




WARHAMMER
40,000



JOHN FRENCH

THE PURITY OF IGNORANCE

A STORY OF THE HORUSIAN WARS



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THE PURITY OF IGNORANCE

John French

'The darkest secrets are those we hide from ourselves.'
- Sebastian Thor, words spoken on the Road to Terra

'Do you know why we do what we do?'

'No, sir. That it is not my... I do not need to know.'

'We do it for the survival of humanity.'

'Yes, sir.'

Lieutenant Ianthe, Second Squadron, Agathian Sky Sharks, sat at attention, hands on her knees, eyes straight ahead. The man sitting across from her was a priest, his bulk covered by an off-white robe. Crude tattoos spidered the knuckles of his hands, and hard, knowing eyes glittered in the wrinkled lump of his face. He was called Josef, or that was the name he had introduced himself with. Now after half an hour talking with him, Ianthe thought he seemed more senior sergeant at arms than a priest in the service of an inquisitor. But what did she know of the Inquisition?

'Do you understand what that means?' said Josef, as though hearing her thoughts in her silence.

'If we fail, so does the Imperium,' she said.

'True, but not the whole truth. We fail and there will be no humanity to be called an Imperium. Not here, not on distant Terra, nowhere. There will just be a thing that was once call mankind, weeping as it eats itself and the darkness laughs. You understand me, Ianthe?'

'Sir,' she said.

He cocked his head, and scratched his stubble-covered jaw. She did not move her own gaze but she could feel his eyes moving across her face, searching for something, watching for something.

‘Tell me about your service before this,’ he said at last.

‘Sir?’ she began, and fought to keep the frown from her face. ‘My apologies, sir, but I thought we had covered that.’

He shrugged, muscle and fat rippling under the folds of his robe.

‘Humour me,’ he said.

She listed her record, passing through the last twelve years of her life in clipped bites of information: Karadieve, command of platoon in the assault on the pirate holds; Anac, command forward reconnaissance units, wounded; Grey Klave, command primary assault squadron. And on until her record ran out, and the silence formed again between them.

‘And now you are here, with us,’ he said.

‘Yes, sir,’ she nodded, and then felt her expression twitch before she could stop it.

‘You have something to say – say it, lieutenant,’ said Josef.

Ianthe nodded, licked her lips and then spoke. ‘Is this interview related to the mission, sir? I have been over my record several times, and my appraisal of the soldiers under my command.’

‘It is related to the mission in every way, lieutenant. In every way.’ He paused, watching her. ‘Is there something else you wish to say?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘It’s just that I have never had the honour of serving the Inquisition, sir. It is...’

‘Irregular?’ he finished for her, and nodded. For a second she thought she saw a glimmer of something like sorrow in his eyes. ‘That it is,’ he said, and there was an edge of weariness in his voice. Then he stood, shaking out his creased robe, and rolling his shoulders like a pugilist before turning and moving towards the door. ‘Ready your squad. It is time.’

Spire Mistress Sul Nereid woke with a scream between her teeth. For an instant the nightmare smudged her sight with bloated flesh and blood-covered chrome, and she felt the acid kiss of vomit rise to her mouth. Then it was gone, draining away with her panic as the dawn light filled her eyes. She shifted, feeling the silk padding of the throne at her back, and the smooth silver of its arms beneath her hands. She stretched, smiling. She had fallen asleep in her chair, just as she had when she was a child and used to sneak into the throne room at night. She laughed, and the sound slid out to meet the sun rising behind the crystal walls of her room.

The throne room sat at the tip of the hive spire. Crystal walls set in frames of

polished adamantine encircled a single open space within. A flight of shallow steps led from the foot of the throne, each one carved from a single piece of dark wood. The pelts of a thousand white felids had been seamlessly stitched to create a rug that flowed down from her throne to spill onto the open space beneath. Slender columns of ivory rose from the black glass floor, each holding a frozen explosion of gemstones and light, which glittered in rainbow hues as they spun in suspensor fields. Beyond the clear walls the cloud layer ran to the arc of the sun slipping above the horizon; the crowns of cumuli rose above a soft sea of white and folded purple and orange. At the apex of the sky's dome stars winked against the last darkness of the night. In the far distance the pinnacles of Tularlen's other hive spires rose from the plateau of clouds like shards of diamond set on cushions of spun sugar. Nereid sighed at the sight.

This moment, this perfect moment, had been hers ever since she had inherited the spire throne from her father. He had treasured both the view and the position it represented, clutching both close to him even as he had fought the doom that claimed him at last. It had been a sad end, but it did mean that the pleasure of waking to this world was Nereid's now.

'Are you hungry, mistress?'

Saliktris's voice came from just behind and beside her throne. She half turned her head, enough to catch the impression of the majordomo standing just on the edge of sight, clad in plum and crimson velvet, his smile an echo of her own. He was always there, just where he needed to be.

'I am...' she replied, and shifted on her seat, tilting her head to one side as she thought. 'But...'

'Some music...' said Saliktris, smoothly.

Nereid's smile widened.

'Yes,' she said. 'That is it. The arrangement from last night would be...'

'Perfection,' he said, and her smile widened. Others might object to a servant talking so freely with their betters, but Saliktris always knew what to say, and what she wanted. She did not know what she would do without him.

The spire throne was no doubt something that many coveted. The House of Tears, the Extrabati and their Mechanicus backers, the Sons of Lupolis, and all the other lesser power blocs regarded this seat, and the power it represented, with a hungry eye. That jealousy had been one of the poisons that had marred her ascension, that and the riots burning in the factory core of the hive, and the Administratum's suddenly inflated tithes of manpower and materiel. Apparently there was a war, and Tularlen had to feed every scrap of flesh and wealth into its

gullet.

No matter that it was draining the wealth of the hive houses, no matter that discontent was curdling to violence in the drone masses, no matter that it could not be done, the Imperium demanded and would not be denied. Nereid shuddered as the memory rose in her mind, and her mouth twisted as though she had just bitten into a rotten fruit.

The expression and memories faded, and she smiled again.

‘Mistress...’ whispered Saliktris, and she looked up.

The ensemble players appeared as her smile bloomed. They filed out into the space beneath the throne, thirty-six men and women robed in white, their instruments gleaming in the brightening day.

‘Do you wish for dancing?’ asked Saliktris, and all she had to do was nod.

Two of the thirty-six players stepped forward, their limbs trailing tapers of silk that shimmered like the inside of a seashell. They halted, and stretched their limbs, becoming statues poised on the edge of movement. The first notes rose from the instruments, blending as layers of melody harmonised from tuned strings, silver flutes and taut drumheads. They began to sing, voices rising to meet the swelling chords of the instruments.

Nereid closed her eyes and tilted her face back as the sound pulled her senses up through the greyness and into a world of unfolding glory. This was what the dull words of preachers never could convey; this was what it was to touch the divine.

She opened her eyes just as the dancers started to move.

‘Wait,’ she said. The dancers froze, bodies suspended in mid-movement as though they hung on strings in defiance of gravity. The music from the ensemble did not cease, but circled through harmonies, holding just beneath the peak of its ascent.

Nereid turned her head slightly to the right, and a mirrored platter appeared, heaped with glistening fruit, each one a jewel taken fresh from its tree. A chalice sat beside it, the wine within almost black in the daylight brilliance. She reached out, took the chalice and raised it to her lips. Warm liquid kissed her mouth, filling her nose with sweet scents and the promise of endless days of laughter. She plucked a fruit from the platter and popped it into her mouth. It burst, and the flavours of the wine and the juice briefly warred before fusing into a taste that slid through a thousand shades of sweetness.

Nereid swallowed, and breathed out.

‘Now,’ she said, and raised the chalice to her lips again, ‘dance.’

The gunship dropped through the deepening blue of the sky, its wings still glowing with the heat of atmospheric transition. White shark's teeth snarled across its fuselage. Rocket pods hung beneath its hunched wings, and kill-marks marched in rows beneath the cockpit. Clouds of sensor baffles crackled through the air around it in an invisible sphere. Any weapon systems looking its way would see nothing but static.

Ianthe felt the gunship shake around her as it banked and levelled out. She allowed herself a smile as adrenaline spiked fire in her muscles. They were almost at the target.

God-emperor grant me strength enough for this, she thought.

'Five minutes to target. Atmosphere protocols active.' The pilot's voice echoed through the compartment. Amber light soaked the soldiers as Ianthe and her squad rose from the benches running down the sides of the compartment. Hands checked rebreathers and sealed visor plates. They were all veterans, all seasoned in battle and hardened in warzones that had left them alive and taken others.

Beside her the preacher called Josef heaved himself to his feet. He shrugged, settling the ill-fitting pressure suit he wore under his robes. He slung his warhammer between his shoulders, and started to fit his rebreather over the bottom half of his face. Ianthe caught his eye, and he nodded to her as she checked the lascarbine strapped across her torso. She glanced at the two figures that remained seated beside the rear hatch.

Inquisitor Covenant was utterly still, dark eyes open, his great sword resting in its scabbard across his knees. The red lacquer on his cuirass seemed black in the amber light. The impulse-linked psycannon mounted on his shoulder moved in a slow arc, back and forth, back and forth, like the head of a patient predator. Beside him sat a woman, her sword drawn, the point resting on the deck. She wore a hessian shift over a studded black body glove, bolt pistols strapped to her thighs, the lower half of her face hidden by a double-plugged breath-mask. A hennaed cross cut across the upper half of her face beneath a shaven scalp. Battered armour plates covered her shins and forearms, red lacquer clinging to the pitted metal. Ianthe thought she saw the emblem of the Adepta Sororitas on the armour plates, but that made no sense; the woman looked more like a wanderer or a bounty hunter than a holy warrior. Ianthe had heard Josef call her Severita, and the name seemed to fit her intensity. Severita looked up as though sensing Ianthe's gaze. Her eyes were green. For a second Ianthe blinked at the feeling of familiarity in that look.

'From the lightning and the tempest, our Emperor, deliver us,' Josef growled

across the squad vox. The soldiers looked towards him, and his voice rose, rolling with strength. 'From plague, temptation and war, our Emperor, deliver us.' She could almost feel the words sinking into them as he spoke, stealing doubt, firing blood. 'From the scourge of the Kraken, our Emperor, deliver us,' he intoned, and as he spoke the next words the voices of the soldiers rose with him.

'From the blasphemy of the Fallen, Our Emperor, deliver us.'

'*Two minutes to target,*' came the pilot's voice, cutting through the prayer. '*Depressurising now.*' The rear hatch began to open, air rushing out of the growing crack. Bright golden light cut into the compartment.

'From the begetting of daemons, Our Emperor, deliver us.'

The door gunners released the side doors, and pulled them back. Rotor-cannons folded out on weapon mounts, barrels jutting out into the thin air as the gunners set themselves. Ianthe could see green holo-light flaring in their targeting monacles.

'From the curse of the mutant, Our Emperor, deliver us.'

The spires of the hives rose from the cloud layer around them, glinting like spear-tips.

'That thou wouldst bring them only death.'

Covenant stood, the air racing through the compartment catching his topknot as he turned to face the open rear hatch.

'That thou shouldst spare none.'

The air buzzed as grav-chutes activated.

'*Thirty seconds to target, weapons live,*' said the pilot. The Valkyrie banked and Ianthe braced herself as the view beyond the nearest side door became the plateau of polluted clouds. Severita was standing beside Covenant, both steady as the world turned around them.

'That thou shouldst pardon none.'

The rotor-cannons began to spin, barrels blurring. Beyond the right-hand door the crystal flanks of a spire tip came into view, so close Ianthe could see the silver angel set on its point.

'We beseech thee, destroy them.'

The rotor-cannons fired. Casing showered out, falling into the dawn light as flames breathed from their muzzles. Sheets of crystal shattered, fragments spinning outwards on a wave of explosive decompression. The gunners panned the cannons across the spire's flank as the gunship turned, thrusters and engines screaming as it cut its speed.

At the rear hatch, Covenant and Severita braced as the gunship tilted, hanging against the wind above the broken summit. The rotor-cannons ceased fire. Covenant leapt, Severita a heartbeat behind him. Six troopers followed, and then Ianthe was at the rear hatch, and the sky was screaming around her as she jumped into the dawn light.

The flank of the spire rose to meet her, jagged holes yawning wide. Beneath her, Covenant, and Severita triggered their grav-chutes, and seemed to jerk upwards as their fall slowed just before they hit the spire side. Ianthe and her squad activated their chutes. She felt force thump through her gut as the chute activated, and then she was through the splintered windows, and the throne room poured into her eyes.

The musicians nearest the window died first, falling as rotor-cannon rounds punched through the crystal and tore them apart. Nereid shrieked in shock and alarm. A black shadow was blocking out the sunlight. Air rushed through the shattered window as the throne chamber depressurised. A singer tumbled backwards into the sky, arms thrashing, the rushing air snatching away the broken harmony of his song as he fell. Figures were dropping through the broken windows, brutes in metal with blunt helmets, moving with disordered speed. They were dark blurs, eyes burning coals in faces drooling blood. The reek of iron and ashes filled Nereid's nose.

This was wrong, this was not as it should be.

'No! Please, no!' she shouted, wine spilling from her mouth as she twisted towards Saliktris. The majordomo had twisted back with the explosion, but was still at her side. She caught the impression of his slim face, as thin and beautiful as a white flame. 'Saliktris, please...'

'Yes, my mistress,' he said, and the song rose.

The cacophony sliced into Ianthe's squad. Pain exploded behind her eyes. Sound vibrated through her flesh and bones to shake her eyes in her skull. To her left, one of her squad dropped as though felled by an axe blow. Ianthe stumbled, for a moment blind. Discordant notes bored into her. Colours exploded with migraine brightness in her sight. Her skin was writhing, a creature with its own will as it strangled her flesh.

'No,' she growled. The word pulled her to her feet and cleared her sight.

Flesh and chrome filled the space before her. Vast machines of blood-daubed metal towered like metal trees towards the ceiling's apex. Flared pipes and clusters of vox speakers sprouted from their sides. Figures stood on the blood-

slicked floor. Shining metal staples ran across their skin, and soiled silk clung to their limbs. Bundles of tubes poured from their mouths and circled their necks, rising to hoods of polished pipes above their heads. Others plucked at strings stretched between their half-fused torsos. Amongst them spindle-limbed dancers spun, cartwheeling through the throng, lidless eyes rolling in screaming faces, scythe limbs arching.

And beyond and above the crowd of horrors a throne rose. Flayed fur and skin draped its steps, crusted with blood and vomit. A figure sat on the throne, bloated to monstrous size, bulk straining against the chair's structure, tatters of bright silk hanging from its form like a half-sloughed skin. A web of tubes and cables coiled over it, vanishing into its bulk like worms burrowing into mud. Trays of red, glistening matter sat beside it, and Ianthe saw crimson on the lips of a small mouth set in the boulder-like head. It was a nightmare vision of careless joy sculpted in machinery and flesh. A vision that was now tearing apart.

Some of the throng were falling, dying as the explosive decompression ruptured lungs. Blood-mist aspirated from their mouths as they shuddered and folded. Ianthe fired, hosing las-fire across the room as she forced herself forward. Some of her squad came with her, firing in ragged bursts. Covenant and Severita were amongst the press, bodies falling before them like wheat before a storm.

'Ianthe!' she heard Josef shout her name over the vox, and jerked around just in time to see a scythe-like blade whip down towards her face. There was no time to avoid it. She raised the lascarbine, and the blade clanged on the case of the gun. A starvation-thin figure was looming over her on thin, double-jointed legs. It shrieked, sacs of skin bulging in its throat. Ianthe felt the sound shake through her. The scythe blade sheared away from the gun, and the stick-limbed figure twisted to cut again. Ianthe slammed the muzzle of her gun into it. Bones shattered under the blow. She pulled the trigger, and the thing was falling, its flesh cooking in the spray of las-fire. Ianthe brought the butt of the gun down to shatter skull and brain. She was breathing hard.

Fire and blood blurred her sight. To her left she could see a clutch of her troopers, already fewer than they were seconds before. They were shooting, but they had stopped moving, their fire ragged. Beyond them, deeper in the churning press, were Severita and Covenant. Severita's sword was a spinning blur orbiting her as she stepped and ducked and cut, never pausing, each movement a slice that severed limbs and bisected bodies. Covenant carved his path at her side, the great sword a sheet of lightning in his hands as it cut, and cut. The psycannon on

his shoulder was spinning and firing, punching figures from their feet behind the inquisitor as he cut down those in front of him. It was a sight to light the dark of despair, two warriors moving amidst a tide of horror as death reached for them. It was also about to end.

Fog was rising in the room, pink with the spray of blood, shivering with the surge of noise ripping from the throats of the dying. Ianthe saw the fog coil across the skin of the dead and flow up the steps of the throne. Something was happening, something that she could feel buzzing on the edge of sight and hissing in her ear. A heat-haze blur was shaking the air. The smell of cinnamon and burnt hair reached her nose through her breath mask. She swayed. The sound of the screams was softening, soothing her into acquiescence.

There was nothing to do...

The future just required her to let it happen...

For once in her life there was no weight to bear, no duty or responsibility...

All she needed to do was be...

+Ianthe... Ianthe... Ianthe...+ breathed a voice that was everywhere.

Laughter, soft but brittle, itched in her awareness. The carnival of violence around her had slowed. Blades traced lazy arcs through limbs. Blood-drops fell like jewels. Skin and bone parted.

She raised her eyes to the throne. The figure on it was a blurred haze, like an image painted in smeared pigment. As she watched, a form detached itself from the enthroned figure, pulling shape to itself as it stepped down towards the floor. It moved slowly, languidly, its limbs sheathed in iridescent skin, its eyes black pools beneath a billowing mane of violet hair. The figure's face turned towards Ianthe and its eyes seemed to swallow the world.

+Ianthe... You poor, wronged child...+ The voice purred in her skull. +How much has been taken from you...+ And the world was falling backwards and the memories of lives she had forgotten she had lived were dancing in front of her...

...She was coming through a rusted door, gun in hand, and the space beyond was a pit writhing with worms that looked at her with slit-pupil eyes... And Covenant was calling to her to shoot, and she was beside him firing until the charge pack in her gun was dry...

...She was standing on a stone platform beneath a sky of bruised light. Balls of lightning were falling from the heavens, and the cannon on Covenant's shoulder was swivelling and firing, punching glowing rounds up at the corposant, and she could see the tangle of arms and mouths thrashing in the balls of flame...

...She was standing with Josef in the ruins of a violated city. His old eyes turned

from the walls that still ran with ectoplasm and blood, and he began to say something...

...And now she was standing in the throne room again.

Curtains of light hung across the space, shifting between colours. The image was strobing, pulsing between colours and blinding monochrome.

The sinuous figure was at the foot of the steps to the throne, movements flowing between the shutter-blinks of light. Claws of red chitin grew from its arms, the edges blurring to black smoke as they peeled a path through the whirl of bodies. It was beautiful and vile, like a song sung from a strangled throat.

Covenant was cutting his way towards the creature, bodies falling before him, Severita at his side, sword weaving circles around his cuts.

Ianthe froze, watching the scene play out, and realised that she had seen this before, this clash of man and daemon. She had faced and survived this many times. She was not the soldier she thought, she was not even sure if she had ever been.

Josef was shouting somewhere close behind her, and one of her squad was falling, his hands ripping at his visor to get to the flesh beneath. Another looked at her, head rotating with serene slowness, gun muzzle rising to rest under his chin.

‘No...’ she began as his finger closed on the trigger. The las-bolt burned through his head and blew the top of his skull off.

Nereid watched Saliktris stride down the steps, his coat whipping in the wind rushing through the shattered windows. Most of her musicians and courtiers lay bloody on the floor, while the few that remained clawed desperately at the brutes cutting through them. She could see those invaders now, dark shadows, like the tattered silhouettes of men, their eyes burning, bellowing as they hacked the beauty of her world to ruin.

Then Saliktris began his dance. Sharpness glinted at the edge of his arms. The court of musicians parted before him, and the majordomo was a blur as he met her enemies, edge to edge.

The daemon – for that was what it was, Ianthe realised – slashed through a silk-wrapped mutant and its pincer claw snapped down towards Covenant in a languid blur. The psycannon on his shoulder pivoted and fired. Rounds burned through the air, and the daemon spun, and Covenant was cutting and cutting, and the daemon swayed and pivoted around each shot and cut as though it were all a dance, as though every step and turn was part of a pattern. As Ianthe watched

Josef waded to Covenant's side, hammer battering aside clawing limbs.

'I shall not fear,' she heard his voice booming out the prayer over the cacophony. 'I shall be fury. I shall be fire.'

'Get up,' the voice made her flinch, and then she realised it was her own, and she was rising from where she had slid to the floor amid the blood and filth. 'Get up, now!' And she was on her feet, gun in her hands. If there were still any of her squad alive, they might have been with her, but if they were, she did not see them. She fired, pouring las-bolts into a tall mutant with no eyes and a needle-fanged mouth. It shrieked, falling in a tangle of hook-bladed limbs. She kicked past it, boots sinking into blood-soaked fur.

To her right the daemon leapt, pivoted in mid-air, and lashed a pincer at Covenant's head. His sword met the blow. Chitin and lightning-shrouded steel met with a howl. The daemon flipped over Covenant, a scorpion tail growing from its back as it arched through the air. The sting stabbed down. Severita's sword spun high, edge bright, and the tip of the daemon's tail was falling away in a spray of ectoplasm. The daemon landed, twirling like a spill of silk in the wind, and Ianthe could feel its laughter shuddering through her thoughts.

Blood was rising from the floor, flowing into globules and spiralling into red ropes, congealing into sculptures of flesh and chitin and claws. Josef was beside Covenant and Severita now, the trio at the centre of the circle of creatures birthing into being from the blood of the dead and the screams of the living. Covenant's psycannon blasted a cluster of creatures to a shower of black slime, and then dry-cycled on an empty breech. The chorus of congealing daemons stepped forward, skin spreading across their limbs. Colours and light were running and swirling at the edge of Ianthe's vision. A warm fog of cloying scent poured down her throat, and she gagged inside her mask.

She was at the foot of the steps leading to the throne. Above her the bloated figure on the silver chair gazed at the slaughter. Gossamer strands of light billowed through the air around the throne.

Ianthe mounted the steps.

Nereid turned and looked at the figure climbing the steps towards her. Ashes fell from its tread. Red eyes burned in its iron face. Her household guards were finally there, ringing the remaining intruders, but this other one had risen from the slaughter and reached the foot of the throne. It would not matter though, not now.

Saliktris would remove these... creatures, and then everything would return to

how it was. Yes... to how it was when she woke. But at that moment she saw Saliktris seem to slow, his endless dance stuttering, as though he were tiring. And the tallest of the invaders stepped forward and hacked down, blade screaming. Saliktris pivoted aside, but only just fast enough to escape the edge, and the swordsman cut again and again, and her guard that had ringed the three were shrinking back. Nereid screamed at them, but they didn't listen. And then the swordsman slashed his sword down, and Saliktris did not sway aside, and the sword split the majordomo from collarbone to groin.

Pain flared in Nereid's chest, expanding into a burning sheet of agony. The world blinked out of existence, and the pain ran out to the edge of her being. Agony burned her thoughts, and she saw again her father fall, her dagger ripping free of his back. She felt the silk of the throne as she sat on it for the first time as spire mistress. She tasted the sweet dream of being able to live in a world that existed for her and for her alone.

Then it was gone, and a hole gaped within her soul, pulling in warmth and brightness, leaving just the feeling of shivering flesh, and the smell of spoiled meat and ashes.

The sound of the wind blowing through broken grass brought the moans of pain to her ears. She could feel the wetness of blood and drool on her chin. She did not want to look up. She did not want to open her eyes; she knew what she would see.

In the end it had just become too much: the demands of authority, the decisions, the relentless indifference of the Administratum as they demanded more and more and the glory of her throne became a vice to crush her.

The voice of her dreams had seemed like a release then. She had given that joy a name and a face, and the dream had remade her world. It had become golden again.

Shouts, gunfire, sounded nearby but she did not move. Her breath was a heavy wheeze in her throat. She heard a crunch of broken crystal nearby.

'Look at me,' said a voice above her, firm but ragged with effort. Nereid stirred, raised her head, and opened her eyes.

A soldier stood before the throne, her grey armour sprayed with blood, her face hidden by a breath mask, her eyes a blank visor. Nereid dropped her gaze to the lasgun in the soldier's hands. The barrel was steady.

'I...' began Nereid. 'I just wanted to be—'

Ianthe pulled the trigger. The las-blast burned through the spire mistress' head.

Blood and charred brain sprayed the soiled upholstery of the throne. The bloated figure slumped, silken bulk settling with a gurgle, its last words lost.

Ianthe let her aim drop. Her limbs began to shake. A sound on the steps made her turn. Covenant stood behind her, sword deactivated. Josef stood with him. Blood and slime covered both of them. Behind them Severita was moving through the heaped dead, pausing to fire a bolt into a twitching corpse. A few of Ianthe's squad were still alive, kneeling or lying on the ground, shaking as though they had been pulled from freezing water. Except that they were not her squad, not really.

'My lord,' she said, and bowed her head.

The after-echo of what she had seen throbbed in her mind. Coloured lights were bubbling in her eyes. She felt as though she were going to be sick.

'You have served well, lieutenant,' said Covenant, and his voice was as familiar as an old friend's.

'I always endeavour to, lord.'

'You remember,' said Josef.

She looked up at the preacher, and the blur of dozens of memories of his face filled her mind.

'Yes,' she said.

A shriek of thrusters cut through the thin air as a black-hulled lighter dropped into sight beyond the shattered windows. They all turned to look at it as it pivoted in mid-air, its rear ramp hinging open to touch the window edge. A figure drifted out of the gloom of the gunship's compartment. Withered limbs and tattered black robes hung beneath it. Loops of metal pipes hung snaked around the shrunken flesh of its head, crackling with worms of greasy light. Ianthe knew who it was, and knew that they had met in the past, over and over again.

Covenant looked at the hovering psyker.

'Begin the purge,' he said. 'Everyone who had a connection with the spire mistress in the last years is to be culled. Issue an extermination order to the arbitrators under my authority. No mercy or exceptions.'

The psyker's head dipped in its machine setting.

+And these?+ said a voice that crackled in Ianthe's skull.

Covenant looked at the troopers from Ianthe's squad who lay scattered across the carnage-daubed room. One was kneeling in a pool of blood and severed limbs, head rolling from side to side, eyes fixed as though in wonder on the empty air. Another stood, eyes closed, swaying in place like a reed in a wind.

The rest did not move, and if they lived, the world was not something that they saw any more.

‘If they will survive, cleanse their minds,’ said Covenant. ‘For the rest... they have earned peace.’ The psyker tilted in mid-air, in what must have been a bow, and then pivoted to face Ianthe; the question asked by the gesture unspoken but ringing in Ianthe’s mind as though shouted. She bowed her head. She knew what was coming; after all, had she not lived this moment many times before?

‘You remember,’ said Covenant, ‘so you know the choice that faces you.’

She nodded.

‘Death or to live and remember nothing – I remember, my lord.’ She paused and words came to her lips, like a prayer learned long ago. ‘To know that daemons exist is to invite corruption. To face them is to risk your own soul. To face them and live is to risk the souls of billions.’

Josef bowed his head, and she heard him mutter something that might have been a prayer. The psyker was drifting closer, and Ianthe could feel its presence blurring the edge of her thoughts.

Covenant held her gaze.

‘A risk,’ he said, carefully. ‘Or a burden to be carried.’

Ianthe raised her head, blinking. Josef looked up at Covenant. Sparks flickered around the psyker. Amidst the blood and corpses, Severita turned to look towards them. Covenant kept his gaze on Ianthe. ‘You have served me for many years in a war that is for the survival of mankind. You will serve in this war again, but you can choose to do so armoured by ignorance, or by the strength of your soul.’

Ianthe stared back at him for a second, and bowed her head before answering.

‘Do you know why we do what we do?’

‘You are the Inquisition.’

‘I am just a servant, as are you now. But do you know what we do in the service of the Inquisition?’

‘We protect mankind.’

‘Do you understand what that means?’

‘If we fail, so does the Imperium.’

The sergeant flicked his eyes to the face across the table from him. Hard eyes met him, unblinking and piercing. The officer’s red and grey combat armour bore no mark of rank, but the weight of her gaze was enough to hold his questions behind his teeth. He had led his squad through two warzones, and seen

the rest of his regiment vanish until there was only him and the few he led: a vagabond remnant of war.

‘You have a question, sergeant?’ she asked.

He flinched.

‘I have not served the Inquisition before. I just wondered if this is how it always is?’

Something flickered in the unblinking stillness of her eyes.

‘Tell me about your service before this,’ she said.

‘With respect, I have given you chapter and verse twice already,’ he said.

She shrugged, and leaned forward slightly.

‘Humour me,’ she said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, the novel *Tallarn: Ironclad*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile*, *Ahriman: Sorcerer* and *Ahriman: Unchanged*, plus a number of related short stories collected in *Ahriman: Exodus*, including 'The Dead Oracle' and 'Hand of Dust'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus many short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

In the grim darkness of the far future, inquisitors are the agents who stand between mankind and destruction. Inquisitor Eisenhorn is one such man, drawn into an infernal conspiracy to combine alien technology and Chaos warcraft...



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