



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

**LEGENDS OF THE DARK MILLENNIUM**

# GENESTEALER GULTS

PETER FEHERVARI



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**LEGENDS OF THE DARK MILLENNIUM**

# **GENESTEALER CULTS**

PETER FEHERVARI



BLACK LIBRARY



## **WARHAMMER 40,000**

**It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.**

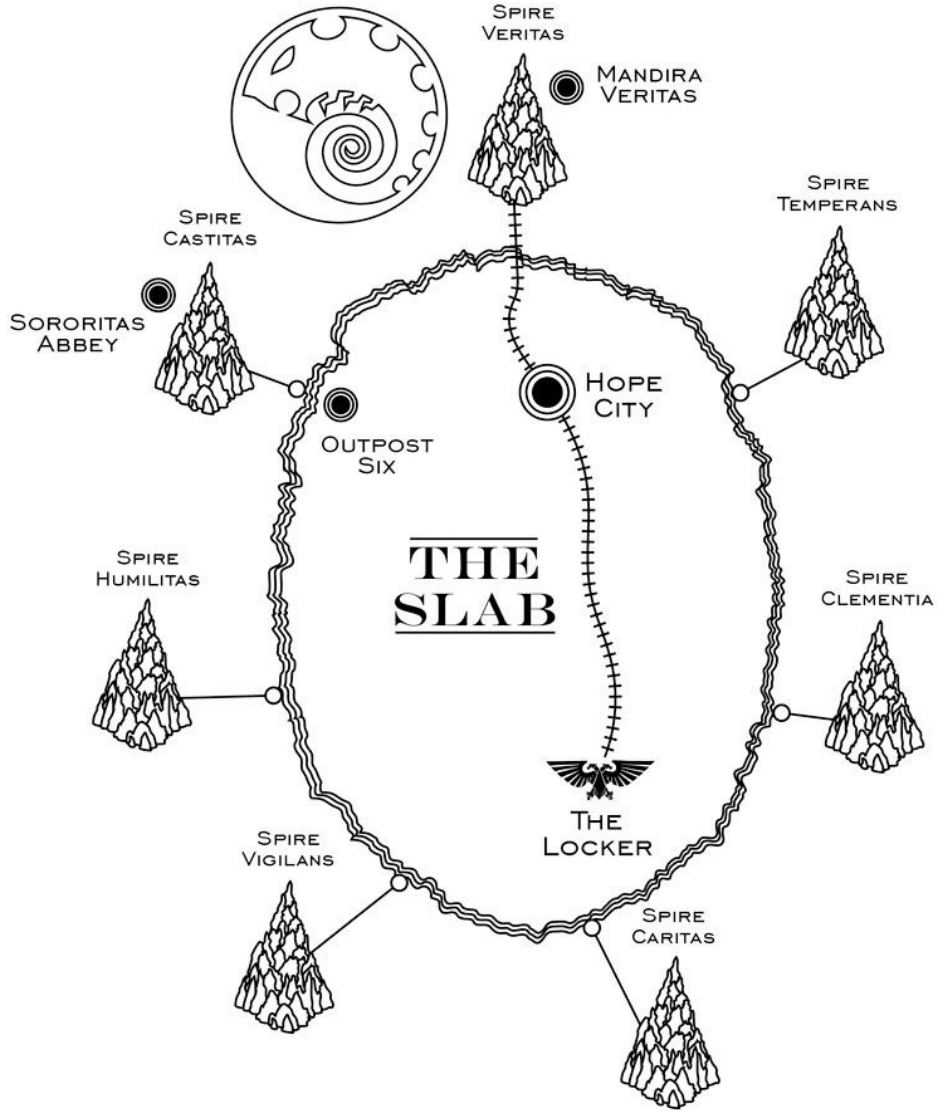
**Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.**

**To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.**

*'Their cults are numberless and diverse, yet beneath the veneer of sanctity, industry or vice that they cultivate, their true purpose remains singular and changeless. And all begin and end in darkness.'*

Inquisitor Haniel Mordaine, Ordo Xenos,  
on the Cult of the Genestealer

# THE KORONATUS RING



# PROLOGUE

## *Redemption Reborn*

Day and night on the scorched world were only different shades of darkness, a slow, shallow slide from grey to black across thirty-one cold hours. At their conjoined zenith the planet's twin suns were little more than pale smears in the sky, like candles behind a dirty veil.

Nevertheless the four hunters always moved by night, only emerging from their lair beneath the spaceport's fuel dump when the darkness was absolute. They had no memory of where they had come from, nor had they the capacity to care, but the imperative that drove them was clear.

Needing no light to see the warmth of their prey, they stalked the outer districts of the ragged city where they had awoken, targeting stragglers and binding them irrevocably to their bloodline with a swift, needle-sharp kiss.

Within three days the hunters had mastered the secret pathways of their new territory and taken a score of thralls. Despite the strangeness of this world it was just another hunting ground to them.

And yet, for one of the four – the first to claim a victim – that was no longer quite true. The shape of its hunt had changed, as indeed had the hunter itself. It understood this only dimly, but with every passing hour its thoughts grew sharper as the simple decrees of survival unfurled into new possibilities and the hunter became the Seeker. Its primal imperative remained undeniable, but the instinct was spiralling into a higher, *deeper* vision that allowed it a freedom to think and plan that had been impossible before.

Firstly, it recognised that its kindred hunters were not changing alongside it. Though they were bound by one purpose, the others remained creatures of pure instinct and always would. Now they followed where the Seeker led, accepting its primacy without hesitation. The apex predator felt no pride or privilege in its

ascendancy. It simply was what it was, as were they.

From its thralls it learned much, drinking deep of their minds and seizing knowledge and concepts that would have been meaningless in its former, forgotten existence. This new world was ripe with prey, but they were scattered across a broken ring of spiny mountains beyond which there was only burning death. The Seeker's own territory was a vast mesa of basalt rock at the centre of the ring – it was like a mountain that had been sheared flat at its midriff by some unimaginably brutal yet precise force, leaving a blank slate for those who had come after. The thralls called this mesa *the Slab*, and their lone city, huddled in squalid senescence towards its northern edge, *Hope*.

The surrounding mountains were encrusted with temples whose vaults ran deep into the rock, extending into the bowels of the world below. Each of these *Spires* was a realm in its own right, but all were bound to the Slab by sweeping bridges of stone. A single authority ruled them all from atop the narrowest peak, revered and feared by the thralls in equal measure.

They called this authority *the Sororitas*.

On the fifth night of its awakening, the predator climbed to an escarpment at the edge of its domain and gazed at the Spire where the Sororitas laired. A red haze shimmered in the gorge below, where the planet's lifeblood churned between the mountains. The haze of soot and smoke rising from the abyss would have been impenetrable to lesser creatures, but like darkness, it was no barrier to the Seeker's void-born eyes.

With an efficacy it neither understood nor questioned, the Seeker cast its awareness across the gorge to the congeries of domes and towers nestling at the mountain's peak. Like an intangible serpent it slipped through barriers of iron and stone in search of flesh and bone and mind. Lurking at the corners of perception, it stalked its quarry's thoughts, snatching stray emotions and scratching at convictions.

It found only a hard resolve that mirrored its own and understood that the Sororitas could only ever be an enemy. Given time, this foe would stir and hunt the hunters.

Watching from the rocks behind the Seeker, the trio of primal hunters flexed their claws restively, sensing their leader's growing aggression. Their empathy was ignorant, but they understood the only thing that mattered: *there would be killing soon*.

The dying woman's sanctum was in the abbey's central tower, directly beneath a

glass cupola stained with a kaleidoscopic whorl of wings. It was the building's highest point, a spear of purity that lanced the mire of Vytarn's sky, just as the sisterhood of the Thorn Eternal had lanced the planet's spiritual mire for over three centuries. When a storm raged the wind would shred the smog-choked atmosphere, allowing listless rays of light through. In those moments the cupola would transmute the light into an iridescent spray that washed the sanctum clean of shadows and sorrows alike.

But tonight there was no wind and precious little light. The abbey's generator had failed again, and the candles the woman had lit at the start of her ceremony had burned down to nubs, leaving her in a tightening noose of darkness.

She knelt with her eyes raised to the bronze bas-relief of the God-Emperor that dominated the chamber. The Crucible Aeterna was an esoteric relic that placed Him at the centre of an orrery of stars bound by thorns. The barbs pierced His flesh and drew a silent scream from His distended jaws. His face was wizened with geometric lines and inset with lacquered eyes that burned with true sight. It was a harsh idol, but the woman felt it possessed a rare honesty.

*The Imperium's deepest foundation is not glory, but sacrifice.*

That credo had been her mentor's, but with time and suffering it had become her own, as her teacher had always known it would.

'But you were wrong about my death,' the woman whispered into the past.

'*You shall die well,*' Canoness Santanza had predicted, appraising the blood-spattered, fire-eyed girl who stood before her, battered but unbroken by her Confirmation Trials. '*But dying is not enough, no matter how well you do it, because then you can do no more.*' She had frozen the girl with a gaze long dead to kindness. '*The Imperium is forever at war and the duty of the Adepta Sororitas is without end. Do you understand, initiate?*'

'*I do, mistress,*' the girl had answered, but they had both known it wasn't – *couldn't* – be true. There had been too much fire in her thirteen-year-old heart.

Fifty-five years of service had dimmed that girl's fire, but never quite extinguished it. Despite the horrors she had endured and the righteous ones she had enacted in the name of her faith, Canoness Vetala Aveline had never become a creature of ice. Whether that made her more or less than her mentor was for the God-Emperor alone to judge.

*I shall know soon enough,* Aveline reflected as the slow killer in her lungs flexed its claws again. This time it drew a cough, but she strangled it into a brief, raw bark. The bronze Emperor's features danced between sympathy and mockery in the flickering candlelight.

*Pitying or deriding a life of wasted piety...*

As her trance receded, Aveline frowned at the gloomy chamber, irritated that the generator's faltering machine spirit hadn't been attended to during her long ritual. This was the third time in as many weeks that the power had failed, obliging the sisterhood to rely on the braziers and candles that decked the abbey, but if ever they had needed light it was now. The abbey's wardens had been sensing a dark presence for days – an oppression that was somehow *watchful*.

'It is not our old enemy,' Aveline declared, rising from her prayer mat with a grace that defied her pain. 'You can stand down from your vigil, celestial. I remain myself.'

A tall figure stepped from a curtained alcove behind her. In contrast to the canoness' plain robes, the celestial wore full battle armour, the elegantly wrought plates polished to a pearlescent sheen that was luminous in the gloom. Her face was hidden behind a sloped visor, but Aveline had no need for mundane clues to read her old comrade's disquiet.

'I know you disapproved of the ceremony, Phaesta, but it was a necessary risk,' Aveline said. 'I had to be certain the daemon had not broken free.'

'Another sister could have borne the burden, canoness.'

'But I am the strongest.'

*At least in spirit, Aveline thought. I left my soul unguarded for nine long hours. No daemon could have resisted such a lure, even one that recognised the trap...*

'You believe you have the least to lose,' Phaesta corrected. As always, the celestial had seen through to the heart of the matter. They had been sisters in battle for almost three decades and faced their sternest test together in the pits of this world, but sometimes Aveline found her First Sister's insight wearying.

'The Black Breath will take me within the month. This planet's air has killed me where all its daemons could not,' Aveline said without rancour, 'but I shall meet its poison with purification.'

'So the Convent Sanctorum has approved your request,' Phaesta guessed.

'I received the confirmation yesterday.' Aveline smiled coldly. 'Vytarn is no more. This planet has been reborn as Redemption.'

She was disinclined to mention that the name was officially appended with the number '219'. 'Redemption' was a regrettably common appellation across the Imperium, but Aveline felt certain that few worlds had a better claim to it than her own.

'You never told me the name you had chosen,' the celestial said quietly.

'You don't approve?' Aveline asked.

Phaesta hesitated before replying. ‘It is a pious name, canonesse.’

‘A name that will make our *world* pious,’ Aveline enthused. ‘But there is more! The sanctity of the Spires has been recognised by the Convent. My application for reclassification has been accepted.’ She laid a withered hand on her sister’s shoulder. ‘Vytarn – *Redemption* – has been sanctioned as a shrine world of the Imperium. That is the legacy I shall leave to the sisterhood.’

*It is the legacy I shall leave to you, my First Sister,* she added privately, *because you shall take my mantle soon.*

‘For all its temples this is a dark world,’ Phaesta said. ‘A name changes nothing.’

*It changes everything!* Aveline wanted to say. *Names shape the truth of things.* But she knew the celestial would never accept such a notion. She might even call it heretical, though Aveline was certain the God-Emperor they both served would understand completely.

‘The darkness under Redemption has been chained, sister,’ Aveline pressed. ‘We bound it with faith and fire two decades ago!’

‘Yet evil shadows the Spires once more. Some taints run too deep to cleanse, canonesse.’

‘You are wrong,’ Aveline decreed. Her lungs were on fire and she was eager to be done with this argument. ‘We defeated the old foe and we shall defeat the new.’

By the sixth day of its inner journey the Seeker’s mind had crystallised into true sentience. With self-awareness came a grasp of possibilities beyond the here and now, followed by a torrent of abstract ideas and imaginings. At the forefront of this was the insistent vision of an ever-turning, slowly unwinding spiral. The Seeker didn’t understand the significance of the image until nightfall, when the truth sharpened into sudden clarity. The spiral represented the great imperative that drove its bloodline.

The Sororitas would call it a ‘symbol’.

Gripped by a cold fervour, the Seeker sifted through the mental fragments it had stolen from the enemy during its incursion. Notions that had been nonsensical before now blazed with power, and from one moment to the next the great imperative became *holy*.

On the seventh night the Seeker bestowed this revelation upon its thralls, who carved the Sacred Spiral into reality, upon wood and stone and sometimes their own flesh. Their veneration elevated them from thralls to disciples, and in turn

their worship exalted their master from Seeker to Prophet.

By the ninth night the Prophet's path was clear, but a shadow occluded the radiance of the Spiral: the warrior women who had inadvertently breathed life into it.

Armed with faith, the Prophet cast its mind across to its enemies' aerie once more to test them with new insight. This time it recognised the seams of madness running through their spiritual armour. In most cases the madness strengthened the alloy, but in a few it had become corrosive, and in none more so than the one called Sister Etelka, whose thoughts were riddled with dark doubts and darker regrets.

Night after night the Prophet gifted the warrior with whispered questions that she thought her own, insinuating itself behind her eyes until she *saw* the secret heresies of her sisters. Thus loyalty unravelled into loathing, then horror and finally hate as Sister Etelka was drawn into the Sacred Spiral and anointed as its first apostle.

On the nineteenth night, the Prophet assembled its congregation and pronounced judgement: *those that deny the Divine Imperative will be cleansed.*

That night Canoness Vetala Aveline clawed her way out of a writhing, thorn-wreathed fever dream and awoke to find herself in the abbey's sanctum, slumped before the Crucible Aeterna. The Emperor's tormented bronze visage was speckled with blood and the black detritus of Aveline's lungs.

*'What's the truth of a name?'* someone asked from nowhere.

That was when she heard the screams.

Gunfire and the whoosh of flames echoed through the vaulted corridors of the abbey, interwoven with a cacophony of snarls, guttural chants and a ceaseless, wordless whispering that seemed to bleed from the air itself.

The tapestries lining the walls of the grand nave were afire, bathing everything in hellish light as the celestial, Phaesta, and her three surviving sisters fought to hold the invaders back from the abbey's altar. The heretics' soot-stained skin and bloodshot eyes marked them out as the lost and the bland of Vytarn – the magma scrapers, refinery labourers and petty functionaries who kept the sickly promethium industry of the Slab running. Such grey spirits were the perennial fodder of the Archenemy, yet Phaesta felt their fall keenly.

*'Your souls were in our care,'* she whispered as she scythed them down with her storm bolter, *'but our eyes were turned to the past.'*

There was no telling how many of the damned had invaded the abbey, but

Phaesta feared it would be too many. Though their makeshift clubs and cleavers were no match for the sisters' blessed weapons, the heretics fought with the fearless ferocity of the possessed.

To her right, Phaesta saw a gaunt youth leap forward and grasp the barrel of Sister Galina's bolter, tugging it towards his chest as she fired. He was ripped apart, showering Galina with blood, but his sacrifice won his comrades precious seconds to close in and bring his executioner down by sheer weight of numbers. The celestial tried to cut a path through to her sister, but the press of the crowd was too great.

*We are too few,* Phaesta judged as she and her remaining sisters retreated towards the chancel. The Mission of the Thorn Eternal numbered less than fifty Battle Sisters, and many had died before the alarm was raised, most of them slaughtered in their sleep.

*'We were betrayed!'* Aveline hissed from the celestial's gorget vox. Phaesta knew the canoness was in the sanctum, watching through the eyes of the servo-skull hovering above the horde. *'Someone opened the gates for the heretics. One of our own.'*

*'That is not possible,'* Phaesta said as a cadaverous elder tried to embrace her. He was still smiling when she crushed his skull with the stock of her gun.

*'It is the only possibility.'* Aveline's voice was a tortured croak. *'Trust no one, sister.'*

Phaesta imagined the canoness hunched in the darkness while her sisters bled for the Thorn. She knew Aveline could barely walk, let alone fight, yet she found no pity in her heart. The canoness had invited this doom upon them.

*This world was meant to be forgotten, Vetala,* Phaesta thought bitterly.

As her squad drew level with the statue of Praxedes the Ascendant, an indefinable instinct compelled her to glance up, and she saw a dark shape squatting upon the saint's marble shoulders – a leering, malformed gargoyle that was all bones and teeth and far too many claws. Before Phaesta could shout a warning the creature lashed down with an improbably long arm and punched through Sister Arianne's breastplate with talons like powered scythes, wrenching her into the air in the same motion. Phaesta and her surviving sister swept the statue's shoulders with gunfire as the beast ducked away. Then the mob was upon them, snatching at their weapons and threatening to pull them down like poor lost Galina.

*'Daemon!'* Phaesta yelled as she swung about with her rifle, trying to clear a path through the throng while keeping the gargoyle in sight. It leapt to another

statue, carrying Arianne like a broken doll in its claws. With a piercing howl it reared up and cast her aside, then leapt for the celestial.

Heedless of the heretics' weapons, Phaesta dived into the crowd, breaking through their ranks with her armoured strength as the gargoyle crashed down behind her. It slashed the head from a chanting madman and tore another in half as it came after her in a storm of claws. She yelled as its talons gouged deep rifts through her back-plate and into the flesh below. Thrown off balance, she hit the ground hard enough to dent her visor.

'Heretic!' a burly labourer snarled as he stepped between them and swung his cleaver down onto her helmet in a two-handed arc. The impact reverberated through her skull and ruptured her nose, but couldn't penetrate the sacred ceramite. Before he could swing again the gargoyle tore through him, mangling his torso into red tatters. The reprieve bought Phaesta time to level her gun and she met the beast with a volley of fire.

'Thorn take you!' she snarled as the rounds punched into its distended jaws, shattering the nest of fangs and throwing the thing backwards. A heartbeat later the explosive rounds detonated, vaporising its skull and spattering her with black ichor. Even in death the beast was dangerous, whirling about in a blind spasm as it fell. She lost sight of it as the mob closed in around her.

'They walk with daemons,' Phaesta breathed into her vox as the heretics' blows began to hammer down on her. They were nothing beside the pain in her lacerated back and the heady, sour-sweet odour of the abomination's blood. That stench was nauseating, yet strangely alluring. As if in sympathy, the whispering from the walls had taken on a sly, velvet resonance. Though it spoke without words its promise was unmistakable: an end to suffering if only she would surrender to that wondrous, wine-dark blood...

Phaesta denied it with a primal bellow that was something between a laugh and a cry.

'I am Adepta Sororitas!' she shouted as she forced herself to her feet, casting off the heretics with the armour's powered musculature. 'Suffering is my wine!'

She finished her attackers with precise, measured bursts before they could swarm her again and kept firing until she realised there were no more. Either the attack was over or the mob had retreated. Swaying on her feet, she surveyed the carnage in the nave as she loaded a fresh clip, her hands working of their own volition. Scores of broken bodies littered the space, among them Otokito, the last of her sisters, but darkness was rapidly claiming the fallen as the burning tapestries were consumed. Once again the abbey's power had failed, though this

time Phaesta suspected it was by design.

*'Celestian?'* her vox crackled as the servo-skull descended to regard her with soulless, sensor-filled eye sockets.

Ignoring the canoness, Phaesta activated the lumen band affixed to her helmet and swept the chamber with its narrow beam. Something slipped between the columns to her right and she swung around, chasing it with a rapid-fire salvo, but its hunched, many-limbed scurry threw her aim and it disappeared into the shadows.

*'There are more daemons,'* she hissed into her vox, *'perhaps many more.'*

*'I saw them,'* Aveline answered tightly, *'but I do not recognise them.'*

Phaesta pictured the canoness furiously poring through the order's forbidden texts, trying to match the living gargoyles to the sketches in those malign tomes – hunting for a way to save her false Redemption.

*You have already gazed too deeply into darkness, sister,* Phaesta judged. Her beam caught another twisted shape, this time to her left, but it slipped away before she could take a shot. So there were two of them, advancing on her position from both sides.

*'You must send a message,'* she said urgently, already knowing how this encounter would end. *'The Convent Sanctorum must be warned of this incursion.'* There was no reply from her vox. *'There is no other way, Vetala!'*

*'Celestian, I–'*

Phaesta drowned Aveline's voice in a storm of gunfire as the beasts came for her. They charged from the darkness in perfect synchronicity, keeping low and angling between the columns to confuse her aim as she spun between them. Despite their bulk and strange gait they moved with terrible speed, their claws extended to claim her.

*'Just the one then,'* she whispered, dropping into a crouch and focussing on the attacker to her right. Aveline's servo-skull swooped down into her chosen target's path like a cybernetic wasp. The gargoyle barrelled through the fragile automaton, but the distraction slowed it fractionally and Phaesta locked on and shredded its chest. As it skidded into a tangled heap she tracked it and blew its skull apart.

*'Warn them!'* Phaesta shouted into her vox.

Already certain it was too late, she spun around to face the remaining gargoyle. Her wild fire tore through its left side, shearing away a pair of arms before it yanked her into its jagged embrace.

The hololithic transceiver chimed, confirming that Aveline's message had been received by the planet's orbital relay station. From there the encoded hololith would pass into the Convent's covert intelligence web. But Redemption was a remote world; even with the Diabolus Extremis priority she had invoked, it would be months before the message reached its destination.

Slumped in her chair, Aveline stared at the glowing runes on the transceiver's panel as if they might offer answers. Like the other ancient machines in the sanctum, it had its own power source. She supposed she should be grateful for that.

'Did I taunt fate?' she asked the machine.

Her question would have been better addressed to the Crucible Aeterna watching from the wall behind her, but she was not ready to face her god quite yet. Besides, she doubted she could rise from her chair. Her condition had worsened over the past week, whittling her breath into a rasp that barely sustained her.

'I should have passed command to Phaesta long ago,' she confessed to the patient transceiver. She had lost sight of the celestian after sacrificing the servo-skull, but Phaesta's silence told her all she needed to know.

'I am the last.'

'*And the least,*' a voice completed the thought, though whether it was her own or a judgement from the Crucible Aeterna she could not tell.

'*Does it matter, Vetala?*'

She laughed and the laugh became a coughing fit that almost finished her. The spasm subsided into a muted pounding and she realised something was attacking the sanctum's door. She dismissed it. Nothing short of Militarum-grade heavy weapons could get through that solid titanium portal, and she doubted the invaders had anything of the sort. Thankfully neither did the abbey, or it would be in the enemy's hands now. The sanctum's walls were reinforced and she had activated the cupola's shields, sheathing the glass in interlocking metal panels. Nothing could get in.

'*And nothing can get out, Vetala.*'

The vox set beside the transceiver hissed: '*Canoness, can you hear me?*'

With the supernal clarity of the dying, Aveline could taste the betrayal in the speaker's voice. '*The enemy has been purged,*' Sister Etelka reported, '*but many Sisters were slain. We have need of you, mistress.*'

Aveline ignored her. There was nothing she could do about the traitor and she didn't have the strength for empty recriminations. The Emperor would take his

own retribution in time.

*'Retribution...'* she whispered. 'Yes, that would have been a more honest name.'

Etelka persisted, imploring, then wheedling, then threatening by turns, but finally she went away, leaving Aveline with the only voice that mattered.

*'Look at me, Vetala,'* it urged from the shadows within and without.

*'Soon,'* she promised.

The Prophet withdrew the tendrils of its awareness from the abbey and returned to the body waiting beyond the gorge. The old, primal part of its mind had yearned to fight alongside its followers, but its destiny had precluded the risk – and that was wise, for the peril had proved great. Most of its army had been lost in the attack, including two of its kindred hunters, yet the Prophet felt no regret at their loss. Their sacrifice had cleared the path for the Sacred Spiral and more would soon take their place. Many more.

*All are one in the Sacred Spiral,* the Prophet decreed unto the eager minds of its surviving thralls, *and the Spiral is All.*

# PART ONE

## *Redemption in Shadow*

*'Sow the first seeds of the Four-Armed God in darkness and nurture the star-blessed spawn in shadows, hidden from the prying eyes of the Outsider; lest he lay waste to the miracle before it can take root and prosper.'*

The Apotheosis of the Spiral Wyrn

## CHAPTER ONE

The shadow had been alone in the cargo hold of the *Iron Calliope* for almost three months when the throng of white-garbed travellers came on board. Until their arrival the cavernous space had been his private kingdom – a realm of sealed crates, abandoned junk and the ghosts of lost crewmen. He'd paid for rations and passage on the freighter with the last of the blood money he'd made in the Tetraktys gang wars, quite certain he was being fleeced, but too weary to care. Interstellar travel was expensive, but many of the captains plying the trade routes of the Imperium were open to shady arrangements. This wasn't the first ship the shadow had haunted and it wouldn't be the last. Every one was just another step on the long road home.

*Almost seven years, he thought bleakly, and I'm not even halfway there.*

After the intruders' arrival he lay low for a few days, taking their measure as they erected tents among the storage racks and slowly colonised his domain. Stealth had become his craft over the past few years, so it was child's play to avoid the babbling, artless crowd. He estimated there were over four hundred of them, a roughly equal split of men and women, all young, but no children.

They were obviously religious types, but nothing like the Imperial zealots he'd occasionally had dealings with. A civilian sect then, probably a fairly standard variant of the Imperial Creed, though he didn't recognise the spiral symbol they venerated. The icon was everywhere – emblazoned on their white jumpsuits, etched into crystal pendants or tattooed onto the backs of their hands. The most devout wore robes and sported tonsures, their bare crowns stencilled with the spiral. To the shadow they looked ridiculous, but then he'd lost faith in faith long ago.

*Pilgrims, he decided, harmless and stupid.*

Unfortunately he couldn't evade them indefinitely unless he resigned himself to

hiding until they were gone, which wouldn't be for another five months. From their talk he'd learnt they were heading for a minor shrine world further along the *Iron Calliope's* route, and he'd be damned if he'd spend the next five months creeping around the fools.

No, it was time to stake out his territory.

'But it was so real,' Ophele said fearfully, 'not like a dream at all.'

'It's nothing,' Ariken advised. 'You're just missing home.'

'I hated home.' Ophele's long, delicate face was pinched and dark rings underscored her bloodshot eyes. Like many of the pilgrims, the girl had been sleeping badly for days.

*Ever since the ship entered the warp,* Ariken estimated.

Most of her companions were ignorant about such things, but the medicae had made it her business to learn about the dangers of space travel before embarking on this voyage. Though her knowledge was sketchy, she understood that their vessel was passing through a realm that was as inimical to the soul as the honest void of space was to the body. Ophele wasn't the only member of the congregation who sensed the leering *wrongness* pressing in on the ship.

'Change is always frightening,' Ariken said gently, 'even when you truly want it.' *Or need it.* She selected a vial from her supply case and passed it to the girl. Ophele wasn't much younger than her, yet she seemed like a child to Ariken. 'Take one before each sleep cycle. If things don't improve in a couple of days, come talk to me again.'

As she escorted Ophele from her tent, Ariken noticed that the chattering of the community had fallen to a murmur.

'What's going on?' she asked her nearest brother.

'A stranger,' the pilgrim said, pointing to the far side of the camp. 'Came out of nowhere.'

*Nowhere... or a nightmare?* Ariken wondered uneasily.

Her curiosity had carried her beyond the approved texts on space travel, leading her to dark stories that suggested the sacred shields protecting ships were not infallible. Sometimes *things* slipped past them from the outer darkness...

*No, she decided grimly, if that had happened I'd be hearing screams by now.*

Fighting down the dread, she pressed through the crowd and saw a man waiting at the edge of the camp. He stood motionless, regarding the pilgrims through a curtain of greying hair that had spilled loose from his headband. A patch covered his right eye and the lower part of his face was lost in a heavy beard that fell to

his chest. It was difficult to tell his age through that tangle, but she guessed he was somewhere in his late forties.

*He looks like he's been here for years,* Ariken thought.

The stranger's khaki-grey fatigues were reinforced with flak plates at the shoulders and joints and a leather gauntlet encased his left hand. The patchwork uniform gave him a martial bearing, but he appeared to be unarmed save for the dagger tucked into his belt.

'Is he a ghost?' Ophele whispered to Ariken. The medicae hadn't noticed the girl following her.

'Only a man, sister,' a deep voice answered behind them. 'Be at ease.'

Ariken and Ophele made way as the congregation's shepherd stepped past them and approached the stranger.

'My name is Bharlo, friend,' the shepherd said, offering a warm smile. 'I am guide to the Forty-Second Congregation of the Unfolded.'

Though he wasn't much past thirty, Bharlo spoke with the easy authority of a man accustomed to being listened to. He was powerfully built and his bare arms were covered in faded tattoos that hinted at a darker past – a riot of burning skulls pierced by blades and the remnants of a dragon. His robes were cinched at the waist with a cord of purple silk and the spiral adorning his shaven head was gilded into his ebony skin. It looped down and around his cheeks, framing his face like a snake.

'Forgive us, friend,' Bharlo continued, 'but we didn't know we shared our ark with another traveller.' He raised his hands, palms open to reveal twin golden spirals. 'Will you break bread with us?'

The apparition's glare fell upon him, but Bharlo appeared unperturbed. After long seconds the stranger jabbed a finger at the far side of the hold and shook his head, then drew the finger pointedly across his own throat.

'I believe we understand you, friend,' Bharlo said, his smile never wavering, 'but know that we're here for you if you change your mind.'

As the stranger turned and walked away Ariken realised she had been holding her breath.

'He *is* a ghost,' Ophele said with conviction.

The shadow knew it would have been simpler to deliver his warning in words, but he thought the pilgrims would be more receptive to a sign.

*Besides, I liked seeing the looks on their faces,* he admitted. *They'd sooner jump off the ship than come near me now.*

Except for the leader – their *shepherd*... He might be a problem. Judging by his muscles and the skein of skulls and blades tattooed across his arms he'd been a ganger once, probably an enforcer, possibly even a minor clan boss. Perhaps such men could change, but there would always be a hard core to them. The shadow had killed enough of their kind to know it. Truthfully he hadn't been much of a fighter back in the days when fighting had been his duty, but he'd learned quickly on the long road home.

Over the next few weeks the shadow built his refuge, hauling crates and loose panels to his territory and assembling them into an improvised cabin. His retreat was in the remotest part of the hold, right up against the ship's hull. It was cold and most of the overhead lumen strips had died, obliging him to rely on the candles he'd filched from the cargo, but it was a price worth paying to keep the spiral-heads at arm's length.

At the start of each sleep cycle he would sit cross-legged in the darkness, trying to ignore their muffled prayers. He was quite certain nobody else was listening to them.

The shadow was returning from another salvage expedition, his arms laden with a teetering stack of food cartons, when someone spoke behind him.

'Hello, ghost.'

Surprised, he swung round and several boxes fell from the top of his haul. A girl was appraising him with frank curiosity. She wore the white jumpsuit of a common pilgrim, but the only spiral he could see was the one stitched to her breast pocket. Her brown hair was cropped short, though she wasn't tonsured.

'I didn't think ghosts scared so easily,' she said.

Ignoring his frown, she picked up the fallen cartons and returned them carefully to the top of the stack.

'Why?' she asked as he turned to go.

'What?' he answered reflexively. It was the first word he'd spoken in months and it sounded like an alien croak to his own ears.

'Why do you collect junk?'

'It's only junk if you don't use it.'

She nodded as if she were giving his answer serious consideration. He guessed she was in her mid-twenties and pretty in a quiet, trim way, but it was her watchful grey eyes that struck him. They lent her a stillness that belied her youth.

'I'm Ariken,' she offered.

‘Cross,’ he said, unsure why.

She nodded again, weighing this up with the same gravity as his previous answer, then appeared to come to a decision.

‘Are you dangerous, Cross?’ Seeing his frown she pressed on quickly. ‘I ask because you’re frightening people and most of them are frightened enough already.’

He began to walk away, but she stepped in front of him, her expression hardening.

‘These are good people,’ she said.

*As good as dead then...* He caught the thought before it slipped past his lips.

‘I’m not your problem,’ he answered instead.

‘Thank you, that’s what I needed to hear.’ She smiled. ‘I’ll see you around, Cross.’

Cross bumped into Ariken a few days later and they spoke again, still brief and stilted, but over the weeks their chance talks grew surer, warmer, until it dawned on him that he was looking forward to seeing her. Reluctantly he realised he’d made a friend. He had no business with friendship, yet he found he couldn’t walk away from it. Maybe he’d been a ghost too long.

*Or not quite long enough.*

By unspoken agreement, Ariken never intruded upon his refuge or too deeply into his past. He said he was travelling home and she left it at that, as if she knew anything else would break their trust.

In contrast she was unguarded about herself, both her past and her path. Like her fellow pilgrims, she was from Khostax-IV, a hive world suffocating under the weight of its own industry. A medicae by vocation, she wanted to see something beyond an artificial sky and a billion grey mirror images of herself, but most importantly, she yearned for *purpose*.

Cross recognised the story; it was as old as the human heart and it forked into infinite roads. In Ariken’s case it had led to the Spiral Dawn.

‘It sounds heretical to me,’ Cross said when the subject of her sect came up. *When he brought it up.*

‘Only because you haven’t been listening,’ Ariken said, exasperated. ‘Anyway, what do you care about heresy? You don’t believe in anything, ghost.’

‘It doesn’t matter what I believe.’ He gave up on the stubborn panel he’d been trying to prise loose from the wall and looked at her sternly. ‘It’s what the rest of the Imperium believes that’s going to matter.’

‘The Spiral Dawn is a sanctioned sect of the Imperial Cult.’ It sounded like she was citing an approved text. ‘The God-Emperor is at the centre of the Sacred Spiral. He is the One in All from which all truth unfolds.’

‘Then what are you looking for out here?’

‘The Unfolding was revealed to the Spiral Father on Redemption,’ Ariken quoted portentously. ‘All true seekers are reborn into the Spiral upon the cradle world.’

‘You don’t believe half that nonsense do you?’

‘Maybe half.’ She grinned. ‘The Emperor half, anyway.’

‘It’s not a game, girl. Who’s paying for this holy jaunt of yours?’

She hesitated, pursing her lips.

‘You don’t know, do you, Ariken.’

‘The shepherd made the arrangements,’ she said guardedly.

‘To ferry four hundred people across seven systems?’ He shook his head. ‘It doesn’t add up.’

‘Nor do *you*, Cross.’ It was the closest she had come to questioning his past and they both looked away, suddenly awkward. His left hand was aching in its gauntlet, as it always did when he became angry.

‘You can’t trust them,’ he said quietly.

‘Who?’

*Anybody!*

‘Priests!’ he spat. ‘And the higher up you go the worse they get.’

‘Now *that’s* heresy. I might have to set a witchfinder on you, ghost.’

He shook his head. ‘You should have stayed at home, girl.’

‘There was nothing there.’

‘There’s much worse than nothing out here.’

*There are shadows like me*, he realised.

Some days later Bharlo paid Ariken a visit. She had been expecting it.

‘Do you believe our ghost is a good man?’ He waited patiently while she considered his question.

‘He doesn’t think so,’ Ariken said at last.

‘Good men rarely do,’ Bharlo observed, ‘but good or bad, he *is* dangerous.’ He placed a hand on her shoulder. ‘You have fulfilled your duty of vigilance to the congregation, sister. You have no obligation to the stranger.’

She hesitated. ‘And if he’s a friend?’

The shepherd regarded her solemnly. ‘Some men are past changing, Ariken.’

*People change. You changed,* she thought. But it was a banal, threadbare argument and she didn't believe it of Cross anyway.

'He and I recognised the truth of each other the moment we met,' Bharlo continued. 'Whatever path our ghost is on, he's gone too far to come back.'

Cross ended his friendship with Ariken shortly afterwards. At first he avoided her, then when that became impossible he answered her questions with harsh lies he called hard truths. He destroyed their rapport with the same calculation he exercised in battle, deriding her as an ignorant, deluded, *doomed* fool. She met it all with dignity, which made the betrayal harder than he had imagined.

'I hope you make it home, Cross,' she said at the end. 'Wherever it is.'

'I'm sorry,' he said after she was gone, unsure whether it was addressed to Ariken or himself.

His left hand felt like it was on fire. Wincing, he pulled off the gauntlet and examined the corpse-claw attached to his wrist. The bloodless skin was mottled with scabs, but he knew they were only the surface scars of much deeper wounds. The parasites that had burrowed into the flesh had almost claimed him for the grey, disease-ridden world that had swallowed his comrades seven years ago. Sometimes he was sure he'd died with them and this endless, pointless journey home was just a kind of purgatory.

*I was a dead man crawling,* he remembered. *I couldn't have survived.*

As the months passed he tried to absolve himself from self and become the shadow once more. But the void he had once inhabited was gone.

Redemption 219 was a sphere of striated greys scarred by patches of angry crimson where the clouds of ash had been swept away. Alongside that colossus the orbiting hulk of the *Iron Calliope* was only a white blemish, the smaller ship it disgorged a mere mote of bright dust.

The landing shuttle dipped towards the dark world, then levelled out as it brushed the hazy exosphere. For a few moments it glided over the curve of the planet, then its thrusters ignited and it hurtled forward, skimming high above the burning oceans in search of the anomaly that a lost visionary or madwoman had named the Koronatus Ring.

The planet's molten surface was spiked with obsidian islands that groped from the magma like charred skeletal fingers, offering no respite for the fragile creatures the shuttle carried. The only sanctuary to be found here was among the Seven Spires and the flattened mountain they encircled.

As it neared its destination the ship tilted sharply and tore through the outer

mantle and into the roiling clouds below.

The descent to Redemption was infinitely worse than the ascent from Khostax had been. Ariken sat hunched on a moulded seat, gripping her safety harness as the landing shuttle shuddered and bucked, as if in the throes of a storm. Ophele was huddled to her left, her lips working in furious prayer, her right hand clutching Ariken's. The pale girl had become Ariken's second shadow during the voyage, following her about like a lost child until the medicae had given in and adopted her as an eager, but hopeless, assistant.

*Maybe I've grown used to lost souls,* Ariken thought. In the months following Cross' strange betrayal she had only seen him in wordless passing. Towards the end of the voyage she had considered attempting a farewell, but what was there to say really? The shepherd had been right: Cross was lost.

The shuttle shook violently and a collective tremor passed through the pilgrims crammed together in tight rows of twenty. The entire company was here, all four hundred and forty-four souls who had left Khostax in search of enlightenment, hope or simply change. She knew many of them weren't true believers of the Unfolding. She wasn't much of a believer herself, but that didn't stop her praying along with the rest of them as the vessel fought the turbulence. She had contrived to sit by one of the portholes, but there was nothing but blackness beyond the glass, as if the ship were diving into a void.

*If we don't make it down I'll never know if the Unfolding is true,* she realised.

Then again, if it *was* true she'd know after her death anyway. Surely her soul would simply spin into alignment with the God-Emperor's design and everything would make sense. In which case, what did it matter?

*Oh, it matters,* Ariken thought fiercely. Neither faith nor logic could deny the simple truth she felt with every fibre of her being: *I want to live.*

At first she whispered it, then, realising nobody could hear her above the roar of the engines, she shouted it – then again, louder.

'I want to live!'

Perhaps it was truest prayer of them all.

## CHAPTER TWO

‘You hear that?’ Benedek said. His voice barely carried over the storm wailing and scratching at the outpost’s walls.

‘Can’t hear anything in a blackout,’ Corporal Anzio Cridd replied. ‘Except your whining.’ He didn’t look up from the card tower he was building on top of the vox set.

‘Sounded like a ship to me,’ Benedek pressed.

‘You’ve been hearing ships since that stubber went off by your head, Bartal.’ Cridd held his breath as he slotted another card onto his tower’s summit. He grinned as the edifice held. ‘Doesn’t mean the ships are there.’

‘The lieutenant said there’s one coming in tonight.’

‘Then they sure picked a sorry night for it!’ Cridd leaned back in his chair, unwilling to attempt another storey until his fellow Guardsman had shut up. ‘Poor bastards.’ He spun round and grinned. ‘Welcome to Redemption, where you can freeze, burn and choke for the Throne, all in the same night!’

‘We’re on watch,’ Benedek said seriously. The lanky trooper was standing by the window slit of their cramped bunker, staring out into the storm as if it made a difference.

‘There’s nothing to see out there, friend.’ Cridd threw up his hands. ‘You’ve just got to sit it out.’

Benedek wasn’t a bad guy to share a shift with but he got twitchy during blackouts, and if he was honest Cridd couldn’t exactly blame him. The soot storms were bad enough when you were behind the walls of the Locker with the whole regiment around you, but out on the Rim they could mess with your head. And out on the Rim in *Outpost Six*... Well, that was something else again.

Outpost Six. The Ghostwatch, the troops called it.

Officially this bunker was just another link in the chain of listening posts the

regiment had erected along the perimeter of the Slab, but everyone knew it was unlucky. The outpost hunkered at the mouth of the crumbling bridge that led to Spire Castitas, where the old Adepta Sororitas abbey lay. Even the Spiral-lovers, who lorded it over the other mountains, avoided Castitas and its brooding ruin.

‘You think the abbey’s haunted?’ Benedek asked, obviously thinking along the same lines.

‘I think you talk too much, Bartal.’

‘They say the Sisters lost their minds and turned on each other.’

‘You *think*?’ Cridd winked lasciviously at his comrade, who looked shocked and made the sign of the aquila. ‘Relax, friend. I’m just messing with you.’

‘Ain’t right to joke about it, corporal,’ Benedek said, suddenly formal.

*Especiallly not with the abbey so close*, Cridd guessed. Suddenly he was in no mood for jokes either. He thought of the men back at the Locker. Even the toughest bastards hated pulling watch on the Rim. Out here there was only wind and darkness – and that was without a blackout trying to drown you in soot.

‘You ever wonder why we’re here?’ Benedek asked.

‘You going Spiral on me?’ Cridd mocked, but there was no venom in it.

The other trooper shook his head gravely. ‘No, I mean what we’re doing *here*? On this burnt rock of a world.’

‘We go where they tell us to go.’ Cridd shrugged. ‘That’s how it works in the Guard, friend.’

‘But it’s been six... nearly seven months,’ Benedek protested. ‘There’s nothing here. Sergeant Grijalva, he says we’re on the graveline.’

The graveline... Consigned to garrison duty until they dried up. It would be a shabby way for the regiment to end its service to the Throne, but after the meat grinder of their last campaign Cridd figured there were worse fates. Besides, he’d heard it all before – every trooper in the Eighth had a theory, but Cridd doubted even Command really knew why they’d been posted to Redemption. Things hadn’t been right with the colonel since the Second Company got itself wiped out on Oblazt.

‘Me, I think we’re here for the Spirals,’ Benedek said darkly. ‘Something’s off about them.’

‘They’re just priests, Bartal. More agreeable than most, I’d say.’

‘Then why are the Spires off limits to Throne-fearing men?’ Benedek inscribed the aquila again. ‘They’re hiding something. The preacher says—’

Something scraped the bunker’s iron hatch – long and grating, like nails being dragged along the metal. The troopers froze. Benedek’s eyes looked set to pop

out of his skull. Cridd drew his laspistol and gestured at the window slit. His comrade stared at him and Cridd nodded sharply. Reluctantly, as if he were approaching a snake, Benedek peered outside.

‘Don’t see anything,’ he said finally.

*There are no ghosts here, Cridd told himself. There’s no such thing.*

But he knew that wasn’t true. Every Guardsman of the Vassago Abyss knew it. Ghosts were in their blood.

Something slammed against the hatch.

‘Maybe it was rock,’ Benedek said hopefully. ‘Wind’s strong enough, right?’

The second blow was hard enough to shake the hatch in its frame. Cridd gripped his pistol as the pounding continued, though he doubted the gun had enough stopping power to worry whatever was hammering at their door.

*Can any gun stop a ghost? he wondered numbly. But if it’s a ghost, why doesn’t it just walk right through the walls?*

The assault ended as abruptly as it had begun. Cridd saw his tower had collapsed, scattering cards across the floor. He felt an absurd urge to pick them up, but Benedek moved first. Very carefully, the lanky trooper looked outside again.

*It can’t get in, Cridd decided, so it’s not a ghost.*

Was that better than the alternative? What *was* the alternative?

He glanced at the vox, but soot storms played havoc with the comms sets, cutting their range to a few thousand paces. No, they were on their own until the next Sentinel patrol came by. That wouldn’t be for a couple of hours at least, but if they just stayed holed up...

‘There’s someone out there,’ Benedek said. ‘I... I think it’s a woman.’

A moment later Cridd heard her voice. It was inside his head.

Ariken stepped out of the shuttle into a freezing black maelstrom. The gale tore at her clothes as she stumbled down the exit ramp, squinting to protect her eyes from the swirling dust. The rotten stench of sulphur was almost as crushing as the cold.

*What...?*

Her backpack almost unbalanced her, but she grabbed the swaying guide rope secured to the landing pad and clung to it like a lifeline, trying to find her bearings in this sudden midnight world. The pilgrim shuffling a few paces ahead was already a blur in the darkness. There was a wail of fear behind her.

Ariken turned and caught Ophele before the flailing girl was snatched away by

the wind. Her friend opened her mouth to say something and swallowed a lungful of dust.

*Why didn't they give us rebreathers? Ariken wondered furiously as she tried to calm the choking girl. Or goggles at least?*

She forced her friend's hands onto the guide rope and pointed at a red haze up ahead. Ophele nodded and they pressed forward, following the rope over the shallow lip of the landing pad until the haze resolved into a marker light mounted on a tall piton. Ten paces further on there was another and Ariken realised they were spaced to offer a hint of light between each stretch of darkness.

*Is that the best you could do? Ariken thought. Why wasn't somebody here to meet us? To warn us!*

Glancing round she realised Ophele wasn't behind her anymore. Gritting her teeth, she fought her way back, pushing past one oncoming pilgrim after another until she saw her friend slumped beside the guide rope. Another man staggered past the fallen girl and Ariken lashed out at him, but he kept on going.

*Cowards!* Ariken raged as she knelt by her friend. Ophele's eyes were squeezed shut and she was shaking violently. Despite her frailty she felt like a dead weight when Ariken tried to lift her.

*No, she thought, it won't begin like this! I won't allow it!*

Abruptly the girl was pulled from her grasp. Ariken looked up and saw a robed pilgrim standing over her, holding Ophele in both arms. The newcomer's face was lost in a deep cowl, but from his height she guessed he must be Bharlo. She thought he'd been the first to leave the shuttle, but maybe he had returned to make sure everyone was safe. That would be just like their shepherd.

The pilgrim stepped past her and waited until she was back on her feet, then pressed on, bowing low into the wind with his burden. She followed, trying to ignore everything except the guide rope in her hands and the bobbing silhouette of the shepherd's back.

*There is no darkness and no cold and no wind and no darkness and no...*

The nightmare march ended as abruptly as it had begun. Suddenly a wall loomed in front of Ariken and in the wall a portal of blinding light. Then she was inside and out of the storm.

'We died,' Ophele croaked, 'all of us.' Her eyes were raw white wounds in her soot-smearred face. 'Our ship went down in the storm and...'

'I hurt too much to be dead,' Ariken interrupted. She didn't have the energy to

be gentle right now. 'I'm sorry, Ophele, but this is real.'

They were slumped against the wall of a hangar, huddled among their fellow pilgrims for warmth. Everyone was shivering and wretched, their garments torn and stained almost black, their faces slack with shock. Even the shepherd looked broken. Ariken saw him a little further along, kneeling with his head bowed and eyes closed. His brow was caked in dried blood.

*I never had a chance to thank him*, she realised. By the time her eyes had adjusted to the light he'd gone, leaving Ophele lying by the entrance. Shortly afterwards the soldiers in black had appeared and herded them further into the hangar like cattle. One of them had slung her friend over his shoulder and then thrown her down at their destination. Another had struck Bharlo with the butt of his rifle when he'd demanded an explanation, then pushed Ariken away when she'd tried to tend him.

She eyed her captors warily, for surely that's what they were. Nothing about them said *saviours*.

There were at least thirty of them, spread across the hangar in groups of two or three. They were dressed in charcoal-black fatigues and angular breastplates that flared into crenelated shoulder guards. Their armour was painted a cast-iron black and hammered with rivets, giving it a rugged, industrial appearance. Most wore open-faced helmets, but a few had opted for caps or bandanas. Some went bare-armed, sporting warlike tattoos or iron armbands, while others had upgraded their armour to cover their limbs in interlocking plates. Their faces were mostly lean and unshaven, their eyes hard.

*These are not good men*, Ariken judged, recalling her conversation with Bharlo. It seemed like a lifetime ago now.

The noble two-headed aquila of the Imperium was embossed on their helmets and breastplates, but they also bore another symbol: a grinning skeleton in a wide-brimmed hat wielding crossed blades. The morbid icon was stencilled in bone white on their shoulder pads, looming over a stylised number '8', but it also served as the central motif for their tattoos.

*That spectre is closer to their hearts than the Imperial Eagle*, Ariken sensed.

The muted roar of the storm surged briefly as the hangar door was thrown open and two men entered. As they drew closer, she saw they could not be more unlike. One was squat and thickset, his baldpate fringed with a spiky halo of copper hair that matched his jutting beard. He wore a rough-spun cassock and a chainmail apron whose links were threaded with devotional icons. His eyes glowered beneath bristling eyebrows, their glare mirroring the energy of his

stride.

The other man was much taller, his slim form swathed in a black greatcoat that trailed to his boots. As he approached he swept a high-peaked cap onto his head and adjusted it with a smooth, practised motion. He was clean-shaven and blandly handsome, his pale eyes as expressionless as his features. She assumed he was an officer, though he appeared to have little in common with his charges.

‘Are they here to help us, Ari?’ Ophele murmured.

*I don't think so, Ariken thought bleakly as the officers appraised the pilgrims. I don't think there's any help for us here.*

‘My name is Sándor Lazaro,’ the short one announced. ‘I bear the word of the divine God-Emperor.’ He grinned ferociously, as if daring anyone to contradict him. ‘Citizens of the Holy Imperium, you have been blessed today! Though you have strayed from the Emperor’s true path your saviour is magnanimous.’

The preacher spoke in the baritone boom of a natural orator, yet Ariken detected a broken, anxious edge in his voice.

‘You have been misled by false prophets, but I stand before you to say... that... it is not...’ Lazaro’s speech trailed into a raw wheeze. ‘Not too late... to...’ He gritted his teeth, trying to strangle a rising cough. ‘To...’

*He's sick, Ariken realised, appraising his flushed face. Very sick.*

‘To repent...’ Lazaro almost choked on the words.

‘Duty is its own redemption,’ the man in the peaked cap intervened smoothly. He spoke more softly than his comrade, but with equal authority. ‘And duty is what we offer you, citizens.’

‘They seem nice,’ Ophele whispered dully. Her eyes were glazed, her breathing shallow.

‘This planet is at war,’ the pale-eyed officer continued. ‘We ask that you stand with us against the enemies of the Throne.’

At first the travellers met this with stunned silence, then a muttering began as his request sank in. Ariken saw the officer was unmoved by the discontent – almost as if he’d expected it. She felt a cold dread rising.

*He's going to make an example of someone.*

‘We are loyal to the Throne,’ a clear voice called out, cutting through the babble, ‘but we are not fighters, sir.’

Ariken glanced round and saw a hooded pilgrim rise to his feet. As the soldiers trained their weapons on him he extended his arms slowly, showing he was unarmed. ‘We knew nothing of a war on Redemption,’ he continued.

‘It is a cold war,’ the pale-eyed officer replied. ‘Our enemy is in the shadows.’

‘Then I ask that you let us depart on the next ship.’ Keeping his arms raised, the hooded man stepped away from the crowd. ‘I believe the Astra Militarum has no mandate to draft honest Imperial citizens, sir.’

There was a murmur of support from the congregation, but it was hesitant. Nobody wanted to be noticed. Ariken glanced at Bharlo: his head was still bowed, as if in denial. It suddenly struck her that he hadn’t been the one who’d come to Ophele’s aid outside.

*It was you,* Ariken decided, frowning at their enigmatic spokesman. He had stopped a few paces from the officer.

‘You have no jurisdiction over us, commissar,’ he said.

‘Except in extraordinary circumstances,’ the officer countered, ‘and this is most definitely an extraordinary circumstance.’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘You appear to be familiar with the Astra Militarum’s code of conduct, pilgrim.’

‘Not familiar enough, it seems.’

‘Show me your face.’

Ariken knew who their spokesman was before he removed his hood.

*They’re both dangerous,* Cross gauged as he faced the commissar, *but this one is the greater threat.*

The preacher was transparent – a cornered animal enraged by its own weakness – but commissars were a breed apart from other men. Most of them were incapable of the normal range of human emotions. It had been conditioned out of them, leaving only martial traits like courage, contempt and cold wrath. Cross had fought alongside enough of them to know their methods.

And yet there was something different about this man, something...

*Nothing,* he realised. That was all he saw in those pale eyes: an absence of emotion altogether, perhaps even of conviction.

‘These people are of no use to you, commissar,’ he said carefully. ‘They aren’t fighters.’

‘But you are.’

Cross said nothing. There was no point in denying it. Commissars were trained to recognise such things as other men recognised humour or beauty.

‘Your wrist, *citizen,*’ the commissar snapped.

Resigned, Cross raised his right hand and pulled back the sleeve. The mark inscribed on his inner wrist hadn’t faded. The identification tags were made to last. He could have had it removed on Tetraktys, but that had felt like one betrayal too many.

‘Astra Militarum,’ the commissar confirmed.

‘And more than a common Guardsman, I suspect,’ Lazaro added. His voice was hoarse, but his coughing had subsided. ‘Throne’s Truth, I didn’t expect much from this rabble, but the Emperor provides.’

*You’re more than a blind fanatic,* Cross thought as Lazaro weighed him up shrewdly. *That grand speech was just for the crowd.*

‘What was your rank, soldier?’ Lazaro demanded.

‘I was a captain,’ Cross said quietly. ‘Let the others go.’

‘The choice will be theirs.’ The preacher beamed. ‘The Vassago Black Flags only take the worthy.’

Lieutenant Kazimyr Senka had become a stranger to his brothers-in-arms. The regiment’s armoured corps had always been a close-knit clan, as distinct from the common troops as the Third Company’s veteran Gallows Dancers, but over the past few months Senka had grown distant from the tank crews and even his fellow Sentinel Sharks. Naturally he kept his disquiet hidden, for the warriors of the Vassago Abyss were not renowned for their tender hearts. He continued to drink hard and pray harder alongside his comrades, but he was dead to their revelry and reverence alike.

*Murder destroyed my taste for lies,* he reflected bleakly, *just as lies destroyed the shrines.*

He dismissed the dark train of thought and concentrated on steering his Sentinel between the boulders littering his path. The tall, bipedal vehicles were perfectly suited to traversing the badlands of the outer mesa. Their broad stride offered a fluidity of movement that wheels or treads couldn’t hope to match, making them fine scout vehicles. To a veteran rider like Senka the machine’s double-jointed legs felt like an extension of his own. When he was sealed up in the high cabin of his mount he became something more than a man.

Unlike the other pilots he looked forward to the patrols that freed him from the Locker. During the long, solitary circuits of the Slab’s perimeter he could lose himself in the mastery of his machine. There were no answers to be found out here, but at least the questions were silenced. Recently however, his thoughts had begun to wander during the patrols, carrying him back to that fateful fourth shrine.

‘I wasn’t really part of it,’ Senka said aloud, suddenly needing to hear a voice, even if it was only his own. Even if it was only another lie.

He leaned forward as his lights speared something in the gloom ahead. A few

strides later a low-profiled bunker resolved itself out of the shadows: Outpost Six, his next port of call on the circuit.

The Ghostwatch, the common troopers called it.

He slowed his walker as he approached the outpost. This close to the precipice the terrain was treacherous, and the Black Flags had already lost one Sentinel to the gorge. He was damned if he'd be the second pilot to take the Fool's Fall. After the brutal attrition of Oblazt, the regiment had precious little armour left. It couldn't afford to squander machines on reckless pilots. Whatever else Senka might have lost, he still had his rider's pride.

'Shark Senka signing in,' he signalled the outpost. 'I have a clean sweep for perimeter patrol Delta. Your report, Six?'

He was met by a hiss of white noise.

'Outpost Six, do you read me?' he repeated. 'What's your status, Six?'

Finally a voice answered. '*Outpost Six.*'

Senka glanced at the rota taped to his drive panel. 'Cridd?' he asked. 'Is that you, corporal?'

A pause, as if the man on the other end were thinking about it, then: '*We waited for you, Lieutenant.*' He sounded sluggish. *Adrift.*

'Waited?' Senka frowned. Of course they'd waited. They were on watch duty.

'*She told us to wait... so we could tell you.*' There was a broken pause. '*They know.*'

'Say again, Six?' Senka queried.

'*They know you, Senka.*'

'I don't follow you—'

'*Oh, you follow me,*' the voice insisted, then it receded, as if addressing someone else: '*I'm done here, Benedek.*'

'Cridd?' Senka demanded. 'Corporal, what—'

He was cut off by a twinned report of las-fire – two shots, separated by a heartbeat.

'Cridd?' he called. 'Benedek?'

He switched frequencies, trying for the Locker, but he knew it was useless in a blackout. He was just putting off his next move. Reluctantly Senka shifted his vehicle into its stationary posture. While the Sentinel's legs bent to lower the cabin he strapped on his rebreather.

*They know,* Cridd had said.

Senka threw the cockpit release before he could change his mind and a farrago of wind and dust poured inside, eager to abrade and stain. Enginseer Tarcante

would have stern words for him later, Senka guessed as he climbed out. The cabin was still almost six feet above the ground, but he knew the exit drill better than his own face.

*I shouldn't be doing this*, he thought as he lowered himself along the hull's handholds, then let go and landed in a low crouch. The bunker was about twenty paces away, still pinned in his Sentinel's beam. It looked pregnant with malice as he approached. The hatch was locked, but Senka had the override codes for all the outposts. He stopped with his hand outstretched, staring at the metal door. It was dented and scratched with deep, parallel furrows.

*Get out of here now*, Senka thought. *Run and don't stop running.*

Fighting down the rising fear, he punched the code into the access panel and raised his pistol. The locking clamps parted with a pneumatic hiss and the hatch swung open.

'Cridd!' he called over the wind. 'Benedek!'

He heard a wet, agonised moan from inside.

*They know you.*

'They don't know anything,' he hissed as he entered the bunker.

The two sentries were sprawled against the walls on opposite sides of the cramped space. There was a charred hole in Cridd's forehead and the laspistol he'd discharged was clutched in his left hand. Benedek was still alive, wheezing for breath as he groped spastically at the smoking ruin of his throat. As Senka knelt beside the dying man, Benedek's eyes locked on him, wide with terror.

'Why?' Senka asked. It was all he could think to say.

'*Tizheruk*,' Benedek hissed, forcing it out with his last breath.

Senka froze, trying to deny that ancient, baleful word.

*Tizheruk... the Night Weavers...*

On the back of his fear came the guilt, casting him back to the Spiral shrines he and his fellow puritans had razed across the Slab. The raids hadn't been officially sanctioned, but the order had come from a manifest authority. There hadn't been much violence at first – the hollow-eyed worshippers had just stood by as their spiral-tainted temples were *re-consecrated* with fire. Until the fourth shrine...

*We murdered a priest*, Senka thought wildly. *What if the Spiral isn't a heresy? Did we bring the Night Weavers down upon ourselves?*

'Kazimyr,' a voice whispered. 'Kazimyr Senka.'

He swung round and something vast and dark slipped away from his beam, disappearing into the storm.

‘Who’s there?’ he yelled, levelling his pistol at the shadows beyond the hatch.

‘Don’t be afraid, Kazimyr,’ the voice said, gentle and unmistakably female.

*How can I hear her through the wind?* Senka wondered, yet somehow the strangeness of it wouldn’t harden into terror. Indeed his fear was melting away, like ice under a blazing sun.

*But there is no sun,* he thought blearily, *and no light.*

He realised there was a figure standing in the doorway. It was swathed in a long robe that blossomed around its head, shrouding its face. It was an enigma, yet he knew he had nothing to fear from it – *from her*. He tried to lower his weapon and discovered it was already by his side. She removed her cowl and he saw that her beauty transcended the promise of her voice.

‘My name is Xithauli,’ she said, ‘and I know you, Kazimyr Senka.’

He realised it was the first time she had spoken aloud.

Whenever a soot storm raged, as it did tonight, the Retriever would climb to the highest tower of the Locker and seal himself in the chamber he had forbidden to all, even the preacher who had elevated him from a humble soldier to a holy crusader.

The regimental fortress had been erected around the spaceport, securing the planet’s most vital facility, but more importantly it had been built in accordance with the Retriever’s holy visions. Foremost among his specifications had been this high, stark tower. The circular chamber at its summit was empty of everything save his dreams, the tools he used to transcribe them – a crate of autoquills – and a ladder to reach its upper vaults. The walls had originally been painted a vacant white, but that emptiness had not lasted long.

Over the months the Retriever’s great work had taken shape, extending across the walls in a delirious web of black scrawls. Countless icons were caught up in its strange geometry: angels and eagles, stars and skulls, cogs and consecrated blades – and myriad nameless things that ached to be.

He had laboured at the tangle with one autoquill after another, furiously rendering his visions into ink-bound reality before they could slip away, capturing their import even if he couldn’t yet decipher it. Sometimes the ink ran dry and he would jab the nib into a wrist and continue in blood. Then the work would flow with greater fervour, but he would feel a shrieking, glacial rage welling up in his heart, as if he’d tapped too deeply into a seam of annihilating truth. In those moments he knew he would be able to see – *truly see* – the God-Emperor’s design, but he always pulled back, fearful that the revelation would

blind him.

‘I’m not ready,’ he confessed as he threw his quill aside yet again and fell to his knees, drained of everything save worship. He knew none of this was really his work. He was only a tool of the God-Emperor – a nomad soul in service to the highest of powers. That truth both humbled and exalted him.

He realised the soot storm was over and a trickle of grey light was seeping through the chamber’s skylight. It was time to return to the squalid realities of the war for Redemption’s soul.

‘A lie is only as secure as the last man who embraced it,’ he told the divine coil.

Then Colonel Kangre Talasca, commander of the Eighth Vassago Black Flags and Retriever of the Faith, rose and descended from the tower to re-join his regiment.

## CHAPTER THREE

Cross didn't recognise the face staring back at him from the mirror. It was no more his own than the name he had adopted on the *Iron Calliope*. His hair was tied back and the beard was gone, revealing long, almost bookish features that suggested a scholar rather than a soldier. He recalled he had worn glasses once, clinging to the myopia of his youth despite the demands of his trainers at the academy to get his eyes corrected. It had been an absurd affectation for an Astra Militarum officer.

'You even wore glasses to a damn death world,' he mocked the stranger, who inevitably mocked him right back. 'You were a fool, Ambrose.'

He'd had his eyes fixed on Tetraktys, ironically just weeks before he lost one in an ambush. The surviving eye was still sharper than it had ever been in cooperation with its twin, yet it saw less that *meant* anything. He hadn't understood that until his friendship with Ariken.

'Don't forget again,' he warned his double.

He donned the black cap Preacher Lazaro had given him and left the cell assigned to him in the temple's cloisters. He was only mildly surprised to find there were no guards outside. After all, where could he run?

'*There will be no more ships coming,*' the commissar, Clavel, had told him when they left the hangar last night. '*We are alone with what's coming.*'

He had said it quietly, so quietly even the preacher hadn't heard his words. Cross wanted no confidences from that pale-eyed killer, yet he sensed the man hadn't been lying. The only way out of this – whatever *this* was – would be to see it through. He had accepted that from the moment he'd stolen a pilgrim's robe and boarded the shuttle to Redemption.

*Redemption... It was that damned name, Ariken,* Cross thought. *I didn't trust it with your life. It always sounded like a trap.*

Lazaro was waiting for him in the chancel. Like the rest of the temple, it was assembled from prefabricated panels, but its priest had adorned it with the paraphernalia of the Imperial Creed: prayer books, cheap tapestries and mass-produced icons masquerading as relics. Cross hadn't expected such shabby trinkets on a shrine world.

'Better,' Lazaro said, appraising his shaven face and black uniform. 'You look like a soldier now.'

'Where are my friends?' Cross asked. The pilgrims had still been huddled in the hangar when he left with the officers last night.

'I told you they won't be harmed. We may appear coarse, but we are an Astra Militarum regiment, not pirates or renegades, Mister Cross.' Lazaro was keeping his voice low, doubtless wary of triggering another coughing fit. 'Tell me, what are they to you? I don't believe for a moment that you're one of them.'

Cross hesitated, aware he had no real answers, even for himself. 'They're decent people,' he said.

'Innocents,' Lazaro confirmed, 'wayward souls lost in the wilderness!' His voice snagged and he continued more quietly: 'Innocence proves nothing, but *courage*... now that is something else entirely.' He regarded Cross keenly. 'You risked your life for fools. Either you have a hero's heart or you're a fool yourself, Cross. One of those could be useful to the Black Flags.' The preacher picked up the heavy, saw-toothed weapon resting beside the altar and strapped it onto his back. 'Come, it's time you saw the Locker!'

They stepped out into the dusty light of dawn. Seen from outside, the temple was just another block among the throng of rugged, soot-smearred buildings hunkered behind the walls of the fort. Only the symbol of the Adeptus Ministorum carved into its gates distinguished it from the rest: a stylised pillar bearing a haloed skull.

'You're wondering why our house of worship is so frugal?' Lazaro said, catching Cross' expression.

'I assumed Redemption was a shrine world,' Cross admitted.

'Like no other, but there are no temples here on the Slab. The shrines lie beyond the great gorge, carved into the mountains that encircle this mesa like the points of a crown.' Lazaro paused, bristling. 'And the mountains are not ours.'

Cross squinted, trying to see past the walls surrounding the compound, but the leaden air was impenetrable beyond a few hundred paces.

'Will it brighten up later?' he asked.

Lazaro snorted. 'The storm swept away much of the filth, but this is as bright as

it gets on Redemption. And even this won't last long.'

Almost without conscious thought, Cross found himself assessing the fort's capabilities as they wove through the compound. The barracks, support structures and storage shacks were haphazardly arranged by the standards of his former regiment, but the outer wall was almost twenty feet high and built from sturdy rockrete slabs. Watchtowers buttressed it at regular intervals, all manned by Black Flags in riveted, faux-metal flak armour. The guards walking the walls were armed with lasguns, but Cross spotted heavier weapons on the towers. There was a sullen wariness about the men, as if they were caught between tedium and anxiety.

*They don't know why they're here,* Cross gauged, watching their haggard faces. For a professional soldier there was almost nothing worse.

The fort had only one gate, its massive twin portals forged from solid metal.

'Iron?' Cross asked.

'Steel,' Lazaro corrected.

'You don't have much armour,' Cross ventured, eyeing the ugly Hellhound tank facing the gates. Its hull was warped and crudely patched up. He had seen some light APCs, a few Sentinel walkers and the distinctive, brutal bulk of a Taurox outside the machine shop, but little else.

'We were grievously mauled in our prior deployment,' Lazaro conceded as they moved on. 'A frozen, xenos-tainted hell called Oblazt.' He almost spat the name.

'Our armour paid the highest price.'

'And your infantry?'

'Just under a thousand men remain. They will suffice.'

'To defend a planet?'

'To redeem the Koronatus Ring,' Lazaro said. 'The Ring *is* the planet.'

'I still don't understand what your mission is here.' *Or why you're showing me any of this,* Cross thought uneasily.

'Our orders were to fortify the Slab and hold it.'

'Against what?'

'Our enemy... remains in the shadows.' Lazaro's face was glistening with sweat and his breath was laboured. Though he hadn't slowed down, the tour was taxing him. 'It has been nearly seven months since we arrived.'

'Your last campaign...' Cross said carefully. 'It wasn't a victory, was it?'

'We were betrayed.' Lazaro's expression darkened. 'By a fellow Black Flag regiment.'

*This is just a garrison duty,* Cross realised. *You're too proud to admit it, but*

*there is no war here.*

‘I offer you a choice,’ the skull-faced woman said, finally breaking the baleful silence she had adopted since entering the hangar.

*Was that minutes or hours ago? Ariken wondered faintly. How long have we been locked up in this miserable place?*

Nothing seemed certain anymore. She had been tending to Ophele when a sudden stillness had fallen over the pilgrims and her friend’s glassy eyes had widened, focussing on something over Ariken’s shoulder.

‘I told you we were dead,’ the girl had whispered.

Ariken had understood the moment she saw the malevolent skeletal figure that had crept into the hangar while her back was turned. In those first moments she thought the apparition was the Harbinger incarnate, but instead of death it had brought only silence, standing motionless as it studied the fearful crowd. Even the guards had fallen still, as if unwilling to draw the thing’s eyeless gaze. It had taken all of Ariken’s courage to see through the deception to the flesh and blood woman behind it. The stranger was sheathed in midnight black armour enamelled with white bones corresponding to limbs and a ribcage. The pale skull tattooed across her dark face completed the illusion of an intact skeleton.

‘Your choice is simple,’ the armoured woman continued, her accent strange and guttural. ‘Serve under the Black Flag...’ She smiled, as if at some private joke. ‘Or go.’

Ariken waited for their shepherd to meet the challenge, for a challenge it surely was, but Bharlo didn’t stir. She suspected he hadn’t opened his eyes since the soldier had struck him.

*He’s broken,* she thought sadly, *and this time we don’t have Cross to speak up for us.*

‘*This isn’t a game, girl,*’ her lost friend seemed to admonish as Ariken stood up. It was the hardest thing she had ever done.

The fortress had swallowed the spaceport whole. Judging by the troops sparring around the landing pads, Cross guessed the open space doubled up as the regiment’s training grounds. A large, blunt-nosed ship sat on one of the pads. He sized it up furtively, trying not to let his interest show. It looked like a transport shuttle, probably intended for cargo, but he guessed it could handle passengers. He wasn’t much of a pilot, but he’d made it his business to learn the basics during the Tetraktys sky raids.

*I can get it into orbit,* he gauged. *It won’t go much further anyway. It’s just a*

*planetary shuttle so we'll need something else after that...*

But that was a problem for later. The ship could almost certainly serve as a piece in the escape puzzle he was trying to solve. He frowned as another detail on the field registered.

'You set us up, Lazaro,' he said coldly, 'like rats in a maze.'

The preacher sighed as he spotted the guide rope the pilgrims had followed through the storm last night. Rather than taking the most direct course to the hangar, it twisted back-and-forth around the field, at least tripling the distance.

'That was Omazet's idea,' Lazaro said. 'A test of sorts.'

'Then his idiocy almost got people killed.'

'*She*. Captain Omazet commands the Third Company. She is a very... *unique* officer.' Lazaro looked uncomfortable. 'She is overseeing the new recruits.'

Cross caught his arm. 'I want to see my friends.'

'I've already told you—'

'You've just told me their lives are in the hands of a sadist.'

'Their lives are in the hands of *the colonel*.' Lazaro's eyes blazed. 'As is yours.'

They glared at each other, then Cross sighed, weary of the game. 'What do you want from me?' he asked.

The preacher's fury faded as swiftly as it had come. Without it he looked almost frail.

'The Black Flags aren't short of fine fighters, Cross, but sharp minds...' Lazaro shook his head. 'We lost our best officers on Oblazt.'

'You want me to serve with you?' Cross couldn't hide his scepticism. 'A stranger?'

'You are not a man of faith are you, Cross?'

'I'm no heretic.'

'That isn't what I asked.' Lazaro held up an admonishing hand. 'You believe it's pure chance that brought you here – chance that put you on the same path as those blind fools and chance that forged your loyalty to them.' He grinned, recovering a measure of ferocity. 'I don't believe in chance, Cross. Come, we've kept the colonel waiting long enough!'

'You are a medicae,' the skull-faced woman said. It wasn't a question, yet Ariken knew she expected an answer.

'I...' Ariken swallowed, trying to revive her dry throat. The weakness angered her, driving her to face the apparition boldly. Up close, she could see the woman's empty eye sockets were only a contrivance of dark lenses. Everything

about her was engineered to instil terror, but none of it was real.

‘I know enough to tell you my people are exhausted,’ Ariken said. ‘We don’t want any part of your army, but we need help – water, food and medicine.’

‘That is not a choice I offer.’

‘Then you’re offering *nothing!*’ Ariken snapped, seizing the anger that had been building in her since this ordeal began. ‘You’re just playing with us.’

‘We look after our own,’ the woman said, ignoring the outburst. ‘Those who serve under the Black Flag shall receive succour.’

‘Then we’ll take our chances alone.’ Ariken turned her back on the hateful creature and saw her fellow pilgrims staring at her, wide-eyed.

*They won’t follow me, she realised, not one of them.*

‘I will offer you a third choice, *Ariken,*’ the woman whispered.

The fort’s keep was an octagonal block reinforced with iron plates that ran the length of its central tower, giving the impression of a vast, outlandish battle-tank. Its doors were set into a jutting gatehouse crowned with a gun emplacement, but it was the pair of creatures standing before the portals that drew Cross’ attention.

*Abhumans, he realised uneasily. Sanctioned mutants.*

The guards were muscle-bound giants with deep-set eyes and prognathous jaws that looked strong enough to chew through stone. Their thick torsos were girdled in white armour and their heads were encased in open-faced helms sprouting black crests. Both carried slab-like shields and massive mauls, yet despite their ferocity there was a gravitas about them that surprised Cross. They stood rigidly at attention, their expressions more stern than stupid, looking almost *noble*.

‘The Silent Paladins,’ Lazaro said proudly. ‘The colonel’s elite guard.’ His hands inscribed an aquila and the abhumans rapped their weapons against their shields in acknowledgement.

‘They are vowed to silence lest their coarse tongues offend the God-Emperor,’ Lazaro explained, his expression almost beatific. ‘They hail from Ctholl, the deepest of Vassago’s Sunken Worlds. It is an accursed, primal place, yet its people are stalwart guardians of the faith.’

The doors of the gatehouse slid open and a young soldier emerged. Instead of flak armour he wore an iron-trimmed leather waistcoat over his fatigues.

‘Shark Senka,’ Lazaro greeted him. The man looked at him blankly. ‘Lieutenant, are you well?’

‘Forgive me, preacher,’ Senka said, snapping back into the moment. ‘I’ve just delivered my report. Yesterday’s patrol... it was a bad business.’ He glanced at

Cross uncertainly. ‘Cridd and Benedek... they killed each other. I heard them arguing over the vox. A game of dice turned sour.’ He shook his head. ‘Forgive me, I must attend to my Sentinel.’

‘Throne damn them!’ Lazaro cursed as the young officer hurried away. ‘We’ve lost too many men to such idiocy!’

Cross wasn’t listening. Something about Senka’s story had troubled him.

*No, not his story, he realised. His eyes.*

That distant gaze hadn’t been filled with horror. Under his exhaustion, Lieutenant Senka had looked almost *happy*.

‘The soldiers have agreed to escort the congregation to our friends in the Spiral Dawn,’ Ariken told the pilgrims. She raised her hands to quiet their ragged cheers. ‘In return, Captain Omazet has asked that some of us remain. She wants volunteers.’ Ariken faltered, sensing the skull-faced woman’s gaze on her back. ‘One hundred volunteers.’

*I’m sorry, she thought, it was the best I could do.*

‘I’ve agreed to stay,’ Ariken continued, ‘but I’m not enough.’

Ophele struggled to rise, but she didn’t have the strength. Ariken quashed a surge of affection – even if the girl made it to her feet she wouldn’t last long among these black-uniformed monsters. Her only chance was with the Spiral Dawn.

‘The captain won’t accept the sick,’ she said harshly, ‘but if we can’t meet her quota we’re on our own.’

*She told me I won’t get one hundred, Ariken thought, watching the sea of pale faces. Please don’t prove the bitch right.*

Connant was the first to stand. He was an ex-PDF trooper, older and tougher than the others. Heike, the no-nonsense manufactorum forewoman was next, then dry, dull Jherem, an administratum scribe who’d barely spoken a word throughout their journey, then Jei, who was too young to be anything much yet... And so it went, until there were some thirty people standing. They weren’t nearly enough.

Instinctively Ariken glanced at Bharlo. To her surprise he was looking right back at her. He nodded gravely and got up. As always, others followed the shepherd and the number rose to forty, then sixty before Ariken lost count. By the time the flow of volunteers had dried up there were well over a hundred pilgrims standing.

‘You have your blood price,’ Ariken told the captain with bitter pride.

‘I will take only one hundred,’ Omazet replied. ‘Only the most worthy.’

‘Leave us, my friend,’ the colonel said.

Lazaro inclined his head and departed the conference room, leaving Cross alone with the regiment’s commander.

‘I am Kangre Talasca,’ the colonel said as he paced the chamber, ‘and you are Cross.’

He was dressed in a sable greatcoat woven with silver scales that shimmered as he moved. His olive skin was smooth and unblemished, but tautly strung across his shaven skull, like a freshly made-up corpse. He might have been anything between thirty and fifty years old.

‘Cross...’ Talasca mused. ‘Is it your real name?’

It was spoken lightly, almost in passing, yet Cross doubted there was anything light about the slender man prowling the room.

‘No,’ Cross replied, ‘it is not.’

‘Our given names are unimportant,’ Talasca approved. ‘It is only the ones we choose that have meaning.’

‘Then are you really Kangre Talasca?’

The colonel ceased his pacing and looked over his shoulder. He smiled, the expression somehow accentuating the cold silver of his eyes. They were elegant augmetic implants, far superior to the crude meat-work of Cross’ own.

‘If I am not Kangre Talasca, then who am I?’

‘You are the colonel,’ Cross ventured. ‘Your duty to your men defines you.’

The smile widened, though it still couldn’t warm the commander’s eyes.

‘A good answer,’ Talasca said, ‘but my duty runs much deeper than that. I am the Retriever, of faith and the faithful. I was not consigned to Redemption by chance. Do you understand?’

*Not by chance*, Cross thought. It was an echo of Lazaro’s argument. More than an echo. Whatever the colonel was – or thought he was – the preacher had made him so.

‘I asked if you understood?’ Talasca pressed.

‘I’m willing to learn.’

Moving with a predator’s grace, the colonel strode over to him. ‘Commissar Clavel told me you were an officer once. Are you a deserter now?’

Cross hesitated. The coiled violence in this man was palpable.

‘I don’t know,’ he confessed with soul-deep weariness. ‘I was wounded. Sick...’ Following an obscure instinct, he removed his gauntlet and raised his

left hand, suppressing a shudder at the corpse-claw reflected in Talasca's eyes. 'I thought I died, but perhaps *nothing* is chance... Retriever.'

*If I've misread him I'm a dead man.*

'I think the name you have chosen is a true one,' Talasca judged finally. Then he swung around and began to pace again. 'Tell me, what did you make of our armour?'

The test had only begun, yet Cross sensed he had passed the most crucial threshold.

After Captain Omazet had chosen her recruits they gathered at the gates to bid their fortunate brethren farewell. True to her promise, the captain had mustered a convoy of lightly armoured vehicles – she called them Chimeras – to carry the pilgrims to the Spire Caritas, where the Spiral Dawn would receive them.

'I want to stay, Ari,' Ophele wheezed, gripping Ariken's hands. Her eyes were raw and she was burning up. She had been too weak to walk so her comrades had lifted her into a transport.

'You'll be safe soon,' Ariken promised. She extricated herself gently and stepped away. 'They'll look after you in the Spires, Ophele.'

'No... no... That's not right... Wait–' The Chimera's hatch slammed shut, cutting off her frantic gaze.

'It's going to be okay,' Ariken whispered as the vehicle pulled away.

'I'm sorry, Ariken,' Bharlo said at her shoulder. His face was gaunt, as diminished as the man behind it.

'There was nothing you could do, shepherd,' she said.

'Perhaps, but a blind shepherd is no good to anyone.'

'What did she say to you?' Ariken asked. 'The captain?' After choosing her tithe, Omazet had taken Bharlo aside and spoken to him quietly.

'She saw the man I used to be, and advised me to find him again.'

'That man isn't someone you need anymore.'

'Perhaps.' Bharlo flashed his familiar, sad smile. Then he turned and climbed into the last vehicle. 'Good luck, my friend.'

*Why didn't she choose him?* Ariken wondered as the convoy departed. *If anyone among us can fight, it's him.*

Preacher Lazaro was waiting outside the conference room when Cross and Talasca finally emerged. Together they made their way to an austere dining room, where Commissar Clavel and three other officers joined them.

'Regrettably Captain Omazet won't be attending,' Clavel said. 'She sent word

that she has been detained with the recruits.’

Talasca nodded curtly. Cross sensed the captain’s absence was not unexpected.

‘The Witch Captain thinks herself too fine for the company of Throne-fearing soldiers,’ one of the officers remarked. His iron-grey hair and goatee were neatly trimmed, sharpening the lines of his hawkish face.

‘She hates all men equally, comrade,’ another of the officers said. He scowled, showing metal-shod teeth through a tangle of black beard. Piercings and tattoos fought for space on his shaven, bullet-like head. His fur-trimmed greatcoat bulged with his girth and he towered over the others.

‘Major Shaval Kazán, our infantry commander,’ Lazaro introduced the giant, then indicated the grey-haired officer, ‘and Major Markel Rostyk, commander of our armoured corps.’

‘Quezada,’ the third officer said as the preacher turned to him. ‘Captain, the Gallows Dancers.’

‘The regiment’s veteran platoon,’ Lazaro explained. ‘Quite exceptional men and women.’

‘By the Emperor’s Grace,’ Quezada acknowledged. He was older than the others and wore a plain uniform distinguished only by a scarlet sash. His white hair was swept back from his seamed face and tied into a high topknot. While Rostyk and Kazán glowered at Cross, Quezada was merely watchful.

‘Captain Cross will be serving with the Eighth in a support capacity,’ Commissar Clavel said. ‘I expect you to offer him every assistance, gentlemen.’

‘Has he sworn the oath?’ Major Rostyk demanded.

‘I have, sir,’ Cross said. He raised his right hand, revealing the sigil Colonel Talasca had inscribed upon his palm with needle and ink. ‘I stand with you under the Black Flag.’

*‘It is the Vassago way, Cross,’ the colonel had told him. ‘Black Flag regiments are raised from the five Sunken Worlds of Vassago – Verzante, Lethe, Szilar, Cantico and Ctholl – but we always draw new blood from outsiders – the survivors of broken armies, warriors without hope or purpose, sometimes even renegades seeking a second chance. All are reborn beneath the Black Flag of Vassago.’*

‘It is a strange mark,’ Rostyk said, scowling at the tattoo on Cross’ palm. It was a stylised figure ‘8’ with a watchful eye at its centre.

‘But true to the man,’ Quezada judged.

At a gesture from the colonel the company sat. Cross had expected the officers to quiz him about his past, but they ate in near silence, as if questions would

transgress some tacit code of conduct.

*Perhaps the mark is enough for them,* Cross thought.

Talasca's table was as severe as the man himself. The meal consisted of water and standard rations spooned onto tin plates, but none of the officers protested and Cross' respect for the Black Flags rose a notch. This regiment might be eccentric, but its officers didn't exploit the privileges of rank – at least not in the presence of their colonel.

*And there's a shadow hanging over them all,* he sensed as they ate. *Oblazt left a deep wound, perhaps even a mortal one.* With a rush of shame he thought of his own lost regiment. *Am I the last of them?*

The three officers departed shortly after the meal and Cross realised the colonel hadn't spoken a word during the gathering. Talasca continued to brood after they were gone. Cross glanced at Lazaro and Clavel, but neither would meet his gaze.

'What did you make of them, Cross?' Talasca asked abruptly.

'Rostyk isn't as clever as he thinks he is,' Cross said, unsure if this was another test, 'but Kazán's sharper than he pretends to be. Quezada... I have no idea about Quezada.'

'I trust none of them,' Talasca declared. 'Other than the men in this room and my Silent Paladins, I trust no one.'

*Mutiny?* Cross wondered. It wasn't uncommon among demoralised regiments, especially those that had lost faith in their commanding officer.

'Tomorrow I shall meet with the Gyre Magus of the Spiral Dawn,' Talasca continued, changing the subject. 'He will protest our detention of the pilgrims.'

'I can't say I'm surprised. You've run roughshod over a sect of the Imperial Creed,' Cross said.

'You will attend,' Talasca told him, 'and observe.' He glanced at his advisors and an unspoken confirmation seemed to pass between them. 'But first there is something you must see.'

Night had fallen when they left the keep. The colonel led the small party across the compound in silence. Cross heard muffled coughing as they approached the infirmary, but the party veered off, heading for a smaller outbuilding. One of the Silent Paladins stood outside its heavy door.

'You'll need this,' Lazaro said, handing Cross a rebreather. 'They're standard issue on Redemption – for the blackouts – but you'll want it now.'

The others were already strapping on their masks so Cross followed suit, fumbling with the unfamiliar mechanism.

‘Throne deliver us from darkness,’ Lazaro muttered as they entered the outbuilding.

Cross faltered. Even through his mask the foetor of corruption in the enclosed space was almost overpowering.

‘I removed the body from storage this morning,’ Clavel said, indicating a tarpaulin-covered shape lying on a gurney at the far side of the room. ‘It’s almost three months old, but I believe it will suffice.’

*Suffice for what?* Cross wondered as he followed the others to the gurney.

‘Show him,’ Talasca ordered.

Clavel removed the tarpaulin in measured steps, trying not to damage the disintegrating corpse beneath. In places the putrefying flesh had stuck to the material and he had to peel it back slowly, yet he seemed unperturbed by the macabre work.

‘It was found on a ledge just over the Rim,’ Clavel said as the naked cadaver was revealed. ‘Its neck was broken. We think it fell during a blackout.’

Fighting his revulsion, Cross forced himself to study the thing on the gurney. It was the general size and shape of a large man, but its frame was distended by bundles of fibrous muscles at the joints and neck. Its left leg was unremarkable, but the right terminated in a reverse-jointed, barbed talon. The left arm looked normal, but the right was sheathed in glistening blue chitin from the elbow down. Instead of a hand there was a bloated, four-fingered claw tipped with vicious bone spikes. The *third* arm was even worse. Fighting for space with the mundane left, it flared out into a serrated, scissoring hook that looked like it could tear through armour.

But it was the thing’s face that made Cross’ gorge rise.

Its vivid blue eyes were still intact in the sunken ruin of their sockets. They looked human, but a spiny ridge bisected them, running from the back of its elongated skull to the bridge of a flat, bestial snout. The lower half of its face was a nest of thorn-tipped tendrils that dangled limply over the edge of the gurney, dripping black ichor.

‘It was only by the Emperor’s Grace that we found it,’ the preacher said, his voice heavy with loathing. He took something from a pouch on his belt and handed it to Cross. ‘The beast was wearing this.’

It was a pendant, carved from obsidian and threaded with sinewy cord. The symbol it bore was a jagged spiral – a savage variant of the icon sported by the pilgrims.

‘Have you reported this?’ Cross asked, thinking of Ariken.

‘As per standard protocol,’ Clavel confirmed. ‘We have received no answer. As I said, that was almost three months ago.’ He paused, glancing at Talasca, who nodded. ‘There’s something else,’ he continued. ‘One of the Sentinel pilots brought me a report this morning...’

‘Senka?’ Lazaro said. ‘The fools who killed each other over dice?’

‘That is the story I instructed Senka to tell,’ Clavel said. ‘The guards killed each other, yes, but it wasn’t over dice. We believe they were... influenced. Before they died they wrote something on the wall in their own blood. We believe it was intended as a warning... or a challenge perhaps.’

‘*Tizheruk*,’ Talasca said. His silver eyes glittered behind his mask.

‘I don’t understand...’ Cross said. The word was like a spike in his mind and his nausea rose with renewed vigour. Instinctively he stepped away from the tainted corpse.

‘The name dates back to the darkest age of the Sunken Worlds, Cross,’ Lazaro said hoarsely. ‘It predates the coming of the Imperium and our salvation. It means Night Weavers, the Stealers of Souls... daemons.’

## CHAPTER FOUR

Kazimyr Senka loathed Hope. The planet's single, dismal city was an industrial stain on the Slab, dying, but not quite dead. It was a muddle of crooked tenements and narrow avenues that could quickly become a maze for the unwary. In the early days of the occupation, before Command had clamped down on things, several troopers had got themselves lost in its knotted streets.

*They never found Blyre*, Senka recalled as the mono-train approached the city. Through the dirty windows of his carriage Hope looked like something that had been broken at birth and reassembled over and over again, becoming more tangled with every iteration. It wasn't a place he wanted to be after dark, but he'd given the Spiral priestess his word.

*And I need to see her again*, he admitted.

The ancient mono-train creaked and shuddered as it slithered along the corroded rail. It had been built to ferry promethium to the spaceport at the mesa's southern reach, but these days it also carried supplies to the Locker or off-duty troopers to the city's Green Zone, the only district that had been approved for 'recreational activities'.

A black wave of refineries and storage depots rushed past Senka's window as the train entered the city's outskirts. Gloomily he imagined the throng of human grubs labouring in the plants as if nothing had changed. The Slab's promethium industry had been ailing long before the Black Flags' arrival, but trade had dried up completely after they'd blockaded the spaceport. Regardless, barrels of promethium had continued to pile up outside the Locker's walls every week, as if the citizens of Hope had no other purpose.

*Which is probably close to the truth*, Senka guessed.

For a man of Lethe, the most regimented of the Sunken Worlds, such apathy was unthinkable. Until recently he'd felt nothing but contempt for the grubs who

wasted their lives here. Maybe that was why he'd been so ready to destroy their pitiful, spiral-branded temples. He hadn't thought it through, not even after the fourth shrine and the guilt its desecration had brought.

*I never really thought anything through, he admitted, not until she opened my eyes...*

'Wake up, Shark,' a voice said, rousing him from his introspection. A burly Guardsman was regarding him with disconcertingly skewed eyes. His heavy greatcoat bore a sergeant's stripes. 'We're in the Green.'

Senka realised the train had pulled into the terminal of the approved district and his fellow passengers, a band of off-duty infantrymen, were heading for the doors. Like most of the common troopers, they were Szilars – coarse, pragmatic men with more taste for drink than protocol.

'Go ahead,' Senka said. He was damned if he'd waste his breath concocting a cover story for a thug who'd probably be senseless within the hour.

The Szilar regarded him for a moment, his misaligned gaze impossible to read. Then the fingers of his left hand inscribed something in the air, keeping the motions hidden from his comrades. Before Senka could question him he was gone, following the others onto the platform.

His fingers had described a spiral.

*You are not the first of your kind to embrace the Unfolding, the priestess had told him. Truth is a potent weapon, Kazimyr.*

Night fell as the mono-train carried Senka deeper into Hope's tangle. He knew there would be little respite from the darkness until another storm cleared the air. Despite the lights lining the track the city's gloom was more oppressive than the darkness of the mesa.

*More hungry...*

Two stops later a group of grubs shuffled onto the carriage. Their gaunt, vacant faces were as grey as their filthy coveralls. They slumped onto the benches and sat in silence, staring into nothingness. Either they were too tired for camaraderie or they had forgotten what it was. None of them paid any heed to the stranger in their midst. In the flickering light of the carriage they looked like corpses on their final journey to the Black Trench that claimed everyone in the end.

*If it took them now would they even notice, let alone care?* Senka wondered.

Some instinct made him turn and he saw another pair of grubs sitting at the rear of the carriage. They wore the tough, rubberised jumpsuits and cowls of the magma scrapers who eked out an existence at the base of the Spires. Despite their hunched postures they were much bigger than their fellow workers, their

long arms bulging with muscles. He couldn't shake the feeling that their jutting jaws were filled with sharp teeth – or that their shadowed eyes were watching him.

*What am I doing here?* Senka thought. But he already knew the answer.

As agreed, the priestess was waiting for him on the far side of the city. He held his breath as she entered the carriage, her robes seeming to glide above the ground like a ghost's mantle. Neither dirt nor darkness could dull their azure lustre, but their glamor paled beside her strange beauty when she threw back her hood. The grubs had departed somewhere along the way so he was alone with her, but that would have been true even in a crowd, for his world had narrowed to the sapphire glimmer of her eyes. They looked impossibly bright in the dreary carriage.

*Like a serpent's eyes*, a distant, drowning part of him shrieked. Suddenly he remembered the terrible thing she had asked of him last night. The thing he had written in a dead man's blood.

*Tizheruk.*

'Kazimyr Senka,' Xithauli murmured, tenderly smothering his screaming shadow. 'You haven't failed me.' She brushed his cheek and he shuddered at the delicate touch of her long, sharp nails. He tried to rise, but she pressed him back into his seat. 'Be still, we have some way to travel yet, my love.'

*My love...* Senka's heart soared like a lovesick youth's at her words, but he knew it was neither sickness nor youth, nor simply banal lust that energised him. He couldn't deny that lust was a *part* of it, but it was eclipsed by the resplendent *mystery* of her.

*Finally, I'll understand.* Even now, he couldn't quite grasp the *questions* he yearned to answer, for they slipped away as he tried to frame them, but that only drew him deeper into their orbit. *Her orbit.*

*'It is the answers that frame the questions, Kazimyr,'* Xithauli advised.

The old Senka would have scoffed at such talk, but now her words filled him with awe, not least because she had spoken directly to his mind, as she had done the night before. The priestess smiled and sat opposite him.

'Where are we going?' he whispered as the train left the city and picked up speed. His voice couldn't carry above the noise, but he knew that didn't matter.

*'Veritas',* she answered. *'This track crosses the gorge to the Spire of Truth.'*

Veritas? It was the highest of the Seven Spires and the foremost enclave of the Spiral Dawn. *Truth...* A shard of memory lanced Senka and he glimpsed a hulking abomination following the priestess into the blackout.

‘What was it?’ Senka hissed, fighting to see clearly. ‘Last night... the thing with you... the other...’

‘There was no *other*, my love,’ she soothed. ‘Only you and I.’ She smiled and he was lost. ‘I will show you such wonders, Kazimyr Senka.’

The priests of the Spiral Dawn called him the Chrysaor. He was less than thirty years old, yet he was revered as a saint and had been since birth, for the blood-deep wisdom of the Spiral had moulded him into a champion that stood outside the Five Paradigms of Form that shaped most of its children. Like the cult magi, he was *born* to command, but while they ruled through subterfuge, his instincts lay in war. There had been no conflict on Redemption since the first days of the Spiral Father so the Chrysaor had waited without rancour, honing his mind and body for the day when he would lead his brethren to embrace new worlds. Patience ran deep in the children of the Spiral, but the arrival of the heretics had stirred something urgent in him – a cold wrath that drove him to *know his enemy*.

The Chrysaor’s quest for knowledge often drew him to the mesa and the city, sometimes even to the walls of the heretics’ bastion, where he would observe, learn and plan for the reckoning he hungered for. He had watched from the shadows as the heretics’ sins grew from petty desecration to outrage. When they had destroyed the cult’s temples across the Slab, he had almost succumbed to the urge for retribution, but some subtle, vital line had not yet been crossed.

Tonight his quest had led him back to the city.

He crept from shadow to shadow, keeping close to the walls as he followed three soldiers through the streets. The men had strayed beyond the usual haunts of their kind, perhaps seeking darker sport to sate their passions. He had recognised their leader from the temple burnings – a scar-faced savage they called Hajnal – and latched onto them as they wandered away from the sullen bars of the Green Zone.

‘We’re going in circles,’ one of the men grumbled.

‘Only in the eyes of a blind man,’ Hajnal snarled.

‘There’s nothing past the Green anyways.’

The Chrysaor hung back as the men squabbled. It looked like they might even start fighting. The outsiders’ capacity for stupidity never failed to surprise him—

*Where was the third man?*

An arm wrapped itself around his throat and a blade pressed under his chin. ‘Easy now, grub,’ someone whispered behind him. ‘See, the dark makes me twitchy. You move and I might jump.’ The speaker raised his voice. ‘I got him,

comrades!’

Hajnal and the other man broke off their argument immediately and sauntered over to the alley where the Chrysaor had been hiding. The third soldier must have sneaked round while he was distracted by the fake squabble.

*I underestimated them, the Chrysaor realised, both their cunning and their shadow-craft. My contempt for their kind blinded me.* He felt no shame at the error, but he would not repeat it.

‘Good work, Maklar,’ Hajnal said to the knifeman. He glared at the prisoner, trying to see beneath his hood. ‘Why you been following us, grub?’

‘You are mistaken.’

‘Is that right?’ All traces of Hajnal’s brash stupidity were gone now, revealing the stone-cold killer beneath. There was an aquila tattooed between his eyes, another hanging from a chain round his neck. Both were as crude as the zealot himself.

‘I am unarmed,’ the Chrysaor said, raising his hands slowly.

‘I wouldn’t say that, grub,’ Hajnal growled, eyeing his barbed fingernails. ‘Let’s take a look at you. Man with nails like that must have a face worth seeing.’ He reached forward and threw aside the captive’s hood. ‘What...’

The Chrysaor felt a thrill of release at the degenerate’s shocked expression. It was the first time an outsider had gazed upon his blessed visage.

‘Veritas!’ he hissed, spitting a gob of venom into Hajnal’s face. In the same instant his third arm whipped out from beneath his robe, revealing a chitin-sheathed claw tipped with dagger-like talons. The claw ripped through the knifeman’s arm below the elbow and he fell back, shrieking as his stump gushed blood. The third soldier moved with unexpected speed, drawing his laspistol and firing two-handed in one smooth motion, but the cultist spun aside and the bolts hit the injured man behind him square in the chest. The Chrysaor grabbed the corpse before it fell and thrust it towards his attacker. Though the gunman leapt aside, the distraction bought the cultist enough time to close in.

*For the dead and the defiled,* he thought as he grabbed the man’s hands in his own and squeezed, crushing the fragile fingers and the gun they held into a mangled ruin. As the soldier began to scream the Chrysaor lashed out with his rending claw and tore off his face.

‘Hee... ra... tak...’ a voice gurgled behind him.

The Chrysaor threw aside the faceless corpse and turned to inspect Hajnal. The zealot was slumped against a wall, his body wracked by violent spasms as the venom turned his own blood against him. His face had swollen into a single

shapeless bruise, haemorrhaging ichor as he choked. The chain of his pendant had snapped under the pressure of his bloated throat.

‘Truth is beauty,’ the Chrysaor decreed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Whenever Vyrunas ascended from the winding subterranean womb of the Mandira Veritas he felt a disconnection so profound he had to force himself to take the last few steps. The living god of the Spiral Dawn dwelt in the Gyre Sanctum below, where He had long ago retreated to meditate upon the Unfolding Path. All the Spiral Kindred were bonded by blood and spirit to their star-spawned progenitor, but Vyrunas' affinity ran deeper, for he had served as the cult's magus for over a century, weaving an invisible, but unbreakable, web of influence over the planet in his god's name.

*I am old,* Vyrunas reflected dispassionately as he climbed, *nearly as old as the Spiral Dawn itself.*

His progenitor's artifice had preserved a measure of his vitality, but both his mind and body were finally failing, exhausted by the rigours of his duty. Unlike the Spiral Father, Vyrunas was a hybrid creature, his exalted blood mingled with that of Redemption's mundane populace. For all his psychic puissance, he was not immortal.

'As within, so without,' he intoned. Above him the golden whorls of the Sleepless Gate spun open, revealing the soaring dome of the temple. In accordance with tradition he closed his eyes as he stepped out of the dark well and into the cavernous amphitheatre beyond. The Mandira Veritas was the sect's foremost temple, converted from an older, heathen structure in the early decades of the Spiral Father's reign. Every edge had been smoothed to a soft, organic curve, every surface polished to a dark mirror.

*Our temple reflects the soul, not the body,* Vyrunas thought as the gate whirled closed at his feet. The portal was set into the summit of a vast obsidian cone that rose from the amphitheatre in a corkscrew of ramps, like a coiled snake. The apex was precisely midway between the dome's oculus and the sanctum of the

Spiral Father.

‘Our lord is troubled,’ Vyrunas told the priestess who awaited him. She acknowledged this with a shallow bow. Doubtless she had sensed the Spiral Father’s disquiet. Like himself, she was a hybrid of the Fourth Paradigm, almost indistinguishable from the outsiders they shared their world with. More importantly she was a fellow magus, one of only three among Redemption’s star-touched kindred.

‘How long was I gone, Xithauli?’ Vyrunas asked.

‘Three days, Gyre Magus.’

*Three*, Vyrunas echoed. Each time he descended to commune with his god his inner voyage grew longer. The process had begun almost a year ago, but it was accelerating. Very soon now the tidal pull of the Spiral Father’s dreams would swallow Vyrunas’ ailing mind. The prospect did not sadden him, for it was the natural order of things, but the timing was unfortunate.

‘You will be Gyre Magus soon, Xithauli,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ his heir replied without emotion.

*She is a youthful, female incarnation of myself*, Vyrunas judged.

The magi shared the same direct bloodline, both descended from the esteemed Saint Etelka. They both radiated a glacial majesty, but in Xithauli it was amplified by an ethereal beauty that often left outsiders floundering. Her silken robes splayed up into a ribbed cowl around her head and silver bangles encircled her neck, lending it an elongated, almost serpentine aspect. In common with all the kindred she was completely hairless and her complexion was tinged a delicate violet. Outsiders mistook this colouration for make-up, assuming it was a contrivance to match her cobalt-stained lips and kohl-framed eyes. Likewise, the bony ridge running from her scalp to the bridge of her nose was decorated with crushed amethysts, creating the illusion of an ornament.

‘Has the heretic commander answered my summons?’ Vyrunas asked. He could have plucked the answer from his disciple’s mind, but that would have been a discourtesy.

‘He awaits you at the bridge, Gyre Magus,’ Xithauli replied. ‘He would come no further.’ She hesitated. ‘I tasted his thoughts again.’

‘That was unwise.’

‘The choice was not mine.’ Xithauli’s face twisted with revulsion. ‘His mind reeks with spite, like a dark beacon. Being near him is like being buried alive with a corpse.’

‘He is lost in his own darkness. The outsiders are often prey to such traps.’

‘There was another with him,’ Xithauli said. ‘His mind was closed to me.’

‘The pale-eyed one?’ Vyrunas asked. ‘The commissar?’

‘No, this one is new. I think the scars in him run even deeper.’

*It looks like a frozen shard of space,* Cross mused, gazing at the obsidian splinter looming above him. The mountain was speckled with crimson lights that twinkled like stars against its dark mass. Preacher Lazaro had explained that they were ritual fires, each one marking a shrine along the path that wound up the mountainside.

‘There must be over a hundred of them,’ Cross breathed, awed despite his doubts.

‘One-hundred-and-forty-four,’ Lazaro said, ‘and this is only one of the Seven Spires.’

They stood at the base of the mountain, waiting among the circle of standing stones that formed the first shrine along the Path of Truth. It lay just beyond the lip of the suspension bridge that connected Spire Veritas to the Slab. The Imperial delegation had crossed the gorge in a convoy of Chimeras supported by Sentinels, travelling in parallel with the monorail running through the centre of the bridge.

To Cross’ mind the bridge was a monument in itself. Its towering stone railings were carved into a chain of open hands inscribed with the watchful eye of Truth. Lazaro had told him that every bridge was unique, though two had fallen into ruin for they led to abandoned Spires: Castitas, home of the shunned Adepta Sororitas abbey, and Vigilans, which had become an active volcano centuries ago.

*‘Veritas is the highest spire,’* Lazaro had said, *‘but I believe the roots of Vigilans run deepest.’*

After crossing the bridge, the vehicles had encircled the shrine of standing stones and several squads had disembarked. Cross didn’t know if the colonel was being cautious or making a show of strength, but after the decomposing abomination he had seen yesterday he was glad of the numbers. The shrine’s white-robed wardens had been evicted curtly, but they had acceded without protest, neither hostile nor cowed by the invaders. Cross had spotted no obvious signs of mutation among them; indeed they were markedly more comely than the scruffy Slab dwellers he’d seen labouring outside the fort.

‘It’s hard to believe...’ he began uncertainly.

‘That such folk would harbour monsters?’ Lazaro suggested. ‘I’ve fought more

heretics than I care to remember, Cross. Some have been deranged fanatics, others devious beyond measure, but there was always something in their eyes that gave them away – an arrogance.’ He shook his head. ‘The Unfolded don’t have it.’

‘You think they’re innocent?’ Cross was surprised.

‘I don’t know what they are,’ Lazaro said. ‘Their Throne-damned Spiral makes my skin crawl, but they claim it’s the God-Emperor’s work. Besides, someone wiser than I sanctioned their sect.’ He sighed. ‘We need to be certain they’re the real enemy before we move against them.’

‘I’ve misjudged you, preacher. I assumed Clavel was the steady hand here.’

‘Clavel? He’s been pushing for war with the Unfolded since he arrived.’

‘He wasn’t with you from the start?’ Cross glanced round and saw the commissar talking to Talasca by the shrine’s hearthstone.

‘Our old commissar was lost on Oblazt. Clavel turned up a few months ago.’ Lazaro frowned. ‘The colonel has taken to him.’

There was a buzzing drone from above and Cross saw a delicate rotor-bladed craft descending from the mountain. It flitted skilfully through the treacherous air currents like a winged insect, the whipped-air chattering of its blades becoming louder as it came in to land just beyond the shrine.

‘It’s the Gyre Magus,’ Lazaro said. ‘We should join the colonel.’

The Spiral Dawn’s ambassador had come alone and unarmed save for a silver staff tipped with an obsidian helix. As he approached, Cross was struck by the resemblance between this man and the bewitching priestess who had first met them at the bridge. Though the ambassador was much older he had the same sharp cheekbones and piercing blue eyes, the same graceful walk and regal bearing. Were they father and daughter?

‘Colonel Talasca,’ the ambassador said, ‘I am honoured that you hold my safety in such high regard that you have attended me with an army.’ Like his presumed daughter, he spoke in a flowing, liquid lilt, almost chanting his words.

‘This planet is under the protection of the Astra Militarum, Magus Vyrunas,’ Talasca answered coolly. ‘As is the Spiral Dawn.’

‘Indeed, we are all servants of the God-Emperor’s unfolding design, colonel,’ Vyrunas acknowledged.

‘You know Preacher Lazaro and Commissar Clavel,’ Talasca said, ‘but may I introduce Captain Cross.’

As the ambassador’s gaze fell upon him, Cross felt something sweep delicately

across his mind, like a phantom breath. He would have dismissed it were it not for a slight hardening of Vyrunas' expression.

*He tried to look inside me...*

'The Spiral embraces all,' Vyrunas said with a gentleness his eyes denied. 'May you find your truth on Redemption, Captain Cross.'

'I trust the pilgrims reached you safely, Gyre Magus?' Lazaro asked.

'Not *all* of them, preacher.'

'We offered them shelter during the blackout,' Clavel said. 'In return, some offered their services to the Astra Militarum.'

'They found their true calling,' the colonel added, flashing his dead smile.

'It would be regrettable if any harm befell them,' the magus said. 'And what of the other matter?'

'The Slab shrines?' Talasca shook his head. 'Nothing so far, but I assure you we are taking their desecration seriously.'

'Eleven people were butchered in the last attack, colonel,' Vyrunas pressed. 'You say you are here to protect us, yet the violations began with your arrival.'

Talasca's smile vanished. 'I will not stand by while you—'

'I am conducting the investigation personally, Gyre Magus,' Clavel interjected. 'If any of our troops are found responsible they will be disciplined.'

'There is another matter,' Talasca said, his eyes glittering. 'Three of my men failed to return from Hope yesterday.'

After that the duel began in earnest. Cross watched Vyrunas closely as they sparred. The ambassador's concern for the pilgrims appeared genuine, passionate even, yet there was an elusive detachment about his manner – almost as if something was missing.

*Does he really feel anything?* Cross found himself thinking.

The parley ended amicably, with assertions of respect and support from both sides, but to anyone with wits it was all a sham.

'Your thoughts, captain?' Talasca asked when the magus had departed.

Cross had been expecting the question. It was why he was here, possibly even why he was still alive.

'I don't know what he is or what his Spiral means,' Cross answered. That was true, but it didn't matter, for it was superseded by a greater truth, one he grasped without recourse to facts or even reason. It was rooted in the *instincts* that had kept him alive against all the odds.

'You believe Vyrunas is dangerous,' Talasca finished for him.

Cross looked at Lazaro and Clavel. One was cautious, perhaps even noble,

while the other wanted a war...

*Do I want to be the man who tips the scales?*

He thought of Ariken and the other pilgrims who had been lured here. Yes, that was the right word. The Black Flags had never been the planet's real trap.

'I think he's more than dangerous,' Cross said. 'I think he's lethal.'

Xithauli was waiting beside the spire-copter when the ambassador returned from the meeting.

'Will they release the other pilgrims?' the disciple asked.

'No,' Vyrunas replied, 'they seek to provoke us. They covet the Spires.'

'Then let them come!' Xithauli said, showing a flash of sharp teeth.

'Do you want war?'

'I seek only to serve the Unfolding, Gyre Magus,' Xithauli answered. She seemed confused by the question.

*It was an unnatural question,* Vyrunas admitted. The kindred had always been unified in their purpose. Indeed it was almost inconceivable for them to be otherwise, but these were unsettled times. The intruders had made them so. Naturally the cult had reached out to the soldiers and secured some converts, but there was a deep-rooted hostility about the regiment that had proved remarkably resistant to the Spiral Gospel. Unravelling so many twisted souls could require years of patient work.

*And I don't have years,* Vyrunas understood, thinking of the Chrysaor. He was still a creature of potential rather than true power, but Vyrunas could feel his *imminence* in the growing aggression of the kindred. The Chrysaor had killed again recently and three dead Guardsmen would be difficult to disguise as accidents.

*If I don't act soon his rise is inevitable,* Vyrunas realised, *and that would endanger everything we have built here.*

There was no rivalry between the Gyre Magus and the Chrysaor, for they were two facets of one purpose, yet their natures were obliquely contradictory. Where Vyrunas saw disorder, the Chrysaor foresaw war. One wove with shadows, the other with fire. Events alone would determine which aspect of the Spiral was in the ascendant. For now shadows prevailed, but perhaps that was no longer enough...

*The outsiders have left me no choice,* Vyrunas decided. *I have held back too long already.*

'Did you find a fitting nightmare among the Misborn of Spire Castitas?' he

asked. The Misborn were blessed aberrations, their bodies deviating wildly from the Five Holy Paradigms. They were enormously strong, but also feral, so Vyrunas had kept them hidden in the old Sororitas abbey for the day when the cult would have need of them.

‘I have found a champion like no other, Gyre Magus,’ Xithauli said. ‘It has been touched by the Dark Beneath the Spires.’ She extended her hands, palms open. ‘We shall give the heretics their *Tizheruk*.’

It disturbed Vyrunas to hear that twisted word on his disciple’s lips. Such poison had no place in the Unfolding, but Xithauli was strong enough to withstand its allure. Indeed, she had studied the dark tomes the cult had found in the bowels of Spire Veritas without coming to harm. The tranquillity of the kindred made them impervious to such corruption. It was surely the truest measure of their bloodline’s superiority.

‘Then let it be done,’ Vyrunas decreed. ‘We will turn our enemies’ fears against them.’

Ariken’s first day in the Astra Militarum had been a study in misery. She and her fellow recruits had been issued with fatigues, padded brown jackets and rebreathers, then lined up to receive the regimental mark from the captain herself. The skull-faced woman had stared into each recruit’s eyes and whispered something before inscribing the icon onto the palm of their right hand. Omazet had worked swiftly and skilfully with her needle, but she had spared them no pain.

After receiving ‘the Black Mark’, the recruits had been placed under the auspices of a compact, softly spoken madman called Nyulaszi. He had informed them, almost cordially, that he was their Shank Sergeant and incidentally their worst nightmare – then proceeded to make good on his word, subjecting them to a string of exercises, tests and humiliations that would doubtless continue for weeks or even months.

*Driftwood*, Nyulaszi had christened them. Ariken didn’t know if it was a broad term for all Black Flag recruits or something he had coined especially for the pilgrims, but she couldn’t deny it fitted. They were lost souls going nowhere.

*The needle alone would have finished you, Ophele*, Ariken thought as she studied the mark on her palm. Each of the recruits had received a slightly different one, as if the captain had been guided by some obscure whim or insight. In Ariken’s case the core symbol ‘8’ had been rendered as an angular helix with unfolded wings, transforming it into the symbol of healing.

*I like it*, she admitted reluctantly.

She was sitting on the steps of the shabby billet assigned to the recruits. The cold and the darkness outside were better than the needful stares of her comrades.

‘So you’re a soldier now,’ a familiar voice said. Ariken looked up and saw someone standing at the foot of the steps.

‘I wouldn’t have recognised you, ghost,’ she said, ‘except for...’ She tapped her right eye, indicating his patch.

‘I share the feeling.’ Cross rubbed his shaven chin ruefully. ‘It seemed like a good idea at the time...’

‘I’m glad they didn’t shoot you.’

‘I think they came close.’

She shook her head. ‘Well, you were right about Redemption.’

‘I wish I’d been wrong, Ariken.’

‘At least Ophele made it,’ she said, ‘and most of the others. That’s something.’

He looked uncomfortable.

‘Cross, what aren’t you telling me?’

He held up a hand. ‘Please, I don’t have much time, Ariken. They don’t really trust me. Not yet.’ He looked at her intently. ‘I came to tell you to be ready.’

‘For what?’ she asked cautiously.

‘For when I find a way out.’ He was rubbing his gloved hand. ‘Until then stay watchful and trust nobody. Can you do that?’

She bit down on the questions that came flooding up. ‘Yes.’

‘You’ll make a fine soldier, Ariken Skarth.’ He turned to go, then hesitated. ‘One more thing – learn to fight.’

She showed him her inked palm and smiled thinly. ‘I’m a Black Flag now, remember?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I don’t think you’ll ever be that.’

# PART TWO

## *Redemption in Blood*

*'Cloak thyself in signs and wonders so that you may walk beside the Outsider as his saviour; but if he should raise his hand against you then cast aside the veil of kindness and become his terror. Let loose his own darkness upon him, for the Outsider's fears are many and beyond endurance.'*

The Apotheosis of the Spiral Wurm

## CHAPTER SIX

*'You are marked for divine wrath, child,'* the priestess had sung. *'Follow in my footsteps and unfold yourself into the Sacred Spiral.'*

The Misborn had not understood her words, for its mind was as malformed as its body, but the *feelings* she had imparted alongside the words had blazed with a clarity it had never known before: it had been *chosen* – singled out to become a terror upon those who threatened its kindred.

Until the priestess had come for it the Misborn had been a vague shadow creature, bound by blood to its brothers, yet also a thing apart from them. After its tortured birth it had been cast into a dark maze where it had fought with others like itself, the strong culling the weak, as their instincts demanded. The Misborn understood dimly that its kind were aberrations to the natural cycle of the Spiral, yet they were also blessed – and none more so than itself, for it had been chosen for vengeance.

The priestess had led her charge out of the maze and guided it across the crumbling bridge beyond, revealing the secret paths only the cult's initiates knew. On the far side of the abyss the Misborn had strayed, driven into a rampage by the stench of the creatures hiding in a hard shell overlooking the bridge. It had hammered at their lair until its mistress had reined in its rage and destroyed their shared enemy with gentle words where strength had failed. That was when it learned that she was called *Zee-thaali*.

For many days and many nights thereafter, the Misborn's saviour had prayed with it in her temple, weaving new patterns into its body and soul. *Zee-thaali* had incised its flesh with spirals and darker, stranger symbols that twisted its muscles into new shapes, granting them a flexibility that matched their strength. Its mind had also quickened, rising from dull savagery into predatory cunning. Finally it was ready to receive its name.

‘Tizheruk,’ Zee-thaali decreed, imprinting the word upon the Misborn’s primal spirit, ‘that is your name and nature now, child.’

*Tizheruk...* the Reborn echoed, embracing the thorny word.

‘Terror runs deeper than simple killing,’ the Priestess continued, ‘you must become a nightmare of blood and shadow to the outsiders.’

Then the acolytes of the Spiral brought a metal cylinder that stank of dead fire and Tizheruk’s saviour instructed it to get inside. Tizheruk had to dislocate its limbs and contort its muscles to squeeze its bulk into the container, but pain was alien to it so it did not hesitate. After the cylinder was sealed the Reborn waited in darkness while it was carried from one unknowable place to another. As the darkness stretched Tizheruk slipped into torpid hibernation, dreaming of the terror it would wreak in the name of the Sacred Spiral...

*It’s going to be a bad one,* Sergeant Alonzo Grijalva judged, watching the turbulent sky. The wind had picked up and flecks of soot were already blowing under the watchtower’s roof, spattering him like dirty rain as the storm gathered strength. The Locker’s walls offered scant shelter during a blackout, but Grijalva would take that over being out on the Rim, especially with the stories doing the rounds these days.

*‘Fall over the edge and it’s not just your body that’ll burn,’* Ibolya, the cook who doubled as the regimental bone-teller, had said darkly. *‘It’s warpfire down there, drifters.’*

‘OK, let’s get the old lady covered up,’ Grijalva said to Jei. ‘Then you can get some recaff going. And put your rebreather on, idiot!’

Jei fumbled with his mask and Grijalva shook his head. His fellow watchman was one of the Driftwood recruits and as green as they came, but he worked hard and brewed decent recaff. He wasn’t a bad lad.

‘You breathe it, you bleed it,’ the sergeant chided, quoting their new medicae. She had advised the Guardsmen to wear their masks whenever they were outside, blackout or not, but nobody was up for that.

*Should have sent the bloody Death Korps here,* Grijalva thought. *They’re born for a filthy sinkhole like this.*

Together the watchmen hauled a tarpaulin sheet over the tower’s tripod-mounted stubber gun. If soot clogged up the weapon’s guts Enginseer Tarcante would have their hides.

‘How long do you think the dark’ll last?’ Jei asked in his spiky, lo-hive accent.

‘Maybe the night, maybe days,’ Grijalva said. ‘Worst I’ve known lasted over a

week.'

They heard an engine rumbling below and a Chimera rolled past, following the curve of the inner wall.

'Where they goin' in a blackout, chief?' Jei wondered.

'Not our problem, son,' Grijalva said. 'Just thank the Drowned Star you're not going with them.'

The windows of Lazaro's chamber rattled as the first wave of the storm reached the fort's temple.

'I need to go,' Cross said, watching as specks of soot swarmed across the glass. 'We'll be heading out as soon as the blackout falls.' He appraised the Regicide board on the table between them. 'The game was yours anyway.'

'It's still a poor way to end it, Ambrose.' Lazaro's voice was a pained rasp and his hand trembled with the weight of the marble cardinal it held. He cursed as the piece slipped and toppled several others.

'Let me,' Cross said, reaching for the board, but the preacher slapped his hand away irritably.

'I'm not dead yet, damn you!'

Cross regarded his friend as he tidied the pieces. Lazaro was a shadow of the doughty evangelist he'd clashed with only three months before. His robes sagged on his frame and his eyes were stained yellow. The Black Breath had its claws deep inside him now.

'I've failed you, Ambrose,' Lazaro said as he worked. 'I thought I'd rekindle some faith in you before I went into the Trench.'

'I'm not sure it was ever there, Sándor. Besides, I'll take friendship over faith every time.'

'Then tell me your story, man,' Lazaro urged. 'Maybe I can give you some Throne-damned absolution before I'm done, whether you believe in it or not!'

'Or have me burned as a heretic, preacher?'

They were silent for a moment, then Lazaro steepled his fingers and looked at him intently. 'What do you think you'll find at the abbey, Ambrose?'

'I honestly don't know. The records of Redemption's past are riddled with inconsistencies. There's even a tale that Space Marines watched over the Spires once,' Cross sighed. 'But all the scraps I found suggest the Spiral Dawn rose when the Thorn Eternal fell. Perhaps the cult just filled the void left by the Adepta Sororitas...'

'But you don't think so,' Lazaro finished. 'There's something else – something

I didn't want to say in front of Clavel. I don't trust the man, but the colonel didn't want me to pass this on either...'

Cross waited, letting his friend make up his own mind.

'All my requests to High Command for off-world records have gone unanswered,' Lazaro said, 'along with the colonel's demands for new orders. We've received *nothing* since we deployed here. Sometimes I wonder if our messages ever got through.'

'There will be no more ships,' Cross said, frowning.

'What?'

'It's something Clavel said on that first night. He told me we were on our own. I didn't know what to make of it.'

'Watch him, Ambrose.'

'I intend to.' The commissar was the last person Cross wanted at his back on the imminent expedition to the abbey, but Clavel had insisted on being included. 'Before I go there's something I need to ask you, Sándor. The attacks on the Spiral shrines...'

'I didn't order them,' Lazaro said flatly, 'and I don't believe the colonel did either.'

'Thank you, my friend.' Cross rose. 'For what it's worth, I'll tell you my story when I get back.' *What I remember of it anyway.*

'Then I'll be sure to cling on to life for your tale,' Lazaro said sourly.

Jherem's breathing was a tortured, phlegm-choked rattle.

*He won't survive the night,* Ariken judged sadly as she swabbed his brow. The shy scribe had been one of the first pilgrims to volunteer alongside her for Captain Omazet's tithe. He would be the seventh to die. Two recruits had been killed in accidents during the early weeks of their training, but the others had succumbed to the disease carried in the planet's air. Sometimes the sick wasted away within weeks, sometimes they lasted for months, but there was no cure.

*This is the real enemy,* Ariken thought, gazing along the row of cots lining the infirmary. There were seventeen dying troopers here and scores more were showing symptoms. At this rate the Eighth would be a regiment of corpses within a year.

'I'm looking for the medicae,' someone said behind her. Startled, she turned and saw a young man standing a few paces away. He was dressed in the uniform of a Sentinel officer, but it was his face that drew her gaze. His finely chiselled features shone with vitality and his eyes sparkled.

‘I didn’t hear you come in,’ she said, hoping the muted light would hide her blush. ‘Sir,’ she added. Obscurely she realised she was alone with the dying and this stranger.

‘Forgive me, I didn’t mean to frighten you.’ He smiled and Ariken’s blush deepened. ‘I’m Lieutenant Senka. Kazimyr, if you will.’

‘Skarth,’ she said stiffly, unnerved by his easy charm. ‘I’m the medicae, sir.’

‘I understood Lieutenant Kopra was the medicae?’

‘The Breath took him three weeks ago,’ she replied. ‘I assumed his duties after I finished basic training.’

‘You’re one of the pilgrims!’ he said brightly, his smile widening. ‘*Ariken!* Yes, I’ve heard of you. The girl who stood up to the Witch Captain!’

Ariken had heard the nickname before, though never spoken so brazenly. ‘I don’t think Captain Omazet would approve of that title, sir.’

‘Oh, don’t be so sure, Ariken,’ Senka said conspiratorially. ‘Your commander is a strange one. We found her on Oblazt, you know – the last of her regiment. She was half-dead with frostbite, but still fighting a guerrilla war against the rebels. They called her the Snow Witch.’ He grinned. ‘Like something out of a child’s tale, but with teeth!’

‘You wanted to see the medicae, sir. Are you unwell?’

‘Do I *look* unwell, corporal?’ Senka came closer, trapping her between the beds. She could hear the wind scratching at the windows. What was he doing here with a blackout on its way?

‘Then why...’ she began, but he held up a hand for silence.

‘I came to offer a *suggestion*. I’ve heard rumours of talented healers among the Spiral Dawn. Given the gravity of our situation here...’ He swept a hand across the infirmary. ‘I thought it might be worth seeking their advice.’

‘The Unfolded are barred from the Locker, sir.’

‘That’s why the suggestion should come from our medicae, don’t you think?’ He leaned closer. ‘Besides, you still believe in the Sacred Spiral, don’t you, Ariken?’

His gaze was intense, almost predatory, and yet she sensed that somewhere deep inside, Kazimyr Senka was *screaming*. Her hand slid to the bone-handled knife Omazet had given her after she’d completed her training.

*If you touch me I’ll kill you where you stand,* she thought, *and to the warp with what comes after.*

But Senka stepped away, still beaming. ‘Please consider my suggestion, Ariken. I’m sure we’ll talk again.’

When he left the infirmary Ariken realised her fists were clenched so tightly her nails had drawn blood.

A harsh scraping sound stirred the sleeper into wakefulness. Moments later the lid of its prison was lifted away and a beam of light shone inside.

‘As within, so without,’ a rough voice intoned over the wind. The man peering into the canister with misaligned eyes was an outsider by birth, but Tizheruk could smell the Spiral in his blood. He had been blessed. He was kindred now.

The man backed away as Tizheruk surged out of the container that had held it for so long. The Terror swayed, its form twisting violently as muscles writhed and bones cracked, knitting back into their natural alignment. With awakening came a gnawing, insistent hunger.

‘We have prepared a sanctuary for you, holy one,’ the cultist said reverently. Another man stood beside the speaker, his face aghast at the sight of Tizheruk’s glory. He also carried the blessing, but its hold upon him was weak beside his fear.

The Terror reared up and the fleshhooks coiled inside its cavernous ribcage whipped out and punched through the unsteady convert’s breastplate. Before he could utter a sound they yanked him forward and Tizheruk’s feeder tendrils smothered his face, piercing his eyes and forcing their way down his throat, stretching deep into his chest cavity. His comrade watched in rapt silence as the Terror drank. When it was finished nothing remained of the coward’s head. Sated for the moment, Tizheruk slung the carcass over its shoulders and regarded the remaining cultist.

‘I am Trazgo,’ the man with the malformed eyes said. He threw back his head, offering his neck. ‘I will serve you with strength or sacrifice.’ When Tizheruk made no move he nodded solemnly. ‘This part of the fort is quiet, but it’s unwise to linger here. Will you follow me, holy one?’

Though his words were nonsense, Tizheruk understood his intent. Moving with surprising grace, the Terror lifted a claw and inscribed a spiral.

*This is the worst storm I’ve seen,* Cross thought as he hurried through the churning darkness. If anything would cover their expedition from prying eyes this was it. They’d waited weeks for a blackout to fall, but this one was almost too much.

The Chimera assigned to the mission was waiting by the gates when he arrived, its engine already running. A lone trooper in a rebreather mask stood by the vehicle. He hammered on the closed hatch as Cross approached.

‘You’re late,’ the masked man called, and Cross realised it was Clavel. The commissar had sensibly opted to exchange his greatcoat and cap for standard kit for this mission.

‘Logistics,’ Cross yelled over the wind. It was a vague answer, but he didn’t give a damn what Clavel made of it.

The hatch swung open and they climbed inside.

‘Clear to go,’ a trooper in a crimson bandana called as he yanked the door shut behind them. His eyes had been replaced with jutting optics and the cog symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus was tattooed on his bare biceps.

*Not an engineeer, Cross gauged, but perhaps an assistant.*

He pulled off his rebreather and wiped away the sweat. Eight soldiers were crammed into the cabin. Even by the loose standards of the Black Flags this squad was eccentric. No two were dressed exactly alike and their equipment was adorned with charms and fetishes whose meaning he could only guess at. The augmented trooper was the strangest of them, but they were all individuals.

‘Gatekeeper, this is Chimera Seven,’ the driver said into the vehicle’s vox. ‘I have passcode Risen Sea for you. Repeat, Risen Sea. Open the gates, friend.’

*‘Acknowledged, Chimera Seven,’* the receiver squawked back.

‘You’re late, Cross,’ the white-haired officer sitting beside the driver said.

‘Logistics,’ Cross said, repeating the excuse. ‘My apologies, Captain Quezada.’

‘It will be several hours before we reach the bridge,’ Quezada said dryly. ‘I suggest you rest while you can, Mister Cross.’ The insult was thinly veiled.

‘Don’t want you falling asleep in my line of fire, sir,’ the woman sitting opposite Cross said. Her dirty blonde dreadlocks hung about her scarred, square-jawed face and her arms bulged with muscles. She was cradling a bulky plasma rifle, its casing engraved with row upon row of kill marks.

‘You saying you’ve got a *line* of fire, Rahel?’ the hatchet-faced man beside her drawled. He nodded at Cross. ‘You’re the man who closed down the Green Zone, right?’

‘The colonel acted on my advice,’ Cross said levelly. ‘Six troopers have disappeared there since the regiment arrived on Redemption.’ *And there’s something wrong with that city,* he thought, recalling his occasional fact-finding visits with distaste. *Something that runs deeper than mundane dissolution and vice.*

‘He made the right call, Trujilo,’ the dreadlocked woman said. ‘That place was off.’

‘Didn’t like the competition, eh, Rahel?’ Trujilo goaded.

After that Cross ignored their talk. He'd served alongside enough veteran squads to recognise the ritual banter for what it was. They would bait each other between missions, but there was nothing frivolous about these fighters. The moment things turned serious so would they. Every one of the eight, from their aloof officer to the softly spoken driver would be a proven killer. The prospect of sharing a transport with such troops would have unnerved him once, but now he just found them tedious.

*'Gates are open. You're clear to go,'* the gatekeeper voxed. *'Throne ward you, Gallows Dancers.'*

The engine's rumble rose to a throaty roar and it surged forward. Cross saw the commissar had taken Quezada's advice to heart: his eyes were shut and he appeared to be dozing.

*'Nothing about you adds up, Cross decided, but right now I think you have it right, Clavel.'*

He closed his remaining eye.

By the time Ariken's shift ended the blackout held sway over the fort, transforming its narrow paths into wind tunnels, but she knew it wouldn't deter her mentor and therefore it mustn't deter her either. Besides, she was still angry with Senka. Sleep was the last thing on her mind.

*'Teach me to fight,'* Ariken had asked Omazet on her second night as a Black Flag. *'I won't be Driftwood.'*

At the time she'd been exhausted by a day's training, yet she had sensed that a hundred such days wouldn't prepare her for the danger Cross had hinted at. Omazet had recognised her challenge and their 'blood trysts' had begun that same night. The rites of their training sessions were far more brutal than the regime Sergeant Nyulaszi put the recruits through, and Ariken understood the captain wouldn't hesitate to kill her if she slackened. Those were the terms of the challenge.

Three months later Ariken had more scars than all the other recruits put together, but she could hold her own against opponents twice her size in unarmed combat and fire a lasrifle like a veteran. After the Driftwood Hundred had finished their training her promotion to Corporal had been inevitable, as was the nickname Nyulaszi had awarded her: 'Black Shepherd'.

But it still wasn't enough and so the blood trysts had continued.

Ariken threw open the door of the hangar where the Witch Captain was waiting and bowed as Omazet strode forward, bearing blades.

‘They never come here, holy one,’ the cultist called Trazgo said. ‘This wreck was already here when we built the fort. We think it came down during a blackout over a century ago.’

Ignoring the man’s babble, Tizheruk inspected the misshapen steel cave. It was deep inside an enormous metal beast that lay half-buried at the heart of the outsiders’ territory. Though it only had one entrance it was filled with winding paths and many hiding places. Despite its strangeness it was somehow familiar, as if Tizheruk had been here before, long ago, though that couldn’t be. Odd symbols were inscribed across its cold walls, repeated many times.

‘It is called the *Obariyon*,’ Trazgo said eagerly, following his lord’s gaze.

Tizheruk’s curiosity passed quickly. Its mind was not built for mysteries. The lair was good, but the Terror could not go to ground yet. Its hunger was too strong – for blood and for wrath.

Mustering the entirety of its limited intellect, Tizheruk regarded the cultist and made the second sign that its mistress had taught it.

‘I understand, holy one,’ Trazgo said, recognising the slashed spiral of retribution. ‘I will take you to the heretic preacher.’

Ariken’s weapons clattered to the ground again and she froze, conceding defeat.

‘Your anger ruled you,’ Omazet chastised, drawing the blade of her weapon across Ariken’s throat, the touch so light it didn’t quite break the skin. She danced away and dropped into a low stance, one curved machete arcing over her head like a scorpion’s stinger, the other sweeping before her defensively.

‘I made myself a slave,’ Ariken conceded as she retrieved her weapons.

*Rage enchained is an asset, but rage unbound is a traitor.* It was the first truth that Omazet had taught her.

Ariken focussed her anger into a frozen spike and leapt towards her mentor again. They met in a whirl of twinned blades, dancing around each other in the circle of light that delineated their arena. The art of the dance lay in keeping both weapons in constant play, each opening a path for the other. Every attack was a defence, every defence an opportunity for another strike.

‘*We’ll talk again*,’ Senka had intimated. Or threatened?

Riding her rage, Ariken hacked and parried in a concatenating rhythm of violence and serenity, becoming one with her weapons. The captain wore a light tunic, but her limbs were tattooed with the same skeletal pattern as her armour, so fighting her felt like duelling with death itself.

‘*You still believe in the Sacred Spiral, don’t you?*’ Senka mocked.

This time Ariken lasted almost a minute before her machetes were twisted from her grasp and Omazet's were at her throat again. The end had never been in doubt, yet Ariken had almost seen her victory. Rationally she understood she would never defeat Omazet, but doubting herself would dishonour her mentor.

'The rage empowered you this time,' the captain approved as she stepped away. 'Where does it stem from, Ariken?' There was no warmth in her use of the forename. Omazet addressed all her troops that way, subtly turning the informality into an intimate threat.

*This woman isn't my friend, Ariken understood, but friendship isn't what I need to survive.*

She told the captain about her experience with Senka, surprised by her revulsion when she recounted it. Omazet was silent for a long time, but when she spoke, her answer was unexpected.

'If I offered you the chance, would you go to the Spires, Ariken?'

'I don't understand...'

'The Unfolded are our enemy. While the colonel dances around this truth I know it as I know the rhythm of my own blood. And I believe you have also come to know it.'

'Then why would I go to them?' Ariken asked, thinking of Ophele and Bharlo and the rest of the pilgrims who had been delivered to the sect.

'Indeed, why would you?'

*Is she making me into a monster? Ariken wondered – and on the back of that: Do I want to be like her?*

The old, terrible nightmare had him in its jaws again, dragging him back through the ravishing cavalcade of sins that had ruled his youth, taunting him with everything he had renounced in service to the Throne. For a nobleman of Verzante, the dark jewel of the Sunken Worlds, life offered limitless opportunities for pleasure – often petty, occasionally unspeakable. Were it not for the whims of chance that trap would have become his grave. Chance...

*There's no such thing!* Sándor Lazaro protested.

'There is only chance,' the haunter of his dreams mocked. *'Everything the missionary told you was a—'*

'Deceiver!' Lazaro hissed as his tormentor shrieked and he tore free.

'Deceiver...' he repeated into the darkness as he awoke. The sheets of his bed were twisted and drenched with sweat. His throat was on fire. Grimacing, Lazaro reached for the water jug by his bed—

A second shriek sliced through the wind moaning at the windows. It was muffled, but the agony and terror behind it were unmistakable.

*It wasn't the nightmare that screamed, Lazaro realised feverishly, it was the scream that woke me.*

A cold hand pressed down against his chest, crushing faith and fire and life from his wasted carcass.

'The Emperor protects!' he rasped, defying the killing fear.

Fighting for breath, he hauled himself up and clasped the hilt of the eviscerator sword propped beside his bed. His wasted biceps trembled as he lifted it, but he felt a surge of faith as his fingers found the activation stud. The weapon's serrated blade had spilled the blood of countless traitors on Oblazt and the memory of their sacred cleansing filled him with renewed vigour. The urge to rouse the blade was almost overpowering, but he held back.

'Not yet, my friend,' he breathed.

The corridor outside his chamber was dimly lit, but there was nowhere to hide except for the sleeping cells and all the doors were closed. At this time of night only the temple's wardens should be here.

*I fear Vladislav and Lohmati have gone to the Black Trench, Lazaro thought grimly. He offered a prayer to his studious assistants as he crept along the corridor. The staircase beyond was empty and he saw the lumen globes in the hall below were still lit. As he descended his foreboding grew, as if he were submerging himself in an invisible, enervating miasma, but a fierce joy shone through.*

*I'll die tonight, Lazaro sensed, but it will be on my feet with a blade in my hand.*

The evil was waiting for him in the chancel, as he knew it would be. The candles had been lit and smoke wafted from the incense burners, but they couldn't mask the stench pervading the chamber. It was a sour-sweet musk, inviting and repellent by turns.

There was a congregation of four tonight. Three of the celebrants were propped up on the pews, facing the altar, though they had no heads. Two of the headless wore the robes of his assistants, the white fabric stained dark by blood, while the third wore regular fatigues. The last worshipper turned as the preacher entered. Lazaro couldn't read the focus of his skewed eyes, but the man looked as if he had been crying.

'What happened here?' Lazaro demanded, strangling his revulsion.

'Redemption, priest.' The celebrant smiled like a sly child.

*He's either mad or possessed, Lazaro judged. As he strode forward the thing*

that had been crouching behind the altar unfolded itself.

‘Sacred Throne...’ Lazaro breathed as he tried to make sense of the aberration towering over him. The daemon, for it could surely be nothing else, was a hulking, misshapen parody of a man, naked save for a filthy tabard hanging from its waist. Patches of blue chitin blotched its livid flesh, thickening into hard plates around its shoulders and neck. Its right arm split at the elbow, one branch ending in a three-fingered claw, the other in a perfectly formed human hand. The left arm hung low and tapered into a long, curved hook. Its head was a hairless bulb with recessed eyes and gaping jaws that trailed thorn-tipped tentacles.

‘*Tizz-ah-ruk*k,’ the daemon moaned, slobbering with the effort of speech. Somehow Lazaro felt sure it was *grinning* at him. He thumbed the activation stud of his eviscerator and its blade roared into life. The weapon bucked in his hands like a living thing, eager for retribution.

*Nothing is chance*, Lazaro decided, *this was always my fate*.

‘For the Emperor!’ he yelled as he charged forward.

He swung his eviscerator in a wide arc as the aberration’s chest tendrils lashed out at him. The blade cut through two of them cleanly, but the others whipped away and retracted. With a wet roar the beast swept out with its curved claw, slicing through the air like a scythe. Lazaro parried and the impact almost threw him from his feet. The eviscerator’s rumble became a howl as its belt-driven teeth gnawed against the bony appendage. Smoke erupted from its casing as the sacred machine raged against the profane.

‘*Tizz-ah-ruk*k!’ the beast moaned again, spattering Lazaro with filth.

The preacher gritted his teeth, driving the blade deeper as his body quaked in the grip of the vibrations. With a tortured shriek the sword’s belt snapped and tore free. It ripped through Lazaro’s left arm just below the shoulder and whirled away like a razor-edged lasso. His neutered weapon slipped from his remaining hand and clattered to the ground, its engine still whining. The scything claw swept back then plunged forward and punched into his chest, driving through until the tip exploded from his back. Lazaro retched blood as the abomination yanked him from his feet and drew him in. It tilted its head to regard him and he sensed something *other* assessing him through its idiot eyes – an implacable, utterly inhuman intelligence.

*It is true*, the secret mind sent, *nothing is chance*.

Then the beast’s feeder tendrils lashed out.

*The coil is without a beginning or an end*, Colonel Kangre Talasca thought

ferverently, *for everything is entwined – enshrined in a single tangled moment.*

The black tempest was raging outside the keep, its fury raising visions from the wounds that Oblazt had left in Talasca's soul. The horrors of that frozen world had almost destroyed his faith, but Redemption had unveiled the blessing behind the curse. From torment came revelation.

'I am not to be disturbed,' he instructed the leader of his Silent Paladins. 'The God-Emperor calls to me, Karolus.'

The abhuman warrior inclined its head gravely and the colonel placed a hand on its armoured chest.

'You and I are destined for glory, my friend,' Talasca promised. He turned away, heading for the tower to continue his great work.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Through the delirium blossoming from his infected hand, the shadow heard something whispering, beckoning him towards the spectral ruin that waited in the jungle – and beyond that, the veiled paths between the stars.*

*I'll be gone for some time, he thought.*

'Cross,' someone was saying insistently. 'Cross!'

*Who...?*

'We've reached the bridge.' A hand shook him.

'Clavel?' Cross mumbled, stumbling back into wakefulness.

'You were out cold,' the commissar said. 'Though you started to talk towards the end...'

'Sleep well, sir?' the scarred woman sitting opposite Cross asked. Her hands were busy running last-minute checks on her plasma gun. All the veterans in the cabin were performing the same ritual, attending to their weapons with a care that bordered on reverence.

'Very well, thank you,' Cross replied mildly. 'I should be able to keep out of your line of fire now, Trooper Rahel.'

The woman threw him a broken-toothed grin, clearly surprised that he'd remembered her name.

The Chimera lurched to a halt and the driver cut the engine. 'Can't risk taking us closer to the Rim,' he said. 'Not in a blackout.'

'Understood, Virgilio,' Captain Quezada replied, clapping him on the shoulder. He turned to the others. 'Masks up, Gallows Dancers! We walk from here.'

Outpost Six had been abandoned since the deaths of its last watchmen. Though their bodies had been removed, the word scrawled across the wall in their blood was still there:

# TIZHERUK

Cross had to force himself to study the faded, rust-coloured text. It was *jagged*, both in its execution and in the feelings it evoked. *Unclean*.

‘What am I leading my troops into?’ Quezada asked, stepping beside him.

‘I’ve already briefed you, captain,’ Clavel answered. ‘We believe Redemption may be harbouring a heretical cult.’

‘You didn’t tell me about *this*, commissar.’ Quezada gestured at the blasphemous word. The three officers were alone in the bunker, waiting while the squad’s scout reconnoitred the bridge.

‘What purpose would it have served?’ Clavel asked.

‘We don’t know what it really means,’ Cross said, meeting Quezada’s gaze, ‘but the Gallows Dancers weren’t chosen for this expedition by chance. We need the regiment’s best.’

The captain’s helmet vox crackled. ‘Quezada,’ he acknowledged.

‘*Galantai*,’ a clipped, heavily accented voice replied. ‘*The bridge, it is a wreck, captain. Much of it has fallen into the gorge and what remains is treacherous.*’

‘Can you get us across?’

‘*We will have to tread lightly, but it can be done.*’

‘Confirmed, we’re on our way.’ The captain switched channels to the Chimera: ‘Virgilio, pull back two kilometres and await my signal.’

‘*Aye, captain,*’ the driver confirmed.

Quezada regarded his fellow officers coldly. ‘If my squad suffers because you have been holding something back...’

‘Understood, captain,’ Clavel retorted. ‘Let’s get on with it.’

The rest of the squad was waiting at the mouth of the bridge, the beams of their helmet lights zigzagging through the swirling soot. This close to the gorge the wind was ferocious.

‘Stay close and don’t stray from the path I mark!’ the scout, Galantai, warned over the squad-wide channel, shouting to make himself heard. ‘And watch your step in the wind. It’s worse on the bridge!’

He was a short, lean man who appeared to favour a permanent crouch. In place of regular flak plate he wore leather armour and a fur-trimmed skullcap. The lasgun slung over his shoulder had an unusually long barrel, suggesting he was a sniper as well as a scout.

‘Stick with me, old man,’ Trooper Rahel yelled to Cross. ‘I’ll catch you if you

fall!’

The bridge to Spire Castitas was carved with stylised flowers – a bloom with a sweeping frond on either side. Cross recalled it was an ancient symbol for chastity, but there was nothing pure about this crumbling monument. It was a twisted twin of the one he had crossed to Veritas.

*Chastity is no longer welcome on Redemption,* Cross thought, unsure where the intuition came from.

The party of nine walked in single file, maintaining a tight formation behind the scout. Galantai hadn’t been exaggerating – things were *much* worse on the bridge. Most of its walls had collapsed, leaving the party dangerously exposed to the gale from both sides. In places the ramparts had fallen inwards and shattered across their path, forcing them to divert around boulder-sized chunks of debris. The deck was riddled with cracks that sometimes split into gaping chasms through which the abyss shone like hellfire. A deep, primordial rumble reverberated up from the gorge and the rotten-egg stench of sulphur seeped through their masks.

‘It’s like we’re passing into the Third Hell,’ Cross whispered, recalling a myth of his home world.

‘Down!’ Galantai signalled, dropping to his knees. Everyone obeyed without question, waiting as the scout eased his rifle free and peered through its glowing scope.

‘Hostiles,’ he reported. ‘Two... no, three.’

*Hostiles?* Cross thought uneasily. *Are we ready to assume that?*

‘Armed?’ Quezada asked.

‘Nothing visible.’

‘Can we slip past them?’

‘No, they are camped in our path. Lookouts probably.’

‘Bleed them.’

*Wait–*

A sharp snap of las-fire pierced the wind. Seconds later another followed.

‘Two kills confirmed. Third mark has gone to ground,’ Galantai reported. ‘He will run...’ They waited. ‘I have him.’ He fired. ‘Clear.’

They reached the bodies a few minutes later. There were two males and a female. All wore rubberised black jumpsuits under rough-spun white tabards decorated with spirals. Each corpse had a cauterised crater in its hairless head where the scout had found his mark. Galantai knelt beside the woman and stripped off her mask, revealing a brutish, almost bestial face.

‘Ugly bitch,’ Rahel opined as the scout ran a finger over the corpse’s brow, tracing a pronounced sub-dermal crest.

‘I have seen this before,’ he said, ‘in the city... but never up close. They try to hide it.’

‘Is she armed?’ Cross asked, joining him.

Galantai pulled a stubby gun from the woman’s utility belt. ‘Auto pistol.’ It was a common, low-cost weapon, but its grip was inlaid with elegantly carved bone. ‘Quality work,’ Galantai approved, slipping the weapon into his own belt.

Quezada addressed Clavel. ‘Thoughts?’

‘It confirms there’s something on Castitas they don’t want us to see.’

‘Are we going to start a war tonight, commissar?’

‘We may not have a choice, Captain Quezada,’ Cross murmured, staring at the crest on the dead woman’s forehead and thinking of the elaborate make-up worn by the ambassador, Vyrunas.

*Is this what he was trying to hide?*

The cultist’s features were like a caricature of the elegant priest’s own and her eyes – wide with the shock of sudden death – were the same startling sapphire.

*Are they mutants?* Cross wondered.

‘Throw them over the side,’ Clavel ordered. ‘We need to get moving.’

Cross wasn’t listening. Something else had just struck him: the decomposing three-armed abomination had also had a crest.

They encountered no one else on the bridge or on the long, winding path to the Spire’s summit where the abbey lay. Up on the mountain there was less detritus for the wind to galvanise so the blackout eased as they climbed.

Dawn broke as they crested the peak and Redemption’s twin suns, Salvation and Damnation, glowered through the clouds. The bastion of the Thorn Eternal loomed ahead, crowning the Spire in a cruciform wedge of crenelated walls and steepled towers. No guards appeared as the squad crept towards its iron gates.

‘This looks new,’ Galantai said, indicating the access panel beside the portals.

‘Regev,’ Quezada called, ‘can you crack it?’

The trooper in the crimson bandana inspected the panel, his augmented lenses glowing green behind his mask. ‘Looks like a standard data-seal.’ He pulled a compact device from his backpack and touched it to the panel. As he tweaked dials on the instrument digits scrolled across its display.

‘Specialist Regev has worked alongside our engineer since Oblazt,’ Quezada explained to Cross with a hint of pride. ‘The soldiers of Vassago adapt to the

tides of chance.’ He turned to the scout. ‘Galantai, watch the mountain path. I don’t want any surprises at our back.’

The scout nodded and crept away.

There was a chime from Regev’s device and the gates vibrated as their internal bolts retracted. The specialist muttered a prayer to the Machine God and pressed a hand against each portal. They swung inward smoothly, revealing a long atrium with an avenue of columns running through its centre.

‘Breach and secure,’ Quezada ordered.

The six veterans fanned out as they swept inside, falling into the well-worn patterns of the squad while the outsiders, Cross and Clavel, followed behind.

‘Clear,’ the troopers reported one by one.

‘Air is clean,’ Regev added, consulting his auspex.

‘Masks off,’ Quezada said.

The squad’s relief turned to expressions of disgust as the stench permeating the place hit them.

‘You said it was *clean*, cog-lover!’ Rahel said, throwing Regev a dirty look.

‘Of toxins, yes.’

‘Gybzan, take point,’ Quezada ordered. ‘I want your fire up front.’

‘Aye, sir.’ A squat, heavysset man brandishing a flamer stalked forward. His helmet and armour were painted with crudely rendered holy sigils and snippets of prayer. The fuel cylinder strapped to his back bore a clumsy, flame-winged aquila.

*He’s a devout pyromaniac, Cross gauged, like so many flame troopers.*

As he followed the squad along the columned avenue he saw the stonework was mottled with scorch marks, bullet holes and deep scratches.

‘There was a fight here,’ Gybzan said sombrely, as if he was imparting a profound secret. ‘A big one.’

‘The Battle Sisters wouldn’t have died any other way,’ Rahel growled.

‘Story goes they went mad,’ the hatchet-faced trooper said. ‘Grubs in town say their canonesse fell for a daemon.’

‘Grubs know crap, Trujilo,’ Rahel hissed. ‘The Adepta Sororitas are *untouchable*. That’s why somebody took them down.’

A doorway lay ahead, but the door itself had been ripped from its frame and hurled across the atrium.

‘Sacred Throne,’ the flame trooper said when he reached the opening. He stepped aside, making room for the three officers.

The doorway opened onto the great nave of the abbey. Its stained-glass

windows were intact and its foundation pillars still stood, but the floor was gone, leaving a sheer drop beyond the threshold. Cross looked down and saw the ground had collapsed onto the level below, crushing its chambers into a rubble-strewn wasteland. Light trickled down from the windows, illuminating the broken statues that jutted from the debris like fallen angels. But it was the sea of bones that shocked him. They were everywhere – the harvest of many thousands of corpses. This sacred space had been turned into a vast charnel pit.

‘We are fortunate,’ Clavel judged. ‘The sunlight will facilitate our passage.’ He appeared unmoved by the devastation.

‘You want me to take my squad down into that graveyard?’ Quezada asked stonily.

‘There is no alternative, captain.’

‘What exactly are we looking for here?’

‘Evidence... records perhaps.’ Clavel shook his head. ‘If anything survived the attack it will be in the abbey’s sanctum. We have to get across.’

Quezada was silent for a while, surveying the pit. ‘They used shaped charges to blow the floor,’ he said finally. ‘What I don’t understand is why.’

‘Desecration,’ Gybzan spat. The flame trooper’s face was dark with fury.

‘But they left the windows intact... and the frescoes,’ Cross said, frowning. ‘No... I think this was something else.’

‘Indeed,’ Quezada said, ‘that is what worries me.’ He turned to his comrades. ‘Masks on, Gallows Dancers. It is time to earn our name.’

The pit was over thirty feet deep. A metal ladder had been installed, presumably by whoever had destroyed the floor, but the bolts fixing it to the wall were badly corroded.

‘It’s unsound,’ Regev said after a cursory check. ‘Probably hasn’t been used in years.’

‘Ropes,’ Quezada ordered, pulling a grappling hook from his backpack.

The veterans abseiled down expertly, slipping into watch duties the moment they landed. Rahel and Gybzan lowered their bulky weapons before descending, then dropped down after them. Both seemed more concerned about the guns than their own safety.

Only Cross struggled, losing his grip towards the end and falling into a pile of bones. He discovered they were coated in slime and what looked like dung. Some of the veterans shook their heads as he got up, but nobody mocked his fall. There was no room for levity in this graveyard.

They pressed forward, weaving between piles of rubble and sections of wall

that still stood. Vast cracks yawned along both sides of the pit, opening into raw tunnels that descended into darkness. They looked like animal burrows, but Cross didn't want to dwell on the kind of creature that could have dug them. By unspoken consent the squad kept away from them. Wherever they led was nowhere anyone wanted to go.

'All these bones are old,' Trujilo murmured as they crept over a mound of the forgotten dead. 'The reek ain't from them.'

*He's right, Cross thought, the flesh that bound these bones is long gone. These people died decades ago at least.*

'It's not just rot,' Rahel said. 'There's something else...'

'Hold up!' Gybzan called from somewhere up front. 'We got a problem.'

There was a long stretch of surviving wall up ahead, cutting directly across their path.

'Can't risk climbing it,' the specialist, Regev, said. 'It could collapse under us.'

'Then let's punch a hole through,' Rahel aimed a kick at the barrier.

'This whole level could be unstable,' Regev protested. 'We should avoid...' He trailed off as a deep, liquescent moan oozed from the burrows on either side and reverberated around the pit. It sounded like the catacombs were breathing. A distant clattering followed, then fell silent. The squad waited, but there was nothing more.

'Spread out,' Quezada ordered. 'Look for a way through.'

'Perhaps the tunnels—' Regev began.

'Not the tunnels,' the captain said firmly.

The eight intruders fanned out along the wall, searching for a break in the barrier, but their eyes kept straying to the tunnel mouths.

*We're not alone down here, Cross thought with dismal certainty. He saw something gleaming among a pile of dirty bones and knelt to brush them aside. Lying among the detritus was an elegant helmet with a sloped visor. It shone a pearlescent white, as if the filth couldn't touch it.*

'Looks like an Adepta Sororitas battle helm,' Rahel whispered beside him. There was a melancholy note in her voice.

'Over here!' Trujilo hissed from further along the wall. He indicated a narrow fissure as the others approached. 'Might be a way through.' He crouched, peering inside. 'Full of bones though...'

'Can we clear it?' Quezada asked.

'Faster to crawl over them, captain.'

'Not going in there,' Gybzan said as if that concluded the matter.

Something moved at the periphery of Cross' vision. He turned and regarded the tunnel entrance to his left, squinting into the darkness. Where did these passages go? To the abbey's crypts or somewhere much deeper? Almost reluctantly, he shone his light into the space.

A hulking, malformed figure stood in the recess, watching him.

'Captain...' Cross started to say.

Trujilo yelled and leapt away as a claw lashed out from the fissure he was examining. As he fell on his back he opened fire, pouring las bolts into the crack. There was a hiss of rage from within and another claw appeared, followed by a third. They gripped the edges of the crevice and hauled a contorted shape towards the light.

'Flamer!' Quezada shouted as he activated his power sword.

Gybzan stepped forward, adjusting the nozzle of his weapon as he came. With a whoosh of heat a torrent of fire flooded the fissure. The thing within thrashed about and howled as its refuge became an inferno.

'The tunnels!' Cross shouted as the figure he had spotted lurched towards them. It was a three-armed blasphemy with bloated muscles and a bulbous, elongated cranium. The face was a lumpen mockery of humanity, devoid of anything save dim fury. Its jaws yawned wide, spilling drool across its barrel chest as it trampled through the bones.

*Mutants*, Cross thought. *They have to be.*

He opened fire, gripping his bolt pistol with both hands to steady his aim. The bullets punched into the giant's torso, the entry wounds erupting into raw craters as the mass-reactive rounds detonated, but they didn't even slow its advance.

'Vassago burns!' Rahel shouted, stepping alongside him. She braced her legs as she pulled the trigger of her plasma gun. There was a momentary delay as the weapon powered up, then a barrage of plasma bolts struck the abomination, incinerating its right shoulder and tearing a smouldering rift across its chest. It crashed to the ground as its spine melted, but continued to drag itself along with its remaining arms.

'Finish it!' Rahel snarled as her gun vented steam. It would be several seconds before she could risk another salvo. Cross advanced on the dying monstrosity, punching bullets into its skull as he stared into its eyes.

*They're blue*, he realised a moment before its cranium exploded.

With a thunder of riven masonry a section of the barrier wall collapsed, covering Regev in rubble, and another of the aberrant giants lurched through the rift. Hissing like a gargantuan snake, it reached for the trapped specialist with an

oversized arm.

‘For the Emperor!’ Clavel shouted as he stepped between them and parried its claw with his chainsword. The whirling blade spat black ichor as it chewed into the creature’s flesh. Struggling against its strength, Clavel dropped his right hand to his holster and pulled his plasma pistol free. As the beast swung at him with its other arms he thrust the gun between its jaws and fired. The blast scorched away its face and burned through the back of its head. Clavel dodged aside as the giant toppled forward and fell across the specialist, who was still struggling to free himself. Congealing plasma oozed from its skull and spilled across Regev’s breastplate, eating through the armour in seconds. He shrieked as his chest dissolved into a smoking crater.

‘This way!’ the commissar called to the others, gesturing towards the fallen wall.

The savage bellowing of the abominations was coming from all sides now and more were emerging from the tunnels, while smaller beasts – presumably juveniles – crawled from mounds of rubble or cracks in the ground. There was no telling how many of them inhabited the charnel pit.

*They were hiding from the sunlight, Cross thought wildly. They don’t like it, but they’re not afraid of it.*

‘Down!’ Rahel shouted as another of the giants loomed over him, its sinewy, razor-tipped arms swinging towards his head. He threw himself to the ground and its talons whipped across the crown of his helmet, tearing it loose. Dazed, he rolled aside as the claws slashed down, rending the stone like bladed piledrivers behind him. A hail of plasma screamed overhead, followed by a rush of fire as Gybzan strode towards his attacker. The flame trooper was singing a martial hymn as he drove the monstrosity back.

Cross staggered to his feet and crashed into another veteran. The man’s arms had been torn off at the shoulders, leaving only splintered, bloody nubs of bone. His mask was gone and his eyes were wide with shock. He was trying to say something.

*I don’t know his name, Cross thought absurdly. He saw Quezada stalking towards them with his bolt pistol raised.*

‘I think–’ Cross began.

His words were cut off as the nameless trooper’s head jerked violently and sprayed blood. Quezada thrust the corpse towards a pair of smaller abominations that were crawling towards them. His gun was still smoking from the mercy killing.

‘Gallows grace you, brother,’ the captain intoned, then jabbed his sword towards the section of fallen wall by Clavel. ‘Through there!’

Gybzan fell in with them as they pressed forward, sweeping his fire in a wide arc behind him to deter their pursuers.

‘I’m running low!’ the flame trooper warned.

Trujilo and Rahel had flanked Clavel on either side of the gap. The three of them were spraying shots into the beasts, Rahel and the commissar alternating their plasma volleys to let their weapons cool. Regev lay nearby, half-buried by the carcass of the giant that had brought down the wall. The dead specialist’s augmented lenses still glowed behind his mask.

‘They’re strong but slow!’ Quezada said. ‘If we keep—’

A juvenile mutant burst from the bones beside him, mewling and spitting. The creature was a squat tangle of muscles, its lumpy head barely reaching the captain’s waist, but one of its arms flared into a scythe-like claw twice its height. As Quezada cleaved the mutant’s skull it lashed out with the claw, slicing clean through his left thigh. The veteran yelled as the leg gave way and he toppled. Cross caught him and lowered him against the wall while the others offered covering fire. Blood was pumping furiously from the captain’s stump.

‘Go,’ Quezada said. None of his troops argued.

*They know their craft too well, Cross thought. If we slow down we’re dead. They’ll honour their fallen later.*

‘Do you want the Emperor’s Mercy, captain?’ Clavel asked, his eyes never leaving the battle.

‘Gallows Dancers make their own mercy, commissar,’ Quezada said, pulling a grenade from his belt. ‘Take the sword, Cross.’ He indicated the power weapon beside him. ‘It’s too good for this graveyard...’ His face was white with blood loss. ‘Go!’

Quezada seized his mercy scant seconds after they were through the wall. The blast reverberated around them, sending concussive tremors through the ground as they hurried across the charnel pit. If the whole place came down then so be it.

‘The other side’s just ahead!’ Rahel shouted.

A man-sized mutant lurched into her path and she dodged aside, saving her precious gun for a greater threat. Cross swung at the beast with Quezada’s blade. He was no great swordsman, but he’d learned the basics at the academy and a power weapon such as this would have been lethal even in the hands of a novice. The curved blade carved through his foe’s midriff as if it had a mind of its own,

almost tearing the beast in half.

‘My thanks, captain,’ Cross said.

There was a stentorian bellow from the right and a statue hurtled through the air towards the survivors. It slammed down a few paces from Rahel, showering her with fragments of stone and bone. She swung round, cursing vividly as she saw the thing that had thrown the missile.

‘Seven Hells...’ Cross hissed.

Even among these giants this beast was a colossus. Its brutish head was squeezed between swollen, chitin-plated shoulders. Both of its arms split into multiple appendages at the elbows, each branch swelling into a three-fingered claw tipped with talons. With a roar, the monstrosity stomped towards them, hunched almost double, with its long arms trailing behind it.

‘Keep moving!’ Clavel shouted.

They raced on, all caution abandoned now. As they reached the far side of the pit, Trujilo cast his grapple at the wall, trying to snag the threshold of the chamber above, but the hook clattered back down.

‘Too high!’ he yelled.

‘Regev had the powered grapple,’ Rahel snarled, shaking her head furiously.

‘Look for another ladder!’ Cross ordered. He doubted he could haul himself up thirty feet of rope anyway.

‘It’s coming,’ Clavel warned as the colossus caught up with them.

*We have to kill it,* Cross realised. He holstered his pistol and gripped the power sword two-handed. ‘Gallows Dancers—’ he began, but the flame trooper was already moving.

‘Burning Throne!’ Gybzan yelled as he strode towards their pursuer. Focussing the last of his fuel into a tight stream, he met the beast’s lumbering charge. It barrelled into his inferno, howling with fury as it was set alight. Burning and blinded, it pressed on until it crashed into its tormentor and dragged him into a savage embrace. Gybzan’s fuel tank ruptured explosively, immolating them both in fresh flames. The blast killed him instantly and shredded the beast’s arms and chest.

The others circled the blazing abomination as it whirled about with its charred victim fused to its torso. Roaring its defiance, it flailed at them with its mutilated arms as plasma bolts tore craters into its hide, burning hotter than any natural fire could. Cross closed in as it weakened, slashing at its trunk-like legs with his coruscating blade until they gave way and the behemoth fell.

‘Gallows take you!’ he snarled and plunged the blade into its melting face. The

beast thrashed about, but he kept it pinned, embracing the emptiness blossoming inside him. Dimly he realised he'd missed it.

'It's done!' someone was shouting. 'Cross, it's over!' He stared at the masked woman. 'There are more of them down here,' she urged. 'We need to move, Cross!'

They found the ladder soon afterwards. It was wet with slime and the bolts securing it to the wall were loose. Clavel tugged at the frame cautiously, frowning as it shifted in his grip.

'We'll have to take it one by one,' he said.

Trujilo went first. While he climbed, the others crouched behind the statue of a brooding cardinal, listening to the pit dwellers lumbering through the maze of rubble. It sounded like they were brawling among themselves now.

*Fighting over the dead, Cross guessed. Ours and theirs.*

'Clear,' Trujilo voxed. *'It's in bad shape. You got to take it slowly.'*

Clavel opted to go second. Trujilo had tested the ladder and now its condition would only worsen with each ascent. The second place was the safest.

*What kind of commissar are you, Clavel?* Cross mused, as he had many times before.

'So what's walking on your grave?' Rahel asked him when they were alone. She kept her voice low and her eyes on the maze.

'My grave?'

'It's something we say in the Sunken Worlds.' She shook her head. 'I meant *what's the ghost on your back?* Because you surely have one, Cross.'

'My ghost?' he thought about it. 'I think that would be *me*.'

'That one goes with the job,' Rahel snorted. 'No, I saw how you fought back there. You've got *another* ghost, my friend.' She indicated his eye patch. 'Something to do with that maybe?'

He shook his head. 'The eye is nothing, Rahel.' His gauntleted hand was itching furiously. It felt like the parasites had returned to finish their work. 'I—'

'Clear,' Clavel voxed, *'Captain Cross next.'*

'Confirmed,' Rahel sent. 'You're up, Cross.'

He considered arguing, but it would only waste time and the sunlight trickling down from above was fading fast. It was still morning, but that meant little on Redemption. The sky was already congealing into its perennial gloom.

'You owe me a story,' Cross said as he got up. 'It takes a ghost to know one, trooper.'

It was a long climb. The rungs were treacherous with slime and he paused

every time the ladder wobbled. He was breathing hard by the time Trujilo helped him over the edge. The pit below was completely dark now.

‘Clear,’ Cross sent. ‘Get out of there, Rahel.’

‘Confirmed. On my way.’

She was a couple of yards from the top when the ladder groaned and lurched violently. She froze. Leaning over the lip, Cross and Trujilo stretched out their arms to her.

‘Move yourself, trooper!’ Cross urged.

‘It’ll hold,’ she said. ‘I just got to take—’

With a shriek of tortured metal the ladder tore away from the wall and tilted backwards. It held for a moment, swaying, then arced gently away into the darkness with its burden. Long moments later they heard it crash down among the rubble, along with the answering clamour of the abominations.

‘Rahel!’ Cross shouted. He expected no answer and none came.

The last of the sunlight was gone by the time the three survivors pressed on. Clavel appeared to have a working knowledge of the abbey, so they followed his lead in silence. Cross assumed the commissar had studied a floor plan prior to the mission, but if so, he had never offered to share it. The path he chose led resolutely upwards, taking them into the abbey’s heights. Beyond the pit the building was largely intact and seemingly deserted, yet the miasma of oppression never diminished.

‘It’s here,’ Clavel said as they reached the end of a pillared corridor. A circular metal hatch was set into the wall ahead, its facade embossed with the symbol of the abbey’s order: a dagger-like thorn encircled by chains. The surface was scuffed and scorched, but the damage was obviously superficial. Most of the wall around the hatch had been torn away, revealing more metal beneath.

‘They couldn’t get in,’ Trujilo observed, ‘and that made them mad.’

‘I don’t see how we’ll do any better,’ Cross said, slapping the hatch. ‘It feels like solid steel.’ He looked around. ‘I can’t see an access panel.’

‘The mechanisms of a Sanctus Haven are subtle,’ Clavel said, ‘and their portals are forged from titanium. Step aside, captain.’

*You’re not even bothering to pretend anymore,* Cross thought as he made room for the commissar. *Is that because it doesn’t matter now that we’re here?*

Clavel placed his palm on the crown of the thorn, paused for several seconds, then traced the length of its spike, paused again then swiped to the left and followed the curve of the chains towards their apex. He hesitated, then removed

his hand and began the sequence again.

‘What’s he doing?’ Trujilo asked, frowning.

‘I’d guess there’s some kind of haptic sensor embedded in the hatch.’ Cross was intrigued despite his suspicions. He’d been a scholar before he became a soldier and the old curiosity was still strong. ‘It’s probably coded to recognise a specific tactile pattern.’ Trujilo looked at him blankly. ‘You open it with gestures,’ Cross clarified. ‘Though I’m not convinced *he* knows them,’ he added as Clavel started over yet again.

Many attempts later there was a sonorous chime and the hatch began to rotate clockwise, corkscrewing slowly inwards as it spun. When it was nearly three feet deep it veered sharply into a recess to the right.

‘Touch nothing,’ Clavel instructed before stepping through.

The chamber beyond was small, its domed vault less than fifteen feet overhead. A stone table occupied the far side of the chamber, its surface inset with panels of machinery whose dials and readouts glowed softly, evidently still powered despite the passing of a century. A high-backed chair had been overturned near the table; it lay among a jumble of books and loose scrolls, suggesting they had been scattered in the same moment. To the left was a recessed alcove containing an empty bunk and basic subsistence facilities. To the right was a shrine.

‘Seven Hells,’ Cross breathed as he studied the relic at the shrine’s heart. It was a circular bas-relief forged from dark bronze and nailed to the wall with massive spikes. The subject was a skein of stars entangled by thorns, at the centre of which was a huge, geometrically scarred face. Its eyes were screwed tightly shut and its jaws clenched against the agony of the barbs that pierced it. The effigy was resplendent with terror and torment, yet that aquiline face was unmistakable. Cross had seen it depicted a thousand times over on his travels.

It was the God-Emperor of mankind.

‘There’s nobody here,’ Trujilo murmured. ‘How does that add up?’

*It doesn’t,* Cross thought uneasily. *Someone locked themselves up in here. Where did they go?*

There was a mechanical grinding sound from above as the shutters covering the dome retracted. The sky beyond the stained glass offered little reprieve from the darkness, though it was still only midday.

‘The power core is still running,’ Clavel said from the control table. ‘They’re built to last for centuries, but I couldn’t be sure until we were inside.’ He pulled a hololith crystal from a slot on the panel and stowed it in his backpack, along with several data cubes, then knelt and began to sort through the fallen books.

‘You’re not a commissar,’ Cross said, joining him at the console.

‘I served in that capacity for many years,’ Clavel replied as he searched, ‘but the Imperium required a higher duty of me.’ He nodded as he found a tome bound in azure-hued leather. Stowing the book in his pack, he returned to the console.

‘There’s nobody in here,’ Cross said. ‘Doesn’t that strike you as strange?’

‘It is irrelevant to our objective.’ Clavel fiddled with some dials and the vox caster embedded in the panel crackled into life. It looked like a powerful set, probably capable of broadcasting across the entire Koronatus Ring, perhaps even into orbit.

‘Our objective...’ Cross began, but Clavel silenced him with a sharp gesture.

‘War is not a binary condition,’ he said into the speaker grille, keeping his tone precise and formal.

*‘Nothing has changed,’* a flat voice replied almost immediately, as if it had been awaiting his transmission.

‘Everything has changed.’

*It’s a code phrase,* Cross realised.

*‘Authorisation approved, Calavera Five,’* the stranger said. *‘What is your status?’*

‘Primary and ancillary objectives are secure,’ Clavel replied, ‘but my incursion in the abbey may have ignited the Wildfire event.’

There was a pause. *‘That is acceptable. All Imperial assets are in place for strategic assessment. Delaying Wildfire is unlikely to yield further significant data.’*

‘I require an extraction.’

*‘Confirmed, we are acquiring your position now.’* The vox fell silent.

‘Who are you?’ Cross demanded, levelling his pistol at the pale-eyed man. Without hesitation Trujilo followed suit with his rifle.

Clavel arched an eyebrow at the guns, but his composure didn’t waver. ‘I am someone who can offer you a chance to live.’

‘That didn’t work out so well for the Gallows Dancers,’ Trujilo said sourly.

‘They died in the God-Emperor’s service, trooper.’ Clavel reached slowly for his collar. ‘I am not going for a weapon,’ he cautioned as he tugged a plain silver amulet from under his jacket. At a press of his thumb it flicked open, revealing a small ruby rosette. Set into its heart was a stylised silver column inscribed with a cyclopean skull.

‘Operative Clavel of the Calavera Conclave,’ said the commissar-who-was-not.

‘Ordo Xenos.’

‘The Cradle of the Misborn has been desecrated, Gyre Magus,’ Xithauli reported, her eyes closed. ‘Many of the Blessed Ones have been slaughtered.’

Vyrunas regarded his disciple keenly: psychic energy coiled about her slender frame, tracing flickering mandalas in sympathy with her displeasure. She had become a fiery beacon at the summit of the Mandira Veritas as she communed with the gestalt spirit of the Spiral Dawn.

‘I did not see it,’ Vyrunas admitted. In truth he saw very little anymore. His vigour was fading fast, and with it his perception.

‘I have dispatched a coterie of Acolytes to the abbey,’ Xithauli said, opening her eyes. ‘The heretics will never leave Spire Castitas.’

‘I concur.’

‘Even if they are silenced, war will come, Gyre Magus.’

*And you hunger for it, Vyrunas recognised, along with all our kind.*

The Ravening was pounding in the hearts of the kindred now, stirring their blood into righteous violence as the Chrysaor’s influence waxed. Even Vyrunas felt the call to war, though it was a muted echo for him.

*It is time for Xithauli to take my mantle, he decided. She is a magus and more than ready to lead us alongside the Chrysaor.*

‘I will go to the outsiders’ bastion,’ Vyrunas said. ‘The heretic priest is dead and their terror walks among them. I shall offer them salvation.’

‘It is too late.’

‘Perhaps, but I must try.’ Vyrunas tilted his staff horizontally across his chest and offered it to her. ‘I await your blessing, Gyre Magus,’ he said.

Xithauli regarded him in silence for a long moment, hesitating out of respect rather than uncertainty. She knew it was her time.

‘So the Spiral flows,’ she intoned finally and took the staff. ‘You have my blessing, Vyrunas.’

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Though it was past midday the blackout hadn't let up, but it was a pale shadow of the deeper darkness that oppressed the Locker. The troopers went about their duties as if nothing had changed, losing themselves in the counterfeit comforts of routine in silence. Talk was too dangerous. Talk risked straying onto the horror in the temple. Under other circumstances Command might have covered up the savage desecration, but too many men had seen it – an entire congregation turning up for morning prayers. No, there had been no silencing the whispers, not until dread itself had done what Command couldn't, because once everyone knew the story nobody wanted to talk about it, at least not until the blackout had run its course. For now the Black Flags just had to hold steady and stay sharp.

Sergeant Alonzo Grijalva understood all this, but the Driftwood recruit posted with him in the watchtower didn't have the instincts for it yet. All the boy wanted to do was *talk*.

'Nine men, chief,' Jei was saying as he poured fresh recaff, 'how could someone kill nine men without nobody seeing nothing?' He handed Grijalva a steaming mug. 'All in one night...' The youth shook his head, trying to look sombre.

*He can't see himself as one of the nine, Grijalva realised. Dying's still impossible for him – something that happens to other people.*

They were in the watchtower's small guardroom. The hatch to the upper level was closed, as were the doors leading onto the bastion walls. There was no point standing outside in a blackout. Besides, one of the murdered men had been snatched from a tower top and Grijalva wasn't going to tempt fates without good reason.

'Connant said their heads was gone,' Jei was jabbering, 'torn right off, even the preacher...'

There was a hammering at the western door and Grijalva almost spilled his recaff. The next patrol wasn't due for another fifteen minutes.

'Watchword!' he snapped as Jei started to throw the bolt. The youth threw him a salute and spoke a challenge into the door grille.

'Skyshadows,' a rough voice replied.

Grijalva nodded and Jei opened the door. A burly Guardsman shuffled in with the wind. He pulled off his rebreather as the youth slammed the hatch shut behind him. His greatcoat was filthy and he reeked of something worse than sulphur.

'Bad out there,' the newcomer said. 'Word is it'll last days yet.' His accent was so thick it slurred his voice.

'I've seen worse,' Grijalva said, frowning as he recognised the Szilar sergeant's walleyes. The man had always been a troublemaker. 'What's your business here, Trazgo? You're not on the wall rota.'

'Off-duty.' Trazgo shrugged. 'You got any recaff to spare, comrade?'

'Our recaff's for the patrols.'

'No matter, can't stay long anyway. I'm walking the whole fort.'

'You said you were off-duty?'

'Different kind of duty,' Trazgo said gravely. '*Sacred* kind.'

'Well ours is just the regular kind, so...'

'I'm spreading the word. Last night was a *sign* – a warning to the faithless.'

Grijalva frowned. 'You saying you know something about the slaughter?'

'I know there's worse to come,' Trazgo said. 'The Eighth is tainted, comrade. Been that way since Oblazt. The colonel isn't right in the head – or the soul.'

'I've heard he paints,' Jei piped in, 'but never lets nobody see.'

'You ever wonder *why*, boy?' Trazgo said darkly. 'Him and his puppet preacher put us all on the road to the damnation.' He hawked and spat. 'Emperor's justice caught up to Lazaro last night and it's coming for the rest of us.'

'You've said your piece,' Grijalva said. 'I'll be sure to pass your thoughts on to Major Kazán. Now get out of my tower.'

'Easy, comrade.' Trazgo raised his hands. 'Just doing my duty to the God Emperor... trying to save some souls.' He nodded at Jei. 'You still got your spiral aquila, Driftwood?'

'I...'

'I'd wear it, boy.' Trazgo headed for the opposite door and paused. 'Think it over, comrades. And remember, justice walks by night.'

'What was that about, chief?' Jei asked when the Szilar was gone.

‘Nothing good, lad,’ Grijalva said. It was going to be a long day.

*And a longer night*, he thought warily. A man’s eyes couldn’t tell the difference between day and night during a blackout, but his soul was sharper.

One of the colonel’s abhuman bodyguards stood in a pool of light outside the temple door, an oversized rebreather covering its face. It raised its maul as two figures approached from the darkness.

‘The colonel sent for me,’ Captain Omazet said, meeting the armoured guard’s gaze sternly. It jabbed its maul questioningly at the shorter figure. ‘The medicae,’ Omazet answered. ‘She is with me. Let us past, paladin.’

Ariken imagined the guard’s sluggish mind testing this puzzle: it had expected one person and received two. Finally it decided the first qualified the second and stepped aside.

‘Steel yourself,’ Omazet warned as they entered.

Colonel Talasca was waiting in the chancel, his back to the door as he studied the altar. He was alone save for the dead, who were many.

*No...* Ariken froze at the threshold. Redemption had hardened her to suffering and death, but nothing had prepared her for the atrocity perpetrated here. Eight corpses lolled in the pews, headless and encrusted with old blood. Another hung above the altar, dangling from the rafters by its feet so its lifeblood had gushed onto the sacred stone. Ariken moaned as she recognised the brown cassock of the hanging cadaver. Talasca spun round at the sound, his hand whipping to the hilt of his sword.

‘You requested my presence, Retriever,’ Omazet said. Ariken knew her captain had already seen this carnage – all the senior officers had. Even so, her composure was admirable. Nothing could have compelled Ariken to *return* to this slaughterhouse.

‘I asked you to attend me alone, captain,’ Talasca said.

‘Ariken is my aide,’ Omazet replied. ‘Her blade is my own. And she has a sharp mind.’

Talasca regarded Ariken, his eyes narrowing to silver slits in the gloom. ‘Then tell me, girl, how did the preacher die?’

*‘With the Retriever everything is a test,’* Omazet had warned Ariken many times. *‘When he tests you – and one day he will – look to the essence of his question.’*

Ariken indicated the broken eviscerator sword lying near the altar. ‘He died a warrior,’ she answered with a ferocity she didn’t feel, ‘with fire in his heart and a

blade in his hand.’

‘Spoken like a Black Flag,’ Talasca approved. He returned his attention to the hanging corpse. ‘Enginseer Tarcante believes the butcher returned here many times during the night, bearing a new... *offering* on each occasion. I do not know when the preacher died, but I am certain his killer tasted his contempt.’

‘He was a great warrior,’ Omazet agreed.

‘He was the *soul* of the Eighth, captain! This desecration strikes at the regiment itself. It mocks everything we are!’ He stepped away from the altar and Ariken saw the scars gouged into its facade. It took her a moment to recognise the spiky lines as a word. Blood had run into the fissures, illuminating it against the white stone, yet she couldn’t quite read it...

‘*Don’t*,’ Omazet hissed, as if reading her thoughts. ‘It is a scar upon the soul.’

‘But *you* are familiar with the name are you not, captain?’ Talasca asked.

‘I am a Black Flag officer. I studied the Lays of Vassago when I took the oath of command.’ Omazet paused, then hissed through her teeth. ‘Is this an *accusation*, Retriever?’

‘No, Captain Omazet, it is a sacred commission. I believe there is a Night Weaver among us.’ Talasca smiled, betraying his madness. ‘And I want you to find it.’

‘Shark Senka requesting egress,’ Kazimyr Senka voxed the gatehouse. ‘Watchword is “icefire”. Let me through please.’

‘*Confirmed*,’ a voice replied. ‘*I don’t envy you, Senka. It’s like the Trench out there today.*’

‘I’ve seen worse, friend.’

The gates opened and Senka sped out onto the mesa, pushing his Sentinel hard despite the darkness. It had been too long since he’d last escaped the Locker’s confines, and he relished the speed. After the deaths at Outpost Six many of the perimeter bunkers had been abandoned and there were fewer patrols. Though Command had tried to cover up what had happened to Benedek and Cridd, rumours had leaked, as they always did in a Black Flag regiment.

*Of course I helped them along this time*, Senka thought, smiling.

He veered off from his allotted course and headed for Hope. The detour would take a couple of hours, but with so many outposts deserted he had plenty of time. Nobody would notice the deviation.

‘We’re free now,’ he whispered to his Sentinel as they strode across the mesa.

It appalled him that he had been a slave for so long – or that he had seen his

fellow Sharks as *brothers*. Every one of them was cut from the same austere mould. They were all minor Lethan aristocrats, sober, unimaginative men who loved their Sentinels more than the wives and children they had left behind when they joined the Astra Militarum. And Kazimyr Senka had been one of them, following obediently in that same banal tradition – marrying at eighteen and siring twin sons before abandoning them to serve the Throne, secure in the knowledge that his family’s wealth would provide for them in his absence.

*I was blind, but now I see,* he thought with fierce joy. *My Xithauli gave me sight!*

Senka hadn’t seen the priestess for months now, but they would be together after Redemption was liberated and that day was coming soon. He wondered if tonight’s summons was from her. As always, the message had come via Trazgo, telling him to stop off at the city on tonight’s patrol. The Szilar sergeant had also given him a small satchel to deliver.

*‘Be careful,’* Trazgo had cautioned. *‘If you’re caught with it Command will have your skin.’*

*‘What is it?’*

*‘Refractor field generator.’* Trazgo had grinned. *‘The colonel’s own.’*

*‘How...?’*

*‘A brother in the keep.’*

Senka saw twin lights burgeoning in the darkness ahead. Wary of a collision, he slowed and veered aside, though the approaching vehicle wasn’t moving fast. Moments later a mesa buggy appeared. Its sleek carriage was framed between big, spiked wheels and a silver spiral adorned its bonnet.

*It’s coming from Hope,* Senka gauged as they passed each other, *and heading for the Locker.*

*‘Spiral ward you, brothers,’* he said automatically. Then he sped forward again, eager for the lights of the city and the beautiful woman who surely waited there.

Searchlights pinned the buggy as it approached the fort’s gates.

*‘Who goes there?’* a voice demanded from the vehicle’s vox.

*‘I bear the revered Gyre Magus,’* the hooded cultist behind the wheel said as he slowed to a stop. *‘Your commander is expecting him.’*

*‘Hold position and await instructions.’*

*‘My magus?’* the driver asked the passenger sitting behind him.

*‘Comply,’* Vyrunas answered. *‘They will admit us.’*

*‘Understood, Gyre Magus.’*

*Gyre Magus*, Vyrunas thought. Though Xithauli had allowed him to retain the title for this final undertaking it felt like a sham. They were both irrevocably magi by blood, but there could only be one Gyre Magus.

*I shall not see the Spiral Father again*, Vyrunas reflected as he waited. *Whatever happens here tonight, my service to Him will be complete.*

When Vyrunas had last descended to the Gyre Sanctum the prophet's will had almost consumed him, dragging him into a whirlpool of waking dreams he couldn't begin to grasp. He had risen five days later, his body wracked with pain and his mind twisted out of shape. The heretics had made his lord's visions savage, yet when Vyrunas had looked into His eyes there had been only wisdom and an infinite tenderness.

*'The kindred of Redemption are part of something greater,'* the Spiral Father had whispered into his mind. *'Truth flows through our blood like a silver cord, connecting us to our transcendent kin between the stars. Someday they will come for us and we shall be made whole again.'*

'I will not see it,' Vyrunas whispered, looking within himself for the sadness that so often afflicted outsiders, but finding only serenity. He knew Xithauli disdained such introspection, but Vyrunas believed it deepened his understanding of the outsiders, sharpening his ability to draw them into the Spiral.

*We are both magi, yet we are not the same*, he decided. *I was born to work in shadows, she in blood. Perhaps that is why my time is truly over.*

Kangre Talasca was perched on a pew among the headless dead, his eyes fixed on the hanging body of the preacher, as if by becoming one with the congregation he might see what they had seen. Major Rostyk had wanted the bodies removed and decently buried, but the colonel had forbidden it.

'You have too much to tell me yet,' Talasca whispered to the dead.

It was said that madmen could not doubt their own sanity, therefore to suspect madness in oneself was a proof of sanity, but Talasca knew that was nonsense. He had never doubted his madness, but he recognised its divinity and embraced it, for it was the kind that bore insights.

One such insight had led him to set the Witch Captain on the trail of the daemon that stalked the Locker. She was an enigma within the regiment – a clever tactician and a skilled fighter, but in place of a soul she had only a shadow. Without her guidance the Eighth would have been lost on the ice fields of Oblazt. Every man in the regiment knew it and hated her for it, but the Black Flags honoured their blood debts. Sometimes Talasca feared her madness might

be holier than his own.

*The Night Weaver will be her test, he decided. If she is truly blessed by the God-Emperor she will prevail.*

His vox crackled. *'The ambassador is here, sir.'*

'Bring him to the temple,' Talasca said. Another of his insights had moved him to receive the Gyre Magus in this slaughterhouse. He wanted to see Vyrunas' face when he entered. That would tell him more than a thousand words ever could.

*'You're cleared for entry to the Locker, Gyre Magus,'* the gatekeeper voxed. *'The colonel will send someone for you.'*

'Proceed,' Vyrunas told the driver as the steel doors parted.

A squad of soldiers were waiting for the vehicle in the courtyard beyond.

'Shall I accompany you, Gyre Magus?' the driver asked, glancing at Vyrunas in the mirror. The weariness in that desiccated face went far beyond natural exhaustion...

The driver snapped the chain of thought quickly. His passenger might sense it as *doubt*.

'No, remain here,' Vyrunas said, pulling up his cowl. 'Fulfil your duty to the Spiral, brother.'

The driver felt the breath of the ancient's will, but it was only a cursory, disinterested touch. After all, he was nothing but a common human cultist.

'Spiral ward you, Gyre Magus,' he said as Vyrunas climbed out of the vehicle. He waited until the soldiers had escorted their charge away before letting the veneer of his faith fall away. Then his hands began to shake, the tremors spreading swiftly through his body until he had to grit his teeth to stop them chattering. Keeping the mental facade intact throughout the journey had almost broken him. He'd learned to guard his thoughts closely in the Spires, but this was the *Gyre Magus*.

*I wouldn't have lasted a moment if the bastard had looked directly at me,* the driver realised. He was still amazed he'd managed to secure this duty, but it had been a huge gamble getting this close to a magus. He'd counted on his passenger's arrogance, but it was probably Vyrunas' exhaustion that had saved him.

*The old man is dying,* he thought. *No! Not a man,* he corrected himself angrily. *Never make that mistake!*

Steeling himself, the driver got out of the buggy and raised his arms as guards

surrounded him.

‘I need to see Captain Omazet,’ he said.

The Witch Captain sat on a prayer mat with her back straight and her legs crossed in a rigid lotus position. Her eyes were fixed on the Imperial mandala that hung on the wall of her chamber. It had always helped her find clarity.

In her old regiment Adeola Omazet had been called ‘Le Mal Kalfu’. She had been an officer, but also a preacher of sorts, though her gospel had focussed entirely on the Emperor’s most ruthless aspect, as the arbiter of His species. Like her god, she showed those who strayed little mercy. Her former charges had feared her more than any commissar, for she could read the slightest doubt in a face or a voice, but they had also venerated her as a dark saint.

The Black Flags were no different.

Yet for all her talents, Omazet was not a psyker. She had no innate ability to track the spoor of a daemon. Then again, she wasn’t convinced it *was* a daemon that walked among them. The atrocity at the temple seemed too contrived. *Too convenient almost...*

There was a tapping at her door.

‘Enter,’ Omazet said. She expected Ariken, but it was Nyulaszi. The Shank Sergeant hesitated at the threshold. None of her company would trespass into her chamber, even those few she favoured.

‘We have a visitor, captain,’ Nyulaszi said. ‘One of the spiralheads. He says he’s cut loose from the cult. Says you know him.’

‘Bharlo,’ Omazet guessed, staring into the mandala.

Ariken’s squad took Trazgo just before nightfall, encircling him as he shuffled into the infirmary. He had visited just about everywhere else in the fort so she’d been expecting her turn. The Szilar sergeant sized up the troopers and shook his head, dismissing the guns levelled at him.

‘You going to murder a Throne-loving man in cold blood?’ he asked.

‘I’ll ask the questions,’ Ariken said, facing him squarely.

‘Did the skull-faced bitch put you up to this?’ Trazgo asked, eying her company insignia.

‘You approached my squad today – others too, all over the fort,’ Ariken challenged. ‘We asked around.’

‘Just doing my rounds. I’m a sergeant, *corporal*.’

‘Off-duty, you told us,’ Heike, a stocky, shaven-headed woman said. The former manufactorum overseer was tougher than the rest of the squad combined.

‘A real soldier, he’s *never* off-duty, Driftwood,’ Trazgo mocked.

‘You know something about the murders,’ Ariken said.

‘Do I, girl?’

‘You said it was the Emperor’s judgement,’ Heike hissed, jabbing her shotgun at him. ‘As good as threatened the rest of us!’

Ariken could feel things slipping out of control. Her friends – *her troops* – were frightened. Almost everyone in the fort was, but these people were only a hairsbreadth away from being civilians. Any moment now someone was going to shoot this degenerate.

‘We don’t want to die,’ Ariken said more gently. ‘You know something, sergeant. We just want to be a part of it.’ She stepped closer to him, trying and failing to connect with those ambivalent eyes. The reek from his greatcoat was nauseating. ‘We were sworn to the Unfolding once.’

She held something up. His right eye flicked to the metal spiral in her hand while the left remained fixed on her forehead.

‘Can you save us, sergeant?’ Ariken urged.

‘I can show you a miracle.’ Trazgo smiled, revealing yellow teeth.

The Gyre Magus regarded the carnage in silence. Waiting beside the violated altar, Talasca searched the ancient priest’s face, evaluating every nuance of expression with his augmented vision. He saw neither horror nor revulsion there. *Distaste* perhaps, but even that didn’t run deep. He sensed it was the *messiness* of the scene that troubled Vyrunas. The carnage offended the magus’ instinct for order. It was precisely the sterile, soulless response Talasca had expected, but when Vyrunas finally spoke his words were unexpected.

‘Our time runs short, Retriever. The daemon is growing stronger.’

‘You believe this incursion was daemoniac, Gyre Magus?’ Talasca couldn’t hide his surprise.

‘As do you,’ Vyrunas said. ‘We have both stood against corruption long enough to recognise its stain. That is why I have come to you, Retriever.’

‘I admit your request for a meeting was unexpected.’

‘When I heard of this outrage...’ Vyrunas swept a hand across the scene, ‘I knew I could hesitate no longer.’ He walked along the aisle towards Talasca, the hem of his robes trailing through runnels of dried blood. ‘The Spiral Dawn has also suffered such atrocities. Many of our temples have been despoiled and our priests slaughtered. It grieves me that the evil has found you. We endeavoured to shield you from its thirst.’

‘Shield us?’ Talasca asked blearily, trying to make sense of the elder’s words. His thoughts felt sluggish and crowded with shadows.

‘This world is both sacred and profane, Retriever. The Koronatus Ring is a divine *weapon* – the Spires are its seven-pronged blade and the shrines its beating heart. We who watch over them are bound to the God-Emperor by a sacrament aeons old.’

Vyrunas’ eyes glittered as he drew closer, dimming everything around him and deepening the shadows in Talasca’s mind.

‘Before the Spiral Dawn, the Sacred Thorn carried the burden,’ Vyrunas continued, ‘and before them, the Resplendent Angels. Countless others have stood against the darkness that shrieks and weeps and hungers beneath this world.’ He stopped before the colonel and extended his hands, palms upwards. ‘Now I call upon you, Kangre Talasca. Stand with us in the God-Emperor’s name!’

Talasca stared at the magus, his mind ablaze with the tormented *glory* of the words.

*I want to believe, he realised. It is all I have ever wanted.*

‘You’ll find what you’re looking for inside,’ Trazgo said, pointing at a hazy silver shape ahead. The wrecked ship lay at the eastern edge of the landing field, where it had crashed over a century ago. Most of its vast bulk was buried, but the tail section jutted from the ground. There was a dark fissure in its silver shell.

‘I don’t understand,’ Ariken said.

‘That’s why you’ve come to learn.’ Trazgo smirked. ‘Don’t worry, I know the way.’ He stepped towards the wreck, but Heike blocked him.

‘I don’t like it,’ she said. There was a chorus of agreement from the rest of the squad. ‘I ain’t going in there. Not at night anyways.’

Ariken checked her chrono. Her friend was right. True night had fallen.

‘What’s in there?’ she pressed Trazgo.

‘Truth,’ he said. ‘If you want it.’

‘Embrace the Sacred Spiral of the God-Emperor,’ Vyrunas entreated. ‘Seize your destiny, Retriever!’

The magus’ whole body was trembling under the strain of the psychic web he was weaving over Talasca – and by the madness he was *un-weaving* inside the man. The colonel was weeping now, his tears stained red by revelation and the weight of Vyrunas’ will as he was dragged towards the Spiral. The process was infinitesimally delicate, but it was the man himself that harrowed Vyrunas.

Talasca's soul was a barbed tangle of self-loathing and rage. Walking his thoughts was like navigating a polluted, eternally coiling river that led nowhere. The magus' own sanity was dissolving in its black waters as doubts and deliriums he couldn't comprehend assaulted him.

*The outsider's mind is poisonous,* Vyrunas recognised. *He has been touched by the Dark Beneath the Spires. He—*

Something thudded into Vyrunas' back. The magus looked down and saw the tip of a blade jutting from his ribs. Before his eyes it jerked forward, trailing bright agony through his chest and splashing Talasca with blood. There was more pain as the blade was yanked free. Choking, Vyrunas staggered around to face his attacker and saw a woman with the face of a skull. Before she could strike again, the magus lashed out with a whip of psychic force and threw her across the hall.

'Spiral flay you!' Vyrunas hissed.

Coughing blood and streamers of psychic energy, the magus turned to Talasca as the colonel's blade arced towards him. There was a moment of bright agony before the world was swept out from under him and he was spinning wildly through the air, his perspective whirling about too swiftly to comprehend. Mustering the last of his will, he slowed his perception of time and saw a robed corpse standing before Talasca. Blood was bursting from the raw wound of its neck in a sluggish fountain. As the headless man crumpled, Vyrunas understood that he had failed.

*Let the Ravening come then,* he conceded.

Then he let go and dropped into nothingness.

A savage bellow echoed from the fissure in the wrecked ship. It was utterly inhuman, but there was no mistaking the fury and pain behind it. Ariken's comrades stared at each other, their eyes wide behind their masks. There was another roar, closer this time.

'Form up!' Ariken ordered, levelling her laspistol at the rift. 'This is why we're here.'

Her squad obeyed hesitantly, those with rifles kneeling as they covered the dark entrance. Trazgo chuckled softly as he watched them.

Ariken tried her vox bead: 'Bridge, this is Squad Three-One. Over.' The answering voice was drenched in static. Even at this range the blackout was killing their comms. 'Bridge, we have a situation at the landing field.'

'You could run,' Trazgo suggested.

‘Shut up, scum!’ Heike snapped.

‘Truth can’t be silenced.’

‘I said—’ A third roar cut her off as something vast and dark burst from the fissure.

‘Blessed One!’ Trazgo called. ‘I come bearing penitents.’

The twisted giant whirled towards his voice and strode forward on massive reverse-jointed legs. To their credit the troopers held their ground and opened fire. A hail of las bolts lanced through the darkness, scorching the beast’s hide in a hundred places, but it kept coming, wading into the barrage with two of its claws warding its face.

*Sacred Throne save us*, Ariken prayed as she glimpsed the nest of tentacles behind its shielding claws.

As the abomination drew closer Heike opened up with her shotgun, carving deep cavities into its flesh. With a shriek of rage, Trazgo leapt at her, grappling for the weapon as the beast loomed over them.

‘Scatter!’ Ariken yelled, diving aside as a serrated hook arced towards her. It swept past and raked through the chest of the trooper beside her, hurling him into the air in a welter of blood. A grasping claw snatched another man by the head and swung him about like a crude meat whip. Heike threw Trazgo off and rolled aside as the giant trampled through them, crushing the traitor underfoot. Moments later it was gone.

*It wasn’t after us*, Ariken realised as she watched it disappear into the main compound. *We were just in the way.*

But even distracted, the abomination had left carnage in its wake. Broken bodies were scattered around her, at least three of them dead. Others were moaning from deep slashes or shattered bones. Among them was Trazgo, though Ariken could tell at a glance that he was finished. His abdomen was a pulped red ruin and his limbs were contorted into unnatural angles. He glanced up as she stepped towards him.

‘They lied to us all,’ Ariken told him.

His lips tried to coax words from his ruptured throat, but only blood came. As he began to retch she shot him between his crooked eyes.

‘Should’ve let the bastard choke,’ Heike said, limping over to her. She was one of the few who’d escaped serious injury.

‘That’s not who we are,’ Ariken said, throwing her spiral pendant onto the traitor’s corpse. ‘We need to sound the alarm.’

The Terror stormed through the fortress, seeking the heretics who had defiled the Sacred Spiral. The hidden god watching from behind its eyes had unshackled Tizheruk from its restraints. Freed from the imperatives of stealth, the beast rampaged, roaring as it raked its claws along the heretics' walls. Sometimes enemies appeared from their boxy lairs and scurried about, striking at its hide with their pitiful weapons until they were crushed.

'*Tizz-ah-rukk!*' the behemoth bellowed as a tall metal beast on spindly legs stomped towards it from the darkness. The strider answered Tizheruk's challenge with a grinding machine roar and vomited a hail of sharp lights from its single stubby arm. It was like the fiery spittle of the small heretics, but faster and much hotter. Tizheruk reeled and staggered back from the assault, shielding its eyes as the burning lights chewed into its flesh. The metal beast followed, but its attack wavered, as if it was catching its breath.

Without hesitation the Terror hurled itself forward and clasped one of the strider's legs with its split right arm, while hacking at its iron sinews with the hooked claw of its left. The strider trampled about, trying to dislodge its tormentor, but Tizheruk clung on, worrying at its leg until something vital gave way and it buckled. The Terror leapt away as its foe teetered and keeled over, spewing flames. A heretic crawled from its body, but the beast grabbed him and shook him violently until he fell apart.

The fight had slowed Tizheruk and there was a harsh wailing coming from all sides now, drawing more of the heretics. Dimly it felt strength leaching from its battered body. Its hook had snapped in half and one of its legs trailed weakly, but its god urged it onwards. Growling low in its throat, the Terror lurched on, surrendering to its master's guiding hand as they hunted the true prey together.

'How did you know?' Talasca asked as he searched among the pews.

'I set a spy among them,' Omazet said, 'though truthfully I never expected him to return.' She was still slumped against the wall where the psychic blast had thrown her. Her carapace armour had absorbed most of the impact, but her body felt like one big bruise. 'He told me the magus had come to see you. That troubled me.'

'I am in your debt once more, captain.' Talasca bent and picked something up. Omazet saw it was the charred husk of Vyrunas' head, scorched by his final psychic exertion.

'The heretic tried to *turn* me,' Talasca hissed, holding up the head with both hands and peering into its cauterised eye sockets. 'I felt him in my mind,

twisting my honour against me with half-truths.'

'We need to hear my spy's story, colonel.' Omazet rose painfully. 'He said something is happening in the city.'

'Can he be trusted?'

Something rammed into the wall behind the altar, cracking its bas-relief aquila and scattering dust across the chamber. Talasca dropped Vyrunas' head and drew his sword and bolt pistol.

'Karolus, to me,' he said into his collar vox, alerting the paladin that stood watch outside the temple.

As the chamber shook under another assault, Omazet joined Talasca, her twin power machetes already unsheathed. The next attack sent deep fractures racing through the wall.

'It would be prudent to withdraw, colonel,' she said.

'Yes,' he agreed, but he remained motionless. Omazet saw he was smiling – eager for retribution after the violation of his mind. She understood completely.

The wall collapsed in a shower of debris that buried the altar and set the hanging body of the preacher swinging like a morbid pendulum. A blasphemous aberration heaved itself over the rubble, trailing the dead weight of its ruined right leg behind it. The beast's hide was a riot of gashes and burns, many of them still smoking, but its blue eyes were sharp.

'*Tizz-ah-rukk*,' it hissed wetly.

As the giant lumbered towards them the officers stepped to either side, hoping to confuse it, but it fixed on Talasca immediately, as if he had always been its target. He danced backward, firing wildly and parrying with his sword as the beast barged through the pews after him, scattering corpses in its wake. Omazet followed behind, slashing and stabbing at its chitin-plated back until she reached softer flesh. With a hiss it swung round and lashed out with its distended, twin-clawed arm. The talons raked deep grooves in her breastplate and sent her staggering away, but barbed tendrils whipped out from its ribcage and hooked into her armour, catching her before she could fall. Hissing eagerly, the beast reeled her towards its tentacle-fringed maw.

*This is not how I die*, Omazet thought calmly.

The tendril hooks were torn away as a hulking abhuman barrelled into her attacker with a slab-like shield. The impetus of the charge propelled both giants into the rubble-strewn altar, but the beast took the brunt of the impact. Crushed between steel and stone, it snarled and tried to lash past the shield, but its remaining arm was trapped. Grunting with strain, Talasca's bodyguard ground

his foe against the stone until he was rewarded with a staccato chorus of shattering carapace. He backed off, then renewed his assault with his crackling power maul, battering the spasm-wracked abomination. With a cry of fury, Omazet staggered alongside him and added her machetes to the attack. A moment later Talasca joined them, hacking with his power sword.

It took the abomination a long time to die.

True night had fallen over the abbey by the time Clavel's extraction vessel arrived. Cross heard a sudden roar of engines from above and a shadow fell across the sanctum's dome.

*'Valkyrie Alpha in position,'* a voice hissed from the vox-set on the table. *'Breaching dome in sixty seconds. Confirm, Calavera Five?'*

'Confirmed,' Clavel responded. He turned to Cross and Trujilo. 'We need to evacuate the sanctum.' Neither of them argued.

The gunship opened fire shortly after they reached the corridor outside. Remarkably, the reinforced glass held for several seconds before surrendering with a cataclysmic crash.

'Why drag us through that hellhole?' Cross demanded. 'Why didn't you just blast through the damned dome from the start?'

'Breaching the haven forcibly would have triggered a data-wipe,' Clavel said. 'That was not an option.'

Nothing remained of the dome when they returned. The sanctum was covered in broken glass and most of its contents were shredded. The control console was a ruin, but Cross saw the malevolent bas-relief shrine had escaped unscathed. Somehow that didn't surprise him.

Cross stared at the giant face. It was staring right back at him with wide-open, painted eyes.

*They were closed before,* he thought, his blood running cold.

A rope dropped from the gunship hovering above and he glimpsed armoured figures moving about in its open hatch. Without a word, Clavel grabbed the line and they began to winch him up.

'What's our play, captain?' Trujilo asked.

'I think we're out of choices,' Cross said, his attention returning to the bronze idol. 'We can't go back and I'll be damned if I stay here.'

As he was hauled out of the sanctum someone whispered to him from below, her voice so faint it was little more than a memory of sound: *'Look at me, Ambrose Templeton...'*

It was a woman's voice, withered with age and sickness, yet the mind behind it had seen his true name. If he obeyed her request, Cross feared he would see *her* eyes staring back from the bronze face.

He didn't look back.

## CHAPTER NINE

Kazimyr Senka loved Hope. True to its name, the city was a bastion of freedom in the shadow of Imperial oppression. It hid its true face behind a mask of misery, but that would soon change.

*We won't have to hide much longer!* Senka thought fiercely.

As he approached the city's outskirts a large truck raced forward to meet him, its wheels bouncing across the dirt road. Its carriage was reinforced with riveted iron plates and the flat wedge of its front was fitted with massive cylinders lined with buzz-saw teeth.

*Those look strong enough to grind through stone,* he gauged.

The servo-arm jutting from the truck's deck carried a bulky laser weapon that Senka didn't recognise. He guessed it was designed for industrial work rather than combat, much like the vehicle itself, but he didn't doubt its lethality.

*'Identify yourself!'* a voice demanded from his vox as the big gun swivelled to track him.

*'Spiral Strider,'* he replied. *'The watch phrase is *Risen Truth.*'*

*'Welcome, brother!'*

The truck swung alongside him and the bald Neophyte operating the servo-arm flashed him the sign of the Spiral. The hallowed symbol was daubed across the truck's bodywork, though it was unlike any rendition Senka had seen before, its form jagged and lined with ridges. It was nothing like the flowing symbol Xithauli had tattooed between Senka's shoulder blades.

*It's more like a spiny worm...* He quashed a pang of apprehension. It was fitting that the sect would go to war under a harsher icon and leave the Sacred Spiral untarnished.

*'The reckoning is coming,'* he crooned to his Sentinel.

His hopes were confirmed as he reached Openhand Plaza, where his meeting

was scheduled. Powerful floodlights lit the square and he saw it had become the staging field for an army. Three more of the armoured trucks were parked along the perimeter, along with several buggies whose hoods had been fitted with guns. Music boomed from the vehicles, filling the square with discordant beats interlaced with swirling, organic harmonies. A throng of citizens in grey coveralls shuffled among the vehicles, hauling fuel drums and ammunition crates, while hairless, pale-skinned Neophyte cultists directed them. The cultists wore rubberised jumpsuits emblazoned with the Spiral Wurm, though some had upgraded their garb with scraps of armour. All were armed, most with autoguns, but here and there Senka saw more dangerous weapons – lasrifles, shotguns, flamers, even a plasma gun. One pair was carrying a massive, pronged cannon between them. He didn't recognise the gun, but like the trucks, he suspected its origins lay in Redemption's promethium industry.

*'Everything can become a weapon in the hands of the righteous,'* Xithauli had told him. *'Nothing is wasted!'*

White-robed Spiralfire Acolytes walked openly among the crowd, their hoods thrown back to reveal bulbous, bone-crested skulls and purple flesh. They moved in a loping crouch, as if they were stalking some unseen prey. Most sported deviant, chitin-covered arms in addition to the natural two, and their jutting jaws were filled with fangs. They were *hybrid* creatures, their kinship to the feral four-armed monsters Senka had occasionally glimpsed all too apparent.

*'Their kind are truly blessed by the Spiral,'* Xithauli had explained when Senka first encountered the Acolytes. *'They are drawn from the First and Second Paradigms of the kindred – champions born for holy war! Revere them, for the Spiral runs strong in their blood.'*

Despite her assurances, Senka found the Acolytes disturbing. There was a barely restrained violence about them that made his hackles rise. He understood that they were his brothers, but whenever they looked at him he sensed a cold hunger, as if *he* were the prey they hunted.

Four of the hybrids met him as he climbed from his vehicle. Their leader wore a Vassago breastplate, the black iron repainted a lurid magenta and embossed with the Spiral Wurm. The Acolyte's third arm terminated in a single scythe-like talon, but he also carried a fleshy, barb-tipped whip that writhed in his grip, as if with a life of its own.

'Brother!' the leader said wetly, his long tongue flitting between his fangs. 'I am Iaoguai, Iconward of the Spiralfire coterie. The Primus awaits you.'

'The Primus?' Senka asked, trying to hide his unease.

‘You knew him as the Chrysaor, but our lord’s apotheosis is now complete.’

Senka’s fear hardened. He had only encountered the cult’s secretive warlord once before, but that had been enough to last a lifetime. The man had questioned him doggedly about the regiment’s capabilities, his gaze unwavering and his voice laden with threat. Talking to him had been like navigating a maze of blades.

*Xithauli*, Senka thought over and over, using her name as a mantra to steady himself as the Acolytes led him to a tent at the centre of the square. He faltered as he saw the banner mounted outside. It was a swathe of flowing velvet, taller than a man and ribbed with silver spines to hold the material steady. A Spiral Wyrms adorned it in gold, set against a field of deep violet. Whorls of sharp obsidian hung from its hem and it was crowned with a long, crested skull inlaid with amethysts. The overall effect was utterly *alien*.

‘The sacred banner of the Spiral Wyrms,’ Iaoguai said proudly. ‘It shall be my honour to bear it into holy war.’ He ushered the dazed Sentinel pilot into the tent.

Primus Chrysaor stood behind a trestle table draped with a map that Senka immediately recognised as a plan of the Locker – after all, he had provided most of the details. The warlord had exchanged his robes for a leather trench coat with a high, gold-trimmed collar that flared behind his hairless head. It hung open, revealing a breastplate that appeared to be woven from melted bones. His human arms were folded, but the segmented third swept about restlessly, its three-fingered claw slicing the air.

*He’s worse than the Acolytes*, Senka thought with a stab of terror.

The warlord looked up from the map, almost as if he had smelt Senka’s fear. His visage was bestial, but it possessed an uncanny dignity that elevated him above the hybrids as a Space Marine stood above a common man.

‘Spiral Strider,’ the Primus greeted him, his voice sibilant, yet deep. ‘Did you bring the shield?’

‘I did, my lord.’ Senka held up the satchel Trazgo had given him.

The Primus smiled. It was monstrous. *And wondrous...*

*His eyes are like Xithauli’s*, Senka realised. Why hadn’t he noticed that before? Under that implacable, imperious gaze his doubts withered.

‘We have much to discuss, brother,’ the warlord said.

‘I am yours to command, my Primus!’

As Xithauli descended towards her lord’s sanctum she chanted an elegy of cessation for her dead predecessor. It was a mark of respect, but it was utterly

devoid of sentiment, for Xithauli was no more capable of sorrow than she was of pride in her ascendance. Vyrunas had urged her to study the emotions that plagued the outsiders, but Xithauli had never seen the need. In her experience manipulating their flaws was absurdly simple, and she had never shared her fellow magus' inquisitive streak.

*Perhaps his great age corroded his judgement towards the end,* she reflected.

She reached the conical antechamber at the foot of the steps and waited as its guardian unfolded from the gnarled walls. The creature's gangling, chitin-sheathed bulk loomed over her, its head tilted inquisitively to the side. Its indigo carapace was inscribed with gold spirals, all rendered in the aggressive, angular aspect of war.

'As within, so without,' Xithauli intoned, bowing her head to the ancient apostle.

The Riven Hunter was the last of the Purestrains that had stalked alongside the Spiral Father in the First Days. Both its left arms had been lost in the purgation of the Sororitas abbey, yet no Purestrains of the later cycles could match its cunning or speed. The creature stood second only to the Spiral Father Himself in the cult's reverence.

*'Attend me, my Gyre Magus,'* a voice murmured soundlessly from the pit in the chamber's centre. *'The Ravening comes and I would share my dreams with you.'*

Xithauli closed her eyes as the ritual demanded and stepped over the lip of the pit. Flexing her will to slow her fall, she descended towards the sunken cavern below. By the traditions of the Spiral Dawn the sanctum was forbidden to all save the Gyre Magus, so this was the first time Xithauli would gaze upon her four-armed god.

*'The long age of shadow and secret war draws to a close...'* the Spiral Father mused. His thoughts were sluggish, as if He was straining to form the insights. *'The Unfolded have woven with unquiet words... and quiet claws... for over a century... but as the Spiral flows... so the path unwinds into new rites.'*

*It is the Ravening,* Xithauli sensed as her bare feet touched warm water. *War calls to His blood as strongly as it calls to my own. His thoughts are clouded by divine wrath.*

She froze her descent, holding herself on the surface of the shallow pool that filled the sanctum.

*'Look upon me, Gyre Magus.'*

Xithauli opened her eyes and saw He was a god of war.

# PART THREE

## *Redemption in Fire*

*'Should the sacred bloodline become imperilled beyond the salves of shadow or terror; then rise up against the Outsider and cast him down with tooth and claw and purifying fire!'*

Apotheosis of the Spiral Wyrn

## CHAPTER TEN

*It's coming, Ariken thought as she followed Captain Omazet into the war room. Whatever Cross was afraid of, it's beginning.*

The regiment's senior officers were gathered around the long table with the colonel at their head, but it was the robed man to Talasca's left that drew Ariken's attention. He nodded a solemn greeting when he saw her.

*Bharlo.*

Major Rostyk frowned as Ariken sat beside Omazet, doubtless wondering what a lowly corporal was doing here, but the others paid her no heed. Truthfully she didn't give a damn what any of them thought. Less than an hour had passed since the horror outside the wrecked ship, and her place was with her squad – what was left of it anyway – but Omazet had insisted on her attendance.

*'You are my shadow,' her captain had said. 'I want you at my back.'*

When everyone was seated they turned expectantly to the colonel. Talasca was hunched over the table, his hands clasped before his face as if in prayer, his eyes closed.

*'Captain Omazet,' he said quietly.*

*'We are at war,' Omazet began without preamble. 'Our enemy is the Spiral Dawn.' She nodded to Bharlo. 'Say your piece, pilgrim.'*

*'They're massing in the city,' the former shepherd said. 'Raising an army.' His face was lean to the point of starvation, his eyes bloodshot and haunted.*

*'How many?'* Omazet asked.

*'Thousands,' Bharlo said. 'Mostly city grubs and Neophytes, but others too... the Blessed Ones – Acolytes and worse.'*

*'Are they daemon-worshippers?' the bearded giant, Major Kazán, asked intently. He appeared unsurprised by the news.*

*He's been expecting it, Ariken sensed. Looking forward to it even.*

‘I don’t know *what* they are,’ Bharlo said. ‘Something worse maybe...’

‘Gentlemen, we cannot trust this civilian’s word,’ Rostyk protested. ‘If there has been a misunderstanding with the sect we should request a parley.’

‘There’s *nothing* to talk about,’ Bharlo hissed. ‘They’re done talking.’

‘The Spiral Dawn is unorthodox,’ Rostyk urged, ‘but it reveres the Emperor.’

‘A four-armed emperor,’ Talasca said, finally opening his eyes. ‘Their magus looked into my mind and I looked back. *I saw what he was inside*. They are an abomination.’

‘I have always known it,’ Kazán said, nodding.

Talasca’s silver gaze fell upon him. ‘The attacks on their temples,’ he said, ‘that was your hand, Kazán?’

‘And I stand by them, colonel.’ The giant scowled, showing his metal-shod teeth. ‘An honest Szilar warrior can *smell* corruption.’

*Except among his own men*, Ariken thought sourly, remembering Trazgo.

‘We’re wasting time,’ Bharlo pressed. ‘They’re coming for us. We have to hit them first.’

‘What are you suggesting?’ Omazet said, watching him closely.

‘I can lead you straight to them,’ he said eagerly. ‘I know the secret paths and the watchwords.’

‘What about Ophele?’ Ariken asked suddenly. She ignored the looks the officers threw her way, some puzzled, others angered by her presumption. ‘What happened to her, shepherd? And all the others?’

Bharlo sighed. ‘The last time I saw Ophele she was two months pregnant, though it looked closer to six. Their spawn grow fast.’ He shook his head. ‘She was overjoyed because she’d been honoured by the cult Iconward.’

‘And the others?’

‘They’re *all* gone, Ariken. They were embraced... *infected* within days of our arrival. Were it not for the captain’s warning, and my old talents, I’d be lost too.’ He turned to Talasca. ‘I’ll lead you right to them, but let me fight alongside you.’

A pistol slid across the table towards him. ‘Take it, shepherd,’ Ariken said. ‘You’ve earned it.’

Bharlo flashed his old, sad smile. ‘Thank you, sister.’ He picked up the weapon and the smile vanished, along with the light in his eyes.

‘So the Spiral burns!’ he shouted as he whipped the gun towards Talasca’s head. The trigger clicked, but there was no discharge. In the same instant Ariken’s machete thudded into his chest. Bharlo stared at her dully.

‘I ejected the power cell,’ she said.

The pistol slipped from Bharlo's fingers and he slumped into death, pinned to his chair by the blade.

'I don't think he knew he was theirs,' Ariken said. 'Not until the end. But it was in his eyes.'

The soldiers manning the gunship were manifestly elite troops, but they were nothing like the spirited veterans who had accompanied Cross to the abbey. All wore black carapace armour and helmets fitted with metal masks, the lenses so dark it was impossible to see the eyes behind them. Their lasrifles were bulkier than the standard model and cables coiled from their stocks to the soldiers' backpacks. Their leader had swapped a helmet for a crimson beret, but was otherwise as faceless as his subordinates. The entire squad sat in silence, so still it was easy to imagine they were automatons.

*Or simply hollow men like Clavel*, Cross decided. He turned to the pale-eyed Inquisition operative sitting beside him. 'Where are we going?'

'Spire Vigilans,' Clavel said, 'the conclave maintains a base there.'

'I heard Vigilans was volcanically active.'

'It is. That's why the Brood avoid it.'

'The Brood?'

'That is our designation for the degenerates of the Spiral Dawn,' Clavel said.

'They are a xenos strain. A particularly dangerous one.'

'And you're here to destroy them?'

'We are Ordo Xenos.'

*That's not what I asked*, Cross thought warily. 'How long have you known about them?' he asked.

'They have been under observation for some time.'

'But you didn't warn us. Not even when we went into that damned pit.' Something else struck Cross. 'You have no intention of warning anyone now, do you?'

Clavel regarded him coolly. 'Your combat proficiency is mediocre at best, captain, but you have proved yourself tenacious and resourceful. You may be useful to the conclave, but if you compromise my mission I will remove you.'

Cross didn't doubt it. He noticed Trujilo was watching them closely. The surviving veteran had heard every word. A glance passed between them, confirming the unspoken alliance that had begun in the abbey's sanctum.

*We're the strangers here*, Cross thought, *and the betrayed*.

'There are others like Bharlo,' Ariken said to Talasca, 'Black Flags they've

turned.’ The eyes of the man pinned to the chair beside the colonel were still open, accusing her in death. ‘I’ve seen them.’

‘Traitors and heretics,’ Kazán growled.

‘I think it’s something deeper than that,’ Ariken said, frowning. ‘More like a disease...’

‘A daemonic plague of corruption!’ Kazán nodded sagely. ‘I have heard of such things.’ He grinned at Ariken. ‘You did well to draw the assassin out, corporal.’

‘He was a victim,’ she said sadly. ‘They all are.’ *And I was almost one of them,* she thought. *I’m sorry, Ophele.*

‘We need names if you have them,’ Omazet said.

‘Senka,’ Ariken answered without hesitation.

‘No, my Sentinel Sharks are Throne-fearing men,’ Rostyk protested, but without conviction. He looked baffled and very old, as if the speed of events had drained him. Under other circumstances Ariken might have felt sorry for him. ‘They’re all good men.’

‘So was Bharlo!’ Ariken snapped. ‘Maybe even at the end... The Unfolded use our faith against us, major.’

‘Rouse the Locker to full alert,’ Talasca said, rising from his chair. ‘The assassin told at least one truth – they are coming for us.’

The flight lasted a little over an hour. Towards the end the Valkyrie tilted sharply, evidently climbing, then set down with a roar of thrusters. As he disembarked, Cross saw the gunship had landed on a narrow escarpment near the summit of another Spire, presumably Vigilans.

‘Tempestor Aickman, with me,’ Clavel said to the squad commander.

The party of four crossed the ledge to the rock face beyond, leaving the troops with the gunship. Their destination was a monolithic building whose facade was carved in the likeness of an ornate broadsword.

*This is a warrior’s temple,* Cross judged as they passed through the entrance in the blade’s tip. The tunnel beyond was dark, but their lights revealed armoured giants carved into the obsidian. Perhaps the myths of the Koronatus Ring were not entirely fanciful, for these statues certainly depicted the Adeptus Astartes. The transhuman warriors were wrought in their true scale, dwarfing the mortals who walked among them, but they were subtly stylised rather than slavishly lifelike. Their postures were stern and regimented, yet they exuded a dignified elegance, as if they were warrior artisans.

*Did they carve this themselves?* Cross wondered, marvelling at the work.

Their path ended at a plain steel hatch that looked incongruous in the ancient temple. Clavel placed his palm upon the surface and it slid aside, revealing another of the masked soldiers.

‘Unquiet dust,’ Clavel said and the sentry lowered his weapon, allowing them past. There was a shabby, well-worn look to the facility beyond that suggested it had been running for years, if not decades. The walls were sheathed in corrugated metal and flickering lumen strips lined the ceilings, illuminating a network of corridors and doors. Though the base looked big enough to house an army, they encountered nobody as Clavel led them deeper.

‘You’re shutting this place down,’ Cross ventured.

‘Vigilans is an ancillary base,’ Clavel said. ‘Our primary facility has always been orbital.’

‘But you’re pulling out. Abandoning the Black Flags.’

Clavel met this with silence.

Shortly afterwards they reached another sealed door and another sentry. The hexagonal chamber beyond was gloomy, most of its light coming from the vid-screens tessellating its walls. Banks of machinery lined five of the room’s six facets, each monitored by a red-robed tech adept. The operators stood stiffly at their posts, connected to their consoles by silvery mechadendrites extruded from their cowls. Optic sensors glowed green under their hoods and a soft, almost subliminal electronic chatter burred between them as they worked.

At the centre of the chamber was a dais fitted with a high-backed command throne whose arms bristled with controls. The chair rotated to face the newcomers as they entered, revealing a man in an elegant scarlet jacket trimmed with gold. His long, grey-streaked hair was swept back to frame handsome features with an unmistakably aristocratic cast. He looked about forty, but Cross knew there were no certainties with the Imperium’s ruling echelons. Such men and women had access to countless juvenat therapies. For all he knew, this man might be over a century old.

‘Inquisitor,’ Clavel said, making the sign of the aquila.

‘You have secured the assets, Calavera Five?’ the seated man asked. His voice was refined and soberly authoritative, exactly as Cross had imagined it would be.

‘Primary and ancillary,’ Clavel confirmed, removing his backpack. ‘Shall I resume operations at the Locker?’

‘No, you will lead the Excision Team.’

‘I assumed Calavera Two—’

‘Calavera Two and his team have not returned from their expedition to the

Underspire,' the inquisitor said. 'We must assume they are lost.'

'Understood,' Clavel said. 'I advise you to evacuate the planet without delay, inquisitor. Once the Wildfire begins Vigilans may be compromised.'

Cross could contain himself no longer. 'Please, whatever this *Wildfire* is, we have to warn the regiment it's coming.'

'Wildfire is *war*, Captain Cross,' the inquisitor replied mildly, 'and it has already begun.'

The Locker had been on high alert for hours. Command had finally killed the klaxons, but spotlights blazed atop the towers and barracks, lancing the darkness with powerful beams. Everyone had been mustered for duty, summoned to the walls or assigned to extra patrols, though few knew why.

Trooper Oriss was different. He knew *exactly* why.

The secret blessing in his blood had roused him from sleep before the alarms sounded, its call igniting a righteous fire in his veins. He had jerked upright on his bunk and seen his spiral brother, Palmar, watching him from across the dormitory. Without a word they had taken up their daggers and walked the length of the long room, Oriss taking the right and Palmar the left, swiftly and silently sending their former comrades into a deeper sleep.

Oriss had felt no guilt, for the men were heretics.

Afterwards they had hurried to the compound's primary ammunition depot, picking up three more Spiralyte cultists along the way. The building was sturdy, its single door too solid to breach without heavy explosives. One of the colonel's abhuman slaves stood outside, and there would be more guards inside, doubtless trusted veterans of the butcher, Kazán.

There the five cultists waited, lurking behind a nearby storage shack.

Eventually a sergeant appeared, marching towards the depot with his squad behind him. As the man gave the watchword and the door opened, Palmar dashed joyfully among the heretics, bearing an unpinned grenade in each hand. The blast lacked the punch to damage the door, but it wreaked havoc on the men and threw the abhuman from its feet.

'Spiralfire!' the four remaining cultists yelled as they raced forward.

The abhuman was trying to get up, but one of its arms had been torn off at the elbow and it couldn't get the leverage. It raised its bloody stump as the cultists encircled it, evidently hoping for assistance.

'For the Four-Armed Saviour,' Oriss intoned as he rammed the barrel of his shotgun into the creature's eye and fired.

The depot's door was swinging about on its hinges, intact, but wide open. Two Spiralytes raced for the entrance and a hail of gunfire cut them down. Oriss gestured to his surviving brother and they flanked the doorway from either side. Moving in perfect synchronicity they pulled pins from their grenades and hurled them inside – then followed up with another pair as the defenders began yelling. Oriss was reaching for his third grenade when the first detonated, triggering a wave of explosions inside the depot. A moment later the entire building quaked and erupted, obliterating everything around it.

Spiralyte Oriss died a happy man.

An explosion thundered through the storm, sending shockwaves up the length of the comms tower. Standing by the window, Captain Ignacio Gharis saw a plume of fire rising from the other side of the compound.

‘Sacred Throne, what was that?’ Trooper Vyndos said from his post by the master vox caster. His scrawny, bearded face was pale. Even at the best of times he seemed to flutter on the edge of anxiety. To a veteran officer like Gharis the man was a disgrace, but his knack for the vox was undeniable.

‘Just do your job,’ Gharis said, trying to work out what had gone up in smoke. *Throne help them all if it was the ammo dump.* ‘You heard Command. We need to warn the outposts.’

‘Blackout’s killing the signal–’

‘So boost it!’

‘I’m already running too much juice through her,’ the operator protested as he fiddled with the hissing set. ‘I push her any harder and she’ll melt!’ He murmured a prayer of solace to the machine’s ailing spirit, as if to apologise for the disrespect.

Gharis turned as the door opened and Edvaro entered.

*It’s not his shift yet,* he thought.

His instincts registered the gun in the newcomer’s hand before his conscious mind caught up. Gharis pulled his sidearm free as Edvaro fired. The las bolt lanced through the captain’s stomach, but he shot back from the hip, hitting the traitor squarely between the eyes. As Edvaro slumped to his knees and toppled, Gharis saw there was someone else behind him. Without hesitation he pumped las bolts through the door and the second intruder tumbled back down the stairs.

‘Lock... door!’ Gharis gasped at the stunned vox operator. ‘Warn... Command.’ His strength gave out and he slid to the floor.

The Bridge was a compact hub of comms stations and monitor banks situated at

the heart of the Locker's keep. All the regiment's vox bands could be tapped into from this nexus, theoretically enabling Command to coordinate every trooper in the fort individually, even during a blackout. It was the most secure room in the Locker and the last place Omazet wanted to be right now.

*'We're under attack,'* someone was wailing from one of the vox banks. *'Gharis is down!'* There was a battering sound behind the panicked speaker's voice. *'They're right outside the door—'*

'This one is yours,' Omazet said to Ariken. 'Go!' Her aide nodded and hurried from the room.

'Reinforcements are on the way, Vyndos,' Lieutenant Mellier voxed from her station. She turned to Omazet, clearly shaken. 'We despatched a squad to the comms tower twenty minutes ago.'

'Perhaps they are the ones attacking it,' Omazet said bleakly.

'I don't understand...,' Mellier's pale, pretty features were drawn. She looked too young to be coordinating the Bridge.

*Which is why I am here,* Omazet admitted. Kazán and Rostyk had been despatched to their respective forces and Talasca had vanished to his tower, ignoring her protests. The urge to rejoin her own troops was strong, but she trusted her lieutenants and someone had to run the Bridge in the colonel's absence.

The vox hissed as another transmission came through: *'This is Squad Nyulaszi. We are at G-Barracks.'*

'Copy Sergeant Nyulaszi,' Mellier replied. 'Have you made contact with Platoon Eighteen? They still haven't signed in.'

*'That's because they're all dead in their bunks,'* Nyulaszi said, his voice tight with anger. *'Looks like a sleep reap.'*

Mellier glanced at Omazet, confused.

'They were killed in their sleep,' the captain explained. She leaned into the vox. 'Nyulaszi, head for the comms tower. Ariken may need support.'

*'Confirmed, my captain.'*

*How deep does this treachery run?* Omazet wondered.

That was when the music started, bursting from every comms station at once and reverberating around the room. It was a nauseating symphony of dissonant beats and oozing textures that had no place in a sane person's ears. A deep, gurgling voice began to chant across the sludge, like a drowned corpse praising its fate.

'Kill it!' Omazet snapped.

Mellier cut the volume and studied her monitors. ‘It’s on every channel, broadcasting across the whole fort.’ She looked at Omazet. ‘It’s coming from the comms tower, sir.’

Major Markel Rostyk marched his Sentinel through the inky blizzard, his searchlights scouring the ground ahead. Antonov and Brodski flanked him on either side, keeping their vehicles within twenty paces of his own so they could maintain unbroken vox contact. They were about twenty miles out from the Locker, patrolling the road to Hope and the monorail running parallel to it. Rostyk knew it was folly to endanger himself out on the mesa, but after the madness in the conference room he needed to be in his Sentinel again – *needed to be doing something he understood*.

Rostyk rarely allowed himself the indulgence of introspection, but the folly of Oblazt had shaken something loose in him and Redemption looked set to break it. On Oblazt, Black Flag regiments had turned on each other; here one regiment – *his regiment* – was turning upon itself. A plague of treachery, the girl had said. Something that could seduce even Throne-fearing men. It made no sense to him...

*‘I see lights on the track, major,’* Brodski reported. *‘It looks like the train.’* His position on the right flank was closest to the monorail.

‘Antonov, stay on the road,’ Rostyk ordered as he veered towards Brodski and crossed the track. They halted their Sentinels on either side and waited as the train rattled towards them. Soon the operator was visible in the brightly lit drive cabin. She was female but bald, like most of the city’s grubs. When she spotted the Sentinels she started signalling urgently with her hands, clearly distressed.

*‘She is in trouble, sir,’* Brodski said, stating the obvious as always.

‘Trust nothing,’ Rostyk cautioned. *That is the only certainty anymore,* he thought sourly.

Both Sentinels turned to face the monorail as it passed between them. The first carriage was packed with grubs – a drab swarm of hairless heads, pale faces and grey jumpsuits. Like the driver, they waved frantically at the Sentinels, mouthing soundless pleas, as if urging them to run. The next carriage was the same, and the one after...

*‘They are fleeing the city,’* Brodski guessed.

Rostyk didn’t answer. Something about the grey throng was nagging at him.

*There are no children,* he realised. *No elders either.*

‘They are not running,’ he hissed. ‘This is an army.’ And the train would carry it

right to the Locker's walls.

'Antonov,' Rostyk sent urgently, 'fall back and destroy the track.'

'Confirmed, major.' The third pilot's voice was already distorted by static, though he couldn't be more than fifty yards away.

'They are unarmed, major,' Brodski protested.

*How can I be sure?* Rostyk hesitated. *I was wrong before...*

Then the last carriage slipped into view and he saw it was full of monsters. Their faces were leering, bestial parodies of humanity, all sharp teeth and ridged crests, like gargoyles carved from flesh and bone. When they spotted the Sentinels they snarled and shattered the carriage windows with oversized claws.

'Fire!' Rostyk shouted, squeezing down on the trigger of his multi-laser. A fusillade of las bolts raked the carriage, tearing through its flimsy walls and cauterising the unclean host within. The abominations surged towards the rear of the carriage as the train carried them into his killing stream. A few fired back from the windows, but their weapons couldn't penetrate his Sentinel's armour.

'For the Sunken Throne!' Rostyk roared, filled with loathing at the sight of the gibbous, scuttling hybrid things. They exemplified the pandemonium that his world had become.

*I should have remained on Lethe,* he thought with sudden clarity. *My daughter will be twenty-two, my son eighteen...*

Something punched into his cabin, triggering warning lights. Rostyk pivoted round and saw a hybrid tracking him with a bulky, pronged gun from the rearmost window.

'The Trench take you!' Rostyk snarled and obliterated the gunner before it could fire again. Scant seconds later the train had rolled past him.

'What were they?' Brodski voxed from the Sentinel opposite. He sounded dazed – as if his mind couldn't process the horror his eyes had sent its way.

'We have to cleanse the rest of them,' Rostyk said.

'I–' Brodski's voice splintered into white noise as an armoured truck hurtled into his Sentinel, smashing it from its feet. There was a howl of tearing metal as the walker was ground apart by the spinning blades on the truck's front. As the vehicle chewed through the Sentinel a servo-arm jutting from its deck swung a cannon towards Rostyk.

'Throne flay you!' Rostyk yelled, as he opened fire on the goggled operator hunched behind the arm. The man ducked away and answered with a lance of searing light. Rostyk jerked his Sentinel aside, but the blast grazed his canopy, tearing a molten rift through the plating.

*A direct hit would have atomised me,* he gauged.

As the truck picked up speed again Rostyk darted forward and swung behind it, weaving about as he gave chase. The operator swung the cannon towards him again, trying to get a mark.

‘Too slow, scum,’ Rostyk whispered as he hunted the goggled figure.

Bullets spattered the side of his canopy. Still racing forward, he pivoted his cabin and saw a sleek buggy had pulled up alongside him. The stubber fixed to its roof was juddering as it sprayed bullets at him on full auto. Rostyk returned fire, punching through the vehicle’s light armour in seconds. It spun away into the darkness, gushing flames. He swung back to the truck as another bolt of energy lanced past him. There was no telling how many more vehicles were out here.

*It is time to run,* Rostyk decided. *The Locker must be warned.*

But he couldn’t leave Brodski’s death unanswered. Pushing his Sentinel’s engine to the limit, he accelerated and flanked the truck. As the cannon swivelled to meet him he fell back abruptly, catching the operator by surprise. Before the man could duck again Rostyk opened fire and the degenerate was scoured from the vehicle. Keeping his finger on the trigger, Rostyk tilted smoothly to target the cannon, battering its casing until it erupted into a bright nova that tore through the truck’s deck, incinerating the men crammed into its hold. The vehicle careened out of control and flipped over, skidding on its side until it exploded.

‘Antonov?’ Rostyk voxed as he raced on. ‘Shark Antonov, do you copy?’ There was no answer from the squadron’s third member. Fearing the worst, Rostyk headed for the monorail and saw the tail lights of the train in the distance. It was still moving, carrying its malevolent payload to the Locker.

*I have to get in front of it.*

A Sentinel stalked out of the gloom ahead, coming straight for him. Instinct made Rostyk veer sharply away, carrying him out of the killing stream it suddenly unleashed. The other walker tracked him as he raced forward, the barrel of its gun blazing as it spun.

*That’s an autocannon,* Rostyk realised as he zigzagged towards the enemy Sentinel. It was still recognisably a Black Flag machine, but its canopy had been sprayed purple and emblazoned with a jagged spiral. More importantly, its antipersonnel gun had been replaced with a heavier weapon, turning it into a vehicle killer.

*Senka.* Despite the changes, Rostyk recognised the Sentinel. Every Shark’s

Sentinel had its quirks and he knew them all.

‘Traitor,’ Rostyk voxed on an open channel as he sped past.

‘*Liberator!*’ Senka threw back as he gave chase.

Rostyk cursed as he saw the wreckage of Antonov’s Sentinel ahead. The man had been a sharp pilot, but his instincts had always been blunt.

*And I didn’t warn him about Senka,* Rostyk admitted. *I didn’t want to believe it, let alone voice it.*

It was irrelevant now. All that mattered was destroying the train. Weaving about to evade Senka’s fire, he followed the monorail, fixing his attention on the train ahead. He was gaining on it rapidly.

‘*You are serving a lie!*’ Senka shouted. ‘*You are all slaves—*’

Rostyk killed the vox. There was nobody left alive out here worth talking to. He caught up with the train less than a minute later. Gunfire poured from the windows as he raced alongside the packed carriages. Most of the grey throng was poorly armed, but occasionally heavier ordinance streaked his way. He ignored it all, intent on the drive cabin ahead.

*I can’t stop them all, but I can slow them down.*

As he reached the second carriage he saw a hunched figure scuttling along the tram’s roof towards him, its four arms outstretched as if for balance. It was sheathed in a spiny blue carapace that glistened in his lights and its jaws gaped wide open, showing dagger-like teeth. He tilted his laser, raking the roof with bolts, but the beast leapt across the gap and crashed down onto his Sentinel’s canopy. Rostyk swerved about wildly, trying to dislodge it as it scabbled about above him, then a claw punched through the roof, narrowly missing his head. It gripped the ruptured metal and began to prise it back as a man would open a can with his knife.

*I’m dead,* Rostyk thought calmly.

‘*Lethe endures!*’ he roared and jammed the accelerator down. His Sentinel hurtled forward, its legs pounding the ground like sledgehammers as they carried it towards the head of the tram. Warning lights flashed across his drive panel and the machine juddered violently, its engine screaming in the throes of a meltdown. As its canopy was wrenched away and the beast reached for him Rostyk hurled his vehicle in front of the tram.

‘*Can’t see nothing, chief!*’ Jei shouted over the wind as he played the watchtower’s searchlight over the ground beyond the wall.

‘*Pray it stays that way!*’ Grijalva called back, spinning their tripod-mounted

heavy stubber in the light's wake. All along the Locker's walls the other towers were mirroring their own, fulfilling the last orders they had received. That had been over an hour ago. Since then there'd been nothing on the vox except the damned music. Grijalva tried his comms bead again and grimaced as the clamour assaulted his ears. Everything about that sound was plain wrong.

*It's hungry,* he thought with a shudder.

He looked around and saw that the beacon light of the comms tower was still shining. It was the highest point in the base, built to act as a relay point and booster for their vox. If it fell, their comms fell with it.

'It's not ours anymore,' he muttered.

'Arise with the Spiral!' Ariken shouted up into the tower's stairwell. There was no reply. Hesitating only a moment, she entered, stepping gingerly over the body lying at the bottom of stairs. 'Trazgo sent me to help, brothers!'

As she mounted the winding staircase she chanted the Mantra of Helical Concord, keeping her hands raised. It was a gamble, but they needed the tower back and this was the only plan she had. If anger was making her reckless then so be it.

*I sent you to them, Ophèle,* she thought, *and they destroyed you.*

There was another body halfway up, straddling the steps like a broken doll. She pulled the spiral pendant from the dead man's neck and placed it around her own, clenching her teeth as she did so.

*There's no shame in turning their tricks against them,* she told herself, but it didn't erase the revulsion the obsidian spiral evoked in her. Her rage hardening with every step, she continued her ascent.

A trooper stood in the doorway at the top of the steps, covering her with a lasgun. Her heart sank as she recognised him. *Connant*. He was a former pilgrim and the first who had stood alongside her to fulfil Omazet's tithe. The ex-PDF man had quickly proven himself capable and risen to command a Driftwood squad of his own.

*He's my friend,* she thought. *One of the last I have.*

'Ariken,' he said, surprised. 'You're with us?'

'Where else would I be, brother?' she said fiercely. 'The heretics stole our lives, but they can't murder the truth!'

'Trazgo never told me...'

'He does like his secrets,' she said, throwing him a wry smile.

'That he does!' Connant's face lit up, as if her words had lifted a burden from

his shoulders. ‘I shouldn’t have doubted you, sister. You were always the best of us.’ He gestured urgently. ‘Come inside! I have to seal the door again.’

There were two more armed troopers inside the room, a man and a woman, both former pilgrims. They smiled as they saw Ariken, their joy infectious. Another soldier was huddled beside the master vox set, his scalp bleeding from a head wound.

‘Who’s he?’ Ariken asked.

‘Vox operator,’ Connant said, ‘too useful to waste. Besides, I think we can talk him round when this is over.’ He shook his head wearily. ‘Too many dead already.’

‘You’re a good man, Connant,’ Ariken said, surprising him with an embrace. ‘You always were.’

*I can’t do this, she thought as she slipped her pistol free. It’s too much.*

But the instincts Omazet had forged in her brooked neither doubt nor sentiment. Ariken shot Connant in the back of the neck and thrust him towards the others, diving to the floor as he crashed into them. Before they understood what was happening she was firing again. Her first shot hit the man in the chest, the second drilled through the woman’s cheek. The man’s breastplate absorbed the blast and he stared at the scorch mark in shock.

‘Ariken, what...’

‘I’m sorry,’ Ariken said and shot him in the head. She turned to the cowering operator. ‘Kill that music and get the vox back online.’

*You were wrong, Cross, she thought. I am a Black Flag now. There’s nothing else left of me.*

Senka roved the length of the wrecked monotrains, watching his brethren clamber from the overturned carriages. His old commander’s sacrifice had paid off catastrophically. The train had hit the Sentinel like a bullet, obliterating both the walker and the drive compartment in a ferocious blast. Senka had watched in horror as the carriages behind had derailed and skidded across the rock, spitting sparks then flames before capsizing. The first carriage had torn free of the rest, rolled onto its roof and exploded as something inside – a grenade or a heavy weapon – had detonated, triggering a chain reaction. Nobody had climbed out of that inferno.

*There must be hundreds dead, Senka estimated, his heart heavy.*

Goliath trucks and mesa buggies were pulling up alongside the carriages then speeding on towards the fortress, their decks and cabins crowded with survivors.

Senka felt a visceral thrill as the truck bearing the Primus appeared. The vehicle's purple bodywork was adorned with savage spirals and a cult banner rose from its deck. A pair of chitinous beasts crouched on either side of the banner, gripping the floor with a multitude of claws, their elongated heads flitting about like snakes. The Primus himself stood behind the wedge-like front, his expression dark as he surveyed the devastation.

'We shall have a reckoning!' Senka thought aloud. He saw another of the four-armed beasts scuttle from a nearby carriage and race towards him. Its carapace was lacquered with gold spirals and its left pair of arms had been sheared off.

*The Riven Hunter*, he realised, recognising the hallowed creature from Xithauli's parables. Pride welled inside him as it vaulted onto his Sentinel and clambered up to the canopy. It had chosen him to bear it into battle!

'I have been blessed,' he said solemnly.

Singing the Razorcanto of the Spiral Wurm, Senka got under way again, eager to bring ruin upon the heretics.

Ensnared in the sanctuary of his tower, Colonel Kangre Talasca painted feverishly, obscuring the dark coil he had earlier wrought. The Spiral heretic had come within a whisper of turning him from the God-Emperor's light and Talasca burned with shame, but his rage burned brighter still, driving him to examine the web the deceiver had woven across his soul. It was incomplete and frayed, but its strands were everywhere and he forced himself to follow them. When Vyrunas had invaded his thoughts the magus had left his own unguarded, and there were seeds of truth scattered among his lies.

'My god sleeps... waking...' Talasca muttered, scrawling a spiral-bound eye, 'bound by flesh... buried in truth. *Truth...*'

*Veritas!* Talasca saw. *Their god is under the Spire Veritas and it is a creature of flesh and blood. A beast that can be killed by blade and fire...*

His hands were whirling now, working in synchronicity to weave new patterns betwixt the old. To saner eyes their creation would have been senseless, but to the Retriever there was order in the chaos, splendour amidst the squalor. A face emerged in the crucible of ink, noble and malevolent, both elevated and tormented by the sea of thorns it ruled and ruled. Talasca closed his eyes, though his hands continued their frantic dance.

'*Look upon me, Retriever,*' the splintered shadow urged, speaking in a swirl of borrowed voices. '*Look and learn the lies.*'

'Stand with us in the God-Emperor's name,' Talasca echoed the half-lie

Vyrunas had offered.

He opened his eyes and looked into the dark coil.

And in time he understood what he had to do.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**- INPUT: RUN HOLOLITH -**  
**- OUTPUT: ACCESS DENIED - SANCTION DIABOLUS EXTREMIS**  
**-**  
**- INPUT: QUERY SANCTION DIABOLUS EXTREMIS? -**  
**- OUTPUT: ACCESS RESTRICTED TO CONVENT SANCTORUM**  
**SUPERIOR -**  
**- INPUT: ABSOLVE SANCTION EXTREMIS - CLEARANCE**  
**LEVEL CARMINE -**  
**- INPUT: GENECODE CARMINE FOLLOWS -**  
**- OUTPUT: PROCESSING - PROCESSING - PROCESSING -**  
**- OUTPUT: GENECODE VALIDATED -**  
**- OUTPUT: SANCTION DIABOLUS EXTREMIS ABSOLVED -**

The senior tech-priest ceased its electronic babble and addressed the man sitting on the command throne: ‘Sanction Extremis absolved, Inquisitor Mordaine.’

‘Run the hololith, Logis Cheopz.’

‘Confirmed.’

The air in front of the throne shimmered and a spectral image materialised. It was a seated woman, seemingly floating above the ground in a globe of blue light. Her emaciated face was framed in a severe bob of white hair and her posture was hunched. It was impossible to tell whether it was age or illness that had ravaged her, but for a moment Cross thought he was looking at a corpse. Then her eyes opened and she began to talk, her voice desiccated, yet commanding.

*‘I am Vetala Persis Aveline, Canoness of the Third Mission of the Thorn Eternal. It has been my honour to preside over the planet Redemption 219,*

*formerly designated Vytarn, in the Ikiryu Sector, for almost thirty years. My identification ciphers are embedded in the encryption frame of this missive, so I won't waste my breath speaking them. I am unlikely to retain transmission capability for long so my words must be brief, but I have appended them with holo-pict recordings that will attest to their gravity.*

*'As you will be aware, Redemption has recently been classified as a shrine world of the Imperium. This is a status it eminently warrants, not least because of the eldritch malediction that its holy spires cage. The temples of Redemption are not hollow monuments, but living exemplars of faith and fire – weapons against the Long Night. But like all weapons, they must be wielded. Our Mission has stood watch against the evil beneath the Koronatus Ring for over three centuries, fulfilling our sacred covenant with the Angels Resplendent, but our service ends tonight.*

*'The abbey has been overrun and my sisters have fallen, most in battle, one in shame. I am the last and I shall not outlive them long.*

*'Our doom was inevitable from the moment we pledged ourselves to this world, for that has been the fate of all its wardens throughout the millennia. We embraced that sacrifice willingly, yet I do not believe our undoing is the work of our oath-bound nemesis.*

*'Another evil has arisen on Redemption – something new and strange. Its aspect is foul beyond measure and the influence it exerts over irresolute souls surely marks it as malefic in nature, yet I can find no mention of its four-armed, indigo-hued daemons in the Apocrypha Daemonica of our Order. I must pass the burden of identification on to you, my revered sisters, along with the stewardship of this blessed, benighted world.*

*'Study the images I have encoded alongside this missive and name this new foe, but do not delay your retribution long, for though the Mission is lost the dark vigil remains. Redemption must be watched, sisters!*

*'In service to the Throne of Thorns, eternally.'*

The image froze, rippled then winked out. For some time the witnesses in the control room were silent.

'Her warning never got through,' Cross said eventually.

'Oh, it got through,' the inquisitor, Mordaine, demurred, 'though admittedly not to her intended recipients. My predecessor intercepted the transmission and identified the canoness' *daemons* as alien organisms. The Ordo Xenos has experience with this species. It was not a matter for the Convent Sanctorum.'

'I don't understand...' Cross frowned. 'If you already had the message then

why send us after the crystal?’

Mordaine waved a dismissive hand. ‘The hololith crystal was a secondary objective... a loose end. It would be regrettable if it fell into the wrong hands.’

*You’ve crossed a line somewhere. Probably several of them,* Cross guessed. ‘How old is that message?’ he asked, following his intuition through.

‘It was recorded over a century ago, captain.’

‘You’ve known about this abomination from the start,’ Cross said, appalled. ‘You’ve been on Redemption all along.’

The cult was waging war on two fronts that night. As Primus Chrysaor descended upon the heretics, so Magus Xithauli ascended the coiled cone of the Mandira Veritas to aid the Spiral Father in battle against an older, darker foe.

‘As within, so without,’ she intoned, taking her place at the apex of the towering edifice. She raised her arms to the dome high above and energy crackled between her hands as she chanted the Mantra of Binding. Seven psychically gifted Neophytes encircled her on the tier below, pooling their energies with her own. Below them was a coven of the temple’s most favoured Spiralfire Acolytes, who could offer only faith.

Below them all, crouched in the Gyre Sanctum and poised at the eye of the gathering psychic maelstrom, was the Spiral Father. His mind burned with the Ravening, but He resisted its call. To do otherwise risked everything, for He had another duty to fulfil this night – a compact He had unwittingly entered into when He overthrew the Spires’ former wardens.

For deep below the Spiral Father, nailed at the metaphysical core of the Koronatus Ring, was *the Other*, and it could also taste the Ravening. While slaughter was a means to an end for the kindred, it was the end itself for the Dark Beneath the Spires. Stirred by the bloodshed on the mesa, the prisoner raged and strained against its cage, but the Spiral Father kept it pinned with an iron will. One of the Neophytes in the temple fell, drained to a withered husk to aid his lord’s struggle.

*The galaxy is rife with horrors,* Xithauli reflected as she watched the cultist die. *Only unity in the Spiral can preserve the light.*

‘This xenos strain poses a uniquely insidious threat to the Imperium,’ Inquisitor Mordaine said. ‘Its most potent weapon is deception, both of the mind and the body – and its patience is limitless. An infestation can span many generations before revealing itself.’

‘You make it sound like a disease,’ Cross said.

‘It *is* a disease, albeit one with claws.’ Mordaine pressed a button on his throne and a hologram appeared, depicting a hunched, four-armed monstrosity. ‘The canonesse’s daemons,’ he said. ‘Logis Cheopz, if you please...’

‘The Ordo Xenos has designated this organism a *Purestrain*,’ the tech-priest said in his electronic monotone. ‘They are apex predators, capable of tremendous feats of strength and stealth, but their primary function appears to be infiltration and infection. When they encounter other life forms they will seek to implant them with a xeno-seed that rapidly subverts the host’s body.’

‘The cult calls it *the embrace*,’ Mordaine said with a hint of distaste. ‘The victims appear unchanged, but deep in their blood they are no longer entirely human. Their offspring will be monstrous hybrids of man and alien.’

‘The deception is refined with each succeeding generation,’ Cheopz said. ‘Our observations suggest the hybrids are superficially equivalent to the standard human template by the fourth generation.’

*Hairless and crested and sapphire-eyed...* Cross’ mind reeled as the truth he had only glimpsed before was drawn into pitiless focus.

‘It doesn’t end, does it,’ he said quietly, ‘after the fourth generation.’

‘No, it begins again,’ Mordaine said. ‘Our observations suggest the fifth generation are always Purestrains.’

*It’s been over a century,* Cross thought. *How often has the cycle repeated? How many of them are there?*

The vid-screens flickered as a tremor ran through the chamber.

‘What in Throne’s name was that?’ Trujilo asked uneasily.

‘The Koronatus Ring is currently experiencing a high level of seismic instability,’ Cheopz replied as if he were commenting on a mild rainfall. ‘Such spikes are rare, but not unprecedented. Anxiety is not required.’

‘We’re sitting on top of a volcano here, cog-priest!’

‘The probability that a substantive eruption will be induced is minimal.’

The Mandira Veritas shook, gripped by a subterranean seizure as the Other lashed about in its cage. Xithauli felt the Spiral Father’s mind tense as He tightened His grip on the prisoner, using the Spires to focus His will into a weapon. Another of the Neophytes encircling her fell, his mind snuffed out to vitalise their lord’s psychic riposte. Only five of the disciples remained, yet Xithauli sensed this battle would last the night, echoing the eruption of blood and fire out on the mesa.

*Our lord is also caged,* she realised, *ensnared by the burden of vigilance and*

*salvation.*

‘*That is the fate of all true gods and emperors,*’ a distant, nameless voice whispered from the torrent of conflicting hungers, ‘*four-armed or otherwise.*’

‘How did these xenos get to Redemption?’ Cross asked.

‘The Purestrains possess no technology,’ the tech-priest answered. ‘Their most common mode of proliferation is concealment aboard Imperial vessels.’

‘*We* carry them between worlds,’ Mordaine said. ‘In Redemption’s case we believe it was freighter called the *Obariyon*. It was almost certainly pure chance.’

*Nothing is chance,* Cross thought impulsively.

‘The canoness’ warning presented us with an unparalleled opportunity to study the pathology of the contagion from its inception,’ Logis Cheopz droned. ‘Moreover, this planet’s isolation was conducive to a rigorous, yet covert quarantine.’

‘But its promethium trade—’

‘Was with us, captain,’ Mordaine said. ‘Our operatives bought whatever Redemption had to sell and destroyed it.’

‘The conclave has observed exacting security protocols throughout,’ Cheopz added, somehow managing to sound prim, ‘however the imperative of this xenos strain is *propagation*, therefore sporadic breaches were tolerated and cult missionaries were permitted passage off-world. Naturally all were excised in orbit.’

‘So how did they get their damned message out?’ Cross challenged.

‘They did not.’

‘You’re wrong, cog-priest! The pilgrims kept coming to this Throne forsaken...’ Cross trailed off as he saw the truth. ‘It was your conclave. You lured the pilgrims here.’

‘Supplementary subjects were required to sustain the integrity of the experiment,’ Cheopz confirmed. ‘Significant data pertaining to the xenos lifecycle accrued from their assimilation into the Brood.’

‘You dropped civilians into the web and watched the xenos eat them alive.’

‘On a genetic level that is technically correct, however—’

‘What about the Black Flags?’ Trujilo cut in. ‘Are we here to feed your spiders too?’

‘No, trooper,’ the inquisitor said, ‘your regiment was selected for its belligerence and tendency towards paranoia. Admirable traits under the

circumstances.' He looked at Cross. 'Don't you agree, captain?'

'What's he talking about?' Trujilo demanded, confused.

'They knew the Black Flags would antagonise the cult,' Cross said. 'You were sent here to fight the spiders, corporal.' Then he asked the most important question. 'Why are we still alive, inquisitor?'

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Ariken's squad was waiting for her in the infirmary. Five of them had survived Trazgo's trap, but two were in no shape to fight.

'I did my best,' Heike told her, 'but I'm no medicae and Saul bled out on the way here.' Her craggy face was still streaked with blood and grime.

'The beast tore off his arm,' Ariken said. 'There was nothing you could do.' She looked at the bunks lining the infirmary. Some were occupied by recently wounded troopers, but most held men and women in the last stages of the Black Breath. The strongest had a few weeks left at best, but she suspected the Locker itself had much less.

*Tonight will decide it, Ariken thought. We need everybody.*

'Round up weapons for everyone,' she said, heading for the medical supply cabinet.

'Everyone?' Heike called after her, confused.

'I'm going to get them on their feet.'

*If nothing else, it will be a cleaner way to die.*

'The ammo depot is gone,' Kazán shouted over the wind.

'*Can we salvage anything, major?*' Omazet replied from his vox bead.

Kazán glared at the rubble where the building had stood. 'If we have many hours to spare!'

*I think that is unlikely.'*

'Has there been any word from Rostyk?'

*Nothing since his patrol left.'*

'He cannot be trusted,' Kazán cautioned. 'He defended the heretics.'

'*Major Rostyk dislikes change. He... Hold please, major.*' Kazán scowled, waiting. When Omazet spoke again there was a new urgency in her voice:

*'Something is happening at the gates. A crowd from the city.'*

'On my way,' Kazán growled.

'Major Kazán is en route,' Omazet said into her vox set. 'Await his arrival.'

*'Acknowledged, captain. Gatehouse out.'*

With the comms tower recaptured, the fort's vox had been restored and the Bridge was buzzing with incoming reports.

'Tower Twelve has fallen silent,' Lieutenant Mellier reported from her post. 'Thirteen has supplied an old watchword.'

'Twelve *and* Thirteen,' Omazet hissed. 'That leaves a blind stretch of wall to the east.'

'I have despatched Squad Terziu to investigate,' the young lieutenant said.

*Mellier is efficient, Omazet decided, and she can think for herself, but unfortunately Corporal Terziu cannot. I want one of my own on this.* 'Send Squad Karcel in support.'

'Karcel is engaging traitors at the supply depot, captain,' Mellier said briskly. Then, as if reading Omazet's mind: 'Nyulaszi has the comms tower and Ariken is securing the infirmary.'

*And I trust nobody else,* Omazet thought, impressed by the coordinator's astuteness. The girl had a talent for this work.

'What do we have at Twelve-Thirteen?' Omazet asked, frowning.

'It's where the old monorail cuts off, sir,' Mellier answered immediately. 'The terminus is about fifty feet outside the wall.'

'Can you handle comms, lieutenant?'

Mellier hesitated just long enough for her answer to carry weight. 'I can, sir.'

'Then the Bridge is yours.' Omazet rose. 'Tell Terziu I'm on the way.'

'Light in Twelve's gone!' Jei shouted.

Sergeant Grijalva squinted through the soot storm and saw he was right. The watchtower to their right was dark.

'Get the light on it!' he called back.

Jei swept their searchlight over to the neighbouring tower and something slipped away from the beam, ducking under the battlements before Grijalva could get a clear look at it. His instincts were jangling, and when that happened Alonzo Grijalva always listened.

'Show me the wall!' he yelled, swinging his stubber to cover the intersecting ramparts as Jei obeyed.

'Dretch!' the boy hissed, resorting to a hive curse in his alarm.

A monstrosity was charging along the wall towards them from the other tower. It was stooped in a feral crouch, scuttling on six limbs like an insect wired on combat stimms. The beast's serpentine head darted up and snarled into the light as Grijalva opened fire. His salvo battered its blue carapace, but it kept on coming. Fighting for calm, Grijalva tracked the creature, trying to aim the bucking weapon at its head. Scant feet from their tower it fell in a tangle of kicking limbs.

'Bridge, this is Tower Eleven,' Grijalva said into his vox bead. 'We have--' He ducked as bullets whistled past him from the dark watchtower. 'Light it up!' he barked at Jei, 'and keep your head down!'

To his credit, Jei didn't hesitate despite the barrage coming their way. Grijalva was already returning fire blindly when their searchlight picked out the hairless, hunched figure manning Twelve's stubber. It was operating the gun two-handed, while a malformed third arm handled the trailing ammo belt.

'That a man?' Jei yelled, then yelped as his searchlight shattered.

'Bridge, this is Eleven,' Grijalva voxed. 'We're under attack from Twelve!'

'They say they've escaped from Hope, sir,' the lieutenant commanding the gatehouse walls said, offering his magnoculars.

'The Locker opens for no one,' Kazán said. He took the lenses and peered down from the battlements. There was a crowd of city grubs clustered about sixty feet from the gates. Multiple searchlights played over them, illuminating a swathe of grey jumpsuits and bald heads. He saw no weapons, but there were at least a thousand of them, so anything could be hiding behind the front ranks.

Kazán grabbed the gatehouse's loudhailer. 'Citizens,' he announced, 'there is no place for you here!'

'Please, lord!' a man shouted from the crowd. 'Hope has fallen to daemons! They are not far behind us!'

'Leave this area now!'

Omazet heard gunfire as she neared the fort's eastern wall. Two of the towers ahead were blazing with muzzle flare as they battered each other.

'*Grijalva in Tower Eleven reports hostile action from Twelve, sir,*' Mellier voxed.

'I see it, lieutenant.'

Omazet raced past a storage shack and crashed into a burly man. He spun round and she saw he was no man at all. The creature's face was a bestial travesty of humanity and its right arm bifurcated into a pair of curved hooks. As the

monstrosity swung at her she leapt back, drawing her twin machetes in the same fluid movement.

*'Heera-taahk!'* the hybrid thing hissed, raising the autopistol in its left hand. Omazet lashed out and lopped the limb off at the wrist, then dodged away from a retaliatory swipe. The beast came after her, chanting a slurred prayer as it swung the hooks in alternating blows. She saw other figures clashing in the gloom beyond, the flash of las-fire dancing between them.

*Squad Terziu, Omazet thought, what's left of them anyway.*

A trooper staggered towards them from the fray. Omazet's opponent lashed out at him reflexively, impaling him with a reverse swing. With an ululating war cry Omazet leapt forward, spinning both her machetes into a stabbing arc as she attacked. As the hybrid wrenched its hooks free she plunged her blades into its chest and yanked down, tearing it open to the abdomen. The dying invader howled, lashing out with its long tongue as she thrust it away.

*What manner of beasts are they?* Omazet wondered as she stalked forward and cleaved the skull of another infiltrator from behind. As its comrade turned she rammed her second machete through its jaws and twisted. The creature fell among the bodies littering the area, both human and hybrid. The surviving Guardsmen rallied at the sight of her and charged from cover to engage the intruders.

*'Bridge, I need reinforcements at Twelve-Thirteen now!'* Omazet voxed.

*'Confirmed, captain. Squad Karcel is en-route to your position.'*

Shrieking a subhuman prayer, a cultist loped towards her with an industrial tool that ended in a massive circular saw blade. Realising that whirling, blood-streaked wheel would chew through her machetes in seconds, Omazet backed away. The hybrid grinned, running its tongue over snaggleteeth.

*'The Spiral Wurm has turned, heretic!'* it sang it in a shockingly human and *feminine* voice.

Then it charged, coming at Omazet with surprising speed. She leapt back and the spinning blade scraped her right pauldron, shearing off a layer of ceramite. Almost unbalanced, she lurched away and crashed against a building. As the hybrid swung again she dived aside and the blade punched into the wall where her head had been a moment before. With a shower of sparks the saw chewed through the metal panel and its teeth caught for vital seconds. As the hybrid tried to tug it free, Omazet rammed a machete through its temple. Still gripping its weapon, the creature slid to its knees, carving a fissure down the wall as it fell.

It was the last of the intruders.

‘We need to secure the watchtowers!’ Omazet yelled to the remaining troopers. ‘I think—’

There was an ear-splitting boom as the wall between towers Twelve and Thirteen shattered.

Major Kazán ignored the explosion. It had come from somewhere in the eastern sector – too far away for him to make a difference. He had to assume the Witch Captain had it covered. Besides, he had his own problems right now. The crowd of grubs gathered outside the gates had begun to wail, their voices blurring into a cacophony of abject terror.

‘This is your final warning!’ Kazán shouted as they advanced, moving as one. He pushed aside the trooper manning the gatehouse turret and seized the controls of its autocannon.

‘Sir, they are civilians...’ the lieutenant said, stepping towards him. There was a sharp gunshot and a bullet erased his face in a splash of blood.

‘Snipers!’ Kazán cursed, ducking behind the cannon’s blast shield.

As if some secret switch had been thrown, the mob’s terror flipped into fury and they broke into a charge, closing on the gates in a frenzied tangle. As Kazán had suspected, the ranks behind were armed, but weapons weren’t the only things the crowd had been concealing: gangling, four-armed horrors bounded from the throng and sprung over their vassals like locusts.

‘Gates are under attack!’ Kazán snarled into his vox as he opened fire. ‘Daemons!’

Gunfire blazed from the watchtowers abutting the gatehouse, their heavy bolters supporting his spinning autocannon. Las-fire rained down from the troopers along the walls, lancing through the night like darts of light. The blistering fusillade tore through the civilians, obliterating them in droves, but the chitinous beasts were much harder to kill. They wove through the barrage in a whirlwind frenzy and withstood anything less than sustained fire. As they drew closer they veered away from the gates and launched themselves at the walls on either side. Kazán saw one of them punch its talons into the rockrete of the western tower and begin to clamber up, claw over claw.

‘Focus on the daemons!’ he shouted. The arc of his mounted weapon couldn’t reach the climber so he wrenched it free. With a roar of defiance, he swung round and shredded the beast. A sniper round whipped past his head, chewing off his right ear.

‘Cowards!’ Kazán raged. He knew there was no way to strike back at the

snipers. They would be entrenched somewhere in the darkness, free to do their dirty work with impunity. He had always loathed their kind. To his mind they were the thieves of war, stealing lives without risk to their own.

‘Reload me!’ Kazán yelled as his cannon spun down. He cursed as he realised everyone else on the gatehouse walls was either dead or wounded, already picked off by the snipers. His muscles straining, he bent at the knees, grabbed another drum and rammed its belt into the gun’s ammo slot.

‘I need more men up here!’ he shouted into the courtyard below.

He heard the throaty roar of engines and a pair of trucks appeared from the darkness, bucking on their bulbous wheels as they sped toward the gates. A bolt of energy lanced from the lead vehicle and punched a hole in the western tower, incinerating one of the heavy bolter teams. As the trucks drew closer their turrets opened fire, raking the walls with bullets.

*They have better armour than us,* Kazán thought bitterly. He rose to his feet and slammed the cannon’s barrel down onto the battlements. Crooning to its machine spirit, he tracked the lead truck, sweeping its deck until the gunner in the open-topped turret was thrown back in his seat, almost decapitated. Moments later the one manning the energy cannon was flung from his post. Kazán stayed focussed on the battered vehicle until something inside it ruptured and smoke poured from its deck. Losing control, it careened about wildly and crashed into the walls.

‘Vassago endures!’ the captain bellowed as his kill exploded.

Grijalva watched as a plume of fire bloomed behind the hostile watchtower. The infiltrator who’d been firing at him roared in ecstasy as its tower collapsed under it. Grijalva ceased fire, aghast at the ruin that lay beyond the fallen tower.

*We’ve lost the whole stretch of wall between Twelve and Thirteen,* he realised. *The Locker is wide open.*

Burning liquid drenched the debris, casting a hellish glow across the compound and adding smoke to the soot storm.

‘Reckon they blew the promethium dump,’ Jei said.

The boy was right. Sector Twelve-Thirteen was where the city grubs had been delivering their promethium barrels since the Locker was built. The fuel had been stacked up along the wall over ten barrels deep, but nobody had questioned it. If the grubs were stupid enough to keep supplying the regiment with free fuel who was going to argue?

*Except they were never stupid,* Grijalva understood. *That was just us.*

‘They’re coming, chief,’ Jei warned, pointing beyond the wall.

‘Sacred Sunken Throne,’ Grijalva hissed as he saw the army advancing on the breach. Its vanguard was a shovel-fronted truck with iron-shod wheels that churned through the liquid fire. Its deck was crowded with crouching monsters, but one stood boldly on a raised platform at the back, its scarlet trench coat flapping in the wind.

*That’s their leader, Grijalva guessed immediately, and the bastard’s as full of itself as any damn officer I’ve ever seen.*

A pair of hulking, malformed brutes wielding industrial hammers lumbered behind the truck on trunk-like legs, and behind them came a swarm of hunched, demi-human horrors in white robes. Though they were all equal in their ugliness no two were exactly alike. Grijalva saw a riot of hooks and claws and twisted appendages he couldn’t even begin to guess at. Most of the hybrid things had three arms, but a few had four or even five, sometimes split at the shoulders, sometimes at the elbows. Bony crests were set into their foreheads and their faces were hideously serpentine, elongated and filled with fangs, yet still disturbingly expressive.

The spinning blades jutting from the front of the truck spun up as the invaders reached the shattered wall. Spitting sparks and rockrete, they began to grind through the rubble, rapidly clearing a path for the horde behind.

‘Reckon we’re fragged, chief,’ Jei said.

‘Reckon you’re likely right, lad,’ Grijalva agreed.

‘Bridge, we have a breach at Twelve-Thirteen,’ Omazet voxed as she watched the enemy truck chew its way into the compound. She and the survivors of Terziu’s squad were crouched behind a pile of storage crates near the rubble. ‘I need everything you have.’

*‘But the gates–’*

‘That is a distraction, Mellier,’ Omazet hissed. ‘This is the real push. Get me some armour or the Locker is finished!’

*We are winning this,* Kazán gauged. The assault on the gatehouse was floundering. No reinforcements had arrived to replenish the attackers’ thinning ranks and most of the four-armed beasts were dead. It was just as well because he was down to his last ammo drum.

*‘Major Kazán,’* his vox hissed. *‘There’s been a breach at Twelve-Thirteen. I’m redirecting your armour.’*

‘Take it,’ he said. ‘It’s doing no good behind the walls.’

Fresh troops surged onto the gatehouse from the courtyard below. As they

fanned out along the wall a purple Sentinel raced past, strafing the battlements with bullets. Three men were hurled back into the courtyard as the others dived for cover. Ignoring the bullets whipping around him, Kazán stood his ground and chased the vehicle with his own fire.

‘Spawn of Tizheruk!’ he yelled after it.

As the Sentinel reached the far side of the gatehouse a beast vaulted from its canopy and landed beside a crouching trooper. Its elongated skull was crested with spines and its black eyes gleamed with cunning. Before the trooper could react, it reached out with an oversized claw and crushed his skull, killing him almost casually. Kazán levelled his cannon as the beast darted towards him in a lopsided scuttle, barrelling through everyone in its path. Only ragged stumps remained of its left arms, but he sensed this creature was no maimed, hamstrung thing.

*Its wounds have made it stronger,* he judged as he opened fire, paying no heed to the troopers between them. They were already doomed so the bullets were a mercy beside the thing’s claws. His volley tore them apart, but the beast wove through the gunfire with terrifying agility. Bullets slipped away from its hide as it leapt back-and-forth between the battlements and the platform, its speed almost defying the eye.

‘Unholy vermin!’ Kazán raged as he hunted it, his whole body quaking with the cannon’s recoil.

And then the beast was upon him, diving from above with its claws outstretched. Kazán lurched back as its blade-like talons sheared through the spinning barrel of his gun, scattering misfiring bullets. He swung at it with the broken weapon, but the beast wrenched it from his grasp and slung it away. With a creak of stretching bones it unfolded itself and rose to its full height. Though Kazán was a giant among men, the abomination was over a head taller than him. Up close he saw that its blue hide was inscribed with foul icons and a fragment of white armour hung from its neck.

*A trophy,* he guessed. The blasphemy renewed his fury and he flung himself forward, surprising his enemy. Wrapping his arms around its waist, he hurled himself over the platform, carrying the beast with him.

They crashed into the courtyard below in a tangle, with Kazán on top. The beast’s arms were trapped under his chest, straining against him like coiled steel. Knowing he couldn’t hold it, he yanked his dagger free, but as he thrust the blade towards its face he met its gaze and froze.

*Beauty is a many-toothed wyrm unwound between shivering stars,* he saw, and

*truth sings bright unto the fruiting worlds that hang ripe and empty...* The stream of alien impressions flowing from the beast numbed him with inviolate nonsense.

‘No...’ he moaned as he struggled against the glamour.

There was a wet hiss and a rigid appendage extruded from the creature’s jaws. It took Kazán a moment to recognise the dripping, thorn-tipped thing as a *tongue*. Like a spring-loaded dart the organ lashed out and embedded its stinger under his jaw.

‘Kill...’ Kazán choked at the shocked Guardsmen circling him. ‘Kill...’

Something cold was pumping into his face, spreading a terrible numbness through his body. With it came a sour-sweet taste that turned his thoughts to sludge, dissolving rage into regret, hate into hope.

*‘It’s like a disease,’* the medicae girl had said.

Then the beast surged up and Kazán was flung aside. He slumped with his back against the gates like a broken doll. Paralysed, he watched the Guardsmen open fire on the horror. Its carapace broke out in scorched pits, but it shrugged off the attacks and leapt among the troopers in a frenzy of fangs and claws.

*Sacred Throne, help me,* Kazán prayed, fighting the apathy creeping through him, body and soul. Making his hand move was like climbing a sheer cliff – a half-remembered talent from some other life, but inch by inch he forced his hand to draw his bolt pistol.

By the time he raised it he had forgotten why.

Crouched among a riot of mangled bodies, his chitinous saviour turned and regarded him. Its carapace was blackened and spattered with blood, but to Shaval Kazán’s awakened eyes it was beautiful.

The heretic truck was almost through the rubble of the fallen wall. It had taken its blades scant minutes to clear a path.

‘Bridge, where’s my armour?’ Omazet hissed into her vox. Karcel’s squad had reinforced her, but that still left her with less than twenty troops and only a couple of weapons with any real punch. The stubber team in Tower Eleven was still alive, but without support none of them would last long against the horde coming through the breach.

*‘Armour is imminent, captain,’* Mellier replied.

With a final shove the truck pushed into the compound. The pair of giants looming behind it followed, swinging their hammers as they strode forward.

*We can wait no longer,* Omazet decided. ‘Tower Eleven?’ she voxed.

*'I hear you, captain,'* a gruff voice replied.

*'The mob is yours, Grijalva,'* she said. *'You have to slow them down.'*

*'We'll fill the Trench with 'em,'* he promised. The revulsion in his voice told her he would be as good as his word.

Omazet raised her lasgun and lined up its sights on the scarlet-coated cultist standing on the vehicle's deck. Every one of her team would be following suit.

*'We can't stop their army,'* she had told her troops, *'but we can cut off its head.'*

*'Bleed him!'* she shouted.

Her troops opened fire from behind storage crates and mounds of rubble, all of them targeting the regal figure standing on the truck's rear deck. He erupted with coruscating radiance as the barrage struck him from multiple angles. His shape was thrown into stark silhouette at the centre of the aura, but he didn't fall.

*He has a refractor shield of some kind,* Omazet gauged. Such equipment was rare and expensive. How had this heretic acquired one? She dismissed the question as irrelevant. All that mattered now was punching through the shield; they weren't infallible and this one was taking a lot of punishment. Despite the hail of fire, the warlord stood unbowed, as if he were truly untouchable.

*Is it real courage,* Omazet wondered, *or just blind faith?*

The silhouette raised its sword and the truck surged forward, roaring towards Omazet's position. Its gun turret blazed, sending a fusillade of bullets ahead of it. She ducked behind cover, but the man beside her was thrown back in a groaning, bleeding heap. A second volley finished him before she could pull him into shelter.

*'Stay on the mark!'* she voxed her team as she rose and resumed firing. *'We have to crack the heretic open!'*

Sergeant Karcel's gun spat from the roof of a shack, battering the warlord with molten plasma. The refractor shield flared up and winked out, finally overloaded. Omazet's next shot hit the heretic squarely in the chest, but didn't penetrate his ribbed breastplate. She raised her sights and saw he was looking directly at her, his expression mirroring her own loathing.

*The Spiral isn't just a sham to them,* she realised. *This is a holy war.*

Then the truck rammed into her barricade, its blades chewing through the metal crates in a torrent of sparks. Omazet dived aside and rolled as the truck spun about, raking the ground around her with stubber fire. She scrambled to her feet and ran for fresh cover as the gunner tracked her. Trusting to her instincts, she wove about wildly and threw herself behind a mound of rubble.

There was a throaty chatter of gunfire from the watchtower as Grijalva joined

the fray, transforming the breach into a killing ground, but the monstrosities were breaking into the compound regardless. For every one Grijalva mowed down another two slipped through. Guardsmen were racing to engage them from all sides, either drawn by the clamour or directed to sector Twelve-Thirteen by the Bridge. They found whatever cover they could and opened fire, trying to keep their distance from the bestial invaders.

*'Captain, I've been informed the colonel has left the keep,'* Mellier reported. *'He's not responding to my—'*

*'Not now, lieutenant,'* Omazet snapped, cutting the signal off.

She rose to a crouch, trying to get a bead on the warlord again. The truck had flattened the crates and was wheeling round towards her. A Guardsman darted past it and threw a grenade, but the warlord snatched it from the air and hurled it away before it detonated. A burst of plasma streaked past him and Omazet saw Karcel on the roof above the truck, his gun venting steam.

With almost feline grace one of the four-armed beasts riding the vehicle pounced onto the roof beside the sergeant. Karcel fired again without hesitation, searing away the creature's head before it could attack. As he turned back to the truck a long needle slammed into his cheek. Evidently guessing he was as good as dead, Karcel risked a third shot and the overheated weapon exploded in his hands, immolating him in plasma.

*It was a mercy,* Omazet guessed, seeing the bulbous needle pistol in the warlord's hand. *Whatever poison that heretic has will be vile.*

There was a clatter of metal as a trio of Sentinels strode past her, two of them heading for the truck, the last veering towards the breach. Trailing behind them came the ugly bulk of *Old Scorch*, the regiment's only surviving tank. The battered Hellhound's turret was swivelling about as it trundled towards the wall.

*Father Terra be praised,* Omazet thought. *Finally!*

Up in the watchtower Grijalva swung his chattering gun about in a tight arc, focussing on the inner mouth of the breach. As the invaders broke through he mowed them down, paying no heed to their sporadic return fire. The hybrids were clambering over their own dead now, but it scarcely slowed them.

*Dying doesn't much matter to them,* he guessed. *Might even be what they want...*

The blackout had finally let up and burning promethium illuminated the terrain below, giving Grijalva an eagle-eye view of the battle. He grinned as he saw the regiment's armour appear. It wasn't much, but right now it looked pretty damned

good to Alonzo Grijalva!

One of the Sentinels raced towards the breach, its multi-laser blazing at the giant aberrations that lumbered into its path. The two brutes swung their hammers about in wide arcs, but the walker backed away as they advanced, staying out of their range as it harassed them. Hybrids charged towards it from cover, firing their autoguns wildly as they came. One of them hurled an improvised grenade, but it bounced off the vehicle's casing and spun away.

Moments later *Old Scorch* rolled into sight, crushing a pincer-clawed savage under its treads as it passed the Sentinel. The fat barrel of its inferno cannon shook and it belched a torrent of fire, its turret rotating back-and-forth to bathe the invaders in a wide arc. Cultists died in droves under the searing wash, charred to misshapen skeletons in seconds, but the giants pressed on, becoming mountains of melted muscle and bone as they drew closer.

'Back off!' Grijalva muttered, already knowing it was too late.

One of the brutes hurled itself forward and slammed down onto the Hellhound's cannon in a molten heap. Squeezing three arms around the barrel, it expired, clogging the weapon's nozzle. The turret swivelled about turgidly under the carcass fused to its gun.

The Sentinel darted forward to intercept the second giant with a concentrated hail of fire, focussing on the charred stub of its head. Heretics leapt onto the walker's legs, clinging on with their hands and hacking at it with claws and scythe-like talons. Grijalva swept them away with his stubber until it clicked impotently.

'Reload me!' he yelled.

'We're out, chief,' Jei said with a helpless shrug.

Grijalva cursed. Even if the ammo dump still stood they were in no position to resupply. 'Grab my rifle from below, lad,' he growled. 'The one with the long barrel.'

A missile streaked over the rubble and exploded against the Sentinel's left leg. The walker unbalanced on the shattered limb and toppled over. Grijalva hunted about and saw a goggled cultist crouched among the ruins of Tower Twelve. He was stooped under the weight of a rocket launcher and he was already reloading.

*That gun's Astra Militarum issue, Grijalva realised, one of ours!* His fingers squeezed the trigger of his empty gun furiously, sending phantom bullets at the thief.

The surviving giant reached the fallen Sentinel and raised its hammer in a three-handed grip. Grijalva flinched as it brought the head down in a crushing

blow that cracked the walker's canopy open. A grenade exploded beside the beast and it staggered backwards, swinging its hammer about blindly, obviously confused by the attack. Its chest exploded in a boil of craters as rapid fire spattered it and a Chimera swept by, its heavy bolter blazing. The vehicle's rear hatch flew open as it passed and a squad of troopers leapt out. They rolled into a crouch as they landed and opened fire immediately. Moments later their transport took a direct hit from a missile and erupted in flames.

*It's mayhem down there,* Grijalva thought, then turned as he heard a pounding from the room below.

'They're breaking into the tower!' Jei yowled as he clambered up the ladder and slammed the hatch shut behind him.

'Hatchway is yours, lad,' Grijalva said. 'Kill anything that tries to get up here.' He took the sniper rifle from the boy and flicked the safety off.

'With what, chief?' Jei asked, jabbing his laspistol pointedly. 'They're dretchin' monsters!'

'Go for their eyes. You can do a lot with a torch if you point it just right.' Grijalva balanced his rifle on the wall and put his eye to the scope, searching for the thief with the missile launcher. 'It's everything or nothing now.'

'We will take the war to the enemy,' Talasca said, addressing the abhuman paladins standing before him in the machine shop. 'That is our divine mission, my brothers.'

The four giants rapped their power mauls against their white breastplates, their brutish faces rapt.

'As the heretics defile our gates, so we in turn shall slip through theirs, unseen and unopposed until we fall upon their false prophet. Tonight we are the Emperor's executioners!'

A squat, red-robed figure emerged from the armoured vehicle behind his squad and approached, its metal-shod feet clanking. The newcomer's face was hidden behind a black iron mask split by a horizontal visor, and angular armour bulged under its robes.

'I have completed the Nine Benedictions of Ignition, Retriever,' the engineer said, 'and awoken the engine of your war carriage.' His voice was a deep, abrasive croak.

'You have wrought well, Tarcante,' Talasca said, eyeing the enlarged hatch of the Taurox.

'The machine's spirit welcomes such noble warriors, Retriever,' Tarcante said,

indicating the ogryns, ‘but the adjustments were the work of many weeks.’

*How did I know I would have need of this?* Talasca wondered. But in his heart he had *always* known it, hadn’t he? Like everything else, it had been in the Dark Coil. Nothing was chance.

‘It is time, brothers,’ he said to the paladins. As they clambered aboard he watched for any sign of doubt. Ogryns were infamously fearful of enclosed spaces, but not one of the four hesitated. His heart soared with pride.

‘Colonel,’ Tarcante cautioned, ‘the Spire Veritas is nearly five hundred miles distant. Even at maximum velocity the journey will take many hours. Are you certain you do not require my presence?’

‘My thanks, engineer, but this is a voyage we must undertake alone.’ He smiled enigmatically. ‘And the Spires shall guide our path.’

‘He’s gone,’ Ariken said quietly. She closed the dead man’s staring eyes, but it was an empty gesture. There was no disguising the agony he had died in. His body was twisted in the throes of the seizure that had killed him.

*The seizure I induced*, she thought as she turned away. He was the last of the patients in the infirmary. Eleven of the sick had responded well to the stimms she’d given them – well enough to get on their feet anyway. Three had thrashed about and fallen into a deeper stupor, and this man – Marc Hildago his name was – had died. Badly.

*They were dead anyway*. That was the logic of the Black Flags, the kind of thinking men like Talasca or Kazán – or her own mentor for that matter – would have embraced without hesitation.

Ariken turned to the ragtag force she had assembled. There were eighteen of them: the remains of her squad alongside the walking wounded and the risen dying. They were all revenants in a way, perhaps herself most of all.

‘The regiment needs us,’ she said. ‘If we don’t fight we’ll die.’ It wasn’t much of a speech, but it was all she had for them.

‘Spoken like an honest soldier, corporal,’ an officer with cropped grey hair said. His name was Gharis, she remembered. She’d found him slumped against the wall in the comms tower with a las wound to the gut. It had cauterised itself so he hadn’t bled out, but he was in bad shape. Though his eyes were bright with stim-induced vigour he was deathly pale. Walking about was the last thing he should be doing.

‘You’ll lead us, of course, captain,’ Ariken offered.

‘We both know I’m just one wrong breath away from the Trench, corporal.’ He

smiled thinly. ‘Besides, this ghost is yours to carry.’

She nodded, knowing he was right.

‘Bridge,’ she said into her vox bead. ‘This is Squad Ariken. Where do you need us?’

*This is wrong*, Sheval Kazán thought, his hand hesitating on the last lever. Yes, it was wrong, yet it felt utterly *right*.

He looked around blearily. The gatehouse was full of bodies, their heads and chests ruptured by bolt rounds. How had that happened? Then he remembered: *they were all heretics*. He smiled. *Weren't they?* He frowned.

‘Major!’ someone called behind him. ‘We’ve lost contact with...’ The voice trailed off.

Kazán turned and saw a Guardsman standing in the gatehouse doorway, his face aghast at the carnage.

‘They were heretics,’ Kazán said.

‘Heretics, sir?’

‘They are everywhere, trooper.’ Kazán shot him and pulled the lever.

Senka smiled as the Locker’s gates began to part. Fitful gunfire was still coming from the walls ahead, but all the big guns had been silenced and the path was now open. The Spiral had turned once more, as he had always known it would.

A Goliath truck pulled up beside him. The cult banner soared above its deck, gripped by the Iconward Iaoguai. The First Acolyte turned and saluted Senka with his scything claw, his noble face grave. Senka saluted back, though he knew his brother couldn’t see it. Their kin littered the ground outside the walls, slaughtered in their thousands by the Imperial heretics, but their sacrifice would be avenged.

Iaoguai signalled sharply and his truck sped forward. His heart soaring, Senka followed.

*Tonight the shadow over Redemption will be lifted*, he thought fervently.

As he loped through the gates a blazing light dazzled him and something rammed into his Sentinel with the force of a wrecking ball. His cabin pivoted crazily as his walker toppled over, then crumpled as the oncoming vehicle rolled over it. Senka shrieked as his legs were crushed under the drive panel.

When the collision came the Riven Hunter was crouched on the gatehouse walls, awaiting the Iconward. As its kindred entered the fort an armoured vehicle sped from the opposite direction and barrelled into the walker. Barely slowed by its

kill, the enemy machine raced through the gates towards the mesa.

Without hesitation the Hunter hurled itself from the wall and slammed down onto the vehicle's roof. Grasping the ridged surface with its humanoid hand, it gouged deep furrows into the plating with its rending claw. The squat turret mounted on the roof swivelled towards it, but the Hunter thrust its legs against the gun barrel and halted its arc. As the cannon spat impotent bullets across the mesa, the Purestrain renewed its attack.

Senka's canopy had cracked open, but he couldn't pull his legs free of the wreckage. As he struggled, he saw Iaoguai's truck reverse alongside him.

'Brother!' Senka shouted. 'Help me!'

The Iconward spared Senka no more than a glance. As his truck turned towards the gates a shaven-headed giant ran forward and clambered onto its deck. *Kazán*.

'Please...' Senka begged as the truck surged away in pursuit of the vehicle that had crushed him. He choked as smoke filled his lungs then screamed as fire followed. The canopy was burning around him.

*Xithauli!* Senka clasped his beloved's image to his heart, but in those last honest moments he found no succour.

The armoured roof of its prey finally gave way and the Riven Hunter's claw punched through to the cabin beneath. Gripping the torn metal, it ripped away a chunk of plating to create a fissure. Eager for slaughter, the beast squeezed its torso into the gap like a lizard. As it pressed forward slab-like hands seized it and heaved it inside. Surprised, the Purestrain struggled in their grip and whipped over onto its back.

'Purge the unclean!' someone shouted.

The Hunter saw the glint of silver eyes from somewhere up front. Then the hulking brutes crammed into the cabin were upon it, cudgelling its carapace with crackling mauls that sent waves of pain through its body. There were four of them, all clad in white armour and open-faced helmets. Though their blunt features were contorted with rage they attacked in absolute silence.

Trapped between the savages, the Riven Hunter lashed out and writhed about to avoid their blows, but in its battle-wise heart it knew there could be no escape. After one-hundred-and-thirty years on Redemption and untold more adrift in the void between the stars, the ancient beast's journey finally ended.

Kazán stood at the fore of the truck, his hands gripping its frontal armour as he squinted into the horizon, seeking their quarry. Dawn was finally breaking. The

blackout had cleared and pallid light wept across the mesa, unveiling the flat basalt plain.

‘A new dawn for a new truth,’ Kazán muttered, but his thoughts were as muddy as the sunlight, slipping between doubt and certainty with every heartbeat.

Finally he spotted the dark bulk of the Taurox ahead. The armoured vehicle was heading for Spire Veritas, exactly as the holy Iconward had suspected. Kazán glanced at the hybrid champion who bore the banner of the Spiral Wyrn and frowned. For a moment he had seen a monster.

The chatter of gunfire from the truck’s turret roused him and he ducked as the Taurox’s cannon fired back. As they closed on their quarry Kazán’s eyes were drawn to the silver eagle emblazoned on its rear hatch. The symbol shone with purity, burning through the slurry of lies in his skull.

*They are like a disease, Kazán remembered. An unholy plague...*

He looked at the Iconward again. This time the monster remained.

‘I am tainted,’ Kazán whispered. He embraced the horror, using it to hold back the lies. They were already rising in him again, oozing into his mind from his unclean blood. He knew he would be irrevocably lost in a few hours.

*I killed my comrades...*

Staying low, Kazán crawled to the gun turret and rose behind its operator. Fixing the silver eagle in his mind, he clamped his hands around the cultist’s head and twisted sharply.

‘For the Emperor!’ he bellowed.

There was a howl of rage behind him as he hauled the limp body from its chair and seized the controls of the stubber. Squeezing down on the trigger, Kazán spun the bucking gun round, meeting the Iconward’s lunge with a storm of bullets. The sharpened haft of the banner plunged into his chest as his volley hammered into the champion, obliterating its torso. Coughing blood, Kazán kept firing, propelling the dying Iconward backwards until it was thrown from the truck. Then he angled the gun towards the banner jutting from his chest...

He froze, held rigid by the razor-clawed spiral hanging before him.

*All are One in the Spiral, his blood sang. Arise in the wake of the Four-Armed God!*

He shuddered as his punctured lungs gave out. The spasm broke the banner’s hold and he opened fire, shredding the unclean standard into tatters. As his vision darkened he staggered round, longing for a last glimpse of the silver eagle that had redeemed him.

The horizon ahead was empty.

*It's gone, Kazán realised dully. How...*

He died before he could complete the thought.

‘Way is clear,’ Uchzhaf the Four-Clawed growled sibilantly as it scanned the deserted expanse of the landing field. ‘Guards is gone.’

Uchzhaf was a hybrid of the Second Paradigm, blessed with four arms and a face that had more in common with a Purestrain than a man. The Acolyte leader’s naked torso was covered in chitinous plates, and a whorled horn jutted from its forehead. Speech was as arduous for Uchzhaf as walking was for the old man who cowered beside it.

To Matias, who was neither truly kindred nor a warrior, Uchzhaf was a terrifying and magnificent figure – everything that he himself longed to be. And yet, despite his frail body, Matias knew he was more valuable than the Four-Clawed, for the cult’s future beyond Redemption lay in *his* hands – his and the three Purestrains that accompanied them.

‘Won’t the sound of the engines draw them back?’ he asked anxiously, eyeing the cargo freighter on the central landing pad. ‘The vessel has not stirred in years. It will take time to rouse its spirit.’

‘Outsiders busy, brother,’ Uchzhaf hissed. The Acolyte surged from their hiding place behind a stack of crates and loped towards the ship. ‘Follow.’

Matias obeyed, his legs protesting as he rose. One of the Purestrains lifted him gently in its long-fingered claws and carried him, as it had done since their party had infiltrated the fortress during the chaos of the battle. Without the creature’s help Matias wouldn’t have lasted ten minutes. He had been well into his middle years when the cult had embraced him – over thirty years ago now – and only the Blessing in his blood had kept him alive. He had come to Redemption among the Nineteenth Congregation – just another pilgrim seeking answers the Imperium couldn’t offer – but the Gyre Magus had singled him out as *special*, for in his former life he had been a pilot.

*What if the access codes Trazgo stole don't work? Matias agonised as they neared the vessel. Or what if the craft's machine spirit denies my imprecations? What if I've lost the knack?*

He crushed the doubts. They were the lingering stain of his old life, but he had transcended such things. The Spiral had brought him this far and he would not fail it.

‘I will carry the Blessing to the stars!’ he vowed.

The Valkyrie rose with a clamour of thrusters and surged forward. Fighting his

nausea, Cross weighed up the soldiers crowded into the cabin with him. Clavel had called them Tempestus Scions. He claimed they were fearless killing machines who lived only to serve the Emperor and Cross saw no reason to doubt it. Once again, the troops sat in rigid silence, as if this was a routine patrol rather than the suicide mission Cross suspected.

*'Why are we still alive?'* he had asked the inquisitor.

*'If you can't answer that question yourself then I fear I've overestimated you, captain,'* Mordaine had replied seriously.

*'You think we might be useful.'*

It had been the only possible answer, but given where their ship was heading their usefulness probably wouldn't last long. The Mandira Veritas was the Spiral Dawn's foremost temple and the nerve centre of the entire organisation. Even with the mass of the cult's forces drawn to the Locker, it would be heavily guarded.

*'Consider it a rite of passage,'* Mordaine had said as the Excision Team prepared itself for the mission. *'If you're the man I think you are, you will survive.'*

'I always wanted to try the heavier gear,' Trujilo said beside Cross, tapping his carapace armour, 'but this chafes like the Trenchrot. This on the other hand...' he hefted his rifle, *'this I like. They say hellguns pack twice the heat of a regular torch.'*

'The weapon is called a hot-shot lasgun,' one of the soldiers opposite said, his voice sounding synthetic through his mask.

'Always be a hellgun to me, brother,' Trujilo growled.

Like the carapace armour Clavel had issued them, hellguns were reserved for the Astra Militarum's finest, but Cross had declined one himself, favouring his old bolt pistol and Quezada's power sword.

*Quezada... Gybzan... Regev... Rahel...* The names of the lost veterans spooled through his mind again, all of them sacrificed for Mordaine's experiment. And likely as not, the rest of the regiment would follow them tonight.

*'Why didn't you warn them?'* Cross had demanded at the end. *'If you wanted to shut down the cult then why not send the regiment in with its eyes open?'*

*'Ignorance was part of the computation,'* Mordaine had answered. *'This contagion is not an isolated incident, Cross. I believe the Brood have spread throughout the Imperium, devouring entire societies from within.'* For the first time, Cross had detected a trace of emotion, though he was still unsure if that cold, rational enmity really counted. *'They prey on ignorance. The question is*

*whether ignorance can ever endure against them.'*

*'So just end the lies,'* Cross had urged. *'Warn everyone!'*

Mordaine had stared at him as if he were a madman.

*Talasca... Lazaro... Ariken...*

'Did you have any loyalty to them?' Cross asked the pale-eyed man sitting on his other side. 'To the Black Flags?'

Clavel answered without hesitation: 'My loyalty is to the Imperium.'

'So you snooped on us and strung us along,' Trujilo accused. 'What else? You seed the Locker with spy-tech so your cog-boys could watch us dance?'

Clavel didn't answer. He closed his eyes and began to breathe deeply.

'Remind me again why we're fighting for these bastards, Cross?' Trujilo asked.

'Because the other ones are much worse, my friend.'

*And that's the whole sorry story of the Imperium,* Cross decided.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The skull-faced woman crossed the frozen plain, numb to misery and pain alike. Betrayal and broken bones were insignificant beside the simple imperative of survival. All that mattered was taking one more step, and after that *just one more*, on and on, deceiving herself with small victories so she wouldn't abandon the endless, hopeless march.

Sometimes a shadow walked beside her, though there was no light on the tundra to sustain it. She never looked at it directly, fearful that it would fade beneath her gaze, or worse yet, harden into reality, but occasionally she glimpsed the harrowed geometry of its visage.

*It is a dark companion, she judged, as am I.*

'What do you want from me?' she asked eventually.

'You are walking an old battlefield, *Le Mal Kalfu*,' the shadow said, addressing her by her true name, 'but it can kill you all the same.'

*Oblazt*, she remembered, *a world of cold wastes and colder betrayal.*

'I endured,' she said fiercely. 'I endure...'

The blizzard darkened into swirling soot and the ice became obsidian. *Redemption, a world ablaze with new betrayals...*

Adeola Omazet awoke to the new battlefield.

She saw the cult's truck accelerate towards her once more, its grinders chewing through the reckless Sentinel it had just destroyed. The scarlet-coated warlord on its deck was looking straight at her again. Omazet had no idea how he had identified her as his nemesis on the battlefield, but his perception didn't surprise her; he was a creature forged for war, his combat instincts tuned to a razor's edge. If she ran from cover the truck's stubber would tear her apart, but if she remained where she was its buzz-saw blades would do the same job seconds later.

*A choice that's no choice at all, Omazet thought bitterly. It's time.*

Her tongue prised free the tablet she'd wedged between her upper lip and gum before leaving the keep. It was a custom of her old regiment to prep a stimm before battle, but the blessings of the black pills came at a price, so she'd rarely used one. Now she bit down without hesitation, breathing deeply as fire surged through her blood.

*This is not how I die!*

As the truck bore down on her time seemed to flex into an elastic, ambivalent blur. Her muscles swelling with the flow, she leapt onto the rubble she'd been hiding behind – then leapt again as the truck's grinders rammed into her perch. Howling with defiance she pulled her legs up high and soared over its frontal plates. For a distended instant a storm of bullets battered her armour in slow motion, then she crashed down onto the stubber's barrel. It buckled under her weight and she tumbled to the deck as the weapon exploded in the gunner's face.

Pain wracked her as she rolled onto her knees and drew her machetes. Her armour was riddled with dents and she suspected half her ribs were fractured, but the stimm kept her muscles working.

*Until it stops my heart.*

Rising to her feet, Omazet swept past the turret and charged the warlord who stood on the rear deck. He opened fire with his needle pistol and metal darts pinged against her blades as she whipped them about protectively before her face. His bestial features tautened into a snarl as she closed with him.

'Heretic!' the warriors bellowed in mirrored fury.

He met her machetes with a long sword of gnarled bone and the chitin-plated claw of his third arm. His agility matched her chemically induced swiftness, and his multiple limbs wove about in an alien rhythm that would have overwhelmed a lesser opponent in seconds. Honed to new sharpness by the stimm, the rhythm of her decades-old razordance drowned out pain and doubt as they clashed.

*I am risen!*

The warriors struck and parried in an immaculate storm of blade and bone, each of them vying for an advantage, but every opening closed the moment it was glimpsed. Sometimes the warlord took sly shots with his needler, but she always saw them coming and blocked the darts. For all his skill, he hadn't yet mastered the *stealth* of close combat.

*That is his only weakness, Omazet sensed.*

She was seeking a way to turn the insight against him when a missile hit the truck at just the right angle and the deck heaved beneath her. With a screech of

sundered metal the vehicle flipped onto its flat nose, catapulting her into the air. As it exploded she hurtled through the wall of a storage shack and crashed into a pile of crates with bone-breaking force.

The memory of the impact jarred her awake and Omazet realised she'd been walking another old battlefield.

*How long was I out?* she wondered, staring up at the shack's ceiling. Had her duel with the warlord happened seconds or minutes or even hours ago? She could still hear the clamour of battle outside, but it was fading fast, drowned by a rising hiss of white noise.

*Did he survive?* She tried to rise, but her body wouldn't heed her will. Wracked by wounds and chemicals, her muscles twitched impotently under her cracked armour.

'I have to finish him!'

She could *see* the white noise now – it was swirling around her in a blizzard, like hungry snow. It *was* snow, she realised as she recognised the tundra. She was back in the frozen limbo of Oblazt's Ghostlands, walking the empty plain once more.

Empty? No, not quite...

'This is not how I die,' she hissed at the shadow walking beside her.

In the sickly light of dawn the Locker looked like an unclean graveyard that had spilled its burden into hell. The dead and the dying were scattered across the compound, men and beasts alike torn, crushed and charred in endless disorder. Wrecked vehicles lay among them, some still belching smoke and fire, others long since burned out.

The unclean horde pouring through the breach had slowed to a trickle shortly before dawn. Now even that flow dried up, finally exhausted by the attrition. Likewise, the defenders' sporadic reinforcements had dwindled to occasional stragglers.

Enginseer Tarcante was the last of the Black Flags to heed the call. He strode into the mayhem flanked by a pair of massive combat servitors. The squat, red-robed enginseer swung about with his axe while his guardians decimated the invaders with the heavy bolters fused to their arms. Desperate Guardsmen fell in behind the cybernetic trio as they pressed on to a building opposite the breach and entrenched themselves. The servitors took up positions to the east and west, while the troopers fanned out along the walls or found positions on the roof.

*Old Scorch* trundled to support them, crushing invaders under its treads and

laying down fire with its pintle-mounted stubber. Though its cannon was still hopelessly clogged, the machine's tempestuous spirit was undaunted. It had not endured the carnage of Oblazt by chance.

The surviving Sentinels and Chimeras also rallied to Tarcante's position, the armoured transports forming a loose circle around the building while the tall walkers prowled behind them. The makeshift bastion drew the horde like a magnet and fierce fighting raged around it, but the engineeer's defence was as robust as it was unimaginative.

*Now there's a commander I have time for,* Grijalva decided. He was offering Tarcante's forces whatever support he could from his watchtower, sniping at the most heavily armed or monstrous invaders. He had long ago slipped into a detached, perfectly focussed state, repeating the same killing cycle over and over – *seek, shoot, load... seek, shoot, load...*

The pattern drowned out the angry battering sounds behind him until the tower's trapdoor crashed open. Grijalva spun round and saw a hybrid hauling itself up through the hatchway. Jei jammed his laspistol into its eye and fired. The invader shrieked and dropped back into the room below, but another surged up in its place almost immediately. Firing on full auto and yelling curses like a madman, Jei spattered its face with las bolts. As it fell he stood astride the hole, shooting two-handed into the darkness below.

'Watch your power!' Grijalva warned moments before his comrade's weapon stuttered into silence. As Jei fumbled to change the power cell a whip of what looked like woven sinew lashed up and caught his ankle. He looked at Grijalva, shocked.

'Chief...'

The whip jerked the boy through the hatchway as Grijalva leapt forward. He flung himself prone and caught Jei's arm, bracing himself against the ground.

'Hold on!' Grijalva shouted, heaving with all his strength.

Jei's eyes were wide with terror as he hung suspended over the chanting, screeching things clustered around the ladder. The whip holding him snapped free suddenly and Grijalva hauled him upwards. He was almost out when a spine-backed monstrosity leapt up and caught his dangling legs in pincer claws. With a final shriek he was yanked down into the eager swarm.

Grijalva rolled away and snatched up his fallen rifle as the screaming started then ended with merciful swiftness. He spun and fired on sheer instinct as a hybrid emerged. The hot-shot bolt punched through its cranium and it dropped

like a stone.

*I'd murder a commissar for a grenade right now*, Grijalva thought as he pulled his laspistol free. If he kept firing the long-las he'd wipe out the power cell in no time. His only chance was to alternate the weapons and make every shot count. If he could take down all the bastards who'd taken a bite out of Jei he'd call it just about even.

Emptying his mind of everything else, he sat with his back against the tower wall and killed vermin.

With a final heave the band of Acolytes hauled the twisted metal chassis of the truck aside and their Primus scrambled free from the wreckage. The Chrysaor's left eye was swollen shut and one of his human arms hung limply, broken in at least three places. His needler was ruined, but his hallowed bonesword was mercifully intact. The *Spiral Fang* was an artefact forged from his lord's secretions, and losing it would have been close to sacrilege. He felt the living weapon's hilt pulsing in his grip, urging him to finish the duel he and the heretic woman had begun.

*We are bonded in holy war*, the Chrysaor thought as he scoured the rubble-strewn area for his enemy.

'Primus, your wounds...' one of the Acolytes began. Almost of its own accord, the *Spiral Fang* lashed out and impaled him. The Acolyte's expression was blissful as the bonesword sucked him dry of vitality, transferring a measure of its harvest to its wielder. The Chrysaor shivered as the holy infusion rushed through his body.

'Take them down!' someone unseen shouted.

A grenade landed at the feet of the Primus. He leapt back as an Acolyte threw itself upon the explosive and erupted in a red geyser. Guardsmen appeared from the wreckage around his kindred, their lasguns blazing. He whirled aside as a stocky female soldier fired a shotgun at him. The shell tore a crater in the chest of the Acolyte behind him and splattered the Primus with blood.

'Dretch eater!' the woman yelled as she racked her gun.

The Chrysaor's jaws distended and he spat a gob of venom in her face. She fired convulsively as she fell and the blast punched through his chitin-clad left shoulder, but he scarcely felt the pain.

'For the Spiral Wyrn!' the Primus bellowed as he charged the would-be assassins.

Rage welled up inside Ariken as she saw Heike drop to her knees. Her friend's

face was already swollen with the warlord's venom and her body was quaking violently.

'No!' Ariken cried. It was a pointless, empty denial, but she couldn't have suppressed it if her life depended on it.

*This ghost is yours to carry...*

Her squad had been advancing towards the breached wall when the heretic vehicle had sped past them. Recognising the woman skirmishing with the warlord, they'd given chase, but by the time they caught up with the truck it was a burned-out wreck. Then the abominations had turned up, wailing as they heaved at the twisted metal chassis. Ariken's squad had waited in hiding, letting them finish in case their captain was under the wreckage, but only the warlord had emerged.

*You've killed her, you bastard!* The force of her fury surprised her.

Ariken and her comrades opened fire as the bestial commander swept towards them with the last of his white-robed vassals at his heels. Las bolts poured into the charging hybrids, mowing down the underlings and tearing holes through their master's coat, but his darting movements cheated the eye and nobody landed a clean shot on him.

'Rage unbound is a traitor,' Ariken hissed, reaching for calm as she aimed, but it was far too late.

'The Spiral burns!' the warlord snarled as he leapt among them.

*There are nineteen of us, but it's not nearly enough,* Ariken realised.

The beast in scarlet swung his sword about in wide, sweeping arcs and slashed with his three-fingered claw, cutting a swathe of death through his foes. Ariken blocked with her rifle as he hacked at her and it snapped in half. She staggered back and drew her machete, hunting for an opening – for some weakness she could exploit.

*Omazet would see it!* Ariken thought frantically. *He can't be perfect.*

But she was not her mentor and she saw nothing except the torment of the men and women she had led to this slaughter.

'Run girl!' Captain Gharis yelled. The warlord's claw slashed his chest open in a welter of blood. As Gharis fell he fired a burst at close range, catching the creature in the side of the neck. The heretic swayed and stumbled, smoke pouring from his charred throat.

*This is the moment,* Ariken judged.

She leapt at the wounded monster, already seeing his death with perfect clarity as her machete swept towards his neck.

‘For the—’

His claw whipped out and caught her blade before it found its mark. She pressed against the hard chitin and found she had no strength left in her. Agony bloomed in her belly, but it was swiftly leeched away by a numbness that was somehow worse.

‘So the Spiral turns,’ the warlord snarled. He twisted the machete from her grip and it clattered to the ground.

There was a roar of gunfire from somewhere nearby and his gaze whipped away, seeking the source. Then he stepped back, yanking his serrated blade from her stomach in the same motion. As she fell she saw him slipping away behind the wreck.

*There are much worse things out here, Ariken,* Cross had warned her.

‘What happened to you, ghost?’ she wondered as darkness gathered at the edges of her vision.

‘*Do you want to live?*’ someone asked her. It sounded like an old woman, but there was an echo of another voice behind her, and behind that echo another...

‘*Do you want to live?*’ the trail of voices urged.

‘Yes,’ Ariken said faintly.

‘*Then look at me, Ariken Skarth.*’

‘Who are you?’

‘*Redemption.*’

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The rumble of the Valkyrie's engines changed pitch as the craft slowed and began to hover. Green lights flashed along the cabin and the rear hatch swung down with a hydraulic hiss. Cold wind rushed inside as the squad advanced in rows of three, the metal loops of their harnesses sliding along the guide bars overhead as they approached their assigned drop points.

Standing in the fourth and final row, Cross glimpsed the sweeping curve of the temple's dome. It was a colossal structure, its soot-encrusted glass reinforced with iron ribs that looked almost organic. A monolithic obsidian helix rose from its apex and smaller spines dotted the ribs, arranged in a spiral.

*Did the cult build this? Cross wondered. Or did they corrupt something that was already here?*

There was a whoosh as the Valkyrie launched its twin missiles. They streaked towards the temple, leaving white contrails in the dirty sky. A moment later an inferno erupted from the dome, cracking its centre wide open and disintegrating the helix.

*'Initiating insertion,'* the pilot announced.

The cabin lights turned red as the Valkyrie swooped towards the wound it had torn in the temple like an eager predator. The first wave of Tempestus Scions leapt from the craft before the burning plume had even faded.

Xithauli looked up as a thunderous blast reverberated around the temple. Fire blossomed overhead, raining shards of fused glass and metal onto the coiled pyramid below. Ripped from the psychic embrace of the Spiral Father, the magus reeled at the devastation.

*'The Helika Veritas is gone,'* she moaned.

A fragment struck her cheek, slicing and burning in the same instant. The pain

roused her and she threw up a telekinetic shield, warding herself from the razor-sharp debris. Her eyes blazed as the Spiral Father gazed through them upon the ruination.

‘The heretics have come for me!’ her lord roared through her throat.

Dark figures dropped through the riven dome on ropes, spitting bolts of laser fire as they descended. Xithauli’s heart pounded like a war drum as she tried to contain the Spiral Father’s seething presence. Then He was gone, but his blessing remained, fuelling her psychic might.

‘So the Spiral Burns!’ Xithauli sang as she levitated above the pyramid’s summit with her arms spread wide and her staff raised. Abandoning her faltering shield, she muttered a mantra of deception and spun her form into a cascade of mirror images, shrouding herself in illusions as searing bolts darted around her.

She whispered a blessing, focussing her attention on a band of Acolytes surging up from the tiers below. Her whisper rose to a shriek and the Acolytes wailed with ecstasy as their muscles swelled with unnatural vigour under her benediction. Their eyes glowing with violet light, they opened fire as they scuttled towards the summit, but neither their faith nor their weapons could match the invaders’ lethality. Though the soldiers were moving fast and wielding their guns one-handed they fired in precise bursts that tore a swathe of death through the cultists.

Xithauli snarled and lashed out with her mind as the invaders neared her. A spasm seized her chosen target and he thrashed about on his rope like a tormented puppet. Moments later his goggles shattered as his skull erupted behind his mask.

The surviving pair dropped to the pyramid’s summit and snapped free of their ropes. In smooth synchronicity they threw grenades into the throng below, then swung round to target Xithauli, sweeping her myriad images with las-fire. A bolt scorched her thigh and another drilled through her hip, sounding bright chords of agony through her body.

‘As within, so without,’ she chanted, embracing the pain and using it to strike back. She clawed at the nearest soldier’s mind with her own, hunting for flaws. His psyche was like a block of iron, devoid of any doubt or vice to latch onto, so she wrenched at his motor functions instead, jerking him round so his gunfire punched into the third soldier. As his comrade fell, her victim snapped free and looked directly at her. Appalled, she realised she had stretched herself too thin and her illusion had fallen. She quickly hissed a new mantra, swinging her staff across her body and picturing a shield blossoming from its centre. The effort

almost finished her, but the soldier's volley burst against the barrier in an impotent spray. Xithauli screamed silently as the silver staff grew red hot.

'Pain is a delusion of the flesh,' she chanted as her hands burned.

Screeching with wrath, the last of the Acolytes she had blessed surged onto the summit and leapt upon her tormentor. As they pulled him down with claw and blade Xithauli dropped from the air and collapsed beside them. Hanging onto consciousness by a thread, she rolled onto her back and saw three more of the baneful soldiers descending.

'Forgive me, Father,' Xithauli murmured as they picked off her Acolytes.

She turned as she heard the golden whorls of the Sleepless Gate swirl open, revealing the dark portal at the summit's centre. Her heart was pounding furiously again, accelerating to match the rhythm of her god's wrath as He drew closer.

*He has abandoned the Ritual of Binding, Xithauli realised. If the prisoner under the Spires breaks free then so be it.*

'This one's still alive, sir,' a masked soldier said, looking down at her. Another man appeared beside him and regarded her with pale eyes. He pointed his plasma pistol at her head.

'Where is your master, degenerate?' he asked, his voice as empty as his gaze.

*'I come, outsider,' the Spiral Father promised with Xithauli's voice. 'I shall devour your soul.'*

A blast of searing plasma silenced them both.

Cross was the last to reach the pyramid. By the time he freed himself from his harness Trujilo and the surviving soldiers had formed a defensive circle around the summit. They were firing their hellguns in alternating bursts at the cultists charging up the corkscrewing ramp of the structure. Clavel stood over the body of a robed woman whose head and shoulders had been scorched away.

*The priestess, Cross guessed, remembering the eerily beautiful woman he had seen on his first visit to Veritas. A woman who had never been human...*

'No sign of Vyrunas?' he asked.

'Vyrunas died at the Locker some time ago,' Clavel answered. 'This was their new Gyre Magus.'

Cross didn't bother asking how he knew this. Doubtless Trujilo had been right about spy-tech being seeded throughout the Locker, otherwise there would be little point in the inquisitor's experiment. For all he knew, the conclave might even have surveillance in the Spires. He wondered if Mordaine was watching the

Black Flags remotely right now, taking notes as they made their last stand.

*I'm sorry, Ariken,* he thought. He hadn't said farewell to her when he'd left for the abbey – hadn't thought he'd have to.

'So what now?' Cross asked. 'Their leader is dead.'

'The Gyre Magus was not their leader,' Clavel said. He walked over to the aperture yawning at the centre of the tier. Cross saw steps descending into darkness from its lip. 'We must locate the vector organism.'

'The hostiles are fighting on two fronts, sir,' the Scion officer reported. He was scanning the temple's distant floor with a pair of magnoculars. 'Someone else is attacking them from below.'

'Interesting, but currently irrelevant,' Clavel said. 'Our primary objective—'

Something vast burst from the portal in a tangle of chitin and engorged muscles, snatching up Clavel in its long-fingered claws as it surged onto the pyramid. The creature's elongated skull was crested with spines that ran the length of its hunched back and curved tail. A second pair of arms sprang from its shoulders, multi-jointed and tipped with immense serrated blades. Most of its body was sheathed in interlocking plates of blue chitin, but its bulbous head looked almost gelatinous, the mauve, deeply wrinkled flesh pulsating softly. Its void-black eyes glittered with a ravenous alien intelligence under the golden spiral etched into its sloping forehead.

*What hope do we have in a galaxy that spawns such blasphemy?* Cross thought, his sanity fraying as he gazed upon the Spiral Father. *The void between the stars is a cesspit.*

With a deep hiss the abomination thrust Clavel's head into its gaping, fang-filled maw. His legs kicked about as it gnawed at his skull, killing him almost playfully as it regarded the intruders.

Someone shrieked, lost and broken. For a moment Cross thought the madness was his own, but then he saw Trujilo hurl himself from the pyramid. As if the scream had snapped them free, the Tempestus Scions opened fire, their hellguns scorching pits into the thing's carapace. It ignored them for a contemptuous moment, its eyes locked on Cross.

*I can show you the truth you have forgotten,* the Spiral Father promised him, speaking directly into his mind, *if you have the courage to see it, Ambrose.'*

The next instant it was moving, twisting about and lashing out with all four arms in a dizzying blur. Clavel's body swung limply in its distended jaws as it fought, dead but not forgiven.

*I died,* Cross remembered, *but I didn't believe it.*

He stood rigid, paralysed with despair as the skirmish raged around him. The six Scions fought with a tightly focussed ferocity that would have been impossible for lesser men – ducking and rolling and diving and firing as the eldritch nightmare hunted them across the tier. Their hellguns left scores of wounds, but none deep enough to slow their foe, and with terrible inevitability the men began to die.

The first was impaled as he dodged a whiplash strike from a serrated blade a fraction too late. The second skidded in a pool of blood, slowing him just enough for a hand to seize him and hurl him from the pyramid. The third was torn in half by a scything slash when his hellgun jammed and his attention wavered for a critical second.

The fourth to die was the officer, but he chose his own death, hurling himself at his foe as he detonated a melta grenade. The fireball carbonised the star god's ribcage and incinerated Clavel's corpse. With an abyssal screech, the beast flung the charred cadaver aside and rose up on its haunches, its body flickering with trceries of psychic energy.

*Muscle and claw are the least of its strengths,* Cross realised with horror. *The magi were only this creature's disciples.*

The beast lunged for one of the soldiers. He slipped between its claws, but this time its *gaze* was the true weapon and he couldn't evade that. His entire body convulsed and he slipped to his knees. The star god was upon him in a second, swiping off his head with a flick of its claws.

The last soldier didn't falter for a second. Though he surely recognised his doom, he continued the cat-and-mouse duel as if every second of survival might snatch victory from defeat. Watching the undaunted Scion, Cross finally remembered the impunity that emptiness offered.

*Everything else is just a lie or a wound waiting to happen.*

Without hesitation he embraced the void and the despair that had paralysed him evaporated. He activated Quezada's power sword and raised the humming blade. That was when he saw the newcomers. They were spread out in a silent circle along the edge of the tier – four giants with crudely noble faces and the shaven-headed, silver-eyed madman who led them. The ogryn paladins' white armour was pitted and spattered with blood.

*They fought their way up the pyramid,* Cross realised. *They were the other attackers the Tempestor saw.*

*'Reality is merely the illusion that prevails,'* the voice of the Coil had told

Kangre Talasca when he'd gazed into its depths and awoken to the truth. His newfound sight had unveiled previously unseen – *unimagined* – perspectives, opening up the secret paths that riddled the ambivalent territory of the Koronatus Ring.

*'Mind, not matter, is the firmament of existence. Will, not body, the most primal force.'*

Driving the Taurox along a knife-edge between madness and revelation, Talasca had brought his squad right to the gates of the enemy, cheating not only time and space, but also the wardens his quarry had left in his path. Now all that remained was to fulfil his destiny – to slay the xenos god-beast that had tainted this sacred world.

'Nothing is chance,' he decreed as he weighed up the abomination at the pyramid's summit. 'We were born for this, my brothers!'

The false prophet saw the paladins and hissed. It stunned the remaining Scion with a cursory mental whiplash and turned in a slow circle, assessing each of the newcomers before moving on to the next. Talasca was the last.

*'Your revelation is just another lie,'* the Spiral Father whispered to him.

Then it lunged out with the full force of its will, its black eyes streaming vermilion fire as it sought to prise his soul apart. Talasca reeled under the onslaught, but his faith warded him for precious seconds and his brothers did not hesitate. Moving as one, the four paladins stormed forward with their Slab shields raised and slammed into the beast with crushing force, then began to batter its carapace with their mauls. Cross followed them without hesitation and Talasca understood that he was part of their holy circle now. Wielding his sword two-handed, the captain hacked and stabbed between the ogyrns, tearing deep wounds into the beast's flesh.

Assaulted from all sides, the Spiral Father released its grip on Talasca and fought back, thrashing against the wall of shields that trapped it. Freed, the colonel yelled a wordless war cry and charged to join his brothers. He lashed out with his slender power sabre in intricate, twisting strikes that wove through to the sinews between its carapace, always finding a worthy mark, as if the blade itself was hungry for justice.

In turn the star god raked the barrier with its talons as its jaws gnashed at the paladins' helmets. One helm was torn loose and the beast's barbed tongue punched into the skull of the unfortunate warrior, seeking the soft meat within. The abhuman paladin held his position in stoic silence, hammering at his foe until the questing organ shredded his brain and he collapsed in a twitching heap.

‘Tighten the circle!’ Talasca shouted and the surviving paladins pressed closer, allowing their prisoner no avenue of escape. ‘Scourge the unclean!’

They killed the god-beast piecemeal, the paladins slowly cracking open its carapace while Talasca and Cross weakened its limbs.

‘For Redemption!’ the Retriever bellowed as one of its scything claws finally gave way, hacked off at its elbow joint.

A second ogryn died when the beast finally tore through his shield and yanked him into its grasp. Another fell when the star god’s barbed tail slid beneath his shield and stabbed up into his groin, punching through to his abdomen. But by the time the circle was broken, the Spiral Father was too weakened to escape. As it lurched brokenly towards the portal the surviving ogryn blocked its path, pressing the beast back with his shield while his comrades continued to harry it.

Finally one of the abomination’s legs splintered and it fell in a knot of broken limbs and smoking chitin. It writhed about and lashed out at its foes until they hacked off its remaining arm. As Talasca raised his sword for the killing blow it fixed him with its black eyes.

*‘You are deceived,’* it breathed into his mind.

‘For the Throne of Thorns!’ the Retriever shouted as he plunged his glowing blade through the spiral icon on its forehead.

Nothing else crawled through the trapdoor. Grijalva waited with his pistol levelled, wary of the silence. His entire world had narrowed to this grim vigil atop Tower Eleven, an eternity with his back against the wall, killing monsters. He’d long ago lost count of the number he’d taken down, but whatever it came to it *still* wasn’t enough to pay for Jei’s death.

*The lad made the best damn recaff I’ve known since the Verzante piazzas,* Grijalva thought absurdly.

Minutes passed, but the trapdoor remained empty. Eventually it dawned on him that he couldn’t hear the beasts mewling and chanting in the room below anymore. In fact he couldn’t hear much at all.

*The shooting has stopped,* he realised. *Has the Locker fallen? Are the bastards playing with me?*

Suddenly weary of it all, he hauled himself up and looked over the wall. In the thin light he saw that the fighting was over. What remained of the horde was retreating through the breached wall in disarray. He caught sight of the warlord among them, its trench coat tattered and smoking. Instinctively Grijalva reached for his long-las, then remembered its charge had died long ago. There was

nothing he could do to the vermin so his attention switched to Tarcante's position.

The makeshift redoubt still stood.

'Throne bless you, cog-priest,' Grijalva breathed.

He heard a thunderous rumbling as a vast, angular shape rose from the centre of the compound. It took him a moment to recognise the old cargo vessel the regiment had inherited when they annexed the spaceport. Like most of the troops, the sergeant had assumed it was just a relic, its service days long over.

*Who's flying the damn thing?* Grijalva wondered as the vessel climbed. As it was swallowed by the roiling, lightning-flecked clouds he let the question slip away. Whatever the vessel meant, he was in no position to do anything about it.

'Clear,' Cross voxed the Valkyrie. He stepped back as it began to winch up the Scion slumped unconscious in the harness. There was blood trickling from the man's nose, but he was still breathing. Cross couldn't tell how much damage the Spiral Father's glancing psychic attack had done, but if anyone could pull through the trauma it would be a man like this.

*He'll probably try to kill me for taking his mask off,* he thought. *Or for freezing up while his comrades were slaughtered.*

Trujilo had also survived, though it might have been kinder if he hadn't. Cross had heard him moaning after the battle and found him curled up a few tiers below, both his legs and his mind broken. The veteran stared ahead with vacant eyes as Cross tightened his safety harness.

A seismic rumble reverberated through the temple as another tremor shook the walls. The quakes had begun during the skirmish and worsened steadily over the past few minutes.

*It feels like the whole temple's going to come down,* Cross thought uneasily.

'Clear,' he voxed. As Trujilo was winched up, Cross joined Talasca and his surviving paladin at the edge of the tier. They were watching for cultists, but so far the lower levels had remained empty.

*The xenos are in shock,* Cross guessed. *When we killed their god we hurt every damn one of them, but it won't last.*

'The Valkyrie can't carry the ogryn,' he warned the colonel. 'We'll have to fight our way out.'

'You are mistaken, Cross,' Talasca said. 'Karolus and I cannot accompany you.'

'That's insane, man. This place will be crawling with xenos soon.' *If it doesn't collapse before that...*

‘We will not be here.’ Talasca indicated the portal the Spiral Father had erupted from. ‘We are going deeper into the Spire.’

*That’s insane,* Cross wanted to say, but the expression on the colonel’s face stopped him. Mundane measurements like sanity no longer applied to this man. The path he walked now ruled him completely. It probably always had. Whether that proved to be for good or ill, Cross was in no position to obstruct it.

*Who am I to judge anyway?*

The pyramid surged in the throes of another tremor, fiercer than any that had come before.

‘The Emperor walk with you, Retriever,’ Cross said.

‘He does, Cross.’ Talasca smiled and for the first time the expression appeared genuine. ‘Come, Karolus.’

As the pair entered the dark aperture Cross pulled on the last of the harnesses. ‘Clear,’ he voxed. Ascending as they descended, he stared down at the desecrated temple – a temple that had almost certainly been built on the foundations of something much older.

*Lie upon lie, within and without. Damned if you do or don’t,* he thought, slipping back into the lyrical patterns that had defined his former life. *Die if you will or won’t. All’s one...*

‘Cross,’ his vox buzzed. ‘*This is Mordaine.*’ The inquisitor’s voice was badly distorted.

‘Your vector organism is dead,’ Cross replied flatly. ‘So is Clavel, along with most of the others.’

There was only the briefest pause. ‘*Acceptable.*’

‘What about the Black Flags?’

*‘We have a problem, Cross.’*

‘I asked about my regiment, inquisitor.’

*‘They survived.’* Mordaine hesitated again. *‘I regret to say their casualties were significant.’*

*No. You don’t regret it,* Cross thought, *not any of it.* But he was too tired for real bitterness. Doubtless that would come later.

*‘I am relaying this signal via the Valkyrie,’* Mordaine continued. *‘The disturbance we are experiencing across the Ring is worse outside the planet’s exosphere. Much worse.’*

‘That doesn’t make sense.’

*‘Redemption is not a natural world, Cross. Things here are... fluid. We’ve lost the orbital station. And my ships.’*

‘Lost contact you mean?’

‘No... we still have contact, but the operatives on board have been compromised.’ Another pause, this time much longer. ‘I am not certain they’re even human anymore.’

‘The Brood got to them?’ Cross was shocked. ‘How in the Seven Hells—’

‘Not the Brood,’ Mordaine cut in. ‘Redemption.’

*‘The Black Needle unweaves the world amidst the fervour dreams of sinners become blind saints!’* the voice shrieked across the flight deck, alight with madness. *‘In fire and ice and poisoned water and with every breath of tainted air, the Word shall beget the Void and—’*

His hands shaking, Matias killed the vox, but he couldn’t silence the *message* that fuelled the voice. As he stared at the ship’s controls the twisted parable scratched at his thoughts, like a malignant seed that had taken root in his skull.

*It’s in the fabric of space itself, the pilot realised, shrouding the planet like another layer of atmosphere. A polluted layer...*

The voice had exploded from the vox when the cargo ship had broken through Redemption’s storm-wracked stratosphere. Matias had identified the source as a massive orbital station, and even a cursory scan had revealed that the place was bristling with weapons. That had been the first shock.

The second had been the insidious message itself.

‘And a perfect geometry of mistruths shall unmake the prevalent horizon of sense and sanctity,’ Matias mumbled, ‘and carve stranger flesh upon the bones of self-deception—’

A clawed hand grasped his shoulder, cutting off the nonsense spilling from his mouth. The pilot glanced fearfully at the Acolyte hunched in the chair beside him, but he saw only camaraderie on its savage face.

‘Take strength in Spiral, brother!’ Uchzhaf urged.

‘You don’t hear it...’ Matias moaned.

‘I hear, but is empty words.’ Uchzhaf squeezed harder. ‘Is nothing!’

*Nothing*, Matias thought. Rather than distress, the pain of the Acolyte’s grip brought a clarity that eclipsed the dark parable. ‘Nothing!’ he confirmed fiercely.

As he returned to his task the Sacred Spiral seemed to revolve before his eyes, spinning tranquillity through his soul. With a smile, Matias coaxed the ship away from the daemon-haunted world, steering his precious cargo towards saner stars.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Spiral Father was dead. The Primus had known it the moment his god's perpetual psychic murmuring had ceased, yet he had clung to the hope that the silence might be temporary – that some unknowable event had disrupted the kindred's communion with their progenitor. That the blessed contact would eventually resume...

But there could be no doubt anymore.

His god lay sprawled at the summit of the Mandira Veritas, its hallowed carapace scorched black and its limbs hacked off. To compound the blasphemy, the Spiral Father's head was missing, either cast from the pyramid or carried away by a heretic. None of the kindred save the Gyre Magus had gazed upon the star god before, but even desecrated and ruined, His sacred form was unmistakable. The Acolytes who had accompanied the Primus to the summit were moaning deep in their throats, their eyes wide as they stared at the corpse. He knew it was not grief that harrowed them, but *confusion* – confusion at the impossible murder of their god and confusion at the silence his death had wrought. A silence that would never end.

'It is unwise to linger here, Primus,' a high, lilting voice said beside him. 'This Spire is no longer ours.'

The Primus turned to the robed youth who stood beside him. Gualichu was the last of Redemption's magi. He was not yet sixteen, but he already had the gravitas and bearing of a leader. Born among the kindred of Spire Caritas, he had been held in reserve during the Ravening, along with the rest of the Caritas Cabal. They were now the most numerous of the kindred, their Spire the cult's strongest bastion.

'What happened here, magus?' the Chrysaor asked.

Thousands had died during his attack on the heretics' fortress, including many

of the cult's finest warriors, yet he sensed a worse fate had befallen the kindred left to guard Spire Veritas. When the remnants of his army had returned to the mountain they had found the bridge and the long road to the pinnacle abandoned. Inside the Mandira Veritas itself there had been hundreds of bodies, their bloody tangle standing testament to a fierce battle. Most of the dead were kindred, but they were far too few to account for the thousands that had remained on Veritas.

'Where did they go?' the Chrysaor pressed, his attention falling on the dark portal yawning at the centre of the summit.

'Nowhere we should follow, Primus,' Gualichu answered pointedly, following the warlord's gaze. He closed his eyes as he cast his mind into the contaminated aether of the temple. 'The Gyre Sanctum has been violated. The Ritual of Binding was not completed.'

'Then the Dark Beneath the Spires is unbound?'

'No...'. The magus hesitated. 'Not unbound, but uncoiled.' An angry rumble rippled through the temple. Gualichu's eyes flicked open. 'We must leave this Spire now,' he hissed.

'We shall reclaim the Mandira Veritas,' the Chrysaor vowed, glaring at the portal as if it were his nemesis. 'The Spiral Wyrms will rise once more!'

*But our truest hope lies with those who have escaped this baleful world,* he admitted.

Three days had passed since the attack and Lieutenant Mellier was still in command of the Locker. There had been no word from the colonel and all the senior staff were either dead or presumed so.

Two captains had survived, but neither was in any shape to take over from her. Captain Gharis had lost an arm and far too much blood, but Enginseer Tarcante, who was the closest thing they had to a medicae now, thought the veteran officer would pull through.

Captain Omazet was another matter entirely. The salvage crews had found her lying in a wrecked shack, battered and comatose. Tarcante had done what he could to keep her alive, but he couldn't say whether she would ever awaken. The injuries to her body were superficial, but he suspected she was lost in some deeper trauma of the mind or spirit. Such things were unpredictable.

Three lieutenants remained, but Mellier's peers had deferred to her immediately. She still wasn't sure how she felt about that, but she had too much on her mind to worry about it. Right now she just had to do her job and keep the regiment running.

*It's what Captain Omazet would demand of me,* she had decided firmly.

Eighty-two Black Flags had survived the assault, including the armour crews, though over half were wounded, some seriously. Another nineteen had been out on the perimeter during the blackout, blithely unaware of the darker storm raging back at base. And yesterday a Chimera had drifted in carrying a pair of veterans, apparently the only survivors of an ill-fated expedition that had cost them two officers and the commissar.

*'Captain Quezada's signal cut out,'* the exhausted scout, Galantai, had reported in his heavy Szilar accent. *'And then the spiral-heads came for us – scores of them. I had to cut and run – to warn the Locker.'* He'd shaken his head ruefully. *'I see that didn't work out so well.'*

Old Scorch had endured, along with three Sentinels and a couple of Chimeras, but they weren't nearly enough to defend the Locker, so Mellier had pulled everyone back to the keep and dug in for a siege. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was the best she could come up with until she received fresh orders, which probably wouldn't be any time soon.

The planet's orbital relay station had fallen silent, but *something* was transmitting from up there, spewing out an endless stream of gibberish with the passion of divine revelation. As Mellier had listened to that frenzied voice the shadows in the room had begun to crawl, as if roused to sedition. She'd cut the signal off quickly and discovered her nose was bleeding.

*There's no help for us there,* she had concluded with a shudder.

The master vox pinged, startling her. She frowned as she saw the signal was coming from somewhere beyond the mesa. It had to be the enemy.

'Locker,' she answered, expecting an ultimatum or a threat.

*'This is Cross.'* His voice was barely audible. *'Captain Ambrose Cross.'* He reeled off an identification code. *'Who am I speaking to?'*

'Lieutenant Mellier.' She hesitated. 'Sir.'

*'What about Rostyk or Kazán?'*

'I am currently the regiment's most senior officer, captain.'

*'Let me speak to Preacher Lazaro then.'*

'Preacher Lazaro is dead, sir.' There was silence on the other end. 'Captain Cross, I said that—'

*'I heard you.'* When he spoke again there was fresh urgency in his voice. *'Listen to me, Mellier – you have to pull out of the Locker. Take what you can, but get out of there fast.'*

'Forgive me, sir, but—'

*'The cult will be coming for you, Mellier. You don't have much time.'*

*'I have secured the keep.'*

*'It's a death trap and if you're any kind of Black Flag you already know it.'*

Mellier sighed, wishing this decision would fall to someone – *anyone* – but her.

*'And where exactly would we go, Captain Cross?'*

*'Come to Vigilans. We have a base here.'*

*'We?'*

*'An ally... I'll explain when you get here.'*

*'How do I know this isn't a trap?'*

*'It doesn't matter,'* he urged. *'It's the only chance you have, Mellier.'*

*'I will consider your proposal, captain.'*

*'Don't think about it too long.'* He hesitated. *'One more thing... The medicae, Ariken... Skarth. Did she make it?'*

*'We never found a body,'* Mellier said, *'but no, she isn't among us, captain.'*

*'I understand. Thank you, lieutenant.'* It sounded like he had expected the answer. *'Come to Vigilans.'*

The signal cut off.

Cross slumped back in his chair, rubbing unconsciously at his gloved hand.

*'You should meet them at the bridge,'* Inquisitor Mordaine said over his shoulder.

*'I'm not sure she believed me.'*

*'As you said, it doesn't matter. Mellier is intelligent. They will come.'*

*You probably have psych-profiles on all their officers,* Cross guessed. *Did you know I was coming to this forsaken planet?* He dismissed the paranoid notion. Even a calculating creature like the inquisitor couldn't predict such things.

*Nothing is chance...*

With a sigh he faced Mordaine. *'What happened to your men up there?'* The orbital station remained lost to them. It continued to transmit its incomprehensible message in a ceaseless tirade, while the ships that had accompanied the station had simply vanished. *'What's happening to Redemption?'*

*'I don't know,'* Mordaine said. It was probably the most honest thing Cross had heard him say. *'There may be more to Aveline's story than I anticipated.'*

*That part is a lie,* Cross judged. *You never doubted her.*

There was a shadow in the inquisitor's expression that might have been unease, but it was impossible to be sure. He sensed that Mordaine had excised such

emotions in a more profound way than Clavel or the Scions had done, or ever could. Everything about the man confirmed Cross' original suspicion that he was older than he looked. Probably *much* older...

*You understand the void better than I do, inquisitor.*

'How long before the Ordo Xenos sends reinforcements?' Cross asked, already suspecting the answer.

'This study is of an extremely sensitive nature.' Mordaine looked at him levelly. 'It began and ended with the Calavera Conclave.'

'So we're on our own.'

'Not quite... I have other operatives, but they are committed elsewhere. It will be some time before they respond.' That *some time* was loaded with enough ambiguity to stretch into years.

*I won't be going home*, Cross realised. He was surprised at his relief. Nothing but regrets awaited him there and he already carried more than his share of those.

'The Brood are our priority,' Mordaine decreed. 'It is imperative that we consolidate Vigilans.'

'And then?'

'Then we watch the Spires and see what comes for us, Captain Cross.'

Ariken awoke into a darkness more absolute than any she had known before. The air shivered with a low, molten drone, like the breath of a slumbering volcano. That ceaseless exhalation was hot and reeked of sulphur, yet the smooth stone she lay upon was cold.

'Where am I?' she whispered.

'Under the Spires,' the darkness answered, speaking with the voice of an old woman.

'Which one?'

'There is only one Underspire.'

'How did I get here?' Ariken demanded, recognising the withered croak.

'You slipped through a crack in the firmament. Redemption is riddled with them.'

'A crack in the ground?'

'In the *soul*, girl.'

'I don't understand.' Ariken tried to rise, but her body wouldn't obey. 'Am I dead?' she demanded.

'That is entirely a matter of perspective. Open your eyes.'

‘They are open!’ Ariken protested, staring into nothingness.

‘They are not. Try again, Black Flag.’

‘I...’ Ariken floundered, opening and closing her eyes repeatedly, but open or closed, she saw only blackness. ‘There’s nothing!’

‘Look *inside!*’

Ariken shut her eyes again and slowed her breathing, reaching for the serenity she had sometimes – rarely – attained in her duels with Omazet; a state where her body had been in motion, yet her mind had been perfectly still. *The candle at the heart of the storm*, her mentor had called it.

Motes of grey shadow began to bloom in the darkness like ashen flowers. As they blossomed they gyrated languidly and coalesced into the *impression* of a woman. The phantom was devoid of definition, yet there was an aura of terrible severity and age about it. Somehow it was *precisely* as Ariken had imagined it would be – a perfect counterpart to the voice in the darkness. Other figures flowed behind it in a spectral trail, their souls receding into oblivion.

The first was a giant resplendent with nobility, yet strangled by sorrow...

The second was a man who reeked of hungry dreams turned sour...

The third... the third was inscrutable and utterly alien...

A plangent mechanical ticking rose through the igneous rumble of the Underspire, like the pulse of a monolithic clock. It was punctuated by the grind and whirl of some impossibly vast engine.

‘Arise in the Crucible Aeterna, Ariken Skarth,’ the phantom woman said. ‘We who watch over Redemption do not watch alone.’

Matias was slumped in his chair, the beatific smile he had worn since their escape frozen into his face. Uchzhaf the Four-Clawed could not remember exactly when the pilot had expired, but it had been many hours ago. Their stolen vessel was old and its systems had begun to fail a few days into their voyage. The air was now bitterly cold and so stale that Uchzhaf struggled for breath. Hybrids of the First and Second Paradigms were strong, but their human heritage was a flaw and Uchzhaf would soon follow Matias into the Spiral’s embrace. That did not matter; like the pilot, the Acolyte had served its purpose.

*Only the blessed ones are important*, Uchzhaf thought, turning to regard the three Purestrains that crouched behind it. The creatures had no need of air or warmth. They could even endure the void of space if necessary, but Uchzhaf did not believe it would come to that. The ship was adrift now and its cogitator would only expend fuel to steer it clear of danger. Its blind voyage might last for

years or even decades, but Uchzhaf had faith that the Spiral would guide its children to a new hunting ground.

‘Sleep, brothers,’ the Acolyte hissed. ‘Sleep until the Outsiders come.’

Even to Uchzhaf, the Purestrains’ black eyes were inscrutable. Moving as one, their heads tilted to regard the hybrid for a long moment. Then they crept from the room to seek a hiding place. When they were gone Uchzhaf followed, but its destination was quite different. Breathing heavily, the hybrid loped along the corridor until it reached an airlock. When the Outsiders arrived they must not find the corpse of a *monster* on board.

Uchzhaf the Four-Clawed had one last duty to perform for the Spiral Wurm.

## EPILOGUE

### *Beyond Redemption*

There was no day or night, no sense of time passing or distance travelled, only an absence of awareness that ended as abruptly as it had begun.

The Sleeper awoke, roused by an almost preternatural certainty that things had *changed* – that the outsiders were here.

It slipped from the snarl of pipes where it had secreted itself and unwound its gangling form into a stooped crouch. The metal maze was lightless and cold, but a residue of air remained, probably because nobody had survived to breathe it.

As the creature crept along the corridor it ceased to be the Sleeper and became the *Survivor*, for the minds of its fellow hunters remained silent. They had not awoken.

Instinct had compelled the three hunters to disperse across their new territory, each one choosing a different region for its slumber, lest some localised catastrophe claim them all. That had been wise, for the Survivor sensed that the others were gone. Maybe something had breached their enclosed world or perhaps parts of its structure had simply collapsed. Either way the Survivor was alone.

By the time it reached the end of the corridor it had forgotten the others, its mind narrowed to a single, all-consuming purpose: *the Blessing had to be shared*.

It didn't take the Survivor long to find its prey, for the intruders moved about in a riot of noise and bright beams. There were many of them, all wearing bulky suits and masks, but few had helmets. Despite their lights they were blind to their stalker, for the Survivor had mastered every trick of the corroded labyrinth before entering its sleep.

As the intruders pressed deeper they grew more confident and began to split

into smaller groups, until six split into four and eventually two. But as their numbers diminished so the intruders' caution began to grow once more. The hunter sensed that the pair it stalked would remain together until they re-joined their kin.

*It was time.*

The Survivor surged from a shaft above its quarry and scuttled along the ceiling, seizing and abandoning handholds with all six limbs. The persistent groans and creaks of the maze camouflaged its charge so it was almost upon the intruders before they registered the disturbance. As the one in the rear began to turn the Survivor snatched it up and cracked its head against the wall, rendering the creature senseless. Its companion swung round, its torch beam flitting about wildly before finding the thing on the ceiling. The prey's eyes widened above its mask... then dulled as they met the hunter's gaze.

Still clasping its first victim in one claw, the Survivor dropped to the ground and rose above its frozen prey. With a wet hiss its tongue extruded, dripping mucus.

Very soon the outsider would be kindred.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Peter Fehervari** is the author of the novel *Fire Caste*, featuring the Astra Militarum and Tau Empire, the novella 'Fire and Ice' from the *Shas 'o* anthology, and the Tau-themed Quick Reads 'Out Caste' and 'A Sanctuary of Wyrms', the latter of which appeared in the anthology *Deathwatch: Xenos Hunters*. He also wrote the Space Marines Quick Reads 'Nightfall', which was in the *Heroes of the Space Marines* anthology, and 'The Crown of Thorns'. He lives and works in London.

An extract from *[Deathwatch](#)*.



He listened to his world die.

From the throne at the centre of the command dais on the bridge of the Imperial Retribution-class battleship *Claw of Damyrov*, High Admiral Clovis Nearchus

shook with tremors of impotent rage. The cries echoed through the vaulted heights of the enormous chamber, issuing from bronze horns, fluttering cherub servitors and the carved mouths of gargoyles. The cries of a world being consumed. The cries of apocalypse.

They overlapped each other, each a panicked petition for aid, each rife with confusion that their protectors had abandoned them. Nearchus had ordered that the transmissions continue to play throughout the ship, as it remained at high anchor over the citadel world of Praesidium. The combined forces of the entire system had been gathered there. Its fleets ringed the planet, while its armies were immobilised on its surface, forced to watch as their worlds burned and their populations were massacred. Twenty worlds aflame, while their defenders did nothing.

Their impotence was mandated by the highest authority of the God-Emperor's Inquisition. Questions were heretical. Dissent was met with oblivion. Nearchus' own first officer had railed against their orders, unable to stand idle as the hive city that housed his wife and children was dragged into the maelstrom of two warring xenos races. For his inconstancy, he had been given the Emperor's justice.

The agent of that justice stood just behind Nearchus as he rose from the command throne, gripping the brass railing of the dais. The high admiral felt the itch of active power armour, the heat radiating from a power pack. He smelled the lapping powder and sacred oils anointing the ceramite plate, and the coils of fyceline smoke that lingered in the ceiling buttresses from the mass-reactive boltgun round used to execute his first officer.

Armoured in black, the Space Marine stood as a silent sentinel, red eye-lenses glowing like balefires. A member of the vaunted Deathwatch, he carried the authority of the Inquisition, and upon his right shoulder stood the proud heraldry of the warrior kings of Macragge, noble cobalt against the sable.

*There is no nobility in the genhanced warrior, Nearchus thought. There can be no nobility in this. In watching the slow genocide of billions, without ever knowing why.*

Nearchus steeled himself, watching as a pair of servitors removed what was left of his first officer's body from the bridge. They were clumsy things, leaving smears of crimson across the deck as they gathered up the chunks of flesh. The admiral turned to the silent Space Marine.

'Can you not hear them?' he asked, pointing to a circling cherub screaming in panic. 'Can you not hear the voices of the Emperor's servants, crying out for

protection? Is that not your purpose?’

The Space Marine remained silent.

‘Our system burns. Billions are dying, our families, our homes. Your masters have forsaken them, and forced us to forsake them as well. Why?’ Nearchus demanded, rage lending his voice a growing boldness. ‘Are we to sit here and do nothing?’

‘No.’ The single word boomed from the Space Marine, who slowly turned the eye-lenses of his helm upon Nearchus.

‘What then? Tell me, what am I to do? Tell me!’

The Space Marine looked down at Nearchus for a long moment, before turning forwards again, resuming his vigil.

‘Duty.’

Artemis rolled into cover, crunching against the remains of the barricade as viridian lightning stitched over his head. Strings of jade energy slashed around him, liquefying walls and scorching the ground into furrows of dirty glass.

The watch captain blinked away a damage rune pulsing on his retinal display, and peered over the barricade.

Phalanxes of silver figures marched out of the smoke in perfect order. Hurricanes of las-fire and solid projectiles blasted into them, smashing much of the front ranks apart. Many of the fallen simply vanished, blinking out of existence, to be reawakened within the labyrinths of their ancient tomb ships. Others slithered back into one piece, their component parts flowing together as they stood. The gaps formed by those rendered ineffective were filled with silent, cold precision, and the advancing necron warriors levelled their glowing weaponry, firing without breaking stride.

The fortifications around the central bastion of Quaris were aflame after weeks of repelling the endless advance of the necrons. Heavy armour, elite regiments of the Astra Militarum and strategic orbital bombardments had done little to oppose their unstoppable march. Confined to a narrow valley barricade, with ammunition dwindling and casualties mounting, the Astra Militarum had petitioned for aid.

Artemis and his kill team had deployed from the *Fatal Redress* as soon as the rapid strike frigate had entered low orbit. Dropping directly into the enemy ranks, the Space Marines of the Deathwatch had fought a blistering counter, pushing the necrons back and buying the defenders time to consolidate.

Now the xenos had returned, and in far greater numbers.

Artemis slapped a magazine of kraken penetrator rounds into his bolter, looking sidelong at a comrade as he squared up beside him.

‘It is a blessing,’ said Rogerio, the myriad xenos skulls chained to his armour clattering as he reloaded his weapon, ‘to face a foe one can kill again and again.’ Hailing from the Crimson Fists, Rogerio had been a veteran of dozens of campaigns as a sternguard before joining the ranks of the Deathwatch. Though his voice was rendered a cold snarl by the bionics that replaced his throat, Artemis could hear the joy and zeal in the old warrior’s words.

‘I’d settle for them staying dead,’ Artemis replied, rising out of cover to snap off a volley of bolter fire. The anti-armour kraken rounds punched through the necron ranks, savaging their skeletal forms too severely for them to reform on the battlefield. He ducked back behind the barricade as the xenos responded with a withering fusillade of gauss cannon fire.

The necron weaponry stripped away the barricade on a molecular level, and Artemis dived back as he was exposed. Rogerio fired bursts from his storm bolter to cover him as the xenos overran the barricade.

‘Hyphantes, in the fight!’ barked Artemis.

A rumbling shriek of igniting promethium filled the air. The Scythe of the Emperor rocketed down on a pillar of fire, hurling a clutch of frag grenades ahead of him. He hit moments after the detonations, smashing into the tight ranks of the necrons. Capitalising on the moment of confusion, Hyphantes tore into the aliens with twin falxes, whirling the curved blades and slashing through living metal.

Artemis and Rogerio stalked forwards, emptying their bolters into the necrons closing on Hyphantes’ rear and flanks, before drawing their melee weapons. Rogerio’s spear spun as he lanced through a necron’s torso, and Artemis activated the power field of Exterminatus, wreathing the blade in crackling energy as he cleaved into a foe.

In the tight confines of the valley, the superior numbers of the xenos did not give the advantage it could in the open field. The crump of artillery sounded from the fortifications, raining shells down upon the rear phalanxes stymied at the front by the Deathwatch.

‘Now, Imtehan!’ grunted Artemis, countering a clubbing strike from a gauss cannon to his head by bifurcating the xenos from neck to groin.

Standing alone atop the high ridge framing one side of the valley, Imtehan snarled. Hooking his fingers into claws, the Space Marine tensed. His breath feathered out from between iron teeth as frost crept over his armour. The psychic

hood sweeping behind his head crackled as his snarl became a roar. Loose rock and dust lifted around him, spinning, as he reached across towards the opposite ridge.

Tremors shook the ground beneath Artemis' boots. He spared a glance up at the ridge, where Imtehan stood within the eye of a tempest. His roar split the air, lightning dancing over his limbs as he reached out. The dust on the opposite ridge began to tremble and leap upon the air. The tremors spiked in intensity as fissures erupted in the splitting rock.

'Back!' ordered Artemis, as Hyphantes and Rogerio closed to his sides. The xenos had ignored Imtehan, and the battle psyker was primed to show them the cost of such an error.

With the effort of hauling a star from the sky, Imtehan *pulled*.

The ridgeline shattered. Thousands of tons of rock floated for a heartbeat before hurtling down into the valley. The necron phalanxes, with no room to manoeuvre, were obliterated as the valley filled with mounds of rock twenty yards high. Dust fountained into the air, racing through the valley and over the ridgeline. Within moments, the rock settled and the guns went silent.

Imtehan dropped to a knee, snarling as he caught his breath. The sawtooth blade framing the ruby blood drop on his right shoulder became caked with dirt as the frost melted over the dust.

'You are graceless, Flesh Tearer,' said Hyphantes. 'But one can find no fault in your results.'

Imtehan wiped blood from his nose with the back of his gauntlet, smearing it over the brutalised mahogany flesh of his face. 'Remind me how graceful you would be, flayed by necron guns?'

'Consolidate on my position, Imtehan,' said Artemis. He opened a new vox-link with the bastion. 'We have delayed them, colonel. But they are far from defeated.'

*'It will give us time to shift our wounded to the rear and consolidate whatever manpower we have left,'* the Astra Militarum commander replied over the scratchy vox-link. *'We are in your debt, watch captain.'*

Artemis killed the link as a priority transmission rune blinked on his display. He felt a slight vibration beneath his boots. Peering into the rock for any sign of movement, Artemis opened the channel.

'Go ahead, Sekor.'

*'Contact from Fatal Redress,'* said the Imperial Castellan. Artemis could hear the roar of engines spooling up behind his voice. *'We are being recalled to orbit,*

*emergency condition.*

‘We are still conducting operations here, our mission is incomplete.’

*‘It appears that it shall remain incomplete, then. The order is coming from a watch master.’*

Artemis frowned. He blinked at the vox-link, sharing it across the kill team. ‘What is urgent enough to draw us from a combat zone?’

*‘This is a watch master and the ordo calling us in,’* replied Sekor. *‘They are not exactly conversationalists.’*

Artemis closed his eyes for a moment, pushing a breath through his teeth. ‘Very well, confirmed. We will stand by for immediate extraction.’

*‘I am en route via Blackstar. Arrival imminent.’*

Artemis severed the vox-link. He looked to Rogerio.

‘What of this mission, watch captain?’ asked the veteran.

‘This is no longer our mission.’ Artemis turned towards the bastion gateway.

‘We will just leave them to their fate, then?’ asked Hyphantes, betraying his unease.

Artemis sighed. Hyphantes was young for a Space Marine, freshly inducted into the battle companies of his own vanishing Chapter before being seconded to the Deathwatch. ‘We will follow our orders, brother. These soldiers swore oaths to defend the Imperium. They will do their duty, as shall we.’

The kill team gathered at the landing pad of the bastion. Imtehan joined them, his meteor hammer slung over one shoulder as they awaited Sekor.

The Corvus Blackstar was a sleek inverted arrow carving through the sky. Smaller than a Thunderhawk, the drop-ship was an experimental craft, in service only to the Deathwatch. Artemis still marvelled at how quiet the Blackstar was, as the drop-ship settled upon the rockcrete landing apron. Assault ramps lowered on each side of the Blackstar’s nose, and the kill team moved to board.

‘Watch captain!’ Artemis turned to see a wiry man in officer fatigues approach, a flock of aides and lieutenants trailing behind him. ‘Something is happening in the valley. Are you going airborne to conduct reconnaissance?’

Artemis stopped, pulling his helm free. He heard the distant sound, metal scraping against stone. He looked down at the colonel.

‘We are leaving this world. Our orders have directed us elsewhere.’

The colour drained from the officer’s face. ‘But, you cannot leave here. Our ammunition is depleted, our soldiers—’

‘Will serve the Emperor,’ said Artemis. ‘Your charge is not to question. You have your walls. Hold them. Do not take a step back. And should you fall, let it

be in service. There is glory in that.'

The scraping grew louder as Artemis turned, joining his kill team as they boarded the Blackstar. Hyphantes spared a look back at the group of shocked mortals. Reaching to his shoulder, he tore a scroll of parchment held to his armour with crimson wax, and dropped it to the ground.

'You discard your oath of moment?' asked Imtehan as the Space Marines locked themselves into the crew bay. 'You shame yourself, and us.'

'We all discarded it,' spat Hyphantes. 'We have forsaken them.'

The scraping became a howling din as the Blackstar lifted from the landing pad. Looking out from an observation viewport, Artemis watched the mountains of broken rock shake, the cracks between them glowing with baleful green light.

As the drop-ship turned to blast into the atmosphere, Artemis saw the rock dissolve, washed away by a tide of silver scarabs. Thousands of the necron constructs flowed over the ramparts, consuming everything in their path as phalanxes of necron warriors marched behind their advance. He saw tiny islands in the ocean of silver, desperate last stands by the Imperial defenders, quickly subdued.

'If you became an Adeptus Astartes believing you would forestall the death of innocents,' said Artemis, turning to the Scythe of the Emperor, 'then you have sworn your oaths in vain.'

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*For my mother, Irén Fehervari, the first deep thinker who I argued with.  
With love and thanks.*

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