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SPEAR OF THE EMPEROR

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

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

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

THE ROTTING EDGE
OF HUMANITY’S EMPIRE

‘Strength without wisdom breeds nothing but savagery. Wisdom without strength promises nothing but extinction.’

– Nisk Ran-Thawll
Chapter Master of the Mentor Legion
PROLOGUE
THE HISTORIAN: I

Vadhán asks me to write these words. He comes to this place of cold stone and candlelight, smelling of the blood he sheds in battle and the storms he sails through to come home. Each time I see him, his armour is always cracked and dented. His face shows fresh bruises, his flesh new scars.

And every time he asks if I’ve recorded what happened so long ago, when the war was still a war, when the Exilarchy was rising rather than standing over us in domination, when the Armada defended these stars.

When the Lions and the Spears held back the shadows of endless night.

Vadhán tells me they still hold, and I know it’s true for I have access to the auspices of stellar cartography. But so many of the stars on those maps seethe red with the Exilarchy’s jagged runes, and so few glimmer with the blue of the Adeptus Vaelarii. The Imperium endures here, but will it ever regain the ground it has lost? How many worlds now burn behind enemy lines, crying out for liberation that will never come?

‘You are old,’ Vadhán says, and though the words are coldly true, his tone is kind. ‘Old, and only human. You stand at death’s edge and it taints everything you see.’

And perhaps this is so. Perhaps mortality darkens my thoughts the same way that it dims my eyes and slows my hands. Time steals everything from us in the end.

I don’t need to write the words he asks for, though. I tell him that it’s all in the archives. Amadeus, my former master. Kartash. Tyberia. Brêac, the smiling god of war. Ekene, the golden lion. Serivahn, the cripple. Morcant, the murderous. Faelan, the ravaged. Ducarius, the dutiful.

The Immortals. The arrival of In Devout Abjuration. The Storm Tide. The Ashes of Elysium. The final flight of the Hex. It’s all there, in picter footage and mission reports.

‘I don’t want pict-captures and mission data,’ he says.

So he wants a saga? Aye, he wants a tale for the feasting halls and fireside
storytellers. It’s my turn to mock him: does he want to be a hero? Is he seeking a legend where he shines above his brethren?

Once, he would have taken offence at my tone. Now the rains of Nemeton have seeped into his blood, and he returns a smile.

‘Just the truth,’ he says. ‘Nothing more, nothing less. And it’s not for me. It’s a chronicle for the archives.’

I tell him that I’m neither a bard nor a poet, a fact he should be well aware of after all we’ve been through, but he answers with another cold truth.

‘You’re the only one left, Anuradha. It has to be you.’

We both know these are likely to be the last words I ever commit to parchment. My human hand is a claw now, too snarled with the rumatiz to hold a stylus. My bionic hand, slowed by time and wearing down at the knuckle joints, will have to suffice. It used to purr smoothly with each movement. Now it clicks and ticks as I hold this quill.

The story Vadhán asks me to tell is a tangled one. It crosses paths with the valiant Lions of Elysium and the soulless Exilarchy. It stirs the ashes of history, rekindling memories of the lost Scorpions of Khamun-Sen and the treachery of the twin princes Kaeliserai and Nar Kezar. It is a story of war, of brotherhood, of victory and loss.

I don’t know if there are any lessons to be learned within these pages. I don’t know if that even matters. And I warn anyone reading this chronicle that if my master seems cold to you, even by the inhuman standards of the Adeptus Astartes, it is because he was. He was born to the Mentors Chapter, a fraternity that demands exacting perfection of its sons.

These were the last days of his life, before Nemeton and the Death of Lions and the breaking of oaths. Before he became what he was at the end. Before he was as I want to remember him.

This, then, is the tale of Amadeus Kaias Incarius and the Spears of the Emperor. It is a tale that has yet to end, but began many years ago, in the reign of the sword-king Arucatas, as a warship set sail for the Elara’s Veil nebula and into the Great Rift.
I

SHIP OF THE DEAD

1

Crossing the Great Rift killed five thousand, nine hundred and thirty-one of the crew. Whole districts of spinal battlements were ripped from the ship’s back. The void shields could not be rekindled. The warship’s superstructure groaned around us as if imbued with miserable life.

Living within these bent steel bones, we laboured on, illuminated by the throbbing red of emergency lighting. The industrial sounds of repair work echoed through every corridor and chamber. Between the metallic crashes, we heard the chanting of choral prayers invoking the Emperor, the Machine-God, and His Reborn Son.

In the silence between the prayers, we heard weeping.

For four days and eleven hours after we emerged, we drifted in the deep void, crippled and cold. No one was permitted to look out into space, where the thrashing madness of the Great Rift still sought to encircle us. Those who broke this edict were executed to spare the rest of us their raving. I killed some of them myself.

When the Motive Force of the ship’s drive was reawakened in the twelfth hour of the fourth day, the air scrubbers clattered back to life in the same moment as the engines. We drew in deep, stale breaths of refiltered oxygen, coughing out the toxin-laden air we’d been sharing amongst ourselves since the power died.

We were alive.

Many were not. Blessings were spoken over the shrouded forms of the fallen, before they were fed to the engine furnaces. In death, they served the warship one last time – this time as fuel.

No one among us was unscathed, but we were alive. Alive, and on the Nihilus side of the Great Rift. It took fifty-two days to run the Straits of Epona through the Rift and it almost cost us the ship, but we had survived. We’d left the Imperium behind.

There was no going back. The ship would never hold together for a return voyage. My master gave the only order he could give.
‘Set course for Nemeton.’

2

Our vessel was the Sword-class frigate *In Devout Abjuration*, with an initial crew complement of twenty-four thousand, six hundred and ninety souls. We numbered just over two-thirds of that figure after the casualties of crossing the Great Rift and the shipboard riots that followed.

Exile. That was the word my master used for the mission. The notion filtered through the diminished crew, perhaps by virtue of the fact it was true. What hope did we have of seeing home again? *In Devout Abjuration* set sail with a full human and servitor crew, but the absence of other Space Marines was a telling sign. The Chapter Master, most noble Nisk Ran-Thawll, was already risking a warship and an officer travelling one of the rare routes through the Great Rift. He wouldn’t commit more warriors into the abyss, not when our chances of survival were so low.

Amadeus held absolute command over the warship, but its day-to-day running was overseen by Flag-Captain Harjun Engel, one of the highest-ranking serfs within the Mentor Legion. When my master remarked on the slow pace we set, Engel patched the Navigator’s murmuring voice through to the bridge:

‘*There’s nothing here. Nothing. Nothing here. We drift in the dark. All I see are reflections of the Emperor’s Light, cast on the sides of shadows.*’

Amadeus mused for five seconds, an eternity to his enhanced cognition, seeking an appropriate reply. Doubtless he considered the Navigator’s words to be uselessly flamboyant language. He craved precision. When people embellished their words, it introduced the possibility of flawed interpretation, and unclarity was something my master took pains to avoid at all costs. Sailors, however, are always prone to such poesy. They operate in a realm without easy definition, on scales beyond comfortable reach of the human mind.

‘Given the nature of our journey,’ Amadeus replied, ‘I will tolerate these inexact sentiments.’

With that, he left the command deck. He didn’t acknowledge the bows and crisp salutes performed by the crew as he passed their stations. Every one of the warship’s complement was lifebound to the Chapter. Each one wore the red eagle of the Mentors somewhere upon their robe or uniform. In this they were no different to Kartash, Tyberia and I. Only avenues of expertise and degrees of training separated us from them. Along with Captain Engel, we
were the most valuable humans on the ship.

Even after crossing the Rift, we were anything but safe. There was no Astronomican for the Navigator to sail by. No stable warp routes to follow. We jumped in fits and bursts, plunging blindly into the warp, fearing each stab into the blind unknown would be our last.

The ship shrieked around us, day and night, night and day.

My master was the only soul immune to the horror that gripped the ship. He immersed himself in his duties, focusing on nothing but the mission ahead. When Amadeus wasn’t training, he studied in preparation for his assignment, and archived his observations with one of his helots.

This was usually Kartash. Of the three of us, Kartash was closest to him, though that’s a relative description, for we were nothing but tools to Amadeus. He considered our individuality no differently than he considered the scratches on the casing of his boltgun, or the chip along the edge of his relic blade: minor divergences that marked them as his possessions, but functionally no different to similar weapons of war. We didn’t resent this, nor did we fight it. We were slaves, trained far beyond the skills of most other humans, but slaves nonetheless. His attitude to us was entirely natural, in keeping with our lifelong training.

Amadeus barely slept. A four-hour slumber cycle was mandated for his kind when they endured their gruelling training rituals, this figure being the rigorously researched duration required to rest overworked muscle tissue and the chem-stimulated transhuman brain. He could survive for weeks with only minutes of true sleep, resisting the build-up of somnolent toxins in his bloodstream, but that was a matter of necessity, not optimisation.

Amadeus slept for exactly two hundred and thirty-nine minutes each day cycle in the habitation cell allotted for his use. To sleep for that long was an indulgence, one he considered practically slovenly despite the mandate inscribed in his fragmented translation of the Codex Astartes. Laxity was anathema to him.

He balanced his unaccustomed idleness by committing to an even stricter training regimen than the traditional fifteen hours a day. I never once saw him cease early. When he ate his portions of nutrient-rich gruel at the assigned hours each day cycle, his sweat-bathed, abused body cried out for nourishment. I knew this as well as he did, for I monitored his biostability data at all times. There was never a moment I didn’t have his vital signs ticking along,
scrolling down the inside of my left eye.

He trained with blade and boltgun, shadow-sparring and dry-firing through hour after hour of training exercises. He pushed himself through physical challenges and cardiomotivator repetitions that would rupture mortal muscle. He fought squads, hordes, armies of holo-ghosts. He ordered me to ritually drain his blood to weaken him before one training session in every five, forcing greater effort and endurance in response. He ran for mile after breathless mile every day through the ship’s labyrinthine innards. I watched the data-spikes as he repeatedly pushed his primary heart to the limit, forcing his secondary heart into overworked life alongside it.

He considered this regimen, in his own words, ‘earning the luxury of sleep’.

We trained as well, as was our duty, but nowhere near to the degree set by our lord.

One day, he told me to shoot him. We stood in the chambers we used for hololithic combat, though today we were focusing on close-quarters battle with blades and gunstocks. Our weapons were loaded with live ammunition to maintain exact weight, as we would feel in the field. Precision was our Chapter’s watchword.

Amadeus entered at the close of our session, considering the three of us as we stood in a loose pack. We were exhausted from two hours of training, slick with perspiration, weighed down by our armour and weapons. Sweat stung my eyes to the degree that even blinking was a relief. We bowed at our master’s approach. He was unarmed and unarmoured.

‘Helot Secundus,’ he said. ‘Shoot me.’

‘Master, with respect, our ammunition is live.’

My mistake was in hesitating, for he shook his head and looked to Tyberia.

‘Helot Tertius. Shoot me.’

Tyberia didn’t hesitate as I had. She levelled her shotgun and fired – or she would have done, had Amadeus not slapped the barrel aside in a blur of motion and thrown her to the floor. The back of her head struck the deck with a jarring smack.

She’d moved fast, faster than any unaugmented human could possibly move, yet Amadeus stood above her, his boot on her throat.

Space Marines have a way of moving, a physicality to their merest motions, which arises from the power inherent in their form. In some, it’s an effortless
and unintentional arrogance. In others, a brutal and knowing grace. It’s power, one way or another, and a natural byproduct of the transhuman condition. They can’t help what they are, any more than they can help the myriad ways it shows in whatever they do.

Amadeus radiated that power then, as he pinned Tyberia with no effort at all. He was too cold to be truly arrogant, for arrogance is born in considering how you appear in the eyes of others. Our master had no such concerns. He didn’t revel in his invincibility, he just lived it. Overwhelming physical strength was as natural to him as breathing was to me. Since achieving his place in the Mentor Legion, he’d ascended above mortal concerns. He could exert his will on the world purely by strength and weaponry.

I’ve lived my life around the Emperor’s Angels, and that perception of the world leaves a mark on their psyches. It would for any being in the same circumstances. That unrivalled ability to act, to change the world around them through a level of violence no other individual can match alone… It makes some warriors proud, it shifts others’ perceptions without them realising, and it can easily ripen into something darker beneath the surface. Things like that can fester.

That day, Amadeus’ review of Tyberia’s response amounted to three words. ‘Acceptable. Keep training,’ he said, and left us alone.

Included in our master’s reflections were his brief considerations of his three helots. He noted that the Chapter had assigned him three ‘efficient and diligent’ slaves for this operation. Though he rarely made specific references to any of us, he added a postscript regarding Kartash. One that matched my own perceptions.

‘I find his piety an olfactory irritant at times,’ Amadeus dictated, speaking of Kartash as if all three of us were not present, as if we weren’t the ones recording his words for the Chapter archives. ‘My Helot Primus carries the scent of blessed weapon oils and sacred incense with an intensity that becomes almost cloying.’

I had noticed this. The holy scent permanently wreathed my fellow slave like an aura, and I’d wondered if there was some sin or chastisement in his past that necessitated this effort at holiness. Tyberia, in her cringing way, insisted it must have been a dark sin indeed, and regarded our superior helot with naked suspicion, as if his secret crime were contagious. Kartash, with infinite patience, assured us that it was a matter of simple devotion. I wondered if he had once held aspirations of priesthood, but when I asked, he gave a sad smile
and said no more.

Amadeus disregarded the matter as meaningless. It didn’t affect our competence, and thus it was tolerable.

4

It took a further forty-three days before we reached Nemeton – a journey that would have taken mere hours before the rise of the Great Rift extinguished the Emperor’s Light. More of the crew died. Dozens, then hundreds, and eventually thousands. Some starved when the botanical laboratories rotted. Some were poisoned by tainted water when the aquapurifiers failed time and again. Some killed themselves when they realised how far from the Emperor’s gaze we truly were.

Because of our rank among the most valuable humans aboard the vessel, we were protected from privation. Amadeus wouldn’t let us die. Yet the innards of our warship became a necropolis. I organised funerary teams to gather the bodies and, for a time, in the name of purity, the shipboard furnaces burned flesh and bone as often as promethium fuel. Soon enough the dead were reprocessed as nutrient pastes for those of us that still lived. I don’t need an eidetic recollection to remember that foul flavour. Sometimes I still wake with the taste in my mouth.

_In Devout Abjuration_ stank like a charnel house. The air scrubbers couldn’t filter out the funeral pyre reek. Even Kartash’s holy incense, so pervasive in our communal chambers, was often overwhelmed by the smoky stench throughout the ship.

When at last we drifted into the Ophion System, a sensation that was too weary to be called relief spread through the remaining crew. As the final day of our journey dawned in the light of Nemeton’s weak blue sun, our survivors numbered only ten thousand, one hundred and seventy.

At the system’s very edge, the Emperor’s Spears strike cruiser _Hex_ drifted into our engagement zone, its cityscape’s worth of weaponry rolling to bear on the far smaller frigate limping into their territory. She was haloed by fighter wings that painted the void with needle-thin plasma contrails, and was escorted by two destroyers, each one a match for the _Abjuration_ in its own right.

The _Hex_ had been waiting for us. Deep-void satellites and monitoring outposts had evidently marked our approach weeks before our arrival. She demanded that we follow her in towards Nemeton, where we would be boarded and our vessel inspected.
‘If you refuse,’ her captain informed us, ‘you will be destroyed. If you raise your shields or run out your guns, you will be destroyed. If you seek to leave the system, you will be destroyed. Do you understand these terms?’

We understood.

‘Will you comply?’

We complied.
II

A WORLD OF STORMS

1

The *Hex* was a long blade of a ship, an ancient strike cruiser of a kind rarely seen in Imperial skies, modified down the generations with additional weapons, fighter bays, hull space and armour that should have left her hideous. She was a killer, a grand lady thousands of years old, and she looked both cantankerous and utterly lethal. I loved her the moment I set eyes on her.

*In Devout Abjuration* sailed at her side, lost in the larger ship’s shadow. The *Hex*’s captain refused any further contact after the curt command that we sail with them to Nemeton.

They guided us in over the course of several hours. Their approach vector seemed erratic at first, as the *Hex* flew in long arcs, avoiding entire spheres of space, rather than cut a straight line to the distant planet. The *Abjuration* shifted and swayed around as she followed her newfound sister. When we were slow to course-correct and cling to the *Hex*’s trail, we were granted a single, brief message from the *Hex*’s captain, ordering us to follow her with more care if we valued our lives.

‘Mines,’ Kartash said. ‘They’re leading us on a course through minefields.’

For that to be true, it spoke of a conflict exceeding our bitterest expectations. Tyberia looked at him as if he’d spoken rank idiocy. ‘No one would mine their home system,’ she said.

Kartash was implacable. ‘The Spears have.’

He saw that Tyberia was ready to object, doubtless citing the threats to navigation and the unprecedented nature of such a defence, but he quieted her with naked logic. ‘Can you suggest any other plausible reason for the divergent courses being plotted?’

She could not. Nor could I.

Before we reached orbit, Amadeus ordered us to machine him into his armour. It took two hours and forty-seven minutes of chanting, blessing and ritualised effort before the final section of battleplate was drill-locked into place. Once it was done, he moved through his full range of motion, articulating every joint to its extreme, repeatedly testing every compression
and lengthening of his fibre-bundle muscle cabling. This took a further three minutes and forty seconds.

When he was satisfied, he stood motionless. Recognising the signal to continue, we bound his pistol holster to his hip, and fastened his belt pouches and grenade arsenal around his waist. Last of all, we presented him most reverently with his deactivated powerblade, sheathed in a scabbard of priceless leather from the flagellated backs of Terran pilgrims, and his heavily modified bolter, which required one of the servitors to lift in its hydraulic hands.

Many Space Marine Chapters have traditions of naming their weapons, granting honour to the machine-spirits within. Amadeus, an exemplar of the Mentor Legion, was disinclined to follow such a custom. His sword was named Fulvus only because its creator had named it so. The blade was a gift, granted to Amadeus by a forgewright of the Desolators Chapter. Along its length were the words 'For the blood of traitors, I thirst. For the honour of angels, I slay.' I always cleaned that acid-etched declaration with the care of handling a holy relic. To my master, the words were nothing more than blood channels to make the blade more efficient.

Amadeus was similarly without sentiment with his firearm. He referred to his bolgun as VCK-XA-1719, the weapon’s serial number, assigned when it was forged aboard one of the Mentors’ foundry ships a century ago.

Once he stood ready, he conveyed no gratitude to us. We were slaves, we expected none. He simply walked from the chamber. I watched through his eyes as he moved through the ship, slowed by needing to force jammed bulkheads open, making his way around hallways blocked by debris.

He paused on one of the remaining observation ramparts lining In Devout Abjuration’s damaged spine. There he lingered, watching the ringed planet Nemeton turn beneath him. Elara’s Veil, the nebula, stained the stars red around us. Behind us, like a bruise in the void, was the chasm of black poison we call the Cicatrix Maledictum, the Great Rift. Back the way we came was the true Imperium, and the Straits of Epona running through the wound that cut mankind’s empire in two. It would be visible from the surface of every world in Elara’s Veil as a rip torn across their skies. There could be no starker reminder of the galaxy’s frailty.

And there was Nemeton, home world of the Emperor’s Spears. Its surface was half hidden by a thick caul of cloud, and its visible landmasses were slivers of geography amidst oceans that drowned most of the planet.
Lightning flickered in the guts of those clouds, bathing the surface in storms. The Rings of Nemeton, kaleidoscopic from afar, were a danger to navigation up close. To call them mundane would do an injustice to their pale blue beauty, but in orbit they were nothing more than rocks of ice, ranging from the scale of mountains to the size of my master’s fist.

Amadeus had meticulously studied his destination. We all had. Now we witnessed the memorised lore playing out before our eyes, in harmony with the active scanning data from the ship’s sensors spilling down each of our retinal feeds. We looked upon the one and only world of the vast blue sun Ophion, on the edge of Elara’s Veil.

We also saw Bellona for the first time. The archives stated that when the tribes of Nemeton looked skywards through the rain clouds, they saw their world’s bright moon as the Emperor’s eye gazing down upon them. The primitives apparently considered this a sign of favour for their storm-choked planet. My view was somewhat less romantic. Scan-lists and population factoring streamed down the inside of my eyes, detailing Bellona for what it truly was: an allied Adeptus Mechanicus forge-moon of grey industry and silver rock. All our readings told the same tale: a moon of armoured spires and bunkered fastnesses, sheltering beneath an orbital defence array that bristled with torpedo platforms and shipyard docking rings. Bellona was militarised almost to the extent of a true forge world.

It was the Bellonan fleetyards that captured my master’s eye more than all else. Though they stood mostly empty, the significance of their scale wasn’t lost on any of us. This was no mere shipyard; this was an orbital installation the size of a hive city, constructed to serve an armada. I watched through his eyes as a frigate in the red-and-black plating of the Adeptus Mechanicus slowly pulled free of her moorings, backing out on thrusters for several minutes until she had the clearance to come about and sail away from orbit.

The fleet in-system was still sizeable, a portion of what was surely a far larger host. The Hex was the largest capital ship, sistered with a strike cruiser of almost equal size, plated in broken armour of burnished gold. She was docked, buried in repair gantries, swarming with mechnician shuttles. Whatever foe she’d been fighting before coming to Nemeton had mauled her almost unto death. A lion’s head showed on her flank, jaw wide, fangs bared, roaring into the void. I heard Amadeus exhale softly.

‘Scan that vessel,’ he ordered Captain Engel on the bridge.

The reply came back at once, ‘The Kai’manah, lord.’
Amadeus made no comment on the existence of a vessel believed to have been destroyed a century ago. He merely tuned his vox-link back to our private channel.

‘Record all you see,’ he commanded us. ‘And take note of what you don’t.’

‘The fortress-monastery,’ said Kartash. ‘I see no sign of a Chapter fortress on Nemeton.’

‘Exactly so,’ Amadeus concurred. ‘Further notation – one of the capital ships in high orbit is a Cardinal-class heavy cruiser in the colours of the Emperor’s Spears. A most adamant violation of the Codex Astartes.’ He sounded cold, but I took the words as an observation rather than a judgement. They required no reply.

‘Do you disapprove, master?’ Tyberia ventured, in her ingratiating tone. It was as if she spoke only to show Amadeus that she was paying attention.

‘I do not know, Helot Tertius. The law of the frontier seems to prevail here. Desperation has forced their hands.’

Nor was it the only sin on display. We counted six more vessels in the flotilla that conformed to Standard Template Construct patterns barred from use by the Adeptus Astartes. A Space Marine Chapter using Imperial Navy vessels, scavenged or otherwise, within its own fleet was most severely punishable in other, better circumstances. But it wasn’t his place to offer judgement, let alone punishment. He’d come to observe. Imperial forces on the Nihilus side of the Rift were known to be fighting against destruction. Nothing would be achieved by taking them to task on transgressions of law made in the name of staving off extinction.

Nemeton’s principal defence in the absence of a fortress-monastery – and if one chose not to count the incredible might of Bellona itself – was its orbital array. Thousands of weapon satellites controlled by monotasked machine-spirits orbited great launch platforms armed with torpedo banks and laser batteries. An Imperial Navy Grail-class carrier had been void-beached and converted to form the core of a high-orbit battle station. Her name no longer showed, her identity banished with her new role. Bellonan fighter craft flitted around her, ugly wasps of Martian red iron.

All of this might in the night sky, defending barbarians that knew next to nothing of its existence. From the surface, the array’s individual components would blend in with the starfield and Nemeton’s beautiful rings.

Part of Lieutenant Commander Incarius’ preparation necessitated studying
the belief systems of Nemeton’s tribes. They were barbaric in every definition of the word: a melange of blood sacrifice and sky worship beneath the gaze of ancestor spirits who supposedly dwelled at the God-Emperor’s side.

‘They are as ignorant as the Cretacian clans,’ my master had once commented aloud in his cell, while reading translations of ancient Nemetese scrolls.

‘Master?’ At the time Tyberia had looked up from where she knelt in silent contemplation across the chamber. Her half-lidded eyes showed her surprise in the shadows of her hood. ‘You have need of us?’

Our lord ignored the question, going back to his reading.

On the observation deck, Amadeus still stared at the world turning so slowly beneath us. The landmasses of Nemeton, such as they are on an oceanic world, possessed no buildings above a primitive level of technology. The planet’s island-continents and archipelago chains seemed wholly given over to forested mountains. Everywhere we looked, everywhere we scanned, there was nothing but knuckly peaks capped with snow, their sides blanketed in evergreen trees.

Of high civilisation we saw no sign, only the memory of cities. Ruins, abandoned generations ago, now devoured by the forests or sunk into the landscape. More curious still, these ruins were of marble, yet orbital auspices denied the presence of that precious stone occurring naturally on Nemeton. The marble was quarried elsewhere in the galaxy and brought to this world through the void.

Someone had tried to imprint civilisation here. Evidently they failed.

Some unspoken instinct lifted my master’s gaze from the watery world, to the heavens lit a hazy scarlet by the trails of Elara’s Veil. Dust. Reflective dust, scattered in bloom-clouds and trailing tendrils, too thin to hinder visibility or interfere with a warship’s systems. Just a smattering of random light on the cosmic canvas.

Amadeus left the observation deck. He didn’t need to tell anyone of his destination. There was only one place he would be going. I informed Captain Engel that our master was on his way.

2

We weren’t permitted to fall into orbit. Instead, as the Hex completed its overbearing escort run, its captain commanded us to anchor in the void out of deployment range. Three other vessels left Nemeton’s orbit on intercept
courses. Our sensors also chimed as we detected the minimal radiation from tight-beam auspex scans originating all the way from the forge-moon Bellona.

The Cardinal-class cruiser and two destroyers drifted into optimal lance range, yet none of the ships granted us a visual link upon our requests. They didn’t greet us or welcome us. They circled us in loose formation, weapons locked. Their stellar dance seemed a performance of almost weary aggression. Every ship in the defence fleet showed markings of recent wounds.

The *Hex* contacted us first with a less-than-charming hail consisting of a single word.

‘Well?’

My master gestured for the vox-link to remain open. ‘I am Lieutenant Commander Amadeus Kaias Incarius of the Mentors Chapter, commanding the warship *In Devout Abjuration*. We ran the Straits of Epona and emerged forty-three days ago.’

There was a pause. The *Hex*’s captain’s voice, crackling over the bridge’s speakers, was inhumanly low but unmistakably alive. Not a servitor, nor a machine-spirit. A Space Marine commanded the strike cruiser.

‘And here you are,’ was the man’s answer. ‘Now state your purpose.’

‘I was sent by my Chapter Master, Nisk Ran-Thawll, to act as emissary to the Sentinels of the Veil.’

‘Very well. What is it you wish to say to us, emissary?’

Amadeus hesitated in the face of their abruptness bordering on hostility. I could almost feel him weighing his words, and deliberating on how much truth they should be laced with. He wouldn’t lie, I was certain of that, but there are degrees of honesty in all diplomatic engagements.

He told the truth. The whole truth, as I understood it then.

‘I was sent to see if Elara’s Veil still holds against the enemy. To see if the Lions and the Spears still live, still fight.’

‘We still live,’ came the reply. ‘And we still fight.’

Amadeus waited for more. After ten seconds, it became clear that more wasn’t coming.

‘It gratifies me to hear that, brother,’ my master said. ‘Lord Commander Guilliman seeks to construct an evolving picture of the riven Imperium. I have further orders to assess the disposition of the forces in Elara’s Veil. Once
I have gathered this information, I will return through the Great Rift and carry word of your war to the Primarch Reborn.’

A pause. A breath. Did they believe us? Did they even believe we were Imperial? Over a century had passed since this region was connected to the true Imperium. What suspicions had grown in the hundred years since these warriors last saw the Emperor’s Light?

‘A boarding party has been launched,’ was the Hex’s reply. ‘If we are satisfied with what we find aboard your vessel, and your words match your deeds, you will be allowed to make planetfall.’

The link went dead.

‘Informal, aren’t they?’ remarked Captain Engel, standing at Amadeus’ side, looking up at the oculus. I looked at him through my master’s eyes. The grey of his hair. The tightness at the edge of his mouth and eyes. He had aged a decade in the months since we’d set out. We all had.

Amadeus didn’t reply to Engel; he spoke only to us. ‘Helots, I will deal with the boarding party while you make ready for planetfall.’

‘Yes, lord,’ Kartash’s voice returned on our behalf. ‘Your will be done.’

Tyberia asked, in a fawning tone I had become used to over the last months, if our master required anything more before the mission’s commencement.

Amadeus terminated the vox-link without answering.

‘Why did you ask that?’ I looked across our communal chamber to Tyberia. ‘If he had any other requirements, he’d state them with his original orders.’

Tyberia bristled, suddenly defensive. ‘I seek only to meet our master’s needs.’

I offered my next words carefully, aware that although the three of us had survived a great deal together, we scarcely knew one another. ‘With respect, Tyberia, I believe you risk being too servile.’

She cringed from me, in disagreement rather than discomfort, and walked away.

‘Remember, this is her first deployment,’ said Kartash. The hunchback had a gentle voice, matching his gentle eyes. You trusted him on sight. Everyone did. ‘And she was trained aboard the Eunoia.’

The Eunoia. The Mentors flagship. I’d been trained aboard one of the Chapter’s deep-void runners, the Vanguard-class light cruiser Mitrah. As
much as Tyberia seemed sycophantic and self-conscious, did I appear rural and imprecise to her, failing to meet the standards she’d come to expect? I didn’t enjoy that thought.

‘Leave it,’ Kartash advised me. ‘She will learn.’ He shook his head to ward off further conversation, and commanded the servitors to begin their duties.

3

Amadeus met the boarding party in the hangar bay. He went with Captain Engel, and both men stood in the avian shadow cast by the incoming Overlord. My master chose Kartash to watch through his eyes, consigning Tyberia and I to work with the servitors.

Yet I divided my attention, working and watching through Amadeus’ eye-lenses as the azure gunship drifted in and down, venting from its boosters as its landing claws kissed the hangar deck. It settled with a pneumatic whine, and its engines began the droning song of cycling down.

‘Helot Secundus,’ my master intoned. ‘Sever this connection.’

The gunship’s gang ramp lowered with hydraulic complaint. I saw silhouettes in the Overlord’s crew bay: the cloaked figures of skitarii warriors, and a taller figure, his helmet crested, his ceramite war-plate graven with the image of a trident, the three-bladed spear.

‘But master…’
‘Now, Anuradha.’

I deactivated the link, blinding myself to my master’s doings and plunging back into my own surroundings. Tyberia was smiling to herself as she racked her weapons in their crates. Evidently, she’d been listening in over the vox.

4

When Kartash entered our chambers after almost an hour, his expression was grave.

‘We’re permitted to make planetfall,’ he said. ‘We will be met by an officer named Brêac.’

‘That’s what we wanted,’ I replied. ‘So why do you look so concerned?’

Kartash mused over how best to phrase his observations. ‘Relations between our master and the Spears are likely to be difficult.’

‘We were prepared for that,’ I pointed out. ‘We expected no less.’
Kartash gave a grunt that wasn’t quite agreement. Tyberia raised an eyebrow at his hesitation. Her own suspicion was mounting.

‘Define “difficult”,’ she said.
Amadeus deployed battle-ready, bolter up, panning for threats. Rain drummed against his helm and shoulder guards as he tracked across his field of vision, targeting reticle twiching this way and that in alignment with his pupils. I saw what he saw, the fresh data spilling down my retinal display: temperature, gravitic pull, ammunition count, Amadeus’ vital signs, the daily prayer-thought… I absorbed all of it with ingrained familiarity while Amadeus focused on his surroundings. As he tracked for targets, the falling rain sheened him silver.

The landing pad barely deserved the name. We had touched down in a forest clearing with the earth scraped bare and blackened by flame weapons. Behind Amadeus, we waited in the shadow of our Thunderhawk gunship.

Ahead stood a single figure, one that matched Amadeus in height and bulk. A Space Marine, though he wore no helm. Red tattoos serpentine across the warrior’s shorn scalp. He’d inked three crimson trails running from his lower lip, as though salivating blood. I saw no obvious sign of rank in the inked symbols, though the helm magnetically clamped to his belt had a high officer’s crest matching ancient pictorial evidence of the Grecka-Romanus warrior caste. His war-plate, polished by the rain, was marked by campaign badges and runic symbols that meant nothing to me. I knew nothing of the wars this Chapter had fought in the last century. The ceramite, however, matched a shade of pale blue I could see by looking up at the breaks in the cloud cover. The Emperor’s Spears wore armour cast in the same azure hue as the rings of Nemeton.

He appeared to be alone. I active-scanned him. He was unarmed.

‘You should lower your weapon,’ he said to my master. ‘You’re embarrassing yourself.’

Amadeus lowered his boltgun and saluted, one hand forming a half-wing aquila against his breastplate. ‘I am Lieutenant Commander Amadeus Kaias Incarius of the Mentor Legion. I was sent by my master, Nisk Ran-Thawll, as an emissary to the Adeptus Vaelarii.’

The Spear bared his teeth in a knowing and mirthless smile. ‘And you say
you sailed the Straits of Epona.’

Amadeus nodded. ‘That is so.’

‘We’ve sent ships into the Straits. Many times. None have returned. Did they reach the Imperium?’

‘I have seen no records that spoke of an Emperor’s Spears craft in the last century. Nor have we seen any of the other Adeptus Vaelarii vessels in the century since the birth of the Great Rift.’

Something flickered across the Spear’s face. As trained as I was in reading the nuances of Space Marines’ inhumanity, I couldn’t discern his emotion from the expression.

‘You wouldn’t see any other vessels,’ the figure replied. ‘The Lions make no effort to cross back into the Imperium, and as for the Scorpions? Well. I wager you already know of their fate, Mentor.’

Those words laid bare one of the Chapter’s oldest wounds. My master rose to the bait with passionless clarity.

‘The Mentor Legion honours the memory of its predecessors. We–’

‘No. None of that now,’ the Spear interrupted, shaking his head. ‘Spare me your reasons for daring to wear those colours in Elara’s Veil. It’s an insult to us, and it’s an insult to the warriors who died wearing that heraldry before you were even born.’

I heard Amadeus breathe a little deeper over the vox. His vital signs accelerated, but he mastered himself before betraying any emotion.

‘Regardless,’ my lord said, ‘I come to you as an emissary.’

‘An emissary, is it? Promoting unity. Judging us. Very noble. The first soul we’ve seen from Imperial space in over a century, aye, and a bastard Mentor at that. What really brings you here, Amadeus Kaias Incarius? Did the Emperor’s false son truly send you, or is this some new ploy of the Exilarchy, seeking to see us bleed?’

We had come expecting a certain degree of suspicion, and perhaps even hostility. My master had relayed his concerns already, that the most primitive Chapters were often the most defiant, the most misguidedly proud. It seemed his wisdom was bearing out. He tried a new avenue of exchange.

‘I know nothing of the Exilarchy. May I know your name and rank, brother?’

Instantly, I knew he’d said the wrong thing. The Spear jerked his tattooed
head towards Amadeus, showing his teeth. Scorn filled his tone.

‘With the colours you wear, it’ll be better for you if you don’t throw the word *brother* around so lightly in our presence.’

The servos in the jointed armour at Amadeus’ neck purred as he inclined his head. ‘As you wish,’ he replied, stoic as ever.

The warrior regarded him in silence. Weighing. Deciding. I watched my master’s heart beat seven times on my retinal display.

‘Take your helmet off,’ said the Spear. ‘At least let me see your face, if you’re coming to us and asking for hospitality.’

My master complied, disengaging the seals at his collar with a hiss of vented air. Although my perceptions were enhanced for my helot duties, his senses were far keener than mine. I wondered what he made of his first breath of Nemeton’s air in the greasy chill of the heavy rain. For my part, I was struck first by the saltwater scent of the world’s oceans, the hydraulic fluid in the Thunderhawk’s machine parts and the charcoal reek of the gunship’s cooling engines. Together, it overcame even Kartash’s pious odour.

The tattooed warrior stepped forward, meeting Amadeus’ eyes. He banged his knuckles against his cloaked chest in a tribal greeting.

‘I am Brèac of the Vargantes, Lord of the Third Warhost, and I grant you permission to walk the soil of Nemeton.’

In return, Amadeus slung his bolter and made a full sign of the aquila, gauntlets scraping against his chest-plate. ‘I accept and appreciate your welcome.’

Brèac closed his eyes and leaned his head back, letting the cold rain wash over his features. When he looked at Amadeus again, I saw disgust in his gaze, illuminated by a flash of lightning. Or was it pity? The dark amusement in the barbarian’s eyes made it difficult to be sure.

I think back now to everything I didn’t know, then. The scars on Brèac’s face and armour were just that: a soldier’s scars, no different, no more personal, than reading about a hundred other battles on dry parchment. They weren’t yet the wounds taken in sacrificing blood and sweat and flesh and bone in order to stop the relentless Exilarchy. The concern on his tattooed features was surely just a symptom of my master’s presence, for I had no way of knowing the bloody beating the Third Warhost had sustained at the Battle of Thayren’s Reach just weeks before.
The precious naivety of it all.

Brêac gestured over Amadeus’ shoulder, to where we stood out of the rain. ‘I have storm cloaks for your vassals. Send them forward.’

My master didn’t even consider it. ‘They are sufficiently protected against the weather.’

‘Is that so? And what are their names?’

Amadeus blinked, taken aback. ‘What?’

‘Their names.’ Brêac spoke as if addressing a child or a fool. ‘You let your servants have names, don’t you?’

Amadeus looked blandly mystified in response to the Spear’s derisive tone. ‘Exactly why should their names matter?’

But he received no answer. Brêac beckoned to the three of us, where we waited on the gunship’s crew ramp. ‘You there. I am Brêac of the Vargantes. Name yourselves, so I may welcome you to this world.’

We looked to our master. He inclined his head, granting permission to speak.

Tyberia spoke first, talking over me. She made the sign of the aquila in greeting, her wrists crossing over her chest, her fingers splayed and her thumbs curved to represent the two-headed Imperial eagle.

‘I am Tyberia Volos, lifebound thrall of the most noble Mentor Legion, assigned as Helot Tertius to Lieutenant Commander Incarius.’

‘I am Brêac of the Vargantes. I bid you welcome to Nemeton, Tyberia. And you?’

With rank order abandoned, I spoke next. ‘I am Anuradha Daaz, lifebound thrall of the most noble Mentor Legion, assigned as Helot Secundus to Lieutenant Commander Incarius.’

Brêac repeated his welcome and turned to Kartash. ‘And you?’

Kartash didn’t answer. He remained in the shelter of the Thunderhawk’s bulk, clutching his white robes closer against the air’s chill.

Brêac glanced at my master. ‘Did you cut out his tongue, or is this a monastic vow of silence?’

‘You may speak,’ Amadeus prompted my fellow helot.

Kartash pulled back. Amadeus witnessed the slave’s cringing withdrawal, as did I, with no small surprise. I saw the tremble of Kartash’s shoulders and the
tightness of his pressed lips. Only then did I catch the scent of copper on his
breath and the tang of adrenaline in his blood. He reeked of an animal’s
biochemical fight or flight response.

I could scarcely believe it. He was scared.

My master sensed it, too. ‘What is this moronic cowardice?’ Amadeus
demanded. ‘What are you afraid of?’

Kartash peered from beneath his hood. He tried to speak, but no words came
forth from his trembling lips.

Amadeus grunted, betraying the irritation he’d masked so well so far. Had he
been human, I would have suspected he was embarrassed to be shamed by his
slaves before the Spear barbarian. Amadeus was beyond such considerations,
though. He was more likely appalled at a flaw discovered in his one of his
tools.

‘What ails you, Helot Primus?’

I delved through my memorised archives for this mission. Did anything in
Kartash’s past render him in some way unsuitable for the Nemeton
Deployment? Surely the Chapter would have anticipated any such failing.

And there it was. Not a physical flaw, not even something specifically noted.
Not a failing at all. Merely an unexpected inexperience.

The Spear reacted first. Armoured in his pale blue ceramite, Brêac towered
above the hunchback. Above all of us, excepting my master. The Spear leaned
down, coming closer to Kartash’s height.

‘Is this your first planetfall?’ he asked, lowering his avalanche of a voice.

‘Yes, great lord,’ Kartash managed to say.

‘You’re compressing your lungs. Spread your arms, to extend your ribcage.
Breathe deep and slow. You command your own body. Focus on that fact.’

Brêac gestured for Kartash to mimic his movements. The slave obeyed, and
as his breathing deepened, his trembling began to subside.

I watched my master as the realisation of his own error crept through.
Kartash’s records stated that he’d been born in the void, like a notable
percentage of the Chapter’s thralls. That night was the first time the
hunchback felt wind against his skin, instead of filtrated air from ventilation
ducts; the first time he had ever stood in the rain of a world, instead of the
recycled chem-rich water of a warship’s ablution chamber.
And the trembling. His muscles were cramping in rebellious spasm. For the first time in his life, he was feeling the powerful drag of natural gravity. He was in pain.

We looked on as Brêac guided him though the acclimatisation. At last Kartash lowered his hood, revealing features four decades old: clean-shaven, light-eyed, casting his gaze downwards after a moment.

‘I am Kartash Avik, Lord Brêac. Lifebound thrall to the most noble Mentor Legion. Assigned as Helot Primus to Lieutenant Commander Incarius.’

Brêac nodded. ‘I grant you the Chapter’s welcome to walk the earth of Nemeton, Kartash.’

‘I was remiss in my focus,’ said Amadeus. If there was regret in his voice, it was for his own ignorance of the details, not sympathy for Kartash. ‘I had not considered all aspects of your service record, Helot Primus.’

‘All is well, my lord,’ Kartash assured him in a quivery tone, without meeting our master’s eyes.

Brêac turned away from Kartash. ‘Come, Amadeus Kaius Incarius. We attend a ceremony here this night.’

‘I require no such honour,’ my master replied, and the Spear gave a harsh shotcannon bark of a laugh.

‘If there’s honour in any of this, it’s not for you, Mentor. Attend us and learn what you will. There is only one law – wear your helm at all times when you’re around the humans. Do not let our people see your face.’

Amadeus nodded, replacing his helmet and saying no more. Brêac did the same, slamming his crested helm in place.

Thunder rolled, and I looked skywards. A storm, black and swollen, was building in the east.

2

The drums beat in a ceaseless rhythm, through the ground, through our bones. Even all these years later, in the moments when my thoughts go quiet, I hear the drums of Nemeton rolling like thunder.

The clearing in which we stood was lit by flickering torch-spears thrust into the earth, surrounding a central bonfire that blazed in defiance of the rainfall. I had studied celebrations like those in texts of primitive societies on other Imperial worlds, and at that stage of Mentor Legion relations, the proper conduct was to heed a Chapter’s customs, no matter how irrational or
inconvenient they might be.

We were far above the tempestuous seas. Like all of Nemeton’s landmasses, this realm was thrust up from the planetary ocean, borne on a tectonic seam. The forest in which we found ourselves was scarcely beneath the sky. Clouds clashed, black and grey, just above our heads. The storm felt close enough to touch. Kartash flinched with every flash of lightning.

The revel was well underway by the time we arrived, though we soon saw that a Nemetese revel was closer to a funeral by the standards of other cultures. The air was mournful, the chanting songs were a chorus of overlapping dirges. The twin scents of distilled fruit-sourced alcohol and burning wood enriched the breezy air. Men and women beat the beast-hide drums and performed fire-jumping ritual dances. Every physical feat was a test, with the dancers and ritualists dripping sweat from their bare skin, even in the rain. The drums could have been the solemn pulse of the world itself. Little about it felt like a celebration, but there was a dignified ferocity to it all, something that spoke of racing hearts and revered tradition.

My master waited by the edge of the festivities and we stood with him, at a respectful distance. The seven servitors stood guard at our Thunderhawk, rather than wasting their time hauling our armoury chests through the forest for three hours to the revel. We three helots wore grey-blue storm cloaks, as did the barbarians that populated the revel. Something in the weave repelled rain rather than absorbing it. Kartash huddled in this, looking desperately unhappy. Tyberia wore hers the way an officer would wear a cape, thrown carelessly over one shoulder, introducing self-conscious elegance to the unfamiliar garment. She stood as if expecting everyone to pay attention to her.

We watched the primitives speaking, trading and chanting in the rain. Infrequent, harsh laughter scudded out from packs of tribesmen, swallowed by the drums or pulled away into the rising wind. A section of the cleared woodland had been given over to both male and female barbarians fighting mock battles, most likely over mating rights or the minutiae of clan honour. Blood marked even the victors of these battles. More than one of the losers lay on the sodden earth, storm cloaks wrapping them as burial shrouds. Other defeated combatants were dragged away and hurled onto the funeral pyres.

Most of the tribespeople wore leather or hide harvested from various beasts. The bones they wore as talismanic trinkets were similarly taken from any number of variant creatures. Some were human.

Passive-scanning revealed that six hundred and ninety-seven people were
present. Two hundred and eighteen were children in the years of pre-adolescence. Few of these youths clustered around their elders; most ran free in packs or emulated the older tribespeople by recreating the games, prayers and fights. Only twenty-three men and women were of an advanced age, bordering on dotage. These gathered together in an informal court of sorts, surrounded by those who would hear their stories and receive their blessings.

The Spears stood amidst these tribal rituals, yet apart from them. Guarded parents kept their children at a distance from the warriors, and made no effort to speak with the Space Marines themselves. I’d seen humans flee in terror of the Adeptus Astartes before, and I’d seen them dumbstruck with reverential awe, but never had I witnessed a human culture display this distant, cautious fear. At my side, Kartash and Tyberia had noticed the atmosphere as well. We all watched, fascinated by the strange contrast inherent in the Spears’ presence. Our hoods were up, our faces in shadow. We hadn’t spoken a single word since arriving at the bleak revel.

Yet my master, in his armour of white and green, attracted more attention than the Spears.

I heard the child approaching. She had been watching us for several minutes and finally gathered the courage to approach. Now she stood a short distance away, just beyond arm’s reach. It would be a lie to say she showed no fear of Amadeus, but where boy-children cringed and hid from the Space Marines in their midst, the girl-children showed something closer to apprehension. This one was no exception.

She stood, and she stared.

Amadeus turned a slow glare upon her. His armour joints grumbled. His eye-lenses glittered in the rainfall.

She remained there, trembling now.

Amadeus stared at the child with weaponised disinterest. Dew drops of rain alighted on his helm, trailing down his faceplate.

‘Begone,’ he said to her.

She fled, shrieking, drawing the gazes of nearby barbarians. Amadeus didn’t watch her leave. He had already returned his gaze to the cold revel.

‘Scout the area,’ he commanded us. ‘Return to me when I summon you.’

Tyberia licked the rain from her lips. ‘Is there anything you wish us to observe, lord?’
Our master didn’t even spare us a glance. ‘Everything. Go.’
Arkosa was back in the true Imperium, not here on the empire’s rotting edge. I was Helot Solus for the operation, the only thrall assigned to Amadeus for his use. At the time he was still Lieutenant Incarius, five years shy of his promotion to Lieutenant Commander. Several other helots were seated with me at their own control stations, but they served other warriors in the squads under Amadeus’ command.

Arkosa was my very first assignment, and the first time I witnessed the impossible brutality of a Space Marine in action. Arkosa, with the terrible wrath of the Emperor’s Angels, taught me just what creatures I was serving.

Many of my augmetics were still untested in the field. The Chapter had reshaped my brain, infusing it with machine parts, flooding its recesses with lore. I knew things I had never learned. I remembered how to do things I had never done. This still threatened to overwhelm me. Fighting the tide of unfamiliar knowledge was like breathing manually. When you stopped to consider the feeling, suddenly it was effort to maintain.

For a time, I thought madness threatened me. It isn’t enough to say that colours are more vibrant and sounds clearer. You can taste the words you say. Sounds, especially the voices of others, become smears of colour across your field of vision. Memories you reach for become entangled, the moments of your life blurring together as Now and Then become one. You dream of worlds you’ve never seen and know their cultures with a clarity you can’t place in your own childhood. I once lost command of High Gothic for three days, speaking only in a clash of the new languages abruptly implanted within my mind.

From reading hundreds of reports in the Chapter’s archives, I know this is similar to the process endured by Space Marines when they are new to their ascendancy. When their genetic enhancements are fresh, their senses swim and merge as they adapt to the overwhelming input.

I did not make planetfall for the Arkosa Deployment. I remained aboard the frigate *Victrix*, connected to my master through the cogitator bay around me and the enhanced systems of his armour. I had optical feeds from his bolter’s
targeter, from the omen-scr ye array on his backpack that looked over his
shoulder, from both of his helmet’s eye-lenses, and from his bionic right eye.
With minimal atmospheric interference, the link between us remained true –
what the Adeptus Mechanicus would call ‘the purity of clean data’.

Arkosa was a verdant world being ground into mud and ash by the uprisings
blackening its surface. The people rebelled in the name of starvation. The Pax
Imperialis broke down as city after city lost control to the rebellion. Entire
regiments of the planetary defence force sided with the rebels. The orbital
defence network fired upon itself as well as the surface, as different factions
vied for control of its killing power. By the time the Victrix reached orbit, all
that remained was a clutch of weakling satellites and orbital platforms in the
rebels’ hands. The Victrix torpedoed them from range and cut their wreckage
apart with broadsides up close.

As easily as that, we owned the sky. My master deployed via Thunderhawk,
piloting it himself and accompanied by his two squads. The Victrix remained
on station, ready to link its bombardment with Amadeus’ orders from the
surface.

My master’s assignment was simple: insertion within Imperial ranks with an
eye to take command of one of the few remaining armies. Eleven warriors to
turn the tide of a war. A common enough operation for Space Marine strike
forces. Each one of those warriors possessed a helot in orbit, the thralls
monitoring them, feeding them data, linking their insights with their masters’
perceptions.

My master commanded that the Imperial remnants herald the coming of the
Mentor Legion with planetwide propaganda. Cracked screens in besieged
cities showed the Space Marines in their ceramite glory, offering bold
evidence that the Imperium had not forgotten the defenders. Vox-reports and
holos flashed live within enemy-held cities as well, showing the foe that their
transgressions had not gone ignored. Vengeance had come.

Almost at once, there was an offer of armistice. A meeting of commanders
and ambassadors was proposed by the leaders of the rebellion. They called
upon the legendary honour of the Emperor’s Angels to meet under a ceasefire,
requesting the ‘Space Marine Lord’ meet them on neutral ground, to discuss
the resolution of the war.

The helots nearest my station turned in their seats, waiting for my master’s
reaction. No one believed it was anything but a trap.

‘I accept,’ Amadeus said at once. ‘Helot Solus, broadcast my acceptance
from the *Victrix’s vox.*

I did so, but the enemy weren’t finished. The warship in the heavens, they said, was to move out of geosynchronous orbit and hold position where it couldn’t fire upon the surface. The rebels would use the few remaining satellites in the network to confirm this condition was met.

‘I accept,’ Amadeus said at once.

A further request cited that my master come unarmed. He bade me, ‘Explain to them that that will not come to pass. They may bring bodyguards, if they fear for their lives.’

Within the hour, he set out towards the agreed-upon site alone: a war-broken cathedral to the Emperor Triumphant, deep in neutral territory.

2

Amadeus was waiting for them at dawn the next day. Motionless. Completely motionless. I watched through my master’s eye-lenses as the six diplomats and commanders approached him in the centre of the fallen temple’s nave. The imagery beneath his boots was a shattered mosaic of the Emperor enthroned and haloed in gold. The white stone pillars supporting the domed ceiling were riven with the acne of small-arms fire. Whatever scenes of divinity the stained-glass windows had once shown were lost to the war. They stood open, as stark as the hollows of missing teeth, now just portals to the morning sky.

Each of the emissaries had brought a bodyguard. While the diplomats stood in front of Amadeus, a further six armed and armoured worthies waited in a loose ring, surrounding him.

They honestly thought six would be enough. Throne, but I pitied them for their naivety.

The ambassadors and their soldiers stood in confident dignity until Amadeus moved. Almost at once they showed instinctive signs of unease and fear: eyes narrowing, lips compressing, micro-shifts in their postures. The bodyguards were no different. Their gloved fingers were tight on the grips of their lasrifles. Four of them maintained poor trigger discipline, either from inexperience or fear. Most of them hid their nervousness well, but their humanity betrayed them to my master’s acute senses and the precision of the wargear we used. In war, information is power, and no one could keep secrets from us.

‘Greetings,’ Amadeus said, looking at each of them in turn.
I was already scanning the gathered emissaries through the optical cogitator that covered my master’s left eye-lens. I matched exposed faces to image files in the planetary archives, assigning names and ranks to each one of them. Although it would have been too optimistic to hope for a full conclave of the rebels’ authority, these six men and women represented a significant portion of the uprising’s leadership in Arkosa’s southern hemisphere.

The bodyguards wore full-face helms, but four of these had serial numbers and signs of rank on their armour plating, making it a simple matter to ascertain their identities and match them to the planetary census. Before a minute has passed, I had their service records. I tight-beamed my findings to Amadeus’ retinal display as soon as I made each connection. He said nothing and offered no acknowledgement. He expected nothing less. I was merely fulfilling my function.

The ambassadors greeted my master. One of them, clad in robes rather than the patchwork flak-plate most of the others had scavenged, acted as master of ceremonies. Before the war, he had served as a minor dynast in the Imperial hierarchy. He spoke with the most ostentatious hand gestures to emphasise every point he made, as if the fervency of his monologue compelled him to do so.

His version of the truth boiled from him. It animated him. He put me in mind of a fevered grox-bull, bloated and poisoned by its own unshed waste, finally able to shit. Self-righteous filth poured from the ambassador in a tide. He recounted the virtues of the war, the necessity of it, imploring ‘Lord Incarius’ to reconsider his allegiance to the falling regime. They had not summoned my master alone to kill him. They had come to convince him their treachery was virtuous. That Amadeus and his Space Marines should be on their side.

This cause was soon taken up by one of the others, a ranking autocrat in the planetary defence force. This elder claimed that the rebels were no less Imperial than the defenders of the remaining cities, and that they were still pure-hearted servants of the God-Emperor. Their rulers had failed them. They were rising up to prevent the planet from starving.

My master listened to all of this. It took some time. Throughout their grievances, they called him ‘lord’. He was not swift to correct them.

‘You posit that the war would end if the Imperial governor opened the subterranean granaries.’ Amadeus panned his gaze from left to right as he spoke, target locking every single face. ‘Is that the summation of all this rhetoric?’
They shared glances. Many of them stood straighter. ‘As a first step,’ the Arkosan commander said. ‘Then a more comprehensive reform of global agriculture to safeguard the future.’

‘The granaries are empty,’ Amadeus replied, ‘as your governing bodies have repeatedly told you. The stores were opened to feed the vast numbers of refugees sealed within the besieged cities.’

‘Not so, Lord Incarius. We have spies within the regency. The granaries aren’t empty. The government lies.’

‘Even if your Emperor-appointed governor sought to deceive you, your war has riven this world. You have rendered it worthless for agriculture on a scale necessary to sustain the population. How many farmers lie dead, conscripted by armies of either side? How many fought and died instead of farming the land? How many fields have burned to ash and will never bring forth crops again? You have presided over a rebellion for food, only to ensure Arkosa will starve.’

I could tell this was nothing new to them. They’d wrestled with these very truths over the years of their war. They had killed their world. It was only natural that they weren’t ready to face up to it. Denial is always fiercest in those that must accept the hardest truths.

‘We know that the war has cost us, but once we take control, off-world trade will resume. The trade routes will reopen.’

My master turned to the man. Most of the humans flinched at the growl of Amadeus’ armour joints. Two of them jerked closer to their sidearms.

‘In a generation, perhaps.’ Amadeus’ tone was as calm as the desert itself. ‘Imperial trading in the region will take decades to return after this period of prolonged instability. Additionally, you have bled Arkosa of its valuable resources, ensuring you have almost no currency with which to purchase the imports you require. The trade routes will reopen and traders will bring the salvation you crave, only to find a world of bones awaiting them.’

Orange runes flashed up on my primary monitor. My master’s relayed perceptions: the weapons he had seen thus far among the ambassadors and their bodyguards. I added another three runic markers, believing them to be bayonets concealed within coat cuffs and, from one man’s stance, a pistol strapped to the back of his belt.

There came a click as my master activated our secure vox-link. The Gothic rune for Obfuscation pulsed blue on my tertiary screen.
'Overlay vox capabilities,' he said to me, ignoring the master of ceremonies speaking on.

The data was already primed. My instruments had swept the chamber and picked up eight vox-signals, currently passive. I beamed an overlay to Amadeus’ left eye-lens, marking those among the gathered humans capable of communicating with their forces elsewhere. Every one of the bodyguards, and two of the ambassadors.

‘Can you jam them?’ he asked.

‘Not from this range, master.’

Then they would need to die first. They couldn’t be allowed to summon aid.

‘Enough,’ Amadeus said aloud to the ambassadors. Several of them flinched.

‘This conclave is at an end.’

A particularly brave officer stood up to my master. ‘Never would I have thought the Emperor’s Angels would come to our world and deny us all hope. What choice did we have? Should we have lain down and died? Should we have watched our families starve when the rationing first began to fail?’

‘Your emotional response to my words is of no concern to me,’ Amadeus replied. ‘I care nothing for the reasons you betrayed the Imperium, nor the justifications you cling to now.’

The commander knew, in that moment, what was coming. Blood drained from her face, and that has always been the surest sign of a warrior in the moments before a battle. Unprepared men and women will flush, their faces reddening. Veteran fighters go pale, their blood flowing to their muscles.

It made no difference. My master had sentenced them to death, and die they did.

When I cleaned his armour that night, I had to use interplate brushes and corrosive oils to gouge the blood from the joints where it had caked.

‘Helot Solus,’ he said to me. I flinched as the diplomats had done, turning to where my master sat at a nine-screen console, reviewing the data-feeds of his mission that day.

‘Master?’

‘Is there some instinct inside you that cried out this morning?’ He didn’t look at me when he asked, and I wondered if this was a test.

‘I don’t understand. Elaborate. Contextualise the query.’
He still didn’t look at me. ‘Is there something intrinsically human within you that revolts at the death of other humans?’

If this was a test, its nature was beyond me.

‘They were traitors,’ I replied. ‘And they died as traitors should die.’

He didn’t nod. He didn’t acknowledge me at all. He kept parsing his eye-lens data-feed, watching and rewatching the bodies of aristocrats and their dynastic bodyguards breaking beneath his fists, his boots, his bolt shells.

I told the truth that day. I felt no revulsion at the death, at the destruction of those treasonous men and women. But it was the first time I had seen Amadeus in an operational capacity, fighting in the field.

I never mistook a Space Marine for human after Arkosa.
Kartash trembled as we walked around the gathering. The hunchback cast his gaze across the barbarians, still shivering with the aftershocks of planetfall. For a time, he said nothing to me. I said nothing to him. Tyberia trailed behind us, constantly looking towards the trees.

On occasion, painted Nemetese brutes approached us with wary gazes and cautious body language, their hands straying close to sheathed blades. Kartash spoke for the three of us, replying to their caution with simple Low Gothic assurances that we meant no harm. His replies were brief and polite, his eyes downcast and unchallenging. Most of the barbarians warned us away from their groups entirely. There wasn’t a friendly eye among them.

We walked on, skirting the crowds of chanting, mourning, fighting tribespeople. What interested us most was the way the clansfolk acknowledged the nearby Spears with none of the reverence or devotion we knew so intimately in our duty for the Mentors. Adult barbarians bowed their heads to the Spears, mumuring words that we first took to be blessings and invocations. It wasn’t long before I amended that belief; the murmurs sounded more like prayers spoken against a threat.

Most curious of all was the way parents placed hands over their boy-children’s eyes, stopping the youths from watching the Space Marines pass, preventing any eye contact between Space Marine and child. Yet girl-children stared, untouched by their parents’ guarding hands. Several adults with young sons sprinkled fistfuls of salt on the ground near the Spears, in gestures reminiscent of shamanic warding.

‘They don’t want their sons taken,’ Tyberia observed quietly. ‘They don’t want their sons to be reborn among the Adeptus Astartes.’

Kartash agreed. ‘This is not a culture that celebrates its Chapter.’ He glanced to me, seeing me scanning the tribal crowds. ‘What are you thinking, Anuradha?’

I’d been thinking much the same as my companions. ‘They’re not showing hostility, exactly. It’s more like caution, a guardedness. The Spears don’t belong among their people any more. They’re treated as outcasts. As
condemned.’

‘Go on,’ Kartash prompted me. ‘These are worthy insights.’

‘The Spears themselves aren’t as barbarous as we were led to believe. It’s as if they’ve been elevated from these tribal roots.’ But immediately I knew the word was wrong. ‘No, let me restructure that thought. Elevated is wrong. It’s as if they’ve had civilisation grafted over their barbarism. In my studies of the more primitive Chapters, including the Wolves of Fenris and the Cretacian Flesh Tearers, they remain exemplars of the cultures that gave birth to them. They possess the tactical acumen of any Space Marine Chapter, yet are indelibly bound to the primal aspects of their parent culture. The Cretacian hunting-clans make for bloodthirsty Adeptus Astartes warriors, prone to slaughter. The warrior-clans of Fenris give rise to hardy Space Marines, glorying in tribal fellowship and primitive superstition. They belong to their cultures in tangible ways. But the Spears… They’re a blend of both worlds, the savage and the civilised, with aspects of both, yet belonging to neither.’

I paused, still staring at the fireside silhouettes.

‘Is there something more?’ Kartash prompted me again. How smoothly he took the role of tutor.

‘Primitive cultures on Adeptus Astartes home worlds often worship, in some ignorance or fear, and with some precedent, the Chapters that draw from the tribal population. Children of the Baalian wastelands journey for months across irradiated wilderness for the chance to become Blood Angels. Fenrisian youths crave the honour of ascending to the ranks of the Wolves. But here? Fathers cover their sons’ eyes as the Spears pass. Mothers move to stand in front of their boys, guarding them. Many cultures honour their Chapters as demigods, but these Spears… They walk wherever they wish, but they’re received with all the warmth of executioners.’

As soon as I said the words, they felt right. The final thought came at once. ‘To be a Spear is a sacrifice, cast out of their clans. They’re treated not as gods, but as ghosts.’

Kartash dwelled on this awhile, watching the taller shapes amidst the gathered humans.

‘An accurate and valuable assessment,’ he told me. ‘You will have the honour of entering it into the mission archives, Anuradha.’

I felt myself flush with pleasure, and I marked the way Tyberia’s lip curled. ‘Nothing she noted wasn’t already obvious,’ she said to Kartash.
But I ignored her. ‘Thank you, Helot Primus,’ I said.

Now the deployment had begun in earnest, he was stepping up his role. The look in his eyes was kind, even indulgent. ‘After all the three of us have been through, it wouldn’t be inappropriate to call me Kartash.’

I had only seen Kartash twice before we were assigned to this operation together, both times aboard the strike cruiser *Haloed by Vigilance* in the year before we set sail to cross the Great Rift. We had never spoken, merely passed in the vessel’s industrial maze of corridors, offering brief bows of greeting, recognising and offering respect to those of a shared, distinguished rank. This unfamiliarity wasn’t unusual; the Mentors’ helots are trained and stationed across entire sectors, wherever the Chapter requires our presence.

Before the Nemeton Deployment I had never met Tyberia. She was young, early in her second decade, with thin lips, golden teeth and a thoughtful stare. Her record spoke of great aptitude, a studious demeanour and significant promise. It neglected to mention the snideness and servility, which I suspected was born of her ambition to excel at any cost.

I’d served Lieutenant Commander Incarius once before, in the Arkosa Deployment I have already described. He’d remarked on this, when the three of us had first been brought before him.

‘I have studied your service archives,’ he said, ‘in advance of the Nemeton Deployment. Kartash, with seniority of experience you will serve as Helot Primus. Anuradha, you will serve as Helot Secundus. You performed commendably for me on the Arkosa Deployment. Tyberia, you will serve as Helot Tertius.’

Kartash had bowed in respect, but I felt Tyberia’s eyes upon me in that moment of rare praise from one of our masters. I flattered myself by believing she was envious of my citation.

After that initial encounter with Amadeus, we were summoned to a briefing chamber and granted access to the Mentor Legion’s scant databanks pertaining to Nemeton and the Emperor’s Spears. Data-branches led to the archives of the Celestial Lions and Star Scorpions Chapters, as well as Elara’s Veil itself. The lore was thin but useful – the three Chapters were collectively chronicled by the name of their allegiance: the Adeptus Vaelarii, more informally as the Sentinels of the Veil. Three Space Marine Chapters, oathbound to stand in guardianship over an entire subsector. Dispositional data was clear on one matter right away: the Chapters had been stretched thin
even when all three had been at full strength.

Tyberia studied the databanks with a focus that bordered on ferocity. Kartash was more passive, committing data to his cranial banks in spurts between training sessions. I let my eyes flow over the words, to record them rather than to memorise them immediately, and spooled them in streaming repetitions during my sleep cycles. Such were the advantages of a mind remade by the artificers serving one of the most technologically advanced Chapters in the Imperium.

Kartash, Tyberia and I hardly spoke while preparing in the weeks leading up to the mission. Even on the long journey towards the Great Rift, we had scarcely interacted. As helots we existed in the same space, blessing and reblessing our master’s wargear in Amadeus’ presence, speaking the necessary prayers, rarely saying an informal word to the Space Marine we were bound to serve. When armouring Amadeus, we moved with the accord of purpose and training. We performed the arming rites without needing to rely on speech.

And once we’d passed through the Rift, what was there to say? The crew of the warship died in droves around us. Our ranks left us isolated from the decks of the ship locked in the throes of starvation, but the misery of the dying crew still reached us. We could do nothing for them. Slaves have always died suffering while those of higher castes survived. This is life. This is civilisation.

Tyberia ignored the deaths as events beneath her station. Kartash catalogued the figures but forbore comment. Both of their demeanours seemed callous to me; the dead and the dying were servants of our Chapter, and they deserved to be honoured for their sacrifice. I collated the images from the servo-skull probes I sent into the other decks, filing them alongside Kartash’s numerical analyses. If I couldn’t help the dead, I could at least ensure they were remembered.

Meanwhile, we prayed we would reach Nemeton alive.

According to Kartash’s archived curricula aboard In Devout Abjuration, the Nemeton Deployment marked his eleventh assignation since he had ascended from thrall to helot rank. All of his previous operations had taken place in boarding actions or void installations. The Nemeton Deployment was my seventh assignment as helot, at twenty-eight Terran standard years of age. Tyberia, at twenty-three, was on her first field operation.
The three of us walked on together, through the revel, through the storm. The revel pyres burned hotter and higher as the night deepened. They were fed with such eagerness that the storm couldn’t kill them, and despite the rain’s chill, we found ourselves sweating.

The rituals went on as druids and witches led the gathered clans, using dirges and duels to celebrate life and mourn the recently dead. Some of the feats of courage, such as leaping the blazes, seemed to be performed with an eye towards impressing the watching spirits of ancestors, proving that heroic blood ran through the veins of their living descendants. Life boiled off the Nemetese barbarians the way heat radiated from the revel fires.

Since landing there, I’d found myself breathing deeper, filling my lungs with the unrecycled air, enjoying the sharpness of the storm’s ozone scent. My hooded robe served me well, the cowl preventing me from needing to constantly cuff the rain from my bionic eyes. I looked across the revel with its dirge voices, pounding drums and clashing blades. Many of the barbarians roared their emotions skywards, beating their chests, moving around the great fires in heaving packs. Rain sprayed from them as they leapt and danced around the funeral pyres. Sweat steamed from them as they fought by the flames.

Much of what they said was a mystery to me. We knew precious little of the Nemetese branches of Gothic; the datacores aboard *In Devout Abjuration* were far from thorough. Many Chapters see no reason to take pains to teach others the tongue of their home worlds.

Tyberia panned her gaze across the clearing, ending by turning to me. Her eyes were still half-lidded. Her irises flickered red with the workings of the augmetics inside her skull.

‘Was it like this when you served with the White Scars?’ she asked me. ‘They are also bred from barbaric stock.’

I almost laughed at that. There was no resemblance at all between the White Scars’ boisterous, cheering brotherhood, and the Spears’ unnerving, ghostly barbarism.

‘No,’ I replied, tempering my smile so she wouldn’t take it as mockery. ‘No, this is something else entirely.’

Kartash mused as he scratched at his stubble. ‘This is a miserable place. I fear we aren’t destined to enjoy our time on this world.’

Tyberia gave a wordless murmur of displeasure, yet I saw her look across at
the slain form of a barbarian, cut open by a rival’s axe and left to lie alone in the rain. For the first time since arriving on Nemeton, there was a flicker of emotion in the depths of her hood. She smiled.

4

Soon after, the three of us wandered apart. Tyberia chose to return the way we came, scouting the path back to the gunship. Her decision surprised me, and I said as much to Kartash. He regarded me strangely, unsure whether I was joking.

‘One of us should scout the path back,’ he pointed out.

‘I know, but Tyberia is ceaseless in her attempts to impress Amadeus. Why decide to take the path where she’ll have far less to report to him?’

Understanding dawned on his hooded features. ‘How scornful you are, Anuradha. Tyberia wants to be away from the crowds. That’s all.’

The revel was an assault on the senses after the dignified years of our training and duty, and then the funereal silence of our dying warship. I couldn’t argue with that. But Kartash’s excuse still rang hollow.

He continued in the face of my scepticism. ‘She is newer to this life than you and I. I warned you already, we should give her time to adapt.’

‘She must gird herself,’ I said quietly. ‘Such weakness is unbecoming.’

Kartash wouldn’t be moved by my logic. ‘It isn’t weakness. It’s just who she is.’

I held my tongue on that judgement.

While Kartash elected to remain amidst the celebrations, watching the clansfolk, I chose to walk beyond the revel’s borders. I moved through the forest in a spiralling search pattern, and if there was anything worth reporting beyond the gathering’s boundaries, I intended to find it.

I was as guilty as Tyberia in a way. After so long aboard *In Devout Abjuration*, passively sucking in the refiltered, sweat-scented air for months on end, I wanted to breathe freely beneath Nemeton’s sky. The farther I roamed, the quieter the drums became. Soon, they were nothing but a shiver through the forest floor.

With the revel set so high atop the mountain, most of my journey was a descent. Down through the trees, away from the well-worn pathways, through the woodland blanketing the uneven land.
Just over a mile from the path, a chunk of eroded white stone gleamed through the muddy earth. Centuries of rainfall had smoothed it to a marble nub, scarcely noticeable, but once the eye fell upon it, it couldn’t be missed. I turned, scanning the undergrowth. Sure enough, the dirty floor of the forest hid several other lumps of the same stone. More echoes of an abandoned civilisation.

Once, there was a building here. A structure of marble. One of those lost cities we saw in orbit. A watchtower, perhaps?

I kept walking. At the forest’s western edge, a cliff overlooked the ocean. The wind wanted me, pulling at me with grasping claws. The storm reached the horizon in every direction, soaking an already drowned world. There, as the rain scythed through me, I at last looked upon the true Nemeton.

The ocean.

The night-water was black, the black of the deep void, though with none of the void’s haunting serenity. The ocean seethed, alive under the roaring wind. And beneath the foaming water… Snaps of lightning offered suggestions of immense shadows. Our archives were vague on what aquatic life thrived in these oceans, so perhaps it was only doubt that fired my imagination. Was that silhouette under the water just a trick of the storm, or the dark bulk of some nameless leviathan?

Misted by the rainfall and half hidden by the rough seas, the shadow broke the water’s surface. Something vast, something black and spined, reaching its curling tendrils skywards. Something that flashed moonlight back from its wet scales. A great eruption of water burst as the thing exhaled. And then it was gone, whatever it was, back beneath the waves.

I returned to the shelter of the trees, pulling my storm cloak tighter against the rain.

Not long after, I found the statues.

The first statue stood alone, mutilated by time and merciless rainfall. A Space Marine, that much I could tell, even weathered down to featurelessness. It stood as a sentinel outside a stone-worked entrance leading into the hillside. The white granite figure was too old to be one of the Second Generation, the Primaris, like every Spear I had seen so far. This statue depicted one of the Firstborn, those Space Marines from the same genetic stock as my master: the warriors that had that served the Emperor so loyally for thousands of years.
Another statue once shared this vigil; now it was reduced to an eroded plinth in the heart of a nest of tangling forest vines. The woods were reclaiming this place, year by year. The inscriptions on both plinths were written in Nemetese script, a series of slashed lines and jagged runes, softened in the stone by the passing of years.

I ran my fingers over the indentations in the stone, taking a pict-record with a blink-click for future analysis. Actual Nemetese script, in context. Every shred of lore would be useful.

The archway leading into the hillside was worn grey stone, doubtless ancient even when my master was young. Whatever engravings once stood out in stark relief were now just impressions of warring figures and the shapeless hulks of great beasts. I saw a claw here, a row of spines there. Above those scenes, the stars were carved with radiant beams of poetic licence. Bellona featured prominently in this etched night sky, looking down upon the people of Nemeton and their Space Marine overlords. The Eye of the Emperor, as the barbarians believed.

I knew what this was. A barrow. Perhaps even a tomb of the Chapter’s heroes. If I entered, would it be an intrusion? Or worse, a desecration? This place was unhidden. The archway stood open, without sign of a broken seal. The pathway, although overgrown, showed wear from the tracks of boots, some human, some transhuman. Clearly this place was visited by the Spears and their people. The Adeptus Astartes came here to mourn fallen brothers. The barbarians came here to mourn stolen sons.

But I was an outworlder. Protocol was difficult in these situations. If caught, I might be punished. That was bad enough, but Amadeus might be spurned for my crime, which would be a far worse fate.

Strangely, Tyberia’s words made the decision clear. Her question to our master, which I’d deemed so servile, was what guided me on.

*Is there anything you wish us to observe, lord?*

*Everything. Go.*

So I went.
VI
THE DEAD, IN THEIR BARROWS

1

Inside the tomb, the storm’s sparse light diminished to nothing. With the eyes my Chapter had given me, I saw my palm and fingers as a heat-smear of orange and red through my right eye, and a contoured monochrome impression through my left. Close one eye and it was like looking through a sniper rifle’s thermal scope. Close the other, and it was like seeing silhouettes through mist. No human eyes could have pierced that darkness.

Down, down, always down. Soon my boots struck thicker stone, leading into the first chamber. I smelt death, but not fresh death. Decay, but so far in the past that it lingered now as a musty suggestion of spice in the still air.

Thermal sight showed nothing alive but me and the barbed, emaciated vermin that Nemeton possessed in place of rats. Rats would at least scatter without challenge; these things raised their quills and hissed at me as I approached. I relaxed my throat and let my implanted vocoder mimic the sound back at them, adding my own snarl. That sent the little bastards scuttling away.

Alcoves lined the walls, each the resting place of a single corpse that had long gone to bone. Each one had their skinless hands folded over their chests, clutching the hilt of a corroded sword. A few heads were turned towards me, eyeless sockets watching my intrusion. Their dead grins offered no comment, only amusement laid bare by rot.

Up close, I examined several of them. The skeletons asleep there were betrayed by their massive frames. None were human in life; each one was an Adeptus Astartes warrior. As if their size wasn’t enough to confirm it, there was evidence that anyone aware of Space Marine ritual practices would easily recognise. Medicae saws had scraped against these bones. An Apothecary’s drills had gouged through them. Damage to the reinforced clavicle struts and the fused sternums indicated the removal of progenoid glands before internment. Even in death, their gene-seed lived on, implanted into adolescent males to grow successive generations of warriors.

Most of the bodies showed horrendous battle-scarring, even down to the bone. The damage wasn’t just from the wounds that killed them; these were
cartographies drawn over long lifetimes of war. Blade-scoring and projectile impacts marked every skeleton. Cybernetic limbs and organs were commonplace, disconnected from their anchors on the bodies now all soft tissue had decayed.

The Imperium was so used to Space Marines as the Emperor’s Angels of Death; how would Imperial citizens react to see this truth laid bare?

I should have been above such bias, but I’m as fallible as anyone else. I’d grown used to the invincibility of men like my master. I’d dressed Amadeus for war mere hours ago, paying no heed to his flesh, focused only on the mechanics of sealing him in ceramite. Reading his service record was a dry recitation; the next time I arrayed him for battle, I promised myself I would read the stories on his skin.

I moved on, deeper through the crypt. On the next level down, things changed. The bodies were barely skeletal. The decay here was the result of decades, not centuries, with evidence of hair, sinew and scraps of skin marking the clean bones.

And the bones themselves…

There were monsters interred here.

This was mutation. At first I couldn’t distinguish between the results of misfires in the genetic process or warp-born malformation. These twisted simulacra of Space Marines must have lived brief lives saturated by pain. Bloated ribcages. Swollen skulls. Withered limbs. The most telling sign of all: miniscule durametal threading showed, undecayed, in their rotten joints and layered in where tendons once coated bone.

These were Second Generation. Primaris warriors. Living and dying within the last century. Something had failed catastrophically during their growth processes.

Their chests and spines also showed the bone-markings of an Apothecary’s craft. I doubted their progenoid organs were taken for re-implanting. Far likelier they were harvested for medicae study or ritual incineration.

None of them showed any sign of war wounds. The majority displayed terminal cranial damage, inflicted by the puncturing bite of an Apothecary’s reductor, evidence of the day each one was put out of his misery. Several of the youngest didn’t even possess signs of medicae termination. They must have died natural deaths after short, unnatural lives.

My eye clicked with every third beat of my heart, recording all I saw. The
absorption of data within my memory spools was an unpleasant prickling behind my eyes.

That was the moment I knew I’d come too far and seen too much. Exploration of a gravesite could be explained. Witnessing a Chapter’s secret shame, or whatever this genetic disaster represented, was far harder to justify through diplomatic protocol. It was time to leave.

I turned, and I was no longer alone.

One of the bodies had moved. It stood at the far end of the chamber, slouching by the entrance. He – it – was a shadow against the other shadows, silent and swaying.

The moment I drew my laspistol, my terminus-eye locked on to the distant figure, relighting my thermal-optics by default. The dead man became a smear of heat-bleach resonance. Not cold at all, like his somnolent brothers. Not dead. And unlike the others, this corpse wore a storm cloak.

He watched me, as I watched him. When he spoke, even his calm tone was a sudden artillery of sound in the barrow’s black silence.

‘You should not be here.’

My eye clicked again, recording his murky image. As if that were a signal, he began to move towards me with an awkward stride that ate up the distance with disquieting swiftness. He limped with the speed a human would run. It did nothing to make him seem more natural. Images of undeath blossomed in my mind.

I found my voice. ‘Stay back.’

He didn’t obey. He stood almost close enough to touch, and though the darkness wasn’t diminished, I could better perceive the massacre of his form. The twist of his limbs. The curl of his hand into a frozen claw. The failed-muscle pull of his face to one side. The hang of one eye and the droop of his mouth. To see such familiar immensity so deformed triggered a flood of revulsion. Before me stood perfection ruined. An Angel of Death, cruelly broken.

If he had been allowed to live, surely it was as the caretaker of this mournful place. The cripple would chasten me now, I was sure. I shouldn’t be here, he had said it himself, and he would lay judgement upon me. If he reached for me, I would move aside and deploy my subdermal weaponry. I’d grant him one warning not to follow me, and if he pursued me, I would kill him.
If I could.
But he did none of those things. He asked me who I was.

‘I am Anuradha Daaz, Helot Secundus to Lieutenant Commander Amadeus Kaias Incarius of the most noble Mentor Legion.’

His eyes blinked out of time with each other. Yet another dissymmetry. ‘This is no place for your kind,’ he told me in a soft tone. ‘You should not be here, Anuradha Daaz.’

The words were hesitant. I couldn’t tell if he was cognitively stunted in some way. It was too dark to determine the quality of intelligence in his arrhythmic gaze, and the halting gentleness of his voice might have been the result of mental damage or simple respect for where we stood.

I didn’t reply. When every word may damn you, it is wiser to say nothing at all.

We studied one another in the dark, and he was the one to break the burgeoning silence. ‘Mentor thrall,’ he said. ‘Tell me what you think of this place.’

I didn’t dare lift my eyes from him. Nothing in his posture or the set of his muscles suggested battle-readiness, but that could change in half a heartbeat. Nor did I understand his words. The simplicity of them rendered them difficult. What did I think of this place? I asked him, did he mean Nemeton? Did he mean the tomb?

The mangled warrior gestured with his good arm, not the one curled into a claw against his chest. ‘No. Not the world. Not even the barrow, just this sublevel.’

He meant the mutated warriors that lay here. He meant his brethren.

I decided to risk the truth. ‘This is a place of sadness.’

Something changed in his mismatched stare. Surprise or interest, I wasn’t sure. ‘Sadness, is it? Why do you say so, Anuradha Daaz of the Mentors?’

I mirrored his earlier gesture. My bionic arm purred as it swept to indicate the closest corpses. ‘Because they died unwounded. They never fought for their Chapter.’

Whatever was in his gaze faded, replaced by an empathy rarely seen among the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes. He nodded, slowly, barely, and took his eyes from mine to look over his entombed kin. His words were quiet, as if in confession.
‘I am Serivahn of the Vargantes. These are my brothers. A failed generation, each one a blade that never drew blood.’

The Vargantes. The same clan, I noted, as Brêac. When I made this observation to Serivahn, he nodded once more. ‘Aye, the warleader and I share a bloodline. The Vargantes aren’t a large tribe, but we make our mark on the Chapter.’

He shifted his posture with a faint grunt, pained simply by standing straight. ‘What?’ he asked me suddenly. ‘Whatever you are thinking, say it. You’ll come to no harm.’

There was no delicate way to phrase it. ‘I possess a great deal of knowledge in the morphology of the Adeptus Astartes, and I know the Fifteen Sacred Stages of Gene-Seed Implantation. These men died due to failures in the adaptation process. Their bodies rejected the Primaris Alpha and Beta phases.’

Serivahn nodded. ‘This is so.’

I gestured to him, to the misgrowth of what should be a perfect physical form. The malformation of his bones and muscles must have been a constant torment. Every minute of this man’s life was spent in the throes of pain.

‘I believe your body rebelled in the same phases. So how is it that your brothers died, and you did not?’

His smile, if it could be called a smile, was a dragging back of one side of his face, bearing strangely flawless teeth.

‘Luck.’

Whose luck, I wondered? His, for surviving? Theirs, for escaping this fate? I wasn’t foolish enough to ask.

‘Why are you here, Anuradha? Why have you come to Nemeton?’

‘I go where my Chapter commands me. My master is here to gather information, assessing the disposition of forces in Elara’s Veil.’

Serivahn surely knew this, for he showed no surprise. He wiped the paralysed side of his mouth with the back of one hand.

‘And if that requires him to fight alongside the Spears?’

‘Then my master will fight. Willingly. Gladly.’

‘Then he’ll likely be welcomed,’ the flawed man replied. ‘For the Exilarchy darkens much of the Veil, these nights. Every warrior is precious.’ He smiled
ruefully, or at least he tried to: half of his face refusing to form the expression.
‘And what if we ask Amadeus to lie about what he sees here? What if we have secrets we wish kept on this side of the Rift?’

That, I couldn’t answer. There was no way of knowing. Amadeus’ role was to bear witness and report on all he saw. I struggled to imagine what circumstances might force him to omit the truth from his accounts.

‘I don’t know,’ I confessed. ‘My master is… traditional… regarding his duty.’

Serivahn gave a truly ugly smile, uglier still because of its flawed sincerity. ‘Straight-backed and serious, aye? We’ve met his type before.’

My vox-bead chimed, where it was surgically implanted into the tragus of my left ear. The sound was inaudible to humans and most animals, but between the silence of this place and the keenness of Serivahn’s senses, I saw his eyes narrow.

‘Your master calls, little thrall.’

‘He does.’

‘And so your evening’s spying comes to an end. Will you waste your breath and my time both, by pretending you never meant to venture into this hallowed tomb?’

The truth had served me well so far. I hoped it would do so once more. ‘I meant to come here,’ I admitted. ‘I never meant to get caught.’

He gave another of those facial-collapse smiles, but said nothing.

‘Am I allowed to leave?’

Serivahn nodded. Even that seemed to pain him. ‘You are. Your presence here is a transgression, but a forgivable one.’

I bowed, aware that as I cast my gaze down it would be the perfect chance for him to kill me. But he merely watched, then limped aside for me to pass.

‘Thank you, Anuradha.’

I turned, facing the mutilated angel once more. ‘For what?’

‘For understanding the nature of this place. For seeing sorrow here, instead of shame.’

It was my turn to nod. I walked on, and this time I did not look back.
Despite taking over an hour to return, I was the first of the helots to arrive. I questioned them about this over our private vox.

‘What?’ was Tyberia’s snap response. She was unable to keep the insect sting from her tone.

‘We weren’t summoned,’ Kartash qualified. Where Tyberia sounded irritated, Kartash was far more sanguine. ‘Most likely he requires something recorded. Tyberia is too far away to return with any haste, and I am not implanted with an archivist’s data-spools.’

‘Or perhaps you’re to be punished,’ suggested Tyberia, her tone silken. I could hear the smile in her words.

Given where I’d just been, that was entirely possible. Amadeus was no longer alone: Brêac of the Spears stood with him.

‘Finished your reconnaissance?’ the Spear asked. His eyes raked over me. Did he catch the scent of tomb-earth on my skin?

‘It was nothing so formal,’ I replied.

‘You took long enough to return. Our time on the home world is short, thrall. There’s a war to be fought, you know.’

A fact all too evident by the battered appearances of their ships in orbit. Whatever conflict drenched Elara’s Veil, the Spears were suffering heavily from it. After my arrival, Brêac was polite but disinterested, and despite summoning me, Amadeus was only marginally more aware of my presence. I had anticipated being largely beneath my master’s notice once the operation was underway, and so it proved to be. Yet the two warriors had been waiting for me.

‘Come,’ Amadeus commanded. ‘You are to archive what follows.’

When Brêac and Amadeus walked away, I followed. They discussed the Straits of Epona, and I listened while looking ahead to a small village of animal-hide tents at the clearing’s edge. The settlement had been erected without any evident sign of order, a temporary village for the duration of the
clan’s stay on this island.

Halfway to the tents, Brêac hailed a pack of children, their faces decorated in tribal symbols of red spiralling paint. Most of the boys covered their eyes, lowering their heads in a gesture that reeked of longstanding custom. Only the girl-children met the Space Marine’s gaze as he spoke.

‘Cyk’eiraxx ihagaur koruz?’

Several of the girls answered him in rapid Nemetese. Their childish tones were wary, with a matching look in their eyes.

‘What is this?’ Amadeus asked the other warrior.

‘I’ll know in a moment,’ Brêac replied. ‘Sar’jaug?’ he grunted down at the children. ‘Sar’jaug bawnh?’

Whatever he said earned a disjointed host of nods and gestures. The children pointed to one of the tent clusters, one that to my eyes looked no different from any of the others.

‘I would appreciate enlightenment,’ Amadeus pointed out.

Brêac gave an acknowledging growl. ‘That’s birth-paint on their faces. One of the tribe’s warlords is about to drop her whelp.’

‘I struggle to see why such an event demands our presence.’

‘It doesn’t. But we’re looking for someone and that’s where she’ll be.’

‘You are going to attend a birth.’ Amadeus spoke the words with care. ‘You cannot be serious.’

The Spear cast a sidelong glance at my master. ‘I’m perfectly serious. How deeply does the most high and noble Mentor Legion involve itself in the affairs of its own people?’

‘I am forbidden to speak of my Chapter,’ Amadeus replied. ‘But I assure you, we are not trained to act as midwives.’

For the first time, Brêac showed surprise, just the slightest catch in his movements. ‘Is that a joke?’

‘No. I am not skilled in midwifery.’

‘A shame. That was funny. You were almost likeable for a moment.’

When we entered the tent, we plunged into a confined world of charcoal-
stench, body-stink, oppressive brazier heat and the jagged sound of overlapping voices. Three women knelt on the ground around the new mother, chanting shamanic holiness. The mother herself lay on a bed of furs, bare and bathed in the sweat of her efforts. On her face was an expression of weary savagery. In her right hand she held a hatchet, the kind to be thrown by a hunter bringing down prey. With this blade she chopped down between her own thighs, severing the umbilical cord that bound her to her child.

The baby, in another woman’s hands, was silent and still. Its wet skin was mottled grey-white, its eyes closed.

I said nothing because there was nothing to say. I didn’t even move for fear of disturbing this hostile serenity. My first breaths in the tent felt like an intrusion. Discord burned in the tribeswomen’s eyes, directed not at me but at the Space Marines I accompanied. Two of the attendant midwives threw handfuls of salt against Brêac’s armour, hissing at him for his intrusion. He ignored them both, but I noted that he came no closer. His restraint appeased the tribeswomen.

An old woman was clearly the mistress of this ceremony. She wore nothing but her scars and tattoos, and the Nemetese runes inked across her filthy bare flesh were statements of grimy context, like splashes of gore laced with secret meaning. Trinkets and charms of wood and ivory clicked together in the snarled fall of her black hair. The scents of animal blood and fire-touched bronze haloed her in an aura.

The old woman closed the baby’s nose with a pinch of her dirty fingertips, then sucked at the infant’s mouth. A heartbeat later, she repeated the motion by holding the baby’s lips together, sucking at the child’s nostrils, one after the other. She spat wet darkness onto the ground once, twice, thrice.

The child still didn’t move. The old shaman didn’t cease her efforts, chanting jagged syllables over and over, murmuring them into the infant’s grey face. She sprinkled a chalky powder over the baby’s chest, then drizzled rainwater from the ends of her tangled hair over the baby’s closed eyes.

The child uttered a strangled caw, crow-like and pained, and gave a weak kick before falling still again.

‘I am well versed in human biology,’ I said, not knowing if they would even understand me. ‘The child is hypoxic. I can help.’

They understood. I saw it in their eyes, they understood enough of what I was saying to grasp the meaning of my offer, even if not the specifics of language. But the mother whispered a single word, ‘No,’ and looked to the
filthy shaman that held her newborn.

‘Asta kh’kagh,’ the witch said to the weary woman, and clutched the child to her chest as she turned and fled the tent. The three of us followed. I’d scarcely begun to dry off in the seething heat before the rain’s chill washed over me anew.

The ragged tribeswoman held the child above her head, shrieking to the dark, windy skies. Her howl – a piercing Iya-iya-iya! – ululated into the storm.

As the rain bathed us, the child gave a liquid cough, beginning to squirm. A moment later it opened its mouth and shrieked its displeasure to the heavens.

At my side, towering above me, the Adeptus Astartes warriors watched the baby’s restoration to life from behind their expressionless faceplates. Rainfall trickled down ceramite plating and dark eye-lenses. Neither of them said anything as the witch took the child back inside the tent. They were similarly unmoved as the sounds of the mother’s relief reached us outside.

‘Not long now,’ Brêac said. His attention was on me once more, in the mechanical way a security pict-feed would track for hidden weaponry. I suspected he was trying to assess the extent of my augmetics and, by extension, my potential lethality. When our eyes met, my gaze to his red crystal lenses, my terminus-eye itched and instinctively placed a targeting reticule in the centre of the Spear’s forehead.

‘Do you find fault with my helot?’ Amadeus asked. Brêac didn’t answer him. He kept his glare upon me.

‘I’ve never seen slaves like these. They’re weaponised far beyond any thrall I’ve ever seen.’

Amadeus answered for me. ‘These are not mere thralls. My Chapter’s helots are significantly augmetic.’

‘So I see. And where are the others? The brokenback that stinks of desperate piety? The maiden with ambition in her eyes?’

‘Scouting, lord,’ I replied. ‘They’re watching and learning what they can of your culture.’

Brêac looked back at my master. ‘You keep odd company, Mentor.’

Amadeus made no effort to hide his derisive tone at that remark. ‘You have brought me to a mournful barbarian revel, where painted tribespeople ward themselves against us as if Space Marines are ghosts risen from the grave. I
would argue, Brêac, that my Chapter-serfs are the only rational humans here. It is you who keeps curious company.’

Brêac’s laughter was a dark chuckle. ‘Come, now,’ he said. ‘Let’s not fight.’

But the night had been long, and my master’s patience was ebbing. ‘I believe I have seen enough of ritual and tradition this evening. We must discuss matters of war.’

‘Must we indeed? That sounds serious. Is there still a war to be fought on the Imperial side of the Rift, or did you run the Straits of Epona just so you could taste battle for the first time?’

Amadeus returned the Spear’s stare. I was reminded of pict-footage I had seen years before, of predatory simian beasts sizing one another up, weighing the odds of a killing blow on the first attack. I could only guess what the two warriors’ facial expressions were behind their helms.

‘You seek to insult me, Spear.’

Brêac laughed again. ‘Do I? This is a far warmer welcome than we could have given you. Do you bring us reinforcement? No. You bring us a shattered warship and a single warrior, and you stand before us clad in the Scorpions’ colours – colours your Chapter wears only because better men no longer can. So why are you here, Amadeus? Why did you sail the Straits? Were you sent to watch us bleeding alone out here, and report back to the creature that calls itself Guilliman?’

‘This hostility is unnecessary,’ my master said, ‘and your words are vile. I am here for the good of the Imperium. Speak ill of the Primarch Reborn again and I will be forced to note your heresy in my mission archives.’

‘Heresy.’ Brêac turned the word into a growl. ‘The Imperium doesn’t exist here, Mentor. There is our territory and nothing more. The people of Elara’s Veil call upon us for aid, not the Imperium. The worlds of this region stand or fall by the blood we shed. The Imperium is a place where the Astronomican still shines, and hordes of princelings like you fight safely at the side of the monster that calls itself a primarch.’

A sterility filled Amadeus’ posture; a threat too cold to be called graceful. ‘He is the Primarch Reborn. You insult the Emperor’s own son.’

Brêac’s demeanour remained one of solemn defiance. ‘I insult the creature that claims it is the Emperor’s son. Spare me your indignant purity, Amadeus. We have neither the time nor the patience for it, here.’
Before my master could reply, Brêac turned to the warlord’s tent. ‘Cyk’eirahx!’ He barked the word in his harsh tongue. ‘Cyk’eirahx, gruach crovuh sei siilgh!’

The tent flap opened and the naked, filthy witch-woman stepped out into the rain. Devoid of any respect whatsoever, she hissed at the two Space Marines. As if that weren’t enough to make her point, she spat onto the ground by their boots and rattled a collection of wooden charms at them. A stream of unintelligible Nemetese spilled from her scarred lips.

Brêac gestured to her. ‘This is whom we seek.’

Amadeus stared at her. He stared right at the wretched crone, shaking his head gently. ‘I pray this is a jest.’

The word geas exists in numerous Imperial cultures, spelled and pronounced hundreds of variant ways. In some it is a lifelong taboo or curse branded upon a person, becoming an icon of superstition, without evidence, that affects the way they live their lives. In others it’s nothing more than a historical bond granted by tribal shamans to make men and women follow the same virtues as their ancestors. Few cultures apply the term with any genuine psychic talent or supernatural imprint.

The night we arrived on Nemeton, my master was given his geas.

The witch’s tent had seemed large from the outside. Inside it, we were crushed together in the dirty heat. I was gently compressed against my master’s side, my shoulder against the rain-slicked cold of his white ceramite. The great red eagle’s head of the Mentors Chapter, a symbol I’d been raised to serve, gazed down at me from his pauldron. The power pack on his back emitted a constant, vibrating drone that made my skin crawl and my gums itch. When he moved in the stillness, even the smallest motion was a gunshot of armoured joints.

The witch crouched naked on a beast-hide rug, and we crouched around her, breathing in the foul air of her home. She was clean only where the rain had washed her, and she smiled in sardonic welcome as we took our places. I wished she hadn’t. Her teeth were a battlefield of competing decay. Those that weren’t black were yellow, and those that weren’t black or yellow were missing.

Clay pots held the reagents for the crone’s heathenism: herbs, trinkets, powders. The skulls of small animals hung from the tent’s support beams,
dangling in our faces. The entire skeleton of a bird of prey had been reconstructed and articulated with dirty string, splashed liberally with black ink and blue war paint, to what end I could only guess. One pot held leaves gone rancid with mould, in another was a substance with the viscosity of tar and the scent of digestive acids. In the corner, a wicker basket shivered with the movements of whatever living vermin was inside. I smelled human and animal dung. I smelled hair grease and sweat so ingrained in the air it had been absorbed into the cloth of the tent. A single crudely fashioned glass jar held a murky, separating fluid with round shapes floating in its depths. When I peered closer, I realised our hostess was fermenting several animal eyeballs in human piss.

Rheumy grey eyes roamed over my facial bionics before she clicked her fingers in front of my nose, watching the movements of my eyes, testing to see how I would react. When I did nothing at all, she leaned closer, running blackened fingertips down my reconstructed cheek. Her nails scraped down the metal.

I leaned away then, not from the contact, but the smell. The rain had cleaned some of the filth from her fingers, but her skin stank of ancient grime and the birth-fluids of the newborn she’d held up to the storm.

My withdrawal must have amused her, for she bared the catastrophe of her smile again, before turning to regard my master.

‘Show me your face.’ Her voice was rustling parchment. It was the sound of treading on dead leaves.

My master looked to Brêac, who nodded, but remained helmed. Collar seals sighed as Amadeus disengaged the locks and pulled his helmet clear. He was far too gifted at self-mastery to show any reaction to the stench of our surroundings. Such things are irrelevant to Space Marine senses.

As the witch looked upon his bare face for the first time, she slipped from awe to cackling joy. Those filthy fingers caressed my master’s face with all the shamelessness of a merchant inspecting a slave at auction. Gone was her wide-eyed wonder. The simple revelation of his features delighted her.

‘The condemned men of other worlds are not so different to the condemned men of Nemeton.’

‘Condemned?’ asked Amadeus.

‘Condemned,’ the witch avowed, and scratched her nails down his ceramite shoulder guard. ‘Condemned to die in this armour, a walking ghost, instead of
living as a man.’
‘To wear this armour is an honour, witch. An honour I fought long and hard for.’
‘Then you are foolish as well as condemned.’ She lifted her hand away. ‘Who were you, in your human life? A boy that dreamed? A child that hoped? Who was the youth torn from his parents’ arms and carried into the stars to die for the God-Emperor?’

Amadeus allowed no emotion to show. ‘I am forbidden to speak of such things.’

The crone pressed a fingertip against her own gums, doubtless at what was a morass of stinging infection. She didn’t beseech him for answers. Even his reluctance amused her.

‘Brêac of the Vargantes was a boy taken when my mother’s mother still lived and fought for our tribe. I read the story in his lifeblood when he returned. Now he brings you here for me to read the story in yours.’

Again, Amadeus looked to Brêac, who nodded a second time.

‘I will consent to partaking of this heathen superstition,’ my master allowed. He looked down at the witch, a frail woman it would take him less than a second to kill. ‘Do you need to know my name? My rank?’

‘I care nothing for either.’ The witch licked the graveyard of her teeth. ‘Now hush. No more talk.’ She drew one of the bronze knives resting on a cloth stained red and brown. ‘Open your mouth, outworlder.’

Amadeus didn’t hesitate. He didn’t fear this creature. My master leaned forward with another growl of servos and opened his mouth. The witch clattered her teeth in a gesture I took to be disapproval.

‘Show me your tongue.’

Amadeus glanced to the blade in her hand, and offered his tongue forward. I tensed on his behalf, my digital weapons prickling, my terminus-eye itching, wanting to ignite in my master’s defence. For the first time since making planetfall, I felt the nakedness of a combat deployment without my armour or weapons.

The witch stroked downwards with the blade, swift and shallow, a surprisingly elegant flick. Amadeus didn’t even blink. He kept his eyes on her as his blood trickled into her palm. The slice sealed within ten heartbeats, but it was enough.
‘Good,’ said the crone, ignoring the genetic wonder of my master’s regeneration. Staring, instead, into his leaked gore. ‘Good.’

The blood spread in a wet cobweb, painting the creases of her withered hand. She tilted her gory palm towards the firelight to see better. Already the blood was drying, far faster than a human’s would clot, and she traced a cracked fingernail along the pathways of her palm, not with any particular sense of patience or care, but with a keenness that put me in mind of Tyberia when she focuses on her mission studies to the exclusion of everything else around her.

All in all, it took no longer than fifteen beats of my heart. She used no trinkets, invoked no blessings, offered up no whispers or chants. She read the blood in her palm; the way it spilled and trickled and dried. The way it reflected the light. Then she looked up and met my master’s eyes.

‘You will be free on the day you laugh above your own grave.’

Silence met her proclamation. In that silence, I wondered if she’d seek to preserve my master’s blood as a holy reagent for future rites. It was nothing less than the blood of the Emperor’s Chosen, after all, right there in her hand. Instead she wiped her palm on an already soiled rag and tossed it into the fire. The rag crackled as it burned away.

Amadeus saw that Brêac wasn’t going to offer any enlightenment. ‘I do not understand,’ he said to the witch.

‘You will,’ she said with curious gentleness. ‘There will come a day when the words have meaning to you.’

I was familiar with Space Marine expressiveness, and I could see the serenity my master wore was a lie. The dilation of his pupils and the brief, subtle tension in his zygomaticus tendons betrayed his discomfort. Amadeus wasn’t a man that enjoyed mysteries. I was learning more about him in a few minutes than I had during the many months of warp flight.

‘I had expected to find some insight in this prophecy,’ he said. ‘Why else would I be subjected to it?’

She sighed with the weariness of the very old explaining something profoundly complex to the very young.

‘This is no prophecy. It is a geas. A geas may be guidance for the soul, or a law of the spirit that will see you dead if it is broken. In one warrior’s blood, I saw that he would die on the night he turned his back on a foe. And so that is what I told him. Did it mean that he must never run from a battle, even if all seems lost? Did it mean he must be aware of treachery even among those he
considers his friends? I know not. I care not. That is his geas to live with. The meaning is his to find.’

Amadeus’ eyes flicked to the rag in the flames, now reduced to ash. ‘And you saw this from a spatter of blood?’

The witch’s dark eyes locked upon my master’s own once more. She sucked in air through infected teeth. ‘In the dance of blood, I see the shape of a soul. Not events yet to come. Not the meaning of the feelings inside my skull. Just the geas, from the shapes. I looked into the wine of your veins and knew only one thing, carried on the whispers of the ancestors… You will be free on the day you laugh above your own grave.’

‘And if I do not… perform this act?’

‘Then perhaps you will live and never be free. Or perhaps you will die. I know not. I care not.’

Amadeus relented at last. ‘I understand.’

‘No, you do not. But you will.’ She gave another wheeze that may or may not have been a laugh, then she turned in her brittle-bone crouch, sighing as she eased her old muscles. ‘And you then,’ she said to me. ‘No tongue blood, this time. You are not clad in holy metal like your master.’

Ceramite was not metal, but I decided against correcting her. It wasn’t my place to educate the primitives of this planet.

The shaman beckoned to me, and specifically to my real arm, rather than the bionic limb. ‘Give me your hand. Your real hand. Not the one made of steel and bronze.’

Neither of those materials was used in the construction of my arm, but I let that pass, as well. I looked to my master for him to intervene – for surely I had no part to play in this ritual – but instead he granted permission with a curt nod. The shaman closed her grimy claw around my fingers, wetly exhaling.

‘Even in this hand, your bones are metal.’

It was true. I stayed silent as she rested the edge of the bronze knife in my palm. I refused to twitch, vowing to show no weakness or hesitation in front of my master. The witch tapped the blade against my skin.

‘Is there true blood in this arm, flowing around your iron bones?’

‘There is.’
The knife moved. Quick. Precise.

She turned my hand as my blood welled, and we watched it dribble into her palm. I counted the droplets. She stopped at twenty, releasing me from her ancient talon. From my monitron bracer I ejected a thumb-size canister of skin sealant, spraying it over the wound. The brief khlaurine scent of the chemical mist was a merciful respite from the stink of this witch’s haven.

The crone did just as she did with Amadeus, though before she spoke, she gave a dry, creaking sound in her throat. I took it to be laughter from a woman that laughed so rarely she barely knew how to do it.

‘Do not believe the broken man’s promises.’

I stared back at her, not even knowing what expression was moving across my face. She was already wiping my blood from her palm, cleaning her skin with her wet hair.

‘But–’

‘Did you hear nothing?’ she cut into my question. ‘Did you hear nothing I told your master? Do not ask me for meaning. I know not. I care not. This is your geas, as is written in your blood, as whispered on the winds in the breath of my ancestors. Do not believe the broken man’s promises.’

‘The broken man,’ I repeated.

Amadeus was watching me closely. ‘Do you know of such a man?’

‘I don’t know, master. Perhaps.’

Serivahn, I thought. The cripple in the tomb. Had he promised me anything?

‘You will debrief me later,’ commanded Amadeus.

When I agreed, the witch grinned once more, rubbing her gnarled hands together with a grandmother’s glee. The wheeze she rasped out was almost a laugh.

‘She despises you, warrior. Ah, but what is the story here? What taints your aura with such sweet hatred?’

Amadeus looked to the witch, then back to me. He said nothing and wore no expression, which did nothing to ease my confusion or discomfort.

‘You’re mistaken,’ I said to the crone. I could hardly relate my role to her and expect a primitive shaman to grasp the concepts of my service and training. I had to be blunt and simple. ‘He’s my master. I serve willingly, and with pride.’
But that only delighted her more. ‘I did not see it in your blood, no, for the blood tells of what will be. I speak of what *is*. I see it now in the shadows behind your eyes. Such sweet hate. Did he wrong you? Or do you hate all of his kind?’

I turned to Amadeus, hoping he would pay the witch’s foolish words no heed. He sensed the threat of this madness lasting even longer, for he rose on humming armour joints.

‘Come, Helot Secundus. Attend me outside. We are done with this.’

He left without a word to the witch. Brêac bid her a more formal farewell, as did I, offering her a brief bow.

She returned a smile, hideously toothless and hideously knowing.

Outside in the rain, as Amadeus replaced his helmet, I swore to him that I had no clue what the crone was speaking of. He shook his head, dismissing the subject. It, too, was evidently beneath him.

Brêac broke the silence that followed. ‘She was speaking of me.’

We looked at him, waiting for more.

‘My geas,’ Brêac clarified. ‘“You will die on the night you turn your back on a foe.” She was speaking of me. She gave me that geas, when she was a child first coming in to her powers.’

‘Have you any insight into what she meant by it?’ my master asked.

The Spear shrugged, his pauldrons snarling with the movement. ‘Who can know for certain? I try not to run from a fight, though. No sense in tempting fate, eh?’

Brêac’s chuckle was a vox-tainted grind, a thawing of his Nemetese solemnity. We had geases now. Did that make us, if not part of the Spears’ culture, at least welcome on its edge? I wondered what would have happened had the witch refused to read the words in our blood.

My master wasn’t blind to any of this. He regarded Brêac as we walked through the clearing, far from the tribesmen with their heartbeat-drums and their chanted dirges.

‘The ritual was a test of trust, was it not? Something in the witch’s judgement let you know whether you would trust me or exile me.’

Brêac grunted, the sound ursine and irritable. ‘You break everything down so literally.’
‘So I am incorrect?’

The Spear let his gaze wander over the fires, over the silhouettes of distant kin that believed him to be nothing more than a lingering spirit. ‘I didn’t say you were wrong, Mentor, just too literal. Maybe I trust you because you have the same soul-bond as the rest of us. Maybe I just realise a truth you haven’t yet faced.’

‘And what might that be?’

‘Your mission,’ the Spear replied. ‘It will never be completed.’

Amadeus watched the other warrior intently now. ‘How do you come by this belief?’

Brêac’s sweeping hand took in the cloudy sky, and the few patches of nebula-stained starfield between the rolling thunderheads. ‘Your ship in orbit. What is its name?’

‘In Devout Abjuration,’ Amadeus replied.

‘Aye. From the reports I’ve received, that vessel is going nowhere for at least another season. It’s well and truly shitted.’

Amadeus cleared his throat. ‘That is an indelicate turn of phrase, but an accurate one.’

‘Even when your ship is starworthy, she won’t run the Straits again. You have, what, a third of your crew left alive? Even if we gave you ten thousand more souls to crew the ship, you’ve already said it yourself – there’s no record of any Spears vessels making it through to your side of the Rift. What makes you think you’ll survive the journey home?’

Brêac paused, resting a hand on my master’s shoulder guard. The first gesture of brotherhood. ‘We’ve sent nine of them, Amadeus. Nine. That’s almost half a million souls and servitors, never seen again. Almost a hundred of those souls were Spears. Gone. Lost. Dead.’

My master considered that. ‘Why did you send them through?’

‘Why?’ Brêac snorted at the question. ‘We’re under siege here. We sent those ships to reach the Imperium. To request reinforcements. To see if the Emperor still lives and Terra still holds. We sent one every five years at first, but it’s been decades now. We can’t risk the losses. We need every blade and boltgun, let alone every warship.’

Amadeus touched his armoured fingers to his own mouth grille, as though contemplating the now-sealed wound on his tongue. ‘I accept the odds of
returning through the Rift are not in my favour. Still, once my mission is complete and I have seen what I need to see, I must try. Duty is duty. Orders are orders.’

‘Orders from who? Guilliman?’

‘Yes. Orders from the Primarch Reborn and from my Chapter Master, Nisk Ran-Thawll.’

‘So be it.’ Brêac let the matter lie. ‘For now, return to your ship, Mentor. I will consult with my brethren. We will decide if you’re to be allowed to join us when we wage war.’

‘I thought the decision was yours. Are you not Lord of the Third Warhost?’

‘It is, and I am. But I wish to speak with my kinsmen. This isn’t just about the Spears, Amadeus. What I decide here will affect the entire Adeptus Vaelarii. Return to your ship and wait. It will not take long. A few days at most.’

My master was guarded. ‘And if you refuse?’

‘Then your ship will still be repaired. But the Veil isn’t safe, Mentor. Strike out into our territory on your own, and you’ll be dead even swifter than you would be if you sailed home.’

‘To sail back into the Rift is to die. To sail alone into Elara’s Veil is also to die. You do not present me with any appealing options, Brêac.’

The barbarian was unmoved. ‘I don’t, do I? You’ll have to settle for the truth, instead.’

Amadeus held his tongue. He nodded, accepting the other warrior’s judgement. I’d not realised I was about to speak until I heard my own voice.

‘I have a question, if I may?’

My master nodded. ‘Speak, Helot Secundus.’

‘It’s a question for Lord Brêac, master.’

Brêac regarded me through his red eye-lenses. I could see nothing of the man behind them. ‘Ask, Anuradha.’

‘What if the witch had seen something in our fates that troubled her or suggested treachery?’

Brêac drew a bronze blade from his belt. In his hand, it was a dagger. If I’d held it, it would have been an Iron Era longsword. Rain slicked the blade
from the moment it touched the air. The bronze shone in his armoured hands, lit by wet moonlight.

‘Had that been the case, I would have plunged this gladius into the side of your master’s throat while he was distracted by the old sorceress. Then I’d have snapped your neck before you could use your terminus-eye. After your bodies were burned, we would’ve killed everyone aboard your vessel and taken it for ourselves.’

Amadeus went still. I imagined his eyes narrowing inside his helm.

‘Do you jest?’ he asked the Spear.

‘From time to time.’ Brêac paused, looking back over the revel fires. ‘Not right now, though.’
Before the Spears reached their decision, the three of us took counsel without Amadeus. It was Tyberia that initiated this little conclave. She gathered us in our communal chamber aboard *In Devout Abjuration* while our master was locked away in seclusion.

The ship was crawling with repair crews and tech-adepts from Bellona that gazed at us as if we had descended from pages of myth – and then entirely failed to inspire them. We were emissaries from the Imperium yet we brought them no hope at all. Undergoing heavy repair in orbital dock above Nemeton’s moon, the ship’s superstructure groaned and whined as if resenting the flashing scratches of cutting torches and fusion-sealers.

In our chambers, Tyberia was in fine form.

‘The Spears will refuse,’ she insisted. ‘They have no trust in their hearts.’

Kartash took issue with her simplistic grasp of the situation. ‘They have weathered almost a century of warfare against this “Exilarchy”, unaware whether the Imperium still exists. These are warriors that have bled and bled, alone out here, with almost no hope of reinforcement. They will take us with them. They cannot afford the luxury of mistrust.’

Tyberia’s smile was a servile patina over a sneer. It was an expression I was already weary of seeing on her face. ‘I respect your experience,’ she told Kartash, ‘but mistrust is a wellspring that never runs dry. What does our arrival signify in their eyes? They’ve cried out for reinforcements for decades. Such is their desperation that they’ve sent several of their ships into oblivion on the chance of breaking through to the Imperium. Now they’re met with a single warship, captained by a single warrior, one that wears the heraldry of their long-dead brother-warriors among the Star Scorpions. Our presence is an insult to them. And worse, they see it as a judgement.’

She was sermonising now. Any temptation I’d felt to engage with either of them drained away.

‘They see our master as an arbiter,’ Tyberia continued, ‘sent to weigh their actions over the last century and judge them. I believe they will judge him and
find him wanting.’

Kartash disagreed at once. ‘Amadeus’ service record is faultless.’

‘Will that be enough?’ countered Tyberia. ‘An exemplary soldier, yes. But an exemplary ally? A trustworthy brother?’

On and on they argued, in the polite bickering of two souls forced to share the same space day after day when tolerance begins to erode. Kartash’s tone turned from generous to condescending. Tyberia’s rejections went from eloquent to petulant.

The only thing they agreed on was that we would not be kept waiting long. We’d all marked the hasty repairs going on in orbit above Bellona. The ships in Nemeton’s system had taken a recent beating and were undergoing rapid maintenance to redeploy. The Spears plainly couldn’t spare these warships from battle for long.

‘What is it about the Exilarchy that makes them such vicious foes?’ Tyberia asked.

‘Numbers.’ Kartash looked at her, surprised she even asked. ‘It can only be numbers. What else would force two Chapters to fight defensively for years on end? They likely face an overwhelming tide of enemies.’

Tyberia accepted the answer, but not without doubt. ‘I think it’s more than that.’

Kartash chuckled. ‘And what brings you to such a conclusion with such little information?’

‘Because of Brêac’s demeanour when we landed.’ Tyberia was speaking softly, her eyes lowered in thought. ‘He mentioned the Exilarchy’s tricks. And his voice was modulated with a degree of frustration. I’d argue these elements suggest the enemy is cunning, and possesses skilful leadership.’

Kartash mused on the possibility, then turned to me. ‘And you, Anuradha? What are your thoughts?’

I’d been hoping they wouldn’t ask me. I had no desire to descend into their point-scoring chatter. I didn’t care which of them was the rightest.

‘Anuradha?’ Tyberia pressed.

‘I think we’ll find out soon enough.’

But she wouldn’t let it lie. ‘You think more than that. I can tell.’

‘Well, I think you’re both right.’
Kartash adopted a lecturing tone. ‘Consider this a thought exercise, Helot Secundus. Speculate, please. Consider it an order.’

Fine. ‘I think you’re both right, but there’s a graver truth at play.’

They both waited for me to continue. Even Tyberia had stopped smirking – a small but welcome mercy.

Ultimately, it hadn’t been Brêac’s reaction that awakened my suspicions. It was the words of Serivahn, in the tomb. Every warrior is precious.

‘If the war between the Adeptus Vaelarii and the Exilarchy has been raging for a century,’ I said, ‘it may mean more than overwhelming numbers or intelligent, tactical leadership. Remove all other variables, and what remains? What’s the simplest reason a deadlock would occur?’

Kartash nodded, taking my point. ‘Because the odds are even.’

‘Exactly. I believe the Exilarchy has Adeptus Astartes warriors, as well.’

They began to discuss that dread possibility, but I left them to it, focusing instead on preparing my armour. The suits of carapace armour we wore in the field were white. We were forbidden to wear the heraldic mix of white and green worn by the Chapter’s battle-brothers, for they are a breed apart from mortal men and women. To emulate them too closely would disrespect the machine-spirits of their ceramite suits. We weren’t soldiers, no matter how highly we were trained. Our place wasn’t on the battlefield in regimental numbers, clogging trenches or leaping from Valkyries. We were operatives and agents, not ground-pounders.

Our personal armouries were similar to those possessed by storm troopers, though in the field each of us wore a communication relay backpack far in advance of Tempestus Scion technology, and our helms were sequenced with rangefinder monocles and target designator auspex feeds that were closer to Adeptus Astartes wargear than anything seen in service within the Astra Militarum.

I was permitted to own three weapons drawn from the Chapter armoury. Each one of these instruments of war would have been worth a fortune on the black markets that plague every civilised Imperial world. That is, they would be, if they could be activated and made to function. Our wargear possessed numerous fail-safes to prevent their misuse in enemy hands.

My primary weapon was a pump-action Engager-pattern assault shotgun, keyed to my biometrics. It could only be fired, reloaded or dismantled if its receptor plates detected my touch. Engagers were designed and crafted by the
Mentor Legion’s Techmarines with one use in mind: they were Space Marine-killers.

I had never fired mine against such a target. At standard range, it would breach ceramite. At close range, it would buckle adamantium. As with all Mentor weaponry, additional modifications were made after its initial creation. Most notable of these was mounted on the weapon’s underside and studded with suspensors for weight compensation: a three-shot auxiliary grenade launcher. Our Engagers were capable of launching vortex grenades, such was the level of training and trust we’d received in our roles as helots.

The second weapon was at once the simplest and most complicated. My left eye had been replaced by an augmetic sphere, smooth and silver. This was a terminus-eye, capable of discharging a pulse of energy equivalent in strength and intensity to an Imperial Guard hellpistol. I had possessed this implant for six years, and it had never stopped itching in its socket. The discomfort was minimal, so I lied at each medicae assessment, assuring my examiners that there was no such sensation, for fear of the Chapter removing such a precious and honoured gift.

The third weapon was a foot-long combat blade, mounted in the housing of my right vambrace. It could be deployed as a punch dagger or, with time to dismantle the vambrace, removed and wielded as a short sword. It possessed a modest generator capable of energising the blade, though its function as a power weapon was limited to short bursts.

Beyond this arsenal, I was also allowed to own various mundanities: a laspistol of unremarkable make; a bandolier of grenades; several short knives of the kind seen on countless worlds in the hands of any ganger, thug or mercenary.

I looked over my personal armour as I placed the last blade back in the stowage trunk. Its newest addition was the storm cloak I was given on Nemeton, which I folded and placed next to my rebreather helmet.

‘Anuradha?’

I turned at the sound of my name. Both Kartash and Tyberia were watching me. What, they asked, did I believe would happen? Would the Spears allow us to accompany them?

‘I’ll be back later,’ was my reply.

Then I walked away. The bulkhead sealed behind me with a metallic slam.
My master was working, reviewing data spilling down three screens at once. He deactivated one of them as I entered his chambers, but not swiftly enough. I cycled back through the last few seconds of imagery recorded by my terminus-eye to see what he had been studying: binaric information pertaining to Elara’s Veil. Specifically, the region of the nebula that surrounds Khamun-Sen, abandoned home world of the long-dead Star Scorpions.

For the first time in our association, Amadeus looked uncomfortable. Guilty, even. Caught looking at something shameful.

‘Helot Secundus. You were not summoned. You will debrief me regarding your geas later. I am occupied at the moment.’ Even in his disregard for the Nemetese practice, he was neutral enough not to spice the word with a sneer.

‘This isn’t solely about the witch’s prophecy, master.’

‘Noted. Well, I have no need of your service at this time.’

‘I understand, master. However, I have need of yours. Will you indulge me? It pertains the deployment, of course.’

He raised a black eyebrow. That was encouraging. By his standards, it was positively expressive. I took it as permission to continue.

‘Have you reviewed my pict imagery from the surface?’

‘Twice,’ he said. Nothing less than I expected from him.

‘May I ask your thoughts on what I saw in the tomb?’

‘My thoughts are as follows. Firstly, it is a quaint local custom in keeping with the signifiers of a tribal culture. Secondly, whatever trials they underwent in implementing the Primaris gene-strains, they overcame them and eventually met with success. That is admirable. Thirdly, the caretaker you saw, the failed Space Marine that still lived, should have been executed as an abomination of the Emperor’s pure intent. And finally, I see the obvious correlation between the witch’s words and the malformed Primaris warrior you encountered. However, nothing he said could be construed as a promise. Does this answer your queries?’

‘Not all of them, master.’

He was giving me his full attention. ‘If this is an attempt at idle discourse, it is both ill-timed and ill-reckoned.’

‘It’s neither,’ I assured him.

Amadeus key-typed in the air in front of his chest. The inscribae thimbles on
his fingertips pulsed as they connected with the hololithic interface only he could see. In response, one of the monitors flicked to the gallery of stills I recorded in the Nemetese tomb. I saw that dark place again, my own memories desaturated through image resolvers and beamed onto my master’s screen. The flickering images ceased cycling, pausing on one of the deformed corpses.

‘Speak,’ Amadeus bid.

‘These warriors…’

‘These failures,’ my master corrected me.

‘Failures. Yes. These dead men, and the Spears we have seen thus far, were all born of the Second Generation. Yet I can find nothing in the archives relating to the Indomitus Crusade reaching Elara’s Veil. Is this knowledge sequestered?’

‘No.’ Amadeus didn’t even attempt to bring anything up on the monitor. ‘Not sequestered, merely unworthy of detailed record. Lord Commander Guilliman and his crusade never reached Elara’s Veil. The Emperor’s Spears and Celestial Lions received the data-threads to create warriors of the Second Generation, but no Primaris-breed soldiers already at full maturation. Such was a common occurrence in the earliest years of the Rift. The knowledge of creating Second Generation warriors mattered to Chapters’ futures far more than a brief influx of men and materiel. So the knowledge was delivered to them.’

‘This Chapter suffered gravely before they refined that knowledge into something usable.’

‘It did,’ conceded my master. ‘As have others, I am sure. Necessity is an ugly overseer.’

‘And who brought that knowledge across the Great Rift?’

Amadeus deactivated the monitor. All curiosity had left his features now. ‘An Imperial strike team. A small force led by agents of the Adeptus Custodes. It hardly matters. Where is this avenue of query leading, Helot Secundus?’

I thought of the dead cities, abandoned generations ago, on the surface of Nemeton. Those places civilisation failed to take hold. I thought of the Spears’ hostility to my master, as a brother of the Mentor Legion. I thought of Brēac’s refusal to show his face to the tribe that birthed him. I thought of mothers shielding their sons as the Space Marines passed, covering their
children’s eyes.

‘I seek context, master. I seek to understand the Chapter you have been deployed to assess.’

‘That is admirable, yet you are doing so in a clumsy manner. My time is precious. You know this. It vexes me that I must remind you of it. Persist, and I shall note your lapse in the mission archive.’

That stung, but I refused to let it show. ‘Do you like them, master?’

He scowled. It was the most expressive I had ever seen him, though I could not tell if it was anger or surprised confusion.

‘Do I what?’

‘The Emperor’s Spears, master. Do you admire them?’

‘What relevance does this triviality have on the Nemeton Deployment?’

I stood my ground. ‘As I said, I seek context. Would you tell me of the Spears through the lens of your perception? What do you see when you look upon them?’

I was sure then that he believed I was wasting his time. He considered this beneath him. I braced for the dismissal I was certain was coming, but instead, he surprised me.

‘I had hoped they would welcome word from the Imperium, even if the messenger wore the colours of our Chapter.’ He hesitated then, unsure if he wished to continue. This was outside the common remit of master and thrall exchange, bordering on personal reflection, and Amadeus wasn’t one of the officers that liked to indulge in such sharing. On the rare occasions he stooped to it, he’d chosen Kartash for conversational musing, not Tyberia or myself.

But I wanted the insight. I pressed for more, and Amadeus granted it.

‘Did your training aboard the Mitrah delve into the Mentor Legion’s prehistory?’ he asked.

I nodded, for although I knew little more than the basics of the Mentors’ foundations, it was still a trove of knowledge beyond what other humans outside the helot caste could possibly possess.

‘We are a young Chapter,’ my master allowed, as if I’d passed the judgement myself. ‘Not even half a millennium old. What do you know of the original Chapter 888, the warriors that wore our colours?’

I knew what most helots knew. I knew that the Star Scorpions were victims
of degenerating gene-seed, their bloodline tragically unsustainable, and their
Chapter dissolved with honour – to be reborn centuries later with a new
genetic lineage. The new Chapter, clad in the Star Scorpions’ colours and
assigned the same number in the great Index Astartes, was envisaged not as a
blunt front-line instrument, but as a surgical tool. They were gifted superior
and occasionally experimental wargear by the Adeptus Mechanicus
priesthood, and assigned to support, train and, in some cases, judge other
Imperial factions. This newborn Chapter took the keen, proud raptor as its
symbol, and was granted the name Mentor Legion.

I related this to my master.

He shook his head at once. ‘The Scorpions, whom the Spears mourn as
fallen brothers, did not perish from genetic instability. Not entirely. That was
their death sentence, and the degradation of their bloodline shortened the life
of their Chapter to mere decades. They would have died out all too soon. But
their destruction came about through other means.’

He halted at the look on my face and cut off my objection. ‘Be calm, Helot
Secundus. This lore is sequestered from the thrall caste, but not forbidden.’

He meant he would not need to kill me for learning what he now taught. My
relief must have shown, for his eyes flickered with what might have been his
cold version of amusement.

‘The Scorpions, still strong despite the affliction of their gene-seed, were lost
on crusade.’

*Lost on crusade.* Words of honour masking the blackest fate a fleet could
suffer, being devoured by the warp. My master saw my understanding.

‘There were communications,’ he added. ‘Abortive fragments, with little in
the way of clarity. Astropathic cries from a fleet trapped in the warp, mortis-
calls from dying minds…’ Amadeus waved the ideas away, for they were
speculations and he cherished only precision and fact. ‘Adeptus Astartes
records state the Chapter was destroyed in the warp, and the Bell of Lost
Souls tolled for them on Terra. And years later, when our Chapter was
founded with the uncommon privilege of wearing a dead Chapter’s colours
and assuming their place in the rolls of the Index Astartes, the Emperor’s
Spears sent ambassadors to vociferously argue against our birth. They
claimed it dishonoured their fallen brethren.’

Were they right? I wondered. Did my master wonder the same thing?
Something in his gaze told me I shouldn’t stretch our tenuous bond further
and ask him.
‘With this in mind,’ Amadeus admitted, ‘it makes it difficult to think in terms of admiration or antagonism. Our Chapters were set at odds the moment the Mentors were born.’

‘But do you admire them?’

He blinked slowly, as close as I’d ever seen him come to sighing at my presence. I could almost see the mechanisms of his mind turning, searching for the words that would translate his transhuman judgements to my human understanding.

‘Ruins dot the Nemetese landscape. The barrow you found is near some of them. I trust you realised those ruins were once part of a settlement.’

I confirmed that I did.

‘And you have studied the chorography of Nemeton?’

I confirmed that I had.

He nodded, expecting no less, and his tone turned thoughtful. ‘There is a story in the geology of this world’s skin and bones. Every civilisation eventually overreaches, Anuradha. It is the nature of empire. This is the moment rot sets in. When border kingdoms begin to resist acclimatisation, when cultures throw off the shackles of their subjugation. Nemeton is one such world. For whatever reason, the Ultramarines pushed their luck here. They established temples and academies and cities, as they had throughout the realm of Ultramar. Believing, I have no doubt, that it would strengthen the tribal warriors destined to become Space Marines.’

There was precedent for what my master said. Many later Adeptus Astartes foundings had remade planetary cultures in their image, or grafted values and mythological elements of their choosing onto native cultures.

But not all. Even the most disciplined Legions and Chapters had, in the past, preferred to harvest recruits from barbarous cultures without altering the world at all. Were these ruins simply an echo of Ultramar’s arrogance, or an experiment of some kind? An attempt at innovation? Perfecting something perceived as flawed?

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Why did they seek to alter Nemeton in this way?’

He looked at me with naked conjecture in his eyes. ‘I do not know, and it is not in the archives. The whim of a new Chapter Master, perhaps. A proud, disciplined warrior from a noble Ultramar bloodline, appointed in a new role of great honour, yet dismayed at the barbaric gene-stock he was commanded
to harvest from.’

I inclined my head, signalling my understanding.

‘What matters,’ Amadeus continued, ‘is that everything these Ultramar overseers tried to achieve eroded in time. They sought to stamp civilisation onto the clans of Nemeton, and the clans resisted it. The barbarians left the cities, returning to their way of life, allowing the marble monuments to fall into ruin. Which brings us to Nemeton here and now, and the Chapter we are dealing with. The Emperor’s Spears are one of the more barbaric bloodlines of the Thirteenth Legion dynasty. You ask if I admire them? The answer is a complex one, for they are scarcely above the barbarians they are drawn from. Much of what I have seen so far persuades me that they are brutes clad in civilised regalia. But their purity of purpose is worthy. The fact they are a single Chapter spread thin over territory that once needed three to defend it. The defiance that sent their ancestors away from the marble cities and back into barbarism is the same defiance that keeps them fighting now. All of this, I admire. Even if it is fortitude in the face of futility.’

That word rung out between us, icy and unexpected. I echoed it back to him. ‘Futility?’

My master recalled the cancelled images of Elara’s Veil as if my words were a summons. Khamun-Sen flashed back into being on his centre screen: a dead world closely orbiting its vicious white sun. We watched it spin, marked by the emblem of the Star Scorpions. I saw the hololithic reflection in his dark eyes.

‘The Androctonus Astra are dead,’ he said, using the Chapter’s prouder High Gothic name. ‘Hundreds of years gone. The Celestial Lions were teetering on the edge of extinction a century ago, even before they were cut off from the Imperium. I doubt their rebuilding efforts have thrived in the intervening years. The Emperor’s Spears have a ragged flotilla of press-ganged vessels in orbit around their home world, and have been fighting almost alone for the last ten decades. Hardly an inspiring picture, Helot Secundus. It does, however, highlight a stark truth – a truth that we on the Imperial side of the Great Rift grow evermore aware of with the passing of time. A truth that the souls on this side of the Rift need to accept before their stubbornness sees them destroyed.’

He didn’t need to say it. I saw it myself. ‘They’re losing this war.’

Amadeus gave a subtle shake of his head. ‘This war, against this Exilarchy they speak of? Perhaps, perhaps not. I refer to the wider conflict.’
Now I understood. ‘Imperium Nihilus.’

‘Yes,’ my master said. ‘And that is why the Spears resent us. Our arrival teaches them the one lesson they do not wish to learn. The Dark Imperium is lost. This half of mankind’s empire will never be reconquered. There are tacticians within Lord Commander Guilliman’s councils that put forward the notion of abandoning Imperium Nihilus entirely, that its remaining defenders and resources be brought back across the Rift to reinforce the territory that remains pure.’

I’d never heard the sentiment spoken so blandly, as a matter of practical fact. The abandonment of half the Imperium. The surrender of half of our worlds, half of our populations, half of our empire, never to be reclaimed. Madness. Absolute madness. And the sheer scale of such an undertaking made it an utter impossibility.

‘Do you believe that, master? Honestly?’

‘I was ordered to believe it. Reinforcements are never coming, not in the numbers required to retake Imperium Nihilus. Elara’s Veil is the fallen half of the empire in microcosm. Perhaps it can hold for another decade. Or a century. Or a millennium. What difference will it make?’

‘To the Imperial souls on this side of the Rift, master, I’d say it would make all the difference.’

He narrowed his eyes. ‘You are being obtuse, slave. I find it tiresome.’

‘Forgive me, master. I have simply never heard the evacuation and surrender of half of the Imperium phrased as a practicality.’

Amadeus’ lips twitched in the approximation of a smile. How animated he was, when speaking of this bleakest of subjects. ‘Practicalities are all that interest me, Helot Secundus. Emotion and tradition have no place in a war of survival.’

But I wondered. Truly I did. And I wondered what he believed, beneath the orders commanding his compliance.

‘Then what of Khamun-Sen, master? Why were you studying it when I entered? Just a matter of practicality?’

‘This conversation is concluded, Helot Secundus.’

I bowed, but hesitated once more. ‘Were you commanded here, master? Or did you volunteer?’

He regarded me with his usual icy ambivalence. ‘You are becoming
inappropriately personal with these queries. Allow me to answer your question with two of my own, thrall. When the witch said you despised me, what was she speaking of? What truth was there in her words?’

‘None, master.’

What little amusement there was had faded from his face. ‘You are lying now, as well as being obtuse. But my point is simple – discussion of emotion and personal thought has no place in your servitude. Violate that precept a second time and I will see it noted in the deployment records. Do you understand me?’

I understood.

He dismissed me with a gesture of his hand. ‘Leave, Helot Daaz.’

I left.

3

Within the hour, the Spears made contact. We were invited, in language that made it clear we were actually commanded, to board the strike cruiser *Hex* and join the warriors of the Third Warhost in what was diplomatically described as ‘a discussion regarding the fate of our Mentor guest’.

Amadeus relayed this to us over the vox. ‘Brêac is preparing the warriors of the Third Warhost before they sail from Nemeton. We will join him in his arming chamber for this… trial, of sorts. Also present will be the battleguards Morcant and Faelan, and two war-priests, Tolmach and Ducarius.’

This was no normal squad. The names of the ranks were unfamiliar to us, but the context was clear. These were elite warriors, the leadership echelon of the Third Warhost.

‘I have accepted the offer,’ Amadeus added, as if there could have been any other answer. ‘In addition, we have been granted access to some of the archives aboard the Hex. They are inloading to our datacore as we speak. Make sure you access them before we leave.’

‘That bodes well,’ Kartash mentioned, after Amadeus cut the link. ‘They would hardly grant us access to their lore drives if they intended to kill us or abandon us.’

Tyberia was somewhat less optimistic. ‘Are you sure of that?’

‘Truly,’ the hunchback sighed the words, ‘you are a miserable companion, Tyberia.’
I’d already activated my monitron bracer to scour the Hex’s incoming data stream. The very first spool of information contained, among other things, the name of the Hex’s captain.

Kartash and Tyberia were looking at me. I’d cursed aloud, without meaning to.

‘It’s nothing,’ I lied. ‘Everything’s fine.’
IX
BEFORE THE LORDS OF THE THIRD WARHOST

For the second time in a week, we bound Amadeus into his armour. This time, we weren’t alone. Other thralls tended to Brêac nearby, while still others knelt at the chamber’s edge, pounding out a slow rhythm on drums of animal hide. The sound was a god-beast’s heart, thudding and rolling. It was a noise too big, somehow, too alive for the dark iron chamber in which we stood.

Brêac was at the chamber’s heart. Thralls surrounded him, drills whining and tools scraping as plate after plate was lifted from trestles and machined into place upon his massive frame. Arming and armouring a Space Marine was never a swift process, and here it was slowed further by whispery tribal chants that shifted in tone with every piece of armour.

As Amadeus had said, Brêac had granted us access to the Chapter’s archives aboard the *Hex*, albeit at the shallowest levels. Although I was grateful, the information strands were stunted and horrifyingly incomplete. Even the Chapter’s current strength was hidden from my data-probes, but at the very least it offered an overview of the Third Warhost. In the spirit of many Adeptus Astartes Battle Companies, a warhost operated as an autonomous strike force. That much, at least, I could glean without coming up against encryption buffers or deleted data strands.

This squad we were to meet was listed by an informal sobriquet in the archives. They were called the Immortals. Tyberia suspected they’d given themselves the title. For once I agreed with her; the name reeked of barbarian posturing.

I closed my master’s vambrace around his forearm, fusing the plates and drilling the connectors down into the sockets implanted within his flesh. As I withdrew the spike, I glanced over at Brêac’s thralls, unexpectedly meeting the eyes of one male, close to my age, watching us from beneath his hooded cloak. Clan tattoos marked his face, staining his features blue. Long, black hair framed his unshaven face.

I’d expected them to stink, to be as unwashed as their tribal kin back on Nemeton. One of the strangest elements in travelling to other worlds is the way people smell. It isn’t a matter of hygiene, simply a case of different
foods, different oils and soaps for cleaning, meaning skin, hair, sweat and breath is always vastly different, world to world. These Nemetese thralls looked little different to their tribal kindred, but there was no trace of the barbarians’ sweat or Nemeton’s rain on them. Instead, there was a musky tang of cleansing powders – not unpleasant, but unexpected.

To them, we likely smelled of off-world sweat and Kartash’s sacred incense.

The male thrall nodded to me in cautious greeting. I returned it, and though we both stayed focused on our duties, the Spear serfs watched us far more keenly. They’d never seen warriors or slaves from Chapters other than the Spears or the Lions. I had a rare moment of amusement with Tyberia while we fitted our master’s breastplate into place, and we shared a smile at the other thralls’ curiosity. They watched Amadeus as if expecting him to do something revelatory.

Morcant was the second warrior to arrive. I knew him from his grainy image in the warhost’s records: Morcant, battleguard to Lord Brêac. The drumbeat changed as he entered, adding a second heartbeat to the booming rhythm. The breathy, primitive chants melted into a new flow. They were singing of battles, duels and distant worlds. For all their rituals were different to ours, much was the same: back before the beginning of the Nemeton Deployment, a scribe-serf solemnly read aloud from Amadeus’ honour scroll while we prepared him for the journey. Here, the Spears’ barbarian kin chanted the warriors’ deeds.

Morcant was even less enamoured of formality than Brêac. No greeting, no gesture of respect to either Brêac or Amadeus, let alone the thralls. He held his arms out to the side as the serfs began to work on him, and Brêac acknowledged him not by name, but by tribal bloodline.

‘Arakanii. Today’s the day.’

Morcant nodded, standing still as the squad’s robed thralls started binding him into his armour, layering plate over his bodysuit, then plate over plate. Layers of azure ceramite, the blue of untainted skies, of Terra’s daylight heavens in a time now relegated to myth.

Like Brêac, he was tattooed with an impression of red woad, and like Brêac, if the ragged pattern had a meaning, it was beyond me. Morcant tilted his head to allow the ablutions slave to shave his blond stubble. He didn’t say anything more, and Brêac didn’t press him. Instead, it was Amadeus that spoke up.

‘Greetings, Morcant of the Arakanii. It is good to see you again.’
This, then, was the warrior that had led the boarding party. Kartash hadn’t mentioned that.

Morcant spat on the deck in front of my master’s boots. The insult was delivered without aggression, almost indifferently. Brêac chuckled at the gesture. Amadeus did not.

The Hex’s datacore listed historical lore about Nemeton’s clans, and those records weren’t kind to the Arakanii. A coastal clan, known for their battlefield scavenging, looting the dead of other, larger clans after tribal wars. Some of the oldest chronicles even recorded witness-oaths seeing the Arakanii devouring the flesh of the dead.

I watched him, this tattooed warrior from a clan of cannibals, as his thralls drill-locked his gauntlets into place. He shivered as the connectors bit into his wrists, and shifted with the infusion of weight once the serfs pulled their drills free. The ceramite weighed heavily upon him for now, with the fibre-bundle muscle cabling on only functional charge as the outer layers were sealed in place.

The next warrior to arrive was Ducarius. Tall, proud, preternaturally graceful. He, too, was greeted not by name but by clan.

‘Kavalei,’ Brêac hailed him.

Ducarius rolled his shoulders and returned a nod. ‘Vargantes.’ Then he looked to my master. The fact there was no derision in his keen blue eyes was a relief to me. ‘False Scorpion, we meet at last. Are you well?’

Amadeus inclined his head. ‘I am well, Ducarius of the Kavalei.’

The Kavalei. The Clan of Kings, a vast and sprawling tribe that eclipsed all others in terms of territory and victories in tribal war. As the most populous clan, most Spears serving aboard the Hex claimed descent from the Kavalei. Ducarius’ beard was dark, as was the stubble cut close to his scalp. The blue tattoos marking his face were in the impressions of talon scars raking his cheeks.

Clearly, he was no line warrior. The war-plate held in his thralls’ hands was burnished black, and several slaves came forward bearing priceless enhancements for his left arm and backpack. These slaves were separate from their brethren: they wore black robes instead of azure, and their chests were marked with the knotted, ray-bladed sun symbol of the Spears’ Druidic Circle.

‘You’re staring, false Scorpion,’ Ducarius said.
‘I am observing and learning,’ Amadeus corrected him.

Another warrior entered. This one had the dark skin of a Southern Isles clansman, rather than the equatorial duskiness of Ducarius or the Northern Reach paleness of Brêac and Morcant. He had no face – at least, no features. In its place was a nightmare of riven flesh and bone-grafted augmetics. Both eyes were replaced by heavy bionics, and a rebreather mask was surgically bound to the bone of his skull over the wrecked holes that had been his nose and mouth. Even his ears were replaced by small aural receptor plates.

‘Amadeus Kaias Incarius,’ he said in his machine voice.

‘Battleguard Faelan of the Kavalei.’

The thralls immediately began to bind Faelan into his azure ceramite, though he disrupted their reverent work by taking his helm from the sterilised trestle where it lay, turning it over in his hands. The warrior ran his callused fingertips over the white surface and over the officer’s crest, starkly red and black against the ceramite. He held it for a moment before replacing it on the table.

‘You are new to your rank?’ Amadeus asked.

‘Aye. A sergeant until last season.’ I couldn’t imagine what he looked like before his face was destroyed. There wasn’t enough evidence remaining to tell.

As if hearing my thoughts, Morcant spoke for the first time. ‘How does your face feel, Kavalei?’

‘The pain has gone.’

Morcant, son of the cannibal clan, leered like a simian at his mutilated brother. ‘And what did they do with the ruined meat they scraped off your skull?’

Amadeus tensed at the insult. I expected the Spears to do the same, but Faelan only tilted his head in inquiry.

‘Why, Arakanii? Are you hungry?’


The last to arrive was Tolmach. He was more mannerly than any other so far: he made the sign of the aquila to my master and offered his hand, gripping wrist to wrist in the ancient greeting between Adeptus Astartes bloodlines. Amadeus welcomed the gesture, and returned it, speaking as formally as ever.
‘War-priest Tolmach of the Novontei.’

‘You’ve studied our tribes?’

Amadeus nodded. He had, of course. The Novontei were wanderers and scavengers, going from region to region, island to island, offering their services as mercenaries and itinerant druids, preferring to serve rather than raid. The other tribes saw them as a breed of necessary vermin, useful in battle and for the secrets kept by their druids, but disparaged for their lack of territory and loyalty.

I’d expected furtiveness, perhaps even wretchedness, from a Spear of that tribe. Instead Tolmach, with his whorl tattooing circling his neck like a torc, was the warmest of them all.

He released my master’s wrist. ‘Strange seeing those colours again. The heraldry you wear hasn’t proven lucky in Elara’s Veil. If you come with us, we’ll try our best to keep you alive, little brother.’

Beneath the jest, there was something in his eyes. Perhaps the memory of pain rather than the fresh bite of it. This would have been the perfect moment for Amadeus to reply with a fraternal remark of his own, perhaps even a jest, something to reach out as this warrior had reached out to him. But that was asking for more than my cold-blooded master could give. He answered with all the charm of a servitor.

‘I will endeavour to stay alive. I have a vital duty.’

Tolmach moved away to his arming thralls, and they began their work. One of the serfs approached him with a bowl of oil-scented water and a straight razor. The warrior scratched his close-cut beard and moustache.

‘Don’t try it,’ he said. The Chapter-thrall bowed and moved back.

Amadeus, whom Kartash shaved daily to Mentor Legion standards of deployment cleanliness, watched without a word.

The Nemetese chanting, still at the level of a whisper, rolled on with the heartbeat-drums. The drummers worked in a shared rhythm, overlapping their beats to simulate the thudding pulse of the five Spears present in the chamber. They were quieter as the ceremony went on, letting the warriors speak.

Servos whirred in Morcant’s knuckles as he formed a fist. The motion made two of his slaves flinch away, and he apologised with a flash of teeth. That was the moment I learned that when a cannibal smiles, it looks far more like a threat than an apology.
Serfs handed each warrior his helm. Brêac’s was crested with a black-and-white plume, marking him as a lord; the battleguards Faelan and Morcant carried helms crested with striped black-and-red plumes. The two war-priests, clad in rune-etched black ceramite, had no crests on their helms, though their faceplates were painted ivory in obvious, skull-like symbolism. Both war-priests had an Apothecary’s tools – the narthecium; the Absolver pistol; the vials and combat narcotics of the battlefield healing art – though Ducarius’ white helm was reinforced with a ceramite psychic hood, and Tolmach carried a Chaplain’s mace of office, a sacred crozius arcanum, forged in the shape of a spread eagle’s wings.

The drums slowed, then ceased. The chanting died out alongside. The chamber was left with the aggressive hum of the warriors’ active armour, as serfs applied final purity seals and honour parchments to their plate.

Amadeus’ armour gleamed. We’d done our best work to make him stand out and represent the Mentor Legion with pride.

‘Would it be possible for me to meet with the captain?’ he asked.

Brêac grunted a reply, ‘He’ll be on his way soon. Trust me, he wanted to meet you, too.’

The bulkhead rumbled open.

Kartash, with his back to the door, flinched and looked over his crooked shoulder. His face was naked of emotion and thought, his eyes locked like charging lasers upon the movement. It passed in the brevity of a half-breath, but I saw it. I saw his frustration becoming a killing urge.

Tyberia and Kartash didn’t recognise the newest arrival. I did. Amadeus did. We were both ready for this.

The dead man stood in the doorway. The dead man from the barrow, the corpse that walked and spoke to me in the darkness where his brothers slept. In the light of the arming chamber, he was both more twisted than the gloom revealed and infinitely more regal. He wore a robe in the colours of his Chapter, the blue of his world’s rings and the white of rejected marble monuments. He wore a pilgrim’s cloth in place of a warrior’s ceramite, but I knew a uniform when I saw one, and I knew the pride in a soldier’s eyes when they wore it.

_Do not trust the broken man’s promises_, the witch had said. And here, surely, was the broken man.
Any illusion that this man was a slave or a serf was banished when the Spears greeted him as they did each other, by tribe.

‘Vargantes,’ they said in union.

‘Immortals,’ he hailed them in return. This mangled vision of a Space Marine looked at all present from beneath his hood. He made no sign of recognising me, regarding all three helots in the same gaze.

‘How stands the Hex?’ asked Brêac.

Serivahn sucked in a wet breath through the crooked snarl of his mouth. ‘She’s ready. We sail in an hour. And hail to you, Amadeus Kaias Incarius. Welcome aboard my ship.’

He offered his pure-formed hand for my master to grip, wrist to wrist. Even ruined as he was, Serivahn was tall, almost a height to match the others. He addressed my master face to face, warrior to warrior. I saw spit shining on the teeth revealed by his drooping lips. The other Spears watched closely, sharing glances and half-smiles.

‘You are the first Primaris Spear,’ Amadeus ventured. ‘I know you from my Helot Secundus’ memories.’

Kartash and Tyberia glanced at me, the former with curiosity, the latter with shocked irritation.

‘The first Primaris Spear that lived,’ Serivahn gently amended. Then he turned to me, offering a shallow bow of unnecessary respect. ‘Hail, little Anuradha, explorer of tombs.’

‘Captain.’ I lowered my head in apology as he brought up my transgression, but instead of anger among the other Spears, I heard their guttural rumbles of amusement. At the edge of my sight, there was Tyberia, glaring at me.

Serivahn drew his robe’s cuff along his mangled mouth, wiping away the saliva. ‘Brêac tells me that you’ll be sailing with us against the Exilarchy. I trust my brother’s judgement, and you have a place aboard the Hex.’

Amadeus inclined his head in gratitude. His eyes raked over Serivahn’s ruined form, but he was at least diplomatic enough not to speak of what he saw. I’d feared his bluntness, which he took for simple honest observation, would make an awkward meeting even worse. His tact now was a pleasant moment of mercy.

‘You asked a question of my Helot Secundus,’ said Amadeus. ‘I would like to answer it now, if I may.’
The Spears looked on, intrigued. Serivahn stretched his curled and twisted arm in a gesture for my master to continue.

‘You wished to know my capacity to keep secrets. I can only assume, therefore, the Adeptus Vaelarii has something to hide.’

‘Every Chapter has something to hide,’ Brêac pointed out.

Amadeus agreed with a curt nod. ‘I was sent by Lord Commander Guilliman to observe, but my oaths to my Chapter still bind me. The Mentor Legion holds many covenants in its care. When I return to the true Imperium—’

‘If.’ This, from Ducarius, who said it not as a barb, but with priestly gentleness.

‘When I return,’ my master continued, ‘I will keep any covenants sworn here, so long as they do not pertain to heresy amidst the Adeptus Vaelarii. In short, you can trust me, brothers… as long as you are trustworthy yourselves.’

The Spears kept their eyes on his. Tolmach nodded, accepting. Morcant’s gaze was ice. Faelan’s facelessness could have meant anything, and Ducarius wore no expression at all.

‘You will see much,’ Serivahn said. ‘I’ve no doubt of that. But nothing of treason or apostasy within the ranks of the Lions and the Spears, Amadeus.’

And, again, the witch’s words came back to me, an unwanted echo. Perhaps Amadeus recalled them in the same moment, for his reply was markedly neutral.

‘Very well,’ he said.

Brêac, his armour cloaked with the white fur of some unknown Nemetese beast, thudded his knuckles against his breastplate, commanding our attention.

‘Enough. It’s agreed, and we have a thousand things to prepare for. Amadeus, you and your thralls have the run of the ship. We sail for Kouris as soon as Bellona allows it.’

Tyberia, stinking of sudden adrenaline, closed her eyes at the words. Kartash offered a whispered prayer, palms up, to the immortal God-Emperor.

For myself, I felt relief. Sheer relief.

We were going to war.
BOOK TWO

THE EXILARCHY

‘I have lost brothers, aye, and wept over their graves. Good men deserve tears to mark their passing. Even the Emperor weeps when His warriors fall. Royal thralls gather that mourning dew in blessed vials, to be treasured as relics forevermore.

Regret is weakness. Guilt is weakness. But sorrow? Sorrow is a chamber in any soldier’s heart. Sorrow is felt even by the divine.’

– High King Arucatas the Swordbearer
Chapter Master of the Emperor’s Spears
PROEM

THE HISTORIAN: II

My hand keeps locking.

It doesn’t stop the words, but it slows them. Sometimes as I write, I have to manipulate the knuckles, massaging my metallic fingers to restore flexion. It’s apt, that the scratches and dents that mark my machine hand are scars from the very past I’m committing to parchment.

Vadhán has gone again. Back to war, back to face the Exilarchy. He fights as a Spear fights, without the opposing burden and blessing of humans at his side and in his helmet-vox, the way my master once fought. According to the stellar cartography, the enemy masses for an assault on Arikeus, one of the final bastions of resistance before Nemeton is laid bare. The Exilarchy, once grievously weakened by the blood we reaped from its mongrel flesh, now rises to eclipse everything in its path. Will I live to see Archenemy drop-ships plunge through Nemeton’s stormy sky, laying siege to the world I’ve come to love?

An eidetic recollection of events can still deceive. I’ve never forgotten anything that happened, but it’s only in writing it all down now that I remember the emotions of those bygone moments, the sensations that burned at the time. They whisper like echoes, half-mocking memories, and when I look at my hands I can almost feel the weight of the Engager in my grip again. Information I haven’t tracked for years returns to me, melancholically spectral. When I close my remaining eye, the ghosts of hololithic data-feeds scroll down in the blackness. When my quill no longer scratches across the papyrus, I hear the elemental beat of Amadeus’ heart in the silence between sentences.

The truth is that my knuckles have loosened enough to continue, and yet I find myself hesitating because of what comes next.

The Exilarchy.

Our great foe. The hordes of heretics and mutants serving those that call themselves the Pure. The face of the Archenemy in Elara’s Veil.

By the time we joined the war, the Adeptus Vaelarii had been fighting the
Exilarchy for almost a century. When the Eye of Terror burst open and the Great Rift ripped the Imperium in half, that alone would have savaged humanity’s empire beyond repair and reconquest. But there was worse yet to come. Foes lurked in that seething wound. Enemies and monsters poured forth from that coruscating galactic scar. Less than a decade after losing contact with the Imperium, this new war came to Elara’s Veil.

The Rift isn’t constant. It ebbs and flows, going in and out like the tide, sometimes seeming to heal, freeing whole worlds from its vile embrace, at other times reaching out far enough to threaten stars previously immune to its foul touch. In those earliest years, it disgorged a host that swept across Elara’s Veil, burning and destroying.

Yet what began as a flood soon broke, individual armies settling on the worlds they’d taken, entrenching themselves not simply as raiders, but conquerors. They didn’t just want blood and souls as sacrifices to their impossible gods. They wanted territory. They wanted the entire subsector, and they would claim it through fire and rage.

I learned all of this from the databanks of the Hex, after Brêac gave us permission to board. I was no stranger to war. I’d fought the Archenemy before, serving other masters on other deployments. But no dry recitations in the archives prepared me for the nature of the Exilarchy, or their brutal lords, the Pure.

The Hex encountered an Exilarchy force on the planet Kouris, two months after sailing from Nemeton.

Back then, we were hunting them.

On Kouris, I first heard the words that would reshape my future. The first time I heard the tribal cry of the Emperor’s Spears, dread-laced, drenched with guttural threat, in a tongue that owed as much to hatred as it did to its Gothic roots.

I don’t need to write this chronicle to recapture the feeling of hearing that chant. The tremors I felt, the fear, the savage joy. I hear it still, in the quiet moments of what remains of my life. I hear it in dreams better described as nightmares.

The warcry of the Emperor’s Spears, backed by the roar of golden lions.

Skovakarah uhl zarûn.
I stared into the rockrete dust. A grey-white expanse clouded all my monitor screens: smoky dust that was dense enough to drown in and thick enough to swallow the sky. When cities die, they bleed dust. A single falling building will choke the streets for hours, over a mile or more. When it’s ten buildings, fifty, a hundred, a thousand, whole reaches of the world become a hazy afterlife where sound is distorted and sight completely stolen.

We sat in a triangle, Kartash, Tyberia and I, back to back to back inside the confines of our master’s modified Damocles-pattern command Rhino. With all our equipment, the tank’s interior was a nest of power cables underfoot and connective cords against the walls, lit by our flickering monitors. Our fingers struck hololithic keys projected from our consoles, and the refiltered air tasted of our unwashed bodies. We’d been calling the Rhino home for several days straight.

In our ears was an overlay of crackling vox-voices playing across the several communication networks. There in the screen-lit darkness, monitor glare tanned our bare hands and faces with the paleness of anaemia. Everything we saw, we witnessed through our servo-skulls. A storm pealed in the west, where the enemy was shelling the city. Sympathy quakes stirred the ground beneath us.

We were on the ground because we’d been blind in orbit: the city was obscured from above by the cauld of dust. Location coordinates meant little – we could drop troops into the mire, but when you knew nothing of enemy troop positions or what buildings were still standing, tolerable imprecision became useless guesswork. We needed eyes in the murk. We needed scanning data.

That data spilled down my left eye. Echolocation pulse flares, visual feeds, rangefinding digitals and alternate vision filters, all endlessly updating, flashing and ticking. It helped with the dust. A little. Barely.

A figure staggered from the mist, clutching a battered lasrifle as he ran. One of his eyes was bandaged. His uniform, the deep black and red of the 89th Novaskyr Adamants, was a shredded mantle of filthy fatigues and cracked
flak-plate.

‘Contact, contact,’ I said to Tyberia and Kartash. I was dimly aware of Tyberia voxing the update over our shared channel to Amadeus.

I tuned her out and thumbed my brass control spheres, drifting closer to the figure, rising to head-height. I had every officer of the 89th memorised, as well as lodged in my console’s archives in the unprecedented case of memory failure. The name Captain Jorothan Maybeck streamed across my monitor along with notable aspects of his service record. He was thirty-nine standard years old. There in the dust, scrabbling over rubble, with his wounds and the palette of exhaustion on his features, he could have passed for fifty. A hard-won fifty.

‘Report,’ I said into my vox-mic. Miles away, the word emerged through the tinny vocoder in my servo-skull’s jaw.

‘Tyberia?’ he asked.

‘Anuradha.’

Captain Maybeck looked into the skull’s eye sockets. Right into my eyes. And he gave his report. It began with the words that mattered most:

‘We’re ready.’

2

The war raging across the surface of Kouris was decided before we began fighting it. The loyalist forces fighting the rebellion there were massing for an offensive to retake both continents from the Archenemy, and after two years of war, the end was in sight. They had projected victory in approximately five months, and at the cost of several million lives.

Brêac deemed this unacceptable. Five months was too long, and the cost of life was too high. The men and women of the Imperial Guard fighting here were needed elsewhere in the Veil, on any number of battlefields across several dozen other worlds.

Our arrival changed everything. From the moment we reached orbit, the clock was counting down. The Spears intended to win the war for Kouris in one week. Brêac would settle for nothing less.

On the first day, he gathered the Guard commanders aboard the Hex for a comprehensive tactical analysis of the situation on the ground. I stood at my master’s side as Brêac and the officers of his warhost listened to the reports of the Guard commanders that had been embattled on the surface for the best
part of two years. Although the humans were uneasy in the Spears’ presence, the observations and tactical appraisals flowed one after the other, until Brêac had a complete picture of the current conflict.

I marked one instance of failure by Imperial forces that indicated command-level incompetence rather than mere defeat at the whims of war. It happened in every campaign: there would always be at least one officer promoted above their talents, a commander that endangered a battle and lost far more lives than necessary. I knew how my master would deal with this, as a veteran of working alongside other institutions of the Adeptus Terra. His role was to teach and guide, to secure victory through the methods laid down by our noble Chapter. We were named the Mentor Legion for a blunt, but pure, reason.

But I couldn’t guess how the Spears would handle this, and it was their decision to make, not ours. Surely it wouldn’t escape their notice.

Indeed it did not. Faelan and Tolmach were next to me in the meeting, at the tactical hololith table that dominated the chamber. They spoke quietly, over my head.

‘We should deal with that colonel,’ Tolmach murmured. As if the meaning weren’t obvious, he brushed his black-armoured knuckles across his holstered Absolver pistol. The leather holster was still darkened by faded, years-old bloodstains from the times he’d used the tool to administer the Emperor’s Mercy to his wounded brethren. No amount of scrubbing could scrape the leather clean.

Faelan, faceless in his mutilation, emitted a dry sound of amusement from his vocoder. It dawned on me then that they might be teasing me. I looked up at Tolmach, narrowing my eyes to enhance my augmetic vision, zooming in for even the subtlest facial signs of sincerity or mirth. After a moment he chuckled, a deeper, more natural sound than Faelan’s machine-snicker.

‘A demotion at least,’ he amended, with a slight smile. ‘We can be ruthless when it comes to the ranks of our allies. We don’t have numbers enough for incompetent officers to waste their soldiers’ lives.’

They were both looking at me, as if expecting me to reply, perhaps rising to the bait of their teasing trap. One of them had his face torn off, unable to smile or scowl or even really speak; the other was part of a druidic order I didn’t and could never fully understand – and yet how human they seemed, in opposition to my master.

‘One shouldn’t jest over matters of life and death,’ I remarked. It seemed a
safely neutral answer, but it didn’t work. They chuckled again, amused by my surprise at their inappropriate humour.

On my other side, Amadeus softly cleared his throat. He stood upright, utterly focused on Brêac, the very image of a professional soldier. I took the hint and faced forward once more, though I caught Tyberia’s smirk at my wandering focus.

Once everyone had spoken, Brêac gave his decision. We would attack, he said. On the first night, he launched the first wave of gunships and drop pods, committing the Spears to the war. He asked if Amadeus intended to fight, and my master utterly failed to respond to that sliver of sarcasm. Instead, he outlined that his expertise lay in aiding mortal forces, and that he would deploy alongside the Guard wherever possible.

That had been five days ago. Five days of ceaseless deployment and redeployment, with my master fighting alongside regiments of the Novaskyr Adamants, the Kourian planetary defence force, and the black-cloaked hosts of the Bellonan Skitarii Legion. He hadn’t yet battled alongside the Spears.

On the sixth day, with the Battle of Akamakar, that would change.

The capital city, Akamakar, was the last remaining principal bastion of enemy strength, and taking it would break the Exilarchy’s hold on Kouris. We couldn’t bombard it from orbit, with its decaying void shield network still functioning. Nor could we deploy Adeptus Astartes warriors directly from the Hex. With the barrier operational, the Spears would need to advance with the troops.

Brêac had commanded that all significant resistance must be shattered by sunset. Everything hinged on taking the regency palace, where the planetary leaders of the rebellion sought refuge. Once the treacherous regent and his supporters in the aristocracy were finished, the Exilarchy’s presence on Kouris would bleed out.

We went in with the troops, to link up with the forces already established in the city. The honour of driving the Damocles armoured personnel carrier belonged to Kartash, as Helot Primus. Tyberia and I remained connected to Amadeus, to serve as needed. Although we were in the first wave, we weren’t at the vanguard. Our tank’s reinforced armour held a treasure trove of rare technology, and Amadeus commanded us not to risk it. We were observers – his aides – not combatants.

The tanks rumbled around us as we advanced through the edges of the city, pounded to dust by the Novaskyr artillery. Armoured personnel carriers
rattled along in line, filled with mechanised infantry. Gunships and transports droned overhead, their troop bays crammed with Guard. Our column was one of several entering the city’s outer districts, though we were braced for the sternest resistance.

The last time I’d raised the cupola hatch and looked out at the rest of the column, the eyes of several tank commanders locked on to me at once. Many of the Novaskyr Guard had fought beside Space Marines before, but the Adeptus Astartes were still an uncommon sight on the battlefield, and their human assistants rarer still. Our Rhino drew endless stares, until the battle began.

I won’t belabour the point, for anyone reading this accounting already knows the ways in which the Adeptus Astartes wage war. The Battle of Akamakar wasn’t the grandest battle that will take place over the course of this chronicle, and it was far from the most brutal. It was, simply put, a city falling to siege. Tens of thousands died in a single day, many on our side. After the battle, long after we’d left aboard the Hex, servitors and citizens in their thousands spent months clearing the rubble and burying the dead.

But of the battle itself, one moment does bear recalling in detail here – the first time I saw the Spears go to war, with my master among them. Until that day, I’d only seen Mentor Legion cadre officers alone, leading and supporting human forces. On the streets of dust-choked Akamakar, I finally saw an Adeptus Astartes battalion meet the enemy.

Brêac had eighty-five warriors, enough to take a world. But their lives were a currency to be spent tactically and frugally. Space Marines are shock troops, a weapon of precision; they are a lance to strike at the enemy’s heart, not an indiscriminate bludgeon to waste crushing chaff. Throw them into a grinding war, and you win victory only by ignoring the advantages your greatest soldiers possess.

Taking Akamakar would come down to timing and synergy as we advanced on the regency palace. Units needed to move through the city, reaching projected markers and holding ground for support to reach them. The bulk of the urban fighting would be fought by the Novaskyr Adamants and the Bellonan skitarii.

The Spears were held back in order to break sections of unexpected enemy strength, or reinforce broken elements of our own advancing forces. They would be deployed, all of us knew that. The question was, when and where?
I had servo-skull probes embedded with the 89th Novaskyr Adamants when the regiment finally broke. They’d advanced deep into Akamakar and driven the Exilarchy’s militia back with the surging strength of a tide. That tide was now breaking. The enemy’s ranks swelled with reinforcements, including gunships strafing the roads, pinning down our forward platoons.

By then, the fighting was road by road, house to house, thickest there in the heart of the city. The 89th had fought the enemy to a standstill along the processional avenues leading to the palace, but they had nothing left to give except their lives. Tanks duelled through the wreckage of entire streets. Fire-teams of soldiers on both sides sniped at each other through the rubble.

Adamants cried out for reloads, cried out for medics, cried out for orders – none of it was forthcoming. An ugly truth spread through the remaining ranks like poison: most of their officers were dead. Leadership was reduced almost to the squad level. Platoons voxed each other from where they braced and hunched in disparate ruined buildings, each surviving sergeant and lieutenant trying to piece together what remained of the main advance.

Tyberia was the one to inform our master of the 89th’s desperate straits. She calmly relayed the details over the vox, and Amadeus replied at once. He was redeploying now. He would be there soon.

So far, I’d seen little uniformity among the Exilarchy fighters. Sometimes ragged packs of them descended in sudden hordes; other times platoons of them ran forward in disciplined bayonet charges. I saw defaced Imperial Guard uniforms, the armour of noble house militia, and turncoat defence force fatigues. The Exilarchy had seeded Kouris with rebellion before landing their armies here. Half of the armed forces rose up with the enemy, betraying the Imperium before the first shot was fired.

It was anticlimactic, in a way, to finally confront the enemy and to find them nothing but human. Deluded, traitorous, but otherwise no different from an Imperial army.

I ask you, humbly: forgive me for my naivety. I thought these front-line rebels and recidivists represented the real Exilarchy. I had no idea then what was to come later.

The dead lay everywhere, carpeting the shelled ground. Captain Maybeck was dead; he’d fallen an hour ago, shot through the throat while declaring a countercharge. One of his remaining lieutenants, Eskar, clutched at one of my drifting servo-skulls, fighting its anti-gravitic motors to drag it close to her face.
‘Where are the Spears?’ she shouted, loud enough to distort the probe’s visual feed. I could still barely hear her over the cracking of lasguns and the deeper thunder of tank cannons. ‘Where are the Spears?’

I didn’t have an answer for her. Our hololithics were patchy and scrambled, even with our Damocles keeping close to the main column. My grasp of the wider battle was limited. All I knew is that Amadeus was redeploying, but one warrior – even our master – wouldn’t be able to stem the losses along the palatial avenues.

This would be his sixth redeployment since the start of the siege. He’d fought in the streets and across rooftops, forcing other tendrils of the besieging host to advance ahead when they had lost momentum, saving broken units from annihilation when they were almost overrun by the foe.

‘Two minutes,’ he voxed.

I glanced to my uppermost monitor, seeing through his eyes. At that moment, his world was confined by arching steel walls, lit by the vicious cast of emergency lighting. Silhouettes moved with him in that gloom, armoured shadows whose azure ceramite was a savage black in the crimson light.

I tuned into his helm’s audio-feed. The industrial whine of engines cycling up droned over all other sound, though I caught the percussive slams of restraint harnesses locking into place, and harsh words in guttural Nemetese.

He wasn’t deploying alone, on foot, or in the bay of a Valkyrie, surrounded by soldiers of the Guard. He was going in with the Spears. In my surprise, I looked to Tyberia over my shoulder, seeing the same expression on her features as she realised the same thing.

The Novaskyr lieutenant was shouting for answers.

‘Reinforcements are inbound,’ I promised her.

In the middle of relaying what she intended to do with the platoons under her command, Eskar jerked forward a fraction of a second before my probe’s feeds went dark. I thought my servo-skull had been struck by enemy fire, but its systems still showed a stream of cascading green symbols. Full function, but somehow blinded.

As I rotated the probe, the darkness slid greasily down in an uneven curtain, leaving a red haze across the visual feed. Flecks of black still covered whole patches of the monitor. It wasn’t damage at all. The insides of Lieutenant Eskar’s head were splashed against my servo-skull. I saw her body below me, shot through by stubber fire.
Other Guard flew past, casting flickering shadows over my diminished sight. They were fleeing from the overwhelming foe. The 89th, at last, had broken.

A gunship roared overhead; not over my probe, but above our Damocles tank, powering towards the front lines on screaming thrusters.

‘Ten,’ Amadeus voxed. ‘Nine. Eight. Seven…’

They dropped into the middle of the rout. The moment their boots struck the earth, every weapon in the district swung their way. Brêac wanted nothing less; over the Immortals’ vox, their inter-squad communication focused on drawing the enemy’s fire away from the regrouping 89th.

Their Overlord gunship hovered above the main avenue, an ugly falcon of cobalt ceramite, mirages of heat curtaining beneath its downward engines. Plasma volleys blasted from its turrets, sunfire bursts detonating in succession, followed by rockets streaming from under its wings. The remaining buildings came down in slides of fiery rubble, bodies spilling within the wreckage. Every Exilarchy gun-nest within a half-mile radius was taken apart in the time it took my heart to beat ten times.

The gunship didn’t stay. Already our ungainly, angelic saviour was climbing, its payload spent, its cargo unloaded. It streaked skywards, racing for orbit to rearm and refuel. Worm-trails of surface-to-air missiles chased it, fired too late from unready hands, crescenting off-target.

Hundreds of enemy troops, from impoverished militia to traitorous Guard, poured their fire into the avenue where a mere twenty Space Marines had landed. The Exilarchy’s mongrel brigades had tasted victory’s very edge. They wouldn’t allow a handful of warriors in ceramite to steal it back.

The Spears never held to a formation. They scattered, inviting the fire upon them, craving it if it meant the broken 89th would have time to reform. Spears scrabbled over rubble or crouched in cover formed by fallen masonry, never remaining still, always firing, turning, firing, pivoting, firing. Exilarchy soldiers burst open under the hammer blows of bolt shells striking home. Throne of the Emperor, there is no weapon more demoralising than the holy bolter. It doesn’t just fire, it roars; it doesn’t just kill, it destroys. Every bolt finding its target detonated in the body of its prey, drenching those nearby in steaming viscera. The reek in the air from so many burst-open bodies was intense enough to register on my probe’s sensoria clusters.

A second Overlord, converted to carry vehicles, roared overhead almost
close enough to land. But this one never even slowed down. Two great shadows dropped from its hollow belly, vomiting tracer fire as they fell. The Repulsor tanks slammed against the earth, their ventral anti-grav plates taking the punishment of the thirty-yard plunge with twin sonic booms.

I couldn’t keep looking at the wider battle. With Amadeus on the ground, my place was with him. Tyberia’s duty was the same: we brought our probes in closer to our master, each one within boltgun range, splitting our attention between immediate threats in his vicinity and outward threats from afar.

‘Sniper team, fifteen degrees north, third merlon along the broken battlements. Novaskyr platoon pinned under heavy fire, forty yards north-north-east. To your right – in the ruins, Exilarchy officer, armed with an energised blade.’

A constant flow of warnings and awareness, streaming into his ears. He’d trained for this. This was how he waged war. He acknowledged neither of us as we spoke in ceaseless, overlapping murmurs, yet he reacted to everything we said. His bolter kicked and banged. His blade rose and fell, bit and tore.

We weren’t defenceless, even at this distance. Our servo-skulls were armed with needlers, spitting las-darts over Amadeus’ shoulders into foes he couldn’t turn to face, risking brief drifts from his side to track and cut down any enemies stalking from other directions.

When Amadeus reloaded in a moment of stolen silence, Tyberia and I still fed him the continual whisper of data from our probes. Even some of the Spears kept glancing his way, unused to the way he fought in brotherless focus, aware of every threat, eager for every target. His warcraft was no revelation to us; this was what we’d trained for and I’d performed the same duty for other Mentor Legion officers on every deployment. Tyberia, on her first deployment, also had a week of field experience now to add to her years of battle simulation training. She was as icy as any veteran helot.

I saw more than one Spear lose precious seconds taken aback by my master’s unending awareness of the battle around him. The Spears fought as brothers, as a unit, moving in harmony and watching out for one another as warriors have done since conflict was the brutal simplicity of shield walls and phalanxes at the very dawn of war. Amadeus fought alone, always moving, never taken by surprise, with his senses open to a hundred things he couldn’t see, simply because we could.

Reinforcements flooded the avenue from the direction of the palace, swarming over the rubble towards us. A horde, a tide of the treacherous
bastards. The Exilarchy’s lords had seen where their triumph was souring into defeat, and had hurled everything they had to fill the breach. More tanks. More troops. The air turned thick with engine exhaust and razorlights of las-bolts knifing past.

To fight fair would see the Exilarchy forces crushed, but these men’s masters had fought Space Marines before. They commanded their minions to abandon the firefights and bring the Spears down through misplaced valour and sheer weight of flesh. Just as the bane of ironclad knights on Old Earth had been swarms of peasantry armed with pole-hooks dragging the men from their saddles, Space Marines too could be overwhelmed through sheer numbers. It was madness to look upon, and yet it was the only gamble that had a hope of working.

In the minutes since they’d landed, the Spears had spent their ammunition with necessary abandon. The 89th were rallying behind them, but were a thin skin of resistance against what now spilled down the avenues.

‘We must fall back,’ Amadeus voxed to Brêac. He was providing coordinates for a decent tactical regrouping – a prudent and *Codex*-approved manoeuvre given what was roaring down the avenue towards them – when the Lord of the Third Warhost stepped forward, cast his blood-spattered white fur cloak to the ground and threw his spear, signalling the charge.

Now I have to describe the indescribable.

It started as a growl. No, even that’s wrong. It started as something subsonic, something you could feel over the vox rather than hear. It was a trembling of your tympanic membrane, your eardrums catching a beat your mind couldn’t.

Then came the growl. Ursine, guttural, conjured in the chests of transhuman men with two hearts and three lungs. I’d heard the sound before, on a single world. It was the thunder of Nemeton, the song of that world’s storms. It came over the vox just as it pealed into the air, exhaled through the mouth grilles of white-painted Mark X Tacticus war-helms.

The sound rolled, *rose*, as the Spears charged. Twenty of them – not twenty-one, for Amadeus had held back with a platoon of the 89th – charging towards a descending army. Twenty Spears, knowing that if they fell back now, they might be overrun before they could regroup.

The crackle of lasguns was the sound of a thousand bones snapping, as migraine-bright beams flashed and flashed and flashed, ionising the dust.
Beneath this storm of raking lights rang the throaty chatter of stubber fire, a blizzard of solid slugs spitting across the dusty vista. The air was murder. The Spears charged into it, through it, battleplate blackening, ceramite plates shrapnelling clear. They sprinted in their powered armour, their boots forming the crashing of drums, their bolt rifles roaring, each one of them giving voice to that rising growl.

The two lines met with an avalanche’s grind as flesh and bone shattered against ceramite. Brêac’s shortsword plunged forward, smashing a shrieking man from his feet, and twenty warriors roared in unison, crying out in the defiant, jagged syllables of the Nemetese tongue.

‘Skovakarah uhl zarûn. Skovakarah uhl zarûn.’

They chanted it. They shouted that chant as bolters hammered and swords fell and axes fell and spears lanced home. Surrounded, wading through the living and treading on the dead, the Spears roared their battle cry. Blood began to darken already filthy ceramite. The snap-crack of power fields around swinging weapons added an aggravating percussion that set my teeth on edge, even a mile away. As the Spears exerted themselves, forcing the fibre-bundle cabling of their armour to new heights of motion, the thrum of their back-mounted power packs rose an octave. Even their armour was singing amidst the slaughter.

Etched on the cobalt battleplate were symbols and markings whose meaning meant little to me and everything to them: rune-scratches in Nemetese ogham, faded scorpion images to mourn their fallen brother-Chapter; and the rearing manticore crest of the Adeptus Vaelarii, the heraldic beast clutching a spear as it bared its teeth.

My primary probe drifted above Brêac, where he was flanked by his battleguards, Morcant and Faelan, in the thick of the fighting. They moved with the harmony of lifelong soldiers, but where Brêac focused wholly on butchery, Faelan and Morcant fought to keep their lord alive. Faelan, with blade and shield, deflected bayonet thrusts from the joints of Brêac’s warplate and executed any desperate wretches that had fallen underfoot in the press of bodies. Morcant fought with knife and boltgun, hammering shots into the crowd, cutting down threats beyond Brêac’s reach.

I drifted closer, seeing the same devotion mirrored in the three squads supporting the Immortals. Every sub-officer had two brethren fighting at his side at the squad’s vanguard. Such loyalty to their leaders spoke of a brotherhood I’d not witnessed in my years among the Mentors.
‘Pull back,’ Tyberia said behind me, where she stared into her own monitors, watching the same butchery. There was no conviction in her voice. ‘We should leave the Spears. Focus on Amadeus.’

‘Do so at once,’ Kartash said, turning her words into his command. ‘And hope that our master forgives your distraction.’

We pulled back, Tyberia swiftly, me much slower, both of us still watching. I thought the advance would stop, opposed by thrashing flesh as the enemy’s numbers began to tell. Even a charge that bold, that machine-like, could still fail, clogged with meat. It slowed, true, but it never stopped. The Exilarchy’s soldiers spent their lives against that bloody ceramite, fingers scrabbling for purchase on limbs and weapons and trinkets. And they died in droves for trying.

I drifted in for one final swoop, my servo-skull’s needler flashing half a dozen times, spitting las-darts over Brêac’s shoulder. Three of the soldiers among the multitude fighting to reach Brêac fell, their faces gouged through.

‘Skovakarah uhl zarûn,’ I said to myself, teeth clenched. Even mimicking that guttural cry made my skin prickle.

Kartash spoke quietly from behind me. ‘I have marked your disobedience, Anuradha.’

‘Understood, Helot Primus.’

‘You should be above submitting to the emotion of the moment.’

‘Yes, Helot Primus.’

‘What does it mean, do you think?’ Tyberia murmured, for once not taking the chance to gloat. ‘That Nemetese war cry.’

Amadeus, who was rallying the battered Guard of the 89th, spoke over the vox to grant us an answer. His study of Nemetese dialects was proceeding ahead of ours.

‘Redden the earth,’ he replied. ‘Skovakarah uhl zarûn. It means “Redden the earth”’. ‘

The Emperor’s Spears took the regency palace less than two hours later. The Lord-Governor of Kouris, clad in custom-forged armour of imitation auranite and armed with a power sword as old as the Imperium, was a shameless defector to the Exilarchy. He demanded trial by single combat against a champion chosen from among the Adeptus Vaelarii.
It would be a lie to say there was no fear in him as he faced his extinction, but he was brave nonetheless, trembling as he made his demand, facing the bloodied and war-stained Immortals in a half-circle. He himself was exhausted from the wounds he’d taken in defending his palace. In my experience, the lords and ladies of Imperial worlds were often fat creatures that stewed in their own pleasures, or grave, serious men and women burdened by overwhelming duty. I’d expected the Regent of Kouris to be the former, and was surprised to see the latter through the eye-lenses of my skull probes.

This was no scarred cultist chanting prayers to dark masters. Here was a man, just a man, one that could have passed for an Imperial Guard general in any one of a hundred regiments. I sensed nothing of hatred in him, and that made me ache in some unquantifiable way. Never before had I heard such weary, resigned blasphemy from one of the enemy. At my side, Kartash and Tyberia were similarly rapt as we watched his final moments tick-tock to their inevitable conclusion.

‘By what right does a heretic demand an honourable death?’ asked Ducarius of the Kavalei.

‘I am no heretic,’ the regent insisted, hissing the words between bloody teeth.

‘And yet,’ said Brêac, ‘you led your world in revolt against the Emperor, and filled your belly with the Exilarchy’s lies.’ He narrowed his eyes, and the expression twisted his tattoos. ‘Those are the actions of a heretic.’

‘The God-Emperor is gone.’ Defiance lit the princeling’s eyes, but still no fury. ‘The God-Emperor is dead.’

‘And those are the words of a heretic,’ said Faelan.

Even in defeat, the regent wasn’t without his pride. He railed at the Spears with exhausted dignity, accusing the Adeptus Vaelarii of failing to come to his people’s aid when the Exilarchy began raiding their shipping routes, and seeding their cities with cults. Above all, he cursed the absent Celestial Lions for not honouring their oaths and leaving Kouris naked in the path of the Exilarchy’s conquest.

‘Do not impugn the Lions’ honour,’ Morcant warned. The Arakanii warrior had a temper that flared in a heartbeat. I thought he might backhand the regent and kill him there and then.

Ducarius, black-clad and solemn, calmed Morcant with a gesture as he
answered the regent’s blasphemy. ‘Our brothers would’ve been here, had they been able. They are embattled elsewhere, Lord-Governor. All of the Veil cries out for salvation.’

The regent shook his head. ‘Grant me what is mine by right,’ he demanded again.

‘Thousands lie dead outside these walls,’ said Tolmach with vicious gentleness. ‘Four Spears lie cold among them. And millions more fell over the span of the war on this world. *Your war.*’

Brêac agreed with the war-priest. ‘You’ve forsaken any rights your rank once gave you.’

The Lord-Governor raised his sword anyway, parading forward to die with all the nobility he could muster. ‘Then I will die on my feet, as a soldier.’

The Spears stepped back. They watched him stagger, and when he lashed out with his heirloom sword, they stepped back again. Pity burned in their eyes at this pathetic spectacle – a traitor that truly believed he deserved to die well.

‘I will die standing,’ the regent roared, and swung again. The sword’s power field whined with every failed cleave.

The Spears refused to grant him his final desire. Brêac gestured to the flailing princeling, and Morcant shot the gold-clad heretic in the belly with a single round. The bisected remains that struck the floor of the throne room quivered, the governor too shocked yet to feel pain or realise he was dead. The last thing he saw was Morcant’s boot descending towards his face, crushing his skull with the sound of breaking branches.

I shuddered as the Arakanii dragged his ceramite boot across the ornate rug, leaving a smeared red trail that had been the regent’s head. It wasn’t the gore, you understand. I’d seen gore and mutilation many times over a decade of battlefield experience. It was the disregard. The inhumanity of the gesture. Morcant wiped the man’s life away like shit from a peasant’s shoe.

In the following stillness, Brêac looked to the empty regency throne. ‘Tolmach, I want you to install a governor from among the Novaskyr officers. Arrange which regiments will remain as a garrison force, and ensure the rest return to the Armada for rearming and reassignment.’

‘Aye, Lord Brêac.’

‘Ducarius, you have the honour of dealing with our dead.’

‘At once, lord.’
'Morcant, Faelan, oversee the withdrawal of our forces back to the Hex and the redisposition of Bellonan legionaries off-world.'

'Aye, lord.'

'As you wish, lord.'

The Spears drifted apart, preparing to manage the fate of the world they’d just won. Only one warrior remained in Brêac’s presence, and he spoke with a sense of reluctant admiration.

'You have just assigned each of them a campaign’s worth of administrative work, Lord Brêac.'

The Lord of the Third Warhost turned to my master, a dark patience in his eyes. ‘They’re used to it. I ask a lot of my officers, Amadeus. I have to. The Spears are the bond that holds Elara’s Veil together. The other armies, the other worlds, they look to us for leadership. Who do you think leads the Veil’s Armada, in deep space? The core of that force is our Chapter fleet.’

'I would like to see this Armada,’ said my master.

‘Pray you don’t, Mentor, for it only gathers in hours of direst need.’ Brêac hesitated then, either unsure what to say or how to say it. ‘You fought with the Guard, even when you deployed with us. Why?’

'I fought where I was needed most.’ Now it was my master’s turn to hesitate. ‘Has that offended you in some way?’

‘No. I’d not expected it, but it didn’t offend me.’ Brêac moved to the throne, running his gloved fingertips over one of the golden armrests, shaped into the face of a roaring lion. ‘The Lions should’ve been here. Kouris is at the edge of their protectorate. The dead fool was right about that, at least, even if he was wrong to whore his world out to the Exilarchy.’

‘Then where are they?’ my master asked.

Brêac used one of the throne room’s great silk curtains to clean the blood from his spear. His chuckle was a joyless snarl.

‘The Lions? I’m surprised you need to ask. They’re dead, mostly. Surely you know the stories, Mentor. A Chapter condemned for daring to call the Holy Inquisition’s bloodthirsty methods into question. Ships sabotaged, lost in the warp. The brutally coordinated ambushes that decimated them in the defence of Armageddon. All that ill luck, eh? Plaguing them ever since they appealed to the High Lords of Terra to rein in the actions of the Inquisition. Quite the coincidence.’
Amadeus’ tone was neutral. Reluctant, by his standards – he wanted to tunnel for more information and there was no way of subtly doing so.

‘I deal in facts and truths,’ he said, ‘not rumours and hearsay. While I hold no affection for the Inquisition, nor its sanctioned methods, I find it difficult to countenance that they would operate against a Chapter in such a way.’

Brêac spat acid onto the floor. ‘Believe what you wish. Your doubts don’t change the truth.’

‘Regardless,’ my master replied, ‘the last lore pertaining to the Lions that reached the Imperium spoke of hopeful tidings. A new Chapter Master was chosen, and the survivors of the Armageddon Massacre were being supported in their rebuilding by a strike force of Black Templars. Do you mean to tell me this was untrue?’

Brêac laughed, the sound gruff and bitter, matching the dark clarity in his eyes. ‘A century ago, it was entirely true. But they were down to their last hundred warriors back then, and they’ve been at war every day since the Rift ripped the sky wide open. Noble bastards, the Lions, and twice as stubborn. They’ve never stopped bleeding, because they won’t stop fighting.’

I registered a slight shift in Amadeus’ posture. He tightened his muscles, a sign, I was coming to recognise, that he was restraining himself.

‘Honourable,’ my master allowed, ‘if… imprudent.’

‘To the shitpile with prudence,’ said Brêac. He turned, not to Amadeus, but to follow the hovering drift of the closest servo-skull; one of Kartash’s. ‘You three slaves. Which one of you fired into the fight on the Emykarus Avenue?’

Kartash and Tyberia were suddenly very silent, very still, in the confines of the Damocles tank.

‘All of them,’ Amadeus replied on our behalf. ‘They are trained to lend aid when opportunity arises.’

Brêac’s gaze drifted to our three servo-skulls in turn. ‘Which one of you came in low over the central advance and fired over my shoulder? Which one of you spoke our battle cry through your skull’s vocaliser?’

Tyberia’s intake of breath was so soft I didn’t know if I imagined it. ‘It was Anuradha,’ she said at once, her skull probe relaying the words, cracklingly adamant. ‘She lingered with the Spears’ advance, master, even when Helot Primus Avik ordered her to withdraw.’

I looked back over my shoulder, narrowing my eyes at her. ‘God-Emperor
help me, Tyberia, you are a petulant and pathetic child,’ I whispered. She didn’t bother turning around, but I saw her self-congratulatory smirk.

‘We will discuss your disobedience when we return to the Hex, Helot Secundus,’ said Amadeus.

I swallowed. ‘Yes, master.’

Brêac rumbled amusement at the exchange. He pointed with the spear he’d cleaned by making rags of royal drapes. The silver blade aimed at the pulped wreckage that had recently been a living, breathing man.

Amadeus followed the gesture. ‘Yes? Does the corpse have some significance you want me to note?’

‘Not the body, fool. The sword.’

The regent’s sword was still intact, a yard from the detonated carcass’ slack fingers. Amadeus cast his glance over the ornate blade, the weapon of a ruling dynasty and inarguably beautiful, but little more than a dagger to him.

‘I see it, yes.’

‘I’m not talking to you, you arse.’ Brêac walked to the body, boots thudding hard and heavy on the throne room’s dressed stone floor, and picked up the fallen sword. In his gauntletted hand, the golden heirloom of generations of Kourian regent-lords caught the light of the setting sun.

‘Anuradha,’ he said, ‘it was good to fight with you, brief as it was. Never had a human battleguard before. By way of thanks… Do you want this?’

Kartash froze, breathing out a soft curse. And Tyberia, it pleased me to note, was no longer smiling. Quite the opposite.

Later, I tried to refuse the sword. Tolmach was the one to bring it to me, and he offered it with no more ceremony than Brêac had done. The Spears treated Nemetese ritual as seriously as life itself, but away from Nemeton their observances were private and subtler, not a matter for outsiders to see.

‘It’s blessed and reconsecrated,’ Tolmach had told me, tossing the sheathed sword to me from halfway across the arming chamber. I caught it, the weapon of kings and queens who’d ruled in the Emperor’s stead for generations: a blade with only a single mark of dishonour in a long and illustrious life.

‘Surely one of the Novaskyr officers is more deserving,’ I’d argued, unwilling to even close my fingers around the treasure I’d caught. ‘Surely any
of them would be more deserving.’

Tyberia had said the same, of course, and I wasn’t shy in agreeing with her. Even Kartash winced at such a royal gift coming to me for what he again called, ‘a moment’s overenthusiastic distraction.’

Tolmach would hear none of it.

‘This is the blade of a fallen regency and a symbol of Kouris’ failed apostasy. A new weapon will be forged for the new bloodline we leave in kingship here.’

I still argued, but Tolmach refused to listen to my protests. He told me that I was boring him, and that his duty was done now the sword had been cleansed of sin.

‘Use it to nobler ends than its last wielder,’ he charged me.

I swore that I would.

Hours later, when Tyberia and Kartash slumbered, I finally drew the blade clear of its scabbard. I could tell you I marvelled at the craft of the kingsword in my hands, and that would be true. I could tell you of its weight and heft and balance, of the perfection of its killing edge, and how the melded metals of its hilt and grip were shaped into an eagle’s spread wings. I could linger with exacting description over the weapon’s power generator, sculpted into the image of a lion’s head on one side of the blade’s base, and a lioness on the other. All of it is true. None of it matters. One detail overrode all others.

Tolmach had done more than bless and reconsecrate the weapon. He’d also handed it over to one of the Chapter forgewrights aboard the Hex, for evidently Brèac had additional orders to be carried out before the sword was given over to me.

Along the flat of the silver blade, an expert hand had acid-carved a stream of Nemetese runes into the steel. The jagged scripture was at absolute odds with the aesthetic of the sword, ruining its beauty without compromising its lethality. A blending of two worlds, like the Spears themselves: the barbaric and the crude clashing with the disciplined and the regal. I ran my thumb along the runes, over the words that read:

_Skovakarah uhl zarûn._

As I reached the last runic letter, the world around me exploded into sound.

‘Battle stations,’ Serivahn’s command thundered over the shipwide vox. ‘All hands to battle stations.’
XI

THE WHITE HUNTRESS

1

The *Hex* ripped her way from orbit on howling engines, abandoning Brêac’s unfinished plans on the surface. She raced from Kouris, void shields slamming up and flickering into life, running out her guns as she sprinted. On board, red-stained discipline took hold as the entire ship rattled around us. Fire-teams of Chapter-thralls rushed to defensible choke points and concourses. Key crew sealed themselves in crucial operation chambers, guarded by hosts of utterly loyal Bellonan skitarii.

Amadeus reached the bridge at a dead run, and I watched through his eyes as he plunged into the ruthlessly ordered chaos of a warship’s command deck bathed in emergency lighting. The oculus screen showed a masterpiece painting of stars with Kouris falling far behind. Serfs and crew called data to each other from station to station. Above it all was the captain’s dais, housing Serivahn’s steel throne.

The First Primaris was at the heart of all he commanded, his withered arm held close to his chest, his other hand gripping his throne. He stared with all the vicious concentration a Space Marine was capable of, that focus of a transhuman mind locked upon its task. I’ve read other chronicles describing it as analytical or mechanical, but that falls short of the truth. It’s a hunger, a gift that elevates them above human soldiers. They see something before them – a task to be completed, an enemy to be destroyed – and their focus becomes an inhuman need to see it done.

Amadeus approached the throne, ascending the steps. ‘Greetings, Captain Serivahn.’

Serivahn didn’t look away from the oculus. You could see on his twisted face how he willed the *Hex* to greater speed.

‘Lieutenant Commander Incarius.’

Morcant shoved his way past Amadeus, moving to Serivahn’s side. ‘Speak to me, Vargantes. Is it her?’

The hunger flared in Serivahn’s eyes. His glare was sharp enough to kill wherever it fell.
‘It’s her.’

Morcant smiled his cannibal smile and turned to the oculus. ‘And to think I cursed Brêac for dragging us to this backwater war. He’s never going to let me live this down. Can we catch her?’

Serivahn still hadn’t looked away from the vista of stars. ‘It will be close. Everything depends on the course she takes and what escorts run at her side.’

‘Did I ask for the odds?’ growled Morcant. ‘Tell me what you think.’

Serivahn met his brother’s savage gaze. ‘I think we’ve got her, Arakanii. I think we’ve got her.’

Several yards away, observing this exchange, my master politely cleared his throat. Both Spears turned his way.

‘Who,’ he asked, ‘or what, are we chasing?’

Her name was *Venatrix Candidus*, the White Huntress. It wasn’t the name she’d been born with, but it was the identity that her wrath-maddened machine-spirit shrieked into the void in the heat of battle. I dare say it suited her, for she was plated in black, dark enough to fade into the night sky. Her only visible markings were a heraldic beast on her sides, some chimeric fusion of serpent and lizard: a basilisk, clutching a world in its scaled coils.

Over the last century, the ships of the Adeptus Vaelarii Armada had come to know her well. She played the roles of outrider and scout for the Exilarchy, breaking warp within a system to bear witness for her masters. A significant number of ambushes identified the *Venatrix* sailing in the vanguard, and a great many of the Exilarchy’s recorded defeats made mention of her fleeing to fight another day.

Depending on your preferred patron for luck, fate, fortune or the God-Emperor’s will had delivered the *Venatrix* to us that day. She’d blasted into existence at the Mandeville point on the edge of Kouris’ system. The *Hex*’s long-range auspices had marked her at once, and Serivahn ordered the immediate withdrawal of every Spear still on the surface. Kouris would be left to fend for itself in the aftermath of its broken rebellion. Within minutes, the *Hex* was coming about. Her last gunship slammed into the deck while its mothership was already rising into high orbit. Serivahn and Brêac would have abandoned any Spears that didn’t return swiftly enough, of that I’m sure.

We burned edgeward, away from the system’s sun. The *Venatrix* saw us
coming: an Adeptus Vaelarii strike cruiser modified over a century of the bitterest conflict, the renowned *Hex* of the Emperor’s Spears. She turned away from us, not even running out her guns or hiding behind her void shields. She dumped all her power into her engines… and she ran. She didn’t even try to bait us. She bolted.

We were still minutes away when the Venatrix cleaved reality apart and slipped into the wound. How could her warp drive be ready again, so soon after terminating a journey? Her crew chose to risk annihilation in the Sea of Souls rather than face our anger.

With a flare of unholy light, the Venatrix was gone.

Brêac, now on the bridge, hammered his fist into a control console and let loose a wordless roar of frustration. Servitors and thralls wisely backed away from him.

‘She always runs,’ Morcant lamented. ‘Blood of the Emperor, Serivahn, do something.’

Serivahn was calmer, at least outwardly. Maybe he just lacked the physicality to express his rage.

‘We can follow them,’ he said, quiet but commanding. ‘This isn’t over.’

But it would be too late. By the time we reached the Venatrix’s warp locus, she’d be deep in the empyrean, almost definitely untrackable. Every second was precious.

And nothing was ready. It takes Navigators hours to prepare to sail through the empyrean, and the generation of a Geller field isn’t something you can merely conjure into being on a whim. Ignoring these fail-safes threatened the ship, but warping before reaching the safe distance of the system’s Mandeville point threatened the entire world of Kouris. Rending reality so close to a populated world invited the eyes of the Ruinous Powers to turn upon all those unprotected souls.

Thralls called warnings from their stations, but Serivahn wanted none of them. He looked to Brêac.

‘Give the order, lord, and we’ll go in after them.’

Brêac ground his teeth together, watching Kouris recede on the oculus. ‘How far are we from the Mandeville point?’

‘Seventeen minutes.’ The deformed warrior looked haggard but stern. ‘Minimum safe distance from Kouris in nine minutes.’
‘That’s too long.’ Brêac drew his spear, igniting the blade. I thought he would lash out, but instead he stared into the crackling power field, a man lost and seeking an oracular sign in the patterns of energy. ‘Even that’s too damn long.’

Morcant banged his knuckles against his chest, a three-beat drumming to the rhythm of a heart, a gesture of Nemetese sincerity. ‘Chase them,’ he said without emotion.

‘I’m not risking an entire world,’ Brêac replied, though he no longer sounded certain. ‘Druids? Your counsel, brothers.’

Both war-priests stood by the throne in their black, rune-marked plate. Ducarius of the Kavalei leaned on his force blade, point down against the deck. Tolmach of the Novontei had his mace of office in one hand, the crozius’ head resting on one shoulder guard.

Ducarius spoke first, the cables and wires connecting the back of his skull to his psychic hood pulling taut as he shook his head. ‘Kouris may not be damned if we give chase here. We speak of gambles, not certainties.’

‘Hell of a gamble,’ Faelan cut in. ‘Lord, don’t do this. We’ll get another chance at the Huntress.’

‘It’s been twelve bloody years since our last chance,’ Morcant snarled, stabbing a finger at the oculus. ‘Emperor’s balls, chase them.’

Tolmach was the only one still to speak. ‘I share the Arakanii’s hunger to engage, and my Kavalei brother is right – it’s a risk, not an absolute. Faelan speaks from the other side of duty, and I’d not blame you for heeding his words, lord.’

‘See? The druids agree with me,’ pressed Morcant.

‘I didn’t say I agreed,’ Ducarius pointed out. ‘Three of our brothers gave their lives in the war for Kouris. Do you want to descend into the ship’s barrow and tell their corpses they died for nothing, if the world they saved is to be risked while their bones are still warm?’

‘Control your ire, Arakanii,’ Tolmach said, and it had the weight of a command. The war-priests watched Morcant more intently now, their disapproval radiating in a cold aura. They had more authority than I’d initially realised; it was difficult to discern how the Spears’ druidic order really functioned. Each of them seemed to be some blend of Chaplain, Apothecary and Librarian.
‘Well, even the bastard Mentor would agree with me, if he had the right to speak. Wouldn’t you, false Scorpion?’

At Morcant’s words, every head turned to Amadeus, standing nearby. He didn’t advance to be part of the inner circle, but stayed on the steps leading to the throne.

‘“For the righteous, ruthlessness is only a virtue when the gains outweigh the costs. When a commander’s ruthlessness is born of emotion or harms those they are charged to defend, it becomes tyranny.”’

Morcant gave a humourless grunt. ‘Now he’s quoting the Codex at us. Emperor spare me.’

‘But he’s right.’ Brêac silenced his men with a chop of his hand. This was the Spears’ way, for their lords to listen to all counsel before making their decision: informal and tribal, just as on Nemeton. Every officer had a voice. No commander could ignore his men and keep their respect, but the final word belonged to their lord. ‘We’re the defenders of Elara’s Veil, my brothers. I won’t risk billions of lives for a shot at the Venatrix. Do any of you really want to be remembered as the warriors that damned a world for the chance of vengeance?’

‘I could live with it,’ Morcant replied.

‘You’re not going to have to,’ Brêac said, and that was the end of it.

At the time, Brêac’s reluctance surprised me. The Mentor Legion’s archives were rich with lore pertaining to the merciless decisions of Space Marine commanders across the centuries, and the hatred these warriors felt for the Venatrix was palpable even watching through my master’s eyes. So, yes, Brêac’s reluctance surprised me. So many tales of the Adeptus Astartes focus on the destruction of their foes at any cost. For countless Chapters, whose stubbornness was a legendary claim to valour, no price was too high to pay if it meant the annihilation of a foe.

But I knew so little of the Spears, then. I didn’t know they had the lesson of the Pure burned into their brains. It had changed them. Forced them to feel a shred of compassion, if only for the sake of their souls. It’s said Space Marines know no fear, but the Spears feared becoming what they hated.

‘Hold course, Serivahn,’ Brêac ordered. ‘We’ll trust in the Emperor to guide our pursuit.’

‘The Emperor is a long way from here, lord,’ said Morcant, and that too had the feel of a familiar axiom. No one argued the point. Several of the Spears
smiled grimly.

After an excruciating wait to spare the people of Kouris from the daemonic overspill of a warp translation, we reached minimum safe distance. Still short of the Mandeville point, we followed the *Venatrix* into the warp, trusting not only to the God-Emperor, but also to the *Hex*’s unready Navigator.

3

The *Hex* shuddered around us, and my senses were split between the bridge, where Amadeus was with the Spears, and our arsenal chamber, where we three helots were buckling ourselves into our armour. We tightened bindings, fixed carapace plates into place, sheathed and holstered weapons… My Engager shotgun was a heavy and welcome weight in my gloved hands after a week in the confines of the Damocles.

And if I closed my left eye, my vision immediately transferred to Amadeus’ helmet lenses and his backpack-mounted targeting array. He was looking at the oculus, at the ectoplasmic hatred of the Sea of Souls trying to drown the ship. I opened my eye at once and suppressed the desire to spit. Saliva soaked my tongue, the forerunner to throwing up. It took three swallows to ease the urge.

‘Is this necessary?’ Tyberia asked as she buckled her helm into place.

‘The call was to battle stations,’ Kartash replied, ‘and if we catch the *Venatrix*, we’’ll be ready for whatever our master commands.’

‘You think he’’ll order us to board the enemy ship?’ I almost laughed. The very idea was madness.

‘And they won’t board us,’ Tyberia was adamant. ‘There are over fifty Spears aboard this ship. It would be suicide.’

‘We may not even catch them,’ said Kartash, with some reluctance. ‘Nevertheless, we will be ready.’

The *Hex* continued to give chase. Warp flight without the guiding light of the Astronomican was a careening sprint along ducts and passages that thrashed amidst the seething madness of the Sea of Souls. For every moment the *Hex* caught traction and pushed forward under its own power, there was another spell of heaving, tormented iron as the ship fought the tides.

We caught them, though. That was the problem. We caught up with the *Venatrix* far too fast.

‘There,’ said Brèac on the bridge. He violated the prohibitions regarding
observation of the empyrean, as did most Space Marine warriors. He gazed into the murk of unreality on the oculus, and I could only guess at what wraiths from his past he saw in those burning waves. Through my master’s eyes, I saw colliding energies, the strange darkness of unlight, and…

‘I see it,’ Amadeus said. Through his eyes, I saw it, too: a silhouette in the ocean of psychic poison, a shadowy suggestion like a knife behind a curtain. ‘How can we have caught them this swiftly?’

‘Because they were waiting for us,’ Serivahn said, breathless, as he surged from his throne. Fury and something desperately close to fear ravaged his features. Everyone felt it in the same second. Across the bridge, weapons flashed into hands. Useless, so utterly useless, but a warrior’s instinct couldn’t always be tamed.

‘Incoming!’ one of the auspex servitors cried out in the same moment Serivahn yelled his orders.

‘Navigator, disengage, disengage! All hands, brace for—’
There was one moment of pure stillness. A primeval, perfect peace. The apotheosis of silence.

Every hand frozen, mid-curling into a fist.

Every eye locked, unblinking, pupils dilated, in that moment horror becomes revelation.

Every sword and axe flashing with the reflections of hellish light. In the steel of our bared weapons, you could see the faces of those that waited in the underworld, withered and bleeding and clawed to ribbons.

The long dead and the recently slain, gazing into our world.

And behind them, things that had never been born at all.

They saw us. We saw them. Everything was silent. Everything was still.

For one perfect moment.
XIII

BEHIND A BROKEN SHIELD

1

Tales of Geller field failure are the ghost stories of the void. Ships that never reach their destination are gently referred to as ‘lost with all hands in the Sea of Souls’, and we clench at those delicate words, turning aside from thinking what they really mean. I have more experience with void travel than most humans could conceive, and I still know next to nothing of the warp. The dead dwell there in their multitudes. That I know. The dead, and daemons that feast on the living.

I’ve boarded a ship that drifted back to reality after its Geller field failed. That was the mercantile runner *Opportune*, and I watched through Vadhán’s eyes as he swept the ship with a strike team of Spears, only to find its mangled iron bones sucked clean of life. The ship was a tomb, its hull and innards twisted beyond reckoning, let alone refit. When Vadhán withdrew his men, he ordered the *Opportune* destroyed. We prayed for the spirits of those lost in the Sea of Souls – a useless benediction, and all we could do.

The ship had been in the warp, unshielded, for too long. There was nothing uncorrupt in her carcass, nothing left untainted that we could salvage, and no clue as to what had happened to her crew when the naked wrath of the warp flooded through her decks. So it became a legend, just another ghost story.

But I was aboard the *Hex* when her Geller field failed.

2

Sound and motion came back to us in the same moment, flooring us with thunder. The ship screamed with sirens. The vox-system vomited static into every deck, loud enough to destroy all other sound.

Around me, it was black. Absolutely, completely black. There was blood in my mouth. I was blind, deafened by the roar of the abused vox-speakers, and wounded. How badly wounded, I didn’t know. When I breathed in, I choked it back out a second later. The air was foul and too thick to pull into my throat. I remember thinking, with the fragile clarity of rising panic, that to breathe in again would kill me. The air tasted toxic. Then the heat hit: hot enough to strike like a physical blow – I was slippery with stinging sweat, my face streaming with it, attacking my eyes.
Training took over. I needed my senses back. In the dark I fumbled with my helmet, needing to twist it straight before pulling the rebreather into place and slamming the visor down. Targeting data flared into existence, tracking helplessly over the blackness. I pulled in my first clean breath, forcing it to be deep, trying to take control of my racing heart by what I let into my lungs.

A scream sounded over the helmet’s internal comm, one of anger as much as shock. Tyberia. A flicker-flash of gunfire followed it, somewhere to my left. It illuminated my surroundings just enough to turn the air from black to grey, orienting me, restoring a hint of what was up and what was down. I was already cycling through vision overlays, pulling myself to my feet. I’d not known until then that I was down on the deck.

‘Tyberia?’ I voxed to her. My voice was a strangled choke. ‘Report.’

Nothing.

‘Tyberia? Kartash? Amadeus?’

Again, nothing.

The thermal-optic feed was a migraine smear of burning light. Monochrome thermal imaging fared better in piercing the murk, turning the absolute blackness into dark mist. Heat warnings sang in my ears until I muted them to pulsing runes on my visor. My rebreather filtered the air but did nothing for the heat. I was sucking in slow gulps of what felt like promethium jet wash.

I fumbled again. My shoulder light finally woke up, spitting out a thin beam that achieved little beyond showing the swirling particles of filth in the air.

Smoke. It was smoke. The Hex was on fire.

Shapes resolved in the ashy mist. Walls that flickered and danced like water, fading in and out of sight. The deck was clearer; the smoke was thinner closer to the gantry flooring. Our arming chamber swam in and out of focus around me; a room that I’d lived in for months on the way to Kouris lost all familiarity in the obscuring smoke. I moved forward, weighed down by armour that had never felt so heavy, and smashed my shins on one of our clothing chests. I’d thought I was close to the door. I was actually on the far side of the chamber.

Tyberia cried out again, this time with nothing but anger. I couldn’t see her, and even the muzzle flash was gone now, but I heard the throaty roar of an Engager discharging over our intra-squad comm. After it, I caught the crunch of her pump-action reload.
Something leered at me from the smoke and I thank the Emperor all these years later that it wasn’t one of my companions, because with my blood up, I turned and fired the second I saw it move. I never learned what it was. Something spectral and amorphous. Something that burst into a shower of steaming blood as it dissolved back into the smoke.

I could barely see my monitron bracer in front of my face. I hammered my gloved thumb on the keyplate, sending swift-burst code across the intra-squad link.

‘Anuradha?’ It was Tyberia, answering at once. She emerged from the smoke, not as the monster had done, but with halting, searching strides. Her Engager was held high, stock against her shoulder, with the muzzle lowered to prevent the kind of fear-firing I’d just unleashed myself.

We were face to face and could still barely see each other. Mercifully, the shipwide vox finally ceased its unmanned static screech. Less mercifully, there was a momentary blast of delighted, soft laughter before it cut off completely.

‘Was that… Was that a child?’ Tyberia asked.

*Maybe, or something pretending to be one.* I didn’t know. I didn’t care. ‘We have to get the bridge. What were you firing at?’

‘I don’t know.’ Her face was hidden behind her rebreather and visor, but her voice caught on the words. If her heart was hammering even half the speed of mine, I knew why. Adrenaline. Fear. Disorientation. A heady mix in our bloodstreams.

We moved together, always within arm’s reach, Engagers swinging to cover the endless shadows we stalked through. I’d trained to fight in burning buildings, but to be stumbling through the inferno that devoured the *Hex* was beyond any controlled fire I’d fought through before. Before my training, I’d thought that fire would cast everything into stark light, blazing around me. The opposite was true. In a fire, you can’t see anything. The familiar becomes alien and almost impossible to perceive. The smoke is almost impenetrable. There’s no right answer between too much caution or too much haste. If you linger too long in one place, you’ll find yourself trapped by the flames, but if you move with speed, you’ll lose your bearings with pathetic ease in the blackness. Either way, you’re dead if you’re not lucky as well as careful.

We advanced down the corridor, crouched low. I led the way, Tyberia moved at my shoulder, constantly swinging back to check the way we’d come. Time ceased to have any meaning in those dark halls. For all the enhancements to
my memory, I can’t recall how long we moved together, a two-thrall strike team, lost in the Hex’s guts. Gunfire rattled above us, behind us, beneath us… Other crew members on other decks, fighting for their lives against who knew what.

The smoke thinned enough for us to get our bearings, but it never really cleared. It lengthened every shadow and cast half of every corridor into night. At one point, the hallway floor became treacherous underfoot, sucking at our boots. When I looked down, we were ankle-deep in viscous brown slime. It stirred as we sloshed through it, sticky as animal slurry.

‘Oh, God-Emperor,’ Tyberia breathed. ‘Oh, shitting hell. Have you scanned this?’

I didn’t need to scan it. My boot had just bumped a partially articulated ribcage, coated in the slime. I knew what we were walking through. I just didn’t know who it had been. At least two dozen of the crew, maybe closer to fifty.

When I raised my head, my shoulder spotlight followed the motion.

‘Don’t look up,’ I voxed to Tyberia. ‘Just move.’

But of course she looked up, and I couldn’t move despite ordering her to. We both stared at the corridor’s ceiling, just like the walls and deck, covered in blast patterns of gore. A family of wet, red skeletons were fused with the metal of the ship. Several of them were still moving, jaws opening and closing on skinned tendons, dripping fingers reaching for us.

Our Engagers roared.

When we reloaded farther down the corridor, both spattered with the blood of dead crew, a new voice reached me through the background static of our squad’s vox.

‘Helot Secundus.’

‘Master…? Master, is that you?’

His reply was lost in static. I resisted the urge to curse down the vox. ‘Master, please repeat. Heavy interference. I’ve lost my connection to your senses.’

‘Anuradha.’ His voice was a crackle of syllables. ‘My instruments have failed. Report your location.’

I did so, and Amadeus commanded us to make our way to the third ascension concourse where he would meet us with several Spears. When he
asked if we’d found the Helot Primus, I could only pray that Kartash hadn’t been in the last corridor.

‘Master, what happened?’

‘The Geller field collapsed before we broke back into real space. The Venatrix launched some kind of psychic mine.’ I could hear the bark of Amadeus’ bolter behind his words. I could also hear screaming that couldn’t possibly be coming from a human throat. It fell silent after another three bolt detonations. ‘The ship was exposed to the Sea of Souls for exactly one point three-five seconds,’ my master continued. ‘Half of the Hex is aflame. Many more decks are flooded by manifestations from the immaterium. Additionally, the Venatrix has followed us back into the void.’

I felt no tremors of weapons fire around us. ‘Is she engaging us?’

‘No. She is boarding us. Do as you were ordered and reach the concourse – we have to repel the Pure.’

‘We’re almost there, master.’ I kept my voice from shaking. ‘Two minutes, no more.’

‘Acknowledged, Helot Secundus.’ And then from nowhere, he added, ‘Be careful.’

I led Tyberia as we ran, heading down one of the ship’s long spinal thoroughfares, grateful for the dissipating smoke. My heart was beating fit to burst, my body stinging from adrenaline. I could hear Tyberia experiencing the same thing; her breath sawed over the vox, into my ears. We ascended a spiral staircase, then crossed a landing at a dead sprint. No bodies anywhere. That, at least, boded well. The heat was still oppressive enough to leave my senses swimming, but mercifully the fires were lessened here.

We rounded the corner at the next junction, and through the wispy smoke, we saw Amadeus at the far end of the corridor. His towering silhouette filled the hallway, and even with all detail lost in the ashen mist, the sight of him fuelled me with relief. The intensity of that emotion almost made me forget myself and greet him with laughter.

Amadeus stood amidst several downed bodies, the shadows at his feet human in scale, writhing and crawling. With idle brutality, he aimed his boltgun down at one of the crawling men and fired. The shell burst the body apart. Gore flowered in the air. Then he placed his boot on the back of a second crawling figure, pinning it in place for a second execution.

Tyberia, with less battle experience, lacked my restraint. ‘Master!’
Amadeus looked up from his work, staring at us through the smoke. He didn’t answer her. He just started running. The decking quivered beneath his heavy tread as he powered towards us. Something so huge had no right to move that fast.

I realised a moment before Tyberia. I was in cover, behind a bulkhead, when the bolts started crashing around us. She hurled herself at my side, crouching behind the dense steel door I was using as a shield.

‘It’s not—’

‘I know, I know.’ I clutched my Engager to my chest and glanced at Tyberia. The ceramite bootfalls pounded closer, carnosaur-loud. My heart was thudding just as fast. A hundred dead heretics and cultists to my name, yet I was trembling like a newborn in winter. Death hammered its way down the corridor towards us.

‘We take him together,’ I said, sounding far surer than I felt.

‘What do we—’

The door exploded against us. My miscalculation almost killed us both, as the Adeptus Astartes warrior chose not to take cover; he chose to break through ours with a bull-rush charge. The bulkhead was ripped from its hinges, crashing to the deck. Tyberia and I were thrown across the gantry floor in clatters of carapace armour. I could hear him over the cacophony, the predatory snarling of his armour joints, the sickly, atomic keening of his power pack: behind me, above me, close, so close.

I moved faster then, than ever before or ever since. I rolled to my back, bringing my Engager up towards the towering shadow, firing at point-blank range. I had one split second of vindication: that Engagers were Space Marine-killers; that he was close enough to hit; that no matter my fear, he couldn’t survive a blast like this.

The shotgun roared in my hands.

I missed.

The shadow above me was a blur of motion. My hands moved without thought, chambering another round. Crunch-click. I fired again.

And missed again. My senses were half a second behind the warrior’s blurring movements. As I fired, he was already weaving away with protesting armour joints. As I chambered a shell, he was already raising his blade.

He kicked the Engager from my hands, hard enough that my fully bionic arm
sent a knife of pain through my shoulder. Gunless and on the ground before this god of war, I discharged my terminus-eye. The blast lased through my helmet, destroying my visor, lancing past the shadow’s raised arms. I missed again. The terminus beam relied on striking where I was looking, and I could barely follow his movements.

Tyberia’s Engager barked from the side. The descending sword sparked with detonating shell fragments and whirled from the warrior’s hand. She caught his weapon, but we couldn’t hit him. We could barely see him.

One of us, I wasn’t sure whether it was me or Tyberia, shouted to aim for the head, aim for the head. The other yelled that they were trying.

The warrior in white moved back in the same furious blur of motion. My reaching grip found my fallen Engager and I fired again, aiming for his head – this time he buckled, staggering off balance. I didn’t see if I’d hit him, I could only guess. When he turned away, I saw the crimson basilisk on his white pauldron: the serpent circling an orb that could only represent a subjugated world.

My shot bought us both a precious few heartbeats to scrabble away. We moved like panicked villagers before a tidal wave – nowhere to go, nowhere to run, fleeing in mindless, animal instinct. I’d only seen Mentors and Spears move the way the Pure moved. To be on the wrong side of that breathtaking violence was a lesson I’d gladly never have learned.

I made it to my feet in time to meet the warrior’s fist. The force was unreal, a beast’s kick to the sternum, driving all breath from my body, shattering my carapace breastplate, hurling me against the corridor wall with enough force that I felt my helmet crack and my skull crack inside it. My cheekbone crunched like pebbles. For a second I was sure I was dead – down on my knees against the wall, blinded by greyness, slavering bile into my rebreather. I groped for the Engager that had tumbled from my grip. I think I said something. I have no recollection of what, or why.

Tyberia’s shotgun bellowed. The shadow above me thrashed but didn’t move away. A talon of ceramite tore at my face, ripping my helmet free, and I screamed because my eye came away with it. I felt the snap, the disconnection of the optic bindings from my broken eye socket.

Tyberia’s Engager roared again. Shell fragments scratched me with cutting heat. I thought, with dizzy surety, she hit me, she hit me.

The warrior cast me down to the deck again. Tyberia cried out as the shadow-giant moved on her. I felt, but didn’t see, the slam as Tyberia struck
the corridor wall.

One last time, my hand slapped on my fallen Engager. I raised it, glaring with my remaining eye, firing at the brute’s back. Once, crunch-click, twice, crunch-click, thrice, crunch-click.

The Pure turned to me. His red eye-lenses blazed. He took a step towards me… and went to his knees with a crash louder than any other yet. He raised an empty hand to the blown-out ruination of his chest, where his fingertips stroked over the mangled ceramite crater, filled with wet red pulp that had been his organs and flesh only seconds before.

And still he came for me. He fell to the deck, dragging himself towards me with both hands. I fired my last round, taking him in the faceplate, snapping his head to the side as the Engager round bored through his skull and blasted a red spray out the back of his helm. Laughter gurgled from the half of his head that remained. He spoke, though the words were mangled without half of his face.

My reply was wordless, furious fear. I screamed as I dived on him, and in my hands was the priceless power sword that I’d neither earned nor deserved. I rammed it down with both hands, hilting it in his body. The second blow daggered through his spine in a clean plunge, carving deep into the deck beneath him. I know there was a third, as well as a fourth, but I lost count after the fifth. There were more. I just don’t know how many more.

Finally, he lay still.

I stumbled from his back, crawling away from what I prayed was his corpse.

‘Throne of the God-Emperor,’ I panted, slumping with my back to the corridor wall. ‘Throne of the God-Emperor.’

Tyberia was unconscious. Maybe dead, for all I knew. I tried to focus on my monitron bracer, to vox to Amadeus, only to see it’d been smashed in the fight. It flickered, detuned and unreliable.

‘Anuradha,’ said a voice, further down the corridor.

‘Master?’ I looked through the haze of smoke.

No. It wasn’t a Space Marine; it was a skeletal figure, reaching out to me, not in hostility but pained need. I knew him at once. There was no way I could mistake who it was. We were in the warp, the realm of the dead, and the dead had come to welcome us.

‘Water,’ my father said to me. ‘Anuradha. Water. Please.’
My father died when I was eleven standard years old. My mother was long dead by then; she died bringing my brother Narakhir into the world, nine years before.

I must be careful with these words. I can’t speak too deeply of my childhood, for even here on the wrong side of the galaxy, fated never to return to my former Chapter, I won’t break the oaths of secrecy I swore to the Mentor Legion. But I can speak of this. I have to, for what came next.

My father served the Mentors, as his parents had, and his parents’ parents. The Daaz bloodline had toiled for Chapter 888 since we were first taken from a world I am forbidden to speak of. We lived in the regulated human habitation sectors of a fortress-monastery I will not name, on a world whose location I won’t share.

And we were, if not happy, then at least safe and content. We provided for the Chapter. The Chapter provided for us.

It was customary to make patchwork leather cloaks and book bindings from the skins of our forebears as a means of honouring those that had served before us. As barbaric as it may sound, even to the headhunting tribes of Nemeton, the custom was performed by funerary surgeons in their sterile laboratories, and there was nothing gory or grisly in the tradition. The deeds of the dead were written on the flesh-leather in meticulous calligraphy. My father went about his duties in the processed leather cloak made of his grandparents’ hides. We saw nothing morbid in the practice. It was simply the way things were.

This was life in the lowest tiers of serfdom. Everything was precious. We wasted nothing. We were cold but never freezing, hungry but never starving.

My father’s name was Ishahan. He worked in a hydroponics district, cultivating protein-rich plants to be rendered down into nutrient paste for the Mentors’ warriors and their vast population of Chapter-serfs. Some of the hydroponics cultivators had talents in rarer or more difficult growths, such as the plant strains used as healing poultices, stimms or combat narcotics in the Chapter’s apothecarion. My father wasn’t one of these gifted few. He was just
a man, loyal and hard-working.

He was killed by a sickness of the internal organs, but before the disease killed him, it devoured him alive. Over the weeks he grew pale and weak, painfully sensitive to light and sound, losing all appetite. Still, he kept working his tasks, leaning on those around him when the burden of his duties and long hours of toil began to weigh heavily.

I think he knew, even then, that he was dying. I remember how he would return to the communal hab-chamber we shared with twenty other families, smiling in the low light as he watched my brother and I, even offering us portions of his rations and promising that he wasn’t hungry. Lying, to keep us strong, as he withered from within.

The disease took him swiftly. We were far below any rank worthy enough to receive medicae aid from our masters, though serfs from the apothecarion sector did grant us a limited supply of pain suppressants to ease his passage to the God-Emperor’s side. They weren’t enough.

He diminished before our eyes until he was nothing but a husk, and then he lived on past the point of pain, past the point of mercy. One night, as we slept on either side of him to share our warmth, we listened to his dry, clicking breaths, certain each one would leak slowly out and never be dragged back in.

Deep in the night, he called my name. Just the barest whisper. His dry eyes barely opened, his cracked lips barely moved, but he croaked my name. He wanted water. That was all he ever wanted any more.

I shook my canteen. It was empty.

‘Stay with him,’ I told my brother. He was two years younger than me. His eyes were wide as I slipped from our blankets.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To get water. Just stay with him.’

‘No.’ This, from my father. He managed to sit up. I can’t imagine the strength it took for him to make that smile look real. ‘I’ll go.’

I told him that I’d go, but he wouldn’t hear my protests. ‘Sleep, both of you. I’ll be back soon.’

He brushed my brother’s black hair back with a palsied hand, then repeated the gesture with me. He was a skeleton of a man by that point, his eyes dull, his teeth loose, his muscles soft. For years my brother believed it was pride that forced our father up that night, to go for water without help.
But I know better. I’ve always known better.

He cloaked himself and left us to our rest. My brother slept. I did not. I lay awake, looking up at the ceiling of metal and stone, for an hour. Then two. Then three. Our father still hadn’t returned.

I followed him, then.

I walked through hab-chambers crowded with other sleeping serfs, through long, cold hallways, down great stone stairways. The fortress was vast. Water for the thralls came in through artesian wells in the bedrock, in the deepest levels. Every hab-sector had a dozen of these sources.

I’d always hated this chore more than anything else. The caverns were huge and dark and home to strange sounds beneath the trickling flow of water from the aquifers. Knowing that we were safe within the void-shielded walls of a fortress-monastery was a comfort for adults. I was a child, and every time I ventured down there in the dark, my mind conjured a thousand monsters. Things that would clutch at my ankles if I walked too slow. Things that would see me, hear me, and give chase if I ran too fast.

My father knew how I felt. That’s why he’d gone. Protecting me from my fears, one last time.

I found him by the artesian well. He had died just short of reaching it, his body stretched out on the ground, frozen in mid-crawl. There was no peace in his repose. One arm was still reached out in futility, curled fingers falling just short of the well’s edge. His face was a rictus of torment, the twinned pain of his sickness and dying thirst twisting his features into a horrifying mask of desperate want. He’d died in agony, savagely thirsting, and falling short of even that final, primal need.

I covered him with his cloak, so I wouldn’t have to look at his face any more. But I stood there, by his side in the dark, for a long time. No matter how many years passed, no matter what I learned or how much data I inloaded, I never forgot the way he looked, his face painted with the pain he’d put himself through in one last act of love.

That was the face staring at me in the hallway aboard the Hex.

‘Anuradha,’ my father said. He was brittle and thin, cloaked in his parents’ leather, his movements stilted and slow, just as I remembered. A parched and shaking revenant, wearing the face of my guilty dreams.
He reached for me with trembling fingers. I could smell the rot in him, the disease that blackened his organs, decaying him while he still lived. His eyes were swollen and yellow, ripe in their sockets. His tongue was a dry worm rolling across cracked lips.

‘Water, Anuradha. Please.’

It was him. Not taken to the God-Emperor’s side at all, but drawn into the warp after his death. We’d sailed unshielded through the land of the dead, and now the dead walked among us.

He didn’t melt into a horrifying, daemonic form to leap at me. No hatred or fury burned in his eyes. He was my father, a ruined husk of a man just as he’d been when he died, reaching for me with the same hope that he’d once reached for a last drink of water.

‘Your mother is here, Anuradha.’

His fingers grazed my throat. Stroking my skin.

‘And Narakhir is with us,’ he said, lowering his voice. His fingers closed. Tightened. ‘Narakhir is with us.’ There was no triumph in his tone, no malicious glee. Only sorrow. ‘Narakhir is here. I swear it.’

I tried to draw breath, though I have no idea what use my stuttering denial would have been, even had I been able to voice it.

A ceramite fist clutched a handful of my father’s thinning hair and pulled him away from me. He screamed in pain, but there was no mercy in that grip. He tried to turn, scrabbling at Amadeus’ armour with weak fingers, a sick man pleading not to be hurt.

Amadeus smashed him, headfirst, into the corridor wall. The first time silenced his cries, breaking the bones of his face. The second time, his skull crumbled in my master’s grip, leaving a red smear against the metal.

Amadeus dropped the headless corpse to the deck. Red eye-lenses glared down at me as he snarled in a tone at odds with his supreme composure.

‘Focus, Helot Secundus.’

I flew at him. Fifteen years of training were cast aside in a heartbeat as I threw myself at my master, hammering a blow with my bionic fist that sent cobweb cracks across the aquila emblazoned on his breastplate. He caught me before I could hit him again, and shoved me against the wall. I felt my father’s blood hot against the back of my neck, and my broken skull flared with fresh pain.
I told Amadeus what he’d done. I told him who he’d just destroyed. He shook me, not gently, banging the back of my cracked head against the gore-marked wall a second time.

‘Focus, Anuradha.’

I stared into his eye-lenses, seeing no sign of humanity behind them, knowing only that he was wrong, that his miserable Chapter had let my father die all those years ago, and that now he’d killed my father’s shade because he was an angel incapable of feeling anything but cold, divine fury.

Amadeus gripped me harder and leaned in close, my bleeding face to his faceplate. ‘Ishahan Daaz died loyal to the Throne, long ago. He is with the Emperor.’

Other figures drew near. Spears. I recognised Tolmach and Faelan.

‘Focus,’ Amadeus said again. ‘Fight. Or stay here and die as you weep over the lies of daemons.’

He released me. I looked at my father’s body, but the ghost was gone. A husk lay there, something cadaverous and centuries dead; something clawed and dark and rotten that had never been born from mortal body, only a tortured mortal mind.

With fingers that trembled as much as my father’s hands had done in the last days of his life, I reloaded my Engager.

‘I understand,’ I told my master. And for a lack of anything else that made sense, I aimed the gun vaguely towards the slain heretic warrior. ‘He took my eye.’

Amadeus laughed softly, beneath his breath. I’d never heard him laugh before. ‘We will arrange for a new one,’ he said. ‘You did well, both of you.’

Faelan nudged the dead Pure with his boot. ‘You took this bastard to pieces.’ His tone danced on the edge of admiration. I didn’t need to tell him how close it had been; one look at Tyberia and me told that story in its entirety.

She stirred, coming to with immediate panic when she saw Tolmach crouched before her. If she’d had a weapon in her hands, she might well have shot him without thinking.

‘Be calm,’ he said. ‘Easy, easy.’

The druid injected her with a cocktail of combat stimms and his own blood, to act as both painkiller and adrenal amplifier. When he offered me the same, I accepted it gladly. The nausea from my broken skull only faded to a
background pulse rather than vanishing completely, but I could at least stand without vomiting.

Faelan replaced his helm, the high crest striped red and black. Tolmach and the three other Spears looked to the battleguard for orders, and Faelan hefted his bolt rifle. His voice was a deep growl through his helm’s vocaliser grille.

‘Everyone that can carry a weapon, come with me.’

All these years later, the Battle of the *Hex* is a saga among the Adeptus Vaelarii, in part because of what it led to, in part because of the lives we reaped, and in part because of how much blood on the iron decks ran from Nemetese veins.

Throne, but we bled that day. Across the ship Spears led armsmen serfs and Chapter-thralls, cleansing their decks and linking up with other squads. The *Hex* was swarming with Exilarchy slaves in such numbers that most of the hallway battles devolved from close-range firefights to simply wading through a press of mutated humanity. Here were the tactics I’d seen on Kouris taken to their savage extreme. The Exilarchy knew how to kill Space Marines. They knew the weakness of gunfire against sacred ceramite, and that squads of laspistol-wielding, autogun-carrying militia were next to hopeless against warriors of the Adeptus Astartes. Through either fear of punishment from their masters or zeal in their twisted cause, the mutants hurled themselves bodily against the Spears. They used the meat of their own bodies as weapons as well as the blades in their hands, stabbing and scratching the surface of cobalt battleplate as they were cut down in their hundreds. Lucky thrusts found armour joints or sank deep into layered ceramite.

In no time at all, the Spears were red from helms to boots. I could hear my master’s hearts beating over our partially restored link, his primary pulse going twice a second, his secondary heart running a quickening tempo to support it. His vital signs peaked and never slowed down. I heard him as he fought, knee-deep in the fallen, heaving in great gusts of air to supply his straining muscles with oxygen. After an hour of the purging, deck by deck, his swordarm began to stiffen. Lactic acid was building up in his muscles. His movements slowed from a blur to perceivable motions – still beyond human limits, but no longer bordering on the supernatural.

Around him, the Spears suffered too, even the enhanced warriors of the Second Generation. My place was behind the advance, firing around their hulking forms and executing downed mutants left wounded on the deck.
behind the Spears’ progress.

The speed of that inexorable advance was breathtaking in both meanings of the word. They moved with a haste I’d have considered impossible had I not seen it with my own remaining eye, and I was breathless within minutes at the effort required to keep up. Our wounds slowed us as much as the madness through which we struggled. At one point I helped Tyberia to her feet after she stumbled over a carpet of the dead, only to have one of the corpses drag both of us down. The mutant’s melted-wax flesh was a riot of cancerous sores, and I yelled out as he sank his blunt, peggy teeth into my bionic forearm, cracking through the carapace armour and crunching into the metal beneath. I couldn’t get my sword free in the tangle of limbs and bodies; I had to move in closer and punch my wrist-blade through the thing’s fat neck, sawing through the monster’s spine. He never stopped smiling at me. Tyberia booted the severed head away, and I saw its dead grin flashing as it turned, crown over cut throat, before dropping, lost, into another corpse pile.

The first Spear to die was Llydwyn. The invaders buried him beneath thrashing bodies, plunging energised knives into the softer armour at his throat and elbows and wrists, only to die when their fellows with flammers bathed them all in alchemical fire. The Exilarchy’s mutants, creatures that Faelan called blade-fodder, willingly incinerated their own kind for the chance to down one of the Spears.

And it worked. Faelan and Amadeus led the resurgence to recover Llydwyn’s body, but the flames had done their work by the time they freed him from his attackers. Tolmach fell back from the formation only long enough to confirm that Llydwyn’s progenoids were unrecoverable.

Amadeus fought in squad formation with the Spears, killing with his blade when he could, resorting to his bolter when he had to, and then his fists, boots, and with lascarbine blasts from his knuckle-mounted digital weapons. We tried to keep pace with them, while Tolmach’s blood-stimm narcotic cocktail sloshed through our veins. One moment my skin was painfully sensitive to the touch, the next I felt numb enough to take a las-round and keep running.

Maybe it was the damage to my cranial implants from the crack in my skull, but the defence of the *Hex* marks the beginning of flaws appearing in my memory. Rather than a meticulous, second-by-second recollection, I remember that endless, bloody day as a series of scattered moments and sensations. The pump of hot gore over my fist as I buried my wristblade in a mutant’s guts. The way he sagged against me, the breath driven from his
body. The drag of his teeth against my helm as he tried and failed to chew through to my face. The chainsaw buzz of a las-bolt slicing the air a finger’s length from my left ear. The clattering of shrapnel as a clutch of fragmentation grenades detonated around the Spears’ boots, just ahead. The chanting to redden the earth, redden the earth.

I fired at things that couldn’t exist and that couldn’t be there. I gunned down things that had no right to be real, and yet there they were. Discerning the difference between skull-cracked hallucination and daemonic intrusion from the realm of the dead left me sweating and shaking as much as any physical effort. Apparitions danced at the edges of my eyes, and my Engager barked at them rather than risk they were illusions born from my swimming senses. Sometimes those revenants burst open in blooms of spectral blood. Even then, I was never certain which ones were real and which were phantoms of my injured mind.

During a lull in the fighting, Tyberia pulled her helmet free and vomited a slop of black worms onto the deck. When I said her name, she turned to me, and her eyes were hollow sockets of fire. The last worms crawled over her lips. The fire she cried ignited the creatures as they slipped from her mouth.

‘What is it?’ she asked me. ‘What’s wrong?’

I closed my remaining eye tight, and when I opened it, she was herself again. Just Tyberia, breathing deeply before replacing her helmet.

‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘Nothing’s wrong.’

The lie didn’t fool her. ‘I know,’ she said across our personal vox-link. ‘I keep seeing things, too.’

‘I thought it was…’ I touched my helm, above where my skull was cracked.

‘I think it’s the Geller Field,’ she answered, reluctantly. I prayed she was wrong. The shield had only been down for a second, but the Hex might never be clean again if the corruption could take root.

‘Did you just vomit?’

‘No, I spat. What did you see?’

You don’t want to know, I thought. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said.

When my vambrace pulsed with tracking data, I had to look at the display through a wriggling mass of the same worms that Tyberia hadn’t actually thrown up from inside her body.

‘Throne of Terra,’ she said from my side, and for a second I thought she was
seeing them too, but her surprise was at the information flashing across the screen. ‘How long have you been tracking his beacon?’

‘I’ve only just made contact,’ I replied, and switched to a vox-channel that included Amadeus. ‘Master, I think I’ve found Kartash.’

‘Send me the information at once.’

I did so, and as subtly as I could, trying not to draw Tyberia’s attention to my delusion, I also brushed the phantom worms from my bracer. They weren’t real, I knew they weren’t real, but I felt them resisting me, their clammy bodies curling for my fingers, trying to latch on to prevent being swept onto the deck.

One of the damn things bit me. Its leech-mouth penetrated my glove and I felt the rows of its teeth tugging on my knuckle as it started to suckle on my blood. I slapped my hand against the wall to rid myself of the sensation. Tyberia was about to say something, likely about my behaviour, when Serivahn’s voice crackled over the squad’s vox, blotted out by bursts of static.

‘...Chambers... Geller generation... Brêac... by the... fire-team...’

‘Vargantes?’ Faelan called back across the channel. ‘Say again. The astropathic bastion?’

The captain’s words forced through the distortion, flawed but audible. ‘The Dreaming Chambers,’ he said. ‘The Pure are in the Dreaming Chambers.’

I spoke to Tyberia, outside the main channel. ‘Kartash is nearby.’

Her tracking was dead. She had to rely on mine. ‘Then I pray we reach him in time.’

4

We fought our way to the astropathic bastion; the conjoined district of the Hex given over to housing the psychic choir and generation of the Geller field to shield us through warp voyages. Casualties here had been immense after the Venatrix had detonated her psychic mine, and the first Spears to reach the temple-barracks had encountered seething horrors.

We waded through the aftermath, making for the inner chambers. Faelan hesitated at the cobalt corpses strewn among the dead and the damned, momentarily stunned by the sheer number of fallen brothers.

‘We’re here,’ he voxed over the master comm channel. The only reply he earned was static. Elsewhere on the deck, far from us, we could hear faint gunfire. This wasn’t the pitched battle we’d expected to charge into.
Tolmach stepped forward, ready to begin harvesting the dead. Faelan’s raised hand warded the druid back.

Tolmach, his black plate miserable with gore, objected with silence. He didn’t want to wait, you could see it in his posture. To delay extraction risked degeneration of the progenoids, lowering the chance of successful implantation in other candidates. The process of human decay begins in the first seconds after death – invisible to the eye but observable on the minute level through medicae lenses. Cells and particles no longer adhere without life to glue them together. The breakdown of a body is deeply underway long before signs of visible rot.

‘There,’ Amadeus said softly, drawing Tolmach’s eye across the chamber.

It was just a child. Just a boy, sat amongst the dead, streaked with blood, washed by it, sheeted with it. He saw us, though our appearance did nothing to stop him. He ate by the fistful, his small hands clutching gobbets of viscera from the slain.

The grotesque swelling of his head coupled with a waspish buzz in the air told us all we needed to know. Looking at him for more than a moment made my eye ache. The chamber around him shimmered with heat haze, though I registered no change in temperature.

The boy looked at each of us in turn. As his bloodshot eyes drifted over me, his voice caressed the edges of my thoughts, as if I were hearing a whisper beneath a spoken conversation.

Come to me.

It’s easy to describe the effect those words had on us, for we obeyed them, but words are inadequate to define why we were compelled to obey. A psychic compulsion implies… what? An order that can’t be disobeyed? A shove towards obedience, like a push from behind? Something that can’t be resisted?

It wasn’t like that at all.

Come to me, he whispered, and I felt nothing but revulsion. His sticky, silent tone. His greasy, swollen flesh. The cranial deformities of an oversized brain that had blossomed along twisted genetic paths, at the whims of mad gods.

Come to me.

But if I moved forward, I could come at him from the side while my master and the Spears engaged from other angles. If I moved closer, I might be able
to take him with my blade while he was focused on Amadeus. If I deceived him, walking towards him in obedience, I could strike him down at the last moment before he could turn his psychic malevolence on any of us.

That’s what it felt like. That’s what it was. The danger of the compulsion wasn’t the loss of your muscles to another’s mind, it was your own mind fighting to make sense of the commands. I obeyed him, believing I was doing what I wanted to do myself.

Tyberia stumbled forward into the room. Even Amadeus and Faelan tensed. The battleguard’s boot scraped across the deck as he reset his balance, fighting the urge to move forward.

I followed Tyberia, certain I could get close enough to strike, only to be hauled back by my master.

The child cringed away, his lips peeling from his teeth, and the heat haze projected by his boiling brain faded away. The trap was sprung.

Tolmach died first. His head snapped back, shedding bloody debris, dead the second the bolt struck his helmet.

The Pure melted out of the mirage. Not a lone warrior, this time, but a force to match our own, the white warriors leading masses of their shrieking underlings. They screamed at the Spears through amplifying vox-grilles, and the Spears met them head-on, blades on blades. The humans milling, fighting and dying around them were suddenly ignored.

I buried my blade to the hilt in the guts of a woman with three faces. When I drew the power sword free, it parted her body from her hips, severing her in half. I fought in Amadeus’ shadow – he killed the cleaved mutant with a boot crushing her skull without even realising it. He was locked, blade on blade, with one of the Pure. They were vicious reflections of one another: white and green against white and age-greened bronze. Amadeus hammered a fist into the Pure’s faceplate and discharged his digital weapons. They flashed from his knuckles, blowing red matter from the back of the traitor’s helmet.

Faelan was possessed, fighting over Tolmach’s body, screaming with a spear in one hand and a sword in the other. He whirled and lashed out in ceaseless lethality, cutting and gutting. I had no idea where or when he’d claimed either weapon. I had no time to care. I went down, again and again, pulled from my feet by the grasping hands of mutants who wouldn’t die. I can still feel the sickening bang, bang, bang of my gun stock crunching into the face of one of them, one that jabbed a shattered sword into my shin, trying to hamstring me.
I don’t know if the collapse of his face killed him, I just know it bought me enough time to get away. I clambered over the dead and the soon-to-be-dead, slipping in guts, tripping on clutching hands, scrambling to link up with Tyberia. We slammed back to back, our Engagers roaring. Every bellowing shot was aimed low, to cripple the Pure so Amadeus and the Spears could finish them off.

I caught one of them in the back of the knee, the shot blowing bone and ceramite outwards before the warrior went down, shouting not in pain but thwarted anger. Amadeus swept the Pure’s head clean from his shoulders with a swing of his energised blade.

_Bitch-bitch-Tyberia-bitch!_ The words burrowed into my brain. I felt them like thumbs pushing into my ears. A second later, Tyberia was gone, staggering away and calling my name.

The boy-child was a blur of skinny limbs and jagged teeth clinging to Tyberia’s body armour, vomiting his undigested cannibal meal over her face. The thing glared at me over her shoulder and knifed its words into my mind.

_Save me help me protect me—_

And I would have done, I would have dreamed righteous reasons for doing it, had Tyberia not screamed my name so loud over the vox that it muted all other sense and sound.

She dropped, her armour steaming, and I swung my Engager like a mace. The heavy casing struck with a thundercrack, sending the mutant brat tumbling across the corpse-strewn deck, where it kept howling. I’d broken the bastard’s neck and he still refused to die.

Faelan ended the thing, driving his spear through its body hard enough to bite deep into the deck below. I saw the little monster’s bloodstained hands stroking uselessly at the blade that pinned it to the floor, slicing its fingers apart as it failed to get a grip.

‘Get it off,’ Tyberia was yelling. ‘My armour, get it off, get it off!’

I tried. The steaming blood from the thing’s guts ate away at my gloves as I pulled Tyberia’s armour plating away. She managed to pull her helmet free and throw it away just in time, with only a smear of burned skin on one cheek. Around us, above us, the Spears and Pure battled on. They were -warring giants with no time to spare for those of us bleeding at their feet.

‘Run,’ my master voxed, tight, breathless. In my dizzy heat, I took it for another delusion. He would never say something so insane.
I looked up at him in time to see one of the Pure catch Amadeus’ sword on the flat of an axe, twisting to shatter my master’s blade in a shower of sparking silver fragments. Several of those shards clattered, de-energised, against my armour.

‘Run,’ he voxed again, locked in a contest of strength with the Pure, trying to strangle the warrior with one hand, keeping the axe back from falling with the other.

I rose on weak legs, ramming the barrel of my Engager under the Pure’s chin. He was fast enough to shove me aside before I could even pull the trigger, but the momentary distraction was enough for Amadeus to twist one hand and press his knuckles against the Pure’s throat. His digital weapons discharged in a flare of white las-light, sending the Pure falling backwards, his neck hollowed through.

‘Run,’ Amadeus snarled the word. ‘One of you has to survive. The mission. The mission.’

The Pure closed in around him, around all of us. One of the warriors brought his bolter up towards me, only for my master to kick the gun aside before it fired. His knuckle-mounted lasblasters flared again, but their charge was drained. They did nothing but scorch the Pure’s white ceramite.

I tried to reload, a motion as instinctive as breathing rendered unfamiliar by the shaking of my hands. One of the Pure pulled the Engager from my grasp; another grabbed me by the back of the head, throwing me aside like detritus. I hit hard, rolled harder and only regained my feet on the third attempt. My sight was reduced to a red smear. My cracked skull throbbed, freshly broken. Only the adrenal cocktail in my veins kept me standing.

Faelan was gone, down on the deck for all I knew. Several of the Spears with us were on their knees, bound in chains of force emanating from handheld energy projectors. The Pure wanted captives.

‘Master!’ Tyberia yelled.

Even on his knees, they beat at Amadeus with gun butts and weapon hilts. The power-chains wrapping him prevented him from fighting back, but he uttered no sound.

Tyberia’s Engager sang one last time, rattling shrapnel against the closest Pure’s battleplate. He jerked with the bang, but paid her no heed at all, focused instead on driving my master down with a heavy boot to the faceplate.
She had no weapons capable of harming them any more. The God-Emperor alone knew where my sword was, lost in the chaos. We were down to laspistols and wristblades. I drew the former, deployed the latter with a metallic *shink!* but Tyberia pulled me back, threatening to drag me off balance in her exhausted urgency.

‘It’s suicide,’ she panted. ‘Come on.’

We ran. At last, we ran, clawing over the bodies, not looking back as we sprinted on shaking limbs. We ran into the dark tunnels, back out of the astropathic bastion. There would be Spears here soon. There had to be. We’d meet them, running in as we were running out. Spear reinforcements that would turn the tide. Spears that would slaughter the Pure and free our master.

But we sprinted through empty tunnels.

‘The slaves,’ came a guttural call behind us. ‘Get the slaves.’ Boots pounded on the deck towards us, belonging to mutants feverish with the need to please their masters.

We ran the way we’d come, only to crash into a sealed bulkhead. Tyberia, stripped of her armour, had no voice on the vox. I called over the command channel for Serivahn to unseal the door, but received no answer beyond static. The bulkhead stayed locked.

‘This way.’ Tyberia led us down an adjacent tunnel, and fifty yards later we met another sealed bulkhead. We weren’t true crew. We had no clearance to open them.

Tyberia took off again, seeking another route. I could hear her, panting hard, breathing the words ‘It makes no sense, it makes no sense’ over and over. And she was right. Sealing the bulkheads meant nothing to the invaders; the Pure were already here, and any boarding party would have melta weapons to reduce bulkheads and barricades to slag.

A third door barred our path back into the deeper parts of the ship. It felt as though we were being herded like livestock, driven to the slaughter pens.

Tyberia covered me as I caught my breath. Her laspistol cracked, spitting beams into the mutants chasing us. I handed her mine; she fired both of them in continual streams while I wheezed into the vox.

‘Is anyone… still alive… in the Dreaming Chambers…’

‘Anuradha? Tyberia?’

My blood ran cold. ‘Tolmach?’
'Anuradha.' The dead Spear said my name with calm, untroubled clarity. He didn’t even sound wounded. ‘Where are you? Have you evaded the Exilarchy?’

‘No… We’re running. We’re in the capillary corridors of the telemetry conclave. They’re right behind us.’

‘Good,’ he said. ‘That’s good. Where exactly are you?’

My throat closed. ‘You’re not Tolmach. I saw Tolmach die.’

After a pause – a hesitation? – the connection broke into static. ‘Anuradha?’ said a second voice.

‘Lord Brêac.’ It was his voice, to perfection. I didn’t for a moment believe it was him.

‘We’re sealing the astropathic bastion and the telemetry conclave,’ he said. ‘You have to get out now.’

‘We’re trying. Why are you sealing the districts?’

‘To slow the threat.’

Which will achieve exactly nothing against the Pure, I thought. All it would achieve would be to trap the survivors in here with the Exilarchy’s forces. Did the lives of astropaths and Chapter-thralls mean so little to the Spears?

‘You’re lying,’ I said to whoever was on the other end of the vox. Why would you trouble yourself with two helots on the run? ‘Who are you? Why are you trying to herd us?’

‘There’s no time for this idiocy,’ Brêac snapped back. ‘Where are you?’

‘Who are you?’ I demanded again. The vox cut out.

Again we ran, keeping ahead of the mutated tide at our heels, firing back at them for whatever it was worth. Another five sealed bulkheads stole any choice we might have had: we hit the descension ramps in our breathless, stumbling sprints, heading down into the tighter ventral tunnels that would lead into the Hex’s auxiliary spinal hallways. It was the only way out left to us.

Salvation, when it came, didn’t come in the form of the Spears. Tyberia saw him first and cried his name.

Kartash, in an antechamber, stood before one of the Pure. The Traitor warrior was on his knees as if praying to our hunchbacked companion, casting the scene in eerie reflection of Amadeus’ capture. A blade of humming green
jade extended from the Pure’s back, haloed in wet sparks where it penetrated the warrior’s back-mounted power pack. I’d never seen a blade like it. It was inhuman, forged from no technology I’d ever heard of, not even the most ancient archives.

The sword withdrew. The Pure fell dead.

I made it in first. ‘Kartash,’ I gasped, my eyes stinging with relief. ‘Kartash.’
He was serenity itself, albeit coldly focused. ‘Where is Amadeus?’
‘They took him.’ The jade weapon was no longer in Kartash’s hands, if it had ever been there at all. I knew I couldn’t trust my senses. ‘He was captured.’

Tyberia stormed into the antechamber behind me. ‘They’re coming. I don’t know how many.’

From there, everything happened at once.

The hunchback smashed Tyberia to the floor with a fist to her stomach, driving the pathetic remnants of her breath from her lungs. Her face started to darken at once as she clawed at her throat, close to asphyxiation, gaping up at Kartash with eyes dreadfully wide.

His first kick shattered my wristblade. His second crunched through my breastplate and threw me back through the open door. I was rolling across the deck while my drunken vision was still trying to process his first movements.

Bootsteps clanked, loud as rolling boulders, ever closer. I was on my feet again, driven by adrenal panic, only for Kartash to meet me in the antechamber doorway. He gripped me with a strength he couldn’t possibly possess, and this time he floored me too fast for me to even understand how. I sensed rather than felt a displacing crack in my spine, and I struck the deck with a cry as my arm and shoulder ignited with pain.

Kartash stepped over the heaving, gawping form of Tyberia. She pawed weakly at his shins, and he repaid her by absentingly grinding her forearm beneath his boot.

And then he was gone, ghosting through the final bulkhead that led from the district. I watched it close. I watched the cog-locks rotating. I heard the machine-bolts seal: crunch, crunch, crunch.

The footsteps were on top of us now. Filthy hands grabbed at Tyberia, hauling her from the deck. I couldn’t move. I could barely breathe. Greyness threatened at the edges of my vision, blackening fast. Everything started to
drift.
The last thing I saw was the panic in her eyes. Then I was gone, down into the dark.
XV

A REVELATION OF DESTRUCTION

1

I didn’t wake as if from slumber. Whether sudden or slow, *waking* implies a restoration of awareness. This was different. This was a halting, dragging emergence, with a delirious lack of haste. It was a crawl back to consciousness, inch by inch, little by little. Sometimes there were sounds in the silence. Sometimes there were impressions in the nothingness. A flare of pain in the numbness. A splash of grey in the black.

Nothing as solid as memory or thought, just moments of sensation, each one separated and out of context. The banging of hammers on metal. The rough roar of flames. The hiss of unclean tongues.

Down again.

Deep, deep down.

But the voices began following me. They intruded on my bleary oblivion. They were whispery and meaningless, and whether they belonged to the living or the dead, I neither knew nor cared. I shrank back from them. For a time, it worked.

But then… a voice I knew.

‘This heat, Anuradha. Throne, I’ve forgotten what fresh air feels like.’

*Tyberia?*

She sounded impossibly far away, and the only clear thought I had was that her words hadn’t come with the chitinous crackle of sound over a vox-link. I remember it so adamantly because it was the first clear thought I’d had in the uncounted hours of that timeless time.

I didn’t pursue her, or the mystery of her voice. I sank, back into the black.

2

Later, I surfaced again. How much later, I don’t know, but I surfaced far and high enough to find the pain I’d been hiding from. It was there, lying in wait, and it seethed, passionlessly vicious, as it embraced me. Acid, in the back of my head. Fire, in my fingers. Burning oil in my eye sockets. I was blind, absolutely and utterly blind.
‘If you touch her,’ Tyberia said, ‘I’ll kill you.’

Another voice said… something. Words I either couldn’t hear or couldn’t understand.

‘No. No. If you touch her, I will kill you.’ Tyberia’s voice was weighed down by exhausted savagery. ‘Do you hear me?’

The other voice faded away. Tyberia spoke again, her voice softer now. ‘No more convulsions, Anuradha. Not another fit. I’m begging you. Let me sleep. Let me sleep.’

I sank again, not for Tyberia’s sake, but to go back beneath the layer of pain. Safe.

3

Once, I surfaced to the sound of Tyberia’s breathing. Deep and heavy, almost against my ear.

‘Tyberia?’ I asked, but instead of hearing my own voice, there was a brief, nasal moan that set my head aflame with slow, searing heat.

A shifting. A shaking.

‘Anuradha,’ Tyberia said, sounding tired and defeated, too weak to make a question of my name.

‘I’m awake,’ I answered. Except I wasn’t. I was already sinking. ‘Tyberia, I’m awake…’

Not even a moan that time.

Back down. Down.

4

‘Kartash. Kartash did this. It’s Kartash’s fault. Kartash left us.’

My thoughts. Surely my thoughts. But were they my words? I didn’t know the voice. It was too ravaged.

‘Hush, Anuradha…’ came the softest reply.

‘It was Kartash.’

‘I know,’ said Tyberia. ‘I know.’

5

My eyes were burning. My throat burned hotter, even harsher. Smoke
inhalation. Choking in the dark.

I hadn’t escaped the fire aboard the *Hex*. I was still there, still on the deck, dying with my face against the melting steel.

‘Easy. Easy now.’

*Tyberia?*

The devouring heat began to fade. Began to cool.

I opened my eyes, except I didn’t, because they wouldn’t open. Pain glued them shut. Fire lapped at my lips. I gagged, fearing that if I cried out, I’d suck the fire inside me.

‘Swallow,’ Tyberia bade me. ‘It’s water. Just water.’

And with those words, it was just water. I felt it on my face, so cold it was vicious in its cool caress, so much of a relief against the heat and my thirst that it was causing me pain.

I swallowed, and the pain of that icy fire flowed through me. I felt it even in my fingertips. It tingled there, a little like a cooling breeze, and a little like burning acid.

The cloth against my face was glasspaper, raking over my skin. The trickle of cold, cleaning water against my closed eyes was—

*Rain?*

*Thunder. The thunder of drums.*

*Rain. The rains of Nemeton.*

—the sweetest pain I’d ever felt. She was cleaning me, cleaning my face, and making me drink. She was keeping me alive. She’d been keeping me alive for I didn’t know how long.

‘Tyberia,’ I said. And this time, I really said it.

I opened my eyes. And this time, they really opened.

The gloom hit me like sunlight, my eyes were so tender from disuse. From how poorly I could make out Tyberia’s scarred and dirty features, I realised only one of my eyes was open. My thoughts were sludge, still drifting away from me. It took far too long, through the dizziness of the pain that welcomed me back to the waking world, before I remembered why my vision was so diminished.

The Pure. My helmet. The *snap.*
I reached to touch my face.

‘Don’t touch it,’ Tyberia whispered. She gripped my wrist as I moved. I had the strength of a dying animal, and she held me with pathetic ease.

Yes, I remembered. I only had one eye.

‘Don’t touch the socket,’ said Tyberia. ‘It’s infected.’

When I tried to defy her, to bring my other hand to my face, she didn’t need to stop me. I was crippled on that side. Paralysed, broken worse than Serivahn.

‘I can’t move,’ I told her. My lips were deliciously cold from the water she’d given me. My mouth was the only part of me that didn’t hurt. ‘I can’t move my arm.’

She smiled. It was the thinnest, most awkward, most tenderly knowing smile I’d ever seen on her face. On anyone’s face.

‘You can move,’ she said. ‘You’ve been convulsing with seizures for days. You’re moving your arm now.’

‘I mean… my other arm.’

Finally, with darkly hilarious lethargy, came the second revelation. I rolled my head to the side, my halved vision taking in the impossible sight at my shoulder.

‘Where is it?’ I asked her, as my eyes darkened, as the depths called me back. ‘Tyberia? Where’s my arm?’

‘Back on the Hex,’ she said gently. ‘Where it fell after Kartash tore it off.’
IN CHAINLESS SERVITUDE

I

Eleven days.

For eleven days, Tyberia had watched over my unconscious form in the iron bowels of the Exilarchy warship *Venatrix*. Sometimes she’d held me in her arms, bracing me as I convulsed, keeping me still because she feared the seizures would aggravate my injuries. Her concern soon darkened when I didn’t wake. She began to worry the cranial wounds I’d suffered in the battle were the surface signs of a deeper brain injury. Even so, she cleaned the tormented flesh of my face as best she could, gave me brackish water from the ship’s supplies, and fed me with portions of the slime that passed for nutrient gruel among the enslaved crew. Sometimes, other captives had threatened to tear me from her arms; two of the dead prisoners had already been eaten, and Tyberia threatened to kill anyone that tried to do the same to me.

I felt the unexpected caress of shame when she told me all this, and I wondered if she’d slept at all for more than stolen snatches of respite, given she’d fought so hard to keep me alive.

‘But you began to come around,’ she said, ‘slowly and surely.’

We sat together as she related what had happened, sharing a vast smoke-darkened chamber with hundreds of other slaves grouped in loose packs. Some were recent captives like us, others had lived aboard the *Venatrix* for weeks, months or years judging by the accrued filth on their clothing and skin. Slaves from other worlds in the Veil. Some even from Kouris, captured on the warship’s last visit to sow the first seeds of rebellion, years before.

My memory was a broken thing of too many dead ends and unfinished passages offering no enlightenment. The wounds to my head had corrupted my data-spools, rendering much of my archived recordings lost for good. I’d never forgotten anything before, at least not since my cranial enhancements. To be unable to remember the events of even a few days and weeks ago was as uncomfortable as my injuries.

Every breath I took drew the reek of dirty bodies and piss-stained steel into my lungs. My vision was still blurred as well as halved, but I could see well...
enough to count forty-seven Spear thralls confined in the chamber with us, their azure robes variously grimy, bloodstained or both. Food and water were brought twice a day by teams of armed overseers, carried in the kinds of trough-cauldrons used to feed beasts. There was never enough of it. Fights broke out over the slop they served us.

The heat was cloying and eternal, the dry heat of a desert that existed only to be hammered by a merciless sun. If you breathed through your nose, the edges of your nostrils would scab and flake. If you breathed with your mouth open, within hours your throat would feel scraped for want of fluid.

Even after waking, I was still as weak as a child. My severed arm was a constant source of pain, where the nerves still sang from the broken connection to the bionic limb that was no longer there. It hurt most when I instinctively reached for something with an arm that no longer existed, or moved in any one of a thousand ways that were perfectly natural when I’d been whole. The thwarted brain signals had no arm to obey their commands, so instead they danced along my abused nerve endings.

My eye was worse. Behind the bionics was natural tissue, and the socket wouldn’t heal. Infection thrived in that miserable heat, and my wounds weren’t the only ones to fester; all of us carried injuries sustained in our capture. I bandaged my sundered eye socket with a wad of cloth and a linen wrap. It did nothing for the distracting pain, or the accursed itch, but at least it soaked up the watery trickle of bloody pus that wept without end.

Tyberia and I slept back to back. Some of the Spear thralls allied with us in a coterie of sorts. Others wanted to take their chances alone, or lost all hope together.

Two days after I’d awoken in Tyberia’s arms, we were visited by a phalanx of the Venatrix’s overseers. These mutants and warp-touched men and women prepared to herd the slaves from the prison chamber, to fates we could only guess. A Pure led them, his polished white armour marking him as a prince among wretches.

Tyberia and I had discussed our eventual fate, days ago, with the Nemetese thralls in our group. What should we do, when they came for us? Was it nobler to resist at any cost, forcing our new masters to butcher us at once?

‘No.’ Tyberia was adamant. It wasn’t just surety that blazed in her eyes, it was hatred, ripe and raw. ‘This isn’t about nobility. Our duty is to survive at any cost, enduring whatever we have to endure, to inflict the most harm upon our captors.’
Many agreed with her, but not all. Nor was it fear that motivated some of them, but a divergent sense of honour.

‘Better that we die untainted,’ one of the thralls insisted with grim purpose. He didn’t need to clarify; we all knew that the longer we remained in this hellish place, the greater the risk of mutation and spiritual deformity. Even the air here was a slow poison. Corruption radiated from the warship’s bones.

‘Dying is the easy way out,’ avowed Tyberia. ‘Take your purity with you to the grave if you want. When I stand before the God-Emperor for judgement, He’ll know I did everything I could to avenge myself on His foes.’

Some of the Spear serfs held to a brighter delusion: ‘It’s our duty to escape,’ one of them said. This was Carakus, the oldest of his kind here, one of Tolmach’s arming thralls. ‘Our masters would expect nothing less from us.’

Tyberia had nodded, though her eyes were hard and cold as glass.

‘There are Spears on this ship,’ Carakus insisted. ‘Held captive. Your master, I believe, as well. There’s hope, yet.’

That, I thought, was debatable.

‘I’ve never seen this side of you,’ I’d whispered to Tyberia later that night. ‘I had no idea this was who you really were.’

She had sighed against my back. I thought she might be weeping. In case she was, I let her believe she was keeping those bitter and wrathful tears a secret. There was no weakness in them.

The next day, a pack of Pure warriors led a host of mutants into our chambers. They’d come to put us to work. The mutants had either been born twisted or devolved along the course of their wretched lives as slaves of the Exilarchy. Almost thirty of the captives rose up, fighting their final, futile battle with no weapons but their fists and teeth. They were gunned down together, those brave souls too proud to endure slavery and the cowards too frightened to live in misery for the hope of taking vengeance. The Pure leader laughed as he killed, delighted by the hopeless resistance.

We watched them die, shot through and beaten into bloody matter, as we stood in a mute, filthy herd, waiting to be led to our new lives. We watched that Pure’s ceramite plate turn from white to red.

I remember seeing the twisted, strong forms of our Pure masters – the disgusting beauty of them, the sins that their dark prayers had wrought upon their flesh – and I knew a shudder of naked fear. The Spear thralls gushing
their wasted lives out across the deck were right; there was only vileness ahead for those that survived in this slavery.

I stepped forward, only to be held back by Tyberia’s hand on my remaining arm. She was sick by then, blazing with fever, lending a sick heat to her eyes and a maddened strength to her grip.

‘No,’ she whispered to me. ‘Not like this. Survive, Anuradha. Survive.’

Wordlessly, I stepped back into place.

But one of the Pure had noticed my momentary defiance. He moved over to me, where some captives shrank back in the hopes of going unnoticed, and others remained proud despite the ruthlessness of their recent humbling.

The Traitor Space Marine clutched my jaw in his armoured hand, forcing me to look up at him. His gums were rotten meat. Rashes inflamed the skin of his face where he’d sewn precious gems into his flesh, like some jewel-mad hive-spire king. Some of the Pure were mostly unchanged from the men they’d once been. Some of them looked like this. His white-and-bronze armour was threaded through with bioceramite bones, like an aborted exoskeleton.

When he turned my bandaged face left and right, he smeared fresh blood from the murdered thralls over my chin, and when he lifted my bandage to expose the wound, I felt the breath of his chuckle in the hollow ruin of my eye socket.

‘Something to say?’ He grinned the words down at me, his voice brutally low, like all of his kind.

I said nothing.

‘Do you want to join them?’ He tilted his head back towards the punctured, riven corpses flooding the deck with their blood. Each one was a broken bag of gore. Most didn’t even resemble people any more.

I still said nothing. He released me with a gentle shove, back into the arms of Tyberia and Carakus.

The mutants cracked their whips, and we started walking.

2

They branded us. At first it seemed merely a matter of spite, for why did we need symbols to mark us as slaves? We could hardly flee our captivity, and there was no mistaking us for anything but what we were.

We’d later learn that we were the property of different masters; each of the
Pure shared in the spoils of war, and so we were marked with their runes accordingly. At the time, treated like mindless livestock, we were pushed one by one into the restraining arms of two scabrous mutants, while the Pure overseer carved runes into the flesh of our foreheads.

Once it was done, I brushed charry dust from an iron pipe built into the wall, polishing it enough to make out the blurry impression of my reflection. Red ran down my face in trails from the mark of ownership. The symbols meant nothing to any of us. Tyberia, Carakus and I had the same sigil cut into our bleeding faces: a twisted name-rune or a hieroglyph from a script we didn’t know. We were property of unknown masters, to be thrown into tasks we couldn’t yet guess.

We weren’t left in ignorance for long. They put us to work on one of the manufactory decks, in the furnace sector. Down there, the Venatrix’s dry heat became a scorching pressure that sucked the sweat from your skin. Men and women expired in a single day for want of water. Our arms were soon speckled with the pockmarks of white-hot effluvia from the foundry fires, spot-scarred to the forearms from loading the machines with fuel and hauling out the metal waste on chains. I struggled with my bionic arm gone, and it hurt to see how Tyberia and Carakus took up my slack. Lazy and weak slaves were killed, beaten to death where they fell. My friends were keeping me alive with their efforts and, through the shame, I loved them for it.

The days rolled on in the same unwinding grind. Dawn was whenever our overseers demanded we begin work. Night was whenever they herded us back to our chamber.

Privation eats at the body punishingly fast. We grew weaker as life dimmed to focusing on nothing but our immediate needs. Our bodies thinned and hardened. Even our internal bionics suffered and slowed through a lack of nourishment to our organic functions. Soon, we were killing for food and water in the crowded communal chamber every night. It was the only way to guarantee we’d have enough to sustain ourselves through another miserable day. In one of the outbreaks of violence, before our laughing overseers could lash us back into order, I fought frantically with another slave, scrabbling and rolling over the floor with him like vermin battling for scraps. Only when I had him pinned beneath my knees, with my fist drawn back to deliver another blow, did I realise this walking revenant of a man had Nemetese tattoos on his shattered face.

For a second, I didn’t care. I stared down into his bloodied features, his stick-thin arms raised in useless warding, and I wanted to finish it. He was
even weaker than I, with my one arm. Starvation was a day or two away from claiming him, and I’d hastened it by beating him bloody. There was no guilt at all. Not even guilt’s shadow. I wanted him dead. That power, hateful as it was, made me feel free. Here was a choice I could make, an action I could take. A problem I could confront and end, amid day after day of forced servitude.

But I lowered my hand. To this day, I don’t know how I did it. I think there were tears of effort in my eyes, though that can’t be true; our bodies were raw by then with the rarity of fluid. Just blinking felt like wiping my remaining eye with sand.

Carakus hauled me to my feet, and I shook him off with a grunt. ‘Don’t touch me, old man. I let him live, didn’t I?’

More days passed. Sometimes the Venatrix shook around us. There was never any warning, and nothing in the way of enlightenment from our overseers. Ships in the warp will always shiver and buckle, and translation to and from the Sea of Souls forever jarred the mind and body with concussive force, but these were tremors on top of the expected motions of a long void journey. They were quakes that ran the length of the warship, hard enough at times to throw us to the deck.

Carakus and I had served on warships for years; we recognised the judders for what they were.

‘Impacts on the superstructure,’ he said, as we strained one day with a cauldron of molten lead, hauling it into place. ‘It’s the Hex.’

‘It can’t be the Hex.’ Tyberia was adamant. She’d been keeping track of the hours since our capture. ‘It’s been fifty-three days. The Hex is gone.’

‘He’s right, Ty,’ I said. ‘Those are incendiary quakes. I don’t know if it’s the Hex, but someone is firing at the ship.’

She refused to countenance it. The surviving Spear thralls joined Carakus in his bitter optimism, but Tyberia believed holding on to hope would just see us miserable and dead that much faster. Focus on surviving, she said. Don’t get distracted by hope.

Working as we were ordered was still no guarantee of survival. The mutant overseers left in charge by the Pure weren’t reluctant to drag captives away on malicious whims we couldn’t understand. These poor souls were returned to us only half the time, and those hauled back into our communal chamber were better off dead. The worst had been flayed and, somehow, still lived when
they cast him onto the filthy floor of our pathetic sanctuary. No one could touch him; even the rancid air on his skin was unendurable agony. We had no solace to offer him, no comfort to give.

Tyberia was feverish again that night, delirious from the natural disease that rampaged through so many unwashed humans in close quarters. A nasty clarity returned to her eyes when she heard the dying man’s moans.

‘I’ll kill him,’ she said, through fever-trembling lips. ‘I’ll finish it.’

‘No.’ I held her down.

‘Someone has to kill him, Ana.’ Her hand was a claw on my wrist.

‘I know.’ I rose to my feet, slipping her grip from my arm and glancing to Carakus. ‘Stay with her, old man.’

I left them there and did what needed to be done. It didn’t take long. That, at least, was a mercy.

Two nights later, they took Carakus. Even Tyberia’s resolve nearly broke then, as she warred with herself over the need to drag him back from the mutants’ clutches. He saw it too, and the old man warned her back with a glare as they wrapped a chain around his throat to drag him away.

‘Skovakarah uhl zarún,’ he said to her.

She swallowed, trembling with fatigued rage, and finally nodded.

They returned him after several hours. We could do nothing but hold him, which we did as gently as we could, and offer a wet rag to a mouth now scarred and beaten toothless. He was unconscious, but the water trickled down his throat, drip by drip. It was all we could offer.

Neither of us could sleep while we held him.

‘Talk, Ana,’ Tyberia said softly. ‘Say something.’

‘I have nothing to say, sister.’ I looked around us, where the sniffing, coughing, stinking masses of humanity slept in uneasy and fragile peace. ‘Nothing at all.’

‘No?’ She grunted in bleak amusement. ‘Tell me what you’d do to Kartash if you saw him again.’

‘Fair point.’ That memory was too strong to lose in the haze of my damaged recollections. I looked at Tyberia suddenly. ‘Did you see his sword?’

Her eyes met mine. ‘What?’
I described what I’d seen. The weapon of unnatural jade. The engraved patterns, like celestial circuitry. The way it shivered in and out of sight, defeating the eye.

‘I saw no sword,’ she said, looking at me with sympathy. ‘And where would he have got hold of such a thing?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Are you sure you saw it? We were all seeing what wasn’t there. There’s also your head wound… and your damaged memories…’

I wasn’t sure of anything. And seeing Kartash for all of a single second’s span wielding an unnatural sword… No, I wasn’t ready to swear to what I’d seen. Not after the rest of the deceptive madness we’d witnessed when the Geller field failed.

We lapsed back into silence.

‘Why were you so unbearable?’ I asked quietly.

‘What?’ she asked again, her tone sharper. ‘What do you mean?’

As I spoke, I squeezed a few trickles of warm water into the mouth of our dying friend. ‘Always reporting my infractions to Amadeus. Always scowling when I earned any praise. Why? What did I do that aggrieved you?’

She released the breath she’d been holding. ‘I was trained on the *Eunoia*. We were taught to act and obey. Precision is everything. The letter of the law, not the spirit of it. And you… you kept earning praise for going your own way. Asking questions I was taught never to ask. Venturing into that tomb. Throne, even shooting over Brêac’s shoulder.’

‘It’s how I was trained. I broke no rules, Ty.’

‘I know. But you bent them, and I was taught that was no better than breaking them. Throne, the Spears even gave you that regency blade, worth a prince’s fortune. You could sell it and buy a tower in a hive spire.’

‘The sword was a symbol of the rebellion,’ I replied. ‘It couldn’t stay on Kouris. That’s the only reason they gave it to me. Well… for that reason, and as a lesson to Amadeus, I think. Something about brotherhood and unity, maybe. They rewarded me for fighting with them, when he stayed with the Guard.’

‘Maybe.’ She seemed unconvinced. ‘Tell me why you hate Amadeus. You never told me.’
I squeezed the rag, shedding another few drops of stagnant water across Carakus’ mutilated mouth. He didn’t wake. He didn’t move.

‘I don’t hate Amadeus,’ I said, my voice low. ‘My hatred is reserved for our captors. And for Kartash,’ I added. I was too weary to even clench my teeth and breathe passion into the curse.

‘Then what is it you feel? What are you hiding?’

I was hiding nothing, and I told her so. But she deserved the truth, as well. ‘The Chapter let my father die,’ I admitted. ‘For years, I bore that grudge, but… I understood it. I didn’t hate them for allowing it to happen. It was our place in the world. My anger was a child’s anger.’

Tyberia knew well enough that silence can sometimes be an invitation. She didn’t need to ask for more; once I’d started, it poured out of me. This drainage of venom was the second time she healed me, and I suspect she knew it.

‘After he was gone, I looked after my brother. For years. Even saw him apprenticed to my senior serf in hydroponics. Narakhir had aptitude for the advanced strains of cultivation that would’ve seen him promoted out of our district. It would’ve been a good life.’

Tyberia’s eyes never left mine. ‘Would have been?’

‘They came for him. The Mentors. They took him for the trials. They said the Daaz bloodline once had a male scion that wore the white and green. Tradition meant that Narakhir could be taken and trained if that’s what he desired, for the chance to join the Chapter as a battle-brother. My father had never mentioned it. Maybe the Mentors missed a generation.’

Tyberia said nothing, but I sighed as if she’d asked the obvious question. ‘He was a twelve-year-old boy, told he had the chance to become one of the Emperor’s Angels. He left that day, swearing he’d come back for me.’

*When I’m one of them, Ana, we’ll live in the higher fortress. Sunlight every day. Never go hungry again.*

Tyberia waited in silence, watching me. Waiting. Knowing she’d lanced the boil, and honesty would flow forth like pus. It couldn’t be kept in any longer.

‘They never told me what happened to him,’ I said, ‘but I knew. I knew it the moment they took him. He was too gentle, too caring to ever pass the trials. Months passed, and no word came, but that was no surprise. I was a hydroponics menial. I’d probably have only seen a Mentor face to face again
in my life if I’d had a son during one of their recruit harvests. In the end, I petitioned – for more than a year – for higher thrall training. They approved of my aptitudes and drafted me into the process. I never expected to reach helot rank. I didn’t want to die on some battlefield somewhere, or… or die like this. I just wanted to get high enough clearance to access the archives and find out what happened to my brother.’

‘What happened to him?’ Tyberia asked. She was stroking Carakus’ hair as we talked.

‘He was killed by another recruit. It wasn’t even in training. It was a brawl in the barracks, between volatile young men being trained to become weapons.’ I snorted, exhaling the bitterness of a decade and more. ‘The boy that killed him was commended for it.’

‘I think,’ Tyberia said in the silence that followed, ‘if that was my tale, Ana, I’d probably hate them too.’

I shook my head, unsure if *hate* was truly the right word. What did it matter? Neither of us would ever return to the Mentors now.

‘So what’s your tale?’ I asked her.

She demurred. ‘I don’t have one.’

‘Everyone has one, Ty.’

‘Not me.’

She went quiet for a time, trying to doze. We sat together, side by side, sharing meagre comfort as we stayed with Carakus. I think she was going to tell me, but against all odds, I slept fitfully against her shoulder, and we spoke no more that night.

Carakus never regained consciousness. What was left of him died before dawn, cradled in our arms. Before the overseers took his body, Tyberia painted her face with his blood. She marked her features in mimicry of Nemetese woad, and only then did we rise to surrender the old man’s body to our enemies.

3

Nothing would please me more than to write down the ways Tyberia survived and got her revenge. Describing some grand gesture that savaged the *Venatrix* from within, or how she led an uprising against our overseers that succeeded where so many before our arrival had surely failed.

The truth is that on the sixty-second day, our overseers came for Tyberia.
They approached us where we sat amidst our diminished pack of Nemetese companions, and one of the mutants uncoiled her whip. She didn’t lash it at us, she meant only to use it as a leash if Tyberia resisted.

‘You,’ the malformed woman said. ‘Leader.’

It was true; Tyberia was our leader by then. She was the one that kept us sustained, ensuring everyone ate and drank. She was the one to listen to the stories of the other slaves’ lives, promising them revenge one day. It wasn’t only the Nemetese captives that heeded her – many of the other prisoners, those that had dwelled aboard the _Venatrix_ for months or years, also listened to her words. Tyberia had even put a stop to the fights breaking out over food and water.

When they came for her, she didn’t curse or scream. Everyone tensed under the guns trained upon them, and the shock-whips clutched with expert familiarity in mutated hands. The moment danced on the edge of a blade. If Tyberia gave the word, a hundred and more slaves would rise up with her.

And die with her, too.

Her gaze swept those closest to her. Empathetic. Understanding. Calming. Had she always been like this, and I’d just never seen it beneath her ambition as a helot? Or had desperation forced her hand, shaping her into this leader of men and women?

Her eyes landed on mine last of all. ‘Survive, Ana,’ she said, as she rose to her feet. ‘And kill Kartash for me.’

She went willingly, yet they leashed her with the whip anyway. Strange as it is to say, for all the deeds that I despise the Exilarchy for, few are as intimate and venomous to me as that needless gesture.

Tyberia was gone two full days, the longest anyone had been taken for so far. They brought her back in the deep of night, and Lanis, one of the Spear thralls, woke me from a shallow sleep to nod in the direction of the opening bulkhead.

The mutants brought Tyberia to us and dropped her before me. I went to her at once, and if the overseers said anything at all, I never heard it.

I won’t recount what they did to her. Suffice to say they brought her back alive, and to this day, I wish they hadn’t. The fact she still breathed wasn’t a miracle, it was a curse. My studies of anatomy served me well enough to know there was no reason her heart still beat in the miserable form they’d reduced her to.
As I held her that night, I was careful not to let my tears fall on her face, for fear they’d sting her wounds. She couldn’t speak. She was beyond that now.

Tyberia tapped her spasming knuckles on the floor in a weak rhythm. I recognised what she was doing at once, spelling out something in our Chapter’s vox-click code. Two words.

Amadeus.

Alive.

I told her I understood. I don’t know if she heard. I’m not sure what was left of her could hear any more, or if she could, she couldn’t process my words. She kept on repeating the code until I closed my remaining hand gently around hers.

She died in my embrace, a hateful mirror image of how I’d almost died in hers. Once she was gone, I wouldn’t let her go. I was told later that it took three of the Nemetese serfs to unlock my arm from around my friend’s body.

Of all those that are no longer with me in my old age, it’s Tyberia I miss the most. Not because of how close we were, but because of how close we might have become. I owed her so much, and repaid her so little.

The overseers came for Tyberia’s body at dawn, but it was gone. We’d managed to take her to one of the work decks, lowering her into an incineratus engine. I didn’t care if the Exilarchy caught us doing it, nor did I care if they killed me for the effort. I wasn’t going to let them take her the way they took all the others. I wouldn’t let them grind her up for reprocessing, and feed her back to us as nutrient slime. While Tyberia burned, Lanis murmured a tribal funerary chant in her accented Nemetese. I could barely hear it over the furnace.

As burials go it was hardly dignified, but it was still a victory. In my time aboard the Venatrix, we held tight to every victory we could.

An hour later, they came for me.
It was one of the Pure. He stalked towards me as I laboured with Lanis in the foundry.

First, though, he butchered one of our overseers in front of us, crippling the mutant with a chainsword swipe across the back of the wretch’s legs, then dragging the thrashing cripple to the closest furnace engine. A cauldron of molten metal bubbled on the production belt, ready to be chained and lifted clear.

The overseer was a head taller than me, and densely packed with muscle. The Pure lifted the mutant by its throat as if it weighed nothing at all. When the overseer screamed in its master’s grip, pleading for mercy, the Pure’s reply was to dispassionately hold the tainted wretch face down in the cauldron.

The struggles, such as they were, ceased almost at once. The remains were cast to the deck, blessedly facing away from us. I didn’t need that screaming, half-melted skull haunting me. My nights were already bleak enough.

The Pure approached us with his great clanking stride. Verdigris showed in the bronze ridges of his white plate, and old blood darkened the tips of the iron spikes either he, or the warp, had fused to the ceramite. His face was a scarred ruin, looking as if it’d been stitched back onto his skull with industrial tools. His mouth only partially aligned with his jaw and teeth.

He beckoned to me with curling fingers. ‘You are the one I seek.’

Around us, the banging and rattling and clattering of the foundry continued on, though I could feel the eyes of nearby slaves upon me. I jerked my chin towards the overseer’s corpse.

‘Why did you kill him?’

I’d thought the warrior might backhand me for my temerity, or laugh at my brazenness. Instead he smiled.

‘His transgression was in allowing valuable slaves to come to harm. Now come, Mentor-thrall. Your master waits.’
I felt the dangerous spectre of hope. ‘Amadeus needs me?’

The Pure moved with a sudden snarl of armour joints, closing his hand around my throat and lifting me from the deck. He was done with my questions. He carried me effortlessly, my feet dangling above the iron floor.

‘The one you call Amadeus is no longer your master.’

‘What is that on your face?’

They were the first words Nar Kezar spoke to me. I saw no reason to lie.

‘The blood of my sister, Tyberia.’

This amused him. His eyes glinted with delight. ‘In a pattern of Nemetese woad, no less. One might ask whether you were a slave to the Mentor Legion or to the Spears. Have you gone native, child?’

With no desire to explain the symbolism of my defiance, I remained silent, biding my time. It didn’t deter him.

‘The Spears use woad as warpaint,’ he added, still smiling that kingly smile. ‘Are you going to war?’

‘Do not patronise me,’ I said quietly. ‘We’re already at war.’

As if my words needed reinforcement, the ship trembled around us. The *Venatrix* was undergoing one of its periodic impact quakes, adding to the judder of warp flight. The Pure warrior paid this no mind at all. I was all that mattered to him for now, and the amusement my presence offered.

Most of the archives pertaining to Traitor Space Marines that fell into webs of the Archenemy’s lies told tales of warped heretics and daemon-changed men wearing ceramite suits thousands of years old. Yet Nar Kezar, like several of the other Pure I’d seen, was little different to my master and the Spears. His armour wasn’t filthy. It didn’t leak oily blood or show the twisted ghost-faces of those he’d slain. True, it was more baroque in craft, and instead of honour badges and deed scrolls, it had patches of chainmail mesh and ornate edging, but there was nothing immediately more warlike or malicious than the towering crests and white fur cloaks of the Spears.

As for his face – the only flesh he left uncovered – his skin was the same dusky shade as mine, and there the resemblance ended. He was unscarred, with close-cropped black hair, and his eyes were ringed with exquisite curls of kohl that curved down his cheeks in elegant crescents. His pale eyes were infinitely knowing and supremely kind. If the warp makes our foes wear their
sins on their faces, then here was an angel on the wrong side of the war. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Had a face like this been beneath the helm of the Pure Tyberia and I cut down?

‘You are staring, child.’ He smiled as he met my gaze. His voice was a priest’s patient tone. His expression was a parent’s indulgence.

‘You are not what I expected,’ I said, omitting any title of respect. Perhaps he was a sorcerer, trying to wreath me in some secret, charismatic spell.

‘Am I not?’ His tone suggested I was eminently unreasonable, but that somehow, through undeserved care, he would persevere. ‘I see.’

‘You see what?’ I asked. Pain and fear made me bold. I had little left to lose, after all.

‘I see the Spears have infected you with their hatred already. That is a shame, Anuradha. I won’t lie, it grieves me.’

‘Can you feel grief?’

The question was honest, spoken in surprise as much as mockery. Amadeus seemed so removed from human feeling at times that I wondered if his training and indoctrination had diluted the intensity of emotion for him. I wondered the same of this traitor. I didn’t for a second believe his attempts at blithe charm were sincere.

‘But of course, child,’ he said, softening his voice. ‘Anything with a soul will grieve.’

I had expected a monster, a warp-changed warlord, sat atop a throne of skulls and bones at the heart of a grand court. Beasts and mutants and Pure alike would stare at me as I was humbled and destroyed for their master’s amusement. I won’t pretend I wasn’t afraid of that fate, but I’d done what I could to steel myself for it.

Instead, the Pure that slaughtered my overseer had dragged me through the Venatrix’s innards, finally bringing me to the private chambers of this warrior, Nar Kezar.

The chamber was huge, overlooking the Venatrix’s spinal battlements, with wide cathedral windows offering a stark view of the warp’s swirling tides. I kept my gaze away from the poisoned ocean, scanning the rest of the suite. In truth it resembled any high officer’s chambers, with adjacent rooms that were likely armouries and sleeping quarters. It wasn’t the monstrousness of the place that unnerved me; it was the familiarity of it. The layout seemed no
different to the chambers aboard a Mechanicus-mandated Imperial warship. I’d stood in the equivalent space aboard the Mentor strike cruiser Bodhisattva. Those halls had been the personal suites of a company captain I’d served on my seventh deployment.

The smell was different, though. Gone was the stale tang of refiltered air so familiar to me from my time aboard the Hex, the Abjuration and other Mentor ships before that. The scent on the highest decks of the Huntress was reminiscent of some musky, burning toxin.

‘I don’t hate you because of the Spears,’ I said, too weary for deception. ‘I’ve seen your Exilarchy with my own eyes. I was on Kouris. I fought to defend the Hex from your men. I’ve survived for two months in your slave holds.’

As regal as he was, when he chuckled at my words, I could happily have emptied my Engager into his guts.

‘Kouris was a skirmish,’ he said, shaking his head at my apparent naivety. ‘The world wished to join the Exilarchy, but we warned its rulers they weren’t ready. And look what their arrogance cost them. Reconquered most brutally, no? How many millions died in the uprisings across their world? How many hundreds of thousands died in the Spears’ campaign to bring peace to the world through fire and blood?’

He shook his head at the tragedy of it all, even closing his eyes as if tears threatened. ‘Oh, Anuradha. If the rulers of Kouris had only waited until we could support them. If they’d only had the restraint to see there was a serene path to be taken.’

He shrugged slowly, and his armour joints purred. In that moment, the ship juddered beneath us. Weapons fire, impacting on the hull. The Pure lord still didn’t acknowledge it.

‘Where’s my master?’ I asked. ‘Where are the Spears you took captive?’

‘My child, I am your master. My name is Nar Kezar.’

‘No.’ Tyberia would have been proud, for I was finding my backbone. ‘You are a heretic and a traitor. My master is Amadeus of the Mentor Legion.’

Again, he smiled. A grin this time. ‘The Mentor Legion. How can you stand here, in these chambers, and not be struck by the bitter amusement of that Chapter’s existence?’

Nothing in the Mentors’ existence struck me as amusing. On the contrary,
despite the Chapter’s youth their record was a proud one, even among the exalted ranks of the Adeptus Astartes.

‘If you didn’t bring me here to see Amadeus, why did you have me dragged before you?’

‘I have questions, child. Questions about the Mentor Legion, which you will answer.’

_Not a chance_. God-Emperor forgive me for foolishness, but I almost laughed.

‘I take it Lieutenant Commander Incarius has told you nothing,’ I said, unable to hide the smile at that small triumph.

‘He has been most excellently conditioned against both physical excruciation and psychic drilling.’ The warlord sounded intrigued by my master’s resistance. ‘He’ll break eventually, of course. But until then, as unlikely as it is that you know anything of worth, I thought you might serve to ease my curiosity.’

_The hell I will._

I scanned the room, avoiding looking out into the warp’s seething winds. Old parchments lined the walls. Sandstone statues depicting Space Marine heroes stood proudly, raising their weapons high or standing in calm judgement. These had been defaced, their features cracked and erased. The hololithic table was dark in deactivation, and nothing on its surface would be of any use to me. I couldn’t use a datapad to strike down an Archenemy warlord. Nar Kezar either sensed my intent, or my desperation.

‘You will find no weapons here, my child. At least, none that would fit your hand.’

I don’t know what made me speak the words I said next. Fear, most likely. Some mix of fear and hope, as the ship shuddered again.

‘The _Hex_ will catch us.’

Nar Kezar’s lips curled as he turned his eyes to the warp outside the ship’s walls. ‘You place a great deal of faith in Brêac and his pet cripple.’

I gestured to the window, where madness boiled into infinity. ‘They’re hunting you even in the Sea of Souls. Even after you brought down our Geller Field. Even after you boarded us and raided for slaves.’

‘The Spears’ defiance has never been in question, child, and their hunt has made the last two months feel like an epoch. But the _Hex_ will not bring us out
of the warp, no matter how valiantly they chase.’

‘If their hunt is futile, why don’t they break off?’

He clapped his gauntleted hands together with a single slam, delighted by my question. ‘You are greatly entertaining, Anuradha. I encourage you to keep holding on to hope if it amuses you.’

My teeth clenched, and the infection in my head throbbed with fresh pain. ‘I fought one of your brothers on the Hex. You aren’t immortal.’

‘You fought several of my brothers,’ he replied indulgently. ‘That is how you were captured, no?’

‘I mean… I killed one of them. I killed one of your men myself.’ Tyberia, blessings upon her soul, would hopefully forgive me for that lie. ‘I gunned him down and executed him while he crawled on the deck.’

Nar Kezar exhaled slowly. ‘Did you now? How fascinating. Are you trying to make me angry, child? I assure you, it won’t work.’

I licked my cracked lips and said nothing. Again, the ship shivered around us. I had to fight to keep my gaze from going to the shielded windows. Somewhere out there, the Hex trailed in our engine wake.

‘Are you so broken already, Anuradha, that you won’t even waste your breath with promises to kill me? I admit, I’d expected a more spirited meeting.’

‘I have no weapon.’

I flinched back as he drew his blade in a blur of motion, moving with the same inhuman reflexes that had animated the Pure we’d killed; moving the same way my master and the Spears moved when they slaughtered their foes. He turned the curved bronze blade in the air before him, letting the soft light of his chambers play upon its rune-worked surface. Violet warp light danced across it, too. That felt more honest, like the truth behind all this beauty.

‘You know what this is, don’t you?’ he asked, looking at me with nothing but sincerity.

‘It’s a khopesh.’

That earned another laugh. ‘How foolish of me not to be specific. No, Anuradha, I mean the blade itself. Look, child. You gaze upon one of the Fangs of the River Ghoul.’

I didn’t reply. He tilted his head, curious at my silence. When I still didn’t
say anything, and he adopted a sombre mien, his gaze drifting to the churning tides outside the great windows. ‘There were ten of them, in all. Four of them are lost now. Never, I suspect, to be found. We believe the Spears hold one of them in stasis, as a trophy. But we still possess five of them. Five of the finest relics ever to see sunlight.’

He sighed, gripped by personal rapture.

‘Why are you telling me this? I care nothing for your traitorous customs.’

His attention snapped back to me, his eyes slightly narrowed as if he sought to determine whether I lied.

‘You truly know nothing of what I speak?’

My tongue thickened beneath that stern gaze. He seemed… hurt, almost, by my ignorance. I shook my head rather than risk trusting my voice.

‘On my home world,’ he said, ‘the River Ghoul, Abydaras, was the creature said to guard the way to the Emperor’s side in the afterlife. Abydaras held the souls of the slain in his jaws, weighing the balance of their sins. The righteous were released. The sinful were devoured. The founders of my bloodline named these blades in honour of that ancient myth. Each of the swords is said to measure the weight of those whose blood they draw. It was their creators’ hope that no righteous heart could ever be stilled by the ten Fangs of the River Ghoul. So, if you do desire a weapon… take this.’

He tossed the weapon to me. It crashed onto the dark metal floor in front of my dirty, ragged boots, and there it lay, breathtakingly lovely. If my regency sword could have purchased a noble’s tower in a hive spire, this blade would have bought the rest of the city.

‘Pick it up,’ he commanded me. ‘Use it, child. See if I bleed.’

I wanted to. I wanted to lift it, but feared I wouldn’t be able to. Not one-armed, even with the bionic bones still inside my natural limb. It was the weapon of an Adeptus Astartes warlord, and I was a malnourished serf with infection running its gleeful way through my blood. Most of all, I feared playing into his plans or taking part in his games. But, Throne of the Emperor, how I wanted to. Ancient legend or not, he would have bled. His heretic heart was anything but righteous, no matter how he behaved now. I was willing to wager my soul on that.

I stepped back from the curved sword. ‘No.’

Again, that expression of surprised hurt showed on his face. Evidently I’d
refused a great honour.

‘Your ignorance grieves me,’ he said. ‘And I am insulted, Anuradha. That is the truth. Did they not teach you of us? Why would they let you rot in such moronic incomprehension?’

‘The Spears told me all I needed to know,’ I said, as coldly as I dared. ‘About the Pure, and the Exilarchy you lead.’

‘The Spears!’ He snarled the word as a curse. He lips peeled back from perfect teeth, rage strangled his speech, and here at last was the beast behind the beauty. ‘I don’t speak of the Spears. I speak of the Mentor Legion, your precious lords. Do they not speak of us? Is it shame that silences them?’

In the face of his sudden fury, ignorance was my only shield. ‘Why would they speak of you?’

Nar Kezar stood as if struck by the blade he’d offered me. He couldn’t have looked more surprised if the God-Emperor Himself had walked from the warp and stood by my side. Words had abandoned him. Shock ripped through him with such force that his mouth trembled.

He would kill me. I was sure of it. He started walking towards me, and I stepped back again, telling myself it was because Tyberia commanded me to survive, not because I was so scared I could barely piece a coherent thought together.

He was fast even in his slow, bulky grace. He clutched my chin in the tips of a finger and thumb, ruthlessly gentle where the last Pure to manhandle me had just been ruthless. I looked up into his pale eyes, unable to think what words would save my life. Certainly, no action would. There was nothing I could do to harm this creature.

‘Do you know,’ he whispered to me, ‘why this war started?’

*Yes, I thought. You tore your way from the Great Rift and laid siege to the worlds of Elara’s Veil. You massacred whole populations and took the survivors for slaves. You bled the Spears and the Lions, and you despise them for having the courage to redder the earth with your filthy blood.*

‘No,’ I lied. ‘Tell me.’

‘We were bleeding, child,’ he continued in that soft tone. ‘Oh, how our wounds ran red. For so long we’d sailed, tempest-tossed in the howling dark. Our servants and slaves wept and wailed and prayed, not just for days, but years. Did we change? Did we adapt? I ask you, Anuradha, who would not
change after nearly drowning in the Sea of Souls? Dreams and delusions became truth and reality. We looked too long into the screaming abyss, yes, and saw what swam there. What gestated there. What waited behind reality’s masquerade, forever looking back.’

Nar Kezar exhaled. For all his beauty, the wind from his lungs was rancid and sour. ‘And when we reached home, after so very, very long, we sought to replenish our ranks. A harvest of flesh, for implantation and ascension into our ranks. New warriors, child. We needed them, most desperately. How then did our brothers react to our return? How did our oathsworn brethren of the Adeptus Vaelarii greet us?’

He released me at last, though he didn’t move away. ‘Here is the truth of your war. It was the Spears. They fired the first shot. And the Lions, those golden champions, fired the second. Three billion lives thrived on Khamun-Sen. Three billion lives, and our entire civilisation. Burned to ash. A kingdom reduced to slag by Exterminatus. Their wrath went deeper than inflicting destruction. This was annihilation. This was oblivion.’

‘Khamun-Sen,’ I said, repeating the name. An unbelieving breath. I feared I’d laugh, and only stopped myself by covering my mutilated face with my remaining hand. ‘Khamun-Sen,’ I said into my palm.

‘And what if we ask Amadeus to lie about what he sees here?’ Serivahn had said, back in the barrow tomb. ‘What if we have secrets we wish kept on this side of the Rift?’

‘My home world,’ Nar Kezar agreed passionately. ‘We tried to defend it. We fought back. And still it burned. To see your master here, child, wearing the colours we once wore… To know the Imperium banished all memory of us, letting lesser men wear our heraldry…’

‘I see no Scorpion on your war-plate. Only the basilisk of the Pure.’

Lost in theatrical reflection, he took a moment to acknowledge my words. ‘As I said, my child, there were changes. Everything changes, you know. But no matter. The insult of the Mentors’ existence will stand, for now. We must secure the Veil first, and bring it to order. It has been a long century, Anuradha. We didn’t want this war, but since the Spears began it, we will finish it.’

‘Why?’ I sounded helpless in my confusion. That frustrated him, I think, because I wasn’t the celebrating convert he’d hoped. The truth – his deformed version of the truth – wasn’t sweeping me up in the throes of revelation. ‘Why fight at all?’
He stared at me as if I were mad. ‘Elara’s Veil is *ours*, you stunted creature. Does ignorance flow through you in place of blood? We swore lifelong oaths to protect the Veil. And we will do so, even over the bodies of our brothers. We are the true Sentinels of the Veil. The worlds that swear allegiance to us are spared the worst of what breeds and seethes within the Great Rift.’

‘You demand they endure horror,’ I said softly, ‘for the sake of avoiding even greater horrors.’

His laugh was bleak, and his gaze invited me to share in some cosmic jest. ‘Is that not what the Imperium is, child?’

*Some of it, perhaps. Some of the Imperium’s worlds, no doubt. But not all. Not all.*

‘No,’ I said. ‘That isn’t the Imperium. It’s the Exilarchy.’

His voice rose, a preacher reaching his pitch. ‘And what do you believe the Exilarchy is? It is nothing more than a union of Veil-worlds that joined with us. Worlds that saw our return in an age of Chaos, and they trust us to shepherd them through it. Worlds that have grown weary of fighting and bleeding and rotting under the protection of the Lions and the Spears. We are the architects of peace, child. We are the heralds of a new dawn.’

My eye socket ached as I stared up at him. I’d have given my life for the chance to lift my bandages and slay him with my terminus-eye. I think Amadeus would have approved of that, even if it would surely have led to my death soon after. I know the Spears would have rejoiced. Even Tyberia might have considered it a worthy death.

I took in the towering figure before me, in his white armour, changed by time and the whims of the warp. The basilisk on his shoulder guard was an unnatural beast twisted by the misery of its own existence, an aberration hating the world that birthed it.

‘They were right,’ I said, and it was too late to call the words back. I met his eyes with what remained of my sight, and I swallowed my fear. ‘The Spears were right to burn your world. The God-Emperor alone knows what poison you brought back to Khamun-Sen after the warp ate your souls. And how is it you still live, when the Scorpions were sentenced to death by failing gene-seed? What pacts did you swear out there in the dark places of the galaxy, to grant you another chance at life?’

The more I said, the more the woad on my face – Tyberia’s blood – began to itch. ‘The Scorpions are dead, and the Adeptus Vaelarii mourns their memory.

Hatred flooded me as I spoke. I thought of Tyberia, what they brought back of her, and what I’d lowered into the incinerator. I thought of my captivity, and the pain of my infected face and broken skull and starving belly. I thought of the bodies in the streets and on the battlefields of Kouris. I thought of my father, the creature that wore his skin, summoned by the deeds of these men, who played at being kings of a kingdom that had renounced them centuries ago.

‘You’re husks. You’re what the warp spat back out after the Scorpions died.’

I was ready, then. Ready for him to kill me. If I was to journey to the God-Emperor’s side, I would see Tyberia and tell her: *I couldn’t do what you asked, Ty. I couldn’t survive. I couldn’t kill Kartash. But I told the truth to a madman, even through my terror, and I don’t regret it.*

Nar Kezar was watching me with half-lidded eyes. Not enraged by my words, but drunk on them. His tongue licked a slow circuit of his perfect lips, and his voice shook with some transhuman incarnation of desire.

‘You have no conception,’ he purred, ‘of how sweet genuine hatred tastes. Oh, to feel as fiercely as you feel. To believe so ardently.’

He laughed softly to himself as he turned from me with no more ceremony, lifted the curved blade from where it lay on the deck, and sheathed it smoothly in its scabbard.

‘If you’re quite finished distracting me with your ignorance…’ he began, and then said no more. He’d turned to the view of the *Venatrix*’s spinal battlements, and the thrashing murk of the warp around it.

And this time, I dared to see for myself. A ship, nothing more than a speck, sailed far to starboard. Even as I watched, it grew. Slipping here and there through the obscuring tides, rolling as it pushed through the etheric storm, its Geller field a dark flare of cold, natural space haloing its hull.

Nar Kezar heaved a breath, evidently weary of the pursuit, showing irritation and, I believe, the very edge of admiration.

‘Brêac,’ he growled, ‘and that bastard cripple.’

‘No,’ I said, watching the ship as it spiral-dived towards us.

‘You object?’ Nar Kezar smiled. ‘I’ve spoken with Serivahn myself, child. I’ve seen him on the oculus when our vessels have traded threats and cannon
fire in the past. I know of his malformations.’

‘No,’ I said again. ‘I mean… that’s not the *Hex.*’

There was a great deal I didn’t know, then.

I had no way of knowing that when the *Hex* had foundered in real space over two months ago, dragged from the warp by the detonation of the psychic mine, she’d sent out astropathic calls for aid, crying out that the *Venatrix,* the hated Huntress, was slipping through its grasp once again.

I had no way of knowing the *Venatrix’s* destination, either. The crew of the *Hex* had surmised their prey wouldn’t make the long and dangerous run for Exilarchy territory, and would instead try to lose her pursuers in regions still held by the Adeptus Vaelarii. I’d missed every council taken around hololithic tables; every star chart marked with projected courses; every report given by an increasingly weakening Ducarius, as he peered into the Sea of Souls and sought to follow the *Venatrix’s* bow wave through the warp. He and the *Hex’s* Navigator had been communing to the same end, and through their union, the Spears had been able to maintain pursuit through the halting, stop-start jumps of warp travel in the Dark Imperium.

I didn’t know of the soul-draining coordination required by the astropaths and Ducarius, arranging meeting vectors and ambush sites in a realm of ceaseless energies that obeyed no physical laws. I had no idea that it took them a month simply to meet up with Adeptus Vaelarii reinforcements, and another month to align their courses to close the trap’s jaws. Even achieving these deeds in that time frame was hailed as nothing short of miraculously fortuitous. Three astropaths died, expiring from the effort required to coordinate the trap’s closing jaws.

Nor was I aware that the mood of the Pure aboard the *Venatrix* was one of unease. The *Hex* was a hated legend among the Exilarchy, as sure as the Huntress was an unwelcome symbol to the Adeptus Vaelarii. When they couldn’t shake Brēac’s ship in the Sea of Souls, when it became clear the chase was going to be long and sour if they sought to match speed against speed, Nar Kezar ordered his vessel to change course again and again and again, trying in futility to lose their pursuers.

And though I had no way of knowing for sure, I could at least guess what they’d done to my master aboard the *Venatrix.* I didn’t expect to see him again in this life, and if by some twist of fate I did, logic dictated he would be a wreck of the warrior I’d once served.
But I knew none of this then. I learned all of it later.

As the unforeseen vessel bore down in a rolling dive towards the *Venatrix*, I knew only one thing for certain: that strike cruiser wasn’t the *Hex*. Later, I would hear the vessel’s name and thank it in my prayers every day and night. I still do so, even now, years from my last battle. Tears prickle the edge of my vision when I think back to that moment, as she tore through the tides of madness, running straight for us.

I was right. She wasn’t the *Hex*. She was called the *Blade of the Seventh Son*. Once, she had belonged to the Black Templars. Now she flew in the colours of the Celestial Lions.

True to her name, she struck the *Venatrix* amidships, ramming her with the wrath of the God-Emperor Himself.

My world exploded in a storm of light and fury.

I didn’t want to die, but I welcomed that storm. I’ll never forget laughing as the thunder struck.

4

Any warrior will tell you that during a battle, you know almost nothing of what’s happening outside your immediate senses. War is disorder. It’s sensation, it’s confusion, it’s a dry mouth and an aching need to piss. It’s trying to see. It’s straining to see where you are and what’s happening around you, to orient yourself and stay alive. You know nothing in the one moment you need to know everything.

Being below decks during ship-to-ship warfare is that sense of disorder magnified tenfold. You don’t know what the other vessel is doing, nor how your own craft is responding. Everything shakes around you: the walls so hard they can’t be trusted, the deck so fiercely you crawl as much as you run. Your world quakes out of rhythm with the ceaseless banging of the vessel’s guns. If you’re close to the firing decks, a single broadside can leave you deaf for minutes afterwards. Servitors and crew will load the macrocannons by tending the autoloader towers, with blood running from their ears, down their necks, into their uniforms.

Explosions. Thunder. Shipquakes. Each one could mean anything. Every detonation could be something as banal as an unessential bulkhead getting blown out, or the very end of the battle. You don’t know. You have no way of knowing. The ship could be cleaved in half, and in the darkness of your own deck, you won’t know you’re already doomed.
I didn’t lose consciousness when the Blade struck, but that’s the only victory I can claim. The chamber was a battered ruin, and I had to pull myself, one-armed, from the wreckage. I couldn’t stand, and at first I couldn’t understand why. I had to roll over to look down at what was wrong – and when I saw it, I was too bleached of emotion to feel any horror. By then, the degradation of my body had become almost a matter of detached curiosity. How much of yourself could you lose and still be you?

I tied my belt around my thigh to stop myself bleeding to death. Beneath the belt, my left knee was crushed to inflexion, the bones were just rubble under the skin. My foot and most of my shin was still somewhere in the wreckage.

The worst part was feeling no pain in that leg. None. Surely a bad sign.

Nar Kezar was gone. From the cracked windows, I could see the Venatrix burning along her mangled spinal battlements. Her starboard side was hammer-struck where the Blade had rammed her, buckled badly enough to break her back.

I could also see stars. We weren’t in the warp. The Blade had driven us back into real space.

We rolled, paralysed in the void, at the mercy of momentum. Fusillades of weapons fire, the last gasps of a dying animal, banged from the Venatrix’s sides. And there was the Blade of the Seventh Son, wounded herself and keeping back, drifting aside from the broadside volleys. She was the huntress now, letting her fading prey spit out its final anger before she would move in for the kill.

The Hex held no such patience. I didn’t know what system we were in, but the Spears’ strike cruiser darkened the light of that distant sun, casting its shadow across us. As she weathered the pathetic broadsides sputtering from the crippled Venatrix, the Blade sailed in alongside her sister ship.

Boarding pods streamed from both vessels.

I kept crawling.

Morcant was the one to find me, timeless hours later, in the darkness of yet another corridor. I didn’t know how long I’d been crawling towards the ever-shifting sounds of battle, and I had no conception of how the wider fight was going. I remember his helm, crested high, looking down at me. Blood marked his armour in rainfall dappling. Three helms in the bronze-edged white of the Pure were chained to his belt. He’d been trophy-hunting.

‘Helot Secundus.’
He greeted me as calmly as if I’d sauntered into his chamber aboard the *Hex*, instead of crawling, one-eyed, one-armed, one-footed, through the spinal decks of an enemy warship. ‘Still alive, eh?’
BOOK THREE

REGENERATION
AND RUINATION

‘Though we are broken, our oaths yet bind us. We are the Lions of Elysium, and as long as a single warrior in our heraldry draws breath, we will uphold our vow to watch over Elara’s Veil. For the fallen Scorpions. For the Spears still fighting. For the Adeptus Vaelarri.’

– Ekene Dubaku
Chapter Master of the Celestial Lions
Forgive me.

My pen doesn’t falter this time because of the hand holding it, but the heart behind it.

Some of what I could commit to this parchment would cross the boundaries of what my former master would consider acceptable. Some of it, honestly, I just have no wish to tell. Where is the line between what a storyteller must relay to those that read their words, and what is a pain so personal that it’s better never laid down for the eyes of others?

Some memories are so vivid I fear they’ll be the last things I think in the seconds before death finally claims me. Would that be a grim reward for a life of loyal service, or would it be fair punishment for the things I’ve done?

Once, I broke a mother’s face with the butt of my gun, so I could tear her child from her arms. History records this as a necessary act in a vile time, but...

I think that will be the one. That will be the memory I summon with my last breath. I’ll see her wide eyes again, excoriated of human sentience, fear-shot through with animal panic. I’ll hear her wordless, bestial screams again, and I’ll deserve it. Yes, there’d be justice in that.

If you’re reading these words, then you already know Amadeus lived, only to die later. What, then, should I write? The months of his regeneration? The gathering of the Armada at Elysium, to face the Storm Tide? Kartash’s truth?

Vadhán asked the same question, in a different way. He came to me again a few days ago, to read through the pages already written. He remained here as he did so, in this very chamber, his face scarred and scabbed from his most recent battles, his eyes flicking over each parchment with ruthless speed. So many chronicles cite the war-gifts of the Adeptus Astartes without fully realising the mundane means in which they differ from us: such is Vadhán’s cognitive speed that in the time a human might read a single page, he’s scanned and comprehended ten of them.

On several occasions, I saw him tense or give a bitter smile at the words on
the vellum. I didn’t ask why. I just watched him read.

‘Those were dark days,’ he said at last. He looked at me curiously in the moments after reading. It was as if he didn’t know me at all, and hunted for some kind of insight into who I was and what I might be thinking. Strange, given that he’d just read my thoughts committed to parchment. He should know me better than ever before.

‘What? What is it?’

‘Amadeus.’ He said the name with a moment’s effort. ‘It’s strange to read, to know with clarity, just how you saw him.’

‘I didn’t hate him, if that’s what you mean.’

‘I don’t know what I mean,’ he admitted.

I smiled in the candlelit gloom, because I could count on one hand the number of times I’ve heard a member of the Adeptus Astartes honestly confess to a moment’s private doubt.

‘He was what his Chapter made him,’ I said. ‘Just as you’re what your Chapter made you. The Mentors demanded perfection, and he answered it by becoming a weapon instead of a warrior.’

‘Do you miss him?’ Vadhán asked suddenly.

‘No.’ I softened the truth by making my voice gentle. ‘No, I don’t.’

He had nothing to say to that. Instead, he gestured to the parchments on the table.

‘Dark days,’ he repeated.

‘Are these days any brighter?’ I countered.

‘We will make them brighter.’ Such belief. Such casual defiance. But his newest scars, on skin and ceramite alike, were from Arikeus.

‘Is the Exilarchy coming?’ I asked, meeting him eye to eye. ‘Arikeus has fallen. I’ve seen the hololiths. I’ve seen the dispersal of our fleets, drawing close to the Ophion System in defensive blockades. Is Nemeton next?’

‘Just keep writing, old woman.’

I ignored his fond tone. ‘Why not answer me? Do you respect me so little, after all this time?’

He looked around the stone chamber in which I write all these words. Winter on Nemeton is cold, even down here. And it’s dark beneath the oceans, so
indescribably dark. If power failed in this fortress, men and women would go mad in the absolute black.

‘Nemeton will never fall,’ said Vadhán.

‘I’m sure the Lions once said the same thing about Elysium.’

Instead of chastising me, he nodded. ‘They did, aye, but they were wrong. I’m not. We’re mustering to break them before they reach the system’s edge. The light of Ophion will never shine on their warships’ corrupt hulls.’

‘You were never so poetic,’ I accused him. ‘They sound like the High King’s words.’

Vadhán chuckled. ‘They are the High King’s words.’

We sat together in the comfortable silence of two souls that knew one another well. I was the one to break it.

‘I’ll write the story you want, Vadhán, don’t worry. We’re close to the end of the first chapter now.’

He ruminated on that, running an armoured palm over his bearded mouth. ‘How will you end this first part? With Amadeus’ regeneration? With the fall of Elysium?’

‘No. Throne of the God-Emperor, no. I’ll write about those days, but the chapter won’t end with either of them. Elysium must come later.’

He grunted something that passed for agreement. ‘I suppose, in truth, there’s only one way to end it.’

‘Aye. With Ekene of the Lions.’
I stared at my new hand. I closed the fingers. I opened them. It was my hand, but not yet mine. It belonged to me, but it was still new enough to be a tool, something grafted onto me instead of a part of myself.

I closed my remaining eye, but it left me at the mercy of my fragmented memories, dragging me back to the screams and burning darkness aboard the Venatrix. I opened it again rather than trigger a reawakening of those scorched memories.

Resisting the memories didn’t always work. It didn’t work then.

The apothecarium aboard the *Hex* was richly appointed and suffused with a sterile, muted blue-white light that was tuned not to strain the eyes. Since waking, no one had told me anything of worth. We were in the warp, but what of the *Venatrix*? What of the *Blade of the Seventh Son*? Where were we headed now, and for what reason?

What of Nar Kezar?

Once, my ignorance had been a shield. I was the perfect thrall, raised among so many other perfect thralls. My masters among the Mentors made every decision in my life, and I expected no enlightenment as to their wishes and plans. I went where they bid, I did as they ordered.

But slavery changes you. It strips you of every decision you can make, even down to eating and breathing and shitting. It flays you of agency. With no control over anything in your life, you are barely human at all.

Now I wanted answers. I needed them, for the sake of my sanity.

They’d told me Amadeus lived, but nothing of his condition. The medicae officer treating me was human, as were the staff working under his direction. They all bore Nemetese tattoos on their faces and forearms. My memory of those weeks is still fragmented from the damage to my cranial data-spools, but I was later told my first action in the apothecarium was to touch the slave scar on my forehead and say, ‘Get this off me. Burn it off if you have to.’

I asked several of the medicae labourers if they’d managed to exload the
recordings from my cranial banks. Their answers were all grunted and negative, but for one that elaborated: ‘It’s not going to work. They’re useless. Fragmented. You’re lucky not to be brain damaged.’

‘But you could try again,’ I pressed him. It would be the eighth time, though. Desperation was making me foolish. ‘Please.’

‘There’s not enough unbroken data to even form a visual feed.’ He looked at me as if I were babbling in a tongue he struggled to understand. ‘Your skull was cracked in three places and the optical trauma from losing your terminus-eye rendered everything in your cranial banks unharvestable. You’re lucky you remember anything at all. You’re lucky to be alive.’

‘Yes, but–’

‘I’m not a servitor,’ he said harshly, as if I’d called him an idiot. ‘If you make us keep straining your cognition spools with repeated attempts, then at best you’re going to have memory problems for the rest of your life. At worst, that won’t be a problem, as you’ll be dead of a brain haemorrhage.’

After that, I let it lie.

A Spear stood sentry within the apothecarium at all times. It surprised me to see that it wasn’t merely a line warrior, but Morcant of the Arakanii. The battleguard remained on duty without a break, his crested helm panning left and right over the chamber, ever alert to threats.

I could guess why he was there. His place was to execute any of the injured that showed signs of taint.

Judgement was still out as to my potential corruption. Daily, they drained my blood into vials, scraped skin samples, subjected me to batteries of quick-response questions while monitoring the electrical patterns of my brain and the chemicals that carried thought. I knew I was passing these tests by the fact Morcant didn’t kill me.

We didn’t all pass. Morcant executed one of the recovered thralls in our ward when she wouldn’t stop raving one night. It was merciful, at least in the way you can measure such things. He closed his hand around her throat as she writhed in her bed, and he twisted. Just once. She fell silent, and her heresies died on her lips.

Morcant, on sentry duty, always ignored my repeated attempts to call to him in search of answers to any of my questions. The most responsive he was to one of my questions was when he shook his head in my direction.
‘Be quiet,’ he ordered me.

‘That thrall you killed last night. I knew her. Her name was Lanis.’

‘Be quiet, Anuradha.’

I obeyed, for lack of anything else to say or do.

In addition to refusing to answer any of my questions, the medicae staff also refused to let me see myself in any reflective surfaces. That didn’t bode well. They had replaced my arm with a cruder, simpler bionic limb than the beautiful piece I’d lost in the fight with Kartash. I kept lifting it and watching it move. It was like something an Imperial Guard officer might possess after a battlefield mutilation. Better than what most Imperial citizens could ever hope for, and I was accordingly grateful, but inwardly I looked at the dull metal plating and missed the consummate craftsmanship of my lost arm.

As for my left leg, that was gone before I even had time to think of any sentiment. There was a period of drunkenness from pain-suppressant narcotics, and then I woke to find my leg was new from the knee down. The augmetic replacement wasn’t human in shape, like my new arm. This was a thinner, industrial pylon between a gearworked node that served as my knee, and a four-taloned claw in the shape of a cross that now made up my foot. It would take me months to get used to. Even once I did, I’d never walk without a hitch in my stride again.

The ward’s chief medicae officer, Owyn, was a gaunt man deep into his sixth decade, with half-lidded eyes that missed nothing.

‘Yes, it’s ugly,’ he told me, with a Nemetese drawl, ‘but it’s what we’ve got.’

‘I’m not ungrateful,’ I told him, and I meant it. ‘I’ll get used to it.’

‘Good. I abhor patients that complain. Now, are you ready for your first visitor?’

I can’t recall what I said, only that I was certain, against all the odds, that it would be my master.

Of course, I was wrong.

2

I smelled him before I saw him. That pious, smoky scent of incense. He approached my bed in his familiar crouched gait, his eyes cast down, an expression of patent discomfort on his face. The monitoring machinery by my bedside beeped louder and faster in response to my escalating heartbeat. Owyn was gone, misguidedly believing I wanted privacy.
'Hello, Anuradha,’ Kartash said.

I drew in breath to call to Morcant, stationed across the chamber. Kartash pressed a finger to my lips, and I lost the shout I’d been building to, as I flinched away from his touch.

‘Anuradha, be calm, be calm.’ The instructive softness of his voice, after everything that had happened, was almost enough to make me scream.

‘Get away from me.’

He jerked in surprise, which was the last reaction I’d expected. ‘What?’ he asked. His eyes shined with sudden hurt. ‘What’s wrong? You’re safe now.’

I think I stammered his words back at him, unable to speak anything worthwhile in the wake of what he said. He reached out to stroke my hair, only stopping – and looking hurt once more – when the bed shivered with my force of my recoil.

‘You’re safe,’ he assured me. ‘You’re safe now. You’re back on the Hex.’

‘I… I know where I am. I’m not delirious.’ It came out in a rush, then. The aborted flight from the astropathic sector. The jade sword he’d used to slay one of the Pure. The way he’d downed Tyberia and hurled me back. The way he’d sealed us in with the animals from the Exilarchy.

Kartash listened to all of it with mounting horror. By the end of my accusations, I was trying to lift myself from the bed while my new arm and leg rebelled and spasmed with nerve-ending misfires.

‘I’ll kill you,’ I said to him, the words a hissing capstone for my anger. ‘For what you did… I will kill you.’

A medicae orderly came to my side, urging me to be calm. Kartash looked mortified, and worse, he looked confused. Morcant loomed over us, a vast presence in his cobalt ceramite, though my relief died in my throat when instead of dragging Kartash away, he stood protectively in front of the hunchback, and glared down at me through red eye-lenses.

‘You will remain calm, thrall.’

‘Morcant, he… he tried to kill us. Me and Tyberia. Kartash tried to—’

The Spear closed his hand great hand around my throat, without squeezing. It would take him no effort at all to end me.

‘Are you calm, Anuradha?’

‘He tried to kill us, Morcant. In the Battle of the Hex.’
Morcant was immovable. ‘I will ask you one more time. Are you calm?’
I wasn’t even close to calm. But I could feign it.
‘Yes, I’m calm. I’m calm now.’
‘See that you remain that way. You’ve shown no sign of taint,’ he said, not needing to add the Yet that lurked on the end of the sentence.
‘She’s confused and disorientated,’ Kartash volunteered. ‘My thanks for your concern, battleguard. She can’t help it, after what she’s been through.’
‘Don’t aggravate her,’ Morcant said to Kartash as he released me. The Spear and the orderly drifted away, leaving me alone with the man Tyberia had asked me to kill.

For a few seconds, Kartash said nothing. He cautiously took his place at my bedside again, seeming to search for the right words.
‘I don’t know what you mean,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, Anuradha. I couldn’t even find you during the battle.’

Throne, he looked heartbroken. His expression invited me to consider the horrors he’d seen after the Geller field failed, alone as he’d been, without Tyberia watching his back. At least I’d had company as I waded through hell, with the dead walking the halls of our warship.

‘I saw things,’ he said, whispering the words. ‘Things, in that battle, that couldn’t possibly have been real. Didn’t you see anything like that?’

_A thousand things_, I thought.

‘I saw you, Kartash.’ God-Emperor, I hated the doubt creeping into my voice. ‘Tyberia saw you as well. I saw you with that blade. I know it was you, flooring us and leaving us for the Exilarchy.’

He shook his head, in hopelessness rather than denial. ‘What blade? What are you talking about?’

I had to admit the truth. ‘I didn’t see it clearly. A sword of jade. It was alien craftsmanship.’

I sounded foolish even to myself. Again, he shook his head. ‘And did Tyberia see it?’

My teeth were grinding now. ‘No,’ I confessed.

He ran his palm down his mouth and chin, sighing quietly. ‘Anuradha… Have you asked yourself _why_ I would abandon you like that? To what
purpose?’

I had no answer for him, and he sighed again. ‘Never have I wished so ardently for our masters to have granted me remembrance spools. Then you could see the truth through my eyes. I’d never abandon you, Anuradha.’

Throne, he was so sincere. I felt the traitorous urge to break down, to sink back into his comforting tutorship, now the worst of my trials were behind me. Maybe he was right. Maybe I was safe again, at last.

‘Get away from me,’ I said. My voice was shaking.

‘You’ve been through a lot,’ he said softly. He nodded to himself, as if his own diagnosis was confirmed the moment he made it. ‘I’m glad you made it, though. You always showed much more promise than Tyberia.’

My bionic hand snapped the iron bar that served as the bed’s edge. I hadn’t realised I’d been gripping it, let alone so hard.

‘Get away from me,’ I said again. Across the chamber, Morcant was watching me. I tried to look as serene as possible, despite wishing I could vomit all over Kartash’s face. ‘And don’t you ever speak her name in my presence, unless it’s in a prayer for forgiveness.’

Kartash rose. ‘You’re confused, Anuradha. Confused and frightened. That’s perfectly understandable. I’ll check in on you tomorrow.’


He smiled sadly, indulgently, even offering a knowing nod to the nearby orderlies. Then he limped his way from the chamber, making the sign of the aquila to Morcant as he passed the warrior. Morcant nodded in response, then went back to watching me.

Chief Medicae Officer Owyn returned, raising his thin, grey eyebrows at the damage I’d done to my bed.

‘I see there’s no issue with the grip strength in your new limb. Try not to destroy your bed, however. You’re not getting a new one.’

‘He tried to kill me, Owyn.’

‘Yes, so you’ve said.’

‘What? When?’

‘When you drifted in and out of consciousness in the first few days. We had a servitor record everything you murmured in your delirium, and the Spears have been monitoring it for signs of hidden taint. You also said he had a
sword made of alien metals and crystals. I shouldn’t need to point out, but I will anyway, that his quarters and possessions were searched thoroughly and there was no sign of such a weapon.’

Someone had believed me enough to make certain, then. That was a start, even if it resulted in nothing but proving my delusion.

‘There’s some good news,’ Owyn added. ‘We’re going to try something new with your eye tomorrow.’

3

My eye socket itched abominably. There was no chance the Spears’ medicae staff could grant me another terminus-eye, and it wasn’t as if I’d used the one I had wisely or well. Still, it stung to lose such a prestigious gift in favour of a simple bionic.

Dealing with my eye turned out to be a foul process. Owyn had already scraped the socket clean and flushed it with antiseptic fluids, but the infection kept returning. He came to my bed after the second failure, accompanied by a towering figure in growling black ceramite. I recognised his bearded features, with the talon-scar tattoos on his cheeks.

‘War-priest Ducarius.’

‘Anuradha,’ he greeted me in return, distracted and plainly tired. His massive hand gripped the top of my head. He turned my face side to side, peering into the eye that was no longer there. He was less gentle than Nar Kezar, but entirely less unnerving.

‘Hold still.’

I was holding still. I told him so.

‘Then hold stiler.’

I asked him how I could hold stiler than already being absolutely still.

‘Well, you could stop talking,’ he pointed out. Ducarius nodded at whatever he saw in my augmetic eye socket, and clacked his scrimshawed teeth. ‘Here. This’ll do it.’

He drew a glass vial from one of his belt pouches, full of a bubbling white liquid. It took me a second to see it wasn’t a liquid at all, but hundreds of tiny squirming bodies bunched up together.

With a care I’d never believed possible, using tweezers clutched with inhuman precision in his huge hand, the Spear druid placed the maggots, one
after the other, in my eye socket.

‘They’ll eat the infected flesh,’ he said to me, and then to Owyn he added, ‘Replace them in two days, before they split and become flies.’

The itching, which had been irritating, now became maddening. Foolishly, I mentioned this out loud.

‘If you want a new eye,’ said Ducarius, ‘you’ll do what it takes to get one.’

With Ducarius here, this was my chance. I had to take it. ‘Where’s Amadeus? They told me he’s still alive.’

Ducarius said nothing for a moment. ‘He’s alive, aye. It remains to be seen for how much longer.’

‘What did the Pure do to him?’

‘Be calm, Anuradha.’

‘Tell me.’

‘This isn’t calm.’

‘Tell me what they did to him!’

‘Restrain her,’ Owyn called to two of his orderlies.

Something a little like Tyberia’s voice broke inside me, and I snapped at Owyn, ‘If you tie me down, you better never set me free again, because I’ll beat you to death with the new arm you gave me. You have your duty, and I have mine. I’m going to do it. I’m going to see my master.’

Ducarius finally nodded. ‘Take her to him.’

4

Tyberia had suffered at the hands of the Exilarchy’s mutants, and what they brought back to me after they’d had their fun had no right to still be alive. Amadeus had endured excruciation far beyond that. He was capable of withstanding far greater physical damage, because of his transhuman form, and he had been in the clutches of Nar Kezar, a true artist of pain, rather than brutal mutants.

The Exilarchy had killed him. He just wasn’t dead yet.

I sat by the slab table where he was cobwebbed in medical cables. The walk here had been difficult and joyless on my new leg, but what awaited offered no solace. My master breathed because machines breathed for him. The devastating thing wasn’t that they’d hacked away at him or removed his
limbs. It was that he was still in one piece, with every bone and organ and inch of tissue showing signs of ritual mutilation. They’d taken him apart while keeping him whole.

I looked at the screens that showed me all this, and then I looked at Amadeus, living on the edge of death. His eyes were closed. Even the eyelids were scabbed and scarred.

‘Suspended animation?’ I asked.

‘No.’ Ducarius kept his voice soft. ‘He sleeps. Deeply.’

‘Why haven’t you given him the Emperor’s peace?’

Ducarius looked wearier than I’d ever seen one of the Adeptus Astartes appear. ‘We are the Spears of the Emperor,’ he said bluntly, ‘and we need every warrior we have. We don’t mercy-kill our brethren unless death is absolutely certain.’

I gestured at the ruination that had once been my master. ‘Death is certain. I’m only half-blind, Ducarius. He can’t survive this. No one can.’

He ignored my informality. ‘You’re wrong, helot. I can stabilise him with a little more time. Another few surgeries and he may even breathe on his own.’

Hope flared. The most treasonous of all emotions. ‘You mean to inter him,’ I guessed. ‘You’ll bind him into a Dreadnought.’ I couldn’t equate the image of my master as he’d been, and as he might become, locked within the life support coffin of an Adeptus Astartes war machine. It wasn’t life as Amadeus had known it, but at least it was life.

But Ducarius bristled. ‘No, Anuradha. Internment is a rare and precious rite, and those sarcophagi are treasured rewards for the greatest Spears. The Chapter would never sanction such a sacrifice on your master’s behalf.’

‘What, then? This isn’t life, Ducarius. Amadeus would despise living as this revenant, slaved to machines that force him to exist.’

The druid brought up a hololith from his vambrace, showing yet more of the extensive internal damage inflicted upon my master.

‘He’ll never fight with a blade and bolter again, but he can command ships and give orders to skitarii. He can fight for the Veil, as Serivahn fights. And after the Exilarchy did this to him, he’ll want revenge. We’re counting on it.’

More than anything. I lowered my hands. I’d not realised they’d been pressed to my mouth, as if a barricade over my lips could contain my fears.
‘Captain Serivahn is… malformed,’ I admitted, ‘but my master is devastated. He’ll never walk again. Even his heart tissue is scarred. Both of his hearts. What will be left of him to serve? A brain in a glass tank?’

‘There’ll be extensive augmetic resculpturing,’ Ducarius admitted. ‘I’d say over sixty per cent of his body will require bionic replacement.’

‘To make what? A servitor with a Space Marine’s mind?’

Ducarius met my eyes. His gaze bored into mine, pinning me with merciless patience. ‘You’ve been in the Exilarchy’s clutches, thrall. You’ve seen the Pure. You know what the Adeptus Vaelarii face here in the Veil. We use every weapon available to us. A broken sword still has an edge. A broken rifle still serves as a club. We fight with what we’ve got. After the last two months, you should understand that without reservation. Come. Return to your ward.’

‘I’m not leaving him.’ The steel in my voice surprised me. It wasn’t just duty talking, I knew that even then. With Tyberia gone and Kartash a traitor, Amadeus was all I had. The idiocy of that sentiment didn’t make it any less true. ‘I’m staying here.’

‘Very well.’

With those words, the druid left me alone with my master. I didn’t know what to say to Amadeus. It didn’t really matter. It wasn’t as if he could hear me.

‘My eye socket itches,’ I told him. ‘It has maggots in it.’

Amadeus made no comment.

Within an hour, three of Owyn’s orderlies brought me a new surgical bed, so I might share my master’s chamber. Not long after lying down, I fell asleep to the sounds of Amadeus’ respirator.

Was I free now? Was I no longer a slave to the Mentor Legion?

And if so… What did that mean? What could I do now? Who was I?

I dreamed of fire in black tunnels, not for the first time, and not for the last.
XIX
VICISSITUDES

1

Little by little, my healers and hosts drip-fed me information. Owyn was the best source of it, though Ducarius, Brêac and, on one occasion, Serivahn were useful in their own ways.

Morcant remained on guard in the main ward, and only infrequently checked on my master and I. Each time he did, he was as conversational as a tongueless servitor. No change, there.

Owyn spent time with me each day. I suspected I’d become a pet project of his, not least because in studying me he gained access to data pertaining to the advanced bionics used by the Mentors Chapter. Most of my original augmetics were damaged or gone, replaced now by standard Imperial designs, but he could see the stories told in damaged nerve endings and bone fusions.

I spent most of my convalescence at Amadeus’ side. It would be right to say he drifted in and out of consciousness, since the abuse his body and mind had suffered did pull him down into irregular healing slumbers. At times he lingered on the edge of biological shutdown, when his sus-an membrane would have taken hold and allowed him to drift into a physiological suspended animation.

But it’s far more accurate to say he drifted in and out of awareness. There were times he was awake and times he was comatose. There were times he knew me and times he did not. On more than one occasion he talked to me as if I were his mother or his sister and he were still a boy. My lingering oaths to the Mentor Legion forbid me from recording those words here, but what I learned through those mumbled delusions suggested a happy childhood from a deeply philosophical warrior caste, on a world I won’t name.

One of the times he recognised me, when his thoughts were clearest, he ordered me from his sight. He wouldn’t say why, but I suspected he was gripped by the shame of being reduced to ruin. I didn’t obey, and there was nothing he could do to make me obey. He was unconscious again before another minute had passed, anyway.

The Pure had done their work well. A Space Marine fallen to the Ruinous Powers, willingly or in ignorance, makes for the bitterest enemy. A fallen
Space Marine knows all his loyal brethren’s virtues and vices, their strengths and flaws. They see the chinks in the mental and physical armour, and can exploit it better than any other foe.

Nar Kezar had intimately known that no Space Marine can be broken through traditional torture. The unrelenting physicality of an Adeptus Astartes warrior is their greatest psychological advantage, not only in war but in their own psyches. They cannot be turned from their duty. They cannot be frightened into retreat. Most of all, they cannot be physically intimidated. A warrior of any Chapter would face a beggar or a demigod with the same zeal in his heart, intimidated by the physical threat of neither one. One of the reasons we say they know no fear is because, even alone, they have a chance of overcoming any foe our hateful galaxy can throw at them.

And that’s what the Exilarchy stole from Amadeus. That surety. That vitality. That enduring strength that had made him so much more than mortal.

Now he was weak. Helpless. Enslaved in a way – not bound into servitude as I’d been enslaved, but bound within a useless shell. Too weak to live. Too alive to die. Even theoretical talk of internment within a Dreadnought chassis became moot once I saw the scans myself: Nar Kezar and his Basilisk torturers had burned away many of the neural pathways that were necessary for integration inside a war machine’s sarcophagus. There was no question that it was anything but intentional. With malicious cunning, they’d denied him even the living death of a Dreadnought’s existence.

And that was vicious enough, aye, but there was a chance it would also affect his body and brain’s ability to interface with his power armour.

They’d left him with the ability to speak, of course. The Pure had hoped, all the while, to milk him for information.

‘Helot Secundus,’ he said to me one day, in the voice of a dying giant.

I was on the walking conveyor provided for my rehabilitation, moving on the spot as the rubberised track flowed beneath me. The rhythm of my movement was the soft drumming of my bare foot and the rattle-clank-thud of my industrial claw, over and over again.

With a flick of my thumb, I slowed the conveyor and moved to Amadeus’ side. It remained to be seen just how aware of his surroundings he would be. It varied day by day, sometimes hour by hour.

What was left of him looked up at me. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot and sclera-stained with fluid from internal ruptures.
‘Where is Nar Kezar?’

‘Captured,’ I explained for at least the tenth time. ‘The Spears are holding him in the brig.’ The other Basilisks had been executed or killed in the battle, but their lord was a precious prize to be interrogated over time.

Amadeus absorbed that, though I doubted it would stick this time any more than it had the other times. Except, this time, it did.

‘Wait,’ Amadeus said, with irritated wonder. ‘Captured. He is in the brig. You have told me that before.’

This was new. I swallowed before answering, ‘Yes, master.’

‘And the Venatrix.’ His sliced lips formed the words with a sense of annoyed care. ‘It is dead, is it not? You said it was dead.’

‘Scuttled. Dead at the hands of the Hex and–’

‘And the Blade,’ he said. ‘The Blade of the Seventh Son. You have told me that, as well.’

‘Yes, master.’

‘I have seen it.’

‘Yes, master.’ Which was also true. We’d watched gun-picter footage of the Venatrix’s death several times. It was always just as satisfying as the first time, watching the warship come apart in the void, bleeding fire into the night.

Amadeus looked at me, aggravated by his weakness for once instead of just at its mercy. ‘Where is your terminus-eye?’

He’d never asked that before. I touched the bandaged socket, but he answered before I could. ‘No,’ he said, with growing surety. ‘You lost it when we were boarded. One of the Pure pulled it from your skull. I promised you a new one.’

‘Yes, master. You did.’

‘I cannot move.’

He couldn’t move because his muscles were lacerated strips of meat and his bones had been surgically pulverised in places. Many of his bones had hairline cracks riven through them, as if a deceitful blacksmith had forged flaws inside the blade of a sword. Such lovingly inflicted mutilation, performed with such craftsmanship, spoke of deeply diseased minds.
‘You’re wounded, master. Badly.’

‘My mouth,’ he said. ‘Would you wipe it for me.’

That was the first time I could remember an order coming out almost as a question. I did as he asked, cleaning the edge of his lips, catching a trickle of bloody saliva on a sterile cloth. The rag hissed and smoked. Fire shot through the tips of my fingers.

I cursed as I dropped the cloth. Three of my fingertips were bleeding.

‘Nh. Forgive me,’ said Amadeus. He was tonguing the inner reaches of his mouth and wincing. ‘I did not know my saliva was acid-infused. I cannot control my Betcher’s gland.’

He kept watching me as I doused my newest injuries, technically friendly fire, with cleansing solution.

‘Helot Secundus Daaz,’ he said to me. His voice was weakening again.

‘Yes, master?’

‘Where is Helot Primus Avik?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t care.’ Nor did I care that my words were a violation of mission parameters. The Nemeton Deployment had already gone wrong in every imaginable way. ‘He’s a traitor.’

Amadeus was fading fast, his eyes glazing over with healing serenity. ‘You have said that before, as well. The strange sword. The capture of yourself and Helot Tertius Volos.’

‘Yes, master.’

I expected him to call me foolish and deride me as he had all the times I’d told him the truth in the past. For once, he drifted away without judging me. Instead, his words were strained and sincere. He was drooling acid again.

‘Thank you. For watching. Over me. You are very. Loyal. Anuradha.’

_Am I?_

‘It’s my duty,’ I said.

‘Nnh. I am sorry. For what happened. To Tyberia Volos.’

‘Yes, you’ve expressed that her death was “regrettable” before, master.’

‘No.’ Amadeus struggled to shake his head on dead muscles. ‘The failure. Was mine.’
This was martyrdom, and as distasteful as it was unwelcome. I told him so, and he showed his broken teeth in a ruined smile. It unnerved me, though I couldn’t say why, that they’d shattered his teeth but left most of his face unscarred. It seemed to hold a significance beyond my reach.


I said nothing. I stood there, trembling with nameless emotion, as he slipped into another healing sleep after that final remembrance. He was sorry for what happened to Tyberia. He should have fought harder for her. For us both. As if there was anything more he could have done.

In that moment, he’d spoken as an angel of Imperial myth. The kind of angel that the ignorant masses believed all Space Marines really were.

Those words saved his life, for they were what made me get back to work.

Chief Medicae Officer Owyn interrupted me when I was trying to work. This was two days after he’d replaced my eye. Amadeus hadn’t surfaced from his slumber.

‘What are you doing?’ Owyn asked.

‘You’re a senior medicae technician on an Adeptus Astartes strike cruiser. You can see what I’m doing.’

Owyn clucked his tongue. ‘Anuradha, has anyone ever told you that you’re an extremely disagreeable patient? The Spears informed me you were a timid and compliant little thing.’

*That was before I spent months as a slave on the Venatrix, and realised I was on the wrong side of the galaxy with no one by my side except a traitor and a dying master.*

‘No,’ I replied. ‘No one has told me that. Only you.’

‘Then I’ll rephrase: Why are you doing this?’

I looked away from where I’d bathed the wall in a hololithic spread of my master’s internal scans. When Owyn met my eyes, the contact only lasted a moment. I caught him smoothing his surgical apron and glancing down. The bastard was trying not to smile.

‘I see your eyes are still blinking out of alignment.’

‘I’m glad it amuses you,’ I said. ‘It’s giving me some punishing headaches.’
All of this was true. Every time I blinked, one eye would close and open, and then the new replacement would mimic it a half-second later. I wasn’t blinking, any more. I was winking twice.

‘I’ll retune the new eye again,’ Owyn said. ‘Now, as to what you’re doing…?’

I was already looking back at my work. ‘I’m cataloguing the damage to Amadeus.’

‘His injuries have already been extensively catalogued.’

I wasn’t ready to discuss my own findings, yet. I waved my hand at the wall, and the receptors on my new palm blanked the images from existence. I tried to keep the pique from my tone. Throne, but I’ve always hated distractions when trying to work.

‘Is there something I can do for you, medicae officer?’

The blue Kavalei tattoo at his temple straightened as he arched an eyebrow. I was struck by the fact that even here was a blend of Nemetese tribalism and traditional thraldom. In this life, Owyn was a respected scholar and medical expert. If he’d been left on Nemeton, likely he’d have been a simple barbarian sailor or warrior. Maybe a village shaman.

‘You were the one to request I come to you,’ he pointed out.

Had I? Truly, my memory was in pieces. The answer came to me after a moment’s reflection.

‘Oh. Yes. I need to speak with Kartash. Would you inform him for me?’

Owyn exhaled slowly. ‘Do you take me for a messenger servitor, Anuradha?’

I tried to look sincere, but my eyes blinked out of time again. ‘Please?’

Kartash was far more cautious this time. He watched me as if I were an animal that might slip its leash and go for his throat. His tone was honey itself.

‘I trust you’re calmer now?’

I had Amadeus’ hololiths laid out along the wall, projected from my handheld auspex. Our master slept across the room, dead to our voices. Today, he was back to breathing through machinery.
‘Helot Secundus?’ Kartash was still holding back near the door.

I indicated the wide spread of holo-images, which weren’t just the Spears’ scan results and findings, but my own extrapolations.

‘What do you see here?’ I asked my former tutor.

Instead of examining what I’d brought him here to see, he cringed back as if I’d threatened to strike him.

‘I’m not entering this chamber until you assure me of your intentions.’

‘Have you become a coward in the months I was gone?’

‘Anuradha, you threatened to kill me the last time we spoke.’

And it was a promise I intended to keep, but that hardly needed mentioning now. For now, I needed his eyes on a problem we shared.

‘I’m calm,’ I said, forcing a smile. ‘I’m better today, Kartash. I’m healing.’

The hunchback sagged with relief. He limped in, still hesitant but no longer openly fearful.

‘Before we speak of this,’ he gestured to the arranged hololiths, ‘have you been told of the prisoner taken by the Lions?’

I wanted to spit. The disgust must have shown clearly on my face, for Kartash flinched, almost reaching out a hand towards me in benediction.

‘Nar Kezar.’ I made the name a curse. ‘May he burn for his heresy.’

‘Ducarius and another of his druids are interrogating him for information.’

‘Good.’ This time I did spit. ‘To the abyss with the Pure.’

Kartash wrung his hands, squeezing them together. He had all the poise of an inexperienced diplomat confronting an unreasonable ruler, and the nervousness, too.

‘What?’ I asked. ‘Just say it.’

‘I thought we could petition Lord Brêac for you to speak with the enemy commander. Seeing this Nar Kezar in captivity might alleviate some of your nightmares. I don’t suggest he’s suffering as you suffered, but you might at least see he’s in no position to harm you any more.’

It’s hard to hate someone when they’re being so considerate. I felt genuine shock at the offer, and softened my tone in reply.

‘I appreciate your concern, Kartash. I’ll think about it. Thank you.’
‘It’s nothing.’ He waved it aside. ‘What is it you wished to discuss? Amadeus’ injury record?’

‘Yes and no.’ I returned my newly repaired gaze to the holo-display. ‘What do you see here?’

Kartash turned his attention to the hololiths, doing exactly what I thought he would: bending his analytical mind to perceiving what lay beneath the surface details. He sought a truth deeper than the obvious ones.

‘Stop,’ I warned him at once. ‘This isn’t a cognitive training puzzle. Don’t look past the surface layers of data. Look at them, and nothing else.’

He stared for several minutes, adjusting several of the holos himself, turning three-dimensional scans to new angles and scrolling through data-feeds for any nuggets of insight.

‘You’re still looking too deeply,’ I said.

‘I confess, all I see are his injuries catalogued in meticulous detail and the various treatments to restore as much of his function as possible. Percentages, inhibiting factors, areas of risk…’ Kartash shook his head. ‘Forgive me, Anuradha, I don’t know what I should be seeing.’

I was smiling, though this was anything but amusing. If I was right, our master’s life rested on the thinnest of gambles.

‘Ignore all of Owyn’s findings and Ducarius’ plans. Amadeus can’t be healed. We know that. So if he can’t be healed to a degree he’d find acceptable, what would you do with a warrior that had sustained this much damage? What would the Mentors do? Maybe not with a line soldier, but with a warrior of Amadeus’ rank?’

The hunchback stared at the data, stripped of all other notation. ‘They would inter him.’

I sighed my annoyance. ‘Do you think I’d call you here just to point out something we can’t do? The Spears have already said they won’t inter him in a Dreadnought, and the cranial scans show he’s had the necessary receptors burned away. Are you blind? Weren’t you trained in Space Marine physiology? Just look. What else do you see?’

‘There is nothing else.’

‘Are you sure?’ I was beginning to fear I’d been wrong. ‘The Spears are focused on limited restoration and prolonging his life. But what might we know, that they don’t?’
I bade him look again. Kartash stared. It took several minutes, but he finally breathed out, soft and slow, as his mouth hung ajar.

‘Oh.’

‘Yes.’ My hands were fists, clenched tight with my eagerness. ‘Am I right? Do you see it, too?’

‘I… I think so.’

My heart pounded. ‘We have to speak with Lord Brèac.’

Brèac ran a hand over his scalp. His hair was beginning to grow back, and the passage of his palm whispered over the stubble. We had gathered in the Immortals’ inner chambers, where the squad stored their banners and trophies, in a chamber that served as the hub of their arming rooms. The Spears were inveterate takers of skulls, and dozens of them hung on chains against the walls, many from alien species I didn’t recognise. I counted at least thirty white helmets that had been taken from corpses of the Pure. Several were sword-split.

Images showing my master’s organs and muscles and bones, hololithically flayed, rotated slowly in the cold air.

Ducarius, black-clad and solemn, looked on with crossed arms. Tolmach’s absence left a wound in the room, though Morcant was present, briefly turning his sentry duty over to one of the Spears under his command. Owyn had arrived last. He stood away from the Spears, stiff-backed in his jacketed uniform and concentrating.

Brèac didn’t take his eyes from the hololithic display when he spoke.

‘This isn’t possible.’ He shook his head. The emotion written in his eyes was as much awe as doubt. He wanted to believe, but he just couldn’t.

‘It’s not only possible,’ I said, ‘it’s been done before.’

Brèac looked to Ducarius, then to Owyn. ‘Cousins of the Kavalei, can either of you do this?’

‘No,’ Owyn said at once. ‘This is far beyond my skills, lord.’

I was sweating from the strain of remaining on my feet. My healing wounds and new augmetics were aching in time with my pulse. I’d already dismissed Owyn’s concern when he threatened to lecture me for being out of bed this long. Worst of all was my new leg. Much like my replacement eye, it was still
adapting to my nervous system and muscle fusions, moving a half-second after I needed it to move. When it did obey me, it overcompensated, striking the deck too hard with every step. It was strange not to stand on two feet, but a foot and an industrial claw. The bionic was both more stable and constantly at risk of making me fall over.

Ducarius took longer to answer. The hololithics bathed his tattooed face in flickering light.

‘The odds aren’t good,’ he said. ‘But there’s a chance. And I’d need Deacon Vectragos to parse a lot of this data for me, as well as handle much of the microsurgery.’

When he spoke of the Bellonan chief engineer aboard the Hex, I nodded. ‘This ritual requires a tech-priest, aye.’

Morcant snorted. ‘Did you just say Aye?’

I flushed at the slip; a habit forming without me realising. No one else commented on it. They were all focused on the hololithic, considering it variously fascinating, audacious and nonsensical.

‘Why wouldn’t you share this lore with us at once?’

‘I can’t speak for the whims and commands of the Mentor Legion, Lord Brêac. My Chapter is a secretive one. Keeping it from you would serve no purpose, and it’s possible sharing the information was part of the deployment’s objectives. If I was to venture a guess, I’d say Amadeus did intend to share this lore with you… once we returned to Nemeton.’

‘“Once we returned to Nemeton”,’ Ducarius repeated with a wry glance. ‘You mean, once he’d seen all the way across the Veil and decided whether he could trust us.’

I didn’t answer, and I didn’t need to. They didn’t need me to confirm something so utterly obvious.

‘You said this has been done before,’ Brêac prompted.

I nodded. ‘It has. Not often, and success rates are low.’ I swallowed, praying they’d believe my next words. ‘We call these surgeries the Calgarian Rites.’

Every head swung towards me. The Spears’ seriousness was practically a physical sensation against my skin.

‘I’m not certain I follow,’ Owyn admitted. ‘I take it that’s a name of some renown on the other side of the Rift?’
‘That it is,’ Brêac said, his voice low. ‘Speak the truth, Anuradha. You say Marneus Calgar himself underwent this surgery?’

‘I swear it. He did, and it worked.’

‘Who is that?’ Owyn asked.

It was Kartash who answered. ‘Marneus Calgar, Chapter Master of the Ultramarines, sword-brother to the Primarch Reborn, and Lord Defender of Greater Ultramar.’

‘Some of those titles are new,’ Morcant said with a cannibal sneer. ‘He isn’t called all of that in our archives.’

‘A great deal has changed since you were cut off from the Imperium,’ Kartash said respectfully.

‘The point is, it worked.’ I tried to steer everyone back to the matter at hand. ‘The most noble Ultramarines—’ Here, I ignored Morcant rolling his eyes and Brêac chuckling, ‘—disseminated their surgical schemata after the ritual’s success. We received the lore mere months before we set sail, and other Chapters were beginning to try it. I have the data memorised. All helots with my cranial modifications and specialty do, as part of our anatomical mastery training. If I replicate it for your druids and tech-priests…’

Ducarius scratched his short beard. He was the one. He was the one I needed to win over.

‘What if it’s corrupted? Bluntly, Anuradha, no one has any reason to trust your memory.’

‘My memories from before the Venatrix are uncorrupted by my injuries. My cranial wounds are anterograde.’

‘They appear to be,’ said Ducarius, with heavy inflection. ‘But will Amadeus let you gamble his life on what appears to be true?’

Morcant grinned at that. Kartash awkwardly shifted from foot to foot.

‘Yes. If he surfaces again, I’ll ask him myself. But if you’re worried about my memory, the information is within the deep-core archives aboard In Devout Abjuration. I can exload them from there.’

‘Kartash holds seniority.’ Morcant sounded so viciously casual about it. And Kartash himself nodded sagely, burdened by the gravity of the decision he believed rested on his shoulders.

But I wouldn’t be torn from my path. Not with this. ‘Kartash holds no
authority at all. The decision whether to trust me is yours, War-priest Ducarius. The decision whether to fight to save my master’s life is yours, too. You’re the one who’ll remake my master or let him die. What Kartash and I want is meaningless.’

Seconds passed in silence. ‘Will you trust me, Ducarius?’

It wasn’t altruism I saw in his gaze. Not merely loyalty to a cousin from another bloodline; it would be moronic to pretend so. The value of the information we carried, and the possibilities it held for the Spears? That motivated Ducarius. But the endgame was the same.

His eyes stayed locked to my face. ‘I believe I will.’
He should have died.

Several times during the procedure, he did die. Ducarius, clad in a surgeon’s plastek-sheet robes, resuscitated him each time his biocodes streamed null across the monitors. Even I had to help, up to my wrists in my master’s bloody chest, massaging one of his enhanced hearts between my palms. I forced it to beat in time with Ducarius’ spoken count.

Everything in his carved-open body was enhanced and oversized, and all of it was damaged. Ducarius and his attendants, Owyn among them, layered temporary synthflesh over the most savage wounds inflicted by the Exilarchy, until cloned grafts could be grown and used to replace them. The surgery itself took nine days and nights. Teams of attendant-surgeons, tech-priests and two lesser Spear druids operated with Ducarius, Owyn, Kartash and myself. Minute by minute we worked with the risk he’d die at any moment, and all our efforts would come to naught.

Kartash was relentlessly guarded, his pessimism masquerading as pragmatism. He pointed out that the Calgarian Rites offered poor chances of success even in ideal conditions, with fully briefed indent medicae staff and a healthy patient. Here, we were on the frontier, and Amadeus was already half-dead before we even began. When I told him to stop calculating and repeating the odds against us, he bristled.

‘I am stating the facts, Helot Secundus.’
‘You’re not, though. You’re whining.’
‘The fact remains that even if the Rites are successful, the chances of rejection in an adult host are–’

‘The only fact here, Kartash, is that the odds don’t matter. We do this or Amadeus dies. There’s nothing else to talk about. Were you always this much of an insipid worm? Did I just not see it before?’

He didn’t say anything back. I girded myself against the hurt in his eyes.

Morcant, who had been standing guard at the chamber’s edge, indicated
Kartash with a grinding purr of armour joints.

‘The little hunchback has a point. Don’t shoot him down for telling the truth.’

It was like this a little too frequently for comfort. In my absence, Kartash had established himself with several of the Spears. He was useful to them, a source of lore on the true Imperium, and a thrall with skills beyond any serf trained by any other Chapter. Trying to convince Morcant of Kartash’s treachery was a useless endeavour. The Helot Primus had started tending to the battleguard’s weapons; Kartash had already half abandoned Amadeus, making himself a valuable servant to a new master.

Ducarius was the only one immune to Kartash’s presence. On the sixth day, when the hunchback let an untied vein slip in his weary hands and spurt blood into the chest cavity, Ducarius backhanded him away from the surgical table. Owyn was already working to tie off the spurting vein and arrange its re-binding, but Ducarius glared at Kartash through narrowed eyes.

‘Get out of here. You’re too clumsy right now to be any use, and I’m weary of your pious stink and miserable counsel. Go. Get some rest.’

Kartash licked his dry lips, then bobbed his head in submission. He left without even a backwards look.

‘Useless bastard,’ Ducarius said, working again. One of the attendants was too slow with the sterilised cloth, and the druid cuffied his sweating forehead on the sleeve of his robe. ‘Who knew a man could whine so much…’

Three tech-adepts assisted with the rebuilding, one of which was Deacon Vectragos, the Hex’s chief engineer. All twelve, stick-thin foot of him was concealed by robes cut in the traditional red of Sacred Mars and the black markings of Bellona. Mechadendrites snaked out from beneath these dark folds. When he moved, he walked on several curving metal tentacles, forgoing any pretence of humanity. When he aided in the surgeries, peering down with the seven mismatched eye-lenses in his dark hood, he deployed tendrils that ended in precision tools and metallic fingers capable of incredible digital dexterity. I never saw what remained of his humanity beneath the robe, but it wouldn’t have surprised me to learn there was nothing but a tangle of mechadendrites instead of a humanoid at all.

With cloned organs, cultured tissue, rebound bones and reconstructed muscle, Ducarius remade my master. The scarring… Throne, the scarring was horrific even before we started. Between Nar Kezar’s torture and our frontier implementation of the Calgarian Rites, there wouldn’t be an inch of flesh left
The deacon did much of what he called ‘the work of osseous and fibrous connective tissue expansion’. Through his craft, Amadeus’ bones were sealed after the torture, tactically broken as needed, and lengthened with growth stimulators and skeletal infusers. His muscles, tendons and ligaments were re-woven as adeptly as possible, but the true healing could only begin once the Primaris Alpha and Beta phases had proceeded without rejection.

It was the Primaris implants that gave us the most trouble. The Hex wasn’t equipped for harvesting and implantation to create new Adeptus Astartes warriors. It had the facilities but not the raw material; the creation of Spears always took place on Nemeton and Bellona, or in rare cases, aboard the Chapter’s flagship, the battle-barge Warrior Queen.

The Calgarian Rites required three organs that couldn’t be manufactured aboard the Hex. For Amadeus to live, Ducarius not only took offerings of blood from living Spears, he also harvested from the dead. The druid unlocked the stasis vaults in the warship’s mortuary, and – alone, in his ceremonial robes – autopsied the necessary genetic material from the fallen.

First was the Belisarian Furnace, a twist of muscled flesh fused between Amadeus’ two hearts. Vectragos was the one to seal the organ in place with his polished, multi-jointed metal fingers, several of which ended in scalpels and tissue-fusers. The implant, flush with chemicals, was supposed to stimulate a Space Marine’s hearts in moments of extreme duress. Inside Amadeus’ body, it secreted its stimulant fluids immediately, serving as a death-ward. More than once in the following days, the Furnace flooded his hearts with adrenal chemicals, staving off a fatal organ failure.

Next were the Sinew Coils. Ducarius spent three days without ceasing in his work, threading durametallic coil-cables through Amadeus’ muscles while others misted the bloody flesh with sterilisers and infused them with stimulant serums to promote healing and growth. Ducarius burned through the Hex’s apothecarium supplies, while his attendants and servitors laboured to synthesise more.

Implanting the Magnificat necessitated sawing open Amadeus’ brainpan and removing the crown of his skull. It was during the implantation of this tiny dextrophic lobe within the core of my master’s brain that Ducarius turned slightly, spitting to one side. A servitor immediately cleaned the spot on the deck.

‘Quite a secret to give up, isn’t it?’
I was manning a surgical laser at the war-priest’s side, firing brief, cutting pulses into the grey meat of my master’s brain whenever Ducarius directed.

‘Sir?’ I asked.

‘I’m not a sir,’ he said. ‘Druids are addressed by name, even formally. It’s tradition. Old, old law.’ He winced as he focused on what he was doing inside Amadeus’ skull. ‘Supposedly, it stops us becoming arrogant with all our authority.’

Attendants wiped both of our brows. I was sweating far more than the druid. Ducarius had flecks of Amadeus’ blood on his talon-scar facial tattoos: red life spattered over blue ink.

‘Emperor’s balls,’ he hissed, ‘I wish Tolmach were here for this. Why’d that idiot have to get himself killed?’

‘He died well,’ I offered.

‘He was a Spear,’ Ducarius replied. ‘We all die well. Doesn’t matter in the end, though, does it? The only way to win is to stay alive.’

He lapsed back into silence, until I prompted him about his question of secrets.

‘I don’t understand,’ I admitted. ‘You mentioned I was giving up a secret?’

‘Here,’ said Ducarius. ‘All of this. You’re sworn to keep the Mentor Legion’s secrets, aye? But the only way any of this surgery will conceivably work is if we share a gene-source with Amadeus. He’s using our blood. Our implants. That makes the Mentors the same bloodline as the Spears. They’re born of Guilliman’s genetic code, like us.’

I held my silence. This was my covenant to keep. True or not, I said nothing at all.

‘The Scorpions weren’t our blood-brothers, you know,’ Ducarius continued. ‘Oath-brothers, true, and that’s what matters at the end of the day, when the sun sets. Blood doesn’t mean a damn thing most of the time. The brothers you choose are the ones you really love, the ones you really trust. And their betrayals are the ones that really hurt.’

I risked another glance to the side, where Ducarius’ features were set with effort. I still didn’t say anything. This was one of those rare times that bloodline mattered a great deal, and we both knew it.

I wouldn’t confirm his suspicions either way. It wasn’t my place, and in the unlikely event any of my former masters among the Mentor Legion read these
words, please know that I was true to my vows.

On the tenth day, we completed the last of the rituals.

As time passed, my memory suffered fewer fits and starts. It was during the period Amadeus slumbered in his healing coma that I began to trust my eidetic recall again, which meant the damage had been biological or physiological rather than mechanical. There’s rarely a good result when cataloguing cranial trauma, and damage to my brain was no minor detail, but this at least meant I required no unfamiliar tech-adept tinkering inside my skull.

My clearest memory of those long, convalescing days is from one night in Amadeus’ chamber, a night ostensibly like all the others. I was sat upon my own bed, my bionic leg stretched out before me, surrounded by tools as I worked on the inside of what would be my master’s new helm. The circuitry in the cerebellum interfaces was capable of intensely clear data-spurts, but I wanted to increase their capacity. Amadeus had been used to incoming streams of information beyond the warriors of any other Chapter. I worried he’d find his new wargear practically primeval unless I tuned it more to his senses.

As I worked, something in the chamber kept creaking. Not my bed, moving beneath my weight and motions. Not the air filtrator on the wall. Not even my master’s bed, for he was motionless. All else was still. A mile away from where I sat the plasma engines were roaring, but here their eternal efforts were nothing but a low hum through the ship’s metal bones.

There it was again. That low creak, muted, barely audible. I doubted there was any wood on the entire ship, but the sound reminded of me overstretched lumber, close to breaking point.

I scanned the room with my wrist-monitron. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Amadeus grunted, twitching gently in his sleep. His fingers trembled. His face, which had escaped the destruction inflicted by the Exilarchy and was now subtly changed with his new skeletal structure, kept contorting in weak flickers of… of emotion? Of pain? I honestly wasn’t sure of the difference when it came to my master.

I slipped from the bed, limping over to him. The twitches subsided, and for almost twenty minutes I stood there, watching and listening. Just as I turned back to my bed, I heard the muted *creak* again, and Amadeus growled in his
sleep. He was sweating through his sheets, the salt of his perspiration reeking of the chemicals and stimulants doing their work inside his body.

That was the creaking. I knew it for certain when I pressed my ear to his chest, listening to the dual drumming of his hearts. Beneath that heavy thudd-thud, thud-thud, there was a sickly dry wrenching sound, quiet but constant. Bile stung the back of my throat.

Throne of the God-Emperor, I could hear his bones growing. His muscle tissue was ripping and fusing, over and over, thickening and swelling. The pain must have been indescribable.

The process was still due to take weeks. Amadeus spent all of it in a slumber that somehow wasn’t deep enough to hide from the pain as body realigned and reformed. I didn’t know if he’d remember it on waking, but I know he felt all of it as he slept.

3

The Third Warhost didn’t rest. While Amadeus convalesced, the Hex sailed and the Spears waged war. Days became weeks, and the weeks bled into the second month. Kartash was lending his services in thraldom to Battleguard Morcant, while I spent most of my hours working on Amadeus’ war-plate and weapons.

The warriors of Brêac’s warhost granted Amadeus a suit of armour. It was my duty to prepare it for him, engineering it for his new height and bulk, should the surgery take and if he ever recovered. That occupied a great deal of my time, and Owyn frequently lectured me about my tools scattered across the ward floor along with ceramic plates and fibre-bundle cabling.

I refused to leave the chamber unless necessary. It wasn’t just loyalty that kept me there, or even my own recovery. When I left the apothecarium, I made sure to keep my journeys as brief as possible before returning to Amadeus’ ward.

Kartash caught me once, in a corridor between the apothecarium and our old arming chambers. Both of us had sling-racks of tools over our shoulders. I tried to limp past him in the stark white light of the hallway, but he moved to block me. I had the ugliest feeling that, somehow, he could hear my racing heart.

I want to paint him as a villain, even here. I want to say that a low hunger simmered in his eyes as he barred my path. How much simpler would it have been had he looked at me as if I were unfinished business? But his gaze was
blandly indifferent. In the moments any emotion showed on his features, it was mild reproval.

He moved back a step, barring my path.

‘Get out of my way, Kartash.’

‘I think not. You and I should talk, Anuradha.’

‘There’s nothing for us to say to each other.’

‘No? No more falsehoods regarding magical blades and baseless accusations of treachery?’

I wouldn’t be baited. I couldn’t understand why he’d even want to bait me like this.

‘Are you trying to anger me into a fight?’

‘Why, Anuradha?’ He looked mournful now. ‘Why would I want such a thing?’

I hoped none of the unease I felt was in my voice. Whatever this was, if it turned into a fight, he’d win it. I was only a few weeks out of surgery, still adapting to my new eye and limbs. ‘Let me past.’

He stayed there, barring my path, fix me with his kicked-pet look.

That was when I suspected he was going to kill me.

After a moment, his gaze flicked over my shoulder. Checking to see if we were truly alone.

That was when I knew for sure.

I drew my sidearm and aimed it at his face. ‘Move. Now.’

Calculations flashed behind his eyes. He smiled slightly, sadly, nodding as he moved aside.

‘You’re deluded, Anuradha. This is so tragic to witness. You had such potential, you know.’

I moved past him, careful to keep my distance, with my laspistol trained between his eyes. My hand was steady, still as cold stone. Thankfully, the infrequent tremor in my new bionic arm wasn’t making itself known right then.

‘You have no right to lecture me. You’ve abandoned our master. You should be helping me prepare and paint his new armour, not sniffing for scraps
around Morcant’s boots.’

‘I have an eye towards the future, nothing more.’ He looked practically yearning as he reached for me. ‘Anuradha, please…’

I fired. The las-bolt flashed, jaggedly bright, over his head. The air around us smelled of scorched steel and ionisation.

‘You only get one warning shot. Now stay the hell back from me. Come to me when I’m alone again, Kartash, and I will kill you.’

He wasn’t going to back off. He was incredibly subtle, still speaking – pleading, really – distracting me as he contracted his muscles with micromovements. A full-body tension done in miniscule degrees, readying himself to make a leap for me. Without my enhanced vision and cognition, I’d not have noticed it at all. It spoke of training or physical enhancements beyond anything I’d undergone.

But the leap never came. He was perfectly composed again, leaving me doubting my senses.

‘Anuradha? What are you doing?’ The voice came from further down the corridor. The newcomer moved towards us with a hitched stride that sounded a little like mine. His just lacked the iron clang of a bionic claw for a foot.

Kartash tried to answer for both of us. ‘Captain Serivahn, please forgive us for this unwelcome discord aboard your ship. As you can see, Anuradha is… still unwell.’

What a picture we painted that day: the hunchback, the cripple and the maimed amputee, squaring off in the iron hallway. The dull white light above us cast shadows of sleeplessness across our faces.

The limping captain gently cuffed saliva from the edge of his twisted mouth. I didn’t move, not even to lower my pistol. A witness, even a Space Marine, ruined as this one was, was no guarantee of Kartash’s behaviour.

‘Move away from her,’ Serivahn commanded.

Surprise flickered in Kartash’s eyes. He’d expected the captain to take his side. ‘Captain, I fear that if I do as you order, she will shoot me.’

‘You fear no such thing,’ said Serivahn softly. ‘You aren’t afraid at all, right now. The pious reek of your skin and hair defeats my sense of smell, helot, but I can hear your heartbeat just fine. It’s as calm as a windless sea. Now move away from her.’

Kartash obeyed, bowing as he did so, theatrically sincere. ‘As you command,
captain.’ He wasn’t finished, though. He met my eyes with cringing earnestness, wringing his hands together.

‘Don’t,’ I cut him off. ‘I don’t want to hear it, Kartash.’

‘And yet,’ he replied, ‘I feel I must say it. On my oath and life, I never did the deeds you accuse me of doing. I swear it, by the fact we were once friends, and by the hope I hold that we shall be allies again.’

‘I… want to believe you,’ I confessed.

*Kill Kartash for me*, Tyberia had said. Had she been wrong, too? Were we both deceived in the aftermath of the Geller Field’s failure?

Kartash didn’t press me. His voice turned softer, rich with acceptance.

‘If you want to believe me, then that will do for now. We can build on that desire. I will stay away from you until you decide otherwise.’

I hated the flush of gratitude that flowed through me, but I didn’t give it voice. I just nodded. He said one thing more, with kindly eyes and disarming verity.

‘I’m on your side, Anuradha.’

‘Enough.’ Serivahn jerked his chin back down the hallway. ‘Go.’

Kartash went. I reholstered my sidearm. Irritatingly, the tremor was back in my bionic arm. I hoped Serivahn wouldn’t mistake it for nerves, even as I wasn’t sure of it myself.

‘Thank you, captain,’ I said in the awkward silence that followed.

‘It’s nothing.’ He indicated the corridor ahead. ‘I trust you’re on your way to the apothecarium.’

I told him that I was. We walked together, as best we could. Even Serivahn chuckled at the graceless pair we made, limping together, out of time, down the corridor.

‘Did Kartash really try to kill you?’ he asked through that wry smile. ‘When we were boarded, I mean. I’ve heard the tale and read the report. I’d like to hear it from you, however.’

So I told him what happened, just as I’d told Morcant, just as I’d told Brêac, just as I’d told Owyn, just as I’d told Amadeus during his rare moments of clarity before the Calgarian Rites.

‘No one believes me,’ I finished, without anger. Bitterness would solve
nothing. I had to leave it behind.

‘Oh, I believe you,’ said Serivahn.

I blinked. Blessedly, I wasn’t winking twice any more. ‘What?’

‘I believe you. I don’t pretend to understand the tensions between those of the serf caste. Spear thralls fight and duel over matters of import in their existences, all the time. Who can say why? It’s not for us to judge, even as their masters. Your lives are far removed from ours. But I believe you.’

He spoke it as an easy, simple observation, despite the weight it carried. We lived on different planes of existence, he and I. He commanded a city in space and his whims decided the fate of wars. I repaired armour and served as a living targeting matrix for my master. But he believed me.

I almost shattered decorum by reaching for his withered arm, so fiercely did I wish for the tactility of showing my gratitude. But I knew better. I was trained better.

‘Thank you.’ I echoed his words back to him from all those months before, in the blackness of a Nemetese tomb.

‘Can you think why he would do that to you and Tyberia?’

I couldn’t, and I admitted as much. ‘He has nothing to hide – nothing I’ve found, at least.’

‘You sound certain of that,’ Serivahn remarked.

‘I am. I’ve ransacked his belongings more than once since returning. Either he’s hiding nothing or he’s hiding it well.’

Or he had nothing to hide, and he was telling the truth. Maybe I was delusional.

‘Why?’ I heard myself ask. ‘Why do you believe me?’

Serivahn didn’t even give thought to the question. ‘You and I told each other the truth in the barrow when we had every reason to lie. I don’t see why you’d lie to me now. Besides, something in the way he swore he was your ally rang out of tune.’

Serivahn cuffed the drooling side of his mouth as he smiled and continued, ‘Men only make promises that painfully sincere for two reasons. Either they’re about to die, or they’re about to lie.’

I had no answer to that, except a weak smile. As we moved on, Serivahn asked, ‘What will you do, now Amadeus is awake?’
I stopped dead in my tracks.

‘…he is awake?’

‘You didn’t know?’ the captain asked. ‘It came over the internal command vox almost half an hour ago. It’s why I was going to the apothecarium. I assumed you were headed there for the same reason.’

‘I’ve been gone from his side less than two hours. Throne of Terra…’

This was the problem of not having Amadeus’ armour systems to use as an extension of my senses. Without seeing and hearing through his helmet’s display, I was just a human. I knew nothing outside what I could see and hear, and no one in authority felt the urgent need to tell me anything.

I ran, and it was the first time I’d tried to run with my new leg. The iron claw-foot hammered on the deck with every step. I was almost as fast as I’d been before, but significantly louder.
XXI
AN UNRAVAGED FACE

I

In the days and weeks after Amadeus woke, the thing I remember most is that he kept missing. If you were expecting me to describe an emotional reunion or conversations of companionable insights stretching deep into the night, you’ve not grasped just who my master was. No, what sticks with me strongest of all, and what triggered the strongest reactions from Amadeus himself, was that his aim was off. He kept missing.

Not by much. He still struck his targets, but the shots were off-mark. If they’d hit live targets, they would have mutilated and maimed, but not killed outright. He did not deal with this well.

During one of his training exercises, when his final bolt took a training servitor in the shoulder, Amadeus tore his helmet off in disgust. Sweat sheened his skin. It dripped into his eyes. And in those eyes, anger danced with frustration. His near-death and subsequent recovery had broken the barriers that had walled away his emotions. I’d seen him furious in the many difficult hours since he rose from the surgical slab, but this was the first time I’d seen him on the edge of his self-control.

He threw his helm to the floor. It hit with the dull clang of ceramite on iron, and rolled towards me. I picked it up carefully. Kartash offered to take it, but I leaned away from his reaching hands.

‘Master–’ I started to say.

‘You will be silent, Anuradha.’ He was looking across at the twitching servitor, where it lay downed and gushing its life out from the ruin of its torso. It would die from the trauma and blood loss, but it would take a long, imprecise span of seconds for the lobotomised creature to bleed out. I felt no remorse or sympathy for the dying servitor. We’d always been told they were mind-locked past feeling pain. I still like to hope that’s true.

I held my tongue, as commanded.

It wasn’t just Amadeus’ aim that had suffered. Everything about him was wrong now. He’d become a mass of aggressive, misplaced physicality. His movements were convulsive and overstrong. He was unbalanced, frequently
dizzy, and his reflexes were spasmodic. Once, he couldn’t unlock his hands from fists for a full eight seconds. I knew what I was looking at for I shared some of his difficulties, but that didn’t make it any easier: I was dealing with the assimilation of a new arm, leg and eye – but Amadeus was living in a completely new body.

Kartash and I were present for every training session, every duel, every practice bout, every hololithic simulation and live-fire test. The Helot Primus had left Morcant to return to Amadeus’ side, with no backlash that I could discern from either warrior. After all, Morcant seemed to care about nothing beyond his own glory, and Amadeus – in those early weeks after his recovery – cared for nothing but his own struggles. There was no misery in him, only anger at unfamiliar failure. The misery would’ve been easier to bear. Seeing my master in these dark rages was utterly surreal.

More than once, I thought he might strike me. At the end of one training session, he tossed his bolt rifle to me as if I were a servitor with industrial limbs capable of easily catching it. I could have handled its weight, with warning, but the force of his throw sent me staggering backwards, tumbling to the deck. I managed to keep his new weapon, donated by one of the Spears, from falling from my grip.

Previously, Amadeus would have either chastised me for my failure or watched with an analytical stare as I hauled myself to my feet. This time he stared, stunned by the fact I’d fallen. The frustrations of not knowing his own strength were boiling through him. Everything he did, he did too loudly, too heavily, too powerfully. Even his voice had deepened with the expansion of his chest.

He didn’t apologise in a way an outsider might detect. He took a slow, calming breath and nodded to two of the nearby servitors, commanding them to aid me. A confession, subtle as it was, that it had been his mistake rather than my failure.

The first time he crossed blades with one of the Spears in the practice cages, in full armour, Brêac laid him low in three blows. Amadeus struck the deck hard enough to scrape along the metal.

Brêac was tactful enough to show no surprise. He offered a hand to help Amadeus rise – I knew my master would ignore it if he could control his newfound temper, or knock it aside if he couldn’t. Instead, after a telltale hesitation, he gripped Brêac’s arm, wrist to wrist, and let the other warrior haul him to his feet.
‘Say nothing,’ Amadeus warned him. ‘I already know how foolish I look.’

Brêac had ascended to his enhanced form over the years of his adolescence. It was nothing like the abrupt ascension my master had gone through.

‘There’s nothing foolish in this,’ Brêac grinned. ‘But no, that wasn’t your proudest moment, I’m sure.’

They began the next duel. This time, Amadeus fought defensively, clashing Brêac’s blade aside with focused precision. He looked almost like his former self in motion, though his face was set in sculpted concentration, utterly unlike his usual icy serenity.

Brêac began to lean in with heavier blows, and their blades crashed louder with each parry. Amadeus’ teeth were clenched hard enough that veins pushed thickly under his temples, and cords stood out on his neck.

He was hesitating. This wasn’t like missing the dead-centre of targets in live-fire exercises. This was hesitation. He was holding back from delivering any blows of his own.

Brêac saw it, too. He lowered his spear.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ he asked.

Amadeus struggled to unclench his jaw. ‘Nothing.’

‘Rains of Nemeton, you expect me to believe that? I’ve sparred before, you know. You could’ve had me five times in the last two minutes. I left myself open to see if you’d try.’

‘If you do not wish to take these spars seriously,’ my master replied, ‘I will duel Morcant. He never restrains himself.’

I watched, unable to join in, unsure what I’d say even if it were my place to speak. If Brêac offered sympathy in such a crucial moment, it would undo much of the cautious union he and my master had forged so far. Of that, I was sure.

‘What does it feel like?’ he asked.

Amadeus met his eyes, taken off guard by the question. ‘What does what feel like?’ he asked, his tone neutral.

‘Your body. Your muscles. You. What does it feel like, since you awoke?’

‘The same,’ Amadeus replied, breaking eye contact. ‘Though my coordination is poorer. I feel like I did… Just more so. Does that make sense?’
Jeers sounded out from the Spears watching at the bars of the training cage. Evidently his answer wasn’t good enough.

‘Spare us your shitty poetry!’ one of the watching Spears called.
‘You don’t feel stronger?’ called another. ‘Faster?’ called another.

Amadeus confessed he was finding it difficult to tell.

‘Well, you’re still ugly as several sins,’ Brêac added. ‘That’s not changed at all. And your face is bare of tattoos, which is the sign of a child, so I assume you still need your arse wiped. I’m not doing that for you, though Morcant might if you ask nicely. But if none of that’s changed, what has?’

Amadeus thought how to answer. He shocked everyone by laughing, and I could tell he hadn’t intended to. The thought just struck him as funny.

‘I feel taller.’

Brêac and the other Spears shared smiles.

‘That was a noble attempt at a joke, I’ll give you that.’ The Vargantes champion grinned as he whirled his spear one-handed, then aimed it at his opponent. ‘Now come on, Mentor, let’s have at it. I’ll put you down again like the tattooless baby boy you are, and you can swear vengeance for next time.’

2

Time kept passing, leaving the three of us behind. Amadeus improved, but by his standards the rate of progress was slow, and by his expectations it was glacial.

The Spears deployed to battle twice more, down onto worlds we learned nothing about except that the *Hex* left them after claiming victories for the Adeptus Vaelarrii. Brêac refused to let Amadeus deploy with them, no matter how stridently my master first asked, then demanded, then begged. Each refusal only deepened my master’s fury.

So much of Amadeus’ identity was bound up in a precision that bordered on perfection. With that gone, he was changing.

Who was he becoming?

Out of his armour, we bathed him and scrubbed his skin. Kartash dealt with massaging Amadeus’ muscles, I handled the duties of shaving his head and cleaning his scarred flesh. Around us, the ship thrummed with energy. The *Hex* sailed to link up with a force of Lions; this was Brêac’s third engagement in recent months, a brief warp shunt from the last.
We flew in juddering bursts, stopping and starting, plunging into the Sea of Souls and crashing back to reality what felt like a thousand times. This was warp travel in Imperium Nihilus at the best of times, but Serivahn was pushing the *Hex* to her limits again, burning plasma and the lives of servants as he implored the ship’s machine-spirit to give them more speed. Word had reached us from the *Blade of the Seventh Son* in a nearby system. They wished us to link up with them, with all speed.

I tried not to think of the Imperial souls dying down on the enginarium decks, lost to overworked, detonating machinery, as well as falling from simple exhaustion. Dwelling on their fates ripped me right back to my time aboard the *Venatrix*. Our worker caste wasn’t mistreated or tortured in the same ways, but no one could claim their brief lives were filled with joy. They were essential cogs in a great machine, and the machine had to keep running, no matter the cost.

The *Hex* sailed hard. Serivahn and Brêac hailed her as the fastest ship not just in the Chapter fleet, but in the entire Elara’s Veil Armada. I never learned if that was anything more than boastful pride typical of soldiers and sailors, but I know many in the Veil shared the belief. Even now, years after the *Hex* was destroyed, she’s spoken of in awe for her savagery and speed. Throne of Terra, but I miss that ship. I thank the God-Emperor that I sailed aboard her in her heyday.

Before we sailed to meet with a strike force of Celestial Lions, Amadeus had again been denied the chance to take part in the last surface assault. By now, my master could have forced the issue. I didn’t know why he hadn’t, but I had my suspicions. Maybe he didn’t want to commit to battle with the risk of humiliating himself, still ill at ease in his new form, but I believe it was far more prosaic than that. I suspected he didn’t want to fight because he was scared.

Understand what I mean when I say this. He was a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes. As we all say, again and again, they know no fear. But to be alive is to know fear, one way or another. My master feared no foe, but with his annihilation and resurrection, I think he feared no longer being the warrior he once was.

He feared to test himself, in case he was found wanting. If he wasn’t a perfect archangel of the Emperor, then what was he?

Perhaps fear was the wrong word. At least, I doubted he’d agree with it. Those were my thoughts as we bathed and massaged him that day.
‘Nar Kezar,’ Amadeus said one day, apropos of nothing, while Kartash and I tended to him. He growled the name while I was shaving his head. I flinched, cutting the barest scratch on his scalp, which he either ignored or failed to notice. Kartash kept massaging the knotted muscles of Amadeus’ left shoulder.

‘Master?’ I asked.

‘Nar Kezar. Kartash tells me you have been visiting him in his cell.’

This was no crime, but I felt guilty for admitting it. ‘Aye, I have.’

‘What is it that you and he speak of?’

‘Very little,’ I confessed. ‘I’m behind the blast shield. He doesn’t even know I’m there unless I speak. He recites poetic verse, mostly. Poetry from Khamun-Sen. I say nothing at all. I’m not there to speak to him. I go to watch him pace in his cell like a caged beast.’

‘Why?’ Amadeus asked, honestly confused. ‘What enjoyment do you derive from that?’

‘Enjoyment? None, master. But it soothes me.’

Amadeus considered that for a moment, then said the last thing I expected.

‘I owe that traitor a debt of pain.’

Never in my life had I heard one of the Mentor Legion speak of vengeance. Revenge was a base act, and the desire for it was an unworthy urge that a warrior must overcome in the pursuit of precision. They considered it beneath them, a barbarian indulgence, unmentioned even in the sacrosanct Litanies of Hate preached by their Chaplains.

He seemed to sense his lapse the same moment we did.

‘Master–’ I started.

He cut me off, steering the discussion elsewhere. ‘I feel there is still tension between the two of you. I trust it is not based on attraction, given what I assume is Kartash’s relative ugliness.’

We glanced at each other, Kartash and I, before looking over at our master again.

‘It is just as before,’ said Kartash. ‘Anuradha believes I wronged her when the Geller field collapsed.’

Amadeus hesitated. ‘You realise, Anuradha, that I have questioned Kartash
regarding these accusations, and he showed no signs of deceit.’

‘Yes, master.’

‘And yet your belief persists?’

‘Yes, master.’ It sounded better than Honestly, master, I don’t know any more.

Amadeus gave no sign of sympathy, of course, and even less sign of believing me. He didn’t reply that I’d seen my father in those bleak hours, or that I’d heard the voices of dead men over the vox trying to lure me closer, or any of the other three dozen delusions that had gripped me just as they’d gripped everyone else. He didn’t need to say any of it. He implied it in two simple words.

‘I see.’

Kartash chimed in, ‘I have tried to parlay with her, master. We’ve agreed for now that I will avoid her when we are otherwise alone. It’s my sincere hope she will come to accept the truth soon.’

‘I see,’ Amadeus repeated. Once he would have lectured us on our inefficiencies or expressed disappointment. Now, he let it pass. Was he becoming sloppy or were his priorities just shifting to more vital matters?

I kept quiet, scraping the razor softly over his scalp.

He grabbed my wrist without warning. Hard. Hard enough to bind me in place, hard enough that my mechanical wrist squeaked with the beginnings of compression. I grunted, trying to swallow my discomfort, knowing it was only a second or two away from becoming pain.

Amadeus murmured an apology, loosening his grip without releasing me. He pulled my hand in front of his face, where he could see his reflection in the shaving blade. For a time he just stared at himself, at the flesh that had been scarred but not ruined by the Exilarchy. Yet he gazed upon himself as if he had no idea whom he saw.

‘You’re still you,’ I said quietly. I just wanted to set him at ease. I didn’t know the source of his anguish, and this was my best guess. ‘That’s still your face. You’re still you.’

Amadeus looked into the reflection of his eyes.

‘Am I?’

After he was bathed and shaved, we walked through the ship’s barrow.
Amadeus commanded us to come; it wasn’t the kind of journey I’d have made for any other reason. The Hex’s barrow deck was part mausoleum, part hall of honour – here were the Spears interred in temporary stasis before burial on Nemeton, or those that had wished to lie forever aboard their warship after death instead of being returned to their home world.

It was unguarded. Any that wished to come were permitted to pay their respects and look upon the deeds achieved by warriors past. We walked along the quiet corridors, witnessing statues of Emperor’s Spears decades and centuries dead, their features and forms carved from plain black basalt. There was a simplicity to it, and an honesty. These were the kinds of statues that would be found on any world that hadn’t advanced beyond the Terran Bronze Epoch or Iron Era.

I learned months later that these statues were carved by squad mates in honour of their fallen brothers, and it was a druid’s duty to bring the rough work to completion. Ducarius was an expert sculptor, though it was said Tolmach had been a masterworker. Certainly, several of the statues I saw that day looked to be shaped by hands capable of genius.

We passed each likeness, several standing above stone coffins set into the iron floor, many more standing alone in remembrance while the warriors they depicted were long since reduced to bones on Nemeton. Each warrior depicted was present with honours earned in battle or mementos worthy of consideration, though the meaning of some eluded me. Honour badges lay in abundance, their parchment slowly rotting. Broken weapons and damaged pieces of armour, taken from the dead Spears themselves as well as their foes, were displayed with morbid relish. The barbarians of Nemeton didn’t shy away from death.

On one of the relic tables, lying next to a shattered and irreparable boltgun, was a twist of golden-blond hair bound with twine. On another I saw a necklace of interlinked scales cast from poor-quality silver. These kinds of curios were everywhere; were they mementos of family members left behind in the tribes? Trinkets taken from worlds where the Chapter had triumphed over the Exilarchy, or enemies even older still?

Every statue had Nemetese runes engraved on its plinth. Amadeus paused by each one to read the tales they told. Most of them were the kind of straightforward, uncomplicated verse preferred by Nemetese bards: they stated deeds done and kept away from exaggeration. Nothing unusual, there. What surprised me was the wording beneath each brief verse: additional sentiments left by brother-warriors, much of it bordering on vandalism.
I laughed at one of them, the sound slicing through the stillness and silence. Kartash and Amadeus jerked their heads to me.

‘Anuradha?’ my master asked.

I gestured down at the plinth of a statue depicting a Firstborn warrior by the name Davath.

‘There.’

Amadeus read it and his eyes widened before, very subtly, he smiled. Kartash hadn’t studied Nemetese with the same focus as I had, and looked bemused until Amadeus translated it.

‘Here lies Davath, who was told to advance with caution and keep his head down.

‘He was a warrior to sail the stars with.

‘But it must be said: when he died, the Arakanii didn’t lose a great thinker.

‘Rest well, you stubborn bastard.’

The helmet on the remembrance table was utterly destroyed, the faceplate holed through and the back of the skull cradle blown out. Whatever firepower had entered through the front hadn’t even slowed down on its way out the back.

Most of the statues showed the same kind of sentiments from surviving brothers.

‘This is disgusting,’ observed Kartash. My master shook his head.

‘No, Kartash, this is brotherhood.’

We reached Tolmach’s statue, standing opposite another one at the far end of a corridor. I hadn’t known Tolmach well, so I wasn’t certain what to expect. What we found was bittersweet: the statue had been carved by those who knew him best, and caught the druid in a moment of amusement, baring his teeth with a grin.

I read the words beneath his stone boots.

‘This is Tolmach of the Novontei.

‘He once headbutted a planetary governor in front of an entire royal court.

‘We miss him.

‘We wish the Pure had missed him, too.’
I couldn’t help it. I was laughing again, trying to hide it.
‘Who is this?’ Kartash asked from behind me.

I turned, facing the opposite statue. It was a younger warrior, as beautiful in cold stone as any man could possibly be. His angelic countenance was turned away from us, leaving him in profile. Whoever had sculpted him had shaped his features into an expression of serene regard: a soulful young warrior looking to the next horizon.

I glanced at the name on the plinth.
‘Oh, shit,’ I breathed the words in the holy gloom. ‘That’s Faelan.’

And it was. The mutilated, faceless battleguard that we’d met in our first hours aboard the Hex and who’d died in the battle against the Pure – this was him as he’d been for most of his life.

Amadeus left Tolmach’s likeness to come and stand next to us.
‘Here lies Faelan of the Kavalei.
‘When he became a Spear, men of every tribe breathed a sigh of relief.
‘And women of every tribe had to settle for what was left on Nemeton.
‘He was ugly as a seadrake’s arsehole after losing his face in the Battle of Sythaur.

‘We were tempted to carve him that way...’

Amadeus trailed off at the end of the words, looking up at Faelan’s features. He stepped back, letting his gaze take in both of these most recent statues. He didn’t need to say what he was thinking. You had to be blind not to realise it.

Where else could my master’s new Primaris organs have come from? He was looking at the monuments of the two men whose deaths had allowed him to live.

‘Master?’ I asked, after the silence become unnerving.

‘You said I was still myself,’ he reminded me.

‘You are, master. Different, but still you.’

‘I would like to speak with Faelan now. He likely underwent something of what I am going through.’

‘His face was destroyed, master,’ Kartash pointed out. ‘Yours is practically untouched.’
Amadeus ran his callused, scalpel-scarred fingertips down his face, over his briefly closed eyes and the contours of his features, larger than any natural human’s.

‘I was never this face, though. My face does not mean the same thing to me that it might mean to a human. Our faces are meaningless. Yet now I find it is the only thing familiar to me. Of everything I own, my face has changed the least.’

‘I’m not sure I follow,’ I said carefully, unsure if he really wanted to speak of this or not. This new Amadeus drifted between formality and informality with what seemed to be random whims. ‘Contextualise this for me, master.’

Amadeus gestured to his robed form, riven by the Exilarchy’s torture blades and enhanced by the Calgarian Rites. His bare arms were a cavalcade of scars, as was his throat and neck. Beneath the robes was far worse.

‘A warrior is his body. He is his armour. He is his weapons. I saw my helmet’s faceplate reflected back at me more often than my bare face. I saw my helm’s eye-lenses more often than I saw my own eyes. Now this body is a destroyed and remade shell. My armour is no longer the suit of plate I have worn in battle for almost a century. My weapons are no longer the blade and boltgun that were crafted specifically for my hands. Can you grasp what that means to me, Anuradha?’

Another sliver of tickling unease. I was Anuradha most of the time now, no longer merely Helot Secundus. It didn’t ring of affection and familiarity though, and I hoped it wasn’t an erosion of sorts. Like a blade losing its edge.

‘I think so, master. I can imagine, if not fully comprehend.’

‘Nor does it end there,’ he said, distracted from us by the focus of his thoughts. His voice echoed around the tomb. ‘We are far past the time for naivety or stubbornness. Let us cut to the matter’s core. The Spears will never release In Devout Abjuration back to us. They need our warship to fight in their war, and they undoubtedly perceive their need as greater than ours.’

Here he paused, amused at the path of his own thoughts. ‘Arguably, their need is greater.’

I saw how it stung him to admit that. Neither of us commented on it.

‘I suspect,’ Amadeus continued, ‘that if I ask Brêac to return my ship to me, he’ll laugh and confess she was painted azure and white in the skies above Bellona the moment we boarded the Hex.’
Kartash looked aghast at such a betrayal. I tried not to smile.

‘That would be entirely in keeping with what we know of the Spears,’ I agreed.

‘Even if I demand it back,’ Amadeus mused, ‘and if they are inclined to give it back, what valour is there in sailing our surviving crew back into the Rift? The Spears aren’t lying. They’ve lost every vessel they cast into those tides. The futility of it made them stop trying. We saw none of those ships emerge into the true Imperium. Is it duty to try to return, or suicide by foolishness?’

I’d thought the same for months. Even Tyberia had uneasily joked about it before our capture. We were here in Elara’s Veil, and here was where we’d stay. We’d live out our lives on this side of the Rift, unless we died trying to cross back through it.

But still neither I nor Kartash said anything. Amadeus wasn’t looking at us, but at the Spears helmet in his hands, picked up from Faelan’s relic table. He laughed suddenly, a shotgun of sound, harsh and true.

‘I have no idea what I must do now. I have no idea who I am. The idea of even considering such things is strange to me. These are philosophies with answers beyond my reach. I have always been a soldier, an officer, a weapon.’

‘Are you so different now?’ I asked.

It can be ugly, when pride dies at the hands of revelation. It can breed guilt. Shame can simmer inside a soul. Most often, it feeds resentment and anger, secretly or on the surface. Only rarely does revelation fuel nobility, since it almost always demands sacrifice. We aren’t a noble species, no matter what the God-Emperor’s texts try to tell us. I’ve met enough humans, in enough cultures, on enough worlds, to know just how rare real nobility is.

I confess, I held no real hopes for Amadeus. Yet he didn’t seem defeated, he seemed amused, bleakly charmed by the unique strangeness of his situation. Hopelessness can be freeing. I prayed it would free him.

Amadeus held up Faelan’s helmet, looking into its eye-lenses, considering the question.

‘Different, yes. As to how different? I do not yet know. I died. That much I know. I died, and yet I live. I have a new body, given to me by the Spears. The organs feeding life through me were harvested from dead men, from Tolmach and Faelan and others who died fighting for Elara’s Veil, and whose deaths staved off my own. My hearts beat with dead men’s blood. My bones are fused with dead men’s marrow. I have a rank I fought for a century to
attain, a rank that means nothing here – and no warriors who will obey me. I have armour and weapons borrowed from the Spears’ armory and painted in the colours of a Chapter I will surely never see again. Colours that are blasphemy in this region of space, worn with toxic pride by a warband of heretics calling themselves the Pure. Does that frame it in context for you, Anuradha?’

‘I daresay it does, master.’

‘You cannot change who you are.’ Kartash was ironclad. ‘That way lies weakness, master.’

‘Perhaps,’ Amadeus admitted. ‘All I want is to do what I was born to do. I am a fighter. I want to fight. I want to serve my Emperor and His empire. I want to destroy the enemies of the Imperium.’

‘You want revenge,’ I interrupted him. He accepted the interruption without chastising me. Indeed, he nodded.

‘Is that so wrong?’

*I want revenge myself,* I thought.

‘I don’t know, master,’ I said.

Amadeus was reflective in the truest sense. His words weren’t softened with wonder, but they reflected the totality of all that had happened to him and were now tempered by the workings of his transhuman mind. Watching him come to terms with reality was like watching a cogitator solve a stochastic equation, parsing down probabilities and possibilities in a stream of thought.

‘Adaptation,’ my master continued, ‘is change. One changes for survival, not surrender. These are colours that cut at the Spears and the Lions, twisting old wounds by kicking at the dirt over old graves. Colours that proclaim my ignorance, and that Nar Kezar, that bastard Prince of the Pure, *laughed at,* as he peeled the plating from my skin. Colours, let us note, we of the Mentors would never have been granted had the Imperium known the truth of the Scorpions’ fate. They would never have cladded us in the colours of traitors. This heraldry *shames me,* Kartash. That is not weakness. It is awareness. It is the last gasp of pride within me, refusing to be extinguished.’

Kartash clucked his tongue. ‘The desire for vengeance is unworthy, master. You know this. You must resist these changes.’

Amadeus subtly raised a dark eyebrow, in his wry and inexpressively expressive way. I realised, when he spoke again, I’d heard his tone of voice
before – on Nemeton. He spoke with the cadence of the witch as she’d woven her riddles.

‘I am an officer on a mission that can’t be completed. I am the heir to heraldry I should never have inherited. I am a warrior far from the war I thought I would be fighting. I am the son of a Chapter that should not exist, resurrected by a Chapter that had every right to let me die. I am indebted, not by sworn oath but my very life, to a horde of Nemetese barbarians who are likely to comprise the only brotherhood I ever see or feel for the rest of my days. So… Who am I?’

Kartash’s tone was laden with solemnity. ‘These are dreadful thoughts, master. Dreadful, dreadful thoughts.’

But I didn’t think they were. In my master’s words, I’d heard the rhythm of the riddles on Nemeton. As for the words themselves, I’d seen a similar revelation play out aboard the *Venatrix*; in a different voice, in a different way, but facing the same truth. Amadeus was speaking like Tyberia had, when her back was to the wall and she was forced to choose just how she was going to live the rest of her life.

I’m certain he’d made his choice already. That was why we were down here among the dead. But I suspect he wanted to try his rhetoric on us first, using his captive audience.

Kartash answered him first. ‘You are Lieutenant Commander Amadaeus Kaias Incarius of the Mentor Legion.’

‘A name given to me by parents I never really knew, and a rank granted by superiors I will never see again, to command armies I will never lead. Clinging to that is not clinging to what *is*, Kartash. It is clinging to what *was*. Does that not strike you as an incredibly petty way to live? Even a trifle pathetic? If I am not those things, then who am I?’

‘You’re a soldier,’ I said to him. ‘A warrior.’

Another of those thoughtful, bleakly amused pauses. ‘Yes. But what kind of warrior? Fighting which war?’

‘I think, master, you have a chance to be whatever kind of warrior you want to be.’

He looked at me for what felt like an age. ‘Choice,’ he said at length. ‘What a novel experience.’
XXII
THE LORD OF LIONS

1

Two days later I saw the *Blade of the Seventh Son* up close for the first time. She wasn’t the *Hex*, and I’ve made clear before now how I loved the *Hex* the second I first saw her, but what she lacked in the *Hex*’s lethal grace she more than made up for in blunt brutality. Her origins among the Black Templars were well documented, but she’d served for a century as the flagship of the Celestial Lions, granted as a gift from one brother-Chapter to another. The Lions had welcomed the gift, and added to her bulk in the decades since.

She was fast, with those colossal and enhanced engines, though too bulky and armoured to be truly nimble. When it came to void manoeuvres, she’d be bloated and at the mercy of smaller vessels. In a chase, or as a battering ram to break enemy blockades, there was no finer warship in the Armada.

I watched her as she drifted at anchor off our starboard bow. She was damaged, even more battered than the *Hex*, from her collision with the *Vénatrix* several months ago, and all the battles she’d fought since. Fighter wings haloed her pitted battlements, leaving faint contrails from their streaking plasma drives.

Even from this distance, the *Blade* shone in the dark. She was quite a sight, that ancient killer with her hull of scarred gold. She kept drawing my eye as she turned slowly in the void, several thousand miles away and still clearly visible through the great bay windows of the *Hex*’s command deck. Behind her, the stars were stained red from a curling tendril of the Elara’s Veil nebula.

I was nervous. Not because of the *Blade*, but because of who would be coming aboard from it. Brêac was the most powerful and influential figure I’d met among the Adeptus Vaelarii, and as one of the senior officers of the Emperor’s Spears, his rank couldn’t be ignored.

There were only two souls that stood inarguably above Brêac in respect and authority. The first was Arucatas of the Kavalei, Master of the Emperor’s Spears, called Swordbearer by his brothers and foes alike, and the ruling High King of Nemeton. I would eventually meet the High King. Fate would have us meet at a mustering of the Armada, mere months after the conclusion of this part of my chronicle.
The other soul, whose primacy eclipsed even that of Arucatas the Swordbearer, would be boarding the Hex soon. His name was Ekene Dubaku, called Kine-bane, Lord of Lions, the Claw of Dorn, and the unchallenged Warlord of the Adeptus Vaelarii.

2

We gathered on the bridge. Kartash and I were permitted to be present, though Kartash had chosen not to attend, citing sundry duties. I was delaying several of my own secondary duties by attending, but I was glad to be without his pious stink in my nostrils, and gladder still to be back on the command deck.

Amadeus sent me ahead, to record anything of import that took place before his arrival. My new eye lacked many of the more exotic qualities of my lost and much-missed terminus-eye, but it suited for imprinting visual feeds onto my cranial data-spools.

Every Spear on board had gathered on the command deck, many of them attended by their robed serfs, all of whom displayed tattoos on their arms and faces, hearkening to tribal bonds or newer deeds performed in the Chapter’s service. Brêac, Ducarius, Morcant and Serivahn held court on the bridge’s central platform, by the command throne and the primary tactical hololith table. They shared quiet words and grim, low laughter. The other Spears watched from gantries and platforms. I could hear the low buzz of conversation among each squad.

The Hex’s strategium was typical of Adeptus Astartes cruiser command decks, with efficiency and antiquity competing for prominence. Towering statues of Nemetese stone, carved into the figures of idolised champions of the Chapter, stood watch over the hive-like domain of busy souls and iron decking that lay before them. Gargoyles shaped as Nemetese sea creatures coiled along the dark metal rafters, while banner after banner hung down in the high darkness, proclaiming the regiments of Imperial Guard and legions of skitarii that had fought alongside the Third Warhost since the Emperor’s Spears’ founding all those centuries before.

The chamber was large enough that some servitors would spend years in the same cavernous room, not needing to leave it during their duties, retreating only to their respite coffin-sockets beneath the deck flooring in order to feed on protein mush and excrete waste fairly similar to what they ingested. At any time, there might be up to a hundred or more servitors in semi-slumber under the grating floor, recharging themselves for another long day of what passed for their lives.
I’d tried servitor food before, back during my years in the Mentors’ fortress-monastery. The more intelligent among the servitors, by which I mean those that hadn’t been lobotomised entirely beyond coherent thought or communication, referred to the stuff as Slop. The ooze was ubiquitous across the Imperium with a host of variant names, but they called it Slop aboard the *Hex* as well. It was grey meat processed and reprocessed past any taste of its origins and infused with chemical nutrients. It tasted exactly the way you would expect from that description.

‘Anuradha.’

I turned at the calling of my name. Brêac, up on the central platform, beckoned me over, and I felt about a thousand pairs of eyes on me as I ascended the stairs to answer him.

‘Lord Brêac.’ I bowed. ‘*Kovulagh shiguth eoska, neia?’*

He grinned, and Ducarius chuckled.

‘That greeting only works when you stand under a real sky,’ said Brêac. ‘It means to hope the rain washes away your sorrows.’

I forced a smile and asked for forgiveness; I’d thought it was a general greeting to wish good fortune upon those you met. So many Nemetese exchanges involved axioms for storms and rainfall. Finding the appropriate ones, and using them in their right context, was no easy feat.

‘At least your accent isn’t as bad as it used to be,’ Ducarius added, saving me from mortification. I silently thanked him for that.

‘What do you require?’ I asked of them.

‘Where’s Amadeus? We thought he’d be here by now.’

‘As did I, lord.’

Providence had it that he arrived right then, striding across the busy bridge, avoiding crowds of working thralls and human officers. His armour was polished and gleaming, dark emerald and pristine white. We’d done all we could to transfer and implant the advanced systems from his previous suit of armour into the new suit of repainted plate. The Mentors’ red raptor showed proud and keen on his shoulder guard. The deck shivered as he made his way up to the dais, and he placed his green helmet on the table’s edge next to the three white ones already in place.

‘False Scorpion,’ Morcant greeted him in Low Gothic.

‘*Agriah uz greagh vosz jajeya,*’ Amadeus snapped back in a perfectly
accented flow of dialect from the Northern Vargantes tribe. Ducarius and Brèac chuckled at the implication in what he said, which was both obscene and biologically impossible.

After a moment Morcant grinned his cannibal smile. Like many Spears, he considered insults to be something of an art. His reply brimmed over with thick sarcasm.

‘My head’s too big to fit up there,’ the Arakanii replied in Nemetese, ‘but your mastery of our tongue brings a joyous tear to my eye. Look at me, my kinsmen. I weep! Can you believe it? Our beloved cousin is growing up so fast.’

We were gathered for a sombre war council, that was true, but for a brief moment my master smiled and stood as an equal with the Immortals. Then the main thoroughfare bulkhead rumbled open, and all eyes turned to the reason we were gathering in the first place.

A great many words have been written about Lord Ekene Dubaku, and a great many stories have been told of his deeds. I’d read all I could of the Lions’ lore within the Hex’s archives, and I was ready for the Warlord of the Adeptus Vaelarii to be a colossal figure in terms of charisma and stature. He was the man that not only commanded his own Chapter and had led them back from the brink of extinction, but who also had been chosen to lead the Sentinels of the Veil and the Armada sworn to them. His authority made him de facto regent of Elara’s Veil.

Instead of a monarch draped in majesty, the warrior that entered at the head of his men was an unprepossessing example of the Firstborn. His armour was gold, though not the honey-gold of Imperial splendour, as seen in the auramite plating of the princely Custodian Guard. Ekene wore armour reminiscent of a purer, plainer gold, burnished beneath a world’s warm sun. He wore a red cloak, one of his few ostentations, but instead of having it trail behind him, it was cast with nonchalant elegance over one shoulder.

At his side was a Firstborn warrior of another Chapter, this one clad in the striking black, red and white of the Templars. And behind these two leaders came twelve Templars and thirty-seven Lions into the strategium, their passage disturbing the crew that moved aside for this parade of their masters and greatest defenders.

At all the gatherings of Adeptus Astartes warriors I’d witnessed in the past, rank after rank of Space Marines stood in dignified silence. Chaplains
preached. Officers intoned vows. Oaths were given and taken and exchanged while choirs chanted blessings and evocations. Formality reigned.

Here, everything descended into brotherly disorder. Squads of Spears welcomed Lions and Templars they knew well from previous campaigns. They laughed and they embraced. If there was some reticence on the part of the Lions, it was only because they carried ill tidings; their joy at uniting with their brethren was hardly diminished. When the Blade had come to the Hex’s aid months before, there had been little time for niceties even after the Venatrix was scrap metal in space. Both vessels had pulled away swiftly once the kill was made and the captives returned, returning to their assigned campaigns.

The two commanders ascended to the central platform where Serivahn and the Immortals waited. The reunion there was no less jubilant, as the Spears bid the newcomers to join them. Ekene even embraced Serivahn, kissing both of the crippled warrior’s cheeks.

‘It is good to see you, my friend.’ Ekene’s voice was a lion’s rumbling purr.

‘And you, Warlord.’ Serivahn looked as pleased as I’d ever seen him. Saliva trickled down the side of his crooked mouth, onto Ekene’s red cloak. The Chapter Master made no note of it, though it can’t have escaped his notice. Instead, he showed clean white teeth in a smile that split his dark features.

‘You say that now, Vahn, but we do not come with hopeful news.’

‘The Hex is yours to command, Warlord.’

Ekene made a gesture – presenting his open hand, palm up, in a slow crescent away from his heart towards Serivahn. A signal of gratitude on his home world, I suspected.

He turned to Brêac, gripping the Spear’s wrist as they embraced. ‘Brêac, my brother, I fear this time we may be asking for you to save us.’

Brêac banged his free fist against his breastplate. ‘Whatever you ask, Ekene, it’ll be done.’

Ekene’s smile was strained. Up close it was easier to see the subtle shadow cast over the reunion by whatever grim word the Lions had come to deliver.

‘I trust you are keeping fine care of Nar Kezar?’ he said to Ducarius.

‘Are you certain we can’t just execute him?’ the druid replied. I wasn’t sure if it was a jest. Ducarius was smiling as he said it, but that didn’t mean much when it came to the Spears.
‘I will take him back with me,’ said Ekene. ‘He and I will share words aboard the Blade.’

‘As you wish, Warlord.’ Ducarius showed no emotion, either way. I didn’t know how I felt, either. Seeing him caged helped me sleep. It kept dreams of the Venatrix at bay.

The Templar stepped forward, and though his greetings were more formal, he was wholly at ease and well known to all the Spears. He was the oldest of the warriors gathered, older than any of those on the dais by at least a century, perhaps as much as two. Like Ekene and the Spears themselves, he forwent much in the way of the trappings of rank. A short grey beard and moustache framed stern, thin lips, and his hair was trimmed to a severe covering of stubble the colour of steel. This was Zvarin Roist, Castellan of the Elysium Crusade. He led the Templars that had escorted the Lions home after their Chapter’s devastation and remained to fight alongside them during their long road to rebuilding. The dawn of the Great Rift had stranded him here, just as it had my master a century later.

Roist was the first to notice Amadeus, who hadn’t joined in the familiar greetings. He offered a neutral nod, and was disciplined enough to hide his interest to a momentary flicker of fascination. Here, at long last, was news from the true Imperium. How this stranded, ageing knight must have burned to speak with Amadeus alone, and ask for word of his noble brethren still fighting elsewhere. Amadeus returned the nod, and waited to be acknowledged by the Warlord.

When I think back now, remembering this meeting, I’m struck by the notion that the Spears and Lions – and even the Templars – loved their Warlord. Simple respect couldn’t fuel the devotion I saw in the eyes of warriors from all three Chapters that day. It was deeper than admiration: he was a living legend to them, an avatar of defiance. He’d inherited a Chapter on the edge of annihilation and now here he was, over a century later, still alive, still leading them. He was more than their commander; he was their talisman.

And he loved the Spears in return. All the Lions did. You could see it in their eyes and their embraces. The Lions were still badly mauled from their desecration a century ago, and oh, how that had cost them in both pride and shame. They were rebuilding as best they were able, but it had been a hundred years of struggling to meet the demands of protecting Elara’s Veil with so few of their own warriors left alive. The Hex’s archives even made the grim claim that the fortress-monastery on Elysium never received the Primaris lore from the agents of the Indomitus Crusade, and that the Lions were only granted the
ability to forge Second Generation warriors when the Emperor’s Spears shared the knowledge with them.

I saw deep pride in Ekene and his golden warriors, but also abiding recognition. The Scorpions and Spears were their younger brother-Chapters, and one had committed the ultimate betrayal. In the vacuum left by treachery, with the Scorpions turning traitor and the Lions bleeding almost unto death, the Spears willingly shouldered the burdens of the entire Adeptus Vaelarii. The Spears had held the line without hesitation, without grudge.

This was a fraternal bond like no other I’d ever seen. I felt uplifted, energised, just witnessing it. You couldn’t force this kind of brotherhood. You could only forge it.

‘And you,’ the Lord of Lions said, ‘must be Amadeus. The one who sailed to us by running the Straits of Epona. You are a brave man, Amadeus of the Mentor Legion.’

The Spears flanked Ekene as the golden lord stood before my master. Amadeus made the sign of the aquila and bowed his head deeply with unfeigned respect.

‘It is an honour to meet you, Lord Dubaku.’

Ekene’s dark eyes burned with the same curiosity I’d seen in Roist’s gaze. ‘Brêac has relayed much regarding your presence in the Veil, but… Truly, we wondered at times if you were a ruse by the Archenemy or a poor jest by our Nemetese brothers.’

God-Emperor help me, even I was smiling now. Some men wield power like a bludgeon and some hide behind it like a shield. Ekene Dubaku used it as an invitation, welcoming you within his aura.

Amadeus shook his head. ‘I am neither, thankfully. And I wish to thank you for your intervention with the Venatrix. My time aboard her was educational, but I was beginning to tire of the Pure’s hospitality.’

Grunted laughter met that remark, and Ekene repeated his Elysium gesture of sincerity, this time with a toothy grin.

‘Ramming that ship was one of the richest pleasures of my life so far, so no thanks are required.’

‘You are gracious, my lord.’ Amadeus replied.

‘No, I am merely honest.’ Ekene stepped closer, tapping his knuckles on my master’s pauldron. ‘Ah, these are ill-omened colours to wear in our dominion,
my wayward friend. It grieves me to see the Imperium passed down our traitorous brothers’ heraldry to your bloodline. I am sure you deserved better.’

‘I am somewhat less than delighted by the truth myself, my lord.’

Ekene turned to the Spears by his side. ‘You told me the False Scorpion was a humourless wretch and tiresome to be around, Morcant.’

The cannibal licked his teeth, not bothering to hide his smile. ‘He was, Warlord. But all the pieces of Tolmach and Faelan that we packed into him have cheered him right up. I can almost tolerate him myself, these days.’

‘Ever a generous soul,’ Ekene observed. I couldn’t help but notice even Amadeus had stepped closer to Ekene now, and the same regard shone in his eyes. That sense of warmth and fraternity had expanded to wrap around him, as well. I think, in that moment, he no longer felt utterly excluded. An outsider, yes. But no longer an invader.

Ekene reluctantly cut the reunion short. ‘We have much to speak of, Amadeus of the Mentors. But now, my brothers, if you’ll forgive me for casting a pall over this gathering…’

The Warlord moved to the planning table and began to summon hololithic images into being. Across the chamber everyone fell silent, and the more Ekene said, the harder it became to remember that there had been any joy at all the beginning of the council meeting.

They called it the Storm Tide. Psychically gifted warriors among the Celestial Lions had first detected it, but soon enough signs and omens were manifesting across the sector around Elysium. Gutter-psykers and sworn guild astropaths alike suffered visions of vast shadows sailing in the Sea of Souls, cutting like knives towards the heart of Elara’s Veil. The peasant-psykers had no idea what they were seeing in their wrack-dreams, only that death tore through the void in the shape of a storm. More educated and talented astropaths sent cries of warning through the warp, audible to the warriors of the Lions’ librarius division, who were already mustering the lords of their Chapter and sending word outwards, to the Spears and the shared Armada.

All the reports concurred. A great wave within the warp was surging towards Elysium. That alone would have sounded like naked horror, but it wasn’t the shrieking energies of the etheric ocean that concerned the Adeptus Vaelarii. It was what those waves meant.

‘A fleet,’ Ducarius said, utterly certain. ‘A fleet large enough to raze your
Ekene nodded. ‘That is what we believe.’

No one knew how that many vessels were maintaining fleet cohesion in the Dark Imperium’s savage warp. No one knew how the Exilarchy was able to maintain its current warfronts while also possessing a fleet capable of creating such a monumental bow wave in the empyrean. The obvious answers weren’t comforting.

‘Reinforcements,’ Brêac growled. ‘The Exilarchy has reinforcements from the Rift, or from elsewhere in Imperium Nihilus.’

Ekene’s face was drenched in flickering light from the hololithic sphere floating above all of them. The world, Elysium IX, was ringed by an extensive orbital defence array and crowed with star fortresses. Even so, it was a pale shadow of Nemeton’s might. Nemeton had Bellona, and a forge-moon evened a lot of odds.

‘If the Exilarchy has managed to add to its ranks from outside the Veil, this changes the war beyond recognition.’

‘And we’ll deal with that, Warlord,’ said Brêac, ‘but first… What of Elysium?’

‘The Armada is already being assembled.’ Ekene spoke with certainty, but without passion. ‘We encountered you early, so you are among the first of the Adeptus Vaelarii forces to hear of this, but word is being sent across the Veil via astropathic duct.’

‘Unreliable,’ Brêac pointed out with reluctance.

‘Necessary,’ Ekene said, in a tone of agreement.

Morcant banged his armoured fist against his chest-plate. ‘If the Armada gathers, we’ve already won. Nothing will break it. We can hold Elysium.’

Ducarius was far more solemn. ‘Arakanii… A warp-wake of this scale indicates a fleet that may match the Armada. At the very least, they will maul us badly. And they have the advantage of, somehow, being able to maintain cohesion in the Sea of Souls. They’re arriving as one fleet. We’d be reaching the system in a trickling flow, ship by ship.’

‘You’re saying we can’t fight them?’

‘I’m saying I don’t know how we can. Warlord, how long do we have?’

‘Weeks.’ Castellan Roist answered for Ekene. ‘A month at most. They can
maintain cohesion in the Sea of Souls, but they’re still slowed by the broken tides.’

Murmurs broke out across the bridge. Even a month would leave them hard-pressed to gather the entire Armada.

‘We can do it,’ Brêac said. He leaned his knuckles on the hololithic table, staring at the vista of stars. ‘We can do it, but we’ll be leaving whole swathes of the Veil undefended. Rains of Nemeton, this might be the end of us. We could lose half our remaining territory in a single season.’

‘That,’ Ekene said, ‘is unacceptable.’

‘Hear me out first,’ argued Brêac.

‘My brother, the decision is already made. I am not here to listen to you, I am here so you may listen to me.’

The Spear lord spoke through gritted teeth. ‘But we can draw our defences away from Nemeton, and–’

The Warlord cleared his throat. That was all it took to silence the respected and mighty Lord of the Third Warhost. It was done without anger, with visible sympathy, and all eyes returned to Ekene’s scarred face. The Warlord spoke his next words with measured gravity, knowing the true weight of them better than any other soul present.

‘Brêac, my brother. Your loyalty breeds an ache in my chest, and I love you for it. But I will not have Nemeton and half the Veil put at risk for the chance we can hold Elysium. Even if we hold it, what will be left of the Armada?’

Silence. Not absolute silence, for all across the bridge armour still hummed and joints still purred and robes still rustled. But it was as close to silence as a thousand men and women can come.

‘What are you saying?’ asked Brêac.

‘I am saying nothing you do not already know in your heart.’ Ekene nodded to the slowly turning world composed of trembling light. ‘Elysium has always lain within the Exilarchy’s reach. We knew this day would come. Now is the time for us to face reality, not cling to our rage.’

‘No.’ Morcant stared wide-eyed at his Warlord, helpless in his denial. ‘No. The Armada will crush whatever is coming. We. Can. Hold.’

Ekene was braced for this. ‘Elysium cannot be defended, Morcant of the Arakanii. And more importantly, I will not let you try.’
‘You coward,’ the battleguard snapped. ‘You dare give in like this? We can protect you!’

Ekene met this fury with fire in his eyes and serenity on his lips. ‘This is not about you, my brother. It is not about what you can or cannot do. It is about the Veil. Elysium is one world. Just one world. I will not sacrifice twenty planets and vast reaches of territory for a single world. Not even the world of my birth.’

Throughout the chamber, Spears warriors were turning to their Lions brethren. Brêac let out a slow breath.

‘Ekene…’

The Warlord raised a hand to forestall yet more prideful protests. ‘Brêac, please. You and your Spears have bled in rivers, shouldering the burdens of three Chapters these last decades. You are not seeing this with a tactician’s clarity. Instead, you see it as a loyal brother, all heart and no rationality. You see this as your failure, do you not? If Elysium falls, the Spears have failed, after all this time, to protect their wounded brothers.’

Brêac said nothing. The truth was etched, damningly clear, across his face.

‘That is noble of you,’ Ekene said. ‘Noble and worthy and every Lion thanks you for it. But we are not children, to be protected from all harm. Death is coming with the Storm Tide. This much we know. Now is the time to plan for what will come, and not mourn what we wish would be.’

Brêac tried one last time. ‘Zvarin,’ he appealed to the Black Templar at Ekene’s side.

‘The decision is made,’ the old knight said at once. ‘Though I commend you for your loyalty and zeal, Spear. I expected nothing less from you.’

‘He warned me,’ Ekene said with a half-smile, ‘that you would be difficult to convince. As if I could not have guessed, myself.’

With those words, a hush descended on the command deck once more. Ekene took advantage of it.

‘We will gather as much of the Armada as we can spare without ceding territory to the Exilarchy. No current campaigns will be abandoned. No worlds will be left undefended.’

‘This is the death of your Chapter,’ Brêac said at last.

‘That may be true,’ Ekene admitted. ‘But there is hope yet.’
‘Hope?’ Morcant narrowed his eyes. ‘Why gather any of the Armada if you don’t intend to fight for Elysium?’

Amadeus grasped it before anyone else.

‘Evacuation.’ With the single word, all eyes settled on my master.

‘As the Mentor says,’ Ekene confirmed. ‘We will evacuate as much of the population as we are able in the time that remains. We cannot defend our world, but we may be able to preserve some of our culture.’

Evacuating a city is a process of infinite complexity and punishing slowness. I’ve seen it with my own eyes, and seen it fail as often as I’ve seen it attempted. Evacuating a whole world is a feat of supreme effort that defies words. Truthfully, it simply can’t be done. Ekene and his Lions knew that, and I knew what they really meant. Their civilisation was doomed, but their culture might yet survive in bands of refugees. Crucially for the Chapter, future generations of children might survive to become Lions.

Hope is often a slender thread, but that never stops anyone reaching for it.

Ekene looked to Brêac, for the first time seeming reserved. ‘If we save enough of our people, there are worlds elsewhere… Worlds that lie deeper in the Veil. Places we might settle.’

‘Nemeton,’ said Brêac.

‘That would create significant tensions,’ Ekene said guardedly, ‘and no few difficulties with the population displacement. But if there were enough land…’

‘Bring them to Nemeton.’ Brêac was adamant.

‘We have considered it,’ the Warlord admitted. ‘I am drafting a petition to offer the High King. If the Swordbearer allows it, it is a tempting possibility.’

‘Arucatas won’t refuse you.’

‘Your confidence girds me, my brother. May I ask, will the Hex sail to Elysium? Will you protect the evacuation convoys?’

Brêac offered his hand. ‘You insult us by even asking, Ekene. We’ll sail at once.’

Ekene grinned and took the offered hand.

Then his head rolled forward, and his body toppled back.
If you’re reading these words and have never seen a Space Marine in the flesh, I hope my efforts so far have managed to capture some of the unreal speed with which they move in battle. If you’re reading these words and you are one of the Adeptus Astartes, then try to contextualise the speed with which the rest of us act and react to the world.

I used the word *unreal*, and it’s the best match for what they do. Over a hundred of them stood together in the command deck that day; a hundred transhuman warriors with preternatural reflexes and cognitive senses that processed information faster than unaltered biology allowed.

When I relate this now, it’s with the clarity of hindsight, analysis and data-spoolled memories. When it happened then, it took place in the time it takes to blink. All that transhuman speed and power meant absolutely nothing.

Ekene’s head tumbled from his shoulders and his headless body began to fall. The Warlord’s blood flecked Brêac’s armour and dappled across his face.

Warriors tore weapons free from holsters and scabbards. Lions and Spears roared in the same breath. I screamed something that may have been a useless denial or an equally worthless warning. I know I shouted Kartash’s name more than once.

None of it mattered. Shock had stolen the first second from all of us, and the first second was the only one that counted.

A chorus of explosives detonated around the central dais, blasting meat and bionics and bloody bones in every direction. A servitor’s iron claw crashed and skidded along the deck scarcely a yard from my foot, while around the dais smoke poured up from the grated flooring: a platoon’s worth of gas grenades, ruining any hope of seeing clearly.

But I’d seen the sword that cleaved the Warlord’s head from his shoulders. I knew it by memory and from my recurring dreams. There was no chance I could forget that blade of circuit-laden xenos-iron, the colour of jade.

The machinery that serves as my memory shows everything in excruciating detail, pict by pict, frame by frame, and even in these perfect recollections Ekene’s assassin is a ghost. One moment she is there. The next, she is gone.

Poison gas whirled around the central platform, thick as exhaust smoke in a tank bay. The warriors slammed helms over their heads, insulating themselves
from the toxins. Such was the speed of all this that Ekene’s headless body hadn’t yet tumbled back. If I freeze my recollections, I can track the black smears of the murderess’ silhouette as she plunged into the smoke. When I let the scene play out as it did on that distant day, everything is reduced to gas and mist and the roaring voices of warriors unable to believe the evidence of their eyes.

She was fast, faster than any living being or robotic invention I’d ever seen. Witch-fast. Nightmare-fast. Bolters kicked and roared, firing into the smoke. More than one human crew member died in the assassin’s place that day.

Intrusion protocols took hold. Doors sealed, room by room, hall by hall, deck by deck. Castigation-teams, the Armada’s naval soldiers, deployed from their barracks across the ship, closing in around the bridge. War-horns howled down the Hex’s great corridors, a call to hunt and fight in an hour of direst need.

Later, we would learn that the assassin had lain in wait in the high rafters, her body contorted and her joints dislocated in order to stay hidden from view below.

Later, we would learn that she had been accosting command deck servitors for months, forcing dozens of the mindless cyborgs to ingest toxin grenades and smoke incendiaries. The lobotomised slaves’ stunted digestive tracts were unable to excrete the explosives, which locked inside the abdominal cavity and lay dormant, waiting for the signal to explode. When the assassin downed her prey and sought to sow confusion, she triggered the detonations, many of which were in the guts of servitors slumbering beneath the grated floor. Smoke and poison gas steamed from the burst-open bodies, adding hallucinogens to the anger and confusion.

Later, we would learn everything. But what use was the knowledge by then? The deed was done and everything was fated to change.

They blamed us, of course. And why wouldn’t they? We were the outsiders there.

A ceramite fist closed around my throat and lifted me from the ground. I felt my spine crackle from the pressure, and gasped for breath as I looked into the eyes of an enraged Lion. His armour was polished to such a sheen that I could see my flailing struggles reflected in his golden ceramite.

‘I have the False Scorpion’s slave!’ he called out. I don’t know if any of his brethren heard him in the press of screaming humans and armoured bodies. He dragged me away with no effort at all, ignoring the crash of my bionic
claw-foot scraping against his plating like an industrial talon.

Lions and Spears alike were convulsing around us. A high-pitched screech, sickly undulating, made the insides of my ears throb fit to rupture. Covering my ears did nothing to ward my senses against that sound. The precious slivers of air I fought into my lungs tasted of acrid chemicals. Either I would die of asphyxiation in this warrior’s grip or I would die of the poisonous gas.

‘You will pay for this,’ the Lion snarled at me.

_It wasn’t us!_ I lacked the breath to plead my case, all I could do was cry the words inside my mind. _It wasn’t me!_ In a moment of inspiration, I tried to signal my denial in _Codex_-standard battle-sign. He ignored the movement of my hand and the message I was trying to impart. He saw I carried no weapon, and paid no further heed.

I had no idea where he was dragging me. I couldn’t see anything through the smoke – nothing but the huge forms of Adeptus Astartes warriors swinging blades or falling to the deck, clutching at their heads. Whatever that pulsing screech was, it was slowing the Spears and Lions down to the level of mere mortals.

My eyes were on fire. The mist was getting into them, whatever that gas and smoke really were. My augmetic eye stung behind the eye socket where the bionics met biology. My real eye gushed with what I hoped were tears and what I feared was blood.

The Lion holding me saw my master in the same moment I did. Amadeus charged from the smoke, his eye-lenses glowing, his fist cannoning into my captor’s helmeted head. His armour joints barked in mechanical protest as he pounded his fist another three times into the Lion’s faceplate, cracking it on the last blow and sending the warrior down to the deck.

‘Traitor!’ the Lion bellowed.

‘Fool,’ Amadeus grunted back. He didn’t waste time arguing or pleading our innocence; he dragged me by the wrist, moving at a lope that required me to maintain a dead sprint to keep up with him. My chest was tightening. My lungs were rocks in my ribcage. What little I was managing to breathe in was probably poison.

‘Master!’ He was just an impression ahead of me now. Just a smear of movement in my dying sight. I stumbled, and he dragged me another ten yards before snarling a curse back at me.

‘Run, damn you!’
‘I can’t see! Amadeus, I *can’t breathe!*’

He lifted me. It was like being in the cold embrace of a lifter-Sentinel, crushed against his armour plating like that.

‘Hold your breath. Keep your eyes closed.’

I did.

He ran.

As his boots hammered on the deck I thought, just for a moment, that we would actually make it.

I don’t know who brought Amadeus to the ground, only that it was several armoured bodies raising a storm of sound. He held on to me until I was pulled from his arms. He struggled until he was subdued. He swore his innocence until they levelled a boltgun at his face. I didn’t see it, but I heard its stock crunch against the bearer’s shoulder as he drew aim.

‘Enough.’ I recognised Brèac’s voice. ‘Enough. It’s over, Amadeus.’

By the time my sight returned, we were in a cell.
Nar Kezar watched us with a knowing smile. Even in captivity and stripped of his armour, he looked like a prince. The Spears had foregone shackles, letting him roam his sparse cell with impunity. He was caged by iron and energy fields, but he was held prisoner by the two Spears in full battle armour at the front of his chamber. There was no use in him using his acidic saliva to escape through the floor or the walls when he would be immediately executed for trying. Every minute of his life, he was watched by warriors that ached for a reason to pull their triggers.

Yet he was handsome and composed as he watched us from across the corridor, in the cell opposite ours. Nude but for a loincloth, he displayed a host of scarification across his body in a runic script I didn’t recognise. It made my eyes water just glancing at them. He sat in a meditative pose, legs crossed, watching us through the two flickering energy fields that separated us.

‘How did you upset our hosts?’ he asked, casual and kind. ‘I trust they finally grew tired of looking at the colours on your armour?’

Amadeus had been disarmed but still wore his war-plate. He hadn’t responded to any of Nar Kezar’s conversational gambits, and this was far from the first that the prisoner had tried.

‘Say nothing to him,’ my master told me, ‘and heed nothing he says to you. His words represent a moral threat.’

The moral threat kept watching us, seemingly amused by our disregard as much as he was enjoying our presence.

‘Let me tell you a story of the Spears’ hypocrisy...’ Nar Kezar began. My master’s head snapped towards the closest of our captors.

‘Will you please shoot him?’

The Spear showed his teeth in a brutal smile. The tattoo on his face was a flair of jagged runes that looked almost carved across his cheeks. On his belt, mag-locked to the ceramite, was a white helm – uncrested but marked with a red trident painted down over the faceplate. He was a Paragon, one of the elite
First Company.

‘Nothing I’d love more,’ the Paragon replied. ‘Sadly, I don’t take orders from you, False Scorpion.’

Nar Kezar laughed. The sound was irritatingly musical. ‘False Scorpion! I like that. How quaint that is.’

Amadeus remained in the centre of the cell, standing tall, almost robotic in his conservation of movement. There was no escape worth pursuing, so he simply wouldn’t pursue it. We were innocent, after all. I was certain the Spears would see that.

‘I should have believed you, Anuradha. About the sword in Kartash’s hands. About Kartash himself.’

I look over at him from where I sat with my back to the wall. My eyes were still raw, but at least I could see again. The Paragon, Connath, had given me a cleansing tonic that I was still blinking from my human eye.

‘I barely believed myself most of the time, master.’ And true enough, I’d never felt any anger at his refusal to heed me. I decided to spare him the acute embarrassment of his confession. Let it not be said that I wasn’t generous when the time was right. ‘My inner ears are still pulsing. What was that screeching?’

He grunted and the awkwardness faded. We were back on safe ground now.

‘The assassin was using a neural shredder. You were fortunate to be so far removed from the central platform, else you would be dead. It incapacitated several of the Spears. They may already be slain. A weapon like that is anything but merciful.’

In the quiet that grew after his words, I risked a moment of optimism. It was tempting to think Brêac and Ducarius would believe we had nothing to do with the Warlord’s murder, but the evidence wasn’t in our favour. Would the stern-faced Templar Castellan consider us innocent? Would Morcant? We had come into their realm as strangers, gained enough of their trust to meet the Warlord of the Adeptus Vaelarii, only for the man to be assassinated.

‘They may not blame us, master.’ I tried denial, to see if it felt convincing. Unsurprisingly, it didn’t.

‘You think they will see us as blameless, then? You think they will believe we were naïve to the murderer in our midst?’

‘They may not realise it was Kartash.’
I was reaching now. I’d told anyone who would listen about the sword I’d seen in my hours of apparent delirium after the Geller Field’s collapse. Any Spear that had seen Ekene die would have caught a split-second sight of the necron phase blade that cleaved their Warlord’s head clear.

Even if they weren’t aware of my story, there was nowhere else such an assassin could have come from. Amadeus and his thralls were the only real possibility. Tyberia was dead. I was there, a witness to the murder. That only left Kartash.

‘Kartash.’ Through Amadeus’ clenched teeth, the name became a low snarl. ‘Whatever the assassin’s real name is, it is not Kartash.’

He stared at his reflection in the energy screen, distorted by the shield’s power field. ‘This stinks of the Inquisition. That pathetic body of bitter, bitter humanity.’

I’d never seen an Inquisitor. They were myths to most of the Imperium, just a dreadful threat that never manifested, a warning to make children behave. I knew nothing of them; most knowledge was sequestered and sealed away from the likes of Chapter-thralls. Did the Inquisition have access to instruments of murder like the black-clad murderess that had killed the Warlord? If so, I pitied the Lions for ever crossing them.

‘They had to twist the knife, one more time.’ Amadeus was growling his words in a way he never would have done before his torture, yet with a temper that was becoming increasingly common since his rebirth. ‘For one hundred years they’ve waited for this chance to wound the Lions yet again. Everything Brêac told me about them is proving true. Could they not be content with driving the Chapter to the edge of death, for the sin of calling their authority into question? Will we lose Elara’s Veil because a clutch of Inquisitors cannot move past their moronic grudge?’

I realised then, something that should have been obvious before. Something I’d never considered. Amadeus loved the Imperium.

Maybe that seems foolish to say about a man so cold he was practically a weapon, but it was true. Why else would he devote himself so fervently? What else but absolute love could inspire a warrior to suppress his own personality and emotions, in the name of duty? He did his duty because he loved mankind’s empire. To him, as savage and bloody as it could be, it was worth saving. It was worth giving everything he had to keep the Imperium functioning for another day. Even another hour.

And in their malice, the Inquisition had violated that loyalty.
I spoke softly, ‘Did you volunteer for this mission, Amadeus?’

He looked at me the way I was looking at him: with sudden, guarded revelation. ‘Of course. Did you believe I was assigned it?’

‘I thought you were commanded to come. I thought you resented it.’

‘Throne of Terra, Anuradha, who do you believe I am? I volunteered because someone had to go, even if it meant death. It was a vital duty, or so I thought. But my superiors knew, Anuradha. The Inquisition could not, would not, have acted alone. Master Nisk Ran-Thawll gave his blessing for them to seed this assassin within our ranks. They knew they were lying to me.’

As he spoke, he banged his knuckles against his chest-plate, over and over. Mimicking, in his fury, the tribal drums of the Spears’ pre-battle ritual. I doubt he even realised he was doing it. Some things just trickle into your blood, the way I’d started saying Aye instead of Yes.

‘They even had her, our nameless assassin, trained as a helot, well enough to deceive me.’

That was what ate him up inside more than anything else. I knew he would mourn his inability to sense Kartash’s betrayal and I was certain he would despise the Inquisition for their schemes of slaughter, but it was the Chapter’s actions that cut deepest. His own superiors, soldiers he had respected his entire life, hadn’t sent him here to explore Elara’s Veil at all.

This was no mission of mercy, to guide the Spears and the Lions back to the true Imperium. The Nemeton Deployment was a masquerade, a stepping stone on a path that ended with today’s events.

‘They threw me into the abyss,’ Amadeus said, low, slow and vicious. ‘They sold my life, and the lives of everyone aboard In Devout Abjuration – they sacrificed the warship itself – to appease the accursed Inquisition. All of those loyal souls, wasted on the whims of treachery.’

There was nothing I could say to that. I feared every word was true.

Amadeus exhaled as his eyes glazed over with realisation. ‘The reek of incense,’ he said.

‘Master?’

‘Kartash’s pious habit. The false holiness. The stench of ritual incense ingrained in Kartash’s skin and hair. Do you see?’

I confessed that I did not.
‘The assassin did it to mask the scent of polymorphine. That is the chemical in her blood that allows her to alter her flesh and bones. I would have smelled it had she not hidden it. The Spears would have smelled it, too.’

I nodded, but said nothing.

I watched Amadeus as he pieced the evidence together and reached another cold truth. ‘The hunchback was nothing but a misleading tactic, as well. That deformity of flesh provided a place for the assassin to hide her weapons. She must have sheathed them in inviolate casings and flesh-changed to accept them within her body.

From the other cell, we heard Nar Kezar’s filthy chuckle.

‘Another beautiful tale of ripe, stinking Imperial hypocrisy.’

Amadeus finally met the other prisoner’s eyes. ‘When I am executed, Basilisk, my last request will be for Brēac to crush your smirking skull beneath his boots.’

A nasty light shone in Nar Kezar’s eyes. He adopted an air of amused indulgence and pretended to meditate once more.

I broke the silence that followed. ‘The Spears won’t execute us, master. They’ll see the truth.’

My master looked at me, most of his confusion masked. Most, but not all.

‘We’re innocent,’ I stressed in the face of his doubt.

‘You don’t understand, do you?’ Amadeus shook his head. ‘You are innocent. I am guilty of ignorance. Through my inattention, I allowed this to happen.’

‘That’s madness. There was no way for you to know.’

‘Victory needs no explanation,’ he replied with annoying calm. ‘Failure accepts none.’

Within the hour, it was time for our trial. The process of weighing guilt and judgement was hilarious if only for its brevity. When it began, Nar Kezar rose from his feigned meditations to approach the energy shield sealing the front of his cell.

‘Ducarius of the Kavalei,’ he greeted the black-armoured newcomer. ‘Another interrogation, druid?’

Ducarius waved an idle hand in the prisoner’s direction, and there was a
quiver of psychic force in the air. Nar Kezar, that proud lord of the Pure, crashed back against the back iron his cell wall. The impact echoed around the cell block. He rose slowly, and much more quietly now. Still smiling, though. Always smiling.

‘Amadeus,’ Ducarius said as he stood outside our cell. ‘Anuradha.’ Morcant was with him, as were two other Paragons. All were helmed for battle. Morcant’s red-and-black crest almost reaching the metal ceiling,

‘We didn’t know.’ I tried to infuse my words with sincerity, fearing it only made me sound like a desperate liar.

Ducarius looked down at me. I felt a pull, a silken caress inside my skull, as if a breeze were drawing something forth from inside me. In that moment I heard the memory of thunder, and felt the cold rain of Nemeton on my skin.

There was laughter in that storm. There was joy. Not from the storm itself, but from the two souls that danced beneath it, sending their laughter up into the sky. Two children, two boys, one younger and one on the cusp of manhood. Two brothers, their faces unmarked by ink, painted only by the sacred rain.

‘Who is he?’ I whispered. Ducarius didn’t answer me, but I think I knew without him needing to. His brother. His older brother, from his tribal life before he was considered dead by his clan and his soul lost to the Spears.

He wasn’t offering me the memory. We were just close enough, somehow, that I could feel it. What was he seeing inside me? My training? My father’s thirst? My time on the Venatrix?

Then, I was falling. Falling backwards, drifting away. The storm faded. The rain stopped. The brothers’ joy became hollow, and the grey sky rotted away to black.

I blinked. It was over. I’d not moved at all. A minute could have passed, or an entire day. A hunger with numb, grinding teeth worked on my insides. Dark liquid spattered in slow drops down my uniform. I sniffed at a feeling of unexpected warmth as my nose trickled with blood, and dabbed another rivulet of it from my lips.

Ducarius beckoned Amadeus closer. My master obeyed. They made eye contact, naked eyes to eye-lenses, for no more than three beats of my heart.

The druid broke the stare, taking a step back with a purr of armour joints. Amadeus’ jaw was clenched tight, but he wasn’t bleeding as I was.
‘Move back from the warding field,’ Ducarius said.

Amadeus stepped back. I didn’t. I hated the Spears’ grim sense of purpose. I hated that they’d already made up their minds.

‘Step back from the warding field,’ he repeated. I only obeyed because Amadeus pulled me back with a hand on my shoulder.

The energy field thinned, then faded with a rumble of diminishing power.

‘What’s happening?’ I asked.

The first Paragon unclamped a bolt rifle from his backpack and threw it to Amadeus. My master caught it smoothly and checked the ammunition count.

‘What’s happening!’ I repeated. ‘Was that our trial?’

But I was back to being a slave, just a human among Adeptus Astartes warriors. My questions meant nothing when they had blood to shed. They didn’t even look at me.

‘My helmet,’ said Amadeus. The other Paragon unlocked it from his belt and tossed it over. Amadeus sealed it in place with a sibilance of air pressure.

‘My thanks.’ His voice was low and mechanically grating, filtered through his helmet’s vox-grille. ‘What information do we have?’

Ducarius showed him a rag of cloth that looked torn from a Spear thrall’s azure robe. Blood marked it, as telling as any tattoo.

‘The assassin bleeds. She was hit, more than once, in the crossfire. She’s weakened now. We can take her alive.’

‘A promising start,’ Amadeus replied. His voice was thickening with eagerness. ‘Your plan, Ducarius?’

Ducarius tapped the side of his own helm, by one of the aural receptors. The conversation I’d been privy to was suddenly nothing more than a series of muted vox-clicks as my master and the Spears spoke over a squad-comm. I knew better than to try to be heard. More than a decade of training had taught me my place, though I’d rarely hated it with such vehemence until now.

I looked up at Ducarius, thinking of what I’d seen and the life he’d once lived. Just a child on a world of storms.

_I saw your brother_, I thought.

The warriors’ helms were still infrequently clicking, and they still made the minor movements of conversation. Ducarius glanced my way, his armour
thrumming with the motion of turning his head down to see me.

His voice was a soft, resonating murmur between my ears.

+His name was Fionn. He died of lung-muck. What you would call tuberculosis.+ I bit my lip, feeling the echoes of that silent voice filter around my mind, seeping into the cracks, taking a long time to dissipate. I wanted to speak more, yet I feared to. It was the same as standing before an icy sea and bracing for the plunge.

What did you see? I thought at him. Inside me, what did you see?

+Everything.+ Ducarius was turning away, his brethren and Amadeus moving with him.

‘Anuradha,’ my master said. ‘Return to our arming chamber. Hide until this is over.’

‘But, master–’ He kept moving. I had my orders, and he had his mission. He was going hunting, and I was going to hide.

3 I refused to sit idly by in exile.

First, I dragged a crate of equipment from our chambers, out into the corridor. I looked both ways into the dimness. Nothing either way. As comforting as that was for half a second, given that Kartash could turn into shadow and move faster than a room full of genhanced Space Marines, it really didn’t mean anything at all.

I left the crate and slipped back into the chamber. I used my monitron bracer to scan my surroundings, motion-pulsing for echolocation and thermal-scraping for heat signatures. Nothing and nothing. Our home, such as it was, was empty except for me.

My real armour was gone, stripped from me aboard the *Venatrix*, and all I had left was a flak vest with padded gauntlets and a visorless blast helmet. I buckled them on with one hand and entered the keycode to secure the armoury door with the other. The deadlocks crunched home one by one, sealing me in our chambers. I listened to them grinding into position while I loaded shells into my Engager. One, two, three; I loaded the shotgun’s auxiliary grenade launcher and racked the first explosive into place.
As I prepared myself, I thought of Kartash. I thought of him shivering in the rain, and how we’d felt to learn it was his first planetfall. How he had suffered that night, with the sensation of natural gravity dragging at his limbs for the very first time. How he’d congratulated me for my insightful observations on Nemetese culture. Whoever she was, this woman who’d been living as Kartash, she’d been laughing at us the entire time. Lying to our faces, praising our insight, shivering with false afflictions and inwardly laughing at our easy trust.

And then came the boarding assault. Downing me and Tyberia, trying to kill us by leaving us for the Exilarchy. After that, all the protests of innocence and poor, wounded expressions of mourning that I held a grudge against him over events that had never happened.

One of my teeth broke, I was grinding my jaw so hard. I swallowed the chip of enamel by accident. God-Emperor, I was falling to pieces since leaving the true Imperium. Surely some tribal poet among the Spears would have something to say about that. Something about symbolism. Ugh.

Calm, calm, I thought.

‘I’m going to find you, Kartash,’ I said aloud to the empty room.

I laid my Engager against my seat in immediate reach as I clambered into the throne. It had been months since I’d activated my consoles and they were slow to come back to life. The monitors showed grey for several seconds as they remembered the feeling of power flowing into them. The hololthic input and displays took even longer. I was gritting my teeth again, my metal fingers caressing the Engager’s barrel as I waited those interminable minutes, feeling each one as an hour.

The sensory thimbles were cold as I slipped them over each finger. The needle-sting of blood-identification tingled my fingertips.

*Anuradha Daaz* flashed up in hololthic letters in the air before me. * Assigned Helot Secundus to Lieutenant Commander Amadeus Kaias Incarius. For the Chapter. For the Emperor. For the Imperium.*

I started typing along the illusory control panels projected before me, falling back into my training, meshing my senses with the remote systems of what was stored in the equipment crate outside. My servo-skulls, all four remaining probes that I’d brought with me across the Great Rift, rose on their weak anti-grav plates. They bobbed uncertainly in the air, slicing the shipboard gloom with their red-dot laser sights. The view on each of my screens was monochrome perfection, bleached of colour but not quality. Their visual
sensoria clusters were still in perfect function. Amadeus and I might have been ruined by the Nemeton Deployment, but our wargear still worked fine.

I eased the skulls forward in opposing directions, cutting my attention between all four. Two remained outside the sealed door, drifting in loose patrolling arcs. The other two went wandering deeper into the ship. Just because I’d been commanded to remain here didn’t mean I couldn’t join the hunt.

She was a shape-shifter. Finding her could take an eternity. I refused to remain imprisoned in my quarters for months while the Spears took blood samples and Ducarius read the minds of thirty thousand crew members.

If she couldn’t get off the ship… Would she hide? Or seek allies? Her injuries would make hiding difficult. But who could she go to? Who would risk everything to join her?

My monitron caught the movement before I saw it. The screen of my bracer flashed an aggrieved green as it chimed once. I was out of my chair in a diving roll, Engager in hand, before the pulse had stopped echoing around the room.

Instinct saved me, as it so often saves soldiers when there’s no time to think, only time to act. I thumbed the sensor plate at my wrist as I regained my feet. The mortis-warning beamed to Amadeus in a data-spurt before I even levelled my shotgun at the intruder.

She dropped from the ceiling. Whatever grace she’d possessed was gone, left behind in the strategium along with the murdered Ekene and the blood she’d lost after killing him. This was no liquid movement ending with a threatening crouch. The figure in contoured, armoured black skin fell like a shadow shot out of the sky. She even grunted as she went to her hands and one knee.

I knew nothing of the training and modifications that assassins of her ilk must go through, but whatever temple or cult had trained her, they made her strong. I couldn’t believe she was still standing. Her black suit of synthetic skin had tried to reseal itself over the rips and ruptures, but Ducarius had been underplaying the gravity of her wounds when he’d shown the bloodied rag. One of her legs ended at the knee, and the black suit had incompletely sealed over the shattered flesh and bone. Bolt-blasted gore showed at the stump. Another two bolts had taken her in the shoulder and thigh, where the reformed armour-skin was burned and fused over what were surely ragged, bleeding wounds.

Her mask was gone, half-torn from her face, melted down the side of her
neck. I had no idea who I was looking at. I’d never seen this woman before. I didn’t even know if this was her real face beneath the torment and the blood and the scabbing.

I couldn’t imagine what chemicals she’d imbibed to stay awake and alive, to slow her blood loss, to keep focused through the pain of her body’s near annihilation.

‘Anuradha.’ My name rang discordantly from her tongue. She pronounced it as Kartash did, but in a voice I’d never heard.

I didn’t fire. If she moved, I’d pull the trigger, and to hell with the Spears wanting her alive. As it was, I was sure she’d be dead from her wounds in minutes. I tracked the gun over her, choosing where to fire.

‘Don’t,’ she said. Her bloodshot eye tracked the movement of my hand. ‘Please don’t.’

‘Then don’t move. The Spears want you alive.’

She smiled, and it was ugly and knowing and vicious even without the blood that bubbled over her bottom lip.

‘I’m sure they do.’ She sighed, and I saw pleasure in her eyes, mixed in with the pain. ‘A Space Marine Chapter Master, on the bridge of a ship. My name will be a legend among my sisters.’

‘If your sisters ever learn of it.’ She was bleeding on the deck. Whatever blood coagulants she’d used were either wearing off or not potent enough to fight wounds this bad. ‘And you were shot to pieces trying to escape. Not a pretty end to a legend, Kartash.’

She licked her bloodstained lips as I used her abandoned name. ‘You don’t have to be a slave any more, Anuradha.’

I hesitated. ‘What?’

‘Your thraldom.’ She waved a trembling hand around at the chamber, at the bank of monitors I’d just reawakened. ‘You don’t have to be a slave, any more. There’s another way. Come with me. Help me get off the ship.’

‘You beat me bloody and left me for dead.’ The shotgun was the most delicious, tempting weight I’d ever felt in my grip. The urge to squeeze the trigger was a physical sensation that buzzed through me. ‘I was enslaved because of you. Tyberia died because of you.’

‘There are temples,’ she said, carefully forming the words with a numb tongue. ‘Sanctuaries. Even here, in Imperium Nihilus. Help me. Help me
reach one. I can’t... I can’t do it alone.’

That much at least was surely true.

‘You’ll be rewarded,’ she said. ‘Freedom. Wealth. Anything. Anything.’

The join where my human leg met my bionic ankle started to itch. I didn’t reply, and I didn’t lower my gun.

Had Amadeus received my signal? How far away was he, when he received it?

‘You have no reason to trust me, I know that. But I meant you no malice. You were just in the way. I had to remove you. But the game has changed.’ She spat blood onto the deck. Whatever was wrong inside her was accelerating. ‘Freedom, Anuradha. Is this the life you want? Staring through that fool’s eyes at war after war? Living as a slave, ignored by arrogant demigods?’

‘I could never trust you.’ That was entirely honest. ‘And I’m not tempted by freedom.’ That was a lie, brazen and raw, to balance out the truth.

I was about to mock her, for she was desperate indeed if I was her last hope, but then she started to... flow. That’s the only way I can describe it. Her skin began to flow like a sluggish liquid, though that implies a slowness that feels wrong in the retelling. It only took a few moments, but where she’d been a moment before, now Kartash sat on the deck – hunched and wounded and in very real pain.

Had I not been so appalled and fascinated, I would have recognised this for the distraction it was. I’d have seen the blades glinting in Kartash’s palm.

‘Just help me hide, then. Use your probes. Help me evade the patrols. I came to you, Anuradha... I thought, after all these years of slavery to the Mentors, you’d hunger for freedom...’

‘Maybe I do.’ I felt traitorous just saying it, but confessing it didn’t mean I’d trust him. Or her. Or whoever this creature really was.

‘Just help me hide. Help me heal. We can flee later. Once we reach my temple...’

‘Then what?’

‘Then you’ll be free.’ Kartash crawled closer, his stubby fingers curling in the gantry decking, dragging his ruined form forward.

‘Stop,’ I warned. ‘The Spears want you alive. I don’t.’
He stopped. His eyes were bestial and calculating as he gazed down the gun barrel. Those dark eyes made me think of an animal alone at night, weighing whether to approach a fire to taste the blood of a sleeping man. Hunger warred with wisdom in that stare.

He wisely said nothing more, letting my imagination fill the silence with wonder. Clear skies. No more endless living on warships and polishing armour and repairing weapons. Pure water. No more refiltered, brackish fluid that tasted of the countless souls that had drunk it before you. Freedom. No more overseers, no more orders, no more living life only to prepare a distant and uncaring master for endless warfare.

Of course I was tempted. Of course I was. Anyone would be. ‘I promise you, Anuradha. On my life and soul, I swear I can set you free.’ That decided it. Those words. They drenched me with a clarity so severe I almost laughed.

‘A witch warned me about trusting a broken man’s promises.’

His features twisted. ‘What…?’

Silver flashed in his hands. The Engager kicked in mine.

4

I threw myself to the side, avoiding his envenomed blades. Later, I’d find them impaled to the hilts in two of my monitors, the alchemical poison on them having dissolved the circuitry behind the screens.

As I moved, he moved, and his façade fell apart. He rolled away, flowing again, regrowing his leg in the time it took me to rack the shotgun’s slide. The assassin was on his feet, not the woman she had been but not the Kartash I’d known, either. This Kartash was taller, muscled, needing no hunchback to hide his weapons and no maiming injuries to elicit sympathy. The alien shortsword gave off a sickly jade sheen as it projected from his fist. It shivered out of harmony with everything around us, phasing in and out of being.

The wounds weren’t wholly a deceit. He was bleeding and he was ragged, and no narcotic cocktails or malleable flesh would let him ignore the bolt shells he’d taken in the botched escape.

He ran for me. He leapt. The jade sword shimmered, existing and de-existing, breath by breath.

None of this mattered. I’d fired, but I hadn’t missed. The vortex grenade I’d
launched at the far wall burst when Kartash was still halfway across the chamber. It didn’t explode outwards and spray fragmentation debris. It tore through physical law, ripping through reality instead of flesh and metal.

I can’t describe the colours that swallowed that section of the chamber, because my eyes are natural and mechanical, and what I saw was outside the realms of both. If fire and hate and acid were colours, they would be the colours of that vortex. It was a hole in the ship, and a maw in reality, and a wound in the world. The sound it made was the sound you would hear if a city of a hundred thousand men and women woke to find their children dead.

I was on the ground, holding to the grated floor. My bionic hand crushed the iron deck, I held it so fiercely. My machine foot clamped with a claw’s grip, bending the metal it locked on to. I still slid in the force of that tempest, blown and dragged towards the puncture that led into the open ocean of the Sea of Souls. One of my metal fingers snapped. Another two started to bend.

Kartash was still on his feet, leaning forward as if fighting the wind of a true hurricane. What inhuman strength kept him able to stand against that storm, I’ll never know or understand. He bellowed wordless hate at me, the sound sucked away into the rip in reality behind him. He screamed in his own voice, in mine, in Tolmach’s and Brêac’s and Amadeus’. I remembered the voices I’d heard when the Huntress boarded us. The voices over the vox, trying to herd Tyberia and I away from safety. Back then I’d thought it was the whispering of the warp, but perhaps even that had been Kartash, too. He hadn’t known Tolmach was dead; that was why he used the war-priest’s voice first. Then he tried Brêac… He’d been trying to find us, to make sure we both died in the battle.

Whatever polymorphine was, it played havoc in his bloodstream now, amplified by the warp or perhaps just taking advantage of his lapse in control. Faces grew out of his flesh and sank back into his body. His mouth opened wide enough to show half of his skull, streamed with bloody veins and tendons, then slid back almost into the right place. His eyes split and reformed in their sockets. They divided like cells under a microscope.

The chamber’s bulkhead fell inwards, but no crashing sound or tremor through the deck could be heard or felt over the void-slit I’d blasted into being. Amadeus stood in the carved-open doorway, silhouetted by flashing red emergency lume-globes. In one hand was his sword, the plain and serviceable weapon given to him by one of the Spears when he’d awoken as one of the Second Generation. Lightning flowed down its length from the generator in the hilt.
Brêac was next to him, with his war-spear raised to throw. They’d sawed through the door, and now the vortex sucks at them, pulling them closer, their boots scraping sparks across the deck. They could have been a painting in that moment, a representation of the Emperor’s Angels of Death. Hell screamed at them, starving for their souls. They answered it by throwing their weapons.

The spear took Kartash in the chest, the sword lanced through his belly, and the blades struck with a twinned *crack* that I heard over the shrieking of the damned. It’s tempting to milk the tale by swearing I recall Kartash’s defiant snarls or describe yet more superhuman endurance, but the truth is that those two weapons practically bisected him. The second they struck he catapulted backwards, shedding blood like red rain in a spinning spray.

The vortex welcomed his spinning corpse. It ate him.

And an eternity later, which my master assures me was no more than ten seconds, the rupture in reality collapsed. Ectoplasm hissed in the sudden silence, fizzing its acidic way through the iron deck. A few spatters of toxic energy. Blood, maybe, from who knows what.

‘You owe me a new spear,’ Brêac said to Amadeus.

My master didn’t answer. He was staring at me, at the ruin of our chambers, and the place where Kartash had been.

‘And you, Anuradha.’ Brêac spoke as he entered the chamber. ‘If you ever discharge a vortex grenade on my ship again, I’ll throw you out the airlock. Rains of Nemeton, Serivahn is going to kill you.’

5

But.

Some nights when I wake bathed in sweat, even all these years later, I think I remember it differently. In my memory, Kartash’s eyes are glazed in death, but in my dreams I see the dawn of knowing horror in his gaze. I recall his body dissolving in the Sea of Souls, torn apart from flensing energies. But in my dreams, I see him torn apart by grasping hands and hungry mouths; fingers that rend, teeth that tear.

He was obliviated by unchained energies. That’s what happened. He wasn’t eviscerated by a shrieking banshee with fire for a grave shroud and Kartash’s name on her skullish lips. Tyberia is at the Emperor’s side. She wasn’t there, with skin of burning blood, clawing at the deck with talons of black fire and screaming for me to give Kartash to her.
Sailors see lies in the warp’s tides. That’s all. Everyone knows that. It’s why staring into the Sea of Souls is forbidden.

I’ve never rewatched that moment from my data-spools. Why would I need to? I know what I saw.

Dreams are just dreams.
There. It’s done. The tale of Amadeus’ arrival is told.

But Vadhán doesn’t think so. He says there’s more to the first chapter, and when I ask what he means, he taps his scarred fingertips against his tattooed cheeks.

I say he’s being foolish. That part of the story is obvious, surely? In reply he bangs his knuckles on his breastplate, giving the Spears’ traditional wartime drumbeat. He intends to drown out my protests. He does this with a smile.

‘That’s a little rude,’ I say to him.


‘Fine,’ I tell him. ‘Fine.’

As the Hex sailed with the Blade of the Seventh Son, Brêac composed a brief report to be loaded into an emergency beacon pod. It would be fired into the Straits of Epona, where it would either drown in the warp’s tides or find its way back to the true Imperium with the God-Emperor’s guidance.

It read as follows:

The warship In Devout Abjuration has reached our dominion after a cataclysmic journey through the Rift. We found her dead in the void, all souls lost. The remains of Amadeus Kiais Incarius were identified. Decay and mutation rendered his gene-seed unrecoverable from the carcass.

During our boarding actions, we uncovered indisputable evidence of the Inquisition’s ploy to interfere with the Adeptus Vaelarrii. Witnesses from the Black Templars, the Celestial Lions and the Emperor’s Spears will attest to the truth of this discovery.

Any subsequent vessels in the Mentor Legion’s heraldry or bearing the Inquisition’s mark that run the Straits of Epona will be destroyed without hesitation.

We are the Sentinels of the Veil. We still live. We still fight.

Elara’s Veil is ours.
Amadeus approved. ‘That says all it needs to say.’

Brêac nodded. ‘I thought you might like it. How do you feel?’

For once, he didn’t hesitate. ‘Free.’ After a moment, he gave a dry chuckle. ‘I just realised, this probe and its message form my tombstone.’

‘It’s poetic enough for the likes of you, False Scorpion. Don’t expect me to shed any tears, though.’

They stood in one of the Hex’s secondary launch hangars, their words echoing around the cavernous space around them. I was half a mile away, sat at my consoles, watching through Amadeus’ eyes and listening through his ears.

‘If you’re staying, you need ink on your face.’ Brêac looked at my master with distaste. ‘You look like a child. It’s embarrassing.’

Amadeus nodded. ‘It will be done.’

Beyond the void-shielded hangar bay the warp raged on, helplessly hating us. Deep in the ship, Nar Kezar railed at his captivity, mere months away from inflicting such grievous wounds upon us that we’d forever regret not letting him die with his accursed ship.

We sailed for Elysium, where the future of the Adeptus Vaelarri would be decided; where the Armada would muster to save the Lions from extinction.

‘Lord Brêac,’ I voxed to him.

‘Anuradha, do you ever stop spying?’ he replied.

‘It’s my duty, lord. May I ask a question?’

‘Aye, you need tattoos as well.’

‘That isn’t my question.’

‘No? Well then, go on.’

‘The Vargantes dialect’s word for false is “Va”, isn’t it? So what is the word for Scorpion?’

‘Dhán,’ he replied. I watched through my master’s eyes as the Lord of the Third Warhost grinned. ‘False Scorpion would be “Vadhán”.’
Sincerest thanks to Nick Kyme for his patience and advice, to John French for much of the same, and to my test readers in the Ezekarion (Ead, Greg, Nikki and Marijan) for enduring those endless Ifs, Buts and Maybes.

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A portion of this book’s proceeds will go to Cancer Research UK, the SOS Children’s Villages charity to help orphans in Bangladesh, and Ellie’s Retreat: a charity in Northern Ireland for H-ABC research and the affected, bereaved families.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Master of Mankind*, *Betrayer* and *The First Heretic*, as well as the novella *Aurelian* and the audio drama *Butcher’s Nails*, for the same series. He has also written the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Spear of the Emperor*, the popular Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Armageddon*, the novels *The Talon of Horus* and *Black Legion*, the Grey Knights novel *The Emperor’s Gift* and numerous short stories. He lives and works in Northern Ireland.
An extract from *Deathwatch: Shadowbreaker*. 
‘Wrong side of the line this time, Lyndon. She made a mistake. Dragged you into it. Don’t make it worse. We can help her, but only if you talk to me. The longer you wait, the greater the chance she dies out there.’

The speaker moved in closer. Lyndon could feel hot breath on his face, noted the sharp scent of recaff on it.

‘We already know about the shipments, the fringe-world smugglers, the charters into t’au space. I admire your loyalty, but think, man – no transmissions, no word of her for months. If she weren’t in trouble, why the silence? The ordo can’t just sit on this.’

The pitch-perfect tones of the confidant, all understanding and sympathy and reason. Every sound, every look, every gesture was calculated to convey that this was a fellow on your side, a man with your best interests at heart. All he wanted was a little information. Just a few words, so easy to speak, so unbearably painful to keep to oneself.

Bastogne, he called himself. Not his real name.

He was good, but Lyndon knew the dance. He’d been on the other side of it often enough. Didn’t make it easier. Too much was at stake. Her ladyship had asked for trust. She needed time. Lyndon expected to die here in order to buy her that. It was the best he could realistically hope for now.

Had the abduction team consisted only of this interrogator and his muscled goons, Lyndon’s confidence in his ability to stay silent would have been supreme. But there was a fly in the balm – a man-shaped fly sitting on a wooden stool in the far corner, robed and hooded, tattooed with the marks of both the ordo and the Adeptus Astra Telepathica.

An ordo psyker.

Sartutius, the others had called him. He sat in silence, pensive after his earlier failed attempt to pry information from Lyndon’s mind with his fell sorcery.

The pentagrammic wards tattooed on Lyndon’s flesh and laser-etched into his bones were holding off the psyker’s invasive mind-assaults, but for how long? Sartutius never seemed to blink those useless all-white eyes. He never looked away, no doubt intent on Lyndon’s aura, probing for gaps, eager to exploit any cracks that would let him inside.

Yes, Lyndon’s wards were strong, but given enough time and the right kinds of pressure, an ordo psyker almost always got the answers he or she was
looking for.

A bead of sweat rolled down Lyndon’s neck. No respite from the heat in here.

The interior of the crude structure was baking hot. A single room, twelve metres by seven, the walls thick, the floor rockcrete. Solid. Probably soundproofed and scan-shielded, too. The interrogator and his team weren’t sloppy. They’d have prepped the place well.

Oil stains on the rockcrete floor, heavy-duty pulleys attached to the rafters – the place had likely been used for vehicle repair or storage in the past. Metal slats high in the walls were tilted inwards a few degrees. Through them, spears of hot midday sun sliced into the room, muted by the grime on the windows but still bright enough to leave trails when Lyndon closed his eyes.

The windows were high, the glass clouded and milky. No one would be seeing in.

‘Trying to help you here,’ Bastogne continued. ‘The ordo takes care of its own.’

_Groxshit_, thought Lyndon.

Everyone in the ordo knew the truth – the larger factions within warred constantly for power and control.

He pressed his lips together, felt pain where the lower lip had been split in the scuffle of his kidnap and re-split in the subsequent beatings.

He hurt all over. It got worse every time they dragged him up out of that hole and smacked him awake. And it wasn’t going to get better.

Dust motes danced a slow waltz in the air, moving gracefully on the interplay of warm microcurrents. Time seemed to pass at a crawl in here. Before the beginning of this morning’s round of questions, he had lain with hands and feet bound, a black sack tied over his head. They gave him food and water, just barely enough to keep him functional. Isolated and blindfolded, most hostages quickly lose track of time, Lyndon knew. It was a common technique, all part of breaking them down.

But mental time-keeping had been an early part of Lyndon’s basic training. By his count, they’d been holding him for three days and six hours. And that meant alarm bells were ringing loud and clear elsewhere.

There was a sudden hard yank on his outstretched left arm. A surge of fresh pain followed as rough rope bit into his wrist. The masked thug holding the
left rope had adjusted his grip. Now the one on the right, just as powerfully built and identically masked, shifted his grip, and more of Lyndon’s nerves sang out. It was only these ropes and the graft-muscled brutes holding them that kept him upright. He no longer had the energy to do so himself. He suspected several bad fractures in his legs.

Simple-minded thugs. Brute force. No finesse. Had he not been bound and injured, he could have killed both in a matter of seconds.

But here he was, strung to pulleys in the ceiling, stripped to the waist, face bruised and swollen, cuts and contusions all over. He was limp, beaten as badly as he’d ever been.

Clever of them to use that paralytic when they did the snatch. It’s what he would have done.

They had placed a false tail on him at the port, just clumsy enough to be noticed, not clumsy enough to be a clear dupe. While Lyndon had been busy avoiding the more obvious tail, he hadn’t spotted the snatch team. He should have known they’d never trust his capture to just one man.

Sloppy. And now he was paying for it. But he wouldn’t let her ladyship suffer for his mistake.

There had been no time to bite down on the cyanide tooth. The paralytic they’d hit him with had been so fast-acting, so potent. Neurox necarhadrine or some new derivative. He was unconscious before his head hit the street. While he’d been out cold, they’d extracted the tooth. The fact that he was still breathing meant they’d also nullified the tiny cortex bomb in his skull.

No clean, quick death for field agent Urgoss Lyndon. Not while he knew what these men did not.

He felt Bastogne’s breath on his face again, this time close to his ear.

‘We’re trying to help her. I wish you could see that.’

The ordo seal was legitimate. Lyndon would have known a fake. Besides, Bastogne had Inquisition operative written all over him. Despite the heat, he wore a long black grox-leather coat and gloves. Somehow, though everyone else in the room was sweating rivers, he was as cool as ice.

‘You know,’ said Bastogne, stepping back but still facing his captive, ‘I admire your loyalty, your integrity. You’re good. Well trained. I respect that. We’re the same, you and I. Same sense of duty to the ordo, to our handlers. Had mine disappeared, you would be asking the questions right now instead
of me, desperate to help an inquisitor who, in all probability, needs urgent aid. I wonder if you’d be quite as patient with me as I am being with you.’

Lyndon had nothing to say to that.

Bastogne turned away for a moment and sighed. He came back in close. Hovering there, he spoke softly in Lyndon’s ear.

‘I would help you, you know, if things were reversed. I’d know that it was the right thing to do. Damn it, man, think of the Imperium. We want the same thing. The enemy is out there, not in here. If you’re helping anyone with your damnable silence, it’s the stinking xenos.’

Lyndon almost managed a snort, but his mouth and nasal passages were bone dry. All that came out was a wheeze. He hung there, breathing hard through those dry, split lips, eyelids fluttering as he teetered on the edge of passing out again.

Bastogne shook his head and gave another sigh, heavier this time, then began slowly walking around Lyndon.

‘What am I to do, then? If you won’t talk to me, how can I help? Doesn’t it bother you? She may be dying out there. The t’au may be cutting into her flesh as we speak, eager to gain whatever she knows. Hear the death clock ticking. A retrieval team sent now, today, might be the only chance she has.’

Lyndon let the words roll off him. His ladyship had been clear:

*Nothing and no one must interfere with my plans. You will give your life if you have to, but reveal not a word. I tell you now, the stakes have never been so high.*

There was a sudden rush of movement from behind him. Pain exploded in his kidneys. Bastogne had struck him a savage body blow.

Agony became all of his reality. The breath burst from his lungs. He sagged almost to his knees, but the twin thugs yanked him up again, sending more fire through his singing nerves.

*Throne and saints*, thought Lyndon. *Let it end. Let me keep my silence and just die.*

Bastogne snarled and spun away in disgust, the tails of his long black coat flaring, his veneer of kindly patience abandoned at last. Behind him, Lyndon coughed wetly.

‘Damn your ancestors,’ Bastogne spat over his shoulder. ‘If you don’t tell me what I want to know, I’m going to start enjoying myself. You don’t want that.’
To the others, he barked, ‘Keep him upright.’

The heavies pulled in the slack again. Lyndon was raised almost onto his toes. He hissed in agony.

Bastogne walked over to a plasteel table set flush against the west wall and opened a black case. Looking down at the contents with some distaste, he spoke quietly, as if murmuring to himself.

The tiny I-shaped pin on his collar picked up his words.

‘My lord, I think I’ve taken this as far as I can go with conventional methods. This is ordo conditioning at the highest level. He can’t be broken without extreme measures.’

Another voice – calm and level, but grainy from so much distance – responded via the micro-vox-bead in Bastogne’s left ear.

‘It was to be expected. Time to move this forward. I want Sartutius to try again. After that, use one of the worms, but not before.’

Bastogne frowned. There in the case, in a transparent cylinder of toughened permaglass, several slick purple forms writhed and slithered against each other.

He looked over at the cowled figure in the corner, seated on his wooden stool, hands clasped, exuding the fell atmosphere which clung to all so-called gifted. The psyker’s tall wooden staff rested against the wall beside him.

‘You’re up again, witchblood.’

There was a frustrated mutter from the cowled man, but he took his staff in hand and raised his frail form gently from the stool. With his other hand, he drew back his hood to reveal a face deathly pale and deeply lined. Networks of pale blue veins laced his papery skin, flowing everywhere. The veins were joined by wires that trailed back to a psychic amplifier bolted to the base of his neck. In the centre of his forehead was the stark red tattoo of the schola that had trained him in the marshalling of his foul power, the same schola that had subsequently sanctioned him for ordo use.

As he brushed past Bastogne, the psyker paused briefly. ‘This is pointless, agent. I have told you already. He is too well protected. If it were tattoos alone, we could flay him. But to break the wards on his spine, on his skull… He would die before I could–’

‘Do as his lordship commands,’ snapped Bastogne. His dislike for the psyker was never far from the surface. ‘And do it fast. Or what good are you?’ He
gestured down at the worms in the tube. ‘If you can’t, we go to the last resort. The chrono is ticking. We’ll need to move soon.’

Sartutius scowled, but he crossed to stand directly in front of Lyndon and raised his right hand. Spreading his fingers, he pressed the tips to several points on the prisoner’s head. He began to chant, his voice a low, monotonous drone.

Lyndon tried to pull his head away, but he was too weak. The psyker’s fingers held him.

The sunlight in the room seemed to flicker and dim.

A sudden chill pricked the skin of those present.

The walls seemed to withdraw a little as unnatural power tainted the air.

Bastogne watched, back to the wall, as far from Sartutius as space allowed. The masked heavies turned their eyes away. They hated being near the sanctioned psyker, especially while he exercised his unholy gift.

Beads of sweat began to form on Sartutius’ pale, bald head. Bastogne saw the trembling begin, saw the muscles of the psyker’s jaw clench as he exerted more and more ethereal force. Something foul began to prickle the skin of everyone in the room. Sartutius’ body became tense, trembling with effort. Bastogne thought the man’s sparrow-frail ribs might crack any second and his chest collapse. Blood began to seep from the psyker’s nose and the corners of his eyes.

The chanting rose in tone and volume.

Then it stopped.

With a sharp cry, Sartutius reeled backwards, almost tripping on his robe. He stumbled, righted himself with his staff and staggered breathlessly back to his stool. He was breathing hard, soaked to the skin. With his long cotton sleeves, he dabbed at the blood trails on his face and neck. When his breath had returned, he hissed at Bastogne, ‘Damn your eyes, man. I told you there was nothing more I could do. The wards hold!’

Bastogne growled back, ‘If his lordship says you try, you bloody well try.’

But Sartutius had tried, and it was clear that Epsilon’s bone-engraver had done all too good a job on her agent.

There was only one option left.

Bastogne reached in and lifted the cylinder from the case. Somewhat
gingerly, he pressed the release on the hinged titanium cap. With his other hand, he took a pair of slim metal tongs, dipped the ends into the top of the cylinder and withdrew one of the squirming creatures.

The worm’s puckered facial orifice immediately rolled back, revealing a cluster of red cilia that began questing in the air, seeking living flesh. At the base of those cilia, Bastogne saw glimpses of the small black bone-cutting beak.

By all the saints, how he hated these things!

He closed the cap and placed the cylinder with its remaining worms back in the case. With the tongs held well away from his body, he crossed back to the centre of the room and the wretched man suspended there.

He stopped a metre in front of Lyndon and raised the worm slowly towards his face. Sensing the proximity of a living host, the worm’s cilia began moving frantically, greedily. The creature writhed, struggling to break free from the grip of the plasteel that held it.

‘You know what this is,’ said Bastogne, voice low, resigned. It was not a question.

The regret was genuine. Truth be told, he didn’t want to do this. Lyndon was forcing him, and for what? The ordo always got what it wanted in the end.

The prisoner raised bloodshot eyes under a bruised and swollen brow and saw the squirming organism just inches in front of him.

He twisted away in panic, feebly yanking on his restraints. The two men holding the ropes tensed, fixing him in place, the muscles of their forearms hardening like lengths of plasteel cable.

Lyndon knew this creature. Seven years ago, he’d had to use one, and for seven years, he’d tried and failed to forget that day.

‘Don’t,’ he breathed. ‘Epsilon still serves the ordo. I serve the ordo. I cannot tell you what you want to know… But have faith. Please. Just… don’t do this.’

The look of reluctance on Bastogne’s face as he brought the creature closer to Lyndon’s nose was no act. ‘I have orders, agent. The ordo needs to know why she went dark. I need her location. Give me reason not to use this before it’s too late.’

How Lyndon wished he could talk. His mind was already busy making the sentences he could speak to avoid this worst of fates. The worm meant more
than death – it meant an agonising descent into madness, the dissolution of his mind. Once it was inside him, it could not be stopped. And still, no matter how much he yearned to escape that fate, he would not – could not – betray her ladyship’s trust. Epsilon’s discovery was of greater importance than the life of any man. The chance that Al Rashaq was no mere legend, that it could conceivably be found and exploited… It was worth many more lives than his.

It could change everything.

So Lyndon held his tongue and steeled himself for the mind-destroying agony that was about to become his entire existence.

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