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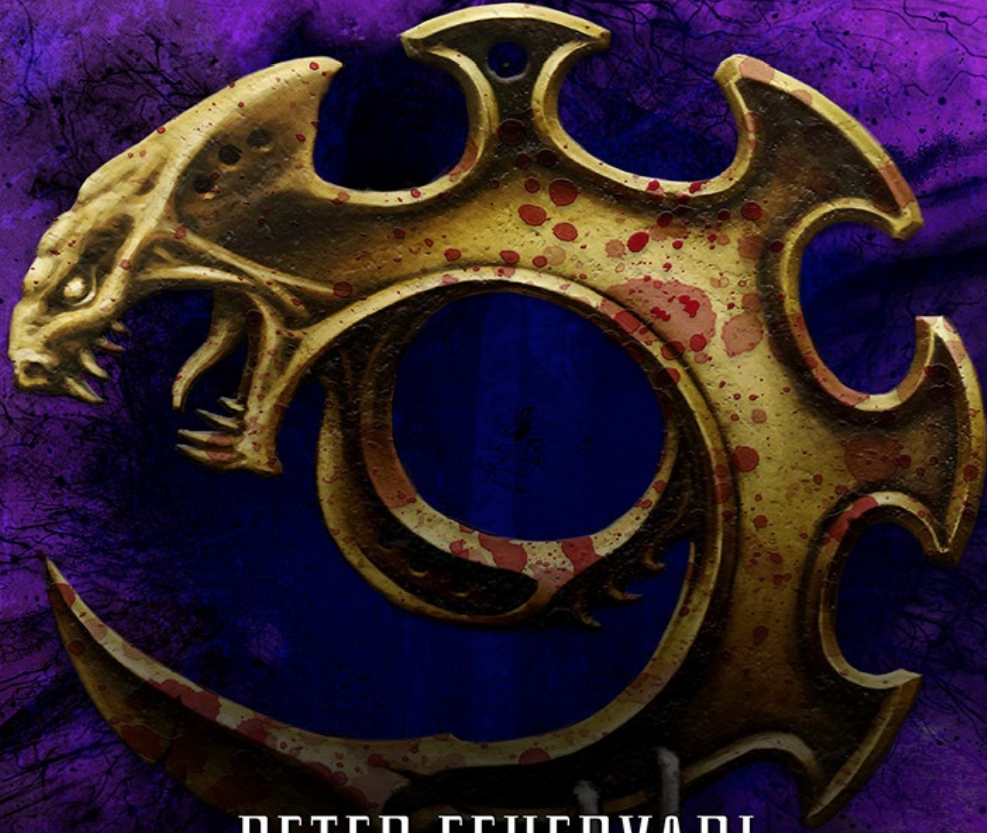


PETER FEHERVARI

**GAST A HUNGRY
SHADOW**

A GENESTEALER CULTS STORY

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**CAST A HUNGRY
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CAST A HUNGRY SHADOW

Peter Fehervari

'Faith is a ravenous beast that burns hotter than the fiercest fire.'

– Inquisitor Aion Aescher

As the three saviours climbed the mountain, the storm that had plagued their journey grew worse, congealing into a black blizzard that threatened to drag them from their narrow path. Soot storms were common on this scorched rock of a world, but there was a ferocity to this one that Ephras, who was Redemption born – and *reborn* – had never witnessed in his twenty-one years. *A rage.*

'We are being tested,' the young missionary murmured into his rebreather as he forged on, hunched into the wind. 'The Severed Spire rails at the Spiral Father's gospel and seeks to turn us from our calling!'

Spoken aloud, the thought energised him, renewing his oath to bring light to this unhallowed region. Since the coming of the great prophet, almost fifty years ago, the blood-deep blessing of the Sacred Spiral had spread across Redemption's single, fragmented continent, yet Spire Vigilans still remained apart, severed from its kindred mountains in both form and spirit. The seven spires of the Koronatus Ring jutted from the molten sea like titanic obsidian spikes, encircling the mesa at their centre with a symmetry that denied nature. Like the spokes of a wheel, vast suspension bridges linked the spires to the mesa, but the one serving – *or binding?* – Vigilans was riven with cracks and twisted out of shape. It was a path only the desperate or the deranged would choose.

Or the truly devout.

We crossed where so many others have faltered, Ephras thought fervently. *Neither wind nor fire shall turn us from our holy purpose. We –*

‘Must shelter!’ a harsh voice called behind him as a hand caught his arm. He turned and peered at the acolyte who’d spoken, unable to tell if it was Jujehk or Gurjah. Both his companions wore rough-spun brown robes and hid their faces in deep cowls, lest their blessings frighten the ignorant. There was no need for such measures in this wilderness, but caution was bred into their kind and they cleaved to it always. While Ephras was merely a man, the acolytes were true *spiralborn*, both exemplars of the Second Holy Paradigm of Form. One day their descendants would walk Redemption openly, but that rapture was decades, perhaps even centuries, distant.

‘Look there!’ the acolyte hissed, pointing at the rock face behind them. Ephras wiped at his soot-smearred goggles and squinted. There was a recess in the mountainside – angular and framed with tessellated blocks: *a shrine*. In almost two days of travel it was only the sixth they’d come across, which was another peculiarity of Vigilans, for the other spires were riddled with places of worship. The entire Koronatus Ring was a web of faith carved into the raw stone of the mountains, its origins rumoured to predate the Imperium of Man.

‘Shelter!’ the acolyte pressed. Like most of its kind, its jaws were not shaped for speech so it was frugal with words.

Ephras hesitated, reluctant to accede to the storm, but it would be folly to pass over this succour and risk falling. He smiled at his companion. ‘Your eyes are sharper than mine, brother!’

And not just your eyes, he thought with a shudder of reverence.

The passage beyond the entrance was narrow and littered with the remnants of the bas-reliefs that had once graced its walls. Ephras frowned as his lumen lantern revealed the extent of the damage, for there was a completeness to it that surpassed natural dissolution. Someone had stripped these walls bare and crushed the carvings into fragments, expunging their meaning. This was *desecration*. Though he had no loyalty to the Imperial warrior gods that the people of Vigilans venerated, Ephras was repelled by the act itself.

Is it the Creed? he wondered uneasily. *Are they here?*

Such sacrilege was typical of the barbaric cult, but its disciples always left the mark of their messiah in their wake, and he could see no sign of the Scorched Hand on these walls.

‘Breaking is old,’ one of the acolytes said wetly. ‘Many year.’

Ephras nodded. He had no idea how his brother knew this, but he trusted its instincts without question. While converts like himself bore the word of the Spiral Father, acolytes like Jujehk and Gurjah were His holy warriors. Without

their protection Ephras would never have survived this far.

We could wait out the storm here, he thought, trying to assess the dark passageway ahead. The shriek of the storm was muted here, but the volcanic rumble of the mountain was much louder, echoing up from the depths like phantom blood rushing through the vessels of an ossified beast.

A beast that was still angry in death.

'Go deeper, Ephras,' his faith urged, for it had a voice, though it spoke rarely and only ever in a whisper. The missionary's heart soared with renewed conviction at the command. He had come to Vigilans to seek out those who had fled persecution during the dark days before the Spiral Father's rise, but his quest had no map. Faith alone was his guide, and it had spoken!

'Where there is darkness we must bring light, brothers!' Ephras decreed, striding into the depths.

She had forgotten her given name, but the lost ones had called her the Teller.

It was a *true name*, for like the weight of the mountain, her words were undeniable, though she no longer spoke them aloud to make herself heard. The need for that had faded along with the lost ones' souls. She didn't recall when that had happened, or indeed how long she had been among them, but she had never forgotten the terror that had driven her here, for it was eternally sharp, preserved in a thousand flashes of burning brands and slicing blades and the castigations of the warrior women who had wielded them. Above all else, the Teller remembered her dead mother's warning: *If they find you, the Sororitas will cast you to the Black Ships.*

What the 'Black Ships' were or why they wanted her were secrets the Teller wanted no answers to, but if she thought of the future she saw the ships waiting there – eager predators, pregnant with pain. The future was nowhere she wanted to go, so she chose limbo, for herself and for those she ruled over. Broken beyond all desire save service, they tended to her needs while she brooded on nothingness. She reigned with one purpose only: to deny change and the horrors it harboured.

Yet change had come to her realm.

The Teller watched from the crowd of animated cadavers as three intruders entered her crumbling refuge, the light of their lanterns drowning the ruddy glow of the fire pit at its centre. She knew the strangers couldn't recognise her sovereignty, for she was as wasted and filthy as her subjects, so she took their measure with impunity as they hesitated at the threshold. Their leader was a tall,

fair-faced youth who appraised her people with disgusted pity and an ignorant kindness that was somehow worse. She despised him instantly, but his comrades were... different. Though they were hunched and faceless under their robes, they radiated a cold, hard *hunger* that knew nothing of terror – that was beyond its touch. The realisation fascinated her for it offered hope, and repelled her because hope was surely a lie.

Evidently deciding the lost ones were no threat, the intruders approached, the youth offering platitudes as he passed among them. Incapable of curiosity or fear, the Teller's subjects fell back listlessly before the strangers, while she watched from beside the fire pit. She had already dismissed the youth, so she was shocked when he looked right at her – *into her*. There was something else behind his eyes, something as cold as his comrades, but much stronger – a mind that recognised what she was!

As the youth opened his mouth to speak, the Teller's coiled fear reared up into rage and she lashed out with her will, striking like an aetheric viper. The stranger screamed as his body was wrenched in a hundred opposing angles that snapped sinew, bone and sanity into a splintered abstraction of humanity. She held the twitching ruin suspended as the hooded ones slowly raised their arms, but she sensed a lie behind their surrender – something hidden.

'We offer–' one began, but she hurled it against the wall, high above the entrance, crushing it in a vice of will and rock until it ruptured. As if in recognition of their error, the survivor raised its *third* hand, revealing a barb-tipped claw sheathed in a hard blue plates, like an insect's shell.

'Peace,' the creature wheezed, straining to shape the sounds. 'We bring... peace.'

Peace? An end to dread? Through her rage, the Teller ached to believe it.

'Be strong,' the stranger urged.

Dimly the Teller sensed it was *the master* speaking now – the hidden mind she had seen behind the youth's eyes. It had slipped to another host. Perhaps something with such power could make good on its promise. She yearned to listen, but the rage would not be denied. It had been buried too long and it *thirsted*.

'Wait!' the creature hissed.

Her fury burst forth in a primal shriek and tore into the speaker. As its hood split open she glimpsed an elongated skull and a toothy maw, but an instant later they split in turn, obliterating the bestial visage in a spray of blood. But her rage was still not sated. A flick of her eyes shredded one of her followers, then

another and another – her will tearing through the vacant crowd like a storm of razors.

Shuddering with effort, the Teller reeled the rage back in, binding it a heartbeat before it consumed her. She had kept it leashed since her escape and it had grown strong in the shadows of apathy. Exhausted, she slipped back towards nothingness, denying the lures of fury and peace alike. As her eyes glazed, she saw her subjects approach the bloody flowers that had erupted among them. Like their minds, their bellies were empty, but unlike ignorance, hunger knew its business well.

The Deadrock trembled and fine cracks tore through its glassy surface, rippling out from the man who knelt at its sheared pinnacle. The fissures glowed an angry crimson that he alone could see, though he had no eyes. Both had burst like overripe fruit when the taint of the Spiral had been seared from his flesh, along with all the lies he'd once lived by, old and new alike.

That had been over a decade ago and he'd come a long way since his purification. Unhindered by go-betweens, his sight had become *honest*, much like the man himself. He couldn't see through the eyes of others – that was his enemy's trick – but he could read this world like no other, for it was his god's canvas.

Someone just woke up, he deciphered. *Someone angry enough to break the chains. A woman? A girl?*

'Who are you?' he asked. His voice was like the murmur of a scorched corpse, but it carried through the gale raging around him. *'Where are you?'*

Along with the charred, heavy-duty coveralls he wore, his name was all that remained of his former life: *Gharth*. On a world defined – and damned – by names drowned in *meaning*, where every Spire was bound to a virtue it couldn't live up to, he cleaved to a name that meant nothing to anyone but himself. Inevitably the Scorched Creed had dreamt up other, darker titles for their messiah – the Blind Pilgrim... the Burning Man... the Fire Bearer – but they knew better than to use them to his face. To his mind the truth was stronger than any fable.

'Vigilans,' he whispered as the fissures darkened.

Gharth rose, his rubberised coveralls creaking as he straightened out. He'd always been a big man, just shy of seven foot, with muscles swollen by forty years in Redemption's slab-mines, but his god had tempered him beyond natural vigour, hardening his bones and sheathing his skin in onyx scales that could turn

a bullet. His hair had been seared away and his scalp branded with a splayed hand, its fingers linked by chains. Oily smoke leaked from his lips and the cauterized sockets in his face, hinting at the furnace within. An axe was strapped to his back, its double-headed blade hewn from the diamond-hard obsidian of the Deadrock.

‘I’ll set you free, friend,’ he promised the lost girl.

Pulling down the bulbous goggles strapped to his forehead, Gharth leapt from the Deadrock, plummeting almost twenty metres to the plain below. He landed on his feet with his back unbent, barely registering the spine-jarring impact. His eighteen firesworn comrades, the Redeemed, stood vigil beside their war bikes, exactly as he’d left them when he’d climbed the sacred rock. A few were lesser giants drawn from the same industrial hell as their leader, but most were simply the lost who’d risen in damnation. Each had forged his – or, in the case of Kael, her – own armour, weaving their suits from industrial scraps and razorwire with solemn, clumsy devotion. They were a patchwork band, but they were tied by a bitterness more potent than blood.

We are those who were left behind.

‘Vigilans,’ Gharth told them as he mounted his bike. It was a massive coal-black monstrosity armoured with riveted plates that flared into a shield across the handlebars. Like its rider, it was favoured by their god and had many names, though Gharth alone knew its *true* name, an eight-syllabled tangle that hinted at a spirit more daemonic than mechanical.

‘Will there be a burning?’ the Redeemed growled in chorus.

‘Until there’s nothing left to burn.’ Their messiah completed the litany. His bike roared as he gunned it into life, like a beast unleashed. Flames spewed from its exhaust as it surged into the maelstrom and the pack followed, eager for the hunt.

Standing in the gallery above the Hall of Rebirth, Aziah, the Chosen Claw of Spire Caritas, watched the throng of aspirants gathered below. Most had the haggard, soot-stained look of Redemption’s serfs – refinery rats, magma scrapers or shrine thralls – but there were a few cleaner ones among them, probably city functionaries or wardens. More of their kind were turning to the Spiral Dawn every month, drawn by the promise of a cure for the black breath or driven by fear of the Scorched Creed. The lung rot was one of Redemption’s perennial blights, but the fire-worshipping cult was a recent terror, its first atrocities dating back less than a decade.

'Make no mistake, the Creed's roots run deep,' Saint Etelka had cautioned the Chosen Claws. *'It draws its strength from the evil beneath the spires, which is older than the Imperium and infinitely more bitter.'*

And it is growing more confident, Aziah thought as he scanned the crowd for a threat. In recent years the Creed's raids and terror strikes had escalated, ranging beyond isolated shrines to the Spiral Dawn's heartlands. The murder cult was moving to a war footing.

'You smell danger, brother,' a voice growled at Aziah's shoulder. He glanced at the muscular acolyte that had crept alongside him. It was a creature of the Second Paradigm, its third arm terminating in a serrated blade of bone – an uncommon blessing that was revered among the kindred. Aziah couldn't recall a time when Bharbaz hadn't been with him, first as his protector, then his claw-brother and now, since his ascension to the Chosen Claws, as his lieutenant.

'The Creed,' Bharbaz said. It wasn't a question. The creature could *taste* its commander's mind, which troubled Aziah, for his thoughts were sometimes sour.

You are purer than I, brother, he reflected as he searched the sea of faces. Like all aspirants, their expressions straddled the gulf betwixt hope and desperation, awe and fear, sometimes heightened by the black breath's touch. Among the extremes were all the petty passions and indignities of the human condition that Aziah loathed.

I despise them because I recognise them, he admitted.

He thrust the shame aside and concentrated on his duty, hunting for the source of his disquiet. The aspirants had been searched when they entered the temple and issued with plain white tunics that offered scant opportunities for concealed weapons, yet his instincts were screaming. Something was wrong...

'The Sacred Spiral dawns eternal!' a voice rang out, resonant with warm authority. 'In its unfolding embrace we are reborn and raised beyond the taints and torments of this mortal gyre!'

Focused on the crowd, Aziah hadn't noticed Heliphos enter the chamber below. The high priest stood on a dais before the silver gates of the sanctum, his arms spread wide in welcome as he began the initiation ceremony. Despite his great age, Heliphos was straight-backed and muscular, his vitality preserved by the spiral blessing in his blood. A winding helix was tattooed across his shaven head, marking him as one of the Gyre Apostles, a convert embraced and elevated by the prophet Himself. The elder had fought beside the Spiral Father in the early days and been rewarded with stewardship of Spire Caritas, where new

aspirants were received.

And I am entrusted with his safety, Aziah thought, his eyes narrowing.

‘Our world is wracked by sickness and slaughter,’ Heliphos pronounced, ‘but you have taken the first steps from the cradle of despair into the light of the star gods, of whom the God-Emperor is but one.’

That was when Aziah found the assassin. The man was one of the higher caste aspirants, but he was stick-thin, his long face withered and blotched by lung rot. It was his eyes that gave him away, for while his fellows’ were filled with eagerness, his shone with rage. Rage and something more...

Wildfire, Aziah realised, recognising the glitter of the Creed’s unholy narcotic. The black crystal formed in the magma-drenched hell at the base of the spires, where only the damned would venture. It combusted when chewed, triggering a paroxysm of fury, along with a brief surge of strength and speed. Anything but the smallest dose was fatal, but that was a price the Creed’s ‘scorchers’ willingly paid for a few minutes of divine slaughter. It kicked in quickly so the infiltrator must have bitten down on a shard after Heliphos entered. The way his eyes were burning, it had been a big one.

‘The Black Needle unweaves the world!’ the fanatic bellowed in a savage rasp, cutting across Heliphos’ sermon.

Then he was beyond words. Blood and smoke erupted from his mouth as his body jerked like a puppet dancing to an idiot god’s whims. The woman in front of him turned and the scalding fumes caught her full in the face. As she convulsed and fell to her knees the assassin flung his arms wide, whiplash fast. His nails – long and tempered to dagger-like sharpness – slashed open the throats of those to either side of him, spraying others with blood. Gurgling deep in his throat, he charged towards Heliphos, slashing a path through the terrified congregation.

‘Scorcher!’ Aziah shouted. Yanking his bonesword free, he vaulted from the gallery. The Spiral was muted in his blood so he had only two arms and neither sported a claw, but the weapon forged from the prophet’s secretions was as much a part of him as Bharbaz’s killing arm. It had been a gift to celebrate the coming of the Third Paradigm, of which Aziah was the firstborn. They had made their first kill together when he was nine.

‘For the Spiral!’ the Chosen Claw snarled as the sword’s hilt pulsed in his grip. He landed in a crouch and sprang forward, barrelling through the heaving, shrieking crowd. The aspirants were insignificant beside the *heresy* of this incursion and he thrust them aside in his eagerness to reach the assassin. One of

the initiates leapt at him and lashed out in a frenzy of clenched fists and snapping teeth. Her wide, bleeding eyes were framed by a rictus snarl devoid of sanity. It was the woman who'd fallen to the scorcher's breath.

'We burn,' she croaked, oily smoke wafting from her seared lips.

Aziah rammed his blade between her jaws, but as he pulled it free a pair of tainted aspirants hurtled into him, one wrapping his arms around the Chosen Claw's waist, the other grabbing his sword arm. They chewed at his padded armour, drooling blood and fumes in their eagerness to reach his flesh. He saw others like them among the crowd, lashing about and leaping upon their fellows like wolves. True to its name, the wildfire was spreading swiftly through the crowd, its delirium carried by the smoke. The drug was dangerous, but Aziah had never seen such virulence. This was something new. Something *darker*.

He yanked his sword arm free, hurling one attacker into the crowd and sinking his fangs into the head of the one embracing him. Though Aziah had no claws, his elongated jaws were filled with sharp teeth that made short work of the man's scalp and gnawed into the skull beneath. Seemingly oblivious to pain, his enemy didn't relent until Aziah's barbed tongue punched through to his brain. Noxious gas vented from the rupture, scalding Aziah's face and setting his hood alight. The stench of sulphur and burning flesh was appalling. With a snarl, he tore his blistered tongue free and staggered back, spitting rancid ichor as he slashed about in a wide arc to keep the tainted at bay. A red haze was falling over him. He couldn't tell the corrupt from the pure...

It doesn't matter. The revelation was exhilarating. Joyous! It drowned out the ceaseless psychic susurrations of the prophet that had shadowed Aziah's thoughts since birth. *None of it matters!*

As Aziah ripped off his smouldering hood he felt the wildfire rippling through him in agonising, ecstatic bursts, urging him to kill and kill again because *nothing* mattered. Nothing was real! Another madman charged him and Aziah roared, meeting him with a swing that almost tore him in two.

'I am risen!' Aziah bellowed, meeting his attacker with a swing that almost tore him in two.

'Remember yourself, Chosen Claw!' the Spiral Father hissed into his mind. The prophet's murmurs rarely coalesced into words for Aziah so they struck him like a physical force, dousing his fury in a wash of shame. He realised Bharbaz was fighting alongside him, its three arms whipping about in a whirlwind blur, the natural blade interweaving with claw and scimitar in lethal harmony. It was a perfect expression of the Sacred Spiral...

‘I am *kindred!*’ Aziah hissed. Gritting his fangs, he quelled the rage and appraised the scene.

It was mayhem. Over a hundred initiates and a score of human converts were crowded into the chamber, scrambling about and brawling and screaming. Many were clustered at the entrance, pounding at the massive doors that had been sealed when the ceremony began. Others were trying to climb to the galleries above, sometimes clambering over each other in their haste, but it was impossible to tell whether it was flight or fury that drove them. There was no sign of Heliphos, but the dais where he had stood was empty. Had he escaped to the sanctum?

‘*They are lost,*’ the Spiral Father decreed.

‘Purge them all!’ Aziah shouted to the acolytes manning the gallery, then turned to Bharbaz. ‘We must find the apostle!’

Together they waded into the crowd, hacking down anyone in their path while the acolytes above sprayed the chamber with gunfire.

‘Save us, brother!’ a choking man begged, clutching at Aziah’s robes. The Chosen Claw cut him down without hesitation; only the spiralborn could be trusted to withstand the taint that had come among them.

A ragged shape leapt from the crowd and slammed into the wall to his right, its hooked talons latching onto the stone. It was a tortured parody of a man, with arms tautened to twice the natural length, while its torso had shrivelled, as if one had nourished the other. The thing’s head hung limply over its back, swinging like a pendulum from a long, stalk-like neck that looked broken or boneless. Its eyes had exploded and its jaws were slack, but it was unmistakably the assassin who had seeded this madness.

‘The wall!’ Aziah shouted to the acolytes above as the thing scuttled towards the gallery like a bipedal spider. ‘Watch the wall!’

An acolyte leaned over the railings, but as he aimed his gun the abomination lashed out with one arm and tore his throat open. Its blind, swaying head screeched joyfully as fresh blood spattered it, then with a surge of speed the thing hauled itself onto the gallery. A riot of muzzle flares lit the shadows as the defenders turned their autoguns on the invader, but it was among them in seconds.

‘Beware, brother!’ Bharbaz yelled as a wailing madman leapt towards Aziah, reaching for him with blazing skeleton-claw hands. As the Chosen Claw swept his blade out he recognised his attacker: *Heliphos*. The apostle’s hair was ablaze, his face a taut death mask splintering from the heat behind it.

‘I have failed,’ Aziah hissed and swept the apostle’s head from his shoulders. It spun over the crowd, spewing smoke like a fleshy censer.

All around the chamber the burning damned were beginning to combust as the wildfire reached its zenith. In these final minutes they were more dangerous than ever. They needed no weapons when their touch alone was lethal. Fighting back to back, the two kindred held them at bay as smoke drowned the chamber.

This temple is forever desecrated, Aziah gauged bitterly. Then his world narrowed to a raw equation of hacks and parries, where a single miscalculation could be fatal. Even at arm’s length, the heat coming off the damned was ferocious.

Finally there were no more. The chamber had fallen silent save for the pop and hiss of broiling flesh. Aziah realised the gunfire had also ceased. He squinted at the gallery, trying to penetrate the filthy swirl.

‘Brothers?’ he called. There was no reply. ‘Brothers!’

A molten wheeze answered from somewhere above, slithering into a chuckle.

‘The assassin still lives,’ Aziah hissed as Bharbaz stepped beside him with its weapons levelled at the gallery.

‘Show yourself!’ Aziah challenged. ‘In the name of the Sacred Spiral—’

The abomination burst from the gallery in a tangle of charred bones and claws, moving faster than Aziah would have imagined possible. The assassin’s long face was still recognisable in the seething riot that his body had become, though its features were distended to monstrous proportions. Hellfire blazed in the warp-spawned thing’s eye sockets as it plummeted towards him, its multitude of claws outstretched.

It is blind, yet it sees, Aziah realised.

An explosive chatter of gunfire sliced through the beast’s roar and a volley of bolts punched into it mid-leap, shredding its torso and hurling it across the chamber. Aziah turned and saw a pale figure striding through the smoke, its rifle blazing as it tracked the scorcher’s arc. The beast crashed down in a broken heap and tried to haul itself up, quaking as the mass-reactive rounds detonated inside it. Its head surged up on its wormlike neck, swaying about as it hunted for its tormentor, then fixed on Aziah once more. With a howl of hatred, the Chosen Claw charged the abomination with his sword raised.

‘**Betrayer,**’ it croaked an instant before he cleaved its skull.

Fresh rage flooded Aziah and he hacked at the carcass relentlessly, as if the blows could expunge that poisonous word.

Betrayer. Why did the accusation sting?

‘Enough, Chosen Claw!’ It was a woman’s voice, cold and hard-edged.

Aziah swung round as the speaker approached. She was clad in ornate power armour that mirrored her slender frame, its ceramite plates polished to a white sheen that seemed to radiate light. A purple tabard embroidered with a silver spiral covered her breastplate and hung between her legs. It was a graceful rendition of the sect’s symbol, quite distinct from the angular variant that Aziah and his acolytes bore. The woman’s face was hidden behind the visor of her backswept helmet, but there was no mistaking her identity for she was the last of her kind on Redemption.

And I would know her among a thousand of her sisters, Aziah thought. *Ten thousand even.*

‘The Sacred Spiral ward you, saint,’ he greeted her, his voice tight.

‘It appears *you* were the one in need of warding, Chosen Claw,’ Etelka Arkanto observed. The Saint of Castitas stowed her storm bolter as a pair of First Paradigm acolytes strode up to flank her. They were massively built and gifted with four arms apiece, the upper pair flaring into curved rending blades, the lower terminating in long-fingered hands that looked almost delicate. Their hoods were thrown back, revealing crested skulls and noble, fang-filled faces tattooed with silver whorls. Both carried bulky plasma rifles and wore silver flak armour emblazoned with their mistress’ heraldry. The Spiral Father had granted her the Shining Claws in honour of her service during the Reformation, which eclipsed even that of Heliphos.

Heliphos...

‘The Apostle of Caritas is dead,’ Aziah said, bowing his head.

‘That is regrettable.’ Etelka reached for her visor.

‘The air is tainted!’ Aziah cautioned, but she didn’t hesitate.

‘My blood is not yet so thin, Chosen Claw.’

There was a hiss as the airtight seal broke and her visor rose. The face beneath was pale and deeply seamed, but its high cheekbones and full lips had weathered the ravages of age remarkably well. Like Heliphos, she had been embraced by the Spiral Father and His blessing was potent. Fixing her violet eyes on Aziah, Etelka breathed deeply of the smoke.

She is not spiralborn! Aziah tightened his grip on his sword, yet he knew he wouldn’t be able to use it. Not against her.

The saint released the fumes slowly and smiled. That grimace – frigid and vulpine – had always disturbed him. *The Spiral’s song is stronger in my blood than yours,* it mocked. His anger stirred, the old and the new conjoined this time.

Betrayer...

‘How did you know?’ Aziah hissed. Every member of the sect was bound by the Spiral Father’s omnipresence, but the scorcher had struck mere minutes ago. How had she made the long journey from Spire Castitas in time?

‘I did *not* know,’ Etelka said, ‘but the Spiral connects.’

‘The fault was mine—’

She silenced him with sharp gesture, dismissing his protests along with the dead priest. ‘This outrage is not why I came to Caritas.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘These are dark times, but not without hope.’ Etelka placed a hand on his shoulder and he suppressed a shudder. ‘A divine vessel has been found to bear our first magus.’

Aziah’s eyes narrowed at the wondrous news. ‘A warp-weaver? Where?’

‘There are complications.’ The saint looked at him levelly. ‘I am bound for the Severed Spire.’

She smiled again.

‘I want you beside me, my son.’

A sullen wind lashed at Aziah as he approached the trailer at the back of Etelka’s convoy. It was a windowless steel box mounted on six wheels. A sealed hatch was set into its rear, embossed with the silver spiral of Castitas. Reverently Aziah pressed a hand on the symbol and closed his eyes.

‘It has been too long, my brother,’ he murmured. A deep moan answered from within as the Cicatrix sensed its birth brother. The saint’s second son was a holy aberration – a rare and revered divergence from the Four Paradigms. Such *misborn* were exalted in strength, but lacking in subtlety so they were kept hidden from outsiders, consigned to the darkest places until the sect required their might.

‘Will it be war?’ Aziah asked as Etelka joined him.

‘Perhaps,’ the saint replied, placing a slender hand beside his three-fingered paw. ‘The Creed are pressing us hard and our veil wears thin. Without a magus to weave it anew the outsiders will soon turn upon us.’

‘Then we will crush them!’ There was a growl from the trailer as the Cicatrix echoed its younger brother’s anger.

‘And in turn the Imperium will crush *us*.’ Etelka shook her head. ‘No, it is too soon. The kindred are too few.’

‘Then you will guide us on the narrow path,’ Aziah said fiercely. ‘As you have

always done.'

'I am no magus, my son.' A note of bitterness had crept into her voice. 'And I am *old*.' Etelka stepped away from the carriage and regarded the roiling, soot-choked sky. 'A storm comes.'

'A bitter one,' Aziah agreed, following her gaze. Despite the planet's twin suns there was little to distinguish day and night on Redemption, but the storms were another matter – they decreed the cycle here. 'It would be wise to let it pass.'

'The Creed will not wait,' she said.

'They know of the weaver? How?'

'I have told you before – this *world* is a betrayer. They know.' She spat without decorum. 'We cannot wait.'

The Cicatrix growled again and scratched at its cell as its mother stalked towards her vehicle.

'Be still, my brother,' Aziah soothed it. But as he followed Etelka all he could think of was the word she'd used: *betrayer*.

As the convoy crossed the mesa, the storm mustered its strength, raising whirling soot devils from the plain and buffeting the vehicles, but withholding its full wrath.

It is biding its time, Etelka Arkanto judged, scanning the horizon. The jagged fang of the Severed Spire loomed ahead, a deeper darkness against the gloom, its bulk riddled with crimson veins. Unlike the other spires, Vigilans was volcanically active and prone to sudden violence.

'It is spite given substance', Etelka's long-dead matriarch, Canoness Aveline had once proclaimed. *'Like a shard splintered from the warp.'*

Where else could a witch find sanctuary on this world? the saint mused. Her former sisterhood had governed Redemption for almost three centuries, standing vigil against the Scorched God and culling those who might become conduits for daemons. Ironically that purge had proved to be an unforeseen retribution upon the sect that overthrew them, for the Spiral Dawn could not breed its magus without a witch's warp-tuned blood.

'And without a magus we shall fall,' she whispered.

Etelka stood on the open deck of the lead war truck, gripping the guardrail of its wedge-like front. The *Silvergyre*'s industrial heritage had been muted with elegant white panels, but there was no masking its spiked wheels and the rack of buzz saws jutting from its fore. Those blades had been forged to chew through the stone warrens beneath the mesa and the vehicle's chassis could withstand a

magma burst. Redemption's mining industry had been in decline for centuries, but its trucks were built to last so the sect had claimed and consecrated them.

Just as it claimed and consecrated me.

Recently Etelka's memories of the dark days of the Reformation had resurfaced, and with them, the guilt. It had been a constant companion in the early years of her rebirth, ripe with the threat of damnation, but with time and the prophet's guidance it had withered. She had not betrayed her sisterhood, but *liberated* them.

'I gave them peace!' Etelka told the wind, but her words sounded hollow, *faltering* – much like the prophet's psychic murmurs, which had weakened as the convoy neared the gorge.

The Scorched God is strong here, Etelka brooded.

'*I see the bridge, Silvergyre,*' a voice crackled from her helmet's vox bead.

'Confirmed,' she replied, squinting at the taillights of the two bikes leading the convoy. Though only twenty metres ahead, the scouts were almost lost in the churning gloom. She switched to the command channel. 'Prepare for the crossing,' she sent to the convoy. 'Slow, steady and vigilant.'

This is where we are most vulnerable.

Sensing their mistress' unease, the Shining Claws to either side of her activated their plasma rifles. She glanced round and saw the truck's stubber gun swinging back and forth in its open-topped turret, the head and shoulders of its operator visible. Another warrior manned the vehicle's servo-arm – a massive articulated claw fitted with a heavy laser and a searchlight. Both gunners were Third Paradigm neophytes like Aziah, their Spiral-touched heritage muted. Though their flesh was purple-tinged and hairless, their crests were subdued and they had only two arms, both unremarkable. Like all their generation, they were very young, but more dextrous with machines than their elder kin – seemingly closer to human.

Yet their serenity is flawless, Etelka reflected, thinking of the darkness in Aziah. Her darkness.

The convoy slowed to a crawl as it approached the bridge. Immense basalt pylons framed its cobbled ramp, each warded by a stone giant. The figures were too abstract and worn to identify, but their belligerent postures were unambiguous. Whatever they were, they revered war. Likewise, the pylons were carved into inverted swords, their hilts threaded with metal cables that connected them to the next pair along. The far side of the bridge, some two thousand metres distant, was shrouded in smoke and darkness

‘This is a warrior’s road,’ Aziah said to Bharbaz, ‘and a warrior’s spire.’

His lieutenant said nothing, but its eyes were alert for danger as their vehicle mounted the stone ramp, hauling the Cicatrix’s carriage behind it. They were at the rear of the convoy, their truck the last of three. Four lightly armoured Talon buggies supported the trucks, along with the scout bikes up front. All told, their expedition numbered almost sixty kindred.

‘Some day we will go to war by the thousand, brother!’ Aziah growled.

The bridge was wide enough to accommodate the trucks side by side, but the kindred were taking no chances. Vigilans had been abandoned centuries ago and its bridge was twisted out of shape, creating a sharp incline to the left, where the sidewall had collapsed into the gorge. Many of the pylons showed steel bones where their stone cladding had sloughed away, though the deck was clear of debris.

‘Whatever falls here is swept into the abyss,’ Aziah said, gazing at the red haze rising from the precipice. It seemed to promise a fate worse than a burning death.

As Etelka had feared, the storm broke when the convoy wasn’t even halfway across. Howling crosswinds scoured *Silvergyre*’s deck and visibility dropped to a few metres, slowing the vehicles to a crawl.

‘Say again, *Gyrerunner One*?’ Etelka hissed into her vox bead. Once again, she was met by a snarl of static that *might* have been a voice. The storm was playing havoc with their comms and the scouts hadn’t signed in for several minutes.

I let them slip too far ahead, she chided herself.

‘I see them!’ Bhezai, the neophyte manning the searchlight, yelled over the squall.

Etelka leaned forward, following his beam. Two lights were approaching, but she couldn’t make out the shapes behind them.

‘*Gyrerunner One*?’ she voxed. ‘Identify yourself!’

The shadows resolved into the compact form of bikes – then a *third* light blinked into life behind them. A fourth...

‘I shall carve the penitent flesh on the bones of self-deception,’ a voice rasped from Etelka’s vox, so sharp and static-free the speaker might have been standing right beside her. *‘For mistruth is its own unmaking.’*

‘Creed!’ Etelka shouted on the command channel. ‘Scourge the heretics!’

As always, the Shining Claws had anticipated her will and their guns spewed superheated plasma before the words had left her mouth. The twin bursts intersected on the lead bike and it exploded into a fireball, shedding molten

streamers as it spun away. Their engines roaring, the other bikes leapt forward, weaving about as they charged, seemingly untroubled by the darkness. Muzzle flare bloomed from their silhouettes as they opened fire, spraying *Silvergyre* with a hail of bullets.

Most of the barrage was blunted by the truck's frontal armour, but some swept onto the deck. Bhezai ducked as his searchlight shattered, showering him with glass. A lucky round slipped into the stubber turret, whipped past the gunner's head and ricocheted into the back of his skull. He slumped over the controls and his gun swung upwards, spitting bullets into the sky.

'Gyre Talons take point!' Etelka voxed the buggies. 'All units, forward full thrust!'

'But the storm –' the driver protested from the compartment below.

'Trust in the Spiral!' Etelka snapped, unslinging her storm bolter. 'We need to get off this bridge!'

As *Silvergyre* surged forward she returned fire, standing straight-backed with her legs braced for balance. Bullets whistled past, sometimes scraping her armour, but lacking the punch to penetrate its ceramite plates. She ignored them and savoured the release of battle.

I am a liberator!

Her bodyguards were crouched behind *Silvergyre*'s shielding, firing in alternate bursts to let their volatile plasma guns cool. Behind her, Bhezai swung the servo-arm about, punching fat las-bolts into the gloom as he hunted the raiders. There was a flare of intense light as he found a mark, virtually disintegrating both bike and rider.

'This is Aziah,' Etelka's vox announced. *'There are more behind us, saint!'*

She ignored him, her whole body reverberating with recoil as she tracked a bike until its light shattered and its casing ruptured. Belching fire, it flipped forward, hurling its armoured rider over the handlebars. He slammed into *Silvergyre*'s front and slid into its churning grinder. Etelka felt a rush of fierce joy as blood spattered her white armour.

'I give you mercy,' she breathed.

'They were waiting for us!' Aziah hissed. *'How did they–'*

'I see you, Sister,' another voice broke in as a hulking bike swept past *Silvergyre* in a blur of black iron and smoke. *'I see what you are.'*

'–trap!' Aziah finished.

There was a wail of tearing metal from somewhere behind Etelka and a buggy spun past where the bike had been moments before, its sundered chassis spewing

flames. She ducked as the wreck careened in front of *Silvergyre* and crumpled under its blades. Blazing metal fragments showered the deck, burying themselves in the hull like powered daggers. A massive shard tore through the waist of an acolyte who'd just emerged from the truck's compartment. The warrior's legs tumbled back inside while its torso was thrown overboard in whirl of viscera. Another fragment buried itself in Bhezai's face, pinning him to an iron strut.

They are driven by the Scorched God's malice! Etelka raged. Keeping low, she gripped the guardrail as her truck rolled over the buggy, bucking violently. She cursed as she saw the Silver Claw on her right was dead, the top of its skull sheared away.

'Beware, daughter!' the Spiral Father urged with sudden clarity.

Etelka raised her head and saw a blunt-nosed colossus bearing down on her. It was a haulage tanker with bulbous wheels twice the size of *Silvergyre's* own, its cab scorched with the splayed hand of the Creed. The open-topped cargo bay behind the cab was crowded with metal barrels...

'All shall burn,' her vox rasped.

'I...'
Etelka began. Then her surviving bodyguard yanked her into an embrace and vaulted from the truck. They hit the ground seconds before the vehicles collided.

A thunderous explosion tore through the storm and a pillar of fire erupted on the road ahead. Aziah grabbed the guardrail as his truck lurched sharply to the right, hauling the Cicatrix's trailer in its wake and raking sparks from the bridge wall. The truck ahead veered to avoid the inferno, but it was already too close.

Kindred leapt from its deck as it plowed into the tangle of twisted metal and burning promethium. Their robes caught fire as they staggered about blindly, too devoted to accept death until a pair of heretic bikes cut them down as they swept past. A speeding Talon buggy swerved to the left, but its wheels burst as they touched the searing slick and the vehicle spun out of control. Its brakes screeching, it crashed into a bike and whirled into the gorge, carrying the entangled bike with it.

'Silvergyre!' Aziah shouted into his vox, already certain there would be no answer. The command truck was still recognisable in the conflagration, but its elegant façade was melting fast. As Aziah's vehicle drew level with the carnage, the second truck's hatch sprung open and an acolyte heaved itself out, only to combust in the intense heat.

'Betrayal is honest,' his vox hissed, somehow drawing his eyes to a hulking shape on the far side of the inferno. Though it was motionless, its outline rippled in the heat haze, flickering between a jagged-edged bike and a horned iron beast. The giant that sat astride the metal chimera was a changeless, indecipherable shadow, yet Aziah sensed it was watching him.

'Burn the lie that binds, friend,' the shadow told him.

'Beware!' Bharbaz yelled as a bullet raked Aziah's head. The Chosen Claw swung round and saw another bike storming towards his truck. Its rider sat high in her saddle with a pistol in each hand, her long hair streaming behind her as she sprayed bullets. She was an easy target, yet the truck's return fire was flying wide, slipping around her as if the wind itself was twisting the stubber rounds off course.

This world is a betrayer, Aziah remembered his mother saying.

The heretic leapt an instant before her bike slammed into the truck and exploded at her back, propelling her through the air like a human cannonball. She crashed onto the rear deck in a crouch, her back crawling with flames. As the kindred surged towards her she spun round, firing wildly and chanting in a guttural slur.

She is another giant, Aziah realised as the biker rose to her full height, her muscles straining against the loosely woven scraps of her armour. A riveted iron box encased her head, its front slashed open to frame bloodshot eyes. What he'd taken for hair was actually a plume of razorwire woven with obsidian fetishes.

'Heretic!' Bharbaz bellowed, lunging past Aziah, heedless of the bullets that thudded into its chest. The acolyte's scything claw lashed out and sliced off the berserker's left hand while its chitinous talon grabbed her other wrist. They were evenly matched in strength, but the woman had only two arms. She snarled as her enemy's third swept down and thrust its scimitar into her chest, its blade tearing through her patchwork breastplate. Aziah saw her eyes widen in ecstasy, their irises glowing as smoke gushed from her helmet.

'Wildfire!' he yelled, but it was too late. The heretic's visor exploded as she vomited a soul-deep spray of flames into Bharbaz's face, scorching the flesh from its skull.

'Chosen Claw,' Aziah's vox hissed, seeming to come from somewhere far away. *'Aziah...'*

Bharbaz's corpse toppled over, its charred skull snapping loose as it struck the deck. A moment later the biker's carbonized body disintegrated under the weight of its own armour. Through a red haze Aziah heard the Cicatrix battering at its

cell – then the vox signal again, urgent and tight with pain.

‘I need you, my son.’

Gharth slowed his bike as he reached the far side of the bridge, then swung round to a stop. The machine growled, eager to return to the slaughter, but he reined it in with a lash of contempt.

‘Be still.’

His empty eye sockets fixed on the bridge, regarding the Spiral-tainted degenerates with deeper vision. They were consolidating what little they had left around their remaining truck, rallying with inhuman tenacity to repel another attack. There was no fear among them – no emotion at all save for the thorny, tormented reek of the fallen Sister and her spawn. Others might have found it ironic that the soulless were led by such lost souls, but Gharth was dead to such notions, just as he was dead to the exhilaration of his fellow Redeemed.

The riders were alight with the rapture of battle as they pulled up alongside him – and bristling against the cessation he had commanded. Only seven of them had survived, but he felt no sorrow for the lost; not even for Kael, who had stood beside him in vengeance since his awakening, and in love before that. Like the others, she had seized death with a joy he could not share. All that remained to him was a hate so immaculate it eclipsed all else.

‘You shall awaken into cold ash,’ his god’s one-eyed herald had decreed, so long ago now, *‘purged of the Spiral’s taint and shriven of the vanities and delusions of the self.’*

‘I want to remember,’ Gharth had protested, gazing at the immolating wellspring the ancient had led him to. He could feel the xenos contagion of the Spiral Dawn spreading through his body, unravelling him with every heartbeat, yet still he’d hesitated. *‘I want to remember what they did to me – to all of us.’*

‘You will not forget. Not that,’ his guide had promised, *‘but your hate shall become as ice. And from that ice you shall bring forth annihilating, irrefutable fire.’*

The first tongues of that promised fire had cleansed Gharth of taint, both xenos and human. The agony had been unspeakable, but he had embraced it with passion until passion itself had been scorched away.

‘Not all ruination is equal.’ Stepping from the flames, the burned man had not known if it was his god, the guide or himself who had spoken those words. Later he’d understood that the question made no sense.

Gharth swung his bike round to face the Severed Spire. To that brooding,

dissident peak the Creed and the Spiralborn were one, both unworthy of anything but contempt.

‘Do your worst, friend,’ Gharth told it and kicked his bike into life.

The battered convoy completed the crossing at a crawl, with the two surviving buggies flanking Aziah’s truck in close formation. Nothing came for them on the bridge. Nothing met them on the other side.

‘Why did they break off the attack?’ Aziah said to Bharbaz, squinting at the storm-wracked ridge above. ‘They had us.’

The charred skull at his feet offered no reply. Neither did the surviving Silver Claw, Hezrakh, who had taken his lieutenant’s place. One of the creature’s arms had been torn off in the explosion, along with half its face, but First Paradigm kindred were almost as hardy as the star-born Purebloods that seeded them.

They make fine warriors, but poor lieutenants, Bharbaz, Aziah thought sadly. He quashed the emotion, ashamed of the weakness. His claw-brother had died serving the Sacred Spiral. Nothing else mattered.

‘The heretics want us alive,’ he mused aloud. ‘Weakened, but alive.’

It was the only answer. Was the enemy taunting them?

Then Aziah’s thoughts clouded as the Spiral Father’s will washed over him, impelling him towards the mountain. The path to the warp-weaver’s aerie unfurled before his eyes, the ruined temple shining like a beacon, reinforcing the *need* to get moving again, to follow—

Our enemy doesn’t know the path, Aziah grasped with sudden conviction. Trembling with the effort, he slipped free of the prophet’s compulsion. *No.*

Hezrakh growled and jabbed its claw towards the mountain.

‘We go,’ the two neophyte gunners behind Aziah chorused.

‘No!’ the Chosen Claw repeated, speaking aloud to brace his will against the psychic tide. ‘The enemy needs us to lead them to the warp-weaver.’ His skull was pounding with the affront of his denial. ‘They don’t know the way.’

The pressure relented and Aziah sensed the prophet turning the possibility over.

‘The storm is their cloak,’ Aziah pressed. ‘It hides them, but does not blind them. We must wait until it passes.’

Hezrakh was staring at him with ferocious, empty eyes, as if its mind had become dislocated. Aziah knew every other member of the convoy shared that expression right now, just as Bharbaz would have done.

They are willing slaves. The thought was laced with revulsion. It was almost *heretical*. Then a wash of approval flooded Aziah’s mind.

'Lead as you see fit, Chosen Claw,' the Spiral Father breathed in its wake.

The prophet's presence faded, but His benediction lingered.

This is why you wanted me by your side, mother, Aziah thought. *You and I serve the Spiral, but not as slaves.*

'Be vigilant, brothers,' he ordered on the command channel. 'We depart when the storm wanes.'

Satisfied there was no immediate danger, Aziah climbed down to the compartment where the saint lay. Hezrakh had shielded her from the blast with its own body, but a long shard of metal had punched through its back and impaled them both. Her guardian had freed itself, but removing the fragment from Etelka had been too dangerous, especially with their healer lost in the skirmish. The shard jutted from her belly like a jag of frozen lightning, her armour cracked and blackened around the wound, looking almost diseased.

'Saint,' Aziah whispered, crouching beside her. 'Mother?'

Etelka's eyes were wide open, but their pupils were contracted to tiny points, exactly as they'd been when he'd found her.

'I need you, my son.' She must have voxed that last message moments before she slipped into oblivion.

'You shall be made whole,' he promised, running a hand over her brow. 'The Spiral connects.'

The saint hauled her broken body over a smooth stone surface. The sulphur-drenched air shivered with a deep rumbling that promised fire, yet the darkness was so complete it denied the possibility of light.

'You have no light, nor the sight to see it,' someone said, as if echoing Etelka's thoughts. 'You blinded yourself for lies. Only a madwoman would dream such blasphemies. Only a fool would listen to her ravings.' Then it struck like a lash. 'And only a heretic would murder for them.'

'You're long dead,' Etelka hissed, recognising the voice of her former superior. 'Go back to your corpse-god, Aveline!'

'I am with Him always,' Vetala Aveline, Canoness of the Thorn Eternal replied. 'Those who serve with faith, serve without end. What do you serve, sister?'

'We are not sisters.'

'We will always be sisters, heretic,' Aveline said without emotion. 'Why did you betray us?'

'You betrayed yourselves,' Etelka snarled, remembering the rituals of fasting and flagellation, and the ceaseless, senseless sermons and ceremonies, but most

of all the burnings – the torment their order had inflicted upon those it claimed to protect. ‘We served a lie!’

By the time the storm abated Redemption’s twin suns had risen. They glowered through the wind-scoured sky, washing the mountain in a clash of ochre and violet as the kindred began their ascent. Like all the spires, Vigilans was girdled by a cobbled road that wound towards its summit, but the path soon narrowed, forcing the expedition to abandon the vehicles on the lower steppes.

Aziah left them in the care of his neophyte gunners, but he could spare no more to guard them. Other than the Silver Claw, the remaining eleven survivors were Second Paradigm acolytes armed with autoguns, scimitars and the blessings of their blood.

‘They will be enough,’ he whispered. ‘They must be.’

While his followers gathered supplies, Aziah went to his birth brother’s trailer and placed a hand on its hatch as he whispered his commands. When he was certain the Cicatrix understood, he opened the hatch and waited, but the divine aberration did not stir from the darkness.

‘Your time comes soon, my brother,’ he promised.

As Aziah joined the others Hezrakh lifted Etelka, cradling her limp form against its chest. Her condition was unchanged, but Aziah would not countenance leaving her behind. If the heretics attacked the vehicles he doubted the neophytes could repel them.

But they won’t attack. They will follow us.

He appraised the road ahead. Even during the short climb they’d made so far it had spawned several tributary tracks, which would doubtless branch in turn, serving scattered shrines or monuments. Like all the spires save the austere pillar of Humilitas, Vigilans was a labyrinth that could swallow an unwary traveller.

Aziah closed his eyes and pictured the path revealed by the Spiral Father.

The darkness was endless, but not quite changeless. As she crawled, Etelka Arkanto sensed a sonorous pounding, so faint it was more a vibration than a sound. Even distant, it was threatening, like the heartbeat of a slumbering leviathan. Whatever it was, she wanted no part of it. Blindly she swerved to her right.

‘Sacrifice is our only path through the maze of thorns,’ Canoness Aveline observed. ‘All others end in damnation. You understand this, sister. You always have.’

‘That isn’t true,’ Etelka hissed, knowing it was.

'Without sacrifice there can be no salvation,' Aveline decreed. 'You are incapable of believing otherwise. Even in blasphemy, you are Adeptus Sororitas.'

'The Spiral Dawn set me free!'

'You allowed its corruption into your body and soul. Why?'

Etelka cried out to the Spiral Father, but even the whisper of his will was long gone.

'Why did you betray us, sister?'

As its brother had decreed, the Cicatryx waited until the purple sun had crawled behind the mountain before leaving its cage. Shunning the road, it crept towards the rock face, moving with an eerie grace that defied its bulk. The thin-blooded kindred standing watch from the truck didn't even glance its way as it began to climb, scythe-over-claw-over-scythe...

When it reached the ridge above, the Cicatryx crouched low and ran its long tongue through the air. *Nothing*. Nor on the next... But as it hauled itself towards a third the smell of seared flesh wafted down from above. The Cicatryx froze, clinging to the sheer rock as a pack of outsiders passed by. They were moving quietly, but their stench was like a scream to the Cicatryx.

It had its prey. It would not fail its brother.

Crouched in her sanctum, the Teller froze as she felt the intruders enter her realm, creeping through the temple gates as if they could hide from her. Most were like the hooded beasts that had come before, their souls cold and entirely at peace. But their leader was different, his serenity riddled with fractures that threatened to break him.

As the strangers pressed on into the tunnels she realised there was *another* among them – a woman whose thoughts were shrouded in darkness. When the Teller tried to look beneath that mantle it rose to engulf her, soaring on the vibrations of its own savage pulse. She wrenched herself free, her heart thudding in time with that dread beat.

Black Ships! Have they come for me?

Sensing their mistress' distress, the lost ones clustered around her moaned and scuttled around the chamber, some even stumbling into the fire pits.

'Fear can be turned, friend,' someone said. *'You can make it your own.'*

The Teller's gaze swept over her subjects, but she found no strangers among them. Her sanctum was still inviolate. With a surge of will she cast her mind back to the edge of her domain. While her attention had been on the dark woman, other intruders had arrived at the temple gates – eight of them, *following*

the beasts. Seven were torches of eager, half-starved violence, but the eighth... Under his fire he was iceinfinitely colder than his quarry.

'Terror is the left hand of fury,' he said, his goggled eyes seeming to look right at her. *'It can be taken or it can be given.'*

Standing at the gates of the temple where he'd followed the degenerates, Gharth felt the witch's disembodied attention fall upon him, barbed with surprise and threat.

'Redemption is a lie, friend,' he told her, *'but you don't have to listen.'* He raised his hands, proffering his smoking palms. *'I can show—'*

There was a stentorian bellow behind him. Human instinct would have compelled most men to swing round, but whatever Gharth was, it wasn't remotely human anymore. He dived forward and the claw that should have decapitated him swept past overhead. Landing on his splayed hands, he vaulted aside as a massive three-toed foot stamped down where he'd been a heartbeat before. Then the Redeemed swarmed his attacker, shrieking with delight as they hurled themselves at it with blades and pistols.

The Spiralborn set a trap, Gharth judged, rising to his feet smoothly. *As we hunted, so we were hunted in turn.*

Unslinging his axe, he weighed up the beast that had climbed from the precipice opposite the temple. It was undoubtedly one of the xenos degenerates, but unlike any he had seen before. Despite its hunched posture the creature towered over his warriors, its chitin-sheathed bulk bloated with misshapen muscles. The ridged bulb of its skull framed a face that mocked humanity. Deep-set eyes leered above a gaping, fang-filled maw that spilled drool as the beast swung about with its three arms. The one on the right terminated in a three-fingered claw, while the pair on the left flared into curved scythes. And the giant was *fast*, slashing and punching in a frenzy that eclipsed the fury of the Redeemed. One of his warriors was already down and as Gharth watched, the beast's claw snagged another and yanked his head between its jaws. The man's legs flailed about as it chewed at his helmet.

'Watch and learn,' Gharth said to the invisible witch as he heard a footfall behind him. He swept his axe round in a wide arc, beheading the three-armed assassin that had crept from the temple. As he turned to face the gates more of the hooded xenos surged out, shrieking their poisonous mantras and spraying gunfire.

They waited inside to seal the trap, he realised as he strode to meet them,

ignoring the bullets that tore through his coveralls. His hardened skin blunted most of them, while the rest lodged impotently in his flesh or bones. There wasn't much left of him that could be hurt by such weapons.

I'll prise them out later.

Moving in uncanny silence, Gharth whirled his axe about, wielding it with his right hand while his left traced smoking symbols through the air. The weapon's obsidian head shattered the scimitars or claws that met it, then swept on to cleave through metal, chitin and flesh with equal potency.

'Fire, walk within me,' he rasped. His focus blurred as his vision soared to encompass a 360-degree arc, then snapped back into sharpness as the world around him fell behind his warp-fired metabolism.

As his enemies slowed to a crawl he reached out with his empty hand and brushed a foe's head.

'Burn,' he said.

The creature's hood ignited as his fingers raked molten runnels through its skull. In the same moment his axe hacked down, hewing through the skull and torso of another degenerate. The cauterized halves drifted gently apart, the divided eyes blinking in confusion.

'For the Spiral!' one of the xenos bellowed, its voice distorted and deepened. It was their two-armed leader – the one Gharth must not kill. His god had decreed it.

'We're all heretics here, friend,' he said, blocking the creature's sluggish swipe and hurling it away. To his surprise its bone blade hadn't broken against his axe.

That weapon is alive, Gharth sensed.

He heard a rising hum as a beast with a scorched face stepped from the temple, the muzzle of its rifle glowing as it trained on him. Smoke gushed languidly from its vents as it vomited a gob of plasma. The blast glided towards him like liquefied light – slowed, but still too fast to evade.

'Truth burns cold,' Gharth told the Teller a moment before a miniature sun kissed his chest.

'You're lying!' Etelka shouted into the darkness. 'I freed myself!'

The primordial pounding was almost deafening now. She swerved again, then again, crawling anywhere but here... or there... or wherever that devouring heart lay, but every movement only drew her deeper into its gravity. She tried to stop moving and found her limbs wouldn't obey.

'Each of us is the crucible of our own becoming,' Canoness Aveline said. She

spoke quietly, yet her voice cut through the cacophony. 'There is no escaping yourself.'

And in the final moments before she plunged into oblivion, Etelka Arkanto understood that was true – just as she understood that she hadn't turned from her sisters out of hope or hate.

'Why did you betray us, sister?' Aveline urged.

'Because I still could!' Etelka cursed, then shrieked as she fell and Redemption's shadow rushed to fill the void in her body, bearing not salvation, but damnation.

Impossibly, the Scorched Man was still standing. The plasma blast had seared through his chest and erupted from his back, leaving a smoking hole where most of his ribcage had been. Its edges still glowed, illuminating the intact spine within. To Aziah, that gnarled column looked like it had been carved from black crystal. Everything else, including the man's heart and lungs, had been incinerated, yet he stood unbowed, his axe held rigidly by his side.

How can he be alive? Aziah thought, stunned.

The heretic's goggled face turned toward him, ignoring the surviving acolytes and the victorious, blood-smeared Cicatryx.

'Betrayer,' the Scorched Man rasped, making it a promise. Then his gaze swept to the temple gates, where the Silver Claw stood, its plasma gun venting steam. Instinctively Aziah sensed he was looking *past* Hezrakh to the tunnel beyond.

'Embrace your truth, sister,' the heretic said to someone unseen. Suddenly crimson fracture-lines broke out across his black skin, spreading rapidly, like some tectonic pestilence of the flesh. With a crack, his charred spine splintered and his torso crumpled in upon itself. The axe slipped from his fingers and he toppled forward, exploding into dust when he hit the ground, as if he had been sculpted from ashes.

A harsh machine roar echoed up from the steppes far below, followed a moment later by the revving of an engine. Aziah froze, remembering the infernal bike the Scorched Man had ridden on the bridge. He could picture it circling the foothills like an iron predator, enraged by its master's fall. Was it madness to imagine such things?

'No, Chosen Claw, it is not,' the Spiral Father breathed into his mind. 'The insanity of the warp-tainted knows no surfeit.'

As if to punctuate the prophet's words there was a scream from the temple, raw with despair.

‘Saint!’ Aziah hissed. The kindred had left Etelka in the entrance tunnel, watched over by an acolyte. ‘Silver Claw, quickly!’

Hezrakh was stepping toward the gates when the shriek became a howl and an abomination erupted from the darkness. It hurled itself upon Hezrakh in a storm of barbed claws, tearing the warrior open before they hit the ground. The horror’s gangling, crimson-scaled form rippled and flickered, as if it burned with a ferocious internal fire and it moved in jagged bursts that defied the eye – slipping and skipping between moments as it savaged Hezrakh. Through the blur of motion, Aziah made out a long skull framed by curved horns that swept over a hunched, spine-studded back. It looked like a perversion of the sacred Paradigms of Form.

‘Daemon,’ Aziah whispered, remembering the saint’s warnings about the Dark Beneath the Spires. Redemption was riddled with gates for such warp-spawned vermin. The abomination’s head jerked up at his words, though its tongue remained buried in Hezrakh’s chest. Viscera slipped from its needle-rimmed maw as it regarded him with coal black eyes.

It knows me. Aziah moaned low in his throat as he noticed the scraps of armour snagged on the beast’s hide. They were a pearlescent white.

With a wail of fury, the daemon vaulted towards him, its reverse-jointed legs thrusting it into the air like a locust. As it rose, he glimpsed the metal shard still jutting from its abdomen. *Her abdomen.*

‘No!’ Aziah snarled, raising his sword. He was shoved aside as the Cicatryx barrelled past him with an answering roar. His brother’s bone scythes lashed out to meet the crimson blur, but the daemon jumped again in mid-air – seeming to dance between different worlds – and hurtled over the sweeping claws to land on the giant’s shoulders. The Cicatryx bellowed and stamped about as the warp fiend raked and gnawed at its head, clinging to its back with barbed feet.

‘Keep back!’ Aziah yelled at the surviving acolytes as one was struck by a whirling scythe-claw. He could almost taste his brother’s frustration – the Cicatryx’s rigid scythes couldn’t bend to strike its attacker, but its humanoid arm hung limply by its side, injured in the fight with the Redeemed. Yet under its frustration Aziah knew there was no fear, nor even true anger – *nothing* except the need to serve the Sacred Spiral. The Cicatryx was an aberration in form only.

I alone bear the saint’s flaw, Aziah realised bitterly. *Her taint.*

With a hideous cracking the daemon’s talons began to prise its victim’s skull apart.

‘Jump, brother!’ Aziah yelled. *It is the only way.*

Without hesitation, the Cicatryx swung round and charged for the precipice, but as it flung itself over, the daemon leapt, then leapt again, somehow finding purchase in the empty air. Its eyes fixed on Aziah as it swept back towards the ledge.

'You can, my son!' it seemed to promise, offering an everything that meant nothing.

'NO!' another mind thundered and Aziah reeled as a wave of hatred surged past him and thrust the tempter away. Snarling and lashing about, it hung suspended over the drop, held in an invisible, unbreakable grip.

Black Ships, Aziah thought suddenly. He had no idea what it meant.

The air crackled with energy as the abomination was hurled away, cast with a force that would carry it beyond the spire's steppes to the molten sea beyond.

'Can it burn?' Aziah wondered numbly.

'No,' the destroying presence said again, but its thunder was distant now. *'No. No. No...'*

'No,' Aziah echoed. Then he stalked to the edge of the precipice and roared his own denial after the daemon: *'No!'*

Shaking with anger, he turned and saw a woman standing behind him. She was naked save for the grime that encrusted her like a second skin, her form withered far beyond the point of natural starvation. Her limbs were like knobbly sticks and the sharp lines of her skull showed behind her face, giving it the aspect of a tormented corpse. For a moment he thought she was a crone, long past the age when she could fulfil the cult's most revered sacrament, but then he met her eyes – alight with rage and hope – and understood that he was wrong. She was not young, but neither was she old. Under her bone-deep mantle of deprivation she probably wasn't much past thirty. What suffering and terror had inflicted upon her, the ministrations of the Spiral Dawn would undo.

We shall restore you, Aziah thought reverently. *And in turn you shall make us whole.*

The Teller waited, watching the cold ones' leader as he watched her in turn. The cracks she had seen in his soul had deepened, yet he had somehow grown stronger – closer to the serenity of his thralls. Two of them had also survived the slaughter, but they meant nothing to her. Their harmony was like a chain – blood-borne and binding. It was worthless. But the leader was different. If he could find peace, then perhaps he could also offer it. If not, she would cast him after the dark one that had risen from the Underspire. The Black Ships would not

have her!

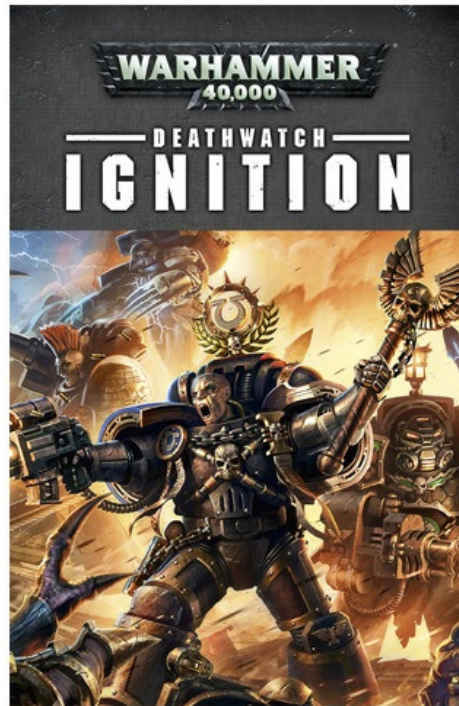
‘No...’ she croaked aloud.

‘No,’ the leader agreed, his fanged face sombre. ‘I will never betray my kindred.’ He stepped towards her slowly. ‘The Sacred Spiral connects us, warp-weaver. Nothing is chance. You are fated to bear our magus.’ He held out a three-fingered hand. ‘Join us, sister.’

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Peter Fehervari is the author of the novel *Fire Caste*, featuring the Astra Militarum and Tau Empire, the novella 'Fire and Ice' from the *Shas 'o* anthology, and the Tau-themed Quick Reads 'Out Caste' and 'A Sanctuary of Wyrms', the latter of which appeared in the anthology *Deathwatch: Xenos Hunters*. He also wrote the Space Marines Quick Reads 'Nightfall', which was in the *Heroes of the Space Marines* anthology, and 'The Crown of Thorns'. He lives and works in London.

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