



Angels of Death

BY ARTIFICE, ALONE

GEORGE MANN



WARHAMMER
40,000



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The disrobing chamber was shrouded in a thick, comfortable silence, broken only by the *skritch-scratch* of a knife tip working insistently back and forth across ceramite, and the distant, tortured sigh of the battle-barge's warp engines.

Captain Aremis Koryn of the Raven Guard sat alone, observed by the dead stone eyes of a hundred primitive statues, each of them peering down at him from one of the shadowy alcoves that lined the edges of the chamber.

All around him lay the carefully placed pauldrons, vambraces, and chest panels of his venerable armour, every inch of its surface etched with the names of the long-dead veterans who had once worn it before him. A little pool of *corvia* – the bleached skulls of ravens, carried to honour those who had died in combat – lay beside the armour, bound by fine silver chain.

Koryn was wrapped in a loose-fitting cotton robe, the ghostly-white flesh of his chest, shoulders and arms exposed as he sat on the cool marble floor, hunched over one of the pauldrons, worrying away with his blade. His black eyes flicked towards the open doorway at the sound of movement from the passageway outside.

‘Come, Cordae. Your loitering makes me ill at ease.’

The Chaplain stalked slowly into the room, his heavy boot steps ringing out like bolter fire in the empty space. ‘I thought you had come here to make preparations for the deployment?’ said Cordae, standing over Koryn so that his shadow fell across the captain's work.

Koryn stilled his hand and glanced up at the Chaplain. Cordae was still clad in his full battledress, his ebon armour adorned with the skeletal remains of a giant Kiavahran roc. The creature's ribcage formed a brace

across his chest, its wings were spread upon his jump pack as if in stilted flight and its skull leered at Koryn like a grim, jutting death mask. Cordae cocked his head in a gesture that mimicked the creature whose spirit he claimed to share. Koryn could not recall the time when he had last seen Cordae without the macabre totems.

‘I did,’ replied Koryn simply, and returned to his work.

Cordae did not move. After a moment, he spoke again. ‘I fear you place too much trust in Captain Daed and the Librarian, Theseon. They have all but taken us captive upon this barge. We labour under the illusion of freedom, captain, but this place is, in truth, a prison.’

‘We must place our faith in our brothers, Cordae,’ replied Koryn, his voice low and even. ‘They fight in the name of the Emperor. Their methods may seem brittle and unfamiliar – ignorant, even – but nevertheless, their motivations remain sound.’

‘Can you be sure?’ asked Cordae, and it was clear he was not.

Koryn glanced up at Cordae. ‘I am sure,’ he said, sharply. ‘I will hear no argument. We do what we must. Gideous Krall and his foul cadre of traitors must be destroyed, before the whole of the Sargassion Reach succumbs to their blight, their sickness.’

Cordae made a gesture that might have been a shrug, or a nod of acquiescence. ‘I understand that Krall has fashioned a floating cathedral from bone and rotten flesh,’ said Cordae. ‘It sits amongst a flotilla of smaller warships, formed from the lashed-together remains of bloated plague corpses and the abandoned vessels of daemons that have returned to the warp.’

‘They shall all burn,’ said Koryn, with conviction. ‘The light of the Emperor shall banish them.’

‘We are few, captain,’ said Cordae, with a note of warning. ‘Even counting the Brazen Minotaurs amongst our allies.’

‘Then we shall fight harder, and longer, and with greater conviction than our enemies,’ replied Koryn.

‘You speak with the confidence of one who foresees the future, with the certainty that we will triumph. And yet, here you sit, alone and stripped of your armour, scratching your name into a pauldron with the end of a blunted dagger instead of preparing for war. Your actions do not mirror your words.’

Koryn glowered at the Chaplain. He knew what Cordae was doing. Koryn was being tested. This was Cordae's way of preparing him for the trials to come.

'I am etching my name alongside those of my ancestors. It is an honourable pursuit,' said Koryn. 'This is *how* I am preparing for battle.'

'Aren't the artificers supposed to do that when you're dead?' asked Cordae, bluntly.

'We're about to mount a boarding action against the enemy's orbital fortress and attempt to smuggle a living bomb deep inside their leader's palace of flesh and bone,' replied Koryn. 'None of us are coming back, Cordae. The artificers won't ever lay their hands upon my armour.'

'Yet you speak of victory and the light of the Emperor,' said Cordae.

'I speak the truth. I am nothing if not pragmatic. I do not wish to die without adding my name to those of my forebears. My honour demands it. Their spirits walk with me, Cordae, just as you share your armour with the spirit of the roc whose bones you wear. I cannot lead our brothers to victory unless I know that my ancestors are by my side. Unless I know that when I die, I cannot join them in honour.'

'It is not your ancestors that worry me,' said Cordae, 'but our allies.'

'I will hear no more of this, Cordae,' said Koryn, sternly. 'You shall not shake me from the path I have chosen.'

'Then my work here is done,' replied Cordae. 'We shall die together, brother, side by side in glorious battle, as we smite the enemies of mankind.' He placed a gauntleted hand upon Koryn's naked shoulder. 'I shall leave you to your preparations,' he said, then turned and quit the chamber.

The test was over. Koryn was unsure whether or not he had passed.

He waited until the sound of the Chaplain's footsteps had died away, before making the last few strokes with the tip of his blade.

He placed the pauldron on the floor beside its twin and stood, tucking the knife into his belt.

'Calix. I wish to dress for battle!' he called, and immediately heard the serf scuttling along the passageway vacated only moments before by Cordae.

Soon he would be ready. It was, he knew, going to be a glorious death.

He glanced at the pauldron, at the words AREMIS KORYN roughly hewn into the black ceramite, and smiled.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GEORGE MANN has written two Raven Guard audio dramas for the Black Library, 'Helion Rain' and 'Labyrinth of Sorrows'. He is the author of the Newbury & Hobbes steampunk mystery series and has written new adventures for both Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Who. He lives in Grantham, UK, with his wife, children and rather large collection of books.



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