

## Alone

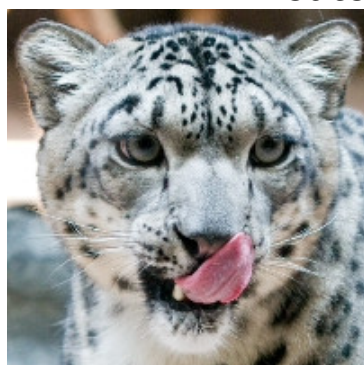
A Raven Guard Audio Drama (2014)

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Of the inhabitants that filled this ship I could find nothing except the evidence of their once presence. There were no bodies, nothing to hint at their fate. Something else stirred the air here, lurking beneath the shadows, lurking beyond the light. The vestiges of faith rode the air, neglected but so suffused into the ship's atmosphere, that it was inseparable. Misplaced though it was, I could admire the depth of feeling that saw these pilgrims trade away their lives and livelihood in the name of an ideal. That the ideal was false, that the Emperor was no God as they claimed, cheapened the notion.

I locked eyes with the depiction of the Emperor, resplendent on his Golden Throne, surrounded by the kowtowing figures of pilgrims. The outright devotion here to anything beyond the ideals formed by the Emperor and his Primarchs made me uncomfortable. I shuddered. I turned away from the image of the Emperor, left the offerings to rot and desiccate in their bowls. I faced the darkness, faced the shadow. Things coiled and moved.

Voice (whispering): "Ithkos!"

I could feel a pressure mount against my mind, manifesting as a vague headache.

Quladis (over vox): "Ithkos, you wound me! Who commands you? Who leads us on this vessel?"

Ithkos: "Death has changed you, Quladis! You were never this talkative in life".

His had been a quiet soul, prone to dark moods, earning him the nickname Grim. His death was the first in our Scout squad and his loss had wounded us deeply. Subconsciously my mind prepared wards against demon kind.

Quladis: "Life has changed you, brother. You will rise far, but others will go farther".

The last was offered almost as an afterthought.

Quladis: "Who commands?"

Ithkos: "Why do you torment me, demon?"

Quladis (surprised): "Torment? Demon? I am trying to help you, Ithkos. You walk in the dark places".

(Ithkos groaning)

A sharp pain lanced into my skull. The demon... The entity that masqueraded as Quladis was trying to grab what it wanted from my mind. My mental defenses coupled with the extra-protection granted by the runes carved into my armor and the crystalline hood that extended above my helmet and drove it out, but it took something with it.

Quladis (surprised): "Ah, Severax is in command. I'm sure Lukaj is overjoyed. Corvin Severax's first taste of leadership... I had forgotten this moment. I wonder if the beloved Captain of the Third knows what his prodigy has stumbled into, what lessons he will learn".

Creature was subtle. I could not find the demon with my mind, could not banish it. The thing was cunning, taking on the guise of a brother long dead.

Quladis: "I am serious, Ithkos. Lukaj will die here or he already has, I forget which".

I started despite (to spite?) myself. Emendor Lukaj, one of the two brothers I could claim as a friend. Dead?

Ithkos: "Speak..."

Quladis: "What?"

Ithkos: "You said Lukaj would die or is dead".

Quladis: "Did I?"

(pause)

Quladis (in two voices): "Ithkos..."

It became two voices now. One belonging to the long dead, the other something else.

Quladis (in two voices): "Submit, improve, join, change!"

Ithkos: "Leave me be, warp spawn!"

I pushed my mind out, questing, searching. The demon recoiled, fleeing down into the darker recesses of the ship. Subtle etchings in the skin of my armor faded to a dull glow as the demon retreated.

(sirens going out)

Red emergency lights, a warning to no one, flashed and warned of calamity. Yellow lights embedded in the steel mesh of the floor beckoned me towards escape pods that would never launch. I ignored them. I searched the darkness for my brothers, but I found none.

Ithkos (over vox): "Brothers!"

(white noise)

My separation here was no accident. I had been trying to contact the rest of the Raven Guard force since we had been separated to no avail. The only voice that had echoed over my vox had been Quladis. For a moment, just a moment I heard a response. Ghostly, broken by vox artifacts, but a voice.

Lukaj (over vox): "Jewel!"

It was Lukaj's, I thought.

Lukaj (over vox, interrupted by white noise): "Bro.... Where's..."

I will find the mystery at the heart of this ship. Where are the bodies? Where are the pilgrims? Where's the key to this?

Quladis (in one voice again): "You will find nothing. You will find sorrow and doom. Leave, turn back or submit and join. These are your only options".

Ithkos: "Why this ship? Why here? Why now? (losing temper) Answer me!"

The mystery nagged. It irked. I hated to be faced with unanswered questions. As young as I was, full of frustration and emptiness I should have known the answers, but I did not. Not then.

(hissing sound, beeping sounds)

Warnings flashed on my helmet lenses, critical atmospheric pressure vented, replaced by the cold hard void. There was no visual cue, no hint or portent. There was no hiss of escaping air, no downward slide of temperature. This was trickery and falsehood, the constant tools of the neverborn.

(whispering and crying voices)

It was a sound I could not hear, could not pick up on my helmet's sensors. I wield boarding shield held up, peering over the lip pass the white and black impression of feathers. It ceased and silence descended.

Ithkos (over vox): "Brothers?"

(silence)

Demons (mocking): "Brothers... Brothers... (screaming) Brothers..."

The word was thrown back at me, beating at my mind in polluted echo. My own voice was tainted by an accent that wreaked of spider-legs and hagfish slime. My nose began to bleed. The stink of wet iron, of copper and spice filled my helmet. I wanted to rip my helm from my head, but the warning still danced across my vision. So I was trapped with the smell, trapped with the blood.

Demons (mocking and groaning): "Jewel... Ithkos..."

My name was long and drawn out. I heard through a voice that made no pretence of humanity. This entity of the Empyrean toyed with me, thinking me fearful. Thinking me alone, easy prey. My hearts pounded louder. The excited drum beats of anticipation, of coming battle. I was a Librarian of the Raven Guard, newly minted perhaps, but still one of the Adeptus Astartes, blessed with a quick and nimble mind. My brothers were bereft of my skills and my protection. They stalked the ship and battled demons without me.

The lights continued to blink, continued to flash on and off. The strobing irritated my eyes, pressing through the lenses of my helmet with vague shifts in shadow. Then the lights died altogether.

(lights crackling and going out, silence)

This was easier, pure darkness I could live with. I was shaped and molded by a Chapter that cherished it. The corridor lit up in inverted colors on my helm display, white and black, refreshed by a subtle echolocation. My footfalls were near silent. The stealth craft as natural as breathing.

Demons: "Walk... Walk... Walk... Walk..."

There was an alcove ahead, another devotional shrine to the Imperial Cult. They studded the walls all along the ship, filled with statues, filled with the trappings of heathen worship. They appeared at regular intervals.

A sound came from this one. A sound that possessed no echo and no description worthy of the name.

Demons: "Walk..."

Boarding shield held before me, boltgun resting on the leap, I crept forward. A carving of some martyred woman looked down upon me with studded disinterest. Who are you, it seemed to ask. Who are you to disrupt the darkness? A crumpled body lay before the saint clad in rags.

It was the first evidence I had found of the 60,000 souls that once worshipped in these halls.

Demons: "Walk... Walk... Walk... Walk..."

(energies crackling)

My eyes flickered out towards the saint. The shrouded woman frowned down at me, its eyes judging and disapproving. Blood wept from the painted marble eyes. She offered an accusatory glare. The scrunched eyes and furrowed brow of rage against foreign intrusion. Ripples passed along the marble like waves through a disturbed pool of water. The saint's mouth opened, yearning wide and full of cracked teeth.

Marble statue: "Ithkos".

Its features shifted, blurring into a semblance of my dead brothers Grim and Dron. This was the brother, not as he had been in life, but as my memory painted him. A young soul utterly without humor, without words, quiet and contemplative.

Marble statue: "You are in danger".

I would not bandy words with the demon a second time.

(several bolter rounds)

I opened fire and recoiled backwards in the same motion.

(voices screaming)

Chunks of stone flew from the statue, but it started to move. It danced towards me, jerking with the grace and speed of a marionette.

(several bolter rounds)

Bolts hammered into the marble, drawing craters and howls of pain that squealed along my mind like ill-plucked musical notes. Gloved hands - demure and small - reached towards my shield grasping the edge, pulling it down. The fingers cracked and dented the ceramite. Decay leached through it, breaking the now fragile lip of the shield. Wrought iron cherubs giggled at the fight, fingers pointed in accusation or approbation. The statue shone too, pale white, eating the illumination.

(whispering demonic voices)

My attention diverted from the physical realm, concentrating on weathering the demon's psychic assault. Even as I focused my body reacted with muscle memory.

(several bolter rounds)

I pushed with my mind, throwing the demon statue back. The pure light of my psychic hood banished the darkness. The saint's features shifted from Quladis to Lukaj. It wore the same broad smile Lukaj habitually favored, even as it scabbled at my shield. Lukaj's broken nose and his heavy brow ridge cracked from the marble.

Marble statue (with Lukaj's voice): "Help me".

It had Lukaj's timbre pitched perfectly, the deep sepulchral tone uncanny.

Marble statue (with Lukaj's voice): "Save, brother. I am... dying...."

The last word lanced into my core. It spoke with fear, real fear staining the words. The tone was mortal, weakened by emotion, not suited to Lukaj. The voice was growing weaker and the statue's movements were less sure.

Chunks of marble flew free, careening into the plastid murals on the alcove walls. Corruption spread from the embedded stone spreading like sickness through old veins, drooling with pollution and taint.

(demon roaring and assaulting, Ithkos groaning)

The creature sank its claws through my armor with the unknowable strength of the neverborn deep into the muscle. Fingers hardened and blackened by fire twisted into bone-carved talons slipped through the ceramite of my greave. Numbness chased the pain, but it lacked the purity of chemical systems. This was an oily void sapping my strength. I gritted my teeth and my mental defenses slipped. The demon flowed through my wards, but stopped just short of resting away my body. It was stopped by my crystal hood, but I could feel it stealing my thoughts, desperately trying to find a way to break me, to turn me to the service of its infernal master.

(Ithkos struggling and moaning)

When I looked back up at the statue, my eyes met with Severax's black stare. The smile remained but now it was a small subtle gesture, a secretive thing, well suited to Severax's temperament.

Severax: "Brother, we need you".

The words danced in the air, visibly etched on reality in tongues of flames. They flickered.

Quladis (in two voices): "No..."

Ithkos: "Stop mocking me!"

My words echoed from joy of the demon's.

(demon giggling)

I pictured words of banishment in my mind, but they had no effect. The demon laughed them away, its chuckling echoing darkly through me. My conviction, my utter confidence in my abilities wavered and gutted the banishment before it could take effect.

(Ithkos groaning and roaring)

My leg pistoned down, booted foot crushing the baleful gaze of the withered husk. I kicked it away.

My arm was wrenched wide, the demon statue grinning out at me through too many mouths. It whispered my name, its voice once again utterly inhuman.

Quladis (in two voices): "Ithkos Jevil".

Names have power. Each syllable was a promise of desperate forbidden knowledge and unending pain. The statue blurred and now... I was looking at myself. There was the hooked nose of the type that Kiavahrans called Imperial, said to be the genetic legacy of Terran colonizers. I had been told that parents on my homeworld claimed that such a mark prophesied greatness.

Quladis (whispering in two voices at the background): " Jevil".

Perhaps, my mother had once whispered that to me in the days before my ascendance. The confused look on the face was a mirror. Pain sparkled in eyes that resembled pools of blackness.

Ithkos (breathing hard, with hysterical notes): "You will not have me, demon".

The bolter fell from my grasp as I tore my sword from its sheathe. Fire lights revealed words carved down the curved blade in the scratch script of Deliverance. Sine Qua Non. In High Gothic it meant, without which there is nothing. It was a talon shaped thing, wicked and cruelly sharp, curving away from the wielder and towards those who assumed to die.

(energies crackling from the sword)

What power I possessed I channeled through the blade and every movement a torture I stepped forward and drove it into the demonic statue's head. The action left me shaken, stabbing myself in the face was not a welcome experience, nor one I had expected.

(Ithkos charging, demons screaming)

The sword crunched through the marble and the demon screamed with my voice. The sound of anguish and pain.

(statue collapsing, silence)

The statue deanimated. cracked and crashed to the metal deck. Smoke gently wafted from the broken marble. Its voice crawled out from the broken head of the husk.

Quladis (whispering): "Ithkos".

I turned to see the body that had grabbed my leg scampering along the floor, scuttling like a spider. I reloaded my bolter and did not stop firing until the tatters of dehydrated and desiccated flesh ceased moving.

(numerous bolter rounds)

My mind ached. The numbness in my leg continued to spread, but the demon was gone, banished into the warp through the rite of violence. I still bear its marks on my calf, five black spots against the white of my skin.

The lumens reignited, not just the red emergency lighting, but the cold yellow glow of full function. The static in my ears ceased. I could hear the hunting calls of tactical and assault squads moving through the hull.

Ithkos (over vox): "Severax, where are you? I have encountered the neverborn. I believe... (taking a breath) I believe we have been lured here".

Severax answered quickly.

Severax (over vox): "Jewel, where are you?"

(vox communication lost)

Ithkos: "Hellfire and damnation!"

No one likes to be toyed with, me least of all.

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(white noise)

Whatever malign intelligence was at work on this vessel, was keeping me separate from my brothers, forcing me down paths of its own devising. Beneath beaten copper filigree and through halls lined with tin and graffiti past empty canteens and sleeping quarters I wandered.

(demons giggling in the distance)

The darkness so much of a comfort to me and my psyche had lost its luster. I wanted to be reunited with Severax and Lukaj. Severax and Lukaj, men who wanted command, wanted to lead.

We had once been eight. Now we were three, three heroes or so we thought. Warriors who would shape our Chapter and carry the glorious history of our forebears on our broad shoulders. We were young and naive. Lukaj assured us that we were meant for great things. I never doubted him. He had a way of convincing you, a way of making every word sound sincere and glorious. His was the only voice that ever convinced me that glory was worth pursuing. Lukaj and Severax may have looked forward to the glory they would earn. I faced ever backwards. I would not forget the brothers who had passed, died, so that we might become what we are.

Lukaj always assumed the role of pack-master. He would be a Chapter Master one day, he claimed, the Master of Shadows. I hated the title, found it trite and clichéd, but Lukaj coveted it. That Severax had been given command over this mission, that Captain Ereal favored him with such a lofty honor, has to be a savage blow to Lukaj's pride. Severax would be his strong right arm as Captain of the 1st Company, Lukaj often said. I would be his left, Chief Librarian. That he claimed was our destiny. That Severax and I desired neither of those roles mattered little. Severax coveted command of the Chapter for himself. I would have been content to serve as line brother.

Fate had other plans.

Something skittered above me, but when I looked, there was only a fresco of cavorting cherubs and beatific saints. They watched with a predatory gaze, eyes painted sharp and shining in the gloom.

Ithkos (over vox): "Brothers, I have found the habitation quarters. The evidence of the pilgrims' lives is all around me, but of the humans themselves there is no sign. I will find the answer here. Where are you? Where do you fight?"

I called into the vox for what seemed like the thousandth time. I quested outwards with my mind as well, but I received no answer. At least, not one I sought. Instead a new voice answered. It belonged to a man, a mortal, honest and fearful and old. Distrust flooded through me.

Old man (mumbling over vox): "Hm... Hm... Hello? Who is this?"

I could hear hope blooming in the voice. I contemplated leaving him be, but remembered my duty to the Imperium of Man. Inwardly I accursed of this distraction. This would lead me away from my brothers, prolong my separation. The duty called and I was no arrogant fool to deny it. I should have, but instead I answered.

Old man (over vox): "Are you an angel?"

My answer took seconds to formulate. I would not give him my name, not across this vox. Names have power. Since my ascension I have had limited interaction with mortals not sworn to the Adeptus Astartes. This was to my knowledge the first time I had spoken with a civilian. In a way I did not know how to address him. If my voice was unsure, if it lacked conviction and decisiveness, I hoped that such flavors would be stolen by vox distortion.

Ithkos (over vox): "I am... Raven Guard".

It was a poor answer, but true. He paused. I could almost hear tears in his voice.

Old man (over vox): "Raven Guard... (nervous shaking) Space Marine? Oh... We are saved..."

Ithkos (over vox): "Your location?"

Old man (over vox): "My flock are in a storage hold near the Engineerium... Are you coming for us?"

I checked the plans for the vessel on my helm display. Their location was about two kilometers aft of me.

Ithkos (over vox): "Stay quiet. I am coming".

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The demons attacked me from above, drifting down from the darkness. They glowed a horrific yellow like bioluminescent sea creatures, tentacles waved from them, caught in some etheric current. These lacked even the wit to taunt. They were mindless things, breathers of fire. One had the drooling face of an idiot madman wreathed with gently

swaying seaweed. The other growled from behind a mask crafted from antlers. Both vomited fire from their mouths, from holes in their bodies ringed with teeth and grasping fangs.

(two bolter rounds)

My helmet refused to focus on the creatures, refused to capture the image. I reached instead with my mind. I trusted to the psychic hood that protected me to keep me safe. Fire the color of rust washed over my shield. The bright light hurt my black eyes even through the lenses of my helmet. The shield glowed cherry red. Smoke drooled from the metal and the paint of my gauntlet bubbled. Warning runes danced across my vision. I was being pushed back, retreating from the fire.

(two bolter shots, demon screaming)

I put two rounds through the idiot's smile and the demon lost hold on reality. It collapsed into a pile of gently steaming jelly. The other demon shuddered wavering.

(Ithkos charging, sudden silence)

It died seconds later slammed into the wall and crushed beneath the weight of my shield. Moving through the darkness I tried to focus my thoughts, to follow the mantras of my teachers in the Chapter's Librarius. More candles burned, tiny flames peaking through mounds of heated wax crushed into rusted savage tears in the ship's structure.

Quladis (in two voices over vox): "Ithkos".

My concentration shattered.

Ithkos: "Again with this shade?"

Quladis (in two voices): "Yes, again. You are in danger, brother".

Ithkos (angrily): "Of course I am in danger. I am alone in the darkness on a ship haunted by a demon speaking to another demon".

Quladis (in two voices): "Do not trust, Ithkos. It is a weakness".

Around me the candles died. As I passed through a cavernous hold great sheets of metal bolted over hangar doors I became aware of a whimpering, mewling behind me.

More demon things, more battle against the foul darkness. The mewling deepened into a bawl, tiny breaths sucked into creaking lungs. It grew in intensity stalking forward. Padded feet scraped against the rusted metal floor like a hunting cat. Three crates remained for my bolter. Soon

I would be down to just my sword and my mind, limited to close combat. This was not a prospect I looked forward to.

Ithkos: "Show yourself!"

The source of the sounds emerged from the darkness. A small frail old man stumbled out of the shadows, hands pressed against his eyes. The hands dropped. An acrid scent filled the room, like ammonia. I aimed my bolter, threat reticules targeting the being. Words began to tumble from the being's mouth. The thing that manifested it as an old man.

(old man nervously humbling, unable to say a word)

I relaxed my shield. Something stirred within me, some long forgotten repressed emotion. My bolter dropped and I dismissed the targeting reticules with finality. The same word kept being repeated, kept flying from the man's mouth. I unfurled my mind, stretching it out. Only the background horror of the ship remained. This man was no threat.

I held out a hand and the old man stumbled out of the darkness. Skinny arms, little more than bones wreathed in flesh wrapped around one of my legs. Clad in tatters and rags, tattooed with Imperial devotions and crowned by a mop of grey hair the man cried, tears dripping onto the black of my warplate. I caught the worshipful prays of thanksgiving and deliverance in his thoughts.

A question flew out of his drooling mouth. Words jumbled. I stole the meaning from the air rather than from his accent.

Old Man: "Are... you... an angel?"

I had no answer for him. I felt ashamed, horrified by this encounter. A flash of warmth spread up my features and my scalp prickled. Gently I tried to ease the man away from me, away from my armor. He would not back and I didn't want to push harder in case I'd broke him.

Ithkos: "Please, I must go. You must stay. You will not be safe if you follow me into the darkness".

He cocked his head to the side like he was trying to understand the words I framed. I addressed him in the Gothic that was native to Deliverance.

Old Man: "I came to find you... to lead you to my flock".

Ithkos: "Your name?"

The old man trembled.

Old Man: "Salvator, angel. Father Salvator".

Ithkos: "Salvator... A good name".

I did not know if it was, but I felt it appropriate to the situation.

Old Man: "Please".

He hit his stride and began to babble.

Old Man (in tears): "My family... My flock.. The monsters are everywhere. The Emperor, thank you. He must have sent you. You are an angel, one of his angels".

The man relinquished his hold on my leg and backed up. Tears still flowed down his cheek, but they looked to be tears of awe now.

Old Man: "I will follow. I will go where you lead, angel".

I sighed and set off down the hold. We must have made a comical sight to whatever entities watched. A Space Marine, big, bulky and threatening in the armor of blackest night, and the old man that followed at his heels.

The vox crackled again. This time it was Severax's voice.

Severax (over vox): "Jewel? Brother? Reroute to the Enginerium!"

The message cut out. He waited for no response. My lip curled, but it was good to hear the familiar cadencies of Deliverance. It was still strange to take orders from one of my oldest friends, if it was really Severax. The old man spouted a number of questions, flowing so fast I had no means of understanding them. I caught words here and there. "Why" featured heavily.

Doorways into nothing yearned to either side of us. A choice dawned. Explicit orders had been given. It may have been a demon taunting me, but I couldn't be sure. If there was the chance that it was a genuine order, I had to follow it. But I was 200 meters from the trapped civilians, 200 meters from being their salvation. I could almost smell the pilgrims huddled in the dark, nearly hear and taste their despair. This was a chance to gain knowledge and understanding. This was a chance to find what had happened aboard the San Sebastian, to find what had invited the fiends aboard this ship.

Yet duty pulled at me. I was under the command of Severax and he had issued orders. This was his first command and I was honor-bound to support it. I wavered, torn with indecision.

Old Man: "Space Marine, my flock is this way, why do you stop? Why do you linger, please?"

Ithkos: "I have orders to continue to the Engineerium".

Old Man: "Hurry. please. They are alone... If only we had protection".

(weird ambient noises)

I made my decision.

Ithkos: "Then pray for them. I will do the rest".

It would do no good, not in the face of the demons infesting the ship, but it might help to set his mind at ease. I ran, unheeding of whether he was at my heels.

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(numerous doors opening, bolter rounds)

Bolts screamed into immaterial flesh. Lunging shapes were more distinct the longer I stared at them. Unearthly whispers tugged at my mind, pulsing in time with the light from my crystal hood.

Demons: "Knowledge, power... I will grant you power, Ithkos Javel. Remake the Raven Guard in your image. You will but accept my gift of what you sell your soul".

A demon lunged as it spoke, spiked limbs stabbing toward me. I battered it away with my shield.

Demons: "You need plead, I will bring your brothers to you and feast on their souls while they die".

Another demon spat flames from grinning mouths, blistering the paint on my shield. Temptations clawed at the facets of my soul. The blandishments of the neverborn. I ignored them all. If some sounded like my brothers, if they whispered in the voices of the long dead, then I tried to put them out of my mind, tried to ignore it.

As one the demons left the door alone and turned to face me. They streamed towards me in a cavalcade of madness. I set to the feet, mag-locking them to the deck. Imperial saints gazed down in empathy from the ceiling. I fired until my bolter ran empty. I fired until half of the demons were nothing but incandescent gobs of flesh. They disincorporated, denied their brief foray into reality. I could feel them wailing on the other side of existence, pressing in at the fabric of real

space. My feet left the floor as I disengaged the mag-lock, jumping back.

Sine Qua Non fairly flew into my hand. My backpack whined, throwing the buzzing growl of its power as I pushed forward. My shield slammed into a demon, a howling mass of loosely connected flaming leaves. Then my sword leaked into its core, bright with the light of my mind. Three more drooled behind it. There was no room for furnace, nor the fancy blade work of sword masters like Xerad Mecha. There was no room for intelligence, just instinct. This was battle at its most intense, at its most personal. Strength matched strength. This was the purity of the Adeptus Astartes against the unreasoning blasphemy of the neverborn.

Old Man (muttering in the distance): "I owe you my life and my salvation..."

I tried to avoid the tentacles, the pseudopods, the death that flew at me each second. The Old Man cowered behind me, shouting half formed prayers at beings that owed nothing to evolution and everything to some madman's pallet.

Old Man (muttering in the distance): "Yes, the son of Corax is angel of death who acts in your name, bless this shadow..."

Ducking beneath a hand covered in noshing teeth I raised my shield, crouched low, settling on my haunches. My other arm swept beneath, cutting demons off at what passed for their knees. I sprang upwards.

Ithkos (crying): "Victory or Death!"

Those words inscribed in High Gothic at the departure hold of the Raven Spire by the Primarch Corax himself had never seemed more appropriate. We were no techno-barbarians, no frothing madmen without discipline. Corvus Corax, honor to that dark and shrouded soul, had taught us the way of things. All with reason, with purpose, with ideals. We fought not just for the joy of it, but because we believed in our causes.

The demons responded in kind. They gabbled at me from misshapen mouths and maws, mocking creatures of the warp, twisted souls, emotions given life. I did not know their true origin, but they corrupted my words, flung them back in my face. They spoke with one voice.

Demons: "Defeat or Life! Death in Victory"

The words twisted in knots. They retained a basic form as if the demons followed some prescribed path. I bashed my shield forward and hit only empty air. In my zeal I broke through them. They were now behind me.

(Ithkos groaning)

I kneeled turning as fast as transhuman reactions allowed. I was nearly mere fast enough. Clawed appendages cracked through my gorget, stabbing into my neck.

(Ithkos screaming from pain)

Electric pain washed through my body. My vision turned white. I may have screamed. Sine Qua Non flashed upwards and carved through the appendages. The pain dulled as the systems of my armor compensated for the trauma.

Demons: "Victory or Death!"

The demon vanished from reality.

(silence)

Severax (over vox): "Jewel? Jewel, come in!"

The vox crackled to life, returned to function once more with the death of the neverborn.

Severax (over vox): "Jewel? Jewel, come in! Jewel, respond!"

I could hear the hunting calls of the Third Company. This must be real. Joy danced through my soul.

Ithkos (over vox): "I have found you".

Severax answered first.

Severax (over vox): "Ithkos, where are you?"

Ithkos (over vox): "The habitation chambers. I have located survivors".

He hesitated, a minute thing, but I could hear a question he would not ask.

Severax (over vox): "Hurry, we have cornered the neverborn in the Enginerium. Lukaj is racing ahead".

Duty pulled at me. On the one hand my commander had spoken. On the other these people demanded protection. Two concepts warred with one another. Stay loyal to the orders of the commander I followed or stay loyal to the purpose of my creation. The former was an easy choice, the easy path. Many of my brothers would have taken it without

hesitation. Severax, Lukaj, Mecha. Each would sacrifice these pilgrims in the name of the greater good, weighing the utility of salvation. It was a harsh choice, but perhaps the best one. Yet not one I could make.

Ithkos (over vox): "I will be there as soon as I have discharged my duty".

Severax (over vox): "Do not tarry over long. Lukaj is yelling about glory again".

The last was posed with sardonic humor and I could hear the smirk in Severax's words. It was as close as my brother ever came to content. I pushed on to where the humans were hiding.

(doors opening)

Pilgrims boiled out clutching makeshift weapons. They fell to their knees in joyous worship at the sight of me. Father Salvator was suddenly furtive behind me. Shy... His eyes were cast down, refusing to meet the gaze of these newly rescued pilgrims. Then he was swept away by the crowd, lost in the swarming tide of desperate humanity. Discomfort prickled along my limbs. I did not know what to say. I did not know what to do. Nothing in my training had prepared me for such a meeting. My mind recoiled at being surrounded by so many unguarded thoughts, at such unbridled joy. Hands touched my armor, furtive at first.

(hissing unclipping sound)

I removed my helmet hoping to put the pilgrims at ease. Several of them recoiled clearly unnerved by the sight of my pale skin and black eyes. I looked around.

Ithkos: "This room is not defensible".

This should have been obvious even to such as them. There were too many doors, too many routes of entrance. They nodded at the perceived wisdom of my words. Time ticked away as I considered the options available to me. All the while I was aware of my brothers fighting and dying in the darkness, unprotected from the demons that hungered for their souls. But I could not leave these innocent souls undefended.

Ithkos: "You require a safer location. Stay close. Do as I say".

We left the room. I watched for the priest, but could not see him.

Whispering voices (barely recognizable): "Drive far away our ghostly foe..."

The neverborn did not trouble us, did not manifest to steal these souls. I could feel the demons watching, feel them pressing in that reality, but none attacked. Our group wandered half a kilometer in the darkness. Even as I led these people I itched to leave them, to move on and find my brothers. The humans twitched at every shadow, balked at every noise.

A path took us to a chapel dedicated to the Imperial Creed. I had noted the location during the briefing we had received from the Captain. It was a good position. One entrance, one exit. The trappings of faith and fealty, the benevolent statue of the Emperor and beatific murals gracing the walls might provide a comfort and perhaps some tangible protection to the souls who sought refuge.

Whispering voices (barely recognizable): "Drive far away our ghostly foe..."

I could see father Salvator standing near the altar, a beatific smile gracing his lined features.

Ithkos: "Seal the doors after I leave".

(silence)

Old Man: "You will not stay?"

Ithkos: "No, my duty lies elsewhere. I must find my brothers".

Old Man (surprised): "There are more angels?"

Ithkos (reassuringly): "Of course, the Third Company of the Raven Guard cleanses this vessel".

Old Man: "You weren't sent by the Emperor as answer to our prayers?"

I was amazed at the way faith drowned reason and logic for these mortals. Did these pilgrims believe we sprang from the warp to aid the faithful? I struggled for a response.

Ithkos (hesitating a moment): "In a way we were. We serve in His name. We came to drive the filth from this ship".

Old Man (crying in tears): "Please, lord... I beg you... To save our souls and stay here and protect us".

True remorse flowed through me.

Ithkos: "I am sorry".

Old Man: "Then grant us a token of your protection. Not for me, for them".

The old priest gestured to the other pilgrims, Stick-thin men and women clad in stinking rags, children... Their faces, genic echoes of their parents, clutching at their legs. Salvator was the only one of them who was truly calm. The only one without fear. Without hesitation I drew my combat knife, marked with the script of Deliverance and the sigil of the flying raven. The blade was a fierce one.

Ithkos: "By the gift of this blade forged on Kiavahr you are under the protection of a warrior of the Raven Guard. It will keep you safe".

I tried to phrase it as ritualistically as possible aiming for the melodramatic. We had no such oaths prepared for this purpose. From the look on their faces - the wide-eyed awe - I had succeeded. I placed the weapon in Salvator's hands, watched as he staggered under its weight. It was a symbolic gesture. In truth the blade meant little. Thousands are stamped fresh from the forges on Kiavahr every year. It was the most humble weapon in our arsenal. He looked untrained, incapable of making full use of the weapon. From the look he gave me beneath the reverence he knew it too.

Old Man: "Come back when you can, brother Jevil".

\* \* \*

(sounds of a battle, bolter rounds, Severax shouting commands)

I emerged from the stygian depths of the ship's passageways. Guilt still raw as salt rubbed into a wound flowed through me. I knew in my hearts that I had likely left those pilgrims to die. Severax was there to meet me. For some unknown reason he wore no helmet. His plain features greeted me without emotion. His face was the color of cave-hidden corpse skin. In the red-stride fires of the Enginerium he looked pinched and ghoulish. The raven's wing tattoo in echoed imitation of the gang markings of Kiavahr showed white on white.

Severax: "Ithkos".

He clapped me on the shoulder. His squad mates were arrayed around him half hidden in shadows. He pointed down to the battlescape below as my brothers held the demons. Watching the flow of battle, watching the demonic tides surge against my black-armored brothers I desired to

add my own volleys of bolt-shells to the tempests that tore the neverborn to pieces.

Severax: "Bide, your moment will come".

Severax returned to the constant stream of orders he offered to the squads fighting below.

(demons screaming and squealing, giggling and laughing)

The demons receded thrown back from the fury of the sons of Corax. The moment Severax had been waiting for came. Dark whispers heralded its arrival. Clouds of cinnamon smoke erupted from the demons and they screeched as one into a cackling laugh. Cold pierced my hearts with the gentle caress of premonition. A voice... An old voice broke through the laughter.

Great Demon (in multiple voices): "Are you an angel?"

Ithkos (shocked): "No!"

Recognition burned through me. I knew in that moment that I had betrayed the pilgrims. I had led their doom to them. The laughter grew. Then came the birth scream of the demon's puppet master. In the center of the mass of the neverborn stood one of the leaders of their loathsome kind. One moment there was nothing, the next it was there. In sealed Imperial records to those cursed with the knowledge the breed were coded Lords of Change, Feathered Lords or the Watching Madness. None of the terms captured the dark magnificence of the demon. Beings such as this had turned entire Chapters of our cousins to the service of ruin. If we did not banish it now, if we did not break its hold on reality while it was so newly born the damage it could cause would be incalculable.

Like all demons their forms were mutable as varied as the stars in the sky. This one appeared as the cross between an old man and a vulture clad in tattered robes of still sentient skin. Its face was old and lined, framed by wisps of feathered beard. It locked eyes with me from across the room. Its voice was rotten with earnest innocence and unfathomable amusement.

Great Demon (in multiple voices): "Are you an angel?"

Its malignant mind battered at my own. Words like honeyed knives and sharpened secrets hissed at me in languages I had never heard before or since. Beating wings of fire and cobwebs it did what its minions had

not. It pushed my brothers back, hurling them against support beams. Our cohesion was lost. The squads recovered quickly leaping to their feet and reopening fire before the demons could take advantage of the confusion. Severax voxed one word to me, his voice dispassionate and low.

Severax: "Go!"

He was too late. I was already moving. I leapt over the rail meant to safeguard mortal lives. I landed on the hot steel, splashing into immaterial blood, cracking the deck beneath me. Severax and his squad followed seconds later. The Engineerium was overcome by madness. The neverborn in all their myriad manifestations screamed, howled and gibbered.

(numerous bolter rounds)

There in the midst of the horror stood Lukaj, bolt pistol breaking chitinous carapaces from a mewling demon. He pistoned his other arm forward, driving a lightning claw into the face of the red-skinned horror. He'd led his squad into the neverborn, driving a wedge into their numbers. But they were in danger. Overextended Lukaj's squad were nearly surrounded by demons, threatened.

Severax: "Return to the line, Emendor!"

Lukaj: "No! We can kill this thing!"

(Space Marine screaming from pain)

Their salience was failing with the momentum. One of Lukaj's squad was wreathed in green fire crumbling swiftly into ash. Then their cordon broke and demons poured through. In seconds they were overrun. The entire squad pulled beneath a squall of screaming demons. I could feel Lukaj's pain and see as he saw, as spider's fangs rang through his chest dripping venom.

(bell ringing)

His fall was slow, measured and controlled. Blood arced through the volcanic heat forming a misted haze of crimson. He clattered forward onto his face. Neverborn covered him. I could feel the pain, the anguish that rolled from him.

(Lukaj groaning)

Sine Qua Non blazed with the light of my soul. I bellowed and drove forwards, the sword held high, power and light forming a corona around my brow. Severax followed. Darkness leapt from my head, but it dissipated against the demons. I cut down severing grasping pseudopods. I thundered my shield into the face of an avian thing, cracking its beacon, driving it out of the back of its misshapen skull.

Severax was the first to reach Lukaj, hunkered behind his own shield. He yield mouthing words that had no meaning save that they conveyed his grief. Blasphemous sounds wrought into bullets crafted from their own flesh studded into the ceramite of his shield and his armor. Blood ran out in red streams shining dark against his black armor. Severax ignored the pain, ignored the wounds. I could hear his mind struggling to make sense of what had happened. He shouted still mouthing nonsense, still nearly broken by grief. In his mind I heard the true words repeated over and over.

Severax: "Not again... Not again... Not again..."

I was calm despite the guilt and the grief that gnawed at my soul. My vision narrowed. It became a tunnel down which I could see memories. I shot them away. I was surprised to hear myself speaking into the vox even as I slashed at demons and warded blows with my shield.

Ithkos (over vox): "Focus, Corvin! Grieve later, save him now".

The situation was surreal. I gave orders to Severax, my oldest friend, the man who would one day be Chapter Master. His thoughts crystallized, reformed. Cold logic came to the fore again.

Severax (over vox): "Of course, Ithkos. You are right".

He stood regal and proud, dark in the ruddy light of the Engineerium, framed by fire.

Severax (over vox): "Victory or Death!"

Ithkos: "In the shadow of the Primarch!"

The rest of Severax's squad arrived and Lukaj was encased in the cordon of black armor. Mirab, Zegul, Mecha and Hel opened fire at the demons that slavered for our souls. We pushed out in a ring. Severax led us, five Space Marines, five Raven Guard faced down a Greater Demon. It screeched its defiance and mockery at us in a voice like hissing coiling snakes.

Great Demon: "Submit or don't, I will enjoy..."

Mecha lobbed a grenade down its open throat.

Mecha: "Grenade!"

The demon swallowed and its neck erupted into a flight of burning beetles. The swarm reformed and the demon appeared little the worse for were. The demon turned a baleful eye toward a brother carrying a missile launcher. It spat a word in some sorcerous tongue. The word hung in the air blazing like a cancerous star, pulsing with the light that ate the mind. The Space Marine erupted into a pillar of salt.

Blood poured from my eyes, trailing down my cheeks. I took a running jump projecting my mind outwards, mentally projecting all the words of banishment I had been taught. My sword arced towards one of its talons, severing three of the twenty fingers that gripped its golden staff. Severax gunned his chain-sword through the demon's torso, cutting a hole in the immaterial flesh. Zegul shoved a brace of grenades into the hole. The demon staff caught Zegul in the chest swiping him into the far reaches of the chamber with a crack of broken ceramite. Then its flesh expanded, erupted, filled with fire.

Demons began to disincorporate as reality reasserted, but the Greater Demon, the Lord of Change was not defeated. Flame burst among the squad of my brothers touching off the munitions carried by a Devastator. Five Space Marines died in fury barely cognoscente of their own passing, their brave souls screaming into the warp, casting out their hatred and their frustration.

We flattened our strength at the demon, heroes all. It took over an hour to die, cut and carved, shuttered and stolen. 21 more of the Third Company fell in the process, torn to pieces by claws or foul sorcery. But for every battle brother who died we did more damage to the creature. By the end it was a wheezing mass of glistening flesh rent asunder by bolter and blade. In the end it was weakened, dying. I declared the rites of banishment crafted by some unknown man and the demon obeyed shrinking with each word. I strode toward it shouting at it, bellowing. My brothers followed behind, their bolters providing a righteous counterpoint to the tempo of the ancient rite.

(silence)

Eventually it retreated.

Great Demon: "Save me! Save yourselves! I will give you power beyond anything you could ever dream of!"

There was only one response and Severax and I delivered it together.

Severax and Ithkos (crying in unison): "Victory or Death!"

(demon squealing)

Desperation haunted the demon's voice. It writhed against the metal deck, blasphemous blood eating into the soot-coated steel.

Great Demon: "Please, I will tell you your future... I will save you from the coming storm... I will make you..."

Ithkos: "Enough, demon. Cease your blasphemy".

It shrank as we hurt it, bleeding more and more of its blasphemous bulk back into the Emyrean. It tried one last tactic, offered one last temptation.

Great Demon (in numerous voices): "I know where your Primarch is... Let me live, let me swim in reality... Grant me your souls and I will tell you where he is... I will take you to him... Please... Please..."

There was a moment's hesitation, so small but alarming before that too was drowned in the thunder of our guns firing.

Ithkos: "In Nomine Imperator! Return to hell, demon!"

Sine Qua Non sawed into the demon's chest, cutting through the tatters of its flesh. Light flared bright and painful, while my sword bit into its cancerous chest. Cast redundant and bizarre organs through seas of lidless eyes Sine Qua Non bit deep.

Murky light ate the demon's eyes. Fire crawled through its limbs. A smile curled its lips. The demon screamed as it dissipated.

Blood thundered fresh from my nose, ears and eyes. I was nearly blind. A hand steadied me resting gently on my shoulder. I removed my helmet and wiped the blood away.

Severax: "We won, brother".

Severax's eyes were shining in the red furnace glow. Already the dead were being led away, taken back to our ship the Veil of Ignorance. So many... The Third Company would take a decade to recover.

Ithkos: "How is Lukaj?"

I surveyed my armor as I spoke seeking breaks in my psychic wards.

Severax (unsure): "He lives..."

Severax's gaze was drawn to the trailing dead like metal to a loadstone.

Ithkos: "Good".

My body relaxed as relief flooded through me.

Severax: "Not really. He is too badly wounded. He may be interred in a Dreadnaught chase if the Apothecaries can save him".

I grew cold. Such a fate to be kept alive, but what kind of life?

Severax: "An end to his ambition".

\* \* \*

My mind turned to the pilgrims. I needed to know or their fate would haunt me. I entreated the assistance of Severax and Mecha to return with me to the pilgrims, to usher them to safety if they yet lived. Though I knew that was a vain hope. The guilt that gnawed at me undermining the decision that I had made grew worse with every passing second. My thoughts rolled almost frantic. My brothers who came with me could not understand. Their souls strode simpler paths. The loss of life was regrettable to them, but necessary. Why waste thoughts on the innocent when duty called?

Severax: "What is wrong, Ithkos?"

Ithkos: "I made a mistake... I should have seen this... I should have..."

I let my words trail off. The situation was unconscionable and I could not describe it. The oppression that haunted this ship still lingered even after the demons had been banished. As we entered the habitation quarters the sickly smell of cinnamon and clothes grew overwhelming. Mecha shot a look to Severax thinking I would not notice. I could feel concern bleeding from him, but alarm also. I quelled him with a half-hearted wave. I could sense the track of Mecha's thoughts while he was concerned in the manner of a friend, he feared my mind lost or broken by the neverborn.

Ithkos: "There was a priest".

It didn't mean anything to them...

Ithkos: "I found him in the hangar. He followed me and I left him with the surviving pilgrims".

Severax: "Why?"

Ithkos: "Why don't'... (pausing, thinking over) I felt pity for them. For him..."

Severax: "You think you were tricked? That he was some ploy of the demons?"

I nodded. I resisted the urge to punch the wall.

Severax: "To what end?"

I could not answer. I did not want to. To try to understand the ways of the demons is a path to madness. Severax's voice was soft, but tinged with a lurking lesson. He was always quick to teach and quick to lecture. Where his ambitions not so high, he would have made an excellent Captain of the Tenth Company.

Ithkos: "No".

My friend grabbed me by the shoulders, stopped me in the corridor.

Severax: "Remember this. Remember the price of pity. The Black Templars so wrong in everything else have got the right of it when they say: no pity, no remorse, no fear".

Sounds echoed strangely infecting Severax's words with a growling menace and the hint of prophecy.

Severax and Mecha brought their boltguns out as we entered the chamber where I had left the pilgrims.

The room was empty and bare. All the murals had been scraped off the walls, off the ceilings. Every surface had been scratched down to bare steel. The taint of corruption grew overwhelming, pounding into my skull. I felt like vomiting. The warp lurked in the room shimmering like a red-wasted landscape. The corruption itself was subtle, lacking the obvious outward visual cues of the hallways leading here. It afflicted the spirit. Whatever entity had stripped this room, had been immensely powerful. To have evaded my sight, to have tricked me and then to have removed one hundred souls from the existence was an extreme demonstration of power.

Ithkos: "Get out!"

They hesitated and I loved them for it. But their minds were unguarded and unsealed against this danger. Severax left off the room without a backward glance. Mecha lingered.

Ithkos: "Xerab, please, I will be safe".

He nodded and left. Yellow light from the swinging glow globes bled into my black eyes, turning my headache into a migraine. The light was off

twisted into a blasphemy that I'd... lacked the words to describe. It was rendered all the more horrifying for its mundanity. I retched again as I wandered through an empty room, trying to make sense of what I saw. A tinnitus whine keened in my ears. My joints creaked. The crystal hood shielding my head crackled with witch fire. Pressure mounted and then ceased with sudden finality. Where the altar had once stood, crouched father Salvator, a manic grin consuming his face.

Old Man: "Hello, angel! I really must be thanking you, Ithkos. You have made an easy job that much more enjoyable".

(Ithkos unsheathing his blade and assaulting)

I charged the priest, no, the demon, all higher thought escaping me. My sword leaked for his head, but the priest moved blinking away. Shadows flowed from my hand, diving for the priest, but he wasn't there. He stood ten meters away near the altar again, his hands palsied and coated with liver spots rested gently on the gold. Tarnish and winds spread from where they touched.

Old Man: "I am the hope for salvation, a small cog in the greater machine that is my patron and myself. These poor pilgrims called for me, sang for me for so long. I had to answer. I had to leave them, to let them know that someone out there cared. So..."

He paused to shoot me a coy shy smile.

Old Man (in multiple voices): "So that's what you call me? Salvation? Always and forever! It rings truest to our first meeting, to our first grand deception. Oh, what fun we will have working together".

(Space Marines trying to bash the door)

Mecha and Severax were trying to get through the blast door. It will be too late. This was my fight, my doom. I threw Sine Qua Non, the blade spun in nova end before sliding into the demon priest's midriff. The priest looked stunned, a question forming on his lips. Confusion rang there followed by murderous rage. The brows quivered, the features lost cohesion. The eyes glared.

Old Man (in multiple voices): "I told you, Ithkos. I warned you and I warned you and I warned you... Do... not... trust... But what did you do? You trusted a demon and now look at you. Pilgrims are dead, Lukaj is dead... A bad business... You've made rather a mess of things".

While it spoke I probed with my mind questing. The demon was weak. I could feel that we had hurt it, that it bled its fabric back into the Empyrean.

(Ithkos punching the demon)

My right fist cannoned into its face breaking the old man's features and revealing raw warp stuff beneath. Teeth and scraps of flesh spun away. It burned.

Ithkos: "By the Throne..."

The demon winced at the oath. Pain curled around my secondary heart, a stuttering interruption. The demon's hand sank into my chest carefully avoiding the aquila that graced it.

Ithkos (smashing the demon with every word spoken): "You... twisting... me... you... used... me...."

Each word saw my fist strike its face. Still the demon smiled.

Ithkos: "The pilgrims are dead..."

I gripped its scrawny arm, pulled until my muscles burned. Its claw emerged from my chest with a gout of black blood, clutching my secondary heart. The pain was nearly overwhelming, but my anguish, my anger sustained.

(Ithkos screaming from unbearable pain )

Ithkos (hardly speaking): "My brother is mortally wounded".

I grabbed the demon's throat. lifted the little man shaped thing into the air.

Ithkos (almost crying): "I wanted to save these people. I wanted to serve my brothers and you perverted the purity of my purpose. Die, you, foul creature! Die!"

(demon screaming)

The shield rim hooked into its neck, sawing through non-flesh, puncturing and maiming.

Ithkos (almost crying): "Die!"

The demon's head flew off dissolving into the raw stuff of the ether before it could hit the wall. I let myself fall into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

Later we burned the San Sebastian, broke it to nothingness in nuclear fire. It could not be allowed to return to service. Its name, its crew and its inhabitants would be stricken from all Imperial records. The deeds I had done there, the deeds I had failed to do would only linger in my memories and one memory would remain burned into my mind forever. One sight. All what was left after I defeated the demon. Where it had been, embedded in the floor seamlessly blending into the metal of the deck was the combat knife I had left in Salvator's hand.