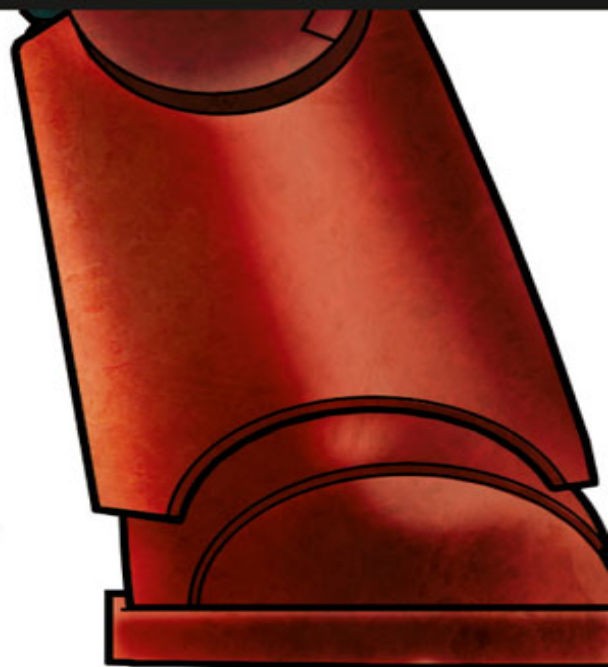
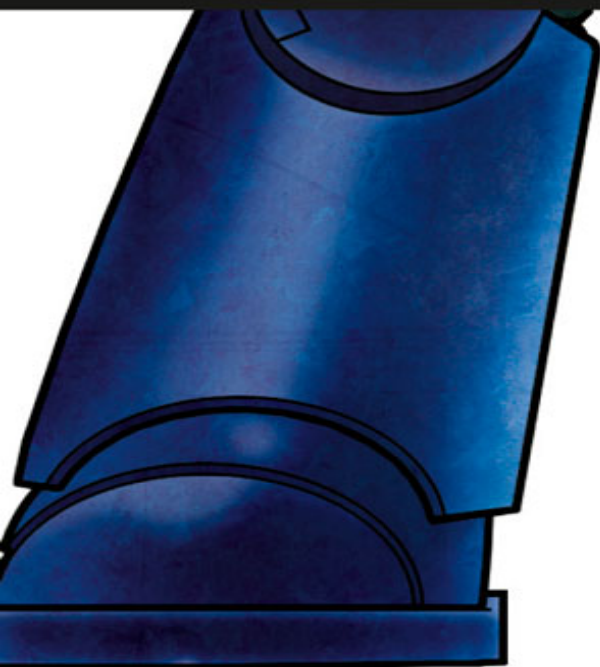




— *Angels of Death* —

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Joe Parrino

They gathered on the edge of the Great Eye. A Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes, the Brazen Claws, loyal sons of the Gorgon, called to council by their Chapter Master. They assembled for the first time in two decades.

‘Where is my Chapter?’

The words rang out with force, deep and rumbling like distant thunder. Ships floated through the void behind the Chapter Master, oddly serene against the madness. Their hulls were painted pelagic blue and clotted red.

The gathered captains met their Chapter Master’s bloodshot eyes with stoic determination. Five stood where there had once been ten.

The Chapter Master thundered again, eyelids twitching, tics marring his bearded face.

Embrose Kalgach, Third Captain, stepped forward from the knot of his brethren. His right arm refused to move. Sparks showered out from the augmetic that replaced the limb. With his left, he pointed behind him at the four hundred Space Marines of the Brazen Claws standing at attention.

‘They stand here, Caul.’

‘You have called and we have answered,’ said Macklen Eogh, captain of the First Company. The other captains, the other four, echoed his words like a tragic chorus of the ancient Grekans.

There was no honorific, no deference. Just the merest hint of a weary respect. They’d lost what little desire they had once harboured for pomp and ceremony in the past twenty years, after the loss of Talus, after so many had died on this ill-fated crusade of vengeance. Now they were here to speak their minds. Twenty years they had waited to do so. Twenty years ago they should have. Now they had learned the cost of those words, learned the true price of vengeance.

Twenty years of hubris, pride and death.

Caul Engentre, Chapter Master of the Brazen Claws, rested his head in one red gauntlet. The choice was his, uttered in the ashes of his home world, the oath sworn amidst the fires of their fortress-monastery. The memories had lost their fury.

It was minutes before he spoke.

‘Tell me,’ he said. The anger bled from his voice.

Julas Imbolkh, fiery hair turning to grey, face a mess of scars, stepped forward to face the Chapter Master. The Seventh Captain struggled to keep his gaze from staring out of the observation window behind Engentre.

‘Erod took the Second out. He told me he was done. He had no wish to die in this damned place. He had no wish to die fighting this damned war, so he turned tail and went back to what we should be doing.’

The words were bold, brave, *brazen*. It was their nature, in their blood and in their name. Engentre let them slide, for he knew the truth when he heard it. The Seventh Captain stepped away, tearing his drifting eyes from the window.

‘What of Duro and the Eighth?’ the Chapter Master asked.

‘Lost along with the Ninth,’ answered Firlus Ghad. The words were blunt, suited to the augmetics that crouched on his throat and left his voice awash with static. ‘The fools chased the Children into the Eye after Hrtel. I’ve not seen them since.’

Two companies gone. It was a massive blow to the Chapter, taken away in three sentences.

Engentre stared out at the gathered Chapter, at the battered men left. There were gaps in squads, gaps in companies, once filled by men he had known and called brother. Even now, even standing at attention, they could not remain still. Their limbs danced, machinery grinding, clanking, ill-maintained. Their bodies were beset by random flashes of neuronc misfire as the Eye slowly wore away at their minds.

‘The flesh is weak,’ murmured Engentre. ‘But it can be made strong, unified with the machine. The mind... that we cannot fix.’ The Chapter Master, a hero with four centuries of facing down the slaving darkness, shuddered as his bloodshot eyes fixed on the knot of fifty Castigatii who stood unmoving in the shadows.

‘So many,’ he whispered. He turned to the rest of his Chapter. ‘So few.’

Silence stretched in the wake of his words.

Eogh broke it, arms stretched wide, dented power fist clenching and unclenching. ‘We are dying, Caul.’

The other captains nodded.

‘This crusade is failing,’ added Kalgach.

‘This Chapter is failing,’ continued Ghad.

‘Talus cannot be avenged,’ entreated Eogh. ‘But we can atone for its loss.’

Brave Eogh, voicing the harsh words that knifed to Engentre’s core. The Chapter Master rocked backwards as if slapped. His captains pressed close, pushing him towards the window, towards the view that stained their eyes and cast their features in a thousand shades of every colour.

Engentre roared. Spittle flew from his mouth. ‘Enough!’ he yelled.

His eyes flew towards the gathered Brazen Claws, past his captains. Something clicked in his head. ‘We leave the Eye,’ he whispered.

The captains nodded and moved towards their men, barking orders.

Proximity alarms blared: sudden, loud and wailing. The ship rocked as if caught by a great wave. Guns thundered, massive batteries opening fire.

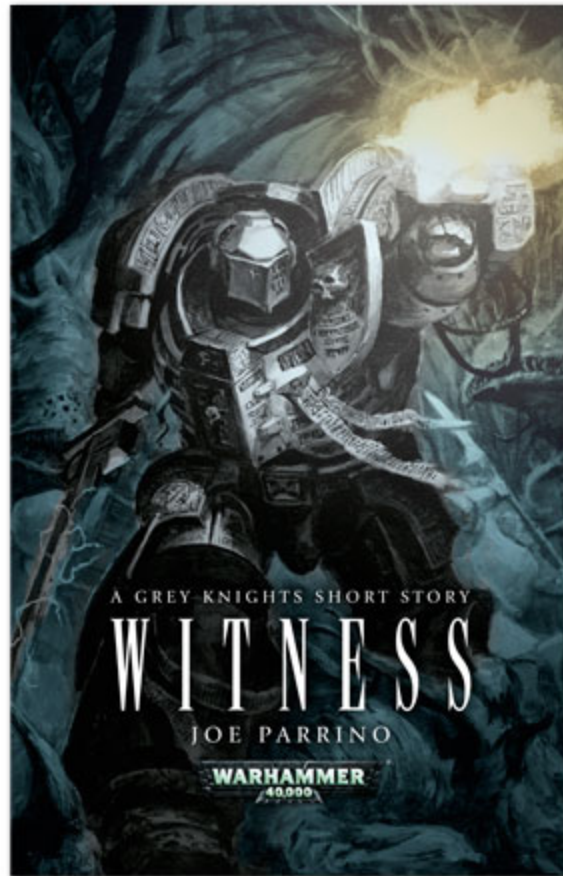
The vox channels erupted with a screech. Voices spewed out, familiar and haunting.

Their words were Gothic, the accent Talusian. Ships hove into view, blotting out the Eye, but illuminated by it. They were covered in flesh and coated in sickly-looking organs, but beneath it, scrawled in red paint on a field of blue, was a red claw. Clutched in its talons was the number eight.

‘You have called, Lord Engentre, and we have answered,’ hissed a voice thick with corruption, familiar and vile.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A lifelong reader and unabashed fan of the Black Library, JOE PARRINO is an American writer currently adrift within the United Kingdom. Still mired in the realm of higher education, when he's not writing papers he's writing stories and working his fingers and brain into mush. Awed and eager in equal measures, he's leapt into the realm of writing with gusto. In his off hours, he reads, writes and wanders about the gothic splendour of Edinburgh.



On the war-racked world of Margentum, Captain Danel Prestoff and the Brindelweld Ninth Imperial Guard stand against traitors, heretics and... something else.

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