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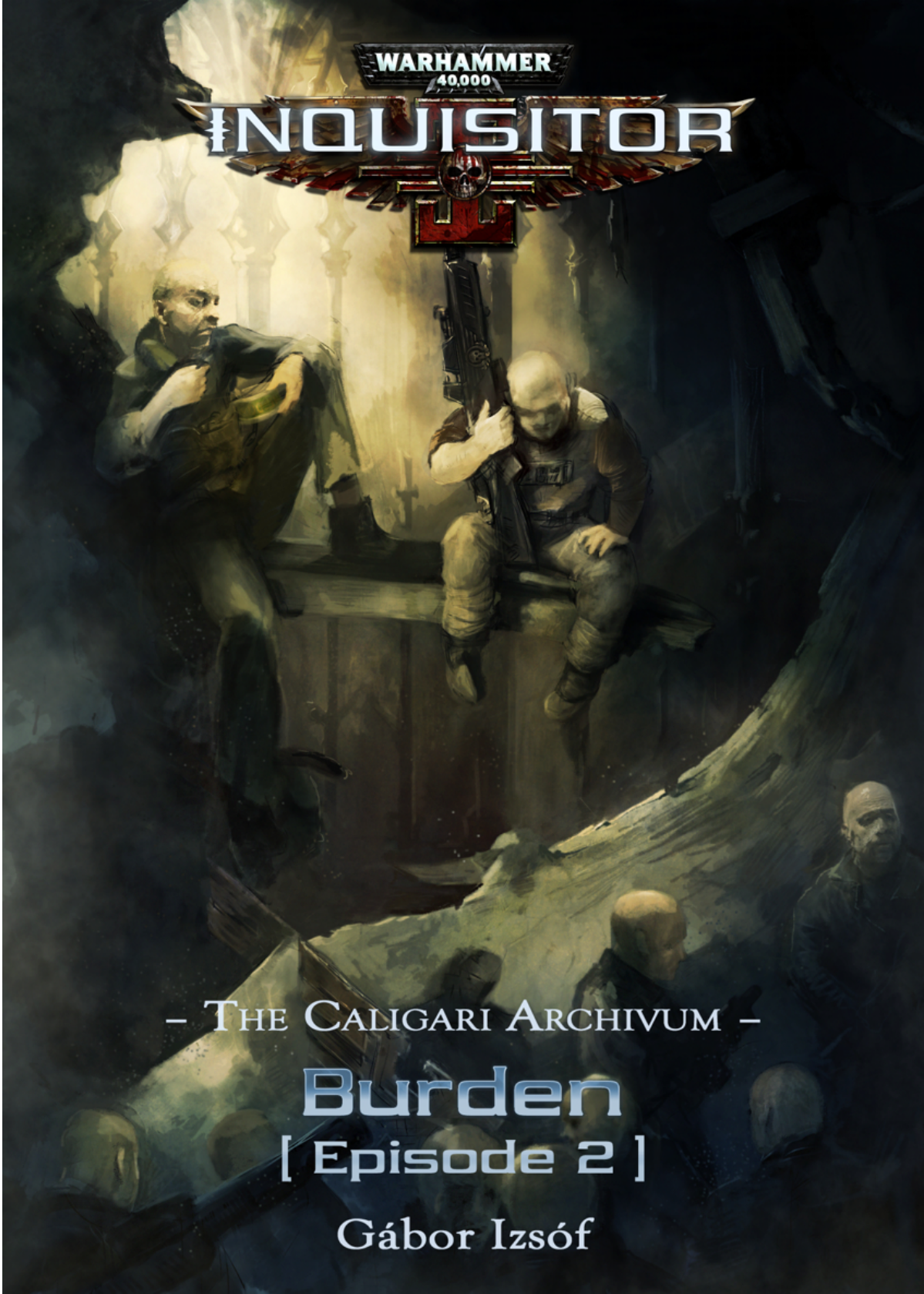


– THE CALIGARI ARCHIVUM –

**Burden**  
[ Episode 2 ]

Gábor Izsóf





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# Burden

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## **The Caligari Archivum**

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**The Caligari Archivum**



# **Burden**

**(Episode 2)**

by

**Gábor Izsóf**

## VII. Exodus

The scouts were jostled about in the fighting compartment of the Centaur as it dived deeper into the darkness, engine gurgling and tracks rattling. Straddling the driver's seat Carac felt vulnerable in the small, open topped vehicle. The dimmed headlights showed only brief glimpses of the wartorn landscape and Forx refused to turn on the powerful searchlight. They had left the Linus Sentorium hours ago, but the young convict's brain was still haemorrhaging sanity from the infernal sights witnessed there.

The image of the bomb-cratered no man's land crawling with daemons oozed into his consciousness again like pus from a ruptured sore. Crimson-skinned, lecherous abominations with horns, licked by warfire, mocking reality with their impossible geometry and corrosive existence. Staggering mass of cultists driven into the razorwire only to be sliced into fat chunks. Obscene human offal still chanting, swirling forward like a foul soup. Human bodies still wearing blood-speckled Imperial uniforms, their frames almost bursting from demonic possession. Heads lolling backwards, cheeks and throats ripped wide open. Hundreds of heavy autocannon shells and tremendous howitzer impacts tore into the Chaos army, but gaps in the ranks soon closed like pulpous flesh. Nothing could stop the filthy tide. Tempting whispers scraped the inside of his head like claws trying to find purchase, urge him to throw himself bare-handed at the daemons...

A kick snapped him out of the nightmare. It was the signal to stop. Bewildered, Carac braked hard and the vehicle stopped after a short slide. He killed the engine and the lights with trembling hands, then wiped the blood running from his nose. Why is it bleeding again? The Centaur rocked when the ratling jumped from the heavy-autogun mount and disappeared into the night. The juvenile sat there shivering, feeling the distant shelling through the seat. A tremendous amount of ordnance was being expended. Back there he heard of how Trenchfoot had served as an artillery officer, until one of his drunken rampages had devastated a hive city. And of how he subjected the "Gangrene Boys" to brutal gunnery training sessions after taking the fortress. Admirably, it worked, as they were standing their ground against the chaos army.

Carac was craning his neck toward the Linus Sentorium when he spotted the convoy, four Taurox transports, climbing the slope with struggling engines. As explosions beyond the horizon lit up the sky, the outlines of the vehicles resembled huge ox-like beasts with spikes. But he knew the spikes were guns. Nearly a hundred convicts lugging looted weaponry were crammed inside and atop the transports, along with fuel drums and spare parts.

Suddenly, night turned to scorching daylight. Following a violent flash in the far distance, a formless monster the colour of deep orange rose from the ground, girdled by a majestic white halo and transformed into a slowly expanding mushroom cloud. The convoy stopped. Some ran for cover. After an eerie silence, the blast wave arrived almost a minute later. Carac stood mesmerised as the earth-shaking detonation rolled over, sending men and supplies toppling. He yearned to be at the epicentre, to have his existence snuffed out in an instant. The defenders had left all their burdens behind.

Three figures emerged from the darkness and climbed into the Centaur while debris pelted the vehicle. Forx was now carrying a long lasrifle over his shoulder. The second was the stranger, still limping from the beatings, his torn scalp fused into a scabbed mess. The last was Zadam, a former Tallarn guardsman with hawkish features and squinted eyes, Garuk's debt collector. A talkative man who thrived on torturing low-rankers.

'Neat trick from the old stubby, I tell ya,' said Zadam to his unwilling audience.' They popped a big one, took the easy way out. Now all dead. Pansies.'

Forx stared at him quizzically. Carac pretended to study the steering controls. Getting noticed here was a bad idea.

'Our newest recruit will explain. Will ya, birdie? Quick, before I take your teeth and tongue!' Hideous laughter rang inside the compartment as Zadam jammed his shotcannon against the stranger's cheek. The trench-sweeper was fixed to the stump of his left lower arm. The answer was flat, lacking any emotion, which annoyed the Tallarn no end.

'It was an atomic warhead, anti-voidship grade. Torus Adnullatus yield. Direct fired from the orbital siege tower with the Corona Securis removed.'

'Good boy! He is a smart lad from the Krieg Corps. An expert, you see?' barked the debt collector, planting a vicious kick under the ribs as a

reward. The man fell, writhing in agony. Zadam turned to Forx.

‘Understood now, little mongrel? Yes? Then tell your little pet to drive! The birdie will show us the way to the wreck.’

For a moment Carac was afraid that a fight was about to break out. He wanted to be somewhere else and, all of a sudden, he really wanted to take a piss. But Forx just flashed his pointy teeth in a submissive grin and gestured at the juvenile to start the engine. As they sped away from the convoy, the stranger pulled himself into the passenger seat beside him, still heaving from the punishment. But it was just a measured, dead-eyed biomechanical reaction, without real suffering. Like a predator pretending to be a prey, hiding in a victim’s hollowed out shell. Carac's innate premonition kicked in, turning his stomach, sending shivers down his spine. He tried to draw aside, but there was no room.

‘Is the pilot dead?’ The question rang out with strange, grim authority. It took a few seconds for Carac to realise it was the stranger, now speaking in clear High Gothic. The only pilot in the convoy was Zadam’s brother. He gasped when the ratling answered by activating a pattern of hidden electro-tattoos on his face. A secret code.

‘What are you two mumbling about?’ snarled Zadam, sipping Frenzon tincture from a vial, a highly addictive combat drug harvested from explosive collar injectors.

The stranger's right eye-ball opened with a wet sound and a poisoned needle shot out, penetrating Zadam's skull just below the nose. The convict let out a high-pitched scream before collapsing. All the tissue in his body started to turn into jelly from the virulent omniphage bacteria. Carac almost crashed the Centaur into a ditch as he watched the stranger kneel beside the debt collector who was scrabbling hopelessly for his shotcannon.

‘In the name of the God-Emperor, hereby I sentence you to death for heresy against Mankind, for consorting with Ruinous Powers, and for crimes against the Holy Ordo. Taste your own corruption, creature!’ A blade flashed over the brain-pan and a fistful of gory dermis was stuffed into Zadam's trembling mouth. He died a few second later, releasing his bowels. The man settled down in the passenger seat again, wiping hands, now radiating an almost unearthly authority. He pinched something on his skin that looked like a blister and squeezed out a capsule to reload the needle launcher. The blade was nowhere in sight.

‘Is the kid tainted?’ The man just looked through him, making the young mule realise his utter insignificance. Forx answered with another string of electro-tattoo flashes. The stranger was displeased.

‘Sparing him is heresy in itself. But for your service, I postpone the execution and make it your responsibility. Clean this up.’ The abhuman opened the bottom hatch and shovelled out the bubbling organic mud, partially dissolved bones and teeth floating on top. Carac grabbed the side armour of the Centaur, leaned over and retched into the darkness.

‘Follow the beacon signal, creature!’ commanded the Inquisitor, clamping an arcane-looking compass onto the instrument panel.

## VIII. Soul Vessel

The colourless twilight found the penal legionaries grouped around the half-sunken voidcraft, which had been blasted out of the sky by hexed anti-air shells. Dirty shapes bustled about the crash site, coughing from the damp miasma of the swamp, scooping brown-green mud from the breached compartments. Decomposed bodies in torn voidsuits were lying beside a Space Marine cadaver, half-devoured by necrophagous slugs, defiling the power armour with mucous droppings. Two crazy-eyed brutes yanked the chain of tech-priest tethered like livestock to supervise the primitive repairs. The shrapnel-marked airframe was being patched up with scrap metal and fast-setting resin. Weary convicts slept on fuel drums, finding refuge from the knee-deep muck after carrying supplies all night. The last survivors of the Linus Sentorium drove the Taurox transports until the vehicles got bogged down or the engines cooked.

Carac winced as a muffled scream and guttural laughter sounded again. Taking another swig from a flask, he tried to steal some courage, but the vitriolic mixture of glue and exhaust cleaner just made him cough. Biting into the oily sleeve of his coverall he overcame the reflex. Drinking on watch duty and making stupid noises would send Forx into a psychopathic rage. Yet he wasn't so sure now, after seeing the stranger completely dominating the abhuman. What could those two have in common? Madness maybe. Forx even killed Auk for him, the man who was supposed to pilot the lander. Resuming the low-ranker disguise, the outsider approached Garuk, demanding a higher position in the Dogbeater's hierarchy as the only remaining pilot, taking credit for killing Zadam and his brother. But he foolishly underestimated Garuk's sadistic urges when anyone challenged his authority.

Another agonizing wail echoed over the swamp. Withdrawing into the emotionally detached part of his brain, Kaius Sokolov calmly observed as his body was nailed to the Aquila Lander's cockpit. The hammer fell and another rusty spike was driven through his leg, crunching through the bone. His unrestrained, bestial half cried out again in the most convincing fashion, shedding tears and drooling pathetically.

'Wanna brag some more about killing my lads? Make demands?' bellowed the warboss, veins bulging on his neck. A herd of mutilated

convicts loomed over the cockpit like starved scavengers, savouring the sight of suffering.

He had already told them everything they wanted to hear from a former Kranken Baron, a Krieg Corps flyboy demoted to the Legio for deviant behaviour. He played the part of a low-ranker who just wanted a seat granted in the Aquila Lander to survive. Blaming the killings on someone else, and arranging them to seem like accidents would have raised suspicion. Hiding in plain sight was a better bet. Killing other convicts was a commonplace, a show of strength in the penal regiments. The strong had complete power over the weak, therefore he didn't need any justification. Successful acts of violence were never questioned, just rewarded or punished. So it was Garuk's turn to play along or set an example. The dark-skinned bully preferred to put on a circus for the subhuman vermin, dishing out another severe beating, etching sacrilegious words into his back with a blowtorch, nailing him to the floor. Despite the failure, he was safe for the moment as the only pilot. The rest is just emotional excrement and easily mendable flesh.

'Hope you dig our humble interpretation of a grav-seat,' mocked Garuk, ramming the last spike home. Kaius felt blood droplets spraying his face. 'Because that is the best comfort we can offer. Right, gents?' The gawkers responded with heinous laughter.

The inquisitor's body was completely dull from the constant pain, so he administered a mental nudge to release a last ululating cry. Satisfied, the gang leader threw the hammer into the mud, then waved over a low-ranker closer carrying an Imperial Guard issue salvus-kit. Coagulant powder was sprinkled over the wounds and a drip-feed bag attached to replenish the lost fluids.

'Pray that we can raise this thing. And next time, cry less to gain respect,' said Garuk, pretending to spare him, before jumping off from the nose of the Aquila Lander. 'Be a good boy and you get these,' he added, displaying a fistful of morphia vials, powerful painkillers. 'Defy me and get trimmed,' he added, and patted the combat knife on his belt with the other hand. And indeed, Kaius prayed to the God-Emperor for deliverance after so much misfortune.

What should have been a straightforward extermination of multiple Legio Penetante divisions, had eventually turned into a disaster. When the Chaos fleet overran Malcorum Prime, the situation became so desperate

that even the inquisitorial quarantine order was disregarded. Panicked generals threw everything at the invaders. So the tainted divisions had been shipped out before he reached Saphrax Quartus, their penal homeworld. After the Imperial Navy was wiped out, the bureaucratic duty of heading a court-martial fell upon him as an Ordo Hereticus agent. All surviving officers were sentenced for treason. But watching them die or being turned into penitence-servitors gave no satisfaction. The last astropathic messages from the fallen planet described revolting penal regiments scattered over a continent. He could have closed the case at that point, but its roots penetrated deeper than the usual precautionary butchery of some criminals. And as a faithful servant of the God-Emperor, he felt ashamed, for his sacred duty was unfulfilled.

The true motive behind the mandatory culling in the penal legions was an ancient being called G'hal Tahak, the Soul Vessel, or Soul Collector – the name depending on the culture and civilisation. Ordo Malleus and Ordo Xenos savants took different approaches to explain its existence, since it was no daemon nor alien creature in the common sense. Discovered by wandering heretics after the Age of Apostasy, it drifted in the warp without consciousness, only emitting a barely detectable presence. It collected souls through mental manipulation, yet it did nothing to acquire or devour them. Its influence spread akin to a plague through a cannibalistic ritual, mainly among the criminal and corrupted, but in a largely non-violent manner. The Inquisition classified it as a slumbering daemon and fought it as such. The only safe way to curb the infection required a rigorous procedure. Gathering all the potentially tainted in one location and purging them at the same time.

According to blasphemous tomes, G'hal Tahak gained souls through planting its corporeal seed in the hosts. The infected became fused to the communion of souls already taken by the creature. The bond was inseparable, defying time and space. Strangely, there was no mental or physical corruption, and the soul was absorbed into G'hal Tahak when the host died. Only heretical acts betrayed the infected, for they spread the curse through rites like the Passage of Flesh. It sounded like a marginal nuisance that even Adeptus Arbites enforcers could have handled, but a macabre side-effect made it far more dangerous. Every host acted as a focusing prism, channelling the Soul Collector's warp-borne presence into reality. This presence was harmlessly divided between the hosts as long as

they were present in large numbers. As numbers dwindled in a relatively close astronomical space, the side-effect grew stronger, a mindless, unmeasured reaction to spread the plague. A single host focused so much immaterial presence that it triggered devastating warp anomalies or lured daemons into existence. Letting those penal legions loose represented a grave threat. A surviving host offering himself to the Ruinous Powers could multiply the strength of the enemy or conjure up something worse.

Kaius Sokolov refused to carry such a burden after 176 years of serving in faith. But with no sizeable fleet present, his demand for a viral bombardment was denied. Request for Ordo Malleus assistance was swallowed up by inquisitorial bureaucracy. With no other option left, he came to Malcorum Prime with a small retinue. Hiding a frigate on the edge of the system, they slipped through the chaos fleet, using the anomalies as cover. The plan was to broadcast a stronger command signal from the surface to penetrate the warp-interference, setting off all the explosive collars. But everything had fallen apart when the runic wards were violated by a Chaos warlock and the Aquila Lander was shot down.

He should have died there, but as a sign of divine grace, he came out unscathed. Interrogating some scavenging convicts before killing them then donning a filthy garment with a deactivated collar served as an adequate disguise. Infiltrating criminal gangs, deceiving feeble-minded heretics, and manipulating them to execute a daring escape plan as if it was their own was second nature to an Ordo Hereticus agent. The only creature who recognized his true nature was a former Ordo mercenary, a failed bodyguard of an interrogator, an abhuman called Forx. This was the second heavenly favour. False promises turned him into an obedient servant, willingly handling the dirty work. Honouring the death wish of the captured Astartes from his retinue. Killing the gang's pilot. Rigging an anti-voidship warhead for delayed detonation in the Linus Sentorium. In the most trying hours, he had considered ending it all, but suicide was treason, the refuge of the weak. He would leave this accursed planet and finish his assignment, God-Emperor willing!

## IX. Ascension

If not for the two scouts, they would all have been dead. Bolter shots bounced off at a steep angle from the Aquila Lander's hull, ripping a manial in two, who had been desperately trying to hammer a bent turbine blade back into shape. Its upper torso fell into the Inquisitor's lap, vomiting blood, and the slimy contents of his chest cavity slopped under the pilot seat. Kaius tossed the corpse out of the armoured cockpit and resumed following the instructions of the tech-priest, who was attempting to raise the landing craft's machine-spirit through the command throne. The reactivation ritual was complicated enough without gore smearing the console. The frail engineeer lit an incense burner and offered a sacred cathode tube for the fallen machine while he repeated the data-sermons. Kaius keyed in a rune-pattern again. Sparks flew and a silver circuitry panel was fried with a puff of smoke. The tech-priest dived into a service hatch, dragging his chains, cursing in binary code. More rocket-propelled bolter rounds flew overhead.

The daemoniac howling got closer as three brass clad traitor-marines and their slave-warriors assaulted the crash site after the failed ambush. Over three-metres tall, the power-armoured hulks waded forward in the mud, drenched in sacrificial blood, bearing freshly severed heads on shoulder spikes, firing ornate bolters and waving huge chain-axes. Their ivory skinned, bestial leader led the charge, praising the Blood God, basking in his own golden aura of corruption. It was a maddening sight that would have petrified less aberrant minds, but the penal legionnaires fought back with the ferocity of a trapped animal. They were not some brainwashed Imperial soldiers, chasing demagogue ideals and false hopes. They were the poisonous dregs of the human race, revelling in violence. Not showing any respect to a far superior foe, the convicts swarmed out of the crash site and outflanked the much slower Khorne worshippers. Reacting to the extreme stress, their collars injected lethal doses of Frenzon into their necks, turning them all into fearless, suicidal murderers. The looted plasma and melta guns provided astounding firepower, but the Blood God still demanded a steep price for every giant felled. A few minutes into the fray more than forty convicts had perished in the bolter fire.

Soon the swamp turned into a chaotic mess, enveloped by steam clouds as hissing geysers sprung up in the wake of high-energy impacts. Another

six convicts exploded into red mist, but in return another chaos marine was brought down, his armoured leg evaporated by a point-blank melta shot. Pushing himself up on one knee, the daemon possessed abomination swung his chain-axe, but was immediately swarmed by twelve hollering savages. He still managed to butcher eight of them before a pneumatic prybar dislodged his horned helmet and a massive hammer, used for adjusting Baneblade tank tracks, smashed into his snarling face. The Traitor Marine's head deflated under the strike with a sickening pop, ejecting one eye ball into the mud, spraying foul blood and brain matter.

A staccato of engine noise rose as the lander's machine-spirit finally arose from its slumber. This was followed by a tremendous explosion when the thrusters fired and the mud plugs were blown out. The tormented roar of the turbines slowly climbed to an unbearable level. Warning runes flashed on the dashboard, threatening catastrophic failure, but the inquisitor was already struggling with the manual overrides, bringing the protesting Aquila Lander under his command. The two brutes handling the chained tech-priest followed Kaius's every move with guns levelled. One licked his missing lips in anticipation of a kill.

Using the voidcraft's hull for cover, a bunch of crack shot legionnaires, Forx included, poured fire into the remaining slave-warriors who were attempting a counter-flanking manoeuvre. An overheated plasma-rifle exploded, incinerating three shooters. Dense lasgun fire cracked and the khornate rabble were held at bay from the crash site. Safe in his hiding place, Carac watched in disbelief as the convicts, drenched in sweat, expending tremendous amounts of Frenzon -fuelled energy, succeeded in turning the battle around. The ivory-skinned, blue-veined monster was surrounded, the golden psychic barrier around his immense bulk coruscating from the impacts. Enthralled by such a profanely seductive presence, men threw themselves on the chainblade of his axe. Others crawled in the mud, trying to kiss his armoured boots, only to be stomped into the slush with a disgusted grunt, as the Blood God favoured only those who died fighting. Even at a safe distance from the slaughter, Carac felt tempted to rush forward and die by the hand of such a magnificently evil creature. But the spell was broken when a half-naked Catachan slapped two anti-tank mines onto the traitor marine's spiked backplate. Both warriors disappeared in a blinding flash as the shaped melta charges detonated. For a split second the rotten soul lingered on, clinging to

reality, until something far viler uncoiled from the warp and snatched its rightful prey.

More than seventy convicts laid dead across the battlefield, frozen into grotesque states of death, chopped up or ripped open by mass-reactive bolter shells. The wounded submitted to their horrific injuries or killed themselves, as no penal legionnaire ever cared about the fallen. Less than two dozen were left standing, panting heavily, nearly collapsing from exhaustion, tasting the unlikely victory they had achieved. But soon five more keeled over, mouths foaming, killed by the Frenzon overdose. Brushing the guards aside, Garuk stepped to the Aquila Lander's bow, his deformed chest rising and falling rapidly, resting a soiled chainblade on his shoulder. In his right hand he held a traitor-marine's head, who had decorated the cancerous growths on his face with obscene jewellery. Leaning closer, shouting over the engines, he addressed the tech-priest huddled up in the command throne.

‘Is the barge void worthy?’

‘Backup systems are holding. Machine-spirit and subwarp drive collapse imminent. Fuel lines leaking. Hull integrity compromised. Weapons offline. Voxcaster array damaged. Hololithic command interf...’

‘Do I have to ask again, machine-fondling scum?’ The warboss jerked the chain clipped to the jawbone of the engineer. The priest's heavily augmented face hit the cabin's edge with a ping, cracking an emerald magnocular lens.

‘Probably, Sir.’

‘I take that for a yes. Range?’

‘With the leak, the promethium will not last longer than 30 minutes, Sir. Destination?’

‘The largest Imperial wreck you can find!’ said Garuk, pointing at the sky, grinning madly.

‘Highly unadvised, but possible, Sir.’

‘Get the coffin ready, we leave in five minutes! This was just the vanguard party.’

Observing the hasty preparations, as the survivors threw everything out of the passenger compartment to make room, others donning worn voidsuits, Carac felt uneasiness like a bad fever creeping into his bones. Something was not right. He rotated his collar as a lucky charm, but it brought no relief. Forx ditched the lasrifle and squeezed himself into a far

corner of the cockpit, already occupied by the deathly pale stranger. The man met the young scout's gaze with no emotion, just like back in the mortar pit at Linus Sentorium, but this time he was reciting something. Carac concentrated hard, trying to read the slowly moving lips.

'...as anointed agent of Ordo Hereticus, mailed fist of the eternally graceful God-Emperor...'

Carac jumped from his hiding place and sprinted towards the cockpit, out of breath. Every neuron in his brain screamed in horror, demanding that he turn around and run as far away in the opposite direction as possible. Responding to the sudden pre-death stress, a huge dose of Frenzon was dumped into his bloodstream.

'...for breaking Lex Martial Legio Penetante, committing high-treason...'

Carac grabbed the abhuman's arm and started to pull him out of the cockpit. Completely dumbfounded, Forx resisted with knotted muscles, shaking off the hand, baring his pointed teeth and hissing in anger. The juvenile fell into the mud. A few convicts stopped and laughed at the comical struggle.

'...for committing carnophagia hominis, for harbouring Ruinous Powers...'

Gathering all his strength, choking from blind fear, Carac grabbed the wildly protesting abhuman's mudsuit with both hands, lifted his kicking, spitting friend and ran. Behind them the Aquila Lander's armoured canopy started to close.

'...hereby I declare you all Excommunicate Hereticus Traitoris...'

Carac ran through the mud like never before, pushed on by the battle drug. The unfamiliar feeling of fearlessness settled in and chased all the anxiety away. He felt Forx's weight shift on his back as the abhuman drew his combat knife to kill him, but he didn't care anymore.

'...and sentence you to death by corporal purgation.'

Shots hit the canopy, sending spidery cracks over the thick plasglass. Kaius Sokolov pressed a flashing yellow rune on the comms console, bringing the partially repaired voxcaster array to life. The short broadcast armed the mechanical fuses with a metallic click and all the explosive collars went off at the same time.

## X. Entombment

The Expurgator Righteous had been a proud battleship of the Imperial fleet for centuries, navigating unharmed among the treacherous warpsurges of the Caligari Sector. It was pounded into oblivion with thirty thousand souls aboard in a matter of hours by two Chaos Leviathan ships, each hosting a single cyclopean daemonic entity. Now the broken wreck drifted in decaying orbit above Malcorum Prime, its immense corridors, gun galleries and halls filled with debris and the dead. Trapped inside the last crumbling data citadels, a deranged machine-spirit plotted the same course over and over again, gradually pushing the eight-kilometre-long steel carcass into the atmosphere for a fiery burial.

Emergency power flickered in one of the still intact bays as two humanoid shapes in voidsuits cranked the hangar door open. The manual docking procedure took gruelling hours, but finally the heavily damaged bulk of the Aquila Lander was anchored inside. Kaius Sokolov unclasped the riveted helmet but left his respirator on, since the air was thick with ice crystals, toxic fumes and charred human tissue. Shutting himself into a tarnished airlock, he leaned against the gunmetal grey wall and rested while the skull adorned gear-trains rotated the chamber around. Despite the regeneration boosting enzymes released from an implanted gland, gaping leg wounds hindered him greatly in the unwieldy magnetic boots. But without a tether line, walking the wreck was safer in zero gravity.

‘Your orders, Inquisitor?’ The tech-priest’s sanctimonious voice came through the suit, distorted by the battleship’s dying plasma reactors.

‘Make essential repairs, refuel. And purge the filth.’ The passenger compartment was severely contaminated. Headless bodies bearing the Soul Collector’s taint were scattered everywhere and the cockpit resembled a khornate sacrificial altar.

‘Already underway, Sir. The machine-spirit is most troubled by the sanguinary corrosion.’

‘I will search the subsection for another voidcraft and a comms unit. Seal the airlock until I return.’

‘May I object to you leaving alone, Sir?’

‘You may not. Hail me when you are done.’

The engineer acknowledged the last message with a burst of binary code. In the following hours, Kaius roamed the isolated deck alone,

sweeping the pitch-black hallways with his shoulder mounted searchlight. It was a reckless act, but the hand-held auspex showed no life signals and after so much affliction he needed time to unwind. Somehow, he was drawn to the ghost ship, its walkways never to be trodden by a human being again.

Listening to the mechanical wheezing of his respirator, he found nothing of use, just desperate last messages scribbled on the walls, blast doors welded shut, and a bizarre diorama of hundreds of frozen servicemen floating like driftwood. They had succeeded in sealing off the subsection, only to be cooked alive by the heat radiating through the walls while the vessel burned. The rest suffocated when their voidsuits ran out of air. He pushed the dead gently aside and watched them collide and tumble in the maze of corridors. He even recited a short prayer, for the crew had served the Emperor valiantly.

There was a good chance that the frigate Gunsalvus was still waiting for him at the fringe of the system, but the failing Aquila Lander lacked the means to make vocular contact. Without the frigate or another warp-capable voidcraft their only recourse was to find the saviour-pods on the Expurgator Righteous and leave themselves at the mercy of the warp currents. And that was exactly what he had suggested to the heretics down on Malcorum Prime. Lies always must be built on foundations of truth. In reality, boarding a saviour-pod was just a drawn out self-funeral in the void. Most castaways were found only hundreds of years later, long forgotten and mummified, drifting on a course leading to nowhere.

Turning back, he tried to raise the tech-priest, but the voxmodule's relays clacked empty, receiving only static. An expectable occurrence with thick metal walls between them. Compelled by a strange thought, he stopped at an intersection. Standing on the arched ceiling, he looked up at the swirling mass of the dead, removed the respirator and drew deep breaths. A myriad of microscopic human remains entered his airways and the exhaled humidity turned to ice. Someone ought to carry these men on. He imagined the necrotic cells coming to new life inside his lungs, bonding the lingering souls of the deceased to his mind. He almost laughed out loud, realising the heresy of thought – akin to the Passage of Flesh – he had just committed. But there was no one here to judge an agent of the Holy Ordo. In the atonement chamber of the Gunsalvus a fitting punishment would be implemented by the tormentor automatons anyway.

This deployment was starting to get the better of him, foreshadowing another mind-scrubbing.

The ambush was waiting for him close to the hangar's airlock, and he walked into it like a fool. Spotting a sudden movement in the halo of the shoulder-mounted strobe, he barely had enough time to draw his bolt pistol, when the ice-covered corpses parted and a shape in a voidsuit crashed forward like a projectile. The weapon buckled twice with a deafening report, ripping the assailant in two, sending fat chunks of frozen meat spiralling into darkness. Kaius only realized his mistake too late. It was a decoy. The real attacker dived in from a different angle and the impact was hard enough to render anyone unconscious, but the plasteel chestframe of his suit saved him. Instinctively, he deactivated the magnetic boots before inertia ripped his legs apart.

As the two entangled bodies smashed against the bulkhead, Kaius heard the helmet strapped to his toolbelt shatter. Enveloped by the familiar stench of Frenzon and rancid sweat, he twisted aside and fired again point-blank, but the gyro-stabilised rounds hit the far wall harmlessly. Something tugged the bolt pistol out of his grasp. An enemy well-versed in zero gravity melee? With sleep-learned skills he could hardly match that. The attacker now hugged him like a man-eating insectoid, wrapping powerful legs around his waist, trapping one arm as they spun out of control.

'Expecting someone else, birdie?' grimaced Garuk, wearing a cracked mask of ice. A heated naval coverall was stretched over his ill-proportioned frame. Kaius's head snapped back from a headbutt, but he caught a glimpse of the explosive collar around the convict's neck, still wrapped in filthy rags. The criminal must have hidden aboard the lander, among the dead. A pitiful mistake. But how had he survived the command signal? The broadcast was short ranged, but not that weak, and the collars were supposed to be resistant to tampering. Something bit into him and with a sickening crunch, his nose was ripped off. Garuk bit again and again like a rabid animal, until the inquisitor's face was a bloody pulp. As they rolled on, scraps of flesh and perfectly round blood droplets sprayed everywhere.

'Wanted to be one of us, Imperial scum?! Now you look the part!' howled the brute with ghastly delight. The artificial eye snapped open, but a vicious elbow caved it in before the inquisitor could fire the needle

launcher. Kaius stabbed with his free hand to take an eye in return, but the blow was deflected and the legs squeezed harder. Panic started to settle in, wrestling for control to unleash all the hidden biological reserves. But there was no way to win until a much stronger opponent had the upper hand. As he already knew Garuk's mental weakness, he let his body slip into feigned unconsciousness. That was the second time the convict could have easily killed him, but the thirst for primitive hand-to-hand violence prevailed again. Hooking a handrail with one foot to gain leverage, Garuk let out a triumphant roar and smashed the inquisitor against the airlock door like a ragdoll. Something cracked and Kaius blacked out for a few seconds.

'Oh, it's not over yet! I still owe you a trimming!' The rubberized fabric gave with an unpleasant sound and the voidsuit was torn apart. Kaius slid out of the ruined garment like a slug, almost naked. He was free. The savage cold snapped him back into the fight and, grabbing a handful of skin he ripped a pale, bloodless slit into his abdomen, revealing a hidden synth-flesh pocket underneath. Metal glinted and three shots rang out from a small, multi-barrelled pistol. The tiny silver projectiles, originally intended to defeat supernatural foes, found their mark with a series of wet thuds. Taken off guard by the attack, Garuk lurched back, grabbing a profusely bleeding neck. Discarding the spent firearm, Kaius flooded his system with extremely powerful stimulants. Time to end this. From another skin cavity he produced a consecrated dagger, with the molar of a saint encased in the pommel. As the organic sheath slid off the blade like a snake's skin, he thumbed off the safety of the impact-operated injector which squirted anointed solution into its victims.

'In the name of the God-Emperor...' his voice quavered, the frozen facial muscles struggled to obey. With a raised blade, he kicked off from the bulkhead. The collision was devastating, and despite the chemicals, Kaius fainted briefly. Using the wall as a launch pad and his deformed spine as a compressed spring the brute met him halfway at the last moment. He was slammed against the wall with ribs snapping. A knee pinned him down.

'How...' he could barely gurgle the word. Black dots danced in his narrowing field of vision as his body submitted to the onslaught. He noticed the dagger in Garuk's chest, buried to the hilt. It should have killed a possessed creature right away, but apparently the convict was no such

thing in the conventional manner. The criminal looked at the blade and spat in disgust.

‘Fool! I survived on a world where gravity tries to crush and suffocate you in the womb. I killed my way out of a zero grav breeding farm with bare hands! I outlived thousands in the Legio. And you ask how?’ The brute ripped off the rags from his explosive collar. The device was wrapped in multiple layers of silver and golden wiring. ‘Neat trick, eh? Shielding of some sort, done by a lexmechanic during the revolt. Now I know it works.’

The bolt pistol swam into his view and rallying every last ounce of energy, praying to the God-Emperor for vengeance, Kaius reached out to grab the weapon. First, he felt a terrible pressure on his extended arm and with a wet popping sound, it was twisted and torn off at the elbow. The inquisitor screamed and screamed, struggling with the waves of insanity as the brute ripped his limbs off one by one. He screamed in helpless rage for he had been defeated by a feral creature, a lowly heretic. He howled in terror when he realised that he was about to suffer the same grisly fate as the Astartes on Malcorum Prime. Degraded like a beast, eyes gouged out, begging for the coup de grace. But with the dismemberment done, the crushing weight was lifted off his chest and Garuk let him go with a satisfied growl. Even with its dark complexion, his skin turned ashen grey from the blood loss. Slowly drifting into the darkness, Kaius watched the brute operating the airlock controls with great effort.

‘Nah, I will not take your eyes. You will watch me leave, before you die here like all these Imperial bastards did, lapping at the backside of the Carrion-Emperor. Now I take my barge back, along with that wretched machine-lover. Thanks for the ride up here, birdie!’

Snatching the Inquisitor’s weapon out of the air, leaving a thick trail of frozen crimson gemstones behind, the convict floated inside the airlock. The heavy armoured door thudded shut. Swallowed by the seething mass of the dead, staring into the cracked shoulder light, unable to scream anymore, Kaius Sokolov, in a strict biological sense, died.

## **XI. The truth beyond**

The psyker's black shroud faded and reality trickled back into tormented time and space. Sirens screamed and pre-recorded incantations boomed through the Machinae Sacra Culleus, warning of an imminent moral threat. On the conveyor tracks, hundreds of prisoners lay dead, bloated to obscene proportions by the outpouring of psychic energies, their overstretched bodies ruptured. Now only emptied leathery sacks hung on the endless rows and lines of flesh anchors.

Beside the tracks, the absurdly thin figure of the soul eviscerator floated under the dark archway, channelling black warpforce discharges into the ground as an unholy conduit between the material world and the Empyrean. The psyk-sensor spikes simply evaporated from his flesh, rendering the implanted explosive charges useless. The abomination's wrinkled face shone with unearthly joy as he embraced some unseen power with arms open. Protruding organs sagged, almost penetrating his translucent skin.

The muscular brute and the inquisitor regained self-awareness at exactly the same moment with a sharp intake of breath, as they surfaced from the stolen thoughts and fabricated visions of the past. Garuk was still suspended on the inspection stand, now half-paralyzed from brain-haemorrhage, stinking of vomit and feculent ammonia. An eye darted around on the intact side of his face, wildly trying to focus on its surroundings, the other side hung like a dead skin mask, blowing saliva bubbles through a lopsided mouth.

The armoured suit's gyroscopic stabilisers kept Kaius Sokolov from collapsing, automatically locking the myo-electric fibre bundles when he lost control. With the psyker's influence waning, the tremendous psychic pressure engulfing the moon returned with a splitting headache, pumping fresh blood out of burst facial veins. Staggering back a step, his massive gauntleted hands shot up to the psychic hood's activation rune and the inquisitor instantly recovered his composure, completely sealed again from the corruption. But the fleeting touch of the warp was there, impossible to erase, a poisonous thorn ulcerating inside the brain, spreading moral sepsis and insanity. Experiencing the rawest energy in the universe even so briefly was utterly horrifying, yet elevating at the same time. He almost gave in to its infernal vistas and filthy whispers, but the

brass guardian seraphs on his shoulder plates chimed, warning of eternal damnation. That was enough to steel his resolve and snap out of the downward spiral to madness.

‘A futile effort...’ croaked the soul eviscerator, grinding his teeth as another warp-borne pleasure wave whipped over him. His organs convulsed like a clenching fist. ‘Just embrace it...’

When he submitted to the psyker’s warpcraft, Kaius had been drawn into a murky shared consciousness, a seemingly chaotic vortex of souls, all related to the event he experienced. Overwhelmed by the mundane thoughts and feelings of multiple individuals before they were blended into one vision, he also got a sobering taste of the mutant’s mind. Tremendous bitterness. An animalistic urge to die. A desire to be consumed by the warp. The creature was a cruel mongrelisation of human and alien genome, existing in perpetual torment. Now it was up to Kaius whether to honour their agreement or not. Clearing his throat, he addressed the monster, keeping the bolt pistol ready.

‘You defied my orders, creature. Why did you show me more than just the recollections of this one?’ He pointed to Garuk, who struggled to speak, moaning incomprehensibly. The hissed answer came with a sneer. Seemingly, the psyker was overjoyed, as if his death wish had already been granted.

‘There was no other way, fool! You fed me a soul that had been claimed by G’hal Tahak. Prying one open unravels countless others. The bonds between them are inseparable...’

Kaius nodded. The suspicion was now confirmed by the perpetrator itself. The soul eviscerator had violated one more mind to gain secret knowledge about the ancient creature. His. So the whole thing he had experienced might have been a masterfully woven lie. There was but one nagging question left.

‘And what kind of base sorcery permitted me to live my own erased memories again? Answer, creature!’

With the warp focus depleted, the mutant slowly sank to the ground, giggling like a child in boundless amusement. Only the thin cybernetic legs clamped to his neck brace kept him upright. He looked more frail than ever before.

‘Nothing can be wiped from the soul, human. They only maimed your brain, made your flesh blind. Everything is still there...’ The psyker’s

voice faltered as exhaustion set in. With quivering eyelids he drifted away, only to snap back into full alertness a few seconds later.

The inquisitor was cast into turmoil by the mutant's words. A part of him wanted to believe that his obsession had just gained a new means to mend something that perhaps would never be whole again. Enough motivation to plunge into the Ordo archives for decades of research. To fill the torture chambers with eldar and other subjects dabbling in soul sorcery. But the other part screamed falsehood and treachery.

'Will you release me now?' the psyker asked with vitriolic sarcasm, like he already knew the answer.

The detonation rang through Station Septimus as the inquisitor's weapon fired. The thick, anointed round sheared a twig arm before penetrating the gutsack of the mutant and exploding inside, smashing the creature to the ground with a wet impact. The still intact upper torso squirmed like a dissected parasite, refusing to die. Mouth moving, the soul eviscerator tried to form more words, but he had no lungs anymore. A heavy ceramite boot stomped down on the morbidly oversized cranium, crushing it to a pulp.

'Begone filth!' Kaius flicked off the blood-soaked viscera running down on his greaves. 'Admire my piety for granting such an easy end.'

With a hoarse, barking cough the prisoner finally gained control of his tongue. The whole body shook from the effort to form slurry words.

'You can never... win... Low-ranking worm... I have... seen into your soul.'

The inquisitor locked his pistol into a richly-decorated metal holster. The immense bulk of his armour swivelled, servos whirring. The humiliation the younger and more foolish Kaius Sokolov had suffered aboard the Expurgator Righteous should have enraged him. But he was a changed man and his judgement wasn't polluted any more by the archaic ideals or pathetic emotions that kept most Imperial servants on a short leash. In fact, the horrid flashback of the escape from the ghost ship made him proud, for he had survived against all the odds. Resurrection in the complete darkness. Building a floating nest from scraps of fabric to fight the extreme cold, without the aid of limbs. Feeding on the dead like a subhuman beast, to stay warm and to put enough organic materials into his body for the micro-organisms to repair the damage. Breaking teeth on frozen corpses and door opening mechanisms. Lapsing back to delirium

from the exhaustion. Casting himself into the void in a saviour-pod, muttering incoherent prayers and blasphemies so he wouldn't get taken by a chaos vessel. Entering suspended animation. It was a glorious tale of hardship, and in a twisted way he was thankful for that. But how had Garuk escaped without a pilot? Oh, he would find out soon enough. Time to compliment his fallen foe.

'Amuse me more, heretic. You will suffer long enough under my tormentor automatons to spit out better clichés. Maybe one day, honouring the experiences we shared, I will turn you into a jewelled servitor. A coprophagus throne perhaps?'

The prisoner's spontaneous body language and suppressed flash of fear was telling. As much as his nemesis loved to dish out punishment on helpless victims, he feared it too. The soul eviscerator had turned this bloodthirsty sadist into a whimpering animal with a mere touch of his hand. Garuk gulped and coughed before forcing out more words.

'You have... no power over me.... It's not even down to you that... I ended up here.'

Kaius coveted these moments. The last futile effort as the sinners bastioned themselves behind empty phrases. Trying to gain the moral or factual high ground without it making an ounce of difference. Containing his perverted arousal, he thumbed his power sword to life and touched the blade to the captive's shin. Its energized edge slid through skin and bone at an agonizingly slow pace, severing the naked limb effortlessly. He kicked the human debris under the conveyor tracks with a demented snickering.

'Anything else to say?' He leaned closer, towering over the former penal legionnaire who struggled not to cry out, biting shallow wounds into his lips.

'One more thing... The Passage of Flesh... The initiation...'

'What of that aberrant heresy?'

'We stuffed you... full of morsels... like a pig... while you were passed out. You are one of us... birdie.'

Despite all the suffering he had endured, Garuk now looked triumphant, an evil light gleaming in his remaining eye, knowing that nothing could save his adversary from defeat. Stung by the words, the inquisitor reeled back. He wanted to vomit. He wanted to tear this accursed body apart and scour every single cell for the corruption.

‘Nonsense – I am free of daemonic taint!’ he shouted in denial at the top of his lungs. Garuk flashed a frail smile with terrible certainty and spat.

‘The Soul Collector is... no daemon. You lost!’

Howling like a wounded animal, driven by an outburst of tormented rage, Kaius Sokolov lunged. He activated the power sword once again and blue lightning crackled over the heavy blade. The frantic swing cut through the inspection stand, bit deeply into Garuk’s chest and lodged the sword into the floor with a shower of sparks. As his guts slid to the ground, the criminal's soul left the broken carcass behind with a ghastly moan, to be claimed by something beyond the veil of reality. Kaius Sokolov, anointed agent of Ordo Hereticus, now the sole vessel and focusing prism of G’hal Tahak, recoiled in horror, realising his fatal mistake. The manifesting presence of the immensely powerful supernatural being burned through his psychic hood in an instant. The unstoppable force fried his brain through the invisible tether line which had connected them ever since he had been infected on Malcorum Prime.

Tasting the ultra-dense death fallout and the trillions of stranded souls around the moon, insatiable hunger arose in the mindless leviathan. Stretching through eight unholy dimensions of Chaos, the incomprehensibly vast bulk of G’hal Tahak lurched, lashing shockwaves over the Immaterium. Frozen into an endless scream, the inquisitor's body seethed from reversed cell division, devolving to a boiling proto-mass. All the dead on Station Septimus melted into a boisterous, churning adhesive, creating an anchor between worlds. The Soul Collector started to reel himself in on the unbreakable line, in defiance of time and space.

When the impossible entity touched the dimensional veil, it set off a chain reaction, ripping a warp rift into reality. All living things on the moon died, their life-force snuffed out by the Immaterium, joining the tidal wave of souls now pouring into the rift. In the wake of the warp breach, riding the Soul Collector’s titanic backwash, daemonic creatures forced their lurid existence into the wounded reality with a diabolical cacophony. Alerted by this apocalyptic event, the orbital defences opened up. Macro-cannons fired megatons of consecrated ordnance into the rift, lance batteries struck at winged horrors and hundreds of torpedoes streaked from the star fortresses through the void. Myriad explosions and impacts blossomed as the invasion was met with astounding firepower. The battlecruiser Vindictor Imperialis, flanked by an escorting fleet of

frigates and destroyers, manoeuvred straight into the maelstrom firing one barrage after another, void shield flaring under the daemonic onslaught. On the gun decks thousands of menials and servitors sweated to load the giant cannons. In the gothic basilica of the vessel, gathered around the lavishly decorated skull of a saint, a mass of robed Adeptus Ministorum priests chanted in unison, plugged into an ancient faith amplifier with golden data cables. Channelling the sheer power of a prayer through the apparatus, all but the most potent abominations were weakened. Flooding the void with energized and mechanical death the intrusion was halted.

But then the torpid mass of G'hal Tahak - an antithesis to material existence - protruded through the gate to engorge himself on the draining sea of souls - and the cataclysm was complete. The moon imploded without a sound, split to core. Reality and warp colliding, a vortex was created, sucking everything into the Immaterium - debris, daemons and souls, fortresses, the battlefleet and a convoy of prison ships. The Soul Collector was cast back into the warp, deprived of its prey, unable to comprehend what had happened. Sucked inwards, the foul mouth of the gate collapsed, welding the breach shut with an aftershock, leaving a severely warp-tainted void behind. With the celestial equilibrium toppled, a chain of catastrophes raged throughout the system, as planets veered off their orbits and immaterial anomalies surged. Then, true to the volatile nature of Segmentum Tempestus, billowing warp storms moved in and the insignificant memento of a pathetic mortal struggle disappeared for centuries.

## XII. Epilogue

All traces of the incident were struck from Administratum records under the Edict of Obliteration, as ignorance was a cure fervently applied to all the Imperium's ailments. Sacred deletion teams descended upon the archives and every single person who had even the most superficial relation to the events on Malcorum Prime and the accursed moon. Minds were scrubbed raw, great savants were turned into drooling simpletons, throats were cut, scriptoriums burned, thousands incinerated on the purgation pyres. On the Legio Penetante detention planet Saphrax Quartus, innumerable convicts were corralled to the surface and evaporated by torpedo strikes. On the scale of a galactic empire, the loss of the Machinae Sacra Culleus was negligible: production was automatically shifted to other human abattoir facilities and even more stringent security rituals were put in place.

Drifting through the surreal dimension of Chaos, dragging a regurgitated mess of stray souls and daemons trapped in its colossal wake, G'hal Tahak slumbered on, seemingly without any purpose other than to mindlessly swell its unfathomable existence. Shackled to the being, millions of flesh-bound creatures fumbled, fought, copulated and died on the ethereal tether lines, living meaningless lives, spreading the Soul Vessel's seed blindly.

Two such lines ended deep under the crust of a daemon infested world, inside a forgotten subterranean complex, buried by relentless orbital bombardment. In semi-collapsed tunnels, behind reinforced blast doors, a wiry human and a stocky abhuman sat beside a makeshift gas stove. The chamber was packed full of rags, weapons, salvus field kits, battery packs and a chaotic assortment of piled-up supplies, gathered from underground stockpiles. Hanging from the nitric ceiling, chunks of salted meat dried on pieces of steel wire. The filthy scouts still wore metal collars, the stigmata of their former lives. How had they survived the command signal? Carac would sometimes try to guess, but the ratling always pretended to be busy, sharpening his combat knife like a maniac and testing the edge on his blackened nails. They stared at the flames in the darkness, two primordial savages taking shelter inside a cave, as a dubious mixture of Imperial Guard rations and the tumorous ham of a burrowing rodent turned into a

pleasant smelling stew. The burden was safe and for the first time in his miserable life... Forx was happy.

*The End*



## 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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