

# Black Pearl

*An Eternal Crusade short story by Graham McNeill*

Candles guttered low in Chapter Master Azrael's private chapel. They burned in sconces formed of greenskin skulls taken on the bloody fields of Piscina. Light shone from empty eye sockets and wax dripped from yellowed tusks. Azrael had taken the skulls himself, and remembered each blow with eidetic precision.

The sword that struck these heads lay on the obsidian altar he knelt before; its edge as keen as the day it left the artificer's forge. One of the legendary *heavenfall* blades, the Sword of Secrets was a relic from ancient days, a potent reminder of all he and the Chapter represented.

Like the masterfully-crafted bolt pistol sitting next to it, the weapon was bound to him by a duty without equal. Other Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes had their oaths, some also stretching back to the lost days of the Arch-Traitor's betrayal, but none bore such a burden as the Dark Angels.

And none among the Dark Angels bore that burden as heavily as Azrael. He wondered, as he often did when in penitential solitude, if Naberius felt as he did. The previous Chapter Master had died on the hunt, but had never spoken of what it meant to lead so honourable a Chapter in war.

Azrael had always sensed a deep well of sorrow in the long-dead warrior, a depth of grief and shame that was now his to bear and which only now he truly understood.

A low fog of incense clung to the hooded statues at the edges of the small chapel, and weak starlight shone through the painted armaglass lancet windows. He knew he was not alone, but the watcher remained unseen in the darkness, its silent gaze never leaving him as he recited the familiar litanies of exculpation on his knees.

The altar was graven with images from the Chapter's history, Piscina, Mooraghen, Byzanthis, Dulan, Rebulus, Vraks and, of course, Caliban itself. Stone-cut warriors from ancient times, heroes all, fought xenos and the vilest of the vile; those who had forsaken the Emperor and cast their lot with the enemies of Mankind.

Azrael knew every image upon the altar, had memorised every aspect of the wars they described, and sought the hidden meanings behind their waging. The litanies of battle revealed only what the Dark

Angels wished, but only Azrael and those inducted into the Chapter's most secret mysteries understood the deeper truths behind them.

He felt the watcher retreat into the darkness and sensed a whisper of movement in the air behind him. A Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels was never truly alone, but this was no silent observer standing in judgement, this was another transhuman giant, one of his warriors. From the pregnant weight of expectation he sensed, he knew exactly who had entered his chapel.

Only one warrior would interrupt him during his devotions. He stood smoothly, lifting the sword and pistol from the altar as he rose. The blade captured the light, reflecting a blood red glow from its star-forged edge.

'Cassiel,' said Azrael, holstering the pistol at his side.

'My lord,' said the Interrogator Chaplain, taking a step into the cold chapel. His dark hair was pulled tightly over his skull, bound by a bronzed circlet. The candlelight didn't quite reach his hooded eyes, which were as dark as the ebon pearls moulded into the pommel of his sword.

'She is here?'

'Her ship awaits your decision, my lord.'

'What to the portents of the Librarius say?'

Cassiel hesitated before answering.

'They feel there is merit in hearing what the inquisitor has to say.'

'And you?' said Azrael. 'What do you say?'

Cassiel placed a palm over his sword's pommel, the fingers stroking the black pearls there. Azrael wondered if he even knew he was doing it.

'The Inquisition has no business aboard the Rock,' said Cassiel.

'That is not an answer, brother.'

‘It is, my lord, just not the answer you want to hear.’

‘If the threat she claims is rising is true, then we have a duty to act.’

‘Our duty is to—’

Azrael held up a hand. ‘Are you really about to tell me my duty, Brother Cassiel? Are you?’

Admonished, Cassiel bowed and said, ‘No, my lord. I would not presume to know the burden of your duty.’

‘No, you should not,’ agreed Azrael. ‘Grant Inquisitor Severina permission to come aboard. The Dark Angels will hear what she has to say of Arkhona.’

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Freezing air gusted into the stone-flagged airlock vestibule, patterning their armour in spiderwebs of hoarfrost. Vapour gathered in the vaulted ceiling and dripped from the carved stone grotesques over the arched entrance to the fortress monastery.

‘So this is the Rock?’ said Baltasar. ‘A curious mixture of aesthetic. Orbital star fort meets feudal castle. It reminds me of the noble houses of a Knight World. Cold too.’

‘What did you expect?’ said Vycor, Cadian to the core and thus impervious to discomfort. ‘This area was open to the void not ten minutes ago.’

Damaris didn’t let the biting cold affect her demeanour. The Dark Angels were undoubtedly watching, and they would measure their response to her petition on her worthiness. Showing weakness in the face of something as trivial as cold would be a bad start to negotiations.

‘Couldn’t they have allowed us aboard via an active embarkation deck?’ said Baltasar, tapping his index finger on the skull atop his cane, a skull that had once belonged to the stunted Navigator of the Black Ship upon which Damaris had recruited him.

‘Expecting concessions to your mortality shows just how little you know of the Adeptus Astartes,’ grunted Vyctor, trying to keep his free hand from inching towards the textured grip of his Kasrkin laspistol.

Baltasar shrugged, shivering beneath his thick hessian robes. A child of an exterminated world where the temperature never fell below scorching, he tolerated the cold about as well as mortal flesh would tolerate a bolt round.

Damaris held her head high as a grumbling steel bulkhead slid aside. Only darkness beyond. Not even the subtle augmetics enmeshed with her eyes could penetrate the gloom.

Her gut told her it was empty.

Not a good start, but if the Dark Angels wanted to intimidate her they were going to have to try harder than this. Damaris Severina had personally ordered the death of ten worlds and met the enemies of Mankind blade to blade. She had suffered like few others had suffered, but returned time and again to the fight.

To be an inquisitor of the Holy Ordos was to submit to a vocation of the soul, a role that could never be denied.

‘Baltasar?’ she whispered.

‘Assaying now...’

Baltasar’s hooded eyes developed cataract-like mist as he stretched his power into the darkness. The keenness of his warp-sense had saved all their lives many times, and Damaris trusted him to discern who or what was waiting for them.

‘There’s something in there,’ he said. ‘Watching us, but...’

His words trailed off, as though he could not articulate what exactly he was sensing. His features creased in a slight frown of perturbation.

‘Dark Angels?’ asked Damaris.

‘No, something...else,’ said Baltasar, letting out a soft sigh, as though whatever he had sought now slipped away from him. ‘It’s gone. Whatever it was, it’s not there now. The chamber beyond is empty.’

‘Then where are the Dark Angels?’ said Vyctor, thin lips pursed together at the perceived insult. ‘Have they no respect for the Ordos of the Inquisition?’

‘It is for us to show respect, Interrogator Lucasta,’ said Severina. ‘Few mortals ever set foot in a fortress monastery of the Adeptus Astartes. Fewer still gain admittance to the sanctum sanctorum of the First Legion. We are honoured to be here at all.’

Vyctor gave her a sidelong glance, but said nothing at her over-elaborate reply, understanding it wasn’t for his benefit.

He gave a curt bow and said, ‘Of course, mistress Damaris, we must honour our hosts with all the respect due to their august heritage.’

The Cadian wasn’t normally given to such ostentation in his words, but had served her long enough to know when to follow her lead.

‘Come on, our hosts will be waiting,’ said Damaris.

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The chamber beyond the frozen airlock was larger than she’d expected, barrel-vaulted and coffered in marble panels emblazoned with faded murals and peeling frescoes. Arcs of splintered archways abruptly ended at the external sheet steel caisson walls, suggesting they had once been part of a far grander structure.

Ice-stiffened banners hung like guillotine blades from frayed ropes, and frost-rimed statuary of armoured Space Marines and hooded acolytes stood like sentries in shadowed alcoves. Another portal opened in the far wall, revealing a stone-flagged corridor lit by flickering lumens.

Damaris set off without a word, marching deeper into the Rock as though she had every right to be there. The passageway echoed to the sound of her boot heels, eventually leading to another empty chamber, a cloister of echoes, dust and abandonment. A single iron door slid open in the adjacent wall, offering continued progress, and Damaris passed through it without hesitation.

Onwards and deeper they went.

Corridor after corridor, chamber after chamber. Passageways of stone and steel, anterooms floored in cracked oolite or hard-packed earth that reeked of age. Galleries filled with portraits so faded as to be unrecognisable and tapestries rotted with decay. Halls of armaments and vaulted spaces designed for feasting.

All empty. All capable of holding thousands of warriors, but now abandoned. The Rock was a deserted ruin, a crumbling palace of muttering shadows and haunted emptiness, where once it must have rung to the raucous cries of warriors; their boasts, their triumphs and their savage joys.

But now it was empty; the innumerable hosts of warriors long dead, and the great victories in which they once had revelled now consigned to the unremembered ages like the mouldering portraits.

At last they came to a heptagonal chamber, its stone walls lit with flickering torches and pierced by heavy timber doors banded with dark iron. Unlike before, none of the doors opened in anticipation of their onward travel.

‘Now where?’ asked Vyctor.

‘This way,’ said Damaris.

‘How do you know?’ asked Baltasar.

‘An inquisitor knows many things, Baltasar,’ said Damaris, gesturing to angular clefts gouged into the stone above each door. ‘Enough to read mason’s marks in the craft-cant of Caliban.’

‘Clever,’ said a voice from a pool of shadow Damaris would have sworn on a stack of Liber Xenotica hadn’t been there before. ‘Only a handful of people beyond these walls would know such marks, Inquisitor Damaris Severina.’

Vyctor spun to face the speaker, but Damaris pinned his hand in place with a burst of psychic force before he might do something as foolish as drawing his weapon. Baltasar sighed as the speaker stepped to meet them, a giant in robes of pale cream over inordinately bulky plate armour. The hilt of a sword emerged from the folds of robe at his waist, and seeing the pommel, she knew the kind of warrior she faced.

‘Chaplain,’ she said, with a bow.

He drew his hood back, revealing the blunt, pugnacious features of one of the Emperor’s Space Marines. His hair was dark, held by a bronze circlet, and his eyes had seen more pain than any man ever should.

‘My name is Cassiel, and the Grand Master will see you now.’

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Cassiel opened a door, not the one Damaris had indicated, and led them yet deeper into the Rock. Once again they traversed empty hallways, reliquary chambers filled with war-trophies and honour banners as well as congregational spaces spacious enough to hold entire regiments of Astra Militarum.

At the end of a long processional, one clearly not as abandoned as the others, Damaris saw a detachment of colossal terminators in battle armour of bone-white plate. They carried vast polearms, bladed with iridescent metal, and these now lowered as they approached.

‘You will surrender your weapons,’ said Cassiel, as a group of hooded servitors emerged from an adjacent chamber, bearing sealed lockboxes of lacquered black wood.

‘Of course,’ said Damaris, sensing Vyctor’s irritation. An unarmed Cadian was virtually an oxymoron, but even he understood that bearing weapons in the presence of the Chapter Master would be forbidden – even though it was singularly unlikely they could actually harm him.

Every weapon they possessed; pistols, knives, digital lasers, augmented lethalties and implanted shock-haptics were either surrendered or fitted with temporary blockers until a robed adept with clicking optics and antennae-like wands extending from the nape of its neck emitted a screech of affirmative binary.

The terminators flanked them as Cassiel led them into a long chamber with a soaring ceiling of panelled wood, rich in vein and tone, as though fresh from the forest. The walls were similarly organic, and the change was momentarily off-putting.

Perhaps that was the point.

Standing at the centre of an arc of green-armoured Space Marines swathed in surplices of pale cream was a warrior who could only be Azrael, Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels.

Vyctor and Baltasar's steps faltered in the face of such a magnificent warrior, his noble bearing and strength radiating from him palpably. This was a council of equals, but Azrael was entirely and incontrovertibly their master.

'Greetings, Inquisitor Damaris,' said Azrael. 'What do you think of my fortress monastery?'

The question was unexpected, but Damaris had faced worse.

'We are honoured to be allowed within,' she said.

'But you expected to be admitted.'

'I hoped for it.'

'A statistically unlikely hope,' said Azrael. 'Of the thousand of petitioners begging for my attention, only a handful are ever permitted to set foot within the Rock.'

'Then I am doubly flattered then, my lord.'

'Do you know why I allowed you to speak to me?'

'No, my lord.'

‘Now would be a poor time to lie, inquisitor Severina.’

Damaris nodded. ‘Apologies, Lord Azrael, but the duties of an inquisitor often require a level of secrecy when one is uncertain of whom to trust.’

‘And you think that applies here?’

‘No, my lord, but old habits die hard.’

‘Then speak truthfully and if I like your answer I will hear the rest of what you have to say.’

Damaris nodded and said, ‘You let us board because your forces are already poised to march on Arkhona. You have your own reasons for this, I am sure, and you wish to know how closely they align with mine.’

Azrael spread his hands wide.

‘I have warriors deployed throughout the Imperium,’ he said, one hand resting lightly upon the wire-wound grip of his vast sword. Damaris had the powerful feeling that were any of her answers not to his liking, he would have no qualms about ending them upon its edge.

She had come this far, and wasn’t about to back down in the face of Azrael’s implicit threat. She took a deep breath and continued.

‘As far as they are known, the pattern of the Dark Angels’ fleet assets suggests a common target. Baltasar’s scrying reveals an underlying co-ordination to their movements that suggests a collective effort rather than individual objectives. I believe that collective effort is drawing in on Arkhona.’

Azrael nodded, and Damaris thought she saw a hint of grim amusement in his eyes, like a scholam teacher pleased by a particularly dense pupil achieving an answer by guesswork.

‘If that is true, and you believe I already muster my warriors to Arkhona, why bother petitioning me in person?’

‘Because of this,’ said Damaris, reaching slowly beneath her storm coat, the motion careful and deliberate, to remove something from her inside pocket. ‘A dying warrior of your Chapter gave me this, and with his last breath he whispered your name and the name of Arkhona.’

‘What is it?’ asked Azrael.

‘That is what *I* want to know,’ said Damaris, holding out her palm to reveal what she had taken from her coat pocket.

A single, obsidian-black pearl.