

# THE THIRTEENTH PSALM

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*Master of the macabre, Peter Fehervari is well known for his appreciation of all things strange and peculiar in the Warhammer 40,000 universe.*

*In this mysterious narrative, a squad of Space Marines from the Angels Penitent are forced to confront their own flaws and the dishonourable history of their Chapter as they are drawn further and further into an enigmatic web of cruelty. Can the past truly remain buried and forgotten? Or are even the Penitent susceptible to falling?*

*Beauty blinds the beholder; bedazzling the eye with grace or splendour and beguiling the heart with the promise of hope. The first rapture is an illusion, the second a lie, both wrought by the Archenemy to bind the soul in sweet tangles while the world sours, bleeds and burns unopposed. Those who cherish beauty flirt with corruption, but those who fabricate, disseminate and embody its deceits are among the foremost of heretics.*

– Thirteenth Psalm  
The Testament of Thorns

## FIRST REFLECTION

Once I was among the worst of sinners. Whenever I meditate upon the Thirteenth Psalm I am dismayed anew by the weight of my past transgressions. The bloodline of my brotherhood runs strong with the Angel Sanguinius' golden taint, cursing us with a comeliness and refinement uncommon among the Adeptus Astartes, even surpassing others who share our progenitor, but that does not excuse my excesses. When I walked among mortals as a Knight Artificer of the Resplendent they gazed upon me as though I were the God-Emperor Himself! But it was the accolades my *creations* received that truly filled my heart with pride, for even among a Chapter of artisans, poets and painters, my works were extravagant in their number and arrogance.

There was a time when the sculptures of Bjargo Rathana were lauded across a thousand worlds and sought by the most discerning – and avaricious – of the Imperium's elite. I brought more glory upon my Chapter with chisel and stone than ever I did with bolter or blade, not to mention the bounty I reaped for our coffers. I recall earnestly declaring that I was a warrior of the *soul*, charged with waging a higher war than the petty scuffles of bone and sinew. Such was our Chapter's decadence that my hubris was not only tolerated, but revered. Chapter Master Varzival titled me an Artisan Illuminant and decreed me too valuable to hazard in battle. And I delighted in it!

It shames me to confess such things aloud, yet it is necessary, for I must face myself without mercy if I am to prevail in the trial before me. The God-Emperor has condemned us all as sinners and shame is the first step on the road to penitence. Since the revelation that excoriated my Chapter I

have walked far along that path and become a *true* warrior of the soul. And yet I was among the last to embrace atonement.

For years I languished in our monastery's Ghost Pits with the foulest recidivists, clinging to my pride, yet our prophet refused to forsake me. Time lost its way in that changeless darkness until nothing mattered save the patient, passionate tone of his censures.

*'Concede the squalor in thy soul, Bjargo Rathana,'* the Undying Martyr urged. *'Confess thy sins and rise above them, soiled but honest in thy contempt.'*

I have heard outsiders claim that our prophet is surely a madman or a sly servant of the Archenemy who has led us to ruin like cattle to the slaughter. Why, they ask, would a *civilised* brotherhood like the Resplendent submit to the degradation prescribed by a mortal stranger? To them I say this – *listen* to the Undying Martyr speak. *See* the sorrow in his eyes when he laments humanity's fall from grace. Only then will you understand and earn the right to judge. Until then it is we who shall stand in judgement over you. That is the doom of the Angels Penitent.

After I awoke to the revelation I seized it with a fervour that eclipsed all but the most blessed of my brothers, and ascended swiftly to the Crown of Thorns that governs our Chapter. For nearly twenty years an iron skull has masked my impure visage, riveted to the bone beneath to seal the compact, for a Chaplain Castigant never relinquishes his vestments. My hempen robes have never known the touch of water and the soot-black armour beneath is begrimed with old blood and the dirt of countless worlds, their stain a litany to the battles I have fought in His name. The crozius I now wield is more honest than a chisel, though it carves in fewer strokes and leaves every subject broken.

I wrought much good work in my new calling, yet my past disgrace tormented me, thus when the Undying Martyr proclaimed a crusade to scour the Imperium of the Resplendent's artistic legacy I sought his blessing to lead the quest. My creations were at the forefront of that prideful diaspora, so who better to expunge them than I? As I had sown, so I would reap!

The Chapter's numbers were few and our allies fewer still, so it fell to a single, much diminished company to prosecute this sacred quest. Rechristening our strike cruiser the *Severance of Glory*, we set about our

task with zeal, seeking out and purging the vainglorious artefacts of the Resplendent.

Many years have passed since the Absolution Company's departure, and with them many of my brothers, for the heathens who covet our heritage have rarely surrendered their treasures willingly and some have commanded armies. It is a testament to the iniquity of the baubles we fabricated that they evoke such ardour in mortals. Indeed our dreams have seeded many monsters.

And so we come to the exquisite abomination that stands before me now – the centrepiece in this gallery of aberrant constructions.

Balanced on a tripod of curved legs, the mirror is taller than I and almost as broad, its arched top lending it the aspect of a doorway. The frame is forged from silver-plated plasteel, sinuous and seamless in its construction, its edges carved into the likeness of curled waves that appear to seethe at the corner of the eye. It is quite remarkable, yet mundane beside the glass it cages. Words are my foremost weapon, yet they defy my attempts to describe that strange surface. There is no tint or distortion to it, nor does it harbour subtle ghosts or glimpses of unholy realms. No, the mirror only reflects the world before it, but with a clarity that somehow surpasses its subjects, as though the reflection is the truth and the reality merely an impoverished approximation.

Above all else, it reveals *you*.

You gaze back at me from that heightened place with a sharpness of being – a *completeness* – that I cannot equal, though we are one. What lies behind your iron death mask, my brother-self? My own face for certain, yet also not.

It is imprudent to gaze into that eloquent glass too long, yet duty demands it. My purpose here is not crass destruction, but righteous castigation. Each artefact of the Resplendent must be studied, decried and conquered with the correct rituals for its redaction to bear meaning. The physical act of violence is only the tip of the spear I plunge into the Sea of Souls whenever I obliterate one of our heresies. As the mirror itself so insidiously suggests, the world of flesh and blood we inhabit is a shroud obscuring an infinitely greater, darker reality, where the Archenemy lurks, ever watchful. *That* is where I must strike! That is–

*My work?* No... You are mistaken. The mirror is not mine. I had no skill

in the crafting of metal or glass, let alone the warp-weaving talents to enliven them. No, it was forged in the Librarium Resplendent by the most potent of our old Chapter's sorcerers, Chief Librarian Athanazius himself. The description in the *Inventorium Illuminatus* is unmistakable, though there is no mention of the mirror's arcane properties – and little wonder, since it was the Librarium that compiled the records and its acolytes were cautious even in those dissolute times. Wise to such evasions, I had prioritised their creations in our hunt, yet Athanazius' masterwork had long eluded us.

It would take too long to recount the twisted skein of events that carried the mirror so far from our monastery on sacred Malpertuis to the remote world I stand upon now. Suffice to say the Archenemy undoubtedly had a hand in its journey, though whether by intent or instinct, I cannot fathom. Either way, this planet has proved itself to be a trap.

As always, it was Brother Anselm, our company's most studious Redactor, who pieced together the trail. I recall the gleam in his eyes when he sought me out in the ship's chapel to reveal the breakthrough, though he kept his elation leashed. Like my own, Anselm's zeal burned cold, tempered by the discipline that our baleful blood demands lest it spill over into madness. We were both veterans of the Resplendent era, our roots steeped in sin, while more than half the Chapter's warriors are now Penitent-forged. While these young 'Thornborn' are aware of the past, they cannot *feel* it as we do, nor loathe it with such clarity. Though my calling disallows the camaraderie shared by common battle-brothers, there was an understanding between Anselm and myself that I choose to remember as friendship.

Now my friend is dead, along with all the others who accompanied me to this foul place. I can see him behind me, still kneeling where he fell, his body propped up by his rigid armour. His eyes are frozen in surprise beneath the splintered crown of his cranium. No... There is more than surprise in them – *betrayal* – for the trail of blood weaving from his corpse leads to the crozius in my hand.

I had no choice. But you already know that, mirror-brother, for Anselm Giordano also kneels broken on your side of the glass.

## SECOND REFLECTION

I should say something of the benighted world where we found the mirror. Oblazt lies on the borders of the Damocles Gulf, just beyond the overt incursions of the foul xenos empire that festers beyond that great void. Though the planet is an insignificant speck of ice within the greater Imperium, it is the cornerstone of its own miserable subsector. The oceans under its frozen skin are abundant with edible beasts, and beneath their realm, deep wells of promethium. A network of domed cities harvests this wealth in the Emperor's name, though our records indicated their masters' loyalty derived from obligation rather than devotion.

Like so many provincial rulers, the Koroleva blue bloods revere themselves first and the God-Emperor second, wallowing in excess while the wretches under their yoke suffer the burden. It sickens me that such leeches are tolerated, indeed fostered, across the Imperium; however it bears witness to the Undying Martyr's message – mankind is beyond redemption. The Emperor condemns and the day of His wrath is imminent. By His leave the Angels Penitent shall prosecute it, but for now the wickedness of backwaters like Oblazt was not our concern. That was my decree when we set our course, but malign fate conspired against us.

When we entered Oblazt's orbit we found a world in the throes of revolution. Most of its cities burned like funeral pyres across the tundra, some with their domes cracked open to the killing cold. The vox waves blazed with defiance of the Imperium, promising a new age of harmony under the aegis of the blue-skinned 'Liberators' who would soon cross the Damocles Gulf and rebuild Oblazt equitably. Their watchword was *Unity*, but beneath its benevolent sheen their manifesto was a filthy xenos lie.

My brothers demanded action. Overlooking the grubby injustices mankind wreaked upon itself was tolerable, but turning a blind eye to this heresy was surely unforgivable! Was it not the God-Emperor's hand that had guided us to this place in its hour of vitiation?

I admit I almost surrendered to the temptation of war, for my own ire was stirred, but a Chaplain Castigant must rise above such indulgence and cleave to a higher purpose. Oblazt was in the grip of a headless, many-tentacled leviathan, while only fifty-five battle-brothers remained to me. We might hunt the beast for months, slicing away limbs, but never slaying it. It was a fool's errand. More than that – a *test* of our devotion to the true quest!

My brethren's fury withered before my rebuke and Brother Veland, who had been the most outspoken of them, begged that his tongue be cut out lest he utter such foolishness again. I denied his plea and merely chastised him with the Mute Censure, binding him to ninety-nine days of silence. Though he was the youngest among us he had the makings of an exceptional warrior, but his quickness to anger troubled me, for it likely presaged the onset of the Black Rage. The Chapter's new recruits have proven more susceptible to our blood's ancient curse than the veterans, as though the clean slates of their souls are easier to stain, but I hoped Veland might elude the blight if correctly tempered. That is why I chose him for the mission ahead. With little prospect of meaningful opposition it would be a fine opportunity to observe and guide him.

No, do not berate me for it! Did you not make the same choice, mirror-brother? Or was *your* Veland made of purer stuff than mine?

## THIRD REFLECTION

‘The trail ends at a city named Zakhalin, Master Rathana,’ Brother Anselm told me. ‘It is among the most inflamed of this world’s cankers.’

We were alone in the ship’s obsidian-tiled strategium, for I required no others to advise me on our course.

‘The disorder will mask our arrival,’ I replied, studying the flickering holo-scan of the city that floated above the tactical pedestal between us. ‘I trust you do not expect me to scour the entire hovel, Brother-Redactor?’

‘I do not.’ Anselm ran a long-fingered hand over the holo, manipulating it with the fluidity he had once applied to a laserwire harp. Truthfully, I still struggled to muster sufficient contempt for the sublime compositions he used to weave, though I know harmony is a false salve.

‘The mirror is almost certainly *here*, master,’ Anselm said, plucking a building into prominence. ‘They call it the Concupiscent Hearth.’

‘A carnal name,’ I judged, but it wasn’t the name that troubled me. I glared at the holo of the grandiose mansion, trying to identify my disquiet.

‘The name befits its mistress,’ Anselm continued. ‘Even by the standards of this world’s degenerate overseers, the reputation of the Konteza Esseker is wanton and cruel.’ He frowned, deepening the seams of his sensitive face. Like many of our veterans, he had aged strikingly since the Great Excruciation, his long, once sable hair now entirely white. ‘The reports I accessed are obscene.’

‘You will cleanse yourself while I am gone, brother. The Seven Flagellations Incinerant shall suffice.’

‘Forgive my impertinence, Master Rathana,’ Anselm said, bowing his head, ‘but I had hoped to accompany you on this purgation. I have long

dreamt of redacting Athanazius' greatest blasphemy.'

I hesitated. Anselm's wisdom was too valuable to hazard, yet he had earned the right to see this through. Besides, what possible peril could the nest of a debased noblewoman pose?

'Very well, Brother-Redactor,' I decided, 'we shall prosecute His will together once more.'

It was many hours later, as our transport gunship descended to the city, that I finally realised what had troubled me about the mansion. Among the sprawl of burning buildings, the konteza's eyrie had appeared perfectly untouched.

Our Thunderhawk set us down atop a hab tower several blocks from our destination then roared back into the blizzard weeping through the cracked dome high above. I had chosen the deployment site to avoid drawing attention, but in the face of that churning white squall I suspected it was a needless precaution. My helm's sensors indicated the temperature was below freezing in the wind-wracked heights and I doubted it would be much warmer in the streets below, despite the fires raging throughout the city. The cold posed no threat to us, of course – even without our armour's thermo-regulators we could easily weather it – but Zakhalin's inhabitants would likely be compelled to seek shelter.

I recited the Cantic of Inception as my squad scanned the flat rooftop for heat signatures, but we were alone.

'They have brought ruin upon themselves,' Anselm observed over the vox, for the gale was too fierce for unassisted speech to carry beyond a few paces.

'As within so without, brother,' I replied, gazing down upon the fires shimmering through the blizzard. 'These degenerates were damned long before this cataclysm.'

'The Emperor condemns!' Brother-Sergeant Salvatore declared. A veteran of many redactions, he never forsook an opportunity to voice the First Psalm. Like all our Thornguard elite, his helmet was painted brown and crested with rusty spikes to mark his piety. A ragged tabard hung from his belt, woven with dried thistles and shards of bone, for our brotherhood forbids fanciful icons of faith. The Ecclesiarchy's proclivity for garish ornamentation mocks the holy war we wage, as does the leniency of its

doctrine.

‘The Emperor condemns!’ we chorused reverently, though Veland held his tongue. It is a sin to abstain from responding to the First Psalm; however the prohibition of silence upon the young warrior was a graver ordinance. He would still be punished for the omission once the mission was over, but I would be merciful.

‘How did the mirror come to be here?’ Brother Laurent, the fifth and final member of the squad wondered aloud.

‘By the Archenemy’s wiles, boy!’ Salvatore growled, his flamer’s tongue lashing about in the wind. ‘Why ask such things?’

‘I stand corrected, brother-sergeant.’ Despite his assent I suspected his curiosity was unappeased, but I tolerated such infractions in Laurent Toledos, for he was another young Thornblood with promise. Though he didn’t possess Veland’s martial flair, there was an earnest intuitiveness about him that leaned towards a subtler path, perhaps as a Redactor like Anselm. Such recruits are rare, for inquisitive souls are seldom pure enough to survive the Trial of Thorns, hence Laurent was worthy of cultivation.

Had I known what lay ahead I would not have chosen him for this mission, nor Veland or Anselm for that matter. The Concupiscent Hearth was no place for complex souls.

We crossed the city without serious incident. Our kind are not naturally built for stealth, nor does our creed encourage it, but the blizzard served as a partial cloak, surrendering to our helmets’ sensors but blinding the scum who wandered the streets. Despite the cold there were many about, mostly in small groups, but occasionally in great mobs. Some were intent on destruction, others on escape from their fellows’ madness. Most who stumbled upon us fled, shrieking that the Imperium’s vengeance was upon them, or fell to their knees and begged for succour. All these we ignored, our consciences salved by the certainty of their doom, but some attacked us with makeshift weapons or autoguns. These fanatics’ foreheads bore the blue circle of their imagined liberators and they fought with a measure of courage, if not skill. We purged them swiftly and without passion, for such vermin were unworthy of zeal.

More of Zakhalin’s phantoms haunted the gateway leading to the

konteza's estate, but they slunk away at our approach. The high marble wall surrounding the grounds had been defaced with paint, lewd symbols and phrases vying for attention with the hateful circle of the xenos-lovers. The iron gates had been battered down, yet I saw no bullet holes or scorch marks, let alone the bodies that typically attended such violence.

'The gates were undefended,' Anselm mused, echoing my thoughts. 'There was no battle fought here.'

'Doubtless their wardens fled,' Salvatore said, stomping over the twisted iron wreckage to enter the grounds. 'Only cowards would let such scum bring down their world.'

As the rest of us followed, a bundle of rags shivered beside the wall and a hand reached out to clutch at Brother Laurent's armoured shins. He spun and brought his bolter to bear on the figure slouched under the gateway. It was a crone, her form wasted to a minimalist caricature of humanity.

'You have come... angel,' the woman hissed, her heavily accented rasp somehow carrying through the wind. Her heat signature was so faint I marvelled she still lived, yet her eyes glittered in the gloom. 'I... saw you. *Dreamt* of you.'

Laurent offered no answer. Though his expression was hidden by his helm I sensed his uncertainty. Some day soon that hesitation would either sharpen into astuteness or prove his downfall.

'She took my sons,' the crone continued, her voice trembling with passion. 'Took so many others too... Burn the bitch!'

I was intrigued to watch the scene play out, but our comrades had already disappeared into the blizzard.

'Brother Laurent, with me!' I ordered.

As I marched after the others I heard him say something to the woman, but the squall snatched away his words. Now, after all that came after, I find myself wondering what he said.

Yes, mirror-brother, such things matter! We are the progeny of the choices we make and I believe Laurent made a choice at those gates, even if it came to nothing.

*Be silent!* Let me finish. I must order my thoughts if we are to end this.

## FOURTH REFLECTION

Like the gates, the konteza's garden bore no traces of conflict. It was a flat, circular expanse covered in many-hued tiles that hinted at some overarching pattern I could not discern; however there was no mistaking the depravity of the statues that adorned it. They were dotted about the place seemingly at random, their strangely distended forms contorted into sinuous studies of carnality. The pink marble they were hewn from was aglow with an ardour their featureless faces couldn't express.

'Are they dancing?' Laurent asked as we passed an improbably conjoined pair.

'In a manner, brother,' Anselm answered solemnly.

'Do not look upon them,' I commanded, though my own eyes strayed to each tableau we passed. Despite their prurience I could not deny the excellence of their execution. Their creator had evidently been a sculptor of rare genius, almost the equal of my own. I vowed we would destroy them once our primary duty was accomplished, for it would be remiss to leave such magnificent obscenities standing.

The konteza's chateau emerged slowly from the blizzard, rising from the estate's centre in a riotous congeries of fluted pillars and faux towers clad in the same roseate marble as the statuary it presided over. Bulbous, vividly enamelled domes topped each wing, vying with one another for attention like the painted harlots who preyed upon mortals. The holo had failed to capture the building's sheer decadence, but it was certainly a fitting receptacle for Athanazius' heresy.

'It is... extraordinary...' Anselm trailed off before he said too much. Some among us have never fully cast off the tyranny of beauty, but we

must never give it voice. I would castigate him for the lapse later.

‘We should burn this abomination in our wake,’ Salvatore declared piously.

‘We shall raze it to rubble, brother-sergeant,’ I promised. ‘Even if it requires an orbital barrage.’

The mansion’s wing-shaped doors were wide open, their ornately carved woodwork showing no sign of having been forced. We approached them cautiously, our weapons readied in expectation of a trap, but the brightly lit hall beyond appeared deserted.

‘Brother Veland, take the spearhead,’ I commanded. The choice would irk Salvatore, but the volatile Thornblood was the most expendable among us.

Nobody sprang from hiding as Veland entered, but I waited until he reached the centre of the immense hall before signalling the others to follow. We fanned out into our pre-designated quadrants behind our spearhead, swiftly scouring the space for enemies. The room was as lavishly furnished as the building’s exterior promised, but many of its ornaments had been smashed and the floor was scuffed with dirty tracks. The xenos symbol was sprayed profligately across the walls in blue paint.

‘Others have trespassed here before us,’ Anselm gauged, studying the trail, ‘but not many.’

‘Surely it matters not,’ Salvatore said. ‘Either way they are nothing.’

‘Yet it is strange,’ the Redactor pressed. ‘This edifice of privilege should have drawn the rabble’s fury.’

‘They were afraid,’ Laurent ventured, running a gauntleted hand over a velvet-papered wall, as if testing it.

‘Perhaps,’ Anselm acknowledged. ‘If even half the tales of the konteza are true, they had cause to be.’

I considered our options. Several doorways led off from the hall, promising a sprawl of corridors and chambers spanning several floors. It might take hours, perhaps even days to locate the mirror if its mistress had concealed it.

‘We will pursue the intruders first,’ I decided. ‘They may know something of use... Laurent, take the spearhead!’

‘By your command, Chaplain Castigant.’

I noticed Veland had stopped at the foot of the grand staircase at the chamber’s far end, his head tilted to one side, as if listening for something.

‘Veland, do you have a contact?’ I demanded. There was no answer. ‘Brother Veland, do—’

He sent a negative, using the tongue clicks of the Muted. All our brethren are required to learn the code, for the prohibition of speech must never be broken, even in extreme peril.

My gaze lingered on Veland as he turned away from the stairs to follow the others. I could not say what troubled me, but revisiting that moment with hindsight, I believe it was the first time he heard the witch’s voice.

We followed the intruders deeper into the chateau. Even after their boots had been scrubbed clean by the fulsome carpets their tracks were easy to follow, for their passage was marked by a trail of destruction, though they always left the lights intact, as if fearful of the dark. Beyond this crude ruination there was a more subtle blight upon the palatial maze. Everything was dusted with ice and my sensors indicated a temperature well below freezing, though the windows were unbroken. Indeed, it was colder within the building than without.

‘Is there no end to the depravity here?’ Salvatore snarled, glaring at the paintings lining the walls of yet another wood-panelled corridor. The canvases had been slashed, but their salacious subjects remained apparent.

‘She doesn’t believe in limits,’ Laurent murmured.

‘I don’t follow you, Thornblood,’ Salvatore said.

‘I...’ The young warrior faltered, as though he hadn’t meant to speak the thought aloud. ‘Forgive me, brother-sergeant, it was a stray notion.’

‘This is not the place for them, boy.’

The veteran was correct. More than any other battleground I had walked upon, the Concupiscent Hearth demanded absolute focus. Yes, my mirror-brother, I recognised it as an *arena* from the moment we entered, even if its trials were not of muscle and sinew. But if I still harboured any doubts that something unclean haunted the konteza’s eyrie they were banished when we finally caught up with the intruders.

‘What madness is this?’ Salvatore hissed as we entered the grand dining hall where their trespass ended. Unlike the other rooms we’d passed through, it was sparsely lit and steeped in shadows, as if to convey an intimate mood, but we saw our quarry clearly enough.

There were eleven of them, sitting stiffly on high-backed chairs at a

round, linen-draped table. A sumptuous repast was set before them, as though in celebration, but the roasted meats and elaborately presented vegetables were rimed with frost, along with the prospective diners. They were naked, their clothes left in neatly folded piles by the door, along with their weapons. The cold had turned their flesh blue and preserved the pain in their staring eyes, yet their faces wore wide grins. Their left arms were raised, locked in a perpetual toast, the wine in their goblets turned to crimson ice.

Murmuring a prayer of chastisement, I walked along the dead, looking for wounds, but saw nothing except the cold's kiss. I imagined them undressing and taking their places decorously, then waiting in silence while their blood chilled.

'How long?' I asked Anselm, who was the closest to an Apothecary among us.

'It is difficult to say, master,' he replied, approaching a bearded brute with concentric circles tattooed across his face. He snapped the corpse's arm off at the elbow and inspected the limb's core. 'Frozen through... But a few hours would suffice for that, after which there would be little change. This could have occurred days ago, perhaps even weeks.'

'A decadent way to die,' Salvatore declared, swiping the head from the cadaver beside him. It shattered at his feet in crimson shards.

'I doubt they chose it, brother-sergeant,' Anselm said. 'It would have been an agonising fate.' He placed the severed arm on the table gently. 'Something dulled their wits and lulled them into death. Perhaps the wine was poisoned.'

'Not the wine,' I judged. 'This was sorcery, brother.'

'She watched them die,' Laurent said, his voice tight with loathing. 'It amused her.' He pointed at a large, gold-framed painting overlooking the head of the table. 'It's in her eyes.'

'Thornblood, I have warned you against such.' I silenced Salvatore's reprimand with a raised hand. I had chosen Laurent for his Emperor-given instincts and it would be folly to ignore them in this nest of serpents. Before the Great Excruciation I suspect he might have found a place among our Librarium's heretics, but properly wielded, his latent gift might become a righteous weapon.

'Corruption slinks beneath the skin of the world, brother-sergeant,' I said,

striding to join Laurent beneath the painting. ‘Sometimes we must hound it with our souls, not our wits.’

The lighting was contrived to fall upon the picture gracefully, emphasising its prominence without washing out its hues. A woman in a black dress returned my gaze from the canvas, her hands folded possessively over the heavy tome in her lap. A mane of red hair framed the pale oval of her face, cascading to her waist and woven with black flowers. Her green eyes were sharp with icy disdain, though her expression was wistful, brooding even. I had never seen her before, yet I knew her immediately – Konteza Urzelka Esseker, the mistress of the Concupiscent Hearth.

Unlike most bloodlines of the Adeptus Astartes, those of my lineage can recognise comeliness in a woman, hence I saw the beauty in that painted visage, but I also recognised it for a mask. The calculation in the matriarch’s eyes pierced the deception, making a mockery of her studied pensiveness. I was quite certain that hesitation was alien to the spirit behind that exquisite face. This was a woman who did as she willed, no matter the cost.

What do you think *she* saw when she gazed into Athanazius’ glass, brother? I have no doubt she indulged the impulse obsessively, even if she disliked the truths it revealed. Perhaps that is what drove her to heresy.

As we left the room I noticed Veland lingering under the portrait, his head once again tilted to the side. There was a perceptible *sway* to his posture.

‘Brother Veland!’ I shouted from the doorway, my patience with his laxity wearing thin. His helm’s lenses locked on me impassively, the white cross of the Muted daubed across his faceplate stark in the gloom. For a moment I thought he would speak, but he merely clicked an affirmative. Somehow it sounded insolent.

## FIFTH REFLECTION

I was compelled to divide the squad, for the mansion's size vastly exceeded my estimates. It was almost as though its inner dimensions defied its exterior, or enlarged slyly around us, spawning new configurations out of sight. There was hazard in separating, yet also in lingering in this defiled place, so I was eager to find our prize, redact it and be gone.

Yes, my brother-self, I am aware how absurd that now seems, but it was a lifetime ago and you fared no better, so do not presume to judge me. We are one in our folly!

It was Laurent who found the mirror. I had assigned him the uppermost floors and taken the cellars myself, convinced the konteza would hide her darkest secrets underground, but that assumption dignified her with caution or shame. Even then, I should have known her better. While I wandered through a sprawling storehouse of condiments to sate or embolden mortal appetites, Laurent uncovered a temple... of a kind.

*'It is an abomination, Thorn Master,'* he continued after reporting his find. *'How can such things evade the God-Emperor's gaze?'*

I frowned at the static drenching his voice. Something had been interfering with the squad's vox since we split up, becoming worse as the distance between us grew. Occasionally I heard an anomalous sound beneath the white noise – a voice perhaps? – but it slipped away whenever I tried to make sense of it.

*'Master, we cannot let this stand!'* Laurent pressed, his passion carrying through the distortion. *'If we–'*

'The mirror, Thornblood?' I snapped. 'You have located it?'

*'I... Yes, Thorn Master, it is here.'*

'On route,' I replied, dismissing his plea. 'Brothers, converge on Laurent!' Anselm and Salvatore voxed affirmatives. Veland's clicked response followed several seconds later, but I was too intent on our prize to admonish his tardiness.

The blizzard pressed close against the windows as I hurried towards the upper levels, its cloak now so dense the outside world might have been gone, erased by that swirling nothingness. And yet, despite its ferocity, I heard no wind beyond the casements.

As I passed an open door something moved at the corner of my eye. I swung round, my crozius and bolt pistol raised. Beyond the threshold was a hexagonal chamber devoid of windows, its walls sheathed in black tiles engraved with floral coils. Serpentine lumen strips lined the walls, bathing everything in a soft indigo radiance that also appeared to heat the room, for the perennial ice was absent here – indeed my sensors confirmed the temperature was *humid*.

My steps clattered loudly when I entered, for the floor was a smooth sheet of glass. Fibrous strands ran under its misted surface in a dense web, presumably extending under the whole room and possibly even beyond. Indeed, I imagined those tendrils insinuating themselves throughout the entire mansion, clustering beneath the plaster like rot.

The lights brightened with my advance, revealing a bulbous urn at the chamber's centre. A plant had erupted from the container's neck in a rampant tangle of vines and leathery leaves that pressed against the ceiling. Vast flowers bloomed among the snarl, their fleshy bulbs fringed with black petals. I have never been more thankful for the sanctity of my sealed armour, for I had no wish to inhale the musk of those leprous blossoms.

*'Are you so sure of that?'* The voice surged up on a wash of static, its rich contralto timbre cutting through the distortion. *'The boon of the Sable Kiss might spur you to profundity once more, Artisan Illuminant.'*

'Only to profanity, witch,' I answered, for I was in no doubt about the speaker's identity. That voice was the perfect match for the woman in the portrait. I realised I had been *waiting* for Urzelka Esseker to address me since seeing her likeness. But how did she know my old honorific, and the dishonour it celebrated? Had she plucked it from my mind? No – no, that

was not possible... but perhaps from one of the others, though only Anselm and Salvatore would remember such things.

*'Paradise lost is all the sweeter rediscovered,'* the witch wheedled, *'and damnation not nearly as sour as you might imagine.'*

The plant was rustling gently, all its flowers turned towards me. Its movements revealed several skulls nestled among its vines like pale bulbs. How many souls had surrendered willingly to its lure over the years? And how many who resisted had simply been hurled into its embrace?

*'Why so fearful of your own gifts, Bjargo Rathana?'* my tormentor asked tenderly. It sickened me to hear her speak my name, as if to a lover. Which of my brothers had betrayed it to her?

'You are mistaken, heretic!' I jabbed my crozius at the plant, as if the witch resided there. 'By His holy name, I abjure you!'

*'You abjure nobody save yourself, broken thing,'* she mocked. *'And whatever I will, will be!'* With a swell of static she was gone.

'The Emperor knows you!' I bellowed. 'And He condemns!'

The plant shivered, as if in empathy. To my disgust I realised its container wasn't an urn at all, but the fleshy seedpod it had sprung from. Resisting the impulse to waste ammunition upon it – for I would not taint my crozius with its sap – I stalked from the room. Doubtless that malign growth was but one of many abominations cultivated in the witch's domain.

I found Laurent on the top floor, standing just beyond the stairwell, with Anselm and Salvatore to either side, all three shrouded in the same silence. I slowed my stride as I joined them, aghast at the enormity of the blasphemy before me.

The whole level had been opened up into a single cavernous space under the mansion's central dome, from which a vast chandelier hung. Thousands of cut-glass lumoglobes glittered in that baroque web of light, leaving no room for shadows, though they would have been welcome, for the entire chamber was devoted to depravity.

I will not dwell upon the myriad engines of torture assembled in that unholy gallery, save to say their construction was masterful. Every one of them sported exhaustive controls to tweak and tune the laments they played upon the flesh, offering countless variations on every conceivable

theme. I doubted any of the konteza's victims had shared quite the same agony or perished before she was entirely satisfied.

Oh, there was genius behind those machineries of misery – *her* genius – yet every one was an obscenity.

As you well know, the Angels Penitent are no strangers to the virtues of torture. Applied with sobriety, the excruciation of the body is a righteous instrument of correction, coercion or execution. Indeed it is the sixth sacrament of the Trial of Thorns that our neophytes must endure to earn the black carapace. But the rites practised here were of a different order and their intent vile, for it was abundantly clear that the konteza's engines powered not just suffering, but also pleasure of equal magnitude.

Do not ask me to describe how she accomplished this perversion for I will not stoop to such vulgarity. Besides, you can see the devices on your side of the glass, so you know their methodology. Never have I been so repelled by mortal vice!

Evidently the chamber had hosted one last great orgy of ecstatic torment, for there were corpses everywhere, frozen like the intruders below, but boasting the marks of far more outlandish deaths. They were displayed alongside the machines that killed them, posed like the mangled dolls of a diabolical child.

'Their lips wear smiles their eyes deny,' Anselm said bleakly, breaking the silence.

'The Emperor condemns!' Salvatore declared. We chorused the sacred words, drawing purity from them.

'This was more than depravity,' I judged, glaring at the curved runes inscribed upon the machines. 'It was a ritual.'

Despite my helmet's filters I could *smell* those malefic sigils – the bittersweet aroma of poisoned dreams, pregnant with the promise of lies that might be true... if only I would drink deep of their charms.

'She sacrificed her followers,' Anselm gauged, examining the nearest cadaver's finery.

'Yes, Redactor,' I agreed, looking away from the runes. 'And they offered themselves willingly.'

'Not all of them,' Laurent said quietly. He had removed his helmet, as if in mourning. Doubtless he was remembering the words of the dying crone at the gates. The konteza took whatever she needed – her own and others.

‘There are innocents among them,’ he added.

‘Nobody is innocent, Thornblood,’ I rebuked him. ‘And it matters not who they were. They died for her regardless. That was enough.’

‘Enough for what, master?’ Salvatore asked.

‘To escape her people’s wrath! Sooner or later they would have come for her in numbers her thralls could not withstand.’

‘You believe she survived, master?’ Salvatore raised his flamer instinctively.

‘Oh, I know it, brother-sergeant! She is still here, though not as she was. Her escape was not *flight*, brother.’

‘We must destroy her,’ Laurent urged.

‘Yes, Thornblood,’ I assured him, but my attention was elsewhere, for I had seen our true objective.

The Mirror of Athanazius stood upon a circular platform at the far side of the chamber, gazing upon the atrocities like a vast glass eye. Instinctively I understood it had been the ceremony’s focal point, one heresy used to amplify another. Though I was here to destroy the artefact I was outraged that our legacy had been defiled in such a way. The mirror’s sins belonged to the Chapter!

We crossed the gallery in silence, wary of the narrow spaces between the machines, though I didn’t believe any conventional foes remained. The darkness haunting this place was no longer a creature of flesh and blood.

As I climbed the platform’s steps I saw *you* rising through the glass ahead to meet me, the hollows of your iron skull fixed upon my own, the razor wire halo wreathing your cranium flecked with rust. A ring of runes encircled your window, carved into the wooden boards of the dais and filled with blood. Their power was enhanced by a plethora of occult paraphernalia – black candles, an antlered skull inlaid with gold, a desiccated six-fingered hand... They were the common trinkets of heretics, made uncommon here by one who knew her craft all too well.

By unspoken consent we kicked the circle apart and crushed the foul baubles underfoot. Laurent’s expression was thunderous, but it was a righteous fury, free of the Black Rage’s mania. I felt pride in him then shame in myself, for pride begets the fall.

‘Master, we cannot leave the witch’s fate to chance,’ he said, turning to face me. ‘If we burn this place she may escape.’

‘The konteza is not our objective,’ I demurred, but not harshly.

‘Then what is our purpose?’ Laurent pressed. ‘If we suffer such heretics to live then why fight at all?’ The sensitivity of the Resplendent endured in him, yet he was unmistakably a Penitent. With time he might have become one of our staunchest voices. ‘Does the Testament not demand—’

‘Beware!’ I yelled as a grotesque figure appeared in the mirror behind him. It wore the black-and-umber armour of a Penitent, but its plates were warped into forms that looked organic, their surface whorled and veined with red. Mauve smoke gushed from spiny nodules atop its backpack, framing a backswept helmet sporting a quilled crest. The helm’s speaker-grille had elongated into a maw that yawned to the warrior’s breastplate and squeezed its eye-lenses into slits. Yet despite all these corruptions it was the symbol painted on its faceplate that appalled me – *a white cross*.

‘Brother Veland?’ Laurent asked, looking over my shoulder as the horror stepped onto the dais behind me. There was no trace of revulsion in his eyes as he greeted it, for while I saw its honest reflection, Laurent had his back to the mirror and merely saw its physical form.

‘Will you not agree—’ Laurent’s head disintegrated into a red mist as the thing that had been Veland opened fire, its bolter’s concussive bursts wringing strange harmonies from the air.

I dived aside and the bullet intended for me struck the mirror and disappeared in a swirl of ripples, as if passing through a pool of water. In the same instant Anselm threw himself from the platform, returning fire with his own bolter as he leapt away from Veland’s assault. Salvatore simply stood his ground and brought his flamer to bear. As it belched fire an incoming round pierced the nozzle and detonated inside the weapon. I have never seen such an improbable shot, nor could I tell whether it was the result of dazzling marksmanship or outrageous misfortune, but the result was the same. The weapon exploded, drenching Salvatore in burning promethium and incinerating his arms from the elbows down.

With a curse I spun round, my bolt pistol bucking furiously as I fired. I wasn’t facing the abomination I’d seen in the mirror, but a fellow Penitent. Veland was hunched in a feral stance as he targeted me, but his armour was unmarked by corruption. Nevertheless, the noise screeching from his helm’s speaker-grille was evidence enough of taint. That dissonant shriek wracked the soul as keenly as the ears, like a dirge channelled from the

warp.

Stumbling, I muted my auditory receptors with a coded word and the gunfire fell to a distant booming, but the sonic barrage was unabated. It swirled about my helmet like a swarm of infernal insects, gnawing at my senses and tearing my thoughts apart before they could crystallise. I felt the buffeting of Veland's bullets slamming against my armour, ripping away chunks of ceramite while my befuddled aim went wide. Dimly I realised my eyes were bleeding.

I barely heard Salvatore's roar as his flame-ridden form barrelled into Veland. The sergeant's back erupted as a slug tore into his midriff at close range, the spray of blood hissing into red steam from the heat. It was a dire wound, but Salvatore's momentum carried them both over the platform's edge.

Freed from the sonic assault, I charged forward and saw them hit the ground in a flame-tangled sprawl that left Salvatore on top. With his arms scorched away and his spine severed, the Thornguard tried to hold Veland down with his bulk alone, but it was a hopeless struggle. With an ululating cry, the madman threw him off and reached for his fallen bolter.

'The Emperor condemns!' I cried, firing as I leapt from above. My explosive shells thudded into Veland's chest a heartbeat before my boots followed, crashing onto the weakened armour like twin hammers. His breastplate caved in, rupturing the solid bone cage beneath. The impact threw his helmet free, revealing the travesty of my foe's once handsome face. His mouth was distended into a rictus yawn, its lips drawn back from spiny shark-like teeth. The flesh framing that maw had stretched and torn to his ears, only held together by bloody strips. Black eyes glared at me from sunken, scale-rimmed sockets that wept purple smoke.

'*She... knows... you!*' The words bubbled up from the back of the creature's throat, their intonation slurred and broken, for that razor-toothed maw wasn't built for speech. '*Knows... you... for... a...*'

I rammed my crozius between its jaws and silenced its blasphemy.

Salvatore still lived, though only a sliver of vitality remained to him. Of Anselm there was no sign, nor any answer on the vox. It was perplexing, but I would have to address that later.

Smoke wafted from the sergeant's scorched armour as I removed his

helmet to offer the Everlasting Sacrament. Flat on his back, he waited silently as I spoke the elegy.

‘Burn me, master,’ he rasped when I was done, turning his head to regard the nearest display of corpses. ‘Don’t let the witch... play... her—’ His appeal broke into a blood-flecked coughing fit.

‘It will be done, brother-sergeant,’ I promised. ‘She will not have you.’

‘The boy... was right. Have to... purge her.’

‘Yes, my brother.’

His eyes clouded and the silence lingered until I thought he was gone, but then his gaze locked on me once more. ‘I have sinned, master.’ It was the faintest of whispers. ‘I used to... paint. Never any good... but...’

‘All the Resplendent have sinned,’ I assured him. ‘Our vanity damned us. There can be no forgiveness, only penance. Now and ever after, the Emperor condemns!’

I expected him to repeat the blessed phrase, for there is no finer way for an Angel Penitent to pass into oblivion, and Salvatore Jacinto was among the most fervent of us. Instead, in that final moment, he smiled sadly and whispered the words that still haunt me.

*‘I never stopped.’*

## SIXTH REFLECTION

We are almost done now, mirror-brother. This has been a tortuous redaction, far exceeding any other I have presided over, but Athanazius' mirror is an artefact of a different order, hence the ritual cannot be expedited. I have castigated the unholy glass with the entirety of the nine hundred and ninety-nine litanies of Reverent Banishment, repeating every word until the intonation was perfect. Black incense wafts from my armour's censers, filling the air with the burnt stench of regret, while the *Exhalation Excruciatis* drones from the skull-bound speakers upon my backpack, its atonal groan lending weight to my words.

Naturally, I divined the *physical* expression of the mirror's redaction long ago. As witness Veland's stray bullet, the glass cannot be broken directly, so I shall strike it from behind, where it is blind. My blessed crozius will make short work of the frame's back-plate, and through it the glass itself. No, it is the *spiritual* aspect of the task that has challenged me, for I have been assailed by misgivings. Before I attempt the final step I must lay them to rest. And so I stand before you now, my first brother. Together we shall purge ourselves of doubt!

The sorceress is the least part of my irresolution. She has returned often to haunt me – taunting, teasing, cajoling or threatening as the mood takes her, but I am dead to her words. I cannot deny she knows what I once was, for she never tires of parading my sins before me, but she understands *nothing*. Her mind is sharp, yet surprisingly shallow, eroded to pettiness by unbridled ambition. In time what little remains of her shall devour itself, as a rapacious serpent consumes its own tail. Oh, make no mistake, she is poisonous beyond measure, but she has no form or substance to administer

her venom unless we open ourselves to her, as thrice-cursed Veland did.

My fallen brother's submission to the witch troubles me more than the tempter herself. Doubtless she prised open a fault line in his soul, yet the swiftness and extremity of his corruption makes a mockery of the Trial of Thorns. Is our testing flawed or are the judges themselves blind? To ask such things is forbidden, yet I must, for Veland's outrage pales beside the quiet treachery of Salvatore Jacinto.

The Crown of Thorns is watchful for recidivists who cling to the blasphemies of art in secret. Thirty-one pariahs have been uncovered since the Great Excruciation, but not one among the Thornguard. Until now. If a devout warrior like Salvatore has betrayed the faith how can we be certain of anyone? How many *more* are there? Writing, composing, carving, painting, perhaps even sculpting in the shadows!

And therein lies my dilemma, brother, for Athanazius' mirror could uncover the traitors among us. It revealed Veland's corruption with damning clarity, as it did Laurent's purity. I did not see Salvatore's reflection while he lived, and though I dragged his corpse before the glass nothing of his soul remained to tell its tale.

But I saw Anselm Giordano's truth.

It was more than a day before the last of my battle-brothers returned to me. At his shouted greeting I turned from the mirror and watched Anselm approach. His helmet was gone and he walked with a limp that hadn't been there before. As he drew closer I saw his armour was battered and scarred with deep scratches.

He stopped below the dais where I waited and his eyes fell on our dead brothers. 'Then we are the last,' he said sadly.

'Explain yourself, Brother-Redactor,' I demanded. 'You have been gone almost twenty-eight hours.'

'My chronolog records it as fifty-five, Master Castigant,' Anselm replied, meeting my gaze. 'Time is as treacherous as everything else here.' He shook his head. 'I cannot explain any of it. When Veland fired on us I jumped and fell... elsewhere.'

'Elsewhere?'

'Another level, hidden below the cellars, though I cannot say how I came to be there.' His expression darkened. 'It was not empty. The witch had

other servants – mutants, but not like any I have seen before. Her blasphemies are without end, master.’

‘Has she spoken to you, Brother Anselm?’

‘No.’ He appeared surprised by the question. ‘And the degenerates I slew had no wit for words. I fought my way to the surface, but it had changed... become a labyrinth. In time I stumbled upon the entrance hall, but the way out was gone. And beyond the windows... *nothing*.’ He opened his hands, palms upwards as if beseeching answers. ‘I believe the witch was toying with me, master. This building is her plaything – perhaps even a body of sorts.’

‘Perhaps,’ I agreed. His theory was sound, but irrelevant to my dilemma. ‘Come Brother-Redactor, I require your assistance.’

‘By your command, master.’

I turned to face the mirror, watching for his reflection as he ascended the steps to the dais. Sentiment vied with duty in my hearts as I waited, but the glass was merciless.

‘What do you require of me, master?’ Anselm asked, stopping a few paces behind me.

‘Only the truth,’ I said, addressing his reflection.

‘Always.’ The finely chiselled face in the mirror was free of the seams and blemishes I had grown accustomed to, and the hair framing it was a lustrous black. But the changes ran far deeper, extending to Anselm Giordano’s very soul. There was a *vitality* about him I hadn’t seen among our brotherhood since the Great Excoriation. This was not the face of a Penitent, but a Resplendent.

‘Did you relapse, Anselm?’ I asked softly. ‘Or did you never forfeit the old heresies?’

‘I do not understand, Master Castigant.’

‘Do you still play the laserwire harp? No... It must be something smaller... easier to conceal.’

‘Forgive me, but you are mistaken, master. I have been true to the Testament of Thorns.’ He frowned. ‘It is *her*. She seeks to deceive and divide us.’

‘It is not the witch’s deceits that concern me now, false brother.’

‘Don’t listen to her, my friend!’ Anselm stepped forward, his hands raised. ‘We must destroy the mirror before—’

‘Traitor!’ I thundered, swinging round. My crozius crackled with energy as I whirled it in a wide arc that scoured away the top of his skull. Anselm froze, staring at me as blood stained his white hair. His lips moved, but no words came. With a final exhalation, he crashed to his knees, his dead eyes locked on me. His face was once again as I remembered it.

‘The Emperor condemns,’ I whispered. As I turned my back on the traitor I heard the witch’s laughter.

And so we are the last, mirror-brother. We stand together in this gallery of iniquities, facing each other through a blasphemy. Much time has passed since we executed our respective Anselms. Like you, I have spent them in prayer, searching for an answer. Sometimes I have wondered why no others have followed us from the *Severance of Glory*, for our mission was expected to be brief, but it is better this way. They would be a distraction at best and a peril at worst. Nobody can be trusted. We must make this choice alone.

The witch has fallen silent, but I sense her watching me. Her eyes are everywhere and nowhere at once. Has she finally accepted that I am beyond corruption? Or is she scheming some fresh atrocity to tempt me? She will not succeed, for the redaction is almost complete. Only the final blow remains to be made, yet still I waver, for the fell truth cannot be denied. Our Chapter is rife with apostates whose cunning has surpassed our most vigilant scrutiny. I fear the rot may even extend to the Crown of Thorns itself. With the mirror’s wisdom I could find them all. I *cannot* destroy it... Yet how can I not?

I do not even comprehend its logic. Veland’s corruption extended to the flesh of his face, while Anselm’s existed only in reflection. Is the artefact fickle in its judgement? False even? Or is my understanding at fault? My *purity*?

Yes, brother, I understand what I must do to learn the answers. It is a grave sin, yet also the lesser of many evils. I am beset by secrets and lies, but the most malign are the misgivings in my own soul. If Anselm and Salvatore were impure how can I be certain of *anyone*?

I must know myself.

I must see you.

I feel the witch’s excitement as I grasp my iron mask in both hands. Its

rivets are old and buried deep in my skull so there is pain when I tug it free, but I welcome that. Nothing matters except the truth. And yet I hesitate, holding the mask before me like a shield. What if...

*What if you are still yourself, Resplendent?* Urzelka Esseker completes my thought. *What if you still dream of beauty, false Penitent?*

'I do not.'

*Then look upon yourself and learn, Bjargo Rathana!*

And finally, I do.