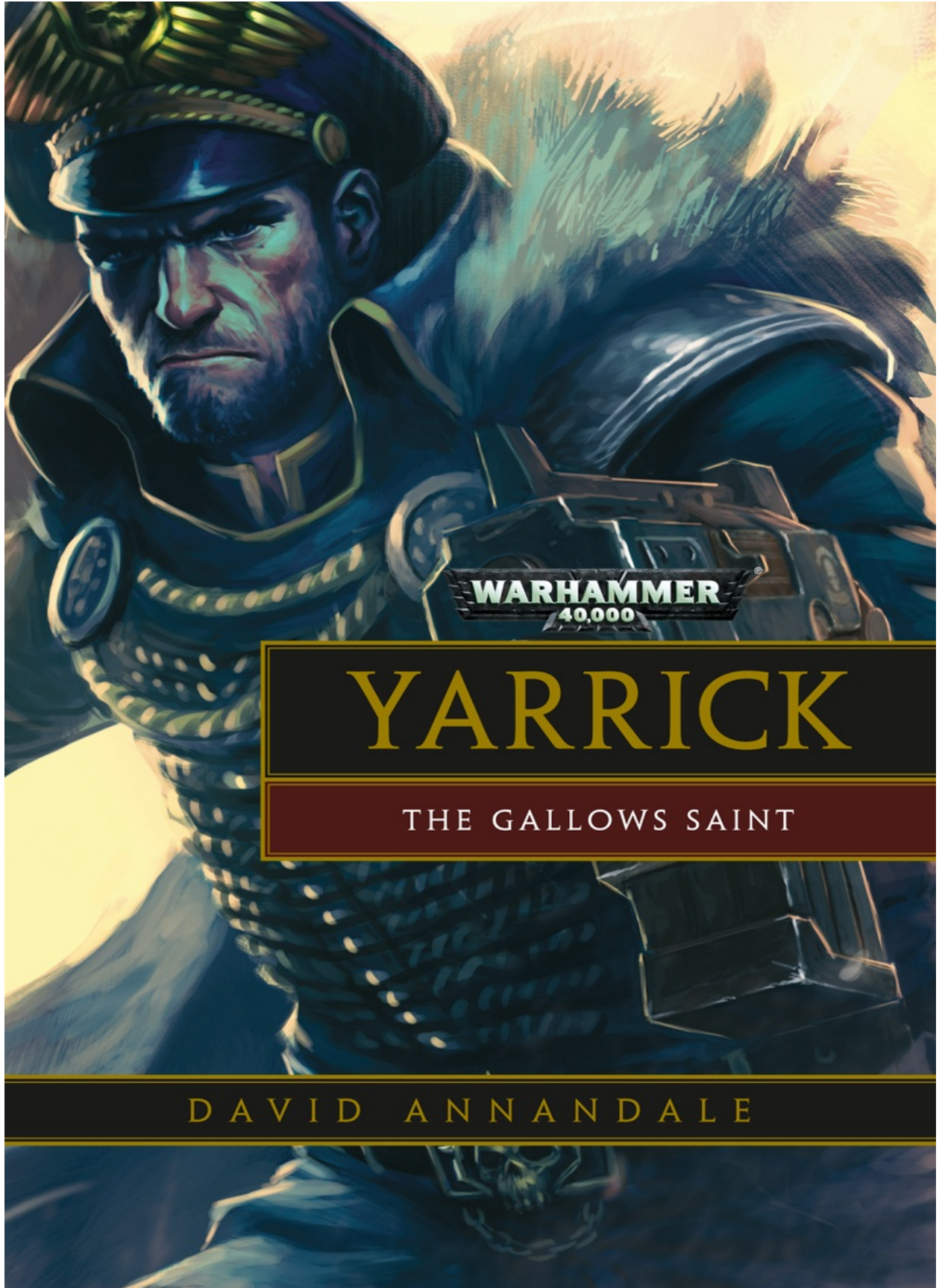


WARHAMMER
40,000

YARRICK

THE GALLOWS SAINT

DAVID ANNANDALE



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David Annandale

I understand the purpose of spectacle. It isn't empty show, a frivolous waste of time and resources. There is always a reason for it. Spectacle has an effect, and so its deployment serves a function. A great spectacle can mould the consciousness of a population. It concentrates the faith of the people, directs their hatred and unifies their purpose. It dictates their thoughts. I have made use of spectacle myself over the years. I have made my person into an object to be displayed before all, especially on Armageddon.

Spectacle is necessary, and it is vital.

It can, of course, be corrupted. I saw that on Mistral. Cardinal Wangenheim's spectacles paid lip service to the Emperor's glory when it was his own that he was magnifying. With the wounding lessons of Mistral still fresh, I watched the triumph on Abydos with mixed feelings. Understanding the purpose of spectacles does not mean enjoying them. But attendance was the course my duty took on this day, and I would not shirk it. Besides, Abydos had earned this triumph. The soldiers of the Armageddon Steel Legion, of the Mordian Iron Guard and of the Vostroyan Firstborn deserved it. The defence militia of the Abydos Rampart deserved it.

The people who had weathered the war deserved it.

The battle to reclaim Abydos from the tau had been hard. The three regiments involved had poured hundreds of companies into the campaign. The xenos had hurled their formidable technology against us, but that wasn't the full reason why the war had been so bitterly fought. The actual tau force on Abydos had been relatively small. We had outnumbered them many times over. But a significant portion of the agri world's population had welcomed the tau. They had embraced the xenos philosophy. And this was another reason why, now that the shooting had finally ceased, the spectacle of the triumph was needed. The great purges had begun, and would continue for some time to come. Clean-up crews were busy expunging the circular tau iconography that had spread like a

plague on walls and arches across the planet. The millions who had turned their back on the Emperor and the Imperial Creed would be executed. It was vital, then, that the population be shown the glory of victory, the strength of the Imperium and the celebration of faith.

The triumph was staged in the Square of Exterminating Grace in the heart of Rhium, Abydos's capital. I was standing beside Captain Artura Brenken of the Steel Legion's Sixth Company, 252nd Regiment. She and I worked well together, and despite the cost of this campaign, we had found it less dispiriting than what Sixth Company had faced on Molossus. The stakes had been clear, intra-regimental strife minimal, and the planetary government had cooperated fully. So the triumph felt real.

We were with the other officers in the marble benches that rose a hundred metres along the north side of the square. The troops marched past, following the route of Vigilance Boulevard, which led to and from the east and west exits. The people of Rhium filled the southern half of the square and lined both sides of the entire length of the Boulevard. They had been summoned by the spectacle. They had come to celebrate, and to be seen celebrating. They had come to see their saviours and to show themselves before their judges.

On the opposite side of the square from the tiered benches was a colonnaded arcade ten stories high. Its Administratum offices, which regulated the flow of produce from Abydos, were closed for the day. Thousands more spectators lined its archways.

The Square of Exterminating Grace was the architectural pride of Rhium. Its importance as a symbol had grown even more as it was one of the few portions of the city that had escaped damage during the conflict. The same could not be said of Rhium's other jewel, the hundred and fifty metre colossus that stood at the eastern end of Vigilance Boulevard. The statue was of Saint Carrinus, the Abydos Confessor who had held the world true to the Imperial Creed during the Plague of Unbelief and had taken a rocket hit to the right shoulder and the left side of its head. The city's skyline was dominated by a figure on the verge of collapse. It had become a demoralizing monument of decay.

Projecting from the centre of the benches was a massive plinth. On it stood the planetary governor, Lord Antonin Schroth. He was motionless, so rigid in his lines that he could have been a statue on the edge of the plinth – a Saint Carrinus in miniature.

'He's doing well,' Brenken said to me.

'He has to,' I answered. He was part of the spectacle. He embodied the triumph of loyalty on Abydos. Still, Brenken was right. From our position, five metres to Schroth's right, I could see the deep lines of exhaustion on his face.

The governor was not a young man, and juvenat treatments or no, the war had taken its toll on him. His strength was brittle. He was aging before my eyes.

On the plinth with the governor, and on his flanks and three steps back were two other officials. To his left was his cousin and senior councillor, Countess Herennia Vernac. The countess was a few years older, and if Lord Schroth presented the face of weathered nobility, Vernac was the anger. The severe cut of her iron-grey hair emphasized the cold angles of her features. Schroth was what the people of Abydos would wish to be. Vernac was their judge. Her large holdings, to the south of Rhium, had been devastated by the fighting. She was playing an active role in the purges, and the first thing she had purged was mercy.

On the governor's right flank was his son and heir, Valentin Schroth. If Vernac was the face of the Abydos's punishment, the younger Schroth looked like its hope for the future. As upright in his bearing as his father, he seemed more at ease in that position. He was not holding fast against a storm. His face was open, broad without running to fat, and generous with smiles. He was greeting his planet's future with confidence.

I did not hear the shot.

It came from a solid projectile weapon. The bullet hit Antonin Schroth in the throat and blew out the back of his neck. The exit wound was massive. His head flopped backwards as his knees buckled. The corpse sagged to the surface of the plinth as if finally giving in to the exhaustion. Blood sprayed the lord's son and Vernac. It pumped across the marble, a red lake bright with the sun's glare.

The crowd's panic was instantaneous, an ocean of faces caught in a sudden storm. Waves of citizens collided as they ran in conflicting directions. But there were almost as many soldiers as there were onlookers in the square. Lasguns held at parade position were lowered at civilians. Someone ordered a sing volley fired overhead, and that was enough. Movement in the square froze.

I was not surprised by the swift imposition of order that followed the assassination. I was surprised when word came only a few minutes later that the civilians were to be dispersed. The assassin had been caught.

Brenken was just as startled. 'That was fast,' she said.

I nodded. We exchanged a wary look. Brenken had only witnessed the aftermath on Mistral, but she had seen the deceptions on Molossus. She had seen the Curse of Unbelief unleashed on a planet for the benefit of an Inquisitorial faction's agenda. On Abydos, we had been spared encounters with political corruption. But an arrest mere moments after an assassination suggested a suspicious efficiency.

We descended from the rows of benches and stood near the base of the plinth.

A squad of Adeptus Arbites troopers arrived to escort Valentin Schroth, Countess Vernac and the deceased lord's remains and his relatives to the governor's palace. I drew one of them aside, a heavyset young man. With his armour, he looked like a walking wall. He seemed more energized than angered by the events.

'We hear there's been an arrest,' I said.

'Yes, commissar. An Administratum scribe by the name of Holten.'

'How was he caught?'

'Gave himself away with the shot. He's good with a sniper rifle, terrible with strategy.' He pointed toward the upper level of the arcade. 'Used his office as a blind. Can't think how he expected to get away. In the panic maybe?'

'Why didn't he?'

'One of us was on the spot.' He grinned. 'Bad timing for Holten. Nice for Trooper Koval's career.'

I believe in fate. I did then, too. The most profound wounds I received on Mistral had made sure of that. I also believe in conspiracy, malfeasance and bad intent. Coincidence and serendipity, on the other hand, are chimeras. 'It would seem this Koval has single-handedly preserved the order we fought so hard to restore on Abydos. I would like to shake this trooper's hand.'

I went to the Adeptus Arbites precinct house on my own. I was greeted in the long entrance hall by Proctor Detlev Monden. He was a brick of a man, made even larger by his armour. He had the look of a man relieved that the day had not been worse, but who did not trust the good fortune to last. He introduced me to Lyuda Koval. She was a still, compact individual. Not a single movement was wasted. I wasn't surprised that the assassin hadn't known she was around. She was one of those people who could choose to withdraw their physical presence almost completely from their surroundings.

'The assassin used a kroot sniper rifle,' Koval told me.

'Not a subtle weapon,' I commented. It fit, though. Modified kroot weapons were in common use among the human tau auxiliaries. They would be the sort of gun deployed by any humans still fighting for the xenos cause.

The right corner of her mouth curled up then down so quickly I barely caught the expression. 'Suitable to the job. Not for concealment afterwards. I heard the shot, saw the muzzle sticking out of a doorway a few paces from me.' She shrugged. 'He's not a fighter. Subduing him wasn't hard.'

'You chose not to kill him?'

'A choice we're grateful she made,' Monden put in. 'He may lead us to more pockets of resistance. And justice will have to be seen being done. As publicly as

possible.'

Of course. Another necessary spectacle.

'I'd be curious to see the prisoner,' I said.

'Certainly.' Monden released Koval to her duties and led me to the cell blocks.

'What do you know about him?' I asked.

'Enough.' Monden pulled a data-slate from his belt and consulted it. 'Paulus Holten. Scribe, Divisio Agriculturae. Served in the Abydos Rampart's infantry.'

'As a sniper?'

'No. Just a grunt.'

Odd. 'Anything of note before today?'

'Not a lot. The only real point of interest is a report of his advocating for "the greater good".'

I raised my eyebrows. 'Really?' That was damning indeed. It marked him as one who had traitorously embraced the tau philosophy. That would explain his motive to assassinate the governor. 'The report is reliable?'

'Multiple witnesses. Turns out the report was filed against him about a month before the tau attacked, but it wasn't a high priority case.'

'I see.' Given the Imperium's bureaucracy, and the sheer number of related reports of heretical utterings that poured in, this was exactly the kind of information that would wind up buried by more urgent items, and whose importance would only become apparent in retrospect. And yet there was an odd detail. 'He spoke of the greater good *before* the tau struck?'

Monden nodded, not entirely happy either. 'Evidence of advance infiltration, no doubt.'

'Have there been any other signs that this occurred?'

He looked even more uncomfortable. 'Not yet.'

My suspicions deepened. The picture that was emerging of the assassination was both too easy and too messy.

Monden brought me to prisoner's cell and left me to my interrogation. I stepped into the small rockcrete space. There was no furniture. Paulus Holten sat on the stained floor, a chain running from his ankle to the wall. His right arm was broken. His wounds had been cleaned, presumably to keep him from dying of an infection before he could be executed in the square. He was of average height and very thin. His hair was lank, and his pallor suggested he rarely saw the sun. When he looked up, the expression in his swollen eyes surprised me. I had expected fear, perhaps defiance, possibly a desperate and self-interested repentance. What I saw instead was hope.

'I didn't do it,' he began. 'Please, you have to—'

'My name is Sebastian Yarrick,' I interrupted. 'I am a commissar of the

Militarum Tempestus, and you *will* stand when addressing me.'

He gulped, struggled to his feet, and managed an approximation of a salute with his broken arm. He did all this, I noted, with the energy of a man ashamed to have momentarily forgotten his place. 'I'm sorry, commissar,' he said. He squinted at me. 'I meant no disrespect.'

'Why did you kill Governor Schroth?' I asked.

'But I didn't, commissar.' He turned a sob into a great, shaking breath, and spoke with passion. 'In the name of the Emperor, I have never, by word or deed, been anything but a loyal subject of the Imperium.'

'The greater good,' I said.

He frowned. 'I beg your pardon?'

'You were overheard proselytising for the greater good.'

He looked puzzled. He continued to squint at me. 'Oh. Yes. I have. Often. But I thought... I've always believed the sacrifice of the individual for the greater good of the Imperium a tenet of our faith.'

I blinked. 'It is.'

I studied his face, noting the cloudiness of his gaze. The cell had a small, barred window a bit higher than eye level. Looking up at it, all I could see was the rooftops of the hab opposite the precinct. That was enough for my purposes.

'Tell me, *scribe*,' I said, pointing, 'which family's coat of arms is on that flag.' I spoke as if I were testing what he claimed to be.

He looked both puzzled and frightened and shuffled into position. He squinted, his eyes narrowed to slits. Sweat broke out on his forehead.

'I'm sure that's the Schroth banner, commissar.'

He was guessing, picking the most likely name. His myopia was severe, as he couldn't even see that there was no flag.

Holten was no more a sniper than I was tau.

I left then, saying nothing more to him and spoke briefly with Monden before exiting the precinct, keeping my observations to myself. I knew a conspiracy was at work, but not its reach. Monden's evident unease over some aspects of the case led me to think he was honest, but Mistral had taught me a lot about the danger of trusting too quickly.

I crossed the street to the hab-block that faced the precinct and took the stairs to the roof. I found a good vantage point from which to observe the precinct entrance, staying there for several hours, but didn't see what I wanted. I headed back to Sixth Company's base on the outskirts of the city, but made plans to return.

'Why?' Brenken asked when I told her. 'Your authority as a political officer doesn't extend to local planetary concerns,' she reminded me.

‘I know. But local upheavals can have direct impact on the regiment we serve and potentially on the Imperium.’

‘And what do you think is happening here?’

‘I don’t know. I think I should, though.’

She nodded, thoughtful. ‘We still have a pacification role here during the purges.’

‘So preventing political upheaval falls within our remit.’

‘I’ll speak with Colonel Messter.’

And so the request would work its way up the chain of command. ‘In the meantime, we are assigned to keeping things calm in Rhium,’ I pointed out.

‘Which you are clearly doing.’ She rubbed her jaw. ‘We aren’t going to like what you find, are we?’

‘Probably not.’ We both had many lessons yet to learn about the nature of our offices, but we knew enough to expect the worst. ‘There’s something else,’ I said. ‘Since the sniper rifle was a kroot weapon, we have no certainty the assassin, or whoever ordered the kill, is human.’

‘You think some tau might still be here?’

‘I don’t rule it out.’

I returned to the hab roof the next day, and on the days that followed. Abydos, meanwhile, appeared to be settling into a fragile order. The ascension of Valentin Schroth to the role of governor had a calming effect, since this was a case of the long-expected merely coming early. The swift arrest and imminent execution of Holten was also useful, and I would have approved if it weren’t for the fact that the true assassin still walked free. I was seeing the mask of order. I did not trust it.

On the fifth day, just after sunset, I finally spotted Lyuda Koval leaving the precinct after her shift. I had seen her before, but always in a squad, always on duty. This evening she was alone.

Koval had been far too conveniently on the spot to arrest Holten. She also would make a much better sniper. Quite apart from the fact that Holten wouldn’t be able to see his target, he was a poor physical specimen. He was lucky to have survived his service with the Rampart. Koval’s preternatural stillness and ability to fade from one’s awareness were useful skills for a sniper.

I left my post and followed, staying as far back as I could without losing sight of her. I knew I was taking a big chance. If I was right about her, then I was tracking a quarry whose skills at this game far surpassed mine. I was no assassin. I did not use the shadows. To the contrary, my role called for me to stand in the light. To inspire or to punish, I had to be visible. To be a commissar, I had to be something larger than Sebastian Yarrick.

If Koval thought she might be followed, she would spot me, even from blocks away. I hoped that she had no reason to be suspicious.

As I walked through the gathering dark of the evening, I asked myself, *If you're right, and she is the assassin, why?* I couldn't picture her as a fanatic, fighting a hopeless battle that would somehow lead to the return of the tau. She was too cool a professional for such a delusion. What benefit could the governor's death have for her? None that I could see except one: riches. If she was a hired assassin, then who was paying her?

Who benefited?

The new lord Schroth, certainly. But not in any manner that wasn't going to occur anyway. I didn't think he would have had to wait long. Antonin Schroth had looked quite frail. Why risk losing everything by rushing to grasp a prize that could well have been his within a matter of months?

If not the son, then who?

My thoughts circled back to the tau. If they still had designs on Abydos, prolonged political instability would tie our forces down in pacification efforts. We would be more vulnerable to a counter-attack. Koval didn't have to be a fanatic to fight for them – if all she cared about was personal benefit, the right price would be enough.

I almost lost her a few times. Her route took a number of turns. Fortunately, the roads of Rhium were wide and straight, designed to facilitate the movement of huge produce transports. Traffic had ground to a halt during the war and, though life on Abydos was taking steps toward normalcy, the roads were not very busy yet. Thanks to the long, unobstructed views, I was able to find Koval again.

Her destination turned out to be the statue of Saint Carrinus. As she approached the monument, I knew that she had been taking precautions against being tracked. They must have been perfunctory. She wasn't expecting a tail.

The colossal saint was hollow. Citizens could climb to the top of his head, and from there share the great man's view of the city whose soul he had saved. At least they could before the rocket strike. The restoration of the symbol had been promised by both lords Schroth.

There was a doorway in the side of the huge platform on which Carrinus stood. I watched Koval go through it, waited five minutes, then followed.

I almost missed the scratches on the rockcrete to one side of the doorway. The design was small, a few centimetres across, and close to the ground. I saw it because I was looking for it: two circles, one smaller and nestled inside the circumference of the larger. A tau symbol. A sign for those who knew where to look.

Inside was dim. Weak lumen globes lit the iron staircase that zig-zagged upward through the platform up the statue's right leg. While my eyes adjusted, I listened. Though Koval could not have reached the summit yet, I couldn't hear her footsteps. She was being quiet. That was ominous, and a warning for me to do the same.

I went up and drew my bolt pistol, watching the shadows, wary for an ambush. She might have spotted me and decided to lure me here. After ten minutes of climbing, I caught a glimpse of a moving shadow. She was a fair distance above and still moving up. I risked quickening my pace.

The climb was a long one. The back and forth of the staircase was hypnotic and my legs and lungs grew tired – it would have been easy to fall into a trance of effort. I forced myself to stay focused. The top of the statue was an endless distance away. I worried I had waited too long. Even if I could run the rest of the way, there was no way I could catch up to Koval before she reached her goal. She would have several minutes to take whatever action she had planned.

I drew level with the damage. The shattered shoulder let daylight in, but the stairs were close enough to the core that they had remained intact. Higher yet, there was more daylight coming from the gap in the head. The hit here was closer to the stairs. Wind whistled through the gaps, tugging at me as I climbed the last few flights.

The way onto the observation platform was open. I moved to the doorway, keeping within its shadows until I could see what awaited me.

The platform was in precarious condition. The right-hand periphery seemed solid, but the centre sagged towards the void on the left. The rockcrete was fissured, and held up by the iron struts that bent under the strain. Three people stood by the right-hand rail. Koval was closest to me, about halfway between the doorway and the far edge, overlooking the statue's brow. She was as still as absence. She carried no weapon, but held her arms a bit out from her sides, hands open, ready to move. Her power maul dangled from her belt. Beyond her, at the edge, instead of the tau I was prepared to see, were Valentin Schroth and Herennia Vernac. Their voices were raised, and I could hear them over the wind.

'What purpose would that serve?' Schroth was demanding. 'We need a time of healing now. The bleeding must stop.'

'Don't speak to me as if you're thinking of Abydos,' Vernac said. She was shorter than Schroth, but her outrage made her seem taller.

'But I *am* thinking of what's best for the planet. I'm thinking of—'

'*The greater good?*' she snapped, cutting him off.

Schroth didn't answer. He stared her, his right hand twitching.

Vernac stepped into his face. 'You were negotiating with the tau,' she said.

‘There is no compromise. You will be purged, along with all the other traitors.’

‘You have no proof.’ The shake in his voice revealed his uncertainty. ‘No records survive.’

‘You’re sure of that, are you?’

He took a step back. ‘No,’ he admitted. ‘But now that father is gone, I am sure you’re the only one to nurture these ugly suspicions. I’m sorry that tau sympathisers have seen fit to go after you too.’ He turned his head to Koval and nodded.

Now it made sense. The kroot weapon. The symbol at the base of the statue that an investigator was sure to find. All misdirection, pointing at fog, and away from Valentin Schroth.

Koval stepped forward. I raised my pistol, but I couldn’t fire – Koval was in a direct line with Vernac. The bolt shell would punch through both. I ran forward. ‘Halt!’ I yelled. I knew she wouldn’t obey. I just wanted to divert her from the countess.

Koval was fast. She whirled, dropped to a crouch, grabbed her maul and hurled it at me in a single movement. Her speed was almost worthy of a temple assassin. The maul hit my right hand and the shock of the blow and the electrical discharge ratcheted down my arm and spun me back. My hand jerked open and my pistol clattered back down the stairs.

I went with the spin, using its momentum. I turned completely around and launched myself forward at Koval, drawing my chainsword with my left hand. She jumped to the left, evading me easily, and ran across the damaged surface, as it sagged still further. Powdered rockcrete crumbled away in the widening cracks. I turned again to follow as Koval reclaimed her maul.

There was feeling in my right arm once more. I had some use of it. I held my chainsword with both hands and advanced more cautiously. I had diverted Koval from her target. Now I had to fight and win, and Koval was much faster than I was.

I moved the blade back and forth. She was motionless, unreadable. She was waiting for me. I closed to striking distance. We faced one another, and I knew what she expected me to do, and what the consequences would be. I had no choice. In another moment Schroth might decide to join the fray, coward though he clearly was. So I made my move, bracing for the inevitable.

I brought the chainsword down in an overhead slash. Koval blocked with the maul, striking the blade with its head. The chainsword conducted the shock into my arms. The chain snarled as my fists convulsed on the grip. My spine stiffened from the paralyzing hammer blow. But I had known it was coming, and I had already shifted my weight to the right. I fell. The sudden weight and the grinding

of the chain pulled the maul from her grip. It skittered across the platform as I went down. Koval jumped over me to retrieve her weapon.

The observation deck groaned. Rockcrete puffed.

Koval froze. The ominous cracks subsided. She picked up the maul.

My nervous system was misfiring. My head was a boulder of pain, my limbs numb lead. My body was allying itself with the traitors.

I would not die that way.

I yelled, a cry of hate tearing through the barrier between myself and action. Before me was the widening fissure of the observation platform. I reared up. My movements were crude and broken, but they were enough to raise the chainsword and bring its blade into the gap, grinding through the weakened struts.

Koval reacted instantly, but the collapse was faster. The platform gave way, two thirds of its surface pulling away from the right edge. It tipped down, knocking Koval off balance. She tried to leap forward, but gravity had her. With a roar, most of the statue's head collapsed. Koval disappeared as an avalanche of rockcrete plummeted to the street far below.

I made it to my feet. Motor control returning, I turned to Schroth. He was pressed back against the guard rail of the small crescent that was all that remained of the platform. Vernac stared at him with equal measures of hatred and contempt. I sheathed the chainsword and strode over to the governor. He opened his mouth. I didn't give him the chance to plead. I grabbed him by the arms, jerked him away from the rail and hurled him into the void.

His scream was long. It vanished in the echoes of settling rubble.

Vernac and I looked at each other. Abydos had yet another new governor, though only she and I knew it at this moment.

'He was right, though, wasn't he?' Vernac said, sounding very tired, very old.

I nodded. 'Yes. Abydos needs to heal.'

The words tasted foul. The words I would have to speak shortly would be even worse.

As we started down the stairs, the head of Saint Carrinus suffered its final collapse.

The death of Valentin Schroth would be reported as an accident, a tragedy befalling the promising lord as he toured the statue he had promised to restore. Only one other citizen of that world would know the truth besides me and Vernac. I told Holten, when I visited him in his cell the next day.

And I told him that he would be alone to possess that knowledge.

'I won't be freed,' he said.

‘No. Your execution will cauterize the injury of the assassination. If it were revealed that his son plotted his death as part of his effort to conceal his own treachery, the wounds would fester.’

Everything I said was the absolute truth. I did not question the necessity of Holten’s martyrdom. But this was, at that time, the most difficult speech I had ever made. I swallowed my self-disgust, and did my duty. I added a new callus to my soul. But I did not hesitate. I felt no pride in what I was doing, but at least I did not hesitate. Sometimes, the knowledge of duty performed is all we have.

‘Then I will die for the greater good of the Imperium,’ Holten said.

I did not like the choice of words. The phrase had become toxic on this planet. Still, Holten was correct. ‘Yes,’ I said.

His smile was beatific. ‘Good.’

His embrace of his own duty did not make me feel any better about mine.

The gallows were erected in the centre of the Square of Exterminating Grace. Once again, the people of Abydos, and the regiments that had saved them, were called upon to bear witness. This would be the sombre conclusion to the aborted triumph. Yet it would still be hailed a victory. A traitor was about to be punished. Abydos’s soul would be cleansed by that much more. Another step towards the planet’s redemption.

Brenken and I were seated on marble once again.

‘So your decision was as easy as that?’ she asked. ‘I didn’t think you put much stock in expediency, commissar.’

‘I don’t. I understand necessity. I saw what unrest can do on Mistral. We did not fight to save Abydos from the tau only to let it tear itself apart from the inside.’

She grunted. I couldn’t tell if she agreed with me or not.

In the square, Holten mounted the stairs to where the noose waited. The gallows were higher than the plinth. His death would be seen by every one of the gathered citizens. The prisoner was escorted by two Adeptus Arbites troopers. His wrists and ankles were shackled, yet it seemed to me that his step was light.

‘There,’ I said to Brenken, ‘is a man who knows that his death has meaning. That isn’t a small thing.’

The anonymous scribe had become a symbol. His end would help mark a new start for Abydos. When he reached the top of the stairs, he walked towards the noose without hesitation. He was met by an executioner confessor, who demanded his repentance.

Holten refused.

‘Extraordinary,’ I muttered. Holten was playing his part. He had voluntarily

taken on the mantle of scapegoat. He was choosing infamy to better serve his Emperor.

They hanged him, and the crowd roared its hatred for the traitor with as much desperation as it had shouted its loyalty a few days ago. Above the uproar of conspicuous faith, the corpse swayed back and forth.

I looked from it to the decapitated statue of Carrinus, watching the spectacle of a world rebuilding itself on a foundation of murdered saints.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of the Yarrick series, consisting of the novella *Chains of Golgotha* and the novel *Imperial Creed*, as well as the Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos*. For the Space Marine Battles series he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction, including the novella *Mephiston: Lord of Death* and numerous short stories set in the Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000 universes. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

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