

WARHAMMER  
40,000

# REPARATION

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A DARK ANGELS SHORT STORY

# **Reparation**

Andy Smillie

Thorolf coughed, sending flecks of blood and filmy matter onto the dirt. Touching a hand to his aching ribs, he scolded himself for allowing the human to get so close. Human, the term barely applied to the gene-bulked creature growling at him from across the arena. The man's, if he had been a man, musculature was swollen to insane proportions, his head lost between boulder-like shoulders. His nervous system had been replaced by a network of cables that poked through pallid skin like rusting veins, and his legs were powered by pistons sunk into the meat of enlarged thighs. In a century of warfare, Thorolf had yet to encounter such a nightmarish union of flesh and science. The chrono-gladiator had been quicker than his bulk belied, steaming into Thorolf to deliver a punch to the Space Marine's midriff that would have killed him if it were not for the hardened bone structure and numerous implants his Chapter's Apothecaries had gifted him. Even now, Thorolf knew his enhanced physiology was working to heal the internal injuries he'd sustained; his twin hearts pumping fresh blood to areas of trauma while his Haemastamen implant helped filter away dead cells.

'We must keep our distance.'

Thorolf turned to look at his cell mate as auditory devices fashioned into the walls of the arena translated the lanky, blue-skinned xenos's words into Gothic.

The chrono-gladiator rushed forward again, steam hissing from metallic vents sunk into its spinal column. Thorolf dived forward, throwing himself into a roll to evade the brute's charge. The tau side-stepped left, flowing around the gladiator to slash a wide gash in its midriff as it thumped past. Thorolf was begrudgingly impressed; the tau wielded his weapon, a long pole-arm with a curved blade at each end, with enviable dexterity.

Ignorant of the wound, the chrono-gladiator reset itself and came at them again.

'Aim for the cabling!' Thorolf shouted to the tau and rushed forward to meet the chrono-gladiator head on, baiting him.

Nodding in affirmation, the tau circled round behind their opponent, whipping his blade up in a tight arc to slash through a host of the putrid tubes feeding the chrono-gladiator's nervous system. Chemical-laden fluid spurted out from the severed cables, which writhed like pained serpents, spraying onto the tau's

exposed abdomen. Screaming in pain as the chemicals seared into his flesh, the tau dropped his weapon and stumbled backwards.

Pivoting with a speed that belied its size, the chrono-gladiator sunk a hammer-like fist into the tau's jaw. The blow shattered the aliens mandible, caved the side of his face in, flipping him backwards through the air like a spent round.

Breathing heavily, the chrono-gladiator turned to face Thorolf. It fought to take a step forward as a shudder permeated its body, the vital fluid balancing its tortured musculature spilling out onto the ground.

Thorolf moved backwards, drawing the chrono-gladiator away from the tau, before darting around the walking-weapon to scoop up the tau's pole-arm. Sticking one of the bladed-ends in the ground and snapping it off, the Space Marine fashioned himself a spear.

'Your body has suffered enough. It's time your soul bore some of the burden,' Thorolf spat, hefting the spear and running full tilt at the chrono-gladiator.

The brute braced itself, flexing its biceps as it prepared to rip Thorolf in half.

A hair's-breadth outside striking range, Thorolf threw the spear. The weapon hit home before the chrono-gladiator could react, punching into the soft flesh of the brute's throat. Thorolf followed it in, diving elbow first into the chrono-gladiator and knocking it to the ground.

The Space Marine recovered first, righting himself and driving the spear further through the gladiator's neck, pinning it to the ground.

Dark ichor ran from the gladiator's mouth as it reached for the spear but again Thorolf was faster, hammering his fists into the brute's deltoids and smashing its shoulder joints. With both of its arms disabled, the gladiator's legs flayed helplessly, its torso twitching in shock as it died.

'The Emperor protects,' exhausted, Thorolf rolled off his opponent's corpse and stumbled to the exit.

'Space Marine... I live,' the tau cried out as Thorolf moved past him.

Thorolf stopped and closed his eyes, 'In His sight.' Straightening, he turned

and walked to the tau. 'No xenos, you do not.'

The tau looked up, his eyes full of confusion, 'I... I thought we had a bond, as warriors.'

'If that were true, I would be as guilty of heresy as those I hunt.' The Space Marine raised his blade.

Thorolf ran his hand up over the smooth metal of his cell wall, bringing it to rest on a blackened, pockmarked section. Closing his eyes, he traced the contours, his fingers remembering how he'd made each of them. Thorolf's thoughts turned to the strangled cries of the chrono-gladiator as its retarded throat tried to give voice to its death. He spat on the wall. The metal hissed under the saliva as the acid liquid burned a fresh imperfection into the metal. Satisfied, Thorolf knelt in prayer and offered thanks to the Holy Throne and God Emperor that he yet lived to continue his mission.

Thorolf stared uneasily at the hunchbacks. Their childlike, smiling faces jarred with their weeping skin in a way that made Thorolf wish was able to adjust his eyes the way he could the optic lenses of his battle helm.

He had little way of knowing how long it had been since his fight with the chrono-gladiator, but he was certain it wasn't time for another appearance in the arena. Perhaps, he thought, this was an oddity of the tournament. Since his imprisonment, he knew that time had flowed strangely. It seemed fragmented and inconsistent, days indistinguishable from hours, seconds stretched out that they might fill eternity. He sighed, through gritted teeth; time was yet another constant that the eldar had taken from him. Running his hand across the black body suit that they had replaced his power armour with, Thorolf visualised the armoured grooves of his sacred breastplate, his fingers able to trace the line of every chink where the reinforced ceramite had been tested in saving his life. Inwardly, the Space Marine promised himself that he would don his armour again.

He looked past his jailors towards the open cell door and waited for the bastardised female to enter. She did not.

A body flew from the darkness beyond the door, hurled like a doll by someone or something far stronger than even the stimm-pumped chrono-gladiator. It landed hard on the floor between the hunchbacks, twitched and coughed up a

smattering of blood. Thorolf took one look at the prone figure, immediately recognising the enhanced musculature of a fellow Space Marine. Without a word the hunchbacks turned and exited, the door locking behind them.

Thorolf moved to check the figure's vitals –

‘Stay back,’ the new arrival snarled through bloodied teeth and pushed his torso off the ground.

‘Easy, brother, we are both playthings of the same captors. I bring no harm.’ Thorolf spread his hands in conciliation and retreated to the far wall.

The Space Marine seemed appeased, and slid back against the opposite wall. ‘Where are we?’

Thorolf looked at the naked Space Marine, studying the tapestry of angry scars that criss-crossed the pale flesh of his torso. Tell-tale puncture marks studded the Space Marine's body, souvenirs left by the pain racks that had tortured his nervous system. Thorolf felt his muscles bunch as he remembered his own ordeal at the hands of their jailors. By contrast, the newcomer's face was untouched; baring none of the signs of warfare Thorolf would have expected to see on one of the Emperor's shock troops. It reminded Thorolf of the hunchbacks, wracked of body and beautiful of visage. His mind recoiled at the twisted work of the eldar surgeons.

‘We are on Damorrhagh,’ Thorolf spoke with hushed clarity, like a preacher consoling his flock. He sought the beads of his faith as he spoke but they had been stripped from him along with the rest of his wargear when the eldar had taken him. The warrior monk sighed and made a mental note to beg the Emperor's forgiveness for uttering the xenos word. ‘It is an arena world of the pirate eldar.’

The newcomer was about to speak when Thorolf interrupted him, ‘I think brother, it is my turn to ask a question.’

The other Space Marine nodded.

‘Who do you serve?’

Anger flashed across the Space Marine's face, ‘And why is it that I should tell

you? Which Legion do you serve?’

‘I seek no advantage over you, brother. I am Thorolf Icewalkdr, son of Russ.’

‘Space Wolf,’ the Space Marine spat, doing a poor job of hiding his distaste for the children of Fenris. The newcomer considered the other Space Marine. It seemed at odds with what he knew of Russ’ descendants that Thorolf had spoken so plainly rather than aggrandising his Chapter in a torrent of audacious boasts. ‘You speak well for a berserker.’

Thorolf felt the Space Marine’s eyes on him. He wondered just how bestial he must look to him, his hair twisting in blood-matted locks down to his shoulders, an unkempt beard clinging to his face.

‘Now,’ Thorolf’s voice hardened, ‘I would know who it is that shares this cell.’

‘I am Ecanus of the Dark Angels.’

Thorolf stared the Dark Angel in the eyes; he could detect no taint of Chaos upon him. ‘I fought alongside a Dark Angel once.’

‘What?’

Thorolf lowered his eyes, ‘Ramiel was my first cell mate. He was a mighty warrior. I honour him with each breath I take in the arena, my body a monument to his legacy.’

‘Where are your fangs, wolf?’ Ecanus snapped, distracted.

Thorolf clenched his teeth in annoyance, ‘It would bid you well to watch your tone, son of Jonson.’ He paused and rubbed a hand against his mouth, ‘Their infernal surgeons took great joy in filing away my lord’s gift. A pain and an affront I will wash clean with blood.’ Thorolf let his gaze drift to the kill markings on the wall.

Ecanus followed his gaze. ‘Leave it to a Space Wolf to tally kills. You and your brethren’s idea of honour is more akin to the feudal barbarism of backwater savages.’

Thorolf's face softened, 'It is not glory that they recount. Each mark serves to remind me of the penance I must face when this is over.'

'This will never be over, Wolf. I have emerged champion from two of these infernal games, only to find myself here, at the beginning of a fresh nightmare.'

'In death brother, in death shall it be over.'

'Hmm,' Ecanus sniffed. 'Perhaps it will be you and I who fight next.'

'Perhaps,' answered Thorolf softly. 'The eldar take great pleasure in watching the arena tear apart the bond of brotherhood.'

'Ramiel?'

Thorolf nodded, 'I killed him.' He met Ecanus's gaze. The Dark Angel brow was creased with rage, his eyes murderous. 'Fear not brother, should we make it far enough in this forsaken tournament then I have no doubt that we shall be pitted against one another. You will have your chance to restore Ramiel's honour...' Thorolf shuffled down onto the ground and closed his eyes, 'but for now, there are plenty enough xenos and mutated abominations for us to dull our blades on.'

The grind of gears and rattle of chain-fed levers woke Thorolf. He could have enabled his Catalepsean Node to cut in; allowing parts of his brain to switch off while the others maintained alertness. But in truth he needed to rest fully. The demands the recent past had placed on his body were nothing to what his mind had been forced to endure. He sat up as the brass door to his cell ground open. A lithe figure entered, the symmetry of her long, curved limbs and perfect bosom at odds with the vertical grille that replaced her face. Thorolf stayed on the ground as two of her kin entered, and flanked her to either side. They were badly hunched, the musculature in their chest's overdeveloped to such an extent it threatened to snap their backs. Their bodies were revolting, sheathed in a sickly skin with pores that dripped with virulent toxins. Yet by the standards of most cultures their faces would have been considered beautiful.

'Stand.' The female hissed the command through her grille-face.

The word rasped through the air, both distorted and clear. Had it not been for his Lyman's Ear, which worked to filter out the harshness of the sound, it would

have ripped into Thorolf's skull like a saw blade. As it was, he felt wetness on his cheeks as blood trickled from his ears. He stood and waited for the hunched males to step forward, keeping his gaze fixed on the perverse ugliness of the female as they shackled his wrists with heavy chains.

'Follow.' The female turned sharply, her barbed hair cutting the air as she exited.

Thorolf ground his teeth as he fought against the nausea her voice induced, and allowed himself to be led from the cell by the hunchbacks.

The corridor stank of death. On the battlefield, Thorolf had smelt almost every death imaginable: the acrid taste of dirt mixed with bone as explosive rounds blew men apart; the sharp tang of laser fire as it lanced through their flesh; and the choking smell of promethium that burned them to ash and boiled away the air they breathed. But the death-smell in the corridor was far more putrid than anything a soldier was capable of inflicting on his enemies. The air tasted of depravity, of death wrought for the enjoyment of butchers. Thorolf tried hard not to breathe too deeply, his enhanced senses choked by the reek of dozens of foul toxins and pollutants. Down there, in the depths of an alien contrived hell, you died over a long time, when elaborate tortures had broken your spirit, and decay and rot had wasted your body. Death here was not a means to an end, an acceptable part of winning a war. It was manufactured for its own sake.

The hunchbacks led Thorolf along a snaking corridor of tarnished metal and smooth stone, lit by ghoulish faces that hung from the ceiling like lanterns. The eyes and mouths cast a drab light on the studded panels of the walkway. Each time he'd been led from his cell, Thorolf had tried to get his bearings. He'd tried to keep track of the twists in the corridor by counting the lanterns, then by remembering the shape of the other cells they passed. But it was no use, each time the corridor looked different, turned in a different direction. It was as impossible to fathom as it was for him to deny the hundred years of training and instinct that forced him to continue to try.

At the bottom of a metal incline, the female turned and spoke, 'Stillness.'

Thorolf remained where he was as the hunchbacks ambled forward and removed his chains.

'Go,' the female motioned towards the ramp with an elongated arm that ended

in knife-like fingers.

Thorolf fixed his gaze ahead and started up the incline. The surface, which at first had seemed smooth and featureless, was covered in an intricate design and script; carved into the metal with a craftsmanship that Thorolf doubted even his Chapter's finest artisans could match. Blood ran in the relief between the symbols, tracing a grim outline around them. Thorolf felt his pulse quicken as he realised the arena he was about to enter was of more significance than the ones he'd fought in previously. At the top of the ramp Thorolf was met by an enormous circular metallic door large enough for his Chapter's holy Land Raiders to drive through two abreast. He waited.

With a whisper, the circular door opened, its petal-like segments peeling apart to reveal an equally massive spiked gate. Light flooded in, and Thorolf was forced to cover his eyes until they adjusted. Then came the noise, a thunderous cacophony of jeering voices calling Thorolf to battle.

'Within dark and forgotten regions hide the enemies of the Emperor. Be resolute. You have received his gifts so that you may enter such places and cleanse them,' Thorolf let the mantra slow the beating of his twin hearts, and ease the tension from his shoulders.

The gate vibrated angrily as unseen machines hoisted it up into the vaulted ceiling. Thorolf took a long breath and strode forward; whatever it was that awaited him, he would bring it the Emperor's forgiveness.

Thorolf stepped onto the arena floor, a steel platform covered in coarse, spiked gravel, to an explosion of noise from the crowd. He ignored them, thankful for the heat of the planet's three suns as they burned down on him. The coliseum was by far the largest he had fought in. Tiered galleries surrounded the fighting pit, towering up into the blood-stained sky to where even Thorolf's enhanced eyes could make out no more than a vague outline. No wall separated the crowd from the gladiators, allowing a privileged few to be sprayed with the blood of a combatant as an opponent's blade opened his flesh. Between each row of seated spectators a pole of spiked iron stood in the ground, the head of a fallen gladiator impaled upon its tip.

At the opposite side of the arena, Thorolf saw his opponent – an ork. He had killed hundreds of the green beast's kin on the field of battle, given the order to

bombard thousands more out of existence from the deck of an orbiting battle-barge. But here, without the protection of his blessed armour, the cleansing rounds of his boltgun or the reassuring weight of the crozius arcanum, the hulking greenskin seemed a far harder proposition. Even hunched, the beast stood head and shoulders above Thorolf. Stood upright, it would have been double his height. The Ork gripped a makeshift mace in each of its oversized fists, metal poles with stone blocks chained to their tops.

Thorolf hefted the saw-blade he'd taken from the armoury in his right hand. 'Pit the might of your faith against the strength of the foe and you will cease their onslaught,' Thorolf knelt in prayer, sanctifying his temporary weapon the way he would have honoured his own battlegear.

The air above the centre of the arena sparked and distorted. Thorolf turned his attention upwards as the light folded in on itself creating a dark spot from which an obsidian balcony materialised. The platform was devoid of any thrusters, and Thorolf assumed it was held aloft by the same advanced anti-grav technology the eldar used on their skimming battle tanks. The crowd fell silent as the doors stood in the centre of the balcony swung open.

A single figure emerged onto the platform. Thorolf recognised him by the blood-soaked flesh cloak that hung across his shoulders. The Orator, the grotesque narrator of Damorrhagh's arenas, was clad in crimson armour that dripped with thick blood pumped over its surface by hidden nozzles. With the skin of his bald scalp scraped back in a taut flesh-lock, his eyelids pinned back to reveal pallid, weeping eyes, and his mouth sewn shut by barbed wire, he was as frightening a spectacle as anything the arena could muster.

'Citizens of Damorrhagh, warriors of the Bladed Lotus, raise your blades and kneel,' the Orator's lips stayed sewn shut as he spoke. Instead, the hundreds of ghoulish faces impaled around the arena gave voice to his words, their lifeless jaws moving in unnatural unison.

A hundred thousand barbed weapons glinted in the sun as the assembled masses obeyed.

'Archon K'shaic,' the Orator made a sweeping gesture with his arms, flicking blood from his armour into the air. The droplets hung suspended for a fraction too long, a morbid collage painted with the blood of the archon's enemies. To

Thorolf they formed a crimson serpent, and he felt his insides bunch at the unnatural liquid.

K'shaic stepped through the doors to deafening applause; the interlocking plates of his midnight black armour shifting like scuttle beetles. The blood-master of the depraved arena world raised a gauntleted hand and took his seat at the front of the balcony.

Once more, the Orator spoke through the mouths of the dead. 'Here in Xelaic Prime, most blood-spattered of our inglorious amphitheatres, the tournament of the Razor Vein dawns. Let us greet it with the blood of a lab-grown man-thing and the entrails of a barbarous ork.'

Thorolf tried to block out the voices, but they washed over him in a nauseous wave that flooded his mind. He looked around for some way of silencing them but saw no cables or antenna linking the heads to the Orator. Thorolf dared not think of the debased technology the aliens used to accomplish such a bonding with the dead.

'Emperor protects,' he said, turning his thoughts away from the macabre.

From across the arena, the ork bellowed a thunderous roar, its mouth opening wide enough to swallow Thorolf's head whole. He remained kneeling and closed his eyes. Enraged by its prey's insensate reaction, the greenskin beat its chest and charged towards the Space Marine. Thorolf felt the ground tremble under the ork's quickening footsteps. It rushed onward, and his nose picked up the beast's foul breath. Thorolf shifted his weight to the front of his feet. The Ork's sweat filled his senses. He heard the crunch of gravel as the beast turned on its foot, swinging a mace at his face. Thorolf sprang up and backwards in a tight arc, his blade flashing out to slice up the ork's midsection and rip through its eye. The beast howled and stumbled backwards.

Thorolf landed and rolled sideways, away from the ork's enraged thrashing. On his feet, he darted inside the beast's reach, chopping its right hand off at the wrist with a downward stroke. Turning in place he brought it back up to block the mace held in the ork's left, though the force of the blow threw him flat on his back. Thorolf rolled sideways as the ork brought a foot down to trample him, reaching up to cut the tendons behind the beast's knees. Unable to stand, the ork fell forward, catching itself on its remaining hand. Thorolf leapt to his feet and

dragged his blade two-handed through the ork's neck. Showered in blood, Thorolf tore his blade free, locking eyes with the archon as the ork's head flopped backwards onto its shoulders.

'Our stances are not as dissimilar as I would have expected Space Wolf; you fight with more grace than I credited you with.'

Thorolf had no idea how Ecanus had observed his fight with the ork, and he was too weary to investigate further, 'Ramiel. I fought many bouts alongside him.' Thorolf eased his body onto the ground, 'A true warrior must learn from his allies and adapt to his enemy.'

Ecanus said nothing.

He was awake when they came for Ecanus. Though his eyes were shut, Thorolf had allowed his Catalepsean Node to keep part of his brain alert, forgoing a measure of rest to keep a mind on his new cell mate. Judging by the stench, a pair of hunchbacks had entered the cell, though Thorolf didn't detect the female. He picked up a new scent as a harsh male voice ordered Ecanus to stand. It reminded Thorolf of the deep rumble the deceleration thrusters on a drop-pod made seconds before impact. He felt pressure build in his ears until he was sure they would burst. Fighting the urge to vomit, Thorolf continued to listen as the hunchbacks shackled the Dark Angel, chains rattling as they led him off into the corridor. Thorolf waited for three breaths but the door didn't close.

Thorolf opened his eyes, and rose to a crouch. Awake, he tensed and relaxed his muscles, bringing his body to combat readiness. Yet he still found himself caught by surprise when the female appeared in the doorway. She fixed Thorolf with her oval eyes, each a single black jewel promising infinite pleasure, and leaned into the cell. Unable to do otherwise, he held her gaze.

The female ran her palm over the wall sending a snaking current across its surface. The metal of the wall shifted like water, rippling away from the current's touch. Thorolf watched as the energy settled in a pool above his head height. The grey of the wall dissolved and fell away in droplets to reveal a dark, fathomless rectangle. A moment later and a fighting pit swam into view. Through the eldritch lens Thorolf felt the heat of the suns and tasted the outside air. Somehow, the female had opened a portal onto the arena itself.

'Watch.'

The word drifted from her face-grille like thoughts and seeped into Thorolf's mind. Despite himself, he took comfort in the warm embrace of her voice. The female retracted her arm, the door springing closed behind her.

'Emperor forgive me,' Thorolf bowed his head, ashamed of his weakness. He let a drop of his acid-saliva fall onto his forearm, keeping his lips sealed as it bubbled away his flesh.

Through the portal, Thorolf watched a blue humanoid enter the arena. He had his back to him, a long blade held by his side. Beyond the tau, Thorolf could just make out Ecanus clutching a trident-like spear in both hands. Thorolf had encountered the tau twice in his lifetime; they were exceptional marksmen and employed powerful ranged weaponry, but he doubted they could match Ecanus in combat. The tau stepped forward and Thorolf caught sight of four more of its kin, all similarly armed and pacing towards Ecanus. That evened things up.

Thorolf could see the crowd cheering, willing blood to be spilt, and the Orator floating above the arena his arms outstretched in pantomime. Yet he could hear nothing. Watch, the female voice surfaced in Thorolf's mind; she was being literal. He stared at the portal as it bobbed within the wall of his cell, and shuddered at the erroneousness of the alien technology.

Thorolf's captors had never allowed him to watch a match before. Perhaps they wanted him to see what nightmares awaited him, so that they may revel in his fear; or they wanted him to watch his brother Space Marine die, and gorge themselves on his anguish. Even in the darkest corners of his heart, Thorolf knew no fear, and the Dark Angel's death would be an inconvenience at best – his would-be tormentors would fail on both accounts.

Ecanus's spear struck the lead tau in the chest and pitched him backwards. Thorolf flinched as a spatter of blood shot through the portal to land on his face.

Thorolf wiped his brow, rubbing the sticky tau blood between his forefinger and thumb, 'Emperor protects.'

The fallen tau's body was blocking his view of part of the arena, but Thorolf could make out Ecanus surrounded by the remaining tau. Ecanus sprang into motion, and in a blur of tangled limbs fought his way through the circle of tau, to emerge on the side closest to Thorolf. The Dark Angel was bleeding from several slashes on his arms and back but seemed untroubled. Two more of the

tau lay dead in his wake, each missing an arm and a leg. Ecanus now gripped their blades in his hands. The last of the tau approached him cautiously. The Dark Angel strode forward, blocking the tau to his left's downward stroke with a rising sweep of his own blade. Reversing the motion, he severed the tau's arm at the elbow, before taking a half step forward and pushing the blade through the alien's throat. Ecanus left the blade in place and spun on the spot, kicking the final tau in the head as it rushed in to attack. The Dark Angel caught the dazed tau's weapon hand and muttered something before bending the weaker creature's arm back until it pierced its chest with its own blade.

Blood dripping from him like a macabre sweat, his muscular frame fighting for breath, Ecanus looked more feral than any Space Wolf Thorolf had ever encountered.

Abruptly, the portal closed and the limits of Thorolf's world reasserted themselves.

'The lion and the wolf, together,' Ecanus held out his hand, 'what would our ancestors make of this?'

Thorolf ignored Ecanus's jibe and clasped the Dark Angel's hand.

Surprised that his mention of the rivalry between their two Chapters hadn't promoted as much as a growl or toothed grin from his opposite, Ecanus clasped the Space Wolves hand for a second too long.

Thorolf was about to speak when a tremor rocked the ground beneath his feet, forcing him to steady himself. The arena floor continued to rumble, giving birth to four obsidian columns that pushed up through the ground like the stems of some infernal plant, dislodged rock tumbling from them as they rose. The pillars stood equidistant from one another, creating a smaller arena within the confines of the larger fighting pit. Each was covered in bronzed spikes and etched with burning runes that spat blood into the air.

'Citizens of Damorrhagh,' the Orator appeared in the air between the four pillars, his arms outstretched like the master of a blasphemous orchestra. 'Archon K'shaic welcomes you all to the final stages of the Razor Vein.' The crowd answered the Orator with a screaming roar, several of them cutting their own flesh in honour of the tournament. 'Two of mankind's superhumans,' the Orator swept his arm out to encompass Ecanus and Thorolf, blood flowing from

his armour to form a toothed serpent in the air. ‘Those considered the height of human evolution...’ the ghoulish vox-faces conveyed every nuance of the Orator’s mocking tone, ‘...against this monster.’ the Orator pointed a blood-slicked arm at the ogryn.

Thorolf stared past the bleeding columns towards their opponent and sighed. The ogryn’s bulk was greater than even his and Ecanus’s muscular frames combined. A particularly resilient species of abhuman, Thorolf had once watched an ogryn stagger from a burning Chimera armoured transport, its skin running from its skeleton like melted rubber as it charged into the fray, bent on exacting vengeance from its would be killers. The abhuman had barrelled into a group of cultists who tried in vain to scabble away. Using its weapon like a meat-hammer, the ogryn beat them to death with blunt, callous strikes. Concentrated lasfire and small-arms munitions had blasted chunks off the abhuman’s flesh as the cultists rallied, yet still it had fought on, cracking their treacherous bones until a barking heavy weapon round exploded its head in a shower of teeth and bone.

Thorolf studied the ogryn’s confident gait as it began pacing towards him, a massive halberd clutched in one oversized fist, a flail of chain wrapped around the other like an improvised knuckle-duster. He took one look at the saw-blade in his own hand and found himself longing for the arcing power of the weapon of his office, the peerless relic his captors had taken from him.

‘An abhuman, a bastard flaw of their species.’ the Orator continued, turning in the air to include more of the crowd. ‘Today, we shall see who evolution truly favours – the genetic misfit or this pair of lab-grown dolls.’

‘You do not fight like a wolf.’ As the Orator brought the fight to a start, Thorolf remembered the words Ecanus had spoken three fights ago, after watching him kill a vicious, bird-like xenos. ‘I have fought alongside Space Wolves before and you lack their ferocity. You attack with poise and intent, never with instinct.’

‘You brother, are not the only warrior with a keen eye.’ Thorolf had replied. ‘The eldar are well versed in how we of the Fang wage battle. I would have been slain like a youngling whelp had I not adapted my approach.’ Thorolf hadn’t been sure if Ecanus had believed him. He still wasn’t.

‘Vlka Fenryka!’ Thorolf beat his chest and advanced to the orgyn’s right. He motioned for Ecanus to circle left, knowing full well their best chance lay in attacking from both sides at once. But the ogryn moved with them, side-stepping and turning so that Thorolf always blocked Ecanus’s line of attack and vice versa. Clever, thought Thorolf, what the abhuman lacked in intelligence his genetic disposition for fighting seemed more than capable of compensating for.

‘You are an oddity of creation, a stain on the Emperor’s divine canvas...’ Thorolf spat as he continued to circle the ogryn. The abhuman’s face folded in rage but it didn’t break from the stand-off as Thorolf had hoped. It wasn’t inconceivable that the abhuman had undergone some form of neural enhancement at the hands of the eldar. ‘I will take your life in penance for the sin of your birth.’ Thorolf stepped in to attack but the ogryn was ready, striking out with the halberd. Wrong footed, Thorolf pivoted out the way, the halberd’s blade slicing through the air where his throat had been a moment before, and dropped into a roll.

Thorolf got to his feet as Ecanus’s impaler speared past him and into the ogryn’s shoulder, stopping the abhuman’s advance and giving the Space Wolf time to recover. Untroubled, the ogryn grunted in annoyance, pulling the spear out and tossing it away.

‘We must attack together.’ Ecanus pointed towards the ogryn, ‘From this side.’

Thorolf followed Ecanus’s gaze – behind the abhuman a glistening spike jutted out from the nearest of the columns. ‘I understand, brother.’

Together, Thorolf and Ecanus strode towards the ogryn. Thorolf relaxed his body and lowered his weapon, baiting the abhuman. The ogryn didn’t waste the opportunity, striking out with the halberd in a long-reaching slash that would have been impossible if it weren’t for the abhuman’s weaponised biceps. Thorolf’s blade was raised in an instant. Blocking the halberd, Thorolf rolled along its length, inside the orgyn’s reach. At the same time Ecanus rushed in and pinned the abhuman’s other arm.

‘All-Father, grant me strength!’ Thorolf hammered his shoulder in under the ogryn’s arm and tried to drive him back. The abhuman resisted, his feet fixed in place.

‘He’s too strong,’ Ecanus snarled.

‘Wound it!’ Thorolf swung the ridge of his hand up and into the soft meat of the monster’s throat, bruising its windpipe.

Ecanus followed suit, delivering three swift punches to the ogryn’s body, the punch-dagger clutched in his fist digging deep into the abhuman’s flesh.

Thorolf felt the resistance lessen, the muscles in his legs flexing as they edged the ogryn backwards.

‘Now!’ Ecanus yelled.

Thorolf pushed with every ounce of the holy strength the Emperor had gifted him, the screaming pain in his muscles drowned out by the roar of defiance in his throat.

Together, the Space Marines powered the ogryn backwards, driving him onto the spike. Thorolf felt the abhuman go slack as the serrated metal punched through its abdomen, shredding its organs as it drove through them. Thorolf kept pushing, tearing the ogryn along the length of the spike until its back was against the pillar. Exhausted, Thorolf let go and staggered away from the eviscerated ogryn.

The abhuman glanced down at the spike protruding from his chest. It was sticking out from his midriff like the misplaced tusk of a metal beast.

Thorolf looked round as a guttural sound rumbled from the ogryn’s damaged throat, blood spilling over its lips with every tortured syllable. He watched as the abhuman reached up with its hands and gripped the spike, and strained to hear a rasping curse, as the ogryn pulled its ruined body, hand-over-hand to the end of the spike.

‘Emperor’s mercy,’ Thorolf stared in disbelief as the ogryn inched its way off the spine of metal. ‘Will this abomination not find peace?’ Breathing hard, he turned his blade over and readied himself for another attack.

For the briefest of moments, Ecanus took his eyes off of the ogryn to glance at Thorolf. The elegant piousness of the Space Wolf continued to unsettle him. It was not the way of the Fenrisians. A rising roar from the crowd drew Ecanus’s attention back to the abhuman, his doubts pushed aside by decades of conditioning as he readied his weapon.

The attack never came. Free from the skewer, the ogryn fell to its knees, its midriff torn apart, its shredded entrails spilling to the ground. Twice it tried to rise, gurgling bloodied chunks as it sought to voice its frustration, until even its enduring constitution gave way to the inevitable, the last of its innards escaping through the grievous wound in its torso. With a final grimace, the ogryn fell forward onto its face and lay still, the earth beneath its body stained dark by an expanding pool of blood.

‘His will,’ Thorolf lowered his blade and walked to Ecanus, ‘You fought well, brother.’

‘As did you. Though it seems as well that you don’t give into your more impulsive nature too often, that clumsy abhuman would have had your head had I not intervened.’

Thorolf grinned, ‘Aye, it is as you say, brother.’ He fought to keep the smile from his face. Thorolf had hoped that the Dark Angel would interpret his carelessness as the act of an enraged, impetuous Space Wolf. Thorolf clamped his fist against his chest, ‘You have my thanks.’

Ecanus’s reply was lost in the maelstrom of directional air as a platform shot down from the upper reaches of the amphitheatre and threw the two Space Marines flat with a decelerating burst from its engines.

Thorolf was aware of the crowd going berserk, chanting words of hate as he suffered for their amusement. Even with his enhanced hearing, he was unable to tell where the roar of the thrusters ended and their bloodthirsty shrieking began. Pinned to the ground, Thorolf managed to crane his neck round far enough to catch a glimpse of the platform. A discus of sublime metal that was at the same time transparent and pitch black, the platform seemed to blink in and out of focus. Holding it aloft were three monstrous faces that spewed flame downward, each a tortured sculpture of the terrible beasts that stalked the arena. Though Thorolf suspected their purpose was more decorative than functional, the platform likely calling upon the same esoteric anti-grav technology that the rest of the eldar vehicles used to stay aloft. Thorolf felt the pressure on him wane as the thrusters died, the platform drifting to the ground to his left. Able to move, Thorolf sprang to his feet and took up a guard position next to Ecanus.

Two hulking figures stepped off the platforms. Each head and shoulders taller

than the ogryn, they gripped two-handed axes in immense fists and left depressions in the ground as they walked. Under ragged robes of dyed flesh, taut translucent skin strived to contain their swollen musculature. Implanted pipes and hoses fed coloured liquids directly into their organs, which glowed with a sickly hue beneath a re-engineered skeleton. Errant cables snaked from sparking backpacks and shocked their nervous system into a constant state of readiness, further increasing their lethality.

Thorolf dropped his guard. He knew with certainty that without the augmentative abilities of their power armour, he and Ecanus were no match for the colossal arrivals. Clearly, whoever else was waiting on the platform was taking no chances that the gladiators might try and kill them.

The lead brute pointed toward the platform, motioning for the Space Marines to board.

Thorolf stepped forward, stopping short as one of the brutes caught his arm. He let out a cry of pain, dropping to one knee as he felt his skin burning beneath the vat-creation's icy grip. Thorolf dropped his blade and the crushing hand let him go. He tested his arm, splaying and tensing his fingers, checking for broken bones and severed tendons. Nothing; his arm was fine. Where his senses told him that his radius and ulna should have been broken, the tendons severed, his limb useless, reality asserted otherwise. Thorolf glanced up at the brute, inwardly shuddering at the adeptness with which the eldar administered pain, and joined Ecanus on the platform.

The brutes stepped on behind Thorolf and the platform sped upwards, activated by the weight of their immense physiques. The crowd applauded as it roared up past the highest balconies of the arena, carried aloft on pillars of blood-red flame. Thorolf tensed the muscles in his legs, ready to adjust for any pitch or yaw that might toss him over the edge. He needn't have bothered – for all its seemingly abrupt, crude acceleration, the dais maintained a perfect horizontal alignment as it climbed. Thorolf experienced none of the discomfort he'd have expected from such rapid acceleration, his breathing normal and his feet as steady on the platform as they were on the ground. Confident in his footing, Thorolf relaxed, noticing for the first time the intricate detail forged into the floor. The prostrate bodies of a human, an orc, a tau, an eldar and several creatures Thorolf had never encountered were strewn across the platform, their macabre mouths fixed in a moment of pain, gutted by a barbed vine that looped

around the platform and tore through their bodies.

‘Watch,’ the word came from nowhere.

Thorolf spun in place, his eyes searching the platform for... the female. She was on the platform. How? The thought hung in his mind like a slab of ceramite, slowing his wits. How had he not seen her? What unholy alliance of light and dark had worked to keep her from him?

‘Watch,’ the female repeated her command and walked to the edge of the platform, pointing a slender limb down towards the arena.

Thorolf swallowed the temptation to shove her off and followed her gaze to the arena below. Impossibly, he could see everything – the Orator, his arms sweeping the air as he spoke; two eldar, one in pale bone armour wielding a sword that throbbed with eldritch current, the other in hues of green clutching an elegant chainsword; facing them the arena champion, Khalys Dzhar, who was all but naked save for the leather holsters and bandoliers that held her array of knives. Unsurprisingly, Thorolf could hear nothing.

‘You two next,’ the female motioned to Thorolf and Ecanus, and withdraw to the rear of the platform.

The meaning was clear; she wanted the Space Marines to watch Khalys slay the eldar, to quiver as they awaited their own turn to cross swords with the arena’s champion. Thorolf would give her no such satisfaction. He was an instrument of the Emperor, he feared no evil, his faith armour against the horrors of the universe. The wych Khalys was but one more stepping-stone on the path to his quarry. Thorolf turned away from the arena...

‘She is not unbeatable.’

Thorolf turned back, annoyed that Ecanus had mistaken his disinterest for concern.

‘She wastes energy with her flourishes. Her obsession with violence makes her unable simply to strike, to kill. For her there is too much pleasure to be gleaned from the moment.’

Thorolf watched Khalys slip a blade into the green-armoured eldar’s neck as

Ecanus spoke.

‘It is slight, minute even, but there is a lull in her concentration.’ Ecanus pointed at the wych’s face and it zoomed into focus. ‘See, as she cuts and tastes blood, she relishes the sensation. We can exploit that.’

‘Warriors of the Bladed Lotus,’ the Orator swept off the Archon’s balcony into the air, a mist of red gore billowing in his wake like a vengeful cape. ‘Much blood has been spilt for your pleasure. Now, it is you who must give yours.’

‘A razor through our veins! A blade through the heart of our foe!’ As one, the warriors of the Bladed Lotus recited the oath. Drawing ceremonial daggers from ornate clasps fastened around their wrists; they slashed their hands, squeezing three drops of blood each into a thin channel that spiralled down through the galleries of the amphitheatre. The crowd fell silent as the blood trickled downwards to pool in the skull of an onyx gargoyle.

‘Drink!’

Khalys bowed to the Orator and walked beneath the gargoyle. The beast’s stone mouth opened, bathing Khalys in the crimson liquid. She opened her mouth wide, relishing the baptism as the blood fell across her face and flooded her throat.

‘And so it begins, the end of the Razor Vein,’ the Orator broke the silence that had descended upon the arena.

Without pause, Khalys turned and paced towards the Space Marines. She had sought no respite after killing the eldar, stopping only to accept a frenzied roar of approval as the crowd celebrated their champion. Droplets of the green-armoured warrior’s blood still adorned her unblemished skin, reminding Thorolf of the tell-tale markings carried by the most venomous snakes of his home world.

Ecanus sensed the other Space Marine’s disquiet, ‘Remember, brother, she can be killed.’ The Dark Angel shook the tension from his body and tested the weight of the impaler he carried in his right hand.

‘As the Emperor wills it,’ affirmed Thorolf adopting an aggressive posture with his blade.

Khalys smiled and stopped. Sheathing her twin blades, she held her empty hands up to the archon. The crowd met her display with ecstasy, eager to see her kill the so called superhumans with her bare hands.

Thorolf thrust his blade at her midsection. She stepped to the side, patting away his arm with her palm before skipping her knee into his jaw. Thorolf staggered backwards, teeth loose in his mouth. Ecanus made to attack Khalys' exposed back but she was quicker, twisting in mid-air to kick him in the head. The blow flipped him; he landed hard on his shoulder.

Thorolf struck out with a flurry of arcing cuts, but the wych weaved between his blows, stepping inside his guard to strike him in the throat before hooking her hand under his arm and throwing him to the ground. Khalys moved to finish the prone Space Marine, but Ecanus interceded, stabbing the tip of his impaler toward her. She turned just in time and leapt over the weapon. Ecanus pressed his attack but the wych cartwheeled off to the side, whipping her feet into the side of his head as she danced past.

The crowd roared with amusement as the Space Marines flailed around like children, unable to land a blow on the dextrous wych.

Khalys attacked again. Pushing through her toes, she let her lithe calf muscles propel her through the air, the ridge of her outstretched foot aimed at Thorolf's throat. Ecanus read her move. Pivoting on his back foot he kicked Thorolf hard in the abdomen. The Space Wolf bent double as the blow, robbing Khalys of her target, unbalancing her. Ecanus let the momentum of his strike carry him round, swinging his rear leg up like the blade of a grav-copter to kick the wych in the face as she landed.

Khalys moved with the blow, folding into a roll that took her clear of the Space Marines and up to her feet. She touched a hand to her jaw and licked her tongue around the inside of her mouth, delighting in the metallic tang of her chemical-filled blood. With a smile that didn't reach her eyes, Khalys unsheathed her knives.

'No more games wych,' Ecanus spat.

Khalys snarled and leapt at the Dark Angel. Ecanus gripped his impaler by the edge of the haft and whipped it out in a long-arcing strike. Khalys bent at the waist, curving her body underneath his swing. Rising, she disarmed Ecanus,

slashing a dagger across his forearm and driving the other into the side of his neck. The wych finished with a flourish, kicking Ecanus in the face with the exact same kick he'd struck her with.

Thorolf looked up from all fours. Kahlys had paused to savour the Dark Angel's blood. It had been for less than a heartbeat, but for an instant she wasn't in motion.

Khalys was poised to finish Ecanus as he struggled with the wound in his neck.

Thorolf sprinted headlong at the wych. She turned as he knew she would. He fed her blades the outsides of his forearms. Devoid of vital arteries, her blows would not be fatal.

Blood splashed across Khalys's face. She moved around the charging Space Marine, though slower than she might have, her mouth open as she relished the fruit of his veins. Thorolf twisted as he past her, and spat a goblet of acid-saliva onto her face.

Khalys screamed as the searing liquid burnt at her flesh. She lashed out like a rabid dog, her twin blades seeking vengeance.

Thorolf swept low, avoiding her desperate attack, and ripped his blade across her abdomen.

He stared at Khalys as she bled out on the ground in front of him. The wych's once perfect features burned away by his saliva, her lithe body ruined by the vengeful teeth of his blade. Ecanus had been right, Khalys technique was as flawed as her debased soul. Thorolf caught the Dark Angel's hand as he moved to finish Khalys.

'The champion of this accursed arena does not deserve the All-father's mercy. She will die in pain.'

'As you wish,' Ecanus dipped his head in acknowledgement.

'Emperor, eternal saviour and redeemer, it is by your hand and unfailing wisdom that we have been spared this fate.' Thorolf closed his eyes in prayer.

Ecanus stared at Khalys in silent satisfaction as the last of her life-force ebbed away. The wych's veins pulsed like flashes of lightning beneath her taut flesh as the cocktail of stimulants and combat drugs in her system continued to burn. Khalys's flesh began to bubble and run as the excess adrenaline and frenzy in her blood melted her organs. Within moments all that remained was a pool of toxic ichor.

Ecanus ignored the jubilant roaring of the crowd and held his hand out towards Thorolf. 'It has been an honour to fight by your side, brother.'

Thorolf looked Ecanus in the eyes and grasped his arm in a warrior fashion, clasping his hand around the other Space Marine's forearm. 'It is my sacred duty to save your soul from the Dark Gods of Chaos,' Thorolf stared into Ecanus's eyes as he spoke, feeling the Dark Angel's grip loosen as realisation set in, 'and I will save your soul, even if you die in the process.'

The nagging feeling Ecanus had pushed to the recesses of his mind burst to the surface like a blazing comet, illuminating the truth that had until now eluded him. Past the unruly, matted hair, the unwashed skin, and the careful lies, Ecanus saw Thorolf for the first time. The other Space Marine was not a wolf but a lion, a Dark Angel.

'You...'

Ecanus's mouth hung open as understanding dawned.

Thorolf brought his knee up and drove his foot into Ecanus's chest. Ecanus let the force of the blow carry him and rolled backwards to his feet. 'I am Interrogator Chaplain Ramiel,' Thorolf spoke, revealing his true identity, 'member of the most sacred brotherhood of the Inner Circle, son of the Lion and avenging blade of the Angels.' Ramiel pointed his blade at Ecanus, 'You are a traitorous cur, a shameful stain upon our Chapter's honour and I have come to offer redemption.'

Ecanus bared his teeth in a snarl, 'I will spit upon your corpse, pawn of Jonson.' Ecanus sprang at Ramiel, unfettered rage dulling the pain from his wounds.

Ramiel stepped off Ecanus's line of attack, avoiding the punch-dagger that was aimed at his primary heart, and sliced his blade down towards Ecanus's thigh. The Fallen countered without pause, pivoting away from the blade, swinging his leg up over the sword stroke to kick the Chaplain in the jaw.

Ramiel staggered, recovering in time to block the cross Ecanus threw at his nose. Too late, Ramiel realised Ecanus had wanted him to block it. The Fallen rode the momentum of the Chaplain's parry, folding his arm in on itself and bringing his elbow smashing through Ramiel's guard and into his face. Ramiel felt the sickening crunch as his cheekbone broke, dropping his blade as he struggled to stay upright. Ecanus allowed him no reprieve, spinning tightly to deliver a powerful back-kick that broke the Chaplain's ribs and sent him sprawling into the dirt. Ramiel wheezed heavily as his lungs struggled to draw breath.

The crowd erupted in violence-fuelled ecstasy, drinking in the animosity between the two combatants.

'I have crossed the depths of space and ripped the hearts from warriors far mightier than you before you'd even deemed to crawl from your mother's foetid womb,' spat Ecanus as he paced towards Ramiel.

Ramiel felt his strength slipping, he needed to buy some time, recover and then—

Fight now, heal later.

Brother-Sergeant Sariel's voice filled the Chaplain's head. Sariel was a member of the Deathwatch, the best of the most elite warriors the Dark Angels could muster. He had helped Ramiel from his knees once before, back on Tervanaous IV when a tyranid bio-weapon had devoured most of Ramiel's abdomen. Ramiel took heart from his old sergeant's words, Sariel's memory surfacing in the Chaplain's mind to help him once more. Emboldened, Ramiel threw himself at Ecanus.

Caught off guard by his opponent's sudden resurgence, Ecanus swung a clumsy punch at the Chaplain's face. Ramiel caught the attack, wrapping his right arm around Ecanus's left and using his other to hook the Fallen's neck, pulling him into a headbutt that began when Ramiel had leapt from the ground and ended when it dented Ecanus's brow and caved-in his right eye socket. Ramiel kept a hold of Ecanus, firing one knee and then the other into his gut, winding him. Grunting with effort, the Chaplain hurled the Fallen Angel across one of the barbed sections the arena floor. The carpet of microscopic blades ripped open Ecanus's skin as he tumbled over it, leaving him bleeding from hundreds of small lacerations.

‘The will of the righteous cannot be denied,’ Ramiel let the catechism invigorate him.

Ecanus’s head swam, Ramiel’s blow had been severe and his body was struggling to heal the myriad incisions puncturing his body. He looked up and saw the Chaplain, blade in hand, advancing. Behind him, Ecanus could just make out the glint of an impaler in the dirt. Standing, he winced as the damnable arena stabbed into his feet.

‘Time to die, Chaplain,’ Ecanus skipped forward and flipped over Ramiel’s sword stroke. Landing behind the Chaplain, Ecanus scooped up the impaler with his foot; catching it he lunged at the Chaplain.

Ramiel had read Ecanus’s move, his clumsy sword stroke a lure. Turning on the balls of his feet, he side-stepped the impaler’s tip, grabbed its haft and pulled Ecanus onto his outstretched blade. Ramiel felt the Fallen’s body judder and spasm as the blade punctured his primary heart.

‘Let the blood of the unclean act as an offering to the Lion’s shade,’

The Chaplain ignored Ecanus’s desperate hands as they tried to push him away. Ripping the blade across Ecanus’s chest, Ramiel scythed it through the secondary heart and tore it out through the shoulder. The Fallen’s body fell at Ramiel’s feet in a ruined heap.

‘The unworthy shall be crushed from the Emperor’s sight.’ Ramiel stamped his foot down hard on Ecanus’s skull, cracking it into the dirt.

The crowd erupted in a torrent of cheering; their sickening ovation amplified to a numbing crescendo by the distended mouths of the cadaver heads encircling the arena.

Archon K’shaic stood, silencing the applauding masses.

‘Champion of Xelaic,’ the Orator began. ‘Through blood and death you have earned your freedom.’

Ramiel stood immobile and waited for the punchline.

‘You will accompany my master to the depths of Commorrhagh, where you will

fight for even greater glory and perhaps even, immortality.’

The crowd approved. Braying like savages, they banged gauntleted fists against armoured chests and roared in pleased excitement.

Ramiel’s jaw tightened in anger. He would no more continue to kill for the entertainment of K’shaic and his depraved race than he would have allowed Ecanus to live. The Chaplain closed his eyes for a moment, finding solace in the darkness and offering a prayer to the Emperor for strength. He felt the weight of the impaler clutched in his right hand, it was perfectly balanced. Opening his eyes Ramiel let his enhanced senses filter out the crowd. Their jeering faded away to a wash of noise, like waves rolling onto a distant beach. The army of pendants and the grotesque sheets of flapping skin blurring out of focus until only the archon remained visible – a dark spot at the end of a white tunnel Ramiel formed in his mind.

‘I am the Emperor’s wrath!’ cried Ramiel, and in one fluid motion the Chaplain stepped forward, his arm shooting up to launch the impaler at K’shaic’s chest.

The impaler flew true, covering the distance to the archon in a heartbeat and striking him full in the chest. The blow triggered a burst of light like the shattering of a minute star, momentarily eclipsing the archon and his attendants. In the after-flare, Ramiel saw K’shaic still standing – the archon had used some form of displacement field to swap places with the Orator.

A thousand lifeless mouths cried out in symphony as the Orator looked down at the haft of the impaler protruding from his chest, its spear tip buried in his black heart.

K’shaic watched dispassionately as the mouthless creature collapsed in a pool of thick blood. The cries of the Orator’s familiars tailed off as the last of its blood ran onto the barbed floor of the balcony. The archon nodded in mock respect towards the Chaplain, with a wicked smile that revealed two rows of dagger teeth.

‘His loyal servant unto death,’ Ramiel reached for where his rosarius should be sitting on his chest and awaited eternity.