



SHADOW PLAY

An Inquisitor Czevak story
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Inquisitor Bronislaw Czevak exchanged the exotic gloom of the webway for the darkness absolute of the death world forest. Without light to navigate by, the inquisitor closed the armoured covers of his map—the *Atlas Infernal*—and allowed it to fall to his side on its leather shoulder strap. The static of dimensional transference died behind him, leaving Czevak in the thick, warm darkness of Umbra-Epsilon V. Everything was black. Indeed, the only way to tell the sky from the horizon was the star-pricked smear of haze that seemed to spread across the above and beyond like oil on water—for Umbra-Epsilon belonged to the dreadspace of the Eye.

About him, Czevak could see nothing, but it was a loud and predatory nothingness. The night forests not only creaked with ambulatory plants and mega-flora but it was also the setting for a carnivorous arms race. A layered cacophony of alien roars betrayed different species of death world killers, haunting the midnight jungle. Calls of aggression, territoriality and the agony of transmutation, as the monsters out-evolved each other for supremacy in the dark, under the Eye of Terror's corrupting influence.

Cranking a chunky lamp, the inquisitor watched as the environment about him retracted, with both plants and predators withdrawing like the feelers of a slug at the horror of brightness. Czevak saw that everything—the leaves hanging from the night forest trees, the gangling insects droning inbetween, the fang-riddled hunters and their brute prey—all appeared different shades of darkness. As the death world's bleak and tiny sun rocketed up into the sky, Czevak witnessed a further, habitual retraction of the night forest flora and fauna. He saw that nothing living on Umbra-Epsilon V had much in the way of pigmentation at all.

The ecology all shared the same translucence that evolution usually reserved for dwellers of the deep. The inquisitor watched the sun cut a swift path across the sickly firmament like a comet before disappearing below the opposite horizon as swiftly as it had appeared. Through some perversity of the Eye, the giant, stationary death world of Umbra-Epsilon V was in fact orbited by its feeble star, rather than the other way around.

Lifting the lamp higher and turning, Czevak saw that the warp portal, through which he had just translated, was part of an arrangement of standing stones.

Dipping a free hand inside his garish coat, he produced an arrangement of explosives. Like festive lights, melta bomb charges hung from a loose coil of cable. Dangling from the arrangement was the atomic clockwork timer with which the inquisitor intended to detonate the explosives. Slipping the coil over his shoulder, Czevak set to work examining the portal's transference nodes and infini-circuitry, until he realised that he had not been the only one interested in the warp portal.

Czevak found that the standing stones and their portal centrepiece were in the middle of an excavation site. Tools and digging equipment littered the monument, abandoned in the black earth. Beside them were bodies. Fresh. Human. Everywhere. As he stepped through the massacre, the inquisitor's lamp caught the dull metallic sheen of a hull, leading Czevak along the length of a bulk transport - a drop-freighter - that the inquisitor reasoned the dig-team must have outfitted for their dreadspace excursion. The open cargo bay was laden with xeno-archeological equipment and similarly decorated with bodies. The expedition was packing serious firepower, as might be expected of an excursion to the surface of a death world, but a brief inspection of the weapons—including a sniff of their barrels and ejection ports — old Czevak that many had not even been fired.

As interesting as the mystery was, Czevak had important business on Umbra-Epsilon V. He turned back towards the warp portal and his intended demolitions, but it was only a half-turn, as curiosity suddenly got the better of him.

- "No," - the inquisitor said, with a finger of remonstrance.

- "Massacre. Deathworld. Massacre. Death world," - he repeated, attempting to convince himself of the foolhardiness of further investigation. Nodding, he turned slowly back for the safety of the portal

and the standing stones. This was fortunate for the inquisitor, since he certainly would have slit his own throat on the wicked blade waiting behind him. Casually holding the weapon was a warrior in the spiked garb and armour of an alien raider. Czevak recognised its species immediately. Pirates. Mercenaries. Sadistic murderers, feasting on the anguish and terror of their victims: the dark eldar were each and all of these.

Holding its helm under one arm and seething with simultaneous hatred and satisfaction, the willowy creature had crept up on the inquisitor like a shadow.

The kabalite's ashen expression suggested the detestation of an entire species and the murderous gleam of its eyes spoke to its intention to hurt him without end. The inquisitor searched for the appropriate words - and not even in his own language. His time spent in the Black Library had exposed him to many accursed texts about the dark eldar, some written in their wretched tongue.

- "You have me," - Czevak told it, praying to the Emperor that his poor translation hadn't communicated something more suggestive to the alien. After a heart-stopping moment, the savage smiled. It really hated him now that he had sullied its beautifully barbed language with his sluggish human tongue. The dark eldar warrior nodded and flicked the tip of the blade towards it, motioning the inquisitor to follow. Czevak felt compelled to comply.

The dark eldar were also infamous slavers. Their devotion to savage thralldom was known and feared the galaxy over. Czevak's hosts did not disappoint. The inquisitor was marched at knifepoint through the night forest to a temporary camp. The complex was guarded by kabalite warriors and the tents' canvas was flayed flesh. A collection of large orb-cages contained the raiding party's death world prizes: all manner of weird and wonderful alien lethality, subdued into servitude by dark eldar beastmasters. Rifle-clutching sharpshooters balanced above the menagerie on barbed sentry poles like stilt fishermen. Also under their wicked sights was a cage-compound containing the raiders' collection of offworld slaves.

The Imperial, the alien and the mutant were all represented among their miserable number. Each was permanently manacled to the black wraithbone bars. When not employed in back-breaking labour or sick entertainment for their dark eldar captors, the poor wretches were forced to carry sections of their own cage and assemble their imprisonment under the alien eyes and vicious whips of their slavers. Stripped of his harlequin coat, melta bombs and the *Atlas Infernal*, the inquisitor was similarly accommodated.

With the light of the death world sun a feeble gleam, there was little to tell between the rapid passing of day and night. Just as regular, Czevak had started to note during the first hours of his incarceration, were the horrific screams of dark eldar warriors. The inquisitor assumed that they were being taken by death world predators, prompting him to find unexpected comfort in his imprisonment. In Czevak's section of cage the inquisitor found he had been manacled with a merchant officer—the lame master of a raided sprint trader—and a dark-skinned brute who looked like he could lift the cage-compound all by himself. Barechested and dressed only in labouring slacks, Czevak identified him as a surviving member of the slaughtered dig-team. Around his head, like a crown, the xeno-archeological labourer bore a distinctive tattoo: a serpent wound around his skull in a circle, attempting to devour itself. Czevak had seen such markings before, on the puppets of Ahzek Ahriman, engaged in the sorcerer's demented and unrelenting search for the Black Library of Chaos.

- "Bronislaw," - the inquisitor introduced himself. He thought it best not to use his title and full name.

- "Huggan," the officer told him. - "Master of the *Euryliad*".

Czevak looked to the cultist, but he said nothing.

- "He doesn't seem to talk much," - Huggan said by way of explanation.

Czevak looked about the cage-compound. The thick wraithbone bars and the alien sharpshooters were the only things preventing the death world fauna feasting on the slaves and for that the inquisitor was thankful. There would be no escaping its confines. He decided that his incarceration would be brief. He needed a distraction. Ironically for a distraction, something that would get him noticed.

- "He'll talk to me," - the inquisitor said confidently.

The cultist was not impressed with Czevak's confidence and continued to ignore him.

- "He's content to sit and wait because he thinks a rescue is coming."

- "Is it?" Huggan dared to hope.

- "No," - Czevak said honestly.

The cultist fixed him with his deep, brown eyes. The inquisitor stared back.

- "Ahriman will never set foot on Umbra-Epsilon V."

Wide-eyed now, the cultist's face clouded with surprise and vexation.

- "What know you of the master?" - the hulking cultist growled back.

- "I know that the Radzner-Gheiss manuscripts - the documents detailing the position of Umbra-Epsilon V and the location of the alien warp portal - contain a small error."

- "There was no such error," - the cultist railed back.

- "We discovered the master's prize exactly where the manuscripts described."

- "Your copies are correct," Czevak admitted. "Your master possesses the originals, lie raided them from the Mount Avalox Repository. I paid a visit to Mount Avalox. While I was there I made a few alterations to the originals."

- "You lie..."

- "Your master isn't coming," - Czevak said. - "He will not arrive to rescue his loyal servants and he isn't en route to take possession of your portal prize."

- "How do you know such things?" - the brute demanded, his building anger causing him to quake and his wraithbone wrist restraint to rattle on the bars.

- "Because I'm here to destroy it," - the inquisitor told him.

The cultist roared and lurched for Czevak, reaching around a terrified Huggan, his great hand clawing for the inquisitor's neck. Dark eldar warriors rushed into the cage-compound, slashing at the black earth with their razorflail whips.

As the cultist released and retracted, a reptiloid appeared at the cage, latching onto the bars with the claws of two of its four scaly arms. In the other two it held Czevak's harlequin coat, melta bombs and the *Atlas Infernal*. The inquisitor was relieved to see the artefacts. The thing was all monstrous serpent from below the waist and above the neck. Everything inbetween was clad in the barbed armour of its alien employers. Czevak knew the species as the sslyth, bodyguards and mercenaries favoured for their loyalty in the ordinarily treacherous ranks of the dark eldar.

- "Bring before the mistresssssss..." - The monster spoke a sibilant interpretation of dark eldar tongue and with their feet barely touching the floor, both Czevak and the cultist were freed by dark eldar warriors and ushered from the cagecompound with shard carbines buried in their backs. Hurried through the camp of flesh-tents, with the light of the death world sun cruising bleakly across the sky, the two prisoners were taken to a large and heavily guarded master-tent. There was another scream - another loss to the host's diminishing number - and the sslyth despatched two of their number to investigate. With the reptiloid slithering behind, the prisoners were dragged into the twilight of the pavilion. The cultist was wraithcuffed to one of the whipping grates that adorned the back of the tent, while the inquisitor was slammed down in a chair before a willowy table. He too had a pair of wraithbone binders slapped on his wrists.

The inquisitor detected kabalite warriors gathered in the shadows, as much ghoulish voyeurs as guards, and saw the sslyth bodyguard come forwards and deposit the *Atlas Infernal*, his string of bombs and his harlequin coat on the desk.

From a draped entrance to a private tent beyond emerged a pair of dark eldar. Czevak stifled his disgust as the two alien women, their skin alabaster white, came out hand in clawed hand.

The first went to take the chair opposite Czevak. She was an emaciated courtesan: smooth skin, jutting bone and barbed corsetry took her loathsome beauty to a cadaverous extreme. Her head was shaved and her eyes sharp, glinting with an inky intelligence. From their body language the dark eldar were lovers, with the second the seeming senior of the pair. A lava flow of bloodsoaked hair cascaded from an arrangement on her head and tumbled down her lithe body. With the tapered fingertips of midnight gauntlets pushing the courtesan down into the seat, she turned and withdrew a few steps. The shredded satin of her loose robe drifted open with the turn to reveal the black leather of thigh-high boots, an armoured girdle and a spiked under-bodice. Her ghastly flesh was all sinewy

muscle, marking the alien filth not only as the host's leader but also a warrior-athlete in her physical prime. Gladiator. Wych. One of the ruling succubi elite.

Out from the drapes shuffled a hunchback. It wore a spiked collar on a length of chain that was held by the courtesan. Its face was an armoured trap of overlapping visors, from the rear of which spilled the horror of a pulsating warp parasite. Czevak had seen such hosts before as part of his work in the Inquisition but had also witnessed the parasites flowing freely through the interdimensional webway. They were known by many names but Czevak recalled them as medusae. Highly empathic, they were capable of absorbing sensations and capturing extreme emotions in the form of a dream or memory. In the Black Library, Czevak had learned how the dark eldar prized the brainfruit as both a culinary and experiential delicacy, through which they could re-experience the pain, fear and vivid emotions of their victims. The inquisitor assumed that the hybrid was performing such a function as he sat there. The courtesan adjusted the filter on an eerie green lens set in the armoured mask, as an inquisitor might a pict-caster before an interrogation.

Czevak squinted across the table at his interrogator. The courtesan began drawing secreted knives from her corset: stilettos, lancettes, shanks, shivs, needle dirks and a selection of kris blades. Each glimmered with the hue and sticky residue of exotic toxins and alien venoms. Czevak nodded his understanding. The courtesan was a Sister of Lhilitu: skilled poisoners and experts in the art of horrible death. The inquisitor smiled. He would play her game.

Like a connoisseur, the courtesan theatrically selected her first blade. The sslyth was suddenly behind the inquisitor, its reptilian claws holding him down and pinning his bare arm to the desk. The unsmiling courtesan picked up the wired string of melta bombs with the tip of her knife and moved them out of the inquisitor's reach. She let slip a harsh stream of alien utterance.

- "Who arrrrrrre you?" - the reptilian mercenary translated.

When Czevak didn't answer, the courtesan used the knife tip to pick up the harlequin coat.

- "How came you by thissssss?"

- "I killed the eldar harlequin wearing it," - Czevak admitted brazenly. The courtesan and her savage kindred exchanged glances of surprise and hostility, although it was difficult to tell what shocked them more—the inquisitor's grand boast or the fact he had delivered it in their own foul language.

- "You lie..." the courtesan hissed.

- "Keep telling yourself that," - Czevak said. The courtesan dropped the coat and tapped the armoured covers of the *Atlas Infernal*.

- "What is this you are carrying?" - the courtesan demanded.

- "I wouldn't open that if I were you—"

But it was already open. Unclasping the golden lock, the poisoner allowed the heavy covers to part and the atlas-plates of stretched flesh to fall open. Rather than shriek and soul-shrivel as he had observed other eldar do, the courtesan merely frowned at the pariah's ancient blood pumping through the veins and capillaries that ran through the skin parchment. Czevak shook his head in simultaneous fascination and disappointment.

- "The children of the Fall have indeed become adept at hiding their gift from She Who Thirsts," - Czevak said.

It wasn't a compliment. The psychic atrophy of their foul race had not only protected them from the attentions of the Chaos God Slaanesh - it fortified them against the nullifying powers of the *Atlas Infernal*. Another sunset produced another stomach-curdling scream from outside the tent. A kabalite officer jogged in to report the obvious in a hateful whisper to his succubus mistress.

- "You know a good deal about our affairs for a preything," - the courtesan accused, playing with her knives like a distracted child.

- "Now let me show you how I come by my information. My anointments are swift - but pain is its own eternity. Affliction is my art and agony its medium. You will tell me all before your end."

- "Is that the venom of the lesser Nguyan skyfish?" - Czevak asked with an enthusiasm that seemed out of place. The courtesan's joyless lips parted with genuine surprise. Czevak continued.

- "The eggs from which, if taken in the spawning season - which I have - provide a natural antidote to the adult skyling's deadly poison."

Czevak watched the courtesan bite at her thin bottom lip with obvious frustration. Stabbing the tip of the blade into the desk, she took up another in her delicate hand. The inquisitor sniffed at the air.

- "The Mount St. Hesta steam traps," - Czevak announced, his eyes closed and nostrils flared. - "A natural volcanic laboratory of the most lethal toxins for twenty systems in any direction. You've opted for a discharge colloquially known as mother's milk. It can be neutralised with a combination of sulphurpetre and nova lotus - which fortunately I have already taken recently as part of a Methuselan water seasoning."

The courtesan snatched up knife after knife, each time with the poison lacing the blade correctly identified and antidote supplied.

- "...a medley of molecular eutrophicants..."

- "...deadly voidshade..."

- "...the harvested phosphor-proteins from Fornaxian blindmites..."

- "...simple chronoflax..."

- "...hydromimetic acid, no wait - soulbane..."

As Czevak played with his poisoner, the death world sun rose and fell. Darkness intruded upon the tent, as well as the screams of the taken. The armoured forms of kabalites entered, the remaining dark eldar sentries having fallen back.

- "Explain yourself," - the succubus demanded with an imperious snarl. A kabalite commander scanned the darkness beyond with his splinter pistol before following his warriors in through the tent entrance.

- "Mistress," - the officer began, - "something unseen stalks us in the forest."

- "It's a death world," - the courtesan shrieked, turning her fury with Czevak on the commander. -

"Everything's stalking something."

- "It is one with the darkness," - the warrior insisted.

- "So are we!" - the poisoner screeched. - "This sack of flesh is behind this. I'm sure of it and he'll be telling me how shortly."

- "This isn't me," - Czevak told her, shaking his head. The back of the courtesan's hand slapped the inquisitor's face aside, her sharpened nails drawing blood across one cheek. Czevak leant forwards and with the finger of one cuffed hand dabbed blood from his cheek onto his tongue.

- "Hive spiderpede venom," - the inquisitor told her. "Blisters, delirium, necrosis, death." - Czevak smiled.

- "Ordinarily."

The courtesan turned her fury back on the commander.

- "I don't know what Archon Myzrioch expected of you but he is dead - by my hand - and his expectations died with him. You live for your mistress, Lelith Hesperax, now. You and your turncoats face possible death in the night forest or certain death here. You choose."

The commander looked from the courtesan to his wych mistress. Lowering his head uncertainly he started backing out of the tent door. The sudden savagery of the officer's disappearance was felt like a gut punch to all watching his exit. The night was a sea of shadow behind the kabalites and it was as if he had been snatched below its black waves by a submerged and hidden predator.

- "On the door!" - Lelith Hesperax yelled with succubite authority, prompting the commander's remaining sentries to set up about the entrance with their weapons trained on the opening. Outside, bleak sunlight had briefly returned.

- "You will talk!" - the courtesan turned on Czevak. Slamming a bone goblet down on the desk, the courtesan poured a ruddy mixture into it from a ghoulish decanter. The liquid sizzled and spat in the cup.

- "Worlds like this," - the courtesan told him, "supply the kabal with slaves and beaststock. Sometimes they face the unnatural enemies of the warp and more exotic poisons are needed for our blades.

They supply these also."

- "What is it?" - Czevak asked.

- "The blood of the warp beasts we have trapped in the night forests," - the courtesan told him. -

"Rarely does one substance have the potential to poison not only the body but also the mind and the

soul. Now talk. What is your business with our portals and who are your friends outside? Tell me now and I promise. I'll kill you quickly. If you refuse, you can tell me between your pleadings for such a luxury, as the toxin warps your form. Consider... Are you ready to evolve?"

The inquisitor licked his dry lips.

- "I'm here to destroy the warp gate," - Czevak answered honestly. - "A powerful sorcerer sworn to the Dark Gods comes to this place to take possession of the artefact and mount an invasion of the webway. Nothing will stand in his way: not the seers and strike forces of the Ulthwé, nor the cult warriors of the Dark City or the roving harlequinades of the webway. He will stop at nothing until the Black Library of Chaos is his. I aim to stop him."

The courtesan grinned. It almost cracked her face.

- "You expect us to believe such a thing?" - The courtesan picked up the chalice and snapped her fingers, prompting the slyth to tighten its grip on the inquisitor.

- "Wait!" Czevak blurted. - "Wait!"

The poisoner hovered.

- "Do you have anything to go with that?" - the inquisitor asked. - "A chaser of some kind, or perhaps some of those little berries on a stick?"

Grabbing the inquisitor's face with its spare hands, the slyth forced his mouth open. The courtesan tipped the bubbling contents of the cup into the gap between his puckered lips. The reptiloid then closed Czevak's mouth and held his nose, forcing the corruption down his throat. The slyth released the inquisitor and Czevak immediately doubled over, his back arched over into convulsions. The courtesan watched with satisfaction as the inquisitor struggled and a roar of agony built up inside his chest. Vomiting the ghastly liquid up onto the floor of the tent, the inquisitor sat bolt upright. The roar built into a single word.

- "Rancid!" - Czevak told the courtesan, wiping blood and spit from his lips.

- "I told you," - he said. - "It needed something." The inquisitor stood up and tossed the wraithbone binders on the desk next to the empty chalice and the *Atlas Infernal*, having deftly freed himself of them under the cover of his convulsions.

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- "Kill him!" the courtesan shrieked, her words bringing a thicket of splinter rifle barrels up and at the inquisitor. As the death world's feeble sun plummeted below the horizon, a deeper darkness settled in the tent. Shadows grew like ink blots, swallowing half of the enclosure's occupants. There were screams and shouts of terror and alarm. Kabalites were enveloped in obscurity and taken by the deep darkness. The blackness snatched the dark eldar warriors and any of their kindred that attempted to deny the darkness its due. Even the powerful slyth had succumbed, its long tail having been seized upon by something hiding in its shadow. Wrenched back by its serpentine length, the slyth clawed at the tent floor with all four of its hands but to no avail. The shadows took it. As the mercenary disappeared, the hulking cultist began thrashing his great body against the grate, attempting to get loose of his restraints. The remaining warriors didn't know where to aim their weapons: Czevak, the escaping cultist or everywhere else.

As darkness turned to twilight with the welcome return of the death world sun, the dark eldar found that Czevak was wearing his harlequin coat, had the *Atlas Infernal* over one shoulder on its strap and the string of melta bombs over the other.

- "Hold!" - Lelith Hesperax called as a dark eldar warrior aimed his weapon at the inquisitor's back.

The courtesan stared her defeat at the inquisitor.

- "How?" - she said.

Czevak slapped the armoured side of the *Atlas Infernal*. He took pity on the poisoner with an explanation: - "The pages exude a field of nullification. It sanitised the corruption in the cup and offers some protection against the pollutive environments of the Eye. It's also what killed your parasite."

The courtesan turned to find her chained voyeur dead on the ground behind her.

- "The brainfruit!" - she screeched in panic, descending on the corpse with one of her kris knives. She proceeded to butcher the host, harvesting the precious brainfruit of the medusa with its preserved memories, sensations and horrors.

- "Time's up," - Czevak told the wych mistress. - "Are you ready to deal?"

- "You think you could trust me?" - Lelith Hesperax marvelled. The inquisitor ignored her.

- "You will send one of your warriors to free the slaves in the cage-compound and escort them to the drop-freighter stationed near the portal. There is a merchant officer among their number who can pilot the ship."

- "And why would I do that?" - Hesperax said with predacious allure.

- "Because in return I'll tell you how to save your own lives," - Czevak said.

The wych glared at him. Czevak pointed to the roof of the tent. - "Tick-tock" – he told her.

- "What about him?" - Hesperax said, pointing at the cultist.

- "What are you doing?" - the courtesan interrupted, clutching a transparent container of harvested brainfruit.

- "He stays," - Czevak insisted.

Lelith Hesperax hesitated for a moment and then directed the warrior watching Czevak to carry out his instructions. As they waited and the frail sunlight ebbed away, the courtesan approached her lover.

- "Don't do this," - she begged.

- "Mistress, I can make him talk." Her continued entreaties met with stonewalled silence and in the distance Czevak heard the powerful engines of the cultist drop-freighter rumble to life. As the inquisitor had hoped, Master Huggan and the prisoners were wasting no time getting off the death world.

- "Talk," - Hesperax ordered the inquisitor.

- "You mentioned that some of your warriors belonged to Archon Myzrioch."

- "This is not treachery," - Hesperax replied, sweeping her hands about the gathered kabalites and the shadowy corners beyond them.

- "Oh, but it is," - Czevak asserted. - "Archon Myzrioch is dead?"

- "By my hand," - the poisoner piped up with dark pride before turning back to her lover. - "For you..."

- "Did you pay off all of Myzrioch's warriors?"

- "They could not wait to serve the Lady Hesperax."

- "What about his mercenaries?"

- "Yes."

- "What about the mandrakes?" - Czevak put to her.

- "Myzrioch worked with shadow-kin?" - the courtesan asked.

- "I'll take that as a no," - the inquisitor replied.

- "So?" - the succubus said. - "So what? Even if Myzrioch was fool enough to engage half-daemons and shadowspawn, his bargain with the darkness has nothing to do with us."

- "They might be living shadow," - Czevak said, "but they still expect to be paid. When you took out Myzrioch, you took up his debt. They have followed you far from the Dark City here. They will not give up."

- "What do they want?" - Hesperax asked, the sharp edge of her words dulled with uncertainty. Now she knew her enemy, things were less straightforward.

- "How would I know?" - Czevak asked with a smile

- "What then?" - the courtesan demanded. Czevak hesitated.

- "Let them die," - the cultist rumbled behind him.

- "You said you would tell us," - Hesperax snarled in accusation.

- "Mistress!" - the dark eldar warrior called, freshly returned from escorting the slaves to the drop-freighter. - "Night is falling."

- "Tell us!" - the courtesan screamed. Czevak nodded slowly to himself.

- "I have read of the shadow-kin demanding the more archaic as part of their payment," - the inquisitor told her.

- "What do you mean?"

- "Rather than slaves and preyflesh, they sometimes ask for a heartbeat or true name."

- "How are we supposed to supply those?" - the wych mistress seethed.

- "I don't know what they would do with them, but a number of times I have read of them demanding an engager's last words."

Hesperax looked to the courtesan, Myzrioch's torturer, poisoner and murderer. The courtesan's eyes were dark with panic. She reached up and touched the succubus lightly on the cheek, a delicate gesture for such a monstrous aberration.

- "Mistress," - the courtesan said fearfully, - "I cannot remember."

- "You don't need to," - Czevak said. - "You're holding them in your hand."

Looking down, the dark eldar beheld the transparent container the courtesan was holding, with the bloody brainfruit within. The courtesan had carried out her dark work - as she always did - with the parasite watching.

- "I'm sorry," - the courtesan told the succubus. - "I wanted you to enjoy his end."

- "I'm sorry too," - Lelith Hesperax told her lover. - "Sorry that you failed me."

In one fluid motion, the succubus landed an athletic kick on the courtesan's chest. The poisoner screamed as she fell back, still clutching the brainfruit. The kick carried her into the black depths of the shadowy corner behind. Night fell. There were screams and horror as the darkness took its prize.

- "Well, that will be me off then," - Czevak said, taking a step towards the door. Before the sole of his boot hit the tent floor, the wych's blade was resting across his chest.

- "You thought you could trust me?" - Hesperax repeated from their earlier conversation. - "You have cost me dearly. There is a price to pay."

- "Isn't there always?" - Czevak agreed. He pointed at her blistered cheek, upon which the courtesan had laid a delicate hand... and sliced her with one of her poisonous nails. - "Hive spiderpede venom: blisters, delirium, necrosis, death. Time really is not on your side, mistress."

A shadow of doubt crossed the succubus's face, a fear that had not existed there since her very earliest days in the battle colisea of the Dark City.

- "Antidote?" - Hesperax said, lowering the blade. The word was half threat, half request. - "For anything your perverse human heart could wish for."

- "All I want," - Czevak told her, - "is for you and your alien filth to leave this world as swiftly as possible."

- "Agreed," - Hesperax said.

- "I mean it," - Czevak told her with an outstretched finger. - "Time is not on your side. You will need every second to reach your destination and every one of your warriors to help find the antidote."

Hesperax nodded her agreement.

- "The antidote is vyxine, drunk as a tea," - Czevak told her. - "The heat activates its properties. You will find it on the exodite world of Ishquiel, in the petals of the darkstar flower. They're black and can be found growing on the foothills of the mountains near the Tal-Morai gateway. Go now, in peace. And remember, wych, that I spared you."

A ripple of hatred passed across Lelith Hesperax's features. She half suspected that the wily human was still holding out on her. She didn't have time for further intrigue, of his or her own. She prompted her remaining warriors to exit the tent and make for the portal.

- "Remember?" - the succubus repeated back to him as she followed them.

- "Don't worry," - she assured Czevak with menace, - "I won't forget you..."

Listening to the xenos footsteps disappear into the night forest, Czevak turned to the cultist, still bound to the grate. Walking over, the inquisitor activated the runes that released the wraithbone fetters, allowing the huge acolyte to crumble to the tent floor. Czevak nodded to himself and went to leave.

- "What will you do?" - the cultist asked.

- "Destroy the portal," - Czevak said.

- "With me on the other side, of course."

- "You would leave me here?"

- "Yes," - the inquisitor told him as he reached the tent entrance. "But I was being uncharitable when I said Ahriman will never set foot here. He will see through the errors I left for him at Mount Avalox. You can still expect your rescue, if you live long enough."

The inquisitor went to leave.

- "And if you do, you can tell your sorcerous lord that Bronislaw Czevak pays his respects..."

