



# VIGILUS ABLAZE

BENEATH THE SURFACE

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A blast shook the passageway, a plume of dust and debris clattering down from the ceiling. It was Sister Judith who had thrown the grenade, halting the mass of cultists who swarmed through the tunnel behind them.

‘That won’t stop them for long,’ Sister Superior Giliana said. ‘Let’s make up some ground while we can.’

The squad moved forwards quickly, forced to stoop a little by the low ceiling, their robes dulled by dust and dirt. They went with an efficient gait, Giliana in the vanguard and Sister Sadrien following watchfully at the rear. With no breath of air, the smoke from the explosion hung motionless behind them, obscuring all beyond it. Lit by the torches of their guns, the haze danced and stirred at the Sisters’ passing as if made up of a thousand tiny flies.

The warren twisted and turned, a labyrinth of identical shafts hewn haphazardly from the rock upon which the hivesprawl of Oteck stood. Already they had travelled several miles from their point of ingress, battling pockets of xenos cultists at almost every turn. The creatures in this region seemed an endless scourge.



‘Here they come!’

Sadrien’s shout came from the back of the column, and as one the Sisters turned

and raised their weapons as the multi-limbed creatures seethed from the smoke with inhuman speed. Genestealers bounded forwards like savage hounds, their claws raking the air in anticipation of stripping flesh from bone. Cultists accompanied them, some mutated beyond recognition, others almost indistinguishable from humans – all wielding their weapons with deadly intent.

The narrow confines of the tunnel forced the Sisters to adopt a layered formation, the first rows kneeling to give a clear firing line for those at the back. Flamers gouted forth streams of holy fire, and bolters filled the cavern with a riotous cacophony. The tunnel floor and walls erupted in a maelstrom of detritus as fire and bolt mowed down the oncoming xenos monstrosities. Bodies heaped upon bodies, but still they came on, Genestealers slashing through the remains of their kin in their desperation to reach their prey.

Flames licked across gleaming chitin, burning creatures squealing and screeching in the darkness as the Sisters laid down their fire with unflinching resolve.

A large specimen broke through the lines and snatched at Sister Esme with its monstrous claws, dragging her across the ground by the leg. She kicked at the creature's domed head with her free boot, but it barely noticed, its slathering maw opening to reveal rows of black, wet teeth.

'Stay down, Sister Esme,' Giliana called as she released the fury of her flamer on the atrocity. Engulfed in flames, it abandoned its prey, allowing Esme to scramble to her knees and add her bolter to the salvo. The beast floundered in the fire until it eventually fell, its blackened carcass adding to those piled on the ground.

'Another grenade, I think, Sister Judith,' Giliana said, as she helped Esme to stand. Judith nodded her assent, and tossed a frag grenade down the tunnel as the Sisters shielded their faces from the blast. When the shaking subsided, they saw wounded cultists dragging themselves out of the debris, their bodies ruined and littered with shrapnel. One by one, the Sisters put them down before moving off down the tunnel.

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The squad paused to rest in a wide chamber. They had found a few of these throughout the complex, and they provided a brief respite from the cramped conditions of the tunnels.

‘These warrens surely cannot go on much further,’ Esme breathed, as Sadrien bent to apply a healing unguent to the gash on her leg. ‘We must have slain a hundred of those creatures.’

‘Only when the last xenos abomination has been purged from this place will our duty be done,’ Sadrien replied, standing.

‘They spread like an infection.’

‘And we will cleanse the wound,’ Sadrien said, resolved.

‘Come, we must keep moving,’ Giliana said, leading the Sisters into the next tunnel.

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At each junction in the network, Giliana had Judith carve the sign of the Aquila into the rock with her knife to mark the way they had come. The more sigils they re-encountered, the more their hope built that at last they had mapped out the entirety of the warren.

It had been perhaps a few hours since their last encounter with the cultists, and the corridors here were in better repair. Without needing to stop and shift debris out of their path, the Sisters made quick progress, and their spirits lifted. Giliana was looking forward to getting back to the wider war; she knew Imperial forces were stretched to breaking point on the surface. As soon as this threat was purged, her squad would be able to join the real fight.

She stopped, her fist in the air, and her Sisters fell in line behind her. She thought she’d seen a movement up ahead, a figure shifting in the shadows...

‘Stay alert,’ she whispered, and the squad lifted their weapons in readiness.

A bulky shape became visible at the end of the tunnel – a creature far larger than any they had yet encountered down here. Giliana had heard of mutants that stood far taller than a man, but she had never fought one. She muttered a prayer of resolve. The shape was moving quickly now, but not with the animal-like fervour of the xenos. Then she heard it – the unmistakable whir of servos, the crump of power-armoured boots. Out of the gloom an imposing warrior emerged, clad in the pale blue-grey of the Space Wolves.

‘Stand down,’ Giliana ordered, and the squad obeyed.

She could tell by his ichor-spattered armour that the Space Marine had seen his fair share of battle down here.

‘Sister Superior Giliana, Order of the Last Prioress,’ she addressed him.

He looked her up and down.

‘I see you’ve been down here a while,’ he remarked, and Giliana noted that the state of her own squad’s armour was not much better than his.

‘Too long,’ she responded.

‘It’s a forsaken place, make no mistake. I lost the rest of my pack in battle with the disgusting xenos beasts.’ He spat on the floor.

‘All of them?’ Giliana couldn’t hide her surprise. The threat was significant, but she had not believed it so dire to pose such a danger to the Adeptus Astartes. She felt blessed to have lost none of her own in this excursion. ‘I knew the sons of Russ were abroad in Oteck, but I didn’t expect to meet any down here,’ she said.

‘It’s a pleasure I would joyfully have gone without, Sister,’ the Pack Leader replied. ‘Bron Snowpelt,’ he announced.

Giliana inclined her head in formal greeting.

‘Perhaps together we can end this menace, and avenge your brothers,’ she said. ‘I believe we’ve almost mapped the whole complex, and you must have covered a great deal of ground yourself...’

She tailed off as she saw the Space Wolf snap to attention, his senses trained down the corridor. Then she heard it, a familiar scrabbling sound coming from up ahead.

‘Here we go again,’ he growled.

A new wave of Genestealers swarmed from the darkness. Snowpelt’s weapon barked, cutting a swathe through the racing horde, but more spilled in to take the place of the dead. Giliana unleashed her flamer, its cleansing fire burning a channel into the oncoming wave, while her Sisters fell into formation, their own weapons adding to the cacophony.

The creatures ran recklessly into the Imperial guns as if compelled by some force even stronger than their normal ferocity. They seethed in the flashes of light and flame, moving like a single organism.



‘Fall back to the chamber!’ Giliana called. The Sisters continued firing as they moved backwards in tight formation. Snowpelt followed them, bringing down a portion of the ceiling to slow the creatures’ advance.

Upon reaching the chamber, the Imperials had only a moment to regroup before the wave began spilling through the entrance. Resuming their onslaught, the Sisters and the Space Wolf mowed their foes down as quickly as they came.

Then the living tide parted, and a figure emerged from the tunnel that now lay shrouded in dust. While the Genestealers were stooped low like animals, this being walked upright like a human, and wore long, ornate robes emblazoned with a sigil – a spiked worm curled upon itself. At the figure’s head the similarity with humanity ended, for its crown was swollen to three times the size of a normal skull, and ridged with thick purple veins that pulsed as if alive.

‘You are not welcome here,’ he announced in a hiss.

Giliana immediately felt the hybrid’s psychic presence, the voice speaking directly into her mind. She recoiled at the violation, which was harder to endure than any physical pain.

‘Vigilus belongs to us. Our ascension is inevitable. There is no point trying to

fight it.’ He slid forwards as if transported upon a carpet of serpents.

‘Xenos scum!’ Esme spat, training her gun on the creature.

He raised a hand and she froze, her eyes clouding over. She lowered her weapon.

‘As you see, you are powerless to stop us. We are endless, and we are righteous. We are the inheritors of this world—’

With an indignant cry, Sister Judith hurled a grenade at the creature. The other Sisters and Snowpelt barely had time to take cover before the detonation shook the whole chamber, reigning detritus on them all. With a screech, the xenos hybrid disappeared as if swallowed by the dust.

The Genestealers surged forth once more, but their numbers were dwindling now and they seemed to have lost some of their fervour. The Sisters made short work of what was left of them.

‘Where did it go?’ Giliana demanded, as Judith tended to Esme.

‘Over here, Sister,’ Bron Snowpelt called, standing at the spot where the creature had vanished.

The Sister Superior joined the Space Wolf at the edge of a jagged hole in the ground. The bedrock was thin here, and Judith’s grenade had ripped right through it.

Snowpelt dropped a lumen into the hole and she watched, first with astonishment and then with despair, as it fell several hundred feet down into a vast cavern, at least five times larger than the one they were in. As the dust settled, she could just make out the broken body of the psyker on the floor, but the sight gave her little comfort.

‘It looks like we might be down here longer than you thought,’ Snowpelt said.

There, lit by the dull glow of the lumen, was another great maze of tunnels winding out into the uncharted darkness, and a thousand glinting eyes staring up in cold defiance.

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