

WARHAMMER
40,000



L J GOULDING

THE AEGIDAN OATH

AN ULTRAMARINES STORY

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THE AEGIDAN OATH

L J Goulding

*'I could count myself a king of infinite space,
Were it not that I have bad dreams.'*

– from *Amulet, Prince Demark* (attributed to the dramaturge
Shakespeare), circa M2

The strips of parchment darkened quickly upon the brazier coals, the heat curling their edges and setting hungry flames over the illuminated script that marked each one.

As the three Space Marines watched, the words of their primarch were erased. Forgotten. Consigned to the murk of history as surely as if they had never been written.

Indeed, there were those who would deny that they ever *had* been written. The laws of men had finally overridden the word of the demi-gods, and the universe seemed so much more hollow and uncaring for it.

Oberdeii stared into the fire.

'I am an oath-breaker,' he murmured to no one in particular. 'No matter what happens from this moment on, that truth will remain with me until the end of my days.'

The halls of the orbital platform were dark, the beacon lights spinning reluctantly to life only as the craft passed the atmospheric threshold. Tarpaulins hung from the gaunt silhouettes of several decommissioned shuttles, their frayed edges stirred for the first time in months by the

downdraft of the Thunderhawk's manoeuvring thrusters, with empty storage bins and cargo crates stacked well beyond the operational grid-lines marked out on the deck. The pilot, Brother Wenlocke, eyed each obstacle through the frost-rimed armourglass of the canopy, easing the gunship into position as carefully as he could in the gloom.

One of the landing struts grazed an abandoned tool bench, sending a brace of oily engine parts clattering to the floor as the dropship touched down. The Space Marine cursed.

'This is a wretched disgrace. Could no one have cleared the landing bays for our arrival?'

Remaining where he stood behind the empty co-pilot's seat, Segas ran his tongue over his teeth and sniffed. 'No one knew we were coming,' he replied, 'and there are precious few personnel still stationed here, anyway. I doubt that cleaning up their predecessors' mess was ever high on their list of priorities.'

Cycling the engines down, Wenlocke turned. 'Forgive me, my lord Chaplain, but we travel with the authority of the Chapter Master himself in this matter. Does that not count for anything? We might at least have let them know the purpose of our visit ahead of time, and they could have prepared what we need.'

Segas shook his head.

'No, brother. We cannot reveal our purpose, save in person and only to those who *must* know of it. No physical record must remain of this enterprise, regardless of the outcome.'

The pilot grunted and rose from his seat, moving his armoured bulk sideways through the cockpit to the rear hatch. Segas slid around the unmanned navigation console to meet him, recovering his skull-faced helm from the stowage locker overhead. He ran a finger over the clean edges of the Ultima engraved upon the brow, and considered all that for which it stood.

Wenlocke made to load his bolt pistol sidearm, but the Chaplain stopped him. 'No. No weapons.'

'And yet you will take your crozius? I've seen you break our foes with it, as often as lead a sermon.'

'Aye, I will take my crozius. We will have one chance, and one chance only, to put this delicate matter right. Our primarch's eternal legacy is at

stake. That was why Chapter Master Decon sent me in his stead, and why I brought only you.'

Pausing with one boot on the topmost rung of the descent ladder, Wenlocke frowned. 'What, because you can trust me to keep my mouth shut when awkward questions are inevitably asked? Or just because we're both old enough to remember what happens to Chapters that keep dirty little secrets from the High Lords of Terra?' Without waiting for an answer, he swung his weight out and began to climb down into the gunship's hold. 'I did as you said – I purged all navigation data from the system. There is no record of our journey left for anyone to find.'

As the grey-haired warrior disappeared from view, muttering to himself in irritation, Segas considered Wenlocke's question.

I brought you for all of those reasons, and more besides, he thought. *Because you and I may never return from Mount Pharos.*

The air was cold and stale, and the deck plates of the corridors felt gritty beneath the Ultramarines' armoured tread. Segas and Wenlocke met with the skeleton crew of the Sothan orbital, all mortal serf-officers of the Chapter who were long past combat retirement age. The men and women saluted stiffly, and they walked with the stilted gait of humans who had lived all their natural life in artificial gravity. They were tired, and had evidently been forgotten by the Imperium at large.

As tired and forgotten as the orbital platform itself, perhaps?

At the Chaplain's request, they arranged transit for the two Space Marines on board an anonymous cargo lighter bound for the planet's surface. The flight was cramped and uncomfortable for warriors of their size, but the need for an unheralded arrival made it a necessity.

Some kilometres outside the ordered coastal city of Sothopolis lay the freight terminals of Odessa, and it was there that they emerged into the first rays of dawn's light ready to walk the overgrown paths to the mountain.

The mountain.

It appeared far more impressive from the ground than when Segas had first laid eyes upon it from orbit. It towered over the distant, lesser peaks of the Blackrocks, utterly dominating the skyline. Many were the myths surrounding its dark history, and only a select few within the Chapter knew

them all.

No matter how deeply Segas and Wenlocke pressed into the creaking quicktree forests, the mountain was always just visible beyond. For the most part they walked in silence, feeling faint and sporadic tremors in the earth beneath their feet.

Though it was a laughable notion, it seemed that Mount Pharos might be following their progress.

Or, at the very least, listening out for their approach.

As the day's heat grew, their path began to climb into the foothills. Without warning, Wenlocke froze mid-step – Segas saw the veteran's hand flick reflexively to the empty holster at his hip, then up in a halting gesture. Something cracked in the thick undergrowth ahead of them, and Segas' own fingers closed around the grip of his crozius maul. The two warriors edged apart, scanning for the unseen threat.

A man trudged into view, walking with a rough wooden staff in one hand and a las-lock rifle slung at his back. His clothing was simple, his frame lean, his gait assured. His tanned flesh and lined features spoke of countless summers beneath the open skies, and a wholesome life working close to the land. Only when he looked up to see the two armoured giants before him – one in cobalt blue, the other in black – did he slow his pace, his expression more vexed than alarmed.

Segas and Wenlocke held their ground, saying nothing. The man leaned on his staff, and mopped his brow with a ragged sleeve.

‘Good day to you, friends. Tell me, have you seen a stray quarian pass this way?’

The Chaplain kept his voice level, his gaze as piercing as he could make it. ‘Quarian?’

‘Aye,’ the man replied. ‘Herd beast. Crafty little boggarts. They give me the slip every chance they get, up and down the hillsides.’

Brother Wenlocke looked to Segas. They both knew that the mountain was forbidden. The paths were supposed to remain untrodden by the people of Sothopolis, and yet here was a simple herdsman wandering wheresoever his animals took him. But he had a straightforward manner about him, and he held the Chaplain's eye without fear. He clearly believed that he had every right to be there. Was this, then, the famed pride of the Sothan people?

It mattered not. They did not have time to dwell upon the trespasses of the locals, and Segas waved Wenlocke back. ‘We have not seen your beast, citizen. We cannot help you.’

The man grinned, scratching his chin. ‘Citizen, he says? Heh. You’ve never been to Sotha before, that’s for sure.’ Still showing no hint of being intimidated, he sidled up to Segas and reached out to paw at his battleplate, appraising him. ‘The Chapter, then? You’re a tall one, like the Scouts and their training sergeants. More than twenty hands from toe to tooth, I’ll bet...’

Segas remained guarded. The herdsman rapped his staff on the packed, loamy earth.

‘Do you know anything of this world, my tall friends? When I was young, the Chapter sent many Scouts. They were taught their craft on Sotha, and took what they learned to the stars, yes? They arrived as boys, but left as gelding-warriors, taller than any man from the plains or the cities. Not as tall as you two though, I think!’ He screwed his face up, thoughtfully. ‘And not as tall as the old man.’

At that, Segas leaned in sharply. ‘The old man? Another Chapter warrior, like us?’

The herdsman grinned again. ‘Aye, a gelding-lord like you, but without any pretty war-plate or badge of rank. *The old man on the mountain*, we always called him. Even before the Scouts stopped coming, he was the only one allowed up to the top of Mount Pharos. The braver lads from the herds used to help him clear the pathways, and he would tell us such tales about the horses and whatnot from his home world. But you’d never cross him. He has a fearsome manner, when he’s riled.’

Wenlocke stepped in behind the man, and placed his gauntlets firmly upon his thin, mortal shoulders, enveloping them completely.

‘This old man on the mountain,’ he whispered, ‘you know where we might find him?’

The herdsman frowned, looking from one gauntlet to the other and then back up at Segas.

‘I dare say, my tall friends, that he’ll be up at the old castellum. The ruins are hard for you to see from the air, I’ll bet. If you’d be so kind as to unhand me, I’ll take you there.’

The Aegida Castellum, Segas recalled from the Chapter's archives on Macragge, had been constructed during the Great Heresy as a base of legionary co-operation on Sotha. Ravaged by traitor assault and never fully rebuilt in all the centuries since, it stood now only in name upon the lower slopes, with tumbles of mossy ferrocrete strewn down the mountainside beneath it. What a casual glance might have mistaken for a rocky outcropping, Segas now saw was the overgrown remnant of a blocky, armoured keep, shot through with pale quicktree trunks and choked by vines.

Over the afternoon chorus of insects and birdcalls, there came the rhythmic threshing of a blade, and the mumbled refrain of what sounded like a work song.

Segas looked often to their guide, who seemed at times as surefooted as any quarian might be upon the uneven surfaces of the steep forest floor. Where previously he had been happy to engage the two Space Marines in inane chatter about the changing seasons and the preposterous price of a sack of grain at market, he fell to a respectful silence as they climbed the outer curtain wall of the ruins. Now that they could hear the old man's gruff voice, the herdsman had become visibly uneasy.

'I shall leave this to you, my lord Chaplain,' said Wenlocke with a bow of his head. 'As you said before, this could be *delicate*.'

Handing off his skull helm to the other warrior, Segas approached the final gate. Wenlocke followed at a distance, with the herdsman trudging warily after him. Through the fallen arch lay what had once been a courtyard or mustering ground, the flagstones now cracked with grasses and weeds.

At the far end, in the shadow of the ruined keep, the old man on the mountain toiled.

His transhuman physique had been little dulled by the centuries. Age had not wearied him as it might a mortal, yet he remained largely free of the battle scars or augmetics that one would expect upon such a venerable warrior of the Adeptus Astartes. His bare limbs were clean, his torso rippled with corded muscle, and only the neural interface ports of his black carapace broke the skin of his back. His wild, white hair was tied back, slick with the greasy sweat that covered his body and darkened his tattered breeches.

He hefted an immense agricultural scythe, oversized for his grip, with which he cut back the vegetation. The rhythm of the sweeping, repetitive motion was a counterpoint to the song on his lips.

‘In avis, in novas, farsoni...’ he murmured as he worked. *‘Invere, vesu ves ni vox...’*

Segas cleared his throat, and called out.

‘Brother-Captain Oberdeii, Warden of the Pharos and commander of the Ultramarines Aegida Company?’

The warrior let his scythe fall still. He straightened slowly, and turned to face the Chaplain. There, in his cold stare and not upon his physical form, were borne all the hardships of his life.

Segas came to attention, saluting him with the sign of the aquila over his breastplate. Behind him, he heard Wenlocke do the same, and waited for a response.

Oberdeii stared at them for a long while, the butt of his scythe resting upon the ground. He showed no sign of recognition at their livery, nor even the Ultima adorning it. Segas began to wonder if they had made a mistake in coming unannounced after all, and whether or not they would live to take word of it back to Macragge.

Reaching up slowly to smooth his long whiskers, the aged captain’s gaze moved to the mortal cowering in the archway. ‘You,’ he barked. ‘I remember you. You are called Bennis. You brought me milk when my bovid was taken by the rot.’

The herdsman let out a gasp of relief. ‘Yes! Many years ago, I think you mean, when I was a boy.’ He patted the strap of the las-lock on his back. ‘You taught me the best way to hold a rifle, as thanks, and—’

‘Shut your mouth,’ Oberdeii growled. Bennis did not need to be told twice.

Segas looked to the captain’s chest, and the twin-scythe emblem tattooed in faded golden ink across it. He saw the afternoon sun glinting from the curve of the actual blade at Oberdeii’s shoulder, and recalled the provenance of that simple icon – the noble Sothan martyrs that it represented, the soldiers who had been farmers, and who had always intended to be so once again.

Oberdeii glowered at him in return.

‘Who are you? A Chaplain?’

‘Yes, my lord. I am Brother-Chaplain Segas of Second Company. My companion here is Veteran-Brother Wenlocke.’

‘Hnh. What do you want? As you can see, I have work to do.’

This was it, Segas realised. This was the moment. He steeled his nerve, feeling the weight of a thousand years of Ultramarian glory resting firmly upon his shoulders.

‘Brother-captain,’ he declared, ‘by the authority of the Lord Macragge, ruler of Ultramar, we are here to relieve you of your command here on Sotha.’

The wooden snath of Oberdeii’s scythe creaked as he tightened his grip on it. ‘No you aren’t,’ he spat. ‘Your Lord Macragge *has* no authority in this. Only one individual could release me from my oath, and he’s dead.’

Caution. Segas had advised caution from the start. He cleared his throat again.

‘My lord Oberdeii, I understand that this must come as—’

Oberdeii let out a wordless roar, and snapped the wooden haft of the scythe between his immense hands. In spite of himself, Segas flinched even as he heard the whimpering Benvis fleeing back down the forest path and away to what he probably considered safety.

‘Do not speak to me,’ Oberdeii bellowed. ‘You understand nothing. I am the last Lightkeeper...’ He began to trail off, frowning. ‘Though... no light comes from Sotha anymore...’

A curious turn of phrase, under the circumstances, Segas thought. Nonetheless, he stiffened into a deferential bow.

‘You have upheld your oath, brother-captain – none could ask for a more worthy guardian. But this world no longer requires the protection of the Aegida Company.’

Oberdeii’s jaw worked silently for a moment. ‘If you want my command,’ he mumbled, ‘then you’ll have to take it from me. I won’t yield without a fight. You can’t deny me that.’

It was an honourable enough request, Segas had to admit. A ritual duel, against a living legend of the Great Heresy, no less. He turned to Wenlocke for approval, though the veteran was eyeing the broken scythe that remained in Oberdeii’s hand, and the edge of the wickedly sharp blade that still glinted in the sunlight.

Nevertheless, the Chaplain nodded. ‘Very well then, my lord. I shall stand

as Chapter Master Decon's proxy in this, and let the matter be decided between us in combat. Brother Wenlocke will—'

The blow was devastating. It lifted Segas from his feet and sent him sprawling to the broken flagstones in a clatter of plate, ears ringing, his vision hazed red.

Oberdeii stood over him.

'Get up.'

Gaping and blinking, Segas tried to shake the dullness from between his temples. He hadn't even seen the old warrior move. Wenlocke stepped forwards to help him to his feet, but Oberdeii shot the veteran a look that would have reduced a mortal to panicked tears.

'What do you think you're doing, *boy*? This is what he agreed to.'

Without breaking his gaze, he drew back one bare foot and kicked the Chaplain squarely in the face, snapping his head around. Blood splattered onto dusty stone, and Segas let out a pained gasp. 'S-Stay back, brother...' he managed, between coppery gulps that caught in his throat.

Wenlocke shook his head, backing away slowly. 'This is lunacy.'

Segas rolled onto his hands and knees, with Oberdeii pacing around him. The captain twitched and murmured to himself, twisting the scythe blade free of the broken haft and holding it like a falx. 'This is *my* duty, *my* honour...' he hissed. 'And my worthiness is not for the likes of you to judge...'

As Segas brought one unsteady foot underneath himself, he reached for the crozius arcanum at his belt once more. Oberdeii froze, his improvised blade ready.

'Better make it count, Chaplain. You'll get one chance. One chance only.'

It was true. Segas knew now that Oberdeii would kill him – and Wenlocke immediately after – if he could. To him, this was no merely symbolic duel for the sake of saving face.

This was the only honour that the old captain had left. For that, Segas found that he pitied him.

The Chaplain rose painfully, activating the maul's power field and holding it in a guard position. His words came at first in a slur. 'Forgive me, my lord. I was given this task, though in truth I feel blessed to journey here and meet you in person.' He took one last, steadying breath. 'Long have I made study of the Chapter's hidden records – I know who you are,

and what you have done for the Imperium.’

Oberdeii hesitated only a moment before he lunged, the blade moving in a masterful feint intended to bring him inside Segas’ guard and strike for his vulnerable neck-seal.

But this time, the Chaplain was ready.

He stepped the same way as Oberdeii and jabbed at the base of his opponent’s skull with the head of the crozius. There was a bright flash and a crack of percussive energy discharge that threw them apart. Had Segas dialled the weapon’s power field for anything more than minimal output, it would likely have blown the captain’s head from his shoulders.

As it was, Oberdeii stumbled forwards, failing to regain his footing before crashing down onto his side, stunned and wracked by fading neural tremors. Spittle foamed at the corner of his mouth, and his right eye was bloodshot as it rolled in its socket. Wenlocke reluctantly moved to aid the stricken officer, kicking the scythe blade out of reach.

From a distance, Segas ran two fingers of his gauntlet across the back of his head where the captain’s wild slash had caught him. They came away traced with cinnabar-red, his genhanced physiology already clotting the ugly gash in his scalp.

He looked down at Oberdeii, and saluted him with the crozius.

‘As I said, my lord – please forgive me, but you are relieved of your command.’

When the captain had taken water and regained his senses, the three of them climbed the mountain together. Wenlocke, usually quick to voice any discontent or to join in someone else’s conversation, remained quiet. He listened intently as Segas put various questions to Oberdeii, and the embittered captain gave such replies as he saw fit.

At times, those replies bordered on the nonsensical, and neither Segas nor Wenlocke believed this was entirely the result of a powered blow to the head. Yet it was clear that even the most curious eccentricities of ‘the old man on the mountain’ carried the weight of years and experience in them.

‘I have learned much in my time,’ Segas mused as they neared the summit, ‘from the writings of such luminaries as Lamiad, Corvo and Prayto. But here I am, walking with another great hero of our Chapter – one who stood at their side, in their finest hour, and spoke with them as

easily as we speak now, and yet lives still among us.’

‘I am no hero,’ Oberdeii grunted.

‘Come now, brother-captain. You—’

‘No hero,’ he repeated, firmly. ‘I did what was asked of me, without question, knowing that to do so would deny me any future glory. No warrior of the Legion was ever a hero simply for doing what was expected of him...’ His attention began to wander again, as it had several times already during their ascent. ‘They say, “Only in death does duty end”. But my name will never appear on any roll of honour, no monument to the Legion *or* Chapter.’

Segas nodded. ‘Such was the solemnity of your duty, and the secrecy of your appointment to it. Even so, there is a great deal written of you, in the grand Library of Ptolemy on Macragge.’

Oberdeii shrugged. ‘Never heard of it. Never been to the capital world.’

‘It is a wondrous sight, brother-captain – the greatest of archives, save for those of the Imperial Palace itself on holy Terra. It was named for the first presiding master of the old legionary Librarius, and has been much expanded in the centuries since. Though my calling has ever been to the Reclusiam and the righteous soul of our Chapter, I am often drawn to the halls of the great library in the course of my duties. It represents the sum total of all Ultramar’s knowledge, culture and philosophies. And its histories, both remembered and... *otherwise*.’

Unease welled up in Segas’ gut. He was not used to discussing such things openly, though he knew that, in all likelihood, Oberdeii was privy to far more dangerous secrets than he. The Chaplain glanced sidelong at Wenlocke, who glanced at them both in turn before mouthing a silent prayer and touching his fingertips to the golden crux upon his breastplate.

‘I feel that we need not be coy, you and I,’ Segas went on, putting his concern aside. ‘There is a place within the Library of Ptolemy wherein lie the two halves of our primarch’s legacy. The first is the great *Codex*, the foundation of the Adeptus Astartes penned by his own noble hand. Such an important work can never be lost or allowed to fall into the hands of our enemies, and so it is watched over night and day by tireless guardians. Guardians much like yourself, in fact.’

Oberdeii did not visibly respond. He continued to place one callused foot in front of the other, loose stones skittering from his tread and away down

the mountainside.

‘The other half is similarly guarded, though for very different reasons. There has been much debate in recent years, between Chapter Master Tigris Decon and his inner circle, as to whether we should purge it from the library altogether. Some urge him to do so, to rid ourselves and our successors of the only remaining proof of Lord Guilliman’s failure and folly during the Great Heresy. Others would seek to remind Master Decon that to destroy our past would blind us to the lessons we might come to learn from it.’

‘And you, Chaplain? What do you say?’

Oberdeii’s question caught Segas off guard. He considered his response carefully.

‘My lord, I believe that such an unadulterated truth can present nothing other than a serious liability to the honour of our Chapter. The Imperium loves and cherishes the Ultramarines, and the memory of Roboute Guilliman, wisest of all the Emperor’s sons. We are beyond reproach.’ He raised a finger. ‘But only as long as all knowledge of Imperium Secundus is kept from the rest of the galaxy. The archive record contains every surviving document and source relating to those confusing times, and it could shatter the reputation of our primarch and the credibility of everything he has done for the Imperium since. Can you imagine if even the hallowed *Codex Astartes* were to be branded as the work of a heretic, one only revealed centuries after his demise?’

‘You would destroy it, then?’ Oberdeii looked to him expectantly for an answer.

‘No,’ Segas replied, holding the captain’s gaze. ‘At this stage, what would be the point?’

The sunset kissed the peak of Mount Pharos as they emerged onto a jutting promontory. As below at the castellum, the remains of a fortress clung to the rock above, nonetheless seeming almost to graze the heavens with its crumbling ramparts. A fortified gate, cracked and weather-beaten, led inside the mountain itself.

‘The Emperor’s Watch,’ said Oberdeii. ‘You will know its name from the archives, Chaplain.’

Indeed, he did.

With the world spread out before them, Wenlocke and Segas paused to

take it all in, and were rendered speechless by the legendary beauty of Sotha. Beyond the forests and the Blackrock range, they could see all the way past Odessa to the hills of the Chrepan region, and the tiny lights of some secondary township growing far from Sothopolis. To the east, night was falling for true over the ocean, and the first stars were already visible in the sky.

Oberdeii sat upon the bare ground, disinterested. Next to that breathtaking vista, he appeared smaller. Older, even.

‘I did not ask for this,’ he muttered. ‘I did not ask to linger on, long after everyone I have ever known has fallen to the reaper’s blade. No glory for Oberdeii, no foes to face – can you imagine that? The misery of a former legionary who cannot die as he was meant to, on the end of a sword or to a well-aimed bullet. We are made too well. A life without war makes us immortal. Our bodies endure, though our spirits may wither...’

He looked up, his expression suddenly haunted.

‘I don’t want to live forever. I see too much.’

Something in the captain’s tone made Wenlocke turn. Segas marked it well. He stepped closer.

‘Brother-captain, do you speak of the xenos device?’

Oberdeii rolled his eyes, and shifted his weight. ‘It is nothing. I don’t hear their voices anymore.’ He looked up into the darkening sky overhead. ‘You would not understand. You young warriors of the Chapter are of a different time. I don’t like to think what the primarch would make of his own sons, now. The songs of Ultramar have fallen flat without him to lead us.’

He got to his feet slowly, as though such dour thoughts alone could age him. He looked at Wenlocke, and let his stare slide into the empty space beyond, his eyes dimming with memory.

‘He stood there, where you stand now. Roboute Guilliman, the Avenging Son, stood in that exact spot over nine centuries ago, and addressed me and my battle-brothers. When I learned of his death, I stood in the same spot again and mourned his passing with a few quiet words. If you had ever known him, ever heard his voice, then you would not question his legacy. Master Decon would not consider himself the lord of Macragge. Not one of us who remains is worthy to question the eternal will of our primarch. Not one.’

The evening breeze brought with it a new chill. Oberdeii closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

‘I’m not mad,’ he muttered. ‘I know what I am to you, to the Chapter. I am a living, breathing reminder of what you consider, in your vanity, to be Lord Guilliman’s mistakes. You could not erase them from the pages of history while I remained here on Sotha, oathed to the final duty that he gave me. Not even if you burned every library on every world.’

Segas said nothing. He was relieved that, one way or another, the captain had arrived at this realisation for himself.

Oberdeii shook his head. ‘But what was my oath, Chaplain? Do you even know? Is *that* recorded in the archive?’

‘It is. You are the captain and last surviving member of the Aegida, a division of the Ultramarines Chapter whose origins can be traced back to the days of the Thirteenth Legion, whose very existence contravenes our primarch’s own law. For reasons known only to a select few, Lord Guilliman saw fit to maintain a phantom *eleventh* company on Sotha even as he forced every other Chapter to conform to the Codex model of ten. Quite aside from the secret shame of Imperium Secundus, the existence of the Aegida Company could be seen as proof of his wilful and deliberate flouting of Imperial decree – a decree that he and his surviving loyal brothers agreed upon only after much conflict. The Second Founding of the Adeptus Astartes was all that kept the dream of a unified Imperium alive, after the Great Heresy.’

Grimly, Segas drew his crozius once more, and held it before him.

‘To say that a revelation of this sort would be a scandal for our Chapter does not even begin to cover it. We and all our Successors would be cast out, the defenders of mankind would be divided and the Imperium would tear itself apart all over again. You are not simply the reminder of a mistake, my lord – you are the embodiment of it, and the last scrap of living proof. The time has come for the Aegida itself to be purged.’

Regarding the Chaplain’s winged sceptre of office, Oberdeii shook his head. ‘Why now? What has changed? What has rattled Tigris Decon?’

Rather than Segas, it was Wenlocke who replied. ‘It must be now, my lord, because the Ultramarines will soon fall under the scrutiny of the High Lords once more. There is to be a Third Founding.’

Oberdeii snorted, though there was no trace of humour in it. ‘A *third*?’

That is impossible.’ He made the sign of the aquila with trembling hands. ‘Who dares to suggest such a thing? Now that our Lord Guilliman is gone and cannot protest it, who has led the Imperium to consider this... this... shallow heresy?’

Wenlocke and Segas shared a hesitant glance. Oberdeii sagged.

‘Dorn,’ he whispered, the realisation breaking him. ‘It could only be Dorn. Such a pale imitation of our primarch’s greatest achievement.’

Segas nodded. ‘Lord Dorn, brother to our departed father, brought this before the High Lords more than forty years ago. The preparations have already begun. Petitions have been filed, Chapter assets marked and divided. The Adeptus Mechanicus has pledged a thousand new—’

‘We are too few,’ Oberdeii interrupted him. ‘The Ultramarines, the Fists, the Angels – we are each only a thousand strong at best. From nine loyal Legions were the Chapters born, and our father did not even live to see the Successors reach full strength in a hundred years.’ He gestured to the Sothan horizon, from east to west, and then to the stars above. ‘I have seen it, brothers. I know how long it takes to turn raw neophytes into seasoned battle-brothers, and no one better. You speak of the Aegida dividing the defenders of mankind? This “Third Founding” will leave the first nine Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes without teeth, mired in petty mortal bureaucracy for another century or more.’

Segas raised his hands placatingly. ‘Brother-captain – I should tell you that Rogal Dorn has urged the High Lords to grant writs of succession to the Second Founding Chapters as well. Any, in fact, that have the veterans, gene-seed reserves and materiel to support them. Over a hundred have already been approved, with the same number again currently being assayed.’

Oberdeii was rendered almost speechless. ‘Shallow heresy...’ he said again, his voice barely a whisper.

‘Regardless of how you may feel about this matter, my lord, this is the moment that Chapter Master Decon has chosen for us to act. We will dissolve the Aegida Company, quietly, under the cover of this new founding. You are to be released from your oath to the primarch.’

The venerable captain whirled around, his hands balled into fists.

‘Never!’ he spat. ‘You do not have the authority! Not even Dorn can command this! Take the Aegida. Take it and pretend it never happened.’

Paint over the dark stain on our spotless history, and return to your “Lord Macragge” and tell him you did as you were told. But I will not abandon my duty. I will not leave Sotha unguarded. Her people have earned that much, at least.’

Segas sighed. It would come to the final choice, then.

He reached to his belt and produced a gilded scroll, sealed with the haloed Ultima of Macragge, and unfurled the freshly scribed vellum within.

‘This is a writ of succession for the Ultramarines Chapter, one of nine already approved by Terra. You will notice that the minutiae have been left incomplete.’ He offered the scroll to Oberdeii, but the captain did not take it. Segas shrugged. ‘Two courses of action remain open to you, my lord. As a mark of respect, for all that you have given and sacrificed for Macragge, Master Decon is willing to approve your immediate transfer to the Fifth Company. You would be assigned to new combat operations focused on the fringes of Old Ultramar, with an exceptionally high probability of glorious martyrdom. Your days will end, on the battlefield, as an Ultramarine. Only in death does duty end.

‘The alternative is that you abandon your old oath, here and now, and sign your name instead upon this scroll. You will become the founding Master of the Aegida Chapter, noble Successors of the Ultramarines. I will join you, along with Brother Wenlocke and seventy-two other appointed veterans of the Orlan Conquest. We will take Sotha as our home world, and defend Mount Pharos from all threats, from now until the end of all things.’

Oberdeii stared at the vellum scroll. He did not seem to be considering the offer so much as attempting to disbelieve it.

‘You don’t understand,’ he muttered. ‘The Aegidan oath I swore to the primarch was not to protect Mount Pharos from the enemies of the Imperium.’

Segas faltered. His mind leapt back to the archives, the many affidavits, records and testimonials that he had curated in his years of study, every second spent in contemplation of this very moment. What had he—

Gesturing to the fortified gateway in the bluff beneath the Emperor’s Watch, Oberdeii answered the question before the Chaplain could ask it.

‘My oath was to protect Sotha from the Pharos itself.’

With those words, the yawning maw of the gate seemed wider and darker than before.

The vaults began as smooth stone, crafted and embellished in the blunt Imperial style. Lumen orbs hung in delicate brass cradles, illuminating the chambers and votive spaces that opened up on either side. This, Segas supposed, had been the work of the Imperial Fists after Sotha was retaken from traitor forces – austere and functional, but artisan-crafted with the strength of rock and steel upon which the VII Legion had built their unyielding legacy.

Soon, this strength gave way to the rough framework of a temple in construction. The ancient scaffold and incompletely hewn masonry ended with a graceless step down to the glassy, obsidian surfaces of the mountain's interior.

At Guilliman's command, Rogal Dorn's sons had been building their new fortress within a far older labyrinth of unknown design.

Why had they ceased their labour so abruptly?

The deeper the three of them trudged into the darkness, their way lit now only by Segas' and Wenlocke's suit lamps, Oberdeii became visibly more agitated. He glanced up and down the tunnel every few moments, muttering to himself.

'He thinks me mad? It is enough that I know... and that I uphold it above all else...' He bent to examine cracks in the smooth, black curve of the rock, then called out with a forced levity. 'Would you believe, eh, these walls used to heal themselves? I saw it with my own eyes, many times. But not anymore. Not after the primarch tore out the mountain's heart.'

A barely perceptible tremor, nothing more than a low vibration, shuddered through the ground beneath their feet. Oberdeii's eyes widened in the gloom.

'And yet, the heart still tries to beat...'

Segas removed his gauntlet, placing one hand upon the tunnel wall. The rock was icily cold.

'Do not concern yourself with the local superstitions, my lord – the mountain and even the distant Blackrocks have long suffered from geological instability. Tectonic shifts are to be expected.'

Oberdeii shook his head, pushing past the Chaplain and leading them

onwards. ‘When he returned to Ultramar after the war was lost and won, Lord Guilliman ordered the Pharos destroyed. The Mechanicum priests carved up the quantum pulse engines like a feast-day fowl, and carted thousands of tonnes of xenos machinery out into the light of day, spiriting it all away to their secret vaults across the galaxy for further study. There was so much of it. Too much to even think about taking it all, not with the short time we had. No one knew how it could just keep on coming, and coming.’

He tapped himself on the chest, where the twin-scythe tattoo was just visible beneath his jerkin. The hurt pride in his voice was mixed with a note of trepidation.

‘I could have told them. I’ve seen further than most.’

The angle of the tunnel grew steeper, and they had to steady themselves against the slope of the floor. Oberdeii moved with many lifetimes’ familiarity, helping Wenlocke to find the best footholds. Still, he seemed distracted.

‘The locals used to have their superstitions – my brothers and I used to sit with the herdsman in the outer halls, as they tried to sing the mountain to sleep. But it was never the same as it had once been.’ He fixed Segas with that same wide stare as the ground trembled again. ‘So don’t tell me that those vibrations are natural tectonic activity. That doesn’t explain why they are always the exact same frequency, and the same duration. The mountain doesn’t sleep... and nor do I...’

Segas took Oberdeii by the arm. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t sleep. I never sleep. You wouldn’t either.’

Even Wenlocke halted at that. ‘You haven’t slept since you swore your oath to the primarch?’

‘Give or take. Catalepsean slumber, but never true sleep. I always like to keep one eye on the mountain.’ The captain smiled for the first time since they had ventured beneath the surface. ‘And besides, I don’t like the things I see in my dreams.’

Segas saw the incredulous look in Wenlocke’s eye. An explanation was in order.

‘Brother, the venerable captain was known to experience visions, precipitated by his connection and proximity to Mount Pharos – this was verified by many, including the primarch himself. Both times the young

Oberdeii's most vivid dreams went unheeded, and both times he was proven correct. He foresaw the arrival of the Blood Angels Legion at Ultramar, and he also foresaw the invasion of Sotha by traitor forces.'

Oberdeii twitched. 'I was just a neophyte. But even now, nearly a thousand years later, those visions remain. Has my whole life been a dream? And if so, whose dream is it...? They saw our light... in the dark between the stars...'

Segas felt his hearts sinking. This old warrior was not fit to lead a Chapter of the Emperor's finest. His centuries away from the Chapter, denied a life of battle and instead given the thankless task of clearing undergrowth with his bare hands, had clearly taken their toll. These frequent babbling rants were proof enough of that.

What had Segas agreed to?

They continued down the incline in silence, until Oberdeii pointed out a smear of dark grey against the blackness of the tunnel. 'There,' he sighed. 'Shoddy work, and inelegant compared to what was built on the surface. But time was short and Lord Guilliman's patience was at an end.'

The way ahead levelled out into a much broader space – not in the natural curve of the passageway, but with a rising blockage that edged all the way up to the ceiling. Their armoured boots struck the uneven surface with dull thuds as they stepped out onto it.

'Ferrocrite,' Wenlocke murmured. 'Poured down here? Why?'

'To seal the mountain,' Oberdeii replied, inspecting the edges of the tunnel where the join was most noticeable. 'To keep everything down there... *down there*. The serf labourers poured millions of tonnes of 'crete into the main tributary tunnels. That was the primarch's last word on the matter of the Pharos, and it is one for which I am thankful.'

'Aye!' Wenlocke snorted. 'If anything yet lives down there, in the depths, then it must squirm and writhe in dark places that no man or primarch has ever—'

Oberdeii turned slowly to face him. His glare was cold and fierce.

'Do not speak of such things. Not here. Not in this place.'

Aside from the low, broad arch of the chamber's sloping vault, the only other feature was a plain stone bier, set with a brazier on the ferrocrite floor before it. Oberdeii approached it reverently, striking a flame into the bowl with a simple flint and rasp.

As the oiled tinder took, the flickering light revealed what lay upon the bier's top.

An iron mask, worked into the semblance of a skull.

The metal was pitted with age, but had been kept polished and oiled through the centuries. Unaccountably, the sight of it sent a chill into Segas' hearts. There was something there, something in the emptiness of the eye sockets, in the stylised line of the jaw that was neither a grin nor a grimace.

'The mask of Barabas Dantioch, first Warden of the Pharos,' Oberdeii murmured. 'A loyal hero of the Great Heresy, by Guilliman's own decree. I live in the shadow he has cast upon this place, in more ways than one, though I can never hope to be so worthy of the title of Warden.'

Beneath the mask were three strips of decrepit parchment, fixed to the bier with wax that had become little more than a discoloured crimson bruise upon the stone. The imprint of the Ultima of Macragge was barely visible in the seal.

'You knelt here?' Segas asked, his voice feeling weak with awe. 'You took the knee before our primarch and made your oath, at the threshold of the Pharos itself?'

Oberdeii nodded. He ran his fingertips over the fine calligraphic script that adorned each of the oath papers. 'Aye. The primarch drew his blade, the *Gladius Incandor*, and I swore the Aegidan oath upon it. By the flames of this brazier was the seal made, by his own hand.'

Brother Wenlocke sank to one knee, his head bowed before the bier and the artefacts laid upon it. The captain regarded him curiously, but continued.

'And now young Master Decon urges me to make a simple choice – a choice between surrendering my rank and my life, or continuing to watch over this place as something I am not. You tell me that I cannot remain an Ultramarine and still act as Warden of the Pharos, as the noble primarch appointed me.'

Segas considered his words. 'I had not thought to put it so, captain. But yes, that is the essence of it.'

By the glow of the brazier, Oberdeii appeared differently, like some haunted phantasm of the abyss. 'No good will come of this, Chaplain Segas,' he said grimly. 'Mark my words – I am as certain of this as

anything I have ever known. This lie that you craft will be the death of all that Guilliman strove to accomplish.’

He reached out and plucked the oath papers from the seal, the wax yielding easily, and what little of the Ultima that remained visible was broken.

‘Pray that our primarch never awakens from his deathly slumber, or we shall know his wrath.’

Segas stoked the brazier, the ashes of the oath papers crumbling as they were ground between the smouldering coals. He saw the grief in Oberdeii’s eyes.

‘Think of it not as the breaking of an oath, but a renewal of the same. When you swore upon the primarch’s blade and your own, the galaxy was a very different place.’ He rose, and placed a hand upon the captain’s shoulder. ‘But I am glad you have chosen this path. The Imperium is changing, and we shall change with it. The past will soon be forgotten, and the future is not what it used to be.’

Oberdeii did not respond. Brother Wenlocke reached for the iron mask upon the bier, and presented it to his new Chapter Master. ‘Hail to you, my lord – Warden of the Pharos in perpetuity, and Master of the Aegida Chapter!’

The proclamation hung in the silence of the sealed chamber for a moment. The trace of a frown crossed Oberdeii’s brow.

‘No. That name is gone also. Gone with my fallen brothers, and my primarch.’

Segas handed him the writ of succession, and a matrix-quill. ‘It is to you, then, Master Oberdeii. By what name shall we bring death to the foes of mankind?’

Absently, the Chapter Master raised a hand to the tattoo over his heart. His jaw was set, his voice low.

‘The Aegida was the shield, but no more. Sotha shall not be defended, but shall strike at the darkness before it can grow, and reap a bitter harvest. Put out the call to the proud men and women of this world – they have earned the right to fight and bleed and die alongside any warrior of this Chapter, and their sons shall be our brethren. Let them turn their ploughshares into swords, and stand with us as equals.’

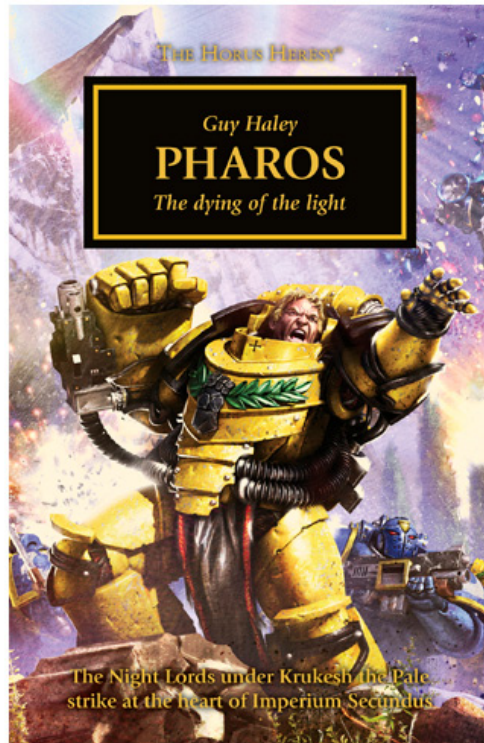
A fire was kindled in Segas' hearts by Oberdeii's words, and the Chaplain watched as he put his mark upon the vellum.

'If I am to be damned then it shall be on my own terms, and red with the blood of my foes. We stand no longer as the Emperor's shield, brothers, but as his noble Scythes.'

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L J Goulding has written many stories for Black Library, including ‘The Lords of Borsis’, ‘Kaldor Draigo: Knight of Titan’, ‘Shield of Baal: The Word of the Silent King’ and the Space Marine Battles audio drama *Mortarion’s Heart* for Warhammer 40,000, and ‘The Oberwald Ripper’ and ‘The Great Maw’ for Warhammer. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

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