



WARHAMMER
40,000
INQUISITOR

– THE CALIGARI ARCHIVUM –

Burden
[Episode 1]

Gábor Izsóf



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The logo features the word "WARHAMMER" in a bold, black font with a metallic texture, positioned above "40,000" in a smaller, similar font. Below these is the word "INQUISITOR" in a large, white, serif font with a metallic sheen. The text is set against a dark, ornate background that resembles a winged emblem or a piece of armor.

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The Caligari Archivum

The Caligari Sector – a vast, ancient and forgotten region in the Segmentum Tempestus, filled with shadows that hide hundreds of tainted worlds. A Sector plagued by the mysterious Warsurges, smaller, but highly unpredictable manifestations of the dreaded Warp Storms. Far from the guiding light of the Astronomican and torn apart by the foul tempests that can twist reality and cut off entire systems for centuries, leaving them ripe for Chaos infestation, the Caligari Sector is a haven for the heretic, the outlaw and the corrupted.

The Inquisitors of the Caligari Conclave are the fearless agents of the Imperium who don't hesitate to enter the dark corners of the Sector to investigate mysteries and purge the unclean. The Caligari Archivum is a constantly expanding collection of their deeds. A series of stand-alone short stories and longer novellas in episodic format, written by various authors, all set in the Caligari Sector, the official sandbox world of Action-RPG videogame,

Warhammer 40,000: Inquisitor – Martyr.

If you like **The Caligari Archivum** stories, check out the Action-RPG
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The Caligari Archivum



Burden

(Episode 1)

by

Gábor Izsóf

I. Arrival

The courier-ship bearing the dreaded symbol of the Inquisition emerged from warp and hundreds of naval guns immediately began tracking it. Ornamented with gothic reliefs of a bygone era, when Mankind's rule was unchallenged, the ship hurtled towards a moon whose existence was denied. The amassed Imperial defences were poised to spew teratons of death upon the uninvited visitor, yet the firing rituals were to be halted, for such vessels bore emissaries wielding the power of the God-Emperor. Astropathic hails and thrice encrypted datasermons challenged the intruder for identification as it dived deeper into the forbidden system, which was alive with activity. Defying the warp storms so prevalent in the Caligari Sector, a host of prison transports loomed over the sickly pale orb, ready to unload their cargo.

With all power diverted to its engines darkness and cold reigned inside the craft. In the suffocating confines of the navigational chapel, humanoid forms lay in bulky voidsuits, faintly lit by the rune streams of the helm console. Their fogged-up visors were penetrated by snaking tubes to sustain bodily functions, dispense stimulants and extract organic slag. Only a few bio-automatons moved on the deck, repeating monotonous maintenance rites. The vessel traversed the galaxy at unfathomable speed, braving the currents of the Immaterium in its haste. The ship's armaments, all adorned with gargoyles had lain dormant for multiple inaugmented lifetimes.

Kaius Sokolov came to his senses when the ship's machine-spirit sounded the alarm and the servitor-chirurgian sliced open the membrane encasing his body. The muscular nozzle in place of the subhuman servant's mouth worked with ghastly efficiency as it cleaned up the phlegmous residue from the creases of his mutilated body. After serving the Imperium for over 200 years, Sokolov could not endure interstellar travel other way. Withdrawing to this sarcophagus fitted with a modified neuroglove had kept warp-borne nightmares at bay and soothed his open nerve endings with modulated pain. But not anymore. The hot airstream heating up the cabin stung like a whip. If not for the expertly inserted gag, Kaius would have bitten off his tongue in agony. After some dry heaving and convulsing, the mind regained control over the faltering flesh.

‘Report,’ he demanded, spitting out the gag. The surgeon regarded a saliva stain on the brushed steel floor with dead eyes. A raspy answer emerged from a vocular box implanted in its throat.

‘Translation from warp complete. We are on schedule. Gellar shield and mains are intact. Your life signals are at level misericus, inquisitor. Do you require assistance?’

‘Denied.’

‘Moral integrity compromised, multiple protocol violations, forbidden destination detected. Requesting permission to report to Ordo outpost.’

‘Denied. Purge the on board mnemonic cogitator and initiate your own mental purgation!’

The servitor, which Kaius had created decades ago from an incompetent acolyte, left without a word. He squirmed his limbless body out of the sarcophagus and tried to recall that intoxicating moment when he had choked the worthless pupil to death, but no real memory came, just bleached emptiness. Impotent rage rose like foul bile. It took a few intimately pathetic minutes to climb into the suit, and he welcomed the obscene, silky feeling of his stubs settling inside the warm, suctioning neuro-sheaths. Reading erratic life signals, the dull grey power armour promptly administered a chemical-cocktail, becalming Kaius’ mind with mild hallucinations. For a moment, he could sense the stirring crew, the rivets shifting in the reheated bulkheads, the artificially decelerated dying of his own internal organs, and the myriad daemonic after-impacts on the ship’s reality-shield as it punched through the Immaterium. But it was all just chemically-induced phantasmagoria, he was no mutant and the suit’s built-in psychic hood sealed him from such influence.

Having taken the shortest route through unlit passageways, now he was standing on the gold-inlaid bridge, studying a hololithic field under a low baroque ceiling. The ancient projector was framed by the calcified corpse of a former captain, who had been given the honour of serving the courier-ship from beyond the grave. Suspended in mid-air, flashing collision runes and interlocking trajectory patterns screamed silent death.

‘Your inquisitorial authentication was rejected as insufficient, sir. Star fortress priming torpedo tubes. We are sailing inside the solution range of four macro cannons. Battlecruiser Vindictor Imperialis is coming around for full side barrage. Your orders?’

Apart from the heavy skull socket, the mentally castrated officer looked annoyingly serene and human in his black voidsuit. There was no hint of tension in his voice, as unnecessary emotions were completely suppressed in all Ordo personnel. Kaius envied the unmarred young body, but he subdued the deviant desires seeping into his consciousness. With servos whirring, he walked to the communications altar and replaced his inquisitorial rosette with another. An angelic choir sounded as the insignia was accepted.

‘Extreme breach of security protocol detected,’ reported another officer, surfacing from the ship's spiritual interface.

‘Silence and submit,’ Kaius commanded and they all obeyed. Their deeply ingrained mental restraints left no room for insubordination. He could have killed the entire crew with a command word.

‘Transmit gene-clearance of Inquisitor Imram Kaeda on my mark. She is already connected to the cryptocaster.’

Slaved to the system through thick datacables, hunched in a dark alcove, Imram Kaeda made no objection. Her severed head floated inside a reinforced crystal container, a favoured device by corpse interrogators to keep subjects portable and reasonably alive. Intricate miniature clockwork machinery whirred on the casing while a small leather bellow inflated rhythmically to run the artificial sustenance. The only mistake Kaeda ever made was letting another inquisitor know she had access to the Machinae Sacra Culleus, the secret penal facility. Setting a trap with venomous lies, then dissolving the remains with omniphage bacteria in the Ordo Hereticus catacombs was unnervingly easy for a veteran of the shadow wars. Briefly, he relived catching the animalistic angst in her eyes before the feline, bodygloved woman exploded into a sack of oozing meat under his powered gauntlet.

As Kaius watched the cryptocaster working, an armless gluttonicus-servitor fed him figlike delicacies drowned in their embryonic sacks, dipped in Sagarrian sour honey. The desserts were lifted from a stasis container and placed on the inquisitor's tongue by means of a long dendrite protruding from the bio-automaton's toothless mouth. Chewing on the jellified bone and gristle, he tried to remember how many Imperial subjects he had exterminated personally, but the mental exercise failed. A thousand? Perhaps more. Only a few could have matched the strength of the biomechanical monstrum he wore, fabricated from an Adeptus

Astartes warrior and his armour, a towering giant who had been serving Kaius faithfully for 85 years since his excommunication. He could recall neither his name, face, nor how he had met his death. With the inquisitor's mangled frame enthroned inside the chestplate, the armour still housed the nervous system and reanimated bodyparts of the space-marine. Without the suit, he was just a helpless worm, a disgraceful mockery of the immense power he wielded.

The same, albeit stolen power would grant him admittance to the Machinae Sacra Culleus, whose history was long lost in Administratum archives under trillions of tonnes of recordings. Those who knew its dark secret had been assassinated or mind-scrubbed into oblivion over the centuries. Kaius firmly believed the latter was worse. His own mind had been despoiled over and over again by chemical wiping and psychic-surgery until no sensitive information remained which could harm Ordo interests or those of his superiors, stuck in their perpetual scheming for power. The last scrubbing had been so deep that he had lost the ability to speak and to control his bowel movements. But even this ordeal seemed distant now. Excised memories were replaced by a never healing emptiness and these absences kindled a furious rage in him and brought forth the spectre of insanity. Then there was that unexplainable, corrosive stain which soiled even the intact corners of his personality.

'Enough!' He waved off the feeding servitor, who squirted a scented digestant into his master's mouth and rinsed out the saliva draining tubes drilled into the lower jaw of his disfigured face before leaving.

Unsanctioned memory retrieval was treason, and treason meant immediate execution in the Inquisition, yet it had become a suicidal obsession for Kaius. It was a lonely endeavour filled with conspiracy and murder, but he had invincible allies. Driven by the same aberrant need, his old personas also scoured the past, leaving a trail of hidden, gene-encrypted recordings. Finding and interpreting these incoherent scribblings was a frustrating and paranoia infested process, but they constituted the only true resource beyond inquisitorial control. Kaius trusted their secret counsels completely as they had saved him from ruination countless times. Only in his darkest moments did he wonder whether he was just a puppet in a greater game, manipulated by his failed predecessors, or something worse. The Imperial Creed he had once sworn upon meant nothing. The sound of a faded voice on decade old recordings

made him torture and kill Ordo brothers to extract the forbidden knowledge. He would commandeer the fastest ship, probably condemning its crew to death, just to get here before all evidence of an incident was erased forever. He became part of the rot, the selfish arrogance that gnawed the Imperium from within.

‘Transmit!’ A burst of garbled data and the stolen identity of the late Imram Kaeda crossed the void, and with it he gained entry to the Machinae Sacra Culleus, the human abattoir which had fed the Imperium with invaluable resources for untold millennia.

II. Sacra Culleus

‘Evoking the Sacred Clause Magnus Secundus in the Treaty of Mars, I demand mercy!’

The plea was left unanswered. A heavy blade penetrated the tech-priest at the shoulder, and the Magos of Station Septimus died with an electrical scream as his bisected torso flopped to the side. Another strike severed the spine of the last gun-servitor, hurling the tank tracked beast into a heat vent. Kaius thumbed off the crackling power sword, pausing for a moment until the waning energy field shed its coating of artificial blood. Unperturbed by the encounter, tossing a ruined mutant leather cape to the ground, he marched to the control pulpit, crushing steaming corpses under his feet. The inquisitor’s battered Mark VIII power armour still smouldered from hellgun impacts. The gun-servitor herd had managed to fire off a few volleys before he uttered the secret syllables of deactivation and butchered them all, along with their bewildered Adeptus Mechanicus masters.

The inquisitor stepped inside the cubiculum, which smelled of charred conduit, and punched in a few commands on the console. Runes flashed on the grimy pict-screen, dating the last activation back to more than a century before. After a brief hesitation, the archaic system acknowledged that a captive had been diverted to Station Septimus for inspection. Then he waited in the darkness, a hulking giant standing under the steel archways eaten away by human perspiration. Awakened by the stench of the slaughter, degenerate cleaning symbionts detached from the walls and filled their flaccid bellies with the carnage, dribbling germicide fluid to the floor. Transports rattled past the platform on conveyor tracks, carrying thousands to extermination. Sporadic gunfire rolled through the subterranean level, as tormented soldiers of a rebellious Imperial Guard division executed themselves by cranking penitence-mills until the guns attached to their skulls fired. This ingenious means of administering martial justice also replenished the electricity in the galvanic vaults.

The Machinae Sacra Culleus was guarded by safety rituals bordering on the lunatic but, as an inquisitor, Sokolov walked the premises undisturbed - until the veritas codes extracted from Imram Kaeda failed, alerting the guardians. One last act of defiance, perhaps. The maintenance logs he leeches from the data tombs, dating back to the Dark Age of Technology,

revealed traitorous levels of neglect and decay. The immensely powerful Gellar shields protecting the moon were failing and no tech-priest could commune with the ancient grav-wave generators any more. The constant psychic-fallout had eroded reality to such an extent that warp-anomalies and daemonic influence became a grave concern. The rot again, spreading through the cracks of the mighty Imperial machine...

As he descended through the levels, Kaius watched the thousands of naked bodies, both volunteers of the Imperial Cult and the condemned, disappearing into the thrumming maws of the apparatus. Cherubs wriggling out of biomechanical wombs swarmed each transport, searching for signs of corruption, punching cytotoxin-injectors through cranium bone, terminating the tainted hosts. Skin and fat sizzled away under the branding irons as servitors marked the fresh corpses with warding runes before they threw them to the ground. Null-psyk headbands wrought from witchbane ore hammered on chemically-depilated skulls to shield minds from malefic intrusion. He witnessed the moon's nauseating aura of death take effect on the unprotected, grinding their sanity away with terrible certainty.

Gigantic automated abattoirs with huge pendulum blades coated in machine grease, dismembered the human frames, while gurgling vacuum tubes guzzled up body fluids. Giant grinders churned out biomass for the terraformation of infertile planets. Servitor assembly lines, creating lobotomised serfs to serve the Imperium for well over a human lifespan. Organs were harvested, bone marrow and blood distilled into poisons or exotic medications so that the inconceivable billions of Imperial citizens could live longer in blissful ignorance. Psykers were turned into dried out husks, forging their drained warpforce into holy weapons, armour, and bone artefacts of saints to fight the Ruinous Powers. Kaius looked on as volunteers covered in morphia oil, singing sacred hymns with unshakable faith in human supremacy and the goodwill of the God-Emperor, slid into the bronze cradles of the thrice blessed butchering automatons, offering themselves to the lightless manufactorums deep below.

To a soul hampered by the organic miasma of emotions, the Machine Sacra Culleus was an abhorrent instrument of cruelty. To a pragmatist, a thinker, it was nothing less than irreplaceable for the survival of a Mankind facing Chaos and the Xenos threat. And what was the fleeting discomfort of the millions who ended up here, compared to the agony of

the forever entombed Emperor, sitting on the Golden Throne for over ten thousand years?

With infernal clanking the transport arrived and a torrent of recycled air swept over Station Septimus. Rusted brakes screeched, hundreds of suspended bodies jostled each other and flesh anchors jingled. The hooked arms of a manipulator array protested loudly, strewing dust and caked grease on the condemned, as it unfolded from the ceiling, lifted the selected captive off the conveyor track and settled it on the inspection stand. Muffled gibbering rose in the ranks as Kaius walked to the subject, suppressing his excitement. Somewhere in the distance sirens began to sound.

III. Evisceratio Animus

The prisoner hung from the inspection stand on two flesh anchors drilled into his shoulder blades. Wearing nothing but a respirator glued to his face and a leaking feeding tube hanging from his lower abdomen, the subject was a muscle-bound man, covered with the crude heretical tattoos typical of penal legion convicts. A lopsided skeletal structure and long arms with a deformed spinal column suggested a high-gravity death world as his birthplace. Ridged white scars and fungal pox marks crisscrossed his dark skin, and several horrific injuries were sealed by a patchwork of discoloured synth-flesh. He had been savagely scalped at least once as per the usual initiation ritual to the vilest Legio Penetante regiments. Miraculously, he retained his nose and ears, a status reserved for those who sat high in the criminal hierarchy. This, then, was a true survivor, probably a more skilful murderer than Kaius himself, who had no recollection of ever meeting the man. But his deleted personalities in the hidden recordings said otherwise.

Fighting the crippling nerve toxin, rope-like muscles tensed and bulged on the brute's body as the inquisitor's gauntleted hand, bigger than the convict's head, reached out and ripped off the breather mask, tearing a bloody O-shaped mark into the face. Undaunted by the armoured giant, the prisoner snarled and spit a thick wad of phlegm into his tormentor's face. Kaius did not even flinch. Bloodthirsty howls of approval sounded from the transport. Now sirens wailed throughout the complex.

'Name, regiment, last campaign?'

'Get rotplague and die, imperial scum,' the man barked in heavily accented low-gothic. Hands shot out, trying to grab Kaius's raised gorget, but the fingers slipped from the damasked neck protector. The inquisitor was much pleased by the futile effort.

'Do you remember me?' Kaius leaned forward and let the criminal take a closer look. The bloodshot, vat-grown eyes studied his ruined features in the dark. Torn cheeks and lips, missing nose. Tubes worming into exposed facial cavities to keep them humidified, draining excessive fluids. Ordo surgeons could have repaired the defects, but he kept them as ghastly artefacts of the past. The prisoner rolled his head back and let out a booming, guttural laughter. Confirmation hit Kaius like a jolt of modulated pleasure. By the grace of the Corpse-Emperor, they had met

before! The constrained laughter grew stronger when other captives joined in. He reeled for a second, overwhelmed by the rush of sheer excitement. All treachery shall come to fruition, another lost event shall be reclaimed.

As the uproar dissipated, the inquisitor beckoned to the creature who had been hiding in a service recess ever since they set foot on Station Septimus. Myo-fibres creaked and a ghoulish apparition emerged from the shadows. The psyker was a horrible byproduct of xenos gene-surgery with seemingly lifeless twig limbs, its internal organs herniating through pallid skin. His morbidly oversized cranium was supported by an atrocious neck brace which balanced the rest of the body on three spiderlike cybernetic legs. This once human abomination was a soul eviscerator, an extremely potent mind-reading beast. Psyk-sensor spikes jutted from his joints, rigged to explosive charges to prevent insubordination or a severe warp-breach. The deeply wrinkled face showed perpetual inner torment.

‘Do as we agreed and I shall end your suffering. I swear upon the sacred power vested in me by the Emperor.’ It took him some effort to address the mutant with formal respect. Under different circumstances Kaius would have blasted open his skull without hesitation. The reanimated arm of the Astartes inside the suit twitched involuntarily, sending an aching impulse through the neuro-sheath.

‘There is no need to swear upon your False God.’ The whispered answer was accompanied by a disturbing smile.

‘My fate is entwined with this man. Extract his memories and feed me everything.’

‘It may very well kill him. Maybe you too.’

‘Do it.’

‘There is a taint...’ A powerful explosion stopped the psyker mid-sentence. The proximity charges Kaius had set up earlier went off, blocking the entrance to the station. Dust fell from the archways. So, the servitor army has arrived. It will take them a few hours to cut through the obstacles with their plasma torches. Unless the tech-priests find another way in.

‘Start the procedure!’ he commanded.

The abomination shrugged, barely suppressed hate in its eyes. Visibly shaken by its malevolent presence, the prisoner made to recoil as the psyker crept closer, but the flesh anchors held him in place. He fought to avoid the grotesque twig-arms, jerking like a madman, spitting obscene

threats and gouts of saliva. When the two bodies inevitably connected, he uttered a visceral, high-pitched scream, then fell unconscious with eyes rolled back, mouth hanging open. Grabbing his victim's head with both hands, the soul eviscerator's lips twisted into a predatory snarl. Waves of perverted pleasure washed over his fragile frame, eyes burning from unholy warpflame, as he penetrated and dismantled the defenceless mind. On the conveyor track dozens died from the raw psychic radiance. Hearts stopped, throats choked by vomit. Brass carrion-seraphs, sensing a moral threat, chimed on Kaius's pauldrons.

'Turn off your psychic collar, inquisitor.' The nonchalant request felt like a stubgun pressed against the temple.

'Remember mutant, betrayal will never get you the demise you crave so much...'

'Stop wasting time, human!'

Kaius Sokolov, renegade agent of Ordo Hereticus drew a deep breath. After becoming the instrument of such heresy, there is no turning back. But is there any price he would not pay? Warning runes flashed on the suit's inner collar as he deactivated the psychic wards - the only thing that kept him safe from mental intrusion. Frozen in a nauseating moment, he was about to let out a feral whine when the impossibly dense death-fallout accumulated around the Machinae Sacra Culleus hit him like a siegehammer. His tongue swelled from the ethereal overpressure immediately, veins popped, trickling blood through the nose and mouth. Death was imminent, but the psyker was ready and its alien presence enveloped the inquisitor like a black shroud.

IV. Messenger

Carac watched the artillery barrage whistle over, ripping into the mountain of corpses piled against a bombed-out bunker. One shell landed close, sending tons of earth, reinforced rockrete and bodyparts flying. To evade the raining debris, he wriggled his wiry frame under two bloated traitor-marine cadavers, stiffened by rigor mortis, which oozed putrefaction into an overflowing ditch, filled to the brim with the dead. With eyes closed, he took a short rest as shrapnel panged off the makeshift cover. Too much movement or drawing any kind of attention to himself meant certain death. More ordnance fell screaming from the sky, puncturing the low hanging clouds. The gut-wrenching impact of a near miss cleared his sinuses out, but at least it was less painful now with one eardrum busted. Using one's whole body to sense vibrations was more reliable than hearing.

In the next two hours the shelling continued and khornate sappers began to assault the fortification he was meant to deliver a message to. The cultists were cut down by heavy autocannon fire, followed by resounding booms as the explosives stuffed in their overstretched abdominal cavities went off. Some brass armoured giants who were goading the Blood God's minions forward got trapped in no man's land, bogged down in the mud. Bellowing wildly, they poured hissing plasma blasts into the portholes while the defenders tried to dislodge them with inaccurate mortar fire. This was the diversion Carac had been waiting for to enter the stronghold unnoticed, since penal legionnaires opened up on anything that moved, even friendlies. There was no other way of beating superhuman enemies.

That little bastard Forx, his psychopathic guardian, was nowhere to be seen, but that was how this unlikely pair worked. They were the last scouts from the penal regiment Dogbeaters, or what was left of it, a few hundred lunatics and degenerate killers. Being a juvenile convict, Carac started out as an ammo mule, shifting heavy munition boxes across the battlefield. Most mules died on the first day, but he survived everything unscathed, making some heretics mutter that he was touched by the warp. To stay nimble, he never carried a weapon, just a junk knife. Armour was pointless and dulled the senses. People with guns usually made bad decisions, and thoughts revolving around fighting and killing was a dead giveaway to

sorcerers. Forx was a different matter, but he was an abhuman and batdung crazy.

Smearing himself with dirt and machine oil, he rotated his explosive collar as a lucky charm, checked his rags to hide any metallic glint and started crawling. Humanoid brains noticed movement before anything else, so taking it slow was the only way. Getting under the battlements by snaking through dense razorwire took him about three hours, while lasgun beams cracked over his head and stray bolter rounds tore into the dead. Now he was close enough to hear the laboured breaths of his fellow convicts on the other side lugging ammo crates to feed the autocannons. Traversing the grey rockrete parapet like a creeping mudstain had been a ten minute affair, but finally he was inside the outer trench system. One challenge was left - revealing his presence without getting shot. And that's where disaster struck at a shadowy intersection for relying too much on his innate sense of danger. As soon as their eyes connected, the well-hidden watchman swung a lasrifle around at Carac. But Forx was already upon him, out of nowhere.

The rusty combat knife landed with a sickening thud and sawed through pelvic bone as the ratling put his whole weight behind the strike. The disembowelled sentry doubled over, trying to scream, but Forx slammed a fistful of mud into his mouth. One more stab and it was done. With a rodent-like swivel of his head, the half-sized human wiped the knife on the corpse, then punched Carac hard in the gut. The savage blow landed the juvenile on his backside, but Forx was already straddling his chest, pushing the chipped blade under his eye. The crazy-eyed, snarling abhuman burst into a long tirade of vulgar hand signals, planted another heavy fist in his face, then disappeared between stacks of ammo crates. Feeling his nose streaming, Carac staggered up, trying to avoid the glassy eyes of the butchered watchman. It was better than taking a las-shot in the chest. Or another ear cut off by Forx as punishment.

Like most ratlings, Forx had been an Imperial Guardsman before he was demoted to Legio Penetante service. He never talked, but his name and former position were tattooed on his forehead. No one in the regiment knew why he picked Carac for a partner, but anyone who tried to interfere with their one-sided relationship ended up getting knifed. And Forx was practically invisible until he wanted to be seen, with scouting skills rivalled only by Carac's inhuman patience and premonition. The juvenile

convict snorted and wiped his nose on his stained brown coverall. Time to deliver the news to the defenders that Garuk is coming through with the rest of the Dogbeaters.

V. Legio Penetante

The two scouts were sitting on a bent plasteel beam, gobbling up rations, watching the sea of scalped heads converging in the mortar pit below. It was a picturesque, but dismal scene, everything drowning in grey rockrete dust and rusty shades of brown. A clean shaven skull was the Legio Penetante standard, but most veterans in the Caligari Sector divisions preferred ripping scalps off as a grisly initiation ritual. The purpose of service was to die anyway and considering that they were a bunch of murderous criminals and heretics, the commissars turned a blind eye as long as relative discipline held. But now no officers were left, only hardened survivors remained. The strongest ruled through sadistic violence, settling disputes with severe punishments or fights until one party was killed.

Carac winced in pain as Forx, still wearing his camouflaged mudsuit, jabbed him in the ribs and pointed. After much bickering the gang leaders of the Gangrene Boys and Dogbeaters agreed to discuss matters. No one used the old unit names, all insignia having been defaced when the Imperium left more than sixty-thousand Imperial Guard and Legio Penetante soldiers behind on Malcorum Prime. Months later, just a couple thousand convicts were left manning the Linus Sentorium, a crumbling line of fortresses, still putting up a dogged, but pointless resistance. Desertion or getting captured meant slavery on a daemon world, being sacrificed for the Skull Throne, or being turned into a soulless khornate cultist. The gathered rabble preferred to die fighting, which pleased the servants of the Blood God even more.

The young ammo mule had not seen what Malcorum Prime, an Imperial Guard staging world, had looked like before the invasion. Older guardsmen told him tales of a lush green planet with military complexes, orbital siege towers and underground facilities stretching for miles, housing millions of soldiers, tanks, vehicles and suborbital aircraft. The Legio Penetante was thrown into the meatgrinder as a desperate delaying tactic, well after the Chaos battlefleet had descended upon the planet. All they found was a barren landscape bearing the marks of atomic bombardment and chemical warfare. Bodies had been piled so high that even the armoured bulldozers Carac drove for a while failed to clear them away, the hulking vehicles ending up buried under corpse avalanches or

sinking into cesspits. The glorious Imperial Navy, the relief force that had brought them here, burned above the planet for weeks. Shattered battleships fell from orbit, blackening the skies with smoke as they disintegrated in the atmosphere. Hopelessly outnumbered, even the Adeptus Astartes was battered back in a titanic clash after the last airbase was overrun.

At first, the convicts were nothing but cannon fodder to soak up enemy fire, to be thrown under tanks until their bones jammed the tracks, to plug gaps in defensive lines with human flesh. The slightest defiance set off dozens of explosive collars – a remotely controlled punitive device worn by every convict. Thousands perished in the early engagements, the sheeple and the weak. The rest had no other choice but to keep dying. Just after military order collapsed and warp-anomalies blocked the command signal to the collars, a revolt erupted. Rebellious gang leaders hanged their Imperial masters and threw them naked onto the razorwire, surpassing the ruthlessness of any commissar. Tattered bands seized the Lines Sentorium, taking terrible revenge on the demoralised guards, then put the seemingly inexhaustible military stockpiles to use. Men turned out to be the only thing in short supply. For a while they even thrived when the Chaos forces, the Nurgle and Khorne worshippers, clashed to claim the fallen planet. But now the feud was over and Malcorum Prime belonged to the fiefdom of the Blood God. Carac has seen enough to know that meant the end.

‘Shut yer gobblers and listen up!’ The murmur died down and a muscular, tattooed brute stepped into a patch of light seeping into the multi-storey bunker through the collapsed roof. ‘I’m Garuk, warboss of the Dogbeaters. Your boss, the mighty Trenchfoot, let my gang in ’cos we did stuff together before His Majesty promoted us here.’

Curses, stray laughter and hissing approval swept the crowd as haggard faces with missing ears, noses and lips turned to face him. Taking bodyparts as compensation for an offence or favour was common practice in the legion, turning the lower ranked soldiers into mutilated wrecks.

‘When do we feast? The Passage of Flesh must be honoured!’ howled a skeletal apparition, covered with loose flaps of infected skin. The mob pushed him forward, only to be propelled back by a meaty fist.

‘I said silence! Bring our birdie in!’ On Garuk’s command, a severely beaten figure was kicked in front of the crowd. He was wearing the explosive collar, but his largely untouched features hinted his body was

used to decadent pleasures. With short cropped hair, a calm demeanour and intelligent eyes, an unremarkable physique, he looked badly out of place here. Like someone destined to be a victim.

‘This meatfunnel here was nabbed by our boys, loitering around, claiming to be a survivor from the Kranken Barons.’ Garuk paused until the malignant shouts of the crowd subsided. Forx stopped eating and stared blankly at the captive with his mouth hanging open, showing pointed teeth. Carac was unnerved when the stranger looked up and briefly met his gaze. They were sitting on the steel beam high above, out of sight.

‘So, he sang us a wonderful tale, a tale that needs to be checked, gents. Couple weeks ago, not far from here, the Barons happened upon a fancy ride, a freshly wrecked Aquila Lander in the bog. The crash site was littered with dead Imperial scum, but the lander was in decent shape. Our birdie even claimed that some of the stiffs were Astartes. What have the Gangrene Boys to say about that?’

‘What do we say, eh?’ The crowd parted and a salvaged penitence-servitor rolled in from the shadows, decorated with severed heads, ears and tongues, cradling the crippled boss of the Gangrene Boys. Despite his lower legs being eaten away by bloodrot, Trenchfoot still possessed a charismatic aura and a voice of spoilt honey. The bearded, aging Vostroyan held his prized chaos trophy in one hand, a gold-plated plasma pistol decorated with a daemon head, and a long chain in the other. Tied to the servitor a huge, naked torso was lying on the ground. It was clearly a Space Marine, clad in a black carapace, but missing all his limbs. Carac noticed that the Marine’s eyes had been plucked out and his mouth sewn shut. Heavy back muscles coiled as the surreal apparition writhed like a worm, struggling to turn over. Space Marines were the stuff of legend and now the Gangrene Boys had one of their own, degraded to a pet. Garuk laughed out, smacking his thighs in delight. There was no greater glory for a gang leader than to parade around such a hated symbol of Imperial tyranny for all to see.

‘Well, he demanded favours, and my hospitality comes at a price, my friend,’ smirked Trenchfoot, much pleased with himself. He yanked the chain, making the Astartes warrior fall on his face. Spittle and kicks rained on the torso from the cheering crowd. ‘We picked him up over there, kinda wounded. Yes, your birdie was spilling the right tune.’

Carac did not even notice Forx go, leaving a half-empty ration can behind.

VI. Burden

Trenchfoot's den was a rusty service bay, which smelled of grease and rancid sweat. It was filled with disembowelled vehicles and war trophies. The cripple sat on a raised elevator platform in a crude chair welded together from defiled Imperial crests and decorated with body parts. A hideous low-ranker crouched at his feet, scraping bloodrot from his master's stubs. Garuk stood beside the host, grabbing the collar around his neck with both hands. With his dark skin, rippling muscles and deformed spine he resembled a savage slave-warrior. Trenchfoot was quaffing the amasec stash of an Imperial Guard colonel whose desiccated body still hung on the wall with at least a dozen other mangled cadavers. The dismembered Space Marine was lying in front of the throne, still chained to the platform.

The captured Kranken Baron had been set loose after suffering the gory initiation to his new gang. He was curled up in a corner, unconscious, as blood mixed with coagulant powder dripped from his head. Carac sat nearby, waiting for the Passage of Flesh to commence. He was standing watch in a gunnery observation tower, waiting for the last sickly sunrays to desert the wrecked landscape.

The Gangrene Boys and the Dogbeaters mingled around rudimentary gas heaters. Ragtag lunatics and heretics paced like caged animals, mumbling obscenities at fattened joyslaves cowering in makeshift corrals. Misshapen veterans greeted each other by knocking collars together. Others flung challenges at each other or exchanged curses with barely restrained bloodthirst. Some squatted on ammo crates, wolfing down food or gawking at the chained Astartes like Carac. The juvenile's nose was probably broken, and it had begun to swell and turn yellowish purple. Forx was nowhere in sight. A menial with no fingers shuffled in, jammed a funnel into the Space Marine's stitched mouth and fed him some inedible muck.

The Passage of Flesh was an opiate for the soul. That is what a knowledgeable man had told him, before he was shot by a commissar for talking too much. As Mankind spread to more than a million planets, the worth of a single human's life had diminished to almost nothing. A convict was worth less than a mathematical nuisance, a glitch in the Administratum archives. Penal regiments disappeared in the galactic wars

by the thousands, thrown away like organic refuse, without a single survivor. Exemplary convicts and heroes were executed as a precaution. Deserters rarely, if ever, succeeded. Imperial pardons for insane heroism were almost unheard of.

But outcasts like Carac still wanted to believe there was escape from this incomprehensibly grim reality. For all of them, even beyond death. 'The dead must be carried on by the living', as the veterans recited, before drawing their knives. The Legio Penetante was a fertile ground for heresy, turning sane men into possessed monsters. Barbaric superstitions and whispers evolved into secret rituals. The Passage of Flesh triggered massive purges by the Inquisition, but it gave them purpose, and the strength to embrace annihilation. It simply shared the burden and Carac's regiment practiced it fervently. Before they charged into withering fire. When they were rushing at tank columns with nothing but krak-grenades. While they were being buried alive in disease-ridden trenches or rotting away in labour camps. Everywhere.

So, when the signal was given by Trenchfoot, all the condemned settled in formal silence behind the walls of the Linus Sentorium and feasted upon each other. Small, symbolic cuts were made with junk knives and morsels of flesh were shared, passed around. There was no more intimate moment in their hopeless existence. Hardened butchers cried tears of joy as the scraps were consumed, merging bodies and souls in the primordial, cannibalistic ritual. A single survivor could carry untold millions to salvation, to freedom, so they believed. As a newcomer, Carac immediately became a vessel for the burden after the flesh of a veteran was forced into him. Now he bore what generations of long dead convicts carried before him, or at least that's what the rest said.

As the two regiments merged, Garuk took a sip from the amasec and watched a madman trying to pry his head open in delirious fervour. The grotesque struggle did not stir any emotions in him. There were no other means to stay sane or lead a band of murderous psychopaths.

'Do we have an agreement, my friend?' he asked.

'You leave with my best men, to go an' try an' snatch that Aquila Lander from the bog, is that it?' Trenchfoot's bitterness was palpable. With rotting legs, he knew he would not make it.

'We spotted the daemonic siege engines two days out. Same damned ones which destroyed our fortress. Yours will fall just as fast, Trenchfoot.'

With or without us, it doesn't matter.'

'What do you know about manning fortifications, you barbaric pig?'

'And what do you know about daemoncraft? They went through walls three meters thick in a day. But most of the boys got taken well before the breach. I can still hear the scraping inside my head.'

The crippled Vostroyan pondered for a while. On the floor below an enraged convict swung a metal bar at the madman and knocked him out before he could hand out his brain matter to the crowd. The attacker did not stop until the man was smashed into a lifeless pulp. When the bar bounced off the floor, a group of Mordians welcomed the kill with a bloodcurdling howl.

'Let's assume you bastards get to the barge. What then, huh?'

'We have a tech-priest and a pilot. You have promethium fuel and tools. And some parts maybe?'

'Aye.'

'If we can raise the flying coffin, we leave this hellhole.'

'Aquila Landers have no warp-drive, you inbred mongrel. You will never leave the system.'

'For that we have a different plan,' grinned Garuk. 'Just as crazy.'

Trenchfoot's eyes gleamed in excitement as he took whiffs of his gluepipe. Deep inside, he had already agreed to the terms and accepted his fate. The proposal was madness, but it appealed to the Vostroyan's warrior spirit. And he had known this man from before the Legio, from when he was a criminal enforcer from the Neo Ulanovsk asteroid belt, throwing miner families out of airlocks for a living.

'Did you get anything out of the Astartes dog?' It was Garuk's turn to ask, inhaling the acrid smoke.

'The usual drivel. Emperor this and that. The haughty bastard got under my skin.'

'I must know what Space Marines were doing here. We looted some Verax serum from the headquarters. Can I have him in for a chat?'

'Aye, after this. Pump him full, the bastard is tough.'

'I have enough to kill an ogryn.'

'One more question, Garuk. How will ya cram a hundred men into one bloody lander which can take less than ten?'

Garuk winked at Trenchfoot with a predatory grin. After a brief silence the two like-minded killers burst out laughing. Mustering their ghoulish

herd with the pride of an incestuous father, they finished the last amasec bottle, slowly made the ceremonial cuts on themselves and feasted.

‘To the burden.’

‘Carry me on, brother.’

About twenty minutes later, the gathering came to an abrupt end. Raid sirens wailed across the fortress as night sentries sounded the alarm. Both gangs rushed to the battlements cursing and bellowing. Soon empty halls and corridors rang with the rumble of guns. Forx waited until all had left the chamber, then slipped from his hiding place and killed the Space Marine.

To be continued



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gábor Izsóf is a Hungarian-born game designer working at NeocoreGames. His first encounter with the Warhammer 40,000 universe dates back to the late eighties and he's been a huge fan of the almost forgotten legacy of Ian Watson and Will Rees ever since. With some background in journalism, he started writing strictly for his own amusement.

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