



THE MADNESS WITHIN

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List of characters:

CRIMSON FISTS:

- * Estebann - Sergeant;
- * Cordoba – Brother;
- * Suarez – Librarian;
- * Menendez (K.I.A.)

CHAOS

- * Bat-leathered Demon

CHAPTER 01 (00.20 – 03.15)

(Grim music, thunder)

This is a world without a name. Until recently it was thought a dead lump of rock, drifting on the edge of the Lokai system. But life does endure here, a lost tribe of men huddling in storm-lashed caves. This is a hostile world, each dark dawn heralding a renewed onslaught from the unremitting elements. Few crops can grow here and electrical death strikes from the skies without warning. It takes a special kind of man to survive on this world. And life for these hardy few is a war without prospect of an end. This world is an ideal breeding ground.

The monastery was over six decades old, ancient by the standards of this world, and its simian builders had long since been forgotten, as had the false gods, to whom their great work had been dedicated. In sixty years more doubtless the monastery would be gone too, already its stone walls had been worn smooth, its crenellations almost flattened, and yet still the rain continued to beat upon it, as if the world itself wanted rid of this unnatural growth on its skin.

Cordoba tried to filter out the crashing of the storm; he listened for the more subtle sounds within, for the scraping of a claw against the flagstone perhaps, or the guttural snarl of a predator anticipating his next kill. His weapons were ready, he was flanked by two of his battle brothers, one of them the decorated sergeant Estebann, who was searching the shadows of the monastery's torch-lit passageways,

searching for a demon. It had been just three years since these three had come here, since they had staked their claim on this building, on this world. To the people of the caves they were the Emperor's angels, armored heralds of a new and more powerful god. They called themselves the Crimson Fists, but only a few short hours earlier they had numbered four more.

CHAPTER 02 (03.15 – 07.33)

It attacked without warning.

(Multiple bolter shots)

Even Cordoba hadn't seen it in the shadows of the archway to the colored cloisters despite his enhanced vision. It was as if the demon had been no more than a shadow itself, until its prey had ventured within striking distance. Three bolters barked and gouged great holes into the stone walls. It seemed that wherever their bolts impacted, the demon wasn't there. It alighted upon Menendez's bare head and although it seemed only a slight thing itself it weighed him in grimace and bore him down onto one knee.

Cordoba and sergeant Estebann activated their chainswords, and Cordoba swung his in a vengeful downward arc. Somehow the demon blurred and shifted from beneath him and his blade bit him to Menendez's shoulder guard instead, sparking and shrilling protest. He felt an itch in his brain. He couldn't look at the demon directly. It was as if his eyes couldn't bear to see, as if his mind rejected its very presence in this world.

Cordoba felt sick and dizzy by the utter wrongness of it. He had only a vague impression therefore of its shape. Like a grotesque elongated bat with a leathern hide and tattered wings folded behind its back. He was aware of its gnarled claws, pointed ears and sliver-dripping fangs, and in his peripheral vision he could see grey malformed ribs protruding from the creature's chest. He aimed his next attack between those ribs, at where the demon's heart ought to have been. It evaded the blow with nimble ease, making Cordoba feel slow and clumsy. A second chainsword thrust and a third failed to find their mark too.

(Multiple bolter shots)

Sergeant Estebann had seemed fed no best; he had fired his bolter three times at his slippery foe from pointblank range and each time somehow he had missed. His fourth bolt thudded into Cordoba's chestplate, leaving him bruised. For his part Menendez had dropped his weapons and was attempting to tear the bat creature off his head. It slicked through his fingers, fluted about his throat and suddenly he was paralyzed. Even Menendez's face was frozen, eyes bulging, teeth clenched. Now he toppled forwards, a dead weight.

The demon rode its prey to the ground, its claws sunk into Menendez's neck behind his gorget. And in that moment blinded by his anger Cordoba forgot himself. He looked at the demon, he met its sunken eyes and found himself frozen too. He could have taken its head off there and then, or shot it through its throat, but he couldn't move a muscle, even flex his trigger-finger.

The demon's gaze, red and unblinking, burnt into Cordoba's very soul. A that itch in his brain became a trip-hammer, thumping, growing, and growing, until he thought his head might burst. The demon was inside his head. It was whispering to him dark blasphemous catechisms that his ears couldn't hear, but that curdled his blood. And it had taken his brain in its gnarl black claws and it was squeezing it. And all Cordoba could see were its eyes, those blazing red pits of fire. Then the demon shrieked and in a flurry of wings it was gone.

Cordoba blinked as if waking from a dream. A fuzzy pink blob hovered in front of him. As his eyes found focus once more it resolved itself into sergeant Estebann's flushed face.

Estebann: "Are you enicted?"

Cordoba saw that his chainsword was dripping with black stinking ichor.

Estebann: "It will be back".

CHAPTER 03 (07.33 – 11.03)

Menendez could not be brought round. He was like the other four, the four who had already fallen today. His pulse still beat albeit

slowly, his lungs still drew shallow breath, but his eyes... his eyes stared glassy straight up. His body was still functioning sustained by the superior gene-seed of the Primarch Rogal Dorn, but it was only a shell now. Menendez was gone, his soul had been devoured. Cordoba lowered his head, as Estebann crouched by their fallen battle brother, mouthing a prayer for him to the all-seeing Emperor and closing those staring eyes.

They stood then, the two of them, the survivors. And they raised their fists in silent salute to each other. The gauntlets on their left hands were red, so that in this gesture they each mimicked the symbol of their prior chapter. They were bloodied but unbowed.

Estebann: "The gene-seed can still be harvested".

Cordoba: "If only brother apothecary had not fallen".

He'd been the demon's first victim. They'd found him in his bunk that morning.

Estebann: "We must protect them, their bodies until help can reach us".

Cordoba reached out, scraping a goblet¹ of black blood from the wall.

Cordoba: "We have a trail to follow this time".

Estebann placed a hand on his shoulder, holding him back.

Estebann: "Not yet".

Cordoba: "We should press our advantage, sergeant. The demon will be...".

Estebann: (interrupting): "Demon is stronger than we are, brother Cordoba. It is no witness to admit this".

Estebann had ever been the cautious one. That was how he'd earned his rank, though Cordoba might have been considered the more natural leader, because such caution was a quality valued above all by the Crimson Fists.

Cordoba: "You wounded the demon. We may be only two now, but we know we can hurt it. It can be destroyed".

Estebann: "We've already lost five brothers in the trying".

Cordoba: "It cannot be allowed to leave the monastery. If it learns of the world outside, if it preys upon the cave people".

Estebann snapped.

Estebann: "I am aware of the dangers, Cordoba. I've given three years of my life to this world, as have you. I believe it's offspring of the future of our chapter, that the blood of our Primarch will one day fuel their hearts".

Cordoba: "Then we cannot leave them to the slaughter".

Estebann: "And I have no intention of so doing, but before we face our enemy again we must seek some advantage we can use against it".

Cordoba: "What advantage can we have? We are..."

Estebann (interrupting): "You've said there are two of us, two survivors of this been in the squad of ours. By my count there are three.

Cordoba: "You can't mean..."

Cordoba felt his top lip curling into a sneer.

Estebann: "There is no one else".

Cordoba: "Suarez, the stinking mutant, the traitor".

Estebann: "He's been trained to fight the creatures of the warp".

Cordoba: "It is because of him we face this parole. It's because of Suarez that our brothers have fallen. It was Suarez who brought this demon to our door".

Estebann: "You may be right, but I fear only he can save us now".

CHAPTER 04 (11.03 - 15.20)

They descended to the caverns beneath the monastery. The steps were narrow and steep, carved out long ago by men of lesser bulk and weight by far than these armored giants. And they had to tread carefully. A handful of servitors lurked in the shadows. They were probably down here hunting the small hairy vermin that served as the primary food source on this world.

The librarian was chained in a tapered alcove. He appeared to be sleeping, but fitfully his eyelids twitching and the occasional moan escaping from his throat. His blond hair was plastered to his forehead by sweat. Despite his ten days in captivity Suarez's chin was still smooth. Cordoba had forgotten how young he was. Suarez had been

stripped of his armor, in its place he wore the pain glove – a black skin suit that could subject his every nerve to excruciating torture. Estebann stooped beside the boy and shook him awake. His red-rimmed eyes opened and immediately Cordoba could see that the madness in them was undimmed.

(Horrible cry)

Suarez screamed and released a torrent of gibberish. He lunged for his sergeant's throat as if somehow with his bare hands he could choke him through his armor. He was brought up short by his chains and Estebann delivered a backhanded slap to the librarian's face with his left gauntlet, stilling his tongue.

(Sound of a serious punch)

Suarez's eyes cleared.

Suarez: "Please, sergeant Estebann. Please, I need the glove. You must turn on the glove again. The pain, I need..."

Estebann shook his head. He began to unlock Suarez's manacles.

Cordoba: "Sergeant!"

Estebann: "We have no choice"

Suarez: "I need the pain. I need it to focus, without it..."

Estebann (interrupting): "Who do you think you are? The Primarch himself? You think you can endure the glove as long as he did before your nerves are fried?"

Suarez: "The demons, sergeant Estebann. They are out there, searching for me, circling, and waiting. I can hear them in my mind whispering, always whispering".

Cordoba: "Your demons aren't out there. They are here. They are in here with us and they are picking us one by one thanks to you".

Suarez: "You can hear them too? Can't be. They can't..."

Estebann (interrupting): "There is a demon here".

Estebann stripped the pain glove from the boy's pale trembling form.

Estebann: "In the monastery. It must have slipped through somehow into this realm. Only we three remain. We need you, Suarez".

Suarez: "No! You must leave me down here, don't let it find me".

Estebann: "We need you, sound of mind. We need you strong. For the Emperor! There is only the Emperor. Say it, lexicanum Suarez. Recite the creed with me! There is only the Emperor! Say it!"

Suarez (mumbling): "He is... Ah... Our shield, our shield...and our..."

Estebann (interrupting): "Our shield and our protector".

Cordoba: "This is futile. You only need to look at the boy to see it. Chaos has claimed his mind, only death can release him now".

Estebann ignored his protest. He held Suarez up, tucked him under his massive left arm and carried him back to the steps. The librarian kicked and squirmed at first, but soon gave up and hung limply in his sergeant's firm hold.

Cordoba wanted to argue further but he held his tongue. The decision had been made and he knew better than to question it twice. His chapter used the pain glove only sparingly unlike their Imperial Fist cousins they saw no need to suffer to prove the piety but he had felt its embrace once and had no wish to endure it again. He was full of foreboding however as he followed sergeant Estebann and his listless² burden back into the monastery proper.

CHAPTER 5 (15.20 - 17.32)

Ten days ago Suarez had turned on his brethren. Cordoba had not been present at the time. He had been in the caves training a promising group of candidates. He'd heard it said however that the librarian had snapped in an instant and fought with a strength surprising for his age. It had taken three of his battle brothers to restrain him. And even then he'd struggled and cursed all way down to the caverns. Cordoba was almost sorry to have missed it. He had not seen real combat in three years, not since Estebann had brought him to this Emperor-damned rock to teach him patience. And of course he had predicted this turn of events almost from the start. He had never trusted Suarez. The boy's mutation may not have been external, but this made him no lesser mutant in Cordoba's eyes. He ought to have been executed for lashing out as he had, for the heresies he had voiced. In another chapter he might have been and Cordoba would have fired the killing shot gladly.

Sergeant Estebann however had other ideas. The Crimson Fists, he had reminded his squad, were a depleted force, struggling for survival since the war against the foul ork Snagroth. They could ill-afford to lose even one man, nor let it be suspected that their gene-seed was corrupted. Estebann had been adamant³ that Suarez could be saved. As far as Cordoba was concerned they were all now facing the consequences of that folly. Suarez would betray them again, of this he had no doubt. Even if he could be overcome a second time it was almost certain, that the demon had conjured, could not be. Then through his misguided attempt to save just one sergeant Estebann would have lost an entire squad of Crimson Fists and most likely a world as well.

CHAPTER 6 (17.32 - 20.55)

Suarez: "It is close".

Suarez had stiffened in Estebann's arms. The sergeant let him stand and the young librarian shuffled forwards, his hands outstretched as if to pluck something from the air. His eyes were round and milk white. They reminded Cordoba of Menendez's eyes after the demon had taken him, staring without seeing. Or rather, perhaps, seeing something beyond the sight of most men's eyes.

Suarez: "I can feel it".

Suarez was more lucid now.

Suarez: "The demon, its mind brushed against mine. I can feel, it is hurt but far from beaten. Fed but far from sated⁴. It knows there is yet finer fare to be had here".

Estebann: "Can you find it? Can you lead us to it?"

Suarez shook his head.

Suarez: "I dare not. I can sense the demon's presence in this realm, in this building, but I... It senses me too. I dare not focus too closely upon it. Must keep my mind closed to it unless..." (mumbling)

They decided to cut through the chapel. It was better illuminated than the passageways and even had the demon been waiting in the shadows still it would have had to cross bright candlelight to reach

the three of them as they traverse the nave⁵. It lifted their spirits too to see this holy place.

Cordoba and sergeant Estebann had made the sign of the aquila before the velvet draped altar. And Cordoba had nodded with grudging approval as Suarez did the same.

Cordoba: "Each time it has killed, the demon has retreated for a short time after. It could be that feeding makes it weak. If Suarez can indeed find it, he should do so now before it can regain its strength".

Estebann: "We are weakened too. We can use this reprieve to get Suarez upstairs, get him back into his armor fit to fight".

Cordoba: "Is that wise, sergeant? The last time he wore that armor, he..."

Estebann silenced Cordoba with a glare. He looked as if he was about to follow this up with a few choice words, when suddenly Suarez jerked as if struck. His hands flew to his head and his legs collapsed beneath him.

(Body falling)

Estebann rushed to his side and caught him as he fell.

Suarez: "It knows. It knows".

Estebann: "What, Suarez? What does it know? Talk to me".

Suarez: "It is whispering... to me".

Estebann: "What does it say? Can you hear it?"

Suarez: "The demon hungers. It has the scent of power and it desires that taste above all else. My barriers cannot long stand against it. It is coming for us".

Estebann: "Coming here? To the chapel, you mean?"

Suarez: "It is coming for... for me".

CHAPTER 7 (20.55 - 26.10)

They could get little sense out of Suarez after that. Estebann had to carry him again to the first floor dormitorium, which they reached without incident. The demon must still have been resting somewhere, digesting. Cordoba was instructed to stand guard in the hallway, which suited him well. Even before he'd often taken pains to avoid Suarez's company. His presence made Cordoba's brain itch. The

same itch, he'd realized now, that the demon had caused in him, and this was a welcome respite⁶ from it. Still he kept a part of his Lyman's ear trained upon the room behind him through the heavy wooden door. Behind that door sergeant Estebann was sealing Suarez back into his deep blue and crimson armor rearming him. Cordoba couldn't shake the feeling that this was just what Suarez had been waiting for.

In the event the first warning sound came from rather close at a hand. Cordoba stepped back, snapped up his bolter, aimed it above the roof beam⁷ above his head, the beam that had just creaked with what sounded like the weight of a body upon it. Only, there was nothing there. Cordoba span around to check, that the demon wasn't trying to misdirect him, wasn't stealing up behind him.

Lightning flashed behind a narrow window. The gust⁸ of wind drove flecks⁹ of rain through a crack in the red-stain glass and a torch flame in the hallway guttered and almost died. Cordoba cursed his own imaginings and returned to his post. A moment later lightning flashed again and this time he was certain. A shadow on the floor boards at his feet, it had been visible for only a split second, long enough.

Cordoba knew that shape, knew it like a genetic memory of danger. Demon was at the end of the hallway at the top the grand staircase watching him. He couldn't see it yet, but it was there. Cordoba's brain was itching again. He knew he should have alerted sergeant Estebann, but the shout died in his throat, stifled by the thought that Suarez would hear it too. Perhaps the demon didn't know the lightning had betrayed it. As Cordoba stalked towards it, he thought that perhaps it might remain in its hiding place, seeing him coming but secure in its invisibility. Perhaps, he could take it by surprise and slay it without the untrustworthy librarian even having to become involved. The demon had to be clinging to the far side of the balustrade. Cordoba searched for it with the corners of his eyes not wanting to meet its gaze again.

(Multiple bolter shots)

He saw a shade, a twitch of movement and fired. The balustrade was destroyed by his first bolt but Cordoba continued to strafe¹⁰ the wall

behind it to be sure. The hallway was filled with smoke and dust; he strode through this cloud to where the demon had been. He looked over a precipice to the floor below when curse stumped his breath. There was no corpse down there. A flutter of wings to his left, Cordoba snapped around, saw the demon flying at him. He met it with a chainsword swipe, which surely had sliced it in two, but impossibly the creature kept coming. He felt its claw wreaking his cheek, its wings in his hair, but it was gone before Cordoba could grasp it. He turned, sent another volley of bolts blazing after it, but again the demon had disappeared.

Something shifted. Behind him in the hallway, Cordoba turned, almost squeezed his trigger again, stopped himself in time. Sergeant Estebann approached him wearily, his own bolter raised.

Estebann: "What the hell are you doing? Lower you weapons, brother Cordoba. That's an order".

Suarez: "The demon".

Cordoba: "Didn't you see the demon?"

Estebann: "There was nothing here".

Cordoba: "I saw it. I felt its breath on my skin and its claws tearing out my flesh. If I had been able to lay my hands on the foul thing, I could have..."

Estebann (interrupting): "I was watching you. You were fighting your own shadow".

Cordoba: "No".

Cordoba wiped a hand across his stinging cheek but was frustrated to find it dry. He tore off a gauntlet, felt it again with his bare fingers.

There was no blood, no scar.

Estebann: "How many days since you slept?"

Cordoba: "Suarez is the mad one, not me. I know what I saw".

Suarez: "The demon can trick your mind. It can fool your senses".

Cordoba almost didn't recognize this new voice at first, this strong confident voice.

Suarez: "That is why you found it so elusive. It can make you believe it is in one place, when in fact it is in another. It can ensure, that nothing is as it seems".

A figure had stepped out into the hallway behind Estebann. Clad in his own armor again wielding his own chainsword and bolter a renewed sense of purpose gleaming in his eyes Suarez looked like a lost boy no longer. He looked like a Crimson Fist.

CHAPTER 8 (26.10 – 29.16)

They returned to the passageway by the cloisters where Menendez's body lay to follow the blood trail from there. "Where the demon was last sighted", sergeant Estebann had said and Cordoba had resented the implication in his words. Trail led up a back staircase, but turned off before the first floor dormitoriums and thus quashed Cordoba's brief hope of redemption. They lost it for a time outside the barricaded room that served as the Crimson Fists' armory until Estebann saw a conjured black stain on a roof beam and they moved on.

Suarez was muttering to himself more gibberish so far as Cordoba could discern. He had his Lyman's ear tune out the sound but somehow the words still found their way into his head, whispering, itching. Could stand it no longer he seized Suarez by the arm, halting him in his tracks, and demanded he be silent.

Cordoba: "Couldn't you hear him?" - He asked of Estebann. – "Laying curses on the Golden Throne itself, offer prayers to the ruinous powers".

Suarez kept his eyes downcast, his jaw set in concentration. Calmly he explained himself.

Suarez: "I was reciting the mantras I was taught to strengthen my mind".

Cordoba: "Can't you see how he seeks to deceive us?"

Estebann: "Right now, brother Cordoba, I trust Suarez more than I can trust you, and I heard no blasphemies from his lips".

Cordoba: "He's lost his mind to Chaos once already".

Suarez: "He's right. I still don't know how the demon found me here, how it tracked my thoughts across its tortured realm, but..."

Estebann (interrupting): "This is what it wants, to divide us, to turn battle brother against battle brother".

Suarez: “Sergeant, I was weak, I was proud. I thought they could not break through the barriers I had built, but I was wrong once. I could be... The madness could claim me again. It could happen any time. And if it does... when it does...”

Estebann: “You can fight it, Suarez. You would not have been assigned to this squad, if you couldn’t. The librarian would...”

Suarez (interrupting): “Promise me, sergeant Estebann. Promise me that... if it takes my mind again you will not hesitate this time. You must kill me”.

Estebann: “You are stronger than it is. That’s all why it desires your power. You are the Crimson Fist, Suarez. Start acting like one”.

Cordoba: “If the sergeant won’t do it, be assured that I will”.

But he turned away from Suarez then, because for a moment in those pleading eyes he had seen something new. Not a cursed mutant or a dangerous psyker, but a frightened man. And that weakness alone was cause enough to despise him. So why then could he not shake the feeling that the librarian was still lying to them, saying what he thought they needed to hear? Why could Cordoba not calm that damn itch in his brain?

CHAPTER 9 (29.16 – 42.00)

The demon’s trail led back to the ground floor. It skirted the servitors’ workshops and the sacristy¹¹, and then took a sharp right turn across the cloisters. Here the incessant rain beat down on a high glass roof, through which Cordoba could see the grey sky.

Two mechanically augmented servitors approached through the gloom, carrying Menendez’s lifeless body towards the medicare ward for all the good it might do him. Cordoba paid them no heat except to wonder briefly why none of their kind had been attacked. Perhaps, it was because they had no souls to feed the demon.

Cordoba: “It is leading us in circles”.

Cordoba spat as they returned to where Menendez had fallen little more than an hour before.

Estebann: “Worse than that, I suspect”.

Estebann glided his hand over the brass sconce¹², coming away with black blood on his gauntlet. Fresh black blood.

Estebann: "I think, while we have been following the demon, it has been following us".

Cordoba spun around; it was there, right where it had been before above the archway. It was leering at him, taunting him. He thought he had a clear shot at it, but what if he was wrong, what if it was fooling his senses again? He remembered what Suarez had said – nothing is as it seems. But he couldn't afford to think like that, to second guess himself. Cordoba fired his bolter; he had hesitated only a microsecond. Long enough.

(Multiple bolter shots)

Demon dived under his bolts. It spread its tattered wings and soared over Cordoba's head. The others saw it too this time. The three Crimson Fists formed up into a knot, back to back, so that they couldn't be attacked from behind as Menendez had. Cordoba and sergeant Estebann tried to follow the demon's flight, popped hot metal after it. Cordoba wasn't sure what Suarez was doing. They only succeeded in collapsing the ceiling. Wood and masonry crashed down around them. Suarez threw up his chainsword arm to protect his head.

Cordoba wanted to keep his weapons ready, so he trusted in the gifts of his gene-seed, his iron constitution and quick healing to protect him.

Under Estebann's splattered orders they backed into the cloisters, maintaining their defensive formation. They trained their bolters through the still standing archway on the wreckage behind it, alert for the slightest movement. Cordoba had taken a blow to the head, but his Larraman's organ staunched the trickle¹³ of blood into his right eye.

Cordoba (thinking): "With the Emperor's blessing I will be the end of the damned thing. It will have been crushed to death".

They waited for the dust to settle. Then sergeant motioned them forwards to search the debris. Barely had they taken the first step, when Suarez yelled out.

Suarez: "It's here. It's here".

Of the three of them he had been the only one facing into the cloisters. Cordoba broke formation, turned and saw that... impossibly Suarez was white. The demon swoop down at him from the glass roof, its claw extended. Once more bolters barked and chainswords screamed, but sounds came to Cordoba's ears, as if from a long distance because that infernal whispering was back and it was louder this time. It filled his head, it overwhelmed his every sense. He let out a defiant howl, that had resonated through his skull until that sound was all that he could hear.

He was a Space Marine, damn it! A member of the most feared fighting force in the galaxy, to many an angel of death. How could this one skinny creature be running rings round him like this? How could it have destroyed his squad?

Suddenly Suarez was on his knees, and he was gibbering helplessly as he had when Estebann had first released him from the pain glove. And the demon was upon him and instant later it wasn't, because Estebann had been ready, waiting for it to make that very move. His chainsword shaved blond hairs of the librarian's head and almost cleaved his startled attacker in two. Almost. The demon abandoned Suarez, flew at Estebann instead. It attached itself to his face, but still the sergeant was barking orders.

Estebann: "Suarez, pull yourself together. We are depending on you, boy. You have to fight it".

Cordoba sheaved his chainsword, closed his eyes. He struck out in the direction of his sergeant's voice, and his twin hearts sang as his fingers closed about the small leathery body. He half-opened one eye long enough to confirm, that he had it. He had the demon. It was thrashing its wings, but still clawing at Estebann's eyes and this time Cordoba wouldn't make the mistake of looking at it. He would close his fist, pulverize the creature's bones. He would save his squad, prove Estebann wrong; prove they had no need of Suarez and his ilk¹⁴.

But the demon was far stronger, than he had anticipated. Cordoba had crushed adamantium in his serve-assisted grip, but he couldn't even snap this creature's spindly¹⁵ neck.

Estebann: "Use your bolter, Cordoba".

Cordoba: "I can't".

He had leveled his gun at demon's head, at least at where he thought the demon's head was. He couldn't fire without risking Estebann's life too.

Estebann: "If you don't, it will take my soul. At least this way I die whole. Do it, Cordoba! That's an order! Do it!"

(Single bolter shot)

As Cordoba fired, the demon slipped through his grasp like a wisp of smoke. He looked in horror, saw Estebann swaying, and falling like a mighty tree felled by a treacherous thunder bolt. The sergeant's ceramite cased body hit the flagstones with a resounding crash, and there was a smoking hole where his face had been.

He was... He happened the best of them, but even he could not heal from such a wound. Sergeant Estebann was dead. And Cordoba howled again. A howl born in frustration and it echoed around the empty stone passageways of the monastery and returned to his own ears as a helpless, hopeless whisper.

For some time after that the only sounds to be heard were of the storm outside. Cordoba knelt at Estebann's corpse and prayed for him. He prayed for himself too. Then slowly he became aware of the new sound – a quiet voice behind him. It was Suarez. He was muttering to himself again.

Cordoba: "Shut up!"

The muttering continued. He pushed himself to his feet, servos whining in his armor. He put his bolter to the young librarian's head.

Cordoba: "Shut up! Shut up!"

Suarez looked up at Cordoba glassy-eyed, he fell silent.

Cordoba: "It's your fault! Sergeant Estebann died for you. He had put himself between you and the demon, because he believed your life more valuable than his own. He'd put his faith in you and all you can do is kneel here and... and..."

Suarez didn't move, didn't even blink. He might not have even seen Cordoba. He was looking right through him.

Cordoba: "He should have put a bolt in your head ten days ago, Suarez. I said as much thing; I should have argued my case more strongly, made Estebann see!"

Cordoba wanted to do it too; he wanted to squeeze the trigger. The mere sight of the librarian was abhorrent to him and after all wasn't that the duty of every subject of the Emperor to purge the unclean? At the very least he could deny the demon its hope for feast. Indeed, was it not possible, that without Suarez's mutated brain to act as a beacon for it, it must just sling back to whatever fetid realm had belched¹⁶ it out in the first place.

Possible, Cordoba considered to himself, but unlikely. He lowered his bolter in the end, because it was what Estebann would have told him to do. And although he may have been gone, although the choice was Cordoba's now, still he couldn't yet go against his sergeant's will.

Suarez: "You only did what you had to".

Cordoba turned back to Suarez surprised to hear him making sense again.

Suarez: "You were following orders. You can't blame yourself".

He looked at sergeant Estebann's corpse, then at Cordoba with pity in his eyes. And the rage that Cordoba had been suppressing boiled up inside his chest at the thought that this boy, this... this... psyker dared judge him. He didn't try to stop himself this time. Cordoba drew his chainsword and flew at the despised librarian intending to decapitate him with one clean blow.

As Suarez saw him coming however, his aspect changed. He rolled, sprang up with the swiftness that belied his armored bulk. His own chainsword met Cordoba's, teeth locking and sparking together, squirming fury to the unheeding heavens. Cordoba strained his biceps, tried to push the other sword aside, but it would not yield. Instead its teeth bore closer ever closer down upon him spraying Cordoba's face with hot sticky oil and forcing him up to his back foot. This couldn't be happening, he railed¹⁷ inwardly. How could the boy be this strong, stronger than him? His chainsword was shaking fit to dance right out of his hands. Cordoba let it go before it could and Suarez fell forwards, as his opponent's resistance was abducted tale.

He may have found great strength from somewhere, but still he lacked Cordoba's skill and experience. Cordoba shoulder charged him throwing him off balance. He brought his head up into Suarez's chin hard and heard his jawbone fracture. He seized the librarian's wrist in his left hand but couldn't shake his hold on his weapon. Cordoba met Suarez's eyes then, and he saw with a shock that they were like the demon's eyes, burning wild and red.

Cordoba: "I knew you are weak. I knew you would turn on us again. You may look like a man, but you are warp spawn like the demon, and no matter how they tried to tame you, librarian, that can't ever change".

They wrestled for long minutes these armored giants, these former comrades in arms. And although Cordoba was fuelled by a righteous anger, though he knew the Emperor was with him, he could feel that his opponent was the stronger of them. It was all he could do to keep that chainsword from his neck. He grabbed for it in desperation with both hands, leaving himself open. Suarez broke his grip with ease and kicked Cordoba away from him. Before he landed Cordoba had drawn his bolter and loosened off a shot. The bolt struck Suarez in the hand and disarmed him at last. His still screeching chainsword clattered off the wall and skittered, hissing and flaring away from him across the cloisters.

Cordoba lying on his back fired again and again. Suarez protected his head with his arms and the bolts ricocheted off ceramite. Suddenly the librarian threw out his right arm and lightning bolts erupted from his fingers as if he had drawn them down from the stormy sky itself. The bolts struck Cordoba with a blinding flash. And that itch in his brain exploded into a ball of fire.

CHAPTER 10 (42.00 – 46.57)

(Sounds of water drops)

For the longest time he was falling through a hell of his own imaginings. He surfaced with a gasp to find himself naked and chained. He was in the caverns in the very alcove, the very chains in which Suarez had been imprisoned. The librarian sat against the rock

wall across from him. Cordoba lunged for him, but came up centimeters short.

Cordoba: "You should have killed me".

Suarez: "I am not your enemy, Cordoba".

Cordoba: "Then why am I chained?"

Suarez: "I need you fighting with me, not against me. Sergeant Estebann said..."

Cordoba (interrupting): "You have no right to speak his name".

Suarez: "When sergeant Estebann gave his life to save me it sharpened my mind. It made me see more clearly, than I have been".

Cordoba (emotionally): "Release me, psyker! Give me back my armor, my weapons. Face me in fair combat without your mutant sorcery and this time..."

Suarez (interrupting): "I did not bring the demon here, though I fear I must have done. I cannot say how it found this plane, but I know..."

Cordoba (interrupting): "Do you expect me to trust a word from your mouth?"

Suarez: "We are brethren, Cordoba. I need your assistance. I need..."

Cordoba (interrupting): "I thought I had made it clear. I am brother to no damn-gene freak scum".

Suarez: "Have we not lived the same life, you and I? Have we not both hunted the deadly barb dragon through the Black Water swamps? Did we not both dream of proving our strength and courage in the festival of the Bloodied Fist?"

Cordoba hadn't known that Suarez like him was from Black Water. It meant nothing however. Many crimson Fists were recruited from that feral world.

Cordoba: "We are nothing alike. You disgust me, Suarez".

Suarez: "We learned at the feet of the very same masters. You think I do not feel the same way as you? Do you think I am not disgusted too by what I am?"

Cordoba: "Then why?"

Suarez: "You can't imagine what it is, Cordoba, to be told there's something abhorrent, something evil inside of you. When you came

of age, you were assigned to a scout squad. You left Black Water to fight for the Emperor while my trial has just begun”.

Cordoba: “If I had my way...”

Suarez (interrupting): “I’d have been drowned at birth or at least when my curse was discovered. As I said we are not so different from each other. The scars on my wrists heal when I receive my gene-seed else I could show you”.

Cordoba: “If you love the gene-father you would have tried harder”.

Suarez: “I sent an astropathic message to Rinn’s World. Sergeant Estebann had me try in the dormitorium, but I couldn’t focus then”.

Cordoba found himself nodding in agreement.

Cordoba: “If it is our fate to die today, then at least chapter master Kantor will know of it. He will send more brothers to destroy that demon scum. He can save this world, preserve our work here”.

Suarez: “That is the second lesson they teach to the librarian, that although our condition is most assuredly a curse...”

Cordoba (interrupting): “It can also be a gift”.

Suarez’s face darkened.

Suarez: “No, Cordoba. To see what I have seen, hear the whispers in your mind, to know that every second of your life is a tight robe walk across an abyss of insanity. That is no gift. But with the right training, the right meditations, the pool of madness could be resisted. And these black talents bent to the Emperor’s will”.

The words came reluctantly to Cordoba’s lips.

Cordoba: “Sergeant Estebann believed you could succeed where we have failed, that you could slay the demon”.

Suarez: “I believe, I may have that power”.

Cordoba: “And yet you say you need my help”.

Suarez: “It is hungry. You kept it from feeding on sergeant Estebann’s soul, but it is afraid too. You came closer than you might think, closer than the demon thought mortal men could, to destroying it”.

Cordoba: “Might it flee? Might it leave us be?”

Suarez: “No, the demon has still not found what it seeks. And it is maddened by that longing. It cannot restraint its urges. It will come for us again and soon”.

Cordoba: "Then release me and return my armor to me before..."

Suarez (interrupting): "Will you fight the darkness with me? Will you add your strength to my own? Will you help me across that abyss? Will you call me brother, Cordoba?"

Cordoba: "There is only the Emperor".

Suarez: "He is our shield and our protector".

He had extended an open hand towards his captive, but Cordoba didn't take it.

Cordoba: "I will fight the demon with you".

Suarez nodded understanding.

Suarez: "For today that will suffice¹⁸".

CHAPTER 11 (46.57 –52.05)

They returned to the chapel. Suarez reasoned they didn't have to hunt the demon, it would find them. So the Crimson Fists could at least choose their battle ground.

Suarez: "I can fight it now. Before when the demon whispered in my mind I tried to deny it, to push it away. I feared my barriers would crumble. I know now that I am strong. I will listen to its voice and thus I will know my enemy".

Cordoba: "What is my role in this?"

Suarez: "You must do what you do best – fight the demon, buy me time to do as I must. And... and should I succumb to the whispers after all..."

Cordoba (interrupting): "My earlier promise still stands".

They stood back to back there in the candlelight with nothing more to say to each other. They waited. They waited for almost an hour before it came again. The whispering. Cordoba turned slightly to check that it wasn't Suarez he could hear, thought he knew it was not, because the voice as before was in his head. He could feel the familiar itch in his brain, but couldn't swear it hadn't been there a moment before. Through his proximity to Suarez he had become well-used to the itch.

Cordoba: "It's watching us".

And suddenly he knew where it was. He couldn't explain how, he could follow the whispers though his ears couldn't hear them or perhaps it was just that he was coming to know his tormentor, how its evil mind worked. It was squatting on the altar of course, it thought to make Cordoba falter, to doubt himself as he had before. Not this time. This creature had defiled the sacred shrine, this monastery, this world enough with its presence. It was past time it died.

(Multiple bolter shots)

Cordoba's bolts tore through a heavy curtain, shredding the Imperial aquila. The demon flew at his face, but aborted its attack run and shut outwards instead as he swung his chainsword in wide arc in front of him. It was flitting about¹⁹ above him, haunting the shadows between pause of light on the vaulted ceiling. Cordoba couldn't follow it with his eyes so he stopped trying. He waited for the flapping between, then he swung again blindly. He was rewarded by an unholy squeal. The first sound he had heard from the demon's throat since Estebann had wounded it.

He didn't think he had hit it, hadn't felt any impact, but he had certainly come close. He should have thought of this, fought like this before. The demon could fool Cordoba's senses, but it couldn't fool his battle honed instinct. He felt that with what he knew now he could have kept it at bay forever. He had no need to.

(Demon growl)

Suarez had been hunched over, praying. Now he straightened, his eyes flashed red, and lightning leapt from his fingertips again. Unable to help himself, Cordoba looked, saw the black shape of the demon, and saw that the librarian had missed his mark by a meter. That was what Cordoba saw, his instincts told him otherwise. The demon was struck squarely, it almost seemed to have leapt into the lightning's path. It was skewered²⁰ for a second, writhing²¹ in mid-air. And it dropped and only just caught itself on its wings before it hit the flagstones.

Suarez attacked again, as the bat demon attempted to flee. This time his lightning drove it half way across the chapel into the wall, and pinned it there.

(Demon squeal)

Somehow however it was still screeching, still kicking and Suarez himself was damp²² with sweat, his face pained with concentration and his legs were beginning to buckle. The demon was fighting back and the librarian was weakening. Cordoba leapt at the demon across empty pews²³ firing. He cursed as even impaled upon the lightning as it was it evaded his bolts with impertinent ease. Instinct, he reminded himself and he remembered what Suarez had said to him. Cordoba (to himself): "I will listen to its voice and thus I will know my enemy".

He could hear the whispering in his head, and it was louder than ever. He could sense that it concealed within those hateful words about all the secrets of the world. He could sense that if he listened, they could tell him all he needed to know - where his enemy was, not where it was pretending to be. The he could deal to the demon a final fatal blow, avenge his fallen brethren and redeem himself. So Cordoba closed his eyes and he listened to the whispers, and was lost.

(Whispering)

CHAPTER 12 (52.05-55.50)

(Wind blowing)

He opened his eyes. There was blood on his hands. He was on his knees staring down at them. The chapel had been wrecked, pews had been upturned, drapes destroyed, the altar itself reduced to splinters. Few candles were left burning, and the shadows between them seemed deep and dangerous. There had been a great battle fought here, and Cordoba... Cordoba had been a participant in that battle. He had new scars, and one of his shoulder plates hung loose. His bolter was out of ammunition, he could feel the bones of his nose knitting themselves back together. Why then did he have no memory of fighting?

Suarez lay sprawled across the single step up to the ruined altar. His body was broken. Cordoba hobbled over, finding himself unexpectedly weak. He thought the librarian dead at first, until his eyelids fluttered open.

Suarez: "Cordoba, I'm sorry. I should have..."

Cordoba (interrupting): "What happened? The demon?"

Suarez: "You, you drove it out. It didn't expect... You always avoided me, Cordoba. Anyone could see you uncomfortable around me, but I never suspected..."

Cordoba (interrupting): "What are you bubbling about? What do you mean? I don't remember".

Suarez: "You are strong, stronger than I am, strong enough to hide it. But it was my job, my job to see. I should have seen".

There were the gashes in the librarian's armor sticky with blood and oil. Cordoba had seen them at once, hadn't wanted to accept what they meant. Chainsword wounds.

Cordoba: "The demon, you said, I drove it out. Where?"

Suarez: "Not far, it is hurt, but it won't go far. It still wants... Even though it knows now, though it has been repulsed once, still it wants what it came for".

Cordoba: "It still wants your power".

Suarez shook his head and cuffed up more blood. It was a moment before he could speak again. He reached for Cordoba's hand, taking it firmly in his.

Suarez: "No, Cordoba. It doesn't want me. It never wanted me".

Cordoba: "Argh!"

Cordoba tore his hand away, he turned his back on Suarez. His brain itched.

Suarez: "It needed no more than a moment, the right moment, a slip of an untrained mind. You must have spent your life denying what you are, Cordoba. The barriers you have built, they are stronger than my barriers, but you are untrained".

Cordoba should have slain him for what he was saying. An hour ago he might have done. He didn't want to hear, he couldn't help but listen. And Suarez was relentless.

Suarez: "It wasn't my mind, that opened the door to the demon, though it caught me unaware as it came through that door. It came for you, Cordoba. It is your power it wants. You are like me, Cordoba. A psyker!"

There was a rumble of thunder directly overhead and the storm seemed to redouble its assault on the lonely monastery.

CHAPTER 13 (55.50 -65.45)

Suarez wasn't healing as he ought to have done. His Larraman's organ must have been damaged, his wounds had begun to close, but slowly. And he was bleeding inside. Cordoba could feel him weakening by the minute. He supported him as best he could, kept him moving forwards. Suarez was dying, but he had insisted they find the demon again first. When Cordoba pointed out that the librarian was in no state for combat, Suarez had said:

Suarez: "It is not I, who will fight it. I see my role now".

They climbed the back staircase, the one up which the demon's blood trail had once led them. The ascent proved too much for Suarez and he siked against his battle brother's shoulder.

Cordoba: "I did this deny. It was my hand that struck the killing blow against you, as it did against Estebann".

Suarez: "Your... Your hand, but another's will. The demon..."

Cordoba: "It was in my head. I allowed the demon into..."

The thought sickened him, he felt unclean inside.

Suarez: "You fought it. Fortunately it was weak and daze from my assault. When you revealed your mind to it, when it saw its chance, it acted in desperation, but your own force of will was greater that it had anticipated. Had the demon not fled when it did, it would have been subsumed, lost within you forever".

Cordoba: "But it will try again".

Suarez: "It is resting, recuperating. When it strikes again, it will be at full strength, and I... I fear I may not be".

Cordoba nodded.

Cordoba: "You must find your strength, Suarez. Use those talents, with which you have been cursed, lead us to this creature".

Suarez: "You misunderstand. I have not been leading you, Cordoba. I didn't bring us this far. I have been following you".

Cordoba fell silent at that as he had after Suarez's accusation in the chapel. He had no words to say. He felt different somehow, weary of mind and spirit and resigned to whatever fate the Emperor had chosen for him. He picked Suarez up, slung him over his shoulder and carried him to the top of the stairs. His intention had been to stop there until directed further. Instinct drew him to his right instead, and Cordoba kept on walking along the passageway towards the dormitoriums. He was following the itch in his brain, he realized. The librarian had been right. Of course, he had.

He sat Suarez down by a door where the itch was strongest. Outside the room, he realized, where the first victim had been found.

Cordoba: "What do we do? How do I..."

Suarez (interrupting): "I can't answer that, brother Cordoba. I can't condense years of training, of mental discipline into a few pithy words, but I feel... I feel that when the demon possessed you, it unlocked something inside you. Something you have spent your entire life denying. I think the answer to your question is within your grasp now. It is simply a matter of... of following your instincts, of trusting yourself".

Cordoba: "What if the demon takes my mind again?"

Suarez: "It is within your power to stop it. Now come, the sooner we can confront it, the better are..."

Blood welled up in his mouth again, and the sentence was left unfinished. His fingers splayed around the wooden door and were too weak to turn it. Cordoba placed his hand over Suarez's and performed the action for him.

The dormitorium was empty. So it seemed to Cordoba's eyes.

Suarez: "Look with your other senses".

He needed no further prompting. He had done this before after all, concentrated on the whispers in his mind, followed them to their source, while being careful not to hear the words, they spoke, not to let them overwhelm him.

It was here, hanging from the ceiling upside down above the head of the apothecary's former bulk. Cordoba flinched from its burning red eyes.

Suarez: "No, we must face it".

Cordoba: "Can't, it might..."

Suarez (interrupting): "There is that risk. It is true that the eyes are the windows to the soul, but you have the power, Cordoba. You can shutter those windows, so that you can see out, but the demon can't get in. Visualize the shield behind your eyes, an impenetrable shield". The demon flew at them. Cordoba swung his chainsword at it, missed. It attacked Suarez clawing at his face. Perhaps, it saw him as the weaker of its foes, scented his blood, but the librarian stood his ground. His back grew straighter and he seemed to grow in stature, he was using his talents again, adding the strength of his mind to that of his body. He battered his assailant away, repelled it further with two chainsword thrusts that came close to eviscerating it. Then he summoned the lightning again.

(Weird almost laser-like sounds)

The bat creature was hit, almost blasted out of the air. It seemed that Suarez had no need of Cordoba's help at all, but then he faltered, whilst his injuries taking their toll and the demon darted free, made for the door but found Suarez still strong enough to ward it away with his blade. Cordoba anticipated the demon's next move, but wasn't fast enough to stop it. It sought towards the room's only window at the far end of the rove bumps.

(Running sounds)

He hurled his chainsword across its path. It recoiled, but recovered too soon. He'd beat it to the window anyway. He wasn't sure how or where his burst of speed had come from, but he didn't question it. The demon was flapping about, cornered, confused, and the whispers in the Cordoba's head had taken on a new fearful tone. He smiled to himself grimly. He had lost both his weapons, he didn't need them anymore. He locked gazes with the demon, sensed its frustration as it saw the path to its longed for prize, but found that path blocked. Cordoba listened to his instincts. He reached deep

inside himself, gathered up all the hatred and the rage he felt there for this monster, for this slayer of his brothers. And he gave it form, focus, direction. He unleashed the totality of his being, his soul itself, and Cordoba shuddered as the energy flowed from him, as it coalesced in front of him into a rolling ball of flame, as it grew and took shape. Human shape. He recognized the form, the psychic flames had chosen. Sergeant Estebann. He felt he ought to have been surprised, but it seemed only right.

The simulacrum surged towards its prey and the rugs and the blankets and the beds between them were consumed. The demon didn't have time to react, it was enveloped and it screamed in Cordoba's mind, a resounding screech of unspeakable pain and horror that chilled his bones. Then the effigies flames burnt out. It collapsed in itself and was no more. And only the demon remained, displaying no marks of burning, but deathly still on its back on the floor. The fire in its eyes quenched²⁵.

Cordoba recovered his chainsword, but kept his own gaze fixed on the fallen creature, weary of another trick. It twitched and he activated the sword and beheaded it. Then he hacked at its body, until it was nothing but a heap of offal²⁶, and after his fourth stroke not even that. The remnants of the demon faded like mist in the sunlight, recalled to its distant realm, and all that remained was the lingering stench of its black blood, which made Cordoba heave and left a bitter iron taste in his mouth.

Suarez had fallen too. It was sometime before Cordoba realized this. Raised his eyes to see the young librarian slumped in the doorway. He wondered if he had witnessed the demon's demise. He imagined that he had, and that only then had he allowed himself to die. He didn't look at the body as he stepped over it, didn't pray for his soul as he had for the others. He didn't have the words. He left Suarez for the servitors to find.

EPILOGUE (65.45 -)

(Absolute silence)

It was six days more before a ship arrived. Cordoba waited by the landing plateau, a lonely figure. He was drenched²⁷ by the rain, hailstones²⁸ pinning of his armor. Then the black storm clouds were pierced by bright white lights. It was a Crimson Fists' Thunderhawk plummeting from the sky. It was early, Suarez must have told the truth, must have sent that message after all. Cordoba hadn't been sure. Of late he hadn't been sure of much.

He had contacted the ship by vox, as soon as it had dropped out of the warp. He had appraised his company captain in situation and told in return that he would be honored for his valor in dealing with the demon threat. He had omitted some details from his report. He greeted captain Balasto and his entourage, escorted them to the monastery and the medicare ward.

As sergeant Estebann had said, the gene-seed of most of Cordoba's battle brothers held in their deathless states was salvageable.

Estebann's seed too could still be harvested thanks to the servitors' post-mortem ministrations. Suarez's body was too damaged. In the opinion of the apothecaries however this was likely for the best, given what they had been told of his madness before death.

Cordoba had been busy these past six days. He had accelerated the training program. This world had just held its own festival of the first Bloodied Fist and had yielded ten fresh recruits to the Emperor's cause. More than enough to replace those lost. The Crimson Fists would endure and Cordoba's work here, Estebann's work before his, was done.

But then there had also been the nights. Cordoba had spent six nights in the caverns enwrapped by the pain glove. The servitors had ensured that it was never on long enough to cause nerve damage but no sooner had they turned it off, then Cordoba had been screaming at them to reactivate it. He had welcomed the fire in his veins. He had felt it scouring him clean of the demon's taint. He could see clearly now. He could see that Suarez had been wrong about him. His senses had been fooled as surely as Cordoba's own had been. The demon had been inside him, it had affected his body and his mind, but he had exorcised himself of it. And its lies had faded like the

memories of a tortured dream. That was the worst it had done, made Cordoba believe even for a short time that he was in some way an abhorrence like it was.

He boarded the strike cruiser that night. He left this storm-lashed world behind him forever. He had already been reassigned to active combat duty, a posting fit for a hero. Cordoba told himself, that everything had ended well.

(Whispering)

He pretended not to hear the whispering in his mind a little louder than it had been yesterday.

(Louder and louder whispering, diabolic drums)