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This deep into the vaults, he could touch the silence. Gosta treasured those moments when he knew that the absence of sound was the true state of the world, and not limited to his perception of it. When the silence inside and outside his head were the same, he could begin to hear.

He had been deaf for over a half-century now. He had memories of sounds, but they were distant, fading abstractions, free of regret. He regarded his condition as an advantage to his calling as a scribe. It was his armour against distraction. Blessed with adamant concentration, he was able to navigate the holdings of the Librarium with an ease and to a degree that was the envy of his fellows. Few of them ever ventured down to the level where he now stood. The memories here were so ancient, their arrangement so arcane, that any quest that led here was doomed to futility. Not so for Gosta. There *was* an order in these depths. Still, he could only understand the vaguest contours of the pattern, and he knew he would die long before he could master it. The challenge and the duty enthralled him, though. And to learn the pattern, to be guided by the Librarium, he would descend to the levels of true silence, and *listen*.

The Imperium's memory had a physical form. It inhabited vast houses. The Great Librarium of Mnemosyne was one of the largest. Above ground, it was a colossus, its squat, domed tower rivalling the height of the spires of the Cathedral of Saint Charteris. The two giants rose from the centre of Arkio, Mnemosyne's capital. They faced each other from either end of Monument Way, a graveless cemetery where memory was fashioned out of stone and iron. As monolithic as the Librarium's silhouette was, what reared to the heavens was a mere hint of its true size. Its vaults descended for kilometres beneath the earth. It was a repository of records from a dozen sectors, going back thousands of years. Its collections were growing all the time. It required an army of scribes just to keep on top of the influx of new memories. It needed a second to handle the requests for the disinterring of old ones: the books, scrolls, ledgers, maps, edicts,

records and thousands upon thousands of other physical traces of the Imperium's thoughts.

Gosta had come looking for a very old one, and he had found it one level up. It had taken him three hours to make the journey, and he took the opportunity to descend a bit further, to listen to the silence with special attention. It was calling him today. He had thought he felt a tug when he had woken in the dormitorium midway towards the surface. Now he was sure. He stood at the entrance to the vaulted archive. The darkness between the stacks was so huge that the lumen globes were as weak as candles. In the gloom, a secret was waiting. It was reaching out for him, filling him with premonition. It had been here for millennia, forgotten, its memory inert. But something was coming and soon. Imminence began to crawl down his spine.

He didn't understand what was happening to him. Beyond the question of skill, he had always taken pride in his intuitive sense of where to look for the most deeply buried memories. This was different. He wasn't looking for this secret. It was pulling him. The curiosity he had felt earlier had become something strange, powerful and disturbing. He prayed that he was feeling the touch of the Emperor's will, guiding him on a destined path. Instead, the prayers felt hollow.

Mouth dry, Gosta stepped inside the hall. The globes seemed to dim as he walked forward. Shelves twenty metres high disappeared into the gloom. The tops off their ladders were invisible. The nearest servitors were three levels up. Anything Gosta wanted he would have to climb to get himself. If anything wanted him there would be no one to hear his cry.

He was frightened by the imminence. He was also mesmerized. The secret must be tremendous for it to matter so much now, after being hidden deep in the archival strata for an age. The call overcame his resistance. He walked deeper into the dark. The globes flickered. The more the light failed, the more clearly he knew where he must go. The secret was buried in time and night. He would find it in a recess at the edge of all knowing.

Lights out. He was surrounded by the truth of dark and silence. He felt the stone beneath his feet. He felt something touch his heart with a clawtip of cold stone. It was the truth of memory's night reaching out for him. He took another step.

The ornate band that clasped his left wrist vibrated. The dim light returned. The call vanished. Gosta blinked. Premonition remained, an anxiety gnawing at his chest. But now he had an immediate duty to answer. He was being

summoned to the surface. It was time to join in a great act of worship. Winter was here.

Hatia Keremon, Imperial Commander of Mnemosyne, stood in her box at the rear of the cathedral. Before her, thousands of the faithful of Arkio filled the pews. More than a third of the congregation was made up of scribes from the Librarium. The more senior ones, the ones who controlled the access to the lower vaults, sat in the front rows. At the far end of the nave, in a pulpit suspended above the altar by an iron framework, Cardinal Reinhard presided over the most important ceremony of the year. The Rite of Endurance sought the Emperor's strength and guidance for the months ahead. The blank season had come. It was not the cold and the damp that tried the citizens of Mnemosyne's inhabited northern archipelago. What wore at the spirit was the endless limbo that came with them. The evening was still clear when Keremon had arrived at the cathedral. The muffled tolling of the bells audible over Reinhard's sermon told her that she would step out into a very different night when she left.

Reinhard had already been speaking for an hour. He would carry on for at least that long again. Keremon did not begrudge him the time. The Rite was the one day that the cardinal was preeminent on Mnemosyne, when the people had the greatest need for spiritual strength. The rest of the year her grasp on the planet's political reins was unchallenged, if unstated. Her greater clout was due to her dual position: the Imperial Commander of Mnemosyne was also, thanks to millennia of tradition, the High Curator of the Librarium. She did not, however, believe in antagonising the Ecclesiarchy needlessly. The cardinal, furthermore, was a vital tyrant of orthodoxy. Mnemosyne had a constant need for his teaching. Especially today.

Keremon's legs were beginning to feel numb when Reinhard said, 'The Emperor's light is eternal.' He was reaching the end of his exhortation. 'Go forth with its strength. It will illuminate our path. Those who doubt this shall be lost. Extend them no pity.'

The doors of the cathedral swung open. The sound of the bells became deafening, their clamour both defiance and warning. Keremon took her cue. She descended from her box. She assumed her role as the planet's secular power drawing force from the spiritual one, and led the congregation out into the cathedral's square. It overlooked Monument Way. A few kilometres distant, the Librarium brooded, the lights from its narrow stained-glass windows adding a dull red glow to the night. Keremon advanced to the edge of the square and

gazed up at the stars. Behind her, the people spread out and followed her example. It would be their last chance for months.

The temperature was dropping fast. The humidity was soaring. The first wisps of mist were snaking along the ground. Keremon waited. She waited for the skies to give the sign that was the mark of winter's arrival and the reminder of light beyond the blankness to come.

The meteor shower began. Mnemosyne's passage through the debris field began every year on this date. Keremon knew that there was no link between that event and the planet's sudden descent into the cold season. Even so, the coincidence was trigger enough for awe. The Rite was the shield that prevented the awe from turning into dread. The streaks through the dark soon became several each minute. Keremon watched them, savouring the brief scars of light. When she felt strong enough, she looked down.

The fog was here. It had rolled in from Arkio's bay, and was now moving past the Librarium. It was a wall of grey-white nothing. It was higher than almost all the city's spires. Only the peaks of the Librarium and the cathedral would still be above it come morning. The fog would settle over the islands of Mnemosyne, shrouding the people, frustrating vision and purpose. It would not leave until the spring equinox. In a world turned into grey shapes and endless absence, it was easy to despair. The reaffirmation of faith was the only succour available to the majority of the population. The High Curator and her scribes were more fortunate. The Librarium's demands and purpose were perpetual. It gave direction. Inside its walls, the preservation and resurrection of memory carried on.

As the fog drew nearer, Keremon turned to the sky once more to watch the shower for a last few minutes. She saw a streak that was much closer to the vertical than the others. It did not vanish. It was joined by another. Then there were several. There were murmurs of wonder from the crowd. Then the wonder turned into fear.

The shooting stars were drop pods.

The mortals made it too easy. Their defeat was a given, of course. The orbital defences went down before the cannons of the ship that had once been the Gladius-class frigate *Grave Sentinel*, but was now the *Herald of Anguish*. The Thunderhawk *Iron Despair* followed the drop pods, delivering a Rhino and a Predator to the field. As it descended, it encountered a squadron of aging Lightning fighters that the Mnemosyne gatekeepers sent to intercept. The

engagement was brief. The flaming wreckage of the Imperial aircraft was already on the ground when the *Despair* released its cargo. There was a full company of the gatekeepers in the city. Its soldiers charged into the gathering fog to repel the invaders at the drop sites along Monument Way. They rushed to fight five squads of Space Marines and their heavy support. Within minutes, the Imperials were all dead. It would be long hours before any reinforcements could arrive.

Easy. Too easy. How could the mortals learn the lesson if they died so quickly?

Not that they mattered. It was the civilians and the planetary leadership who would feel the true benefit of Akror's teaching. They, too, were being most cooperative. They fled, bleating, back into the cathedral. There they cowered, hemmed in, a concentrated mass waiting for his attention. Akror stood in the doorway with two squads of his brothers for a full minute before wading in. He let the congregation see what had come for them. He waited for the whimpering vermin to read the message his power armour bore. Black and crimson met, their intersection becoming the fusion of blood with ebony flame. That much, these fools could understand. They might also understand the surface meaning of the shrunken skulls that dangled from his belt, the bandolier of fingers that Luctus had draped over his pauldron. The deeper signification of the fetishes would be lost on the mortals. No matter. This was just the beginning of revelation.

It was time to begin the lesson in earnest. He began to walk forwards. He spoke, his helmet speaker sending his voice across the space of the cathedral. 'I am Akror,' he said, 'captain of the Company of Misery.' His brothers followed a few paces behind. 'We have come to free you.'

He stopped at the rearmost pew. The humans who crouched behind it shrank further to the floor. He reached down and let his left hand hover back and forth over three of them, suggesting indecision. He saw their eyes widen with mortal fear and desperate hope. Good. They were taking in his teaching, even if they didn't realize it yet. He snatched a preacher up by his robes and held the man aloft. 'You don't believe me,' he said, addressing both the individual and the multitude. 'But I do not lie.' He brought the preacher closer. With his right hand he tore off the man's nose. The preacher screamed, then began to gag on his own blood.

Akror paused, letting the shrieks and the writhing wash over the crowd. 'This is liberation,' he said, and went back to work. Through the splintering of bone and the tearing of muscle, he coaxed the ecclesiarch's cries to new heights. 'It is liberation from the lie of hope.' He continued until the screams faded to moans

and then to silence. Even then, the man's limbs twitched for a few more seconds. 'Look how hard freedom is,' Akror said. 'Seconds from death and his instinct is still to fight me, as if this time, in this final moment, he will pry himself from my grasp. What does this hope do for him? Nothing. I repeat: I do not lie. But this priest is lying. To himself.' He tore the man's head from his body. 'And there: an end to his lies.' He threw the body to the ground and crushed the head beneath his boot, continuing his slow march down the central aisle of the nave.

'And what of this priest's friends?' He did not look back. 'Are they learning what they should?' Behind him, he heard Luctus and the others stop before the pew. 'Are they convinced of the reality of luck? Are they telling themselves that they had just had a narrow escape? That what happened to the priest could have happened to them, but they were spared by the caprice of fate? Yes. I believe that is what they think. That is the lesson they have chosen to embrace. They are wrong to do so. They must be chastised. And freed.'

He kept walking, but stopped speaking. He listened to the sounds of his brothers reinforcing the sermon. There was the crunch and splash of blades sinking into bodies, then a dull roar. That was Skleeros turning his flamer on the entire length of the pew and the one beyond it. The roar ended, giving way to the crack of flames and agonizing, fading howls. Akror savoured the stench of burning flesh as it filtered in through his helmet's grille.

The moans and the cries of the rest of the congregation began to grow again. The first intimations of the deep truth were sinking in. Akror knew that the process could be gradual. It had taken the company long enough. Centuries upon centuries, during which the Desolate Brotherhood had served the Emperor and clung to that wretched illusion. Centuries upon centuries of missions, each more brutalizing than the last. The Chapter punished endlessly for its loyalty, until, on Misery, the disaster that had dissolved hope away forever, revealing the truth of bone and agony beneath the lie.

Yes, the process took time. And time was at a premium. Akror could wish that Mnemosyne remain forever within the hands of the Company of Misery, but he would content himself with the impact this mission would have on its people and on the psyche of the Imperium. So he accelerated the lesson. He fired his bolter into the crowd. He pulled the trigger in short bursts, pivoting to spread the mass-reactive death to as wide an area as possible. The rounds were designed to kill armoured foes. Their effect on this weak prey was devastating. Heads and torsos vanished. Blood sprayed in great arcs. In between each burst, Akror resumed speaking. 'Hope is a lie,' he repeated. 'We believed in it once. So we know how

you think. You cling to the idea that if there is life, there is hope. Of course you do. We will pry that lie from your clutches.'

He used a sustained burst now, killing dozens. Halfway to the transept, he maglocked the bolter to his thigh and switched to his chainsword. Blade growling, he began to work his way up and down the rows, reducing the humans to slabs of bloody meat. 'This is the supremacy of pain!' he shouted. 'The eternity of misery! There is no future. The past will be erased. There is only this present, this unending moment! This is the truth we will bring to the entire Imperium.'

Now he and his brothers slaughtered in earnest. As each victim fell, the remaining mortals were pushed closer to the full realization of the truth. Perhaps some already saw that suffering was the only reality before them. If they did, they would soon experience absolute proof.

As he sank the chainsword into an Administratum functionary's ribcage, he voxed Xoren. 'Have you taken the Librarium?'

'We have, brother-captain.'

The answer was incomplete. 'Is it burning?'

A hesitation. 'No,' Xoren admitted.

'Why not?'

'Some of the scribes managed to close the vault doors. They are adamantium. We cannot break through to the lower levels.'

Akror cursed and drove his whirring blade through the man's heart and out of his back. 'The scribes must have the keys,' he said.

'The locks appear to be based on a combinatory mechanism.'

'Then torture the information out of the scribes.' He should not have to explain the most obvious steps. Though he would punish ambition with extermination, he expected initiative, at the very least.

'When they closed the door...' Xoren began, then trailed off.

'Yes?'

'We killed them.'

'*All* of them?'

'They had defied us.'

The execution was natural. The deaths were inevitable. But the mistake was unforgiveable. The Librarium was the prize. It was why the Company of Misery had come to Mnemosyne. Akror would incinerate this portion of the Imperium's memory. The archives were the means by which the Imperium told itself the tissue of lies it called its history. Akror would take the falseness of memory and

its distorting fictions and purge them from all thought. The narrative of the Imperium would fray. And before help could be sent, Mnemosyne would experience the unchanging *now* of pain. Its loss and its suffering would ripple out towards the rest of the galaxy. Failure to gain access to the vaults would render the attack on Mnemosyne pointless. Akror commanded fifty warriors – more than enough to smash any challenge the defence forces of Mnemosyne could muster. But they had to be gone before the Imperium responded with a full retaliation.

‘I believe there are more scribes,’ Xoren said, saving himself from execution.

‘What do you mean?’

‘There were too few here. This can’t have been all of them. They would not have been able to perform all the required duties for more than a few hours.’

Akror snapped off his chainsword. He raised his fist, catching the eyes of his brothers. ‘Stop,’ he ordered. The squad broke off from its butcher’s work. Akror scanned the mortals. Most of them were dead, but there were still several hundred huddling together. They were weeping in mad fear and despair. Akror held up his sword, revving it periodically. He returned to the nave and moved towards the transept and, beyond it, to the choir. He looked for the clothing of scribes.

Gosta watched from the gallery. High Curator Keremon had led as many scribes as could follow up the staircase of the cathedral’s north tower instead of racing blindly to the choir. There were a few dozen with her. She had signalled total stillness when the Traitor Space Marines entered the cathedral.

Gosta had followed Cardinal Reinhard’s sermon by reading his lips from the third row. The Traitors wore helmets, and so he did not know what their leader was saying. But he could tell that the monster was preaching. He gestured as the cardinal did, punctuating his words with sweeping arm gestures. When he started shooting and carving up the congregation, there was a continuity to the gestures. He was still preaching, Gosta knew. If he watched long enough, he might even grasp the nature of the sermon.

But even as the horror grew down below, Gosta still felt an acute presentiment. The imminent thing had not yet happened. The monsters were not the source of what had been calling to him from the Librarium’s night. There was still something coming. Gosta was terrified by what he was witnessing. He was also afraid of what he had yet to see.

He looked away.

Keremon was signalling. Time to move while the monsters were engrossed in their massacre. She took the scribes back into the tower, down the spiral steps, and kept on going past the ground level. Gosta stayed as close to her as he could. He focused on her determination, blotting out the terror of his fellows.

The stairs ended in the crypt. It extended the length of the cathedral, reliquaries and saints' tombs marching off into a distance obscured by the dim lighting. In the centre of the eastern wall was a tunnel leading away from the cathedral, running under Monument Way.

'Where are we going, High Curator?' Gosta asked.

She was careful to face him so he could see her lips, but her eyes were on the rest of the scribes. She answered him, but she spoke to all. 'We are going to the Librarium,' she said. 'If we hide here, we will be found, and die pointless deaths.' She paused, listening, Gosta realized, to another question. 'Perhaps they have attacked there,' she said. 'If so, all the more reason for us to go. Perhaps there is refuge to be found in the lower vaults of the Librarium. But if not, we are going where our duty lies. Do you think that there is anywhere in the city that is safe? If we are going to die, we shall do so with honour.'

Her speech did nothing to diminish the waves of fear coming from the crowd. Gosta did, though, find a certain comfort in having a purpose. Perhaps the others did too. They followed Keremon into the tunnel.

Where were they? Akror had carved his way through robed bodies before hearing from Xoren. Could he and his brothers have killed that many, though? He cast his eyes over the mounds of corpses. No, he thought. There were a great number of scribes here, but not great enough, even taking into account those Xoren had encountered. As the rest of the squad herded the remaining congregation into the choir, he saw no scribes. There had to be more.

His eye fell on the cardinal. The ecclesiarch was refusing to cower. His garb was torn and matted with blood. He had lost his mitre. His grey hair hung over his eyes, stuck to the gash in his forehead. The trappings of his authority were gone. He clung to his office through posture and pride alone. He stood in the front row of the choir and glared at the Company of Misery. There was hatred on his face. That was as it should be. There was also contempt.

For that, he would be punished. First, though, he would make himself useful.

Akror approached the choir. He loomed over the cardinal. The mortal looked up at and surprised him by having the temerity to speak. 'I am Cardinal Reinhard of the Adeptus Ministorum. I am faithful, in body, heart and soul to the God-

Emperor of Mankind, and I will not f—’

Akror backhanded him. He showed Reinhard what contempt meant. It did not lie in bellicose speeches. It lay in the disinterested infliction of pain. Akror was quite willing to break the cardinal’s body down one bone at a time with perfect skill and boredom. The fact that he desired information from Reinhard was the sole reason to pay attention to how he killed the man.

The ecclesiarch lay on the cathedral’s floor, stunned. Akror picked him up, noting the broken cheekbone. He held Reinhard as he had the preacher earlier and waited a few seconds for him to realize the ominous similarity. ‘Where are the scribes?’ Akror said.

The cardinal spat blood. ‘That is your—’

Akror crushed Reinhard’s left hand. He waited for the man’s scream to fade to a whimper, then asked again, ‘Where are the scribes?’

Reinhard’s defiance was weak this time, but it was still there. He shook his head.

The right hand. ‘Where are the scribes?’

Akror had to ask three more times. With each repetition, there was less of the cardinal left to break. In the end, he did not consciously surrender the information. It was the desperation in his pain that spoke. When Akror spoke the question, Reinhard’s eyes twitched upward, toward the gallery. Akror grunted and broke the cardinal in half. ‘With me,’ he shouted, and raced back down the nave towards the towers and the stairs.

The tunnel was unlit. The weak glow from the crypt reached in for the first ten metres. Then they were feeling their way forward in complete darkness. For a few minutes, Gosta moved through a deep void of stone. Despite the press of bodies, he was alone, and the premonition grew so strong that he almost cried out. The secret in the dark called to him again. He needed to return to the Librarium not to fight, not to hide, but to answer that call.

Uncertain light returned. The tunnel sloped upwards. A hundred metres more, and the scribes arrived at the surface, emerging from a stone vault partway down Monument Way.

Gosta was disoriented. Amber lumen globes perched on top of iron posts every fifteen metres, but the thick fog turned the light into a smeared glow. The nearest memorials were vague, hulking shapes in the stained night. They were commemorations of saints and battles. Now, though, shrouded by the blurring of winter, the official memories of the Imperium were indistinct. They were

shadows and obstacles, and they taught nothing.

Keremon looked around, then pointed the way forward. Gosta had faith that she had a better sense of where she was than he did and started to follow. Not all the scribes did. A small cluster remained just inside the vault. They refused to move out into the fog. Keremon eyed them with contempt, and left them to their fate.

Deeper into the fog, moving between the shapes of night, the experience was more disturbing than the tunnel for Gosta. It had been a realm of simple darkness. He hadn't expected to be able to see anything. In the winter blankness, his eyes strained against the barriers. His attempts to pierce the amber-tinted swirl failed, and claustrophobic bands tightened across his chest. In the tunnel, he had known where the boundaries were. Outside, he was vulnerable. The monsters could come for them from any direction. The monuments, stripped of meaning, loomed like sudden threats. He kept thinking that he should be able to see the Librarium by now, but all he saw was more fog, more shadows of stone and metal. More night.

He became aware of vibrations in the paving stones. At the same moment, Keremon looked back. She said nothing, but picked up speed. The other scribes began to run. The terror was rising again. The pulse in the surface of the road spiked as Gosta turned his head. He was in time to see a flash sear the fog. It came from the direction of the vault. It was followed moments later by the bright flickering of flame. Gosta ran faster.

He knew there were sounds to be heard, important and terrible ones. He kept glancing at the faces of his fellow scribes. He saw their terror evolve. The fear for their own lives was infused with horror. After a minute, more than a few ran with their hands covering their ears. He caught up to Keremon. 'Please,' he begged. 'What is happening?'

She answered in stages, wasting little breath, turning her head his way as much as she could without falling. 'The ones who hid. They were found. The Traitors want the keys to the lower vaults. They did not receive them. So they have no need, now, to hold back at all from torture.'

The looks on the other scribes' faces told Gosta all he needed to know. The torture was not yet done. It must have been an art of the most horrific kind to last this long and be so audible.

The vibration in the paving stones became worse, heavier and constant. A vehicle was approaching.

Keremon turned off the central path of the Way. She took the scribes into the

narrower routes where the monuments clustered closer together. There were no globe posts here. It was hard to see, the fog at times becoming a tangible part of the night itself, a faintly glowing darkness that coated Gosta's flesh and sank into his lungs. Marble slabs like tomb markers made the footing treacherous. They were commemorations and exhortations. On this night, Gosta did not find them inspiring. He knew what most of them said, but they were illegible in the gloom, more memories being wiped by the winter fog. They were mere obstacles now, traps seeking to make him fall and die amidst the dumb and blind masses of the shrouded monuments.

There was no running here. The flight slowed. The vehicle could not follow them here, but the Traitors on foot would not be slowed. The vibrations grew stronger yet, then stopped. The vehicle was parallel with the scribes' position. Gosta could just make out a hint of a great, squat mass off to the left, a shadow amongst shadows. Light stabbed from it, bouncing between the statuary and obelisks as it sought its prey. Keremon kept glancing back. That frightened Gosta even more. The other hunters must be getting closer.

He looked ahead, desperate for some hint that they were approaching the Librarium. It was a mountain. Where was it? Where was the light from its windows? He knew he was clutching to an illusion of hope, but the illusion gave him the strength to go forward.

Something very big loomed ahead. Gosta ran faster, jumping over slabs. His heart sank when he realized what it was: the great cenotaph in that marked the centre of Monument Way. It was a colossal dolmen. Its monolithic supports stood on either side of the central alley. The tens of thousands of names that marked its surface were invisible. The cenotaph was mute. It was shape only, an obstacle that might doom Mnemosyne's curators of memory. Keremon hesitated for a moment, then headed right. It would take longer to go around the barrier in that direction. Gosta was conscious of the time lost, and the approach of the Traitors, but this was still better than venturing into the certain death trap of the alley.

He could feel the earth tremble again with the approach of ceramite boots. The hunters were almost here. He tried to move a bit faster yet. He felt no hope, only the desire to frustrate the Traitors for as long as possible.

As the scribes rounded the support, the imminence came for Gosta. He gasped. The event was close. It was in the fog with him. There would be no running from it. It was certain as death, and it was something greater and more terrible. If his premonitions had been the onrush of his own end assailing him, he was sure he

would have already felt the fulfilment of prophecy. He had seen enough of the Traitors to know that he was already dead. They were too far from the Librarium.

He wondered why he felt regret. There would be no safety there. He was confusing a sense of purpose with the hope for salvation.

There was a new glow ahead. It wasn't the amber of the globe posts. For a moment, Gosta let himself imagine that he was in reach of the Librarium after all. But what he saw was too close to the ground, and it wasn't spread out like light from the stained glass. It was red. Keremon slowed, looked back again and resumed her run. No one was shooting at them from the glow.

Gosta's mouth dried as they approached the pulsing, wavering light. It made him think of flame, but it seemed to be moving towards them. He had moved beyond premonition now. The thing he had been anticipating and fearing was before him. It came to meet them. He bit back a scream. The secret from the Librarium reached for him again, forbidden knowledge uncoiling to greet the dark arrival.

Brighter red, the pulsing more insistent, haloing massive shadows. Something deeper and harder than night was here. They surged out of the fog. There were five of them. They marched with the steady beat of a fatal machine. They were Adeptus Astartes, but Gosta had never heard of a Chapter with these markings. Their armour was black. The design of the aquila made it look as if it had been formed from bones. No, Gosta realized, he was wrong. Those *were* bones that had been worked into the ornamentation. And the glow did come from flames, and the flames rolled and spiralled around the limbs and frame of the Space Marines, and sometimes, sometimes, the flames even came from the crimson eyes of the helmets.

The scribes froze. Here were beings for which there was no accounting. There were no records of these warriors and no memories of them. They emerged from the winter void as if summoned into existence for the first time. Yet the scars on their armour said otherwise. The marks of centuries were upon them. They were ancient, yet torn from time. They were apparitions of the moment and their steps shook the ground with the weight of the infinite.

Behind the scribes were monsters. Before them were phantoms.

Gosta trembled. There was no point in running. These were not the same beings as the Traitors, but if the Imperium had no tales to tell of these Space Marines, were they a threat or salvation? If they had come to join in the slaughter then Gosta had had enough of running. He would live with his fear and

pray for dignity as he met his end. There would be no struggling.

The phantoms crew closer. Their weapons were pointed forward. Still, they held their fire. Only a few metres away now, and they were not slowing. They did not acknowledge the presence of the scribes.

Keremon rushed to the left, calling out and waving her arms. The jerk of her sudden motion snapped Gosta out of his stunned state. He ran too, stumbled, fell and scrabbled against the ground, a whimper constricting his throat. A ceramite boot came down a hand's breadth from his leg. He had a close view of the warrior's flame as he rolled out of the way. There was no heat. The fire was a spectre too. Though it flickered and jumped like a true fire, there was something wrong with its colour and with its very being. The red was too close to the shade of blood. It was shot through with other elements that were not colours at all. Gosta was sure that the flame had a *texture*. He was seeing the very stuff of the real itself being altered, twisted and consumed. He lay where he was, trembling, watching the Space Marines march past, heading in the direction of the hunters.

Gosta stood and joined the huddle around Keremon. She was looking at the phantoms with a holy terror. Even during the worst of the massacre in the cathedral, the events had not paralyzed her. She was High Curator, but she was also Imperial Commander of Mnemosyne, and Gosta was familiar with her military record. She had lost her awe for war. Now, though, her eyes were wide. She was as stunned as any of them.

Her lips were moving. Gosta leaned forward to see what she was saying. She was not speaking to the others. She was murmuring something to herself. Her mouth shaped the same words over and over again. 'The Damned,' she was saying. 'The Damned.'

Fog. Always the fog. Never ending, never clearing. It is the ghost of the world. Shapes of echoes form and dissolve. Everything passes. Time makes phantoms of the real. There is no permanence except war. It gives the enemy substance, a substance of treachery and corruption. It cannot be allowed to exist. The substance must be killed, the enemy made less than an echo.

Erase him.

Scratch him from time.

Fragile eddies in the fog. Dark grey in the lighter grey, the smudge of mortals. Ignore them. Seek the enemy. A billow in the fog, the wind of conflict, pushing towards the foe. There, ahead, the hard silhouette in crimson. The blood to be shed. The scar of the traitor in the grey.

The coordination of the attack. Words are not necessary. Were they ever? That knowledge, irrelevant, is gone. Only the knowledge of war matters. The one permanence.

Pull the trigger.

Shatter the outline.

Return all to the fog.

Akror had his prey in sight. Thirinos and Vassanos, in the Rhino *Annunciation of Grief*, had been stymied, unable to venture off the main alley, but it had driven the scribes onto more difficult terrain. The mortals, almost blind, their route blocked again and again by monuments, had slowed. Akror and the rest of the squad were gaining ground quickly. The scribes had run hard and long.

‘We could have saved them the effort,’ Luctus said. ‘If they want to be at the Librarium so badly, they could have just asked.’

Akror grunted. The mortals had fled with a purpose. He didn’t care that their destination was where he would have brought them. They would not arrive on any terms but his own. Most of them would never leave Monument Way. All he needed was the knowledge they held.

The scribes they had found hiding in the vault had been a disappointment. Skleeros had terrified them from their refuge by blasting it to rubble with his rocket launcher. Akror had moved in while the others hobbled the scribes by breaking their legs. It was not necessary for him to hurt them badly before they started speaking. He did anyway. And what they cried out to him was that the combination that would unlock the vault was known only to the senior scribes. Which none of them were.

They had not died well. They had died in the full revelation of misery.

The squad switched to thermal vision for the rest of the hunt. The fog was intense, but the scribes showed up clearly, first as a flare of bodily heat in the distance then resolving into individuals as Akror closed in. Their body language was expressive as they hit the cenotaph and tried to find their way around it quickly. Akror held the squad back from attacking just then. It amused him to see the mortals grasp at hope as if it were a frustrating mirage. They were learning. The truth was stabbing at them with harsh, short jabs, chipping away at the mortar of their beliefs. Another few minutes and they would come to realize an approximation of the truth.

Approximations were not sufficient, however. They had to know the reality of misery, and that came from experience, not belief. He would teach them. He

would teach them to death. But first, they would give him the means to open the heart of the Librarium.

‘Take them,’ he said. ‘Don’t kill any until we’ve determined which ones have value.’

They rounded the cenotaph; there was sudden activity ahead. The scribes were rushing to the side, a roiling movement just beyond them, but no heat signature. He blinked. ‘What—’ he began.

There was a sound like bolter fire. Concentrated, heavy. But the shells that streamed from multiple weapons seemed to be born of the fog itself. They came in streaks of flame that killed without burning, and that lingered in the air like a ghost’s wound. They pounded into Plionos and Krakos, shattering pauldron and helmet, engulfing them in heatless, corrosive fire. The two had no chance to react. Their blood and bone erupted before them. They fell, and their annihilation was totalled. There would be nothing to salvage. They were gone as if they had never existed, their legacies reduced to the memories of their brothers.

The irony was not lost on Akror.

The barrage did not stop. It forced the squads back around the cenotaph. Luctus took enough hits to blast away his left pauldron and four more brothers of the Company of Misery fell. Akror and the others returned fire as they withdrew. Akror still couldn’t see a target. There was too much turbulence in the air, and nothing registered where he should be seeing the enemy. He turned off the thermal vision and saw a squad of Adeptus Astartes wrapped in uncanny fire.

They wore the Aquila – they were loyalists. Their nature confused him, mysteries and wonders here that he had thought were the province of the Gods of Chaos. Yet there was no such allegiance here.

He would drag the truth from them later. First, he had to regain the initiative.

Once on the other side of the cenotaph, he led the battered squads along its width to the main alley and linked up with the *Annunciation of Grief*.

‘Loyalists,’ he told Thirinos, who was manning the pintle-mounted, twin-linked bolters.

‘Who?’

‘No idea. Kill them and we’ll find out.’ He peered through the fog. His enhanced vision was no help against it. The cenotaph, still close, was a massive vagueness. ‘Normal vision only. They don’t show up on the thermal.’

‘How is this possible?’ Luctus said. ‘They’re alive, aren’t they?’

‘Are they?’ He wasn’t sure.

‘They’re burning.’

‘With warp fire, I’ll wager.’

Akror ordered a perimeter established around the Rhino. He couldn’t see more than a few metres but he could hear as well as ever, even though the sounds bounced off the monuments and surrounded him with echoes. He focused on the crunch of boots on stone. The loyalists had not split up. They were maintaining unit cohesion and closing in at the same steady but unhurried march as before.

He pointed to the passage beneath the cenotaph’s capstone. ‘Here they come,’ he said. His brothers had heard too, and were already moving into position.

The sounds of the march ceased. Silence. Nothing but the fog. The night seemed as empty as the Imperium’s history would be once Akror completed his mission. Again, he felt the grate of irony against his chest. He was fully aware of the value of symbolism. It underlay his mission on Mnemosyne. He resented the way the meanings of this battle were shifting at his expense. He would reclaim the narrative. He had come to turn all stories into mist, and he would do so yet.

There was just the small matter of the warriors with no story of their own to kill first.

The silence stretched long.

They must still be there, he thought. ‘Shoot the passageway,’ he ordered Thirinos. ‘Cover the—’

A rocket screamed out of the fog and slammed into the front of the Rhino. The explosion that engulfed Thirinos was both material and spectral. The air was rent by a second scream, coming from a chorus of disembodied voices. Convulsed, already dying, Thirinos sent rounds blind through the fireball. The second missile hit the pintle directly. The gun fell silent. The smoke and flames cleared. The choir of shrieks faded. Thirinos’s corpse slumped forward over the ruins of his weapon. The forward armour of the Rhino was damaged, but had held up to the blast. Inside the vehicle, Vassanos responded to the attack by urging the *Annunciation* forward. Skleeros had to leap to the side to avoid being crushed by the vehicle’s charge. Vassanos drove hard for the passage. The engine roared. Black smoke poured from the exhaust, staining the dull glow of the fog. The spikes on the front armour were hungry for the blood of the foe.

‘Teach them anguish.’ Akror shouted and ran with the Rhino. The Company of Misery closed with the challengers. ‘This planet is ours!’ Akror proclaimed to his brothers and his enemies. ‘Its destiny is pain. The only destiny is pain.’ *Kill all hope*, he thought.

The *Annunciation of Grief* hit one of the loyalists. He should have gone down.

The impact might not have been enough to smash his armour, but it should have broken many bones. One of the spikes impaled his abdomen. The warrior was motionless for a second. Then he gripped the spike and pushed backward, removing himself from its two-metre length. Still holding the metal wedge, he back-pedaled along the alley's surface, then launched himself upwards. He landed against the slope of the front armour. He pounded his fist against Vassanos's viewing slit. Glassteel cracked.

The other loyalists marched against the warriors of the company. Bolters raged against each other. Akror felt several rounds punch against his torso and legs. A few struck his helmet. There was damage. He barely noticed. He had survived far worse when he had still served the Imperium. He had survived Misery itself. He knew the truth of pain because he experienced its eternity. The corrosion of that planet of revelation was with him still. It filled his blood with black flame. It propelled him forward with the zeal of a prophet, and the fury of a judge.

He and Luctus emptied their clips into the two loyalists before them. The phantoms never broke their stride. They had to be injured, but it was as if their flames devoured the bolter-rounds. Instinct told Arkor to back off, gain distance and keep firing. Rage would not permit it.

The red is close now, the very substance of treachery. Grasp it. Rend it. Is that damage? It is unimportant. Nothing is important while the enemy exists. Shade the mist with his blood.

Bolters maglocked, chainswords out. The snarl of the weapons turned into grinding whines as they clashed against each other. Akror blocked an overhand blow from his opponent. They rocked back and forth, locked in stalemate. Akror dropped his sword and sidestepped. The phantom went forward, his flank open. Akror struck, gouging deep. The loyalist straightened with the chainsword still in his side, turning his head towards Akror as though curious, and smashed him aside with both arms. Akror stumbled back.

The other loyalist had Luctus backed against the Rhino's flank. They were trading blows with the chainswords. They struck at each other as if they were using rapiers. The hits were glancing.

It is done.

Something passed between the loyalists. Akror saw no signal. But his opponent was moving off. The other abandoned its duel with Luctus. He turned away, taking a solid blow to the arm from Akror's battle-brother. The loyalist spun hard, throwing Luctus back against the *Annunciation*, then joined the first in a fast retreat. Fire bled from the wound.

Explosions rocked the transport. The blasts drowned the scream of the engine. Shrapnel burst out of the flank, cutting Luctus in half. Akror snarled and ran to the other side of the dead Rhino. Only Skleeros was still on his feet. 'They have our measure, captain,' he said.

Akror's lips pulled back in a grimace of hate so hard that blood filled his mouth. He looked back. The enemy squad had reformed. A wall of phantoms was closing in on them. 'They haven't won,' he told Skleeros. He moved fast into the maze of statuary to the north. Skleeros followed. They pounded the memorial slabs to dust. Akror began to turn east, then stopped and paused. He listened.

'They are coming,' Skleeros said.

The drumbeat of the enemy's footsteps was steady.

'Good,' Akror said. He started running again, heading for the Librarium, where three full squads awaited. 'This is not a retreat,' he said. 'This is a trap.'

Keremon saw nothing of the battle. As soon as it began, she had started forward once more. She would bring her charges safely to their goal. There, they would act as duty demanded. So would she. If that meant dying, then so be it. If their defiance was a futile gesture, then so be it. They would have worthy deaths, and on this first night of winter, that seemed a fine gift in its own right.

She looked back a few times. There was little to see in the dark and the fog. There was much to hear: the full-throated roar of the bolters, the teeth-rattling cry of the chainblades, the explosions. Once, the fog parted just enough for her to catch a glimpse of giants in black and bone. When she looked away, she carried with her the portrait of methodical, unrelenting war carried out by beings merciless as the grave.

She didn't want to see more, but she braced herself to do so. She knew she hadn't seen anything close to the all the horrors this night had embraced. She knew it was her responsibility to confront them. She was Imperial Commander and High Curator, and was being called upon to give her life to preserve her planet and the great work of memory of the Librarium.

There was, in truth, no greater honour.

Overshadowing the honour, though, was the fear. The Traitors brought the fear of death and defeat. The other Space Marines were even more troubling. She didn't know what they were. Yet she did. She had heard the whispers during her service in the Imperial Guard, caught a few more since her ascension to Imperial commander. The whispers gave a name to these Space Marines. They gave rumours to the name, but no true memories. The darkness of the Damned shrouded awful secrets. Their mystery defied the great purpose of the Librarium of Mnemosyne and of its sister repositories in other systems.

There was, to her knowledge, no authorized record of these beings. No hint of who they were or might once have been.

But what if there was a memory? What if the secrets were revealed?

There was no time to contemplate those consequences. That was a mercy.

No time, too, to wonder what would happen when she brought the scribes to the Librarium. Time only to move as fast as possible, as safely as possible and as directly as possible through the fog, through winter, through the great shapes whose meaning was quickly being forgotten.

At last, the fog ahead was broken by an immense shadow. She put on a burst of speed. So did the scribes at her heels. The shadow became more solid. Slivers of light shone at regular intervals on its height. Closer. Another few moments and she would be able to make out the Librarium's main entrance.

Closer. Clearer.

Keremon stumbled as the picture before her resolved itself. The Emperor protects, and he did now, thinning the fog just enough for her to see the tank. She crouched behind the last of the monuments. It was a bronze statue, five metres tall, of Sebastian Thor in the midst of furious judgement. Beside her Gosta whispered, 'How do we get past that?'

'We don't,' she mouthed. *We wait*, she thought. *We pray*.

The tank was just recognizable as a Predator. Its form had been altered with spikes like huge, curved claws. It was draped with the sanded flesh of the Traitors' victims. Across its front armour was the body of a Space Marine. He had been coated in steel. His limbs were torn from his torso. His ribs surrounded a gaping hole, and within the hole was an eight-pointed star. The turret tracked back and forth. It was more and less than a machine of war. It was a feral beast, hungry for prey.

On either side of it, in a solid line, waited thirty more Traitors. Behind them, already returned, their captain marched.

Keremon began her prayers.

The tank's cannon fired at the same moment as the monsters opened up with their bolters. Return fire started a second later, and then the phantoms stormed through the fog. Keremon saw them as a blur of great shadows and slithering flame rushing past only a few metres to her left. They moved fast, lightning carved from the night. The squad spread out, the reaching claws of talons.

The tank's first shot went wide. The turret swung to the right. It boomed a second time. It struck one of the phantoms in the chest. Keremon winced at the glare of the explosion. When her vision cleared, the Space Marine was still there. His fire raged high. He took another step. Then the flames died, and he fell.

'So you can die!' Akror shouted. He was taunting. Keremon believed he was also shouting with relief.

The rest of the phantoms crossed the final metres that separated them from their foe. They advanced against withering fire. Keremon didn't understand why they did not fall, but they did not, and their response began to take the Traitors down.

The tank fired again. The ground fountained where one of the Damned had been a moment before. The Space Marine had leapt, and now he landed on the turret. Standing in the hatch was a Traitor, operating the pintle-mounted combi-weapon. He hit the phantom with the double blow of bolter and flamer. The loyalist swung his chainsword through the storm and decapitated the Traitor. Smoke rising from his pockmarked armour, he fixed an explosive to the barrel of the cannon and was already locked in the next struggle when the world flared silver. Keremon squeezed her eyes shut against the pain of the brilliance. When, still dazzled, she looked again, the meltabomb had turned the gun to slag. The Predator was disarmed.

The fog roiled with the heat of battle. The scene before Keremon was a phantasmagoria from the mythic depths of humanity's nightmares. Phantoms struggled against monsters. Fearsome gods tore each other apart in a world of fire and night and devouring limbo. The air was filled with the tumult of war. It was the sound of worlds ending and the shrieking birth of legends. The fury became more compact, like the closing of a dark, burning fist. The struggle clustered around the Predator. Then something blew the Librarium's great iron doors off their hinges, and the battle moved inside.

The tumult was still huge, but the fog settled. As Keremon saw less and less of the battle, the new shape of her duty became clear. She stood up and faced the scribes. 'Stay here,' she said. 'I will be inside the Librarium.' When Gosta made as if to come with her, she shook her head. 'You are more important to the full

reach of the Librarian's memories than I am. If I do not survive, it will fall to you to collate and record the traces of what transpired in there.' She did not add, *if Mnemosyne survives.*

'But why must you take this risk?'

A few minutes ago, she would have said to see if any of the other scribes had survived, and if there was any way she could fight the Traitors. But she already knew that everyone inside was dead, and that there was nothing she could do. It was the vision of the war itself that had revealed the nature of her real mission. 'Because I am the High Curator,' she said. 'I must bear witness. At this moment, the Librarian is not the repository of memories. It is the site of their origin.'

She ran across the scarred pavement before the building, past the abandoned Predator and up the steps to the entrance. She stepped from the night and into the inferno.

Furnace of war. The fog of the world ablaze. So much treacherous red. The Emperor's foes fight back with their own anger. Hurl it back at them, unleash the full scope of righteous wrath.

This space. Not just another interior that will pass into the fog. Long echoes here. The past refusing to vanish. Something is here. A memory, a record of a scar. A dream of what once was given a form that still lingers. It should not be here.

Ignore it for now.

Use the solidity of the past. Defeat the enemy's numbers. Grind him into the muck of oblivion.

'Who are they?' Xoren said.

'I am tired of that question,' Akror answered. They were racing down an aisle barely wide enough for the two of them. One of the loyalists had been visible at the other end a moment before.

Under the huge dome of the Librarian was a single circular room that reached the entire height and width of the building. Radiating out from the centre were rows upon rows of record cabinets dozens of metres high. Along the walls were shelves of scrolls and tomes. The shelves rose even higher, stopping only at the dome itself. This was the palace of regimented memory. This was where the vast collections of the archive were catalogued and cross-referenced. As immense as the hall was, it was only the surface of the Librarian's memory – the means that made it possible to find what was sought in the great depths below. In the centre,

flush with the floor, were the adamantium doors to those depths.

The room was on fire. The cabinets and shelves blazed. The flames devoured dry parchment and vellum as if they were promethium. The smoke was as thick as the fog had been outside. The destruction of the Librarium was Akror's goal, but his brothers had not set this fire. Two of the loyalists bore flamers, and had turned their plumes on the walls and aisle as soon as they had entered. From the touch of ghost-energy, fire had exploded around the room. The loyalists spread out along the rows, appearing and disappearing in the midst of destruction. The Company of Misery outnumbered them better than three-to-one, but there was no way to bring the greater force to bear. Akror had to send out smaller hunting parties. He could hear battle being joined throughout the Librarium. The dome echoed with the roar of flame and the stutter of bolters. The vox was alive with the shouts of his brothers. Shouts of frustration, shouts of anger, shouts of pain. Shouts that cut off. There were no shouts of triumph.

The cabinets to his right blew outward, smashed by the combined force of a frag grenade and the battering ram rush of the loyalist. He burst through with bolter firing. Xoren took the brunt of the blast, shells and blow. He fell. The phantom stood over him, firing point-blank into his helmet until it and his head were destroyed.

Akror emptied his own clip into the loyalist. The burning warrior ignored him until Xoren was dead. Then he turned on Akror. He was wounded. His armour was cracked and punctured in a dozen places. Akror was still not given the satisfaction of seeing his foe bleed. The loyalist's warp fire burned higher, and brighter. Akror switched out bolter for chainsword. He moved a shade faster than the loyalist and dug his blade into the other's breastplate while he was still raising his own sword over his head. Akror sawed down and forward. The bone aquila splintered. The sword cut through ceramite, carapace, flesh and dug into bone.

The loyalist faltered.

'You are no phantom,' Akror snarled. 'You feel the truth of misery now, don't you?'

*Misery? Oh my brothers, does the wretch think to teach us anything about pain?
Anything about rage?*

Gather the fog, the devouring fog, the burning fog. Consume everything. Take it all. Emperor, for You the gift of final wrath.

Keremon stayed low to the ground and made her way around the periphery of the great hall. The smoke clawed her lungs. She watched with horror as the superhuman war destroyed what she would have given her life to protect. Centuries upon centuries of cataloguing was disappearing in a storm of flame. The memories stored below her feet were falling back into the darkness of a great forgetting. Each passing second made her presence more vital. This terrible event was an incendiary memory in formation. It fell upon her to record it, and so she had to witness it to the fullest. She crawled past the spokes that were the rows of cabinets. Some were empty except for the spreading fire. Others were filled with the battles of giants. And now, down the end of this row, near the centre of the hall, she saw two figures in a tableau of extremity. There was a great flame there, but not the natural fire that was consuming the Librarium. It came from the phantom that grappled with the leader of the Traitors. Akror had buried his chainsword in the Space Marine's chest. The phantom should have fallen. Instead, he seemed to grow with the rising intensity of his flame.

A fatal line was crossed. The two terrors were frozen for a moment. And then a nova of warp light burst from the centre of the phantom. A shock wave that was rage itself lifted Keremon from the ground and threw her into a wall. The blast filled the world. The end of witnessing had come.

It was dawn when Gosta recovered consciousness. The explosion had driven them all into oblivion, but not because of its physical force. There had been another power there, one he did not understand. Perhaps its power came from its destruction of all comprehension.

In the grey blankness, he sensed a heavy calm. He left the shelter of the statue. The other scribes followed. They crossed to the Librarium slowly. The fog was even thicker, and mixed with smoke. Gosta could barely see his own feet. He stopped moving and caught a glimpse of huge, black shapes passing before him. They shook the ground with their steps. The ghost of flame surrounded them, and warned him to draw no closer. Then they were gone, and he mounted the steps into the Librarium.

He found a world of smoke and ruin. A sob wracked him. He stood in the corpse of the building that had shaped his life. He moved with his fellows through charred wood and a falling snow of ash. Scattered around the room were the burned, smashed remains of the Traitors. At the centre of the room, he found Keremon.

The High Curator was still alive but badly burned. Her left arm was smashed.

It hung loose and flexible as a rope. Her left eye was wide and looked as if it had been scoured blank by too great a sight. Her right eye blinked as he approached. She could see him and pointed to the vault door. 'Go down,' she begged. 'Go and see.'

He did. The seal had been strong. The fire had not touched the archive. The work of cataloguing was destroyed, generations of labour that would have to begin again, but the memories themselves were still here. Mnemosyne was secure, her invaders destroyed. The mission of her citizens would continue. Gosta could tell what Keremon and the other scribes needed to know from the first level.

What he had to see for himself was much further down.

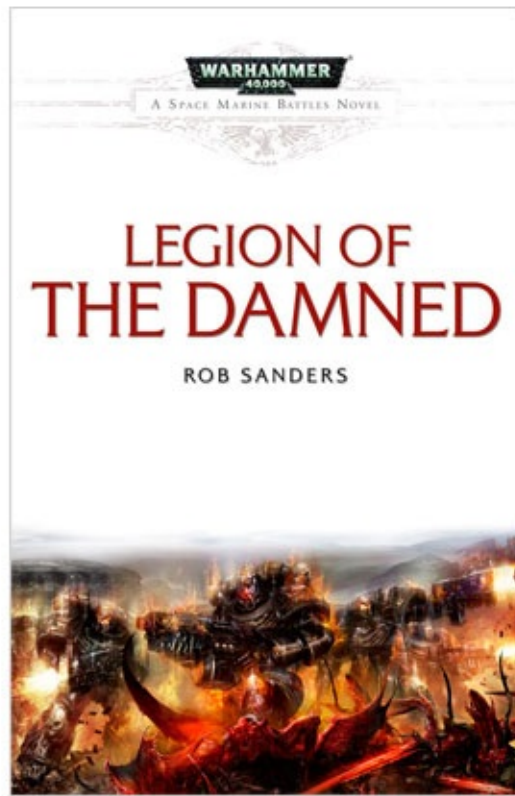
Though the tugging was gone, he had no trouble remembering the location. He was dropping with exhaustion, but he kept on going, deeper and deeper, until he was in the vaulted chamber once more. He approached the spot where the secret waited.

He reached into the recess on the shelf. The secret was gone. Something that was not true flame, but could burn when it chose, had come into these depths. He recoiled when his fingers touched the cinders of memory itself. He stumbled back, his heart pounding. The lumen globes dimmed again as the last traces of thought scattered into the air, then vanished.

Where the secret had been, there was now only a gap, a hollow absence, and the infinite, watchful dark.

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