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# TALISMAN OF VAUL

**Darius Hinks**

Kurdrak woke with a scream like a newborn, writhing in the dark, drenched in his own blood. He tried to rise but his legs collapsed beneath him. His neuroresponsive armour hardened into barbed plates, anticipating an attack, but none came. He lay there, slipping in the blood, cursing his indolence. How could he have let himself sleep? Here, in this den of savages. How could he be so stupid?

The pain increased and he thrashed around, trying to find his husk blade, or a knife - anything he could use to lash out - but there was nothing. Someone laughed, low and cruel, then the torment grew too great and he slipped back into unconsciousness.

When he came to, the pain was still there, but more manageable. It was coming from the side of his neck. He reached up to investigate, but as his fingers touched the wound, pain jolted down his side like a flash of electricity, curling him into a gasping ball.

Before he withdrew his fingers, they brushed against a hard surface, something jammed between the veins.

Something *in* his neck.

He managed to stand, repulsed and furious. What was it? He wanted to

touch it, to discern its shape, but his neck was still throbbing from his last attempt. He leaned against his bunk, dazed and febrile as he tried to trigger the overhead lights. Nothing happened. Something was wrong with his ship. He tried more controls, but there was no response. The *Talon* had been disabled. He called for his guards, but there was no reply.

He stared into the dark and his eyes gradually began to adjust to the gloom. The cabin looked like his treatment theatres back on Commorragh. Every surface was wet with blood, much of it his own. He could see where he had lurched around the room, clumsy with pain leaving bloody handprints on the walls. But even more of the spilled blood was that of his guards. They were heaped across the furniture in a variety of awkward positions. Throats slit. Eyes blank. Kurdrak cursed as he staggered through the doorway, shaking his head in disbelief. He had been betrayed. They were all dead. His whole crew. He could see them sprawled through the companion-ways and crumpled against the bulkheads. No, not all of them: there was one person missing.

'Xaloth,' he spat.

Even before they landed on Precipice he had suspected her of treachery, but he played along, acting the fool, waiting for a chance to learn who was paying her. As he stumbled through the dark, cursing himself for not killing Xaloth when he had the chance, Kurdrak saw a crimson light spilling over the carnage, bleeding into the *Talon*, coming from somewhere up ahead. Pain was still throbbing down his side from the object in his neck, but Kurdrak managed to stagger on until he saw the source of the light. The landing ramp was down. The light was the blood-glow of Precipice, flooding through the jumbled walkways and into his shuttle. He grabbed a splinter pistol from a weapons rack and walked out into the damp, clinging heat.

Crowds were thronging down the mooring spar, and some of them looked over as he staggered out into the glare, grimacing at the state of him. No one seemed keen to approach a blood-splattered drukhari. Most people hurried on through the forest of gantries and anchorage points, heading towards the trading hall known as the Dromeplatz, but one figure remained motionless, watching him from the far side of the mob, her face hidden in the folds of her hood, her relaxed posture betraying wry amusement.

'Xaloth,' hissed Kurdrak. He lurched down the ramp, raising the splinter

pistol as he waded into the crowd. 'You're losing your touch,' he gasped, though he knew she would not hear him over the din.

Whatever she had placed in his neck had not been enough to kill him. He might not have long left, but he would use whatever time he had to make her pay.

Crowd parted at the sight of his raised pistol and some people cried out in alarm, but Xaloth was already gone, sprinting off through the scrapyard of rusting superstructures. Looming over the whole scene was the magnificent relic that had drawn all these moronic treasure hunters. Not one of them understood what they had come to plunder *The Blackstone Fortress*. They even managed to reduce its magnificence with the crudity of their language. They looked upon the masterwork of a god and all they saw was a fortress made of black stone. He almost pitied them.

Kurdrak dragged his gaze from the Blackstone and ran after Xaloth, dodging past rusting fuel tanks and shattered turbines, trying to get a clear shot. Her nimble frame vaulted easily through the piles of salvage, slipping through the shadows with infuriating nonchalance.

Kurdrak loosed off a shot, but it went wide, puncturing the hull of an abandoned shuttle seconds after Xaloth had already leapt up onto a ventilation pipe and disappeared from view.

Kurdrak trailed ribbons of blood as he shoved through salvage teams and flight crews. A man bellowed as Kurdrak ran past him, trying to land a punch. Even wounded and dazed by pain, Kurdrak was too fast for the lumbering ape, not even bothering to acknowledge the man as he rushed after Xaloth. He jumped up onto the ventilation pipe and nearly fell off the other side. It was a sheer drop - hundreds of feet down to the void screen that encircled Precipice. As he teetered on the edge of the pipe, he saw the heat shimmer where the artificial atmosphere butted up against the vacuum of space. If he fell he would fry, burning in the currents, providing a brief, spectacular entertainment for the crowds in the Dromeplatz before tumbling out into the stars.

Pain jarred in his neck again, giving him focus, and he looked around. Xaloth had skirted round the outside of the Dromeplatz, jumping onto another mooring spar and sprinting towards the eastern edge of Precipice, the area known as Lagan. He raced after her, straining to draw a bead as she dodged through the jumble of shadows and lights thrown by the

Dromeplatz. He was desperate to touch his neck, to explore the object nestling beside his jugular, but another jolt of pain might send him to his death, so he resisted and ran on through the crimson fumes.

Xaloth paused at a crossroads and turned to face him, smiling.

He raised his pistol but she ducked beneath a piece of shattered plasteel and ran off down another walkway. As Kurdrak turned the corner he saw her disappear into the drinking den known as the Helmsman, pushing through teetering, makeshift doors into the rowdy darkness beyond. Kurdrak halted, muttering another curse. The Helmsman was a warren of staterooms and lounges, spurring off a huge central bar. It would be packed with hundreds of drunks. He shook his head and strode up to the doors, driven on by rage and pain.

He ducked as he entered, assailed by the insects that nested in the Helmsman's rafters. They snapped in his face like wet rags: big, meaty, moth-like things, thrashing violently as he swatted them away. He barged through the crush, glaring furiously, daring anyone to speak to him. The Helmsman was sparsely lit, so he was spared the full, repugnant horror of its occupants, but he saw enough to be distracted from the pain in his neck: fat, lumbering oafs, yelling, belching and boasting of their plans - fantasising of the riches they would claim once they raided the Blackstone Fortress. Most of them were gathered like supplicants around a shard of the fortress that had been placed at the centre of the room. Kurdrak felt a rush of fresh hate as he saw how they had torn down a piece of genius and jammed it into their ugly little starport. They had even pasted scraps of paper across its surface - obscuring its beauty with images of their own bulbous, leering faces.

He shook his head, trying to control his rage. He had avoided this place for days, knowing how hard he would find it not to start a fight. Then he saw Xaloth, framed briefly by a column of light as she slipped through the crowds. He shouldered his way through the drunks and saw that she was making for one of the private rooms that lined the main bar.

She paused outside a door, looking around to see if she had been followed. Kurdrak hid, ducking behind a particularly monstrous human until she pushed the door open and left the bar. Then he dashed through the shadows, gripping his splinter pistol tightly as he reached the door.

He pressed his ear to the buckled plasteel, listening to the voices on the

other side, but there was too much noise in the bar for him to hear anything. Some of the locals were staring at him. Even on Precipice he must have made an unusual sight: wraith-thin, clad in barbed, kabalite armour and spewing blood from whatever Xaloth had planted in his neck.

He checked his pistol, booted the door open and marched into the room.

'Zokar,' he gasped, stunned to see his brother's grinning face. The archon of the Dead Heart Kabal was meant to be in Commorragh, but here he was in a back room of the Helmsman, flanked by dozens of aides and guards, turning the stateroom into a barbed glade of ebon, razor-edged armour.

'Thank you for coming so promptly,' replied Zokar, adopting an expression of mock sincerity.

Kurdrak was too stunned to reply, lowering his pistol in shock. Xaloth was standing at Zokar's side and she handed something to the archon. It looked like a dull, unpolished gemstone, as black and impenetrable as the Blackstone Fortress.

'Bear with me, brother,' said Zokar as he pressed the stone into the breastplate of his armour. As it clicked into place, the plates rippled like liquid, swallowing the stone before forming back into a whole.

Kurdrak glared at him, counting the number of warriors in the room and wondering if he could kill his brother and tumble back out before they gunned him down.

Zokar shook his head. 'I realise I'm the last person you expected to see, but a word of advice, brother - ask me what's in your neck before you do anything else.'

Kurdrak's fury was so great that he almost pulled the trigger anyway.

'If I die, blood of my blood,' said Zokar, 'we'll face our reward together.' He tapped his chest armour, where it had absorbed the gemstone given to him by Xaloth. 'We are bonded. By more than blood.'

Kurdrak's finger still hovered over the trigger. 'What have you done?'

Zokar shrugged. 'Given you another chance. Another chance to prove your loyalty.'

'Loyalty?' laughed Kurdrak. 'You have no idea what the word means.'

Zokar continued smiling. 'And you do?'

Kurdrak scowled, then turned to Xaloth. 'I saved your life. Zokar would have killed you. And you repay me like this? By returning to the service of the man who tried to murder you?'

She laughed. 'I never *left* his service.'

'Did you think I wouldn't know you were up to something,' said Zokar. He held up a piece of skin, revealing the runes carved into it. 'Xaloth told me what you found before you left Commorragh.'

Kurdrak cursed at the sight of the skin. So this was what it was all about. Xaloth must have stolen it after killing his guards. 'You have no idea what that is,' he spat.

'Then tell me, brother. What have you found? What was so valuable that you would betray your archon, cross half the galaxy and come here, to this wretched place? What is so important about this map that you decided to keep it secret from me?'

Kurdrak said nothing.

The archon retained his relaxed, sardonic demeanour. 'I suspected you'd play this tiresome game. And this map is meaningless if I don't have you on hand to decipher your ugly scribbles. So...' he paused for dramatic effect, smiling cheerfully, 'Xaloth has placed a little love token in your neck - a neurotoxin charge.' He raised one of his hands and closed his gauntlet into a fist.

Pain snapped through Kurdrak, hitting him with such violence that he doubled over, gasping for breath. It radiated from his neck and flashed across his body, boiling in his veins like acid. Zokar smiled, closing his eyes, as though savouring a pleasant flavor. Then he opened his fist and let the pain cease, but it took a few seconds before Kurdrak could see the room clearly again. Zokar's smile faded.

'Let's dispense with the tedious negotiations. Do what I say, or I'll flood your heart with more pain than it can endure.' He waved the shred of skin. 'What does this lead to? Xaloth has told me a little, but I want details, brother.'

Kurdrak glared at him.

Zokar clenched his fist, tighter this time, and Kurdrak howled as he hit the floor, his head clanging on the deck plating. Zokar tortured him for nearly a minute this time, smiling kindly as Kurdrak thrashed and spluttered at his feet.

When Zokar finally released his grip, Kurdrak had to lie still for a while, gasping for breath until his vision cleared and his heart grew steady.

'Brother,' said Zokar. 'Learn to share. We're kin. Serve me well, and I

might not kill you.'

'And if I kill you?' slurred Kurdrak, managing to stand and point his gun at Zokar.

Zokar looked sympathetic. 'Unwise. The pain inducer is powered by the ebb and flow of my heart.' He tapped the point where his chest armour had absorbed the gemstone. 'If the glorious trajectory of my life is cut short, the charge will self destruct, spilling all of those delightful neurotoxins in one go. I'm afraid you wouldn't experience much pain - the dose would be far too powerful. You'd be dead before you had the chance to thank me, released into the loving caress of She Who Thirsts.'

Kurdrak finally lowered the pistol. For the moment at least, he was trapped. He had no doubt his brother's threat was sincere. He nodded.

'These oafs call it a Blackstone Fortress,' he said, 'but you and I know what it truly is. A piece of pre-history. A relic from before the Fall, wrought by the great weaponsmith himself. Vault's Talisman. A shard of his divinity, still hanging in the stars, still tangible and real.'

Zokar nodded eagerly, finally looking serious. 'And the map?'

Kurdrak hesitated, grimacing, before continuing. 'The Blackstone's power is unlike anything else in the galaxy because it is not of the galaxy - it's fuelled by the power of Vault. The power of a god. He placed a fragment of his soul in everything he made, and the piece he left in the Blackstone is still there - vast and omnipotent, a potent echo of his spirit.' He nodded to the scrap of skin. 'This map leads to a point of sacred conjunction - a holy fulcrum called the Blood Anvil, deep in the heart of the fortress. A place where a supplicant, if his heart is bold enough, could join his essence to Vault's.' Kurdrak tried to keep his voice steady, but failed. 'And once joined to Vault, that supplicant would be rid of death's spectre. His soul would be inured to the passing of time, preserved by the flame of the Great Smith.'

'We already have ways of prolonging our life,' said Zokar, leaning forwards in his chair, his eyes glinting.

'This is *true* immortality,' said Kurdrak. 'Freed from the grip of She who watches us from the other side of death.'

Zokar stared at him for a moment, a rapturous expression on his face, then he shook his head and sat back.

'So Xaloth was right.'

Kurdrak nodded.

After a while, Zokar smiled again. 'You're right, brother, no one here has an inkling of what's buried in the Blackstone, but *we* do.' He nodded at the implant in Kurdrak's neck. 'And you're going to lead me to it.'

The walls of the Blackstone loomed high, cold and brutal, hammered into impossible geometry on the anvil of a long-dead god. Kurdrak paused, admiring the remorseless grandeur: featureless planes and soaring vertices, all wrought of such a seamless black ore that it seemed to leech the starlight, turning the star fort into an abyssal wound, seething, quiet and ominous amongst its more flashy attendants. He could not study its magnificence for long. His mind was already crowded with the voices of the Blackstone - soundless, incoherent cries that radiated from every chasm and resonated in his skull, screaming a language with no words, ordering him to turn back.

He looked at the shred of skin in his hand, so pale it looked luminous in the darkness. The runes were rolling and shifting, as though the ink were still wet, creating shapes as baffling as the star ship they described. The human who originally inhabited the skin had been too deranged to explain his own nature. Kurdrak had employed every technique at his disposal, eliciting screams and howls for mercy, but nothing close to a logical reply. The man had been a sorcerer, that much had been clear, and his artistry had burned secrets into his skin. Most of it was indecipherable, but after months of secret, arduous research, Kurdrak had found meaning scored into one bleeding remnant. He preserved it, tracing runes of his own over the top, transcribing descriptions of routes and formulae that referred to the spirit of an ancient, divine being. It was only years later, when word reached Commoragh of a newly discovered Blackstone Fortress, that Kurdrak understood: his map led to a ghost – the ghost of a god.

They had docked their shuttle at the Stygian Aperture, the docking closest to Precipice. There were a few ships already hunched in the gloom, but they were as dark and lifeless as the Blackstone itself. Zokar was at his side and they were flanked by Xaloth and a cluster of kabalite warriors, their splinter rifles glinting in the shuttle's landing lights.

As Kurdrak headed off towards the chamber wall, he glanced at the scrap of skin, checking the runes and serpentine patterns. He reached the side of the chamber and looked up at its faceted clutter of hexagons and

rhombuses. Some of the planes contained openings - the entrances to the transportation chambers that were veined through the Blackstone.

'In here,' he said, waving the others through an entrance and hurrying over to the rune panels that lined one of the walls.

As the others rushed in after him, Kurdrak saw movement in the vast darkness. Something was circling, edging towards them. Zokar had seen it too. He nodded at the rune panels.

'Quickly, brother.'

Kurdrak ran his fingers over the runes and the chamber hummed into life. It was about twenty feet wide and twice as long, and it looked like a piece of volcanic glass - all shards and splinters. It reminded Kurdrak of the spires that crowned Commorrhagh, but its beauty was of a stranger kind. Where drukhari architecture was slender, cruel and deliberate, this was bafflingly complex - numberless angles and intersections forming a design impossible to comprehend. The runeboard closed the door with a cut-glass *clink* and the darkness became absolute.

Xaloth and the guards triggered lumens on their weapons, splashing light over the faceted walls and creating a confusing jumble of reflections. Kurdrak's face stared back at him from hundreds of mirrors, all revealing the gruesome nature of his neck implant. Most of it was sunk beneath his skin, but what little he could see looked like a black, barbed seed pod.

The chamber vibrated gently for ten minutes or so, then grew still and the noise faded away. Kurdrak touched another rune and the door opened, bathing them in silver light. Breath-catching cold flooded into the chamber, locking Kurdrak's face into a grimace as he waved his pistol at the kabalite warriors, ordering them to advance ahead of him.

When the warriors showed no sign of being attacked, Kurdrak, Xaloth and Zokar followed.

They emerged into what looked like a cabinet of enormous jewels - hundreds of clear, irregular prisms lay all around them, some as small as a man, others the size of void ships - vast, crooked, sheer-sided edifices scattered with no apparent logic. All of them were rimy and glittering, and Kurdrak's breath billowed around his head in sparkling clouds. There was a faint, cold light leaking from somewhere overhead and, after a moment's pause, Kurdrak nodded and strode on between the crystals.

They rushed through dozens of chambers that all looked the same, then

the architecture began to change, opening out into wide, terraced steps that spiralled around ink-dark wells. Kurdrak and the others paused to stare into one of them, but the darkness was impenetrable. The holes looked like black circles, painted across the floor. Only the warm, subterranean drafts that spilled from them hinted at the bottomless drop beneath.

Kurdrak circled the holes with care, slowing his pace as he struggled to make them out in the darkness.

Gunshots whined in the distance, reverberating across the towering walls, followed by a howling sound - dozens of creatures, crying out in pain or hunger.

Kurdrak halted, listening to the sounds of battle, and the others gathered around him, training their weapons on the shadows.

'How far?' demanded Zokar, his eyes flashing in the light from his neck armour.

Kurdrak did not register his question, still listening to the howling sound. It was coming closer, but the strange acoustics of the Blackstone made it hard to be sure of the direction.

Pain jammed through his neck and spread through his chest, dropping him to his knees.

When it ceased, he looked up to see Zokar, his fist clenched, smiling at him.

'How far?' repeated the archon.

Kurdrak looked at the scrap of skin again, peering at the runes. 'Not far,' he mumbled, struggling to speak. 'We'll have to be careful not to miss the entrance. It's well hidden.'

There was more gunfire and howls.

Zokar raised his hand in a cheerful threat.

Kurdrak limped on through the gloom, staring at the walls. The surface was a collision of asymmetrical shapes, all chiselled from the same dull, black ore. He ran his fingers over them as he hurried on, letting the cold radiate into his bones, listening for a voice that could ring out over the chorus in his skull. There was nothing.

He passed another one of the wells and climbed a fan of wide terraces, heading up into the higher levels, glancing at the map as he went. The steps swept up the wall and ended at another crooked, angular opening. The doorway was forty feet tall and shaped like two diamonds stacked on

their sides.

Kurdrak rushed on into the next hall without pause and found himself bathed in light. The hall was even larger than the preceding one and constructed in a similar fashion - spirals of wide, terrace-like steps that fanned out in every direction, some forming logical staircases, others turning in on themselves so awkwardly they would be impossible to use. As in the previous room, the ceiling was so high it was lost in the shadows, beyond a vague hint of apexes and vertices. There were some differences though. One entire side of the chamber was built of transparent crystal - a vast, faceted window looking out onto the stars. Precipice was visible on the other side - ugly and tangled, surrounded by its mantle of glittering junk. The bloodshot eye at its centre, the Dromeplatz, blazed so angrily that its light spilled through the window like a sunset, lighting up the whole chamber and revealing the second thing that made it different from the previous rooms.

At the centre of the hall, where the terraces spiralled down towards a rectangular pit, there was a vehicle - some kind of groundcar, with wide, heavy caterpillar tracks and a wedge of rusting plasteel mounted at the front. It must once have been a piece of construction equipment, but someone had strapped lascannons to its sides and clad it in armour plating. The weaponry had clearly not helped. The truck was lying on its side, flames rippling over its chassis.

Kurdrak and the others froze, aiming their guns at the wreckage. There were bodies leading away from it. Humans. Blubbery faced simpletons like the ones in the Helmsman. There was no question that they were dead. Whatever killed them had done a thorough job of tearing them into shreds, before eating most of their insides. The corpses were little more than heads and gore-slick skeletons. The sides of the groundcar were glistening with blood and in some places the sides had been ripped away, ravaged by claws powerful enough to tear through armour plating.

Howls echoed around the chamber, followed by more gunfire. Kurdrak guessed it was only in the next room.

Zokar was staring at him, but before he could trigger another burst of agony Kurdrak waved the rest of the group across the hall away from the crashed truck towards a cluster of openings in the floor on the far side of the room.

They had almost reached them when shapes burst into the room from another doorway. Three men scrambled over the lopsided floor, struggling to run back towards the overturned groundcar. They were shooting back over their shoulders as they ran, filling the air with las-fire, trying to halt whatever they were fleeing from.

Kurdrak and the rest of his party watched in silence, immobile.

One of the men howled as he caught sight of the drukhari. He was dressed in a bulky, padded jacket and his face was hidden behind an oxygen mask, but his panic was clear in the shredded croak of his voice. 'Help!' he cried, changing direction and running towards them.

Zokar sighed, raised his pistol and shot him in the head, sending him flapping back into the others and filling the air with blood. 'We don't have time for this,' he muttered, looking at Kurdrak. 'Where next?'

Kurdrak nodded at one of the lightless openings in the floor, but before they could move, the other men opened fire. Kurdrak ducked and returned fire, hitting a man in the chest and sending him sliding across the dark, glassy floor. The last one cried out as he reached the groundcar and saw the butchered corpses.

'Let me speed things up,' said Xaloth, drawing a serrated scimitar from her belt. The blade was oily with toxins and she smiled as she padded down the slopes towards him.

'Wait!' snapped Kurdrak, as more figures flooded into the hall, entering through the same doorway the men had come through.

Xaloth paused, lowering her sword in shock as the newcomers rushed towards her. They were vaguely humanoid, but clearly not human. They were huge, hulking animals, twice the size of a man and stooped like apes, with powerful arms that reached right down to their feet. Kurdrak had never seen their like before. They reminded him of enormous insects, with a thick, beetle-like carapace and massive serrated mandibles. Despite their awkward, hunched posture, they powered quickly across the room, racing towards Xaloth with a chorus of grinding howls.

She recovered from her shock and fired, but her splinters clattered uselessly against the monsters' thick shells. Zokar's kabalite warriors fired more splinters into the stampeding creatures, again to no effect. Zokar looked only vaguely interested as the creatures smashed into Xaloth, enveloping her in an explosion of blood and bone, tearing her apart in a

crazed feeding frenzy.

'Stall them,' he said, glancing at his guards and waving languidly at the slaughter.

The kabalite warriors rushed down the slope, firing as they went and drawing toxic blades. If they feared death, they showed no sign of it.

'Time's up,' said Zokar, turning to Kurdrak, sounding irritated rather than alarmed.

Kurdrak nodded, checked his map one last time and bolted towards one of the circular openings in the floor, from most angles, it looked like a bottomless drop, just like all the others, but when he placed his foot exactly where the runes suggested, its secret was revealed: a narrow staircase, spiralling down into the darkness.

As Kurdrak's armoured boot clicked down onto the step Zokar grinned, delighted, and shoved his brother aside, hurrying down the stairs.

Kurdrak took one last look at the fight by the groundcar. Most of the kabalites were already dead, torn apart by monsters in seconds. Their brutality was impressive. Zokar was already disappearing down into the darkness, so he left the creatures to their feast and hurried after his brother. The light from Precipice only reached down the first few steps and they were quickly plunged into darkness. The only light was the faint glow leaking between the spined plates of their armour.

'Wait!' Kurdrak hissed, grabbing Zokar by the shoulder. 'There are dozens of staircases.' He triggered the lumen on his splinter pistol and stabbed it through the darkness, revealing a bewildering mesh of intertwined staircases. They were woven together like the fibres of a cloth, twisting and flowing into each other, creating hundreds of intersections.

Zokar halted. 'Which one?'

Kurdrak studied the map again, looked around, then nodded at one of the staircases.

'That one. Ignore every split - just keep on that staircase.'

The temperature dropped as they descended and the steps quickly became treacherous, so coated in ice that they had to slow down to a careful crawl as they plumbed ever deeper into the fortress. Kurdrak lost track of time as the staircase wound endlessly on into the blackness. The air grew thick and heavy and he found it hard to move. It was like wading through oily liquid. Zokar asked him something glancing back with an annoyed scowl, but the

words were too muffled to make sense. It was like Zokar was talking to him through a wall. Zokar looked even more irritated and repeated the question, but the sound was even more deadened.

Kurdrak shook his head and waved his brother on, flashing his light down the steps.

Zokar hesitated, obviously considering whether to trigger the implant again, but then he said something else incoherent and continued down the stairs.

Kurdrak began to wonder if the map might be a lie. He had spent months researching the route he cut from sorcerer's corpse, but could he have made a mistake? Could this all be a trick? He was about to call a halt so he could re-examine shred of a skin when Zokar looked back at him, his eyes wide with excitement.

Kurdrak looked past him and saw the reason. There was a faint glow coming from somewhere beneath them – flashes of emerald and sapphire, dozens of colours in fact, all flickering up the steps towards them.

The brothers struggled through the leaden air, moving as fast as they could manage, but it still took what seemed like an age before they saw the bottom of the staircase. As they reached the final few steps the air suddenly cleared and they stumbled forwards.

'It's gone,' said Zokar, looking at Kurdrak. 'The oppressive atmosphere.'

Kurdrak nodded. Zokar's voice was clear and natural. The cold was more extreme than ever though. They were surrounded by clouds of their own breath as they left the final steps and saw what lay at the bottom.

The room was unlike any they had passed through so far. Where the rest of the Blackstone was wrought of hard angles and bleak, colourless planes, this looked like a natural grotto: ragged, rough-hewn stone rose up over their heads in a dome, reflecting millions of ripples from a curtain of falling water at its centre - a subterranean waterfall, filling the cave with icy mist and a rattling, thundering roar.

The brothers stared. The water was ablaze with colour - turquoise and amethyst, crimson and gold - shimmering across the liquid like a magnetic storm. They stepped closer, too awed to speak. There were shapes rolling in the liquid: faces, staring back at them, their gazes heavy with wisdom.

'Is this it?' demanded Zokar, edging closer, glancing back at Kurdrak. 'It must be. Is this the Blood Anvil?'

Kurdrak nodded. After all these years, he could barely believe he had reached it; barely believe it was real.

'What do I do?' cried Zokar. 'How do I join my soul with Vaul? How do I tap into his power?'

'Are you sure you're ready for this?' asked Kurdrak.

Pain exploded through him, more violent than ever before. It was brief, but when he opened his eyes he was lying on the floor, blood rushing from his ears and bubbling through his throat.

'Tell me what to do,' snarled Zokar.

Kurdrak's eyes were full of blood and his limbs were shaking violently, but he managed a choked reply. 'Step into the liquid. Your spirits will join.'

Zokar strode into the wall of colour.

Kurdrak sat up and wiped the blood from his eyes, watching as Zokar turned around in the liquid, his face a vision of rapture as he beamed out through the silvery torrent. Zokar tried to speak, to cry out in delight, but liquid had already filled his mouth, lining his features like a second skin, and no sound emerged.

Zokar's smile faltered.

He tried to step back towards Kurdrak but he was unable to move, trapped like an insect in amber, or a foetus in its gestational sac. His eyes burned as he stared at Kurdrak, but his face remained frozen, still wearing the same faltering smile. He tried to close his fist, to flood Kurdrak with pain, but his fingers were frozen in place.

Kurdrak climbed slowly to his feet, still shaking, wiping more blood from his face.

'I learned the truth before I even landed on Precipice,' he said, his voice hoarse. 'But after risking so much to get through that wretched debris cloud I thought I may as well land anyway.'

Horror dawned in his brother's fixed stare.

'It was a simple mistake,' explained Kurdrak, looking at the scrap of skin. 'A lack of scholarly rigour, you would probably say. I *almost* translated the runes correctly.' He waved at the rainbow-infused torrent. 'This *is* the Blood Anvil. Your spirit *has* been bonded to Vaul's ghost. But the power goes the other way, you see. The Blood Anvil doesn't share the power of Vaul's Talisman, it *feeds* it.' He stepped closer, fascinated, his eyes almost touching the surface of the liquid, just a fraction of an inch from Zokar's.

'Excuse the deceit, brother, but I knew you would never let me go. And you made it all to clear what would happen if I killed you, so this was my only option. I haven't entirely misled you, though. You have achieved a kind of immortality. The Blood Anvil will preserve your flesh for as long as the Blackstone Fortress endures, which has been millennia, so far.'

He limped back to the bottom of the stairs, giving his brother a final, sympathetic smile.

'Whether it will preserve your mind is another matter.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Darius Hinks'** first novel, *Warrior Priest*, won the David Gemmell Morningstar Award for best newcomer. Since then he has ventured into the Warhammer 40,000 universe with the novels *Mephiston: Blood of Sanguinius*, *Mephiston: Revenant Crusade* and the Space Marine Battles novella *Sanctus*, and has carved a bloody swathe through the Warhammer world with *Island of Blood*, *Sigvald*, *Razumov's Tomb* and the Orion trilogy.

An extract from *Blackstone Fortress*.



How they would have wept to hear him. All those years of brutal tutelage, so many prayers meted out with an unsparing stick, and not one of their aphorisms had stayed with him – all that cant wiped away by the savagery of the war. Only one simple phrase, whispered to the rhythm of his breath, had kept him alive. *Through the needle's eye*. He could see it in his mind – a sliver of sanity, surrounded by a galaxy of madness. *I live or die*.

In place of a sky, it seemed Sepus Prime wore a dirty, sodden cloth, stained the same feculent shade of dun as the mud below. It sagged low over the fly-clad marshes, bleeding a desolate rain, crushing the mounds of dead and billowing around a shame-faced sun. Glutt waded through the filth, a slight man weighed down by a heavy coat. His face was a mask of dark, viscous mud, and his mouth was hidden by a rebreather. Only his eyes were visible – flashes of white beneath a peaked cap, scouring the trench for the shot that would finally kill him.

‘Through the needle’s eye,’ he whispered, risking a glimpse into no-man’s-land, using his staff to haul himself over a broken trench wall.

Fumes lay heavy on the swamp, crawling lazily over shattered gun emplacements and crook-backed trees. Even through his rebreather Glutt could smell the chemical stink of enemy weapons. How many of the regiment were still alive out there? Betrayed. Clawing at their throats, calling for loved ones, begging for the help they were promised. The reinforcements that never came. They *never came*. They had all been fools, but he would be a fool no more. Anger fractured Glutt’s thoughts, dangerous and raw. He recited his mantra with vehemence, clinging to his mind, weighing it down with words.

He pulled out a map and wiped it clean, tracing a finger over the

gridlines, counting the miles. He was close. Another few hours and he would see the barracks. He had no desire to rejoin the regiment now, after all that he had seen, but where else could he go? He had no vox and he dared not risk any other method of communication, and this side of the valley seemed to have been forgotten. The earth shivered beneath a mortar shell rain, but it was a distant sound, like the echo of a storm.

An image flashed through his mind, so vivid he gasped – pale, ruptured flesh tearing over a clinker-black shell. He drove the vision down but it coiled beneath his thoughts, waiting for his guard to slip. He had seen it countless times over the last few months. It was horrific, but part of him was also fascinated. It was so clear. What did it mean?

He was about to drop back down into the trench when he saw movement in the smoke – half a mile away, near a bombed-out gun emplacement. He grabbed his laspistol and peered through the scope.

‘Sorov?’ he whispered, catching a glimpse of red sash.

There was another blur of movement, then nothing. Only the lolling, yellow fumes and the sporadic grumble of mortars. He had not seen a soul for two days. Perhaps he imagined the shapes? Then he heard a faint crackling – not the rattle of gunfire, but the white noise of a vox-unit. It came from the gun emplacement.

He dropped into the bunker, his breath coming in snatched bursts. Insurrectionists were everywhere. Snipers haunted every gully, masquerading as corpses, lying patiently beneath cold limbs, waiting for some fool to break cover. Again he heard the crackle of vox traffic, muted by the fumes but unmistakable.

He peered up over the scorched embrasure, looking through the gunsight again, trying to guess where a sniper might hide. There was a rusted tank chassis, halfway to the gun emplacement, jutting from the mud like an unearthed fossil: a Leman Russ, one of its sponsons still visible, pointing defiantly at the leaden clouds. Just the kind of place a sniper might wait. He looked in the other direction. There was a trench, parallel with his, about a hundred feet away. It had caved in, sporting a crest of broken joists and blast-warped girders. Again, exactly the kind of place snipers might hide. There were cadavers in the razorwire, swaying in the breeze like abandoned marionettes. It looked as though they had been thrown clear of the trench by an air strike, but he had seen traitors adopt that pose, then

lurch into movement at the first sign of a target.

‘Lieutenant Sorov?’ he whispered. Could he still be alive? And if he was, why would he be here? The push on the civitate had started. Sorov always led from the front. Why would he be back here, so far from the front line? The thought that the lieutenant might still be alive shook Glutt’s resolve. Sorov had stood by the men. He alone in all the regiment seemed worthy of trust.

Glutt hunkered in the trench, crippled by indecision. The image of torn flesh washed through his thoughts again, but he crushed it with his mantra, determined to think clearly. What if it was Sorov out there? Could there still be another route for him, even now?

Glutt bolted up the trench wall and ran through the smoke, head down, flicking his pistol from the tank to the corpses. His footfalls rang out through the smog. *Slap. Slap. Slap.* Flies whirled around him, drawn by his blood-black coat. Sweat pooled in his eyes. He tried to sprint, but his legs were wasted from lack of food and the mud gripped his heavy boots, leaching what little strength he had left.

Minutes passed until finally the gun emplacement reared up before him, brutal and angular, a slab of pitted rockcrete shattered by artillery. One side was intact, but the other was gone, leaving the surreal sight of a furnished room, split down the middle and hanging in the air. The furniture was undisturbed: a neatly made bunk, metal plan chests, a small dining table; all perched in the clouds, washed clean by the endless rain.

Glutt had almost reached the walls when he heard someone snap the safety off a lasgun.

He staggered to a halt, his heart thudding as he tried to pinpoint the sound.

‘The savant?’ The words were spoken quietly, but they echoed across the swamp, eerie and dislocated.

‘Lieutenant Sorov?’ gasped Glutt, still crouched, staring at the shifting clouds.

‘Throne,’ said Sorov, striding into view, flanked by Guardsmen, their lasguns trained on Glutt.

‘In,’ he snapped, waving for Glutt to approach.

Glutt staggered forwards, into the arms of the Guardsmen, who grabbed his filthy coat and hurled him inside the ruined tower.

As Glutt lay panting on the floor, Sorov and the others stood over him, scowling.

Sepus Prime could not touch Lieutenant Sorov. He shrugged it off like an idle threat. He was one of those officers with the inhuman ability to look clean, fresh and unperturbed as the galaxy went to hell around them. His hair was immaculate, oiled and gleaming beneath his cap, and the buttons on his coat flashed proudly as he moved. An old scar curved from the corner of his mouth to his ear, but even that looked deliberate – just another military honour. He studied Glutt through half-lidded eyes.

‘Where is the rest of your detail?’

‘We never made it to the front lines, lieutenant. The insurrectionists were on us before we reached Tadmor Ridge. I was able to—’ He hesitated, noting the wary expressions of the Guardsmen. ‘I was able to *disable* some of them, but there were too many.’

‘You’re a psyker?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You abandoned your men?’

‘No.’

‘They’re dead,’ said Sorov, his expression blank, ‘and you are not.’

‘I did everything I could, lieutenant.’

Sorov studied him in silence. No one helped him to his feet.

The silence was broken by the crackle of the vox-unit. There was another trooper crouched a few feet away – a comms officer, hunched over his vox-caster.

‘Ten minutes until contact,’ said the Guardsman, with the handset held to his ear. There was a tremor of excitement in his voice. ‘Everything went to plan.’

Sorov closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again he looked back at Glutt. ‘Tell me, Glutt,’ he said. ‘If you were a traitor, why would you have stumbled over here and revealed yourself, rather than using your talents to kill me from a safe distance?’

Glutt struggled to keep his expression neutral. *Traitor*. Sorov had pinpointed the doubts that had haunted him for weeks. All he saw on Sepus were pitiable fools and callous, inhuman orders. His faith was gone. What did that leave?

‘There is no reason,’ said Sorov. His expression softened. ‘You’ve done

well to last this long, soldier. Not many have.’ He nodded to his men. ‘Pick him up. And keep an eye on him. He’s a sanctioned psyker. Don’t let him ruin this.’

As the Guardsmen dragged Glutt from the mud, Sorov headed over to the comms officer.

‘Korbol,’ he said, glancing up at the shattered floor of the room above their heads. ‘Anything?’

‘Nothing, lieutenant.’

Sorov nodded, and then glanced back at Glutt. ‘Over here.’

Glutt tried to brush some of the muck from his coat as he rushed after Sorov, but it had dried into a thick crust. He moved with the clumsy, awkward steps of an automaton.

‘Get me Kapek,’ said Sorov to the vox-officer.

There was another burst of static, then a voice came through the speakers, ghostly and hazed by distance, like an old recording.

*‘This is Sergeant Kapek. We have—’* The voice was cut off by a series of pops and whistles. *‘We are no closer, lieutenant. Heavier losses than anticipated. The aerial strikes failed to knock out the lascannons. They’re cutting us down.’*

Sorov grabbed the handset. ‘Ten minutes, sergeant.’ His voice was an urgent whisper. ‘Ten minutes more.’

There was a pause on the other end, but it was not static this time; they could all hear the sergeant breathing. *‘Ten minutes?’* he said finally, sounding shocked.

Sorov raised his voice, despite the risk of revealing himself. ‘Throw everything you have left at them for ten more minutes. It’s working. He’s headed your way.’

This time there was no pause. *‘Ten minutes, lieutenant. We’ll do it.’*

Sorov looked pained and seemed on the verge of saying more, but he held it back.

*‘Lieutenant,’* came the voice again. *‘Are you still there?’*

‘Sergeant.’

The voice sounded defiant this time, all trace of doubt gone. *‘It was an honour, lieutenant.’*

Sorov’s expression tightened. When he spoke again, his voice was as rigid as his face. ‘High command will know, sergeant. Commander Ortegal

will know what happened here today.’

Another series of pops and crackles hissed through the speaker.

‘*Kapek out,*’ came the reply, then the line went dead.

Sorov stared at the handset for a moment. Then he took a deep breath and handed it back to the comms officer, turning to face the other men. ‘I give them five minutes, but it will suffice. By the time the insurrectionists wipe them out we’ll have hit our target.’ Sorov looked at the comms officer. ‘Federak. These are the *exact* coordinates?’

Federak was wiry and short, with the slabby, knocked-about face of a prize fighter. ‘This is the right emplacement, lieutenant,’ he said. ‘If Gorny got his maths right, the shuttle will pass right overhead.’

‘Good.’ Sorov looked around the group. One of the Guardsmen was carrying a rocket launcher over his shoulder. ‘If you get even one clear shot, you’ll be lucky.’

The trooper nodded. ‘Sir.’

Sorov stared at him. ‘We’ve thrown everything into this. There are a few hundred men left at the barracks, but you saw the state of them. There will be no more chances. This is it.’

The man saluted. ‘One shot will be enough, sir.’

Sorov nodded, then waved at the damaged upper floor of the tower. ‘Into position.’

He glared at the rest of the troopers. ‘Am I so pretty you can’t take your eyes off me? Watch the damned trenches. Keep yourselves alive for a few minutes and you might even get off this rancid planet.’ He caught sight of Glutt. ‘You keep out of the way.’ He leant closer, tapping the eagle-shaped head of Glutt’s staff. ‘I’m no fan of witches, sanctioned or not. Throne preserve you if I catch you trying any parlour tricks.’

Glutt saluted.

Sorov nodded to the pistol at Glutt’s belt. ‘You know how to use that thing. Join the others and watch the bunkers.’

Glutt saluted and rushed to stand beside the comms officer.

‘What are you doing out here?’ he whispered, once Sorov had climbed up into the room overhead to join the trooper with the rocket launcher.

Federak gave him a suspicious look. Glutt felt like proving his suspicions right, showing him what a psyker could *really* do, but he thought of the needle, biding his time. He had no clear plan. He no longer believed in the

regiment, but what did he believe in?

‘The governor’s going to pass over this way,’ muttered Federak, waving his gun at the clouds. ‘He thinks he’s won. He’s racing to Tadmor Ridge to deal with Sergeant Kapek and the rest of those poor sods. Sorov got a man into his inner circle. The pilot. We know the exact route he’s taking. He’s going to pass over this spot in a few minutes.’

Glutt could not believe the lies people told themselves to try to stay sane. ‘You’re going take down the governor? What difference will that make? They’ll still massacre the rest of the regiment. The insurrectionists will still control the whole coastline. We’ve still lost.’

Federak forgot his wariness of Glutt for a moment and laughed. ‘Not destined for high command are you? Think. Before Governor Narbo took control of the insurrectionists, what were they doing?’

Glutt bit down his rage and shrugged.

‘Killing each other,’ Federak elaborated. ‘Always killing each other. Why do you think they used to be so easy to control? They all think *they* should be in charge. None of them will follow the others. It’s only because Governor Narbo executes his opponents that they’ve become an army. There *was* no insurrection until Narbo lost his mind and pulled them all under one banner.’ He nodded at the trooper with the rocket launcher. ‘We’re about to remove the glue that holds them all together.’

‘But we’ll have nothing left either.’

Federak shrugged. ‘Once Narbo dies, the insurrectionists will turn on each other. They’ll become a mess of squabbling warbands and high command will send us home with a chest-full of medals.’

‘Sorov knew this would happen,’ muttered Glutt. He looked up at the lieutenant. Maybe there *was* still a man worth following? Maybe he was making a mistake? No. One true man in a legion of liars was not enough.

‘Of course,’ said Federak. ‘I don’t know what Governor Narbo was smoking when he decided to join with the insurrectionists, but he should have known Sorov would never let him get away with it. The man has balls of steel.’

Glutt was about to reply when Federak frowned and looked up.

‘Hear that?’ he muttered.

There was a low, shuddering rumble drifting through the clouds – the unmistakable drone of promethium engines. Overhead, the lieutenant and

the trooper with the rocket launcher shifted their position.

Everyone in the tower held their breath.

The sound grew louder as a dark smudge appeared in the mustard-yellow clouds. The lieutenant whispered something and the trooper raised his rocket launcher. The shuttle thundered right overhead – so low Glutt could see its markings.

A deafening blast rocked the tower and the sky turned white.

Glutt ducked, shielding his eyes.

Smoke enveloped the gun emplacement.

‘Down!’ cried Sorov. ‘She’s down!’

Glutt raced through the fumes and staggered out into the mud. The others were ahead of him, danger forgotten as they ran towards the downed shuttle lying just a few hundred feet away, engulfed in flames. It was on its back, but the wings were still visible. It was an Aquila lander – the governor’s personal shuttle.

‘Quick!’ barked Lieutenant Sorov, dashing through the mud and waving for his troops to approach in two different directions. ‘Make sure.’

Glutt ran after them, struggling through the mire, unable to keep pace. The excitement of the others was infectious. It threatened to overwhelm him. ‘Through the needle’s eye,’ he whispered.

Lieutenant Sorov was the first to reach the lander, halting a few feet from the blaze, his laspistol held out before him.

‘Governor!’ he cried, dodging from side to side as the ruptured fuselage spat flames at him. ‘Are you in there?’

Part of the engine cowling collapsed, adding a fresh gout of flames to the blaze.

‘Lieutenant!’ gasped Federak. ‘It’s not safe!’

Sorov ignored him, squinting through the flames, edging closer, waving his pistol at every movement.

‘There!’ he cried.

A hunched shape dragged itself through the inferno.

The Guardsmen opened fire, launching a blinding barrage of las-shots at the struggling figure. The shape shuddered and fell. Then, as the shots died away, it lurched to its feet and charged, flames trailing from its misshapen head.

Most of the Guardsmen fired again, but Glutt’s pistol faltered in his grip.

The needle's eye suddenly grew in his mind, expanding and reforming, letting madness flow around it. Sparks flashed – arcing from his brain, splintering his vision, turning the world into a kaleidoscope. He stumbled, teetering, engulfed by colour.

As the flaming figure dived at the Guardsmen, Glutt staggered back through the mud, his staff rattling in his grip, infused with the energy that was lashing from his face. The others were too busy to notice Glutt's crisis. The burning figure stumbled through their shots and grabbed a Guardsman by the throat.

Reality slipped from Glutt's grasp. His peripheral vision vanished, leaving just the tunnel of garish light, centred on the thing that had emerged from the shuttle. It must have once been the governor. Most of his uniform was burned away, but there were enough scraps left to reveal that he was a high-ranking officer. Whatever he once was, Governor Narbo was now a nightmare. Glutt realised to his horror that *this* was the vision he had been struggling to hold back for days. Beneath his charred uniform the governor's flesh had ruptured and split but, rather than blood and viscera, there was a black carapace, bristling with spines, pulsing as it strained against its human cage.

As skin sloughed from the black shell, the thing snapped the Guardsman's neck and hurled him to the ground. Glutt howled and light spewed from his throat, ripping through the smoke. The force of the blast kicked him off his feet and he landed in the mud. The governor's head was lolling weakly from the creature's back, sagging like an empty hood, but another face had appeared in its chest where the skin had fallen away – a pool of black skin, rolling and bubbling around a canine snout.

The Guardsmen were still firing at the creature, but to no effect. The shots thudded into its stooped frame but it paid them no heed, lurching on, filling the air with blood.

'Warp spawn,' muttered Glutt, staggering back towards them, his voice flat. 'You can't kill it.'

The thing discarded its kill and lunged forwards, enveloping another man. The soldier howled briefly, before his cries were smothered.

Three Guardsmen had died in as many minutes. Two were left, plus Sorov and Glutt.

The final scraps of Governor Narbo fell away to reveal a coiled,

serpentine hulk. It was impossible to make out clearly in the smoke, but Glutt caught glimpses: an insectoid face, twitching as it swallowed gore; a cyclopean eye – featureless and yellow, like an egg yolk, bubbling in tar. It toppled forwards, dragging another Guardsman down into the mud, tearing him apart.

Sorov and Federak fired furiously and the lieutenant cried out in disgusted rage.

Over the last few months, Sepus had gradually fractured Glutt's mind. The last time he had tried to use his gifts they had almost overwhelmed him. He had sworn not to try again until his mind was more stable, but now he saw no option.

Glutt closed his eyes, pictured the needle and stepped through its eye.

The immaterium rocked through him, exploding his atoms, whipping his flesh into an empyric storm. Now, finally, he heard the words of his masters from the scholastica psykana. Oaths of protection tumbled from his lips; psychic bulwarks, beaten into him as a child, reared from his subconscious like a suddenly remembered song. It was too late. Warp fire pulsed from his heart and flooded his blood vessels, igniting his flesh as he wrenched himself back into reality.

The scene was unchanged – the serpent-thing was still wading towards Sorov and Federak, guts draped from its jaws.

Glutt raised his staff and howled, opening his mind to the full violence of the warp. It ripped through him, rattling his bones, blistering his skin, sparking from his staff. The warp creature reared, but it was too late – Glutt's bolt had already hit home.

Spider legs burst from the creature's sides – dozens of them, scrambling frantically, trying to lift its sagging bulk – but as Glutt abandoned himself to the immaterium, his staff hurled ever-greater torrents of warp-fire into the struggling horror. Sorov and Federak backed away, guns lowered in shock.

The world fell into shadow leaving only the column of light, blazing from Glutt's staff.

Glutt's mind linked with the sentience that had mutated Narbo. To his surprise, he felt neither hate nor violence, but something else. For a brief moment, he saw the galaxy from an utterly alien perspective. He tasted ideas that would never have occurred to him: freedom, acceptance,

liberation.

Then it was gone.

Unreality collapsed and reality returned. Glutt stood, swaying before the shocked faces of Sorov and Federak, then dropped to his knees in a pool of oil, surrounded by scraps of the governor.

Glutt was changed. He could feel it. There was a new layer of skin beneath his old one, simmering, ready to explode. What a fool he'd been. Holding back for so long.

'Emperor be praised,' whispered Sorov. 'You killed it.' He held out a trembling hand and helped Glutt to his feet.

They all looked at the remnants of the governor.

Glutt shook his head, his voice husky. 'It was never alive.'

Sorov stared at the pool, pale with shock. 'The governor's heresy ran deep.'

'Something found a way into the world through his flesh,' said Glutt.

Sorov frowned at Glutt, confused. 'What? What was it?' Then he shook his head and recovered his composure. 'We can talk later.'

Glutt sensed that Sorov did not really want his question answered.

The lieutenant seemed unable to think for a moment, staring at the charred remains and muttering under his breath, then he turned to the vox-officer, Federak. 'Share our news with the insurrectionists. They need a new leader. Set the dogs on each other.'

Federak looked even more dazed than Sorov, but he nodded and triggered the vox-caster, stuttering as he announced the governor's death across every channel.

By the time they made it back to the trench, the vox network was a cacophony of voices, all desperate to know if the news was truth or propaganda. The clamour grew as the governor's aides revealed that he should have reached Tadmor Ridge by now.

Sorov did not pause to celebrate his success. He waded through the stagnant pools that lined the trench, muttering calculations under his breath. For ten minutes he said nothing to Glutt or Federak, lost in his own thoughts. Finally, as the pallid sun neared the horizon, he paused and turned to Federak.

'Get me the barracks,' he said. 'Sergeant Baranov.'

The vox-caster whined and screeched as Federak struggled to find the

right frequency, then a voice crackled over the speakers.

*'Lieutenant. Sergeant Baranov here, sir.'* The voice sounded flat and beaten.

*'The governor's dead.'*

*'Yes, lieutenant. We heard.'*

'He's dead, man,' said Sorov, confused at the sergeant's apparent lack of enthusiasm. 'Do you know what that means?'

There was a pause at the other end. *'We intercepted a message from Commander Ortegal,'* said the sergeant eventually. *'We know about the orbital strike.'*

*'Orbital strike?'*

There was another pause.

The colour drained from Sorov's face. 'Tell me, sergeant. Quickly.'

*'Sepus Prime has been reclassified, sir. Designated unsafe for human habitation. Contaminated. There's a plague. Mutations. Linked to the heresy of the insurrectionists. I couldn't understand all of the terms. They do not intend to...'* The man paused to clear his throat. *'They mean to leave us here, sir.'*

*'Even when they start the bombardment?'*

*'We fall under the same designation, sir. Contaminated. The fleet is preparing virus bombs.'*

Sorov leant against the trench wall, staring at the handset.

The crackle of gunfire rang out across the network.

Sorov looked up at the clouds, as though he might see the cruisers overhead, readying their loads.

Federak took the handset. 'Is that las-fire? Are you under attack?'

*'Suicides.'*

Until that moment, Glutt had been in a kind of dazed trance, revelling in the new power jangling across his skin, wondering at the change he was experiencing. But at the sight of Sorov, winded by shock, staring at the sky, Glutt's transformation took a new turn. Anger kindled in his palms. He tried to stay in the present, grabbing the lieutenant by the arm. 'We have to get to the barracks, sir. This can't be true. Sergeant Baranov must be confused. Commander Ortegal wouldn't abandon the whole regiment when we have just handed him a victory. He wouldn't bomb his own men.'

Sorov stared back at him. 'Governor Narbo was a heretic. You saw him,

Glutt. He was clearly infected by this “plague”. And high command must have already known about it. They must have already been planning this reclassification.’ Something flickered in his eyes. ‘But they never told us.’

Glutt battled the black despair that was rising at the back of his thoughts. ‘One traitor. They can’t condemn us all for that. They can’t condemn the whole planet.’

The trench shook so violently that it seemed as though someone had lifted it and slammed it back down again. Beams and girders tore from the walls, and earth slammed into the three Guardsmen, causing them to stagger and cough. The dusk deepened, smothering the trench in gloom. Aftershocks juddered through the mud.

‘They’ve started,’ whispered Federak, his voice brittle.

Sorov nodded vaguely, but he had recovered his composure. He dusted down his coat and raised his chin, looking off towards the horizon.

‘No,’ said Glutt as a storm whipped up in his eyes. The needle’s eye was gone. The needle was gone. There was nothing left but madness. It blazed through him. The new flesh forming beneath his muscles burned, furious and unbreakable.

The booms grew louder. Splashes of silver flicked across the clouds. It might have been a natural storm if not for the ominous rhythm of the hammer blows – the footsteps of a colossus, marching towards them. As the detonations came closer, the noise grew unbearable, mingling with the storm in Glutt’s head.

Sorov reached into his coat for a hip flask. He drank with his eyes closed, savouring it, then held the flask out to them. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said, his words almost lost beneath the approaching apocalypse.

Federak snatched the flask and took several hungry swigs, unable to match the lieutenant’s calm demeanour, cowering and moaning as he drank.

Sorov took the flask back and handed it to Glutt. ‘You are heroes,’ he said as Glutt took the flask in his trembling fingers, spilling some of the contents down his chin as he drank. ‘And no hero dies unnoticed.’ Sorov looked up at the tearing heavens.

A river of flame washed down the valley like gold from a furnace, too bright to watch, incinerating fortifications and bunkers and turning the air to liquid. Sorov was little more than a silhouette by now, but until the very

end he held himself with dignity, straight-backed and proud.

In the final seconds, as Federak started to scream and sob, Sorov raised his hand in a salute.

The blast hit.

Glutt howled. Not in fear, but in fury. It was unthinkable that a man like Sorov could be betrayed. Against all the odds, Sorov had led them to victory. Maybe Commander Ortegal could murder the entire regiment, but not Sorov. Not like this.

The force of the bombs rushed through Glutt, melting and evaporating his flesh, but rather than killing him, they fuelled his rage, transmuting him into a pillar of warp fire – lifting him up, still howling, into the tornado and making him one with the storm.

The galaxy could not work this way. The universe could not be so unfair.

As the planet died around him, Glutt recalled his moment of contact with the power that transformed Governor Narbo: that strange, mirrored view of life, so unlike anything he had seen before.

The rock boiled from beneath his feet and Glutt sank into darkness. As he fell, he sensed something flicker at the back of his thoughts – a new consciousness, born from the ashes of his faith.

He reached out, taking it by the hand.


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