the asteroidal water of aqua meteoris could not be farmed by the Greater Ommissian Hoist. Only the blessed aqua sanctus remained, and what little of that was locked up safely within the walls of Martyr's Pyre. It was reserved only for those who did the work of the Emperor, and could not be wasted.



Tanyon's own thirst had been slaked with the holy liquid only that morning, and he had been granted the great fortune to drink in the presence of his piousness, Pontifex Slyne Galluck, embodiment of the Emperor's will. It must be time for

another sup, he thought. Seeing all these people was giving him a thirst. The Preacher signalled for his bodyguard of faithful Vigilant Guard to forge a path through the throng, and walked in their wake towards the cathedral's entrance.

As they noticed him and recognised his sacred robes, the crowd transferred their attention to him, yelling spiteful invectives in his direction.

'Be at ease,' he intoned, his voice taking on the conciliatory tone he used so often in his sermons. 'The Emperor protects. You have nothing to fear. Trust in the Ministorum.' He waved his hands for calm.

As members of the crowd jostled against him, he saw their emaciated forms through their ragged clothes, felt as one woman clawed at his hand the dryness of her skin.

A shout went up at the back of the throng as a volley of jugs and bottles were flung towards him, the rioters so driven to madness that they would sacrifice their precious pots just for a chance to draw his blood.

'Savages,' the Preacher muttered as the missiles were deftly deflected by his bodyguard.

The doors of the cathedral opened to let him pass, and he slipped inside before the crowd was able to follow. Within the vaunted halls, he breathed deeply, the sickening stench of the common-folk replaced by the perfume of the incensed air. The clamour of the angry protesters gave way to solemn silence, and he contented himself that even on Vigilus there still existed places of sanctuary and reverence. Instructing his bodyguard to remain by the doors for his return, he proceeded through the cloisters, his robes swishing along the polished stone floor.



Sister Superior Susana stood before the ornate stone font in which the precious water of the Ministorum was stored, her boltgun cradled in her arms. This was one of several such shrines held within the great hivespire, each guarded by Sisters of the Order of Our Martyred Lady and blessed by priests with holy unguents. The heady smell of scented smoke that filled the antechamber was so strong it was almost acrid, the flagellants having doubled their liturgical censuring since the riots outside had begun.

Beside her stood her fellow Sister, Zoel, her face like hers a mask of quiet contemplation. Yet inside, Susana was unable to quell a growing unease. Her reverie was broken when the corpulent figure of Preacher Tanyon hove out of the fragrant mists and waved an arm grandly to announce his arrival.

‘My blessed Sister,’ he began, ‘how sour the tides of fate have turned of late.’

‘Indeed, Preacher. This world and its people are at the peril of countless grave dangers.’

‘Its people? Its people?’ the Preacher blustered. ‘Nothing but useless wastrels. Scoundrels. Who is working in the manufactorums, I ask you? Who is building our guns and producing our ammunition? No one! Selfish, idle, the lot of them. No respect. No gratitude!’ He was waving his finger at her as if giving a sermon, then remembered himself and lowered his arm.

‘They are thirsty, Preacher. They have nothing—’ She stopped speaking as the sound of an explosion reached them, and the walls shook with the force.

‘See what that was,’ she barked at Zoel, who obediently vanished into the cloisters, her boltgun raised.

‘A skirmish somewhere in the city, no doubt,’ the Preacher said. ‘Some xenos scum giving target practice for the Vigilant Guard.’

‘It was close,’ Susana replied. ‘You ought to get somewhere safe.’

Before either of them could act, Zoel returned, at a run.

‘It’s the rioters, Sister Superior,’ she said breathlessly. ‘They’ve breached the walls! They’re coming in!’

‘Emperor give us strength,’ Susana whispered, as she heard the shouts and rattle of gunfire approaching through the drafty halls.

‘The sacred cloisters have been polluted, Sisters!’ the Preacher cried. ‘Purge this infestation!’



The vanguard of the rioting crowd spilled into the chamber, torches and crude weapons held aloft. Zoel raised her boltgun and they stopped, their leader spreading his arms out across the gaggle of scrawny protesters in a protective gesture.

Susana saw the man gaze at her with an awed expression. It was a reaction she was used to receiving when she encountered civilians, so unaccustomed were they to witnessing the stature and grace of a Sister of Battle in the flesh. But his eyes were haunted by suffering, and she found herself stirring uncomfortably beneath his glare.

‘Please,’ he said, gesturing to the font with the empty bottle he held in one hand. ‘We are so thirsty.’

‘Purge them!’ Tanyon clamoured.

Zoel took a step forwards, her gun trained on the leader.

‘Wait.’

Sister Susana walked past her comrade and approached the restless throng. She wrenched the bottle from the leader’s hand and studied it. With an air of reverence, she took the bottle back to the font and filled it with the consecrated liquid, before returning it to its owner. He stared at it blankly for a moment, then met her eyes in understanding.

‘Sister Superior!’ Tanyon raged, backing away to the font and obscuring it with his substantial bulk. ‘You abandon your duty to the Ecclesiarchy? To the Emperor?’

‘No, Preacher,’ Susana said. ‘I do not.’

With a tilt of her head, the Sister Superior issued a wordless order to Zoel, who

lowered her weapon and went to her commander's side. The two walked through the crowd, the people parting to let them pass like an ocean drawing in before releasing a great wave. Then, as they left the antechamber and passed through the cloisters, they heard the people baying and crying with relief and thankfulness – and their praises rang so loud that the dying shrieks of Preacher Destimus Tanyon could barely be made out at all.

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