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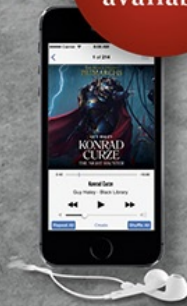
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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of His inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that He may never truly die.

Yet even in His deathless state, the Emperor continues His eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in His name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

ONE
BROTHERS

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

The company standard is dappled with blood. To Thaneod Darrago, the pattern of it looks like a starfield painted in negative. Some of the blood is old. Very old. Some is new, and belongs to his brothers, both lost and living. It is the blood of Sanguinius. Angels' blood. The same as Darrago's own. As he smooths the standard flat with care, he catches the scent of it. It is rich and familiar, a contrast to the cool, recycled air of his quarters aboard the Blood Angels strike cruiser *Sanguine Tear*. Like the rest of the ship, Darrago's quarters are clad in iron and gold, but unlike the grand halls and the decorated, ornate bridge, they are spare. Darrago's work station takes up most of the space. It is a smooth marble surface on which the company standard lies under lumens that are warm and yellow like sunlight. Stylised skulls set into the walls watch him from blank eye sockets as he lays out his tools. Needles made from fine steel. Golden thread, carefully woven by Chapter thralls at the Arx Angelicum. They are fine things. Delicate things.

'In blood are we made,' Darrago says, as he sets about his work.

The fine steel needle is as familiar to him as his weapons and wielded just as easily in his badly scarred hand. The standard is his to bear. His to carry, to mend and to care for. His to stitch with new glories, in golden thread. It is scarred, as he and his brothers are scarred. It has been mended one thousand times, by one hundred hands, but Darrago knows well enough that it is impossible to ever truly reverse damage once it has been done. You can overstitch it. Strengthen weak areas and restore faded glories. You can even conceal damage, if you so wish.

But you cannot undo it.

'Company Ancient.'

Darrago looks up at the words. The speaker is one that he expected, though that

does nothing to lessen the cold weight that accompanies his presence, and the questions that Darrago knows he will ask.

‘Well met,’ Darrago says. It is hard to mean the words because there is only one thing that calls this particular brother of his.

Blood.

His brother approaches. He is clad not in robes, but in full battleplate. It growls in the silence like a caged thing. He remains standing, though there is space to sit, because he is not the type to rest.

‘You know why I am here,’ his brother says.

Darrago nods. ‘Because of Luminata,’ he says. ‘The shrine of Sanguis Gloria.’

‘And the chalice,’ his brother says, looking down at the standard. ‘A new glory for your banner.’

‘Not a glory,’ Darrago says, and he goes back to his work.

‘What, then?’

Darrago keeps his eyes on the shape of the chalice as he re-makes it in thread.

‘A memorial,’ he says. ‘Something to commemorate.’

There is a pause, during which Darrago can hear the low rumble of the *Sanguine Tear* as she plies the warp, and the beat of his hearts, quickened by memory.

‘The chalice held at Sanguis Gloria was said to be an immaculate vessel,’ his brother says. ‘It was said that our father himself gave it to the people of Luminata as a show of faith.’

‘I know the stories,’ Darrago says. ‘We all know the stories.’

‘Yet corruption was drawn to the chalice,’ his brother says. ‘Evil sought it out, to use it against us. To twist the immaculate and make violence of it.’

Darrago stops his work. ‘I saw what was done on Luminata,’ he says. ‘I saw the chalice taken by traitors. I saw the shrine afire. I saw the storm they meant to make, and what it took to stop it.’

His brother is silent for a moment. His dark eyes do not flicker. Do not blink. Darrago knows that the stillness is momentary. That his brother can be swift and violent.

Merciless.

‘And what did it take to stop it?’ his brother asks.

Darrago’s eyes fall to the half-made chalice. He remembers Donato, bowed. Sanyctus, screaming.

‘Great sacrifice,’ Darrago says. ‘And angels’ blood.’

THE SANGUINE TEAR, THEN...

The shrine of Sanguis Gloria stands astride the pilgrims' city below. An angel, carved from the white face of the tallest mountain on Luminata, it wears the cloud layer for a crown, and casts long shadows with its wings. Long enough for thousands of pilgrims to stand in and sing their hymns. They move as the shadows move with the sun, but they never stop their singing. It carries upwards on coursing winds. A constant chorus. Standing in the shadow of Sanguis Gloria and being surrounded by the roar of the pilgrims' song is a memory that Thaneod Darrago holds on to. One that reminds him of all of the ways that mortal hearts can be good.

Which is especially important when they fail.

He watches through the eyes of his brothers on the ground and in the shrine, through a dozen pict-feed links broadcast directly onto his helm's display from the Blood Angels fighting on Luminata. He sees the sky twist and burn around the shrine of Sanguis Gloria. Clawed clouds, and lightning earthing in reverse, reaching up to strike at the sky. He sees bodies fall from the platform built into the shrine's summit to join the others that lie broken at the foot of it, where the pilgrims once sang. A pool of blood grows around them like another long shadow. Darrago sees cultists wrapped in bloodstained bandages torn apart by bolter fire, dying for those that twisted them and turned them against the Emperor. Lastly, Darrago sees warriors clad in crimson and silver that burn with witchlight and wickedness. Heretic Astartes.

Word Bearers.

Darrago's hearts thunder at the sight of them. The marks they wear. The darkness that follows them. Darrago has a great capacity for hatred. Of the alien. Of the mutant. But no hatred burns as fiercely for him as that he holds for the

heretic. For those who turned their backs on their brothers and embraced Chaos.

The feed flickers and distorts. Over the roars and battle cries of his brothers, somehow Darrago catches the sound of whispers. The words are reversed, just like the lightning. Demented, hollow echoes that sound like gasping breaths. He grits his teeth and shuts it out, then winds his fingers tight around the standard he carries and takes his place alongside his First Company brothers on the teleportation dais, because the time has come for the Archangels to join battle. Each of them has a particular space on the dais amidst the warding words set in gold. Those words are ancient, much older than the *Tear* herself. Darrago can see where they have been flash frozen by repeat teleportations, leaving micro fractures running through the gold. Too many to count. Eleven of his brothers stand on the dais around him, clad in scarlet and gold. Command falls to Larracus Donato. The captain is a veteran amongst veterans, his mastery of battle-craft rarely matched. If Donato is the Archangels' tactical mind, Darrago is their soul. The company standard is not the only thing to fall under his care. He watches over his brothers, too.

Darrago looks to Radst Phaello first, and the four members of his squad. Sanguinius' blood runs in every one of them, but Sergeant Phaello is the one who most resembles the graven images of their father. The Angel, serene. That composure of his carries over into battle, where Phaello is deliberate and measured. The other four veterans are sworn to the giant, Diordis Victorino. Like Phaello, he is fair and pale. Where Phaello is serene, though, Victorino is fierce like the radstorms of Baal. He favours the thunder hammer and the heart of a fight, as do those who fight with him. They are the Archangels' wrath. Darrago knows that to be particularly true of one of his brothers. The one he has known for the longest time, and whom he watches with the most care.

Adiccio Sanyctus.

He stands beside Victorino now, curling and uncurling his hands in their lightning claw gauntlets. He goes without his helm, and his one remaining eye is furious and dark.

'Adiccio,' Darrago says, using his given name because he knows it will cut through, like it did on Kalatar.

Sanyctus looks at him. Of all of Darrago's brothers, he is one of the most scarred. He has been mended nearly as many times as the company standard, but with nowhere near the artistry.

'Thaneod,' he says. 'We must go. Now.'

Darrago has never known Sanyctus to be patient, but with every battle, the

urgency in him grows. It becomes more vicious and desperate.

Darker.

‘The lesson,’ Darrago says. ‘Do you remember?’

It takes a moment, but then his brother blinks. There is a flicker in the snarl of scar tissue that is all that remains of Sanyctus’ right eye as the lid tries to close.

‘I remember,’ he says.

Sanyctus stops curling his hands inside his gauntlets. He lifts his helm and locks it in place, and his scars and his fury are hidden behind a beautifully artificed mask of red ceramite.

‘Tur Zalak and his coven have taken the Crown.’ Captain Donato’s voice carries easily, without needing to be raised. The seals affixed to his Terminator plate catch gently in the recycled air as the vox-spoiled sound of war echoes in Darrago’s ears. The pict-feed shown to him is a frozen, flickering image of the shrine of Sanguis Gloria, seen from the air. The angel’s eyes are dark hollows that billow black smoke. Dark stains run down the shrine’s marble face like tears. ‘The storm is their doing. They have used it to blind our Librarius and blunt our aerial assaults.’ Donato’s voice is cold. ‘The Word Bearers intend to despoil the shrine of Sanguis Gloria, and Luminata with it.’

He pauses. His face is set, but Darrago sees the fury in the captain’s eyes.

‘It is not just the Crown that the heretics have taken,’ Donato says. ‘They have also taken the chalice.’

‘The bastards will burn,’ Victorno says. He slams the haft of his thunder hammer on the dais. ‘Every one of them.’

Donato nods. ‘We will restore the shrine of Sanguis Gloria, and we will recover the chalice. None shall stand against us.’

Darrago answers alongside his brothers.

‘None shall survive our wrath!’ they roar together.

‘In Sanguinius’ name,’ Donato says.

The words conjure the pilgrims’ song once more in Darrago’s mind. The glory he felt at the sound of it. At standing in the shadow of great wings, on a world on which his father is said to have set foot. Then the teleportarium lights turn white and the storm surrounds him.

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

‘The chalice. You said before that you know the stories.’

Darrago nods. He has abandoned his work on the company standard. It seems in poor taste to do it in the face of these questions. In the face of this particular brother.

‘Do you believe them?’ his brother asks.

Darrago exhales slowly. He sets to winding the golden thread he has been using back onto the spool. It catches the lumen light and glitters. The spool is made from carved bone that has been polished so smooth it could be mistaken for something made, and not something grown.

‘I served on Luminata long ago. Before the Archangels, when I was of the battle companies. I spent one month at the shrine as part of the standing guard,’ he says. ‘As one of the ten who always remain to watch over the chalice and the shrine built in our father’s name.’

‘Remained.’ There is no change in his brother’s face, but his choice of words is cold and deliberate.

‘Remained,’ Darrago says, with a nod. ‘I looked upon the chalice once in that time.’

‘And what did you feel?’ his brother asks.

Darrago thinks about it. It had seemed small and delicate, made from thin-spun gold. The face of the chalice was without blemishes or the tarnish of age. It was a small and delicate thing, yes, but a perfect thing too.

‘I felt pride,’ he says. ‘Awe.’

‘Then you believe that it was indeed crafted by the primarch’s hand?’

Darrago shrugs. He puts the wound spool back into the heavy wooden box it came from, nestling it among rolls of crimson silk.

‘That I do not know. You asked what I felt, and that is my answer.’

‘There are those among us who would have taken the chalice from Luminata if they could have,’ his brother says. ‘That would have sooner seen it cared for at the Arx Angelicum, with the other Chapter relics. Who considered mortal hearts much too weak to trust with such a thing.’

‘It is true that there is weakness to be found in mortal hearts,’ Darrago says. He thinks of those who shed their faith and devoted themselves to Tur Zalak and his lies. Who turned on each other and against those sent to save them. But then Darrago thinks too of those who sang at the foot of Sanguis Gloria when he first set foot on that world, all those years ago. Of the roar of the song. The way it carried on the wind and rang from the marble.

‘But there is strength in mortal hearts, too. Perhaps that is what our father saw, if the stories are to be believed.’

‘Perhaps,’ his brother allows, and for the first time there is a small change in his face.

A moment of understanding.

‘And what of the second time you saw the chalice?’ his brother asks. ‘What did you feel then?’

Darrago remembers reaching the Crown on the day of the battle. Or night. By then it had become so dark that it was hard to tell the difference. He remembers the chalice, small and delicate. Surrounded by balefire and warpstuff and the whispers of heretics. It was a point of light in the darkness that flickered and failed as he looked upon it. He remembers seeing his brothers fall around him. Seeing them succumb to the storm.

‘I felt despair,’ he says, because he cannot lie. He will not. ‘It was blackening as I looked at it. Becoming spoiled.’

‘Flawed.’

The word is cold, and heavy. Deliberate, just like all of his brother’s words.

Darrago nods. ‘Yes,’ he says.

THE SHRINE OF SANGUIS GLORIA, THEN...

Teleportation is both instant and endless. A barrage of noise and of nothingness. This time, though, something influences the jump. Something great and dark that brings with it the sound of whispers played in reverse. He sees his brothers, lost and living. He sees the heart of the storm. The ritual site. The Dark Apostle, Tur Zalak. His eyes are shadowed pools and his smile is one made of needle teeth. Last of all, Darrago sees the chalice, said to have been given by Sanguinius to the people of Luminata. It fills with blood until it spills over the sides. The smell of it is strong. Rich and familiar.

Angels' blood.

Then the endless instant is over, and Darrago opens his eyes.

He has fallen to one knee. The rough stone floor around him is cracked and slicked with hoarfrost. Darrago still holds tight to the company standard, keeping it aloft despite almost falling himself. The thin coating of ice that has spread across his armour shatters and flakes off as he stands and takes in where he is. He raises his storm bolter and points it into the half-dark.

'This is not the Crown,' he says.

The chamber is a vast ossuary, built from and decorated with the timeworn bones of the dead. According to Darrago's helm display, it lies over a kilometre down from the Crown. Warm, dry air hits him, carrying with it the scent of old parchments and older bones. Dust and grit falls from the arched ceiling far above, ringing against Darrago's armour as the shrine tremors around him. Just like during the jump, the sound of whispers surrounds him. Nonsense words, spoken in reverse. Dozens of shadows move between the streams of dust. Fast, erratic shadows, clad in shifts and linen bindings and masks made of bloodstained sackcloth. They carry glittering, hooked blades.

Cultists.

‘Blood,’ they hiss, and it sounds just like the storm that Darrago fell through to get here. ‘Blood for the Blessed.’

They come for him, leaping and running, moving with misfiring twitches of their limbs. Darrago plants the standard, splitting the stone underfoot even further.

‘Not mine,’ he roars, and he fires on them with his storm bolter. ‘Not today.’

Muzzle flashes light the ossuary. Two of the cultists are ripped from their feet. Ripped asunder by the explosive rounds. Darrago catches the scent of their blood in the air. It is old. Sour. Corrupt. It makes his canine teeth ache up into his head.

A third cultist collides with him bodily. That glittering knife she carries scores a deep line across his armour though it should be able to do nothing of the kind. Not to Terminator plate. Smoke rolls from the blade and the gouge it leaves. The sackcloth mask the cultist wears is torn open at the mouth. Darrago can see the way she grins with filed teeth as she tries to go for his throat with that smoking blade.

‘Blood,’ she says, again. ‘Blood for the Blessed.’

Darrago backhands her. The blow knocks her clear off her feet and collapses her chest with a wet crunch. She lands amongst the dead and goes still. Darrago turns to face the other cultists to find that Victorno’s squad have joined the fray.

To find that he cannot see Donato, or Phaello, or any one of his squad.

‘The others,’ Darrago says, over the vox. ‘Where are they?’

‘I cannot raise them,’ Victorno answers as he knocks a cultist aside on the face of his storm shield. ‘The vox is fouled, just as the damned teleportation was. Auspex too. It was something in the storm.’

Something in the storm. Darrago remembers Zalak’s needle-teeth grin and he snarls.

‘The Dark Apostle,’ he says. ‘This is his doing.’

‘Then we will make him answer for it.’

Victorno’s thunder hammer connects with one of the cultists and the flare of light prints on Darrago’s vision. The sound echoes in his ears. The impact of the power weapon shatters the cultist completely. Victorno roars, already moving. Not fast and erratic like the cultists, but unstoppable. Maeklus fires on the heretics with his flamer, lighting the ossuary with purifying flame. The promethium clings and steals the cultists’ screams but they do not stop. Darrago puts them down with bolt rounds. Ebellius catches one leaping at him in mid-air and closes his power fist around the cultist’s body with a snap of ozone and of

bones.

‘This is just like Corolis,’ Ebellius says. His voice is loud and booming. ‘Just like the caves. The heretic militia, and their damnation engines. There must have been sixty of them. Not a bolt-shell left, but I had the launcher.’ He rolls his gauntlet into a fist and thumps it against his chestplate. The cyclone launcher mounted on his shoulder clicks and grinds in sympathy. ‘I emptied the missile rack,’ he says. ‘Caught them in the collapse. I was the only one to walk out—’

‘Through the dust,’ Maeklus says, interrupting him. ‘We know. If you plan to collapse this place too, then please catch me in it. I would rather be buried than listen to another of your old boasts.’

His voice is not loud, or booming. It is a seldom-used rasp. Maeklus rarely has much to say, but if anyone can draw him, it is Ebellius. To one outside the Archangels, it might seem that they antagonise one another, but Darrago has known them both long enough to know better.

It is just a kind of balance.

‘Look at them run,’ Ebellius says, ignoring Maeklus. ‘I said it was just like Corolis!’

But Darrago can see what they are doing. They aren’t running. They are redirecting. Moving like the tide to crowd around Sanyctus.

The cultists scabble at his armour plates and try to pull him to his knees, even as he cuts them down with his lightning claws. They are targeting his armour joints to destabilise him. Trying to maim him and pull him to his knees, all the while screaming those same words, over and over.

Blood for the Blessed.

Darrago kills his way through to Sanyctus, reaching him only as the last of the cultists falls to his brother’s claws.

‘Adiccio,’ Darrago says.

Sanyctus takes a breath. Darrago can see it in the fractional movement of his armoured shoulders.

‘Arthemio,’ Sanyctus says, and there is not just anger in his voice then, but grief too. ‘He is gone.’

And Darrago sees. The fifth member of Victorno’s squad, Artemio, is lying amongst the dead, surrounded by those timeworn bones. His armour is still glittering with ice from teleportation.

‘I saw him fall. Before the heretics swarmed us,’ Sanyctus says. ‘He did not say a word. I saw him and he saw me, and then he just fell. It must have been the teleport.’

‘Something in the storm,’ Darrago says, absently.

He has lost many brothers in service to the Throne. It is always painful, but it is more so when the death is quiet. When it is the kind that cannot be fought or answered.

Darrago bows his head.

‘May the Angel watch over him,’ he says.

‘We must go.’

The words belong to Victorno. The sergeant’s armour is chipped and scored and the heavy head of his thunder hammer is blackened from the power field’s activation. From the slaughter. Ebellius and Maeklus stand beside him. Darrago knows that there is grief in them too, just as he knows how they will cope with it. Ebellius will make jests that he does not mean. Maeklus will say nothing, until they return to the *Tear*.

‘The mission still stands,’ Victorno says. ‘We make for the Crown before they can complete the rite. Before the storm breaks.’

Darrago nods. Sanyctus is still looking down at Arthemio. Darrago puts his hand to his shoulder guard to draw him away.

‘Aye,’ Sanyctus says. ‘Before it breaks.’

Not far from the first of the ossuaries, Darrago and his brothers find those amongst the shrine’s mortal defenders who did not defect. Darrago remembers the Militia Gloria from the thirty days he spent at the shrine. Everywhere in the Imperium has a standing army, especially if it is deemed sacred, and Sanguis Gloria is no different. They are pilgrims too, of a kind – those who chose to stay and take up arms to defend the shrine, rather than returning to their far-flung homes.

The bodies of the Militia Gloria surround Darrago as he treads the memorial hall alongside his brothers, crunching broken glass underfoot. The dead are not clean and timeworn as they were in the ossuary. These deaths were messy. There is very little white and gold left to their uniforms. Everything is blackened and reddened. Shell casings and discarded powercells lie everywhere.

‘They fought bravely,’ Victorno says. ‘Desperately.’

Darrago looks around and nods. The Militia Gloria are not the only dead. The cultists and converted were bled here too. Their linen-wrapped bodies lie alongside the militia. Their jagged knives and their scavenged guns. With the mess that has been made of them, the two factions are almost indistinguishable. He curls his hand tighter around the banner pole.

‘They were devoted,’ he says.

The memorial hall is one of the main thoroughfares into the shrine proper. It is clad with plasterwork murals on both sides that depict the Passing of the Chalice. The murals show hundreds of mortals clad in white with their hands outstretched as the primarch Sanguinius holds out the chalice to them. Sanguinius himself is rendered entirely in gold leaf and rubies. He catches so much light that his shape becomes unclear. Hard to look at.

‘They meant to hold them here.’ Maeklus is at the head of the group, as always. The heavy flamer he carries makes him a pathfinder. A clearer of ways. He stands before an archway which was once a doorway. It was once barricaded, too, but now splintered wood is all that remains of either. Blast marks pock the stonework and plaster, and dust is still spiralling in the air. That is where most of the militia lie. Darrago notices that even in death, they are still gripping their lasguns tightly.

‘Devoted,’ Sanyctus says, looking too. ‘You are right about that.’

Darrago can hear gunfire echoing from the way ahead. The shrine carries and bends the noise.

‘We keep moving,’ Victorno says. ‘Succeed where they could not.’

Victorno takes another step towards what is left of the door that the militia tried to hold, and there is a noise. Movement amongst the dead. Then a bright light and a *crack* of air. Las-fire splashes harmlessly across the face of Victorno’s raised shield.

‘No further!’

The voice belongs to one of the Militia Gloria. She pushes herself upright against the wall and holds her lasgun pointed at them in shaking hands. Her white and gold uniform is blackened and spattered with blood, but Darrago sees the mark of rank on her. Shrine-sergeant. He sees, too, the marks that the enemy left on her.

A deep wound bisects the shrine-sergeant’s face, from her jawline to her shaved scalp, marring the faith-tattoos there. Speaking opens the cut afresh, sending beads of blood into the creases in her skin. The woman’s heart rate is elevated and thready, her breathing shallow.

Victorno lowers his shield.

‘Enough,’ he says. ‘We are not the enemy.’

The shrine-sergeant blinks. Her pupils are dark and dilated.

‘We do not have time for this,’ Maeklus says.

His words come over the vox so that the mortal cannot hear them. They are not

callous or cruel. Maeklus is neither. He is being logical, as always. Victorno only sends one word in reply.

‘Wait.’

‘You say that you are not the enemy,’ the shrine-sergeant says. Her words collide and run together. ‘Neither were they, either. Not to begin with. But they became enemies all the same.’

It is Sanyctus who takes another step forwards then. The shrine-sergeant snaps her rifle over to him, but she does not fire.

‘No further,’ she says, again.

Sanyctus moves slowly. Carefully. He unlocks his helm and lifts it free to reveal his face.

‘If she shoots, she could have your other eye,’ Ebellius says, over the vox.

Sanyctus does not acknowledge Ebellius’ words, but Victorno does. He fixes his eye-lenses on Ebellius, who nods.

‘Merely an observation, brother-sergeant,’ he says, in his smiling voice.

‘We mean you no harm, shrine-sergeant.’ Sanyctus modulates his voice to speak to the mortal, softening it. ‘We were sent here to save this place. We are Blood Angels.’

She blinks again, then looks at each of them in turn. Her eyes fix on Darrago last of all and the company standard he carries, and then her face falls as she realises what she is looking at, and what that means.

‘Blood Angels,’ she moans. ‘I fired upon *angels*.’

The shrine-sergeant lowers her rifle.

‘Forgive me, lords,’ she says, and she goes to one knee amongst the dead. ‘I have failed. In defence of the shrine. In deference.’

‘No,’ Victorno cuts her off. ‘There is no forgiveness due. No failure either. Not yet. Not while you live.’

‘What can I do?’ she asks.

‘You have a choice,’ Victorno says. ‘You can allow your injuries to claim you, or you can fight.’

The shrine-sergeant glances down at the lasgun in her hands. The weapon is clean and well-maintained. An aquila has been carefully hand-painted onto the stock. It is fine work. When she looks back at them, her eyes are still dark and dilated, but they are clearer now.

‘That is not a choice,’ she says. ‘I swore to protect this place. The chalice. I will fight.’

‘There is fire in this one,’ Ebellius says.

Victorno puts down his thunder hammer, head first. The sound of it on the stone is like a tolling bell. He puts out his gauntleted hand to the shrine-sergeant.

‘Then stand,’ he says.

She reaches out and takes hold of his hand and he pulls her to her feet. She is still shaking when he lets her go, but her face is set and she keeps her balance.

‘What is your name, shrine-sergeant?’ Darrago asks.

‘Orako,’ she says. ‘Talina Orako.’

In answer, the Blood Angels name themselves in turn. Darrago sees Orako mouthing the shapes of their names with a kind of reverence that he has seen many times in mortals. It is a reverence that has always made him feel vaguely uncomfortable.

‘Know this, Talina Orako,’ Victorno says. ‘We will not slow for you. We cannot protect you. We will take you as far as we can to allow you to rejoin what remains of your militia, but we can take you no further. Our path leads us to the Crown, and it will be bloody.’

Orako puts one hand to the icon pinned to her uniform. The golden chalice.

‘Yes, lord,’ she says. ‘Thank you.’

‘There is no need to thank us,’ Victorno says, and this time Darrago can hear the smile in his voice. ‘Nor to call any one of us “lord”. Names and ranks will do.’

Victorno has always been the same. He has no patience for graces. Deeds are his only concern.

Orako blinks again. She nods, slowly.

‘Yes, brother-sergeant,’ she says.

They follow Orako through the shrine. It is a labyrinth of arch-roofed corridors that twist and divide, leading to other ossuaries. To cathedrals and prayer chambers. To the unadorned billets of the Militia Gloria, and the spare halls used by the pilgrims. Those in particular are filthy and worn. Sheaves of prayer paper scud across the floor as the Terminators pass through, pulled into eddies by the static cling of their weapons’ power fields.

‘This is the swiftest path,’ Orako says, sweeping her lasgun side to side. ‘It will take us to the central spine, and the lifter platforms that lead to the Crown.’

Darrago knows that keeping pace with them taxes the shrine-sergeant. He can hear it in the beat of her mortal heart. He knows that it is more than just the pace that taxes her, though. More even than her injuries. It is the whispering, too. The ever-present words spoken in reverse that carry on the cool air. Despite what

Darrago is, those whispers pull at his edges and set him ill at ease. He watches the way Orako's fingers tap a nervous rhythm on her lasgun's stock and listens to the quick and thready beat of her mortal heart, and wonders how much of it she can endure.

How much of it they should allow her to endure.

'Your militia,' Darrago says. 'Where are they?'

Orako frowns. Her pace falters, as if thinking and moving are a struggle to do at once.

'The Climb,' she says. 'They were evacuating pilgrims and innocents down through the Spinal Climb.'

Darrago has seen the Climb before. It is narrow and twisting and runs up from the shrine's feet to its crown. Much too narrow for power armour, never mind Terminator plate. For a moment, he cannot help thinking of the pilgrims and the innocents pushing their way down that spinal stairway. They will be afraid. Their hearts will be loud.

Like prey-animals running.

Darrago shakes his head, hard. He shakes the thought clear, too. The vile thought.

'And you know this from the vox?' Victorno asks. 'You have communications?'

Orako shakes her head.

'The shrine-general sent a runner,' she says, then she stops walking completely. 'He sent Luriet, because of his quick feet.' Her face twitches and she sniffs. 'He was quick, but not enough. They cut him to ribbons. The traitors. The Devoted.'

Orako blinks. Her heart rate is quicker still. To Darrago it sounds like drums.

'The things they did,' she whispers. 'The things I saw.'

Victorno is watching her carefully, his helmed head slightly tilted. Darrago can read that look and knows what the sergeant is thinking. What Orako's fate will be if she has seen Tur Zalak, or one of the creatures summoned by his rites. Mortals cannot be allowed to know of such things.

'What did you see?' Victorno asks, his voice deliberately level.

Orako's tapping on the gun stock stops and she looks at him.

'Violence,' she says. 'Such violence.'

Then she shakes her head too. That same quick shake.

'Forgive my distraction,' she says, and the barest smile flickers on her face. 'This day has been wearing.'

Ebellius laughs at that. It is not as loud as usual, as if he has tempered it to keep from startling her.

‘A truth if I ever heard one,’ he says.

Together, they press on through the pilgrim halls, past crumpled sheets and rolled blankets and over stone worn smooth by thousands upon thousands of bare feet. There are pictis and inked drawings pinned to the walls around them. Hundreds of faces look out at Darrago, watching with frozen eyes. Some pictis are new. Some are yellowed by time, tattered and frayed. They are pinned over and on top of one another and they ruffle and turn in the cold air that blows through the shrine.

‘The pictis,’ Darrago asks. ‘Why are they pinned here?’

‘They are the devoted dead,’ Orako says. ‘Those who died on their path to the shrine, or on the Climb itself. Those who live pin the images here as a memorial. To commemorate them.’

‘What claims them?’ Sanyctus asks. He has set his helm back in place now, so the question is accompanied by the snarl of external vox. ‘Why are there so many dead?’

Orako glances at him briefly.

‘Many things claim them. Starvation. Thirst. Exhaustion. There are no provisions made for those who make the Climb. Faith will take them to the summit. To the chalice.’

‘Have you ever made the Climb?’ Sanyctus asks.

Orako nods. She is back to tapping that insistent rhythm on the stock of her gun, a nervous action.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘I was a pilgrim once. I travelled for thirty-six days to get here. Ship to port, to ship again. It took another week to get into the city. Another three days to make the Climb.’

‘And then you chose to stay.’

‘After I had seen the chalice, I couldn’t bring myself to leave. It was beautiful.’

It had been beautiful to Darrago, too. Not just the chalice, but the crowds of pilgrims. Those hymns, sung loud. But it was not just beauty he saw, nor faith. He thinks too of the highest ranking members of the priesthood, borne aloft on clockwork walkers, or carried on palanquins by the faithful.

‘When last I served here, I saw the divide between the pilgrims and the priests,’ Darrago says. ‘Between the poor and the privileged.’

He remembers the fat those priests had carried. The heavy cloth of their robes and the thick chains of gold they slung around their necks. The wine they drank and the food they wasted.

‘The divide grows wider every year,’ Orako says. ‘Recently, peace has been

hard to maintain. Even before the storm began, there were problems. Acts of cruelty.'

'Among the pilgrims?' Darrago asks.

Orako shakes her head.

'No,' she says, softly. 'I should have seen it. Should have realised what was happening. But then the storm came, and everything changed.'

'With quick work, we can yet salvage this place,' Darrago says.

'Damage like this, though,' Orako says. 'Can it ever truly be undone?'

Darrago takes a moment to answer. He will not lie to the shrine-sergeant, so he chooses his words carefully. He thinks of overstitching tears in cloth. Drawing ragged edges together.

'We can restore it,' he says.

Orako shakes her head. She takes a ragged breath.

'I do not understand how those who turned could do it. How they could defile this place, after giving everything just to see it.'

'Weakness.'

The single word comes from Maeklus. Orako looks to him, as if she is expecting him to elaborate.

'You will have to forgive my brother, shrine-sergeant,' Ebellius says. 'His words are few, and rarely comforting.'

'Better that than a talkative fool,' Maeklus replies, flatly.

Orako looks from one to the other. Darrago can tell by the expression on her face that she cannot tell the humour for what it is.

'He speaks in jest, of course,' Ebellius says, and he laughs.

'Of course,' Maeklus says, just as flatly as before.

'Quiet, the both of you,' Victorno says, and he stops in place.

Darrago realises why when the vox hisses live in his ears.

'*Archangels.*' The voice belongs to Captain Donato. '*Do you live?*'

'Most of us,' Victorno answers. 'We lost Arthemio. The failings of the teleport took him from us.'

There is a snarl that isn't just vox. It is Donato, too.

'*Alfeo and Vytali fell the same way,*' Donato says. '*Lost to the storm.*'

Darrago remembers the moment of translation. The smile of Tur Zalak and the dark shape that brought with it whispers played in reverse. Whispers that he can still hear.

'To something *in* the storm,' he says, over the squad channel.

'*Aye, brother,*' Donato says. Gunfire undercuts his words. '*There is a prayer*

hall at the centre of the shrine. The Angel's Heart. Make for it, and we will regroup with you. From there we will push up together and retake the Crown.'

'Aye, brother-captain,' Victorno says.

The vox-link severs with another hiss. Darrago realises that Orako is looking blankly at them.

'What is happening?' she asks.

'A change of plan,' Victorno says. 'The Heart first, then the Crown. We must reunite with the brothers that we have left.'

Orako's eyes widen. 'Then you have taken losses too?'

She makes it sound unthinkable. Darrago remembers what it is that mortals see when they look at the Adeptus Astartes. He remembers his first service on this world, where the pilgrims bowed before him and would press their hands to the stone in the wake of his passing, as if he were holy to them too, just like Sanguis Gloria.

'We lost three of our own,' he says.

The breath Orako takes makes her shoulders fall. She puts her hand to that icon pinned to her robes again.

'I am sorry,' she says.

Darrago thinks about those words. Death is expected for him and his brothers. It is why they are made, to deal it to their enemies and to endure until they too succumb to it. That does not mean that he does not mourn, or grieve, or that he does not appreciate the sentiment behind the shrine-sergeant's words, simple as they may be.

'Thank you, Talina Orako,' he says.

When the cultists come for them, those reverse whispers seem to grow louder. Darrago can hear them even over the sound of las-fire, and bolt-shell detonations. He can hear it over the growl of armour, and the splintering of stone. Over the cultists' own bellowed words.

Blood. Blood for the Blessed.

A thousand dead pilgrims watch in frozen silence from the walls as Darrago fires his storm bolter into the press, sending cultists reeling. In the staccato light of muzzle flare, he catches a clear glimpse of one who has cut away a good deal of his own skin so that his teeth are always bared. Like the woman in the ossuary, the cultist's teeth are filed to points in what feels like a poor mimicry of Darrago's own pointed canines. The cultist's jaws hinge wide in a wordless, slurring scream that is cut short as one of Darrago's bolt-rounds hits him, centre-

mass.

Beside Darrago, Sanyctus cuts through the crowd. Orako is at his side as she has been since they found her in the memorial hallway. She fires her lasgun in bursts, catching those who are not cut down by Sanyctus' claws. Ahead, Maeklus makes fires of the traitors, while Ebellius clears the space around him with his power fist, setting the air crackling with the displacement field. Victorno pushes a wedge into the crowd with the face of his shield, breaking bones and crushing the fallen underfoot.

'Push through,' Victorno shouts, over the noise. 'Do not let them slow us.'

'The launcher is always an option, brother-sergeant,' Ebellius says. 'Just give the word. I could have the lot of them dead in an instant.'

'Didn't you learn a thing from Corolis?' Maeklus asks.

'Of course I did,' Ebellius says, with a laugh. 'It was very effective.'

'No launcher,' Victorno growls. 'Not until I allow it.'

There is a rasp from Ebellius' external vox that Darrago knows to be a sigh.

'Aye, brother-sergeant,' he says.

So they keep pushing forwards through the dead. Watched *by* the dead. Darrago holds tight to the standard, keeping it raised even as the crowd of cultists pushes and pulls like a tide and the floor underfoot becomes slick with blood.

Blood, the cultists say, as one. Blood for the Blessed.

Two cultists part the crowd. They are big, gene-bulked men with replacement arms of functional steel, as if they might once have been labourers. Both of them carry toothed industrial vibro-blades that are made to cut stone. Matching, ragged wounds mar the cultists' faces where they have excised their loyalty tattoos. One of them lunges for Darrago. The vibro-blade skids and scrapes across his vambrace with a burst of sparks. He raises his storm bolter and fires again, putting two smoking craters in the cultist's chest. The cultist bellows like an animal, dropping his weapon on the stone. Ebellius puts the wounded cultist down for good with his power fist. The other cultist goes for Orako. The shrine-sergeant fires her lasgun until the cultist is too close to fire on. She ducks under the blade, but it snags her and makes her cry out.

'*Blood!*' the cultist roars.

Darrago turns to aid Orako, and sees Sanyctus do the same, but the shrine-sergeant is already moving. She gets inside the cultist's reach and drives the butt of her rifle into his face. Once. Twice. Blood sprays over her and the cultist falls onto his back, his nerveless fingers still gunning the vibro-blade. Orako drops onto his chest and keeps hitting until Darrago can hear the rifle impacting

against the stone floor. As the rest of the cultists fall to bolter and blade, he approaches her.

‘Shrine-sergeant,’ he says.

She doesn’t look up. Her strikes have become weak and clumsy. Her head lolls and her shoulders heave with breathing.

‘Talina.’ It is Sanyctus who speaks her given name. It seems to bring Orako back to herself. She finally stops and looks up. Her face is dashed with dark blood.

‘Angels,’ she says, and she frowns, before looking back down at what is left of the cultist she killed. ‘Oh,’ Orako says. ‘Oh, no.’

She staggers to her feet and lets her rifle hang by the strap. The stock and body are dented and misshapen from where she used it like a club. She wipes her hand over her face, smearing the blood. Darrago is struck by a memory then, of a distant world, long ago. A memory that he shakes clear before it can sink its teeth in.

‘I wanted to make them stop,’ Orako is saying. ‘That’s all.’

‘You have,’ Sanyctus says. ‘We have.’

‘Not the cultists,’ she says.

‘Then what?’ Darrago asks.

She looks at him. She is shaking again, though this time it is adrenal and violent. Instinctual.

‘The whispers,’ she says. ‘They are torture.’

‘She is breaking.’

Again, Maeklus’ words come over the vox, and again they are not meant to be cruel. He stands and watches her, his eyes narrowed above his breather mask.

Sanyctus shakes his head. The movement is sharp and jagged.

‘No,’ he says, over the same link. ‘She isn’t. She won’t.’

Those words, and the desperation with which Sanyctus says them, grieve Darrago. He remembers a different conversation between himself and Captain Donato. One that made him feel that same desperation, though he tried his best to hide it.

He will not break, he had told Donato. I swear it.

‘Talina,’ Sanyctus says to Orako. ‘The whispers will only hurt you if you let them. Hold close to your name. To your oaths. To yourself.’

Darrago recognises the words easily, because they are not so different to the words he used with Sanyctus on Kalatar. He wonders if it is a deliberate choice.

With all of them watching, Orako straightens herself.

‘Talina Orako,’ she says, absently. ‘Sworn to protect the shrine of Sanguis Gloria. Once a daughter, then an orphan. A trader, then a pilgrim. Last of all a soldier.’ She looks down at the body once more. ‘But always a loyal servant of the God-Emperor of Mankind.’

‘Good,’ Sanyctus says. ‘Hold to that.’

Orako nods. She bows her head, one closed fist to the icon of the chalice pinned to her uniform.

‘See?’ Sanyctus says, over the vox-link. ‘She will not break.’

Maeklus merely shrugs and turns away. Victorno lowers his hammer fractionally.

‘I hope that you are right,’ Victorno says. ‘Because you know what must be done if you are not.’

Darrago sees Sanyctus clench his fists inside those clawed gauntlets he wears as he watches Orako set off towards the next hallway.

‘I know,’ he says.

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

‘That violence you saw in the mortal. You believed the rite was the cause.’

Darrago thinks about that for a moment. He looks down at his hands. They are the hands of a killer, made blunt and heavy by his ascension and criss-crossed with scars from everything that has come since.

‘I believe there is violence in every soul,’ Darrago says. ‘The rite just drew it out. Fed it and fuelled it.’

‘Just for the mortals?’

Darrago knows the question isn’t really a question. That his brother knows the answer, and wants to hear it spoken aloud.

‘We have more than our fair share of violence in our souls,’ Darrago says. ‘You know that better than most.’

‘I do.’ Darrago’s brother says nothing else. He just waits. That kind of studied, deliberate silence is in itself an art. In some ways it is no different than Darrago’s own needlework, or Captain Donato’s weaponcraft. It all takes patience and skill. Darrago listens to the ship humming and the ceaseless exhalation of the ventilation systems, and he knows that he cannot outlast that silence. That he must speak, and do so honestly.

‘The rite drew out the Thirst, too,’ Darrago says. ‘I felt it keenly. Each moment was a test.’

‘And what of the Rage?’

The word sets a fire in Darrago’s blood. Rage. The Thirst is hard enough to speak of. It is a constant pressure. A shadow companion that hangs at all of their backs like darkened wings. The Rage, though. That is *other*.

‘Had I felt that keenly, we would not be having this conversation,’ Darrago says.

‘And what of your brothers?’

The words are like a physical blow.

‘What of them?’ Darrago replies, struggling not to snarl.

‘Before you even set foot on Luminata, you were watchful of Adiccio Sanyctus. Is that not true?’

Another question that is not truly a question.

‘I watch over all of my brothers,’ Darrago says. ‘That is part of what it means to be Company Ancient.’

His brother does not frown, and his temper shows no signs of breaking. Darrago knows that is studied and deliberate too.

‘But Sanyctus more than any other,’ he says.

Darrago thinks of standing in the teleportarium. He thinks of the days and weeks before that. The *years*.

‘Yes. Because he asked it of me, long ago, and I could never refuse a friend. Especially not one to whom I owe so much.’

‘For what?’

‘Deaths he spared me from,’ Darrago says. ‘A dozen, or more. The first was during the Torix campaign, before I bore this banner. Before I was granted the honour of Terminator plate. Adiccio walked through fire to find me, when the pyrostorms breached the citadel. We felled the last of the Torix witches together.’

‘I know the story,’ Darrago’s brother says. ‘I have seen the memorial scrolls.’

‘Torix was just the first,’ Darrago says. ‘He has always put his brothers’ lives before his own. He has always fiercely defended those who cannot defend themselves. Mortals, especially. He is selfless.’

‘Self-sacrificing,’ his brother says.

Sacrificing.

The word stirs Darrago’s blood.

‘Sacrifice is our father’s legacy,’ he says. ‘It is no sin.’

‘No, not a sin,’ his brother says, evenly. ‘But darkness can often be found in brothers who seek death so desperately.’

Darrago shakes his head. His blood is more than stirring now.

‘You twist my words,’ he says.

‘No,’ his brother says, patiently. ‘I seek the truth. That is my duty, just as yours is to tend that banner, and to counsel your brothers. Duty is not spiteful, or malicious. Nor is the truth, though it may feel as if it is when it concerns a friend. I know that you feel that you owe Sanyctus. Perhaps you even wish to protect him, but you cannot. We may hide aspects of what we are from those

outside the Chapter, but we must never hide from one another. That way lies darkness.'

Darrago exhales a slow breath. Some of his anger bleeds away again in the face of his brother's own unbroken temper.

'I know.'

Darrago starts putting the silver needles he uses back into the box alongside the spool of thread. He pushes them back into the needle cushion one at a time, exactly back where they came from.

'You were more watchful of Sanyctus than the other Archangels.'

'Yes.'

'And why was that?'

Darrago thinks of the years before. Of Torix and Solace and Perdicia and every other battle. Of standing on the teleportation dais on the *Sanguine Tear* and seeing the distance in Sanyctus' face.

'Because I could not let him fight his curses alone,' he says.

THE SHRINE OF SANGUIS GLORIA, THEN...

Darrago knows that close to the shrine's summit, the hallways and prayer halls are grand. When last he saw them, the level of artistry had reminded him of the Arx Angelicum. Of the home that he was given. Those upper hallways have high, arched ceilings and delicate gilding inlaid into the walls. The marble underfoot is pristine and veined with crimson stria. This hallway, though, is far from the shrine's summit, from the Crown. It is not grand, nor gilded. It is the pilgrimsway, built for those who come to Luminata with nothing but their souls to offer. It is wide like a roadway, made for dozens to walk side by side. Bare and functional and made of cold, old stone. Candles burn in wall niches, scenting the air with heady perfume. Red wax runs from them in long, slow trails. Everywhere Darrago sees graven images of his father carved from plaster and stone. Sanguinius is wrought a hundred times, in all of his aspects. The Angel, serene. The Angel, triumphant.

The Angel, wrathful.

Darrago throws out his arm and slams one of the cultists against the wall of the corridor. Both the man and the stone break under the impact of it. The man's robes were white and gold once like Orako's, sewn with the symbol of Sanguis Gloria – a chalice with feathered wings. Now they are dark with dirt and the deaths of others.

'You cannot defeat us,' the cultist says. His words are wet and rasping. 'We are *devoted*. We will take blood. Blood—'

'Enough,' Darrago says, and he cuts the blasphemy short by breaking the cultist's neck.

The man grins wide even as he dies. Darrago releases him in disgust and the body slides down to lie broken at his feet. Blood paints its way down the wall,

black and filthy with corruption.

Another long, slow trail.

Even through his helm's filters, the smell of that blood hits Darrago hard with every breath that he takes. It stirs the primal part of him that never truly sleeps, that thirsts for blood and revels in the scent and the spill of it. The same part of him that imagined the panicked heartbeats of the pilgrims and thought of people as prey. The caged, vicious animal at his core. It is a curse he carries, as all of his brothers do. One of two: Thirst, and Rage. Darrago has been fighting his twin curses every day since his ascension to the Chapter. Keeping them contained is a matter of will and of strength, so he takes another breath and squeezes his eyes closed for an instant, thinking of a handful of old words that have always served him well.

In this, we are angels.

Darrago opens his eyes.

His brothers are pushing up the pilgrimsway, leaving a trail of the dead. Torn by claws. Crushed by hammer blows. Broken and mangled and sundered. He hears hoarse shouts. The flat bangs of bolter-fire and the crack of power fields as they go about their duty. Because that is what this is. Duty. They swore an oath to liberate the shrine. To take back the chalice. They can only go forwards, never back. There is no retreat. No respite. He must go forwards. He must endure.

So Darrago pushes on, too. Through the Devoted and their blades. The enemy are swollen by their new allegiances, made fast and strong and deadly. They grin and whisper and sigh as Darrago tears and crushes and breaks. Jagged edges score his battleplate and snag the soft joints. Bloodied hands trail down his faceplate. He breathes in, and the smell hits him again. It hurts more than any of the physical blows ever could. Darrago sees the others in stuttering glimpses.

Then he catches sight of another figure, and he freezes.

The primarch Sanguinius looks down at them, hands outstretched. His face is mournful. Tears glitter on his cheeks. Darrago finds he cannot catch a breath at all.

'Father,' he manages to say, though the word threatens to clot in his mouth.

Those tears catch the light as if they are moving. They are cut gemstones. Sanguinius' skin is marble. His eyes are painted in gold leaf. It is another statue, but it does not feel that way to Darrago. He looks around again, and now he sees more than just glimpses. The pilgrimsway has become a slaughterhouse. It is like a channel cut for blood to flow through. His brothers are painted red on red, still tearing and crushing. Still breaking. Darrago's purpose is violence. His duty is

death. But he knows the difference between duty and darkness. He knows the pull of the Flaw when he sees it, but never has he seen it afflict so many, so completely.

‘Violence,’ Talina Orako says. ‘Such violence.’

They are the same words as before, but Orako is not looking at the cultists. She stands at the heart of the storm and the darkness and looks at Darrago and his brothers now, with that same horror in her eyes.

As Darrago watches, she opens her hand and drops the blade she carries. It hits the floor with a clang like a struck bell, and Sanyctus turns to face her at the sound. He snarls. His claws are lit and hissing. Darrago sees Orako’s eyes widen and he smells her fear, even through his helm’s filters.

‘Adiccio,’ he says, urgently.

Sanyctus’ hands curl inside their gauntlets and the claws deactivate and go dull. Darrago hears him take a ragged breath.

‘Do not be afraid,’ Sanyctus says, but his voice isn’t so well modulated this time. ‘We mean you no harm. We are Angels.’

Darrago catches the way Orako’s eyes flicker to the wreckage at their feet. He remembers again what it is that mortals see when they look upon the Adeptus Astartes. Angels, in more than name. But that is not the whole of the epithet that he has heard uttered on so many worlds since his ascension.

‘Angels of Death,’ Orako whispers.

The climbward approach of the pilgrimsway is once again pinned with the dead. Dozens of blank and staring eyes follow them as they approach the spinal climb, but this time they are not pictis or drawings. They are bodies. Hundreds and hundreds of bodies.

Darrago looks to the walls as he follows his brothers through the pilgrimsway. The bodies are pinned there like prey caught by a butcherbird, as if they have been mounted on thorns to make feeding easier. The arms of the dead are wound with linens torn to resemble wings. The false feathers move in the stale air. Darrago sees pilgrims and priests. Thralls and retainers.

‘No.’

The word comes from Orako. He has heard her murmur it infrequently the deeper they go. The more they see. Now, though, she hisses it and Darrago sees why. Pinned amongst the dead are those dressed in marble-white, with the icon of the golden chalice pinned to their tunics.

The Militia Gloria.

Orako goes to the closest of them and puts out her hand. She stops just short of touching those once-white robes.

‘They are gone,’ she says. ‘My brothers and sisters.’

Darrago sees her hand close into a fist hard enough to make the knuckles turn pale.

‘They have been bled.’ Sanyctus has stopped. His voice is a hollow echo. Darrago stops too and looks at the closest of the sacrifices. A priest, by his robes. Darrago puts out his hand and turns the man’s head and sees the mess of his throat.

A mess made by teeth.

Darrago pulls his hand away.

‘They drank from them,’ he says, and his voice is hollow too.

Unbidden, a memory wells up from the depths of his mind. One that he has tried for the longest time to forget. The day that he succumbed for an instant to the Red Thirst. It presses at Darrago in every waking moment, but especially now, in this place. Especially with all of the blood spilt and with that hateful whispering that never stops. Darrago’s fangs ache at the thought of it, and his hearts do too.

‘This is blasphemy,’ Orako says.

‘Blasphemy.’

The word is a ragged gasp. An exhalation. It comes from Darrago’s left, from the sacrifice that is hanging closest to Victorno. This one is not dead. Not a priest either, but one of the shrine militia. He is breathing quickly now that he has awoken. Darrago can hear the thready movement of his mortal heart.

‘Sahbal,’ Orako says. ‘Oh, Throne. *Sahbal*.’

She goes straight to him. The militiaman’s eyes open and a wide, rapturous smile spreads over his face at the sight of Darrago and his brothers.

‘Angels,’ he slurs. ‘You brought angels.’

Orako sets about trying to free Sahbal, but she cannot do it alone. The iron spikes pinning him in place are driven too deep into the stone.

‘We have to get him down,’ she says, and she looks at Victorno. ‘Please, brother-sergeant.’

Victorno nods. He slings his hammer and Ebellius maglocks his storm bolter. Each of them takes hold of one of the metal spikes pinning Sahbal to the wall.

‘Deep breath, now,’ Orako says to Sahbal.

The militiaman’s eyes go wide, and then he screams as the Blood Angels pull the spikes free. Victorno takes his weight and lowers him to the ground. Sahbal

has been bled, too, like the others. Just not enough to kill. When Victorno lets Sahbal go, he falls to his hands and knees and Orako crouches in front of him.

‘What happened?’

Sahbal looks at her. His eyes are wide and dark and the pupils are fixed.

‘The storm came,’ he says. ‘It brought the truth with it.’

Orako frowns. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘All this time standing in the Angel’s shadow,’ Sahbal says. ‘Looking up. I didn’t understand.’

‘This is delirium,’ Maeklus says. ‘He is dying.’

‘No,’ Orako says. ‘He is not going to die. He is going to be fine.’ She puts her hands on either side of Sahbal’s face. ‘We are getting you out of here. Get on your feet.’

‘I cannot leave,’ Sahbal says. ‘None of us can leave. We swore ourselves to the Angel.’

‘Make him leave, or leave him,’ Victorno says. ‘Whatever your choice, make it quickly.’

‘You cannot stay,’ Orako says to Sahbal. ‘There is violence here, Sahbal. Violence and darkness, and if you stay, then it will take you too.’

Sahbal blinks slowly. He allows Orako to drag him to his feet. The movement is awkward and stilted.

‘Violence,’ Sahbal says. ‘And darkness. Yes. But those things were here before the storm. They are just plain to see now. That is the truth, brought by the storm. By the true angels.’

Beside Darrago, Sanyctus’ claws flicker live.

‘He is not what he appears to be,’ Sanyctus says.

Orako shakes her head, and moves to block Sahbal with her own body.

‘You would kill him as if he is an enemy. He is not. It is this place, making us see enemies where there are none. The whispers mean to make monsters of us.’ She pauses and looks at her own hands. Takes a breath. ‘I feel it, worse with every moment, and I think that you feel it too.’

A heavy silence falls at Orako’s words. She looks ashamed to have said them, but she does not move aside. Darrago feels shame then too, because he knows that there is truth in what she says. That they should be above such things, but they are not. He puts his hand on Sanyctus’ shoulder guard to pull him back.

‘I would kill this creature because he is an enemy,’ Sanyctus says, shrugging him free. ‘Can you not see it? Can none of you see it? He is one of them. The Devoted.’

‘Devoted,’ Sahbal says absently, and he looks to Sanyctus with those wide, dark eyes. ‘Of course I am devoted.’

And then Sahbal collapses back against the wall. His limbs thrash. Orako turns to hold him still as he seizes and his eyes roll back.

‘Sahbal!’ she shouts.

‘The truth,’ Sahbal says, through his gritted teeth. ‘You will see.’

And then, before Darrago or any one of his brothers can act, Sahbal moves with preternatural speed, taking Orako’s blade from her belt and burying it in her chest. She cries out and staggers backwards, her bloodied hands wrapped around the blade’s hilt. Victorno catches her as she falls. As the militiaman’s bones break and reshape. They grow longer and bend back on themselves. His jaws distend and the once-militiaman laughs in many voices like the song of a tuneless choir. Sanyctus roars and charges, and buries his crackling claws in the creature’s chest. Sahbal screams again, this time in that terrible, multiple voice, and a pressure wave rolls out from the two of them like the detonation of a frag missile. It is enough to knock Darrago reeling, and tear thread and cloth from the company standard. Sanyctus is thrown backwards with a pained yell. The once-militiaman grows and swells and becomes something horned and blackened that laughs all the while without needing to breathe. Wings unfold from its back and snap wide, trailing smoke. As one, Darrago and his brothers fire on the once-militiaman, wreathing it in fire and tearing welts from its smoking flesh with bolt-rounds, but still it laughs. Still it stands.

Then it moves.

Darrago sees his brothers disarmed and sent reeling. Hears them bellow and breathe ragged over the vox connection. Their heart rates waver in his helm’s display even as the once-militiaman comes for him and tears his storm bolter from his grasp as he fires it. It slams him against the wall of the pilgrimsway and Darrago feels his ancient, inviolable armour creak and break. Something breaks inside him too and he grunts in pain, the sound of his own pulse filling his ears as he falls to one knee. The creature turns away from him and snaps its wings, propelling itself at Sanyctus. It pins him to the floor with a clawed hand as Darrago tries to get to his feet.

‘***And you,***’ the once-militiaman says to Sanyctus, through distended and dislocated jaws. The laughter undercuts every one of its words. ‘***You will be the last and the greatest sacrifice. Blood for the Blessed.***’

Darrago hears his brother roar in defiance and sees the flare of light from Sanyctus’ claws as he plunges them once again into the creature’s chest. It

howls, and it sounds like singing. Darrago finds his weapon, raises it and fires. The shells tear holes in the creature that was once Sahbal. Darrago keeps firing on it, bellowing old words dredged up from memories he cannot quite grasp. The creature relinquishes its grip on Sanyctus and is forced backwards, still howling. It tries to use its shadowed wings to protect itself, but even that does not last, because Darrago's brothers are back on their feet. As one, they surround it. They fire at it and strike it with blade and hammer and claw, snapping bones and shredding its wings to smoke. Crushing its jaws, and breaking its chest open to the air. Only then does it finally stop its infernal laughing, allowing the pilgrimsway to fall silent save for the creak of weapons cooling and that whispering that never ceases.

That, and the sound of Talina Orako dying.

The shrine-sergeant is propped against the wall of the pilgrimsway. As Darrago watches she lowers her lasgun and it falls to the floor with a clatter. The barrel glows from repeat firing at the thing that Sahbal became. Orako is shaking uncontrollably now. Blood runs from her nose, and her eyes are wild with fear. Sanyctus approaches her. He goes to one knee and removes his helmet again.

'They made a monster of him,' Orako stutters, through her teeth. 'Such a monster. Wings and teeth and those eyes. Those terrible *eyes*.'

'It is a choice,' Sanyctus says. 'Always a choice. Do you understand?'

'He let the whispers hurt him,' Orako murmurs.

Sanyctus nods.

'I did what you said,' Orako says. 'Held close to my name. My oaths. Myself.' She exhales, and that is a stutter, too. 'I am dying, aren't I?'

'Yes,' Sanyctus says.

Orako's head rocks forwards in a nod.

'But I didn't give in, though it would have been easy to. So easy. I think perhaps I can be proud of that.'

Sanyctus blinks. Darrago sees the scar tissue on his face flicker.

'Yes, you can,' he says, softly.

Orako shifts, and blood wells from the wound in her chest.

'I am Talina Orako,' she says. 'Once a daughter. Now an orphan. Once a trader. Now a soldier.' She lifts her hand and holds it out. In her palm glitters the symbol of the golden chalice. Sanyctus holds out his own massive, clawed hand and allows the icon to fall into it.

'But always a loyal servant of the God-Emperor of Mankind,' Sanyctus says.

Orako smiles at the sound of her own words given back to her, then she

shudders and her eyes become flat and fixed. Sanyctus closes his gauntlet around the icon and gets to his feet.

‘To the Heart, then,’ he says, still looking down at his closed hand.

Victorno nods. ‘To the Heart.’

‘After the daemon’s words?’ Maeklus says. ‘Do not be a fool.’

Darrago can see where the creature’s clawed hand pressed into Sanyctus’ chestplate, leaving a mark that looks almost like a bruise. He thinks of what he saw in the moment of transit. Of the chalice spilling over with angels’ blood.

‘The last and greatest sacrifice,’ he says, slowly. ‘The blood they want is yours.’

‘Let them try and take it,’ Sanyctus says, a snarl twisting his face.

‘Think clearly, Sanyctus,’ Maeklus says. ‘We cannot take you with us.’

‘Well, we cannot leave him behind,’ Ebellius says. For once, he is serious. ‘We are few enough as it is. We need his blades.’

Maeklus shakes his head. ‘If they were to capture him—’

Ebellius snorts a laugh. ‘Let them try, like Sanyctus says. They will soon see what happens when they do.’

‘This is not something to take lightly, brother,’ Maeklus says.

Ebellius flinches as if Maeklus has struck him. ‘I know that. You know that I do.’

‘Stop.’ Darrago does not raise his voice, or clash the standard pole on the stone. He just speaks clearly and evenly, and they fall quiet. ‘It is not your decision what we do – any of you. Nor is it mine.’

He looks to Victorno. The sergeant is still looking at Talina Orako’s unmoving form, resting one hand on the haft of his thunder hammer. Victorno shakes his head.

‘There is no way out other than victory. No extraction. We will not give them what they seek, because Sanyctus will not fall. None of us will fall.’

Victorno looks up from the shrine-sergeant’s body and hefts his thunder hammer.

‘The only thing that we will give to the Devoted and to Tur Zalak and his coven is death.’

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

‘The Devoted fed upon the faithful.’ There is a change in the face of Darrago’s brother then. The shadowed hollows of his eyes seem to grow darker. ‘It is a perversion of our own rites,’ he says.

Darrago thinks about that. About drinking from the Red Grail all of those years ago when he had but a mortal heart. He cannot remember it clearly, but he remembers the dreams that followed during the Angel’s slumber. Dreams of feathered wings and a voice like choirsong. Dreams of warmth, but not the warmth of a rad-desert, or a blazing sun. It was a golden kind of warmth, a pure kind. Drinking from the Grail is what granted him and every one of his brothers ascension. It is a sacred rite. Pure, like the warmth from the dream. What he saw in the shrine does not conjure images of that rite, but images that he would sooner forget.

‘They tore out their throats,’ Darrago says, absently. ‘Like animals.’

He feels a change in himself as he speaks the word *animals*. He thinks of the lone watch-station of Solace, so long ago now. Of catching his own reflection in fire-lit steel and glimpsing an animal there, baring bloody fangs.

Darrago blinks and lets out a breath.

‘It was not so much a perversion of our rites, as a reflection of our failures. Something meant to expose us, not only to ourselves, but to those who had built Sanguis Gloria in our father’s image. To those who consider us angels.’

He thinks of Orako’s words as she stood against them.

The whispers mean to make monsters of us.

I think that you feel it too.

‘You feel sorrow over the mortal’s death.’ There is no judgement in the way his brother says those words, just a cold curiosity.

‘All deaths are sorrowful in one way or another,’ Darrago says. ‘It means a life cut short. One less loyal soul to fight and live and defy everything set against us. We are few, in a vast galaxy.’

‘Mortals live short lives, Thaneod. They die easily, in great numbers. That is why we are made. To fight where they cannot. To stand where they fall. To endure what breaks them.’

Darrago nods. ‘But Orako did not break,’ he says. ‘She endured the whispers. She endured her once-brother turning into something dark and hateful that she could not hope to understand. Despite all of that, she kept to her name and her oaths, and died without losing herself.’

‘That is what truly concerns you,’ Darrago’s brother says. ‘There is a part of you that seeks a noble death. That dreads watching a brother become something dark and hateful. This isn’t about the mortal, not really. It is about the Flaw and the pull of it. It is about the fact that she saw a glimpse of it in the five of you, and that makes you feel ashamed.’

Insight is another of his brother’s masteries. He uses it as deftly as he does a blade and with just as much certainty.

Darrago shakes his head. ‘There is already so much for them to fear,’ he says. ‘Xenos. Traitors. The lost and the damned. They should not need to fear us, too.’

‘There are few things in this galaxy that are assured. Death is one. War is another. For mortals, fear is just as certain. I said it before. It is why we are made.’

‘To endure what they fear until the day that we become it ourselves,’ Darrago says, before he can stop himself. ‘Tell me, brother, what does that make us?’

His brother, as always, does not look away when he answers.

‘Angels,’ he says.

THE SHRINE OF SANGUIS GLORIA, THEN...

‘How did you know?’ Darrago asks. ‘You knew before Sahbal turned what had become of him.’

Sanyctus blinks. That scar tissue flickers. The damage looks deep in the half-light of the pilgrimsway as they keep moving towards the Angel’s Heart.

‘It made me think of Perdicia,’ Sanyctus says.

Darrago remembers every battle. It is one of the gifts that comes from ascension, though where battles like Perdicia are concerned, remembering sometimes feels more akin to a curse.

‘The cult of masks,’ Darrago says, softly.

He remembers what the cult had done. What his brothers did, too, to make it right. He remembers standing beside Sanyctus to protect a cathedral full of innocents who had taken sanctuary from the sins of their neighbours. He remembers in the aftermath, how the families had come to thank them. They had pressed their hands to Darrago’s armour as if in reverence and he had not known what to do, or what to say. He remembers Sanyctus dropping to one knee as the innocents took to their prayers, taking the time to speak good words for their lost.

‘A cruel day,’ Sanyctus says. In the moments between battles, he sounds more as Darrago remembers him to, more like his old friend, who spoke with the people of Perdicia. ‘Every ninth mortal in the city tier crowned with molten silver in the name of something false.’

‘I remember,’ Darrago says, and he can smell the silver and the burning. ‘But I do not see what that has to do with what became of Sahbal.’

‘They gave themselves up to it willingly on Perdicia,’ Sanyctus says. ‘I could see the choice on them. In their eyes. They all had the same look. The same

madness.’

Darrago thinks of the once-pilgrim and his wide, dark eyes. The intensity of them. He thinks of the cultist he killed earlier and the words he spoke.

‘Devotion,’ Darrago says. ‘That is what you saw in them. A devotion to darkness.’

Sanyctus nods. ‘They chose the easy path,’ he says. ‘They chose to give in, instead of fighting it. I saw the same madness in Sahbal.’

‘The pilgrims and the priests chose to follow heretics,’ Darrago says. The idea is unthinkable to him. His mind fights it. ‘They chose Zalak and his covenant.’

‘Out of weakness or fear,’ Sanyctus says. ‘Perhaps they did not fully understand the choice that they were making, or what they were truly becoming, but they made the choice nonetheless. They still had to answer for it.’

He looks at Darrago. For a moment, he almost looks serene beneath the blood and the ashes and all of his scars, then he takes his helm and locks it back in place. Darrago just sees himself reflected in the jade eye-lenses.

‘As we all will, in the end,’ Sanyctus says.

The approach to the Heart is filled with candles. Thousands of them, still lit and flickering, two or three times Darrago’s own height. New ones have been affixed over the old ones, and over time they have melted and combined to create grand, twisted stalagmites of wax crowned with those tiny flames. Flames that endure despite the sawing breaths of dry, stale air that push and pull through the shrine. Despite the candlekeepers who lie dead at the feet of each of the red wax monoliths. They burn on heedless as the Archangels tread through puddles of softened wax, leaving heavy, pressed footprints behind them. There are other footprints in the wax, too, crossing over one another as if made in panic. Most of them were made by boots or soft shoes. Some by bare feet, that look misshapen and distorted.

‘They should have gone out,’ Maeklus says.

He is looking up at one of the candles. It is so large that the candlekeepers have carved hand and foot holds into the face of it in order to reach the top and tend the flames.

‘There is something to be said for light that can endure in a place this dark,’ Victorino says.

Maeklus frowns. ‘They should have gone out,’ he says, again.

Sanyctus stops moving. ‘Quiet,’ he says, the combat-edge made by adrenaline turning his voice sharp. ‘Do you hear that?’

Darrago listens. He hears the burn of candles. The drip of wax. The snarl of his own Terminator plate.

The whispers in reverse, growing louder.

‘Ready yourselves,’ Victorno bellows.

At his words, every candle in the corridor roars to new life. The flames grow to reach the ceiling, then as one they blow out. Everything but the pilot light on Maeklus’ flamer. Darrago’s eye-lenses adjust instantly to compensate for the darkness, and to reveal spiked, horned shadows peeling away from the walls, wielding jagged blades. The daemons’ eyes glow balefire red and Darrago’s world becomes a handful of instances, lit by gunfire. The daemons are only part-born, not truly corporeal, and they flicker like the candles did, disappearing and reappearing and trailing smoke. They roar like working engines without needing to take a breath, a constant assault of noise. Where they are hit by bolt-shells, or by power weapons, the daemons disincorporate and burst, scattering ashes. But there are many. One of their jagged blades strikes Darrago’s armour at the waist and goes through. It goes through him, too. He roars in pain, coughing blood onto the inside of his faceplate. Darrago fires his storm bolter until the daemon’s balefire eyes gutter out. Beside him, Ebellius shatters marble and daemonstuff alike with his power fist. Victorno’s hammer lights the corridor with every strike. Sanyctus’ claws cut and rend as the daemons shift and swarm and move on him as one. They seek his blood, too, just like the Devoted.

‘Adiccio!’ Darrago shouts, as he loses sight of his brother.

‘Burn them!’ Sanyctus roars.

‘Aye,’ Maeklus says, and he turns his heavy flamer onto the daemon-tide.

The corridor ahead of Darrago lights, hot white and red. The flames roll over the daemons, and over Sanyctus too. For a moment, he is lost to it. Consumed by it. But Terminator armour is built to withstand the worst of punishments.

And so are those who wear it.

The flames go out and the daemons are dust, but Sanyctus remains. Fire clings to his armour, burning his oath seals away. Wax runs over and off the plates. They are blackened by ashes now too, save for those red wax trails. Sanyctus’ eye-lenses have cracked with the heat of it. He tears his helm free and locks it to his belt. He is breathing deeply and raggedly.

Maeklus does not speak. He just approaches Sanyctus and thumps his closed fist against his shoulder. Sanyctus nods in answer.

‘Blinded all over again, brother,’ Ebellius says. ‘There is such a thing as wanting too much for glory.’

Ebellius laughs, because Ebellius always laughs, especially when things are dire. Sanyctus doesn't join in. His one good eye is dark and furious. The firelight reflects in it.

'Glory,' Sanyctus says. 'No. Not glory.'

Then he turns away and moves off up the corridor, and for a moment to Darrago the red wax trails on his brother's armour look just like saltires.

Red on black.

The closer they get to the Angel's Heart, the darker it becomes. There are no more candles. No more pennants or banners. No more murals or gilded glories. They have all been torn away and replaced with eight-pointed stars and inverted chalices and those same words that the cultists keep saying.

Blood for the Blessed.

It is painted in great, angry strokes that flake and smear and smell like iron. It is dizzying, that smell.

Overwhelming.

Darrago crushes devotionals underfoot just as he crushes the cultists holding the cloisters of the pilgrimsway. The heretics. The once-priests that have painted red trails down their faces and the fronts of their robes. He breaks their bones with his gauntleted fist. His breathing is loud and ragged inside his helm. Beside him his brothers fight and break and kill too. They are unstoppable.

Blood.

The word echoes for Darrago as the cultists roar it at him.

Blood.

But then he breaks and he kills until all of the cultists are dead, but still the roar does not stop.

Because the roar is his own.

Darrago stops. Staggered. He plants the company standard to keep from falling. His limbs tremor and his fangs ache up into his head. He blinks. Sees his brothers kill in what seems like half-time. The cultists still do not scream, but some of them laugh as they die. The golden thread sewn into the company standard catches Darrago's eye. The glories, and the lessons learned.

'In this,' he shouts, through the pain and the darkness and the want to give into the roar. 'We are angels!'

His words echo back at him from his helm's emitters and off the walls of the pilgrimsway as his brothers falter and stop their snarling. Their shaking.

All save for one.

‘Sanyctus!’ Victorno shouts.

Sanyctus has left a trail of the dead and a thick slick of that black blood. It takes much of Darrago’s strength not to let it unsteady him. Overwhelm him.

‘Adiccio,’ Darrago says, between breaths.

At the sound of his name, Sanyctus turns. His one good eye is wild. A thick stripe of blood paints its way down his chin and the front of his Terminator plate. He drops the cultist that he is holding in his gauntlet and his lightning claws snap live. He lunges for Darrago, and Victorno blocks it with his storm shield. The power fields clash together with a boom of pressure.

‘The lesson!’ Darrago shouts. ‘Adiccio!’

Sanyctus finally falters. Finally stops.

‘The lesson,’ he slurs through his teeth. ‘I remember.’

Victorno pushes Sanyctus back and lowers the shield slowly. Sanyctus looks down at the marble floor. At the bodies and the blood.

‘This place,’ he says, and his voice is less slurred. More like his own. ‘We mean to save it. To make it clean. Yet there is already so much ruin.’

‘We will save it. We are the only ones who can.’ The pause Victorno makes is deliberate. Weighted. ‘We are the only ones strong enough.’

After a long moment, Sanyctus nods slowly. ‘The Heart, then the Crown,’ he says. ‘Then it is done.’

Darrago is unsure in that moment whether Sanyctus is talking about the task that lies ahead, or about himself. He does not get the chance to ask because his brother turns away and the five of them set to moving along the pilgrimsway. Into the darkness and towards the Heart. This time Maeklus leads, with Ebellius walking beside Sanyctus. Victorno stays at Darrago’s side.

‘He barely saw you, this time,’ Victorno says, over a private vox link. ‘It is getting worse with every fight.’

Darrago shakes his head. ‘It is just this place,’ he says. ‘That is all.’

‘This place is vile,’ Victorno says. ‘That is true. It presses at the edges of my mind. Feeds the curses we carry. But he meant to fight you, Thaneod. He meant to kill you. That is more than a moment of weakness. That is failure.’

Darrago lets out a slow breath. ‘The words brought him back,’ he says. ‘It is not failure yet.’

‘The lesson,’ Victorno says. ‘Remember the lesson. Why does it bring him back? What does it mean?’

Darrago tightens his grip on the company standard.

‘The lesson comes from Kalatar,’ he says. ‘From the war with the orks.’

Victorno grunts. ‘Those that took his eye,’ he says. ‘Damn near took my head. I remember. But what is the lesson?’

Darrago watches Sanyctus, keeping half an eye on his brother’s vital signs. The heartbeat monitor is more steady now, but it is always a pace quicker than the others.

‘We fought furiously on Kalatar,’ Darrago says. ‘But Adiccio most of all. When the battle turned, he would not fall back. He meant to kill their warlord in vengeance for the death and destruction they had wrought on that world, but he got cut off from the rest of us. I lost sight of him amongst the hordes and I only found him again by the trail of greenskin dead. There was not a glimmer of gold left on his plate for the blood and the damage. I thought that he could be dead too, he was so still.’

Darrago shakes his head. It makes the servos in his armour whine.

‘I called out his name, and he moved. He looked at me with the eye left to him and put his hand to the ruin of the one that he’d lost and told me that was the price for his failure. That his rage truly had blinded him. Then he asked me to remember it. To never let him forget the lesson.’

‘And when he cannot be reminded?’ Victorno asks. ‘When the words no longer work?’

Darrago feels a pull of grief on his hearts, just as when he saw Arthemio lying amongst the timeworn dead.

‘You know the answer to that question, Dio,’ Darrago says. ‘We all know the price for that kind of failure.’

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

‘Then you had considered the fact he might fail? That the Flaw might claim him?’

Darrago has set about folding the banner now, leaving his work half done. He will return to it later, when his head is not so clouded and he is not so troubled. When the questions are done, and judgement passed.

‘It would be ignorant not to,’ Darrago says. ‘There is an inevitability to it. It is a decline that cannot be denied. The path leads only downwards. It is what you do on that path that you can control. How surely you can slow the descent.’

Darrago’s brother nods. ‘Meditation. Training. Craft or creation. Mantras, like your own.’ He pauses. ‘In this, we are angels.’

When the mantra is spoken by Darrago’s brother, the inflection is different. More sombre.

‘Those words remind me what I am,’ Darrago says. ‘What I should be.’

‘And where do they come from?’

Darrago finishes folding the banner. He pushes out the last of the creases.

‘Adiccio,’ he says. ‘He spoke those words to me on Solace, long ago.’

The memory of that day comes back to him now, as it does often, and he catches the chill that comes from shame. Darrago pushes it aside with effort and tries not to think of that blissful blindness and the euphoria that came with the taste of blood. That is why those words became a mantra, because they ease the pain of that memory and keep him from making any more like it.

‘It is another thing I owe him for,’ Darrago says. ‘More so than the deaths denied, in truth.’

Solace was the moment that truly bound the two of them together. A singular instance of terrible vulnerability, the likes of which Darrago had never known

before that day, and has not known again since, thanks to that handful of words given to him by a brother.

‘It would have been ignorant not to consider the Flaw, or how it circled my brother,’ Darrago says. ‘But that does not mean that I doubted Adiccio, or that I believed he would fail. He has always been selfless, as I said, but he has always been strong too. Capable of arresting that descent, no matter the pull of it. He always returns to us.’

‘And after the chalice? Was that truly Adiccio Sanyctus who returned to you then?’

Darrago thinks about it a moment. About golden fire and the screams of warp-sent horrors. About the look in Sanyctus’ remaining eye, beatific.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘I believe it was.’

THE SHRINE OF SANGUIS GLORIA, THEN...

The Angel's Heart was once a hall of worship, grand and arched. There are smooth furrows in the marble floor from the passing of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims. From where they have knelt to speak the words of worship carved into the floor before another representation of Darrago's father. This one is three times Darrago's size and made from gold. It is sculpted with a beneficent smile and a hand outstretched as if it means to offer something.

Instead, the offerings have been made before it.

The bodies of pilgrims and priests have been dragged and moved and heaped to make that same eight-pointed mark on the floor at the foot of the statue. It burns, that mark, with blue fire that dazzles Darrago even through his helm's lenses. In the centre of the circle, surrounded by the dead and the fire, are five kneeling figures, clad in crimson armour trimmed with silver. They are chanting unwords. The same unwords that carry on the cold air as whispers.

'Heretics.'

The five Word Bearers stop their chanting and get to their feet. They trail smoke as they turn as one, their armour plates swelling and shifting as curves of bone push through the ceramite. They grow horns and claws and jutting spines, their eye-lenses glowing balefire red.

'Warp-kin,' Victorno snarls.

Darrago and his brothers fire on the possessed Word Bearers without hesitation, but the shells burn up when they hit the ritual circle, burst by tongues of blue flame.

The first of them laughs, in a twinned, asynchronous voice.

'Hail, angels,' he says. ***'Come to make an offering, have you?'***

He turns his head with a creak of ceramite and metal, and looks to Sanyctus.

The five balefire lenses set into his helm flicker.

‘And such an offering it is, too,’ he says. *‘This fractured angel, with violence boiling his blood.’*

Sanyctus roars at the Word Bearer. His claws light and he takes a step forwards. ‘Wait,’ Darrago says, because he can guess what will happen should Sanyctus try and cross that burning circle. ‘Adiccio.’

‘I will show you violence,’ Sanyctus bellows at them. ‘I will show you blood.’

The Word Bearer laughs again, and his four brothers echo it.

‘Perfect,’ he says. ‘Just as the Blessed said.’

There is another creak of ceramite, and with a rolling cloud of smoke, leathery wings unfold from the traitors’ backs, casting long shadows in the light from the witchfire.

‘Such a shame,’ says the Word Bearer, with his five golden eyes flickering. ‘For you to think yourselves angels, but never to know how it truly feels to fly.’

His next word is an echoing chain of syllables that sends Darrago blind for an instant and makes his ears ring. The witchfire circle rolls out as the Word Bearers snap their wings and leap into the air. Darrago moves with his brothers to shield Sanyctus, taking the brunt of the tide of witchfire across his armour. The standard is caught in it too, making the glories wrought in golden thread catch and smoulder. Darrago feels the fire as if he is not wearing armour at all. It scorches his skin, and stings his eyes and his throat as he tries to breathe.

Through the blindness and the pain, he barely manages to raise his storm bolter and fire at the Word Bearer that comes to kill him, claws outstretched. This one has no eye-lenses at all. His faceplate has shaped itself to resemble nothing but teeth. The traitor’s armour shifts to catch the detonations from the bolt-shells and deflect them in the instant before he lands heavily, trying to knock Darrago to his knees. He punches his jagged claws through Darrago’s armour at the shoulder and the chest. The pain of it sets Darrago’s nerves alight and makes his vision dazzle. He cannot cry out, because with the claw buried in his chest he cannot breathe, but Darrago does not fall, because he is made to stay standing. He is made to endure and defy. He moves despite the bleeding and the pain and his empty, breathless lungs, firing his storm bolter at point-blank range up into the Word Bearer’s body.

The traitor goes reeling and his claws come clear. That hurts twice as badly. Darrago’s armour systems blare warnings in his ears. The Word Bearer snaps his wings to regain his balance, but Darrago will not let him fly again. He punches the standard pole through one of the traitor’s wings and pins him to the ground

with it. The Word Bearer twists and pulls and the wing tears and begins to reshape, but he is not quick enough this time. Darrago empties the rest of the storm bolter's magazine into the traitor's head and chest until the ceramite cracks and the bones beneath it shatter and the heretic falls with a crash of armour plates, bleeding black all over the floor.

Darrago pulls the standard free and he turns to see his brothers fighting furiously to keep the Word Bearers from taking Sanyctus. Ebellius shatters the frozen, grinning helm of one of them with a blow from his power fist. Maeklus has set one of them afire, but the Word Bearer keeps his feet, fighting even as he burns. Victorno uses his storm shield to push the one with the five golden eyes onto his back foot.

'Every drop of blood spilt is just another offering,' the Word Bearer says. ***'The rite has already begun!'***

He turns Victorno's hammer strike aside with his gauntlet, though such a thing should not be possible. It sets Victorno off-balance, opening his guard. Then the Word Bearer lashes out with his other clawed hand, shattering Victorno's faceplate and sending his blood across the marble floor. The sergeant staggers and slurs an old Baalite curse. Darrago's bolter is empty, so he charges instead, but he is slow from his wounds and the way the witchfire burned him.

So Sanyctus gets there first.

Sanyctus hits the Word Bearer with all of his weight, burying both of his lightning claws in the traitor's chest.

'Perfect,' says the Word Bearer. ***'Such a perfect, violent thing.'***

He steps back and free of Sanyctus' claws with a welter of black blood and smoke. The traitor answers with his own claws. One strike opens Sanyctus' face to the bone. The other buckles his chest plate and drives him to his knees.

'No!' Darrago shouts.

The Word Bearer's mask tilts towards him, and the warped ceramite splits like a smile.

'Blood,' he says. ***'For the Blessed.'***

Then there is a roar, and the Word Bearer's smiling mask is pulverised by a spear of bright light fired from behind Darrago. The Word Bearer staggers backwards and lets go of Sanyctus, his faceplate trying to reshape through the colossal damage. Darrago looks back to see Captain Donato haloed by light as he charges into the fray. Phaello is with him, and the two shield-brothers that remain of his squad, Ivaro and Lurani.

'No,' Donato bellows. 'The only blood spilt here will be yours.'

TWO
WEAPONS

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

Larracus Donato has never found much respite in rest, so when he is not called to battle, he trains. He chooses to do so without his Terminator plate. Without his power fist or his storm bolter. Instead, he wears the kind of roughweave training clothes an aspirant might wear. That too is because it allows him respite, from the weight of the armour and what it means to wear it, but there is another reason for Donato's choice.

Because there is value in remembering what you once were.

So Donato trains alone in the lower decks of the *Sanguine Tear*, under white-hot lumens that remind him of home and make the wooden boards underfoot warm. He trains with a simple, short-bladed sword that he cast for himself. The combat servitors outnumber him three to one. They are armed with their own jagged blades and set to draw blood, because there is no respite in an easy fight either. Donato turns aside from the erratic motion of the first, and puts the momentum of that movement into severing the second servitor's arm at the shoulder. His follow-up strike sends it reeling and broken and sprays oil across the training hall floor.

Donato's hearts beat steadily in his chest. His mind is clear, and the fury far away. This fight is to him as painting or poetry is to his brothers. It is about artistry. About technical skill, and perfect execution. The third servitor lunges for him with its heavy, augmented limbs. Donato ducks under the strike and punches his sword through the servitor's nervous centre. It spasms and falls aside. As he moves to finish the fight, the heavy doors to the training hall open and an armoured figure enters. One of Donato's brothers, but one he rarely has cause to speak with. One he feels no joy at the sight of. His brother waits in silence outside the training circle. There is no ending the fight other than by victory, so

Donato despatches the last of the servitors quickly. That last one manages to cut him before it falls, snagging him across the arm with the jagged blade it carries.

‘Damn,’ Donato says, and he puts his hand to the wound.

It is not severe. Donato barely feels the cut itself, and it certainly will not scar, but his hearts are not steady now. The fury is not so distant. To some degree, it is because of the blood; even spilling his own sets the curse he carries singing. But Donato is practised at ignoring that song. The true cause for his unrest is that Donato knows that he could have won without injury, but he let the presence of his silent, watchful brother unsettle him.

‘I would speak with you, brother-captain,’ his brother says.

‘Then speak,’ Donato says, as he crosses the hall and takes up a cloth with which to clean the oil from his training sword. Normally thralls would already be clearing the circle, but there are none present. The questions that this brother asks are only for those of the Chapter to hear. ‘Know that if you mean to ask about Luminata, I fear there is little more I can add,’ Donato says. ‘I have already made my report. I have already spoken with Lord Commander Dante.’

His brother has crossed the hall too. If the mention of Dante’s name gives him pause, he does not show it. Nothing ever shows on his face in moments like these.

‘I have read your report,’ his brother says. ‘It told me much, but not everything.’

Donato catches his own reflection in the blade of the training sword. Just like the wound he took from the servitor, the scars that he earned on Luminata are already fading.

‘Then what do you want me to tell you?’ he asks.

‘I want you to tell me about Adiccio Sanyctus,’ his brother says.

That does stoke the fury in Donato’s blood. He waits for it to pass before he speaks again, because he must be calm in the face of his brother’s questions.

‘You want me to tell you of Sanyctus,’ he says. ‘I will tell you. He has given much in the name of our father. In the name of the Throne, and of the Emperor. I saw him save Victorno’s life when we fought at the foot of the Stone Saint. He felled the ork tyrant of Kalatar. Stood against a tyrannid horde alone at the Shieldworlds’ edge, to allow the Astra Militarum to regroup and emerge victorious. To spare the lives of mortals and lend them strength.’

‘Those stories too, I know,’ his brother says. ‘Glories are not why I am here.’

Donato shakes his head. ‘No, they are not,’ he says, coldly.

His brother does not remark on his words, or the tone of them, though he would

have the right to.

‘I want you to tell me what truly happened at Sanguis Gloria,’ his brother says.
‘I want to know what became of Adiccio Sanyctus.’

THE SHRINE OF SANGUIS GLORIA, THEN...

Donato watches as Maeklus sets light to the circle of offerings and the bodies burn all over again, this time gold and red, and not unnatural blue. His helm filters out the smoke, but not the scent of it. Funeral pyres. Donato lets the last outside transmission he received after teleportation play back again.

There will be no reinforcements, it says. What forces remain on the surface work to clear the pilgrims' city of traitors, and of innocents. This task is left to your Archangels, brother. If the shrine cannot be saved, then it must fall, and our enemies with it.

'They sought to take Sanyctus.'

Donato turns from the fire at the words. Darrago's armour is split and battered and splattered with black blood. The Company Ancient is breathing with a rasp that suggests the slow reknitting of a punctured lung. He has removed his helm and locked it to his waist, exposing a face made up of blunt angles and old scars. The aquila brand burned into Darrago's flesh is stark but his eyes, as always, are contemplative. The Company Ancient is a warrior, as they all are, but over time he has become the conscience of every one of the Archangels, including Donato.

'Just Sanyctus,' Donato says.

Darrago nods. 'The one with the golden eyes called him perfect,' he says, absently. 'A perfect, violent thing.'

Donato thinks about that. About Kalatar, and the Shieldworlds' edge, and every battle before this, and he cannot find a lie in those words.

'We will not let them take him,' Donato says. 'I do not intend to lose another brother.'

Darrago shakes his head. His eyes are more than contemplative now. They look sorrowful.

‘Nor do I,’ he says.

‘Spare an eye for him, Thaneod,’ Donato says. ‘Just as we spoke about.’

‘Always,’ Darrago says, with a nod. ‘The traitor said something else. He called Sanyctus the last sacrifice. For the Blessed.’

The Blessed.

Donato snarls at the name. At the twisted suggestion of it.

‘The name that Tur Zalak has given himself,’ he says. ‘He thinks himself a priest. Thinks himself enlightened. He is no more than a heretic. A mad dog, serving false gods. His death is long overdue.’

‘We will serve it here,’ Darrago says. ‘For our lost.’

Donato puts a hand on his brother’s shoulder.

‘For all of the lost,’ he says, because he does not just want to kill Zalak for those lost here. For Arthemio and Alfeo and Vytali. He wants to kill Tur Zalak for what he did on Perdicia. For the cult of masks, and for the knotted scar across his chest that Zalak gave him that still aches, though it has no right to. He wants to kill Zalak for every one of his sins, from the Great Heresy until now, but most of all Donato wants to kill him to clear the stain on his honour. On Perdicia, Donato failed, but he will not fail again. Not here, under the sight of his father.

‘We go now,’ he tells Darrago. ‘And we end it.’

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

Donato chooses to continue the questioning in his own chambers, rather than the training hall. It is a large chamber as befits his rank. Weapon racks line the walls, hung with instruments of war. Swords and spears. Axes and knives. Donato walks to the empty space and racks the sword he trained with alongside the others.

‘All of these weapons were made by your hand?’ his brother asks.

‘Every one,’ Donato says.

It is another act that quiets the song in his blood. Another deliberate act that requires technical skill and perfect execution. He never uses them in battle, only in training, when he is trying to find peace.

‘The broken ones,’ his brother says. ‘You keep those too.’

Donato turns and looks to the west wall. Every weapon hanging there is damaged. Blades are snapped or dulled. Splintered and cracked.

‘They are all lessons,’ Donato says. He crosses to the west wall and puts his hand to one of the splintered blades. ‘This one was tempered in a weak flame.’ He moves his hand to the next. An axe, with a bowed edge and a crack in the face of it. ‘This one was quenched too soon. It makes the blade weak.’

Donato puts his hand to the last of the swords. The most recent. It would have been a longsword, and a beautiful one, but it shattered halfway up its length the first time he used it in training. He remembers that the splinters cut him.

‘There was something in the steel of this one,’ he says. ‘It could never have done anything but break.’ He drops his hand away. ‘To discard them would be to forget them,’ Donato says. ‘And I do not make a habit of forgetting my failures.’

‘Nor your enemies.’

Donato looks to his watchful brother. ‘You speak of Tur Zalak,’ he says.

‘You had faced him before,’ his brother says.

Donato nods. He can feel the thrum of the *Sanguine Tear* through the floor of his chambers. It rattles the blades on the walls minutely. They sing a shrill, barely audible song.

‘On Perdicia,’ he says. ‘Fifty years ago.’

‘You were sent to kill him, and to save the world from damnation.’

‘Yes.’

‘Perdicia was saved, but you failed to kill Zalak.’

Donato’s hand goes to his chest. It is an unconscious action. A bad habit. The old, knotted scar there aches as if it is made fresh. It always does, when he thinks of Perdicia.

‘I fought him alone,’ Donato says. ‘In a place that was sacred to Perdicia’s people, but that Zalak and his traitors had desecrated in the name of his false gods.’

‘The Temple of the Emperor Ascended,’ his brother says.

Donato nods again, remembering. The temple was a ruin. Smoking, cracked and slicked with molten silver. Every surface was a shattered, warped mirror.

‘I had him,’ Donato says. ‘I had shattered one of his legs and broken his arm. Taken his staff from him. He was doing little more than crawling away from me.’

‘And then?’

Donato frowns. ‘I could have fired on him to finish it,’ he says. ‘But instead I meant to crush him. To break him, as he had broken Perdicia, and her people.’ He shakes his head. ‘I was arrogant. Blinded by pride. I left myself open, and he struck me when I thought him already defeated.’

That old scar aches again. The damage runs deep. Zalak had cut Donato to the hearts and escaped, leaving him to bleed all over the mirrored floor of the profaned temple. Even in that moment, as he had been close to death, the smell of the blood had set the curse singing.

‘And in the shrine?’ his brother asks. ‘Did your pride blind you then, too?’

‘Blind me to what?’ Donato asks, coldly.

His brother tilts his head, minutely. For the first time in a long time, Donato feels how it must feel to be prey.

‘Failure of a different kind,’ his brother says.

THE SHRINE OF SANGUIS GLORIA, THEN...

In the corner of Donato's helm display, there is a red line tracking warp activity. It has been climbing since they entered the shrine. The closer they get to the summit, the steeper the line. The darker the path. The heavier the pressure of the storm that Zalak makes at the Crown. Donato feels it press against his mind as he advances up the marble steps, with his brothers in tow. Gunfire rains down on them from above from emplacements manned by cultists. It rings against his armour like rain on steel.

On either side of Donato, blood runs down the walls, collecting on the steps until the pools grow too wide and it spills over to the next and the next. The stink of it surrounds him. Suffuses him. It sets the curse he carries singing more loudly than it ever has as he keeps pushing up the steep climb. It takes every ounce of Donato's will to ignore the song of the curse. He thinks of training. Of deliberate, controlled movements, and the steadying of his hearts.

He thinks of the message.

This task is left to your Archangels, brother.

'Do not falter,' he roars. *'Archangels!'*

They answer him in kind. Some over the vox, and some aloud. All of their voices are ragged with the strain of ignoring the song, but there is one that Donato barely recognises. One that sounds nearly animal.

Sanyctus.

His armour is blackened and burned. Cracked and trailing smoke from where it has turned aside the gunfire. He is snarling. Showing his fangs.

The Archangels hit the top of the marble stairway, and hit the cultists too. The mounted guns are smashed aside. Bolter-fire thunders in the half-dark. But the cultists are not alone. There are creatures with them that have been called by the

storm. Great, flayed hounds with jaws full of jagged teeth. They howl at the sight of the Terminators, and to Donato that too is another terrible, atonal song. One of the flesh-hounds leaps for him, and he fires on it with his combi-melta. The beam is searing white, an instant of light in the darkness. It punches through the daemon's form and disincorporates it before it can collide with him. The ashes that are left of it scatter across his armour, and then they too disappear.

'Push through!' Donato yells.

And his Archangels obey. Donato sees it in flashes, by the light of gunfire and by the roar of Maeklus' heavy flamer

Phaello, choosing his targets. Not wasting a single round.

Ivaro and Lurani with their storm-shields locked and braced.

Victorno, crushing the skull of a flesh-hound to ashes.

Ebellius turning aside the beast that come for Maeklus with a roar that is both joy and anger.

Darrago, holding the company standard high. The only gold in the darkness.

Sanyctus, swift for one clad in Terminator plate. The kind of speed that comes from angels' blood. That comes from the song that Donato has spent decades ignoring. In the flashes of bolter-fire, Donato sees Sanyctus tear cultists asunder with his claws. Sees him break them against the marble and grow the pools of blood on the floor. As the fight drains away like the blood does over the edges of the steps, he sees Sanyctus fall to his knees with a crash of armour plates. There are furrows carved into the stone wall from where he put out his claws to try and keep from falling.

Donato goes to his side as the last of the cultists dies, and the last of the flesh-hounds are sent howling back to the warp.

'Brother,' he says. 'Can you stand?'

Sanyctus raises his head. Drool strings his teeth when he opens his mouth to speak.

'Can you hear it, brother-captain?' he slurs.

Donato can hear many things. The hum of armour and power weapons. The thunder of his hearts. Those damned ever-present whispers. The song in his blood. Before he can say anything, Sanyctus turns his head and looks at him sidelong.

'He watches us,' he says, in a voice made of broken edges. 'Our father sees. He calls for us.'

Donato has served for centuries, he has seen and heard and endured terrible things, but in that moment he feels the claws of unease cut deep. He remembers

hearing words like those before, long ago. A different world. A different brother.
He remembers what he had to do.

‘Our father,’ he says. ‘You hear our father?’

Sanyctus blinks. He looks away from Donato and down at the marble floor, and the mess that is left of their enemies.

‘I fell,’ he grunts, and he sounds more like himself. ‘When did I fall?’

Donato moves his finger from the trigger of his gun. He maglocks it to his armour and puts out his hand.

‘You haven’t,’ he says, and he pulls Sanyctus to his feet, with the unspoken end of that sentence echoing in his head.

Not yet.

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

‘Could you have killed him in that moment?’ The question cuts Donato’s retelling short. The silence that falls is heavy. ‘Could you have made that choice?’

Donato looks at his brother and wonders if the question is really to do with what happened in the shrine, or if it is to do with this particular brother’s own duty.

‘I did not have to,’ Donato says.

‘That is not an answer.’

Donato has to think of training then. He has to steady his hearts.

‘In the event of a true failure, and without one of the Chaplaincy present, dealing with that failure falls to the officer of rank. It would have fallen to me.’

His brother tilts his head again in that same way as before. ‘That is still not an answer, brother-captain.’

Donato thinks of the moment in the shrine. Of Sanyctus’ words.

Our father sees.

He thinks of a scream that becomes a roar. Of an angel, becoming animal.

‘Yes,’ Donato says, with certainty. ‘I could have made that choice. I could have killed him, if I had to. When a soul is truly lost, death is a mercy.’

‘A mercy,’ his brother says. ‘For them, or for us?’

That roar echoes in Donato’s head again.

‘Both,’ he says.

THE SHRINE OF SANGUIS GLORIA, THEN...

Their path upwards brings the Archangels to another ossuary. This one is above the heartline of the shrine, so it is built for the rich and the powerful. The consecrated bodies of the dead are set into the walls and ceilings and the tall, spiral columns. The bones are coated with gold leaf, studded with gemstones and laser-etched with prayers and hymnals. Far above, slaved cherubim still circle lazily on old commands, scattering handfuls of silk shreds made to look like feathers. But the rich and powerful dead are not the only dead in the ossuary. It is the site of another slaughter. Of another rite, but this time the sacrifices are not pilgrims or priests.

They are angels.

‘The keepers of the chalice,’ Darrago says.

The Company Ancient has taken a knee to turn one of the dead. The body is shattered and broken. There are tectonic cracks in the ceramite and the plasteel is twisted and misshapen as if by heat. There is not much of the face left to recognise, but the mark of the keepers still remains. It is a loop of white silk tied around the Blood Angel’s vambrace, sewn with the icon of the golden chalice. Donato knows that Darrago wore it at one time, long ago, as he did.

But it is not the only mark that the keepers of the chalice bear.

On the throat of the shattered and broken body that was once one of their brothers, there are marks made by teeth.

‘Something drank from them,’ Donato growls.

Darrago gets back to his feet.

‘Just like the other sacrifices,’ he says.

The false feathers fall against Donato’s armour, brushing over the plates with a sound like whispers.

Just like the other sacrifices, the whispers say.

The words echo from all around them. From every curling scrap of silk and every set of frozen, gold-leafed jaws. The words are harmonised, almost choral. Donato reacts instinctively. He raises his combi-weapon and points it, though there is no target to see. No threats highlighted in his helm's display.

'Show yourself!' he bellows.

Myself?

The words dizzy him, even through his helm, and he feels his nose start to bleed.

I would rather show you yourself, the whispers say.

The ossuary around Donato runs like wet paint and sloughs away. In its place grow spires and arches and panels of stained glass. They push up around him and enclose him. Donato's hand goes to his chest, to that aching, old scar. The wind howls around him, bringing with it the smell of fire.

Perdicia.

It is always Perdicia.

Around him, his brothers fight against Zalak's traitors. A clash of arterial red, and bruised crimson. Donato sees Ebellius and Maeklus, fighting side by side. One breaks, the other burns. He sees Darrago, planting the banner pole and standing defiant as the wind pulls at the cloth. He sees Victorno leading the charge. Phaello, sending one of the Word Bearers reeling with a well-placed shot. Lurani and Ivaro, with their shields locked. He sees Sanyctus by the flash of his claws as he cuts down another of the traitors.

Last of all, Donato sees Tur Zalak, standing at the head of the hall with his arms outstretched. Darkness coils around him like smoke. He grins, showing needle teeth.

Donato roars at the sight of him and charges forwards. His tread sends cracks through the floor underfoot, and it begins to give way. Donato's world turns and he loses sight of Zalak. His brothers cry out around him as the floor collapses, and together they all fall through cavernous darkness until Donato loses sight of them too.

He lands like a comet striking earth. More shattered marble. He should be shattered, too, from that height, but he is not. Dust rains down on him from above and it too sounds like whispers against his Terminator plate. Perdicia is gone, as is the Temple of the Emperor Ascended. He is back in the shrine of Sanguis Gloria, with the old wound in his chest aching so much that it is almost blinding. Donato puts his hand to it again, and finds it comes away bloody. His

battleplate is split, the way it was on Perdicia. Struck by a traitor's blade.

'You are a fool, Angel.'

The words are familiar, because Donato has heard them before. He knows the voice. It is carefully pitched and controlled. Each word enunciated.

The voice of a traitor.

Tur Zalak stands under the fall of dust. It glitters on his warped, battle-scarred armour like ice. The Dark Apostle's face is what enrages Donato the most. Aside from those needle teeth of his, Zalak looks much as he might have before he turned. His eyes are painted with charcoal ash, golden markings tattooed beneath them.

He does not look like the monster that he is.

'I will kill you,' Donato says, with certainty. 'You will fail here, as you did on Perdicia.'

Zalak smiles. 'You might consider Perdicia a failure,' he says. 'But I do not. Had I completed the rite there, the reward would have been paltry in comparison to what I will be given in trade for all of this. For Sanguis Gloria, and the chalice. For true angels' blood.'

Donato tries to get to his feet. To kill Zalak. To break him, as he should have on Perdicia. The action makes him bleed all over the marble and himself. Makes the curse in his blood sing.

'That is far enough,' Zalak says.

Another figure stirs in the darkness beside the Dark Apostle. It is a woman dressed in ragged robes marked with pointed sigils. She is so thin that she looks as though she was built from bones deemed too poor for the ossuary. She sticks close to Zalak like a second shadow and looks out at Donato through her tangled fall of blonde hair.

You will listen, she says, in a voice that sounds like whispers. Like feathers made from silk, brushing over his armour. That voice locks Donato's limbs and holds him still. The psyker giggles and Donato sees pointed, bloody teeth, made for tearing.

'*You*,' he growls. 'You bled my brothers.'

Donato struggles against the binding the psyker has placed on him. His limbs burn and his armour creaks with the stress of it.

Zalak just smiles. 'Visia here did not bleed your brothers,' he says. 'They did it to one another, after they fed upon the Militia Gloria, and the priesthood.'

'Lies,' Donato says, struggling to such a degree that his vision dazzles. Even his bionic eye crazes with static.

‘You should have seen it, Larracus,’ Zalak says, as if he has any right to name Donato like a friend would. ‘You Blood Angels are thought of as perfect, but I can tell you that you are never more so than when you stop fighting what makes you strong.’

‘Lies,’ Donato says again, as his vision flickers.

Zalak sighs. ‘Show him,’ he says to the psyker he called Visia.

He sees it in violent, swift glimpses. Donato is struck by the smell of blood and by the taste of it, as if he himself has done the tearing. His jaw locks, crashing his teeth together.

‘See,’ Zalak says, as the visions fade and the taste of blood with it. ‘Perfect, just as I said.’

Donato manages to shake his head. Everything he was shown felt real. It felt true. He has seen enough to know that it is not impossible, too.

But still, he refuses to give in.

‘Release me,’ he says to the psyker. ‘Do so now and I will make your death swift. It will be a mercy.’

The psyker retreats behind Zalak, her bony, thin hands pressed against his vambrace. She hisses at Donato and the pressure on his limbs increases.

‘A mercy,’ Zalak says, unconcerned. ‘That is what you said to me on Perdicia, when you thought yourself victorious.’ He tilts his head. ‘You said that death was a mercy that I did not deserve.’

Zalak draws a dagger from his belt. It is jagged and crooked as if it was grown and not made. The blade is black, but it glitters like the void when he starts tapping it against the palm of his gauntlet. It is coldly familiar – the same dagger that Zalak buried in Donato’s heart. Donato tries to shout defiance at the sight of it, but he finds he cannot even do that, now. The psyker has silenced him.

She giggles again, as if she can hear his thoughts.

‘But death is not a mercy,’ Zalak says. ‘Death is a means to an end. It is payment.’ Zalak stops tapping the blade. ‘You think me indiscriminate,’ he says. ‘A monster.’ He smiles. ‘Perhaps that is true. I have done monstrous things, certainly. But I have done them gladly, knowing what I will gain in return. I have dedicated my monstrous acts to gods who love me for them. But you, Larracus Donato. You and your brothers. You hide what you are. You fight it. You call yourselves Blood Angels and clad yourselves in gold and red until the moment that you can no longer pretend to be something that you are not. That is why you think that death is a mercy. Because you would rather be dead than accept the truth.’

Zalak's smile widens.

'That you are the true monsters.'

He steps back and the psyker makes a shape in the air with her spindly hands. Donato sees his Archangels this time, in violent, swift glimpses, just like before. He sees Ebellius turn on Maeklus and shatter his helm and the face underneath. The two of them burn as they kill one another. He sees Darrago struck down by Victorno, before Phaello fires on him and kills him in turn. Lurani and Ivaro tear each other apart like animals. He sees Sanyctus by the flash of his claws as he cuts Phaello's throat, before falling to his knees. Sanyctus looks right at Donato then and speaks.

'He calls for us,' Sanyctus says.

Zalak walks over to Sanyctus. He doesn't react. Donato cannot even cry out to him.

'I thought it was your blood I needed, Larracus. That you would be the one to stand on the knife's edge of control under the Angel's eyes. That you would be the perfect sacrifice. It would have had such symmetry. Blood for blood, after Perdicia and how you wounded me. But it was never you.'

He pulls Sanyctus' head back to expose his throat.

'It was always Sanyctus,' he says, and he opens Sanyctus' throat with the dagger.

Donato roars then, despite the psyker's control. He moves, though he can barely breathe for the pressure. Donato gets to his feet as drool strings his teeth and blood bursts from his nose. A tear paints its way down his face at the sight of his brothers, lost, and he lunges for Zalak. Donato means to break him. To utterly destroy him. The blow never lands, because Zalak disincorporates and blows away like smoke.

But the psyker does not.

Visia hisses again. She raises her hands and lashes out at Donato with panicked, invisible force, but he will not be stopped again. He will not be silenced. With the psyker weighing his limbs and cracking his battleplate open with telekinetic force, he manages to raise his combi-melta and fire.

The beam catches her full in the chest and obliterates her. In the micro-seconds before she realises that she is dead, the psyker whispers for a final time.

It was always Sanyctus, she says, as the darkness steals away and Donato finds himself standing once more in the ossuary amongst the dead. Amongst his Archangels, who are just as still.

'Brothers,' he says, and his voice echoes from the old bones.

For an instant, not one of them moves or speaks, and Donato's heart aches just as keenly as it did in the dream, but then they stir and move and stand again and Donato realises that the dream was a lie. Maeklus' faceplate is intact. Ebellius is not burned. Darrago is not broken, and Phaello did not have to fire on Victorno. Lurani and Ivaro did not tear one another apart, and Sanyctus did not turn his claws on his brothers. His throat is not cut. They are not lost.

Not yet.

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

‘Why do you think that Zalak considered Sanyctus the perfect sacrifice?’

‘Attempting to understand Zalak is madness,’ Donato says. ‘There is nothing that can be learned from the minds of heretics.’

‘I am not asking you to understand him. I am asking you to speculate, brother-captain. To draw a conclusion from observation.’ His brother tilts his head. ‘I know that you pride yourself on seeing every eventuality. Every outcome and the path that leads to it. So tell me what you saw. Speculate.’

Donato feels as though he is training, then. As if his brother has just disarmed him. He can almost hear the clatter a blade makes when it drops. He exhales a slow breath.

‘I believe that Zalak thought Sanyctus the closest to breaking,’ he says. ‘The most affected by the shrine, and by the rite. The closest to succumbing to the Flaw.’

‘And was he?’

If Donato felt disarmed before, now he feels as though he is being held at sword-point.

‘I told you before, if he had been, I would have dealt with it.’

‘Then why do you suppose Zalak showed you those things. Why did he tell you his intent?’

The question puts Donato on the back foot. He is being outmanoeuvred.

‘In an attempt to break me,’ Donato says. ‘To make me weak. An easy kill.’

‘To make you afraid.’

Donato looks at his brother flatly. ‘Fear is lost to us. You know that. I will not say that it does not trouble me, but I feel no fear.’

His brother shrugs. It is a slight, spare movement. Everything he does is

economical, until the moment his wrath is required and he stops being caged.

‘Semantics, brother-captain,’ he says. ‘The idea of succumbing to the Flaw unsettles you.’

‘It unsettles all of us,’ Donato says. ‘That, I can be sure of.’

His brother blinks. Donato thinks it might be the first time he has done so since the questioning began.

‘But you did not see yourself succumb to it,’ he says. ‘You saw your Archangels fail, one after another. You saw them murder each other, and then be murdered in turn.’

Donato’s hearts thunder at the memory of it. ‘Yes.’

‘Then what troubles you most is the idea that they might fall, and that you might see it.’

Donato thinks of the dream. Of a different world. A different brother.

‘Yes,’ he says, again.

His brother nods. ‘It is an ugly thing,’ he says. ‘No matter how often you see it.’

Donato finds himself at a loss at the words and the honesty in them.

‘Ugly as it might be, though, we cannot turn away from it. To do so would be more of a failure than falling.’ That trace of honesty is gone now. Donato’s brother is back to being inscrutable.

Back to judging.

‘I do not plan on turning away,’ Donato says. ‘Not from this, or from anything else.’

THE SHRINE OF SANGUIS GLORIA, THEN...

‘The dream you were shown. It was of Perdicia, wasn’t it?’

Phaello’s words are softly spoken, even though the vox-channel he is using to speak to Donato is private. The two of them tread up from the Heart side by side. This path is lined with arched windows through which Donato can see the storm outside and the constant flares of lightning. Rain runs upwards on the stained glass, like tears being shed in reverse.

Donato nods. ‘It is always Perdicia.’

The two of them have spoken of it before, because Donato has had no other dreams since that day. On the rare occasions he truly sleeps, that particular failure is always waiting for him.

‘I saw it too,’ Phaello says. ‘Though it was changed. Zalak twisted it, and had you die before I could reach you.’

Phaello had been the one to find Donato half-dead in the Temple of the Emperor Ascended and to call the teleport that saved his life. That is why Donato told him of the dreams, something that even Darrago does not know.

‘I will kill him here,’ Donato says. ‘As I should have then. He will pay for the dream. For Perdicia. For everything he has done.’

‘May I speak plainly, brother-captain?’ Phaello asks.

Donato looks at him, knowing that Phaello’s words will set his temper afire, whether they are meant to or not. He knows, too, that is why he must listen to them.

‘Always,’ he says.

Phaello nods. ‘I have seen you do great things,’ he says. ‘Marshal armies. Command a company-wide assault with ease. I have seen you oversee teleport strikes and orbital assaults and turn the tides of dozens of wars. You did those

things because you have always been able to see the battle in its entirety, even from the ground. You always see everything. The whole battle, and not just the pieces that make it up.’

‘You asked to speak plainly, Radst, so do it. Get to your point.’

Phaello’s face is hidden behind his helm, but Donato hears the concern in his voice clearly enough.

‘I do not think that in this you are capable of seeing everything. I think that you are driven to kill Zalak, and nothing else. That you are letting revenge decide things for you.’

Donato has always asked for honesty from his brothers, but it does not mean that Phaello’s words do not stoke his temper. Especially because, at his heart, he knows them to be true.

‘Zalak means to take Sanyctus from us and use him to complete his rite,’ Phaello says. ‘If he does that, we fail. The shrine falls. The chalice is lost. We are acting according to the enemy’s design and being moved like pieces in a game.’

‘What would you have me do?’ Donato asks. ‘Turn back? Leave Sanyctus behind? Neither of those things are an option, brother. Nor can we await Zalak. His armies are endless, and we are all that is left. Our only option is to go forward.’

‘I know. I am not suggesting retreat. I am just telling you what it is that I see.’

‘Because you think I cannot,’ Donato says.

Phaello pauses, as if he is loath to speak his next words.

‘Can you, brother-captain?’ Phaello asks.

Donato hears the rain and the thunder and the whispers. The old wound in his chest aches furiously. The red line in his helm’s display climbs. He blinks, and sees Zalak’s grinning face, as he has every time since they left the Heart. He remembers how they ended up facing one another alone on Perdicia. He had planned the battle so carefully. Considered every eventuality. Acted reactively and rationally. He had ordered his brothers to evacuate the innocents, or to hold critical locations. To fight elsewhere, because he had considered himself sufficient to defeat Zalak. He had thought it a precise application of force.

And he had been wrong.

Donato exhales a long, slow breath.

‘Fifty years have passed since Perdicia and my failure. I was short-sighted that day. Arrogant. I am not the same as I was then. None of us are.’

‘That is a truth,’ Phaello says. ‘But the failure is not yours alone to bear. Everything we do, we do together. That is the way of a brotherhood.’

Donato nods. He knows that Phaello speaks the truth. That that is the strength of the Adeptus Astartes, but it does not change the way he feels when he thinks of Perdicia. It does not change the ache of that knotted scar.

‘I appreciate your counsel, brother,’ Donato says. ‘But today will not end as that day did. I will not allow it.’

Outside, the clouds bloom with light. They are twisted and bloated, almost appearing like great, mocking faces. A second later, thunder booms, and the shrine tremors around them. Donato holds tight to his weapons.

‘This time, it will be different,’ he says. ‘This time, I will not fail.’

Zalak’s storm has found its way inside the shrine. Violet lightning crackles over the marble and arcs to Donato’s Terminator plate as they push for the lifter platform that will take them up to the Crown. Boiling clouds hang in the vaulted space. Thunder booms, and rain falls inside, rain that is black and thick and paints trails across everything it touches. With the storm come creatures, not half-formed things like they fought in the lower levels, but creatures that are whole and strong and buoyed by the storm. Donato’s helm display is nearly solid crimson with threats.

‘We are running out of time, brother-captain,’ Phaello says. ‘We need to reach the Crown.’

His voice is calm, as it always is, but Donato knows Phaello to be troubled all the same. He feels it too, because of the rite Zalak is conducting and because there will come a point when the shrine and the world itself are beyond repair. Beyond saving. Something that broken cannot be made perfect again.

He thinks of the message.

If the shrine cannot be saved, then it must fall.

The daemons move for him, bringing with them a cloud of perfumed, choking smoke. They trail it with their every movement, shedding flakes of ash that glitter like broken glass. One of them smiles, exposing pointed, even teeth, and strikes at Donato with its massive, clawed hand. He turns it aside with his power fist and fires his combi-bolter into the daemon’s head and chest. It disincorporates, blowing that glittering ash across his armour, where it scores and chips the paint. Thunder peals. Ahead, through the melee, the rain and the shadows, he sees Sanyctus cut through another of the daemons with a strangled yell that echoes louder than the thunderclap of the creature’s death. He is already moving for his next target. His heart rate is a jagged line in Donato’s helm display.

‘You are right,’ Donato says to Phaello. ‘We are running out of time.’

Ivaro and Lurani move in step with Sanyctus, using their shields to turn aside the daemons resolving from smoke all around them. The creatures are grey-skinned and black-eyed with maws of pointed teeth and cutting claws in the place of their hands. When Donato takes his next breath, he catches the scent of dried flowers and gravedirt, even through his helm's filters. He fires on them. Takes glancing blows from those claws across his shoulders. Ahead, Maeklus' flamer lights the chamber. The vox is fouled with atonal, contented humming as the daemons move and twist and cut, almost too quickly to see.

Quick enough to slip through Ivaro's guard.

'*Brother!*' Lurani shouts.

Donato hears Ivaro take a breath over the vox, but his words are stolen from him as one of the daemon's hooked claws severs his shield arm at the elbow. His shield falls with a crash and Ivaro cries out, but that sound too is stolen as the daemon's other claw severs his spine. The creature opens its maw and sings a twisted dirge as Ivaro falls to his knees.

'No!' Lurani roars.

He turns and slams his storm shield into the daemon, shattering it with the force of the blow, before finishing it with a strike from his thunder hammer. He holds guard over Ivaro with his shield raised and his shoulders set.

'Keep moving!' Phaello orders him.

Lurani rasps a breath over the vox. 'I will not abandon him.'

Around him, the daemons laugh in their splintered voices.

Such pain, they sing, and they lunge for him.

Lurani braces, but they never reach him, because Phaello does not allow it. Donato has never known another soul as keen-eyed as Phaello. As clear-headed. One of the daemons goes over backwards, a smoking hole made of its chest. Another is spun by his second shot. Its head disappears in a burst of glittering ashes. A third is disincorporated mid leap as Phaello's rounds punch through it. Two more end on Sanyctus' claws. The smell of flowers and death is cloying and choking. Underneath that are the whispers in reverse. Ever-present. Dizzying.

Donato turns aside another strike and the daemon he is facing hums through its pointed teeth. That same contented noise. It goes to cut him like Ivaro was cut, but Donato saw how it was done. He catches hold of the claw and snaps it before firing his own bolter into the daemon's body until it too bursts and disappears, taking the humming sound with it. It is replaced by another sound. The urgent ring of Ivaro's life signs as they falter.

'Keep going,' Ivaro slurs. 'Before they return.'

Lurani shakes his head. 'I cannot,' he says, as Donato and Phaello reach them. 'Not without you.' Lurani has locked his thunder hammer to his armour and he has his hand outstretched. 'Get up,' he says, though he must know that Ivaro cannot.

'Can't,' Ivaro says. 'Nothing works. Not my legs, nor my arms.'

The damage is bad. Too bad for a sus-an coma, going by the vitals in Donato's helm display. It is only the false muscle structure of Ivaro's armour keeping him upright.

That, and his stubbornness.

'Go. Finish it.' Ivaro smiles, showing bloody teeth. 'Archangels.'

Then Ivaro's head lolls, and the flatline alarm rings in Donato's ears. Lurani's hand drops to his side.

'Archangels,' he says, to his dead shield-brother.

The lifter platform hangs on massive links of chain, slung around cogwheels ten times Donato's own height. The way up is lit by flashes of lightning. Wind howls down from the summit, far above, rattling those chain links together. It carries with it that ceaseless whispering and slick black rain that puddles on the platform and spills over the edges. The lever to start the mechanism is so outscaled and heavy that it takes both Victorno and Darrago to engage it. Donato remembers the priests using gene-bulked, augmented servitors to do it when he last stood here.

'Why haven't they cut the chains?' Phaello asks. He looks up into the darkness with his storm bolter raised as the lifter starts to grind slowly upwards. The sound is tectonic.

Sanyctus stands at his side, flexing his fingers absently inside his lightning claw gauntlets. He looks up into the dark, too. His one good eye is narrowed. 'Because of me,' he says. 'All of this is because of me.'

'No,' Donato says. 'All of this is because of Zalak.'

Sanyctus shakes his head. 'They seek my blood,' he says. 'That is why they have not cut the chains. That is why they have not collapsed the levels and buried us.'

'Then I suppose I should be thanking you,' Ebellius says. 'Being buried once in a lifetime is quite enough.'

Sanyctus glares at him. 'We are playing into their hands. Moving according to Zalak's plan. He means to thin our numbers, to weaken us until I am all that is left.' He takes a breath that sounds painful. 'Maeklus was right. I should have

been left behind.’

‘We leave none behind,’ Darrago says. ‘You know that.’

The Company Ancient is watching over Sanyctus as he always is. Darrago puts out a hand to lay it on his shoulder guard, but Sanyctus shrugs him free.

‘I am a danger,’ he says, and his words are jagged. They run together in the way of delirium. ‘Do not tell me different. I see the way you look at me. As if I am an animal. As if I am already lost.’

‘Addicio,’ Darrago begins.

‘No,’ Sanyctus snarls. ‘Do not lie to me. Arthemio is dead. Alfeo and Vytali. Ivaro. They are all dead, and I am still standing. It is not *right*.’

Victorno slams the haft of his thunder hammer on the deck of the lifter. He takes a step towards Sanyctus. ‘That is enough,’ Victorno says, warningly. ‘I won’t have those words. Not from you.’

Sanyctus shakes his head. The movement is almost spasmodic. He is shaking as if he is going into shock. ‘It. Is not. Right.’

There is a moment shorter than the space between heartbeats where Donato glimpses the dream again. Feels the pain he felt at seeing his brothers murder one another.

‘Enough,’ Donato bellows, over the whispering that has grown so loud now. Louder than the movement of the lifter platform or the peal of thunder. Louder than his hearts, drumming in his ears. ‘We all know what it is to be Angels. What it takes, and how it tests us. What it means to fail those tests.’

He looks to his Archangels in their burned and battered Terminator plate. Each with hundreds of glories to their name, and scars enough to match the stories.

‘But we are more than just angels,’ Donato says. ‘We are brothers. We are blood. We face every task and every test together.’

His words silence his brothers and break the moment of confrontation. Phaello looks to him and nods, but Donato is distracted. He realises he can no longer hear the whispers. Not because they have stopped, but because they are being drowned out. Smothered, by a roar from above. Donato looks up as a vortex of warpfire opens above them at the summit of the lifter channel. The rain is replaced by motes of flame that fall and stick and cling to the lifter platform as the spiral of fire descends. In the tumult, Donato sees yawning maws and leering eyes, all aflame.

‘Brace!’ he yells, as the warpfire vortex surrounds them.

Creatures resolve from the fire. Carry it with them. Spew it from their wide-open jaws. It trails from their eyes. The heat stings Donato’s own eyes and steals

the air from his lungs, even through his helm. The temperature readout in his helm's display skyrockets as he tears one of the creatures from the storm and slams it onto the lifter deck. The warfire catches and clings to the ceramite. Donato can hear his armour groan with the heat as he crushes the creature into dust. Beside him, Darrago roars. He fires on the daemons in an effort to keep the banner he carries from catching. Power fields flare as thunder hammers strike and power fists snap closed. Bolt-rounds detonate. The vortex shifts and changes and moves, trying to separate the Archangels. Trying to cut Sanyctus off from the rest of them.

'Together,' Donato bellows, again.

And they move as one, weapons turned outwards, as the fire closes in. It is agony – breathless, boiling agony – but not one of the Archangels falls. Not one of them breaks the line. They stand together. Send the daemons back to the warp, together. The lifter chains creak in the heat as the summit draws near.

'Ebellius,' Donato shouts. 'Deal with the vortex!'

Above them, the source of the warfire yawns like a maw. It is a rift from which more of the creatures spill and claw their way.

'With pleasure, brother-captain,' Ebellius says, and even now, in this apocalypse, Donato can hear the smile in his words.

Ebellius moves out with Victorno on one side, Lurani on the other. They use their shields and their bodies to keep the daemons from him. Ebellius slams his closed fist against his chestplate, an old affectation that makes a sound like a war drum. The missile launcher mounted on his shoulders tracks up as far as it can before locking and firing. The boom of displaced air rolls the fire and smoke back for just long enough for Donato to catch sight of the missiles detonating above them. The rift screams and begins to collapse. Fire rains down around them. To Donato, half-blinded by pain, it looks like stars falling to earth. The daemons around him burn out as they reach for him and then blow away like smoke.

In the aftermath, he hears the clicking and creaking of armour as it cools, and the thunder of the lifter as it grinds to a halt at the summit of the shrine. The path to the Crown is crowded by mist and dappled with flickering light. The whispers are so very loud now. The red line that tracks warp activity is sheer. Donato's helm display registers a whole host of new threats. He hears bolter-fire. Sees muzzle flare.

Donato steps off the lifter platform to face their enemies and his Archangels follow him, trailing ash and smoke from the edges of their armour plates. They

are burned and battered. Chipped and scored. Laced with new scars.
But they are still standing.

‘This is it,’ Donato bellows, as gunfire cracks against his armour.

‘The end,’ Sanyctus rasps from beside him, his voice burned raw.

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

‘You knew that Zalak wanted Sanyctus’ blood. That he thought him the closest to breaking, and the final sacrifice required for the rite to be complete.’

Donato nods. He is still looking at those broken blades of his. At the jagged edges.

‘You knew that if you were to fail, that Sanguis Gloria would be lost, and Luminata with it. Millions of lives. Millions of *souls*.’

‘Such are the odds we face,’ Donato says. ‘Every battle, every campaign. We are always the ones left standing on the blade’s edge between annihilation and salvation. That is what it means to wear the armour we wear. To be Blood Angels.’

‘That is true, but this battle was more than that for you, captain. You say you had no choice but to go onwards. To make the climb and face Zalak in the Crown.’

‘There was no extraction,’ Donato says, reaching out to the longsword that could have done nothing but break. ‘No retreat. Of that I was certain.’

‘Even if there had been, would you have accepted that as a choice?’

Donato is quiet for a moment as he puts his fingertips to the broken blade. It cuts him easily, and he pulls his hand away again.

‘No,’ he says. ‘I do not think that I would have.’

‘Because you believed that you could keep Sanyctus from death. From the Flaw and the chalice and becoming Zalak’s sacrifice, by standing together. You believed that you would not fail a second time.’

Donato turns his hand and watches the blood paint a thin line down his fingers. By the time it reaches his palm, the cut has already started to clot and knit back together.

‘I believed that I had learned from my failure,’ he says. ‘That I would be able to save my brother, and the shrine into the bargain. I believed that I could make right everything that had been broken or changed. That I would stand once again in the Angel’s Crown and look upon the chalice as I had all of those years before.’

The blood settles into the creases of Donato’s palm like molten steel running into a mould.

‘But I was wrong,’ he says.

THE SHRINE OF SANGUIS GLORIA, THEN...

Donato has set foot in the Angel's Crown once before. He remembers how it looked on that day, all of those years ago. A white marble chamber far above the clouds, lit by pale sunlight streaming through the Angel's eyes. He remembers how it had been dappled with colour from the glassaic. How he had walked through shards of coloured light to approach the stasis field in which the chalice was held. Donato remembers priests murmuring blessings constantly around him as he stood before the chalice. All that he had been able to think about was how perfect a thing it was. He had seen no marks made from casting. No tarnishing or flaking of the gold.

No flaws.

Not like today. The Crown is dark and violent. It is not light that streams through the Angel's eyes, but smoke that billows out of them as if it burns from the inside. The floor is dappled with coloured light, but this time it is violet and crimson and makes the shapes of screaming faces where it hits the marble. In the centre of the Crown, the dead have been dragged into a pile. Their arms are all spread like wings and their blood has been painted to make a jagged, uneven star on the floor. Cultists kneel around the sacrifice circle, clad in strips of linen. Sixteen of them. They put their hands flat down in the blood and then press it to their chests and faces and throats in jagged, marionette movements. The stasis field is broken, but the chalice still floats in space at the heart of the darkness, at the heart of the rite. It is turning black as Donato looks at it.

'It hurts.' Sanyctus' voice over the vox is a slur. 'The chalice hurts.'

Donato struggles to tear his eyes away from that perfectly made vessel. Ruined now. Around it stand eight figures clad in crimson and steel, whose armour is decorated with horns and jagged edges and scraps of tanned skin. They are the

ones to murmur now, to utter profane blessings as the darkness twists to a point above their heads.

Donato registers all of this in seconds, despite the pressure of the rite and the roar of the whispers, so loud now. His mind turns, assessing the threat even as his spirit sets fire at the sight of what they have done.

‘Traitors!’ Donato bellows. The word tears its way free from his throat. His voice has a near-animal edge. Donato feels as though his vision has narrowed to a singular, specific point as one of those figures clad in crimson and steel turns. One who wields a staff of bones, and whose skin is painted with golden cuneiform.

The figure drops into a neat, mocking half-bow and smiles with needle teeth.

‘Ah, brother-captain,’ Tur Zalak says, in his deliberate, sonorous voice. ‘It is good to see you.’

‘Do not speak that word,’ Donato snarls. ‘You have no right to speak of brothers.’

Zalak steps down from the dais. A pressure wave precedes him that breaks against Donato’s armour like an ocean tide. Donato’s limbs tremor. He wants to charge Zalak more than anything.

He wants to destroy him. To shatter his bones and break open his skull.

To spill his blood.

Blood.

Donato shakes his head, hard.

‘The chalice,’ he voxes to his squad. ‘It is the locus of power. We must destroy it.’ It hurts to say it, to suggest the destruction of such a thing. But better that, than allow it to become something twisted. ‘We stand together, for that is how we are strongest. We go forward, and we finish it. Kill the traitors. Destroy the chalice. End the rite.’

‘Together!’

The answer comes from every one of his brothers. It echoes in Donato’s ears.

‘I promised you death,’ Donato says, to Zalak. ‘I have come to deliver it.’

Zalak tilts his head. His dark eyes flicker with amusement as his traitor brethren step down off the dais too. They grow wings which flicker and distort and change. The darkness grows, and the pressure with it. Donato feels blood run from his nose. He barely tastes it. His blood is already singing.

Zalak laughs, and it is twinned and echoing. ‘Death?’ he asks. ‘No. Not death.’

Zalak raises his other hand, the one holding the jagged dagger that cut Donato so badly on Perdicia. That scar aches again now, sending fire along his nerves.

Zalak holds the dagger in a loose grip, pointing it towards Sanyctus. Donato is dimly aware of the sound Sanyctus makes in response. Of the snap of his lightning claws as they go live.

‘What you have delivered is the last sacrifice,’ Zalak says. ‘The greatest sacrifice.’

Donato’s vision is so tunnelled that all he sees is Zalak’s hateful, traitor’s grin.

‘A perfect, violent thing,’ Zalak says.

And then he crashes that staff of bones on the marble floor, the murmur reaches a crescendo, and a jagged star of balefire rolls out from Zalak. It is crimson and violet and yet more black than the empty void. The balefire quests for spaces in the Archangels’ formation and tries to push them apart and build walls of flame between them. But Larracus Donato and his Archangels are made to endure. Made to withstand. They stay on their feet and they stay together, just as he ordered. As one, they push forwards through the fire, towards the chalice. Donato’s armour creaks and splits across the surface layers. His cloak is turned into tatters and his helm’s eye-lenses splinter. Donato views the world through fractured sight as Zalak and his daemon-possessed Word Bearers come to meet them.

Donato raises his combi-melta and fires. One of the Word Bearers is torn asunder by the scorching beam of light. He sheds smoke as he crashes unceremoniously to the floor of the Crown. Beside him Victorino and Lurani raise their shields and block another of the traitors from reaching Sanyctus. Power fields scream and flare and then Phaello and Ebellius both fire their storm bolters on the traitor, shredding his wings. The Word Bearer’s shifting mask splits, becoming toothed jaws that open wide as he bellows in pain. Darrago remains with Sanyctus. At his side, as always. Donato thunders his power fist into another of the Word Bearers and breaks his tainted form open to the bone. Curved claws close around Donato’s vambrace in answer. The ceramite bends. Buckles. The bones in Donato’s forearm buckle too. Integrity alarms blare in his ears as he lands another blow with his power fist. This time, the Word Bearer is more than broken. He is obliterated.

Zalak is upon them now. The balefire parts for him and coils in his wake. Donato fires on the Dark Apostle. The combi-melta beam is white against all of that darkness. It dazzles Donato’s flesh-and-blood eye, and his bionic adjusts to compensate. The melta fires true as it always has. Donato knows that he will not fail, not this time. He will kill Zalak now, just as he should have all of those years ago. He will make the Dark Apostle pay for Perdicia. For every death.

For every sin.

But then the balefire coils around Zalak in defence, swallowing up the melta-fire, drinking it like sand drinks rainwater. Donato doesn't have time to fire again, because Zalak is not weighed down by the darkness. He is buoyed by it. Elevated. Almost too quick to catch.

Almost.

Donato raises one arm in time to turn aside a strike from Zalak's jagged knife. He drives the weight of his combi-bolter into the Dark Apostle's face, breaking bone and sending dark, sour-smelling blood into the air. Zalak tries to break Donato in return, but Donato catches the staff of bones in his power fist before the blow can land. The power fields snarl, and for a moment in time, the two of them face one another. The angel, and the monster.

'You could have defeated me,' Zalak says, through his broken teeth. 'Had you just let go. Had you just given into the gifts of your blood.'

'You know nothing of my blood, or my gifts,' Donato says, as the staff of bones begins to splinter in his power fist's grip. 'And you *are* defeated. You just do not know it yet. *Archangels!*' Donato roars.

Phaello and Ebellius weather the cutting claws and bolter-fire of the possessed Word Bearers to move in perfect concert with one another. They fire their storm bolters on Zalak while Donato has him locked in place. The impacts blow craters in the Dark Apostle's armour and the flesh beneath it, scattering his blood across the marble and across Donato's own battleplate. Zalak's guard fails and his staff drops away, breaking the deadlock. Donato does not give him an opportunity to recover. He crashes his power fist into the Dark Apostle's chest. Once. Twice. Even warp-touched and elevated by darkness, it is too much for Zalak to withstand. He falls to his knees with his armour buckled and smoking, looking up at Donato as he bellows and raises his fist to strike again. To kill Zalak, as he should have on Perdicia.

For all of the lost.

For his failure.

But then in the instant between heartbeats, when time itself seems frozen, Zalak smiles and speaks a string of hideous unwords in his heretic tongue.

Donato is pushed backwards. He goes momentarily blind. Deaf. His mouth fills with blood and the animal part of him that he so carefully controls surfaces, furious. But he cannot move. Cannot act. The animal is caged, and so is he. Donato's limbs lock and his fingers go numb. He drops his storm bolter and falls to his knees as his armour's sensors chime and wail in distress. Donato looks

down to see that his armour is broken open, and that he is too, along that old, aching scar. He cannot breathe. Cannot stand. He can do nothing but watch as daemons resolve from the balefire at Zalak's command and roll across his Archangels like a hateful tide. As one of the possessed Word Bearers, a monstrosity of horns and teeth with one lidless eye, buries its bladed hand in Lurani's chest. Donato hears Lurani gasp over the vox as his shield falls, and his hammer with it. Lurani's last act is to take the traitor's head in his hands and crush it, even as his hearts fail. With Lurani's death, their line is broken. Ebellius is pulled to his knees by red-skinned daemons wreathed in balefire. Maeklus roars and wades into the fire to save him. Victorno's shield is cracked like glass. Phaello is disarmed and sent reeling. Darrago's armour is splintered. He has to use the standard to keep himself upright. Sanyctus cuts and cuts at daemons and at the Word Bearers alike but the noose is closing around him.

No, Donato tries to say, but he can no more speak than he can move.

Zalak manages to get back to his feet by leaning heavily on his staff of bones. Black blood scatters as he limps forwards. His chest rattles with every breath. Despite that, Zalak smiles.

'Old wounds, brother-captain,' he says, haltingly. He has that jagged knife in his hand. 'They never quite heal, do they?'

Donato tries to move. To act. To speak. But it is just like the ossuary and the dream he was given.

'I know what it is that you dread,' Zalak says. 'You dread seeing your brothers torn apart. Seeing them die. Seeing them fail and change.' Zalak's smile broadens. 'I could kill you now,' he says. 'But I rather think that death is a mercy that you do not deserve.'

Donato's fury is caged inside the prison of his body. He can do nothing but twitch and struggle to breathe as Zalak turns away to make for the dais. To make for Sanyctus.

'Now, Larracus Donato,' the Dark Apostle says. 'You will see the true value of angels' blood.'

**THREE
ANGELS**

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

Adiccio Sanyctus is badly burned. Arms. Hands. Throat and chest. His face, too, he thinks, from the way it feels. Those burns open anew when he shifts his weight and when he moves his manacled hands. That is where the burning is the most severe. As if from contact. The adamantium manacles are cold against the bubbled, ruined skin of his wrists. It looks like candlewax put to heat and left to run. Left to set itself again as it cools. It should be agony to be burned like that, but Sanyctus feels no pain at all. Not even when the wounds open again. He is just numb. Distant.

Calm.

Sanyctus takes in the cell that surrounds him. For that is where he finds himself standing. In a cell. It is dark and shadowed, lit only by the grey light coming through the narrow, horizontal slit in the door. The walls are plain, decorated not with marble or gold or paint, but with marks made by hands, or something like them. It smells like cold iron. He is unarmoured, instead wearing roughweave as an aspirant would. The manacles he wears are thick binders, made to hold back those who are strong. Who cannot hold themselves back. They are scored and scuffed just like the cell is.

A memory comes back to Sanyctus then, just a splinter of one, of him offering out his hands, and allowing the manacles to be closed around his wrists. The others were there, too. The Archangels. His brothers. His captain.

It had been Donato who closed the manacles.

Sanyctus blinks. The old scar still tries to mimic his good eye, even after all this time. He is not sure that is the sort of thing that can be unlearned. It is instinctual. He uncurls his closed hands. One is empty, but in the other there is something he recognises. A small icon, wrought in gold. A chalice, with

feathered wings. He has been holding onto it so tightly that it has made an impression in the skin like a bruise.

Another splinter of memory hits him. A woman's face, cut deeply and bleeding. The mortal's head is shaved and marked with a faith-tattoo.

Violence, she says. Such violence.

Sanyctus waits to recognise her. But the woman's name will not come, and neither will the rest of the memory. All he has are the words and the look of shock and awe on her face.

That, and the instinctive knowledge that whoever she is, the woman in his memory is dead.

Sanyctus curls his hands and it makes the chain link on the manacles click together, and the burns open up on the backs of his hands.

He let them close the manacles. He wanted the chains. The cell.

The quiet.

So he sits in the quiet for what feels like hours as what happened returns to him slowly, like a dream remembered on waking. Luminata. The shrine of Sanguis Gloria. The lost. Arthemio. Ivaro. Alfeo, Vytali. Lurani. His brothers.

And the mortal, Talina Orako.

Sanyctus remembers the way she looked at him in the moments before life abandoned her. The words she spoke.

But I didn't give in, though it would have been easy to. So easy.

I think perhaps I can be proud of that.

And he wonders if he can feel the same.

Sanyctus is drawn from his thoughts as the bolt holding his cell closed slides free and the door opens. The smell of incense smoke steals inside in the moments before his visitor steps over the threshold. It is one of his brothers. One Sanyctus knew to expect from the moment he saw the manacles and the markings on the inside of the cell door. His brother is clad in crimson armour that is sculpted to resemble raw muscle. It is intended to look as though it is laid bare. A truth. His pale face is unhelmed, framed by a fall of tangled dark hair. His eyes are darker. Reflective, like glass. He stops before Sanyctus and draws the weapon of his office, putting the head of it to the stone with a heavy thud. The curved edge of the executioner's axe catches what little light there is.

'Do you know why I am here, Adiccio Sanyctus?' asks Astorath the Grim.

And Sanyctus realises that he does know why. It is a memory that should unsettle him, but doesn't. Just like Astorath's presence should, but also doesn't.

'Because I asked to speak with you, High Chaplain,' Sanyctus says. 'Because I

wished to submit myself for judgement after the events of the battle for Sanguis Gloria.'

Astorath nods. It is an economical action. He does not wear his shadow-black wings here, but he looks no less like a dark reflection of their father for it. One gauntleted hand rests easily on the pommel of that axe he bears.

'Then speak, Adiccio Sanyctus,' he says. 'And I will judge.'

THE SHRINE OF SANGUIS GLORIA, THEN...

Sanyctus is dimly aware of the battle around him. Of his brothers, falling. Failing. Bleeding. Trying to protect him. Some part of him recognises the moment Lurani flatlines and the sight of Donato going to his knees. Recognises Darrago's urgent voice.

'Adiccio,' he says. 'Wait.'

Sanyctus can hardly look away from the chalice. It is turning so black. Bruised and rotting. There is barely any gold left to see.

Closer, it says.

'Let me go, Than,' he says. 'I need to go.'

'No,' Darrago says. 'Don't be a fool. Remember the lesson.'

Sanyctus shakes his head, and his vision smears with the movement. The only thing that stays sharp is the chalice. Darrago's words make no sense. He does not remember. He cannot find the want to try either because of that *voice*. It is beautiful. Mellifluous. It makes Sanyctus think of the slow spill of molten gold. Of choir song. But the voice is in pain too. Such pain that it makes Sanyctus' fangs ache. Makes his hearts ache. A tear paints its way from his good eye. He has been able to hear it since the teleport. With every step it has grown louder. With every kill, more insistent.

Closer, the chalice says.

And Sanyctus pushes forwards. He breaks the line, leaving Darrago behind.

'Adiccio!' he keeps shouting. 'No! Stop!'

Sanyctus sees Darrago try to follow, to stop him, but the Company Ancient is halted by shadowed, horned daemons that resolve from the marble and the storm. They claw at Darrago's armour and sing twisted joy. Sanyctus wants to help his brother, but he can't. He cannot stop. He must reach the chalice. He

turns away, cutting down the possessed Word Bearers with strength that comes from pain and rage and grief. He cuts through the Devoted cultists who remain. Spills their blood. It hangs in the air before being drawn into the growing rift and swallowed, with a sound like laughter. The rift screams and yawns and opens wide. Tectonic fractures run through the shrine, splitting the floor underfoot and sending cracks up the walls. What glassaic is left blows inwards in glittering clouds, cutting Sanyctus' face and clattering against his armour.

And the chalice's pleading word becomes a song-like scream.

Sanyctus' limbs tremor inside his armour as he climbs the stairs to the dais. Mortar dust coats him like a shroud, and chunks of stone clatter down on either side of him. The rift grows and grows, and his vision tunnels to a needle's eye. All that he can see is the chalice. The dark, pulsing striae twisting through what is left of the gold. Flaws, made by darkness.

Adiccio, the chalice says.

Sanyctus puts out his hand. The rite and the rift splinter the claws and the gauntlet. Shatter his armour clean away. He feels the agony the chalice feels, but he doesn't stop. He pushes through the pain and the darkness, dimly aware that Tur Zalak is with him on the dais. The Dark Apostle is laughing. Saying something Sanyctus cannot quite catch.

Something about sacrifices.

Sanyctus feels a blade press against his throat, but he will not stop now. Not even if it means death. So he reaches out with the last of his strength, and he takes hold of the chalice.

And loses the shrine to darkness.

When Sanyctus' sight returns to him, he finds himself walking up a steep desert dune, holding the chalice of Sanguis Gloria in one hand. The gold is blackened and twisted, and the gemstones have splintered like poorly made glass. He is unarmed. Unarmoured. Clad in a simple tunic and trousers made of roughweave fabric. The sun hangs ahead, a bright white disc that heats the dunes around him. The sand burns the soles of his bare feet with every step. It is treacherous. Sliding and shifting as he climbs. He puts out his free hand to keep from falling, and that burns too.

Sanyctus looks back over his shoulder. The bottom of the dune is lost to darkness. The wind howls down there. It sounds almost animal. It would be easier to stop. To give up. To turn around and let the sand take him back to the valley below, into the cold darkness.

Sanyctus blinks and curls his burned-raw hand into a fist, then he struggles back to his feet and continues upwards.

He has to reach the top of the dune.

He has to follow the other footprints.

They are larger than his own. Evenly spaced and unbroken, as if the sand did not have the heart to break beneath the climber. On either side of the set of footprints there are shallow furrows from something trailing and catching the sand.

Adiccio.

Sanyctus looks up to the top of the dune, where the sun sits. It is too bright to look upon for long. Dazzling. It prompts a tear from his good eye that falls and hits the sand where it is swallowed up straight away.

Closer.

Sanyctus starts to run as best he can up the face of the dune. The sand slides and pulls and tries to trip him, but he puts his feet into those other prints and finds the safe path. The only path that leads to the summit. He reaches the top with his hearts beating loud in his chest and his skin burned from the sand, and he falls to his knees. It is not because of the pain, or the exertion. It is because of the figure waiting for him. Tall and glorious and rendered in light.

‘Father,’ Sanyctus manages to say.

The figure takes a step closer, and the bright light dims just enough for Sanyctus to glimpse feathered wings, and soulful eyes. A patient, proud smile.

My son.

Sanyctus cannot bear those words, or that smile. He glances down at the chalice of Sanguis Gloria, blackened and broken.

‘I have failed you,’ Sanyctus says, and those words hurt more than any injury he has ever received. ‘I could not stop them. The chalice is damaged. Too far gone to be saved.’

Adiccio.

Sanyctus looks up at the sound of his name.

The chalice is merely an object. A beautiful one, surely, but just an object nonetheless. It is not my legacy. Neither is Sanguis Gloria. Legacies are not made of gold, nor stone. Not thread nor script. Shrines may fall, and icons may be lost, but my legacy remains in you, Adiccio. You and every one of your brothers. My Blood Angels.

Sanyctus thinks of everything he is. Everything that he has done. He smells blood and tastes it, and his limbs start to shake.

‘Your legacy,’ he says, and he feels hollow. ‘I want that to be true, but I think that it cannot be. I think that I am damaged too. Just like the chalice. Too far gone to be saved.’

His father looks down at him. A tear paints its way from the primarch’s eye. It falls and hits the dune, where it becomes another grain of sand. This close, they glitter like precious stones.

No, he says. You are not. You chose to fight the pull of the sand. The call of the darkness. You chose to tread the steeper, more difficult path towards the light. The Flaw might tempt you and test you, but in those moments of being tested you will find strength. The will to deny it. You are made to fight, my son. To endure. You are strong.

And with his father’s words washing over him, Sanyctus feels strong. Nothing hurts anymore. Not his burned skin, nor his injuries. Not his head, nor his hearts.

‘I will not fail you, father,’ he says.

Sanguinius puts out his hand.

I know, he says.

Sanyctus glances once more at the chalice in his hand. The twisted form of it. Then he reaches up and takes hold of his father’s hand, and the world goes white.

Sanyctus takes a breath as though breaking the surface of water. He tastes blood, smoke and spoiling.

Molten gold.

The chalice is in his hand. The gold flows like water, coating his arm and searing the skin. Lightning arcs from the chalice to his battleplate. To the dais around him. Above him, the gateway to all the hells of man’s imagination screams. That blade is still at his throat, as if no time has passed at all, but it must have, because Sanyctus doesn’t feel pain. He feels strong, just as he did at the summit of that dune.

‘The last and greatest sacrifice,’ Tur Zalak hisses.

Sanyctus blinks. ‘No,’ he says. ‘Not a sacrifice. I am my father’s legacy.’

And with that, he tears the chalice free from the storm and crushes it in his hand. The storm screams and lightning arcs wildly. Golden fire travels up Sanyctus’ arms and across his body, despite his armour. It scorches his face. It burns Zalak, too, shattering the black dagger in his hand. Zalak screams like the storm does, his skin afire. Sanyctus endures it, because that is what he is made to do.

Because he is strong.

He turns and lights the claws he has left and cuts the Dark Apostle deeply. Deep enough to damage both of the traitor's hearts. Zalak staggers backwards down the steps. He coughs up black blood and smoke.

'A perfect thing,' Zalak slurs, with his eyes fixed and dilated. 'A perfect, violent thing.'

And then there is the boom of a bolt-shell detonation, and Zalak's grin disappears in a burst of blood. He falls, dead. Donato is standing, despite the terrible wound in his chest. Smoke spirals from the muzzle of his storm bolter.

'I said that I would do it,' he manages to say, to the still form of Zalak. 'I told you I would kill you.'

With Zalak's death, the storm completely destabilises. That yawning rift screams and roars and sings and starts to draw back in. The Dark Apostle's body is drawn up into it. Taken gladly by clawed hands and remora-mouths. Daemons are stretched and pulled and torn apart as they too are taken back by the rift. Another tectonic rumble shakes the shrine, and the floor underfoot splits further. Columns of stone collapse around Sanyctus as he staggers down from the dais towards his brothers.

'Adiccio.'

For a moment, Sanyctus thinks himself back on the dune under the bright white sun, but of course the voice is Darrago's. His old friend still lives, though his armour is shattered and burned and broken. Phaello and Victorno are standing, too. Ebellius and Maeklus.

'It is done,' Sanyctus says.

He takes a step forward and falls to one knee. Puts out his burned, unarmoured hand to catch himself. It doesn't hurt. None of it hurts. His brothers pull him back to his feet and help take his weight. He dimly hears Donato contacting the *Sanguine Tear* over the ringing in his ears.

'The chalice,' Sanyctus says, finding he has to reach for words. For coherent thought.

'It is gone, Adiccio,' Darrago says. 'And it is for the better. It could not be saved.'

Sanyctus shakes his head, because that isn't what he was trying to say.

'I know,' he says. 'But it is not his legacy. We are. He told me so.'

Darrago puts his hand on his shoulder. 'Who, brother?' he asks.

Sanyctus feels the unmistakable chill of the teleport building around them. Hoarfrost crawls over his armour.

‘Our father,’ he says. ‘He told me so.’

The last thing he sees is the concern in Darrago’s dark eyes, and then the world lights white again.

THE SANGUINE TEAR, NOW...

When Sanyctus finishes his retelling, there is a long moment of silence that is filled by the snarl of Astorath's armour. The High Chaplain's dark eyes are unreadable, as always. He has not removed his hand from the pommel of his executioner's axe.

'I spoke with your brothers before coming here,' Astorath says.

Those words are not the ones that Sanyctus expects, so he cannot help his reply.

'Why?' he asks.

'Because I am never asked for by those who are in need of judgement,' Astorath says. 'It is the dirge that calls me. The song of death. I hear it always.' He puts his free hand to his chest, over his hearts. 'No matter how far distant my brothers may be, I hear it and I answer. I do what must be done.'

Sanyctus knows what that means. He has known souls who have been granted redemption by Astorath's blade. Every Blood Angel has. It is what makes the High Chaplain both revered, and loathed. Sanyctus wonders for a moment at what a burden that is for Astorath to bear. To be so alone amongst brothers. He is a part of their father's legacy, too. The darkest part.

'But not this time,' Astorath continues. 'This time I was called upon not by the dirge, but by you. That is not the way of things, which is why I spoke with your brothers. They spoke highly of you, Adiccio Sanyctus,' he says. 'They named you as friend. A hero, and a brother. But they spoke honestly too of what they saw in the shrine. Of moments of fury and violence. You yourself have told me of the pull of the chalice. Of what you saw when you laid a hand upon it.'

Astorath narrows his dark eyes. An expression crosses his face that Sanyctus cannot name.

'You saw our father.'

Sanyctus glances down. He opens his hand again and looks upon the icon of the chalice that he holds. The burns on his hand have made patterns in his skin. They almost look as though they could be pressure marks, from the grip of another hand.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘That is what I saw.’

He looks back up at Astorath. The High Chaplain is still watching him in that same way, with his eyes narrowed.

‘When the dirge brings me to a brother in need of judgement, they roar and scream in their delirium. They speak of our father, too. Of his death, and the arch-traitor who slew him. They see it. Experience it for themselves. They become trapped within it. It is agony, endless and tormenting. But you do not roar, or scream. You speak not of our father’s death. You are not in agony.’

Sanyctus shakes his head. He feels no pain at all, though he should. Just that same distant calm.

‘What you saw was something else,’ Astorath says. ‘This is neither the Rage, nor the Thirst.’

‘Then what, High Chaplain?’

There is another heavy pause, in which Sanyctus recognises Astorath’s expression, and understands why he found it so difficult to discern.

It is uncertainty.

‘I do not know,’ the High Chaplain says. ‘A dream, perhaps. A vision. Something conjured by trauma. That I cannot say.’ Astorath shakes his head. ‘But I do not hear the dirge in you.’

Sanyctus becomes still. He feels as though his hearts have ceased.

‘Then, the Flaw?’ he asks.

‘It lives in you still,’ Astorath says. ‘It is a part of you, and that cannot be changed. It is merely quieted, for now. Your descent arrested.’

Sanyctus thinks of his father’s words.

The Flaw might tempt you and test you, but in those moments of being tested you will find strength.

‘I understand,’ Sanyctus says, and the words are only half meant for Astorath.

‘Then what is your judgement, High Chaplain?’

Astorath finally moves his hand from the pommel of his axe.

‘I have none to offer,’ he says. ‘I do not judge angels. Only the lost.’

Sanyctus blinks. Astorath deactivates and removes the manacles, setting him free.

‘My thanks, brother,’ Sanyctus says.

There is a subtle change in Astorath's face at the word 'brother'. He is quiet for a moment. Unlike the other pauses, it is not patient, or deliberate. It is a natural hesitation.

'I would ask you one final question,' the High Chaplain says.

'Of course,' Sanyctus replies.

That pause again.

'What was it like, to hear his voice?' Astorath asks.

Of all the questions, Sanyctus would never have expected this one. Not from Astorath. He thinks carefully about it, searching for words that can encompass the feeling of standing before his father, who was so very bright, like a noon sun. Words to capture seeing the glittering dunes of cast tears and hearing words spoken in a voice like molten gold.

My legacy remains in you, Adiccio.

You and every one of your brothers.

My Blood Angels.

'Perfect,' Sanyctus says, softly. 'It was perfect.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Harrison is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Honourbound*, and the short stories 'Execution', 'Trials', 'Fire and Thunder', 'A Company of Shadows' and 'The Darkling Hours', featuring the character Commissar Severina Raine. She has also written the short story 'Dirty Dealings' for Necromunda, as well as a number of other Warhammer 40,000 short stories including 'The Third War' and 'Dishonoured'.

An extract from *Deathwatch: Shadowbreaker*.



‘Wrong side of the line this time, Lyndon. She made a mistake. Dragged you into it. Don’t make it worse. We can help her, but only if you talk to me. The longer you wait, the greater the chance she dies out there.’

The speaker moved in closer. Lyndon could feel hot breath on his face, noted the sharp scent of recaff on it.

‘We already know about the shipments, the fringe-world smugglers, the charters into t’au space. I admire your loyalty, but think, man – no transmissions, no word of her for months. If she weren’t in trouble, why the silence? The ordo can’t just sit on this.’

The pitch-perfect tones of the confidant, all understanding and sympathy and reason. Every sound, every look, every gesture was calculated to convey that this was a fellow on your side, a man with your best interests at heart. All he wanted was a little information. Just a few words, so easy to speak, so unbearably painful to keep to oneself.

Bastogne, he called himself. Not his real name.

He was good, but Lyndon knew the dance. He’d been on the other side of it often enough. Didn’t make it easier. Too much was at stake. Her ladyship had asked for trust. She needed time. Lyndon expected to die here in order to buy her that. It was the best he could realistically hope for now.

Had the abduction team consisted only of this interrogator and his muscled goons, Lyndon’s confidence in his ability to stay silent would have been supreme. But there was a fly in the balm – a man-shaped fly sitting on a wooden stool in the far corner, robed and hooded, tattooed with the marks of both the ordo and the Adeptus Astra Telepathica.

An ordo psyker.

Sartutius, the others had called him. He sat in silence, pensive after his earlier failed attempt to pry information from Lyndon’s mind with his fell sorcery.

The pentagrammic wards tattooed on Lyndon’s flesh and laser-etched into his

bones were holding off the psyker's invasive mind-assaults, but for how long? Sartutius never seemed to blink those useless all-white eyes. He never looked away, no doubt intent on Lyndon's aura, probing for gaps, eager to exploit any cracks that would let him inside.

Yes, Lyndon's wards were strong, but given enough time and the right kinds of pressure, an ordo psyker almost always got the answers he or she was looking for.

A bead of sweat rolled down Lyndon's neck. No respite from the heat in here.

The interior of the crude structure was baking hot. A single room, twelve metres by seven, the walls thick, the floor rockcrete. Solid. Probably soundproofed and scan-shielded, too. The interrogator and his team weren't sloppy. They'd have prepped the place well.

Oil stains on the rockcrete floor, heavy-duty pulleys attached to the rafters – the place had likely been used for vehicle repair or storage in the past. Metal slats high in the walls were tilted inwards a few degrees. Through them, spears of hot midday sun sliced into the room, muted by the grime on the windows but still bright enough to leave trails when Lyndon closed his eyes.

The windows were high, the glass clouded and milky. No one would be seeing in.

'Trying to help you here,' Bastogne continued. 'The ordo takes care of its own.' *Groxshit*, thought Lyndon.

Everyone in the ordo knew the truth – the larger factions within warred constantly for power and control.

He pressed his lips together, felt pain where the lower lip had been split in the scuffle of his kidnap and re-split in the subsequent beatings.

He hurt all over. It got worse every time they dragged him up out of that hole and smacked him awake. And it wasn't going to get better.

Dust motes danced a slow waltz in the air, moving gracefully on the interplay of warm microcurrents. Time seemed to pass at a crawl in here. Before the beginning of this morning's round of questions, he had lain with hands and feet bound, a black sack tied over his head. They gave him food and water, just barely enough to keep him functional. Isolated and blindfolded, most hostages quickly lose track of time, Lyndon knew. It was a common technique, all part of breaking them down.

But mental time-keeping had been an early part of Lyndon's basic training. By his count, they'd been holding him for three days and six hours. And that meant alarm bells were ringing loud and clear elsewhere.

There was a sudden hard yank on his outstretched left arm. A surge of fresh pain followed as rough rope bit into his wrist. The masked thug holding the left rope had adjusted his grip. Now the one on the right, just as powerfully built and identically masked, shifted his grip, and more of Lyndon's nerves sang out. It was only these ropes and the graft-muscled brutes holding them that kept him upright. He no longer had the energy to do so himself. He suspected several bad fractures in his legs.

Simple-minded thugs. Brute force. No finesse. Had he not been bound and injured, he could have killed both in a matter of seconds.

But here he was, strung to pulleys in the ceiling, stripped to the waist, face bruised and swollen, cuts and contusions all over. He was limp, beaten as badly as he'd ever been.

Clever of them to use that paralytic when they did the snatch. It's what he would have done.

They had placed a false tail on him at the port, just clumsy enough to be noticed, not clumsy enough to be a clear dupe. While Lyndon had been busy avoiding the more obvious tail, he hadn't spotted the snatch team. He should have known they'd never trust his capture to just one man.

Sloppy. And now he was paying for it. But he wouldn't let her ladyship suffer for his mistake.

There had been no time to bite down on the cyanide tooth. The paralytic they'd hit him with had been so fast-acting, so potent. Neurox necarthadrine or some new derivative. He was unconscious before his head hit the street. While he'd been out cold, they'd extracted the tooth. The fact that he was still breathing meant they'd also nullified the tiny cortex bomb in his skull.

No clean, quick death for field agent Urgoss Lyndon. Not while he knew what these men did not.

He felt Bastogne's breath on his face again, this time close to his ear.

'We're trying to help her. I wish you could see that.'

The ordo seal was legitimate. Lyndon would have known a fake. Besides, Bastogne had *Inquisition operative* written all over him. Despite the heat, he wore a long black grox-leather coat and gloves. Somehow, though everyone else in the room was sweating rivers, he was as cool as ice.

'You know,' said Bastogne, stepping back but still facing his captive, 'I admire your loyalty, your integrity. You're good. Well trained. I respect that. We're the same, you and I. Same sense of duty to the ordo, to our handlers. Had mine disappeared, you would be asking the questions right now instead of me,

desperate to help an inquisitor who, in all probability, needs urgent aid. I wonder if you'd be quite as patient with me as I am being with you.'

Lyndon had nothing to say to that.

Bastogne turned away for a moment and sighed. He came back in close. Hovering there, he spoke softly in Lyndon's ear.

'I would help you, you know, if things were reversed. I'd know that it was the right thing to do. Damn it, man, think of the Imperium. We want the same thing. The enemy is out there, not in here. If you're helping anyone with your damnable silence, it's the stinking xenos.'

Lyndon almost managed a snort, but his mouth and nasal passages were bone dry. All that came out was a wheeze. He hung there, breathing hard through those dry, split lips, eyelids fluttering as he teetered on the edge of passing out again.

Bastogne shook his head and gave another sigh, heavier this time, then began slowly walking around Lyndon.

'What am I to do, then? If you won't talk to me, how can I help? Doesn't it bother you? She may be dying out there. The t'au may be cutting into her flesh as we speak, eager to gain whatever she knows. Hear the death clock ticking. A retrieval team sent now, today, might be the only chance she has.'

Lyndon let the words roll off him. His ladyship had been clear:

Nothing and no one must interfere with my plans. You will give your life if you have to, but reveal not a word. I tell you now, the stakes have never been so high.

There was a sudden rush of movement from behind him. Pain exploded in his kidneys. Bastogne had struck him a savage body blow.

Agony became all of his reality. The breath burst from his lungs. He sagged almost to his knees, but the twin thugs yanked him up again, sending more fire through his singing nerves.

Throne and saints, thought Lyndon. *Let it end. Let me keep my silence and just die.*

Bastogne snarled and spun away in disgust, the tails of his long black coat flaring, his veneer of kindly patience abandoned at last. Behind him, Lyndon coughed wetly.

'Damn your ancestors,' Bastogne spat over his shoulder. 'If you don't tell me what I want to know, I'm going to start enjoying myself. You don't want that.'

To the others, he barked, 'Keep him upright.'

The heavies pulled in the slack again. Lyndon was raised almost onto his toes.

He hissed in agony.

Bastogne walked over to a plasteel table set flush against the west wall and opened a black case. Looking down at the contents with some distaste, he spoke quietly, as if murmuring to himself.

The tiny I-shaped pin on his collar picked up his words.

‘My lord, I think I’ve taken this as far as I can go with conventional methods. This is ordo conditioning at the highest level. He can’t be broken without extreme measures.’

Another voice – calm and level, but grainy from so much distance – responded via the micro-vox-bead in Bastogne’s left ear.

‘It was to be expected. Time to move this forward. I want Sartutius to try again. After that, use one of the worms, but not before.’

Bastogne frowned. There in the case, in a transparent cylinder of toughened permaglass, several slick purple forms writhed and slithered against each other.

He looked over at the cowled figure in the corner, seated on his wooden stool, hands clasped, exuding the fell atmosphere which clung to all so-called *gifted*. The psyker’s tall wooden staff rested against the wall beside him.

‘You’re up again, witchblood.’

There was a frustrated mutter from the cowled man, but he took his staff in hand and raised his frail form gently from the stool. With his other hand, he drew back his hood to reveal a face deathly pale and deeply lined. Networks of pale blue veins laced his papery skin, flowing everywhere. The veins were joined by wires that trailed back to a psychic amplifier bolted to the base of his neck. In the centre of his forehead was the stark red tattoo of the schola that had trained him in the marshalling of his foul power, the same schola that had subsequently sanctioned him for ordo use.

As he brushed past Bastogne, the psyker paused briefly. ‘This is pointless, agent. I have told you already. He is too well protected. If it were tattoos alone, we could flay him. But to break the wards on his spine, on his skull... He would die before I could–’

‘Do as his lordship commands,’ snapped Bastogne. His dislike for the psyker was never far from the surface. ‘And do it fast. Or what good are you?’ He gestured down at the worms in the tube. ‘If you can’t, we go to the last resort. The chrono is ticking. We’ll need to move soon.’

Sartutius scowled, but he crossed to stand directly in front of Lyndon and raised his right hand. Spreading his fingers, he pressed the tips to several points on the prisoner’s head. He began to chant, his voice a low, monotonous drone.

Lyndon tried to pull his head away, but he was too weak. The psyker's fingers held him.

The sunlight in the room seemed to flicker and dim.

A sudden chill pricked the skin of those present.

The walls seemed to withdraw a little as unnatural power tainted the air.

Bastogne watched, back to the wall, as far from Sartutius as space allowed. The masked heavies turned their eyes away. They hated being near the sanctioned psyker, especially while he exercised his unholy gift.

Beads of sweat began to form on Sartutius' pale, bald head. Bastogne saw the trembling begin, saw the muscles of the psyker's jaw clench as he exerted more and more ethereal force. Something foul began to prickle the skin of everyone in the room. Sartutius' body became tense, trembling with effort. Bastogne thought the man's sparrow-frail ribs might crack any second and his chest collapse. Blood began to seep from the psyker's nose and the corners of his eyes.

The chanting rose in tone and volume.

Then it stopped.

With a sharp cry, Sartutius reeled backwards, almost tripping on his robe. He stumbled, righted himself with his staff and staggered breathlessly back to his stool. He was breathing hard, soaked to the skin. With his long cotton sleeves, he dabbed at the blood trails on his face and neck. When his breath had returned, he hissed at Bastogne, 'Damn your eyes, man. I told you there was nothing more I could do. The wards hold!'

Bastogne growled back, 'If his lordship says you try, you bloody well try.'

But Sartutius *had* tried, and it was clear that Epsilon's bone-engraver had done all too good a job on her agent.

There was only one option left.

Bastogne reached in and lifted the cylinder from the case. Somewhat gingerly, he pressed the release on the hinged titanium cap. With his other hand, he took a pair of slim metal tongs, dipped the ends into the top of the cylinder and withdrew one of the squirming creatures.

The worm's puckered facial orifice immediately rolled back, revealing a cluster of red cilia that began questing in the air, seeking living flesh. At the base of those cilia, Bastogne saw glimpses of the small black bone-cutting beak.

By all the saints, how he hated these things!

He closed the cap and placed the cylinder with its remaining worms back in the case. With the tongs held well away from his body, he crossed back to the centre of the room and the wretched man suspended there.

He stopped a metre in front of Lyndon and raised the worm slowly towards his face. Sensing the proximity of a living host, the worm's cilia began moving frantically, greedily. The creature writhed, struggling to break free from the grip of the plasteel that held it.

'You know what this is,' said Bastogne, voice low, resigned. It was not a question.

The regret was genuine. Truth be told, he didn't want to do this. Lyndon was forcing him, and for what? The ordo always got what it wanted in the end.

The prisoner raised bloodshot eyes under a bruised and swollen brow and saw the squirming organism just inches in front of him.

He twisted away in panic, feebly yanking on his restraints. The two men holding the ropes tensed, fixing him in place, the muscles of their forearms hardening like lengths of plasteel cable.

Lyndon knew this creature. Seven years ago, he'd had to use one, and for seven years, he'd tried and failed to forget that day.

'Don't,' he breathed. 'Epsilon still serves the ordo. I serve the ordo. I cannot tell you what you want to know... But have faith. Please. Just... don't do this.'

The look of reluctance on Bastogne's face as he brought the creature closer to Lyndon's nose was no act. 'I have orders, agent. The ordo needs to know why she went dark. I need her location. Give me reason not to use this before it's too late.'

How Lyndon wished he could talk. His mind was already busy making the sentences he could speak to avoid this worst of fates. The worm meant more than death – it meant an agonising descent into madness, the dissolution of his mind. Once it was inside him, it could not be stopped. And still, no matter how much he yearned to escape that fate, he would not – *could not* – betray her ladyship's trust. Epsilon's discovery was of greater importance than the life of any man. The chance that Al Rashaq was no mere legend, that it could conceivably be found and exploited... It was worth many more lives than his.

It could change everything.

So Lyndon held his tongue and steeled himself for the mind-destroying agony that was about to become his entire existence.

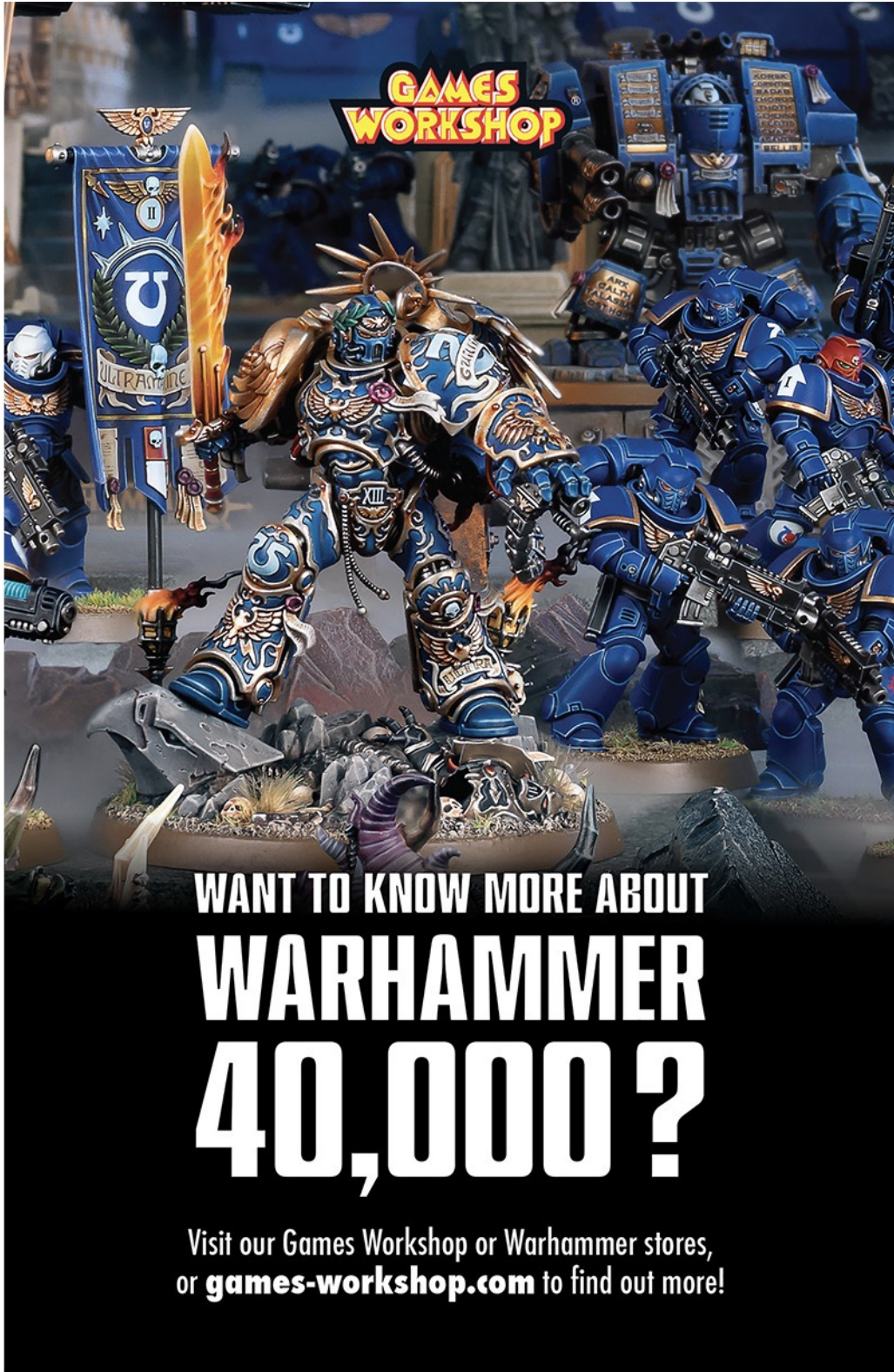
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For Michael, Paddy and Matt.

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