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They ran and the howling followed them.

Gerst led. He was the youngest, the fittest and arguably the most scared. Sergeant Zlodni had been the only thing keeping them together, finding adhesion through authority and fear of reprisal. When Zlodni died, with most of his throat ripped out and his torso spilling up wine-red intestine, the troopers of 64th squad learned to fear something else more.

For it wasn't only screams that followed the men of Vostroya, the knife-sharp howling also gave chase. Half-glimpsed through mist and the accumulated dust and smoke of a recently fought battle, the Guardsmen's pursuers took on almost spectral forms, little more than flecks of shadow.

Around dawn, just before the infantry divisions of the proud Vostroyan First-Born 85th were due to launch their attack, a thick fog had swept over the ruins of Kaeros. Aggressive preliminary bombardment had reduced the city and its outlying regions to rubble. That rubble now made for uncertain footing as the Guardsmen fled through it. Fog clung to the hollowed-out shells of buildings and pooled in craters like exhaled breath reluctant to depart. The ever-thickening soup was everywhere, foul with the stink of petrochemicals, coppery blood and the strangely soporific odour of the enemy.

The fog made orientation difficult and gave their fear even sharper teeth, but it was that soporific scent that really addled the mind. It altered perception, made dead men come back to life and live ones crave oblivion. Out in the fog, across the ruins of a battlefield now lost, the hazards were manifold.

Some though were absurdly mundane...

A trooper squealed in pain as he twisted his ankle. Churned earth, made that way by a procession of booted feet, had snagged his foot.

Hersk, who was third from the front, thought it sounded like Andrev. Then Andrev screamed, short and clipped. Then there was nothing. Hersk glanced back in time to see a shadow, but no more than that. He blinked and the shadow

was gone, swallowed up by the fog, the auditory memory of Andrev's death the only evidence Hersk had not imagined it.

Six became five.

Soon it was four.

Gerst stumbled, too eager and heedless to escape the danger, real and illusory, that champed at their heels. A second later and the others heard a grunt. A few seconds after that and they found poor Gerst slumped over, impaled by a spike of shrapnel jutting from the ground like a gnarled finger. His warm blood steamed as it ran down the rusty metal.

No one stopped to check Gerst's vitals. There was no time. If he wasn't dead already then whatever was chasing them would finish him. It would not likely be quick.

Hersk spared a few seconds to look around but it was just fog and the looming, indistinct silhouettes of whatever it concealed. For a brief moment as he passed the corpse-like figure of his comrade, Hersk was envious of Gerst. Then he hated himself for thinking that, and ran a little harder, a little surer.

'Slow down,' he called ahead to Rzanév, who'd taken over as frontrunner in Gerst's absence.

'You *khekk*ing insane, comrade?'

'No, *zadnik*, but you'll be dead if you don't slow down. Where are you even going, Rzanév?' Hersk was breathless; they had ran almost three kilometres at full pace in heavy kit already. Polished armour was fine for parade grounds and useful in combat, but only dragged at the resolve and the body during a panicked flight. Olek was lagging. As the oldest of the group, he might have a veteran's experience but he had also lost some of his former youthful vigour.

'Away from here, comrade.'

Through the mists, which were rolling heavily across the rugged battlefield now, Hersk saw Rzanév's head darting back and forth like a bird's, scouring the fog for attackers. He found none, for the enemy they faced did not allow themselves to be seen until it was too late. If you saw them at all, it would be your last sight before you went to the Throne or were cast into the soul-shriving hell of the warp. Or so the campfire tales had said. It had been amusing back then, scary stories to put the living *shaznek* up Gerst and have a few laughs at his expense.

Now Gerst was dead. No one was laughing now.

Raiders had come to Kaeros. They had plundered and murdered, and the planet's defences had been unable to throw off their yoke. So Vostroya had

answered. They had come with regiments of men in their gleaming breastplates and furred helmets, banners snapping in the wind. The First-Born would show Kaeros how they had earned their prestigious reputation and they would give the alien aggressors a pertinent lesson in Imperial military prowess. But their histrionic marching displays, their pomp and grandeur, had amounted to nothing.

Except death. A count of almost three hundred men from the vanguard, if what Hersk believed in his gut was true, that he and his comrades were the last men alive in Kaeros. Or at least the last free men alive. Rumour was that the raiders took slaves. Hersk had already decided death would be preferable and had resolved to keep enough power in his laspistol for a single, suicidal headshot.

‘To where, Rzanev? To where?’ hissed Blezni as loudly as he dared. Hersk could hear the vox-operator’s laboured breathing just behind him. He didn’t have the heart to tell him that it didn’t matter if he shouted at the top of his lungs, that their tormentors knew where they were and had been toying with them. Their only hope for survival was to find a place to hunker down and fight back until help arrived.

Blezni’s last received communication before all had gone to shaznek was that reinforcements from Colonel Ketsbya’s main battle group were inbound. That meant armour, lots of armour. They just needed to stay alive long enough for it to arrive.

‘Rzanev!’ Hersk snapped when the trooper just kept going, head still darting back and forth, while behind them, all around them, the howling persisted. It reminded Hersk of cruel laughter, only sharper and eerily resonant. Altogether alien.

‘Up there,’ said Rzanev, with more hope than conviction. ‘There’s a ridge. I think I remember it.’

‘From what?’ asked Hersk, still skeptical, though he noticed Blezni and Olek had upped their pace. Hope will do that to a desperate man, even if it is false.

‘A road. The road into Kaeros. The tanks will be on it.’

‘Colonel Ketsbya’s armour,’ Blezni whispered naively.

The ridge loomed, thronged by cloying smoke until the wind blew it clear and gutted Rzanev’s hopes just like the aliens had gutted Zlodni.

It wasn’t a ridge. It was a mound. Rzanev had mistaken flesh for earth. They were Vostroyan, the bodies of those who had died in the ambush arranged like some mad artist’s mortal sculpture. At the summit of the mound, stacked four metres high, were all the officers the aliens had slain, their limbs intertwined then bound together with spools of razorwire. It had been hard to see at first, like

a black smudge in the air had somehow besmirched the view. Only when Rzanév got up close and disturbed the corpse-flies did they truly see. Commissar Rudinov was the crowning piece, a spike stuck through his pate. His gaping mouth and lolling tongue made him look surprised. Hersk wagered the commissar had not been expecting it.

With Rudinov's death there had been no call to arms when the running began, no bolt shell to the temple and the Imperium's shouted catechisms of hate towards the alien. Instead, there was blood and razor-edged blades, a promise of torture and death muttered on alien lips.

A terrible sickening feeling built in the pit of Hersk's stomach when he realised where they were.

Olek threw up.

Rzanév stared disbelieving at those same skeletal ruins they had bombed not three hours earlier.

Blezni started weeping, and cried out despite his terror of what would happen if he did.

They were back in the centre of Kaeros. They had been running in circles. Somewhere in the fog, the cruel laughter redoubled.

Slethial drank in their fear. As the mon-keigh were enervated, he was nourished but far from sated. Their pain was an altogether sweeter and more fulfilling repast, for a tortured soul has more value as an offering to She Who Thirsts than one at peace.

To Slethial, his prey's fear was a soaking rag he planned to wrench dry of every panicked drop. But, it seemed, the feast was not to be his to enjoy alone.

'I tire of this game, brother,' hissed Yethanda, as she draped her sinuous body over his.

Slethial seized her wrist, the concealed *drauca* blade millimetres from his neck.

'I've told you before, *sister*, you won't usurp me as succubus of this cult with such childish play.'

Yethanda winced as Slethial twisted, forcing her to release the blade before it was turned back on its wielder.

'*Whoreson!*' she spat, freeing herself from her brother's grip and retreating back apace, a hurt expression on her porcelain-white face.

Slethial shrugged, 'She was your mother too, dear sister,' and paused to admire her.

Yethanda was beautiful, even by the high standards of Commorragh, but it was an ophidian allure she possessed, with a viper's bite in kind. She pouted, 'One scratch of that poison—'

'And I would doubtless be writhing in agony at your feet,' Slethial concluded for her.

Yethanda gave a coquettish smile that only made her seem more dangerous and unpredictable.

Her body was lithe, her armour of red carapace and crimson leather both questionable in terms of the protection it offered and very revealing. The blood spatter dappling her body was more encompassing than her bodice and greaves. She wore a half mask and crown, her lustrous raven-black hair cascading from it and down across her bare back.

Yethanda was a *Lacerai*. As well as the small curved drauca blade she had tried to poison her brother with, she also carried a pair of razorflails. They were deactivated at present and looped around her waist, the segmented teeth currently in the form of a whip. One twist of Yethanda's wrist and she could hold a serrated sword, such were the chimeric properties of the weapon.

More pragmatic than his sister, Slethial wore heavier armour. Even his face was shielded behind a mask, a white and featureless opal that Yethanda often taunted was there to hide his aberrant appearance. Polished to a mirror sheen, its surface was incapable of tarnishing and reflected the faces of Slethial's victims as he tortured and killed them. To the succubus, this small measure of additional sadism was also an appealing reason to wear the mask.

Like his sister, Slethial wore the same red and crimson to reflect the colours of their cult, the Serpent Incarnadine. But he was a *Hydrae* and consummately skilled with the crystalline-bladed gauntlets from which he derived the name of his fighting discipline. Unlike Yethanda's blades, Slethial's were already whetted by their latest prey.

'It is just a little knife, dear brother,' she purred demurely, slipping the drauca blade back into its sheath on her ankle, bending down lasciviously to do so.

A muffled shout through the fog from the swine they had been chasing interrupted their sibling flirting, forcing them back to the task at hand.

'Four slaves would fetch a price,' Slethial observed. 'Adrachis might pay handsomely for a few more live subjects...'

At the mention of the haemonculus's name, Yethanda jabbed out her tongue in a mock retching expression.

'He is a diseased worm. I'll not parlay with him,' she said, springing away

acrobatically after their prey who had started running again. 'I want four more heads on my trophy rack,' she called, the mists rapidly enveloping her until all that remained was her voice. 'If you're nice to me, I might give you one, brother.'

'Bitch...' Slethial smiled, deciding he would not kill his sister until *after* their sport, then ran into the mist after Yethanda.

'We are dead men,' murmured Blezni, a dangerous, almost catatonic, look taking over him before Hersk jerked him back to life.

'If we stay here, yes.' He turned to address the others. 'If we continue to rush around blindly.'

Instinctively, they had formed a circle facing the outer void of spectral fog. Each man cradled a lasgun, except Hersk who only had his pistol and held it like it was the last link to this existence.

'Then what do you suggest?' snapped Rzaneev. 'We can't stay here.'

The grisly flesh totem of their former officers glowered down on them with dull, glassy eyes. No, none of them wanted to linger here any longer.

Blezni rocked back and forth on his heels. His eyes seemed far away, and his lips moved silently in the words of a prayer.

*Oh, Saint Nadalya the Grey Lady, oh Throne of Earth, deliver our souls from peril this day so we might yet become your shield again.*

Over and over, Blezni mouthed the words.

'He's gone, comrade,' observed Olek to Hersk. 'What have you got left?'

Hersk was thinking, realising abruptly they were looking to him for leadership. Without knowing how it had happened, he had just become responsible for these men. His fear redoubled, but he marshalled it and sought the horrible nullifying fog for an answer.

He saw it reaching up out of the endless white: the crenellations of a tower.

'There, a redoubt,' he said, trying not to cling too tightly to hope. They turned and saw it as if for the first time, the summit of an old tower not in keeping with the rest of the city's aesthetic and rising from the base of a rugged hill. Crags and boulders jutted from the base but at least they could see it, and it was miraculously intact.

'I thought we'd bombed everything in this shaznek town,' said Olek, about to wipe his feverish brow with his jacket sleeve before he realised there was no hand at the end of it and blood was spouting from the cleanly severed stump like a geyser.

‘Saint Nadalya! Throne and Earth!’ Rzanév backed away from the bloodied Olek, who tried to staunch the bleeding with his other hand then realised that it had been removed too. On the fallow breeze, Hersk thought he made out a playful giggle, an oddly coy and uniquely disturbing sound in the circumstances.

Blezni’s praying became audible. Rzanév joined him and the chorus grew louder still.

Hersk was torn between helping Olek and getting the others to move.

Then a flash of silver caught the eye – it looked like the weak sun overhead had caught on Olek’s armour at first – and poor Olek’s body separated into two. Hersk’s decision was made for him.

He roared.

‘Run!’

Crying, urinating all over his fatigues, Blezni bolted for the hill. So did Rzanév.

They prayed, all three, shouting their voices to the murky heavens above and the unseen earth below, shouting desperately to anyone or anything that would listen.

*Oh, Saint Nadalya the Grey Lady, oh Throne of Earth, deliver our souls from peril this day so we might yet become your shield again.*

And as if in answer, a figure emerged from the mists around the tower, clad in heavy black armour.

Yethanda was laughing so hard, her body pulsating with the pain and fear of the slave she had bifurcated, that she almost missed the apparition in the fog. She blinked to be sure it wasn’t some hallucination from the copious amounts of narcotics she had taken prior to the battle, then licked her lips in anticipation.

‘You’re a big one...’ she purred, sprinting off into the fog when she felt Slethial close on her from behind. ‘He’s mine, dear brother. All mine.’

‘Who is that? It looks like a...’ said Rzanév.

‘Does it matter, comrade? He’s a friend and we are surrounded by foes.’

They had reached the edge of the hill. It was still a long way to the summit and the ground was far from certain. No one wanted to end up like Gerst, not so close from salvation, so they took it slow despite their fear of what was closing in behind them.

The tower loomed, tall and forbidding. Though it was closer now, it seemed equally indistinct as it did when Hersk first saw it, and the armoured figure was

no clearer either.

Frowning, trying to discern a better idea of their would-be saviour's nature, Hersk failed to realise how far he had dropped behind the others. About to increase his efforts, in spite of the risk, he felt a whisper breeze caress his left side and was promptly seized by paralysing agony.

Hersk went down in the dirt, ripping open his gloves and cutting up his hands as he tried to brace his fall. His head struck the sharp edge of a stone, denting and dislodging his helmet. For a few moments, he blacked out. He couldn't be sure exactly how long for. When he came to again, he tried to cry out, looking up through blood-rimmed vision at Rzanév and Blezni slowly disappearing into the fog as the savage gash on his forehead bled freely into his eyes. Suddenly, he found a booted heel on his neck, silencing him.

'*Shhh*, not yet little slave...' The voice was female and perversely soothing as she pressed the bladed heel of her boot deeper into Hersk's exposed throat. Managing to half-turn his head, Hersk saw the alien standing over him. She was painfully beautiful, cut from a cruel, terrifying cloth, and statuesque, pale and hard as stone.

She sank down onto her haunches, and the pressure on Hersk's neck eased as she lifted her boot at the time same. Leaning in close so he could smell her scent, she whispered demurely, 'Now you can scream...'

Hersk's gaze followed the line of her outstretched finger. It had a baroque-looking claw fashioned from some strange, dark metal on the end.

A few strides further up the hill, Blezni and Rzanév were dead. Locked in each other's arms, their final embrace was made all the more disturbing by the fact that their arms were *inside* one another's chests and came out through the extension of the ribcage at the back. It was horrific, and at that moment Hersk knew he had met the sculptor of the flesh-totem.

Despite the paralysing poison running through his body, Hersk tried to scream.

Yethanda shuddered with undisguised pleasure at the suffering of the slave. She laughed uproariously as he tried futilely to wail, spit and curse even though one side of his body was limp with the poison administered by her blade.

'Don't worry, little bird,' she cooed like a mother to its child, 'I'll return soon, and by then the medicine I gave you will be wearing off. You'll feel everything that I'm going to give you,' she promised and rose languidly to her full height.

'Now,' Yethanda muttered to herself, 'where is your large, armoured friend?'

Slethial realised he was not alone. At first he thought it might be another mon-keigh slave that had somehow managed to elude him and his sister, that had found some cranny in which to hide and was only just now daring to resurface. But he was wrong about that, and certain of the fact as soon as the figure began to appear through the mist.

He had been chasing his sister when the deviation was forced upon him. Yethanda was swift, and Slethial knew she would kill all four slaves if he wasn't around to deter her. A favour, however small, from a haemonculus was useful. Slethial had need of Adrachis's patronage. He had lost an eye in a gladiatorial duel with another wych, the previous succubus of the Serpent Incarnadine as it happened. With Adrachis's esoteric arts, it could be regrown. It was another reason why Slethial wore the mask, to hide his flawed beauty, as much from himself as his fellow dark eldar. He wanted the eye back. Slethial's vanity demanded it.

He had been close, just behind Yethanda, when he caught the vaguest sense of someone watching. Slethial had good instincts. They had kept him alive longer than he probably deserved, and they were warning him again as he stalked the figure in the fog.

It was taller than the others and clad in thicker armour, but every time Slethial tried to outflank the strangely materialised apparition, he was in front of it again and no closer to his prey.

Yethanda was lost to him again, absorbed into the fog that had grown thicker and more pervasive in the last few minutes, or was that Slethial's imagination? Like a hidden cancer, doubt crept into Slethial's mind and he pushed it down, usurping his sense of unease with arrogant self-assurance.

'Your blood on my blades, mon-keigh,' he hissed to the dark figure in the mist, only to find in his momentary lapse in concentration that it had gone.

Slethial scowled, at once incredulous, annoyed and afraid. 'What is happening?'

Hersk clawed his way up the ridge. Still numb from the paralysing toxin in his body, he scrambled on his belly with only one arm to propel him. It didn't matter that the sharp rocks beneath him tore his tunic and scraped his armour, or that blood painted his face in crimson from the gash on his forehead – all that mattered was the tower and the imagined salvation it offered. But as Hersk reached for it, desperate just like a drowning man is desperate for a rope, he noticed that his would-be saviour was no longer there. Without the time or

luxury to wonder why, Hersk kept climbing, his eyes on the distant summit.

Yethanda wondered briefly what had happened to her brother, but decided she cared not. This slave would be hers, this kill. She had killed bigger, and exulted in the terrified shock on her victim's faces when they realised she, a lithe little female, had murdered them. Many outside of her own wych cult had made the mistake of underestimating her. She revelled in proving the fatal error in that assumption.

The hill was steep and littered with jutting rocks that reminded Yethanda of pulled teeth. In fact, now she considered it, the entire hillside was almost like a giant maw gaping in agony. The symbolism pleased her, and she was smiling as she stormed up the rugged earthy flank of the hill, hands behind her back reaching for the hilt of her razorflails.

She was used to a reaction when she allowed a foe to see her bearing down on them. Some fled, a good honest response to a wild-haired harridan such as she. Others stood their ground, weapons drawn, or even attacked. Yethanda could dodge bullets, shells or energy beams easily enough – she had been doing it all of her life. But this one did not move, still as a statue of onyx.

Yethanda decided to scream, a shrieking war cry that could chill the blood of men. With a twist, she released the razorflails and they slid serpent-like, almost sentiently, off her body. She ate up the last few metres to her prey with long, powerful strides. The low breeze caught in the mane of her hair, which flared behind her like black fire. Now, with the prey so tantalisingly close to being within striking distance of her favoured blades, Yethanda saw and processed further details of her enemy.

The armour was not only black, it was also ebon. Trimmed and fashioned with bone, in fact. So too its helmet, which resembled a dour skull, and in the pits of those cold and lifeless sockets... fire. Yethanda would often look into the eyes of her victims as she killed them, she enjoyed the pleasure of witnessing the terror there and the stark realisation that this was their last moment of existence. She revelled in the sense of power it gave her.

But the black and bone warrior betrayed none of this. The eyes only burned, and incredulous as it was to her, Yethanda discovered in those final few seconds before combat that *she* was the one that felt fear. No, not just fear... sheer, unreasoning dread.

Like a shade drawn from the shadow realm of Aelindrach, Yethanda beheld an apparition before her. The edges of its armour shimmered and smoked as if they

too were aflame and bled slowly into the mist, becoming a part of it. Flesh and blood enemies, she knew how to fight, but an incorporeal wraith... Yethanda had always feared and despised the mandrakes of Commorragh for precisely that reason and here she found herself confronting something that had less in kind with the slaves she had already butchered and more in kith with the shadowy creatures of Aelindrach. Something happened then, during that crashing cascade of realisation and emotion, that had never happened to Yethanda before. She faltered.

The razorflails whipped out, driven by momentum, two lashing tongues of hell-steel forged in the hidden workshops of the Bone Middens, but failed to land a blow.

Yethanda, half staggering by now as she was undone by her own failed acrobatics, gaped in disbelief as the razorflails simply passed *through* it. Her eyes widened as the black and bone warrior seemed to disappear and reappear, as if it wore an archon's flickerfield, and was abruptly within reach. Despite the evidence of her eyes to the contrary, Yethanda refuted that she had been outmanoeuvred. The feeling did not last. It was replaced by another. Pain. It began as a warm sensation in her torso, and grew needle-sharp in seconds as she realised she had fought her last duel. And though she hated herself for it, cursing inwardly as her precious soul was released unto the warp and to She Who Thirsts, she cried out, as weak as the wretches she had once so gleefully culled.

Slethial was rooted to the ground when he heard his sister scream his name. Yethanda had done so before, but in very different circumstances to this. It often presaged pain too, but again not like this. Confronted with the spectral figure in the mist, and the aching knowledge of his sister's fate expressed in that scream, Slethial felt suddenly alone.

For a few moments he was caught by indecision. He had lost the one he had been stalking anyway, and he loved his sister, however *uniquely*.

Even though he knew it was foolish, he cried out to her in return, 'Yethanda!'

And then he ran towards the still echoing sound of his own name. Through the fog, he perceived a hill. Its flanks were studded with nubs of rock that looked like teeth. Here was the mouth of pain that had swallowed his sister. The poetry of that greatly disturbed Slethial.

He slowed, survival instincts flaring again, as he saw Yethanda's slayer. One of the mon-keigh was attempting to crawl towards it on his stomach, but Slethial was not interested in the slave now. He wanted the one in black and bone; he

wanted revenge for Yethanda. His sister lay in two halves on the side of the hill, her split-apart corpse steaming in the cold air. Slethial forced himself not to look away, for to do so would mean losing sight of his enemy and he would not do that again. His jaw was set as he began to stalk anew, and he experienced a rare emotion he had not felt in many years. Grief.

Suddenly the desire for vengeance became palpable, an ache in his gut that could only be cured with blood sacrifice.

Slethial ran back down and across the ridge, skipping and leaping over crags and gullies like a shadow-dancer. His gaze never left the black-bone figure, and although he fought not to tremble, Slethial managed to move up and around the ridge to arrive on his enemy's blind-side. The blades of his hydra gauntlets extended...

Every increasingly painful inch, Hersk prayed. He muttered the benediction to the Grey Lady, Saint Nadalya, and to the Emperor, in the hope that they would heed him still. They had granted him the favour of the tower and its guardian, but he needed just a little more to see him to them safely. So the words kept coming, the caked blood across his lips cracking with every syllable he uttered, the salt tang of tears in his mouth and the agony of his wounds returning. It hurt more as the paralysis faded, just as the alien warrior woman had promised, which meant he could also move easier... and faster.

Hersk had closed his eyes as he crawled past Blezni and Rzaney, still locked in their bloody embrace, comrades even in death, but now he opened them. The summit of the hill was only a few more metres away and Hersk rose shakily to his feet as desperation fuelled his limbs. Staggering and slow at first, he then began to build momentum. The black armoured figure, one of the Emperor's Angels, loomed above, beckoning him. Then Hersk saw the figure of the alien behind it and tried to cry out a warning.

Slethial did not hesitate. As he reached the black-bone figure, he lashed out with his gauntlet, driving a deep wound in the warrior's flank that cut through its armour like a razor cutting through flesh. It was deeply satisfying as the figure slumped to one knee but that was merely a sting – a debilitating move to slow the enemy down so Slethial could face it mask to eye as he delivered the killing blow. Not even pausing to relish the prowess of his art, Slethial came around the front of the figure and rammed both his hydra gauntlets into its chest. Eight deadly blades punched through the warrior's back, every one piercing a major

organ.

‘My sister sends her regards,’ he spat, only for his expression to change dramatically a few seconds later.

Rather than falling down in agony, the warrior actually got back on its feet. For the first time, Slethial saw its eyes and watched, fascinated and terrified, as they burned like pyres.

It was not supposed to be like this. His enemy was meant to look upon his own agonised visage and despair, yet the apparition reached out for Slethial’s mask instead and tore it off.

Slethial felt powerless, as if he had already fled his body and was watching events play out without the will or agency to influence them. He managed to tear a gauntlet free, noting the absence of blood on the blades, and raise his hand. Fingers clenched into a claw, Slethial gripped the edge of the black-bone warrior’s faceplate just as he felt his own neck seized by that same enemy’s armoured glove. Defiantly, he tore the faceplate away and what he saw there with his one remaining eye turned his blood to ice. What little colour was left in the succubus’s face drained away. It took his soul with it as Slethial was literally scared to death and knew at last the true meaning of fear.

Hersk watched the black armoured warrior drop the dead alien on the ground. He was almost there and, despite the mist, could see his saviour clearly for the first time. It was no Space Marine, not like Hersk had ever seen. The figure was not fully corporeal, the tower just visible *through* it as if its armour were made from dark gossamer and not ceramite and adamantium at all. It stood at ease, replacing its faceplate, and Hersk was abruptly glad it had for he had no wish to see what visage lay beneath it. The fire in its eyes was pitiless. Whatever mercy it had performed in saving him, Hersk realised it was unable to express it. Perhaps it was not mercy at all. Perhaps something else drove the actions of this revenant?

Finding his voice hard to come by, Hersk stopped and cleared his throat. He had survived, and was about to give thanks to his fearsome saviour when the sound of a slow clap interrupted him.

Hersk’s gaze was drawn upwards where, as the mists began to part, he saw the edge of an ornate balcony and a figure enthroned upon it. His lamellar armour was a deep and lustrous green, a scalloped cape rested languidly on the arms of the baroque throne upon which he was seated. He wore a crown above an alien visage and it was he that was clapping.

*Archon Kuellek.*

Some of Hersk's scrubbed memories began to return. There were others on the balcony, more of the dark eldar, courtiers and warriors, artisans and slaves. It was a cornucopia of the foul alien breed that had enslaved Hersk and his fellow Vostroyans.

He remembered the nights of torture and fear, of coming out into the arena for the pleasure of these animals. This had been the final act, Hersk realised as the amphitheatre surrounding him resolved through the fading mist. He also belatedly realised that the archon of this province, a sub-realm they referred to as Night Spur, was not speaking to him. He referred instead to his slave master, the one who had orchestrated this vile display.

'An illusion then...' Hersk muttered, seeing the extent of the battlefield revealed. It was vast. The aliens had fashioned everything, every detail, a perfect simulacrum representing the place from which Hersk and the others had been taken. It was a game. He and the others had merely been part of the entertainment.

'And you an illusion also,' he said to the black armoured warrior, who had yet to move or fade.

Archon Kuellek was not often given to praising his inferiors but this was an unparalleled feat that Night Spur had just witnessed. A pity about the Serpent Incarnadine's wyches but it would serve as a salutary lesson for the cult that wielded power in Night Spur. Kuellek even dared wager that High Commorrhagh had seldom seen a show of its like, although he would never utter such a bold statement aloud for fear that Lord Vect might hear of it and condemn Kuellek's sub-realm to banishment and extinction.

'Impressive. I thought only the lesser slaves had been taken in the last raid.' Kuellek gestured to the black bone warrior. 'But this one is worthy of more sport. Where did it come from?'

'My lord,' Kuellek's slave master bowed obsequiously. 'I confess...' he stumbled. '...I do not know. I have never seen this slave before.'

Hersk saw the archon turn savagely. His slave master's answer had evidently displeased him. Abruptly, the archon rose to his feet and unleashed a crackling beam of dark light from a ring on his finger. The slave master withered under its touch, turning to ash. Then the archon was shouting down into the arena. Concealed cannon emplacements slid open and their lance-nosed armaments

stabbed forwards, whilst at the same time the archon's warriors rushed to the edge of the balcony, weapons drawn.

But it was too late for them, Hersk realised, because the black-bone warrior was no longer by his side. It was standing on the balcony. Nor was it alone. Throughout the amphitheatre, more black-bone warriors appeared. First there was a squad, then two squads, then three, until the arena was overrun. The shooting began thereafter and did not end until every one of the dark eldar present was dead, including Archon Kuellek.

Silence descended like a veil and the black-bone warriors departed with the fleeing of all sound.

Hersk was left alone. He trudged up the hill, knowing it was not true earth but some version of it the dark eldar had created. He entered the tower, though it was only a ruin and not the bastion he had first believed it to be. The stone was authentic, some enterprising slave master having reclaimed it to use in the archon's games. A fatal error, for in the base of the tower, encased in a reliquary and surrounded by stone, was an armoured corpse. Such was the age of it, only a skeleton remained, but its armour had endured. It looked familiar. Hersk imagined the ebon trim, the black, and knew it was the same warrior who had stood sentinel upon the hill. This was his tomb, taken from its final rest. And as the truth dawned, Hersk saw the tower and the reliquary it housed began to fade.

He thought about the pistol, and the one shot remaining in it. But the aliens would not let him die like that, not with dignity. They would bring him back and return him to the arena. Still scarcely able to believe what he had witnessed, his mind still piecing together reality from fiction, Hersk turned to regard the slaughtered alien masses. They were burned, reduced to a clutch of smoking and ruined corpses as their evil hearts had been put to the flame.

'I don't want to live...' Hersk murmured, holding the laspistol in his hands that he knew would not end his suffering. 'I want to rest. Only in death...' he whispered, and faced the tomb.

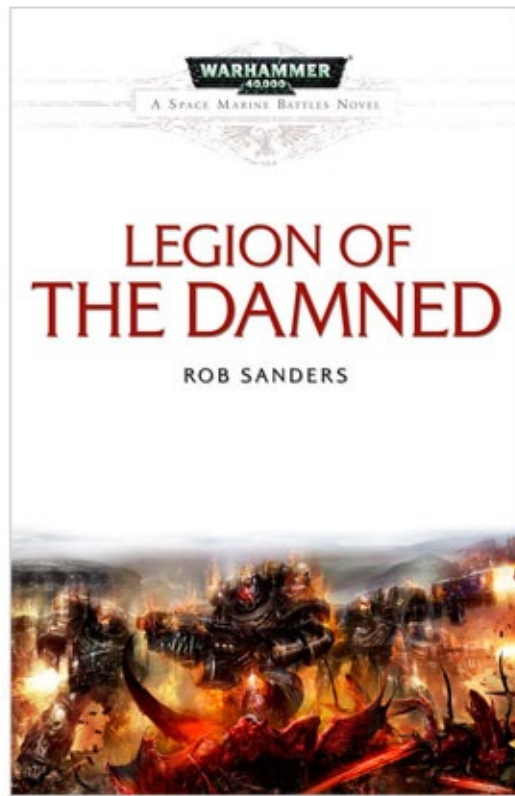
The black and bone breastplate of the warrior blocked his view. When Hersk looked up, its blazing eyes were already upon him. The damned warrior, for it and its kindred were certainly thus, placed its hand upon the Guardsman's head.

'*Only in death...*' it uttered in a sepulchral voice that seemed to emanate from inside Hersk's head and not the warrior's skeletal vox-grille.

Understanding, Hersk closed his eyes and as he muttered the benediction of Saint Nadalya one final time, he surrendered to the fire.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NICK KYME is the author of the Tome of Fire trilogy featuring the Salamanders. He has also written for the Horus Heresy, Space Marine Battles and Time of Legends series with the novels *Vulkan Lives*, *Fall of Damnos* and *The Great Betrayal*. In addition, he has penned a host of short stories and several novellas, including 'Feat of Iron' which was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection *The Primarchs*. He lives and works in Nottingham.



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