

Soulbound

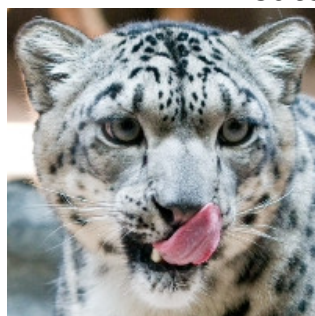
A Raven Guard Audio Drama Script (2018)

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They speak of other hands at play. I seek to understand their role in what occurred and what might yet occur”.

Qeld: “Then I shall strive to provide what enlightenment I am able. Where would you have me begin?”

Kayvaan Shrike: “Where all such tales begin. Here, in the Ravenspire”.

* * *

Qeld: “I presume you have heard the reports from the Pardemiron sector, brothers? With the heretic Masic dispatched, the 4th Company had regained control of the entire sector. The traitors scuttle for cover back to their foul nests”.

Illith: “Aye, Qeld. Yet the war rages on. My own Company remains under siege from the gibbering filth that crawls like an endless tide from the dark corners of the warp. I fear I am required to lead them against such horrors”.

Mordren: “Illith is right. Out amongst the Carrion stars the Knights of the Raven face a mutant cult of growing strength and guile. They must be suppressed”.

Qeld: “I too leave my Company in the midst of war, Mordren. We lay siege to Quomoris, where the greenskins gather their forces. These are troubled times. Our enemies grow more desperate and more dangerous still”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “In this you are right, Qeld”.

Qeld: “Chapter Master?”

Kayvaan Shrike: “Now more than ever you are needed. All of you... Word has reached Deliverance of a message of grave import to our Chapter. It's fallen into the hands of the interrogator in the service of the Inquisitor of the Ordo Hereticus. The interrogator travels across the wastes of Delephron aboard an enormous mag-train that circumnavigates the globe. If he were to reach his destination...”

Qeld: “Then the Inquisitor would be in possession of whatever is contained in the message”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “Indeed. I should keep the contents of that message from all ears but my own”.

Illith: “To act against the Ordo Hereticus, is that in itself not an act of heresy?”

Kayvaan Shrike: “An eventuality that cannot come to pass”.

Artarix: “Then what would you have us do?”

Kayvaan Shrike: “Infiltrate the mag-train and extract the message. Do not spill the blood of the interrogator. Do not even be seen. We must offer this Inquisitor no doubt as to our motives. We are righteous in the eyes of the Emperor. We must remain above reproach”.

Artarix: “And what about our brothers and the conflicts they engage in? We have been recalled from battle to seek a message?”

Kayvaan Shrike: “The contents of which might shake the very foundations of our Chapter. You must succeed”.

Illith: “Then our path is clear. We set out for Delephron within the hour”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “May Corax guide you hand”.

* * *

Old Man: “Whispering... Whispering... The unsilent void, the alabaster darkness teeming with life. The black-eyed smile and promises, promises, promises... nothing but death... Whispering... Whispering...”

(incoming vox transmission)

Bledheim (over vox): “Inquisitor Sabbathiel?”

Old Man (in the distance): “Whispering...”

Sabbathiel (over vox): “Bledheim, what is your status?”

Bledheim (over vox): “Everything proceeds according to plan, my lord. I have boarded the mag-train with our guest”.

Sabbathiel (over vox): “Is that him gibbering on in the background?”

Bledheim (over vox): “Yes, my lord”.

Sabbathiel (over vox): “Can’t you shut him up?”

Old Man (in the distance): “Nothing but death...”

Bledheim (over vox): “I have tried sedation, but the chemicals only appear to increase the fervor of his visions. I suspect his brain has been damaged by repeated exposure to the warp”.

Sabbathiel (over vox): “Fascinating, well just try and get him here in one piece. The message you are carrying is valuable enough to attract the wrong kind of attention”.

Bledheim (over vox): “Understood. Bledheim out”.

(closing vox transmission)

Old Man: “Whispers... Whispers... Whispers...”

Bledheim (starting to torture the old man): “What do you know? Huh, what have you got swirling around inside there?”

Old Man: “No... No... Stop it... Stop it... Stop the lights, the blinding lights... The whispers...”

Bledheim (sighing): “Never mind, we’ll find out soon enough. You’ll enjoy discovering the secrets of my little box”.

* * *

We fell out of the sky like flints tossed into an endless sea of night. Beneath us the mag-train rocketed across the barren wastes like a silver serpent, its passage stirring vast plumes of dust in the gloaming. It was immense, a ribbon of gleaming metal, a sleek river in a desert wasteland. It must have been a hundred carriages long and carried a thousand times as many civilians. Somewhere in one of those carriages was the message we sought.

Illith: “Target acquired, Corvus formation”.

Qeld: “Acknowledged”.

Illith: “Victorus Aut Mortis!”

Space Marines (altogether): “Victorus Aut Mortis!”

We dipped low, riding the buffeting wind currents, circling like carrion birds as we descended, our jump-packs on minimum thrust. And then the mag-train was rushing up to meet us, its convex adamantium roof glinting in the moonlight.

Illith: “Ready yourselves! We have only once chance of this. Mordren!”

Mordren: “Entering final descent vector now, compensating the crosscurrents”.

(Space Marines landing on the train)

Mordren: “I am down”.

Illith: “Qeld?”

Qeld: “Confirmed. I am down”.

Illith: “Artarix?”

Artarix: “Aye, Shadow Captain!”

I watched as Artarix dove in, a swooping shadow, his night-black armor seeming to absorb the very light of the moon, until he was nothing but a smear of ink against the horizon, a storm cloud waiting to divest its turbulent payload. As he dove closer, I saw him twist, caught momentarily in a grip of crosscurrent. He dipped low attempting to compensate, but the current had snared him and he swung out wide slipping suddenly out of sight beneath the penumbra of the mag-train's roof.

Qeld: "Artarix!"

I thundered over the roof top, mag-locking one armored boot to the train as I peered over. Artarix was spinning out of control caught in the mag-train's slipstream and slamming repeatedly against the side of the thundering vehicle.

Artarix (slamming against the carriage): "Ah! Ah! Qeld!"

Qeld: "Fire you jump-pack, maximum thrust!"

Mordren: "Are you mad? It'll kill him! He's caught in the vehicle's magnetic pool. He'll be ripped asunder. He can't withstand the force..."

Qeld: "He is Raven Guard..."

Illith: "Artarix, do as Qeld says".

Artarix: "Aye, Captain!"

(Artarix igniting his jump-pack)

I shielded myself as Artarix's jump-pack ignited dousing me in the ferocious backwash of its vents. At first it accomplished nothing but to send Artarix into a wild spin and I feared I condemned my brother to his death beneath the tracks. But then the jump-pack did its work, suddenly prizing him free of the mag-train's grip and flinging him up and out spinning away from our position. Mordren and I watched as Artarix fought to regain control and then Illith swooped in to grasp hold of his arm and steady him. Together they descended to the roof to join us.

Mordren: "It seems that ravens truly can fly..."

Artarix: "By the blood of the raven, my thanks to you, Qeld, for your counsel".

Illith: "Qeld, find us an entrance point. I do not wish to remain up here any longer than is necessary".

Qeld: "Aye, Shadow Captain".

Illith: "Mordren, check the com's chat to show that we are not discovered".

Mordren: "Aye! For Corax, brother!"

Illith: "So far our luck has helped. Now we focus on the mission: seek, locate, extract".

* * *

We entered the vehicle through a service hatch at the far end of the carriage. Ahead of us thrummed the engine itself, a massive archaic thing, operated by a machine that even the most esoteric adept of the Mechanicus might struggle to decipher. We slid through the shadows of a storage carriage the size of a small warehouse, ghost in between towering crates of provisions. Here the air was rich with the scent of unfamiliar spices and moldering vat-grown meat, the meager subsistence of refugees and soldiers.

Illith: "Advance in shadow..."

Qeld: "As the raven hunts, brother".

Ahead of us Illith slipped from behind the heap of crates, gesturing for Mordren to approach the door leading to the adjoining carriage. We were operating on instinct now, maintaining a closed vox loop, intent only on achieving our mission. We would take each passenger carriage in turn searching silently and methodically until our quarry had been located. Then Illith would summon the Stormraven that was presently maintaining low orbit and we would make a swift exit.

Mordren approached the door, his fingers brushing the grip of his bolt pistol in the holster at his belt. After a moment he turned to regard Illith, his expression sour.

Mordren: "Brothers, this carriage is blighted by the stench of Chaos".

Illith: "Step aside".

Illith crossed to the door moving silently, his combat knife clutched in his fist, peered through the viewing port in the partition and then stepped back shaking his head.

Illith: "There are others here aboard this train. Foul creatures marred with the corruption of Chaos".

Qeld: "Then our mission has changed".

Illith: “Not yet, for now our goal remains the same: locate the interrogator and extract the message”.

I nodded my assent and followed Mordren as he opened the door with his shoulder, his massive blade resting easily in his fist. The stench of decay that greeted us was ripe and all-prevailing.

* * *

(flies buzzing inside the carriage)

Qeld (over vox): “You are right, Mordren. Something unnatural has blighted the passengers of this carriage”.

Most of the passengers still remained in their seats, their corpses peeling, bloating and blistering. Their lips curled back from their teeth, yellow eyes blooming with rot. Some still moved, but no longer by their own volition.

Mordren (over vox): “Look, they are crawling with maggots... Infested... Their chests rising and falling in some grotesque parody of breathing. In the name of the Emperor...”

Ahead of us scrabbling in the gangway was the remains of a man, his torso completely decomposed beneath the waist. Even his clothes had rotted away to rags, his flesh peeling in long ribbons, so that his ribcage was exposed revealing the faint beating of his heart within. Putrid liquid sipped from his mouth as he dragged himself towards us with skeletal fingers.

Illith (smashing the rotting figure): “I have seen such abominations before, deep in the Sargassian Reach. They’d been a foul taint of the plague god. We may yet share the train with heretics and traitors, brothers”.

Mordren (over vox): “Then they shall be eradicated. The carriages will run red with their spilled blood”.

Illith (over vox): “No, we locate our target and we get clear. Once our mission is complete, the mag-train will be destroyed from orbit and the traitors with it”.

(another bloating corpse moaning nearby)

Mordren (over vox): “I saw it move...”

Illith (over vox): “We go now. If our enemies are aboard, they may already be alerted to our presence”.

Illith's implacable gaze settled on me for a moment and then he turned away and was gone, sliding like smoke into the shadows. I strode forward crushing the remains of the sprawling dead underfoot as I made for the adjoining carriage.

Artarix (over vox): "This one is the same. It reeks of festering death".

Illith (over vox): "It reeks of traitors".

The carriage bore the same hallmarks as the previous one. Passengers lay heaped in abstract poses of death, their puckered flesh erupting in buboes, skin tightening around their skulls as we watched, drying and crumbling away to dust. Here too the lights had been damaged and flickered incessantly casting long shadows. A large ragged hole had been chewed in the left side of the carriage, the adamantium around its edges corroded and discolored.

Mordren (over vox): "Be wary, something spurs in the darkness".

I looked away at where Mordren had indicated with the muzzle of his pistol. From behind she looked like a woman. She was standing in the gangway with her back to us and she was slightly hunched, her shoulders drawn up to her neck as if she were hugging herself, seeking comfort or respite from the horror surrounding her. She rocked back and forth with the slow steady motion of the train.

Mordren (over vox): "Wait here, brothers".

Artarix (over vox): "Hold, Mordren! She might yet provide us with answers about what happened here".

Mordren (over vox): "We know what happened here, Artarix. Mark my words, she bears the taint..."

Artarix (over vox): "In which case she shall die, but let us be certain".

Artarix: "Mortal, turn around! Slowly!"

I raised my bolter in wariness. At first the woman did not respond even to acknowledge that Artarix had addressed her. My finger brushed the trigger. Something was wrong. Then slowly the woman's head twitched to the side as if she was stealing a glance over her shoulder in the flickering light too terrified even to turn in our direction.

Artarix took a step closer.

Artarix: "Turn around now! Last warning!"

He reached out a hand for her shoulder. The woman twisted turning deathly on the spot. What had at first appeared as items of clothing now revealed their mimicry as taut leathery wings unfurled from the creature's sides filling the width of the carriage.

(Raptor screaming)

It rose to its full height at least as tall as Mordren. It was thin and skeletal, bones protruding through exposed patches of papery skin. Its hands and feet ended in sharp talons fashioned from twisted bone and its face leered at us. A face that had once been human, but now resembled a misshapen bat, half-decayed and moldering. It wore the tattered remains of power armor and the ragged ruin of an ancient purity seal caused my ire to rise. This had once been a Space Marine in service to the Emperor. But now it was a thing twisted and reshaped by Chaos into a monster.

Artarix: "Abomination!"

It lurched forward moving with surprising agility. I unleashed a hail of bolter rounds collapsing the left side of its chest in a shower of brittle bone, but still the creature came on, its talons flashing as it lashed out for Artarix.

Mordren: "Get back!"

Mordren took another swing opening a gaping mouth in the creature's belly. It staggered, emaciated guts spilling down its thighs rank with the stench of death. It screeched and then turned flapping its wings as it launched itself at the ragged opening in the carriage wall.

(Raptor breaking the glass and leaving the carriage)

Before Mordren could close on it again, the creature had dragged itself through the gaping breach and away into the sand-filled sky beyond.

Mordren: "It is a thing of weakness, a traitor..."

Artarix: "Rather than face my sword it flees..."

Qeld: "Creatures such as that do not operate alone. There may be more of them aboard this blighted train".

Artarix: "What do they seek? They could not have anticipated our arrival!"

Mordren: "I do not believe in coincidence. Might they seek the same prize as us?"

Illith: "Aye, it might yet prove so. Regardless their presence places our mission at risk. We must remain vigilant and heed the Chapter Master's words. We cannot fail".

(monster roaring)

Artarix: "Mordren, behind you!"

Mordren turned, his sword flashing, but it was too late. The raptor dove through the breach in the carriage wall, its talons sinking deep into his armor, affixing him in its grip.

Mordren (moaning): "Oh... oh... foul heretic... unhand me!"

Within seconds it had dragged him out behind it and away into the sky.

* * *

(sounds of a distant battle, women crying, numerous gunshots)

Old Man (whispering): "Darkness and night... Belief and death... Circles within circles..."

Train Master: "Oh, out of the way! Can't you see what's happening here? Mag-train is under attack".

Bledheim: "Yes I rather see that it is. Please excuse my companion. He is a little... disturbed".

Train Master (nervously): "Disturbed? We are all bloody disturbed. Have you seen those things?"

Bledheim: "Creatures born of nightmare? One and all!"

Train Master: "Don't just stand there, man. I need to alert the driver and quickly! We have to stop the mag-train"

Bledheim: "Oh, I think not. It's of far greater import that the train reaches its destination".

Train Master: "Are you mad? We'll all end up dead".

Bledheim: "Or inevitable for us all, I fear".

Old Man (whispering): "Circles within circles... Death and life... dark and light..."

Bledheim: "Indeed".

Train Master (taking his gun from the holster): "Stand aside or I am going to have to use force".

Bledheim: "Oh, I don't think that will be necessary".

(Bledheim injecting the train Master with some poisonous substance)

Bledheim: "In my experience there's rarely need for such uncouth methods".

Train Master (moaning): "What? What have you done? What have you injected?"

(Train Master falling to the ground)

Bledheim: "Then see? Inevitable..."

Old Man (whispering): "The white and the black... The ravens sing..."

Bledheim: "And so shall you, my friend! So shall you".

(Bledheim opening the door)

Bledheim: "Come now. I think it's time we found somewhere more conducive to a proper conversation, don't you? And you really must stop defacing the walls..."

* * *

Mordren: "Die, Hel-spawn!"

I ran to the breach. High above the train twisting through the night air Mordren grappled with the Raptor as it raked him with its claws drawing deep furrows in his armor. I tried to draw a bid with my bolter. I loosed a series of short bursts aiming to shred the Raptor's wing, but the thing was elusive and moved too swiftly using the billowing sand cloud as cover. The risk of hitting Mordren was too high.

Mordren: "I'll stain you, wretched heretic!"

The Raptor still plucked Mordren from behind, pinning him with his misshapen legs. Mordren was thrashing, struggling to find an angle of counter-attack. He inverted his sword in his grip and he was stabbing back repeatedly under his left arm, attempting to skewer the creature. So far it had evaded every thrust.

Artarix: "Over here! Another one!"

I turned to see a second Raptor burst from the sand storm. Its wings folded back as it dove towards us. The strange weapon in its talons spat goutts of corrosive acid that hissed as they struck the flank of the mag-train, chewing pop-marks in the metal.

Illith: "Deal with that! I'm going off to Mordren".

Illith leaped deathly through the hole in the carriage wall, twisting his body as he fell towards the sand storm. He dipped momentarily out of sight, before the rumble of his igniting jump-pack signaled his intent and he rose up towards Mordren leaving a vortex of sand in its wake. I dove for cover and rolled as stream of acid splashed through the wound in the mag-train's flank, dousing the end wall of the carriage and causing seats, floor and human remains alike to bubble and blister. I climbed to my feet, opening up with my bolter and shattering one of the viewing ports, catching the Raptor in its leg and causing it to dip suddenly, altering its trajectory.

Qeld: "Illith, it's coming for you, brother!"

Illith: "I see it!"

The creature had succeeded in arresting its dive and now it twisted into another ascend, wings battering at the cross-currents as it aimed its weapon at Illith who had seen its approach and was hurriedly closing the gap between them, combat knife clutched in his fist. The creature twisted as a timely shot from Artarix shredded its left wing and it seemed to stutter in the air, losing its momentum.

Illith: "Vile beast!"

Illith saw his opportunity and swept in soaring past the Raptor, opening its throat with the edge of his blade as he passed, leaving a river of dark blood trailing in his wake.

Mordren and the other Raptor spiraled through the air, both struggling for dominance. The Raptor leaned in baring its fangs, intent on opening Mordren's throat before he flung his head back smashing its nose across its face. It lurched backwards, temporarily loosening its grip and Mordren twisted bring his sword around in a sweeping arc. The sword bit deep cleaving the creature between the neck and shoulder, parting flesh, muscle and bone. The Raptor's wings shuddered and twitched and then its grip finally relented and it slid away from Mordren, slipping into an awkward downward spiral before being caught in the mag-train's wake and pulled swiftly out of sight.

Mordren too was tumbling, falling towards the mag-train's roof unable to right himself in order to ignite his jump-pack.

Illith: "Mordren!"

Above Illith had dipped into a steep dive, but even with the jump-pack to assist him, the crosswinds made it unlikely he'd be able to reach the falling Raven in time.

(Mordren screaming)

With seconds to spare before his impending collision Mordren twisted arching his back and raising his sword. With an almighty effort Mordren plunged the blade downwards as he closed on the mag-train's roof spearing the sheet metal to the hilt.

(Mordren falling on the train)

He collided with the side of the train, rebounding viciously. His hands however remained firmly affixed to the hilt of his sword and he used it as an anchor clinging on as the extreme force of the train's slipstream buffeted his body.

Illith: "Here, Mordren!"

Illith thudded to the roof by the jutting hilt of the sword. He dropped to one knee, clasping Mordren by the vambrace and with a groan of effort hold him up onto the train roof beside him.

Mordren (breathing hard: "Right... on time, brother"

Illith: "Come, let us cover below. And Mordren..."

Mordren: "Aye..."

Illith: "Do not forget your sword".

* * *

(ravens croaking)

Kayvaan Shrike: "Our unconscious gestures, our mannerisms, our demeanor... They speak volumes about us, Qeld. So it is that I see you reach once again for the wound at your neck. I know that it troubles you. Yet you are a Space Marine of the Raven Guard and the wound itself is but a scratch. So the gesture speaks of something deeper, something more profound".

Qeld: "Forgive me, Chapter Master. I meant not to distract from my report".

Kayvaan Shrike: "Not at all, Qeld. I would know what is on your mind".

Qeld: "It is nothing, an irritation".

Kayvaan Shrike: "Come now, Qeld. Speak you not of fear?"

Qeld: "Fear? I do not recognize the word".

Kayvaan Shrike (smiling): "No, and you were trained well. But fear runs deep and carves an assailable channel to the soul. You Qeld, fear corruption. You worry that the festering wound upon your flesh might somehow come to represent your own inadequacy, that the enemy has marked you and through that mark they might prey upon the weakness in your hearts. You fear my judgment. You fear failure and that fear in its ignorance moves you ever closer to the precipice of your own downfall".

Qeld (hesitating): "I... No, Chapter Master, these words do not mirror my thoughts. I... remain true. I despise the heretic. Fear has no place in my soul".

(qeld making a pause filled with hesitation and doubt)

Qeld (hesitating): "As you say the wound is a mere trifle. I shall not allow myself to be further distracted by it".

Kayvaan Shrike: "Good, then pray you continue".

Qeld: "As you command".

(ravens croaking and flying away)

* * *

The next carriage contained what was left of a small force of guardsmen who were taking potshots through the shattered viewports with their lasguns at a number of circling Raptors. They were only six of them left: four men and two women. Although the corpses of at least fourteen others lay around them where they had fallen. To their credit two Raptors lay dead amongst them suggesting a battle had already taken place at closer quarters. The human corpses were already beginning to fester with unnatural decay, although the living appeared to have so far resisted the virulent plague. We remained in the shadows unseen and unnoticed.

Artarix (over vox): "We must assist the mortals".

Mordren (over vox): "Aye, I would cleave more of those abominations before the day is through".

Qeld (over vox): "We can do little for the mortals now. They hold the Raptors at bay at least temporarily. This foul plague consumes the

mag-train from within. We must locate the interrogator before he too is lost”.

Artarix (over vox): “Brother, the traitors’ purpose is not yet clear. Surely we cannot tolerate them to live”.

Qeld (over vox): “And yet the Chapter Master was ill at ease. Have you ever seen him such? The content of that message troubles him. We cannot fail in our duty”.

Mordren (over vox): “Is it not our duty to smite the harbingers of treachery when we find them?”

Illith (over vox): “Mordren is right. We cannot pass without offering our support. We stand and fight”.

Illith (showing himself to the guardsmen): “Who is in command here?”

The six guardsmen turned to stare at Illith who had suddenly appeared phantom-like behind them. The rest of us followed suit drawing equally astounded and terrified gazes. One guardsman dropped to his knees lowering his eyes. Slowly a woman raised her hand in a salute.

Amerine Leth: “Our Sergeant is dead, my lord, but I am Amerine Leth and I have assumed command”.

Illith: “Then allow us to lend to you our strength”.

Amerine Leth: “The Emperor protects, my lord”.

Corporal: “Sir, they are circling around for another attack”.

Amerine Leth: “Stay on them, Corporal, remember to aim for their wings”.

Illith: “Mordren, Qeld, take the right flank. Artarix and I shall support the left”.

We took our positions at the viewing ports beside the humans, scanning the skies still swirling with the dust of the mag-train’s passage.

Artarix: “I see one! There!”

The Raptor dipped to the left to avoid the strafing fire drawing on its wings dipping into a steep dive, heading directly for the train.

Artarix: “It’s coming”.

I held my aim, waiting as the Raptor swept closer, closer... The bolter round shredded the creature’s right wing causing it to twist and enter into an uncontrollable spiral still caught in its headlong dive towards the

train and unable to slow its momentum. It was coming right for the viewing port to my left, exactly where I intended. With a sudden booming explosion the entire side of the carriage crumpled, superheated fragments of adamantium tumbling away in the mag-train's wake. The result of a crack-grenade. Mordren stepped forward planting his feet in the wreckage, swinging his blade around in a wide sweeping motion from the hip. The Raptor screeched unable to alter its trajectory, recognizing too late that its death was now inevitable. Mordren's blade sunk and its head rolled, tumbling away into the dust. Mordren kicked the rest of the corpse from the carriage before turning to the rest of us.

Mordren: "Behind you, brother!"

I turned to see one of the Raptors bursting through a viewport on the other side of the carriage, a dead guardsman hanging in the sheds from its claws. It grinned wickedly dipping its head as it dropped down into the carriage. I raised my bolter just as lasgun fire plucked hot and searing and the creature's head seemed to melt filling the carriage with the stench of roasted meat. The Raptor collapsed into a ragged heap. I turned to see Amerine Leth holding her weapon.

Amerine Leth: "Thank you for your assistance".

I inclined my head in acknowledgment. To my left Illith and Artarix were just disposing of the third Raptor, obliterating it at close range with bolt rounds.

Illith (sighing): "It is done".

Artarix: "For now..."

Illith: "Aye. You spoke earlier of purpose, Artarix. Their tactics here make little sense unless they mean simply to slow us down".

Artarix: "You believe they have split their forces".

Illith: "It is the only logical explanation. They hamper us while they seek their prize".

Artarix: "The message".

Illith: "Perhaps".

Qeld: "Then we must remain focused on our mission. We must seek the interrogator".

Artarix: "We have somewhat lost the element of surprise".

Illith: "Aye, but we remain Shadowmasters. Our path is clear. Amerine Leth, there may yet be more of these foul creatures aboard this train".

The woman glanced at her remaining soldiers, all four of them. There was pride in her eyes.

Amerine Leth: "Aye, sir, we shall remain here and vigilant".

Illith: "May the Emperor guide your hand".

* * *

We ghosted through the ruins of four further carriages melding with the shadows. As we moved we became one with the darkness, a passing breath deadly and unseen. We emerged from cover only to slip our blades into the throats of two further Raptors found lurking in the dark inside spaces between carriages. Each of the carriages had been entirely given over to the corrosive effects of the dark god's plague. Corpses twitched and erupted spilling forth writhing masses of maggots or else buzzing clouds of insects that fed upon the festering remains, gorging on the unnatural decay.

Mordren: "Whatever the traitors seek, their pox spreads unfettered through the mortals".

Qeld: "Their filth pollutes all that it touches. If one of the hive cities were to become infected with such malodorous horrors, Delephron itself would have been purged".

Illith: "The mag-train is already lost. Once our mission is complete, it shall be destroyed. There can be no survivors. The taint is all-consuming".

Artarix: "Halt!"

Ahead of me Artarix slipped to rest maintaining his cover amongst the flickering shadows.

(Raptor screeching ahead of the Raven Guard)

There in the carriage before us was a Raptor. It stood before one of the walls, its head cocked curiously to one side peering at some barely distinct markings that had been etched into the paint. I watched it for a moment as it grinned in satisfaction, pus dribbling from the corner of its mouth. It leaned in closer sniffing at the wall as if sensing something amongst the sigils.

I slid forward, my breath still. I could sense my brothers watching from the shadows. I inched around behind the creature and then with one swift movement reached around and opened its throat spilling hot blood down the front of its armor. It sighed its last burbling breath before I dropped it to a heap on the floor. Beside me Illith folded out of the darkness.

Illith: "See here on the wall?"

Artarix: "Sigils... Their form is primitive, but their complexity cannot be mistaken. I've seen such markings before".

Mordren: "This is what they seek. Whatever created these marks has drawn the traitors here".

Qeld: "Then there is more aboard this mag-train than an interrogator with the message".

Illith: "Not necessarily..."

Artarix: "If word of the message has got out, there are those who would destroy worlds to obtain something so valuable to master Shrike. Might our enemies seek to use it against us?"

Illith: "Aye".

Mordren: "Then our mission has changed. We must retrieve this message and destroy all aboard this mag-train who might be aware of its existence".

Illith: "Agreed".

Illith gestured for us to move about. Once again we melded with the shadows and the carriages became a blur of motion as we continued with our hunt in silence.

* * *

(flies buzzing)

If there had been any lingering doubt that the traitors sought to slow our progress the wreckage of the adjoining carriage dispelled them. Here the architects of disease have come to work seeding the corpses of the passengers with some rare and potent poison that had caused their distended bodies to bloom like flowering plants to divulge their foul spores.

Illith: "Wait! The air here is polluted, thick with spores. See how they corrode our armor?"

Illith proffered his wrist and despite having only ventured into the carriage a few moments earlier there was already evidence of spores gathering around the seals of his vambrace. Where they had clumped the armor had taken on the appearance of verdigris copper, mottled and corroded as if slowly being consumed.

Mordren: "I feel their nauseating effect. They permeate our defenses attempting to weaken our bodies".

Illith: "And our resolve. They infest even our helms. Our ventilation systems will be of little use here".

Artarix: "It is clear the enemy intends to slow us down. The corpses have been arranged in such a way as to hinder us, to force us to remain in this wretched fetid atmosphere".

Illith: "Aye, but little do they know us".

Mordren (coughing): "My wound... These demonic spores infested seeking ways to corrupt my blood".

Illith: "Then we seek a different path".

Qeld: "A different path?"

Illith: "Aye, if we cannot go through, we go over".

* * *

Old Man (whispering): "Black and white... And Life and death... And pain and pleasure... And creeping, creeping, creeping... Monstrous things with blackened eyes".

Bledheim: "Oh, I do wish you would be quiet".

Old Man (whispering): "From the shadows they shall come silent and bearing only death. Shhhh.... Shhhh..."

Bledheim: "They are coming for us now".

Old Man (whispering): "Wheels and wheels... Life and death... The turning hands against the darkness..."

Bledheim: "Oh, very profound. Oh, I had rather hoped to take my time over this but these fools have forced my hand. My hand, eh? I see my wordplay is somewhat lost on you".

(Bledheim sighing an opening his torture box)

Bledheim: “Never mind, now... What’s in my little box? Ah, now these concoctions are very special indeed. They should help to spill your dreams. Are you ready?”

Old Man (whispering): “They are watching. They can see it all. They are there even when you know they are not”.

Bledheim: “I shall have to take that as a yes”.

(Bledheim injecting the old man with another substance)

Old Man (whispering): “Still...”

(old man starting to moan, unable to take a deep breath)

Bledheim: “There, nothing like a little pain to liven up the synapses. Now be swift, for momentarily I must take my leave”.

* * *

Mordren: “Stand clear!”

(explosion)

We hold ourselves up through a hole in the roof grateful for a sudden rush of air which swiftly banished all trace of the foul miasma below. Up here the resistance that resulted from the train’s motion caused every movement to feel as if I were wading through water. To either side of us the desert sands stirred in the wake of the massive vehicle billowing up in swirling clouds that obscured much of horizon from view. The shadows of distant hive cities bloomed large and bleak in the distance.

Illith: “Over here, one of the Raptors”.

The creature was freshly dead, pinned to the carriage roof by its own rusty blade. Its wings flapped ambivalently in the wind, its head lolling loosely to one side. One eye was still open staring, the other had been roughly gouged out leaving a sleek trail of blood and ichor. Like it’s sickening kin it was scuttled and emaciated, covered in papery skin. Illith gave a short sharp nod and beckoned for us to continue.

Mordren: “Brothers, watch the skies!”

(Raptors screeching)

I turned to see two of the creatures emerging from the dust clouds to our right. I swung my bolter in their direction and unleashed a hail of shells steadying myself against the motion of the train.

Illith: “Concentrate fire on the wings! Bring them down, now!”

One of the creatures pitched forward as its head detonated, blood, brain matter and pus spraying into the air following the attention of one of the Illith's pistol shells. It seemed to hang for a moment limp and dead before being swept away by the gust. I swung about losing a three round burst at its companion. The Raptor's throat opened in a wet yawning smile. Its head rocked back, blood spurting from the wound and then came free disappearing into the swirling dust. The body dropped thudding against the side of the train before careening off towards the desert below.

Mordren: "There is another one! Behind you!"

(Artarix screaming from pain)

Mordren: "Artarix!"

I twisted in time to see a third Raptor burst out of the dust cloud to spear Artarix through the chest with its rusted blade. He spasmed dropping to one knee, his face twisted in pain. Defiant to the last Artarix staggered to his feet lashing out at the creature with his combat knife. It staggered reeling from the gash across its jaw and then came on again talons flashing. Behind the creature Mordren burst from the shadows swinging his sword in a wide arc.

Mordren (screaming): "For Corax!"

His sword swept through the pestilent flesh of the creature bisecting it at the waist. Its corpse crumpled to the roof and then slid silently off into the dust leaving a sleek trail of stinking fluids. Slowly Artarix rose to his feet, still steady despite the motion of the train. The creature's weapon still jutted from his back.

Artarix (moaning): "You cleave... better than you fly, brother... Get this foul blade out of my chest".

Mordren (laughing): "As you wish, brother".

Mordren grinned. He sheathed his own blade before reaching for the grip of the Raptor's weapon, his fist closed around the handle. With a single sudden tug he wrenched it free. He tossed it over the side of the train following in the wake of its dead owner. Artarix turned to Illith, he wrenched his helm from his head and spat blood. His jump-pack was sparking, its machine parts badly damaged.

Artarix (breathing hard): "I am going to need a new chest plate".

* * *

The adjoining vestibule chamber, a small cubic space that provided access between carriages, proved to be inhabited.

Artarix (over vox): "I sense movement, brothers".

Qeld (over vox): "Another Raptor mimicking human form".

In the half-light the creature had its back to us hunched forward as before, emaciated and withered. I gripped my combat knife and slid forward ready to dispatch it.

Old Man (whispering): "The shadows move".

The creature spun suddenly turning its face to me. And I saw that what had at first appeared to be another traitor was in fact a thin human male dressed in mud-spattered crimson robes. He was bald-headed and his hands, the fingers worked until they were misshaped and claw-like, scratched at the walls with a fragment of shrapnel, etching bizarre geometric shapes and forms. Simply being in his presence seemed to irritate something deep and unpleasant inside my skull, creating a sense of pressure behind my eyes. His eyes had long ago been removed, the sockets roughly stitched shut and puckered. Nevertheless I had the unnerving sense that he was looking directly at me despite the fact I remained concealed in shadow.

Old Man (whispering): "The white and the black... The black and the white... Life to death to life... The tooth and the claw..."

Qeld (over vox): "Those symbols, they are the same as the others we found".

Mordren (over vox): "Aye, this might be what the traitors seek, but it is no thing of Chaos".

Artarix (over vox): "It is an Astropath".

Illith (over vox): "An Astropath? Here?"

Illith slid from the shadows to stand before the decrepit man. The Astropath twitched and cocked his head, then smiled broadly showing the yellowed broken stumps of teeth.

Old Man (agitated): "The black and the white... The white and the black... Yes! Yes! To you it shall be divulged!"

The Astropath twitched again clenching his fists so hard that his broken nails broke the flesh of his palms. Blood trickled down his wrists.

Illith: "What shall be divulged?"

Old Man: "Whispers in darkness! Messages in smoke".

Illith: "Messages?"

Qeld: "I believe our target has been acquired, Illith!"

Illith: "Then I would hear your message".

Qeld: "Our mission was to extract him".

Illith: "Our mission has just changed. Speak on, old man".

Old Man: "Ravens of iron, ravens of smoke. On Taltos do they gather where the sky burns with a fire of three suns. The children of Corax rise and the darkling things twist and writhe at their doings. Hunted have the hunters become and shadows shall be drawn into the light. What was old is new again and what is new may yet prove old. A reckoning is coming for the white and the black... The black and the white... Not all who walk in the shadow bear the mark. This one knows the truth of it. He is the proof!"

He turned his head to look directly at Mordren stabbing a bony finger in his direction.

Mordren: "I know nothing of what this creature speaks!"

Artarix: "Taltos... Is that not the world upon which the Iron Ravens fell?"

Qeld: "Aye, fallen into the warp over a millennium ago".

Illith: "Tell me, old man. Does Taltos live anew?"

Artarix: "Can we even trust a word he says? He's clearly lost his mind".

Illith: "We have no choice. We shall hear him".

Old Man: "The white and the black... The black and the white... Life and then death and then life... Three suns burning bright as the Emperor's light".

Mordren: "The madness has consumed him. He speaks of events long passed".

Illith: "And yet many agents seek his counsel. We must deliver his words to the Ravenspire. There might yet be truth and revelation to be found. If Taltos has returned from the warp..."

(Raptors screeching in the distance)

Artarix: "They are close and yet they ignored this creature. It is clear they have passed this way. What else might they seek aboard this train?"

Illith: “Artarix, remain here to guard the Astropath. Let us be clear about the purpose of these creatures before we seek extraction”.

* * *

(ravens flying above the Ravenspire)

Kayvaan Shrike: “I would hear your counsel, Qeld. What do you believe the words of the Astropath to mean?”

Qeld: “I find his words opaque, Chapter Master. Rich in meaning but lacking sense. And yet...”

Kayvaan Shrike: “Go on”.

Qeld: “And yet in attempting to tease meaning from his gibbering I... I find myself recalling the fate of the Iron Ravens, our ill-fated successors”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “What of them?”

Qeld: “Truly Chapter Master, you recall their fate. It was you who spoke to me of it”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “Of course, but I am interested in what you perceive. Please, continue”.

Qeld: “As you wish. Little is known. They were lost to the warp almost a thousand years ago”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “They gave their lives heroically”.

Qeld: “And yet the Astropath spoke of Taltos, of ravens who walked in shadow. Taltos was an Imperial world, was it not? Long lost to the warp”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “Indeed”.

Qeld: “Then what if with the advent of Cicatrix Maledictum Taltos has reemerged, spat out from the rent in the warp to once again take its rightful place amongst the stars? Perhaps, a small contingent of Iron Ravens survives”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “Such a thought bears careful consideration. If the planet has reemerged it might yet bear the scars of corruption. So too the survivors of such an oddity”.

Qeld: “Is it not then paramount that the Raven Guard be the first to seek the truth? If the integrity of the surviving Iron Ravens were to be called into question...”

Kayvaan Shrike: “Then the eye of the Inquisition might yet fall upon the Raven Guard. The Inquisitor must not find anything on Taltos. If necessary the successors must be purged. The honor of our Chapter is at stake”.

Qeld: “I shall leave for Taltos immediately. The Shadowmasters and I”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “No, you remain injured, Qeld. Rest here a while”.

Qeld (after a pause): “As you wish, master”.

* * *

Civilians (screaming): “Help! Help!”

We slipped through into the next carriage to witness a scene of utter carnage. Two Raptors were in the process of massacring a horde of civilian passengers who were piling into the gangway in an effort to flee the creatures’ advance. The viewing ports had all been shattered and passengers had begun flinging themselves from the train rather than face the horror of the Raptors’ onslaught. The Raptors however seemed intent on cutting a swathe through the crowd, their attentions affixed on a single fleeing figure. A wiry looking man dressed in a hooded robe with sunken eyes and a hooked nose. The fingers of his left hand appeared to have been replaced with a bristling array of syringes, each containing a different colored liquid. When he caught sight of us over his shoulder, his eyes widened in surprise.

Illith: “Qeld, get after the man they are pursuing. We’ll see to the traitors”.

Mordren: “My blade hungers for their tainted blood”.

(Mordren charging with a scream)

The Raptors twisted at the sound of Mordren’s battle cry, the first turning directly into the downward arc of his blade. Its left arm dropped to the floor, popped off at the elbow. It screeched in pain and then lurched forward, clawing at his chest plate with its remaining talons, its wings beating furiously unable to give it lift in such a confined space. Illith meanwhile was closing on the other, shells chewing holes in its leathery flesh, shattering brittle bones and ancient ceramite panels. As he closed the gap between them his combat knife flashed and they locked in a grim embrace, the Raptor’s talons flashing.

I hurried after the human. Was this then the interrogator we had sought? And why did the Raptors seek him and not the message-

bearer? I battered civilians out of my path as I hurried after him. The crowd surged pushing left. I twisted to see another Raptor crush through the side of the carriage. I fired, bolter shells thudding into the creature's chest, but it was simply too fast. I dropped to one knee as it dove, raising my combat knife and opening a long line across his thigh. The Raptor's retaliating blow sent me sprawling forward, then I rolled coming back up on the other knee, bolter firing. This time the shells cut chunks of flesh from the creature's shoulder leaving its right arm hanging limp by his side. I could see it was close to death. The knife wounding its side had spilled its innards and one of the bolt shells had opened up its chest revealing a writhing mass of maggots within. I kept my bolter trained on it, but readied my knife. When it came for me, I would take its head from its shoulders. It lurched and I sidestepped, blade flashing. The creature staggered forward, its head lolling. Blood bubbled from the wound gashing down my arm. I stepped back pushing it aside, turning to seek the man I had been pursuing. But there were two further Raptors in my path. They came at me from either side. Too late I realized they were shepherding me towards an opened rent in the roof, a hole through which a third creature was now descending.

(Another Raptor screeching)

Qeld: "I shall not die here!"

I lashed out with my blade as the three of them fell in, opening wound after wound in their festering flesh. Within moments however the creatures had me pinned.

Qeld: "Get off me!"

For a moment I managed to wrench my arm free. I caught one of the creatures a glancing blow across the side of the head, but it was already too late. I was being held into the air, dragged towards the rent in the roof.

Illith: "Qeld!"

There was no time. Illith's shots burst upon the Raptor's hides, but did little to slow him. They issued a chorus of shrilled calls and then we were out of the train soaring away from the dust clouds, the train thundering away far below us.

Qeld: "Unhand me!"

* * *

Kayvaan Shrike: “And it is during the ensuing battle that would have stained the wound in your neck”.

Qeld (in doubt): “I... The memory fades... I... I am uncertain”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “I see that the wound runs far deeper than I fear. The pollution already weakens your mind”.

Qeld: “No, Chapter Master, I remain pure”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “And yet your memory fails you. Tell me, Qeld, what followed your abduction from the train?”

Qeld: “I fought the creature. My bolter was knocked from my grasp as we tumbled through the dusty air. Sand choked my visor”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “And then?”

Qeld: “And then... I know not. Then I was here in the Ravenspire”.

Kayvaan Shrike: “How interesting. I see the conflict inside you. Your instinct is powerful. It seeks to override your (changing voice) adult mind”.

Qeld: “The wound... What? (shocked) What is this?”

(Qeld regaining conscience finding himself back on the mag-train)

Qeld: “A needle? What is this?”

(Bledheim laughing in a distorted voice)

Qeld: “My neck... It was never a wound. What foul substance have you used to pervert my mind, heretic?”

(Bledheim laughing)

Bledheim (in distorted voice): “Oh, just a little concoction of my own devising. I am delighted to report that it has proved most satisfactory. You succumbed quite readily to its sweet embrace. Tell me, did you truly believe yourself to be within the confines of your master’s tower?”

(Qeld roaring and trying to break the binding chains)

Bledheim (laughing in distorted voice): “There is no escape, little bird. But fear not you are quite safe. Master Shrike will see to that. Now let’s see about finding a fresh needle shall we? After all we are going to be here a while”.

Qeld: “I shall resist you, abomination. You and your foul kin shall not break me”.

(Bledheim laughing)

Bledheim (in distorted voice): “Such vitriol, such vehemence. I may yet animate your corpse for amusement when you are dead or feed you to my maggots. But first I’d like to finish our little chat”.

(Bledheim stinging Qeld with another needle)

Qeld: “No!”

Bledheim: “Where were we?”

(Bledheim laughing)

* * *

(civilians crying in the chaos of a raging battle)

Bledheim: “I would appreciate it greatly if you’d remove your elbow from the small of my back”.

Train Master: “Oh... Oh, I am sorry. What’s going on? We finally stopped”.

Bledheim: “Most perceptive of you”.

Train Master: “We are on the outskirts of Shadelon hive. I can see it through the window. If we can get out, maybe we can get to safety and avoid those things”.

Bledheim: “Ah, so... You’ve seen them, haven’t you?”

Train Master: “Didn’t you? They are monstrous. I don’t think anyone on this train will ever sleep again”

Bledheim: “Yes, that is a problem, isn’t it?”

(knocking sounds)

Train Master: “Emperor, protect us! They are here!”

Bledheim: “Then it is time I took my leave. Those creatures seek to devour my soul”.

(Bledheim opening the door and leaving, sealing the door shut)

Train Master: “What are you doing?”

(gunshot)

Train Master: “You’ve locked the door! Let us out! You can’t do this”

Bledheim: “Think of it as a kindness, nah? The cure for the insomnia you so fear. It really is the only option”.

(Bledheim walking away and whistling a tune)

(incoming vox transmission)

Sabbathiel (over vox): “Well?”

Bledheim (over vox): “I have the information you require, my lord. If I called prevail upon you for an emergency evacuation”.

Sabbathiel (over vox): “Oh, you’ve made another mess”.

Bledheim (over vox): “Oh, the Adeptus Astartes are doing a fine job, cleaning up behind me”.

Sabbathiel (over vox): “Oh, very well. Very well, be ready”.

Bledheim (over vox): “Oh, I am always that, my lord”.

(closing vox transmission)

(Bledheim walking away)

* * *

Illith: “It is done. Delephron is purged. The traitors shall not spread their foul plague throughout the hives”.

Artarix: “And what of Qeld? Do we seek him?”

Mordren: “He is one of our own, a brother of battle forged in blood and shadow”.

Illith: “Aye and he shall be sought, but first we must return to Deliverance with word of our findings. The Iron Ravens have long been thought lost to the warp. Yet the Cicatrix Maledictum stirs and what was once fiction is now fact. We must warn master Shrike with all haste, for it is unknown what awaits us on Taltos”.

Mordren: “They are brothers of the raven, blessed of Corax himself, yet you doubt their integrity?”

Illith: “I do not, but I cannot know the mind of those who seek them. This Inquisitor has a certain reputation”.

Artarix: “Then we have little choice. Let us hope that Qeld might yet prevail where others have not”.

Illith: “He is one of us. He is Raven Guard”.

Mordren: “Aye!”

Illith: “For Corax then!”

Three Space Marines: “For Corax!”

* * *

Bledheim: "Inquisitor Sabbathiel!"

Sabbathiel: "Bledheim! Your report made interesting reading. I presume the Astopath died on the mag-train".

Bledheim: "Yes, my lord".

Sabbathiel: "A shame... I should have liked to question him further".

Bledheim: "I regret it immensely, my lord".

Sabbathiel: "Fear not, Bledheim. You shall have your opportunity soon. There are further questions to be asked of others who seek to obfuscate. Our enemy has many facets and we strive to uncover them all".

Bledheim: "I stand ready".

Sabbathiel: "Come, walk with me a moment".

(Bledheim and Sabbathiel treading together)

Sabbathiel: "Given the destruction left in your wake I am most surprised to see you sustained no injuries during your recent expedition".

Bledheim: "A wise man knows his strengths, my lord, and his weaknesses. I have never relished combat. I leave such things to those better suited to them".

Sabbathiel (smiling): "Ahaha, how generous of you".

Bledheim: "So what would you have me do next, my lord?"

Sabbathiel: "Events on Delephron have ruffled feathers. Our investigation here is over".

Bledheim: "Ah, to Taltos then?"

Sabbathiel (smiling): "Indeed. We begin preparations on the morrow. First we look to our allies. We need a blunt tool for a blunt job".

Bledheim: "In understand, my lord. I shall make contact with the Red Hunters immediately".

Sabbathiel: "Excellent. Soon, Bledheim, the heretic spawn of the Raven Guard shall be exposed".