

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN

# BLOOD REAPER

A NIGHT LORDS NOVEL



**A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL**

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**Night Lords - 02**

**Aaron Dembski-Bowden**

**(An Undead Scan v1.0)**

*For Vince Rospond, with sincerest thanks, from Aaron and Katie.*

*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 Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants—and worse.*

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

## Prologue

### A CRUCIFIED ANGEL

The warrior turned his helm over in his hands. Gauntleted fingertips stroked along the dents and scratches marring the midnight ceramite. The faceplate was painted white with an artisan's care, in stylised mimicry of a human skull. One scarlet eye lens was ruined, cobwebbed by cracks. The other stared, dispassionate in deactivation, reflecting the darkening sky above.

He told himself that this wasn't symbolic. His helm's ruination didn't reflect the damage done to his Legion. Even as he quenched the notion, he wondered from whence it came. The war had a proven and profane habit of fanning the embers of melancholy, but still. There were limits.

The warrior took a breath, seeing inhuman creatures dance and bleed behind his closed eyes. He'd been dreaming of the eldar lately, for months before setting foot on this desolate world. Thousands of them: spindly things with gaunt faces and hollow eyes, aboard a burning ship of black sails and false bone.

"Soul Hunter," someone called. His brother's voice, making the name somewhere between a joke and a title of respect.

The warrior replaced his helm. One eye lens flickered live, bathing the vista in the killing-red of his targeting vision. The other showed angry grey static and the distracting after-images of visual input lag. It still echoed with a grainy and colourless view of the setting sun a few moments after he'd turned away from it.

"What?" the warrior asked.

"The Angel is breaking."

The warrior smiled as he drew the gladius sheathed at his shin. Fading sunlight flashed off the blade's edge as the steel met cold air.

"Glorious."

Crucifying one of the Imperial Astartes had been a delicious conceit, and served well as a means to an end. The warrior hung slack from his bonds, bathed in pain but surrendering no sound from his split lips. *The Emperor's "Angels of Death"*, the warrior smiled. *Stoic to the last.*

With no iron spikes to hand, getting him up there required a degree of improvisation. Ultimately, the leader ordered his men to bind the Angel to the hull of their tank by impaling the prisoner's limbs with their gladii.

Blood still dripped to the decking in liquid percussion, but had long since ceased to trickle with rainwater eagerness. The Adeptus Astartes physiology, despite its gene-written immortality, only held so much blood.

Beneath the crucified captive, a helm rested in repose. The warrior dismissed another unwelcome tide of reflection at the sight of a helm so like his own but for the colours of allegiance and the bonds of a bloodline. With no real venom, he crushed it beneath his boot. How keen and insipid, the tendrils of melancholy lately.

The warrior looked up, baring features destroyed by mutilating knives. His armour was ceramite—halved with rich blue and pure white—pitted and cracked around the impaling short swords. His face, once so grim and proud, was a skinless display of bare veins and bloody, layered musculature. Even his eyelids had been cut away.

“Hail, brother,” the warrior greeted the captive. “Do you know who we are?”

With the angel broken, a confession took no time at all. To speak the words, he came up close, the purred question rasping through his helm’s vocabulator into the air between them. The warrior’s faceplate was almost pressed to the Angel’s flayed features—two skulls staring at one another as the sun went down.

“Where is Ganges?”

As his brothers prepared, the warrior watched the distant fortress burning on the horizon, paying heed to how it devoured the world around it. A sprawl of towers and landing platforms—its dark mass ate the land while its smoking breath choked the sky. And yet it offered so little of worth when laid bare to plundering hands. Why attack a world if the one node of resources was already drained dry? Piracy without profit was nothing more than begging.

Undignified. Oh, yes. And embarrassing.

The warrior stared at its distant battlements—a meagre stronghold on a lifeless world, claimed by a thin-blooded Chapter calling itself the Marines Errant. A raid for weapons, for supplies, for precious, precious ammunition... wasted. The Chapter’s own crusades bled their reserves to nothing, leaving naught but scraps for the Eighth Legion’s grasping hands.

The fortress fell within a day, offering as little sport as plunder. Servitors and robed Mechanicum acolytes tore through the databanks in the nigh-abandoned stronghold, but discovered only what every warrior already knew: the raid was a waste of their diminishing ammunition reserves. The Marines Errant no longer stored their secondary armoury here.

“Things have changed since we last sailed these reaches of the void,” the Exalted growled to his command crew. The confession pained him, pained them all. “We have hurled our last spears... to conquer a husk.”

Amidst the bitterness of desperation and disappointment, the embers of possibility still burned. One word cycled through the streams of data, over and over again. *Ganges*. Representing the ties in this sector of space between the Marines Errant and the Martian Mechanicus, a deep-void outpost was responsible for a significant supply of raw material for the Chapter’s armoury. The Marines Errant, so proud in their armour of oceanic blue and marble white, maintained order within the subsector by vigilant destruction of human and alien pirates. In protecting Mechanicus interests, they earned the allegiance of Mars. In earning such unity, they

garnered a share in the Mechanicus' significant munitions production. A circle of symbiosis, fuelled by mutual interest.

The warrior admired that.

What mattered most was this deep-space refinery's location, and that eluded all who sought to find it. Sealed behind unbreakable encryptions, the only answer that mattered remained known to none.

The few prisoners taken from the hollow monastery offered little in the way of information. Human attendants, lobotomised servitors, Chapter serfs... None knew where Ganges lay in the heavens. What few Imperial warriors had defended this worthless world died to their brothers' bolters and blades, embracing their deaths as honourable sacrifice rather than risk capture and desecration.

A single defender yet drew breath. The warrior dragged him onto the ash plains to be flayed under the setting sun.

Even now, the Errant still drew breath, though not for much longer. He had revealed all the Eighth Legion needed to know.

*Ganges.* A raid there would reap much richer rewards.

In orbit, the Vectine system's sun was a vast orb of adrenal orange, a colour of deep fire and desperate strength. On the surface of the third world, it was a weeping eye, closed by the smog that blocked most of its brightness. The warrior watched it finally set behind the devastated stronghold.

A voice came to him, carried on the crackling waves of the vox network.

"Soul Hunter," it said.

"Stop calling me that."

"Sorry. Uzas is eating the Errant's gene-seed."

"The Errant is dead? Already?"

"Not quite. But if you wish to execute him yourself, now is the time. Uzas is making a mess."

The warrior shook his head, though there was no one to see it. He knew why his brother was asking: the Errant had been the one to break his helm, firing a bolter at close range during the assault and savaging the faceplate. Vengeance, even vengeance this petty, was tempting.

"We have all we need from him," the warrior said. "We should return to the ship soon."

"As you say, brother."

The warrior watched as the stars opened their eyes, scarcely piercing the dense cloud cover, little more than pinpricks of dull light. Ganges was out there, and with it, the chance to breathe easily again.

# PART ONE

## UNBOUND

### I

#### ECHOES

The ship was quiet as she walked its cobwebbing corridors.

Not quite a lack of sound, more a presence in itself that ghosted down the black iron hallways. Three days had passed since the *Covenant of Blood* last sailed under power. Now it coasted through space, its decks cold and its engines colder. *The hunt*, they called it, in their whispering tongue. This ethereal drift through the void, sailing in powerless silence closer to the target, seen and heard by none. *The hunt*.

Octavia called it *waiting*. Nothing was more tedious to a Navigator. The hull still creaked as abused steel settled, but the sounds of the crew were more muted than ever before. So few remained now.

One of her attendants trailed at her heels as she walked from her chamber. He was a scruffy, robed thing, more than half of his hunched form given over to crude bionics.

“Mistress,” he whispered over and over. “Mistress, mistress. Yes. Mistress. I follow mistress.” He didn’t seem able to lift his voice above a whisper.

Octavia was learning to ignore the annoying creatures. This one was one of the ugliest in the pack of augmented men and women that professed to serve her. It stood only as high as her shoulder, with its eyes sewn shut by thick, crude stitching. Whatever modifications were done to its body whirred, clicked, ticked and tocked as it loped along with a hunchback’s gait. “Mistress. Serve mistress. Protect mistress. Yes. All of these things.”

It regarded her with an eyeless face, looking up and seeing her through means she wasn’t sure she wanted to understand. Bizarrely, he looked hopeful. He seemed to want praise for shuffling along by her side and occasionally bumping into walls.

“Shut up,” she told him, rather politely given the circumstances.



“Yes,” the hunched man agreed. “Yes, mistress. Quiet for mistress. Yes. Silence now.”

Well, it’d been worth a try. “Please go back to the chamber,” she said, and even smiled sweetly. “I will return soon.”

“No, mistress. Must follow mistress.”

Her reply was an unladylike snort as their boots continued to clank along the hallway decking. Their images walked with them as they passed a hull section of reflective steel. Octavia couldn’t resist a glance at herself, though she knew she wasn’t going to like what she saw.

Ratty black hair, with its snarls only half tamed by a fraying ponytail. Pale skin, sunless and unhealthy. Her jaw line sported a faded bruise she couldn’t recall earning, and her ragged clothes were smeared with oil and general deck-dirt, the rough fabric dyed the blue of a midnight sky back home on Terra. If her clothes had been tidier, they’d have formed a uniform: the attire of the ship’s slave caste, loose and unwashed, hanging off her slender frame.

“Pretty as a picture,” she accused her scruffy reflection.

“Thank you, mistress.”

“Not you.”

The hunched fellow seemed to muse on this for a moment. “Oh.”

A muffled weeping in the distance stole any further comment. Human emotion, helplessness without a shred of malice. A girl. The sound carried strangely down the hallway, resonating against the metal walls.

Octavia felt her skin prickling. She stared down the corridor, peering into the darkness that her hand-held lamp pack could only barely pierce. The beam of light lanced left and right, stabbing the gloom with weak illumination. Bare metal walls met her questing, until the light could reach no further down the long hallway.

“Not again,” she whispered, before calling out a hesitant greeting. No answer.

“Hello?” she tried again.

The girl’s weeping stopped, fading away as Octavia’s voice echoed.

“Hello, mistress.”

“Shut *up*, you.”

“Yes, mistress.”

She swallowed, and her throat clicked softly. There were no children on the ship. Not anymore. Octavia reached for her hand vox, and almost thumbed the Send rune. But what was the point? Septimus wasn’t on the ship. He’d been gone for almost two months now, leaving her alone.

Octavia clicked her fingers at her... servant? Attendant? Thing.

He turned blind eyes up to her. How he managed to stare adoringly when his eyes were sewn shut was quite beyond her.

“Come on,” she said.

“Yes, mistress.”

“You heard that, right? The girl?”

“No, mistress.”

She led him on, leaving her chamber far behind. As they walked, he picked at the dirty bandages wrapping his hands, but said nothing more. Occasionally, a sound

from deeper in the ship would carry through the hull's bones. The clanging of a machinist's tools or the clank of footsteps several decks up. Occasionally, she heard muttered voices, sibilant in their murderer's tongue. She was struggling to learn even the basics of Nostraman since her capture. To listen to it, it sounded both seductive and mellifluous. To learn it was another matter. At its core, Nostraman was a nightmare of complex words and jumbled phrasing, scarcely related to Gothic at all. She suspected that despite Septimus' pleasant praise, she was mispronouncing everything, and she was fairly certain the vocabulary she'd mastered so far wasn't something even a particularly dim infant would be proud of.

They moved on through the gloom, nearing the passageway's end. In the darkness ahead, where the corridor branched into a junction, a figure dashed from one hallway to the next. It ran right across her path—too slight and small to be an adult, too tiny to be even a ruined thing like her attendant. A blur of blue clothing met her stare before the figure was gone. Octavia listened to its gentle, rapid footfalls running down the other corridor.

Again, she heard the childish weeping—the soft mewling of a child trying to keep her pain hidden.

“Hello?”

“*Ashilla sorsollun, ashilla uthullun,*” the little girl called back to her, as the sound of fleeing footsteps faded.

“I think I'm going back to my chamber,” Octavia said softly.

## II

# GANGES STATION

A sliver of midnight drifted on dead engines, betraying nothing of its presence.

A world turned in the emptiness, its cloudless face one of grey stone and lifeless continents. Even an untrained eye needed only to glance at the rock to see its potential, not to nurture life, but to feed an industrious species with its precious ore.

The only evidence of human existence hung in orbit: a vast platform of gunmetal grey, its empty docking arms reaching into the void. Along the station's hull, stencilled in Imperial Gothic lettering, was the word GANGES.

The sliver of darkness drifted ever closer, as blind to astral scanners as it was to the naked eye. Within its blade-like body, a machine began to shriek.

Maruc crashed down onto the couch, wanting nothing more than to stop moving. For a few moments, that was more than enough. He couldn't even be bothered to kick his boots off. Sixteen-hour shifts weren't the worst of his compulsory labour duties, but they were damn close. He drew in a breath that hurt his ribs, getting a lungful of his habitation pod's stuffy air. He smelled food cartons that needed throwing out days ago, and the ever-present suggestion of unwashed socks.

Home sweet home.

By the time the sigh finished leaving his lips, he was already thumbing at his closed eyes, trying to massage away some of the sting from staring at clanking conveyor belts all day. The earache, he couldn't do anything about. That had to stay.

With an exaggerated groan, he rolled to reach for the remote control palette where it lay in pieces on the floor. A few clicks later and he'd reattached the battery pack. He repeatedly speared the loose *ON* button with his fingertip, knowing it'd pick up on his intent at some point. For a wonder, it only took a few seconds this time. The screen mounted on the opposite wall flickered to life.

Well. Sort of.

It showed the kind of jagged distortion that spoke of something much worse than a mistuning. A technical fault, maybe. No picture, no sound, no nothing. Not that Ganges' endless cycle of Ecclesiarchal sermons, obituaries and technical safety broadcasts were exciting, but they beat seeing nothing but static.

He tapped the volume gauge. Silence became the dead-voiced whispery hiss of interference, even at full volume. Wonderful. No, really. Just great. Like he had the credits spare to call out the technical servitors again? Beautiful.

He let the remote fall from his oil-stained fingers, where it promptly ended up bisected on the floor, missing its battery pack again. He then said "Balls to this" out

loud to the empty habitation chamber, decided he was too tired to bother unfolding the couch into its bed position, and worked on sleeping off yet another pointless day in an increasingly pointless life.

Was he proud? No. But “just” seven more years of this, and he’d have enough saved to drag himself off Ganges for good, catching a shuttle to somewhere else—somewhere with prospects slightly less grim. He’d have signed up for the Imperial Guard long ago if his eyes could see worth a damn. But they couldn’t, so he hadn’t.

Instead, he worked the construction belts here, sighing his way through a job deemed too menial to bother programming a servitor for.

Maruc drifted into sleep with these thoughts at the forefront of his aching head. It wasn’t a restful sleep, but that didn’t matter because it didn’t last long anyway.

The screen started shrieking.

Maruc jerked back from the border of sleep with a series of curse words, grabbing at the remote and slapping the battery pack back into place. He dulled the volume while his free hand checked his ears to make sure they weren’t bleeding.

They weren’t. He was almost surprised.

A glance at the digital chron on his wall showed he’d been asleep, or almost there, for less than five minutes. Sound had evidently returned to the monitor, though it didn’t sound like any distortion he’d heard before. This unit had given him a fair share of technical issues. His screen had crackled, buzzed, popped and hissed before. It had never shrieked.

Bleary-eyed, with a pounding headache, he raised the volume again. The sound grew louder, but no clearer. A tortured machine whine, pitched painfully high. A hundred human voices, formless and tuneless, rendered inhuman as they drowned in static. It was both, and neither.

The lights flickered above. Another power cut coming. Ganges was a run-down backwater at the best of times, stuck in orbit around a dead world at the arse end of nowhere. Last time the lights died, they’d been out for three day cycles before the tech crews had the illumination generators breathing again. Work hadn’t ceased, of course. Not with the production schedules each sector had to meet. The entire western district of the station spent seventy hours working by torchlight. Dozens of menials had lost limbs or fingers in the machinery, and that week’s obituaries ran as long as a saints’ day prayer scroll.

Maruc hauled himself off the couch just as the lights went out. Fumbling in the dark brought him to the wall, and he opened the emergency supply cabinet containing his lamp pack, with a batch of standard-issue battery packs that would serve in every one of the hab-room’s scarce and simple appliances. He was always lax in charging them, so which ones were still live remained a mystery for now. He stuffed all eight of the palm-sized discs into his overall pockets, operating under the shaky light of his hand-held torch, then crashed back onto the couch to await the inevitable personnel announcement that would demand they all “Behave as normal”, and that “Illumination shall be restored at the earliest possible juncture”.

Throne. What a hole.

Two minutes went by, and became five. Five became ten. Every once in a while, Maruc would click on his lamp pack and aim the torch’s beam at his wall chron, frowning at the passing of time.

At last, the chime sounded from the vox speaker mounted above the door. Instead of the automated message he'd been expecting, the stationwide vox system gave the same screaming whine as his screen, only twice as loud. His hands slammed to his ears, as if fingers and dirty palms could block over a hundred decibels of skull-aching shrieking. Maruc hammered the door release with his elbow, spilling out into the communal hallway on his knees. The sound followed him, crying from the deck speakers out there as well. Other doors slid open, but that only amplified the sound: the scream leapt from individual hab-rooms as other personnel staggered from their own chambers.

*What the hell is going on?*

He yelled the words, but never heard them leave his throat, nor did anyone nearby respond.

Arella had been telling a story about her cat when everything went to hell. It hadn't been a particularly funny story, or an interesting one, but up on the overseer deck anything that passed the time was considered a welcome distraction. Their work shifts almost always consisted of twelve-hour stints spent watching scanner screens that showed nothing, reading crew reports that never looked any different from previous days, and discussing what they'd all do once they were transferred off this derelict munitions station, hopefully rotated back to actual fleet service.

Today, something had happened, and the crew on shift weren't exactly thrilled. Their chief officer, Arella Kor, was especially ardent in wishing things had just stayed quiet.

The weapons array was active, defensive turrets staring out into the void. The shields were live, layered spheres of invisible force protecting the station's hideous hull. Arella's eyes strayed to the timer on her console. Seven minutes and forty-one seconds had passed since the interference began. She was calling it "interference" because that sounded a lot less worrying than "the damn screaming".

Currently, the damn scr—the interference was being broadcast through their internal vox-net, screeched onto every deck at an insane volume. They couldn't shut it down, and no one knew why.

"The lights have just died in Western-Two," one of the others called out. "Oh, shit... and Western-One. And Western-Three. And all of the Eastern sector. And—"

Fittingly, the lights died on the command deck at that same moment. Reserve generators cycled up, bathing them all in the headache red of emergency lighting.

"It's an external signal." The officer at the console next to her tapped his screen—one of the few on the station that still seemed to be functioning. "Whatever it is, it's coming from out there."

Arella blew a lock of hair off her face. The command deck was always too hot, the air filtration had never worked right, and stress wasn't helping. "Details?" She wiped her sweaty forehead on her sleeve.

The officer stabbed his screen with a fingertip again. "A sourceless transmission, ten minutes ago. It's here, logged in the archive. When the signal was processed by our cogitators to be recorded and filed, it... spread. Like a disease, almost. It flooded specific station systems: the communications array, and the more primitive parts of the power grid."

Arella sucked on her bottom lip, biting back the need to swear. “Gravity?”

“Uncompromised.”

“Shields?”

“Still up.”

“Atmosphere. Life support. Weapons.”

“All still live. It’s a simple, brutal, randomised blurt of scrap-code. It can’t shut down anything complex. It’s just communications, auspex and... it looks like the illumination network is offline. Only the most basic systems, but they’re all filled with invasive code, impeding function.”

She looked back at her own scanner screen, at the same wash of corrupted feedback she’d been seeing for the last ten minutes. “Scanners, lights and vox. We’re blind, deaf and mute. And you *know* we’ll get kicked in the teeth for this. The clankers will have demerits splashed all over our records. Just watch.” As if it would make any difference, she absently buttoned up her uniform jacket for the first time in countless shifts.

“You’re not worried that this might be an attack?” the other officer asked.

Arella shook her head. “Our weapons and shields still work. Nothing to worry about, except who the Mechanicus will hold accountable. And that’ll be us. Pissing clankers and their profit margins.”

Only a few years ago, she’d have worried about all the people forced to work in the dark. Now her first fear was for herself: the Adeptus Mechanicus wouldn’t take kindly to significant production delays, and this was going wrong in a hundred ways already. She might never get off Ganges at this rate.

The officer next to her, Sylus, scratched at his unshaven jawline. “So we get jammed and fall off critical productivity. How is that our fault?”

Arella struggled to keep her patience. Sylus was new to the station, only two months into his tenure, and he hadn’t mingled well. The bionics replacing his left cheek, temple and eye were ludicrously expensive—clearly he was a rich man playing at being a grunt. Maybe his wealthy father sent him here as some kind of punishment, or he was an Adeptus Mechanicus mole snooping for screw-ups. Whatever the truth, he was a stubborn bastard when he wanted to be.

She snorted. “Who do you think the clankers will blame? ‘Pirates jammed us’ isn’t going to fly. Hell, why would anyone target a place like this? If whoever is out there could even get past our weapons, there’s nothing here worth taking.”

Sylus was no longer listening. Arella rose from her seat, mouth hanging open, staring out the command deck window at a ship that shouldn’t exist.

The *Covenant of Blood* was born in an age when humanity did more than reach for the stars—mankind sought to conquer them. Great shipyards had ringed the planets of the Sol System, as the Emperor led the species back into the galaxy on a crusade to unite every world of worth within His aegis.

The vessels brought about in that era sailed the stars ten thousand years ago, before rediscovered Standard Template Constructs homogenised the technology of the entire human race. Innovation was not considered a sin. Deviation in the name of progress was visionary, not blasphemy. Like many of the warships born in those first

fleets, the *Covenant*'s design was initially based on fragments of STC technology, but not limited to it. When it sailed under full power, it tore through space as a sleek hunter, owing as much to the contours of ancient Crusade-era warships as it did to the blocky structure of an Adeptus Astartes strike cruiser.

The Exalted's affection for its vessel went far beyond pride. It was a haven, the creature's sanctuary from a galaxy that desired its destruction, and the *Covenant* was the weapon it wielded in the Long War.

On its command throne, the creature licked its jaws, watching the image of Ganges Station expand in the oculus. They'd ghosted this close, undetected by the station's instruments or weapons batteries, but as they neared the invisible edge of the Ganges' void shields, they were close enough to be seen by the naked eye.

"Closer, closer," the Exalted drawled to its bridge crew. "Maintain the Shriek."

Arella's monitor still showed a confused storm of data; flickering after-images, information screeds and signals tracked that simply couldn't be there. One moment it registered fifty-three ships almost on top of each other. The next, nothing but empty space.

Outside the view window, the ship drifted closer. Armour plating—layers of black, bronze, cobalt and midnight—reflected the gaze of distant stars.

"It looks like an Errant strike cruiser," she said. "A big one." She chewed on her bottom lip, unable to take her eyes from the ship drifting closer. "The Marines Errant aren't due for resource collection until the end of the production cycle, nine and a half months from now."

"It's not the Marines Errant," Sylus replied. "Not their colours, nor their symbol."

"So who the hell are they?"

Sylus laughed, the sound soft and low. "How am I supposed to know?"

Arella sat back down, breathing through her teeth. "Why aren't we firing?" She felt the rise in her voice, perilously close to a whine. "We have to fire."

"At Imperial Space Marines?" One of the others looked appalled. "Are you insane?"

"They're in our space with no clearance, are making no attempts to hail us, and are jamming all our sensors to worthlessness? Coming in on a docking drift with a Mechanicus outpost, full of resources to be shared with the Marines Errant Chapter? Yes, we should be defending ourselves." She swore again. "We have to fire, somehow."

"With no target lock?" Sylus was resisting panic with much better grace. If anything, he looked almost bored, working his console and retuning dials with a safecracker's patience.

"Get Station Defence to fire their guns manually!"

Sylus scowled now, trying to listen to his earpiece. "Internal vox is down. What do you want me to do, Arella? Shout down the corridor and hope the whole station hears? They're blind down there, anyway. Illumination is dead. How will they get to the turret platforms?"

She clenched her teeth, watching the warship drift closer. Almost three thousand people were on board Ganges, and they had the firepower to stave off an entire pirate

fleet. Now, a single enemy ship was aiming for their heart, and the only people that knew couldn't say a damn thing to the people that could actually do something about it.

"Run out the guns," she said.

"What?"

"Open the gun ports. We'll set the eastern weapon batteries to fire at the ship's rough coordinates. Program it as a live-fire drill. It'll work!"

"That's a good idea." Sylus reached for his holstered side-arm, and without any hesitation at all, drew it and fired in a single smooth movement. The gunshot cracked in the small chamber, startlingly loud. Arella slumped from her chair into a boneless heap, with a hole drilled neatly through her forehead. Mushy wetness decorated the wall behind her. "And it would've worked," Sylus finished.

Of the three other officers on shift, two sat stunned, while the third reached for his own pistol. That one died first, sighing back in his chair as Sylus pumped three rounds into his chest. The other two both sought to run. Headshots ended their plans, spraying more skull fragments and dark paste around the control chamber.

"Messy work," said Sylus.

He booted one of them out of the leather control throne and started working the console, tending to several of the station's primary systems in neat succession. The gun ports stayed sealed—a hundred turrets all denied the power they needed in order to activate. The launch bays and escape pod hives were locked, power completely siphoned away, trapping everyone on board the station. At last, the station's void shields collapsed, starved of nourishing energy and severed from their fallback generators. Alarms began to wail in the chamber, which he ended almost immediately. Irritating sound, that.

Sylus took a breath. He felt like lifting his boots up and resting them on the console, but—bizarrely—it seemed needlessly disrespectful. Instead, he rose to his feet, reloaded his pistol, and moved over to the vox console where he'd been sitting before.

A single blue light flickered. Incoming message. He clicked it live.

"Report." The voice on the vox was between a gurgle and a growl.

"This is Septimus," he replied. "Ganges Station is yours, my lord."



### III

## NIGHTFALL

Rats always survive.

Nothing to be proud of in that thought, yet it was shamefully apt. He'd lasted longer than most in this dim, crimson world of emergency lighting.

"Let's go," Maruc whispered over his shoulder. With their lamp packs beaming thin slits of light ahead, the three men moved through the corridor. Each time a spear of torchlight brushed the wall, deck markers painted onto the hull proclaimed the passage as *E-31:F*. Maruc always did everything he could to keep off the station's main corridors. No part of Ganges was exactly safe since the killers had come, but Maruc had made it for a few day cycles longer than most by being cautious above all. He kept to the tertiary passages and maintenance ducts whenever possible.

He knew he stank from enduring seventy-nine hours of unwashed bodies crawling through the dark, and his eyes were aching pools, pained from the endless squinting. But he was alive. Like a rat, he'd survived, listening to the sounds of distant screaming, gunfire and laughter resonating through the iron bones of Ganges Station.

The worst thing was the cold. How could cold be so intense that it burned? Ice crystals painted diamonds across the metal walls around them. Their breath left their lips and noses in thin clouds, taking precious warmth with it. Maruc was no doctor, but he knew they'd not survive another night in this section of the station. The killers, whatever they were, had broken the heat exchangers in East Ganges. Maybe they wanted to flush the remaining crew out from hiding. It was possible. Or maybe they were bored with their hunt, and wished only to freeze the remaining crew to death wherever they'd gone to ground. Neither thought was exactly comforting.

"You hear that?" Maruc whispered.

Ahead of them, something metal rattled upon metal. He hissed the signal to halt, and three lamp packs peered down the hallway. Nothing. A bare corridor. The rattle carried on.

"It's a ventilation turbine," Joroll whispered. "Just a vent fan." Maruc turned away from the other man's wide eyes and the airy press of his rancid breath.

"You sure?"

"It's just a vent fan. I think." Joroll's voice was as shivery as his hands. "I worked in those ducts. I know the sounds they make."

*Sure*, Maruc thought, *but that was before you cracked*. Joroll was slipping faster than the rest of them. He'd already started to piss himself without realising. At least

when Maruc did it, it was to keep warm. Another survival tactic. *Rats always survive*, he thought again with an ugly smile.

“Come on, then.”

They moved with exaggerated caution, not truly knowing what the killers could sense. Joroll had caught the best look at one, but wouldn't speak about it. Dath, bringing up the trio's rear, claimed to have seen more than Maruc, but it still wasn't much to go on—a huge figure with red eyes, screaming with a machine's voice. Dath had fled before seeing anything more, diving through a maintenance hatch and panting his way down the crawl-tunnels while his work crew were noisily torn apart behind him. One killer had been enough for fifteen people.

Maruc couldn't claim such a witness account himself. He suspected that was why he was still alive. He'd stuck to the smallest passages from when he'd first heard the reports of the killers coming aboard, leaving them only for necessities like raiding food stores or scavenging through stockrooms for battery packs.

Too cold for that now. Now they had to move, and pray other sections of the station still had heat.

For a time, he'd considered just giving up, just laying down in the confined crawlspace of a maintenance burrow and letting the ice take him. He'd probably never even decay after he died. At least, not until Adeptus Mechanicus salvage crews arrived to restart the heat exchangers... then no doubt he'd collapse and bubble away into a smear of rot along the steel.

At the next junction, Maruc waited a long time, doing his best to listen over the sound of his own heartbeat. He started to move down the left passage.

“I think we're okay,” he whispered.

Joroll shook his head. He wasn't moving. “That's the wrong way.”

Maruc heard Dath sigh, but the other man said nothing. “This is the way to the canteen,” Maruc said as softly and calmly as he could manage, “and we need supplies. This isn't the time to argue, Jor.”

“That's not the way to the canteen. It's to the right.” Joroll pointed down the opposite corridor.

“That's towards the Eastern technical deck,” Maruc replied.

“No, it's not.” Joroll's voice was rising now, with a querulous edge. “We should go this way.” The nearby ventilator fan continued its slow clicking.

“Let's just go,” Dath said to Maruc. “Leave him.”

Joroll spoke before Maruc had to make the choice, for which the ageing manufactorum worker was immensely grateful. “No, no, I'll come. Don't leave me.”

“Keep your voice down,” Maruc said gently, having no idea if it would really make any difference. “And keep your torches low.”

Maruc led them on. Another left. Another. A long corridor, then a right. He froze at the turn, reluctantly aiming his torch down the hallway at the double bulkhead entrance to the canteen.

“No...” his voice was soft, strengthless in a way even whispers weren't.

“What is it?” Joroll hissed.

Maruc narrowed his stinging eyes, letting the beam of light play around the sundered doorway. The bulkhead was off its joints, torn from the wall in a wrenched mess of abused metal.

"It's not good," Maruc murmured. "The killers have been here."

"They've been everywhere," said Dath. He almost sighed the words out.

Maruc stood shivering in the biting cold, his torch beam falling victim to the tremors of his hands. "Let's go," he whispered. "*Quietly.*"

As they drew near the broken doors, Joroll sniffed. "I smell something."

Maruc breathed in slowly. The air felt cold enough to scald his lungs with iceburn, but he didn't smell a damn thing beyond wet metal and his own stink. "I don't. What is it?"

"Spices. Bad spices."

Maruc turned away from the quivering look in Joroll's eyes. He was cracking now, no doubt about it.

Maruc was the first one to turn the corner. He crept to the edge of the torn doorway, looking around the large chamber in its wash of siren-red lighting, unable to make any real detail out from the gloom. The tables, dozens of them, were overturned and thrown around, to be left wherever they landed. The walls were dark and pitted with gunfire's touch, and a horde of chairs were spilled across the floor—doubtless the remains of a worthless barricade. Bodies, lots of bodies, lay draped over the tables and stuck spread-eagled to the icy floor. Open eyes glinted with frost crystals, while smears of blood had become beautiful pools of ruby glass.

At least nothing was moving. Maruc lifted the torch and let the light shine in. The darkness parted before the torch, and the lamp pack revealed what the emergency lighting hadn't.

"Throne of the God-Emperor," he whispered.

"What is it?"

Immediately, he lowered his torch beam. "Stay here." Maruc wasn't going to risk Joroll's patchwork sanity in there. "Just stay here, I'll get what we need."

He entered the canteen, boots crunching on the red glass puddles of frozen blood. His breath was white mist before his face, curling away in the dim light as he moved. Giving the bodies a wide berth wasn't easy—Maruc did all he could to avoid touching them, though he couldn't help looking. What torchlight had shown in grim clarity was more obvious up close: not a single corpse in this chamber had escaped desecration. He stepped over a skinned woman with cringing care, and moved around a heap of leathery strips, where her harvested flesh was frozen to the floor. As he moved, her leering, skinless face of bared veins and blackening muscle offered him a toothy smile.

Some of the bodies were little more than reddened skeletons, either missing limbs or barely articulated at all, ice-dried and hard as they lay across tables. The chill had done a lot to steal the smell, but Maruc could tell now what Joroll was talking about. Bad spices, indeed.

He crept closer to the closed storage bulkhead, praying the wheel-lock wouldn't squeal when he turned it. Maruc braced against the frostbitten metal in his hands and twisted it. For once, fortune was on his side—it gave with a sudden lurch and turned

with well-oiled mercy. With a deep breath, he hauled the bulkhead open, revealing the walk-in storage room behind.

It looked unlooted. Shelves of dried ration packs in boxes, crates of reconstituted meat product; every container stamped proud with the aquila or the cog of Mars. Maruc was three steps in when he heard the scream behind him.

He knew he could hide. He could shut the storage door and freeze to death alone, or find a crawlspace and wait for whatever was happening to be over. His only weapon was the lamp pack in his numb hand, after all.

Joroll screamed again, the sound disgustingly wet. Maruc was running before he realised it, boots slapping on the cold floor.

A killer entered the canteen, dragging Joroll and Dath in its hands. Throne, the thing was huge. Its black armour in the red gloom was a smear of ink spilled into blood, and the vicious buzz rising from its internal power generator was enough to make Maruc's teeth itch.

Joroll was dead weight in its hand, the dark fist wrapped around a throat that shouldn't bend that far back. Dath was still kicking, still screaming, dragged by a handful of hair in the killer's clutch.

Maruc threw the lamp pack from his sweaty grip. It clanged off the killer's shoulder guard, spinning away from the icon of a winged skull without leaving a dent.

It caused the killer to turn, and growl two words through its helm's vox speakers.

"I see."

With casual indifference, the killer hurled Joroll's corpse aside, dumping it on a table alongside a skinless body. Dath thrashed in the monster's grip, his heels kicking at the icy ground seeking purchase, his numb hands clawing uselessly at the fist bunched in his long, greasy hair.

Maruc didn't run. He was sore to his bones from the cold and the cramped spaces, half-starved and exhausted from three nights without sleep. He was sick of living as a rat, with desperate fear the only emotion to break through the pains of hunger and the slow onset of frostbite. Too defeated to force a futile run, he stood in a chamber of skinned bodies and faced the killer. Would death be worse than living like this? Really?

"Why are you doing this?" he voiced the thought that had rattled around his head for days.

The killer didn't stop. An armoured hand, already coated in frost, thumped around Maruc's throat. The pressure was worse than the cold. He felt his spine creaking and crackling, felt his throat's sinews crushed together to feel like a bunch of grapes in his neck, choking off any breath. The killer lifted him with slow care, anger emanating from the skull painted across its faceplate.

"Is that a question?" The killer's head tilted, regarding him with its unblinking red eye lenses. "Is that something you wish to know the answer to, or is your mind misfiring in a moment of panic?" The grip on his throat loosened enough to allow speech and a few gasps of precious breath. Each heave of Maruc's lungs drew stinking air into his body, cold enough to hurt.

"Why?" He forced the word through spit-wet teeth.

The killer growled its words from the skull-faced helm. “I *made* this Imperium. I built it, night after night, with my sweat and my pride and a blade in my hands. I bought it with the blood in my brothers’ veins, fighting at the Emperor’s side, blinded by his light in the age before you entombed him as a messiah. You live, mortal, only because of my work. Your existence is mine. Look at me. You know what I am. Look past what cannot be true, and see what holds your life in his hands.”

Maruc felt piss running down his leg, boiling hot against his skin. The Great Betrayer’s fallen angels. Mythology. A legend. “Just a legend,” he croaked as he dangled. “Just a legend.” Breath from his denial steamed on the warrior’s armour.

“We are not legends.” The killer’s fist tightened again. “We are the architects of your empire, banished from history’s pages, betrayed by the husk you worship as it rots upon a throne of gold.”

Maruc’s stinging eyes took in the silver aquila emblazoned across the killer’s chestplate. The Imperial eagle, cracked and broken, worn by a heretic.

“You owe us your life, mortal, so I give you this choice. You will serve the Eighth Legion,” the killer promised, “or you will die screaming.”

## IV

# ASUNDER

Taking the station had been as easy as any of them could've hoped. There was pride to be taken there, albeit not much. If a warrior could find glory in capturing a backwater manufactorum installation like this, then Talos wouldn't begrudge him for it. But as victories went, it rang hollow. A raid of necessity, not of vengeance. A *supply run*, the words taunted him, even as they dragged a smile across his lips. Not the kind of engagement that would be adorning the Legion's banners for centuries to come.

Still, he was pleased with Septimus. And glad to have him back aboard the ship—two months without an artificer had been an annoyance, to say the least.

Three nights ago, Talos had taken his first steps onto the station's decking. It was not a treasured memory. The boarding pod's doors flowering open, twisting the steel of the station's hull with that distinctive whine of protesting metal. Then, as always, emerging into a welcoming darkness. Visors pierced the black with programmed ease. Thermal blurs looked vaguely embryonic as they curled in upon themselves: humans on all fours; reaching blindly; cowering and weeping. Prey, crying around his ankles, resisting death by only the most pathetic and futile attempts.

Humanity was at its ugliest when desperate to survive. The indignities people did to themselves. The begging. The tears. The frantic gunfire that could never pierce ceramite.

The Eighth Legion stalked through the station almost unopposed, stealing what little excitement there might've been. Talos spent several hours listening to the braying of other Claws over the vox. Several had run amok, butchering and relishing in their ability to inspire fear in the trapped humans. How they'd cried their joy to one another, during those long hours of maddened hunting.

"Those sounds," Talos had said. "The voices of our brothers. What we are hearing is the Legion's death rattle. Curious, how degeneration sounds so much like laughter."

Xarl had grunted in reply. It might have been a chuckle. The others forbore comment as they moved down the lightless corridors.

Three nights had passed since then.

For those three nights, First Claw had done as the Exalted had ordered, overseeing the *Covenant's* resupply. Promethium fuel was taken in barrels and vats. Raw, roiling plasma was leached out of the station's generators. Ore of all kinds was taken in great loads to be turned into materiel in the *Covenant's* artificer workshops. Useful members of the station's crew—of the few hundred that escaped the initial

massacres—were dragged aboard the ship in chains. The vessel still remained docked, even now sucking what it needed through fuel lines and cargo loaders.

Six hours ago, Talos had been one of the last to drag slaves aboard, finding them hiding in a canteen that had clearly been a site for one of the Claws' butchery. According to the Exalted, the *Covenant of Blood* would remain docked another two weeks, leeching everything of worth from the processing plants and factory foundries.

All was as well as could be expected, until someone slipped the leash. The slaughter aboard Ganges was done, but some souls were never satisfied.

A lone warrior stalked the *Covenant's* decks, blades in his hands, blood on his faceplate, and his thoughts poisoned by superstitions of a curse.

It was a curse, to be a god's son.

Were these not the prophet's own whining words? *It was a curse to be a god's son.* Well, perhaps that was so. The hunter was willing to concede the point. Maybe it was a curse. But it was also a blessing.

In his quiet hours, when he was granted mercy for even a moment, the hunter believed that this was a truth the others too often forgot. Forever they looked to what they didn't have; what they no longer possessed; glories they would never achieve again. They saw only the lack, never the plenty, and stared into the future without drawing strength from the past. That was no way to live.

A familiar pressure grew behind his eyes, worming its way within his skull. He had lingered too long in the stillness of reflection, and a price would be paid in pain. Hungers had to be sated, and punishments were inflicted when they weren't.

The hunter moved on, his armoured boots echoing along the stone floor. The enemy fled before him, hearing the ticking thrum of active battle armour and the throaty rattle of an idling chainblade. The axe in his hands was a thing of fanged and functional beauty, its tooth-tracks oiled by sacred unguents as often as blood.

*Blood.* The word was a splash of acid across his cobwebbing thoughts. The unwanted scent of it, the unwelcome taste, the flowing of stinking scarlet from ruptured flesh. The hunter shivered, and looked to the gore lining his weapon's edge. Immediately, he regretted it—blood had dried in a crimson crust on the axe's chainsaw teeth. Pain flared again, as jagged as knives behind the eyes, and didn't fade this time. The blood was dry. He had waited too long between kills.

Screaming released the pressure, but his hearts were pounding now. The hunter broke into a run.

The next death belonged to a soldier. He died with his hands smearing sweat-streaks over the hunter's eyes, while the ropery contents of his stomach spilled out in a wet mess down his legs.

The hunter cast the disembowelled human against the wall, breaking bones with barely a shove. With his gladius—a noble blade that had suffered a century's use as little more than a skinning knife—he severed the dying man's head. Blood painted his gauntlets as he held the harvest, turning it over in his hands, seeing the shape of the skull through the pale skin.

He imagined flaying it, first slicing pale peels of skin free, then carving ragged strips of veined meat from the bone itself. The eyes would be pulled from the sockets, and the innards flushed by acidic cleansing oils. He could picture it so clearly, for it was a ritual he'd performed many times before.

The pain started to recede.

In the returning calm, the hunter heard his brothers. There, the prophet's voice. Enraged, as always. There, the wretched one's laughter, grinding against the prophet's orders. The quiet one's questions were a muted percussion beneath all of this. And there, the dangerous one's snarls punctuated everything.

The hunter slowed as he tried to make out their words. They hunted as he hunted, that much he could make out from their distant buzzing. His name—they spoke it again and again. Confusion. Anger.

And yet they spoke of savage prey. Here? In the derelict hallways of this habitation tower? The only savagery was that which they brought themselves.

"Brothers?" he spoke into the vox.

"Where are you?" the prophet demanded. "Uzas. Where. Are. You."

"I..." He stopped. The skull lowered in a loosening hand, and the axe lowered alongside it. The walls leered with threatening duality, both stone and steel, both carved and forged. Impossible. Maddeningly impossible.

"Uzas." That voice belonged to the snarling one. Xarl. "I swear by my very soul, I will kill you for this."

Threats. Always the threats. The hunter's lips peeled back from his teeth in a wet grin. The walls became stone once more, and the threatening voices of his brothers melted back into an ignorable buzz. Let them hunt as they wished, and catch up when they could.

Uzas broke into another run, mumbling demands to the god with a thousand names. No prayers left his lips, for no son of Curze would ever speak a word of worship. He commanded the divinities to bless his bloodshed, sparing no thought for whether they might refuse. They had never done so before, and they would not do so now.

Mechanical teeth bit into armour and flesh. Last cries left screaming mouths. Tears left silver trails down pale cheeks.

To the hunter, these things signified nothing more than the passing of time.

Soon enough, the hunter stood within a chapel, licking his teeth, listening to the growl of his axe's engine echoing back off the stone. Broken bodies lay to his left and right, thickening the cool air with blood-stink. The surviving vermin were backed into a corner, raising weapons that couldn't harm him, pleading with words he would only ignore.

His thermal hunting vision cancelled, leaving him watching the prey through targeting locks and red eye lenses. The humans cringed back from him. None of them had even fired a shot.

"Lord..." one of them stammered.

The hunter hesitated. *Lord?* Begging, he was used to. The honorific, he was not.



This time the pain started at his temples, a pressing, knifing plunge to the centre of his skull. The hunter roared and raised his axe. As he moved closer, the humans cowered, embracing one another and weeping.

“A fine display,” the hunter drawled, “of Imperial soldiering.”

He swung at them, and the axe-blade’s grinding teeth met shining metal with a ringing crash.

Another figure stood before him—the whining prophet himself. Their weapons were locked, the blade of gold risen in defence of the cowering Imperials. His own brother was barring his bloodshed.

“Talos,” the hunter spoke the name through blood-wet lips. “Blood. Blood for the Blood God. Do you see?”

“*I am done with this.*”

Each crash against his faceplate jerked his head and jarred his senses. His vision blurred over and over in quick succession, his neck snapping back hard enough to send him staggering. The corridor rang with the echo of metal on armour. Disoriented, the hunter snarled as he realised his brother had struck him in the face three times with the butt of his bolter. His mind was so slow. It was difficult to think through the pain. He sensed rather than felt his hands losing their grip on his weapons. The axe and the gladius fell to the ground.

As he regained his balance, he beheld the chapel, and... No. Wait. This was no chapel. It was a corridor. A corridor aboard the—

“Talos, I—”

The dull clang of steel on ceramite echoed again, and the hunter’s head was wrenched to the side, the force pulling at his creaking backbone. Talos spun the blade of gold, while the hunter crashed down to the grilled decking onto his hands and knees.

“Brother?” Uzas managed the word through bleeding lips. It was spinal torment to raise his head, but there—behind an overturned table, the floor strewn with home-made trinkets and curios of scavenged metal—two ragged, filthy humans were recoiling from him. An ageing male and female, their faces streaked with grime. One wore a blindfold in the ever-present darkness. A *Covenant* tradition.

The hunter turned his head as his brother’s footfalls drew closer. “Talos. I didn’t know I was on the ship. I needed...” He swallowed at the cold threat of judgment in his brother’s emotionless eye lenses. “I thought...”

The prophet aimed the point of his golden blade at the hunter’s throat.

“Uzas, hear me well, even if only once in your wretched life. I will kill you the moment another word leaves your viperous lips.”

The smell of old blood and unwashed metal stained the air around them. Servitors hadn’t been directed to clean this chamber in many months.

“He has gone too far.” Mercutian made no effort to hide the reprimand in his voice. “When I stood with Seventh Claw, we didn’t avoid gathering for fear of tearing out each others’ throats.”

“Seventh Claw is dead,” Xarl grinned. “So however they governed themselves, it didn’t pay off in the end, did it?”

“With respect, brother, watch your mouth.” Mercutian’s up-hiver accent was clipped and regal, while Xarl’s swam in the gutter.

Xarl bared his teeth in what would, in a human, have been a smile. In his scarred Legionary’s features, it was a predator’s challenge.

“Children, children,” Cyrion chuckled. “Isn’t it lovely when we gather like this?”

Talos let them argue. He watched from the side of the chamber, his eye lenses tracking every movement, his thoughts remaining his own. His brothers clashed with the banter and baiting so typical of warriors who struggled to keep each other’s company away from the battlefield. Each of them wore their hybrid armour: repaired, repainted, re-engineered and resealed a thousand times since they were granted ownership of it so many years before. His own armour was an efficient mess of conflicting marks, formed of trophies taken from a century’s worth of slain enemies.

Chained to the interrogation slab in the centre of the room, Uzas twitched again, a reflexive muscle spasm. The joints of his armour whirred with each tremor.

Sometimes, in rare moments of silence and introspection, the prophet wondered what their gene-sire would think of them now: broken, corrupted, wearing stolen armour and bleeding through every battle they couldn’t flee from. He looked at each of his brothers in turn, a targeting cross hair caressing their images in silent threat. The bleached skulls and cracked helms of Blood Angels hung from their armour. Each wore expressions that melded bitterness, dissatisfaction and directionless anger. Like war hounds close to slipping the leash, they barked at one another, and their fists forever strayed near holstered weapons.

His single footstep thudded an echo around the confines of the torture chamber.

“Enough.”

They fell silent at last, but for Uzas, who was mumbling and drooling again.

“Enough,” Talos repeated, gentler now. “What do we do with him?”

“We kill him.” Xarl stroked a fingertip along his own jawline, where the jagged scar from a Blood Angel gladius had refused to heal cleanly. “We break his back, slit his throat, and kick him out of the closest airlock.” He pantomimed a slow, sad wave. “Farewell, Uzas.”

Cyrion took a breath but said nothing. Mercutian shook his head, the gesture one of lamentation, not disagreement.

“Xarl is right.” Mercutian gestured to the prone form of their brother bound to the table. “Uzas has fallen too far. With three nights to indulge his bloodlust on the station, he had no excuse for losing control on board the *Covenant*. Do we even know how many he killed?”

“Fourteen human crew, three servitors, and Tor Xal from Third Claw.” As he spoke, Cyrion watched the prone form chained to the table. “He took five of their heads.”

“Tor Xal,” Xarl grunted. “He was almost as bad as Uzas. His death is no loss. Third Claw is little better. They’re weak. We’ve all seen them in the sparring circles. I could kill half of them alone.”

“Every death is a loss,” said Talos. “Every death diminishes us. And the Branded will want retribution.”

“Don’t start that.” Xarl leaned back against the wall, rattling the meat-hooks that hung there on corroded chains. “No more lectures, thank you. Look at the fool. He drools and twitches, after slaughtering twenty of the crew on a deluded whim. Already, the serfs are whispering of rebellion. Why is his life worth sparing?”

Mercutian turned black eyes to Talos. “The Blood Angels cost us a lot of crew. Even with the menials from Ganges, we must be careful in rationing human life to a madman’s chainblade. Xarl is right, brother. We should cast the serpent aside.”

Talos said nothing, listening to each of them in turn.

Cyrion didn’t meet any of their gazes. “The Exalted has ordered him destroyed, no matter what we decide here. If we’re going against that order, we need to have a damn fine reason.”

For a while, the brothers stood in silence, watching Uzas thrash against the chains that held him down. It was Cyrion who turned first, the servos in his neck purring smoothly as he regarded the door behind them.

“I hear something,” he said, reaching for his bolter. Talos was already sealing the collar locks on his helm.

And then, from the corridor beyond, came a vox-altered voice.

“First Claw... We have come for you.”

With Tor Xal dead, Dal Karus found himself shouldering an unexpected burden.

In better days, such potential promotion would have come with a ceremony and honour markings added to his armour. And in better days, it would have also been a promotion he actually desired, rather than one he fought for out of desperation. If he did not lead, then one of the others would. Such a catastrophe was to be avoided at all costs.

“I lead us now,” Garisath had said. He’d gestured with his chainsword, aiming the deactivated blade at Dal Karus’ throat. “I lead us.”

“No. You are unworthy.” The words were not Dal Karus’, despite how they echoed his thoughts.

Vejain had stepped forwards, his own weapons drawn, and started circling around Garisath. Before he realised what he was doing, Dal Karus found himself doing the same. The rest of the Branded retreated to the edges of the chamber, abstaining from the leadership challenge either from caution, prudence, or the simple knowledge that they could not best the three warriors that now advanced upon one another.

“Dal Karus?” Garisath’s laughter crackled over the vox. Each of them had donned their helmets as soon as they’d learned of Tor Xal’s demise. The action demanded retribution, and they would deal with it as soon as their new leader was affirmed. “You cannot be serious.”

Dal Karus didn’t answer. He drew his chainsword with one hand, leaving his pistol holstered, for these ritual challenges were made only with blades. Garisath hunched low, ready for either of the others to attack. Vejain, however, was edging aside, suddenly hesitant.

As with Garisath, Vejain hadn’t expected Dal Karus to move into the heart of the chamber. He was more cautious, stepping away and casting red-lensed glances between his two opponents.

“Dal Karus,” Vejain turned the name into a bark of vox. “Why do you step forward?”

In answer, Dal Karus inclined his head towards Garisath. “You’d let him lead us? He must be challenged.”

Garisath’s mouth grille emitted another grainy chuckle. The burn markings blackening his armour—those curving Nostraman runes branded deep into the ceramite—seemed to writhe in the gloom.

“I will take him,” Vejain grunted. His armour bore similar burns, depicting his own deeds in Nostraman glyphs. “Will you then challenge me?”

Dal Karus exhaled slowly, letting the sound rasp from his helm’s speaker grille. “You won’t win. He will kill you, Vejain. But I’ll avenge you. I will cut him down when he’s weakened.”

Garisath listened to this exchange with a smile behind his skullish faceplate. He couldn’t resist gunning the trigger of his chainsword. It was all the bait Vejain needed.

“I will take him,” the warrior insisted, and charged forwards. The two Night Lords met in a circle of their brothers, chainswords snarling and revving as the blades scraped across layered armour the colour of Terran midnight.

Dal Karus looked away at the end, which came with both inevitability and infuriating speed. The blades were almost worthless against Legion war plate, and both warriors fell into the practised, traitorous brutality of chopping at each other’s armour joints. Vejain grunted as a fist cracked his head back, and the single second he bared his articulated throat armour was more than enough for Garisath to finish him. The chainblade crashed against the softer fibre-bundles encasing Vejain’s neck and bit deep—deep enough to grind against bone. Shredded armour rained away. Blood slicked the machine-nerves that scattered across the chamber floor.

Vejain fell to his hands and knees with a clang of ceramite on steel, his life gushing away through a savaged throat. Garisath finished the decapitation with a second swing of his sword. The helm clattered to the decking. The head rolled free. Garisath stopped it with his boot, and crunched it underfoot.

He beckoned with his bloodied blade. “Next?”

Dal Karus stepped forwards, feeling his blood sing with chemical stimulants—an aching song that spread from the pulse-point injection ports in his ancient armour. He had not raised his blade. Instead, he’d drawn his plasma pistol, which was met with disquieted mutterings. The magnetic coils ribbing the back of the weapon glowed with angry blue phosphorescence, painting a ghostly light over every Night Lord watching. The indrawn hiss of air through the muzzle’s intake valves was a rattlesnake’s blatant warning.

“Do you all see this?” Garisath put a sneer into his voice. “Bear witness, all of you. Our brother defiles our laws.”

The pistol juddered in Dal Karus’ grip now, the fusion weapon thrumming with the need to discharge its accrued power. “I will serve no law that does not serve us in kind.” Dal Karus risked a glance to the others. Several of them nodded. Due to his lethality with a blade, Garisath was the leader Third Claw expected, not the one they unanimously desired. Dal Karus’ gambit was founded upon it.

“You break tradition,” one of the others, Harugan, spoke into the silence. “Lower the weapon, Dal Karus.”

“He breaks tradition only because he has the courage enough to do so,” Yan Sar replied, earning several vox-crackling murmurs.

“Garisath must not lead,” said another, and this too earned grunts of assent.

“I will lead!” Garisath snarled. “It is my right!”

Dal Karus kept the weapon as steady as its shaking power cells would allow. The timing had to be perfect: the weapon needed to be at full charge, and he could not fire unprovoked. This must bear at least some pretence of a righteous execution, not a murder.

Acknowledgment runes chimed on his retinal display, as the members of Third Claw signalled their decision. Garisath must have seen the same, or else surrendered to his frustrations, for he gave a blurt of shrieking vox from his mouth grille and leapt forward. Dal Karus squeezed the trigger, and released the contained force of a newborn sun from the mouth of his pistol.

Afterwards, when sight had returned to each of them, they stood motionless in their communal chamber. Each warrior’s armour was dusted with a fine layer of ash: all that remained of Garisath after the blinding flash of plasma release.

“You made your point.” Harugan growled his disapproval, and even the smallest movement—a gesture towards Dal Karus’ weapon—sent dust powdering off his armour plating. “Nothing left to salvage now.”

Dal Karus answered by nodding down at Vejain. “Some salvage exists. And we are not led by a madman. Take heart in that.”

The others came forwards now, treating Vejain’s body with little more respect than they’d show to an enemy’s corpse. The body would be dragged to the apothecarion, where its gene-seed organs would be extracted. The armour would be machined off into its component pieces and divided among Vejain’s brothers.

“Now you lead,” said Yan Sar.

Dal Karus nodded, little pleased by the fact. “I do. Will you challenge me? Will any of you challenge me?” He turned to his brothers. None answered immediately, and it was Yan Sar that replied again.

“We will not challenge you. But retribution beckons, and you must lead us to it. First Claw killed Tor Xal.”

“We have lost three souls this day. One to treachery, one to misfortune, one to necessity.” Dal Karus’ own beaked faceplate was a Mark-VI helm of avian design, painted a dull red to match the others of Third Claw. Snaking burn scars were branded deep into the composite metal. “If we go against First Claw, we will lose more. And I have no wish to fight the prophet.”

He didn’t add that one of the reasons he’d killed Garisath had been in the hope of avoiding the fight now threatening them. “We are no longer of Halasker’s companies. We are the Branded, Third Claw, of the Exalted’s warband. We are Night Lords, born anew. A new beginning. Let us not baptise our genesis in the blood of our brothers.”

For a moment, he believed he'd swayed them. They shared glances and muttered words. But reality reasserted itself with crushing finality mere seconds later.

"Vengeance," promised Yan Sar.

"Vengeance," the others echoed.

"Then vengeance it is," Dal Karus nodded, and led his brothers into the very battle he'd murdered Garisath to prevent.

Soon after the accord was reached, the remaining members of Third Claw stalked down the central spinal corridor of the prison deck, blades and bolters in gauntleted hands. What little light existed on the *Covenant of Blood* played across their armour, and shadows pooled in the black rune brands burned into the war plate.

Voices ahead, from behind the closed bulkhead leading into a side chamber.

"Do we ambush them?" Yan Sar asked.

"No," Harugan chuckled. "They know we will not let Tor Xal go unavenged. They are already expecting us, I am sure of it."

The Branded moved closer to the sealed door.

"First Claw," Dal Karus called, taking pains to keep any reluctance from bleeding into his voice. "We have come for you."

Cyrion watched his auspex's monochrome display screen. The hand-held scanner clicked every few seconds, giving a wash of audible static.

"I count seven out there," he said. "Eight or nine, if they're bunched up."

Talos moved to the doorway, uncoupling his bolter from the mag-lock plating on his thigh armour. The weapon was bulky, rendered ornate by bronzing, bearing two wide-mouth barrels. He still felt a stab of reluctance to carry it so openly. Its bulk didn't discomfort him, but its legacy did.

He called through the sealed door. "We'll settle the blood debt with a duel. Xarl will fight for First Claw."

In the chamber, Xarl gave a dirty laugh behind his faceplate. No answer came.

"I'll deal with this," Talos said to First Claw. He blink-clicked icons on his retinal display, summoning up the runes for other squads in the vox array. The Branded, Third Claw, flashed active.

"Dal Karus?" he asked.

"Talos." Dal Karus' voice was low over the occluded vox-channel. "I am sorry for this."

"How many of you are out there?"

"An interesting question, brother. Does it matter?"

*Worth a try.* Talos took a breath. "We count seven of you."

"Then let us settle on that. Seven still outnumbers four, prophet."

"Five, if I free Uzas."

"Seven still outnumbers five."

"But one of my five is Xarl."

Dal Karus grunted reluctant acknowledgement. "That is indeed so."

"How did you come to lead Third Claw?"

“I cheated,” said Dal Karus. With the words spoken as simple confession, he offered no justification, nor any excuse. Irritatingly, Talos found himself warming to the other warrior.

“This will bleed us both,” Talos said.

“I am not blind to that, prophet. And I did not spit on my allegiance to Halasker just to die on this crippled ship mere months later.” There was nothing of anger in Dal Karus’ voice. “I do not blame you for Uzas’... instability. I dealt with Tor Xal for long enough myself that I am all too familiar with the affliction of taint. But the blood debt must be paid, and the Branded will not settle for a duel of champions. My own actions may have annihilated any lingering worth in that tradition among us, but even before I acted, they were howling for revenge.”

“Then you shall have your blood-price,” the prophet said with a rueful smile, and severed the link.

Talos turned back to his brothers. Cyrion stood at ease, his weapon in his hands, only his slouched shoulder guards giving any indication of his reluctance to leave the chamber. Mercutian could have been carved from granite, so dark and motionless as he stood unbowed by the massive cannon in his fists. The heavy bolter’s cavernous barrel thrust from a skull’s open maw. Xarl clutched a two-handed chainblade in an easy grip, leaving his bolt weapons locked to his armour within quick reach.

“Let’s get on with it,” he said, and even vox-corruption couldn’t hide the smile in his voice.

Mercutian crouched, tending to his heavy bolter. The cannon was as unsubtle as Legion weaponry could be: wrapped in industrial chains and capable of vomiting a brutal rain of fire from its fat throat. “Third Claw will use bolters over blades. If Tor Xal is dead, we won’t have much to contend with once we stand within sword’s reach. Getting into sword’s reach will see us dead, though. They’ll cut us to pieces with bolter fire.” He sounded as maudlin as ever.

Xarl barked a laugh and spoke in his gutter Nostraman. “Smoke grenades as soon as the door opens. That buys us a couple of seconds before their preysight re-tunes. Then we’ll bring blades to a gunfight.”

Silence reigned for a moment.

“Free me,” the last member of First Claw snarled.

Four helms turned to their brother, slanted red eyes judging without a trace of human emotion.

“Talos,” Uzas spat the name as he trembled, forcing his speech through clenched teeth. “Talos. Brother. Free me. Let me stand in midnight clad.”

Something black trickled in a wet leak from his ear. The stink of Uzas’ skin was cringingly ripe.

Talos spoke the words as he drew the relic sword from its sheath on his back.

“Release him.”

## V

# REVENGE

She found Septimus in Blackmarket, and saw him before he noticed her. Through the thin crowd, she watched him as he talked to the gathered serfs and crew. The scruffy fall of his hair almost covered the bionics on the left side of his face, where his temple and cheek had been rebuilt with subtle augmetics of composite metals, contoured to match his facial structure. It was a degree of surgical sophistication she'd rarely seen outside of the wealthiest theocratic covens and noble families of Terra's tallest spires. Even now, the other humans looked upon him with a varied clash of dislike, envy, trust and adoration. Few slaves aboard the *Covenant* wore their value to the Night Lords so openly.

With the communal market chamber less crowded than it had been before the Siege of Crythe, it was also less stifling and oppressive. Unfortunately, without the press of bodies, it was also colder—as cold as the rest of the ship. Her breath misted as she watched the crowd. The attendant hunched alongside her seemed content to mutter to himself.

"I thought we'd captured more... people," she said to him. When he turned blind eyes up to her and didn't answer, she qualified her statement. "The new slaves from Ganges. Where are they?"

"In chains, mistress. Chained in the hold. There they stay, until we leave dock."

Octavia shuddered. This was her home now. She was an undeniable part of what went on here.

Across the chamber, Septimus was still speaking. She had no idea what he was saying. His Nostraman came in a whispering flow, and Octavia could make out maybe one word in ten. Instead of trying to follow the thread of what he was saying, she watched the faces of those he spoke to. Several were scowling or jostling their fellows, but most seemed placated by whatever he was telling them. She smothered a grin at his impassioned sincerity, the way he turned to people with a gentle gesture to make a point, the way he argued with his eyes as well as his words.

The smile died on her lips as she saw one of the faces in the crowd, darkened by weariness. It was a face in mourning, and coping by wearing a mask of grim anger. Rather than interrupt Septimus, Octavia moved through the crowd, apologising softly in Gothic as she made her way closer to the grief-stricken man. He noticed her as she neared, and she saw him swallow.

"*Asa fothala su'surushan*," he said, dismissing her with a weak wave of his hand.

"*Vaya vey... um... I...*" she felt a blush rising to her cheeks as the words stuck in her mouth. "*Vaya vey ne'sha.*"



The people surrounding her were backing away now. She paid them no heed. Given what was hidden beneath the bandana around her forehead, she was used to being ostracised.

"I haven't seen you since... the battle," she forced the words to her lips. "I just wanted to say—"

*"Kishith val'veyalass, olmisay."*

"But... *Vaya vey ne'sha*," she repeated. "I don't understand." She said it in Gothic in case her halting Nostraman hadn't been clear enough.

"Of course you don't." The man made the dismissive gesture again. His bloodshot eyes were ringed by the dark circles of a mounting sleep debt, and his voice cracked. "I know what you wish to say, and I do not wish to hear. No words will bring back my daughter." His Gothic was rusty from disuse, but emotion lent meaning to the words. "*Shrilla la lerril*," he sneered at her with a whisper.

*"Vellith sar'darithas, volvallasha sor sul."* The words came from Septimus, at the heart of the crowd. He pushed through the people to stand before the other man. Although the other slave was surely no older than forty, privation and sorrow had aged him far beyond his years—Septimus, as ragged as he was, was almost youthful in comparison. A brief flicker of greeting passed between Septimus and Octavia as their eyes met, but it was gone as soon as it showed. The artificer looked down at the hunched slave, anger in his human eye. "Watch your tongue when I can hear the lies you speak," he warned.

Octavia bristled at being defended when she still had no idea what had been said. She wasn't a bashful maid, needing to be protected to stave off a fainting attack. "Septimus... I can deal with this. What did you say to me?" she asked the older man.

"I named you a whore that mates with dogs."

Octavia shrugged, hoping her blush didn't show. "I've been called worse."

Septimus stood straighter. "You are the heart of this unrest, Arkiah. I am not blind. Your daughter was avenged. As poor a fate as it was, that is all that can ever be."

"She was avenged," Arkiah answered in Gothic as well, "but she was not protected." In his hand, he clutched a Legion medallion. It caught the dim light with treacherous timing.

Septimus rested his hands on the pistols at his hips, hanging in battered leather holsters. "We are slaves on a warship. I grieved with you at Talisha's loss, but we live dark lives in the darkest of places." His accent was awkward, and he struggled to find the words. "Often, we cannot even hope for vengeance, let alone safety. My master hunted her killer. The Blood Angel died a mongrel's death. I watched Lord Talos strangle the murderer, witnessing justice done with my own eyes."

*His own eyes.* Octavia glanced automatically to see his human eye, dark and kind, next to the pale blue lens mounted in his chrome eye socket.

*"Tosha aurthilla vau veshi laliss,"* the other man gave a mirthless laugh. "This vessel is cursed." Murmurs of agreement started up. It was nothing new. Since the girl's death, talk of omens and misfortune were running rampant among the mortal crew. "When the new slaves walk among us, we will tell them of the damnation in which they now dwell."

Octavia couldn't understand Septimus' reply as he slipped back into Nostraman. She withdrew from the crowd, waiting for the gathering to finish, and at the edge of the huge chamber, she sat on an empty table. Her attendant trudged after her, as unbearably loyal as a stray dog she'd made the mistake of feeding.

"Hey," she nudged him with her boot.

"Mistress?"

"Did you know the void-born?"

"Yes, mistress. The young girl. Only child ever born on the *Covenant*. Dead now, to the Angels of Blood."

She lapsed back into silence for a while, watching Septimus arguing to quench all talk of rebellion. Strange, that on any given Imperial world, he would probably be a wealthy man with his skills in great demand. He could fly atmospheric and suborbital craft, he spoke several languages, he knew how to use and maintain weapons, and worked with an artisan's care and a mechanic's efficiency on reconstructive artificer duties. Yet here, he was just a slave. No future. No wealth. No children. Nothing.

*No children.*

A thought struck her, and she gave the little attendant another nudge.

"Please do not do that," he grumbled.

"Sorry. I have a question."

"Ask, mistress."

"How is it that all these years, only one child was born on board?"

The attendant turned his blinded face up to her again. It reminded her of a dying flower trying to face the sun. "The ship," he said. "The *Covenant* itself. It makes us sterile. Wombs wither and seed grows thin." The little creature gave a childish shrug. "The ship, the warp, this life. My eyes." He touched a bandaged hand to his threaded eyes. "This life changes everything. Poisons everything."

Octavia chewed her bottom lip as she listened. Strictly speaking, she wasn't human in the most pedantic sense—the genetic coding in a Navigator's bloodline left her in an awkward evolutionary niche, close to being a sub-species of *Homo sapiens*. Her earliest years were filled with lessons and tutors hammering that very fact into her with stern lectures and complicated biological charts. Few Navigators ever bred easily, and children were an incredibly treasured commodity to a Navigator House—the coin with which to purchase a future. Had her life run its pre-planned course, she knew that after a century or two of service she'd be recalled to the family holdings on Terra and linked to another low-level scion from an equally minor house, expected to breed for the good of her father's financial empire. Her capture had rather done away with that idea, and it was one of the aspects of this greasy, dimly lit slavery she actually considered something of a perk.

Even so, her hand strayed to her stomach.

"What's your name?" she asked him.

The figure shrugged with a rustle of dirty rags. She wasn't sure if he'd never had a name, or simply forgotten it, but either way no answer was forthcoming. "Well," she forced a smile, "would you like one?" He shrugged again, and this time, the gesture ended in a growl.

Octavia saw why. Septimus was approaching. Behind him, the crowd was dispersing, going back to their ramshackle market stalls or leaving the communal chamber in small groups.

"Hush, little hound," the taller pilot smiled. His augmetic eye whirred as it focussed, the blue lens widening like a dilating pupil.

"It's fine," Octavia patted the hunched man's shoulder. Beneath the ragged cloak, his arm felt cold and lumpy. Not human. Not completely.

"Yes, mistress," the attendant said softly. The growling ceased, and there was the muffled *click-chuck* of a firearm chambering a round.

Septimus reached forward to brush a stray lock of Octavia's hair behind her ear. She almost tilted her cheek into his palm, warmed by the intimacy of the gesture.

"You look filthy," he told her, as blunt and cheery as a little boy with good news. Octavia leaned away from his touch even as he was withdrawing his hand.

"Right," she said. "Well. Thank you for that observation." *Idiot.*

"What?"

"Nothing." As she said the word, her attendant started growling at Septimus again, obviously registering the annoyance in her voice. *Observant little fellow.* She considered giving him another pat on the shoulder. "Still talking of rebellion?"

Septimus looked over at the diminishing crowds, masking a sigh. "It is difficult to convince them the vessel is not cursed when we're being murdered by our own masters." He hesitated, then turned back to her. "I missed you."

A nice try, but she wouldn't let herself warm to that. "You were gone a long time," she offered, keeping neutral.

"You sound displeased with me. Is it because I said you looked filthy?"

"No." She barely resisted an irritated smile. *Idiot.* "Did everything go well?"

Septimus knuckled his scruffy hair back from his face. "Yes. Why are you angry with me? I don't understand."

"No reason," she smiled. *Because we've been docked for three days, and you haven't been to see me. Some friend you are.* "I'm not angry."

"You sound angry, mistress."

"You're supposed to be on my side," she told her attendant.

"Yes, mistress. Sorry, mistress."

Octavia tried a change of tack. "The murders. Was it Uzas?"

"It was, this time." Septimus met her eyes again. "First Claw have taken him to the prison deck."

"He's captured. And there's an influx of new crew members. Maybe there'll be some stability now. Things can return to normal."

Septimus gave his crooked smile. "I keep trying to tell you: this *is* normal."

"So you say," she sniffed. "What was the Shriek like? Inside the station, I mean."

He grinned at the memory. "It jammed the aura-scryers. Every auspex drowned in interference. Then it slaughtered all in-station and off-station vox, but there was more: it actually killed the lights all across Ganges. I have no idea if Deltrian and the Exalted planned it, or how it worked, but it was a surprise to me."

"I'm glad you had fun." She retied her ponytail and checked her bandana was tight. "It was less amusing for us. The Shriek drinks power like you wouldn't believe."

The engines dimmed to almost nothing, and the void shields were down the entire time. I had nothing to do but wait while we drifted for days. I hope we don't use it again."

"You know they will. It worked, didn't it?" His grin faded when she didn't return it. "What's wrong? What has happened?"

"*Ashilla sorsollun, ashilla uthullun*," she said softly. "What do those words mean?"

He raised an eyebrow. His artificial eye clicked as it tried to mimic the expression. "It's a rhyme."

"I know that." She resisted the urge to sigh. He could be so slow, sometimes. "What does it mean?"

"It doesn't translate directl—"

She held up a finger. "If you say, 'it doesn't translate directly', to me one more time, I will have my little friend here shoot you in the foot. Understood?"

"Understood, mistress." Her attendant moved its hands beneath its overcloak.

"Well..." Septimus began with a scowl at the hunched slave. "It doesn't rhyme in Gothic. That's what I meant. And both *sorsollun* and *uthullun* are words that mean 'sunless', but with different... uh... emotions. It means, more or less, 'I am blind, I am cold'. Why do you ask? What's wrong?"

"Arkiah's daughter. The void-born."

Septimus' hands, bound in fingerless gloves of scuffed leather, rested on his low-slung gun belt. He'd attended the girl's funeral only five months before, when her parents had let the shrouded corpse be released through the airlock with so many other slain human crew. "What about her?"

Octavia met his eyes. "I've been seeing her. I saw her while you were away on the station. And a week ago, I heard her. She called those words to me."

The door didn't open. It burst outwards in a storm of debris that filled the corridor with smoke. Emergency alarms sounded at once, sealing nearby bulkheads as the vessel's automated systems registered an enemy attack and the risk of hull breaches.

In the smoky mist, five towering silhouettes ghosted forwards, their slanted red eyes backlit and streaming with targeting data.

Bolter shells cracked and crashed against the walls around them, detonating with the crumpling pops of bursting grenades, showering the Legionaries with fragments of iron and burning chunks of explosive shell. Third Claw had opened up the moment their preysight had adjusted to the smoke.

Talos emerged first from the mist, bolter rounds shredding the armour from his war plate, ripping chunks of ceramite overlay from the cabled musculature. He closed the distance in the span of a heartbeat, swinging his sword in a carving arc. Retinal imagery displayed the grievous damage to his armour in aggressively bright runes, and was immediately joined by the flatline sound of a slain warrior's armour no longer transmitting life signs.—Garius, Third Claw, Vital Signs Lost—,his eye lenses warned. Such a shame.

"You've been fighting mortals for too long," Talos spoke through the stinging bite of nerve nullifiers. His armour injected the fast-acting narcotics right into his

heart, spine and bloodstream, but their effects were limited in the face of this horrendous fire. Bolters suffered against Legion armour—they were weapons far better at breaking flesh than ceramite—but despite his mockery, the massed assault was taking its toll.

He didn't even need to wrench his blade clear. The blow had cleaved Garius' head clean from his shoulders. Talos gripped the bloody collar guard, ignoring his brother's life pissing out from the severed neck in red spurts all over his gauntlet. In death, Garius served as a shield of meat and armour. Detonating shells pounded into the headless corpse until Talos hurled it at the closest member of Third Claw.

Xarl was among them a moment later, his chainblade crashing against a brother's helm hard enough to send the warrior sprawling into the wall. Talos risked a momentary glance to see Xarl's war plate as chewed up and broken as his own. Xarl was already leaping at another of the Branded, heedless of the damage he'd sustained.

Uzas, ever devoid of grace, had hurled himself at the closest of the enemy, and was doing his level best to punch his gladius through the other warrior's soft throat armour. All the while, he screamed a meaningless screed of syllables into the warrior's faceplate, giving voice to mindless hate. His armour wept fluid from a thousand cracks, but he rammed the short blade home with a howl. The Branded warrior jerked, polluting the vox with his gargling. Uzas laughed as he sawed ineffectively, his sword grating against the dying Night Lord's spine without severing it. A flatline chimed through everyone's helm receptors.

—Sarlath, Third Claw, Vital Signs Lost—

“Blades!” Dal Karus called to his surviving brothers.

Talos ran for him, the Blade of Angels swinging with a trail of crackling force streaming behind. Their swords crashed together, locking fast, neither one of them giving ground. Both warriors spoke through the breathy grunts of painful exertion. “Foolish... to use... bolters...” Talos grinned behind his faceplate.

“It... was a risk... I admit,” Dal Karus grunted back. The grinding teeth of his chainsword clicked and ticked as they tried to whirr against the golden weapon it parried. Garius' blood spat and popped as it burned dry on Talos' energised blade.

—Vel Shan, Third Claw, Vital Signs Lost—

Talos couldn't see how the kill was made, but he heard Xarl give a roar over the whine of another flatline. He doubled his effort, leaning harder into the struggle, but his damaged armour was betraying his strength. As his muscles burned, his retinal display flickered twice. Power was flashing erratically through his armour systems, and it was all he could do to keep his blade locked to Dal Karus'. He felt the unwelcome drag of his arms growing heavier. A spray of sparks spat from a rent in his back-mounted power pack.

“You are weakening,” his enemy growled.

“And you... are outnumbered,” Talos grinned back.

Dal Karus broke the lock, disengaging savagely enough to send the prophet stumbling backwards. The chainsword skidded across Talos' sundered chestplate, scratching the defiled aquila emblazoned there. With a curse at his overbalanced swing, Dal Karus did all he could to ignore the flatline chiming—a stream of tinnitus proclaiming the deaths of his brothers.

He moved back, sword up to guard against... against...

Against all of them. Against all of First Claw.

They stood as a pack, surrounded by the bodies of those they'd slain. In the clearing haze, Talos, Xarl, Uzas, Cyrion and Mercutian stood with bloodied blades in their fists. Their armour was shattered into ruin, and for the briefest moment of empathy, Dal Karus envisioned the amount of labour involved in repairing such punishment. Talos and Xarl stood shredded by gunfire, their armour plating ripped away and the underlayers blackened, punctured and burned. Their helms were dented to the point of malformation. Xarl was missing an eye lens, and both of Cyrion's were cracked beyond easy repair. Half of Uzas' features were visible through his broken faceplate. The leader of the Branded, the last soul to hold the title, locked eyes with the smirking, drooling fool.

"This is your fault," Dal Karus said. "Your madness has cost us every life taken this night."

Uzas licked teeth made dark by bleeding gums. Dal Karus doubted the beast even understood his words.

"Let's finish this." He set the teeth of his chainblade whirring again, chewing air. "Do not dishonour Third Claw by making me wait for my death."

Cyrion's laughter broke out, stripped raw by his vox-speakers. "Dishonour," he wheezed the word through chuckles. "A moment, please." He disengaged the seals at his collar, removing his scarred helm and wiping his eyes on a deed-parchment he tore from his armour. "*Honour*, he says, as if it matters. These words from a warrior who was a murderer at thirteen, and a rapist two years later. *Now* he cares about honour. That's beautiful."

Talos raised his bolter. The double-barrelled weapon was engraved with the deeds of a fallen warrior who'd achieved so much more than any of those in its new wielder's presence.

"Please," Dal Karus sighed, "do not execute me with Malcharion's weapon."

"Remove your helm." The prophet didn't move as he spoke. Sparks and lubricating oils still flicked and dripped from the wounds in his war plate. "You surrendered any right to choose your death the moment you forced this idiotic confrontation."

Slowly, Dal Karus complied. Bareheaded, he faced First Claw. The deck smelled of blood's spicy scent, thinned by the chemical reek of bolter shell detonations. He offered a rueful smile, almost an apology.

"Why didn't you just kill Uzas?" he asked. "It would have ended this before it began."

"You are not foolish enough to truly believe that," Talos spoke softly, "and neither am I. This, as with all things in the Legion, is a wound torn open by revenge."

"I wish to join First Claw."

"Then you should not have come against us in midnight clad." He kept his aim at Dal Karus' face. "If you cannot dissuade your own squad from petty vengeance that costs loyal lives, what use are you to the remnants of the Legion?"

"You cannot control Uzas. Is there a difference? Are your lives worth so much more than ours?"

“Evidently they are,” Talos replied, “because we are the ones with our guns to your face, Dal Karus.”

“Talos, I—”

Both barrels bellowed. Tiny gobbets of meat with wet fragments of skull clattered across the walls and against their armour. Headless, the body toppled, crashing against the corridor wall before sliding down, slumping in crooked, graceless repose.

They stood without speaking a word to one another for some time. Savaged armour sparked and made unwelcome joint-grinding sounds as they lingered in the slaughter they’d created.

At last, it was Talos who broke the stillness. He gestured at the bodies.

“Drag them. Septimus will strip their armour.”

“Two months.”

Talos laughed. “Please do not joke with me, Septimus. I am not in the mood.”

The human slave scratched his cheek where the polished metal met pale skin, as he stared at the carnage strewn across his workshop. The seven corpses, with their armour suffering only minimal damage—they could be stripped and the meat flushed into the void within a day. But all five members of First Claw were barely able to stand with the damage done to their war plate. Oil and lubricant ran in drying stains from cracked-open punctures. Dents needed to be beaten out, mangled ceramite had to be cut free and completely replaced, torn layers of composite metals needed to be resealed, repainted, reformed...

And the subdermal damage was even worse. False musculature made of fibre-bundle cables needed to be reworked, rethreaded and rebuilt. Joint servos and gears had to be replaced or repaired. Stimulant injectors needed sterilising and reconstructing. Interface ports had to be completely retuned, and all of that was before the most complicated repairs were undertaken: the sensory systems in each helm’s retinal display.

“I’m not joking, master. Even using these parts as salvage, it will take more than a week for each suit of armour. Recoding their systems, rebuilding them to your bodies, retuning their interfaces to each of you... I cannot do it faster than that. I’m not sure anyone could.”

Cyrion stepped forward. A misfiring stabiliser in his left leg gave him a dragging limp, while his own features were cracked and bleeding.

“And if you worked on only mine and your master’s?”

Septimus swallowed, careful to avoid Uzas’ stare. “Two weeks, Lord Cyrion. Perhaps three.”

“Mortal. Fix mine.” All eyes turned to Uzas. He snorted at them. “What? I need my armour tended to, the same as each of you,” he said.

Talos disengaged his helm’s seals with a snake’s hiss of vented air pressure. Removing the mangled ceramite took three attempts, and the prophet’s face was a bruised and bloody painting of varied wounds. One of his eyes was crusted closed by a foul-looking scab, and the other glared, clean and black, devoid of an iris like all of the Nostramo-born.

“Firstly, do not address my artificer—and our *pilot*—as if he were a hygiene slave. Show some respect.” He paused to wipe his bloody lips on the back of his gauntlet. “Secondly, you bear the blame for putting us in these straits. Your urge to howl your way around the crew decks drinking the blood of mortals has removed us from being battle-ready for two months. Will you be the one to tell the Exalted he has lost two Claws in one night?”

Uzas licked his teeth. “The Branded chose to face us. They should’ve walked away. Then they’d be alive.”

“It is always so simple for you.” Talos narrowed the one eye that still worked. He filtered his tone through a last attempt at patience, seeking to keep the strain of his wounds from reaching his lips. “What madness infests your mind? What makes you incapable of understanding what you have cost us tonight?”

Uzas shrugged. The bloody handprint painted onto his faceplate was all the expression he showed to them. “We won, didn’t we? Nothing else matters.”

“Enough,” Cyrion shook his head, resting a cracked gauntlet on Talos’ shoulder guard. “It’s like trying to teach a corpse to breathe. Give up, brother.”

Talos moved away from Cyrion’s placating hand. “There will come a night when the word *brother* is no longer enough to save you, Uzas.”

“Is that a prophecy, seer?” the other warrior grinned.

“Smile all you like, but remember these words. When that night comes, I will kill you myself.”

Each of them tensed as the door’s chime sounded. “Who comes?” Talos called. He had to blink to clear his blurring vision. The wounds he’d taken weren’t healing with the alacrity he’d expected, and he had the grating sense that the damage beneath his armour was worse than he’d first thought.

A fist thumped against the door three times. “Soul Hunter,” the voice on the other side crackled by way of greeting. Its tone was surprisingly rich with respect, despite being as harsh and dry as a vulture’s caw. “We must speak, Soul Hunter. So very much to speak of.”

“Lucoryphus,” Talos lowered his blade, “of the Bleeding Eyes.”



## VI

# HONOUR THY FATHER

Lucoryphus entered the chamber in a bestial stalk, prowling on all fours. His feet, sheathed in ceramite boots, were warped into armoured claws: curling, multi-jointed and wickedly bladed, no different from a hawk's talons. Walking had been a bane to Lucoryphus for centuries—even this ungainly crawl was difficult—and the sloping thrusters mounted upon the warrior's back spoke of denied flight, a Legionary caged by the confines of these corridors.

His eyes bled, and from this curse he took his name. Upon the white faceplate, twin scarlet tear-trails ran from the slanted eye lenses. Lucoryphus of the Bleeding Eyes, with his avian helm twisted into a daemon's visage mouthing a silent scream, watched with a predator's eyes. Machine-growls sounded in his cabled neck joints as the warrior's muscles tensed with unintentional tics. He regarded each of the gathered Night Lords in turn, the avian helm snapping left and right with an eye for prey.

He'd been like them once. Oh, yes. Just like them.

His armour bore little evidence of allegiance to his Legion or bloodline. Each of his warriors displayed their bond the same way: each bore the red tears of their leader reflected on their own faceplates. The Bleeding Eyes were a cult unto themselves first, and sons of the Eighth Legion second. Talos wondered where the rest of them were at the moment. They represented fully half of the additional strength the Exalted's warband had taken on from recovering Halasker's companies on Crythe.

"The Exalted sends me to you." Lucoryphus' voice made words from the sound of fingernails scratching down sandpaper. "The Exalted is wrathful."

"The Exalted is seldom ever anything else," Talos pointed out.

"The Exalted," Lucoryphus paused to hiss air in through his jagged mouth grille, "is wrathful with First Claw."

Cyryon snorted. "That's not exactly a unique occurrence, either."

Lucoryphus gave an irritated bark of noise, not far from a falcon's shriek, but flawed by vox corruption. "Soul Hunter. The Exalted requests your presence. In the apothecarion."

Talos placed his helm on the workshop table before Septimus. The mortal didn't disguise his sigh as he started turning it over in his hands.

"Soul Hunter," Lucoryphus grated again. "The Exalted requests your presence. *Now.*"

With his face marred by the wounds he'd suffered only an hour before, Talos stood motionless. He towered above the hunched Raptor, in armour devastated by his

brothers' recent revenge. On his back, the golden blade stolen from the Blood Angels reflected what little light existed in the artificer's chamber. On his hip, clamped by magnetic seals, rested the massive double-barrelled bolter of an Eighth Legion hero.

By contrast, Lucoryphus of the Bleeding Eyes had come unarmed. A curious gesture from the Exalted.

"The Exalted requested," Talos smiled, "or demanded?"

Lucoryphus twitched with an involuntary muscle spasm. His avian head jerked, and the daemonic faceplate released a hissing breath. His left talon-hand snapped shut, the clawed fist trembling. When the fingers unlocked, they curled open on squealing metal joints.

*"Requested."*

"First time for everything," said Cyrion.

The Exalted licked its teeth.

It still wore its armour for the most part, though the ceramite plating had long since become part of its altered flesh. The apothecarion was expansive, but the Exalted's nature forced it into an uncomfortable hunch to avoid scraping its horned helm across the ceiling. All around it was silence—the silence of abandonment. This chamber hadn't seen any real use in many years. As the Exalted stroked a taloned finger across a surgical table, he reflected how the decades of neglect would soon be undone.

The creature moved over to the cryogenic vault. A wall of sealed glass cylinders, all racked and stored in perfect order, each etched in Nostraman with the names of the fallen. The Exalted growled low, a tormented breath, as its knife-like digits scratched squealing streaks down the metal vault racks. So many names. So very many.

It closed its eyes and listened, for a time, to the *Covenant's* heartbeat. The Exalted breathed in unison with the distant rhythmic thrum of the fusion reactors, rumbling as the engines idled in dock. It listened to the whispers, the screams, the shouts and the blood-borne pulses of everyone on board. All of it echoed through the hull into the creature's mind—a constant sensory tide that took more and more effort to ignore as the years passed.

Rarely, it would hear laughter, almost always from the mortals as they endured their dim, dull existences within the ship's black bowels. The Exalted was no longer sure how to react to the sound, nor what it could really signify. The *Covenant* was the creature's fortress, a monument to both its own pain and the pain it inflicted upon its grandfather's galaxy. Laughter was a sound that pulled at the Exalted, incapable of dredging any true memories, yet still whispering that, once, the creature would have understood such a sound. It would've made the sound itself, in the age when "It" had been "Him".

Its lips peeled back from its shark's teeth in a grin it didn't feel. How times changed. And soon, they would change again.

*Talos. Lucoryphus.* The knowledge of their presence didn't come in simple recognition of their names. It was their thoughts drifting closer, bunched tight like fused writing and polluted by fragments of their personalities. Their approach came

upon the Exalted like a whispering, unseen tide. The creature turned a moment before the apothecarion's doors opened on protesting gears.

Lucoryphus inclined his head. The Raptor stalked in on all fours, the sloping thrusters on its back shifting side to side in sympathy with the warrior's awkward gait. Talos didn't bother to salute. He didn't even acknowledge the Exalted with a nod. Instead, the prophet entered slowly, his armour a mauled palette of absolute ruination, and his face little better.

"What do you want?" he asked. One of his eyes was buried beneath strips of torn pale skin and weeping scabs. His head was laid open to the bone, and the flesh was scorched and angry. Damage from a bolter shell, and one that had almost killed him. Interesting.

Despite the prophet's typical undignified defiance, the Exalted felt a moment's gratitude that Talos had come in such a condition.

"You are wounded," it pointed out, its voice a draconic murmur. "I can hear your hearts labouring to beat. The blood-stink... the mushy, liquid concussion of overstrained organs... Talos, you are closer to death than you appear. And yet you come before me now. I appreciate your display of trust."

"Third Claw is dead." The prophet spoke as bluntly as always. "First Claw is crippled. We need two months to recover."

The Exalted inclined its tusked head in acknowledgement. It knew these things already, of course, but the fact the prophet reported it like an obedient soldier was enough to work with. For now.

"Who broke your face?"

"Dal Karus."

"And how did Dal Karus die?"

Talos moved his hand from the great puncture wound in his side. The gauntlet came away coated in a sheen of blood. "He died begging for mercy."

Lucoryphus, hunched atop one of the surgical tables, emitted a shrieking snicker from his vocalisers. The Exalted grunted before speaking. "Then we are stronger without him. Did you harvest Third Claw's gene-seed?"

The prophet wiped spittle from his lips. "I had servitors store the bodies in the cryo-vaults. I will harvest them later, when we have a greater supply of preservative solution."

The Exalted turned its gaze upon the mortuary vaults: a row of lockers built into the far wall.

"Very well."

Talos didn't hide his wince as he took a breath. The pain of his wounds, the Exalted suspected, must border on excruciating. This, too, was interesting. Talos had not come out of obedience. Even grievously injured, he had come because of the location the Exalted had chosen. Curiosity could motivate even the most stubborn souls. There could be no other answer.

"I am tired of this existence, my prophet." The creature let the words hang in the cold air between them. "Aren't you?"

Talos seemed on edge, taken aback by the remark. "Be specific," he said through bleeding gums.

The Exalted stroked its claws down the sealed gene-seed pods again, leaving theatrical scratches on the precious containers. “You and I, Talos. Each of us is a threat to the other’s existence. Ah, ah. Do not even think to argue. I do not care whether you are as ambitionless as you claim, or if you dream of my death each time you allow yourself to sleep. You are a symbol, an icon, for the disenfranchised and the discontented. Your life is a blade at my throat.”

The prophet made his way to another operating table, idly inspecting the hanging steel arms that dangled slack from the ceiling-mounted surgical machinery. A rime of dust painted the table’s surface grey. When he brushed the powder aside with his gauntlet, the surface beneath was stained brown by old blood.

“Doloron died here,” he said softly. “Thirty-six years ago. I pulled his gene-seed myself.”

The Exalted watched as Talos indulged in memory. The creature could be patient, when the moment required it. Nothing would be gained by rushing now. When the prophet faced the Exalted once more, his good eye was narrowed.

“I know why you summoned me,” he said.

The Exalted inclined its head, grinning between its tusks. “I suspect you do.”

“You want me to begin rebuilding our numbers.” Talos raised his left arm, holding it out for the Exalted’s inspection. Something sparked in his elbow joint. “I am no longer an Apothecary. I haven’t carried the ritual tools in almost four decades. None of the fresh blood from Halasker’s squads have endured the training, either.” Perversely warming to speaking of their dire straits, Talos gestured around the chamber. “Look at this place. The ghosts of dead warriors locked in cold storage, and three dozen surgery tables gathering dust. The equipment is little more than scrap due to age, neglect and battle damage. Even Deltrian couldn’t repair most of this.”

The Exalted licked its maw with a black tongue. “What if I could replenish all that was lost? Would you then replenish our ranks?” The creature hesitated, and its deep voice drew in a breath somewhere between a growl and a snarl. “We have no future if we remain divided. You must see it as clearly as I. Blood of the gods, Talos—don’t you wish to be strong again? Don’t you wish a return to the times when we could face our foes, to chase them down like prey, without endlessly fleeing before them?”

“We are above half-strength, but only barely.” Talos leaned on the surgical table. “I’ve done a soul count myself. The Blood Angels butchered over a hundred of the crew, and almost thirty of our warriors. We are no better than before we inherited Halasker’s men, but at least we are no worse.”

“No worse?” The Exalted tongued aside the stalactites of saliva that linked its teeth. “*No worse?* Do not turn a blind eye to your own sins, Talos. You have already slain seven of them this very night.”

Metal wrenched in protesting chorus with the harsh words. The Exalted’s monstrous talon deformed the wall where the creature gripped too hard. With a grunt, it pulled its claw free. “Halasker’s warriors have been with us a matter of months, and already the infighting is savage enough to see bloodshed almost every night. We are dying, prophet. You, who can stare down the paths of the future, have no excuse to be so blind. Stare now, and tell me if you see us surviving another century.”

Talos didn't answer that. It didn't need an answer. "You call me here, proposing a truce I don't understand to a conflict I'm not willingly fighting. I do not want to inherit Malcharion's mantle. I don't want to lead what remains of us. I am not your rival."

Lucoryphus emitted another static-laden burst of noise—either a hissing laugh or a derisive snort. Talos didn't know the warrior well enough to tell. "Soul Hunter carries the war-sage's weapon, yet claims not to be Malcharion's heir. Amusing."

The prophet ignored the Raptor, focussing on the creature that had once been his commander. Before he spoke, he had to swallow a mouthful of blood that welled up from the back of his tongue.

"I do not understand, Vandred. What has changed to make you speak like this?"

"Ruven." The name was spat as a curse as the Exalted turned its bulk, resting both of its warped claws against the vault wall. Hunched, growling, it stared at the genetic treasure within. "At Crythe, when we fled before the wrath of the Blood Angels. That night poisons my thoughts even now. Ruven, that thrice-damned wretch, blithely dictating to us as if he were anything more than the Warmaster's peon. I will not be commanded by one who abandoned the Legion. I will not kneel before a traitor, nor heed the words of a weakling. I—*We*—are better than that."

The Exalted turned again, its black eyes staring with the passionless, soulless intensity of a creature born in the ocean's silent depths. "I wish to be proud once more. Proud of our war. Proud of my warriors. Proud to stand in midnight clad. We must rise again, greater than before, or be forgotten forever. I will fight that fate, brother. I want you to fight it with me."

Talos looked over the decrepit machinery and the abandoned tables. The Exalted couldn't help but admire the warrior's restraint in swallowing the pain he must be feeling. Something, some restrained emotion, glinted behind the prophet's good eye.

"To repair the ship and restore our strength, we'll need to dock at Hell's Iris again."

"We will," the Exalted grunted.

Talos didn't reply to that. He let the silence speak for him.

The Exalted licked its blackened maw. "Perhaps we won't see quite as much bloodshed this time."

At that, Talos took a pained breath. "I'll help you," he said at last.

As the prophet walked from the room, the Exalted's cracked lips stretched back from its rows of stained teeth in something approximating a smile. Behind Talos, the door sealed with a grinding clunk.

"Of course you will," the creature whispered wetly into the cold air.

The door closed, leaving him alone in the sub-spinal corridor to reflect on the Exalted's words. Talos didn't labour under any delusion—the creature's offer of truce was founded in its own gain, and none of the Exalted's assurances would keep the prophet from watching his back at every opportunity. The *Covenant* wasn't safe. Not with the tensions boiling between Claws.

When he judged he'd come far enough, Talos slowed in his stride. Wiping his good eye free of blood was a constant irritant. The flayed half of his face was bitter

with chill now, and the air stroked his skull with unpleasant fingers. Beneath it all, his pulse did little more than push pain around his body.

Remaining out here alone was unwise. Upon leaving the apothecarion, the first place he needed to reach was the slave holds. If the Exalted wished the warband to stand stronger than ever before, that required trained slaves, gunnery menials, artificers, manufacturers, and it required Legionaries. This last need was the hardest to fulfil, but it could be done. Ganges Station had surrendered a bounty in flesh, as well as plunder.

The prophet turned into a side corridor, feeling his hearts clenching in his chest at the movement. They didn't beat, they hummed: buzzing as they overworked themselves. A fresh wave of nausea gripped him in an unwelcome and unfamiliar embrace. The genetic resculpting done to him as a youth had all but banished the capacity to feel dizzy in the human biological sense, but intense stimuli could still be disorienting. Evidently pain could, too.

Four steps. Four steps down the northward corridor, before he crashed against the wall. Blood tainted his tongue with a coppery sting, mixing with the caustic juices in his saliva glands. An exhalation became a purge as he vomited blood onto the decking. The puddle hissed and bubbled on the steel: just enough corrosive spit had washed into the blood for it to become acidic.

Something locked in his knee joint, almost definitely a cord of fibrous wirework too damaged to bend anymore. The prophet pushed off from the wall and limped away from the still bubbling blood-vomit, moving alone through the ship's darkened tunnels. Each step brought fresh pain blooming beneath his skin. With a lurch, the world turned. Metal rang out against metal.

"Septimus," he said to the darkness. For a time, he breathed in and out, working the ship's stale air through his body, feeling something hot and wet drip from his cracked skull. Shouting for a slave wasn't going to help him now. A curse upon Dal Karus' bones. For a vindictive moment, he imagined granting Dal Karus' helm to the slaves to use as a chamber pot. Tempting. Tempting. The prospect of such childish vengeance brought a guilty smile to his bleeding lips, even if the reality of such an act was too petty to really consider.

Forcing himself back to his feet took an age. Was he dying? He wasn't certain. He and Xarl had borne the brunt of Third Claw's bolter fire—their armour was devastated, and Talos was well aware how savage his wounds were if his blood wouldn't clot to seal the great rupture in his side. What remained of his face was a lesser concern, but if he didn't deal with that soon, he'd need extensive bionic implantation to repair the damage.

Another dozen steps sent his vision swimming. Blinking his eyes wasn't enough to clear them, and the telltale sting in pulse points was a stark indication that his armour had already flooded his system with synthetic adrenaline and chemical pain inhibitors to incautious levels.

The Exalted was right. His wounds were graver than he'd wished to reveal. Blood loss was starting to steal the sensation in his hands, and he felt leaden below his knees. The slave holds could wait an hour. Nerveless fingers felt for the secondary vox-link in his gorget.

“Cyrion,” he said into the link. “Septimus.” How short, the scroll of names he could call to in perfect trust. “Mercutian,” he breathed. And then, surprising himself, “Xarl.”

“Prophet.” The reply came from behind. Talos turned, breathing heavily from the effort of staying on his feet. “We must speak,” the newcomer said. It took a moment for the prophet to recognise the voice. His vision was getting no clearer.

“Not now.” He didn’t reach for his weapons. As a threat it would be too obvious, and he wasn’t sure he could grip them with any conviction anyway.

“Something wrong, brother?” Uzas delighted in tasting that last word. “You look unwell.”

How to answer that? The constriction beneath his ribcage told of at least one lung collapsing. The fever had the sweaty, unclean edge of sepsis, a gift from the myriad bolter shell fragments punched into his body. Add the blood loss and severe biological trauma, coupled with his weakened state suffering an overdose on the automatically administered combat narcotics... The list went on. As for his left arm... that no longer moved at all. Perhaps it would need replacing. That thought was far from pleasant.

“I need to get to Cyrion,” he said.

“Cyrion is not here.” Uzas made a show of looking around the tunnel. “Only you and I.” He stepped closer. “Where were you going?”

“The slave holds. But they can wait.”

“So now you limp back to Cyrion.”

Talos spat a mouthful of corrosive, pinkish saliva. It ate into the decking with glee. “No, now I stand here arguing with you. If you have something to say, make it quick. I have duties to perform.”

“I can smell your blood, Talos. It flows from your wounds like a prayer.”

“I have never prayed in my life. I’m not about to start now.”

“You’re so literal. So blunt. So blind to anything outside your own pain.” The other warrior drew his blade—not the weighty chainaxe, but a silver gladius the length of his forearm. Like the rest of First Claw, he kept his weapon of last resort sheathed at his shin. “So confident,” Uzas stroked the sword’s edge, “that you will always be obeyed.”

“I saved your life tonight. Twice.” Talos smiled through the blood sheeting his face. “And you repay me by whining?”

Uzas still toyed with his gladius, turning it over in his gauntlets, examining the steel with false nonchalance. The bloodstained handprint was a painted smear across Uzas’ faceplate. Once, on a single night long ago, it had been real blood. Talos remembered the moment a young woman had struggled in his brother’s grip, her bloody fingers pushing with absolute futility against Uzas’ helm. A city burned around them. She was writhing, struggling to avoid being disembowelled by the very blade now in his brother’s hands.

After that night, Uzas ensured the image remained painted onto his faceplate. A reminder. A personal icon.

“I don’t like how you look at me,” Uzas said. “Like I am broken. Cracked by flaws.”

Talos leaned over, letting dark blood trickle between his teeth to drip onto the decking. “Then change, brother.” The prophet straightened with a pained hiss, licking the taste of rich copper from his lips. “I will not apologise for seeing what stands before me, Uzas.”

“You’ve never seen clearly.” The warrior’s vox-voice was laden with static, flensing away any emotion. “Always your way, Talos. Always the prophet’s way.” He regarded his reflection in the gladius. “Everything else is corrupt, or ruined, or wrong.”

The chemical taste of stimulants was acrid on the back of his tongue. Talos resisted the urge to reach for the Blood Angel blade strapped to his back. “Is this going to be a lecture? I’m thrilled you’ve managed to piece more than four words together into a sentence, but could we discuss my perceptions when I’m not bleeding to death?”

“I could kill you now.” Uzas stepped closer still. He aimed the point of the blade at the defiled aquila sculpted over the prophet’s chest, then let it rise to rest against Talos’ throat. “One cut, and you die.”

Blood trickled onto the blade, drip-drip-dripping from Talos’ chin. It left the edges of his lips in trails like tears.

“Get to the point,” he said.

“You stare at me like I’m diseased. Like I’m cursed.” Uzas leaned closer, his painted faceplate glaring into his brother’s eyes. “You look upon the Legion the same way. If you hate your own bloodline, why remain part of it?”

Talos said nothing. The ghost of a smile played at the corner of his mouth.

“You are *wrong*,” Uzas hissed. The blade bit, the barest parting of skin against the metal’s edge. With that gentle stroke of steel on skin, blood welled onto the silver. “The Legion has always been this way. Your eyes have taken millennia to open, and you recoil from the truth. I honour the primarch. I walk in his shadow. I kill as he killed—I *kill because I can*, the way he could. I hear the cries of distant divinities, and I take power from them without offering worship. They were weapons in the Great Betrayal, and they remain weapons in the Long War. I honour my father, the way you never have. I am more his son than you’ve ever been.”

Talos stared into his brother’s eye lenses, picturing the drooling visage behind the skulled faceplate. Slowly, he reached for the blade at his throat, lifting it away from his skin.

“Are you finished, Uzas?”

“I tried, Talos.” Uzas jerked the blade back, sheathing it in a smooth motion. “I tried to salvage your pride by telling you honestly and clearly. Look at Xarl. Look at Lucoryphus. Look at the Exalted. Look at Halasker, or Dal Karus, or any son of the Eighth Legion. The blood on our hands is there because human fear tastes so very fine. Not through vengeance, or righteousness, or to ensure our father’s name echoes through the ages. We are the Eighth Legion. We kill because we were born to kill. We slay because it is fuel for the soul. Nothing else remains to us. Accept that, and... and stand... with us.” Uzas finished with a wet, burbling growl, taking a step backwards to steady himself.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Too many words. Too much talk. The pain is back. Will you heed me?”



Talos shook his head. “No. Not for a moment. You say our father accepted everything I hate. If that were true, why did he consign our home world to flames? He burned a civilisation to ash, purely to stop the cancer spreading through his Legion. You’re my brother, Uzas. I will never betray you. But you are wrong, and I will save you from this suffering if I can.”

“Don’t need saving.” The other warrior turned his back, his tone ripe with disgust. “Always so blind. I don’t need to be saved. Tried to make you see, Talos. Remember. Remember tonight. I tried.”

Talos watched his brother’s retreating back as Uzas moved into the shadows.

“I’ll remember.”

## VII

# FLIGHT

Freedom.

*A relative concept*, Maruc reflected, *when I have no idea where I am*. But it was a start.

Time was fluid when nothing ever changed. At his best estimate, they'd kept him chained down here like a dog for six or seven days. With no way to know for sure, he founded the guess on the amount people slept, and how much they'd been forced to shit themselves.

His world was reduced to a blanket of darkness and the smell of human waste. Every so often in the numberless hours, dull light from lamp packs would spear around the grouped people as the ship's pale crew came in with salted strip-meat rations and tin mugs of brackish water. They spoke in a language Maruc had never heard before, hissing and *ash-ash-ash*-ing at each other. None of them ever addressed their captives. They came in, fed the prisoners, and left. Immersed in darkness again, the captives barely had enough chain between each of them to move more than a metre apart.

With the exaggerated stealth he'd used on Ganges, he slipped the iron ring off his chafed ankle. He was missing his boots, filthy and standing with his socks in a puddle of cold piss. *Still*, he thought again, *it's definitely a start*.

"What are you doing?" asked the man next to him.

"Leaving." *What a question*. "I'm getting out of here."

"Help us. You can't just go, you have to help us." He could hear heads turning in his direction, though none of them could see through the absolute blackness. More voices joined the plea.

"Help me."

"Don't leave us here..."

"Who's free? Help us!"

He hissed at them to be quiet. The press of their stinking bodies was a clammy, meaty pressure all around. The slaves stood in the pitch darkness, shackled at the ankles, clad in whatever they'd been wearing when they'd been dragged from the decks of Ganges Station. Maruc had no idea how many of them were in this chamber with him, but it sounded like a few dozen. Their voices echoed off the walls. Whatever storage hold they'd been dumped in, it was big. The ship that had attacked Ganges was clearly not something to mess with, killers from myth or not.

*I've decided not to die*. It sounded foolish even to himself.

"I'm going for help," he said, keeping his voice low. It was easy enough—dehydration roughened his throat, almost silencing him completely.

"Help?" Bodies jostled against him as someone way ahead moved position. "I'm in Station Defence," he called back in a harsh whisper. "Everyone's dead on Ganges. How did you get free?"

"I worked my shackle loose." He stepped away, blindly feeling through the press of bodies to where he hoped the door was. People cursed him and pushed back, as if offended by his freedom.

Relief flooded him when his outstretched hands grazed the cold metal wall. Maruc began to feel his way left, seeking the door with filthy fingertips. If he could open it, there was a chance that—

There. His questing hands met the door's ridged edge. Now, did it open by a pressure plate mounted on the wall, or a codepad?

*Here. Here it is.* Maruc brushed his fingertips along the raised keys, feeling a standard nine-button codepad. Each of the buttons was larger than he'd expected, and faintly indented by use.

Maruc held his breath, hoping to slow his clamouring heart. He keyed in six buttons at random.

The door slid open on ungreased tracks, groaning loud enough to wake the dead. Light from the other side spilled into Maruc's eyes.

"Uh... hello," said a female voice.

"Get back," Septimus warned. He had both pistols in his hands, aimed at the escaped slave's head. "Another step. That's right."

Octavia rolled her eyes. "He's unarmed."

Septimus didn't lower his bulky pistols. "Shine the light inside. How many are free?" Octavia complied, panning the spear of light over the grim scene.

"Just him."

*"Forfallian dal sur shissis lalil na sha dareel."* Septimus' words were lost on her, but his face showed he was cursing. "We must be cautious. Watch yourself."

She glanced at him for a moment. *Watch yourself?* As if she needed to be told to be careful? *Idiot.*

"Of course," she huffed. "A real horde of danger here."

"I protect mistress." Her attendant, ever present at Octavia's side, had a grubby sawn-off shotgun clutched in his bandaged hands. His sealed eyes stared at the freed slave. She bit back the very real need to punch both of them for their overprotective swaggering.

"He's unarmed," she repeated, gesturing at Maruc. "He... *Sil vasha...uh... Sil vasha nuray.*"

Her attendant sniggered. Octavia shot him a look.

"That means, 'He has no arms'," Septimus replied. He still hadn't lowered his guns. "You. Slave. How did you get free?"

When the glare faded, Maruc found himself staring at three people. One was a hunchbacked little freak in a sackcloth cloak with his eyes sewn shut. Next to him, a tall girl with dark hair and the whitest skin he'd ever seen on a woman. And next to

her, a scruffy fellow with bionics on his temple and cheekbone, with two pistols aimed right at Maruc's face.

"I worked my shackles loose," he admitted. "Look... Where are we? What are you doing to us?"

"My name is Septimus." He still didn't lower the guns. "I serve the Legiones Astartes aboard this ship." His voice carried into the chamber. No one spoke. "I'm here to find out each of your professions and areas of expertise, to determine your value to the Eighth Legion."

Maruc swallowed. "There is no Eighth Legion. I know my mythology."

Septimus couldn't entirely fight down the smile. "Talk like that will get you killed on this ship. What was your duty on Ganges?" As the guns came down, so did Maruc's hands. He was suddenly uncomfortably aware that he needed a shower like never before.

"Manufacture, mostly."

"You worked in the refinery?"

"Construction. At the conveyance belts. Assembly line stuff."

"And the machinery?"

"Some of it. When they broke down and needed a kick."

Septimus hesitated. "That was difficult work."

"You're telling me." A strange pride flowed through him at that moment. "I know it was a grind. I was the one doing it."

Septimus holstered his guns. "After we have done this, you are coming with me."

"I am?"

"You are." Septimus coughed politely. "You will also need to bathe." He entered the chamber, and the others followed him. Octavia's attendant kept his shotgun gripped tight. The Navigator offered an awkward smile to Maruc.

"Don't try to run," she said. "Or he'll shoot you. This won't take long."

One by one, Septimus gathered their former duties, noting them down on a data-slate. This was the third slave hold they'd visited. None of the prisoners had attacked him so far.

"Are they dosed with kalma?" she whispered at one point.

"What?"

"The pacifying narcotic. We use it on Terra, sometimes." She sighed at his glance. "Forget it. Are you slipping something into their water rations? Why don't they do something? Why not try to fight us?"

"Because what I'm offering them is no different from what they already did." He hesitated and turned to her. "As I remember, you didn't fight me, either."

She gave him what would have been a coquettish smile, had it come from a noble-born scion of a Terran spire family, clad in her full finery. Instead, it looked a little sleazy and a little wicked. "Well," she toyed with her ponytail, "you were much nicer to me than you were to these people."

"Of course I was." Septimus led the way out. Behind them both, Maruc and her attendant trailed along. The others had been instructed to wait until more crew came to take them to other parts of the ship, so they could clean themselves and begin their new duties.

“So *why* were you nicer to me?” she asked.

“Because you took me by surprise. I knew you were a Navigator, but I’d never seen one before.” His human eye glinted in the torchlight. “I wasn’t expecting you to be beautiful.”

She was glad the darkness hid her smile. When he tried, he could say just the right th—

“And because you were so valuable to the Legion,” he added. “I had to be careful with you. The master ordered it.”

This time, the darkness hid her glare. *Idiot.*

“What’s your name?” she asked Maruc.

“Maruc.”

A smile preceded her answer. It was the kind of look that made him suspect her father must’ve crumbled under glances like that. “Don’t get used to it,” she said. “Our lord and master might have a different idea.”

“What’s your name?” Maruc asked her.

“Octavia. I’m the eighth.”

Maruc nodded, gesturing at Septimus’ back with a dirty finger. “And he’s Septimus, because he’s the seventh?”

The taller man looked back over his shoulder. “Exactly.”

“I do not have a name,” the hunched attendant provided helpfully. Stitched-shut eyes regarded him for a moment. “But Septimus calls me Hound.”

Maruc already hated the creepy little thing. He forced an aching smile until the twisted fellow looked away, then he glanced at the girl again. “Septimus and Octavia. The seventh and eighth,” he said. When she just nodded, he cleared his sore throat to ask. “The seventh and eighth *what?*”

The Exalted sat upon its throne at the heart of the strategium, brooding amongst its Atramentar. Garadon and Malek stood closest to their liege lord, both warriors casting hulking shadows in their tusked and horned Terminator war plate, with their weapons deactivated and sheathed.

Around the raised dais, the bridge crew worked under the harsh glare of spotlighting glaring down at each console. While most warships’ command decks were bathed in illumination, the *Covenant of Blood* lingered in a welcome darkness broken only by pockets of light around the human crew.

The Exalted drew a breath, and listened for a voice it could no longer hear.

“What troubles you, lord?” This, from Garadon. The warrior shifted his stance, causing his war plate’s joints to sound in a clashing opera of grinding servos. Rather than answer, the Exalted ignored its bodyguard’s concern, keeping its thoughts turned within. The mortal shell it wore—this swollen icon of daemonic strength—was its own, through and through. The creature had wormed its way within the Legionary’s form, hollowing it out and melting across its genetic coding in the most insidious and beautiful usurpation. The body that had once been Captain Vandred Anrathi of the Eighth Legion was no more: now the Exalted reigned in this husk, proud of its theft and the comfortable malformation to suit its new owner.

But the mind, the memories—these were forever stained by the taste of another soul. To quest through the husk's thoughts was to bear distant witness to another being's memories, dredging them for meaning and lore. With each invasion, the Exalted's violating mental tendrils would meet the enraged—and helpless—presence curled foetal within the thoughts. Vandred's shade bunched itself tightly within his own brain, forever severed from the blood, bones and the flesh that he'd once commanded.

And now... silence. Silence for days, weeks.

Gone was the laughter that edged upon madness. Gone were the tormented cries promising vengeance each time the Exalted sifted through the psyche's accumulated knowledge and instinct.

The creature breathed through its open jaws, sending tendrils of thought back into its mind. Their questing reach spilled memories and emotions in a ransacking mess.

Life upon a world of eternal night.

The stars in the sky, bright enough to hurt the eyes on cloudless evenings.

The pride of watching an enemy ship burn up in orbit, trembling its way down to crash upon the world below.

The awe, the love, a devastating rush of emotion felt while staring at a primarch father that took no pride in any of his sons' accomplishments.

The same pale corpse of a father, broken by the lies he fed himself, inventing betrayals to sate his devouring madness.

These were fragments of what the husk's former owner had left behind: shards of memory, scattered across the psyche in abandoned disorder.

The Exalted sifted through them, seeking anything that still lived. But... Nothing. Nothing existed within the bowels of this brain. Vandred, the scraps of him that had remained, were gone. Did this herald a new phase in the Exalted's evolution? Was it at last free of the clinging, sickening mortal soul that had resisted annihilation for so many decades?

Perhaps, perhaps.

It drew breath again, licking its maw clean of the acidic saliva. With a grunt, it summoned Malek closer and—

*Vandred.*

It was less a name, more a press of personality, a sudden aggressive burst of memory and emotion, boiling against the Exalted's brain. The creature laughed at the feeble assault, amused that the shadow of Vandred's soul would mount such an attack on the dominant consciousness after all this time. The silence hadn't been a symptom of the soul's destruction after all; Vandred had hidden, burrowing deeper within their twisted shared psyche, building his energy for this futile attempt at a coup.

*Sleep, little fleshthing,* the Exalted chuckled. *Back you go.*

The shrieks faded slowly, until they were swallowed once more, becoming the faintest background buzz at the very edge of the Exalted's inhuman perception.

Well. That had been an amusing distraction. The creature opened its eyes again, drawing breath into the husk to speak its decree to Malek.

A storm of light and sound awaited back in the external world: wailing sirens, rushing crew, shouting human voices. A laugh from within stroked at the Exalted's senses—the shadow of Vandred, revelling in his pathetic victory, distracting the daemon for a handful of moments.

The Exalted rose from its throne. Already, its inhuman mind stole answers from the barrage of sensory input. The sirens were low-threat proximity warnings. The ship was still docked. The auspex console chimed in urgent declaration, a tri-pulse that suggested either three inbound ships, or several smaller vessels bunched together. Given their location, it would be worthless haulier ships in service to the Adeptus Mechanicus; an Imperial Navy patrol blown far off-course by the winds of the warp; or, in all unfortunate probability, the arrival of a vanguard fleet in the colours of the Chapter Astartes sworn to defend this region of space.

“Disengage all umbilicals from the station.”

“Underway, my lord.” The mortal bridge attendant—*was it Dallow? Dathow?* Such insignificant details struggled to remain in the Exalted's mind—bent over his console, his former Imperial Navy uniform devoid of all allegiance markings. The man hadn't shaved in several days. His jawline was decorated with greying stubble.

*Dallon*, Vandred's voice ghosted through the creature's mind.

“All systems to full power. Bring us about immediately.”

“Aye, lord.”

The creature extended its senses, letting its hearing and sight bond with the *Covenant's* far-reaching auspex sensors. There, burning in the deep void, the warm coals of enemy engine cores. The Exalted leaned into the sensation, wrapping its sightless vision around the approaching presences—a blind man counting the stones in his hand.

*Three. Three smaller vessels. A frigate patrol.*

The Exalted opened its eyes. “Status report.”

“All systems, aye.” Dallon was still working his console as the Master of Auspex called out from his scanner table. “Three ships inbound, my lord. Nova-class frigates.”

On the occulus screen, the view resolved into the form of three Adeptus Astartes vessels, cutting the night as they speared closer. Even at their speed, it would take over twenty minutes for them to reach weapon range. More than enough time to disengage and run.

*Nova-class. Ship-killers.* These carried weapons for void-duelling, rather than Imperial Space Marines for close-range boarding actions.

All faces turned to the Exalted—all except the servitors slaved to the ship's systems, who mumbled and drooled and cogitated, blind to anything outside their programming. The human crew watched expectantly, awaiting further orders.

It knew what they expected. It knew with sudden clarity that every human in the oval chamber expected the Exalted to order another retreat. To flee made perfect sense; the *Covenant* was still a shadow of its former might, limping from the scars earned during the brutality at Crythe.

The Exalted licked its maw with a black tongue. Three frigates. At optimal strength, the *Covenant* would drive through them like a spear, shattering all three with contemptuous ease. Perhaps, if the fates allowed it, the *Covenant* could still...

No.

The *Covenant* was close to complete ruin. Its ammunition loaders were empty, its plasma drives starved. They'd not used the Shriek on an amused whim—the Exalted ordered Deltrian to fashion it from necessity, along with the prophet's human slave serving on the station as a traitor on the inside. Attacking Ganges through conventional means had never been a viable possibility. Nor was surviving this fight, even against such insignificant prey.

Yet for a moment, the temptation was agonisingly strong. Could they win this? The Exalted let its consciousness dissipate through the vessel's iron bones. The plunder leeches from Ganges was still mostly in the ship's holds, not yet processed into usable compounds. All the raw material in the galaxy wouldn't help for a second.

Then the time for baring blades and showing fangs would come soon. Now was the time to be ruled by reason, not rage. The Exalted clenched its teeth, forcing calm into its words.

"Come abeam of Ganges. All starboard broadsides to fire at will. If we cannot finish stripping our prize, then no one will."

The ship shivered as it began to obey. The Exalted turned its horned head to its bridge attendant. "Dallon. Ready for translation into the warp. Once Ganges is in pieces, we run."

Again.

"As you command, lord."

"Open a link to the Navigator," the Exalted growled. "Let us get this over with."

She sprinted through the darkness, led by memory and the dull lance of illumination from her lamp pack. Her footsteps rang out down the metal corridors, echoing enough to become the panicked sound of a horde of fleeing people. Behind, she heard her attendant struggling to keep up.

"Mistress!" he called again. His wails were receding as she outpaced him.

She didn't slow down. The deck thrummed beneath her pounding feet. Power. Life. The *Covenant* was moving again, after days of sitting dead in dock.

"Get back to your chambers," the Exalted's voice had drawled, irritation utterly unmasked. Even if the creature could threaten her, it didn't need to. She wanted this. She ached to sail again, and desire moved her limbs more than any devotion to duty.

She'd argued even as she obeyed. "I thought the Marines Errant weren't due here for months."

Before severing the link, the Exalted had grunted its disapproval. "Evidently, destiny has a sense of humour."

Octavia ran on.

Her quarters were nowhere near Blackmarket. Octavia scattered her attendants as she finally reached her chamber after almost ten minutes of running down stairs, along decking, and simply leaping down the smaller stairwells.



“Mistress, mistress, mistress,” they greeted her in an irritating chorus. Breathless and aching, she staggered past them, crashing down onto her interface throne. Responding to her presence, the wall of screens came to life before her. Picters and imagifiers mounted on the ship’s hull opened their irises as one, staring out into the void from a hundred angles. As she caught her breath, she saw space, and space, and space—no different from the days before, as they’d sat here in the middle of nowhere, docked and half-crippled by damage. Only now, the stars moved. She smiled as she watched them starting their slow dance.

On a dozen screens, the stars meandered to the left. On a dozen others, they sailed right, or coasted down, or rose up. She leaned back into the throne of black iron and took a breath. The *Covenant* was coming about. Ganges hove into view, an ugly palace of black and grey. She felt the ship shiver as its weapons screamed. Despite herself, she smiled again. Throne, this ship was majestic when it chose to be.

Her attendants closed in around her, bandaged hands and dirty fingers holding interface cables and restraint straps.

“Piss off,” she told them, and snatched off her bandana. That sent them scattering.

*I’m here, she said silently. I’m back.*

From within her own mind, a presence that had lingered as a tiny, dense core of unrest began to unfold. It spread, great sheets of discordant emotion unwrapping to blanket her thoughts. It was a struggle to keep herself separate from the invader’s passions.

*You*, the presence whispered. The recognition was laced with disgust, but it was a faint and distant thing.

Her heart was a thudding drum now. Not fear, she told herself. Anticipation. Anticipation, excitement, and... well, alright, fear. But the throne was all the interface she needed. Octavia refused the crude implantation of psy-feed cables, let alone needing restraints. Those were the crutches for the laziest Navigators, and while her bloodline might not be worth much in terms of breeding, she *felt* this ship well enough to reject the interface aids.

*Not me. Us.* Her inner voice tingled with savage joy.

*Cold. Weary. Slow.* The voice was the low rumble of something tectonic. *I awaken. But I am frozen by the void. I thirst and hunger.*

She wasn’t sure what to say. It was strange to hear the ship address her with such tolerance, even if it was patience brought on by exhaustion.

It sensed her surprise through the resonant throne. *Soon, my heart will burn. Soon, we will dive through space and unspace. Soon, you will shriek and shed salt water. I remember, Navigator. I remember your fear of the endless dark, far from the Beacon of Pain.*

She refused to rise to its primitive baiting. The machine-spirit at the ship’s heart was a vicious, tormented thing, and at best—at its absolute least unpleasant—it still loathed her. Much more often, it was a siege just to unify her thoughts with the vessel at all.

*You are blind without me, she said. When will you tire of this war between us?*

*You are crippled without me, it countered. When will you tire of believing you dominate our accord?*

She... she hadn't thought about it like that. Her hesitation must've flowed down the link, because she felt the ship's black heart beat faster, and another tremor ghosted through the *Covenant's* bones. Runes flickered on several of her screens, all in Nostraman script. She knew enough to recognise an update of increased power capacity in the plasma generator. Septimus had taught her the Nostraman alphabet and pictographic signals pertaining to the ship's function. "The essentials", he'd called it, as if she were a particularly dim child.

A coincidence, then? Just the engines building up energy, rather than her thoughts triggering the shipwide shiver?

*I grow warm, the Covenant told her. We hunt soon.*

*No. We run.*

Somehow, it sighed within her mind. At least, that was how her human awareness interpreted the breathless pulse of inhuman frustration that slid behind her eyes.

Still uneasy from the ship's accusation, she kept her thoughts back, holding them inside her skull, boxed away from the machine-spirit's reach. In silence, she watched Ganges burn, waiting for the order to guide the ship through a wound in reality.

The warp engines came alive with a dragon's roar, echoing in two realms at once.

"Where?" Octavia spoke aloud, her voice a wet whisper.

"Make for the Maelstrom," came the Exalted's reply, guttural over the vox. "We cannot linger in Imperial space any longer."

"I don't know how to reach it."

Oh, but she did. Couldn't she feel it—a bloated, overripe migraine that hurt her head with each beat of her heart? Couldn't she sense it with the same ease as a blind woman feeling the sunrise on her face?

She didn't know the way there through the warp, that was true. She'd never sailed through a tempest to reach a hurricane's heart. But she could sense it, and she knew that was enough to reach it.

*The Maelstrom.* The *Covenant* heard her torment and responded itself. Waves of sickening familiarity washed over the Navigator as it felt the ship's primitive memory through the bond they shared. Her skin prickled and she needed to spit. The vessel's dull recollection became her own: a memory of the void boiling with cancerous ghosts, of tainted tides crashing against its hull. Whole worlds, entire suns, drowning in the Sea of Souls.

"I have never sailed into a warp rift," she managed to say. If the Exalted replied, she never heard it.

*But I have, the Covenant hissed.*

She knew the tales, as every Navigator did. To plough into a warp rift was no different than swimming in acid. Each moment within its tides flayed ever more of a sailor's soul.

*Legends and half-truths, the ship mocked her. It is the warp, and it is the void. Calmer than the storm, louder than space. And then, Brace, Navigator.*

Octavia closed her human eyes and opened her truest one. Madness, in a million shades of black, swarmed towards her like a tide. Forever present in the darkness, a beam of abrasive light seared its way through the chaos, burning away the stuff of screaming souls and formless malice that rippled against its edges. A beacon in the black, the Golden Path, the Emperor's Light.

*The Astronomican*, she breathed in instinctive awe, and aimed the ship towards it. Solace, guidance, blessed light. Safety.

The *Covenant* rebelled, its hull straining against her, creaking and cracking under the strain.

*No. Away from the Beacon of Pain. Into the tides of night.*

The Navigator leaned back in her throne, licking sweat from her upper lip. The feeling taking hold reminded her of standing in the observatory atop her father's house-spire, feeling the unbelievable urge to leap from the balcony of the tallest tower. She'd felt it often as a child, that prickly sense of daring and doubt clashing inside her until the moment she leaned just a little too far. Her stomach would lurch and she'd come back to herself. She couldn't jump. She didn't want to—not really.

The ship roared in her mind as it rolled, the waters of hell crashing against its hull. Her ears hosted the unwelcome, ignorable sounds of human crew members shouting several decks above.

*You will destroy us all*, the ship spat into her brain. *Too weak, too weak.*

Octavia was faintly certain she'd puked on herself. It smelled like it. Claws stroked the ship's hull with the sound of squealing tyres, and the crashing of the warp's tides became the thudding beat of a mother's heart, overpoweringly loud to the child still slumbering in the womb.

She turned her head, watching the Astronomican darken and diminish. Was it rising away, out of her reach? Or was the ship falling from it, into th—

She suddenly tensed, blood like ice and muscles locked tighter than steel. They were free-falling through the warp. The Exalted's cry of desperate anger rang throughout every deck, carried over the vox.

*Throne*, she breathed the word, swearing with her heart and soul, barely cognisant of her lips speaking over the vox to the helmsmen on the command deck above. Her speech was automatic, as instinctive as breathing. The battle in her mind was what mattered.

*Throne and shit and fu—*

The ship righted. Not elegantly—she'd almost lost their way completely, and the vessel's recovery was anything but clean—but the ship pounded into a calmer stream with both relief and abandon. The *Covenant's* hull gave a last horrendous spasm, rocked to its core as she stared the way she wished to go.

She felt the primal machine-spirit calming. The ship obeyed her course, as true and straight as a sword. Even if it loathed her, it flew far finer than the fat barge she'd suffered on under Kartan Syne. Where the *Maiden of the Stars* wallowed, the *Covenant of Blood* raced. Untouchable grace and wrath incarnate. No one in her bloodline, not in thirty-six generations, had guided such a vessel.

*You are beautiful*, she told the ship without meaning to.

*And you are weak.*

Octavia stared into the tides around the ship. Above, the Emperor's Light receded, while below, the faint outlines of great shapeless things thrashed in the infinite, turgid black. She sailed by instinct, blinder than she'd ever been before, guiding them all towards a distant eye in the storm.

## PART TWO

# HELL'S IRIS

### VIII

## THE CITY AT NIGHT

He knew he was one of the *slow* children.

That was the word his tutors used to describe the children that sat separate from the others, and he knew he belonged with them. In his class, four of the children were *slow*—already, he formed the word in his mind with the same delicate emphasis the adults around him used when they said it—and the four of them sat by the window, often completely ignoring the tutor's words, yet never suffering punishment for it.

The boy sat with them, the fourth and newest of the four, and stared out of the window with the others. Cars passed in the night, their front lamps dull to ease any strain on the eyes. The clouded sky was hidden by tower-tops, each spire decorated by great illuminated signs selling whatever it was that adults felt they needed.

The boy turned back to his tutor. For a while, he listened to her speaking about language, teaching the other children—the *not slow* children—words that were new to them. The boy didn't understand at all. Why were the words new to everyone? He'd read them in his mother's books a dozen times before.

The tutor hesitated as she noticed him looking. Usually she ignored him, forgetting he was there with casual, practised familiarity. The boy didn't look away from her. He wondered if she would try to teach him a new word.

As it happened, she did. She pointed to a word written across the flickering vid-screen and asked him if he knew its meaning.

The boy didn't answer. The boy only rarely answered his tutor. He suspected it was why the adults called him *slow*.

As the chime pulsed once, heralding the end of tuition for the night, all of the children rose from the seats. Most of them packed writing pads away. The *slow* ones put away scraps of paper with childish drawings. The boy had nothing to pack, for he'd done little but stare out the window all evening.

The walk home took over an hour, and was even slower in the rain. The boy walked past cars trapped in traffic queues, listening to the drivers scream at one other. Not far from where he walked, only a block or two away, he heard the popcorn crackle of gunfire. Two gangs fighting it out. He wondered which ones, and if many had died.

It wasn't a surprise when his friend caught up with him, but the boy had been hoping to be left alone tonight. He gave a smile to pretend he wasn't annoyed. His friend returned it.

His friend wasn't really his friend. They only called each other friends because their mothers were real friends, and the two families lived in hab-chambers next to each other.

"The tutor asked you a question tonight," his friend said, as if the boy hadn't realised.

"I know."

"But why didn't you answer? Didn't you know what to say?"

That was the problem. The boy never knew what to say, even when he knew the right answer.

"I don't understand why we go to tuition," he said at last. Around them, the city lived and breathed as it always did. Tyres screeched in the next road. Shouted voices accused, demanded, pleaded with other shouting voices. Music pounded from inside nearby buildings.

"To learn," his friend said. His mother had told the boy that his friend would grow up to "break hearts one night". The boy couldn't see it. To the boy, his friend always seemed confused, angry, or angry about being confused.

"Our tutor never says anything I didn't know before," the boy shrugged. "But why do we need to learn? That's what I don't understand."

"Because... we do." His friend looked confused, and that made the boy smile. "When you even bother to speak, you ask some really stupid questions."

The boy let it rest. His friend never understood this kind of thing.

About halfway home, well into the maze of alleys and back roads that the adults all called the Labyrinth, the boy stopped walking. He stared down a side alleyway, neither hiding nor making himself known. Just watching.

"What is it?" his friend asked. But the boy didn't need to answer. "Oh," his friend said a moment later. "Come on, before they see us."

The boy stayed where he was. Trash lined the alley's narrow walls. Amongst the refuse, a couple embraced. At least, the man embraced the woman. The woman's clothing was ruined, cut up and torn, and she remained limp on the dirty ground. Her head was turned to the boy. As the man moved on top of her, she watched both boys with black eyes.

"Come on..." his friend whispered, dragging him away. The boy said nothing for some time, but his friend made up for it, talking all the while.

"You're lucky we didn't get shot, staring like that. Didn't your mother teach you any manners? You can't just watch like that."

"She was crying," the boy said.

"You don't know that. You're just saying it."

The boy looked at his friend. “She was crying, Xarl.”

His friend shut up after that. They walked the rest of the Labyrinth in silence, and didn’t say goodbye to each other when they finally reached their habitation spire.

The boy’s mother was home early. He smelled noodles on the boil, and heard her voice humming in the hab-chamber’s only other room: a small kitchen unit with a plastek screen door.

When she came into the main room, she rolled her sleeves down to her wrists. The gesture covered the tattoos along her arms, and the boy never commented on the way she always hid them like this. The coded symbols inked into her skin showed who owned her. The boy knew that at least, though he often wondered if perhaps they meant even more.

“Your tuition academy prelected me today,” she said. His mother nodded over to the prelector—it was blank now, but the boy could easily imagine his tutor’s face on the flat, grainy wall screen.

“Because I’m slow?” the boy asked.

“Why do you assume that?”

“Because I did nothing wrong. I never do anything wrong. So it must be because I’m slow.”

His mother sat on the edge of the bed, her hands in her lap. Her hair was dark, wet from a recent wash. Usually, it was blonde—rare for the people of the city. “Will you tell me what’s wrong?” she asked.

The boy sat next to her, welcomed into her arms. “I don’t understand tuition,” he replied. “We have to learn, but I don’t understand why.”

“To better yourself,” she said. “So you can live at City’s Edge, and work somewhere... nicer than here.” She trailed off on the last words, idly scratching at the ownership tattoo on her forearm.

“That won’t happen,” the boy said. He smiled for her benefit. She cradled him in response, the way she did on the nights after her owner hit her. On those nights, blood from her face dripped into his hair. Tonight, it was just her tears.

“Why not?” she asked.

“I’ll join a gang, just like my father. Xarl will join a gang, just like his. And we’ll both die on the streets, just like everyone else.” The boy seemed more thoughtful than melancholy. All the words that broke his mother’s heart barely moved him at all. Facts were facts. “It’s not really any better at City’s Edge, is it? Not *really*.”

She was crying now, just as the woman in the alley had cried. The same hollow look in her eyes, the same deadness.

“No,” she admitted in a whisper. “It’s no different there.”

“So why should I learn in tuition academy? Why do you waste money on all these books for me to read?”

She needed time before she could answer. The boy listened to her swallow, and felt her shaking.

“Mother?”

“There’s something else you can do.” She was rocking him now, rocking him the way she had when he was even younger. “If you stand out from the other children, if

you're the best and the brightest and the cleverest, you'll never have to see this world again."

The boy looked up at her. He wasn't certain he'd heard right, or that he liked the idea if he had.

"Leave the whole world? Who will..." He almost said *Who will take care of you*, but that would only make her cry again. "Who will keep you company?"

"You never need to worry about me. I'll be fine. But please, *please* answer your tutor's questions. You have to show how clever you are. It's important."

"But where would I go? What will I do?"

"Wherever you want to go, and whatever you want to do." She gave him a smile now. "Heroes can do whatever they want."

"A hero?" The idea made him giggle. His laughter was balm to his mother's grief—he was old enough to notice it happen, but too young to know why such a simple thing could resonate within a parent's heart.

"Yes. If you pass the trials, you'll be taken by the Legion. You'll be a hero, a knight, sailing the stars."

The boy looked at her for a long time. "How old are you, mother?"

"Twenty-six revolutions."

"Are you too old to take the trials?"

She kissed his forehead before she spoke. Suddenly she was smiling, and the tension in the small room evaporated. "I can't take the trials. I'm a girl. And you won't be able to take them if you're just like your father was."

"But the Legion takes boys from the gangs all the time."

"It didn't always." She lifted him away, and returned to stirring the noodles in the pan. "Remember, it takes *some* boys from the gangs. But it's always looking for the best and brightest stars. Promise me you'll be one of those?"

"Yes, mother."

"No more silence in tuition?"

"No, mother."

"Good. How is your friend?"

"He's not really my friend, you know. He's always angry. And he wants to join a gang when he's older."

His mother gave him another smile, though it was sadder, seeming like a wordless lie. "Everyone gets into a gang, my little scholar. It's just one of those things. Everyone has a house, a gang, a job. Just remember, there's a difference between doing something because you have to, and doing it because you enjoy it."

She placed their dinner onto the small table, her pale hands in little gloves to keep them from being burned on the tin bowls. Afterwards, she tossed the gloves on the bed, and smiled as he ate his first mouthful.

He looked up at her, seeing her face change in stuttering, flickering jerks. Her smile warped into a twisted sneer as her eyes tilted, pulled tighter, slanting with inhuman elegance towards her temples. Her wet hair rose as if charged by static, cresting into a stiffened plume of arterial red.



She screamed at him, a piercing shriek that shattered the windows, sending glass bursting out to rain down onto the street far below. The shrieking maiden reached for a curved blade on the nearby bed, and—

He opened his eyes to the comforting darkness of his meditation chamber.

But the solace lasted no more than a moment. The alien witch had come through, following him back to the waking world. She said his name, her feminine voice breaking the black silence, her scent carried with her movements on the stale shipboard air.

The warrior reached for her throat, huge fist clutching the pale woman's neck as he rose to his feet and carried her with him. Her boots dangled and kicked in weak resistance, while her mouth worked without air to fuel her voice.

Talos released her. She fell a metre, crashing to the deck on boneless legs, falling to her hands and knees.

"Octavia."

She coughed, spitting and catching her breath. "No, really, who did you think it was?"

By the open doorway leading into his meditation chamber, one of the Navigator's attendants stood hunched and squirming, a scrap-metal shotgun in his trembling, bandaged hands.

"Need I remind you," the Night Lord said, "that it is a violation of *Covenant* law to aim that weapon at one of the Legion."

"You hurt my mistress." The man somehow stared with blinded eyes, his aim unwavering despite his obvious fear. "You hurt her."

Talos knelt down, offering his hand to help Octavia rise. She took it, but not before a moment's hesitation.

"I see you inspire great loyalty in your attendants. Etrigius never did."

Octavia touched her throat, feeling the rawness there. "It's fine, Hound. It's fine, don't worry." The attendant lowered his gun, returning it beneath the ragged folds of his filthy cloak. The Navigator puffed a loose lock of hair from her face. "What did I do to deserve that welcome? You said I could enter if the door was unlocked."

"Nothing," Talos returned to the slab of cold metal he used as a repose couch. "Forgive me; I was troubled by something I saw in my dreams."

"I knocked first," she added.

"I am sure you did." For a moment, he pressed his palms to his eyes, wiping away the after-images of the alien witch. The pain remained, undeniably worse than it had been in past years. His pulse thudded along the side of his head, the pain cobwebbing out from his temple. The injuries earned only a month before had done nothing but fuel the pain's growth. Now it hurt even to dream.

Slowly, he raised his head to look at her. "You are not in your chambers. The ship is blessedly free from that horrendous shaking, as well. We cannot possibly have arrived already."

Her reluctance to dwell on the topic was crystal clear. "No," she said, and left it at that.

“I see.” She required another rest, then. The Exalted would be less than thrilled. The three of them shared the silence, during which she flashed her lamp pack around the walls of his personal chamber. Nostraman writing, the flowing runes raggedly drawn, covered every surface. In some places, new prophecies overwrote older ones. Here was the prophet’s mind, spilled onto the metal walls, scrawled in a dead language. Similar runic prophecy was carved over patches of his armour.

Talos seemed unconcerned with her scrutiny. “You look unwell,” he said to her.

“Thank you very much.” She was well aware how sick she looked. Pasty skin and a sore back, with eyes so bloodshot and sore it hurt to blink. “It isn’t easy to fly a ship through psychic hell, you know.”

“I meant no offence.” He seemed more thoughtful than apologetic. “The pleasantries go first, I think. The ability to make small talk. We lose that before anything else, when we leave our humanity behind.”

Octavia snorted, but she wouldn’t be distracted. “What was your nightmare about?”

Talos smiled at her, the same crooked smirk usually hidden by his helm. “The eldar. Recently, it is nothing but the eldar.”

“Was it prophecy?” She rebound her ponytail, checking her bandana was still tight.

“I am no longer sure. The difference between prophecy and nightmare isn’t always easy to perceive. This was a memory that became twisted and fouled towards the end. Neither a prophetic vision, nor a true dream.”

“You’d think you could tell the difference by now,” she said, not meeting his eyes.

He let her venom pass, knowing its source. She was afraid, rattled by his treatment of her upon awakening, and doing her best to mask the fear in condescending anger. Why humans let themselves become enslaved to such pettiness remained a mystery to him, but he could recognise it and acknowledge it, rendering it ignorable.

Encouraged by his tolerant silence, she said “Sorry,” at last. Now their eyes met—hers the hazel of so many Terran-born, his the iris-less black of all Nostramo’s sons. The gaze didn’t last long. Octavia felt her skin crawl if she stared too long at any of the Night Lords’ enhanced, proto-god features. Talos’ face had healed well in the last month, but he was still a weapon before he was a man. The skull beneath his delicate features was reinforced and disgustingly heavy: a brick of bone, hard as steel. Surgical scars, white on white, almost concealed by his pale skin, ran down from both of his temples. A face that would’ve been handsome on a man was somehow profane when worn by one of these towering warriors. Eyes that might have been curious and kind were actually disquieting, always seething with something rancid and unconcealed.

Hatred, she suspected. The masters hated everything with unending ferocity, even one another.

He smiled at her scrutiny. That, at least, was still human. A crooked smile: once worn by a boy who knew much more than he wished to say. For a moment, he was something beyond this scarred statue of a hateful god.

“I assume there was a purpose to this visit,” he said, not quite a question.

“Maybe. What were you dreaming about... before the eldar came?”

“My home world. Before we returned to destroy it.” He’d slept in his armour, all but for his helm. Septimus had repaired it with Maruc’s assistance, and Octavia had been present in the final moments, watching Talos re-breaking the aquila with a single ritual hammer blow.

“What was your family like?”

The warrior sheathed his golden blade in its scabbard, locking it to his back. The grip and winged crosspiece showed over his left shoulder, waiting to be drawn. He didn’t look at her as he answered.

“My father was a murderer, as was his father before him, and his father before that. My mother was an indentured whore who grew old before her time. At fifty, she looked closer to seventy. I suspect she was diseased.”

“Sorry I asked,” she said with feeling.

Talos checked the magazine in his massive bolter, crunching it home with a neat slap. “What do you want, Octavia?”

“Something Septimus told me once.”

He paused, turning to look down at her. She barely reached the base of his sternum. “Continue.”

“He said you killed one of your servants, a long time ago.”

“Tertius. The warp took hold of him.” Talos frowned, almost offended. “I killed him cleanly, and he suffered little. It was not a mindless murder, Octavia. I do not act without reason.”

She shook her head. “I know. It’s not that. But what happened? *‘The warp has a million ways to poison the human heart.’*” She smiled, barely, at the ancient and melodramatic Navigator’s quote. “What happened to him?”

Talos locked his double-barrelled bolter to his armoured thigh plating. “Tertius changed inside and out. He was always a curious soul. He liked to stand on the observation deck when we plied the warp’s tides, staring out into the midst of madness. He looked into the abyss for long enough that it poured back into him. The signs were few at first—he would twitch and bleed from the nose—and I was younger then, I barely knew what to look for when it came to corruption. By the time I knew he was lost, he was a ravenous thing, crawling along the lower decks, hunting and eating the human crew.”

She shivered. Even the youngest Navigators knew the myriad degenerations that could take hold of humans in the warp, and despite her tedious career on *Maiden of the Stars*, Octavia had seen her fair share of taint in an unguarded crew. Nothing quite that bad, but still...

“And what happened to Secundus?” she asked.

“I have no desire to speak of the second. It is not something I recall with any pleasure, nor even any vindication when it was over.” He picked up his helm, turning it over in his hands. “Just tell me what’s wrong,” he said.

She narrowed her eyes. “How do you know something’s wrong?”

“Perhaps because I am not a complete fool.”

Octavia forced a smile. He could kill her; he *would* kill her, without a heartbeat’s hesitation.

*Now or never*, she thought.

"I keep seeing the Void-born."

Talos breathed slowly, closing his eyes for several seconds. "Go on."

"I hear her weeping around corridor corners. I catch glimpses of her running down empty passages. It's her. I know it is. Hound hasn't seen her, though."

Her attendant gave a bashful shrug, not enjoying the Night Lord's sudden scrutiny. Talos looked back to Octavia.

"So." She tilted her head. "Am I tainted?"

When he answered, it was with a tolerant sigh. "You are nothing but trouble to me," he said.

His words stoked the embers of her pride enough that she squared her shoulders, standing up straighter. "I could say the same thing to you. My life has hardly been any easier since you captured me. And *you* hunted *me*, remember? Dragging me on board with your hand around my throat, like some prize pet."

Talos laughed at that—his laughter was always the barest chuckle, little more than a soft exhalation through a crooked smile.

"I will never grow tired of your bladed Terran tongue." The warrior took a breath. "Guard yourself, Octavia. Despite your fears of your own weakness, the fault doesn't lie with you. This ship has spent an age within the warp. The corruption is not within you, but the *Covenant* itself. Taint rides in its bones, and we all breathe it in with the air supply. We are heretics. Such is our fate."

"That... is hardly reassuring."

He gave her a look then, almost achingly human. A raised eyebrow, a half-smile, a look that said: *Really, what did you expect from me?*

"The *Covenant* hates me," she said. "I know that. Its spirit recoils each time we touch. But it wouldn't haunt me like this, not on purpose. Its soul is too simple to consider such a thing."

Talos nodded. "Of course. But the *Covenant* is crewed by as many memories as living, breathing mortals. More have died on these decks than still work them. And the ship remembers every one of them. Think of all the blood soaked into the steel that surrounds us, and the hundreds of last breaths filtering through the ventilation cyclers. Forever recycled, breathed in and out of living lungs, over and over again. We walk within the *Covenant's* memory, so we all see things at the edges of our vision from time to time."

She shivered again. "I hate this ship."

"No," he said, holding his helm once more. "You don't."

"It's nothing like I imagined, though. Guiding a Legiones Astartes warship—it's what every Navigator prays for. And the *Covenant* moves like something from a dream, twisting and turning like a serpent in oil; nothing can compare to it. But everything here is so... sour." Octavia's words trailed off. After a moment, she watched him closely, smelling the tang of acid on his breath.

"You are staring," he pointed out.

"You were lucky not to lose your eye."

“That is a curious choice of words. Half of my skull was replaced by layered metal bonding, and I am reliably informed by Cyrion that the left side of my face looks like I lost a fight with a crag cougar.”

He stroked gauntleted fingertips down the sides of his face, where the scars of surgery were slowly fading. Even his post-human biology struggled to erase the damage done. The scars on the left side of his face ran from his temple to the edge of his lips. “These scars are not a mark of fine fortune, Octavia.”

“It’s not that bad,” she said. Something in his manner put her at ease—a touch of almost fraternal familiarity in his measured tone and honest eyes. “What’s a crag cougar?”

“A beast of my home world. When next you see one of the Atramentar, look to their shoulder guards. The roaring lions on their pauldrons are what we called crag cougars on Nostramo. It was considered a mark of wealth for gang bosses to be able to leave the cities and hunt such creatures.”

“Mistress,” Hound interrupted. She turned at the break in her history lesson.

“What?”

Hound looked awkward. “I killed a crag cat once.”

She tilted her head, but Talos answered before she could. “Hill Folk?” His low voice resonated in the chamber.

Hound nodded his ruined head with its crown of scraggly grey hair. “Yes, lord. And I killed a crag cat once. A small one. Then I ate it.”

“He probably did,” Talos conceded. “The Hill Folk lived away from the cities, eking out an existence in the mountains.”

Octavia was still watching Hound. “Just how old are you?”

“Older than you,” Hound confirmed, nodding again as if this answered everything. *Bizarre little thing*, she thought, turning back to Talos.

“How’s the arm?”

The warrior had glanced down at his armoured left arm, closing the hand into a fist. On the surface, encased in armour, it looked no different to his right limb. A different story lay beneath the ceramite: a limb of dense metal bones and hydraulic joints. The subtle grind of false muscles and servos was still new enough to be novel. He still felt a faint amusement at the vibration of small gears in his wrist or the crunching clicks when the plasteel elbow joint moved too fast. For her benefit, he offered his hand, tapping his thumb to his fingertips over and over in quick succession. Even the most subtle movements made his growling armour thrum.

“Cyrion lost his arm at Crythe,” he said. “I consider this an unfortunate thing to have in common with him.”

“How does it feel?”

“Like my own arm,” he shrugged, “but less so.”

Despite herself, she felt a smile. “I see.”

“I believe I will speak with Deltrian regarding the repairs,” he said. “Do you wish to join me?”

“Not at all, thank you.”

“No,” Hound piped up, still lurking by the door. “No, sir.”

Vox-speakers across the ship crackled to life. The Exalted's bass drawl rumbled through the corridors, "*Translation into the empyrean in thirty rotations. All crew to their stations.*"

Octavia looked up at the speaker mounted on the wall. "A polite way of saying, 'Octavia, get back to your room.'"

Talos nodded. "Return to your chamber, Navigator. Watch for the ghosts that walk these halls, but pay them no heed. How far are we from our destination?"

"A day from the Maelstrom's edge," she said. "Maybe two. There's one more thing."

"Which is?"

"The Void-born's father. Septimus told me not to trouble you with this, but I think you should know."

Talos inclined his head for her to continue, but said nothing.

"Sometimes in Blackmarket, and elsewhere on the crew decks, he tells us all how the ship is damned, cursed to kill us all in the coming nights. Some of the older crew have been listening and agreeing for a while... You know how they were about the girl. But now the new crew, the Ganges crew, they're starting to listen. Arkiah blames you. The girl had your Legion medallion, and she still... you know."

"Died."

Octavia nodded.

"I told Septimus to deal with this," the warrior intoned. "But thank you for bringing it to my attention. I will end the situation myself."

"Will you kill him?"

He wasn't deaf to the hesitation in her voice. "Dead slaves are worthless," he said. "However, so are disobedient ones. I will kill him if he forces my hand, but I have no wish to end his life. He is an example of human resistance to corruption, for he was able to sire a child despite decades of life in the bowels of this ship. I am not an idiot, Octavia. He is as much an example as his daughter was. His murder would profit us little, and serve only to antagonise the mortal crew. They must be brought to obey through fear of the consequences, not crushed into obedience by hopeless depression. The former breeds motivated, willing workers who wish to survive. The latter breeds suicidal husks that care nothing for pleasing their masters."

The air between them grew awkward, and Talos grunted an acknowledgement. "Will that be all?"

"What awaits us in the Maelstrom? What is the Hell's Iris?"

Talos shook his head. "You will see with your own eyes, if the ship manages to hold together for long enough to actually reach the docks there."

"So it's a dock."

"It's... Octavia. I am a warrior, not a scribe or a literist. I lack the words to do it justice. Yes, Hell's Iris is a dock."

"You say that like it's a curse. 'I am a warrior.'" Octavia licked her dry lips before speaking. "What did you want to do with your life?" she asked. "I told you the truth: I'd always dreamed of guiding such a warship, and for better or worse, fate gave me what I wished for. But what about you? Do you mind if I ask?"

Talos laughed again, that same whispering chuckle, and tapped the defiled aquila emblazoned across his chest.

“I wanted to be a hero.” A moment later, he masked his scarred face behind his skulled helm. Red eye lenses stared at her, devoid of all emotion. “And look how that worked out.”

## IX

# VOYAGE

Reaction was mixed as one of the Legion masters strode into Blackmarket that night. Most stood stock still, freezing in place, variously wondering who had done something wrong, or if their own transgressions were about to be punished. Some fell to their knees in respect, or bowed their heads in greeting. Several fled at the first sight of the master's red eye lenses emerging from the blackness. Most of these—oil-stained workers from the engine decks—ran down the many corridors leading from the communal crew chamber.

Their escape went ignored. The warrior moved through the parting crowd to stand before a single man who tended a market table, selling scraps of white cloth and charms woven from female hair. Nearby, humans dimmed their lamp packs as a sign of respect in the presence of a Legion master.

“Arkiah,” the warrior growled. His vox-voice was a guttural snarl, a rasping coming through the vocabulator in the helm's mouth grille. The man flinched back, cowed by fear, kept straight only by his stubborn pride.

“Lord?”

The warrior reached for the gladius sheathed at his shin, his movements deliberate and slow. As he rose with the blade in his hand, eye lenses still locked to the mortal's sweating features, he growled another three words.

“Take this sword.”

Talos dropped the gladius onto the table with a clang, scattering trinkets off the edges. The blade was as long as the human's arm, its silver length turned amber in the dim lighting of the communal chamber.

“Take it. I am due to meet with the tech-adept, and that meeting goes delayed while I remain here. So take the sword, mortal. My patience is finite.”

With trembling fingers, the man did as he was ordered. “Lord?” he asked again, his voice quavering now.

“The blade in your hands was forged on Mars in an age now believed to be myth by almost every soul in the Imperium. It has cut the heads from men, women, children, aliens and beasts. With these hands, I pushed it into the beating heart of a man who ruled an entire world.” The warrior reached to his belt, where an Adeptus Astartes helm hung on a short, thick chain against his hip. With a jerk, he wrenched the helm free, letting it thud onto the table where the sword had lain a moment before.

Red ceramite, marked by dents and scratches; green eye lenses, both cracked and lifeless. The helm stared at Arkiah in dead-eyed silence.



“This helm is all that remains of the warrior that murdered your daughter,” said Talos. “I killed him myself, in the running battles that raged across the decks as we fled from Crythe. And when it was done, I severed his head from his shoulders with the very blade you now struggle to lift in your hands.”

The man made to lower the sword, to rest it back on the table. “What do you wish of me, lord?”

“It is said you sow the seeds of discord among the mortal crew, that you preach this vessel is damned, and all who sail aboard her are destined to suffer the same fate as your daughter. Is that so?”

“The omens...”

“No.” Talos chuckled. “If you wish to be alive at the end of this conversation, you will not speak of ‘omens’. You will speak the truth, or you will never speak again. Do you preach of the *Covenant’s* damnation?”

Arkiah’s breath misted in the cold air. “Yes, my lord.”

The warrior nodded. “Very well. That does not anger me. Slaves are not forbidden emotions and opinions, even misguided ones, as long as they obey their duties. What *are* your duties, Arkiah?”

The ageing man backed up a step. “I... I am just a menial, lord. I do whatever is asked of me by the crew.”

Talos took a step closer. His active armour growled with teeth-itching resonance. “And does the crew ask you to preach that every one of them is damned?”

“Please don’t kill me, lord. Please.”

Talos stared down at the man. “I did not come here to kill you, fool. I came to show you something, to teach you a lesson every one of us must learn if we are to remain sane in the lives we lead.”

Talos gestured to the helm as he continued. “That warrior killed your daughter. His blade tore her in half, Arkiah. She would have taken several moments to die, and I promise you those moments were more painful than anything you can possibly imagine. Your wife also died in the raid, did she not? Slain by a Blood Angel blade? If she was with your daughter at the end, then this warrior likely butchered them both.”

Talos drew his own blade. A Blood Angel sword, as long as the human was tall, prised from the loose fingers of a slain hero. The polished and winged artefact was wrought of silver and gold: its craftsmanship unmistakable, its value uncountable. He slowly, gently, rested the golden blade on the ageing man’s shoulder, the edge just shy of kissing the mortal’s neck.

“Perhaps this was the last thing they both saw. A faceless warrior towering above them, blade ready to fall, to cut, to cleave them apart.”

Tears stood in the man’s eyes now. When he blinked, they trailed down his cheeks in quicksilver rushes.

“Lord,” he said. One word, nothing more.

Talos read the question in the broken man’s eyes. “I have come to ease your doubts, Arkiah. I did what I could. I tore her murderer apart. I carry his memory with me, in the taste of his blood on my tongue as I ate his heart. Your daughter died, and

you are entitled to your grief. But here, now, you have the murderer's remains. Use the sword. Break the helm. Take the vengeance you crave."

At last he found his voice. "I do not wish vengeance, lord."

"No." The Night Lord smiled behind the faceplate, pulling the healing muscles tight. Despite his words to Octavia, his face was a mask of constant aggravating pain now. He'd been considering stripping the skin from the left side of his skull, deadening the nerves, and replacing the scar tissue with bare augmetics. He still wasn't sure why he felt such reluctance to do so.

"If vengeance is hollow," Talos continued, "then you have simply not suffered enough. Revenge is all any of us can hope for, each time we must lick new wounds and wait for them to heal. Every soul on this ship, mortal and immortal alike, accepts that as truth. All except you. You, who insist you've been wronged more than any other. You, who dare to whisper dissent into the shadows, forgetting that your masters dwell within that same darkness. The shadows whisper to us, Arkiah. Remember, little human, treachery on this ship is punishable by being flayed alive."

Talos was no longer speaking directly to him. The warrior turned, addressing the crowd that ringed them both, even as he aimed his words for Arkiah's ears.

"So answer me something: do you mumble your traitorous words because of selfish grief, as if you are the only one to have lost something precious, or is it because you truly think your fellows will rise up in rebellion against the Legion?"

"My daughter..."

The Night Lord was a blur of movement and a purr of servo-joints. One moment he faced the crowd, his back to Arkiah; the next, the weeping man was held aloft by a fistful of greying hair, boots hanging above the decking.

"Your daughter was one of hundreds to lose her life that night," the Night Lord growled, "on a ship that falls apart beneath our feet even now because of the damage it sustained. Do you want me to apologise for not protecting her? Or would that also change nothing? Would those words, even true, ring as hollow as worthless vengeance? Will they bring her back?"

Talos hurled the man aside, sending him crashing into a table that toppled under the impact. "We lost dozens of warriors the same night you lost your daughter. Dozens of souls who'd stood on the very soil of Terra and watched the walls of the Emperor's palace tumble to the ground. Warriors who'd devoted eternity to fighting an unwinnable war in the name of vengeance. We lost hundreds of mortal crew. Every mortal on board lost someone or something precious that night, and they swallowed their grief, settling for the hope of revenge. But not you. *You* must tell everyone else that their losses mean nothing next to yours. *You* frantically whisper that everyone must piss themselves in fear at an unwritten future."

Talos sheathed both blades and shook his head. "I grieve for her loss, little father, for her life and what it represented in this wretched sanctuary we are all forced to suffer. I regret that all I could give her was the peace of vengeance. But let me be utterly clear, mortal. You live only because we allow it. You drew your first breath in an empire we built, and you serve us as we tear it down. Hate us. Despise us. We will never care, even as we shed blood to protect you when we must. Heed these words, human. Do not dare put your heart's losses above anyone else's. The warp always finds its way into fools. Poisonous thoughts are a beacon to the neverborn."

The crowd watched with rapt eyes. Talos turned, his eye lenses meeting the gaze of every serf in the chamber, one after the other.

“We sail through bleak tides, and I will lie to none of you about what awaits in our future. The *Covenant* bleeds, crying out for repair. We draw near to the dock at Hell’s Iris, a place some of you will remember without affection. Once we are docked, remain locked in your quarters unless you are attending to essential duties. Every soul among you with access to a weapon, make sure you carry it with you at all times.”

One of the crowd, a new slave from the Ganges, stepped forward. “What’s happening?”

Talos turned to the man, looking down at his unshaven face. It was only then the Night Lord realised he’d been speaking Nostraman. Half the crew were new—they had no experience with the dead language.

“Trouble,” Talos spoke in Low Gothic, the Imperium’s mongrel tongue. He was growing more comfortable with it since Octavia came on board. “We are making for a haven of renegades in the heart of Imperial space, and will arrive at its borders within a handful of hours. There is a chance the ship will be boarded while we linger in dock. If that happens, defend the *Covenant* with your lives. The Eighth Legion are not generous masters, but we are saints compared to the depraved souls we must ally with. Remember that, should you find yourself tempted by thoughts of escape.”

Talos saved his last glance for Arkiah. “Little father. If you defy the Legion with anything more than a selfish coward’s whispered words in the future, I will carve the skin and muscle meat right from your bones. Your flayed skeleton will be crucified at the heart of this very chamber, hanging as a warning to all. Nod if you accept these terms.”

The ageing man nodded.

“A wise decision,” Talos replied, and stalked from the chamber. In the shadows of deeper corridors, he spoke four words into an open channel.

“First Claw, to me.”

He sat with his head cradled in shaking hands, gently rocking back and forth as he sat in the middle of a bare chamber, whispering the names of gods he hated.

One of his brothers called to him over the jagged soundwaves of the vox.

“I come,” Uzas replied, rising to his feet.

He lowered the immense blade, releasing the trigger to let the sword’s teeth fall still. The engine in its hilt idled as the warrior listened to his brother’s summons. Sweat bathed him beneath his armour, leaving his skin itching even as it soaked into the absorbent weave of his bodyglove.

“On my way,” Xarl voxed back.

The quill slowed in its scratching path across the parchment, then finally stopped. The warrior looked to the skull-faced helm on his writing desk, watching him with its unblinking eyes. Reluctantly, he placed the quill back in its inkpot. A dusting of fine-

grained sand trickled over the parchment to help the letters dry, before the warrior reached to activate the vox-mic in his collar.

“As you wish,” said Mercutian.

He walked the ship’s corridors, staring into the darkness through red-stained lenses and flickering white targeting cross hairs. A rune chimed on his retinal display, his brother’s name-glyph pulsing for his attention. He blinked at it to reply.

“Something amiss?”

“We are gathering in the Hall of Remembrance,” Talos’ voice came back.

“That sounds tedious. What might the occasion be?”

“I want a full report of the necessary repairs before we dock.”

“I was right,” Cyrion replied. “That *is* tedious.”

“Just get there.” Talos severed the link.

The Hall of Remembrance echoed with the sound of divine industry. Servitors lifted and hauled, drilled and hammered; each one of them robed and hooded in black surplices, bearing the winged skull symbol of the Legion on their backs. Several had Nostraman glyphs tattooed on their foreheads—former serfs guilty of minor sins, sentenced to live out their lives as lobotomised, augmented drones.

Scores of menials and servitors laboured at tables and conveyor belts, constructing the explosive bolt shells used by the Legion’s warriors, while others worked at wall-mounted consoles, deep-scriving parts of the ship and directing the repair teams. The entire hall resonated with the flood of chattering voices, clanging tools, and beaten metal.

Four great sarcophagi hung bound to one wall, wrapped in chains and supported by ceiling clamps. Only one remained within a protective stasis screen, its cracked surface halfway restored to perfection, though blurred by the field’s blue mist.

The warband’s Dreadnought coffins shivered as the ship gave another lurch, their chains rattling again. Each of the coffins’ surfaces was immaculately wrought from precious metals, carvings lovingly etched into the armour. Such patient and diligent work was the responsibility of a master artisan, the craftsmanship a league apart from the simplistic repairs performed by most menials and slaves.

First Claw regarded one another around the chamber’s central hololithic table. A three-dimensional image of the *Covenant of Blood* rotated before them all, its flickering, patchy contours flawed by stains of flashing red damage warnings. It pulsed in and out of existence in sympathy with the tremors shaking the ship.

“That doesn’t look good,” Cyrion noted.

“It is not,” Lucoryphus rasped. “Not good at all.” His presence had been an unwelcome surprise for First Claw upon entering. Talos knew without doubt that the Raptor had been sent by the Exalted to serve as the shipmaster’s eyes.

“Tech-adept.” Talos turned to Deltrian. “I need a complete listing of the repairs to be done, with the materials you’ll need. I also need a time frame for how long the *Covenant* will be in dock undergoing overhaul.”

Talos stood with Deltrian, opposite Xarl and Lucoryphus. Little could be considered similar between the three warriors: Talos stood in his Legion war plate,

weapons sheathed, eyes calm, helm resting on the edge of the table. Lucoryphus kept his weeping mask in place—in truth, Talos had no idea if the other warrior could even remove it anymore—and leaned forward with a graceless awkwardness, struggling to remain bipedal on his ceramite talons. Xarl was also bareheaded, the skull helm locked to his thigh. He stood impassive in his beaten armour, his scarred features a map of unpleasant memories, and his black eyes always moving between Talos and Lucoryphus. He wasn't subtle about it, wasn't even trying to be subtle—Xarl sensed the genesis of a rivalry between the two warriors, and watched with keen eyes.

Deltrian grinned because Deltrian always grinned. The chrome skeletal face beneath the black hood could form no other expression. As the tech-priest spoke, vein/wires and cable/muscles in his cheeks and neck tightened and flexed. His voice was an automaton's emotionless screed.

"The immaterium propulsion engines have been subjected to an inadvisable degree of damage in the last eight months—" here, Deltrian paused, turning his emerald eye lenses to Lucoryphus, "—but they function within permissible boundaries."

The tech-adept's eyes hissed softly, moisturised by the coolant mist-sprays built into his tear ducts. Talos couldn't help but steal a glance. He kept his curiosity about Deltrian's personal reconstruction behind polite respect, but why even a tech-priest of the Martian Mechanicum would rebuild himself to resemble an augmetic image of a skinless human was a mystery. He suspected it was because of Deltrian's bond with the Eighth Legion. This aspect, more given to inspiring fear in mortals, surely suited him better.

Or perhaps it was a matter of faith. Appearing as a synthetic version of the human skeleton, to show the many changes Deltrian had undergone in his quest for mechanical perfection, as well as evidence that he acknowledged his mortal beginnings.

Talos caught himself staring. With a guilty smile, he looked back at the hololithic.

Deltrian gestured with a chrome claw to red patches across the ship's hull. "The flawed systems are located at these points. The hull sections in absolute need of complete reparation are located here, here, here, here and here. As for core systems, the Ninth Legion inflicted severe damage upon the actuality generators. Until this date, shipboard repairs have been sufficient to restore sustained empyrean flight. If we do not dock soon for an overhaul of the actuality generators, the immaterium engines will be throttled by failsafes, preventing their activation."

"Meaning?" Xarl asked.

"Meaning the Geller field is damaged," Talos answered. "The warp engines won't work for much longer unless the shield generators are repaired."

"Yes," Deltrian confirmed. He appreciated the purity of precision in the warrior's words. He nodded to *Legiones Astartes One-Two-Ten; preferred appellation: Talos*. "Precisely," the tech-adept finished.

"Ninth... Blood Angels..." Lucoryphus rasped. "No longer a Legion."

"Acknowledged." Deltrian tilted his head a moment. "Recorded."

Cyrior gestured to the hololithic. "The Geller field is flawed?"

Deltrian's voxsponder unit built into his throat gave a blurt of machine-code. "Terminally flawed. Temporary repairs will degrade with greater frequency. The longer we remain in the immaterium, the greater the potential of a breach-risk."

"This is going to take weeks." Talos shook his head as he watched the hololithic ship turn. "Maybe even months."

Deltrian gave another blurt of vocalised code in a static rush of numerals, as close as the adept ever came to cursing. "The immaterium engine flaw is not the *Covenant's* principal concern. Observe." His skeletal fingers keyed in a code on the table's keypad. The hololithic shimmered before them, several other areas along the hull flickering red. When none of the warriors said anything, Deltrian emitted a tinny growl. "I restate: *Observe.*"

"Yes, I see," lied Cyrion. "It all makes sense now. But explain it for Uzas."

Talos silenced his brother with a glare. "Humour us, tech-adept. What are we seeing here?"

For several seconds, Deltrian merely watched the warriors as if awaiting some kind of punchline. When nothing was forthcoming, the tech-adept pulled his black robe tighter, his silver facial features sinking deeper into the depths of his hood. Talos had never realised a mechanical skeleton could look exasperated while still grinning, but there it was.

"These are projected statistics equating to damage we will sustain in the remaining days of our journey, based on the turbulence of the immaterium so far."

Talos smoothed his gauntleted fingertips over the scars streaking down from his temple, unaware of the unconscious habit in the making. "That looks like enough to cripple the ship."

"Almost," Deltrian allowed. "Our Navigator is untested and weak. She steers the ship through savage tides. She ploughs through warp-waves because she can sense no way around them. Visualise the damage her route is inflicting upon the *Covenant.*"

"So she's not a smooth sailor," Xarl grunted. "Get to the point, tech-adept."

"In Nostraman vernacular, the Navigator is shaking the ship apart." Deltrian cancelled the hololithic. "I will state the situation in the simplest terms. Until this date, we have counted on ingenuity and the fictional concept of 'fortune'. These resources are no longer viable. Slave 3,101, preferred appellation: Octavia—will destroy this ship through incompetence if she fails to make peace with the machine-spirit and alter her techniques of navigation."

The Raptor growled, drawing in breath through his speaker grille.

Deltrian raised a hand of chrome bones to forestall Lucoryphus' comment. "No. Do not interrupt this vocalisation. There is more. We will reach the destination dock. I speak of eventualities and concerns for the future. She must learn to navigate with greater haste and proficiency, or she will continue wounding the *Covenant* each time she carries us into the immaterium."

Talos said nothing.

"Furthermore," Deltrian pressed on, "our journey is hastening the erosion of several vital systems. Ventilation. Liquid waste recycling. The recharge generator pods supplying the port broadsides. The list is long and severe. Our vessel has sustained such a degree of damage in the last standard solar annum that less than

thirty per cent of function is operating within reliable parameters. As my servitor crews move deeper through the ship's organs in reconstruction operations, they locate new flaws and bring them to my attention."

Talos nodded, but remained silent.

"I lack expertise in reading unaugmented facial emotional signifiers." Deltrian tilted his head. "You seem to be experiencing an emotional reaction. Which is it?"

"He's annoyed with you." Uzas licked his teeth. "You're insulting his pet."

"I do not understand," Deltrian confessed. "I speak only in realities."

"Ignore him." Talos gestured to Uzas. "Tech-adept, I understand your concern, but we work with the tools we have."

Lucoryphus, quiet for several minutes, broke his silence with a susurrating laugh. "Is that so, Soul Hunter?"

Talos turned to the Raptor. "You have something to say?"

"Did this warband not once have a warrior who could pilot vessels through the warp?" Lucoryphus twitched, hissing another laugh. "Yes-yes. Oh, yes, it did."

"Ruven is gone, leashed to the Warmaster's side, and we have no other sorcerers among us. No sorcerer is a match for a Navigator, brother. One possesses the lore to guide a vessel through the warp. The other was born to do nothing else."

The Raptor snorted. "Champion Halasker had sorcerers. Many Eighth Legion warbands treasure them." Lucoryphus either gave a sharp nod or his neck twitched at the right moment. "They speak of you, Soul Hunter. Talos of the Tenth, the warrior with the primarch's gift without ever staring into the warp's secrets. How many of our brothers only claim the father's foresight after mastering the secrets of the warp? But not you. No-no, not Talos of the Tenth."

"Enough," Talos narrowed his eyes. "This is meaningless."

"Not meaningless. Truth. You have been gone from the Great Eye too long, prophet. You are a wanted soul. Your talents should be shaped. Sorcery is as much a weapon of this war as the blade you stole and the bolter you inherited."

Talos didn't answer. His skin crawled as his brothers in First Claw turned their eyes to him.

"Is this true?" Xarl asked. "The Black Legion's warp-weavers want Talos?"

"Truth and true," Lucoryphus rasped. His helm's bleeding eyes stared unwavering. "Potential bleeds from the prophet like a black aura. Soul Hunter, did not Ruven seek to train you?"

"I refused." Talos shrugged. "If we could focus on the matter at hand..."

"I was there when he refused," Cyrion smiled. "And in my brother's defence, Ruven was—at the very best of times—a piss-drinking, snide little whoreson. I would have refused to loan him a weapon, let alone allow him to shape me into one."

Lucoryphus crawled around the table on his metallic claws, the thrusters on his back swinging with his uneasy gait. For several steps, he rose to a bipedal stalk—standing as tall as his Legion brothers—but the movement clearly frustrated him. He dropped back down to all fours as he prowled by the chained sarcophagi, still idly musing in his serpent's voice.

"And what of you, First Claw? Xarl? Mercutian? Uzas? What are your thoughts on the prophet's reluctance? How do you see him now, in this new light?"

Xarl chuckled, offering no comment. Mercutian kept his stoic silence, his features betraying nothing.

"I think," Uzas growled, "you should watch your mouth. The prophet chose his path, same as all of us, same as every soul." The warrior grunted in dismissal.

The others looked at him in undisguised surprise. Even Lucoryphus.

"Enough," Talos snarled. "Enough. Honoured tech-adept, please continue."

Deltrian didn't miss a beat. "...and a discrepancy with the subsidiary feeds powering the forward lance array was acknowledged and recorded forty-six minutes and twelve seconds ago, Standard Terran Chronology. Fifteen seconds. Sixteen. Seventeen."

Talos turned to the tech-adept. "I think what you're trying to say is that we've been lucky so far, that the ship hasn't crumbled to pieces."

Deltrian gave a faint machine-code hiss of disapproval. "I would never vocalise the matter in those terms."

"How long will this take to repair?" Xarl asked. "All of it."

Deltrian's hood turned to face the warrior. Emerald eye lenses and a silver smile glinted in the shadow. He had the exact calculations, but suspected the Night Lords would refuse to hear them anyway. "With full crew workforce at eighty per cent efficiency: five-point-five months." It almost pained him to be so imprecise, but their too-mortal intellects demanded compromise. "Eighty per cent efficiency allows for mortal sickness, injury, death and incompetence in the repairs."

"Five and a half months is a long time to be stranded in Hell's Iris," Xarl scowled. "What if we barter for the Blood Reaver's dock crews to aid us? We trade for materials and labour, rather than dealing with the labour ourselves."

"Blood Reaver..." Talos was watching the hololithic, his voice distracted by the pain in his temples. "A ridiculous title."

Cyryon chuckled. "A damning statement, from a warrior called 'Soul Hunter'."

Talos covered his smile by scratching at his scarred cheek. "Continue, tech-adept."

"With the Hell's Iris work crews, the overhaul could be completed within a time frame of one month."

"Forgive me for being the one to mention this, but we are not exactly beloved there," Mercutian pointed out. "There's every chance the Tyrant will refuse to let us dock, let alone lend us the services of his work crews. And we are not bearing a wealth of resources to barter with. We need everything we liberated from Ganges."

"Just say 'stole'," Xarl sneered at the other warrior. "*Liberated?* What does that even mean? You stinking City's Edgers, always dressing things up in pretty words."

Mercutian returned the glare, anger in his eyes. "Only Inner City gutter trash 'steal'. This is a war we're fighting, not robbing a store on a street corner for handfuls of copper coins."

Xarl's nasty smile never faded. "Stern talk from the rich man's son. Easy to use pretty words when you're up at the top of the tower, overseeing a crime syndicate where everyone else does all the dirty work. I used to shoot City's Edge juves when they came slumming in our sector. I loved every minute of it, too."

Mercutian breathed through his teeth, not saying a word.



The pause lasted exactly 6.2113 seconds. Deltrian knew this, because his grasp of chronology was an exercise in numerical perfection. He ended the silence himself, offering a rare attempt at humour to pierce what he considered to be a tangential and bemusing confrontation.

“If we are not allowed to dock, to use Nostraman parlance, that would be very... unlucky.”

The word felt unclean and uncomfortable. He immediately wished he'd not vocalised it, and responded in two ways. The first was a human tic of sorts, a motion of pointless reassurance that felt intriguingly mortal to indulge: he pulled his robe tighter around his skeletal frame, as if cold.

He was not cold, of course. Deltrian had removed the capacity to register temperature against his epidermal surfaces, and only tracked such variances with detached measurements from thermal signifiers in his fingertips.

The second reaction, taking place in the very same split second, was to dump the word from his short-term memory with a calculated data-purge.

It worked, though. Talos smiled at the tech-adept's attempt at humour, and silenced the warriors with a soft, “Brothers, enough, please. Even the tech-adept of the Machine God looks awkward to witness yet another family argument.”

“As you wish,” Mercutian saluted, fist over his heart. Xarl feigned interest in the hololithic, his sneer remaining in place.

“Lucoryphus?” Talos asked.

“Soul Hunter.”

“Please do not call me that.”

The Raptor cackled. “What do you want?”

“Inform the Exalted of the tech-priest's estimated time frames.”

“Very well,” the Raptor breathed, already turning to crawl from the room.

“I don't like him,” Cyrion thought aloud.

Talos ignored his brother's remark. “Can you translate the details of the repairs to an encrypted data-slate? I will ensure everything proceeds apace once we reach dock.”

“Compliance.” Deltrian hesitated. “But do you mean to imply that I will not be going ashore in Hell's Iris?”

“Do you want to?” Talos frowned. “Forgive me, I hadn't considered it. First Claw will accompany you as an honour guard if you choose to leave the ship.”

“I offer you this expression of vocalised gratitude,” the tech-adept said. “As an addendum to the exchange of vital linguistics, I apply a further question. Is your arm functioning to an acceptable degree?”

Talos nodded. “It is. My thanks again, tech-adept.”

“I am proud of that work.” Deltrian grinned at him. But then, Deltrian always grinned.

Maruc looked over to where Septimus was working. The lamplight was dim, doing no favours to Maruc's straining eyes, but he was slowly getting used to it over recent weeks.

“What's this?” He held up a metal object the size of his thumb.

Septimus glanced over to the older serf. Maruc's desk in the shared workchamber was a mess of drill bits, files and oiled cloths. A half-assembled bolt pistol was scattered over the surface. Septimus put down the creased schematics he'd been studying.

"A suspensor. It's for Lord Mercutian's heavy bolter."

The ship gave another shiver.

"Was that—?"

"No." Septimus turned from Maruc's worried gaze, silently hoping Octavia would head for calmer tides. "Whatever you were going to ask, it wasn't that. Don't ask, just work."

"Listen, Septimus..."

"I am listening."

"This is a rough ride. Rougher than even the bulk transport rigs I've sailed on. What if something goes wrong?"

Septimus just stared at him. "What do you plan to do? Run outside and bind the hull together with industrial adhesive? By all means, go ahead. There are a million monsters waiting to cut up your soul, and I'll have the unwelcome pleasure of training someone else."

"How can you be so calm?" Maruc scratched his cheek, leaving a smear of oil on his skin.

"I am calm because there's nothing I can do about it."

"I've heard stories about ships getting lost in the warp..."

Septimus went back to his reading, though one gloved hand rested on his holstered pistol. "Trust me, the stories do not approach the truth. The reality is much worse than your Imperial fairy tales. And now is really not the time to dwell on it."

The ship gave another shake, this one severe enough to throw them both from their seats. Yells from other decks echoed through the ship's hull in an eerie cacophony.

"Warp engines are dead again," Maruc swore, touching his fingertips to a bleeding temple. He'd cracked his head on the table edge as he went down.

"*Sinthallia shar vor vall'velias*," Septimus hissed as he picked himself up off the decking.

"What does that mean?"

The other serf brushed his gloved fingers through his hair, keeping it out of his face. "It means, 'That woman will be the death of us.'"

Octavia leaned forwards in her throne, knuckling her closed eyes. Sweat dripped from her forehead onto the decking, making the soft pitter-patter of gentle rainfall. She spat, tasting blood and choosing not to look. The eye in the middle of her forehead ached from staring too long, and itched from the sweat trickling at its edges.

With a sigh, she slouched back. At least the ship had ceased its trembling. If the last few times were anything to go by, she had between one and three hours' rest before the Exalted ordered her to pull the ship back into the warp. This last juddering fall from the Sea of Souls had been the worst by far. Octavia felt her lingering connection to the ship, and the distress of the crew bleeding through the vessel's steel

bones. People were injured this time. She'd dropped out of the warp much too sharply, though she'd held on as long as she could, until she'd almost felt her blood starting to boil.

"Mistress?" she heard a voice ask.

She knew the voice, and felt how close it was. She knew if she opened her eyes, she'd see a dead girl staring back at her.

"You're not there," she whispered.

The dead girl stroked her fingers along Octavia's knee. The Navigator's skin prickled, and she jerked back in her seat.

Opening her human eyes was exquisitely difficult. A moment of strangely pleasant reluctance preceded the closing of her third eye, and the thrashing uncolours faded to a more traditional nothingness. Her human eyes opened with some effort, gummy with tears.

Hound knelt at the front of her throne, his bandaged hands on her knee.

"Mistress?" he almost whined.

*Hound. It's just Hound.* "Water," she managed to say.

"Already have water for mistress," he replied. He reached beneath his tattered cloak, drawing forth a grubby-looking canteen. "It is warm. For this, I am sorry."

She forced a smile for the eyeless freak. "It's fine, Hound. Thanks." The first swallow was no different from drinking honeyed nectar. She could almost imagine the sweet, warm liquid rehydrating her sore muscles. Back on Terra, she drank imported wine from crystal glasses. Now she was pathetically grateful for lukewarm water, recycled from who knew what, offered by the hand of a heretic.

She was too tired to cry.

"Mistress?"

She handed him back the canteen. Her stomach sloshed with the warm water, but she didn't care. "What is it?"

Hound wrung his wrapped hands, watching her with blind eyes. "You are struggling to fly. I worry for you. You sweat and moan more than Etrigius ever did when he guided the ship into the secret tides."

Octavia's smile was more sincere as she wiped her face with her bandana. "He was probably a lot better at this than I am. And he'd had more practice. I'm used to sailing within the light, not through the darkness."

Hound seemed to digest this. His withered, stitched eyes seemed to stare right at her. "Will you be all right?" he asked.

She hesitated, and realised she wasn't too tired to cry at all. His concern touched her, tingling at the corners of her eyes. Of all the tainted souls on this ship, it was this abused, malformed little man that asked her the most obvious of questions—the one even Septimus avoided asking, out of his stupid, stubborn politeness.

"Yes," she said, swallowing back the threat of tears. "I'll be fi—"

The Exalted's decree cut across her words. "All crew, remain on station. Reconfigure the immaterium drive for return to the warp."

She sighed to herself, closing her eyes again.

## X

### THE FLAYER

They called him the Flayer, for reasons he felt were obvious. It wasn't a name he cherished, nor was it one he reviled. It was—like so many other things in his existence—simply something that happened in his presence, a matter over which he could exercise no control.

He had unprepossessing eyes that usually failed to display any emotion beyond a distant disinterest, and a face so thin it bordered on gaunt. He worked in his armour, and laboured several times a day to cleanse and reconsecrate the layered ceramite. The scrub cloths always came away reddened by the blood that decorated his armour in random patterns, for his duty was not a clean one. His helm was white, though he rarely wore it on board the station.

"Flayer," a weak voice pried at his attention. "Don't let me die."

Variel turned his cold eyes down to the warrior on the surgical table. The stink of his burned skin and baked blood was a pungent musk, while the warrior's armour of red ceramite and bronze trimmings was a cracked ruin. For several moments, the Flayer watched his brother's life leaking out from a hundred cracks.

"You are already dead," Variel told him. "Your body has just not accepted it yet."

The warrior's attempt at a defiant cry emerged as a strangled choke. He managed to grip Variel's bulky narthecium gauntlet. Bloody fingers smeared filth over the buttons and scanner display.

"Please do not touch me," Variel gently removed his arm from the dying warrior's grip. "I do not like to be touched."

"Flayer..."

"And please refrain from begging. It will avail you nothing," Variel let his forearm hover over the warrior's cracked breastplate. The gore-grimed narthecium clicked as it cogitated. The scanner display chimed twice. "You have suffered severe ruptures to one lung and both hearts. Sepsis has saturated your bloodstream with poison, straining your organs to the point of failure."

"Flayer... Please... I wish only to serve our lord..."

Variel rested his fist by the warrior's sweating temple. "I know you, Kallas Yurlon. Nothing will be lost when you expire." Here, he paused, but not to smile. Variel was unable to recall the last time he smiled. Not in the last decade, certainly. "Do you wish the Emperor's Peace?"

"How dare you mock me?" Kallas sought to rise. Blood ran from the cracks in his armour. "I... will speak... with the Corpsemaster..."

"No," Variel tensed his fist. "Sleep."

“I—”

A piston’s *snick* sounded from the narthecium gauntlet, powering an adamantium drill-bore through the warrior’s temple with a crack, lodging within the brain. Kallas Yurlon immediately sagged, lowered back to the surgical table in the Flayer’s gentle arms.

“You will not speak to Lord Garreon at all. As I said, you are already dead.”

Variel opened his hand, lifting his fingertips from the pressure plate built into the palm of his gauntlet. The bloodied drill-spike retracted back into its housing along the Flayer’s forearm, secure in its pod of sterilising fluid.

He keyed in a short command on his vambrace controls, triggering the deployment and activation of several more traditional tools: a las-scalpel, a motorised bone saw, and the silver claws of a thoracic vice.

Next, he began the task of burning, cutting, spreading bone and peeling back flesh. As always, he worked in absolute silence, reluctantly breathing in the smells of incinerated muscle and exposed organs. The first progenoid came free in a sticky withdrawal, clinging trails of sealant mucus forming gooey strings between the gene-seed and its gaping cavity.

Variel dropped the bleeding organ into a chemical preservative solution, before moving his narthecium’s tools to the dead warrior’s throat and repeating the extraction procedure. He worked quicker this time, his efficiency bordering on brutal. Through a vertical slit in the side of the neck, the Flayer inserted reinforced forceps from his vambrace kit. The cut flesh parted with a leathery rip, freeing more blood and exposing the viscera within Kallas’ neck. The second progenoid node came loose from the sinew with greater ease, trailing a few snapped veins. Variel placed the organ in the same solution as the first and sealed both of them in a glass cylinder.

On a whim, he reactivated the laser scalpel that extended from his bracer. The post-mortem surgery was quickly completed, and Variel peeled away the harvested skin, leaving the corpse staring at the ceiling through a flayed face.

Slowly, his cold eyes as emotionless as ever, Variel looked up. With his duty done, the Flayer’s focus diffused, spreading wide as he let his surroundings filter back into his senses. Around him, there was a carnival of noise: the shouts, the screams, the oaths and curses rising above the blood-stink.

Variel gestured to two medicae slaves, summoning them closer. The Star of the Pantheon had been crudely burned into the flesh of their faces, and they wore aprons streaked with bodily fluids. Their augmetic limbs allowed them to serve as corpse-bearers, dragging warriors in full war plate.

“Take this husk to the incinerators,” he ordered them. As the Flayer watched the humans hauling the dead meat away, he slid the glass cylinder with its precious cargo into the storage pod sheathed to his thigh armour.

Lastly, he cleaned his narthecium with several bursts of disinfectant spray, before drawing breath to speak a single word.

“Next.”

They came for him several hours later, as he'd known they would. The only surprise was that he faced only two. It seemed Kallas Yurlon hadn't been as beloved by his brothers as Variel had suspected.

"Hello," he greeted them. His voice echoed faintly in the corridor, but didn't carry far. They'd chosen their spot well, for here in one of the station's secondary thoroughfare spinals, few others would hear any screams or gunfire.

"Flayer," the first one growled. "We have come for Kallas."

Variel still wore no helm. Nor did the two brother-warriors he faced, and their scarlet and black ceramite was a mirror to his own. He met their eyes in turn, taking heed of the ritual scarification blighting their faces. Both had mutilated their flesh with carvings of the Pantheon Star.

*How very telling.*

Variel spread his arms, the very image of benediction but for the lack of any warmth in his eyes. "How may I be of service, brothers?"

The second warrior stepped forwards now, aiming a deactivated chainsword at the Apothecary's throat.

"You could've saved Kallas," he snarled, his bloodshot eyes unblinking.

"No," Variel lied, "he was too far gone. I gave him the Emperor's Peace."

"Deceiver," the warrior laughed. "Betrayer. Now you mock his shade with such words."

"We have come for Kallas," the first Legionary growled again.

"Yes, I believe you mentioned that. I am not deaf."

"His spirit besieges us, demanding vengeance in his name."

"Indeed." Variel moved slowly, not wishing to startle his brothers into attacking, and tapped the dry leathery memento on his shoulder guard. The skinned, stretched face of Kallas Yurlon stared eyelessly back at them. "Here he is. He is most pleased to see you. See how he smiles?"

"You..."

If there was one thing Variel never understood about many of his brothers, it was their propensity—no, their *need*—to posture. Each of them seemed to consider himself the philosophical protagonist of his own saga. Their hatreds mattered more than anything else; their glories and the abuses against them had to be spoken of at every opportunity.

Baffling.

As his brother began to utter yet another threat, Variel went for his bolt pistol. Three shots cracked into the warrior's chest, detonating in a storm of debris, throwing the Legionary back against the wall. Shrapnel cracked against the ceiling light, shattering it and plunging the narrow corridor into darkness. He was already running as the chainsword started up.

Variel blind-fired back in the seconds it took his gen-hanced eyes to adjust, explosions breeding light in flickering stutters as his second volley of shells struck home. He reloaded as he sprinted, slamming a fresh magazine home and weaving around three corners in quick succession. Around the last, he waited, drawing his carving knife.

“Flayer!” the second warrior screamed after him. The thunder of running boots came closer with each heartbeat. Variel’s eyes focussed through the darkness, his weapons heavy in his hands.

His brother rounded the corner to be met with Variel’s dagger punching into the soft armour at his collar. With an exaggerated gargle, the warrior’s forward momentum sent him sprawling, tumbling to the decking in a heap of squealing ceramite and humming armour joints.

Variel stalked closer, his pistol aimed at his brother’s head. His eyes widened at what he saw. The warrior fought his way to his knees, and was dragging the knife from his own throat with pained, voiceless breaths. How very tenacious.

“Your vocal chords are destroyed,” Variel said. “Please stop trying to curse at me. It is embarrassing.”

The warrior tried to rise again. A brutal pistol-whipping put an end to that, breaking his skull with a wet crack. Variel rested his bolter’s muzzle against the back of his fallen brother’s neck.

“And blessedly, I am spared from hearing any ludicrous last words.”

Variel spat acid onto his brother’s armour, where it began to eat into the clenched fist icon of the Red Corsairs.

“I assure you, that was unintentionally symbolic,” he told the doomed warrior, and pulled the trigger.

Lord Garreon was a warrior that—to use a Badabian expression—wore his wounds with a smile. In his case, the expression was far from literal: he smiled about as often as his favoured apprentice, yet he kept his visage with the corruption battle had placed upon it, rather than re-engineer himself with bionics. Garreon’s face was a pale picture of tectonic ruination, the lacing scars serving only to make an ugly man uglier. The right side of his face pulled tight at his temple and cheek—the taut, dead muscles giving him a scarred, eternal sneer.

“Variel, my boy.” His voice was kind where his face was not: a grandfather’s tone, belying the massacres ordered by the ageing warrior’s thin lips.

Variel did not turn to the greeting. He remained as he was, staring through the observation dome at the smoky void and the world turning below. Wraiths, little more than formless mist, drifted past the glass, the spectral suggestion of faces and fingers finding no purchase as they ghosted by. Variel ignored them with ease. The pining of lost souls was of no interest to him at all.

“Hail, sire,” he replied.

“So formal?” Garreon approached, his own armour rattling with its profusion of vials, trinkets and talismans. Variel knew the sound well. Truly, the Apothecary Lord had embraced the Chapter’s allegiance to the Pantheon.

“My mind wanders,” the younger warrior confessed.

“And where does it wander? To the globe turning beneath our feet?” Garreon paused to moisten his lips with a swipe of his quivering tongue. “Or the two bodies in Subsidiary Spinal Eleven?”

Variel narrowed his eyes as he stared at the black world outside the glass. “They were newbloods,” he said. “Weak. Worthless.”

“You left them unharvested,” his mentor pointed out. “Lord Huron would be less than pleased.”

“Nothing of value was lost,” Variel replied. He moved away from the edge of the observation platform, crossing to the other side. Here, the view was a deeper slice of the tempestuous, cloudy void and the metallic bulk of the station itself, reaching for kilometres in every direction. Variel watched the comings and goings of dozens of cruisers for several minutes, as well as the swimming dances of the parasitic lesser ships clinging close to each of them. The warships drifted in orbit around the station, or remained docked at its edges. The lights of the shuttle traffic painted the poisoned nebula with flickering stars racing hither and thither.

“Inspiring, is it not?” Garreon said at last. “To think we once ruled one world. Now, we cradle a horde of systems in our tender grip. Billions of lives. Trillions. That is how power is measured, boy: in the souls one holds in his clutches, and the lives one can end with a word.”

Variel’s grunt was patently noncommittal. “I sense you bring news, master.”

“I do. And it is tied to your wastrel ways.” The edge of a lecture dwelled within those words, Variel knew. “Our lord desires gene-seed. A great genetic harvest, to swell our ranks with fresh blood. He will commit to the siege soon—a battle two years in the making. He bids all of his fleshsmiths to be ready.”

Variel shook his head. “I find it difficult to believe Lord Huron would truly commit to this undertaking. He would not spend the Corsairs so frivolously.” He gestured at the fleet of cruisers drifting around the station. Many bore the black and red armour of the Tyrant’s Own, while others displayed the hues of allegiance to other disgraced Adeptus Astartes Chapters. By far the greatest number were Imperial Navy vessels, their hulls desecrated and branded with the Pantheon Star. “Lord Huron’s forces could break the back of any armada in the Holy Fleet,” Variel added, “but this is not enough to lay siege to a fortress-monastery. We would be obliterated the moment we entered orbit. Imagine, master—all these beautiful ships becoming burning hulks, screaming down through the atmosphere.” Variel snorted without an iota of amusement. “Such a graveyard they would make.”

“You are not a general, my boy. You are a bone-cutter, a flesh-crafter. When the lord desires your perception of his crusades, I am sure he will ask for it.” Garreon’s sneer pulled tighter. “But do not hold your breath in expectation for that day to ever come.”

Variel inclined his head, meeting his master’s eyes at last. “Forgive me. My humours are in flux today. What do you require of me, master?”

Garreon forgave his apprentice with a wave of dismissal, casting the topic from his mind. “Lord Huron has not summoned us, but we will go to him before he does.”

Variel knew the purpose even before he asked. “He suffers?”

“He always suffers.” Garreon licked his lips again. “You know that as well as I. But come, let us ease it again for a time, if we are able.”

Lufgt Huron sat in his ornate throne, armoured fists clutching at the armrests. The great Gothic chamber stood empty but for the Tyrant himself; all of his courtiers, attendants, bodyguards and beseechers sent away while his Apothecaries worked their trade. Variel had seen the expansive hall play host to hundreds of warriors at



any given time, despite the fact that this deep-void station was far from the Tyrant's largest or most opulent bastion. Now, the vast chamber echoed with the sounds of Huron's ragged breathing and the tri-hum of the three renegades' war plate.

"Garrllmmnnnuh..." the Tyrant drooled. "Garrellmmnuh."

"Hush, Great One," the Apothecary Lord replied, knuckle-deep in Huron's skull. "I can correct the synapse relays," he sighed. "Again."

Variel crouched by the side of the iron throne, his scalpel and micro-forceps picking at the Tyrant's throat. With each crackling breath, the reinforced hydraulics that mimicked Huron's neck muscles clicked and clanked. What little flesh remained was atrophied and almost nerveless, lumpy with scar tissue too degraded to bond with synthetic skin. The Tyrant had long ago endured injury to the very edge of destruction, and the mechanical repairs that kept him alive were crude, hideous, loud... but ultimately functional.

They were, however, temperamental.

Variel's memory, like most of the humans elevated into the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes, was as close to eidetic as mortality would allow. By his reckoning, this was the seventy-eighth instance he had been summoned to tend to his liege lord's augmetics, not including the initial surgeries performed with Garreon and two Techmarines in order to save the Tyrant's life.

Those first instances had been closer to engineering than surgery. A third of Huron's body was reduced to molten meat and burned bone, and in cutting away the ravaged flesh, a great deal more of his mortal frame had to be sacrificed to prepare attachment ports for extensive bionics. The right side of his body no longer existed beyond the clanking grind of Machine Cult ingenuity—all fibre-bundle muscles, piston joints and metal bones fused to the warrior's armour.

Variel had seen the bio-auspex readings at the time, just as he'd seen them each time since. The degree of pain registered within Huron's mind was far beyond the realms of human tolerance. Each time Lord Garreon or the Flayer burned out the synaptic relays, dulling their master's perception of his own agony, it would only be a matter of months before his enhanced physiology compensated for the damage, repairing the nerves enough to transmit pain again. Short of invasive lobotomising surgery that would risk what little brain tissue remained, there was nothing his healers could do to offer a permanent solution.

So he endured. He endured, and he suffered, and he channelled the torment into his piratical ambitions.

The Tyrant's throat and chest were bare now, his breastplate pulled away to reveal internal organs that bore closer resemblance to the filthy, oily innards of an engine than the organs of a human being. What was left of Huron's face—the grey, dead-fleshed parts that weren't given over to exposed bionics—twitched in response to unintentional tics as Garreon worked inside his lord's brain.

Huron hissed in a breath, recapturing some of the saliva trickling over his lips. "Better," he growled. "Better, Garreon."

Variel used a steel scalpel to peel back a layer of nerveless skin from where it was caught and mangled in the iron workings of the Tyrant's throat bionics. With patience and flesh-sealant, he reworked the flap of flesh, bonding it back in place. His eyes flicked upward, locking in place when he saw Huron's own gaze had

dropped to meet his. The Tyrant's eyes blazed with the force of his ambition: each moment was lived in the path of pain, and every day saw him lording over an empire in the heart of madness.

"Variel." The lord's voice was a bass rumble. "I heard K-Kallas Yurlon died on your t-table today." The spasms in his speech came with each probe of Garreon's scalpel.

"This is so, my lord."

Huron bared his teeth in a savage smile. Variel stared back, seeing a warrior that should have died long ago—a creature held together as much by hate as by augmetic implantation. In any other living being, he'd have considered such a notion an idiotic attempt to forge a legend through hyperbole. But Luftg Huron, the Tyrant of Badab, known by the names Blackheart and the Blood Reaver, needed little assistance in turning his deeds into legend. The empire he ruled assured him of infamy; his conquests assured him of his place in history; and biologically speaking, the Flayer struggled to see how the Tyrant maintained a grip on life, let alone still displayed such prowess in battle.

The answer was as unpalatable as it was mythical: the Astral Claws only survived to become the Red Corsairs because Huron sold their souls to hidden masters within the warp. At the Chapter's darkest hour, he pledged them to the Unknown Pantheon, swearing them to an eternal crusade against the Imperium they'd once served.

After the Chapter's remnants fled here to the Maelstrom, mutation and instability began to settle into their gene-seed with corrosive rapidity. Variel had studied the changes, as had Lord Garreon and the other remaining Apothecaries. In mere centuries, many of the Red Corsairs were as victimised by genetic disorder as the Traitor Legions dwelling within the Eye of Terror for millennia.

*Such a pact, Variel thought now. Survival, at the price of corruption.*

"Kallas was close to taking the champion's mantle. You could have saved him, Variel."

The Flayer didn't waste time asking how Huron knew the truth. "Perhaps, my lord. I will not lie and say I liked him, but I did my duty. I weighed his life against the other work facing me. Keeping Kallas alive would have necessitated several hours of difficult surgery, ensuring the deaths of other warriors awaiting urgent treatment."

The Tyrant shuddered as Garreon resealed his skull plating. "I thank you, both of you. You've done well, as always."

Both Apothecaries removed themselves from the dais as Huron rose to his feet. Ornate power armour thrummed and whirred, and the warrior breathed a satisfied sigh. The massive power claw serving as the Tyrant's right hand closed and opened, the talons curling in the cold air of the chamber. In the weapon's palm, Variel took note of the Pantheon Star carved into the crimson ceramite. It drew his eyes as it always did.

"I was informed, three hours ago, that we have uninvited guests in the northern reaches." Distant light from the local sun reflected off the visible chrome portions of Huron's skull as he turned. "A Legion ship. As tempting as it was to order one of our fleets to leave them as wreckage, I foresee a greater use for these visitors."

Lord Garreon's sneer never wavered. Variel remained silent, wondering why the Tyrant chose to speak of such things before them both.

"It seems," Huron bared teeth of solid metal, "that they request sanctuary and succour. A long transcription of repairs and resupply accompanied their request to enter our space. They will reach us within two weeks, whereupon we shall discuss the price of our assistance."

"You seem amused, my lord," Variel said at last. "But I am at a loss to see why."

Huron chuckled, saliva stringing between his steel teeth. "Because it is the *Covenant of Blood*. And if the Exalted and his prophet intend to leave Hell's Iris alive, let alone with their precious warship repaired, they have a great deal of bootlicking to do."

# XI

## THE MAELSTROM

The *Covenant of Blood* drifted through the roiling void, no longer buffeted by the tides of the true warp, yet still shivering in the weaker currents of...

Well. Of whatever this place was. Octavia wasn't sure. She reached up to check her bandana, as if to reassure herself it was still there, still blocking her secret sight.

As the daughter of a Navigator bloodline, she was hardly unfamiliar with the way the Sea of Souls spilled over into the material universe. Rifts in space were rare, but each was an ugly, dangerous scab—a tormenting hazard to stellar navigation, avoided by every Navigator with a desire to keep their sanity intact and their ship in one piece. It was the warp and natural space amalgamated in defiance of physical laws: a thinner breed of the former; a haunted, twisted reflection of the latter.

They'd already sailed past several worlds, through the heart of three systems. On one of the worlds, the oceans had boiled, visible even from orbit. Unnatural storms plagued the planet's face, raining piss, acid and blood onto the continents below.

Space itself was corrupted. She watched the bank of screens before her, seeing a thousand shades of violet and red pressing against the external lenses. The mess outside the hull clashed and swirled with the repellent properties of oil and water, always colliding, bonding without mixing. Her staring eyes interpreted the colourful dance as a liquid mist, thick enough to make the ship shudder, thin enough to show the stars beyond.

If she stared long enough, she could make out the suggestions of faces and fingers in the ooze, screaming, reaching, dissolving. Some seemed to taunt her with their maddening familiarity. She swore she saw Kartan Syne at one point—the last captain she'd served. And more than once, the rippling tides resolved into the face of her oldest brother, Lannic, dead these last six years after his trader vessel was warp-lost on the Eastern Fringe.

"Why do you watch, mistress?" one of her attendants asked. She glanced at the wretch, who was unhealthily tall and sexless in its overcloak, keeping its face behind stained bandages. Several others lurked close to the door, whispering amongst themselves. It was impossible not to smell their sweat, their stinking, bloodstained bandages, and the rancid oil-blood of their bionics.

"Because," she said, "it's like the warp, but... I can see it with my human eyes." How to explain the difference to one not born to a Navigator bloodline? Impossible.

One of her attendants trudged closer. "Mistress," the hunched figure said.

“Hello, Hound. Could you get rid of the others?” She didn’t say it was because of the smell—Hound didn’t exactly come across as a floral garden himself, and she couldn’t recall the last time she had a chance to bathe, either.

As Hound shooed the other attendants from her chamber, Octavia stared back at the screens. The ship was passing a cloudless planet that looked to be made of rusted iron. Whatever its true form, the Maelstrom had warped the world into a visage of grinding continental plates formed from scrap. Octavia stared at the great canyons carved into the planet’s face, wondering what it would be like to walk on such a world.

“*Corshia sey*,” a female voice said behind her.

She was out of the throne in a heartbeat, spinning and drawing her pistol, aiming at—

“Now that’s a curious welcome,” said Septimus. He rested his hands at his gun belt, thumbs hooked into the leather strap. “Have I annoyed you in some unforeseen way?”

“How long have you been standing there?” Octavia narrowed her eyes. “When did you come in?”

“Hound let me in a moment ago. He’s outside with Maruc and the rest of your *nishallitha* coterie.”

Now that word she did know. *Nishallitha*. Poisonous.

Septimus came closer, and she let him pluck the gun from her hands. This close, he smelled of fresh sweat and the coppery oils he used to maintain First Claw’s weapons. After placing her gun on the seat of her throne, he took her hands in his own, the beaten fingerless leather gloves wrapping her grubby, pale fingers.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Your hands are very cold.”

He was a head taller than her. She had to look up to meet his eyes, and the fall of his hair covered most of the chromed augmetics at his cheek and temple.

“This whole ship is cold,” she replied. It was difficult not to be aware of just how close he was now. She’d not been this close to another person in months—not since Talos had carried her from the prison facility. And that had been a cold salvation, relief permeating her more than any real comfort. This was human contact, the close warmth of a real person, not a towering fanatic in growling armour plating, or a hunched mutant with his eyes sewn shut.

“What is it?” he asked. The traces of blond stubble marked his jawline, where he’d not shaved in the last two days. Worry stained his features. She thought it again, despite herself: he’d be handsome, if he wasn’t a heretic—if the darkness of this ship didn’t run in his blood.

“I’m not used to being touched.” She tilted her head, little realising how imperious she suddenly looked. Her breeding as a noble scion of Terra wasn’t as far behind her as she believed.

He released her hands, though not immediately. Slowly, his fingers unlocked from trapping hers, and the warmth he brought receded.

“Forgive me,” he said. “Sometimes, I forget your unique upbringing.”

“That’s one of the reasons I put up with you,” she smiled. “What did you say when you came in?”

It broke the moment. Septimus narrowed his good eye, and the augmetic lens clicked and whirred as it struggled to mirror the movement. “I didn’t say anything. I entered and merely watched. You looked peaceful for once. I hesitated to disturb you.”

“*Corshia sey.*” She said it softly. “What does it mean?”

“It means to beware,” said Septimus. “Or, more literally, it is a slang threat from the Legion’s home world. A warning given to those soon to die: ‘Breathe now.’ The implication is simple: breathe while you still can.”

“Yes, I got that.” She faked a smile. “Charming culture.”

Septimus shrugged, his jacket rustling. “Nostraman gutter threats. The lords speak them often. Did you hear it from one of the crew?”

“Stop worrying,” she shook her head, giving him her best, most convincingly irritated glare. “And get your hands off your guns. I’m not a child, needing to be defended on the scholam playground every time you hear someone calling me a name.”

He looked away, suddenly awkward. “I did not mean to imply anything.”

“It’s fine,” she said, her tone suggesting quite the opposite. “Just forget it.”

“As you wish.” He offered her a polite bow. “I sense you wish to be alone, so I will comply.”

“Wait.”

He halted, and she cleared her throat. “I mean, wait a moment. Did you want something? You don’t come here much, anymore.” She tried to keep the last comment casual, purging it of anything beyond neutrality.

She wasn’t entirely successful. She saw it in the way he looked at her. “The Exalted ordered your isolation,” he said. “And I have been attending to my own duties. Maruc needed training. We had five suits of ceramite war plate to restore, as well as First Claw’s weapons.”

Octavia brushed his excuses away. “So did you want something?”

He frowned. “Forgive me, I am not sure I understand why you are so terse tonight. I wished to see you, nothing more.” He reached a hand into his jacket pocket, leaving it in there. After an awkward moment, he asked, “How are you feeling?”

So it was going to be like that. Typical. The very last thing she needed. “Can you just relax, please? For once? I’m not sure I can deal with your formal manners tonight, Septimus. I need a friend, not another handler. Choose which one you are, please, and stick to it.”

His jaw tightened, and she felt a guilty thrill of victory. She’d struck a mark there.

“It’s not formality,” he replied. “It’s called respect.”

“Whatever it is, I prefer it when you leave it at the door.” She forced a smile, retying her ponytail. “Have you looked out the window recently? Metaphorically speaking.”

“I try not to. You should probably do the same.” Instead of elaborating, he walked around her chamber, stepping over clothing and screwed up balls of paper from her many failed attempts to keep a journal. “When was the last time you cleaned this chamber? Yet again, it appears you lost a fight with a storm in here.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“By the standards of the slave holds, yes, it’s quite the princess’ palace.” He drew his hand from his pocket and tossed something to her. “For you.”

Octavia caught it in both hands. A tiny bundle, no larger than her thumb, wrapped in blue cloth. The material looked ripped from a Legion slave uniform. She glanced at Septimus, but he was busy turning off her two dozen monitors, one by one. Slowly, she opened the ragged cloth.

A ring sat in the palm of her hand. A circle of light, creamy ivory, with elegant, miniscule Nostraman runes branded onto the surface.

“Oh,” she said, for want of anything better to say. She didn’t know whether she should feel pleased, shocked or confused. All she knew for certain was that she felt all three.

“It’s to thank you,” Septimus deactivated the last viewscreen, “for Crythe. When you helped us run, rather than kill us all.”

“Oh,” she said again.

“I traded for it,” he said. “In Blackmarket, of course.” He moved back over to her, standing by her throne. “They’re very rare. The material is difficult to cut into jewellery. Only those with access to machines are able to do it.”

She turned it over in her hands, unable to read the spidery Nostraman. “What’s it made from?”

“Bone. From a Blood Angel—one of the enemy warriors that died on board.”

Octavia looked up at him again. “You bought me a gift made from the bones of an Imperial hero.” It wasn’t a question, nor was it spoken with a smile.

He smiled, though. “When you put it like that...”

“I don’t want it.” She offered it back to him. “You’re unbelievable.” She shook her head as she met his eyes. “You’re also an idiot, and... and a heretic.”

He didn’t take it back. He just walked away, nudging a pile of junk with the side of his boot. “All of those accusations are true.”

Anger was getting the better of her now, but she let it flow, guiding her incautious words. “Was this supposed to impress me?”

Septimus hesitated. “Impress you? To what end?”

She glowered. “You *know* to what end.”

His laughter annoyed her even more. “You’re serious,” he said, and laughed again.

“Get out.” She smiled thinly, “Before I shoot you.”

He didn’t leave. He came back over to her, taking her hand and slowly, carefully bringing her dirty knuckles to his lips. The kiss was as soft as the memory of a breeze.

“That is not how this works, Octavia. You are the most precious mortal commodity on this vessel, and a death sentence hangs over anyone that angers you, for you are the Legion’s favoured prize. You are beautiful—the only beauty in this sunless world. But it has not crossed my mind to do anything more than watch you from afar. Why would I have ever considered it?”

He seemed genuinely amused, holding her by the hand as he spoke. “I am not one to chase uncatchable prey. My normal duties are difficult enough.”

She still scowled up at him, resisting the need to lick her dry lips. His stare wasn't annoying, but she told herself it was.

"You should go," she told him. Her voice caught on the words. Throne, he had the darkest eyes. Well... one, anyway. The lens was half-covered by his scruffy hair.

"Besides, I heard a tale," he lowered his voice, "that humans die from a Navigator's kiss."

"That sounds like a legend to me," she said, looking up at him. "But you never know." She tilted her head, her lips parting slightly. "Navigators are dangerous creatures. Don't ever trust one."

He trailed a thumb along her jawline, not saying anything. Octavia drew a breath, and—

—froze as the door opened on grinding tracks. After a split second, she stepped back from Septimus in an awkward hop, thumping her backside into her writing desk. Hound lumbered in, followed by Maruc. The older man looked like a beggar in his dishevelled slave uniform. He gave her a shy wave, sensing he was intruding.

"Mistress," her attendant said. "Mistress, forgive me."

"It's fine." She refused to look at Septimus. "It's fine. What is it? What's wrong?"

"A guest, mistress. I could not refuse him entry."

One of the Legion's warriors stalked into the room. His midnight armour caught what little light existed, its polished surface painted with bolts of lightning, akin to veins along the ceramite. His bare face was thin, unscarred, with emotive eyes despite their rich blackness. He was smiling, though only slightly.

"Lord Cyrion," Septimus bowed.

"Septimus," the warrior greeted him. "We dock tonight. You are needed in the preparation chambers." Cyrion gestured to Maruc, with a growl of armour joints. "You too, Nonus. The thrills of hard labour await, my dear artificers."

As the humans walked from the room, Cyrion looked over at the flushed Navigator. She seemed to be intrigued by a few scraps of paper on her desk, judiciously avoiding looking at anyone else.

"So," he said to Octavia. "How are you?"

Hell's Iris welcomed them two hours later with no shortage of posturing. Frigates declaring themselves as outriders for the Blood Reaver's fleet pulled into formation with the limping *Covenant*, escorting the larger cruiser closer to the station.

On the bridge, the Exalted sat enthroned, flanked by Garadon and Malek of the Atramentar in their hulking Terminator war plate. The human crew worked around them, busy with the mathematical intricacies of guiding the massive warship into port.

"We made it," the creature drawled.

Malek inclined his head in a purring growl of armour joints. His tusked helm swung to face his master. "Now comes the hard part: staying alive until we leave."

The Exalted grunted in acknowledgement as Hell's Iris grew larger on the occulus. It galled it to admire what it was seeing, but the Tyrant's resources were second only to the Despoiler's in scope and might. Hell's Iris triggered a very



specific jealousy within the daemon's heart, for its past as much as what it represented now. The port was a nexus of secessionist activity, and it was far from the largest waypoint in the Tyrant's empire. The station itself had once been the Ramillies-class void fortress *Canaan's Eye*, positioned in deep space controlled by the Astral Claws Chapter. When indignity and betrayal swept through the region centuries before, during the Badab War, the fortress became one of many assets claimed by the rebels in their drive to secede from the Imperium. Imperial archives listed *Canaan's Eye* as destroyed by a battlefleet led by the Overlord-class cruiser *Aquiline*. What Terran records failed to state was the subsequent recapture and towing of the Ramillies hulk into the Maelstrom warp rift by the piratical renegades that rose in the wake of the Astral Claws' subjugation.

Centuries of raiding had only added to the rebuilt station. It sprawled in space around the dead, warp-corrupted world of Yrukhal, its metal halls home to tens of thousands of souls, serving as a port for hundreds of ships.

"My skin crawls to return here," Malek admitted.

"Too many ships," said Garadon. "Even for Hell's Iris, this is too many."

The Exalted nodded once, its eyes never leaving the oculus. Massive cruisers suckled at the station's fuel feeds, while smaller destroyers and frigates sailed at the outpost's perimeters.

*A continent of steel, populated by carrion-feeders.*

"Huron himself is here. Nothing else explains the presence of so many warships in his colours."

Malek grunted. "That will not make our dealings any easier."

The Exalted ground its teeth together. "Master of Auspex, sweep this fleet."

"Aye, my lord," a human officer called back.

The command deck doors rumbled open, admitting two more Legion warriors. Talos and Lucoryphus—the former striding in with his weapons sheathed, the latter crawling with all the monstrous grace of a gargyle.

"Blood of the Legion," Talos swore as he saw the oculus. "What have we sailed into?"

"A sea of sharks," Lucoryphus hissed. "Very bad. Very, very bad."

Belatedly, Talos made his salute to the Atramentar warriors on the Exalted's dais. Lucoryphus didn't bother. He prowled around the bridge, disconcerting the mortal crew by staring at them. His painted, crying faceplate watched with unblinking intensity.

"Greetings," he leered at one officer. Even hunched on all fours, Lucoryphus was the height of the mortal man, and four times as bulky in his war plate with its back-mounted thrusters.

"Hail, my lord," the officer replied. He was a gunnery rating, clad in a faded Imperial Navy uniform stripped of insignia, his silvering hair thinning at the crown. Despite half a lifetime in the Legion's service—indeed, in the Exalted's presence—attracting the direct attention of a master was still something to make even the most jaded soul start sweating.

"I am Lucoryphus," the Raptor cawed, "of the Bleeding Eyes."

"I... know who you are, my lord."

The warrior crawled closer, its weeping eye lenses somehow alive with cold delight. The officer instinctively inched away.

“Do not run. That would be unwise. Bad things happen to humans who turn their backs on me.”

The officer swallowed. “How may I serve you, lord?”

“You are not of the home world. Your eyes are not pure.”

“I was taken,” the officer cleared his throat, “I was taken years ago, in a raid. I serve loyally, my lord.”

“You are not of the home world,” Lucoryphus hissed. “Then you have never heard the hunting call of a Nostraman condor.” The Raptor’s neck twitched, causing a growl of joint servos.

A second shadow, a taller one, fell over the mortal’s face. He managed a salute, and the words, “Lord Talos,” fell from his lips.

Lucoryphus turned on his claws. Talos stood behind him, his armour bedecked in skulls and Blood Angel helms.

“Soul Hunter?”

“Please do not call me that.” Talos gestured to the officer. “This man’s name is Antion. He has served us twenty-three standard years, in the destruction of exactly eighty-seven Imperial vessels, and more raids than I care to remember. Is that not true, Gunnery Officer Antion Kasel?”

The officer saluted again. “It is true, my lord.”

Talos nodded, looking back down at Lucoryphus. “We do not toy with the lives of those that serve us, Raptor.” His gauntlet rested on Malcharion’s bolter mag-locked to his thigh. “That would be counterproductive.”

“The mortal and I were merely having a conversation.” Lucoryphus’ voice hinted at a smile behind the daemonic faceplate.

“The mortal has a duty to do. If we need to open fire, I would prefer all of our gunnery officers to be able to do so, rather than have them distracted in conversations with you.”

Lucoryphus gave a cackle and crawled away, armour joints snarling.

“Thank you, my lord,” the officer said quietly, saluting again.

*Thank you.* Those words again. Twice in one year. Talos almost smiled at the thought.

“Back to your duties, Kasel.” He moved away, returning to the Exalted’s raised dais. A rune flickered on his retinal display—incoming message—the name-glyph signified Malek of the Atramentar. Talos blinked at the icon to activate it.

“Nicely done,” Malek voxed.

“Raptors,” replied Talos. “Those things should be leashed.”

“And muzzled,” Malek agreed. “Brother, a warning: the Exalted is uneasy. Huron is here, at Hell’s Iris.”

“Understood.” Talos cancelled the link, standing on the steps leading up to the throne. Only the Atramentar and the Exalted itself were permitted to stand at the top of the dais.

“Auspex scan complete,” the Master of Vox called.

The Exalted's eyes were closed. It reached its senses beyond the heavy, cold hull, feeling the drifting warp-wind as the *Covenant* adjusted its course by guidance thrusters. The escorting frigates broke formation and pulled away, rejoining the patrolling fleet.

*Something...* the Exalted sensed it out there. *Something familiar...*

"Speak," the creature demanded. Its black eyes flicked open. "Ignore the names and classes of individual craft. Tell me only what matters."

"My lord, the enemy fleet is—"

"They are not our enemy," the Exalted snapped. "*Yet*. Continue."

"The Corsair force is of considerable strength, but with unconventional fleet disposition. Many cruisers lack support craft, and several frigates and destroyers seem to lack any larger cohesion. This is a mustering of several flotillas, with at least nine marks of allegiance spread across various craft. They appear to be composed of renegade Adeptus Astartes Chapters and defected Imperial Navy vessels."

"No," the Exalted growled. "There is something else at work, here." The daemon stared into the oculus, its talons clicking at keys on the armrests of its throne, cycling through external views.

"There," it barked, baring its teeth. "That ship is no Red Corsair vessel, no matter what its colours claim."

"It registers as the *Venomous Birthright*."

The Exalted shook its horned, tusked head again. "No. Probe deeper. Peel back the layers of auspex deception."

"Focussed scanning, my lord."

The Exalted narrowed its glinting eyes, unable to break its stare. The vessel was a weapon of crenellated, Gothic beauty, a sister to the *Covenant of Blood*, born of the same design and craftsmanship. Whereas the *Covenant's* hull echoed from the earliest ages of the Great Crusade, before the full homogenisation wrought by the Standard Template Constructs of Mars, much of the Corsair fleet was wrought from the more codified principles of construction instituted on Mars in the last ten millennia.

The *Venomous Birthright* obeyed no such strictures. It could only have been born in the naively prosperous centuries of the Crusade itself, or in the bloody, hate-fuelled decade of the Horus Heresy. Whichever was true, it traced its roots to an era before the rest of this fleet had even been conceived.

"My lord?" The officer sounded uneasy.

"Speak."

"The ship's transponder code has been altered. I read signs of encryption scarring in its identity broadcasts."

"Break them. Now."

"Aye, my lord."

The Exalted closed its eyes again, reaching out with its hidden sense. With deceptively gentle caresses, it ran ethereal feelers over the warship's hull, smoothing its psychic sense over the armoured contours. Yes, the vessel was old—ancient, even—so much older than these other craft. Its pedigree was a noble one, and it had sailed the stars since the Great Betrayal, ten thousand years before.

*Greetings, void hunter,* the Exalted whispered to the craft. *You are no weapon of the thin-blooded Corsairs. You are older, greater, and were once something so much more.*

Something within the ship, some cold-fire core of intelligence, responded with a predatory snarl. Its presence was goliath, its emotions too alien to contain within a human, or even daemonic, mind. Yet for all its immensity, it spared no more than a second's attention for the psychic intrusion.

*Begone,* its immense heart demanded, *little fleshthing.*

The second of connection was enough. The Exalted pulsed back into the body it wore, opening its eyes to see the bridge once more.

"My lord, the encryption was crude. I've managed to pierce it, and the vessel is—"

"I know what it is," the Exalted growled. "Or rather, what it was. Did you ascertain its former name?"

"Aye, my lord."

"Speak it, for all to hear."

"The original identity signifier reads as the *Echo of Damnation.*"

The Atramentar warriors tensed by the throne's sides, and Lucoryphus released a hissing stream of Nostraman invective. The Exalted gave a wet, grinding chuckle, feeling the name set Vandred's spirit writhing within.

"Yes," it grunted. "There, my brothers, is the reality of the carrion-feeders we are dealing with. The Corsairs, in their endless expansions, have claimed one of the Eighth Legion's warships. Look upon it, and tell me your thoughts."

It was Talos who spoke. "Some sins will not be allowed to stand." He faced the Exalted, his words burning with conviction even through the crackling of his helm's vox-speakers.

"That's our ship." The prophet clenched his teeth behind his faceplate. "And we are not leaving until we take it back."

Even in dock, the Maelstrom's void-tides rippled against the *Covenant*, their gentle crashing formed from aetheric energies cooled in the icy nothingness of true space. The crew couldn't help but hear the polluted solar winds caressing the warship's hull, and despite all he'd seen and heard in the last ten years, it set Septimus' teeth on edge. He checked his pistols, thumbing the ammunition runes to check their power cells.

"Nonus," he said.

Maruc clicked his tongue, not quite tutting. "I'm not sure I'll be able to get used to that."

"It's not that difficult, I assure you." Septimus handed him one of the pistols. "Have you ever fired one of these?"

The older man scratched at his unshaven jawline, which was well on its way to being buried beneath an itchy grey beard. "Of course not."

"Well, this is how you do it." Septimus raised his pistol, mimed the activation, and dry-fired three times. "It's not difficult. These were designed for use in the Imperial Guard, so they are far from complicated."

“Hey.”

Septimus raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“Don’t you be mocking the Guard, son. They’re heroes, one and all.”

Septimus smiled. “Your perspective tends to change when your masters decorate their armour with Imperial Guard skulls for months after each encounter with them.”

“I wanted to be Guard, you know.”

Septimus let it drop. “As I was saying, keep this weapon with you at all times. Hell’s Iris is a particularly unpleasant port.”

Maruc—he still couldn’t think of himself as “Nonus”—blinked twice. “We’re going ashore?”

“Of course we are.” Septimus leashed his machete to his shin. “We have a duty to do. This place is dangerous, but if we tread with care, no harm will come to us.”

“Is Octavia coming?”

Septimus gave him a look. “She’s a Navigator. The Legion can’t risk her in a hellhole like this.”

“But it can risk you and me?”

The slave grinned. “Can and will. Come, let’s get this over with.”

First Claw crossed the umbilical corridor into the station, to be met by a contingent of the Tyrant’s warriors blocking the opposite bulkhead. Their ceramite war plate, rendered in red, black and bronze, was a riotous contrast to the midnight and bone worn by the Night Lords.

“Nobody say anything foolish,” Talos warned First Claw over the vox.

“As if we ever would,” Cyrion replied.

Each of them openly carried their weapons drawn and ready, mirroring the posture of the Red Corsairs ahead.

“Halt,” the squad leader demanded. His horned helm regarded each of the Night Lords in turn. “What brings you to Hell’s Iris?”

Xarl snorted, resting his immense chainblade on his shoulder. “I have a question of my own. Why do you thin-blooded little mongrels not kneel before warriors of the First Legions?”

Talos took a breath. “You are an absolute gift to diplomacy, brother.”

Xarl just grunted in reply.

“Was that supposed to be humorous?” the Corsair leader asked.

Talos ignored the question. “We need repairs. I am charged by my commander to speak with Lord Huron.”

The Corsairs exchanged glances. Most abstained from wearing their helms, leaving their scarred faces on hideous display. Talos marked the emblems of the Powers cut and branded into facial flesh. Such devotion. Such ardent, fevered devotion.

“I know your ship,” the Corsair leader said. “I remember the *Covenant of Blood*, and I remember you, ‘prophet’. Your actions last time you walked these halls have earned you no friends.”

“If you know us, then further introductions are pointless,” said Talos. “Now let us pass.”

“I am gatemaster for this dock,” the Corsair growled through his helm’s vox-speakers. “It would be wise for you to show a little respect.”

“And we,” Mercutian pointed out, “were waging the Long War for several thousand years before you were born. Respect goes both ways, renegade.”

The Corsairs bristled, clutching their bolters tighter. “Where was this vaunted respect last time you walked within our domain? I have warriors that still carry scars from the last time we met. What if I choose to send you back to the junker you arrived in?”

“That would be unwise. Lord Huron is expecting us.” Talos reached to unlock the seals at his collar, pulling his helm free with a hiss of vented air pressure. The corridor reeked of stale bodies and armour oils, with the faintest hint of something sulphurous beneath. He looked at the Corsairs, black eyes taking them in one by one.

“I appreciate the blow to your pride,” Talos said. “We were less than courteous guests when we last came this way. But your master has already made his intentions clear by escorting us into dock. He wishes to see us. So if we could dispense with the posturing, nobody needs to die this time. We will go past you, or we will go through you.”

The Corsairs raised their weapons as one, bolter-stocks cracking back against shoulder guards. First Claw responded in kind, chainblades revving and pistols rising in unison. Talos held Malcharion’s bolter in one hand, aiming both barrels at the Corsair leader’s faceplate.

Cyrion chuckled over the vox. “Another warm welcome.”

“Lower your weapons,” the Corsair commanded.

“Gatemaster...” Talos warned. “It does not need to play out this way.”

“*Lower your weapons,*” he repeated.

“Talos,” another voice called in greeting. From behind the Corsair squad, another warrior wearing the armour of the fallen Chapter pushed through his brothers. The squad nodded in acknowledgement of the figure, though he paid them no heed in kind.

The Corsair stood between both squads, blocking the line of fire. Talos lowered his bolter at once. Xarl, Mercutian and Uzas did so with greater reluctance.

“Brother,” the Corsair said, and offered his hand to the prophet. Their armour clanked together as they gripped wrists for a moment, forming the traditional greeting between warriors since time immemorial.

“It is good to see you,” the prophet said. “I’d hoped you would be here.”

The Corsair shook his head. “I had hoped you wouldn’t be. Your timing, Talos—as always—is venomous.” He turned to the warriors behind him. “Stand down.”

They complied, saluting as they did so. The leader grunted a reluctant, “As you wish, Flayer.”

“Come, all of you.” Variel’s cold eyes drifted over First Claw. “I will take you to Lord Huron.”

## XII

### PROPHET AND PRISONER

“You will come with us to Vilamus.”

“I knew this was all going too well,” Cyrion voxed over a private channel. Talos ignored him.

“That is the price of my aid,” the seated figure added. “When we lay siege to Vilamus, your forces will be in the vanguard.”

Lord Huron’s throne room in Hell’s Iris was hardly devoted to any suggestion of subtlety. The station’s war room had been converted to a monarch’s chamber, replete with a raised throne and rows of crusade banners hanging from the ceiling. Rows of bodyguards, supplicants and beseechers lined the walls: human, Renegade Astartes, and creatures lost in the mutable states of those in thrall to Chaos worship. The decking showed its stains with unwashed pride—blood, burns and greyish slime in equal measure—while the air bore the stink of something sulphurous, rising from the breath of the gathered warriors.

It all added to the pain-pulse buzzing inside the prophet’s skull.

“Nothing,” Mercutian voxed quietly, “bears the same stench as a Red Corsair haven.”

Talos had replaced his own helm upon entering the station. “We have to agree to his wishes. Huron won’t let us leave alive if we refuse.”

“His offer is suicide,” Cyrion pointed out. “We’re all aware of that.”

“We should confer with the Exalted,” replied Mercutian.

“Yes,” Xarl smiled behind his faceplate. “I’m sure that will happen. Just agree, Talos. The smell of this place is seeping through my armour.”

“Well?” the enthroned figure asked.

Lord Huron’s ravaged features stared with delighted interest. He was not a man with a mind to hide his emotions, and what remained of his human face was twisted into a leer that bled superiority. He knew he’d won even before these dregs of the Eighth Legion came before him to beg, and he felt no qualms in showing the triumph across his brutalised visage. Yet, even in his monstrous exultation, little of pettiness showed. He almost seemed to share the joke with First Claw.

Talos rose from his knees. Behind him, First Claw did the same. Variel stood to the side, his face a careful mask of passionless boredom.

“It will be done, Lord Huron,” Talos said. “We agree to your terms. When do we sail?”

Huron reclined in the osseous throne, the very image of an ancient, indecorous warlord. “As soon as my work crews have resurrected your broken *Covenant of Blood*. A month, maybe less. You will provide the materials?”

Talos nodded. “The Ganges raid was most fruitful, my lord.”

“Ah, but you fled from the Marines Errant. Not as fruitful as the venture might otherwise have been, eh?”

“No, lord.” The prophet watched the warlord, wishing it was easier to dislike Huron’s disarming informality. A strange, reluctant charisma bled from the Corsair Lord’s wounded carcass in a trickling aura.

“I watched the *Covenant* drift in, you know,” he said. “How you let such a grand ship fall into ruin is, I suspect, something of a tale.”

“It is, sire,” Talos conceded. “I would be glad to speak of it at a more opportune time.”

Huron blinked his dry eyes. Mirth enlivened them, and his shoulder guards rattled with the laughter he kept beneath his breath.

“Now seems the perfect time, Night Lord.” Around the chamber came the rumbling chuckles of Legionary voices. “Let us hear the story now.”

Talos swallowed, his mind racing beneath the pain. Huron’s conversational noose was as simple and blunt as it was unavoidable. In a moment of foolish instinct, he almost glanced at Variel.

“My lord,” the prophet inclined his head, “I believe you already know the vital aspects of our sufferance at Crythe. A more poetic voice than mine is required to do the tale any justice.”

Huron licked his corpse-lips. “Indulge me. Speak to me of how you betrayed the Black Legion, and ran from the Blood Angels.”

More laughter from the armed audience.

“I curse the Exalted for sending us to do this,” Cyrion sighed.

“He’s baiting us,” Xarl’s voice was low, cold.

The prophet wasn’t so sure. He bowed theatrically, feigning a role in the amusement at First Claw’s expense. “Forgive me, Lord Huron, I forgot how difficult it must be for you to receive pure information on the war waged by the First Legions. Those of us who once walked at the sides of primarchs tend to forget how distant and isolated the lesser Renegade Astartes must feel. I will tell you of Abaddon’s preparations for the coming crusade and the Night Lords’ place within it, of course. I only hope you will enlighten us as to whatever games you and your pirates have been playing, so far from the war’s front lines.”

As Talos’ words fell across the silent chamber, Uzas sniggered like a child over the vox.

“And you rebuke Xarl for his diplomacy?” Mercutian sounded aghast. “You’ve killed us all, prophet.”

Talos said nothing. He merely watched the warlord upon the throne. Ranks of Red Corsairs stood at attention, waiting for the order to open fire. A stunted, inhuman creature skittered around their armoured boots, cackling to itself.

Huron, master of the Maelstrom and the largest pirate warfleet in the Eastern reaches of the galaxy, finally allowed his face to split into a smile. It took obvious



effort to make the expression, the grin formed from twitching muscles and quivering, nerveless lips.

"I would have liked to walk upon Nostramo," the Tyrant said at last. "In my experience, its sons have an entertaining sense of humour." Huron drummed his armoured talons on the armrests of his throne, releasing a mouthful of laughter closer to a gargle.

"I am glad to entertain you, lord, as always." Talos was smiling himself.

"You are still a soul blinded by overconfidence, you know."

"It is a curse," the prophet agreed. The warlord gave another of his burbling, throaty chuckles—the sound of unspat bile trapped in wounded lungs. Thin pistons compressed with clicks, visible through the patchwork skin of the warlord's throat.

"And what if I'd not required you for this little task, Legionary? Then what?"

"Then you'd have aided us from the goodness of your own heart, lord."

"I can see why the Exalted loathes you." The Corsair Lord grinned again.

It bled the tension from the chamber in a rush of acidic breath. Huron rose, gesturing to the Night Lords with his oversized metal claw. At the movement, the creature loping around the chamber—a hairless, wretched little quadruped with skinny malformed limbs—scampered over to the warlord and climbed Huron's armour plating with its knobby talons. The Corsair lord paid it no heed as it clutched onto his back-mounted power pack, gripping with its taloned hands. Swollen eyes glared at the Night Lords, and its awkward teeth clicked together with a stuttering rattle.

"What. The hell. Is *that*?" Cyrion breathed.

Talos whispered a reply. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"It looks like someone skinned the spawn of a monkey and a dog. I believe one of you should tell the Blood Reaver that he has an abomination crawling over his back."

"I think he knows, Cy."

Huron beckoned to them again, his claw squealing as its joints moved.

"Come, warriors of the First Legions. I have something of yours that you may wish to see."

The myriad decks of Hell's Iris thronged with life, but the Tyrant's honour guard had sequestered an entire level of the star-fortress for the Corsairs' own use. Here, guarded by Huron's most capable warriors, the command structure of the Red Corsairs made their plans to strike out against the Imperium. And here, under the watchful eyes of the Chapter's elite, the Tyrant liked to keep unwelcome guests incarcerated at his leisure.

As they walked through the quieter corridors, boots clanking on the decking, Talos let his gaze drift over the profaned metal walls. Each bore a manuscript's worth of blasphemous screeds and incantations, inked and branded into the naked steel.

Huron's movements drew the prophet's eyes more than once. The master of the Red Corsairs was a shattered creature, but his dragging limp belied the suppressed power in every jerking movement. Seeing him now, this close—close enough that the sickly flickering light glinted back from his tarnished armour plating—it was no

trouble at all to discern why the former Tyrant of Badab remained alive. Some warriors were too stubborn to die.

Had he been mortal, Talos suspected Huron's presence would be enough to cow him into obeisance. Few other warleaders exuded such an unpalatable aura of threat, born of a destroyed face, a pained smile, and the growl of fibre-bundle cabling in his armour joints. But then, few other warleaders commanded a secessionist empire, let alone an astral kingdom of such immense size and might.

"Something in my face interests you, prophet?"

"Your wounds, my lord. Is there much pain?"

Huron bared his teeth to the curious question. Both warriors were the painstaking product of extensive, archaic genetic manipulation and bio-surgery, making pain a relative concept to post-human warriors with two hearts, three lungs, and the habit of spitting acid.

"A great deal," the Corsair lord said, leaving it at that.

Behind First Claw, the lumbering forms of Red Corsair Terminators filled the corridor, plodding along in tank-like obstinance. The hairless little mutant scabbled around their heels. Cyrion kept casting looks back at it.

"Before I give you this gift," Huron's tongue moistened his cracked lips again, "tell me, Night Lord, why you risked that ludicrous jest with me in the throne room."

The answer came smoothly, relayed through his helm's vox-speakers. "Your empire is a cancer webbing through the Imperium's heart, and it is said you command as many warriors as any Legion lord except for the Warmaster himself." Talos turned to glance at Huron, the warlord's broken features outlined by a target lock. "I do not know if that is true, Lord Huron, but I doubted such a man would be so petty or ungracious as to vent his anger over a few spoken words."

Huron's reply was no more than a flicker of amusement in his bloodshot eyes.

"Will we even want this gift?" Xarl voxed to the others.

"Not if it's what I think it is," Cyrion's voice came back, a little distracted. "That little thing is still following us. I may shoot it."

"*Ezhek jai grugull shivriek vagh skr*," Huron announced, bringing them all to a halt.

"I do not speak any of the Badab dialects," Talos confessed.

Huron answered by gesturing at a sealed bulkhead door with his massive power claw. The curving talons had been painted the same red as his ceramite a long time ago, but battle had slowly disintegrated the weapon's appearance, leaving it scorched black from flame. The Tyrant inclined his head to the Night Lords, and the overhead illumination strips reflected their light back off the chrome portions of his bare skull.

"Here is what I wished you to see," he said. "Tormenting it has been both useful and entertaining, but I suspect you would take pleasure in seeing it, as well. Consider this viewing a token of gratitude for accepting my offer."

The bulkhead began to rise, and Talos resisted the urge to draw his weapons.

"Keep your helms on," the Tyrant warned.

He couldn't tell how long he'd waited: blind, alone, and feeling the unwanted sting of tears trailing down his face. The shackles were no punishment at all, despite how

they gripped his wrists to bind him to the wall. Likewise, the onset of starvation was a pain to be overcome, something to be ignored along with the bite of desperate thirst that scratched like sand in his veins.

The collar leashing his throat—now that was punishment, but one born of a weaker breed. He couldn't see the runic scripture inscribed upon the cold metal, but it was impossible not to feel their emanations. *Pulse, pulse, pulse* in his neck, with the same, inevitable throbbing of an infected tooth. To be denied a voice and the power wrought by his every whispered word... it was humiliating, but that made it nothing more than another humiliation to be heaped upon so many other indignities.

No. He could, and would, withstand such things. He could even endure the other minds burrowing into his own, their careless, invisible probes thrashing aside his mental defences with all the ease of idiot children ripping through paper. It hurt to think; it hurt to remember; it hurt to do anything but force his mind to a meditative blankness.

Still. He could survive it, holding his psyche intact through shivering concentration.

But the light was another matter. He knew he'd screamed for a time, though he'd no perception of just how long. After the screaming, he'd rocked back and forth, head lowered to his bare chest, drooling acid through clenched teeth. The chlorine stink of dissolving metal had only added to his nausea, as his spit ate into the floor.

His strength deserted him at last. After weeks—months?—he now knelt with his arms wide, wrists bound to the wall behind, head loose on an aching neck, eyes dripping tears, unable to lubricate past the pain. The light splashed against his closed eyelids with corrosive intent, a press of misty white bright enough to drag tears from the eyes of a soul otherwise beyond sorrow.

Through this haze of pain and messy clouding of his thoughts, the prisoner heard the door to his cell opening once more. He took three slow breaths, as if they could expel the pain from his body, and breathed out the words he'd been waiting to say for the entirety of his bloodless crucifixion.

"When I am free," he spat the words out with strings of saliva, "I will kill every single one of you."

One of his tormentors came closer. He heard it in the purr of armour joints, the soft grinding of machinery muscles.

"*Athrillay, vylas*," his torturer whispered in a dead language, from a dead world. Yet his captors knew no such tongue.

The prisoner raised his head, staring blindly forward, and repeated the words back.

"Greetings," he said, "brother."

Talos didn't want to imagine the prisoner's pain—his own retinal display struggled to dull the atrocious strength of the chamber's lights, and even behind his faceplate he felt the sting of tears at the aggravating brightness.

He curled his armoured fingers through the captive's unshaven, greasy hair, and yanked the prisoner's head back, baring the sweating throat. His words were a Nostraman hiss, pitched low to defeat unwanted ears.

"I swore to kill you when next we met."

"I remember it." Ruven smiled through the pain. "Now is your chance, Talos."

The prophet drew his gladius, pressing the blade's edge against the prisoner's cheek. "Give me one reason not to peel the skin from your treacherous bones."

Ruven choked out a laugh. As he shook his head, the sword rubbed against his flesh, slicing a shallow gash.

"I have no reasons to give you. Spare us both the pretence that I will beg for my life, and just do as you will."

Talos withdrew the blade. For a moment, he did nothing but watch the drop of blood crawl its wet way down the steel. "How did they catch you?"

Ruven swallowed. "The Warmaster cast me aside. For my failures at Crythe."

Talos couldn't help the crooked grin that took hold. "And you fled *here*?"

"Of course. Where else? What other havens for our kind have such size and scope? Such potential? The Maelstrom was the only answer that made sense." The prisoner's face twisted into a snarl. "I did not know some of my erstwhile brothers had so harmed the Eighth Legion's reputation with the Corsairs."

Talos was still watching the blood trickle down. "We made few friends last time we were here," he said. "But that's not why Huron took you prisoner, is it? These might be your last words, brother. Lies have no place in a valediction."

Ruven said nothing for a time. Then, in a sibilant whisper: "Look at me."

Talos did so. Streams of bio-data flickered across his visor. "You are dehydrated to the point of tissue damage," he noted.

The captive grunted. "Is that so? You should be an Apothecary."

"The truth, Ruven."

"The 'truth'. Were it only so simple. Huron allowed me to remain at Hell's Iris if I traded away the secrets I'd spent decades prying from the warp. At first, I conceded. Then there was an... altercation." Ruven's androgynous features split into a dry-gummed smile. "Three Corsairs died summoning denizens of the warp many times more powerful than they could bind. Tragic, Talos. So very tragic. Evidently, the dabbling fools were considered promising candidates for Huron's Librarium."

The prophet stared at the sorcerer for some time.

"You are still there, brother," Ruven said. "I hear you."

"I am still here," Talos agreed. "I am trying to discern the truth from your lies."

"I told you the truth. What purpose would lying serve? They have shackled me here for what feels like months, saturating my eyes with light. I cannot see. I cannot move. Abaddon cast me aside, stripping me of my role in his Black Legion. Why would I lie to you?"

"That is what I intend to find out," Talos replied, and rose to his feet. "Because I know you, Ruven. The truth is anathema to your tongue."

"A traitorous prize, is he not?" Lord Huron asked. "I am almost done with him, for he is no longer worth any amusement, and I believe he holds little information back from my sorcerers now. They have peeled all the lore they need from his mind."

"What were his crimes?" Talos glanced back at the kneeling form of his former brother bathed in the radiant light.

“He caused the death of three initiates, and refused to share his knowledge. He had to be... encouraged... to do so, by other means.” The Blood Reaver’s cadaverous features peeled back into a smile. “Rendering him helpless was a trial in itself. Collared as he is, he is no threat. He cannot whisper into the warp to call forth his powers. Binding his warpcraft was the very first precaution I took, immediately before blinding him.”

“Play this carefully,” Cyrion warned. “This is a promise of our fate if we betray the Corsairs.”

“If?” Talos voxed back. “They have the *Echo of Damnation*. I’m not leaving without it.”

“Very well. *When* we betray them.”

Talos clicked an acknowledgement pulse back over the vox in reply.

“Let him rot here,” the prophet said to the Corsair lord. “What of his weapons and armour?”

Huron’s split lips curled. “I have his wargear. Consider it another gesture of goodwill that I offer it back to you.”

Ruven let out a moan that disintegrated as it left his slack jaws. Chains rattled as he tested his shackles for the first time in weeks.

“Do not leave me here...”

“Burn in the warp, traitor,” Xarl chuckled back.

“Thank you for the gift,” Talos said to Huron. “It is always gratifying to see betrayers reap what they sow. Kill him if you wish. It matters nothing to us.”

“Talos,” Ruven whispered the name once—on the second effort, it became a scream. “*Talos*.”

The prophet turned to the prisoner, his retinal display compensating for the insane glare once again. Ruven was staring at him now. Blood ran down his cheeks in twin tear-trails as the light burned out the sensitive tissue behind his eyes.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t beg for your life,” Talos said.

The bulkhead slammed closed before Ruven could reply, sealing him inside the cell with his own screams.

## XIII

# REGENERATION

Septimus sipped the drink, forcing himself to go through the suddenly difficult ritual of actually swallowing. He considered it a fair bet the beverage was distilled from engine oil.

The bar, such as it was, was one of many on board Hell's Iris, no different from a hundred others of its filthy kind. Wretched men and women mixed in the gloom, drinking foulness as they laughed and argued and shouted in a dozen different tongues.

"Oh, Throne," Maruc whispered.

Septimus scowled. "Don't say that here if you wish to leave alive."

The older man gestured to a lithe young woman across the room, moving from table to table. Her hair streamed down her naked back in a flawless fall of silken white, while an exaggerated femininity set her slender hips swinging with every step.

"Don't talk to it." Septimus shook his head. For a moment, Maruc thought he saw a smile on the other serf's face.

*It? Don't talk to it?*

But she'd seen Maruc's interest. "*Friksh sarkarr*," she purred as she approached, her dress of battered leather scraps whispering against her milky skin. Fingers the white of clean porcelain stroked his unshaven cheek. As if approving of something, she nodded to herself. "*Vrikaj ghu sneghrah?*" She had a child's voice: a girl on the edge of maidenhood.

"I... I don't..."

She shushed him with her fingertip, resting the pale digit on his dry lips. "*Vrikaj ghu sneghrah... sijakh...*"

"Septimus..." Maruc swallowed. Her eyes were wide, the rich green of forests he'd only seen in hololithics. Her fingertip tasted of some unknowable spicy musk.

Septimus cleared his throat. The maiden turned with a ghost's grace, moistening her lips with a forked tongue.

*"Trijakh mu sekh?"*

The slave drew back the edge of his jacket, revealing the holstered pistol at his hip. Slowly, pointedly, he shook his head, and gestured to another table.

The girl spat onto the floor by his boot, slinking away with her hips swinging.

"She's something else..." Maruc watched her moving away, leering at all the flesh on display.

"Skin-walker," Septimus grimaced at the taste of his drink—he wasn't swallowing any more of the stuff, but it was grotesque enough even to pretend, when

it lapped against his lips. “That leather she’s wearing, do you see how it is sewn together?”

“Yeah.”

“It isn’t leather.”

Maruc watched the girl as she traced her fingernails gently across the back of a rough-looking man’s neck. “I don’t think I can sit here much longer,” he said. “That fat thing across the room has too many eyes. There’s a beautiful girl with a snake’s tongue, walking around wearing human skin. Everyone in here is armed to the teeth, and the sorry bastard under the next table looks like he died two days ago.”

“Be calm.” Septimus was watching him closely now. “Be at ease. We are safe, as long as we don’t attract attention to ourselves. If you give in to panic, we’ll be dead before the first yell has finished leaving your lips.”

“I’ll be fine.” Maruc calmed himself with a slug of his own drink. It spread a pleasant warmth through his gullet. “This is good stuff.”

Septimus let his expression speak for him.

“What?” Maruc asked.

“For all we know, this is distilled rodent piss. Try not to drink too much of it.”

“Fine. Sure.” He made another subtle scan around the room. One of the other patrons seemed to be too small for his own skeleton: bones at every joint poked out from his flesh, even along the ridges of his spine and the stretched skin of his cheeks. “Your lord was right, you know.”

“In what way?”

“About escaping when we docked. Being stranded here would be worse than staying on the *Covenant*. Throne...”

Septimus winced. “Stop saying that.”

“Sorry. Look, have they even told you what the Legion agreed to?”

Septimus returned a shrug. “First Claw pledged the Legion to a siege of some kind. They’re calling it *Vilamus*.”

“A world? An enemy fleet? A hive city?”

“I’ve not had the chance to ask.”

Maruc’s gaze drifted back to the beautiful girl. “Are there many of those... people?”

Septimus nodded. “The flaying of flesh is one of the more common traditions in many cults. Even the Legion does it, remember. Lord Uzas’ ceremonial cloak was once the royal family of some insignificant backwater world the *Covenant* raided.”

“You mean the cloak once belonged to them?”

“No. *Was* them. It is not leather, either. But the skin-walkers are a common enough cult. Mutants, mostly. Avoid them at all costs.”

“I thought she wanted to—”

“She did.” Septimus’ human eye glanced to the doorway, and he adjusted a silver ring on his finger. “But she’d have skinned you afterwards. Come on.”

Maruc followed as Septimus led him to the door. The younger slave reached back to loosen his short ponytail, letting his scruffy hair fall to his chin, half-covering his subtle bionics.

“Keep your weapon ready,” he said. “You never know when someone will take offence to us.”

“You still haven’t said why we’re here,” Maruc whispered.

“You’re about to find out.”

Octavia sighed—the kind of sigh where she felt she’d lost weight once it left her lips. As she breathed out, she exhaled months of tension, keeping her eyes closed as she tilted her head back.

The warm water rained against her face, tickling her eyelids, running in pleasant trickles along her lips and chin. She had nothing in the way of soap, but even that didn’t dent her enthusiasm. She scrubbed at her body with a rough sponge, almost feeling the grime of neglectful months sloughing from her skin.

With the *Covenant* docked, taking on fresh water supplies, the refilled tanks took the strain off the depleted recycling processors.

She risked a glance down at her figure, though it took surprising courage to do so. While she was far from the emaciated wraith she’d expected to see, her skin was a pale palette, and the trails of blue veins showed faintly beneath her flesh. Still, she had to confess she felt unhealthier than she looked. Evidently the nutrient-rich gruel that served as shipboard fare was more nourishing than its sandpaper taste suggested.

With her nose wrinkled, she picked a little fluff, the same midnight blue of Legion slave clothing, from her navel. *Delightful.*

With a quiet laugh, she flicked it away.

“Mistress? Did you call?”

Octavia looked up with a start, covering herself with her hands. Octavia had at least a shadow of mundane human instinct within her, for she sought to ward her nakedness from a stranger’s eyes. While one hand guarded her bare skin, the other flew to her forehead, palm covering everything beneath her hairline.

But it was there—a flicker of sight—the shadow of something either human or close to it, glimpsed through the turbulent vision offered by her genetic gift. She saw its stained, multi-hued soul as an imprint in the seething torment of the warp all around.

She’d looked at someone, stared right at them even if only for a heartbeat, with her truest eye.

Her attendant, standing at the communal ablution chamber’s edge, made a throaty gagging sound. He reached up to his throat with trembling hands, choking on air he could no longer swallow. Darkness moved across the bandaged face: a wet, spreading darkness, broadcast from the attendant’s black eyes and open mouth. The blood stained the dirty weave in moments, bathing the bandages in stinking red.

He collapsed against the wall behind, wracked by spasms, beating the back of his skull against the steel. Wrapped hands clawed at his head, pulling the bandages away to reveal a starkly human face, albeit one soured purple by asphyxiation. Bloody vomit emerged from the old man’s lips in a reeking torrent, splashing across the chamber’s wet floor.

He lay there, grunting, twitching, bleeding, as the warm water still rained upon her.



She swallowed, her human eyes still staring, as another of her attendants made his hunchbacked way inside. He spared her no glance, limping over to the dying elder, a beaten shotgun in his hands. He placed the sawn-off barrel in the older attendant's gaping, gushing mouth, and pulled the trigger. The chamber resonated with the gunshot's echo for several seconds. What remained of the old man—which was very little above the neck—fell still.

"It wasn't my fault." Octavia breathed the words, caught between shock, anger, and shame.

"I know," said Hound. He turned to his mistress, his blinded eyes fixed upon her. She still felt a strange reluctance to lower her hands. Either of them.

"I told you all to wait outside."

"I know this, also." Hound chambered another round with a sharp *click-chuck*. The spent shell tinkled across the dirty decking, rolling to a smoky rest against a wall. "Telemach was in great pain. I entered only to end it. I will leave now, mistress."

"I think I'm finished now..." She turned away from the headless body, and the ruination smearing the metal wall.

But she didn't leave with Hound. She stayed in the room with the dead body, her hands against the shower wall, head lowered into the jetting water. Her hair, almost long enough to reach her elbows now, was a black velvet drape hanging down.

She'd never killed with her eye before. The only time she'd ever tried had been a failure—at the moment of her capture so many months before, when Talos had dragged her into this new life with his hand around her throat. All the stories she'd heard over the years came flooding back to her in a bittersweet rush: sailors' legends that Kartan Syne's crew had whispered when they believed she couldn't hear them; the warning tales given to every scion of the Navis Nobilite in the years of their extensive tuition; the things she'd never learned from her teachers, but found herself believing after reading them in old family logbooks.

*A Navigator cannot kill without consequence.* So the stories said.

*Blood of my blood, do not let your soul be stained by such a deed.* Her father's words.

And a notation in an ancestral Mervallion journal, more damning than all else: *Every murdering glance is a beacon to the Neverborn, a light in their darkness.*

She didn't look over at the body. She didn't need to—its slumped repose was etched into her memory, scratched upon her senses with grotesque finality.

A tickle in her throat was all the weary warning she needed—a few seconds later, Octavia was on her knees, puking the day's gruel into the rusty drainage grate. Her tears mixed with the falling water, lost in the downpour, a secret to everyone but herself.

The Corsairs' apothecarion saw a great deal of business. Many of the surgical tables held victims of the unending honour-duels and violent disagreements aboard Hell's Iris. Most were human, though plenty of others occupied their own mutational places on the charts of known natural species.

Deltrian moved through the chaos, his hooded features grinning at everything he saw. Talos walked behind him, as did Variel, the two warriors ostensibly acting as escorts. The tech-adept paused briefly to point at another ceiling-mounted auto-surgery unit, its mechadendrites hanging with the unpleasant curl of a dead spider's legs.

"We require one of these for stereotactic procedures, with the A, D and F socketed limbs."

A dull-eyed servitor, wearing a robe similar to Deltrian's, trailed behind the other three. It drooled an acknowledgement, recording its master's wishes in an internal database.

Deltrian paused again, picking up a silver instrument. "Tyndaller. Seven should suffice. A similar number of these occluders will be necessary."

The servitor murmured another acknowledgement.

Variel tensed at the reaching hand of a Corsair grasping for his medicae vambrace. His thin features soured into a scowl.

"Do not touch me. Your wounds will be tended soon." Variel disengaged himself smoothly, resisting the urge to sever the warrior's fingers as punishment. He rejoined Talos a moment later. "Your facilities on the *Covenant* must be close to useless if you require so much from us."

"You are not wrong. Battle and disuse have ruined almost all we have. In our last engagement, one of our squads was lost while flushing out a boarding party of Blood Angels from their refuge in the apothecarion chambers. You cannot imagine the damage the fools in red inflicted, let alone the dead Claw that failed to kill them."

"A cryotome," Deltrian interrupted. "Interesting."

Variel ignored him. "The *Covenant* is a ruin, Talos, held together by luck. And you are starting to appear the same."

Talos passed another table, stopping to slit the throat of the slave strapped there, killing him quicker than the death he was going to suffer by drowning in his own blood. The Night Lord licked the blood from his gladius, briefly lighting his senses with the flickering after-images of another mind's memories.

*A chamber, messy, with the warmth of security; a trench, raining mud and shrapnel, clutching a sabre in his cold hands; the sickeningly mortal feelings of doubt, of fear, of weakness as all strength bled from his limbs... How did these people live and function, with such messy minds?*

He supped a single taste, no more, and the insights were mist-thin, gripping his senses lightly before fading fast.

"My scars?" he asked Variel after sheathing his gladius again, and tracing a gloved fingertip along the faint scar tissue down the side of his face.

"Not your scars. The skin has regenerated and bonded well from whatever damage it sustained, and those markings will grow ever fainter. I am referring to the tracks of pain along your features less visible to untrained eyes."

Variel held his gauntlet close to Talos' face, too astute to risk touching the other warrior. The fingers crescented, as if holding an orb over the Night Lord's temple. "Here," he said. "Pain blooms from here, crackling beneath your skin in rhythm with your pulse, riding your veins like access tunnels to the rest of your skull."

Talos shook his head, but not in disagreement. “You are a better Apothecary than I ever was.”

“In some ways,” Variel withdrew his hand, “almost certainly. As I remember it, you have little in the way of patience.”

Talos didn’t argue the point. He watched Deltrian for a few moments, as the tech-priest peered down at a thrashing human, evidently intrigued by the analysis table upon which the wounded man lay.

“The head pain is getting worse, is it not?” Variel asked Talos.

“How could you possibly have guessed that?”

“Your left eye is irritated; the tear ducts are dilated by a measure of millimetres more than the other. The aqueous humour in the eye is also beginning to cloud with the suggestion of blood particles. As yet, these flaws remain hidden to mortal eyes, but the signs are there.”

“Servitors rebuilt my skull after a clash with Dal Karus and Third Claw.”

“A bolter shell?”

Talos nodded. “Crashed into my helm. Sheared away a chunk of my head.” He made a chopping motion along his temple. “For the first hour afterwards, I was able to get by with pain suppressors and adrenaline injectors. After that, I was oblivious for three nights while the medicae servitors worked their reconstruction.”

Variel’s sneer came as close to a smile as he could manage. “They did imperfect work, brother. But I appreciate circumstances were hardly in your favour.”

The Night Lord felt the petulant urge to shrug. “I’m still alive,” he said.

“You are indeed. For now.”

Talos glared at the Apothecary. “Go on...”

“The pain you are feeling is pressure on your brain, brought about from degenerating blood vessels, some of which are swollen, while others are likely to be on the edge of rupture. The braincase’s new shape is also a contributing factor, and if the pressure continues to increase, it is likely you will haemorrhage blood from your optic cavity, which will occur after your eyeball is pushed out from its socket by the mounting strain. You will also likely sustain a degree of necrosis among the degrading blood vessels in your brain as well as in adjacent tissue, as you begin to suffer further cerebral vasospasms. However, I can rectify the servitors’ flawed... tinkering... if you desire.”

Talos raised a black eyebrow, his face even paler than usual. “I wouldn’t trust one of my own squad to help me into my armour, and they all wear the winged skull of Nostramo. Why would I trust a warrior with Huron’s claw on his shoulder to pry through my brain?”

Variel’s amusement ended at his eyes. “Because of Fryga, Talos. Because I still owe you.”

“Thank you for the offer. I will consider it.”

Variel keyed a command into his narthecium gauntlet. “See that you do. If my estimate is correct, refusing means you will be dead by the end of the solar year.”

Talos’ reply was broken off by Deltrian drifting back to them in a purr of smooth augmetics and a whisper of robes.

“I have collated the required data,” he declared in tinny pride.

Variel saluted, fist over his breastplate. “I will take the data to my master. Lord Garreon is overseeing the resupply of your vessel.”

Talos caught himself thumbing his temple. With an irritated growl, he replaced his helm, clicking it into place and bathing his senses in the warm thrum of his armour’s autosenses.

“I will escort you back to the *Covenant*, tech-adept. I must report to the Exalted myself.”

“Think on what I have said, brother,” Variel said.

Talos nodded, but didn’t answer.

Maruc caught up with Septimus, finding it harder to move through the crowded thoroughfare. He also couldn’t quite keep revulsion from showing on his face; some of the creatures passing were brazen with their mutations. He almost collided with a spindly black-skinned woman, who cursed at him through a slack, rippling face like melting tallow. He muttered something loosely apologetic, and hurried on. The spicy stink of sweat mixed with the copper of spilled blood no matter where he turned his head. People—and “people”—were shouting, growling, shoving and laughing in every direction.

Septimus reached out a hand to grip another walker’s shoulder, halting the young woman in her stride. She turned, clutching an empty plastek bucket to her paunchy stomach.

“*Jigrash kul kukh?*” the serf asked her.

She shook her head.

“Low Gothic?” Septimus tried.

She shook her head again, her eyes wide at the expensive bionics just visible beneath the fall of his hair. She reached to touch them, to brush his hair aside, but he gently slapped her hand away.

“*Operor vos agnosco?*” he asked.

She narrowed her eyes and nodded, a quick bob of her head.

*Wonderful*, Septimus thought. Some backwater variant of High Gothic, a language he barely knew anyway.

Carefully, he led the woman, who looked to be wearing a plundered vestment of various discarded Imperial uniforms, to the edge of the wide hallway. It took him several minutes to explain what he needed. At the end of his halting explanation, she nodded again.

“*Mihi inzizta*,” she said, and gestured for him to follow.

“Finally,” Septimus said under his breath. Maruc followed again. As he peered at the woman’s bucket, he realised it wasn’t quite empty. Three fruits, like little brown apples, bumped about in the bottom.

“You wanted a fruit seller?” he asked Septimus, his expression showing what he was thinking—that the other serf was insane.

“Among other things, yes.” He kept his voice low in the crowd.

“Will you tell me why?”

Septimus cast a disparaging glance over his shoulder. “Are you blind? She’s pregnant.”

Maruc's mouth widened. "No. You can't be serious."

"How do you think the Legion makes new warriors?" hissed Septimus. "Children. Untainted children."

"Please tell me you're not going to—"

"*I will leave you here, Maruc.*" Septimus' tone froze. "I swear to you, if you make this any harder than it has to be, I will leave you here."

The three of them moved down an adjacent corridor, the woman leading them, still clutching her bucket. Less crowded here, but still too many witnesses. Septimus bided his time.

"What did you tell her?" Maruc asked at last.

"That I wished to purchase more fruit. She is taking us to another trader." His voice thawed as he glanced at the older man again. "We are not the only ones doing this. Across the station, serfs loyal to the Claws are playing the very same game. It's... It is just something that must be done."

"Have you done this before?"

"No. And I plan to do it right, so it doesn't have to happen again soon."

Maruc said nothing. They walked for another few minutes, before passing a smaller, darker side tunnel.

Septimus' eyes, human and the augmetic alike, washed slowly over the corridor entrance. Unless he was grossly off-course in this hideous labyrinth, this passage would lead back to the ship faster than returning down this particular thoroughfare.

"Be ready," he whispered to Maruc, and tapped the woman on the shoulder again, the silver ring on his knuckle brushing the side of her neck. She stopped and turned.

"*Quis?*" She seemed confused. The crowd still sailed past, and she held her bucket protectively over her stomach.

Septimus kept his silence, watching for the droop in her eyelids. As soon as her eyes began to roll back, he caught her in a smooth motion, keeping her standing. To all observers—those few who paid any heed at all while going about their own dealings—it seemed he suddenly embraced her.

"Help me," he ordered Maruc. "We need to get her back to the ship before she comes to her senses."

Maruc caught the bucket as it slipped from her slack fingers. They left it at the side of the corridor, as they carried her between them, the woman's arms around their shoulders. Her boots moved mechanically, her eyes rolling drunk in their sockets, as she accompanied her kidnappers to a new life in the slave holds of the *Covenant of Blood*.

Octavia clutched her jacket close as she left the communal ablution chamber. Several of the mortal crew waited in the corridor, kept out by her armed attendants, waiting their turn for the recharged cleansing racks. For obvious reasons, she had to bathe alone. Even though the crew knew the reasons, it seemed it only added to their dislike of her.

Most averted their eyes when Octavia came into the corridor. Several made superstitious motions to ward off evil, which she found bizarre, given where these

people lived. Quietly, she asked two of her attendants to recover Telemach's body from the chamber and dispose of it however they wished.

Nostraman mutterings followed her as she walked away. In a solitary life, she'd never felt as lonely. At least on the *Maiden of the Stars* the crew hadn't hated her. Feared her, certainly, for fear in a Navigator's presence was a legacy of her bloodline as undeniable as the subspecies' third eye. But here, it was different. They loathed her. Even the ship despised her.

Hound loped along at her heels. For a while, they walked in silence. She didn't care where she was going.

"You smell very female now," Hound said unhelpfully. She didn't ask what it meant. It probably meant nothing at all—just another of his blindingly obvious perceptions.

"I don't think I want to live like this anymore," she said over his head, staring at the walls as she walked.

"No choice, mistress. No other way to live."

Throne, her eye ached. Beneath the bandana, an abrasive itch was steadily growing angrier. It took supreme effort not to claw at the skin around the closed eye, soothing the rawness with her fingernails.

Octavia walked on, taking lefts and rights at random. She was prepared to concede that she dwelled in self-pity, but she felt it was an indulgence she'd earned lately.

In the distance, she heard a faint shriek—it sounded female, though it cut off too quickly to be certain. Hammers, or something like them, crashed in dull industrial rhythm somewhere nearby, muted by the dense metal walls.

Her eye gave another dizzying throb. The pain was making her nauseous now.

"Hound?" She stopped walking.

"Yes, mistress."

"Close your ey... Never mind."

"Yes, mistress." He paused in his hitched stride, looking around as Octavia removed her bandana. The skin of her forehead was sticky with sweat, the flesh almost burning to the touch. Blowing upwards did nothing but flutter a few wet locks of hair and make her feel foolish. It certainly didn't cool her down.

Sweat dripped onto her nose. She wiped it, catching sight of a dark smear on her fingers.

"Throne of the God-Emperor," she swore, looking down at her hands. Hound shuddered at the curse.

"Mistress?"

"My eye," she said, wiping her hands on her jacket. "My eye is bleeding." The hammering clanged louder as her words hovered in the air between them.

Touching her forehead made her wince, but she daubed the bandana over the sore flesh. Her eye wasn't bleeding, exactly. It was crying. The blood drops were its tears.

"Where are we?" she asked, her voice shaking as her breath misted before her face.

Hound sniffed. "The apothecarion."

"Why is it so cold?"

The hunched slave pulled his weathered shotgun from beneath his rags. “I do not know, mistress. I, also, am cold.”

She retied the bandana while Hound aimed into the endless array of shadows.

Ahead of them both, the massive bulkhead leading into the apothecarion ground open on heavy gears. The hammering rang stronger, truer, coming from inside.

“Hound?” her voice was a whisper now.

“Yes, mistress?”

“*Keep your voice down...*”

“Sorry, mistress,” he whispered. His blunt-nosed shotgun tracked across the open door and the view beyond. Bare, silent surgical tables stood in the darkness.

“If you see the void-born in there, I want you to shoot her.”

“The void-born is dead, mistress.” He looked over his shoulder, mutilated face bunched in concern.

Octavia felt the blood running down her nose now, tickling her lips on its journey to drip from her chin. The bandana was no barrier, little more than a poor bandage. Soaked already, it did nothing to oppose the slow dripping.

She drew her own pistol as she neared the open door.

“Mistress.”

She glanced at Hound.

“I will go in first,” he stated. Without waiting for an answer, he moved inside, his hunch keeping him low, shotgun raised level with his unseeing eyes.

She followed him in, sighting down her pistol.

The room was empty. Every surgery table was bare. The abandoned machinery made neither noise nor motion. Octavia blinked her human eyes to ward off the blood’s stinging touch. It didn’t help much.

Metal crashed against metal, almost deafeningly loud in the freezing chamber. She spun to face the far wall, aiming at ten sealed vault doors, each one the height and width of a human. One of them juddered in time to the hammering from behind. Whatever was within wanted to come out.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” she stammered.

Hound was less inclined to flee. “Can it harm us, mistress?”

“It’s just an echo,” she checked her pistol’s ammunition counter. “Just an echo. Like the girl. Just an echo. Echoes can’t hurt anyone.”

Hound didn’t have the chance to agree. The vault door burst outwards on squealing hinges. Something pale moved in the darkness inside.

“...*not with Malcharion’s bolter...*” Its sepulchral voice, toneless yet sharp, cut the cold air. “...*wish to join First Claw...*”

Octavia backed away, eyes wide, murmuring for Hound to follow.

Another figure blocked the doorway. It stood tall, silhouetted against the gloom, red eye lenses tracking her movements with silent regard.

“Talos!” she breathed the name, relief flooding through her.

“No, Navigator.” The Night Lord stepped into the chamber, drawing his weapons. “Not Talos.”

He returned, just as Variel had known he would. The Flayer acknowledged him with a nod, and deactivated the hololithic text he'd been studying.

Talos had not come alone. Cyrion, Xarl and Mercutian stood behind him, armoured, helmed and silent but for the chorus of growling armour.

"When I sleep," the prophet seemed almost ashamed, "I dream. My muscles react, but I do not wake. If I break the straps binding me to the table, my brothers will hold me down while you perform the surgery."

"One is missing," Variel noted.

"Uzas often chooses not to heed our summons," Cyrion replied, "unless war threatens."

"Very well." The Corsair Apothecary moved over to the lone table in his private chamber. "Let us begin."



## XIV

# LOYALTIES

His brothers' voices are dim, forgettable things, belonging to a world of sour smells, aching thoughts and sore muscles. Focussing on their words threatens to pull him from the dream, drawing him back to a freezing chamber where his body thrashes on a table, enslaved to its flawed biology.

The prophet releases his ties to that world, seeking sanctuary elsewhere.

His brothers are gone when he...

...opened his eyes. Another shell crashed down nearby, shaking the grey battlements beneath his boots.

"Talos," came the captain's voice. "We move."

"Harvesting," he said through gritted teeth. His hands worked with mechanical familiarity, breaking, slicing, sawing, extracting. Something screamed overhead on failing engines. He risked a glance to see an Iron Warriors gunship whine above in a lethal spin, its thrusters aflame. The gene-seed cylinder snicked home into his gauntlet the very same moment the grey Thunderhawk ploughed into one of the hundred spires nearby. The battlements gave another horrendous shudder.

"Talos," the captain's vox-voice crackled with urgency. "Where are you?"

"It is finished." He rose to his feet, retrieving his bolter and breaking into a run, leaving the body of a Legion brother sprawled on the stone.

"I'll go back for him," one of his squad said over the channel.

"Be swift." The captain was in grim humour, for obvious reasons.

The Apothecary's vision blurred as his helm struggled to filter out the sensory assault of another cannon barrage. Tower-top weapon batteries hurled their payloads into the sky, massive mouths thundering. Another wide spread of rampart stretched out ahead: where his brothers were making short work of the gun crews. The humans, ripped limb from limb, were hurled over the side of the battlements to fall hundreds of metres in grotesque imitation of hail.

A weight hit him from behind, powerful enough to send him crashing onto his hands and knees. For a moment, his retinal display flickered with meaningless static. Talos blinked once, thudding his forehead on the ground. Clarity returned immediately. He turned on the ground, bolter firing the moment it came level.

"Fists," he voxed. "Behind us."

They ran, all formation broken, bolters clutched in golden hands. Despite their distance, another bolt shell cracked off his pauldron, sending shrapnel skittering across the battlements.

His attempted rise earned him a bolt shell to the chest, detonating against his chestplate and shattering the Legion symbol there. With a breathless grunt, he crashed back down.

“Stay down,” one of his brothers ordered. The name-rune flashed on his visor—his sergeant’s name.

A dark gauntlet slammed into his armoured collar, gripping the ceramite. “Keep firing,” the sergeant ordered. “Cover us, or we’re both dead.”

Talos reloaded, crunching the magazine home, and opened up again. His brother crouched behind him, firing with a pistol while dragging the Apothecary back.

The sergeant released him as they both took cover behind a section of loose rubble.

“Thank you, brother,” Talos said.

Sergeant Vandred reloaded his own pistol. “It’s nothing.”

*“Hold him still.”*

*There. His brothers’ voices again, clearer than before.*

*“I am.” Xarl. Irritated. The same grating disquiet that has always coloured his voice, present even in youth.*

*The prophet feels his knuckles clacking against the table, a percussion born of twitching fingers. Sensation is returning, and with it, the pain. Breath rushes into his lungs, wickedly cold.*

*“Damn it.” Variel’s voice. A brother by oath, not by blood. “Is he aware, or fully somnolent? The readings state both.”*

*The prophet—no longer the Apothecary upon the battlements of Terra—mumbles saliva-drenched words.*

*“It’s a vision.” Cyrion. That was Cyrion. “It happens. Just deal with it.”*

*“It is affecting his slumber, and generating anomalous readings. Blood of the Pantheon, his catalepsean node may never function again after this—his body is trying to reject the implant.”*

*“His what?”*

*“I am not jesting. His physiology is in rebellion, rejecting any implantations linked to his brain. This must happen with every vision—his wounds are magnifying it. Whatever these dreams are, they are not a natural byproduct of the gene-seed.”*

*“You mean he’s tainted? Warp-touched?”*

*“No. This is not mutation, but a matter of genetic development. In many initiates, the gene-seed doesn’t take. You have all seen it, surely.”*

*“But his held. It did take.”*

*“It did, with tenacity, not grace. Look. Look at the bloodwork, and the signifiers here, and here. Look what his implants are doing to his human organs. His own gene-seed hates him. The chemicals and compounds that they released in adolescence to make him one of us still do not sit quietly in his blood. They try to change him even now, to develop him further. Like us, there is nothing he can develop into beyond the genhanced state. Yet his body still tries. The result is this... visionary state. Talos’ body is too aggressive in processing your primarch’s blood. His genetics are in constant flux.”*

*The prophet wonders, then, if this is what cursed his father. His gene-sire—his true father—the primarch, Lord Curze. Did the Emperor’s machinations in genetic construction never settle within his father’s bones? Did Curze’s powers rise from a reaction to the Emperor’s own blood in a lesser frame?*

*He tries to smile, but spit flies from his lips.*

*“Hold him.” Variel isn’t angry, he is never angry, but he is certainly displeased. “It is difficult enough with the convulsions, but we are risking severe brain damage now.”*

*“Please, Corsair, just do what you can.”*

*Mercutian. The rich man’s son, heir to the City’s Edge syndicate. So very polite. The prophet’s smile registers across his face as a peeling rictus grin, formed not from humour, but the tight sneer of tensing musculature.*

*“He’s suffering cardiac dysrhythmia. In both hearts. Talos. Talos?”*

*“He can’t hear you. He can never hear anyone when these things take hold.”*

*“It is a wonder he survives these.” Variel stops speaking, and flashes of red pain jab into the prophet’s head, flashing scarlet before his sightless eyes. “I... need to... trigger his sus-an membrane, to stabilise the overworked core organs... Th...”*

...he was home.

He was home, and knowing it was a dream did nothing to diminish the rush of chill comfort. *A memory.* This had all happened before.

Not Nostramo, no. And not the *Covenant*. This was Tsagualsa, the refuge, their fortress on the fringe of space.

The doors to the Screaming Gallery stood open, Atramentar guardians barring passage to all but the primarch’s chosen. They stood in defiant pride, not permitted to enter themselves, yet warding the doors against intrusion. The Legion’s Terminator elite walked with heads high these nights; their refusal to serve the new First Captain was a festering wound that accorded them a subtle rise in prestige. With Sevatar dead and a Terran appointed to his role, the former First Captain’s elite warriors splintered into hunting packs, binding themselves to company commanders they respected, rather than remain whole under a new master not of their home world.

One of the Terminators was Malek, his helm untasked, his red eye lenses bright with targeting acquisitions. Talos saluted the two Atramentar before making his way into the antechamber.

The walls, like so much of the Legion’s fortress, were formed from black stone sculpted into forms of torment. Twist-backed humans arched and writhed motionlessly, captured at moments of supreme agony, their wide eyes and screaming mouths shaped by sadistic devotion.

Shaped. Not carved. Talos hesitated by the doors, his fingertips tracing over the open eyes of an infant girl reaching for the protective—worthless—embrace of an older man, perhaps her father. Who had she been, before the Legion raided her world? What had she done with her short life before she was dosed with paralytics and coated with rockrete? What dreams were quenched by her living entombment within the hardening walls of a primarch’s inner sanctum?

Or did she know, on some panicked, animalistic strata of her dying mind, that in death she would be part of something more momentous than anything she'd achieved in life?

Within the stone, she would be long dead. The mask staring out at the world immortalised her in the naive perfection of youth. No tracks of time across her face; no scars from battles against an empire that no longer deserved to stand.

He withdrew his hand from her frozen face. The interior doors opened, bathing him in the warmth of the inner chamber.

The Screaming Gallery was in fine voice tonight—an opera of bass moans, piercing cries and the ululating chime of sobbing beneath the other sounds of sorrow.

Talos walked down the central pathway, boots thumping on the black stone, while the floor either side of the walkway rippled and tensed with the pliancy of human expression. Eyes, noses, teeth, and tongues poking from open mouths... The ground itself was a carpet of faces flesh-crafted together, kept alive by grotesque, baroque blood filters and organ simulator engines beneath the floor. As an Apothecary, Talos knew the machinery well: he was one of the few charged to maintain the foul ambience within the Screaming Gallery. Robed servitors mono-tasked for the duty sprayed gentle bursts of water vapour into the blinking eyes blanketing the floor, keeping them moist.

Several of the primarch's chosen were already gathered. Hellath, loyal beyond any other, preternaturally gifted with a blade, with the skull on his faceplate painted in streaky crimson; Sahaal, the Terran recently given First Captaincy—one of the few offworlders permitted here—the proud ice in his veins leaving him scorned by his brothers as often as heeded by them; Yash Kur, his fingers curling in twitch-spasms, breathing in a low rasp through his open mouth, the sound leaking from his helm's vocabulator; Tyridal, skulls rattling against his war plate, as he dragged a whetstone along his gladius. His gauntlets were painted in sinners' red—a marker of the Legion's condemned: those warriors whose crimes against their own brothers meant they awaited execution at the primarch's own hands. A death sentence rode above Tyridal's head, to be exacted when Lord Curze decided his usefulness was at an end.

Malcharion stood to the side, arms crossed over his chest. No rank existed within the Screaming Gallery. Talos greeted his captain with nothing more than a quiet acknowledgement, inaudible over the wails rising from the floor.

When the primarch entered, it was with no flourish at all. Curze pushed open the double doors behind the Osseous Throne, his bare hands pale against the wrought iron. With no preamble, with no ritual greeting, the lord of the Legion took his throne.

"So few of us?" he asked. Thin lips revealed a shark's smile—the warlord's serrated teeth all filed to arrowhead points. "Where is Jakr? And Fal Kata? Acerbus? Nadigrath?"

Malcharion cleared his throat. "En route to the Anseladon Sector, lord."

Curze turned his cadaverous visage to the Tenth Captain. The dark eyes were enlivened by a curdling brightness, suggesting some deep sickness within.

"Anseladon." The primarch licked his corpse-lips. "Why?"

"Because you ordered them there, my lord."

Curze seemed to muse on this, his gaze slackening, seeing through the walls of his palace. All the while, the floor's wailing never ceased.

"Yes," he said. "Anseladon. The Ultramarine vanguard fleet."

"Aye, lord."

His hair had once been black, *Nostraman* black—the dark hair of those who grew without true light of the sun. Now its lustre was gone, and a frosting of grey patched close to his temples. The veins canalling below his white skin were bold enough to form a clear map of the subterranean biology at play beneath his face. Here was a fallen prince, gone to the grave, hollowed out by a hatred so strong he could not lie down and die.

"I have thirty-one fleets of varying force at work within my father's empire. I believe, at last, we have drawn enough of the Imperium's ire that Terra has no choice but to act against us. But they will not lay siege to Tsagualsa. I will not allow it. Instead, I will ensure my father's vengeance must assume a more elegant form."

As he spoke, Curze fingered the old scars on his throat—those bitter gifts given by his brother, the Lion. "And what will you do when I am gone, my sons? Scatter like vermin fleeing the rise of the sun? The Legion was born to teach a lesson, and that lesson will be taught. Look at you. Your lives already have such little purpose. When the blade finally falls, you will have nothing left at all."

The chosen regarded each other with growing unease. Talos stepped forward. "Father?"

The primarch chuckled, his laughter the sound of waves dragging over shale. "The Hunter of One Soul. Speak."

"The Legion wishes to know when you will lead us to war again."

Curze sighed, a contemplative breath, leaning back in the ugly, shapeless throne of fused human bone. His battle armour, replete with its geography of scratches, dents and carvings, growled with idle power.

"The Legion asks this, does it?"

"Yes, father."

"The Legion no longer needs my hand upon its shoulder, for it has already ripened. Soon, it will burst, spilling itself across the stars." The primarch lowered his head slightly, fingernails scraping along the ivory armrests. "For years, you have butchered to your hearts' content, all of you. As Nostramo collapsed back into anarchy, so has the Legion. That spread will only grow worse. It is the way of things. Human life taints everything it touches, if it spreads uncontrolled. Nostramo's sons are no exception. In truth, they are among the worst for such things. Disorder rides in their blood."

Here, he smiled. "But you know that, don't you, Soul Hunter? And you, war-sage? All of you, born of the sunless world? You watched your world burn because the flaws of its people infected the Night Lords. And how beautiful it was, to immolate that sphere of sin. How righteous it felt, to truly believe it would make a difference to a poisoned Legion."

He snorted at the last. "How very naive of me."

The primarch cradled his head in his hands for several long seconds. As his sons watched, his shoulders rose and fell with slow, deliberate breathing.

“Lord?” several of them asked at once. Perhaps their concern caused his head to rise. With shaking hands, the primarch bound his long hair into a crested topknot, keeping the dark strands from his face.

“My thoughts are aflame this eve,” he confessed. Some of the sick gleam in his eyes faded as he reclined again, his intensity dimming. “How fares the armada we sent to Anseladon?”

“They will arrive within the week, lord,” said Yash Kur.

“Excellent. An unpleasant surprise for Guilliman to deal with.” Curze gestured to two servitors standing behind his throne. Both were extensively modified beneath their robes, fitted with industrial lifter spades for forearms. Each one carried a weapon in its protective embrace: an oversized gauntlet of scratched, abused ceramite, bearing slack metal talons as fingernails. Both augmented slaves approached in unison, raising their gear-driven arms with a reverent lack of haste. Like armourers of old, squires kneeling before a knight, they offered their service to their master.

Curze rose in kind, towering above every other living being in the chamber. The omnipresent wails became true screams.

“Sevatar,” the primarch intoned. “Come forward.”

Hellath spoke up. “Sevatar is dead, my prince.”

The warlord hesitated, his pale hands close to the gauntlets’ waiting ceramite sleeves. “What?”

“My prince.” Hellath bowed low. “First Captain Sevatar is long dead.”

Curze thrust his hands into the gauntlets, linking them to his armour. The thrum of active war plate grew louder, and the curving talons wavered as they powered up. The servitors backed away, blindly treading on several of the weeping faces, breaking noses and teeth under their heavy heels.

“Sevatar is dead?” the primarch snarled the words, his anger mounting. “When? How?” Before Hellath could answer, the generators in Curze’s gauntlets whined to life, dripping electrical ripples down the blades’ edges.

“My prince...” Hellath tried again. “He died in the war.”

Curze turned his head, as if seeking a sound none of his sons could hear. “Yes. I remember it now.” The claws powered down, shedding their coating of artificial lightning. He stared around the Screaming Gallery, that unsubtle manifestation of his own inner conflict.

“Enough talk of the past. Muster what companies remain in local systems. We must prepare for—”

“...convulsions.”

*“I need only to seal the skin. He metabolises even specially synthesised anaesthetic with irritating speed. Hold him.”*

*The prophet feels himself speaking, feels the words crawling past lips that aren’t quite numb. But they have no meaning. He tries to tell his brothers of home, of Tsagualsa, of how it felt to stand in the darkening light of their fading father’s last days.*

*“The...”*

...war-sage pulled his blade from the dying Blood Angel's throat, kicking the warrior's breastplate to send him crashing back into the chamber.

"Into the breach!" Captain Malcharion roared from his helm's vox-grille. "*Sons of the sunless world! Into the breach!*"

His shattered squads poured forwards, sinking another layer deeper into a palace the size of a continent. The chamber, a gallery of paintings and statuary, rained plasterwork from its ceiling onto the Night Lords below. Dust and grit clattered onto the Apothecary's shoulder guards.

Xarl fell into step alongside Talos as their bloodied boots crunched over marble and mosaic alike.

"Damn the Angels, eh? They're giving as good as they're getting." Breathless from the fighting, his voice was harsher than ever. Meat clogged the idling teeth of his lengthened chainblade.

Talos could feel the weight of gene-seed vials in slot-racks attached to his armour. "We're fighting to win. They're fighting to survive. They're giving it back much worse than we're giving it to them, brother. Trust me when I say that."

"If you say so." The other Night Lord stopped to crash his boot down on a mosaic relief of the Imperial aquila. Talos watched the symbol shatter, feeling his saliva glands tingle with the need to spit.

"Hold here!" the captain called back. "Ready barricades, reinforce this chamber. Defensive positions!"

"Blood Angels!" yelled one of the warriors at the chamber's exit arch. The Night Lords toppled pillars and statues, using the priceless stonework as last-minute cover for the coming firefight.

"Apothecary," one of the sergeants called. "Talos, over here."

"Duty calls." Xarl was grinning behind his faceplate. Talos nodded, breaking cover to sprint over to where another of Malcharion's squads was taking shelter in the shadows of a fallen pillar.

"Sir," he said to Sergeant Uzas of Fourth Claw.

Uzas was unhelmed, his keen eyes still watching for the Angels' arrival. The bolter clutched against his breastplate was exquisitely wrought—a gift commissioned from the Legion's armoury by Captain Malcharion, forged to commemorate Fourth Claw's victories in the Thramas Crusade.

"I've lost three warriors," the sergeant confessed.

"Their bloodlines will live on," he said, tensing his left hand into a fist, deploying a surgical spike from his narthecium gauntlet. "I harvested each of them."

"I know, brother, but watch yourself. Our enemies are not blind to the responsibility you carry on your arm, and they target you almost as much as they seek to bring down the war-sage."

"*For the Emperor!*" came that inevitable cry from the chamber's mouth.

Talos rose with Fourth Claw, aiming above the pillar and opening fire at the Angels. Two of his shells detonated against the arch frame; the Blood Angels too canny to risk a frontal charge.

“I had rather hoped,” Uzas reloaded in a smooth motion, “that bloodlust would drive them out into our gunfire.”

Talos dropped back behind the pillar. “Their cover is better than ours. We have statues. They have walls.”

Another cluster of Night Lords scrambled into cover behind the immense pillar. Vandred and Xarl were among them.

“So much for squad cohesion,” grunted Talos.

“Oh, you noticed?” Vandred chuckled, and tapped his cracked helm. One eye lens sported a hairline fracture down its middle. “My vox is down. Uzas?”

The other sergeant shook his head. “Even Legion channels are corrupted. Thirty-First Company’s channel is broadcasting nothing but shrieking. Whatever is happening to them, they’re not enjoying it.”

“I thought it was just vox-breakage,” said Vandred. “It’s nice to know we’re all suffering the same.”

One of the Night Lords nearby rose out of cover to send another volley at the Angels. A single bolt shell cracked into his helm, wrenching it from his head in a kicking burst of shrapnel. With a curse, he crouched again, wiping blood and acidic spit from his face.

“Do these bastards ever miss?”

Talos regarded the depleted Tenth Company spread across the chamber. “Not often enough.”

The warrior, Hann Vel, blind-fired over the top of the fallen pillar. The bolter in his hand exploded before the third shot, taking the Night Lord’s hand with it. Yet again the victim of Blood Angel marksmanship, Hann Vel bellowed with a drunkard’s unfocussed fury, covering the burned stump with his remaining hand.

With bizarrely elegant elocution, Hann Vel shouted a curse. “A plague on these red-clad sons of whores!”

*That looks painful,* Talos thought, and his crooked grin went unseen in his helm. Let the warp take Hann Vel, the warrior was a fool at the best of times.

“Captain,” Uzas was voxing. “Captain, this is Uzas.”

The war-sage’s reply grated back on the rasping tides of static. “Yes?”

“Three squads to charge, the rest to rise in fire support?”

“My thoughts exactly—we’re not breaking out of this vermin pit any other way. *First, Fourth and Ninth, make ready to charge.*”

“Lucky us.” Uzas smiled at the others. He drew his gladius, lifting his head to cry, “For the Warmaster! Death to the False Emperor!”

The cheer was taken up by the others, warrior after warrior, squad after squad, screaming their hate at the Blood Angels.

With a curse through clenched teeth, Talos...

...saw the scene fading. That siege of sieges, the countless hours spent advancing chamber by bloody chamber through the Imperial Palace so long ago, drifted back into the recess of memory.

*“How long do these episodes last?” Variel was asking.*

*“As long as they need to,” said Cyrion.*



He...

...watched it move, with its undulating, soft-spined flow. It was human only in the loosest sense: the way one might envisage humanity if the only lore available described the species in the vaguest terms. Two arms reached from its torso. Two legs propelled it forwards in a disgustingly fluid stagger. Each limb was a malformed thing of awkward joints and bones twisted beneath the veined skin.

Uzas' axe crashed against the creature, ripping smoking flesh and steaming fluid away in ragged gobbets. Mist armoured its white flesh—a sculpted haze clinging to its body, with its vaporous edges offering the sick suggestion of a Legionary's armour.

The faint brume roiling in place of its head played the same misty trick, coalescing into the shape of a Night Lord's helm.

Around, behind, Talos saw the dark metal walls of the *Covenant's* abandoned apothecarion. Octavia had her pistol braced in both hands, cracking off las-rounds as the creature slunk away from her. A repetitive booming announcement rose from her side, as the little attendant she favoured let loose with his shotgun.

Uzas gunned his chainaxe again.

Talos opened his eyes, to see that only Variel remained in the confines of the small chamber. The Apothecary worked alone, unarmoured now, greasing the component pieces of an array of dismantled pistols.

"Uzas," the prophet said, though the word was broken by his own creaking voice. He swallowed, and tried the name again.

Variel's eyes were burdened and bloodshot by exhaustion. "They know. Your brothers know. They heard your murmurings as you... dreamed."

"How long ago?" The prophet rose on aching muscles. "When did they go?"

The Corsair Apothecary scratched his cheek. "I have spent four hours rebuilding your skull and brain with no fewer than thirteen separate tools, saving your sanity and your life in the process. But by all means, ignore that fact in favour of pointless overexcitement."

"*Variel*." He said nothing more. The look in his eyes said what his words did not.

The Flayer sighed. "Nostramo bred ungrateful sons, didn't it? Very well. What do you wish to know?"

"Just tell me what happened."

"It is a warp echo," Uzas voiced from his helm's speakers. He derided the creature even as he stared at it. "A phantom. A nothing."

"I know what it is better than you." She stood by the door, her laspistol raised. "That's why I was running."

The Night Lord seemed not to have heard her. "And you are to blame for its presence here." He turned from the vault, where a creature made of white skin and stinking mist was shivering its way from a morgue locker in bitter recreation of a stillbirth. Uzas' red eye lenses fixed upon Octavia. "You did this."

She wouldn't lower her pistol. "I didn't mean to."

The Night Lord turned back to the creature. On shaking limbs, it rose to its full height. The body had been dead for weeks, but refrigeration kept it untouched by the darkening stains of decay. It was naked, headless, grasping no weapon in its curling hands. But its identity was unmistakable.

“You are dead, Dal Karus,” Uzas sneered at the warp-thing.

“...*wish to join First Claw...*” Its voice was ice on the wind.

Uzas answered by squeezing the trigger on his chainblade’s haft. The axe-teeth gave a throaty, revving whine, frustrated by a feast of thin air.

“...*not with Malcharion’s bolter...*”

Octavia felt no shame at being immeasurably braver with a Legionary—even this particular Legionary—between her and the spiteful wraith. She fired three shots around Uzas’ towering bulk, and, taking the cue, Hound fired with her. Spent shells rattled along the decking.

Dal Karus bled smoking, milky fluid from the gunshot wounds in his torso, but kept coming in the twisted, awkward stagger. The mist forming his helm stared at the three figures ahead, while his bare feet slapped on the cold floor with each lurch.

“No blood to offer. No skull to treasure.” The Night Lord’s voice slurred, the words half-formed and wet. “No blood. No skull. A waste. Such a waste.” The chainaxe howled louder. “Die twice, Dal Karus. Die twice.”

Uzas charged, devoid of grace, fighting without finesse. He swung the axe wide, arcing down with heavy chops, while stabbing and carving with the gladius in his other hand. His thrashing would’ve been ludicrous had it not been performed by a warrior approaching three metres in height whose weapons tore the wraith apart. Steaming fluid splashed over nearby tables. Chunks of smoking flesh dissolved into sulphurous puddles, eagerly hissing as they devoured the decking.

The fight, such as it was, ended in a matter of moments.

“Hnnnh,” said Uzas in the aftermath. He dropped his weapons in disgust, letting them clatter to the floor. “No blood. No skull. No gene-seed to taste. Just a husk of slime melting into the air.”

“Uzas?” Octavia called his name.

The Night Lord turned to face her. “You do this. You summon the Neverborn to you. I know the stories. You killed with your mutant’s eye. I know this. So the Neverborn come. Weak ones. Easy prey. Kill them before they grow strong. This time, this time. Navigator is lucky. This time, this time.”

“Thank you.” She had no idea if he could even hear her, or would care if he did. “Thank you for killing it while it was... weak.”

The warrior left his weapons where they lay. “The *Covenant* doesn’t sail without you.” Uzas hesitated, looking back to the vaults. One locker stood open, its door wide and dark—a missing tooth among a multitude. “The pain returns. Slay a piss-weak little daemon thing, and the pain returns. No blood. No skull. Nothing to offer, nothing to prove the deed was done. And the creature was too weak to matter. Not even a true daemon. A lost soul. A phantom. I said that first, didn’t I? I killed your foolish little ghost. Others still chase you, don’t they? Kill with your eye, and they grow stronger. Stories about Navigators. Heard many of them.”

She nodded, her skin crawling at his meandering speech. *He's no better than the warp-echo*, though she felt a flood of guilt for thinking it.

"Octavia. The Eighth."

"Yes... lord."

"Septimus. The Seventh. He refuses to repair my armour unless Talos commands it. The Seventh is like my brother. He watches me and sees a broken thing."

She wasn't sure what to say.

"I am stronger now," he said, and gave a hollow, quiet little laugh. "But it hurts more. See the truth. Steal the power. A weapon. Not a faith. But it is hard to stay together when your thoughts fly apart."

All three of them turned as the doors ground open again. Framed in the dim light, three Night Lords stood with raised weapons.

"Uzas," Xarl fairly spat the name. "What has happened here?"

The Night Lord gathered his dripping weapons. "Nothing."

"Answer us," Mercutian warned. The heavy bolter in his hands—a weighty cannon of black iron—panned up and down the slouched figure at the centre of the chamber.

"Get out of my way," Uzas grunted. "I will go past you, or through you."

Xarl's chuckle was sincere, crackling through his helm. "You have quite an imagination, brother."

"Let him go," Cyrion moved aside. "Octavia, are you well?"

The Navigator nodded, watching Uzas stalk from the chamber. "I'm... Yes. I'm fine."

She added the "Lord" several moments too late, but at least she added it for once.

## XV

# DISQUIET

Lucoryphus of the Bleeding Eyes ran an oiled cloth between the teeth of his chainsword. Boredom didn't strike him often, for which he was grateful. On the rare occasions it took hold, he struggled to endure the sluggish state of mind that accompanied these prolonged periods of inactivity.

The *Covenant* functioned as any other Legion vessel in a neutral dock, which is to say it sucked up crew and supplies, stealing what it couldn't trade for, while vomiting out profit. And all to the dead melody clank-song of repairers' hammers ringing on the hull.

Vorasha, one of his best, stalked into the cargo hold the Bleeding Eyes had claimed for themselves. The Raptor moved on all fours, that same rapid crawl adopted by most of his kind, metal talons leaving indentations—or outright punctures—in the deck floor.

"Many weeks in dock, yes-yes."

Lucoryphus exhaled through his voculator in reply. Vorasha's speech always grated against his nerves: the other Raptor barely formed words in full any more, conveying his meanings through a degenerate tongue of clicks and hisses. Statements were often punctuated by an almost infantile assurance. *Yes-yes*, he'd breathe, time and again. *Yes-yes*. If Vorasha wasn't so skilled, Lucoryphus would've cut him down long ago.

"Need to soar," Vorasha stressed. "Yes-yes." The engine housings on his back coughed with denied flight, venting a slither of smoke. A charcoal reek of strangled thrust filled the air.

Lucoryphus prefaced his words with a bladed caw, signifying the ire behind his emotionless mask. "Nothing to hunt. Be at ease, pack-brother."

"Much to hunt," Vorasha snickered. "Could hunt Corsairs. Crack armour open. Drink the thin blood that runs from split veins."

"Later." Lucoryphus shook his head, a rare human gesture. "The prophet agreed to serve the Blood Reaver. An alliance... for now. The betrayal comes later." He went back to cleaning the teeth tracks of his gutting blade, though even this soured his mood. His bloodless sword needed no cleaning, and therein lay the problem.

The Raptor leader looked around the cargo hold, his neck cabling flexing with machinery purrs. Discarded weapons featured as much as furniture, while a cluster of robed Legion serfs spoke quietly amongst themselves in the far corner.

"Where are the Bleeding Eyes?"

"Some on station. Some on ship. Yes-yes. All waiting for Vilamus."

Lucoryphus rattled out something like a laugh. *Ah, yes. Vilamus.*

Talos and Malek stood on opposite sides of the table, unintentionally mirroring their positions on the debate.

“We have to sail with the Corsairs,” the prophet restated. “I am not arguing against honouring our debt to Huron. But the *Covenant* is the equal to any two cruisers in their fleet. Once Huron’s fleet is scattered at Vilamus, the *Covenant* will be able to hold off an assault for as long as we need. That is when we move against them. We withdraw quickly from Vilamus, while Huron’s forces are still deployed. Then we take back the *Echo of Damnation*.”

“This is idiocy.” Malek turned his craggy features to the Exalted on its throne. “My lord, you cannot be considering the prophet’s plan.”

The creature gestured to them both with a magnanimous talon. “Ah, but I like his plan. I share his passion for the blood we must shed, and I also refuse to see the *Echo of Damnation* commanded by any soul not born of Nostramo.”

“Lord, too much will be left to chance. The *Covenant* is likely to take massive damage even if we’re successful. And what if we are boarded while the prophet’s plan has left our decks empty?”

“Then the crew, and any of the Legion remaining on board, will die.” The daemon heaved its exoskeletal bulk out of the throne, armour joints creaking. “Prophet.”

“Sir?”

“You are getting ahead of yourself in one regard. Before we retake the *Echo of Damnation*, we must aid Huron in taking Vilamus. How many men will we lose there? None, if luck dances to our tune. And what if fortune favours another song, as it always does? Every warrior we leave dead at Vilamus is a soul that cannot storm the *Echo* with you.”

Talos keyed a short code into the table’s hololithic console. The cardinal projector generators blinked into life, beaming a lie before them. The shivering, rotating image of the Red Corsair strike cruiser, *Venomous Birthright*.

“Just give me the Bleeding Eyes,” he said. “I will lead them in with First Claw. We will take the *Echo of Damnation* as we sail away from Vilamus.”

The daemon licked a black tongue along its maw. “You ask for much. My best squad, and my newly acquired Raptor cult. These resources are precious to me.”

“I will not fail the Legion,” Talos nodded to the hololithic. “You were the one to come to me, Vandred. You wanted to reforge ourselves anew. Give me what I need, and I’ll return with another warship.”

The Exalted looked long at the prophet. So rare, to see the light of conviction, of zeal, in the warrior’s eyes.

“I trust you,” the daemon said. “Brother. I will grant you the forces you need, and I will hold off the Blood Reaver’s fleet while you enact your plan. I see only one true flaw with your thinking.”

“Name it, sir.”

“If you storm the ship and take it, its own Navigator may refuse to serve you. Worse, he will jump the ship back to Hell’s Iris.”

"I will kill the *Birthright's* Navigator," Talos admitted. "The likelihood of betrayal already occurred to me."

The daemon tilted its head. "Then how do you plan to pull your new vessel into the warp?"

The prophet hesitated. *Ah*, the Exalted thought, *I am not going to like this*. "Octavia," the daemon said. "You mean to take her with you."

"Yes. I will take her in the assault. She will jump the ship once we've taken it."

The Exalted growled in foul simulation of laughter. "And the *Covenant*? Who will guide us through the warp while you race away, leaving us to face Huron's guns?"

Talos hesitated again. "I... have an idea. It needs to be refined, but I believe I can make it work. I will only proceed with the plan if every piece of the puzzle falls into place. You have my word."

"Very well. Then I grant you permission. But I need you to focus on the first of our problems. We need to live through our agreement with Huron before we can betray him."

Malek took a breath, his greying stubble split by a scowl's trace. "Vilamus."

"Indeed," the creature grunted. "First, we must survive Vilamus."

The weeks passed, and her irritation grew. The Legion drilled and sparred, its warriors honing themselves for a battle no one cared to inform her about. None of First Claw came to see her in her chambers, not that she'd expected them to, but boredom was making her desperate.

Of the mortal crew, the only people she knew were Septimus, Maruc and Hound. The first of that list... Well, she had no desire to see him at the moment, anyway. The last time they'd met had been acutely uncomfortable. She was almost glad Cyrion had interrupted them, not that she was even sure what he'd interrupted.

The second name on the list was usually with Septimus, off-ship and engaged in some nefarious activity neither of them wanted to explain. That left her with Hound, who was—being fair to him—hardly the most cultured of conversationalists. Her royal blood might be watered down by the relative status of her lineage, but she was still a Terran noble, and had played hostess on several occasions to members of the Throneworld's ruling class.

Her attendant's main avenue of discussion was his own mistress. He seemed interested in little else, though he was good for helping her learn more Nostraman. The viperous tongue deviated from any possible Gothic roots more than any human language she'd encountered, but once she stopped seeking similarities, it became easier to begin afresh with a clearer outlook.

Still, boredom was always peering over her shoulder. Navigators were not born to sit idle.

Beyond Hound, all she had to distract herself were the endless repair updates, but even they'd dried to a trickle now the *Covenant* was ready to break dock.

Her door proximity sensor tolled again. Octavia caught herself halfway to reaching to check her bandana. Some habits shouldn't be developed, and that one was starting to stick. All too often she felt her hand twitch when Hound spoke to her,

and she'd keep touching her covered eye with every loud noise echoing down from higher decks.

Hound stumbled his way around her messy chamber, tilting his face up to the viewscreen by the bulkhead.

"It is Septimus," he said. "He is alone."

The Navigator made a point of studying her personal viewscreen, the one mounted on the armrest of her throne. Schematics, essays and journal entries wiped across the screen as she cycled through the *Covenant's* datacore. The updated feed from Hell's Iris swelled the ship's onboard repository of knowledge with a great deal of recent lore about the local subsectors.

"Mistress?"

"I heard you." Octavia frowned at the glowing screen, and typed *VILAMUS* for the third time, refining the search.

"Shall I grant him entrance, mistress?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. Do you know what Vilamus is?"

"No, mistress." Hound moved away from the door, resuming his place, sat with his back against the wall.

*DATA CORE MATCH* blinked across her black screen in aggressively green script. She activated the entry, unlocking a stream of scrolling text and numbers.

"It would be useful," she sighed, "if I could read Badabian."

Blurry orbital images accompanied the archive data. The Navigator breathed a little "Huh" of surprise as the pics resolved to show a world no different from a thousand others—with one incredible exception. "I don't see why we're... Oh. Oh, Throne of the God-Emperor... they can't mean to attack this."

Octavia looked up at Hound, who was busy toying with the loose end of a wrist bandage.

"Hound," she said. "I think I know what Vilamus is."

Septimus headed to Blackmarket, determined not to let his mood get the better of him. Octavia was a fey creature even in her calmest moments. Trying to understand her was like trying to count the stars.

Several of the traders there greeted him with nods, a few with sneers, and many more with smiles. The massive chamber was a hub of activity, with new wares hawked as soon as they were smuggled on board from Hell's Iris. Several of the table stalls even had thuggish bodyguards on hand to defend presumably valuable merchandise. The serf raised his eyebrow as he passed a table laid out with what looked like plundered Imperial Guard weaponry—even a chainsword, scaled to fit a human hand. But that wasn't what drew his eye.

Septimus gestured to the stocky, long form of a lasrifle. Its body and stock looked to be formed of plain, dull metal. Scratches and burn marks along the rifle's length showed both signs of older wear and more recent desecration, likely the removal of all Imperial aquilas.

"*Vulusha?*" he asked the ageing merchant in the ragged Legion uniform. "*Vulusha sethrishan?*"

The man replied with a patently false laugh, naming a prince's ransom in trade items.

Septimus' smile was equally insincere. "That's quite a price. It's a rifle, my friend. Not a wife."

The trader picked up the chainsword, his knuckly fingers wrapping the hilt in an exaggerated grip that would see him disarmed in a heartbeat in an actual fight. With awkward chops, he cut the air a few times.

"I have more to trade than most of these others. How about this blade? Better than that chopping cleaver you keep strapped to your shin, isn't it? And look, it has perfect balance. See? This was once a hero's blade."

"It's a chainsword, Melash. No chainsword has perfect balance. They're not balanced at all."

"Why do you come to harass me, eh?"

"Because I want the rifle."

Melash tongued a sore on his lip. "Very well. But the gun was also the weapon of a hero. You know I would never lie to you."

"Wrong again." Septimus reached out to tap the Munitorum number code in faded stencilling along the rifle's stock. "It looks like standard-issue Guard gear to me. What comes next, old man? Will you tell me you have a family to feed?"

The trader sighed. "You wound me."

"I'm sure I do." Septimus moved aside as a small crowd of slaves moved past. Blackmarket had never looked busier. It was almost disorienting to be in the middle of so much life, like a real city night-market. Torches lit up dozens of unfamiliar faces. "Just sell me the damn gun, Melash. What do you want in trade?"

The other man sucked his lower lip. "Can you get me batteries? I need power cells, Septimus. Everyone is bringing lamp packs on board, but energy cells will be in short supply a few weeks after we set sail. And caffeine. Can you get me some powdered caffeine from the station?"

Septimus watched him closely. "Now tell me what you really want, and stop avoiding it in case I refuse."

The old man gave a more honest, but more awkward, smile. "A labour trade?"

Septimus raised an eyebrow. His bionic eye clicked and purred as it sought to mirror the expression. "Keep talking."

Melash scratched at his bald pate. "Some trouble with a gang on the lower decks. Hokroy's crew, a new pack from Ganges. A lot of the new blood, they haven't learned the laws, yet. They stole from me. Not much, but I didn't have much to begin with. Some coins, my pistol, some of my wife's jewellery... She's dead, dead in the Angel attack, but... I'd like it back, if you can arrange it."

Septimus held out his hand. Melash spat into his own palm, and grasped the serf's hand in a shake.

"I meant *give me the rifle*, Melash."

"Oh. Ah, I see." The man wiped his hand along his uniform trousers. Septimus, wincing, did the same.

"Delightful," he muttered. "Did you get a strap when you stole the rifle?"

"A strap?"



“A strap, to carry it over your shoulder.”

“A strap, he says. I’m not an Imperial supply depot, boy.” The trader handed him the lasgun. “It needs juice, by the way. I’ve not charged its power pack yet. Good hunting down there.”

Septimus moved back into the crowd, passing Arkiah’s stall. The widower’s table, once Blackmarket’s hub, stood at the heart of the hurricane: a zone of stillness while chaos reigned all around.

He halted at the barren display. “Where is Arkiah?” he asked a nearby woman.

“Septimus,” she greeted him with a shy smile. Despite being old enough to be his grandmother, she reached up to straighten her tangled grey hair. “Have you not heard? Arkiah has left us.”

“Left?” He scanned the crowd for a moment. “To live aboard the station? Or to dwell deeper within the ship?”

“He...” she hesitated once she saw the rifle in his gloved grip. “He was killed a handful of nights after the Legion master came here to chastise him.”

“That was weeks ago. No one told me.”

Her shrug bordered on demure. “You have been busy, Septimus. Chasing the Navigator and gathering for the Legion, I hear. Children and mothers... How many have you brought on board? When will they be released from the slave holds?”

He waved the questions aside. “Tell me about Arkiah.”

The old woman made a face as the cold air graced one of her decaying teeth. “When the Legion lord came, it made Arkiah a pariah in the nights that followed. People thought it bad luck to go near him, lest they risk earning the Legion’s displeasure as he had. From there, it got worse—he started insisting he was seeing his daughter again, running through the corridors beyond Blackmarket. After that, he was always alone. We found his body a week later.”

She made no effort to hide her feelings from him, or the hurt in her eyes. Killings between the human crew were a fact of life on board the *Covenant*, frequent enough to put the crime figures in an Imperial hive to shame. Bodies showed up beaten and stabbed regularly enough for few mortals to bat an eyelid unless it was someone they knew. But then, everyone knew Arkiah, even if only because of his daughter.

“How did he die? What marks did you find on him?”

“He’d been gutted. We found him sat against a wall in one of the granary silos. Eyes open, mouth closed, one of his daughter’s hair-trinkets in his hand. His insides were out, scattered over his lap and the floor nearby.”

*Uzas.* The thought rose unbidden, and Septimus fought to prevent it reaching his lips. The old woman didn’t need to hear it, though. She saw it in his eyes.

“You know who did this.” She peered at him. “Don’t you? One of the Legion, perhaps. Maybe even your master.”

He faked nonchalance with an underplayed shrug. “Talos would have skinned him and strung him up in Blackmarket, just as he’d promised. You should know that; he’s done it before. If this was the Legion’s doing, it was one of the others.”

*Uzas.*

It could be any of them, but the name stuck like a parasite as soon as it entered his mind. *Uzas.*

“I have to go.” He forced a smile. “Thank you, Shalla.”

He didn’t consider himself a killer, though the gods on both sides of this war knew he was a murderer many times over. Duty called, and its calls often involved the fyceline-stinking thunder of gunfire in closed spaces, or the hacking crunch of a machete smacking into flesh. An unpleasant tingle crawled through the fingers of his right hand each time he recalled the grating nastiness of a machete blade sunk into flesh, only to be stopped by bone. He was just a man—it often took a second or third try to get through someone’s arm, especially if they were waving it around, trying to claw at his face.

But he still didn’t consider himself a killer. Not really.

In addition to clutching this denial around him, as if it offered some kind of protection, he took a faintly macabre pride in the fact he’d never enjoyed killing anyone. Not yet, at least. Most of the people who’d died at his hands in the last decade were fair game, one way or the other, because they’d simply been fighting for the enemy.

He could even salve his conscience when it came to the recent kidnappings, telling himself—and his victims—that life aboard the *Covenant* was immeasurably better than the Corsair hellhole he was abducting them from.

But this was different. Somehow, premeditation was the least of it. The entire endeavour, from agreement to commencement, set his skin crawling.

Octavia. Too long in her presence. Too many hours spent sitting with her, discussing life aboard the *Covenant*, being forced to examine and analyse his existence, instead of pushing ahead, outrunning the guilt, protected by familiar denial.

Once, not long ago, she’d asked him his name. “Not ‘Septimus’,” she’d laughed when he said it. “What was your name before?”

He hadn’t told her, because it no longer mattered. He was Septimus, the Seventh, and she was Octavia, the Eighth. Her former name hardly mattered, either: Eurydice Mervallion was dead. Did her family ties mean anything? Did her bloodline’s wealth make any difference anymore? And what of the fine manners she’d been taught as a scion of the Terran aristocracy?

The *Covenant* shaped them now. Septimus was a construct of these black corridors, a pale man who toiled for traitors, clutching two pistols, walking through the dark bowels of a blasphemous ship with a mind to commit murder. He was a pirate, a pilot, an artificer... and a heretic as truly as those he served.

It wasn’t that the thoughts themselves were so sour; it was that he was thinking them at all. Damn that woman. Why was she doing this to him? Did she even know she was doing it? For weeks now, she’d refused to even see him. What the hell had he done wrong? She was the one whose questions dredged through silt best left untouched.

The door to First Claw’s armoury parted before him on oiled hydraulics. He looked down at the lasrifle in his hands, checking it over one last time before giving it to its new owner.

“Maruc, I have something fo... Lord?”

Talos stood by his weapon rack, while Maruc worked with a hand-held broach, working the toothed tool along the side of the Night Lord's pauldron. Hardly a tall man, Maruc needed to stand on a stool in order to reach.

"Minor damage," Talos said. Unhelmed, he turned his black eyes upon Septimus. "I was sparring with Xarl. Where did you find a Kantrael-pattern Imperial Guard lasrifle?"

"Blackmarket. It's... a gift for Maruc."

Talos tilted his head, something vulturine creeping across his gaze. "How fares the harvest?"

"The slave holds are swelling again, my lord. Finding untainted children has been a challenge, though. Mutants abound on Hell's Iris."

The Night Lord grunted in agreement. "That is the truth. But what is wrong? You are uneasy. Do not waste time lying to me, I can see it etched on your face and inscribed within your voice."

Septimus was long-used to his master's blunt, immediate honesty. Replying in kind was the only way to deal with Talos.

"Arkiah is dead. He was disembowelled and left in a grain chamber."

The Night Lord didn't move. Maruc continued to work. "The void-born's father?" Talos asked.

"Yes."

"Who killed him?"

Septimus shook his head without any other answer.

"I see," Talos said quietly. Silence resumed, but for the metallic rasp of Maruc's broach scraping at the armour's imperfections. Presumably, he had no idea what they were saying, for he didn't speak a word of Nostraman. "What else?"

Septimus placed the lasgun on Maruc's workbench. When he faced Talos again, it was with one eye narrowed, and his bionic eye dilated in sympathetic unity.

"How did you know there was more, lord?"

"A guess. Now speak."

"I have to kill some people. Crew. No one important."

Talos nodded, but his expression showed no sign of conceding to the point. "Why do they need to die?"

"A trade agreement I made in Blackmarket. They're Ganges crew, and some of the newbloods are enjoying the lawless lower decks a little too much."

"Tell me their names."

"The gang leader is Hokroy. That's all I know."

Talos still stared. "And you assumed I would just allow you to do this? To wander the lower decks alone, murdering other members of the crew?"

"It... hadn't occurred to me that you would find fault with it, lord."

"Ordinarily, I wouldn't." The Night Lord grunted as he overlooked the repairs to his shoulder guard. "Enough, thank you." Maruc got down from the stool. "It is not the crew's place to dispense justice, Septimus. It was not their place to kill Arkiah, nor yours to hunt down a pack of thieves. Times are changing, and we need to change with them. The new crew, those from Ganges, need to be faced with the consequences of lawlessness. The Exalted's choice to ignore the actions of mortals

on board is no longer viable. We have too many new souls walking the hallways, and too many old souls used to living without consequence.”

Talos paused for a moment, striding over to where his helm lay on Septimus’ work table. “I believe it is time the Legion exercised more control over its subjects, reinstating the premise of iron law. Slaves cannot be given the keys to the kingdom. Anarchy is the result.” His smile was crooked, and more than a little bittersweet. “Trust me, I have seen it before.”

“Nostramo?”

“Yes. Nostramo.” The warrior fastened his helm into place. Septimus listened to the snake-hiss of seals locking tight at the collar. “I will deal with this, as I should have dealt with it weeks ago.”

“Lord, I—”

“No. You must do nothing. This is the Legion’s work, Septimus, not yours. Now, ensure you are ready for the coming siege. We sail for Vilamus in mere days.”

The serf looked to his master. “Is it true, what they say on the station?”

Talos snorted softly. “That depends what they say on the station.”

“That Vilamus is an Adeptus Astartes fortress-monastery. That the Blood Reaver’s entire fleet is laying siege to one of the best-defended worlds in the Imperium.”

Talos checked his weapons, before mag-locking them to his armour—the bolter to his thigh, the blade to his back.

“Yes,” he said. “That is all true.”

“Are you not concerned about potential losses, lord?”

The Legionary lifted a shoulder in the barest shrug. It sent skulls rattling against his armour, talking to one another in jawless clicks. “No. All we have to do is stay alive, for the real battle will come after. That’s when we’ll bleed, Septimus. When we retake the *Echo of Damnation*.”

## XVI

### GAMBITS

The mood in Blackmarket was more subdued than usual, and it didn't take her long to see why. The reason—the seven skinless reasons—hung above everyone's heads, suspended from the ceiling on corroded chains.

Hound had stepped in some of the blood upon entering, which triggered a stream of muttered grumbling. "The Legion is teaching a lesson to the crew," he said, not bothering to clean his ragged boots.

The lesson was a wet one. Each of the seven bodies had dripped a great deal, if the stains on the decking were anything to go by. People were still tracking blood all over Blackmarket, and the smell, even for a heretics' ship, was something special. As Octavia watched, a tremor ran through the *Covenant*, more test-firing by the engine crews. The chained bodies swayed in their crucified moorings, and something long and stinking spilled from one's open stomach. It slapped onto the floor like a slimy cord of fat, glistening meat-rope.

Hound saw her staring, mistaking the disgust on her face for confusion. "Intestines," he said.

"Thank you, I guessed."

"You shouldn't eat them." He said these words with the sage wisdom of experience.

"I wasn't going to."

"Good."

Octavia turned her eyes back to the crowds. No one glanced her way for more than a moment. Before, she'd been a curiosity to some, and ignored by others. Now they all avoided her, from the oldest to the youngest, turning their heads from hers if she even looked their way.

She knew why, of course. The story had spread well over the weeks since she'd killed her attendant. Leaving her chamber already felt like a mistake, but sitting alone and hiding with her boredom wasn't an option anymore. She'd go just as crazy in isolation as she would if she risked walking the ship's halls again.

One of the Legion strode through Blackmarket, helmed and armed. His loose gait suggested a routine patrol, though she'd never seen a Legionary here before for anything other than specific business.

"Navigator," the Night Lord greeted her, granting her a nod as he passed. Backswept wings, like those of a bat or a daemon from the pages of scripture, rose from his helm as a stylised crest.

She didn't recognise the warrior—he was from one of the other Claws—so she replied with a muted, “Lord...” and left it at that.

The warrior left Blackmarket, heading deeper into the ship. “That would also explain why everyone is behaving,” she mused.

The skinned bodies swung above in morbid echo of the Legion war banners on the bridge, drifting in the breeze of the air filtration system. A flayed hand hung not far from her face as she looked through the tin trinkets offered on one table. The trader quickly looked away after a giving a glassy smile.

Octavia walked on. When she reached Arkiah's table, she trailed her fingertips over the bare wooden surface, looking around for some explanation of his absence. No one would meet her eyes for long enough to ask. She checked her bandana, though she knew it was in place, and made a decision. Time to get out of here. One could find other places to walk; maybe the observation deck.

She turned and walked right into someone. Her face bounced off his chest, snapping her head back, and she thumped down onto the blood-slick deck with watering eyes and a sore backside.

“By shidding node,” she said, covering her mouth and nose. Blood dripped between her fingers.

“Forgive me.” Septimus offered his hand. “I didn't expect to be headbutted.”

She took the offer, rising with his help. Hound offered her a scrap of cloth that looked as though he'd used it to wipe grime from parts of his body best left covered. She shook her head and used her sleeve instead. A bloody smear streaked over the dark material. Oh, if her father could see her now.

“Is it broken?” She wrinkled her nose.

“No.”

“It stings like it is.”

“As I said, forgive me. I've been looking for you. First Claw is gathering, and they ordered both of us present.”

That didn't sound good. “Very well. After you.”

“You need me *to do what?*” Octavia asked. She didn't laugh. She wanted to, but she couldn't manage it.

First Claw gathered in their armoury, but they were not alone. Octavia had entered with Septimus and Hound, finding Maruc already present, which was no surprise. The tech-priest was another matter entirely. He seemed to be paying little heed to the Night Lords, occupying himself with drifting around their sanctum, an iron ghoul in whispering robes, examining curios and spare parts for their armour.

“I have never been granted access to a Legiones Astartes armoury chamber before,” he noted with tinny interest. “Such intriguing disorder.” The tech-adept stood as tall as the warriors, though stick-thin by comparison. He arched over Maruc's desk, seemingly occupied by pushing a hand-held thermal counter across the wood, the way a child might nudge a dead pet to see if it still breathed.

“This is broken,” Deltrian observed to the rest of the room. When no one replied, he deployed digital micro-tools from his fingertips and began to repair it.

“You need me to do what?” Octavia asked again. Disbelief still coloured her voice, bleeding it dry of any respect. “I don’t understand.”

Talos spoke softly, calmly, as he always did when not wearing his helm. “When the Siege of Vilamus is over, we intend to attack a Red Corsair vessel, one of their flagships, calling itself *Venemous Birthright*. You will be deploying with us in a boarding assault pod. Once we secure the ship, you will guide it into the warp with the *Covenant of Blood*, and we will make for the Great Eye in Segmentum Obscurus.”

Hound, like his namesake, made a growl at the back of his throat. Octavia could barely blink.

“How will the *Covenant* jump without me?”

“I will deal with that,” said Talos.

“And how will we take over an entire enemy warship?”

“I will deal with that, as well.”

She shook her head. “I mean no disrespect, but... if it’s a fair fight...”

Talos actually laughed. “It will not be a fair fight. That’s why we will win. The Eighth Legion has no passion for fighting fair.”

“We do tend to lose those,” Cyrion noted with a philosophical air.

“We’ll handle the blood-work,” Xarl’s voice was a vox-growl, somehow still conveying his eternal eagerness. “Don’t you worry your fragile little skull about it.”

“But... how will you do it?” Octavia asked.

“Treachery.” Talos tilted his head. “How else? The details are irrelevant. All you need to know is this: once we return from Vilamus, make sure you are armed and ready. You will join us in a boarding pod, and we will protect you as we move through the enemy decks. The *Birthright*’s Navigator has to die quickly, lest he jump the ship with us still on board. We will kill him, secure you in his place, and take control of the enemy bridge.”

Octavia’s gaze drifted over to Deltrian. “And... the honoured tech-adept?”

“He’s coming with us,” Cyrion nodded.

The tech-priest turned in a graceful whirr of machine-joints. “As requested, my servitors are re-tooled and poly-tasked for the planned eventualities.”

She glanced at Septimus, who gave her an awkward smile. “I’m coming, too. So is Maruc.”

Maruc grunted. “Punishment for my many sins.” He swallowed and shut up the moment Uzas turned towards him.

“I, also, am coming,” Hound announced. Silence greeted this proclamation. “I am,” he insisted, and turned his blind eyes to Octavia. “Mistress?”

“Fine,” Cyrion chuckled. “Bring the little rat.”

“‘*Hound*’,” Hound replied, almost sulkily. Now he had a name, he clung to it with tenacity.

“I know what Vilamus is,” she told them. “And that’s why I can’t believe you’re so confident about surviving it. A fortress-monastery? An Adeptus Astartes world?”

Cyrion turned to Talos. “Why does she never say ‘Lord’ when she addresses us? You used to train these mortals with a stricter hand, brother.”

Talos ignored him. “None of us will die at Vilamus,” he said.

“You sound very sure... lord.”

The prophet nodded. “I am sure. We are not taking part in the main siege. Huron will be tasking us with something else. If I’m correct, then for the first time since you’ve come aboard, we are going to fight a war our way.”

“And we tend not to lose those,” Cyrion added. For once, there wasn’t a shadow of amusement in his voice.

Variel opened his eyes.

“Enter.”

The door raised on loud, unhappy tracks. The Apothecary loathed the times his Chapter based themselves at Hell’s Iris. The station might be a military marvel, but it was filthy and run-down in a thousand offensive ways.

“Variel,” Talos greeted him, moving into the chamber.

Variel didn’t rise from where he sat in the centre of the floor. The meditative control he’d held over his body loosened as awareness of the real world returned. His primary heart, slowed to a state of almost complete sedation, resumed its normal beat, and he felt the invasive warmth of his armour’s interface spikes once more, buried in his body.

“I suspected you would be immersed in self-reflection,” Talos said through his mouth grille. “But this can wait no longer.”

Variel motioned to the surgical table against one wall. “Both of your post-surgery examinations have revealed no flaws in my work, or your healing processes.”

Talos shook his head. “I did not come to speak of that.”

“Then what brings you here?”

“I came to speak with you, Variel, brother to brother. With neither my Legion overhearing, nor your Chapter.”

The Corsair narrowed his emotionless eyes. “And yet you stand... what is your expression? In midnight clad? The winged skull of Nostramo stares at me from your armour, as surely as Huron’s claw is clenched on my own war plate.”

“Is that an observation?” Talos smiled behind his skull mask, “or a warning?”

Variel didn’t answer. “You do not even show me your face.”

“It is too bright in here.”

“Speak, then.”

“You are a brother to First Claw. Fryga forged that bond, and it has remained true for two decades. Before I can speak further, I have to know if you intend to honour the oath you took that night.”

Variel didn’t blink much. Talos had noticed it before, and suspected the habit had an intensely disconcerting effect on humans. He wondered if the effect was something Variel had cultivated over time, or a natural proclivity that grew more obvious after gene-seed implantation.

“Fryga was almost thirty years ago for me. Only twenty for you, you say? Interesting. The warp has a wonderful sense of humour.”

“The oath, Variel,” said Talos.

“I never swore an oath on Fryga. I made a promise. There is a difference.”



Talos drew his sword, the weapon reflecting shards of the bright light back onto the austere walls.

“That is still one of the most exquisite blades I have ever seen,” Variel almost sighed.

“It saved your life,” the prophet said.

“And I saved yours mere weeks ago. One might say that we were even, and my promise has been kept. Tell me, are you still dreaming of the eldar?”

Talos nodded, but offered nothing more. “Whether you saved my life or not, I need your help.”

Variel rose at last, moving over to the end section of his workstation—a sterile washbasin surrounded by racks of tools and fluids. With great care, he disengaged his gauntlets, stripping them off before slowly, slowly washing hands that were already perfectly clean.

“You want me to betray my Chapter, don’t you?”

“No. I want you to betray them, steal from them, and abandon them.”

Variel blinked, slow, like a basking lizard. “Abandon them. Interesting.”

“More than that. I want you to join First Claw. You should be with us, waging this war as part of the Eighth Legion.”

Variel dried his hands on a pristine towel-strip. “Get to the point, brother. What are you planning?”

Talos produced an auspex from a belt pouch. The hand-held scanner had seen better days, scored by decades of use, but it functioned well enough when he activated it. A two-dimensional image resolved on the small screen, the subject of which Variel recognised immediately.

“The *Venomous Birthright*,” said the Apothecary. He looked up, attempting to meet the prophet’s gaze for the first time. It worked, even through the other’s eye lenses. “I had wondered if you would ever detect its heritage, or even care if you did.”

“I care.” Talos deactivated the auspex. “It’s our ship, and after Vilamus, it will be in Eighth Legion hands again. But I need your help to take it back.”

On Variel’s shoulder guard, the stretched face of Kallas Yurlon leered eyelessly in the Night Lord’s direction. The Pantheon’s Star still stood proudly on the leathery skin, black against the faded peach-pink of flayed flesh.

“And if I agreed... What would you need from me?” Variel asked.

“We cannot storm a cruiser full of Red Corsairs. I need the odds in our favour even before our boarding pods strike home.”

“Much of that crew is still Nostraman, you know.” Variel didn’t look at Talos as he spoke. “Survivors. Rejuvenated officers, valued for their expertise. Children of first generation exiles from your lost world. While the Night Lords are hardly a brotherhood of blessedly kind masters, I suspect many would prefer the cold embrace of Eighth Legion discipline to the lashes of Red Corsair slavedrivers.”

He snorted. “Perhaps they will help you reclaim your ship. Not the Navigator, though. Ezmarellda is quite firmly one of Huron’s creatures.”

Talos wouldn’t be baited. “I need your help, brother.”

The Apothecary closed his eyes for some time, leaning on his workstation, head lowered. Deep breaths carried through his war plate, causing his shoulders to rise and fall with the hum of active armour.

He made a noise with his mouth, and shivered. Talos almost asked what was wrong, but Variel made the noise again, his shoulders shaking. When the Apothecary stepped away from the table, his eyes were bright, and his lips pliant in the dead-muscled parody of a smile. He kept making the noise, somewhere between a repetitive breathy grunt and a soft shout.

For the first time in decades, Variel the Flayer was laughing.

He raised his head as the door opened again, though it took several attempts to speak.

“The weekly sip of water?” he sneered in Gothic.

The voice that answered was Nostraman. “I see they still keep you here, leashed like a prized whore.”

Ruven gave a growl of guarded surprise. “Come to mock me a second time, brother?”

Talos crouched by the captive in a purr of active armour. “Not quite. I have spoken of your fate with the Corsairs. They mean to execute you soon, for they can tear nothing more from your mind.”

Ruven breathed out slowly. “I am not sure I can ever open my eyes again. My eyelids are no barrier to the light, and they feel fused shut.” He strained against the chains, but it was a weak, irritated gesture. “Do not let them kill me, Talos. I would rather die by a Legion blade.”

“I owe you nothing.”

Ruven smiled, cracked lips peeling back from aching teeth. “Aye, that’s true enough. So why did you come?”

“I wanted to know something before you died, Ruven. What did you gain from that first betrayal? Why did you turn from the Eighth Legion and wear the colours of Horus’ Sons?”

“We are all Horus’ sons. We all carry his legacy with us.” Ruven couldn’t help the edge of passion creeping into his tone. “Abaddon is the Bane of the Imperium, brother. His is the name whispered by a trillion frightened souls. Have you heard the legends? The Imperium even believes him to be Horus’ cloned son. And he bears that legend for a reason. The Imperium will fall. Perhaps not this century, and perhaps not the next. But it will fall, and Abaddon will be there, boot on the throat of the Emperor’s bloodless corpse. Abaddon will be there the night the Astronomican dies, and the Imperium—at last—falls dark.”

“You still believe we can win this war?” Talos hesitated, for this was something he’d simply never expected. “If Horus failed, what chance does his son have?”

“Every chance, for no matter what you or I might say, it’s a destiny written in the stars themselves. How much larger are the forces in the Eye now, than those that first fled after the failed Siege of Terra? How many billions of men, how many countless thousands of ships, have rallied to the Warmaster’s banner in ten millennia? Abaddon’s might eclipses anything Horus ever commanded. You know that as well

as I. If we could refrain from butchering one another for long enough, we'd already be pissing on the Imperium's bones."

"Even the primarchs failed." Talos wouldn't give ground. "Terra burned, but rose again. They failed, brother."

Ruven turned his face to the prophet, swallowing to ease the pain of speaking. "That is why you remain blind to our destiny, Talos. You still idolise them. Why?"

"They were the best of us." It was clear from the prophet's voice—Ruven knew he'd never even considered the question before.

"No. There speaks the voice of worship, and brother, you cannot afford to be so naive. The primarchs were humanity magnified—all of mankind's greatest attributes, balanced by its greatest flaws. For every triumph or flash of preternatural genius, there was a crushing defeat, or another step deeper on the descent into madness. And what are they now? Those that still exist are distant avatars, sworn to the gods they represent, ascended to devote their lives to the Great Game. Think of the Cyclops, staring into every possible eternity with his one poisoned eye, while a Legion of the walking dead does the bidding of his few surviving children. Think of Fulgrim, so enraptured by the glory of Chaos that he remains blind to his own Legion's shattering millennia ago. Think of our own father, who ended his life as a conflicted madman—dedicated one moment to teaching the Emperor some grand, idealistic lesson, and devoted the next moment to doing nothing but eating the heart of any slave within reach, while he sat in the Screaming Gallery, laughing and listening to the wails of the damned."

"You are not answering my question, Ruven."

He swallowed again. "I am, Talos. I am. The Eighth Legion is a weak, unbalanced thing—a broken coalition devoted to its own sadistic pleasure. No greater goals beyond slaughter. No higher ambitions beyond surviving and slaughtering. That is no secret. I am no longer a Night Lord, but I am still Nostraman. Do you think I enjoyed kneeling before Abaddon? Do you think I relished that the Warmaster rose from another Legion, instead of my own? I loathed Abaddon, yet I respected him, for he will do what no other can. The gods have marked him, chosen him to remain in the material realm and do what the primarchs never could."

Ruven took a shivering breath, visibly weakening as he finished. "You asked why I joined the Despoiler, and the answer is in the fate of the primarchs. They were never intended to be the inheritors of this empire. Their fates were sealed with their births, let alone their ascensions. They are echoes, almost gone from the galaxy, engaged in the Great Game of Chaos far from mortal eyes. The empire belongs to us, for we are still here. We are the warriors that remained behind."

Talos took several seconds to answer. "You truly believe what you are saying. I can tell."

Ruven gave a defeated laugh. "Everyone believes it, Talos, because it is the truth. I left the Legion because I rejected the aimless butchery, and the naive, worthless hope of simply surviving this war. Survival wasn't enough for me. I wanted to win."

The prisoner sagged in his chains. Instead of hanging slack, he fell forwards, crashing onto the cold deck. At first he couldn't move—the shock was too great, as was the pain of reawakening muscles abused in the fall.

"I... I am free," he breathed.

“Yes, brother. You are free.” Talos helped the trembling sorcerer sit up. “It will be several minutes before your legs are ready to be used again, but we must be quick. For now, here, drink this.”

Ruven reached out, his fingers curling around the offered cup. The tin was warm in his numb fingers. Sensation was returning to his extremities already.

“I understand none of this. What’s happening?”

“I traded a supply of our gene-seed reserves to the Blood Reaver, in exchange for your life.” Talos let that sink in; the immense wealth of such an offer. “And then I came to free you,” the prophet admitted, “or slit your throat. Your fate depended on what you would say. And I agree with you in one respect, brother. I am also tired of just surviving this war. I want to start winning it.”

“I need my armour. And my weapons.”

“They are already in First Claw’s armoury.”

Ruven gripped the iron collar around his throat. “And this. This must be removed. I cannot summon my powers.”

“Septimus will remove it.”

The sorcerer chuckled. It sounded decidedly unhealthy. “You are up to Septimus now? When I last walked the corridors of the *Covenant*, you were served by Quintus.”

“Quintus died. Can you stand, yet? I will support you, but time is short, and even through my helm, the light is beginning to pain me.”

“I will try. But I have to know, why did you free me? You are not a charitable soul, Talos. Not to your enemies. Give me the truth.”

The prophet hauled his former brother up, taking most of Ruven’s weight. “I need you to do something, in exchange for saving your life.”

“I will do it. Name it.”

“Very soon, the *Covenant* will have to fly without a Navigator.” The prophet’s voice lowered and softened. “We’ll remove the collar, and restore your powers, for there is no one else who can do it, Ruven. I need you to jump the ship.”

# **PART THREE**

## **ECHO OF DAMNATION**

### **XVII**

#### **VILAMUS**

Tareena thumbed her tired eyes, pushing hard enough to see colours. Once she was satisfied she'd numbed the itch into oblivion, she adjusted the vox-mic fastened to her ear and tapped it twice to assure herself that it was as useless as it'd been for the last few weeks.

Her auspex didn't so much chime lately as gargle, its rhythmic scanning note broken into an irregular stutter of audible static. The screen looked as clean as the scanner sounded, displaying a wash of distortion that meant nothing to anybody.

She knew the cause of the disruption. They all did. That didn't help in dealing with it, though. Tareena turned in her seat.

"Warden Primaris?" she called across the chamber.

Warden Primaris Mataska Shul came closer, bringing her austere silence with her. Tareena sensed a reprimand in the near future, for raising her voice.

"Yes, sister." The old woman spoke with exaggerated care.

Tareena keyed in a retuning code, which changed absolutely nothing on her scanner display. "Warden Primaris, forgive my interruption. I wished only to know if the augurs had refined their estimates on the duration of the interference."

The Warden Primaris graced her with a thin-lipped smile. "We are all troubled by the solar storm, sister. The Primaris Council meets with the Tenth Captain at the tolling of the bell for third reflection. Until then, trust in yourself, and your instruments, blinded as they may be for now."

Tareena thanked her superior and returned to her console. The sun Vila, at the heart of the Vilamus system, was a temperamental benefactor, no doubt there. Tareena had only just entered her seventh year in the Wardens of Vilamus, and this was Vila's fifth outburst. None had lasted this long, though. Previous incidents of

solar instability ended after a handful of days. This one was already into its third week, with no sign of abating.

She cycled through archived images of the bright, proud heart of fire in the system's centre. Several images, among the last recorded by the fortress-monastery's observation satellites before they lost connection to the surface, showed the sun spurting great arcs of misty plasma from its surface—far above typical solar flare activity.

Tareena's expertise training had been focussed on interstellar operation, for her placement in the fortress-monastery's command strategium. She knew what she was looking at, and though "solar storm" was accurate enough, it wasn't the phenomenon's true title.

*Coronal mass ejection.* Natural, and not entirely uncommon among stars as aggressive as Vila. Still, it played sweet hell with the monastery's more sensitive electronics, and she'd rather not be caught on the surface of the planet without a reinforced radiation suit.

Not that there was anything out there, anyway. Vilamus itself, the fortress-monastery of the Marines Errant, was the only node of life upon the entire world. She was born here, she would die here, just as her parents had, and her children would.

"Sister Tareena," said a voice farther down the main console. She turned, seeing Jekris looking her way. His hood was down, revealing a face worn by years of concern and a great deal of smiling. He was close to fifty now, and still unmated. She liked him, liked his fatherly face.

"Brother Jekris." She kept her voice soft, aware of the Warden Primaris lurking nearby.

"Sister, I would ask you to aim a specific scrye-pulse to the east, at the following coordinates."

She glanced at the coordinates he sent to her screen, but shook her head. "My instruments fail me, brother. Do yours not do the same?"

"Please," he said. "Indulge me, if you would."

She keyed in the digits, aiming a focussed auspex burst at the specified area of land. It took almost a minute, for the radar dishes on the fortress' battlements needed the time to turn and realign. She keyed in her personal code when the *READY* glyph flashed.

The imagery came back as a washed-over smear of meaningless junk. The charts came back with even less clarity.

"I see nothing through the storm," she told him. "I am sorry, brother."

"Please," he said again, his gentle voice betraying a curious edge. "Try again, if you would."

She complied—it wasn't as if she had anything else to do anyway—and spent several moments looking at a returned spread of the same garbled results.

"I see nothing, brother."

"Would you examine my results?"

She blinked. "Of course."

Jekris transmitted several images to her secondary monitor, which she cycled through in turn.

“Do you see it?” he asked.

She wasn’t sure. In several of the images, there looked to be some kind of structure in the wastelands, but interference stole any chance of comprehending its scale, let alone if it was actually there. Little more than a thumb-sized smear marked the centre of several pics, almost lost in the turmoil of distortion.

“I don’t think so,” she admitted. Tareena transferred them to her primary screen, coding in a demand for image recognition. No matches came up. “It’s a scanner ghost, brother. I’m certain of it.” She flicked a glance to the Warden Primaris, though. Such things had to be reported in times of auspex failure.

Jekris nodded, and summoned the elder with a raised hand.

Tareena focussed another scan at the location, tightening the auspex pulse to its smallest scope. The returning image was no clearer than anything else she’d performed in weeks, with no sign of the ghost image at all. As the senior scrye-mistress present, she initiated a purge of previous data from her scanner cache, and set up each element of her comprehensive scrying to run separately. Motion; thermal; bio-signs; everything. One by one, they came back negative, negative, negative.

All except the very last.

“I... have a reading,” she announced. “Traces of iron detected, two hundred and sixty kilometres east of the fortress walls.”

“Mass readings?” The Warden Primaris was noticeably more alert all of sudden.

“No mass.” Tareena shook her head. “The distortion won’t allow specifics.”

“It is a drop-pod,” said Jekris. “Look at the shape.”

Tareena made a soft, “Huh...” sound as she looked back at Jekris’ images. *No. It couldn’t be.*

“The Marines Errant have no forces in orbit,” she objected. “Where would they have come from?”

“We have no idea what the Errants do or do not have in orbit, sister.” Jekris gave a shy smile, hesitant to disagree with her. “For we cannot see what is up there.”

“It’s likely one of our satellites. An observer, or a missile platform. With coronal mass ejection of this intensity, it’s almost guaranteed that several of our satellites will malfunction, falling into degrading orbits.”

“So soon?”

“Much depends on the satellites themselves, and the nature of the malfunction. But, yes, so soon.”

Jekris looked to the Warden Primaris, no longer trying to convince anyone but the elder.

“It’s a drop-pod, mistress. I am certain of it.”

Tareena stared at the imagery again, sucking her teeth. But, at last, she nodded. “I cannot say, either way. It could be a satellite. It could be a drop-pod.”

The Warden Primaris nodded. “I will inform the Marines Errant at once. They will surely choose to investigate.”

The radiation was brutal, so they sent Taras and Morthaud. Adeptus Astartes Scouts, despite their extensive modification, would still suffer out on the wastelands with the

sunstorm raging through the system. That left the task to experienced Space Marines: Taras and Morthaud volunteered right away.

Both wore the heraldry of Eighth Company with pride, their squad designation emblazoned on their armour. Both wore their helmets, split by halved paint schemes of white and blue. Both, as always, were arguing.

“This will be a false alarm,” Morthaud said. “Mark my words, we are chasing a downed chunk of rock, or worse, an auspex ghost.” He delivered this proclamation from the land speeder’s gunner seat, his hands gripping the heavy bolter’s handles.

Taras, by contrast, worked the pilot’s controls, easing the skimmer over the jagged landscape at full thrust. A cloudy plume of rock-dust streamed behind them, pushed into smoky shapes by the burning, howling engines.

They spoke over the vox, suit to suit, not afflicted by the stellar unrest taking place in the heavens. Their suits of armour were certainly miracles of machinery to the wider Imperium, but the relatively crude simplicity and limited sensor suites left war plate immune to the kind of interference that slaughtered more sensitive and intricate systems.

“You’ll see,” Morthaud finished his insistent little diatribe. The speeder banked as it dodged around a smooth up-cropping of eroded stone, jostling both warriors in their seats. Taras didn’t glance at his brother; his focus on the wastelands ripping past was absolute.

“Would that not be preferable to the alternative?”

Morthaud scoffed as he sighted through the cannon’s targeting reticule. “It would hardly be the first time we’ve had satellites degrade and strike the surface.”

“No,” said Taras. “The other alternative.”

“Why would one of our ships—”

“I am not speaking of one of *our* ships. You know I am not; cease being stubborn. The initiates may find it amusing, but I do not.”

Morthaud, like his brother, remained locked to his duty with unwavering resolution. Everywhere he looked, the heavy bolter’s fat-mouthed muzzle followed. “Now you speak in impossibilities.”

Taras said nothing for several moments. “Chapter home worlds are not immune to attack,” he muttered.

“Perhaps. But we are far from the mindless xenos breeds that have attempted such things in the past. Come, brother, be serious. What is this bizarre melancholy?”

Taras veered sharply around a towering jut of rock, watching as the landscape grew harsher, cracking into ravines the deeper they travelled into the wastes. “We have been garrisoned too long. That is all. I yearn to crusade once more.”

He seemed on the edge of saying more, but instead uttered a muted, “Hold.” The speeder’s engines eased their prolonged roar, quieting to a throttled whine. The wastelands raced past at speed, instead of flashing by in an endless, colourless blur that almost defied perception.

“We’re close now,” said Taras. “Just over the next ridge.”



Morthaud ran his gauntlet along the scarred heat-shielding, brushing away the sooty ash of atmospheric entry. It was undeniably a drop-pod. And it was undeniably not one of theirs.

Before converging on the pod, they'd tried to raise Vilamus on the vox, with the expected result of such a futile gesture. Taras had led them in an extensive sweep of the local area, before they'd disembarked and made their way down into the canyon. Even without their squad, echoes of that unified loyalty showed in every movement—one would descend to a stable section of wall, while his brother covered him, aiming a bolter into the canyon below.

At the bottom, they split up, tracking separately while maintaining a steady stream of vox updates. The Marines Errant met again by the downed pod, once they were certain the area was secure.

"A single pod, in the midst of the storm." Taras regarded the empty restraint thrones inside the open pod. "And in this ravine... It is a wonder the scryers managed to track it at all."

Morthaud hovered his hand-held auspex over the pod's scorched hull. "The carbon-scoring is fresh. It's been down no longer than a week."

"Look for marks of allegiance." While his brother scanned, Taras kept his bolter up and ready, panning around for any signs of foes. "Be swift. We must return to the fortress."

Morthaud deactivated his scanner, brushing aside more of the cindery dust from the pod's armour plating. His efforts revealed a faded symbol: a horned skull, backed by splayed daemonic wings.

"Do you see anything?" Taras voxed.

"Aye." Morthaud stared at the symbol, feeling his skin crawl. "Traitors."

Failure, they'd told him, came with no shame. He was still useful. He still had a role to play in the Chapter's solemn duty. Indeed, failure came with its share of bittersweet triumph, for to even survive a failed trial was a feat relatively few managed to achieve, amongst the thousands that made the attempt. The rolls of the ignoble dead were long, their names listed as afterthoughts, for the sake of completion rather than remembrance.

Yet he was still human, and still at the mercy of his emotions. Each time he bowed before one of his masters, he would swallow the writhing twists of regret and jealousy. Always the same questions bubbled up from below: What if he'd tried harder? What if he'd managed to endure for a few more moments? Would he be the one now standing in blessed ceramite, while lowly humans bowed and scraped before him?

*"To serve is to know purity":* the words inscribed above each of the archways leading into the serf dormitories. He took great pride in his work, of course. All of the Wardens did. Their role was a vital one, and their diligence beyond question. From the lowliest programmer of servitors to the most respected of artificers, the Wardens treasured their irreplaceable position at the Chapter's heart.

This duality sat better in some hearts than others. He erred on the side of caution when discussing his regrets, though. Many of his robed brothers and sisters seemed

to take nothing but joy in their duties, eager to serve the Chapter with no heed for what might have been.

Yeshic raised his hood against the ever-present chill permeating the great halls. His nightly duty stretched out before him—a long shift in the Meritoriam, writing the Chapter’s deeds onto scrolls and purity seals for their suits of holy armour. Difficult work, for the scripture had to be exact and the writing perfectly formed. In some cases, the deeds were so extensive that the lettering on purity seal parchment was unreadable to the naked eye. Yeshic did good work, and he knew it. The Third Captain himself had once written him a commendation for his elegant poetry in expressing the officer’s deeds. After taking the commendation to the Warden Primaris, he’d been honoured with a branding of the Chapter’s holy sigil, the falling star, burned into the flesh of his forearm.

Upon entering Meritoriam Secundus, the lesser of the two chambers used for such work, he passed dozens of occupied desks, nodding in greeting at several of the other scribes. The wooden box under his arm contained his personal inks, which he placed at the edge of his table, pressing it into its waiting niche. With meticulous care, Yeshic prepared the inks, his quill pens, and the pots of sand used to help the lettering dry.

He was reaching for his first parchment when he heard the noise come from the antechamber.

“Did you hear that?” he asked Lissel, the young woman at the next table. She frowned at the interruption, her quill not resting in its scratching flow. Silence was rarely broken here. Lissel shook her head without looking up from her work.

There it was again. A muffled, minute clang, the report of metal against metal.

He looked over his shoulder, to the doorway leading into the antechamber.

“It’s nothing,” Lissel murmured. “Just Cadry, tidying the stores. He went in a few minutes before you arrived.”

Yeshic rose from his seat nevertheless, moving over to the closed door and keying the release code. As the portal opened on smooth hinges, nothing untoward met his questing gaze. Meritoriam Secundus had an immense storage chamber, with a shelf-forest of parchment racks, scroll tubes, ink vials and tools to mix pigments.

He stepped inside, closing the door so the others wouldn’t be disturbed as he quietly called Cadry’s name.

An irritating thrum in the air set his gums itching, though he couldn’t fathom its source. A machine sound, without a doubt. Perhaps the grinder pestle was malfunctioning; not an unprecedented event, by any means. Yeshic moved deeper, heading through the rows of shelving. The feeling of static in his mouth grew stronger. The resonating hum grew louder in unison. It almost sounded like the growl of awakened ceramite, consecrated in the Emperor’s name. But the Marines Errant never ventured into this wing of the fortress. Yeshic smiled at the very idea; an Errant would struggle to even fit through the doorway here.

“Cadry? Cad—Ah.” The elder sat hunched over the automated grinder, while the machine sat idle in its place on a workbench. The abrasive thrumming was everywhere now, more invasive than truly loud, strong enough to warm his eyes with subtle vibrations. He looked around for any sign of an Errant nearby, but saw nothing. All was in perfect order, bar Cadry’s slack posture.

“Cadry? Are you well?” He touched the old man’s shoulder. With a boneless slouch, Cadry fell face forwards onto the bench.

A heart attack, then. The poor old fool. Yeshic checked for a pulse at the elder’s neck, and found nothing. His skin was still warm, though. The younger scribe muttered a prayer, stumbling over just what to say. Cadry had served with honour for seven decades. Many of the Wardens would attend his funerary rites, perhaps even one or two of the few Marines Errant remaining in Vilamus.

Yeshic turned the body to see the elder’s face, intending to close the eyes before the funereal attendants arrived.

Blood painted the old man’s chest. The eyes were gone. Hollow sockets wept and stared in their place, blackened by wounding, wet with fluid.

Yeshic turned, running only a single step before hitting the hand launching against his throat. Iron-skinned and shockingly cold, the grip clenched tight, leaving him capable of nothing but spraying wordless spit from flapping lips.

He looked up, following the arm that caught him. His attacker hung from the ceiling, armoured in ornate, ancient ceramite of a kind the serf had never seen. One of the Errant hands clutched the rim of a maintenance shaft, the other dragged the writhing serf up from the floor with no difficulty at all, no matter how the human thrashed.

Within three beats of Yeshic’s heart, the Errant had hauled himself up into the maintenance conduit, dragging the serf with him.

*Not an Errant not an Errant not an Errant.*

“Do not pray...” the warrior whispered in a tinny crackle of vox, leering with red eye lenses, “...to your Emperor. Or you die even slower.”

*Not an Errant... How... Who...*

“Who—”

The warrior squeezed again, choking off his air. “And do not ask foolish questions, or I will feed you your own eyes.”

The image of Cadry flashed back to him through his racing thoughts. The fat old man, blinded by mutilation, his eyes pulled from his head and placed upon his tongue. Maybe he’d even choked on them, before they went down...

“Thank you,” the warrior whispered. “Your obedience has spared you the same last meal your friend enjoyed.”

The *not-an-Errant* drew a silver blade as he crouched, resting the tip beneath Yeshic’s chin.

“Wait,” the serf wept. “Please.”

The warrior exhaled something like a sigh, confessing three words to the whimpering human. “I loathe begging.”

He thrust the blade upwards, burying it halfway to the hilt through tongue, palate, skull and brain. Yeshic convulsed, arms spasming against the duct’s sides with quiet clangs.

At last, the Meritoriam scribe fell still. The warrior worked quickly, cracking the sternum with the pommel of his combat blade, and hack-sawing through the ribcage with several chops. Once the ribs were broken, spread like open wings to reveal the harvest of organs beneath, the warrior kicked the corpse from the maintenance

tunnel, letting it drop with a wet crack to the floor below. What had been inside the body began to leak out. That included the smell.

He regarded his rushed handiwork: the eyeless old man, the autopsied younger one; his ninth and tenth kills since arriving less than an hour before. What a fine discovery they would make for some oblivious menial.

The warrior paused only to clean his blade, sheathing it at his shin. The sirens chose that moment to begin.

Curious, Talos glanced back down at the gift he'd left, but the bodies were undisturbed. The sirens raged on. It sounded like the entire monastery was crying out in alarm, which, in a sense, was exactly the truth. Somewhere in this immense fortress, either his earlier handiwork—or that of his brothers—had been discovered.

## XVIII

# INFILTRATION

Huron's plan had been easy to admire, as was the passion with which he'd presented it. Showing surprising humility and consideration to the one hundred warriors he was ordering to potential suicide, the Tyrant came on board the *Covenant of Blood* with a minimal honour guard to grant a personal address. On the *Covenant's* bridge, flanked by two of his Terminator huscarls, the Corsair lord detailed his plan in full, highlighting the Night Lords' potential avenues of assault. He even conceded the point that, ultimately, the Eighth Legion's arrival was a fortuitous event. Their warriors were much more suited to the first phase of the invasion, and although he entrusted the results to them, he knew their finest chances of achieving victory would be through their own methods.

Talos had watched all of this, gathered with First Claw in a loose pack around the hololithic table. The other Claws did the same. Only one Night Lord stood alone, his armour freshly repainted, diminished by his isolation yet standing proud. Ruven had no Claw, for each of them had refused him. The Exalted and its Atramentar reacted harshest of all, vocally promising to slay the betrayer if he was foolish enough to offend them even once.

Partway through the speech, the Blood Reaver summoned a hololithic projection of the Vilamus fortress-monastery. Even the rough, flickering image ignited something akin to envy in Talos' unwavering gaze. No fortress-monastery was the twin of any other, and Vilamus rose like an Ecclesiarchy cathedral, reinforced into a gothic bastion with staggered battlements, tiered ramparts, landing platforms and, on the highest levels, docks for warships drifting below low-orbit to be repaired at the Chapter's sanctuary.

"We could crash the *Covenant* into it," Xarl mused, "and it still wouldn't make a dent." He carried his helm under his arm. For reasons Talos couldn't work out, since arriving at Hell's Iris, Xarl had taken to wearing his ceremonial helm. Its ornamentation was an echo of the Legion's emblem, with twin sleek, chiropteran wings rising in an elegant crest.

"Why are you wearing that?" Talos asked quietly, during the mission briefing.

Xarl looked at the helm in the crook of his arm, then scowled at the prophet. "No harm in a little pride, brother."

Talos let it go. Perhaps Xarl had a point.

Huron paused to clear bile from his throat. Gears clanked in his neck and chest as he swallowed. "A fortress-monastery is a defensive bastion like no other. Each of you knows this, but even such strongholds have degrees of capability. Vilamus is no

provincial castle on the Imperium's border. The hololithic simulations of even the entire Corsair armada attacking from orbit make for grim viewing. Even with our fleet, that battle would not earn any of us much glory, I assure you."

Several of the gathered warriors chuckled.

"You are right to question why I am using you so harshly," Huron allowed. "And that is because if your Legion cannot complete the first steps of the invasion alone, then the siege itself has no hope of success. I am using you, but not as a master uses a slave. I am using you as a general wields a weapon."

"What's in it for us?" one of the Bleeding Eyes called out. The question elicited a chorus of hissing chuckles from the others. Thirty of them in all, most crouched to accommodate their clawed feet, though several—the least-changed among them—stood tall.

Huron didn't smile. He inclined his head, as if acknowledging the question's wisdom. "Some might say allowing your ship to enter my dock would be reward enough. But I am not selfish with the spoils of war. You know what I want from this assault. The Eighth Legion is free to plunder whatever it wishes, as long as the Marines Errant supply of gene-seed is left untouched. Take armour, relics, prisoners—I care for none of it. But if I find the gene vaults harvested, I will withdraw my amnesty. The *Covenant* will not simply be fired upon and chased from Corsair space as it was the last time you... stretched... my patience. It will be destroyed."

The Exalted dragged its armoured bulk forwards, sending minute tremors through the deck. Massive claws came to rest on the table's surface, and tumourous black eyes half-lidded themselves, warding against even the anaemic light of the hololithic projectors.

"Every Claw will take part in the surface assault. The only warriors remaining on the ship will be the Atramentar." The creature paused to drag air and spittle back through its teeth. "I will deploy each Claw in drop-pods."

"And how do we breach the orbital defences?" Karsha, the leader of Second Claw, addressed his question to Huron rather than the Exalted. "I assume you are not laying us all on the altar of fate in the hope a handful of us survive to do your bidding."

Huron nodded again. "I understand your scepticism, but this offensive has been years in the planning. Raider fleets have coordinated across the subsector for years, forcing the Marines Errant into increasingly wide patrol routes. For almost a decade, the Chapter has reached farther and farther from their fortress, its crusading fleets devoted to watching over vulnerable Imperial shipping routes. I have sacrificed more than my fair share of ships to engineer this opportunity, and committed more warriors to early graves than I care to admit. The fortress-monastery is defended by—at most—a single company's worth of Imperial Space Marines. Their fleet is gone, scattered across the subsector. All that remains are the orbital defence platforms, and though they are formidable, never in the Red Corsairs' history has such a prize been open for the taking."

Huron's smile was every bit as predatory as any of the Night Lords. "Do you believe I would be so careless as to simply hurl warriors at the world, ruining our one chance of a clean assault? No. What is your name, Legionary?"

“Karsha.” The Night Lord didn’t bother to salute. “Karsha the Unsworn.”

“Karsha.” Huron gestured to the hololithic with his oversized power claw. The immense talons curled through a cluster of radar dishes mounted on one of the fortress’ eastern walls. “The sun, Vila, is being encouraged to bleed, haemorrhaging great flares into the void. Tides of solar wind and magnetic field disruption already flow through the Vilamus system. When the tides spill over the system’s worlds, each will suffer geomagnetic storms, lighting the sky with aurorae at the planets’ poles, and...”

Karsha growled in reluctant admiration. “And slaying all vox and auspex on the surface.”

“And in orbit.” Huron corrected. “Throughout the entire system, magnetic interference will butcher all scanning and transmission. The storm will leave our own assault practically blind, for we cannot rely on our own instruments when we commit to the siege. Infiltrating Vilamus will be no trial for any of you. The first phase should not test you at all. The second, however, will be when complications set in. We can discuss that later.”

Talos stepped forward. “How will you trigger the sun to initiate a coronal mass ejection?” Though he aimed the question at Huron, his gaze drifted to Ruven at the crowd’s edge. “Such a thing cannot be artificially bred.”

Ruven didn’t meet his eyes, but Huron did. “Nothing is impossible, prophet. My warp-weavers are capable of more than you realise.” He spoke the words without boasting, merely stating a fact. “It is a small thing, in truth, to reach into the heart of star and fire the arithmetic of fusion. My men know their task, and will die before failing me.”

“If you are able to blind the Marines Errant fortress-monastery,” Karsha affirmed, “then we will not fail.” Grunts and murmurs of assent travelled through the ranks. Xarl was grinning; Mercutian muttered to himself; while Uzas stared off into the middle distance, his gaze slack and unfocussed. Cyrion met Talos’ glance.

“Just as you said,” he agreed. “We’re fighting this one our way.”

The prophet nodded, but didn’t reply.

The same night, the *Covenant of Blood* broke dock and entered the warp, making for the Vila system.

The drop-pods fell nine days later.

As he moved through the labyrinth of maintenance tunnels and ventilation shafts, he kept one thought primed in his mind: *as predators, they stood a chance; as prey, they’d not last a single night.*

First Claw’s drop-pod had come down to the east of the fortress, driving home in one ravine among a clawed landscape of many. Erosion and tectonics had enjoyed millennia to work their influence, giving the world’s wastelands a scarred and hostile face. Once they’d climbed the canyon’s wall, they’d headed west at a sustainable sprint, scattering across the empty plateaus after nothing more than a few irritated farewells.

With almost two hundred kilometres of lifeless, waterless barren landscape to cover, Talos had reached the walls of the fortress-monastery three nights after

leaving the canyon. He used his gauntlets and boots to smash handholds in the fortress walls, and gained access through a wide-mouthed heat exchange venting tunnel. The flames were industrial—true fire, rather than the corrosive, clinging nightmare of a flame weapon's breath—and he walked through the thrashing orange heat with impunity, letting it scorch his armour and the skulls that hung from it.

Of his brothers' fates, he had no idea.

True stealth had never been a viable option for the assault's first phase. The battle armour of a Legiones Astartes warrior hardly allowed for one to become a consummate, untraceable assassin, not while it growled as loud as an idling engine, rendered him close to three metres in height, and bled a power signature detectable to even the crudest auspex readers. When the Eighth Legion went to war, it wasn't under a veil of secrecy and the flawed hope of going unseen. Leave such cowardly hunts to the soulless bitch-creatures spawned by the Callidus Temple in their gestation vats.

He flicked a glance at his retinal chron. Two minutes had passed since the sirens began their tumultuous whine. The prophet consulted an archived hololith schematic on his left eye lens as he ran in a crouch through the maintenance tunnel. A large chamber waited ahead, almost certainly the hub of Chapter serf operations on this level. Killing everyone present but for a few screaming, fleeing survivors would surely attract some attention.

Not far now.

Lucoryphus claimed no great ties to being his gene-sire's favoured pet, nor did he care that other warriors lauded themselves as part of the primarch's inner circle. Like most of his brethren, his perspectives aligned along a different route in the generations since Curze's death. He was a Raptor, first and foremost, and a Bleeding Eye second. Thirdly, distantly, he was a Night Lord. He did not cast his Legion bond aside, but nor did he drape himself in icons of Nostramo's winged skull.

It was just a planet, after all. A sizeable minority of the Legion weren't even drawn from there. They were Terran, born on the Throneworld, descended directly from the bloodlines that begat the whole human race.

Vorasha was Earthborn, beneath the daemon-faced armour, the blood-weeping eyes, and the irritating cackles. This, too, meant nothing. Lucoryphus knew Vorasha thought as he did: Raptors first, Bleeding Eyes second, allegiance to the ancient Legions last. What was a birth world, anyway? Such details meant nothing. It maddened him to see others put so much stock in it; always, they looked to the past, refusing to face up to the glories of the present and conquests of the future.

The prophet was the worst of all. His grotesquely distorted perception of the primarch soured Lucoryphus' stomach. Curze killed because Curze wished to kill. His was a rotten soul. In death's vindication, he taught his idiotic lesson: that the evils of the species deserve to be destroyed.

The Raptor gave a grating cackle each time he thought of it. If the lesson was so vital, so pure, so necessary, why did Curze leave a Legion of murderers sailing the stars in his name? He died a broken thing, a husk of himself, with hatred the only emotion strong enough to pierce his own confusion. He died to teach a lesson to a



father already slain; he died to show a truth that every soul in the empire already knew. That was not vindication, it was stupidity. Proud, blind, and deluded.

*Primarchs.* He wanted to spit at the thought of them. Useless, flawed creatures. Let the dead ones decay in poetic scripture throughout history's pages. Let those that survived dwell in the highest eyries of the immaterium, singing the ethereal praises of mad gods. He had a war to win, unshackled to failures from a time of legend.

The Exalted had asked much from him, and Lucoryphus willingly pledged a blood oath promising success. To be one of the Bleeding Eyes was a sacred bond; they were a populous brotherhood, spread across several sectors and allied to countless warbands. Lucoryphus prided his warriors' reputations among the best and brightest of the splintered cult. He led thirty of them, and many of those were insufferable wretches who'd claw his throat out if they believed they could take his place, but when blood called, they answered as a pack.

The labyrinth of maintenance tunnels hollowed through Vilamus had been built for teams of servitors to march through to fulfil their myriad repair functions. These, he crawled through with ease, a loping leopard's pace, claws hammering into the metal. He cared nothing for the noise he was making. Let the enemy come. Unlike the Claws, bound to the earth and forced to ascend slowly, every single one of the Bleeding Eyes had ascended to Vilamus' middle levels, riding the winds with their jetpacks before gaining entrance.

With the thrusters on his back, Lucoryphus was denied access to the smaller ventilation ducts, so his routes were limited. Caution was still a factor, as was his intended destination. A flickering schematic layout of the fortress overlaid his right eye, refocusing and turning as he rose through the monastery's levels. Frequently, the image would dissolve into a worthless wash of static, leaving the Raptor sneering irritated growls through his vox-caster speakers. They, at least, hadn't failed, but the coronal storm played havoc without regard for its victims' allegiances.

The sirens had been ringing for several minutes. Presumably, one of the Claws on the lower levels was beginning to enjoy themselves. Lucoryphus loped on, sloping facemask snarling left and right at the ornate gothic architecture. Even these access tunnels were wrought with an obscene amount of dedication and craftsmanship.

He ceased all movement. Dead still, he waited, muscles tensed. The only sound for several seconds was the beat of his primary heart and the ventilating rhythm of his breath. But there, at the edge of hearing...

He broke into a feral run, lamenting this undignified crawl and aching for the chance to soar. At the end of the tunnel awaited light, voices, and the sweat-stink of human flesh...

*Prey.*

Lucoryphus launched from the tunnel mouth, crashing through the thin iron grating with a condor's cry. They'd heard him coming—he'd made sure of it—and stood ready with their useless weapons clutched in steady hands. No fear in these ardent defenders, none at all, and why would there be? What had ever frightened them in the entire span of their threatless lives at the heart of this impregnable bastion? Fear was something they needed to be taught.

Las-fire scorched his armour with meaningless kisses, but the Raptor twisted as he fell, keeping his vulnerable armour joints protected. The ground shook with his

landing, all four claws birthing cracks in the stone beneath his weight. In the span of two seconds, he'd taken another three las-round kicks against his pauldrons and tracked all four of the robed defenders, retinal targeting locks signalling the types of weapons in their grips, and giving dull-sensed representations of the humans' heart rates.

Lucoryphus took in their distance at the same moment all of these details flickered over his eyeballs. The humans were too far away for an efficient leap and an easy kill.

*Irritating.*

He turned to the wall, jumping as his engines fired—his posture betraying nothing of humanity, closer resembling the splay-limbed leap of a house lizard. He hit the wall with his hands and feet, sticking there for a moment in a parody of saurian inelegance. Then he was moving, muscles burning, joints growling. Claws and talons cracked into the stone as he climbed, his jerky reptile-scramble carrying him away from the enemy fire below. Once he'd clawed high enough, he kicked off from the ornate stonework, letting gravity and the weight of his armour bring him back down.

*Better.*

The Raptor plummeted, shrieking from his helm's vocalisers, outstretched claws still smeared with rock dust.

Though inexperienced, the serfs weren't devoid of training. Pride and devotion carried them, keeping their lasrifles firing, while lesser—or less-indoctrinated—souls might otherwise run. Lucoryphus was a great admirer of courage and the things it could achieve in those rare moments where fate and the human spirit met to create something unique. In most cases, bravery did little more than end lives several seconds quicker than cowardice. If the white-robed serfs had run, he'd have needed to give chase. Instead, they stood their ground and died for it. Quick deaths, but none of them painless.

Lucoryphus crouched down once the deed was done, returning to all fours. His weapons were still sheathed, but his claws ran red. With an impatient grunt, he shook his ankle, dislodging a gobbet of meat between his taloned toes. The corridor was an abattoir, decorated with scraps of cloth. When he listened closely, he heard sounds of approaching mortals; their tread too light to be anything more. Hunt-lust surged through him as he crouched in the gore, chilled by anticipation, his limbs trembling with unsated needs.

He said "Preysight", though it left his helm's vocaliser just as it left his lips—a snarled, wet clicking from his throat. In his fury, the Raptor's Nostraman suffered similarly to Vorasha's. He felt saliva, thick and sticky, stringing between his tongue and the roof of his mouth.

Through his preysight, the wide corridor blurred into a world of tremulous greys. Even the bodies around him were bleached of detail, little more than vague shapes in the colourless nuance. Only when the enemy came around the corner did life and movement flicker through his eye lenses; jagged flashes of white against the dullness. Many of the Eighth Legion rigged their helms to track by heat, or to home in on movement. Lucoryphus of the Bleeding Eyes preferred to do things his own way. He tracked by the visualisation of sound. The humanoid flickers painting over his eyes

were formed from the percussion of footsteps and heartbeats, strengthened by voices and the crack of gunfire.

He met them with a shrieking charge of his own, drawing his weapons as his thrusters lifted him off the ground.

Talos picked up the severed head by its hair, ignoring the pissing trickle of its hewn neck. His blow hadn't been clean enough, and the stump wasn't cauterised by the power sword's chop—when the woman's head rolled from its perch, it was still free to bleed. Her body was an ungainly rug of tan flesh and twisted robes, sprawled across the floor.

He was no judge of these things—and the dead woman's slack-jawed, eye-rolled expression hardly made a judgement easier—but she seemed to have been attractive. Using the memento's hair, he tied it to one of the chains at his waist. The head thumped and bumped against the skulls already bound there. More blood seeped down the Night Lord's thigh and knee guard. He paid it no heed.

He rolled another body over with the edge of his boot. The young man's face gazed up at the ceiling, seeing through his murderer. Talos was turning away when his retinal display gave the tiniest flicker. Tilting his head, he looked back down at the dead man. A heartbeat?

A blood bubble burst at the corner of the serf's closed lips. Ah, so he still breathed. Not dead after all.

"You," Talos told him, "have earned yourself a place of honour." He hauled the dying man across the room, dragging him by the ankle, their trail marked by a glossy arterial smear along the stone floor. Slaying these menials granted little joy, at least not to the prophet, beyond a short thrill of a successful hunt each time he cleansed another chamber or corridor of their lives. He was wondering again how his brothers were faring, when footfalls outside the chamber stole his attention.

Talos whirled, bolter up and aiming at the doorway. Uzas lowered his own weapons—the gladius and chainaxe were both burnished with slick red.

"Brother," Uzas greeted him. "Such hunting. Such prey. The blood-stink is almost enough to drown the senses."

Talos lowered his own weapon, though not immediately.

"What do you plan to do with that?" Uzas gestured with his axe at the dying man.

"He was just about to help me make a blood condor."

"Few still alive in this subdistrict..." Uzas was swaying slightly, though Talos doubted his brother was aware of it. "No sense in making a blood condor. I killed many, Cyrion killed many. No one left alive to see it."

Talos let the ankle drop. With a gentility born of inattention, he crushed the man's throat beneath his heel. All the while, he watched Uzas in the doorway. "Where is Cyrion?"

Uzas didn't answer.

"Where is Cyrion?"

"Gone. Not here. I saw him before."

"How long ago?"

“We killed together for a while. Then he left to go alone. He hates me. I saw him strangling, and cutting, and eating the dead. Then he left to go alone.”

Talos snorted, the breathy, grunted challenge of a baited predator. “I have something to ask you,” he said. “Something important. I need you to focus on my words, brother.”

Uzas stopped swaying. His chainaxe stuttered at random intervals, as the Night Lord’s finger twitched on the trigger. “Ask.”

“The Void-born’s father. The crew found him dead. These last weeks, I believed it was the deed of nameless members of the old crew. But it wasn’t, was it?”

Uzas barked out something close to a cough. Whatever it was, it wasn’t an answer.

“Why did you do it, Uzas?”

“Do what?”

Talos’ voice showed nothing of anger, or even resignation. His tone was as neutral and plain as the dead rock remnants of their home world. “I know you can hear me. I know you’re in there.”

Uzas let the chainaxe whirr for several seconds. At last, he shook his head. “Mortals die, sometimes. I am not always to blame.” He turned to look down the corridor. “I go to hunt.” And he did, without another word.

The sirens still rang. Across the fortress-monastery now, the Claws were beginning to turn the lowest chambers into charnel houses, shrieking, roaring, doing everything they could to draw attention to themselves.

Talos stared at the empty doorway for several seconds, trying to decide if the conversation with Uzas was over.

With a murderer’s grin, he decided it wasn’t.

Xarl didn’t share his brothers’ idiotic pleasure at being tasked with a duty so devoid of glory. To haunt the fortress’ lower levels and butcher the indentured servants was one thing—someone had to be given that lamentable duty—but for First Claw to be ordered to do it was quite another.

He mused on this as he cleaned a meat clog from his chainsword’s mechanics. This one was bad enough to jam the damn weapon, but given the harvest of life he’d reaped around him, it was to be expected. Seventeen Chapter serfs lay in pieces, spread over the corridor. Xarl couldn’t grasp the mindset that allowed unaugmented humans to charge at him with nothing more than solid-shot pistols and knives, but that was ignorance he could easily live with. Evidently, those who could understand such things just ended up dead. Truly, not the most useful knowledge, then.

*Distraction.* The word itself was almost a curse. *The Claws will spread throughout the fortress-monastery*, the Exalted had ordained in its high and mighty drawl, *serving as distractions to allow the Bleeding Eyes to infiltrate the generatorum.*

And Talos just took it. He’d stood there, nodding his head, while the Bleeding Eyes were tasked with taking the prize.

Xarl shook his head at the memory. “I don’t like this,” he said aloud.

Mercutian had forgone his heavy bolter in favour of a simple chainsword. “That can only be the fortieth time you’ve said so.”

The two had crossed paths before the alarms started ringing, both chasing humans through the catacombs of this immense and loathsome fortress. Mercutian admitted he’d tracked Xarl’s rampage through the hallways, hoping to link up with Talos.

Xarl’s blade restarted, sprinkling blood from its wet teeth. “You’re usually the miserable one. It’s not like you to be so sanguine.”

“I am far from sanguine, but anything is better than being on the ship. And here, at least, we can hear the screams.” He seemed somehow abashed by the confession. “We’ve been out of battle for too long. I needed this. I needed to know we were still fighting the war.”

Xarl’s two-handed sword cycled down, idling at the ready. “*Fighting the war.* You even sound like Talos now.”

Mercutian reacted to Xarl’s tone in subtle, telling ways. His blade rose slightly, and his helm lowered into a glare. “And what of it?”

The other warrior chuckled. “It’s bad enough with him whining about faded glories and the Legion’s demise. If you commit to his delusions about a noble past that never happened, I’ll kill you myself in the name of mercy.”

Xarl ventured down the corridor, beneath the skeletal arches of dark basalt that rose to the ceiling. Mercutian followed, ill at ease. He considered, though only briefly, plunging his sword through the back of Xarl’s neck. Such treachery was beneath him, but the temptation was not. Xarl was a vicious soul, despite the trust Talos placed in him. The prophet considered him his most reliable brother, but Mercutian had always believed Xarl reeked of betrayals yet to come.

The thought of murdering his brother triggered a grimmer one: how many times had Xarl thought to do the same thing to him? He knew he wouldn’t like that answer. Some questions didn’t need to be asked.

As they walked, the sirens continued their plaintive whine around them, singing of excitement up in the higher levels.

Xarl’s mood soured as he passed empty prayer chambers, bare of furnishing and even barer of prey.

“Answer me something,” he demanded, apropos of nothing.

Mercutian kept turning to watch for any approaches from the rear. The corridor, replete with its mutilated inhabitants, remained as silent as the tomb they’d made of it.

“As you wish,” he said quietly.

“When was this grand and noble era that Talos describes? I was there, as were you. I fought in the Thramas Crusade, beating myself bloody against the Angels in Black. I was there when we pacified 66:12. I was there when Malcharion executed the king of that backwater pisshole, Ryle, and we broadcast his daughter’s screams for three days and three nights, until his army threw down their arms. I remember nothing of glory. The glory came in the decades after Terra, when we finally slipped the Imperial leash. Our father was honest then—we crusaded because we were strong, and the enemy was weak. Their fear tasted fine, and the galaxy bled when we struck. So *when*, brother? When was this golden age?”

Mercutian looked back at the other Night Lord. “It’s perspective, Xarl. What’s wrong with you? The venom in your voice borders on wrath.”

“*Talos*.” Xarl injected the word with acid. “I wonder lately, just how far he can fall into his own ignorance. He wearies me. If he wishes to lie to himself, then he may do so, but I cannot take another lecture about a noble Legion that never existed.”

“I fail to understand why this anger surfaces now.” Mercutian stopped walking. Xarl turned, slowly, his voice brought low by ugly emotion.

“Because after this moronic siege, we will fight the battle that matters: the *Echo of Damnation*. And what happens then? Talos will begin his new duties. The Exalted wants to rebuild our forces. Who will control that gradual resurrection? Talos. Who will indoctrinate the newbloods after implanting them with gene-seed? Talos. Who will fill their minds with sour lies about how the Emperor demanded that we, the great and glorious Eighth Legion, became the Imperial weapon of fear that no other Legion dared to be? *Talos*.”

Xarl gave an uncharacteristic sigh. “He will breed a generation of fools that share in his delusion. They will rise through our ranks, championing a cause that never existed, inheritors to a legacy that was never real.”

Mercutian said nothing. Xarl glanced at him. “You feel as he does, don’t you?”

“I was there as well, Xarl. We were the weapon humanity needed us to be. I cherish those memories, when entire worlds would surrender the moment they learned it was the Eighth Legion in orbit. Whether the Emperor demanded it of the primarch, we may never know. But we were that weapon, brother. I take pride in that.”

Xarl shook his head and carried on walking. “I am surrounded by fools.”

## XIX

### MERCENARIES

The Exalted leaned back in its throne, listening to the sounds of the strategium filtering through a veil of distracted thoughts. Around it, the sickening orchestra of human existence played out in its entirety: the grotesque, wet sound of moisture-laden respiration; the rustling hisses of clothing against flesh; the sibilant dryness of whispered words, spoken in the eternally misguided belief that the Legion masters couldn't hear.

Vandred had fallen blessedly silent again, and taken his lingering emotions with him. The Exalted only prayed it was a permanent oblivion this time, but held out little hope for such beneficence. The host body's former soul was likely folding back in on itself, hiding in the deepest recesses of their shared mind in the futile hope of making another attack.

Such desperation.

The Exalted let its gaze slide to the occulus, where a turbulent moon of methane oceans turned in the void. The moon was a shield, an aegis against the fortress-monastery's broken scanners somehow managing to detect them in orbit. Rather than linger in the upper atmosphere and risk discovery, the Exalted erred on the side of caution, withdrawing the *Covenant* to a safe distance after releasing the Legion's drop-pods.

Musing in the calm before the storm, the daemon immersed itself within its own mind, seeking any memory-scent that might lead it to Vandred. When it discovered nothing, not even the ghost of a trace, it turned its amused senses back to the world below.

This was a far more difficult sending, requiring protracted, painful focus. The Exalted bared its fanged maw, acidic spittle drizzling from its gums.

*Lucoryphus*, it pulsed.

Maruc cleaned the rifle with practised ease, vaguely listening to Septimus answering Octavia's endless questions.

As far as gifts went, the lasgun was a considerate one; the weapon of a Guardsman, for someone who'd always wished to be in the Guard, but he wasn't sure exactly what Septimus expected him to do with it. His eyes were bad, and that was the beginning and end of the whole situation. He doubted he could hit anything past twenty metres or so, and he wasn't going to be earning any sharpshooter medals any time soon.

Hound sat close to Maruc, clutching a dirty shotgun in his lap, his hands wrapped in even dirtier bandages. The former station worker couldn't tell where Hound was "looking" exactly, but if the angle of his face was anything to go by, the little blind man was watching Septimus and Octavia, brazenly doing what Maruc feigned disinterest in.

Meanwhile, Septimus and Octavia were doing what Septimus and Octavia always did best.

The seventh of Talos' slaves didn't look up from his work, tending to the engraved details on Lord Mercutian's heavy bolter. The file in his fingers made soft rasping sounds as it cleaned minor corrosion from the curving runes etched into the metal.

"Our Claws are nothing but distractions, moving upwards from the lowest levels." Still, the file scratched. "Vilamus has thousands of human defenders, but the Claws will go through them like sharks cutting the sea. The only concern is that the Marines Errant still have a skeleton garrison in place. Although they'll be unprepared for a strike at their home world's heart, they're still Imperial Space Marines, and they'll defend their monastery to the death. They have to be led away from the main objectives for this to work. That's where our Claws come in. They'll cleave through the monastery's population, drawing the Marines Errants' ire."

Octavia, with nothing to do since they'd arrived in the Vila system, was lounging around Maruc and Septimus' workshop. She flicked a worthless Nostraman copper coin across the room. Hound shuffled after it to pick it up and return it to her.

This was a game she played fairly often. Hound didn't seem to mind.

"What about the ones who hiss and spit?" she asked. "With the..." She curled her fingers into claws.

Septimus stopped to sip a cup of lukewarm water. "You mean the Bleeding Eyes. The only thing that matters is shutting down the secondary generatorum. That's what the Bleeding Eyes have been ordered to do. Once they disable that, the orbital defence batteries will fall offline. Then we attack. The *Covenant*, and the rest of Huron's fleet, moves into the atmosphere. The siege can begin."

"What if the Marines Errant attack the Bleeding Eyes, and not the Claws?"

"They won't." He glanced up to read her expression, checking to see if she was merely trying to be difficult and contrary with this interrogation. For her part, she looked curious enough, but he couldn't be sure. "They won't," he continued, "because the Claws will be attracting attention to themselves, while the Bleeding Eyes are sneaking in undetected. Have you seen the size of it on the hololithic? I've seen smaller hive cities. It's unlikely any of our warriors will see an Imperial Space Marine until the second phase of the siege. Even the distractions are likely unnecessary, but Talos is trying to be cautious. They need everyone to survive for what comes after."

Octavia mused for a few moments. "I almost feel guilty," she admitted. "If the ship was easier to fly, I'd not have wrecked it in the warp's tides, and we wouldn't need to take part in this madness."

Septimus switched to a different scraper, scratching at another set of runes. "The Claws don't care. The siege is meaningless, and they will do as little as possible while they're down there. Even in the siege, watch how the *Covenant* behaves. The



Exalted will save almost all of the ship's ammunition for what comes after. Talos doesn't care about anything except retaking the *Echo of Damnation*."

"But we've only just managed to build a crew large enough to run one ship. Why do they want two?"

"Why do they want anything?" Septimus shrugged, looking over at her. "For skulls. For the fact they find it amusing to shed an enemy's blood. For the simple act of revenge, heedless of cost and consequence. I obey them, Octavia. I don't try to understand them."

Octavia let the subject drop. Feints within feints, distractions within distractions... Nothing the Eighth Legion did was ever simple. Well, except when they ran away.

She tossed the coin again, and dutifully, Hound stumbled over to get it. As he crouched by the door, wrapped hands struggling to scoop the coin from the floor, the bulkhead rattled open. Hound staggered back, trundling over to his mistress. The humans watched an immense figure filling the doorway, its helm panning left and right, examining them each in turn.

The Legionary stepped into the chamber. His armour was almost devoid of ostentation, without a single skull or oath scroll bound to the ceramite. With every Night Lord bar the Atramentar deployed to the surface, Septimus knew who this had to be.

He didn't salute. He *wouldn't* salute.

The warrior regarded the four of them, silent but for his armour's voice, thrumming with each movement. In one hand he clutched a black staff, topped by the skull of a creature bearing a grotesque abundance of teeth.

"This chamber," he growled in Gothic. "It reeks of mating."

Maruc's face screwed up in a crinkle of confusion. He wasn't sure he heard that right. Hound glanced blindly in the direction of Octavia and Septimus, which was the only cue the Night Lord needed.

"Ah. Not mating. Desire. The smell is your biological attraction to one another. Your scents are histologically compatible." The Night Lord snorted, a beast snuffling an unpleasant scent from its senses. "Another foul flaw of the human condition. When you do not stink of fear, you stink of lust."

Octavia had narrowed her eyes at the beginning of his tirade. She had no idea who this was, but her value made her brave.

"I am not human," she said, more cattily than she'd intended.

The warrior chuckled at that. "A fact the slave staring at you with desire in his one remaining eye would do well to remember. *Homo sapiens* and *Homo navigo* were never meant to mix with any graceful genetic fusion. The balance of your pheromones is a curious one. I am surprised you do not repel one another."

Septimus didn't hide the ice in his voice. "What do you want, Ruven?"

"So you know me, then." The Legionary's slanted eye lenses fixed upon the artificer. "You must be the seventh."

"I am."

"Then you should treat me with more respect, lest you share the same fate as the second." Ruven chuckled again, a low baritone song. "Have you ever seen a soul

ripped from its housing of flesh? There is a moment, just a single, beautiful moment, when the body remains standing, every nerve transmitting a tide of electrical fire from the misfiring brain. The soul itself thrashes, still bound closely enough to its corpse that it shares the agony of a detonating nervous system, but unable to do anything beyond writhe in the aetheric currents.”

Ruven gave a contented sigh. “Truthfully, I have rarely seen a more perfect embodiment of terror incarnate. I thanked the second for the gift of his death, for I learned a great deal about the warp, and my own powers, that night.”

“You killed Secundus.” Septimus blinked. “*You* killed him.”

The masked warrior performed a courtly bow. “Guilty.”

“No.” Septimus swallowed, trying to force himself to think. “Talos would have killed you.”

“He tried.” Ruven stalked around the armoury, examining the tools of Septimus’ trade. He stopped when he reached Hound. “And what are you, little wretch?” Ruven nudged the attendant with the side of his boot, knocking Hound from his seat. “Navigator Etrigius took poor care of his slaves, didn’t he?” He looked at Octavia. “You have inherited the dregs, girl.”

Hound snarled up at him from the floor, but Ruven was already moving on. “Septimus, you vastly overestimate your master’s abilities—and his sense of prudence—if you believe Talos could ever kill me. After Secundus, he did try, and I commended his enthusiasm every time. Ultimately, while he never forgave me, he abandoned the tedious attempts at revenge. I believe he grew tired of failure.”

Octavia raised an eyebrow. Abandoning revenge? That didn’t sound like Talos.

Septimus was less inclined to hold his tongue. “You did this to my face,” he said. “The prison world, in the Crythe system.”

Ruven peered down at the mortal, regarding the expensive, subtle augmetic work at his temple and eye socket.

“Ah, so you were the Thunderhawk pilot. What a well-trained rodent you are, boy.”

Septimus clenched his teeth, fisting his hands to fight the overwhelming urge to reach for his pistols. “You sent those prisoners to kill us on Solace.”

Octavia’s confidence was evaporating now. While Septimus had been left for dead on Solace, mutilated in the Thunderhawk’s cockpit, the survivors had beaten her to the edge of consciousness and dragged her by her hair into the bowels of the prison complex.

“That was you? You sent them? Four hours,” she whispered. “I was down there in the dark, with those... animals... For. *Four. Hours.*”

Ruven shook his head, dismissing their melodramatic human nonsense. “Enough of this whining. My armour requires maintenance.”

“I am not your artificer.” Septimus almost laughed.

“You tend First Claw’s weapons and armour, do you not?”

“Yes, I do. And you are not one of First Claw.”

“I was once. I will be again.”

“Then you may order me to tend to your armour if First Claw ever accepts you again, and I will still refuse. Until then, get out.”

Ruven glanced at each of them in turn. “What did you just say?”

“Get out.” Septimus rose to his feet. He didn’t go for his guns, knowing such a gesture was worthless. The Legionary could slaughter them all in a heartbeat if he chose. “Get out of my master’s armoury. This is the domain of First Claw and those in service to them.”

Ruven stood in impassive silence. This was something he’d simply not expected. Curiosity and amazement far outweighed any anger.

“Get out.” Octavia, unlike Septimus, had drawn her pistol. She aimed it up at the sorcerer’s horned helm.

Hound followed suit, his grubby shotgun emerging from a split in his rags. “Mistress says to go.”

Maruc was last, aiming his polished-iron lasrifle. “The lady asked you to leave.”

Ruven still didn’t move. “Talos used to train his slaves to much higher standards,” he said.

Now Septimus drew his pistols, aiming both of them at the Night Lord’s faceplate. Meaningless gesture or not, the slaves stood united.

“I told you to get out,” he repeated.

“You do not sincerely believe this display is actually threatening, do you?” Ruven took a step forward. Twin red dots wavered over his left eye lens, as Septimus thumbed the safeties off. The Legionary shook his head. “You live only because of your value to the Legion.”

“No,” Septimus glared, one of his eyes dark and human, the other glassy and artificial. “We live because you are alone on this ship, and loathed by all who sail her. My master shares much with me. I know the Exalted seeks the smallest, meagre reason to execute you. I know First Claw would kill you before trusting you again. You have no rights over our lives. We live not because of our worth, but because you are worthless.”

Before Ruven could reply, Octavia reached her free hand to her bandana, hooking her fingers under the edge of the cloth.

“Get out.” The pistol trembled in her other fist. “*Get out.*”

Ruven inclined his head, conceding the point. “This was most educational, slaves. I thank you for it.”

With that, he turned and stalked from the room. The bulkhead sealed behind him.

“Who the hell was that?” Maruc asked them.

“A bad soul,” Hound was scowling. His sewn eyes seemed puckered, squeezed tighter than usual. “A very bad soul.”

Septimus holstered his guns. In three steps, he’d crossed the room, taking Octavia in his arms. Maruc looked away, a sudden feeling of awkwardness prickling his skin. It was the most he’d seen them touch, and he knew Septimus well enough to judge that it’d taken all of the artificer’s courage to be so bold. He could point a gun at a demigod easily enough, but could barely muster the stones to offer a little comfort to someone he cared for.

She writhed out of his embrace almost immediately. “Don’t... touch me. Not right now.” Octavia shivered as she slipped from his arms, but her hands didn’t stop

shaking once she was free. “Hound, let’s go.” Her voice quavered on the simple command.

“Yes, mistress.”

Once the door sealed again, the two men were left alone. Maruc placed his rifle back on the workbench. “Well, that was exciting.”

Septimus was still looking at the closed door. “I’m going after her,” he said.

Maruc smiled for his friend’s benefit, despite the way his heart still raced in the wake of the confrontation with the Legionary.

“You picked the wrong time to grow a backbone. Let her be alone. What she said, about being taken by the prisoners on Solace—was that true?”

Septimus nodded.

“Then the last thing she wants at the moment is a man’s arms around her,” Maruc pointed out.

Septimus crashed down onto his seat, leaning forwards, his arms on his knees and his head lowered. Ash-blond hair fell forwards, curtaining his pale features. His dark eye blinked, his blue lens clicked and whirled.

“I hate this ship.”

“That’s just what she says.”

Septimus shook his head. “It was so much easier before she joined the crew. Come when summoned; do the duty; know your value. I questioned nothing, because there was no one to answer to.” He took a breath, trying to frame his thoughts, but came up empty.

“How long has it been,” Maruc kept his voice gentle, “since you judged yourself by human standards? Not as a slave without any choice, but as a man halfway through the only life he gets?”

Septimus raised his head, meeting Maruc’s gaze. “What do you mean?”

“Throne, it’s cold on this ship. My bones ache.” He rubbed the back of his neck with oil-blackened hands. “You know what I mean. Before Octavia, you did all of these things without ever needing to look at yourself. You did what you did because you had no choice, and you never judged any of your actions because there was no one else to see them. But now there’s her, and there’s me. And all of a sudden you feel like a heretic son of a bitch, don’t you?”

Septimus said nothing.

“Well, *good*.” Maruc smiled, but it was merciful rather than mocking. “You should feel like that, because that’s what you are. You denied it to yourself for all those years, but now you’ve got other eyes watching you.”

Septimus was already buckling his machete to his shin in crude echo of First Claw’s sheathed gladius blades.

“Going somewhere?” Maruc asked.

“I need some time to think. I’m going to check on my gunship.”

“Your gunship? *Your* gunship?”

Septimus adjusted his beaten jacket before heading to the door. “You heard me.”

Cyrion reflected, as he occasionally did, on the attitudes of his brothers. After ascending another spiralling flight of stairs, he’d torn through several linked

chambers, each with the austere chill and bare decoration of an Ecclesiarchy cathedral, and he was beginning to wonder just where the serfs on this level were hiding.

If this level was even used much at all.

Occasionally, he came across stragglers, but these were unarmed, terrified things, and he doubted killing them would draw much attention at all. Still, he cut most of them down, careful to let a handful flee, screaming, through the monastery.

Hopefully they'd bring the Marines Errant down here, so the Bleeding Eyes would finish their brutally simple missions, and the Claws could be done with the siege completely.

Cyrion was less enamoured of the plan than the rest of his brothers. He didn't care that the Bleeding Eyes had claimed the right to destroy the secondary generatorum—let them play whatever games they wished, and drape themselves in glory if they so chose. No, what stuck in Cyrion's craw was a much simpler, much less palatable notion.

He, like his brothers, didn't care about Vilamus.

The Imperium would no doubt consider this a great tragedy, and scribes were sure to waste oceans of ink in detailing the travesty of its loss. Lord Huron, likewise, would gain much from the siege, and this would be archived in history as one of his boldest, most daring raids.

The day the Marines Errant were doomed to a slow, ignoble demise. The night an Adeptus Astartes Chapter died.

And that was what troubled Cyrion. They were going to be instrumental in striking a vicious wound against the Imperium, yet neither he, nor any of his brothers, cared.

All eyes were on the true prize: the *Echo of Damnation*. Talos, Xarl, the Exalted, all of them—the battle they hungered for was going to be waged against fellow traitors. They would rather bleed their own allies than focus on injuring the Imperium.

The attitude was not a new one: Cyrion had ventured into the Eye of Terror on countless occasions, witnessing the brutal crusades waged by the remnants of the Legions against one another. Brother against brother, warband against warband—millions of souls shedding blood in the name of their chosen warlords.

He'd fought in those wars himself; against hordes of Legionaries fighting for power, for faith, for conquest or for nothing beyond the pure release of rage, letting fury spill from them like corruption from a lanced boil. On more than one occasion, he'd opened fire on other Night Lords, gunning down brothers whose sin was no more than choosing to follow a different banner.

Their greatest enemy was their own inability to unite without unrivalled leadership. Few warriors possessed the strength and cunning to truly hold the disparate armies of the Eye together. Instead, loyalties were sworn at the lowest levels, and warbands formed from those who unified in the hope of surviving and raiding together. Betrayal was a way of life, for each and every soul in those armies was already a traitor once. What did one more treachery matter, when they'd already forsaken their oaths to mankind's empire?

Cyryon, for all his flaws, was no fool. He knew these fundamental truths, and he accepted them.

But he'd never seen it play out like this before. In the past, even at Crythe, inflicting harm upon the Imperium came before all else. It was the one goal guaranteed to force warbands to unite, even if only for a time.

Yet none of them cared about Vilamus. None of them cared about tearing this worthless, insignificant Chapter from the pages of history. Instead, they were ripping it from the galaxy's face with all the passion of wiping blood from their boots.

Was this how it began? Was this the path that ended with Uzas, snarling instead of speaking, blinded by his own hatred of everything that lived and breathed? Perhaps this was how all corruption began... in the quiet moments, facing the fact that avenging the sins of the past mattered more than any hope for the future?

Now there was a thought. What would they do, once the war was won? Cyryon grinned as he walked, enjoying the prospect of an unanswerable question.

He had to admit Vilamus was a bastion of the most majestic, bleak beauty, and such things appealed to him. In a way, it reminded him of Tsagualsa, stirring the faint embers of a long-fallow melancholy. Tsagualsa had been hauntingly beautiful—a bastion beyond words, raised by thousands of enslaved workers grinding their lives away into the dust of that barren world.

Cyryon replaced his helm, still tasting the blood of the last three serfs he'd slain. Flickering after-images danced behind his eyes, telling him nothing of any worth. Moments of great emotion in their lives... joy, terror, pain... All meaningless.

His bootsteps echoed as he left the chamber, moving back into the labyrinthine hallways and corridors that linked the subdistricts of this immense, baffling monastery. It would be glorious to be able to claim such a fortress as both haven and home, rather than the dank decks of the *Covenant*, or worse, the Legion's claimed worlds in the Eye—but its immensity was a weapon against invaders. His retinal map had failed a while ago, and he'd not studied enough sections to commit the entire thing to even an eidetic memory.

Stumbling around lost and butchering helpless Chapter servants was all very amusing, but it wasn't—

A squad of liveried, armed Chapter serfs ran around the far end of the corridor, cracking lasrifles off and taking firing positions. Cyryon heard the officer yelling orders. It was by far the most organised defence he'd witnessed yet. At last, Vilamus was reacting, its defenders hunting the intruders. He almost charged them, such was the call of instinct, despite the fact more and more of them were filling the corridor's far end. Their movements were a stampede of footsteps on stone.

In truth, he'd enjoyed the easy massacre so far, but things were about to become a measure more difficult.

Cyryon turned and broke into a run, leading his slow pursuers on a merry chase. Already, he heard them voicing for more of their kindred, calling for other squads to cut him off ahead.

Let them come. The more that arrived, the fewer would be left to defend the upper levels.

Brekash vocalised his anger as a chittering hiss through his mouth grille. The nuances of language within that single sibilate were there for all to hear, but only his brothers in the Bleeding Eyes had any chance of understanding the meaning.

Lucoryphus understood all too well. He rounded on the other Raptor, his claws crackling in echo of his own irritation.

“Do not make me slay you,” he warned.

Brekash gestured to the whining generator, easily the size of a Land Raider battle tank. Another bark of un-language left his vocaliser.

“This is meaningless,” he insisted. “How many of these have we destroyed? How many?”

Lucoryphus replied in kind with a condor’s shriek, the cry of an apex predator foreshadowing his words. “You are being moronic, and my patience bleeds dry. Destroy it, and let us move on.”

Brekash was one of the few warriors in the pack who preferred to stand on his altered foot-claws. He did so now, looking down at his crouching leader.

“You are leading us into folly. Where are the Marines Errant? They do not come to defend these places because these places have no worth.”

Lucoryphus’ helm jerked in a brutal twitch of his neck. Several of the power cables and flexible pipes hanging from the back of his helmet thrashed as the Raptor spasmed, hanging loose like mechanical dreadlocks.

“We’ve seen no Marines Errant because this monastery is the *size of a hive city*, fool. Scarcely a hundred of them remain on the world. If the Imperial Ones have even had time to react in defence of their fortress, they are defending the lower levels against the Claws.” Lucoryphus punctuated his words with an aggressive growl.

Brekash wouldn’t be cowed. “Each of these we destroy makes no difference. Already, we’ve slain nine machines. Nothing has changed.”

Lucoryphus ordered two of the others to cease toying with the bodies of the dead serfs. “Urith, Krail, destroy the generator.”

The Raptors obeyed, crossing the room in an arcing leap, carried by coughs of jetpack thrust. With nothing even approaching finesse, they laid into the juddering machine with their claws and fists, pounding dents into it and ripping hunks of steel away. Once they’d torn several openings to the generator’s innards, the two Raptors let a handful of grenades clatter into the machine’s core.

“Forty seconds, lord,” Krail hissed.

Lucoryphus nodded, but didn’t leave. He turned back to Brekash. “This fortress is a city, and we stand inside its guts, crawling north and south, up and down, poking at the organs. Think of a Legionary’s heart, brother.” The Raptor held out a claw as if carrying a human heart in his palm. “It is a layered fruit, with chambers and pathways leading inside and out. Cut one connection, and perhaps the body dies, perhaps the body lives. Cut many connections, and there is no doubt at all.”

Lucoryphus inclined his tendrilled helm towards the clanking generator. “This is one of the heart-chambers of Vilamus. We have severed some of its bonds. We will sever more if we must. But the heart will fail, and the body will die.”

Brekash saluted, a clawed fist over his heart. “I obey.”

The Raptor leader’s bleeding lenses refocussed on his brother. “Then we move.”

The Exalted's swollen black eyes rolled to the oculus once again.

With the lashing return of an overstretched cord, the creature's senses snapped back into its own mind. Lucoryphus' perception took several sickening moments to fade—the disgusting feeling of too-human flesh; the repugnant sensation of staring with eyes forged in the material realm, blind to the minutiae of ethereal nuance.

“The Bleeding Eyes are on the edge of success,” the creature growled.

“Orders, my lord?” asked the deck officer.

The daemon leaned forwards in its throne, its armour growling, but not loud enough to mask the horrendous creak and crackle of inhuman sinew.

“Ahead two-thirds.”

“Aye, lord.”

The Exalted watched the oculus closely, before keying in several adjustments to the hololithic system display.

“Come abeam of the first orbital defence platform. Launch Thunderhawks to recover our drop-pods before the Corsairs arrive.”

“As you wish, lord.”

“And ready the warp beacon. Summon Huron's fleet as soon as our Thunderhawks are on approach to dock.”



## XX

# THE FALL OF VILAMUS

Cyrion was the last to join them. He pounded into the room, bolter in hand, almost skidding to a halt on the litany-etched stone floor. Footsteps—a great many footsteps—clattered in the corridors some way behind him.

“I got lost,” he admitted.

Xarl and Talos moved with practised fluidity, their movements twinned as they took positions either side of the wide doorway Cyrion had just used as an entrance.

“It sounds as though you brought friends,” the prophet remarked. “How many?”

Cyrion stood with Mercutian, both of them readying bolters. Uzas ignored his brothers, though his helmed head snapped around with a hunting dog’s eagerness when he heard the approaching footsteps.

“Enough,” said Cyrion. “Dozens. But they’re only human. I haven’t seen a single Marine Errant.” The warrior glanced around the chamber for the first time, seeing the immense circular hall cleared of all furniture—everything, every dead body, every pew seat and ornate table, had been dragged to the chamber’s sides, leaving the middle bare. “You’ve been busy,” Cyrion said. The others ignored his comment, which neither annoyed nor surprised him.

Talos slapped his crackling sword blade against the stonework to get Uzas’ attention. It left a scorch mark.

“Bolter,” he said.

“What?”

“Use your bolter, brother. We’re taking a defensive position in this chamber. Too many foes to charge.”

Uzas hesitated, perhaps not comprehending. He looked down at the axe and gladius in his hands.

“*Use your bolter,*” Xarl snapped. “Look at us against this wall, freak. Does it look like we’re charging?”

Uzas sheathed his weapons at last, and unlimbered his bolter. It caught the prophet’s eye with the sting of memory; the same relic Malcharion had commissioned to honour Uzas’ deeds in a brighter, better age.

“Uzas,” he said.

“Hnnh?”

Talos could hear the footsteps drawing closer, along with the shouted, oath-rich encouragements of the squads’ officers. “Brother, I remember when you were given that weapon. Do you?”

Uzas clutched the bolter tighter. “I... Yes.”

The prophet nodded. "Use it well. Here they come."

"I hear them," came a human voice, frail and thin compared to the rumbling growls of the Legionaries' speech.

Talos nodded to Xarl, and they moved around the corner as one. Bolters crashed in dark hands, shuddering as they spat shells down the corridor. Both warriors were back in cover before the first las-streaks slashed through the doorway in response.

"That one you hit in the face," Xarl chuckled. "Both bolts. His head turned into red mist. I can hear his men choking on it."

Talos reloaded, catching the spent magazine and storing it away. "Focus."

The chains on his armour rattled against the ceramite, though he wasn't moving. Xarl flicked a glance at his own pauldron, where the chained skulls were knocking together as if in a breeze.

"About time," Mercutian muttered.

First Claw averted their eyes from the centre of the room as the light first began to manifest. Sourceless wind rushed against their armour, a vortex in reverse, breathing cold air against the implacable ceramite. The faintest touch of ice rime formed on the edges of their armour, while the bloodstained clothing worn by the dead bodies spread around the chamber crumpled and flapped in the building gale.

"Such drama." Cyrion bared his teeth behind his faceplate.

A sonic boom of violated air shattered several of the overturned tables, blasting their wreckage against the walls.

The light receded, crumbling back into the nothingness from whence it came.

Five figures stood in the chamber's heart: five figures in desecrated armour, strewn with talismans and engraved with bronze runes. Four of them eclipsed the fifth—their immense Terminator war plate giving guttural snarls as they viewed their surroundings, tusked helms turning this way and that.

The fifth was bareheaded, dwarfed by the others in stature, yet emanating an amused, ugly charisma from the glint in his eyes to the confident smirk.

"You have done well," grinned Lord Huron of the Red Corsairs.

Variel walked in calm, impassive reflection, heading through countless corridors on his way to the observation deck. It was time to take stock, and drawing close to the time when a decision must be made. To that end, the Apothecary made his way to one of the few places he could be assured of some peace. He always felt his thoughts flowed clearest when staring out into the humbling reaches of space.

The first phase was complete, with the Night Lords evidently successful in shutting down one of the secondary power feeds within the walls of Vilamus. Huron had chosen his target well—with that subdistrict's generatorum offline, the fortress-monastery was vulnerable to an attack far more insidious than the relative barbarism of an orbital strike.

Rather than insist his oath-bound hirelings martyr themselves for his cause, Huron required them to do nothing more than deactivate the outlying shields preventing teleportation, and clear enough space in various chambers for several of his own squads to manifest directly within the fortress. Thus began the second phase,

and if Huron's forces proceeded at the expected pace, they would still encounter insignificant resistance.

It was a plan not entirely without elegance, chosen because little else had any hope of success. Assaulting a fortress-monastery with anything other than esoteric cunning was doomed to failure. The fact this assault was deemed to be so decisive and without risk was, in the Flayer's mind, nothing short of miraculous. He could almost imagine Imperial archives referencing this defeat for centuries to come, citing the perils of leaving a Chapter's sanctuary so woefully unprotected.

With its initial defences rendered worthless, Vilamus now stood on the edge of true invasion.

Huron would drag his Terminators down to the surface through the arcane complexities of teleportation, manifesting at the preset coordinates cleared by the Eighth Legion infiltrators. From there, each squad would seek to link up on the march to the primary power relay station deeper within the monastery's core. A Terminator advance, while ponderous, would break everything before it. With fifty of his chosen elite in the priceless suits of war plate, reinforced by eight Claws from the *Covenant*, Variel doubted Huron would have anything to worry about.

The destruction of this inner sanctum would supposedly herald the endgame. For now, even with its orbital platforms blinded and powerless, and even with its protective shields dead, Vilamus remained an unapproachable bastion, capable of annihilating any ground forces that dared lay siege at its staggering walls. Any attempt to make a landing would be met with withering fire from the legion of turrets and missile silos lining the battlements.

Variel reached the observation deck, striding to one of the glass walls and gazing down at the barren rock of a world. From orbit, it seemed almost a stalemate. The raider fleet approaching the world couldn't drop warriors in support. Gunships and drop-pods remained clutched in loading bays, filled with eager warriors unable to see battle.

Vilamus was visible to the naked eye even from this altitude, but it failed to inspire anything but contempt in the Flayer's thoughts. A vast spire of uninspiring red stone, soon to be cleansed of anything even remotely valuable.

The Tyrant's Terminator elite were at work down there, cutting their way to the primary energy relay sector, ready to starve Vilamus' last defences of the power they craved in order to fire.

Variel stared at the world in silence, severing himself from the vox-channels to avoid the pre-battle tedium of his brothers swearing oaths to powers they barely understood. He needed time to think, despite doing little else these last weeks.

At the cusp of the second phase's completion, Variel would need to act, one way or the other. With his best estimate, that gave him less than an hour to make a choice.

The creature glared at Talos as it clutched the Tyrant's shoulder guard. He was tempted to swat the ugly little thing with the flat of his blade, and wipe its alien stare clean off its beady-eyed face. Spindly, cursed in appearance with an excess of protruding bones at its ribs and ungainly joints, the xenos-wretch rode on the warlord's armour, occasionally twisting its features into a grimace.

Huron's focus was elsewhere. After greeting the warriors of the Eighth Legion, he'd immediately set to advancing through the hallways, every tread crushing marble and onyx floor tiling beneath his boots, and testing the abused vox network in a bid to link up with his other squads. The Terminators flanked their lord, forming a ceramite shell as they marched, filling the breadth of even the widest corridors.

Behind them, First Claw walked in relative quiet, weapons lowered, each member's thoughts sealed within his own helm.

The few squads of uniformed Chapter serfs that didn't immediately flee died to the chattering crash of Terminator storm bolters. Several times, the horde stalked over ground thickly pasted with organic mush from shell-burst bodies. The Corsairs appeared no different, but First Claw was stained red to their shins.

Talos recognised the smell thickening the air, knowing the same spicy, sulphur-copper reek of ruptured human meat from every battlefield he could remember. Yet, most recently, it had been richest on the corrupted decks of Hell's Iris. The scent saturated even the metal hull of Huron's outpost, doubtless seeping in from the Maelstrom's poisoned winds. No wonder mutation ran rife.

"What *is* that thing?" Xarl voxed. In close proximity, communications worked, though in a scratchingly weak half-hearted way.

"I asked Variel once." Talos couldn't stop staring at the little beast-thing. "Huron calls it a *hamadrya*, apparently. It's a psychic creature, mind-bonded to the Tyrant."

Xarl curled his lip. "I want to slap it off his back and stamp on its leering face."

"You and I both, brother."

Huron brought the procession to a halt with a raised hand. "Hold." The Corsair's eyes, already bloodshot and narrowed by the pain of simply existing in his reconstructed state, twitched as he concentrated. The creature on his back drooled a viscous, silvery slime from its chittering maw. It bleached the paint from Huron's armour where it dripped.

"We are close now. And several of our kin-squads draw near. Come, brothers. The prize is almost ours, then this siege can truly begin."

"Wait," Uzas said. "I hear something."

To say they arrived in orderly formation would be to do them an injustice, for the warriors' cohesion far exceeded anything seen in the Blood Reaver's attack force. In pristine ceramite of blue and white, matching the halved heraldries of ancient Terran knights, a single squad of warriors threw themselves into cover at the far end of the corridor. Their movements were utterly economical, ruthless in their soldierly precision, taking positions in total silence but for the growl of armour and the crack of bolter stocks against shoulder guards as each of them took aim.

Their leader was unhelmed, his stern features moulded into a mask of absolute resolve. Even over the distance, Talos knew that look, and could recall when he'd worn it himself. The defiance in the warrior's gaze made the prophet's skin crawl. Here was a man that believed in his cause. He felt no doubt, no hesitation, no temptation to wrack his mind in the futile second-guessing of sworn duty. His life was unclouded by broken oaths, and the legacy of mistrust and confusion that drifted in the wake of every betrayal.

Talos saw all of this in the time it took the warrior to raise his chainsword—a single second spent recognising the eyes of one who lived his life according to Talos' own long-abandoned convictions.

He heard Mercutian say, in rare Nostraman gutter-tongue, "*Oh, shit.*"

The prophet and his brothers moved in a unity of their own, despite no signal passing between any of them. Clutching weapons tightly to their chests, First Claw stepped into the hulking shadows of the Terminators.

"*Kill them,*" Huron sneered, already advancing in a halting, hitching stride. His Terminators followed, leaning forwards into onerous runs, keeping pace and enclosing their lord, shielding him with their armoured bodies. Their tread was enough to send an arrhythmic pulse through the ground.

Ahead of them, the brother-sergeant chopped the air with his howling chainblade, and the Marines Errant filled the corridor with a demolishing hail of bolter shells.

Detonating shells burst against the layered ceramite, shrapnel clattering against the walls in gritty hail. Even protected as they were in their armour, the Corsairs growled and cursed.

First Claw kept themselves in the Terminators' wake, shadowing their steps, letting the Corsair elite wade through the enemy fire. Xarl's snigger came over the vox, and Talos felt himself grinning.

"You're doing fine, brothers," Cyrion mocked the Corsairs over the squad's secure vox-channel. The gore-scent was buried now, hidden beneath the chemical tang of bolter discharge and the powdery reek of fyceline dust.

"Fight," one of the Terminators growled in a grey-voiced drone of vox. "Fight, you spineless Nostraman bastards." First Claw didn't answer, though their helms gave subtle clicks, betraying the laughter they shared in private. As the Corsair warrior reloaded his storm bolter, a shell cracked against his helm, shattering both tusks and earning a pained grunt.

The sound of so many bolts striking home was a rainstorm on a roof of corrugated iron. Over the din, Talos heard the Marines Errant sergeant give that ancient cry, "For the Emperor!"

Ah, the whispery tendrils of nostalgia. The prophet smiled again, even as the warrior in front of him buckled and crashed to his knees, finally felled by massed bolter fire. Talos moved in the same moment, slipping into another Terminator's shadow, sharing the living, cursing cover with Mercutian.

"*Charge!*" Huron screamed the order in two voices, when the vocaliser built into his throat took over from his damaged vocal chords. His warriors powered forwards, lowering their bolters and hefting energised mauls.

"We should take these fools everywhere," Cyrion suggested.

"Blood..." Uzas whispered over the vox. "Blood for the Blood God."

Xarl blind-fired around the bulk of the Terminator he was using as a shield. Talos and Mercutian joined in, and the prophet risked a glance around his reluctant protector's shoulder guard. He saw the Marines Errant falling back in supreme order, abandoning their dead, still pouring out half a squad's worth of fire.

Tenacious dogs, these Marines Errant.

Their sergeant was down, his legs stretched out slack and useless, while he used his own body to defend two of his men crouching behind him. The two warriors dragged him back as they fired over his shoulders, their gunfire adding to the meticulously clockwork *crack, crack, crack* of his pistol.

One of them struck Huron. They all heard the thudding kick of a bolt shell hitting home, and the crumpling burst of the reactive shell exploding against armour. The warlord staggered back between the members of First Claw. He had a single moment to curse the Night Lords for their apparent cowardice, and the fact he sensed the truth was written in a sneer across his features: he knew full well each of them was smiling behind their skulled helms.

The instant passed. Huron threw himself back into the relentless advance, raising his mechanical right arm as if to warn the Marines Errant away before they committed some grievous error. In the claw's palm, the spokes of an eight-bladed star led to a gaping, charred flamer nozzle, dripping colourless promethium fuel in its crudest, stinking raw form.

The Marines Errant broke ranks at last, only for their retreating forms to become statuesque silhouettes in the flooding wash of white fire. One of them unleashed a chemical torrent from his own flamer, dousing two of the Corsairs in corrosive splashes of liquid fire.

Girded in the technological marvels that comprised each suit of Tactical Dreadnought Armour, the Terminators shrugged their way through the flames.

But the Marines Errant burned. They roared as they died, fighting as they dissolved, lashing out with weapons fused to melting fists. With their armour joints liquefying, running under their ceramite plating as molten sludge, the last Marines Errant crashed to the ground.

The Corsairs kicked the burning husks aside, and marched on.

"We are close," Huron growled between clenched steel teeth. "So close."

He turned to the Eighth Legion warriors, to berate them for their pathetic show of timidity, to encourage them to push on and fight harder, so that they might all earn this great victory together. But when he turned, the hallway was empty but for the Marines Errant he'd killed. Flames still licked at exposed patches of skin. Bolters were reduced to pools of grey slag, halfpuddled on the stone.

The Night Lords were gone.

An astral congregation came together in the skies above Vilamus. For some time, Variel was content to watch the gathering from the observation deck of the Corsair warship *Misery's Crown*, likening the drifting cruisers to sharks, assembling at the first scent of blood in the black water.

These were his brothers, and this mighty armada was the greatest embodiment of all they'd achieved together. Below them, powerless and unprotected, was their greatest prize yet.

The *Pride of Macragge* drifted past, another stolen ship, its repainted hull proudly bedecked in blasphemous symbols of brass. Variel spent several minutes watching it sail by, observing the Pantheon Stars carved into the warship's armour plating.

The deck vibrated beneath his feet as the *Crown* shivered in the planet's upper atmosphere, settling into a low orbit. He could make out the *Venomous Birthright* at the flotilla's edge, orbited almost parasitically by its support fleet. The lesser cruisers burned their engines hard to keep up with the warship as it coasted around the Red Corsair cruisers, unleashing its formidable weapon batteries on the deactivated orbital defences. It was hardly alone in this spiteful act of aggression; several vessels followed their own flight paths, reducing the missile platforms and defence satellites to wreck and ruin.

Debris flared briefly in the void as it crashed harmlessly against the *Birthright's* shields, splashing gentle kaleidoscope ripples through the shimmering field of energy. Shoved by the momentum of their destruction, several of the large installations tumbled into the atmosphere in a slow motion that seemed almost graceful. Variel watched them burn and spin, dissolving in atmospheric fire as they fell to the planet below.

He turned, finding what he sought almost immediately. Midnight against the nothingness, the *Covenant of Blood* was a long-bladed spear at the armada's heart. The winged skull of Nostramo stared from its battlemented aftcastle, its eyeless gaze leering across the fleet to meet the Apothecary's stare.

Variel was still watching the Eighth Legion warship when the drop sirens started their industrial caterwauling. He turned from the observation portal, affixed his helm in place, and tuned into the melee of clashing, crashing voices.

"This is Variel."

"Flayer, this is Castallian."

"Hail, Champion."

"I have been trying to reach you, brother. Lord Huron has succeeded." Bootsteps, clashes and clanks in the background. "Where are you?"

"The... The gene-seed vaults are still exhibiting signs of terminal flux in the cryogenic process. We cannot receive and store plunder from the surface with them in this condition."

"What do you mean, 'still'? I don't understand."

*No*, Variel thought. *Of course you don't.*

"I have recorded no fewer than thirteen specific notations in the last month, citing that our ship's vault is unacceptably temperamental."

"Apothecary, I need a solution immediately. The Chapter is deploying as we speak. Vilamus' defences are broken, and we are needed on the surface."

Variel let the silence run for ten long, long seconds. He could almost hear his captain squirming.

"Flayer?"

"I have destroyed the servitors responsible for the improper rites of maintenance, Champion. You have nothing to fear; the Tyrant will assign no blame to you."

There was a pause. "I... am grateful, Variel."

"I need time, Castallian. We are one of the only vessels capable of transporting what we steal, and I have no desire to stand before Lord Huron with the confession that we allowed laxity to destroy a quarter of the genetic treasure harvested from the world below."

Another pause. "I am placing my trust and my life in your hands."

"Not for the first time, brother. I will join you in the second wave. Good hunting."

Variel waited for exactly one minute, counting the seconds in his head. Vox-channels scrambled as he tuned through several frequencies.

"This is the Flayer," he said at last. "Do you know that name?"

"My... my lord," the voice replied. "All know that name."

"Very well. Secure an Arvus shuttle to be launched the moment the starboard docking bay is clear. I need transport to the *Venomous Birthright*."

"As you command, Flayer." Variel heard the officer speaking off-vox, making arrangements. The transfer of personnel from ship to ship during such an operation was hardly an anomaly, but it required some creative planning with the gunship fleet launching and the hangars so crowded by crew.

"Deck commander?" Variel interrupted the man's organising.

"Yes, sir?"

"I perform this duty for Lord Huron himself. If you fail me, you will be failing our master."

"I will not fail, sir."

Variel killed the link, and started walking.

"The Corsair fleet is moving into drop formation, my lord."

The Exalted said nothing. It merely watched.

Malek of the Atramentar followed his master's gaze. "Talos was right. The first phase was laughably easy."

Garadon replied, the other Terminator clutching his massive warhammer in both hands, as if ready for a more immediate threat.

"Easy for us. I'm sure if he'd entrusted his Red Corsairs to infiltrate the fortress, they'd have wasted hours on uncoordinated killing sprees. Do you underestimate our Claws' finesse, brother?"

Malek just grunted for an answer.

The Exalted snarled its first order in some time, sending mortal bridge officers moving to obey. "Launch Thunderhawks to retrieve the Claws."

With a smile, or as close as the Exalted's twisted jaws ever came to one, it looked at its bodyguards. "See what we have done here," it murmured. The creature exhaled slowly, the sound a mimic of a dying man's last, difficult breath. "See how we brought a storm to a weatherless world. Underbellies of dark-hulled warships form the clouds. The rain is the burning hail of a hundred drop-pods."

"It begins," the creature said.



## XXI

# DEFIANCE

They came to another four-way junction.

“I hate this place,” grumbled Mercutian.

“You hate everything,” Cyrion replied. He thudded a fist against the side of his head, trying to restart his failing retinal display. “My hololith is still stuttering.”

Talos levelled his Blood Angel blade towards the eastern corridor. “This way.”

The walls were shaking now. Huron had surely succeeded, stripping Vilamus of the power it needed to activate its last outer defences. The tremors in the air could only be the first wave of drop-ships coming down, and drop-pods hammering through brittle stonework.

“Huron will be heading for the gene-vaults,” Mercutian voxed. “That won’t be a fast fight, but we’re still not exactly blessed with an abundance of time.”

Talos vaulted a wall of bodies, no doubt left by an eager Corsair Terminator team on their march to the primary generatorum.

“He’ll have to smash through a hundred Marines Errant,” the prophet said. “They know why that scarred bastard is here now, and they’ll be massing to stop him.”

First Claw was doing what they did best whenever a fair fight threatened to engulf them: they were running in the opposite direction. Talos led the pack in their headlong sprint.

“He’ll divide his forces to split the remaining defenders. If the Marines Errant are in this subdistrict, the Red Corsairs will be bleeding for every step they take. Some enemies need to be divided before they can be conquered.”

Xarl laughed. “When did you start paying attention to battle briefings?”

“When there was a chance I’d be caught up in something as foolish as this.”

A squad of serfs spilled into the hall from a side chamber ahead. Their tabards displayed the falling star of the Marines Errant, and by Talos’ reckoning, you didn’t need to be a prophet to see that was a bad omen.

Las-fire slashed past them, into them, leaving ugly charcoal marks on their armour. First Claw didn’t even slow down—they blew through the troops like a winter wind, leaving tumbling bodies and severed limbs in their wake.

The Angel blade hissed and spat, its power field incinerating the smears of blood along its length. Each died in a flicker of smoky flame, evaporating to leave the weapon cleansed only seconds after it last took life.

Uzas stumbled, slowed, and broke ranks.

Talos cursed, looking over his shoulder. “Leave the skulls,” he voxed.

“Skulls. Skulls for the Skull Throne. Blood for the—”

*“Leave the damn skulls.”*

Uzas complied, dragging himself away from the bodies and sprinting to catch up with his brothers. Perhaps the sense of urgency broke through his maddened perceptions, because Talos doubted his brother had obeyed out of a sudden ability to actually obey orders.

Septimus couldn't help it. He could never help it when he sat in this seat, always finding himself grinning like he had as a child—the boy who wanted to be a pilot.

Maruc checked his buckles in the co-pilot's throne. He was having a great deal less fun.

*“You can fly this, right?”*

Septimus spoke a smooth flow of Nostraman through his boyish smile.

*“Is that a yes or a no?”* Maruc buckled the last strap.

Septimus didn't answer. He reached a hand to his earpiece. *“Blackened, primed for launch. Requesting clearance.”*

The short-range vox snapped back a crackling reply.

Meanwhile, the gunship started to shake in sympathy with its own howling engines. Outside the reinforced window, the hangar was immersed in a concert of commotion, half-blanketed in rippling waves of heat exhaust. Maruc saw servitors staggering clear of the launch deck, loading trucks with empty claws retreating from the grounded flyers, and several Thunderhawks shivering with the whining build-up of their rear boosters. Each of the gunships seemed aggressively avian, unnecessarily so, with their sloping wings and leering noses. Each of them had a beast's wings painted on their hull armour, following the lines of their mechanical pinions. Septimus' craft, *Blackened*, had a crow's skeletal wingspan painted along the sloping metal, reaching to the wingtip gun turrets.

In all his life, despite working around finger-chopping, limb-mauling, eardrum-breaking industrial death traps, he'd never seen an angrier looking machine than a Thunderhawk gunship.

*“I'm not in love with flying,”* he admitted.

Septimus had one gloved hand on the flight stick, and the other on one of the many levers spread across the console.

*“A strange thing for you to only mention now.”*

The first gunship rose on a crest of polluted heat-shimmer. To Maruc's eyes, it was a graceless thing, a metal beast that wobbled in the air, its engines howling too loud.

Then came the sonic boom. A flare of white fire left him blinking; a bang that resonated like thunder in a cavern had him flinching; and the gunship tore forwards into the visible slit of space at the hangar's far end.

Not graceless at all, he thought. Throne, these things could move when they wanted.

*“Blackened,”* crackled the vox. *“Good hunting.”*

Septimus grinned again.

The bulkhead opened to reveal three robed serfs. The clenched claw icon of the Red Corsairs stood out in expensive gold-thread weave upon their chests. Their hoods were up, but their heads were lowered, bobbing in obsequious respect.

“Greetings, Flayer,” the first said. “Welcome to the *Venomous Birthright*.”

Variel had forgone wearing his helm. Despite the innate intimidation it offered, he’d noticed over the years that humans reacted with greater discomfort to his bare face. He believed it was because of his eyes—eyes as light as polar ice often suggested some inhuman quality in mythological literature—but this was merely a guess. In truth, he’d never been bothered enough to ask.

“Do you know why I am here?” he asked them.

More obsequious bobbing of robed heads. “I believe so, lord. The vox message was corrupted by the storm, but it pertained to the gene-vaults, did it not?”

“It did,” the Flayer nodded. “And time is a commodity I cannot afford to waste,” he added.

“We will escort you to the gene-vaults.”

“Thank you,” Variel smiled. It was a gesture no warmer than his eyes, but it got the slaves moving. As they walked through the arched corridors, he noticed how much additional lighting the Tyrant’s tech-adepts had installed since first claiming the *Echo of Damnation*. One of the most obvious aspects of its transformation into the *Venomous Birthright* was the profusion of lamp packs jury-rigged to the walls and ceilings, casting a harsher illumination than any Eighth Legion warship crew would tolerate.

This would be one of the first things Talos would change, he was certain of it. Variel had visited Blackmarket once, out of idle curiosity. It was all too easy to imagine scavenger packs of those same Night Lord serfs stealing these lights for personal use, trading them, stealing power cells, or simply smashing them out of spite.

The hallways were wretchedly filthy, which was no surprise. Variel was long-used to the myriad corruptions that took hold in a poorly-maintained vessel. The Red Corsairs had owned the *Echo of Damnation* for six years now, and given her plenty of time to fester and grow foul.

After they’d been walking for several minutes, Variel calmly drew his bolt pistol and shot all three of his guides from behind. Their robes actually reduced the mess, keeping the exploded gore wrapped up, like wet gruel in a silk sack. He left what remained of the three slaves to twitch and bleed, their ruptured insides slowly soaking through their clothing.

A side door slid open, and a uniformed officer peered out. “My lord?” Her eyes were wide in alarm.

“What is your rank?” he asked calmly.

“What happened, lord? Are you harmed?”

“What is your rank?” he asked again.

She lifted her gaze from the burst bodies, standing fully in the doorway now. He saw her insignia as she began to answer.

“Lieutenant Tertius, lor—”

Variel's bolt smacked into the woman's face, blasting the inside of her skull back into the room behind. Her headless body folded with curious tidiness, crumpling in a neat heap, blocking the automated door from sealing closed again. It bumped her thigh repeatedly as Variel walked past.

The bridge was a fair distance—and several decks—away, but reaching it would solve everything. What he needed was an officer of rank. These dregs simply wouldn't do.

No more than thirty seconds later, after ascending a crew ladder to the next level, he came face to face with an ageing man with his hood lowered. The elder's skin was jaundiced, and he reeked of the cancer that was devouring him from within.

But he had black eyes—all pupil, lacking an iris.

"My lord?" the man asked, edging away from the staring warrior.

"*Ajisha?*" said the Apothecary. "*Ajisha Nostramo?*"

Ruven sent the attendants away with a curt dismissal. While he'd seen many degenerates in worse conditions during his years in service to the Warmaster, he'd always found Etrigius' servants to be particularly unwholesome things, and their service to the new Navigator had changed nothing of his opinion.

The chlorine reek of them offended his senses, the way it rose in a miasma from their antiseptic-soaked bandages, as if such trivial protections could ward against the changes of the warp.

"The mistress' chamber," they whisper-hissed in some bizarre, sibilant choir. "Not for intruders. Not for you."

"Get out of my way or I will kill you all." There. It couldn't be stated in plainer terms, could it? He levelled his staff for emphasis. The curved xenos skull leered down at them.

They still didn't move.

"Let him enter," came the Navigator's voice over the wall-vox. Her words were punctuated by the door juddering open on ancient mechanisms dearly in need of oiling.

Ruven entered, shoving the slowest ones aside.

"Hello, Navigator," he said. His amiability was so false it almost hurt the teeth to give it voice. "I require the use of your chamber."

Octavia was retying her dark hair into its usual ponytailed captivity. She didn't meet his eyes.

"It's all yours."

Something growled in the corner of the room. Ruven turned to it, realising it was not a pile of discarded clothing, after all. A shotgun's barrel and a mutilated face peered out of the ragged heap.

"Please take your mutant with you," Ruven chuckled.

"I will."

Octavia left without another word. Hound followed obediently, his eyeless face turned to Ruven the whole time.

Once they were gone, the Night Lord circled her throne, taking note of the blanket covering the psychically-sensitive metal frame. Curious now, he lowered

himself to press his cheek against the metal armrest. Cold, painfully cold for a human, but hardly fatal. He rose again, his disgust deepening.

This female was a lazy, weak-minded creature, and they would be better served without her. To slay her outright would only anger the prophet, but she could be replaced by other means. Ruven had never suffered in guiding vessels through the warp. Sorcery could achieve through strength of will that which a Navigator achieved by a twist of genetic fortune. He had no need to see into the warp, when he could simply carve a path through it.

The throne was too small for him, designed as it was for lesser beings. No matter. The walls were the reason he'd come. Nowhere else on the ship boasted such dense partitions to its surrounding chambers. A warship was not a quiet vessel, but a Navigator's chambers were as close to true silence as a soul could find.

Ruven sat on the floor, brushing aside more of the Navigator's mess. Scrunched parchment pages with unfinished log entries rolled across the decking.

He closed his eyes at last, and spoke murmured words from a nameless tongue. After only a few syllables, he tasted blood in his mouth. After several sentences, his hearts began to hurt. Witch-lightning coiled around his twitching fingers, maggotty crackles of the corposant stuff squirming over the ceramite.

The quicksilver pain running through his blood brought a smile to his serene features. Too many months had passed since he'd been free to work his wonders.

The ship's machine-spirit sensed his intrusion, reacting with a serpent's suspicion, coiling back into itself. Ruven ignored the artificial soul. He didn't need its compliance or its capitulation. He could drag this vessel through the Sea of Souls no matter what resided in the *Covenant's* beating heart. Doubt's clinging fingers trailed over his skull, but he cast them aside with the same contempt he'd shown the Navigator. To doubt was to die. Mastery of the unseen world required focus above all else.

The ship gave a shudder. Instantly he was himself again, seeing nothing more than what his eyes showed before him.

And he was breathless, his respiration choppy, his hearts hammering. Perhaps he was weaker than he'd believed, after so long in chains. It was an unpleasant confession, even if only to himself.

Ruven gathered his concentration to make a second attempt, and stared at a burning chamber through another warrior's eyes.

The Marine Errant writhed in his grip, held off the ground by the massive clutching claw. Ceramite creaked, then cracked, split by lightning bolt fractures under the talon's pressure. With a grainy laugh, Huron hurled the warrior aside, paying no attention as the Errant slid down the stone wall. A bloody smear marked the dead soldier's trail. The inscription on his pauldron, etched in ornate High Gothic, read: *Taras*.

He had to admire them, though. Their predictability left them vulnerable, yet it also showed their dogged tenacity. With half of his Terminator assault marching to the gene-vaults, and half besieging the Chapter's reclusiam, the depleted Vilamus garrison cut itself into two even smaller, weaker forces. The reclusiam represented the Chapter's heart and soul; in the main chapel, where the Errants' loremasters had

held court for centuries, the Chapter's relics were held in the trust of stasis fields. In the gene-vaults, a millennium's reserves of gene-seed was stored in cryogenically sealed vaults.

One target represented the Chapter's past, the other its future.

Conflicted sergeants led their squads to die at whichever shrine they chose to defend, while the fortress-monastery trembled with more Red Corsairs making planetfall every moment. In the wastelands outside the monastery, the Tyrant's warriors assailed the walls with an army of artillery, cracking breaches in the ancient stone for more Corsairs to spill inside.

Although the halls of Vilamus ran red, the fighting was most savage around the Corsair elite. Terminator kill-teams bulwarked themselves within their objective chambers and refused to give ground. Shrapnel grenades burst at their feet, going completely ignored. Any living being in the enemy's colours that crossed the flagstones ended its existence as a meaty stain on sacred floor, pulled apart by firepower capable of cracking tanks apart.

Huron swatted a kneeling serf aside with the flat of his axe, powdering the boy's ribs, sending him skidding away to die in a corner. The amusingly clockwork beat of his rebuilt hearts was a pleasant percussion to the chatter of mass-reactive shellfire.

Vilamus' reclusiam had been an austere, orderly sanctuary, with its relics presented on marble plinths. He paused to examine a time-yellowed scroll suspended in an anti-gravitic aura. It listed the names of the First Company warriors who'd died in the Badab War, so many centuries ago.

Huron's teeth reflected the burning banners on the walls. With a care that bordered on reverence, he turned his palm to the preserved manuscript and discharged a gout of liquid flame. The papyrus dissolved, its edges drifting away on the smoky air.

Centuries' worth of gene-seed would soon be his. Let the Night Lords flee if they chose. They'd performed their mundane task with enough distinction that the Exalted could be forgiven for its past transgressions.

Someone screamed. Huron turned, axe in hand.

The heraldic armour of a Marine Errant was already aflame, and he raised a stolen relic above his head as he charged. Huron caught the hammer's haft with ludicrous ease, intercepting its killing fall.

"Stealing your own heroes' relics," he sneered into the burning warrior's faceplate. "You shame your Chapter." Gears in Huron's knees droned as he levelled a kick into the warrior's stomach, sending him sprawling into a clanging heap on the sooty flagstones. "Your brotherhood is about to die, and you profane it?"

The Errant tried to rise. Defiant to the last, reaching for Huron's shin-guard with a dagger in his hands. The Tyrant caught a momentary glance of the warrior's breastplate, and the name *Morthaud* inscribed there upon the carved Imperial eagle.

"Enough." Huron clutched the thunder hammer in his power claw, the way a man would hold a thin stick. Without activating either weapon, he pounded the maul into the back of the Errant's helm, relying on his own strength to do the deed. The sound of a tolling bell rang throughout the chamber.

Huron chuckled as he tossed the priceless weapon aside.

And Ruven opened his eyes.

Variel let the guards salute him.

“Flayer,” said the first.

“Welcome, lord,” added the second. He, too, had black eyes. “We had received no word of your arrival.”

Variel answered as he always answered mortals greeting him: with the barest nod in their direction. Without further ado, he walked on to the strategium, entering through onto the rear concourse.

The Apothecary took a moment to process the scene. Over fifty human officers working at their various stations, much the same as any of Lord Huron’s warships. The captain of the *Venomous Birthright*, who went by almost twenty irritatingly ostentatious titles, the shortest of which was “Warleader Caleb the Chosen”, was nowhere to be seen. His absence didn’t trouble Variel at all. Quite the opposite, in fact—Caleb would surely be leading his company in the assault on Vilamus, as the Corsairs’ battle companies joined up with the Tyrant’s advance force.

He strode down the angled steps, descending to the main bridge. Mortals saluted as he went, to which he replied with the same customary nod as before. He took care to meet every face that looked his way, seeking pairs of black eyes among the human herd.

At least a third of the command crew possessed them. This was going to work. Variel approached the throne itself.

With the *Venomous Birthright*—the *Echo of Damnation*—hailing from an era when the Legions commanded all of the Imperium’s might, the throne was sized for a Legionary. The human commander remained standing by its side, straightening as Variel drew near. His eyes were blue.

“Lord Flayer, it is an honour to have you aboard. Our vox is still crippled; we had no idea it was you on the shuttle...”

“I do not care. Where is your captain?”

“Warleader Caleb, Scourge of the—”

Variel raised a hand. “I desire a new cloak. If you delay answering me each time to list the many titles your master has earned, I will make that garment out of your skin. That is a warning. Please heed it.”

The officer swallowed. “Captain Caleb is overseeing the launch, my lord.”

“And what of his company?”

The officer broke attention to scratch at the cropped, greying hair by his temple. “The Marauders are in the process of full deployment, my lord.”

“Why have they not deployed already?”

“I do not know, lord.”

Oh, but he did, and Variel saw the lie in his eyes. Caleb was a meticulous bastard, demanding no shortage of pomp and ceremony before every engagement. The Apothecary could easily imagine the battle company kneeling in reverence to the True Pantheon while their drop-ships were prepared and made ready around them, heedless of how their presence slowed the process.

When unleashed, the Marauders were one of Huron's most fearsome companies. It was why they'd been granted the *Echo of Damnation* as plunder—they'd been the ones to conquer it.

Their presence was going to be a problem.

Variel nodded. "I understand, commander. I am here from the flagship because my message was too precious to entrust to a menial or the whims of flawed vox. Our situation is grave, commander. Show me the launch bays."

"Grave, lord?"

"Show me the launch bays."

The commander ordered a naval rating to bring a quad-split image of the four launch bays up onto the occulus. Two stood empty; two were still in extensive use. Variel saw docked Thunderhawks, cradled Land Raiders, and whole squads of Red Corsair warriors ready for embarkation.

"This will not do at all," he murmured. Too many of his brothers remained on board. Far, far too many. Marauder Company wasn't even close to being fully deployed. It could take an hour or more. The Night Lords were preparing for a fight, but this would leave them grievously outnumbered.

"Lord?"

Variel turned to the man. Slowly.

"You know who I am," Variel asked, "do you not?"

"I... yes, my lord."

"Listen well, commander. I am more than 'the Flayer', more than the Corpsemaster's inheritor, and more than an honoured member of Lord Huron's inner circle. When I speak to you now, it is as a ranking member of the Chapter, here under the Tyrant's authority, empowered to exercise his will."

The officer was getting nervous now. He nodded curtly.

"Then obey this order without question." Variel fixed the man's gaze with his own. "Seal both port launch bays at once, establishing bioweapon protocols for containment."

The commander's confusion was apparent. It was apparent for just under three seconds, and ended when his face ceased to exist in a clap of detonative thunder.

Variel lowered his pistol, and looked at the closest living mortal officer. She looked right back at him. She had eyes for nothing else.

"You know who I am, do you not?"

The woman saluted, controlling herself admirably. "Yes, lord."

"Then obey this order without question: seal both port launch bays at once, establishing bioweapon protocols for containment."

She moved to obey, shouldering one of the console officers aside. Her fingers began to hit keys, tip-tapping an override code across the small monitor.

"Lord, it requests a code for emergency command clearance."

Variel dictated a long screed of a hundred and one alphanumeric characters from memory, ending with the words *Identity: Variel, Apothecary Secundus, Astral Claw Chapter.*

The officer paused at another obstacle. "It requests a further unicode, lord."

"Fryga."



She entered the five letters, and sirens began to wail across the ship.

As he ran, his boots beat the worthless wasteland soil, unhindered by the thick dust at his ankles. The hovering gunship hurled a sandstorm against his armour, its engines giving an ululating whine as they kept it off the ground. The gritty wind abraded his war plate's paintwork, leaving sliver-scratch slices of gunmetal grey showing through the blue.

First Claw had emerged from a blast-fissure blown in the fortress-monastery's outer wall, to be confronted with a battalion of Corsair battle tanks and cargo lifters massing on the desert. Landers and gunships still ferried warriors down from orbit, while drop-pods hammered down in staccato thunderclaps, sending arid dust spraying up from their impact craters.

"Are they planning to stay here?" Cyrion voxed.

"They'll strip the fortress bare. With this many of them, it will not take long." Talos turned away from the dust storm being dredged up by the landing gunship. Grit still clattered against his armour, but at least his eye lenses were clear now. "Some of these transporters are already lifting siege tanks back into orbit."

With the sigh of contented machinery settling, the gunship's landing claws crunched into the wasteland's skin.

Mercutian and Xarl were already running aboard.

"Lord," Septimus' voice crackled from the cockpit. "You're the last squad. The Exalted reports that all is ready for your return."

Talos looked back at Vilamus. The fortress' towers reached too high to ascertain where they ended and the clouds began. By contrast, its lowest levels were practically aflame, thick smoke bleeding from the shell-cracks in the great walls.

A victory, but not *their* victory. This was a game played by another band of traitors, and it had tasted hollow from beginning to end.

Uzas remained with him.

"Are you ashamed?" he voxed.

Talos turned. "What?"

Uzas gestured with his axe, aiming it at the fortress. "Are you ashamed to be running from another fight, brother? You shouldn't be. This is meaningless. Our fight is about to begin."

"Uzas?" Talos asked. "Brother?"

"Hnnh?"

"You spoke with such clarity. It was... it was good to hear."

Uzas nodded. "Come. Prey waits in the heavens. Blood, skulls and souls."

"And our ship."

"Hnnh. And our ship."

Octavia went to the one place she knew there'd be no one to talk to, while Hound waited outside.

She needed sleep. Just a few hours, maybe, before Talos returned and asked her to take part in the most dangerous and insane night of her life.

She'd never been in Septimus' room before. Given how he teased her for her mess, it wasn't as tidy as she'd expected. Mechanical innards and oiled cloths were spread over half the floor, as if he'd been summoned away in the middle of dissecting some unknown machine. A wide workbench stood against one wall, a low bunk against another. Several pairs of boots—one with its lost laces replaced by adhesive tape—were scattered in a tumble under the desk.

It smelled of him in the room, though—the rich, oaky incense of cleaning oils; the scent of a man's clean sweat while he worked; the spicy, almost antique smell of well-worn, well-loved leather.

Octavia turned one of his parchments over, into the light of the workbench lamp.

Her own face looked back at her.

Her own features, rendered in charcoal, sketched onto the paper. She wore her bandana, her face tilted slightly to the side, gazing off the page at something unseen. Above the corner of her lips was the little mole her maids had always insisted on calling a beauty mark.

She turned another sheet, revealing an unfinished vignette of her throne, with her blankets and a cushion heaped against one side. The third parchment was a self-portrait, rougher than the other sketches, with his augmetic left eye and temple undrawn. The fourth and fifth were both Octavia again; this time wearing a scowl in both images, her eyes narrowed and her lips between pursing and pouting. She wondered if she really looked like that when she was annoyed—it was a withering look, straight from the wealthy, spoiled halls of aristocratic Terra.

The next sheet showed a hand-drawn schematic of a Legionary's gauntlet, and the next, a list of words in numbered order, all written in Nostraman. She could read enough to guess it pertained to the gauntlet diagram.

She turned the rest one by one, seeing herself several more times. By the end, she was blushing, no longer tired at all when Hound thumped on the door.

"Mistress, mistress... Wake up. The ship moves. It's time soon."

Captain Caleb Valadan looked up as the sirens began to wail. Hazard lights flashed yellow in their wall-mountings. The doors—the *accursed doors*—slammed closed with brutal finality, trapping over fifty of his men and their war machines in the hangar.

Corsairs rose from their knees, their oath-swearing rituals ending with an abruptness born of confusion.

"Commander," Caleb voxed. He expected nothing but static, and his expectations were met. Curse the vox. Curse the solar storm. Curse the—

+ Initialising purge in: thirty seconds + announced the automated wall-speakers.

Every one of his warriors was standing now, their talismans and battle-trophies rattling against their armour. The hazard lights flashed brighter. He felt a sickening pull on his attention, and turned to face the shielded hangar bay opening.

The shield itself was a mellow screen of thin mist, clouding vision just enough to be noticeable. Beyond it, the void—the pinprick multitudes of distant suns, and a crescent slice of the thirsty, lifeless world below.

If this was a true purge...

“Sir?”

“Shut your mouth,” Caleb snapped. “I’m thinking.”

+ Initialising purge in: twenty seconds +

“Into the gunships!” he ordered.

+ Initialising purge in: ten seconds +

Variel watched the occulus, his gaze flicking between both populated hangars.

“See? They are secure within the grounded gunships. All is well.”

Inwardly, he was cursing. It’d been too much to hope that this would work with such unbelievable ease, but trapping them like this was something, at least. He watched Caleb’s armoured form sprint up a rising gang ramp, and silently wished him an intensely painful demise.

The picture was the same in both hangars. The Corsairs reacted with admirable haste, saving themselves. This would be a problem, but one that could be dealt with in the near future.

+ Initialising purge... Initialising purge +

The void shields covering the yawning hangar bays gave uncoordinated flutters, their radiance dimming. The primary hangar went first, its shield dissipating like engine exhaust in a gale, drifting out into the airless void. The second failed a moment later, repeating the same blown-smoke dissolution.

Variel watched the air roaring out in great flapping sheets of force, howling silently on the screen—an exhalation into space from lungs that could draw nothing back in. Crates rolled across the deck, spinning and leaping in their rush to fly into the void’s gaping maw. Servitors, too brainless to realise the threat to their own lobotomised existences, went next. Dozens remained perfectly still as they flashed through the air, sucked out into space. Others still attempted to twist and turn as they flew, unable to understand why their limbs wouldn’t respond. They mouthed error codes as they failed to attend their duties.

Racks of missiles, heavy bolter ammunition and unattached rocket pods spun and flew free in a near-constant stream. Variel winced as a hellstrike missile smashed into a wall on its way out.

The vehicles were next. The unsecured autoloaders and heavy lifter buggies crashed together and flipped end over end. A Land Raider in mid-loading slid back with punishing slowness, sparks spattering from its treads as they left grind-scars on the decking. When it fell from the hangar at last, it was with a jerking yank, as if some unseen hand finally claimed it as a prize.

In all, the vacuum took less than a minute to void both launch decks.

The three Thunderhawk gunships remained locked in their racks, filled with warriors Variel had hoped to see die. A similar scene appeared in the other hangar, but for the shuddering, squealing form of one gunship being dragged across the landing pad. Free of its rack, the vacuum had almost taken it before its pilot could fire the engines. Instead it lay scarred and wounded in the hangar’s heart, all three landing claws severed by the strain.

Variel turned to the bridge commander.

“Illuminate the contamination warder beacons. We must ensure none of our sister ships attempt to lend aid until we have the situation under control.”

“Contamination warders alight, lord.” The oculus switched to a view of the warship’s spine, where miserable, pulsing red lights flared along its vertebrae battlements. They put Variel in mind of boils, ready and ripe, in desperate need of suppuration.

“Bring the ship away from the fleet. High orbit.”

He waited, standing by the command throne, watching the sedate drift of stars.

“Should we re-pressurise the launch bays?”

“No. Our warriors are safe for now.”

“Lord, the Eighth Legion warship *Covenant of Blood* is shadowing us.”

The concourse doors opened before Variel could weave more deception into a plan quickly coming unravelled. A lone Red Corsair entered, his bolter in his hands, his helm crested by two curving horns of cracked ivory. With a measured tread, he descended to where Variel was standing.

“Flayer? Sir, what in the name of unholy piss is going on?”

Again, the Apothecary was denied the chance to answer. One of the console officers called back in a panic.

“Lord! The *Covenant* is launching boarding torpedoes.”

*Now or never. Now or never. Now, or I die here.*

“*Valmisai, shul’celadaan,*” he let his voice carry across the bridge. “*Flishatha sey shol voroshica.*”

The crew looked at one another. A few rested hands on holstered sidearms, but most looked confused.

His Red Corsair brother didn’t move a muscle. “And what does that mean?”

Variel drew and fired in a single movement, the shell pounding into the Corsair’s throat armour and bursting inside his neck. There wasn’t even a strangled cry. One moment two Corsairs stood speaking, and the next, one collapsed without a head.

Several seconds later, the spinning helm came back down and clattered onto the decking with the dull *clunnnnggg* of ceramite on metal.

“It means the Eighth Legion is taking this ship back. We are about to receive guests, at which point, this ship must be made ready to make a brief warp jump. Anyone who opposes these actions should speak up now. I was not jesting when I said I needed a new cloak.”

## XXII

# ECHO OF DAMNATION

The shaking set Octavia's teeth knocking together. Being leashed into an oversized throne didn't help; she was clutching her restraint straps much tighter than they were returning the favour, and her hips thudded against the seat's sides as the turbulence rattled her around.

Maruc was next to her, his hands as white-knuckled as hers. He may have been yelling, but the noise stole any evidence of it.

*"Is it always like this?"* she cried out.

*"Yes,"* one of the Legionaries voxed back. *"Always. Except Uzas is usually screaming about blood, and Xarl likes to howl."*

*"Blood for the Blood God! Souls, skulls, souls, skulls..."*

*"See?"*

Octavia turned her juddering head to look over at Talos. He was sat calmly by comparison, his weapons locked to the pod's wall behind him. She wasn't even sure it had been him yelling back over his vox-speakers.

Xarl leaned back to give a full-throated howl. His helm's vox-speakers corrupted it, rendering it with a tinny edge, but that did nothing to diminish the volume. The four humans covered their ears—even Hound, who had not been able to say a word yet with the way the pod was shaking. His tiny voice had no hope of registering over the din.

*"Fifteen seconds,"* Talos yelled over to her.

*"Okay."*

*"I always wanted my own ship,"* Cyrion leaned forward to shout. *"Talos, you can have the next one we steal."*

She smiled even as she winced at the noise. Across the pod, she met Septimus' gaze. For the first time in a while, she found she couldn't hold it.

*"Five. Four. Three. Two. O—"*

The impact was like nothing she'd ever felt. For several heartstopping seconds, she genuinely thought she'd died. Surely, there was no way of surviving the bone-jarring pound of slamming into a warship's hull at such speed. The impact boom made the pod ride beforehand sound as serene as her father's tower-top garden at midnight. It eclipsed thunder, dwarfed even the rolling crashes of warp-waves hitting her hull... Even with her ears covered, she was sure she'd be hearing that devastating ocean-crash of sound for the rest of her short, deaf life.

She tried to say, "I think I'm dead," but couldn't hear her own voice.

Light streamed into the pod's far end. Artificial, pale and unhealthy light, it rushed in and brought an unwelcome stink inside with it. She coughed on the pungent stench of unwashed bodies, rusting metal, and human beings shitting themselves for a moment's sick warmth in freezing corridors.

"Ugh," one of the Night Lords snorted. "It reeks like Hell's Iris in there."

Talos tore his weapons from the wall, and left the pod without a word. His brothers followed. His slaves had to jog to keep up. Octavia was the last to leave, checking her pistol for what was surely the hundredth time.

"*Vishi tha?*" a voice asked from inside the pod.

She saw Septimus, Maruc, Hound and the giant forms of First Claw ahead in the corridor. For a moment she couldn't follow, but nor could she look round.

"*Vishi tha?*" the little girl asked again. It sounded as if she was sat in the pod, waiting on one of the oversized thrones.

"You're dead." Octavia squeezed the words through closed teeth. "You're dead and gone."

"*I can still kill you,*" the girl said in sugar-sweet Gothic. Octavia turned, pistol raised, aiming into an empty pod.

"Keep up," Septimus called back to her. "Come on."

Thus far, it had been a rather bloodless coup—barring a handful of regrettable incidents—and Variel watched the occulus with something approaching pride. The crew were nervous, unsure, excited, polluting the air with sweat-scent and fear-breath, all of which Variel loathed inhaling. He wore his helm just to keep the human stink from invading his lungs, content to breathe his armour's stale air supply instead.

Why the Night Lords found such things intoxicating was beyond him.

The Red Corsair fleet remained in low orbit, its focus ostensibly on the world beneath their hulls. With vox and auspex worthless, it was impossible to know if any other vessel had even witnessed the infinitesimal boarding projectiles spearing through space to drive home in the *Echo*'s hull.

The fleet's sheer scale was a disguise in itself. No armada this size could allow its ships to drift near each other while they rode at orbital anchor, and flotilla formation was a matter of calculating hundreds of kilometres between the biggest cruisers. The fleet's outrider vessels plied the distances between the bulkier warships, ready to react to threats breaking from the warp farther out in the system.

He watched a destroyer squadron sail past, their sleek dagger-prows cutting between the *Covenant* and the *Echo*. The squadron's speed remained the same throughout; with fluid, arcing trajectories, they rode the void to another cluster of cruisers.

A routine patrol. All was well.

"Lord?" asked the female officer he'd unwittingly and unofficially promoted, purely by virtue of her proximity to him at the moment of a murder.

"Yes?"

"Captain Caleb is... active, sir."

He hadn't waited long.

The purge was no accident, and no mere malfunction. Nothing had triggered the bioweapon alarms within the hangar, which ruled out any actual threat. The launch deck still lingered in vacuum, with the bay portal shieldless and left open to the void. Ice crystals glittered in a delicate rime across what little equipment remained in the hangar, painting the metal gunships with a patina of frost.

The gunships weren't fuelled yet. That ruled out the most obvious solution, even if their thrusters could be fired in cold vacuum.

Caleb Valadan possessed many virtues that made him an effective leader, but patience was most assuredly not one of them. Someone, somewhere, had tried to kill him on his own ship. And someone, somewhere, was going to pay for it very shortly.

He crossed the launch bay in a slow stride, his boots mag-locking with each step. Once he reached the immense doors leading back into the ship, he stroked his hand across the rimed steel, brushing aside the fast-forming ice dust.

These doors couldn't be cut, couldn't be cleaved. Depressurising the rest of the ship wasn't even a worry—the hangar doors were supremely thick, cored by dense metals, designed to resist anything that could endanger the vessel.

Beneath his helm, his brand-scars were itching again. The freshest one—imprinted for the sixth time in as many days to stave off his regenerative healing—was still raw enough to be painful. Balls of the Gods, what he wouldn't give to scratch it.

Caleb withdrew his hand, leaving crystals of glitter-frost drifting in the lack of air.

"Marauders," he said over the short-range vox. "If we can't cut our way in, we'll cut our way out."

Variel tilted his head. He'd not seen this coming, either.

The beetle forms of his distant brothers began their halting march across the weightless bay, boots keeping them tight to the deck. Caleb was at the lip, only metres from walking out onto the external hull.

Variel forced his teeth to unclench. This was not his role, and he was losing his temper. If he'd desired a position of command, he'd have betrayed his way to one long ago.

"Activate bay security fields," he said.

Intolerable. Truly intolerable.

Caleb spoke several languages, from Old Badabian to the trade-tongue of Hell's Iris, used as a communal lexicon by the station's native population. He swore now in every language he knew, which took some time. Then he turned to his men. Already, grey frost was lightening his blood-and-black ceramite. It sprinkled as powder from his joints as he moved.

"Squads Xalis and Dharvan—get over to the far side of the deck and load that Vindicator. We'll breach the external hull."

"Sire..."

"Look around you, Xalis. Look around, drink in the beauty of this fine sight, and ask yourself if now is really the time to argue with me."

The image on the oculus shook, but it was too distant from the bridge to feel any translated tremors.

A Vindicator siege tank's primary weapon mount was known among the Adeptus Astartes as a Demolisher Cannon. The weapon's most renowned use had been ten thousand years before, when the Traitor Legions used hordes of them at the feet of Titan god-machines to breach the walls of the Emperor's Palace.

Variel licked his teeth in distracted thought as the oculus image filled with drifting shards of twisted metal, chopping out of the smoke. He wondered how many of them had just died in that ill-advised escape plan, and suspected it was a great many.

"Close your eyes," Talos warned.

Their pod had struck the ship's underbelly, not far from the prow, leaving them relatively close to their destination. She'd never really seen the Night Lords hunt before, never seen others' reactions to them. The crew members they did pass broke and fled at the first sight of the intruders. Whether they ran to hide or raise the alarm made no difference. First Claw let none of them live long enough to do either. Bolters banged and bucked in steady grips, implanting mass-reactive shells into the backs and legs of fleeing humans. Gladii and knives—a quick stab, a clean cut—finished off those who writhed on the ground.

Several of the people they passed were Nostraman. To a man, these fell to their knees before the warriors of the Eighth Legion, speaking praises and blessings to see such a potent reminder of their annihilated home world.

The Night Lords moved quickly, efficiently, one of them always levelling a bolter to cover the others. Seeing them like this, it was almost hard to believe the truth of how they loathed each other.

She didn't hear them talk, just the clicking tells of vox-channel chatter. They weren't silent by any means, with their armour growling loud enough to wake the dead, but nor were they devoid of grace.

Septimus moved at her side, his pistols drawn. Maruc huffed and puffed, his lasgun tight against his heaving chest. Hound, shortest by far, struggled to keep up at all. His mutilated features were strained by the exertion. He used his shotgun as a walking stick, and yet again, she found herself wondering how old he was.

Throne, the ship stank. If they were supposed to live here after this, she prayed someone had plans to clean it. More than once they passed dead bodies stuck to the floor in stages of advanced decay. Rot hung in the air like it belonged.

Everything made of metal sported a wet tarnish of corrosion and grime.

The *Covenant* was cold, and it was dark, and it was often dank. But this matched sailors' tales of Archenemy ships. The *Venomous Birthright* was a Chaos ship, right through to its sickened core. She was already worried about bonding with the machine-spirit, and how abused the vessel's soul would be when she met it at the end of this journey.

"Close your eyes," Talos warned.



Her name was Ezmarellda.

The fluid she bathed in was an ammoniac clash of nutrient-rich ooze long turned foetid, and half a decade's worth of her own urine. She was naked but for the scaling that hardened her flesh, and she was blind but for the fact she could stare into the Sea of Souls.

Her hovel was a dark chamber with the floor given over to a bowl depression, which she swam, drifted and walked through, as the mood took her. The edges of her rank pool were too high for her to reach, leaving her trapped in a pit of her own filth. She heard them enter, and her malformed face twitched this way and that. What should've been a mouth gummed ineffectively together, making wordless sounds whose meaning was lost to anyone but herself.

When Octavia saw her, she saw her own future laid bare. All Navigators suffered devolution as the centuries passed. She knew that. But this...

First Claw moved around the pool, and Ezmarellda tried to follow each of their movements by the tread of their armoured boots. She had no way of knowing that five bolters were aiming right at her.

Septimus covered his mouth, even though his eyes were closed. Maruc turned to throw up, though nothing he could've contributed to the pool would have made it any worse. Hound did nothing, either because he'd never been able to see, or because he was inured to such things. He stared at Octavia, as he always did.

Octavia had no reason to close her eyes. She was the only one bearing witness to this, and in a way, she was grateful. This was Navigator business. This was as *Navigator business* as things could possibly be.

"Can we use her?" Xarl asked in a crackle of vox. He'd not seen it, yet still his bolter tracked its every twitch.

Octavia didn't answer.

The Navigator turned at the sound of Xarl's voice. Ezmarellda waded through her liquid muck on clubbed limbs, drooling and smiling. She treaded water in the ripe, watery slime, and reached up with hands that had already begun a painful fusion into clawed flippers.

"Hello." The Navigator's voice was creakingly infantile—a grandmother with her mind lost to dementia, speaking the way she had as a little girl. Saying a single word sent blood-pinked drool trickling down her chin, and she seemed eager to speak, to say more, apparently unaware of how difficult it was for her to form words.

Octavia touched the offered limb, her fingertips soft against its leathery flesh.

"Hello," she said back. "Did... Huron bring you here? To live?"

Ezmarellda turned in the water, her twisted spine making it difficult to remain in one position for long. As she moved, a bleached skull rolled up from below the water, bobbing on the scummy surface.

"This is my ship." The Navigator licked at her melted lips with a flapping black tongue. "*This is my ship.*"

Octavia backed away.

"No," she said. "We really can't."

Five bolters opened up in perfect unity.

There was no way she'd get down in the water.

Octavia sat by the doorway, her back against a wall gone mouldy with eternal condensation.

"I can pilot us from here."

Talos conceded to it easily, given the circumstances. "I will leave Uzas and Xarl to watch over you."

She nodded, but didn't thank him.

Maruc was still staring in horror at what floated face-down in the reddened ooze below. "Throne of the God-Emperor," he said for the fourth time.

"He wasn't a god," Cyrion said with an edge of irritation in his tone. "I know. I met him once."

The chamber looked worse with her eyes closed. She saw as Ezmarellda had seen, the layers of bloated, cancerous corruption clinging invisibly to everything around her. The Sea of Souls had lapped against this ship's hull in the past, but the taint hadn't yet taken true root. Its blight was brought by its crew, not nestled within the iron bones.

At first, the machine spirit flinched away from her, despite its power. She moaned as she reached to her wrist, screwing the connection valve implanted there and locking the interface cable tighter.

*You are not my Navigator*, it told her, just as the *Covenant* once had. Its voice was deeper, yet more guarded.

*Yes, I am*, she repeated the same words she'd pulsed to the other ship so many months before. *My name is Octavia. And I will treat you with more respect than any other Navigator you've sailed with.*

Suspicion. Disbelief. The suggestion of claws hidden in psychic sheaths. *Why?*

*Because that is how my father raised me.*

+ Jump + an intruding voice wavered through her thoughts. The sorcerer, Ruven, on the *Covenant*. + Octavia. Jump +

*We have to sail*, she told the *Echo*.

*Show me the way.*

+ Now +

*Now.*

*Now.*

At the edge of the Red Corsair armada, two warships fired their engines with calculated precision. They both drifted forwards, gaining speed, their hulls parallel in form as well as formation.

Destroyer squadrons were already en route. Several other cruisers were coming about, their captains aiming to blockade the accelerating capital ships.

The void tore open before both ancient strike cruisers as their armoured prows punctured through from this realm into the next. With a swirl of colours reminiscent of migraines and madness, the twin wounds in reality burst open to swallow both vessels whole.

The inbound ships shivered as reality reasserted itself. On their bridges, captains cursed to find their weapons now locked on empty space.

The *Covenant of Blood* tore back out of the warp soon after, manifesting several star systems away as its commander had intended.

Their warp-wake would take an age to track, mixing with the undercurrents already swirling around Vilamus from such a huge fleet arriving only hours before. The Exalted felt no cause for concern.

Freed of the coronal flares, the warship's systems came back to life with a rising swell of power and muted sighs of relief from the crew.

“Auspex, aye.”

“Vox, aye.”

But the Exalted was barely listening. The creature raised itself from its throne, and gazed out into the black.

“Where is the *Echo of Damnation*?”

## XXIII

### RESPITE

The *Echo of Damnation* coasted to a drift, engine contrails streaming to misty points that vanished into the void.

Talos hadn't sat in the throne yet, and he wasn't certain he wanted to. Variel had been pleased to see him arrive on the command deck, insofar as Variel was ever pleased by anything.

"Tell me everything," said Talos. "We took the ship with no resistance at all. How did you manage it?"

"I attempted to jettison the Corsairs into space," the Apothecary admitted. "When that failed, I settled for imprisoning them."

"Where?"

"The hangar bays. They sought to attempt an escape by loading and firing the main armament of a Vindicator siege tank."

Talos cycled through live pict-feeds of the hangar bays. Two stood empty and powered down. The other two... Talos cast a slow look at the former Red Corsair.

"That explains the holes in the hull," Cyrion said, looking around Talos' shoulder.

"I believe their short-range vox was active, for they attempted it in both bays at corresponding times. The results were very much as you'd imagine when a Demolisher cannon is fired at grievously short range."

"It worked, though," Mercutian pointed out.

"If you are referring to the twin hull-breaches, then yes, their mission was a resounding success. If you're referring to the fact the explosions and resulting blast-waves killed almost a quarter of them, then the results are somewhat less spectacular."

Cyrion sucked air through his teeth. With his helm vocaliser on, it was a mechanical rattlesnake's hiss. "You mean they went marching over the hull after they blew a hole in the landing bay?"

"Yes. Caleb led them out, no doubt seeking a judicious point of entry to cut their way back into the ship with power weapons."

Talos chuckled, low and soft. "Then they were on the external hull when we jumped."

"Almost definitely. I watched it happening to several of them, who were in range of the external picters. It was an illuminating scene. To see armour, then flesh, then bone itself dissolve into the Sea of Souls. The speed with which they were flensed by the jagged tides of the warp was most humbling to witness. Most lost their holds on

the hull the very same moment they were struck by the first waves. But I did get to study a few of them, watching them being utterly taken to pieces by tides of molten psychic energy.”

Even Cyrion winced.

“Blood of the Father, Variel.” Talos shook his helmed head. “That is a cold way to kill.”

The Apothecary looked thoughtful. “I was hoping you’d be impressed.”

“I am,” Talos confessed. “I only wish I’d thought of it myself.” The prophet called over to the vox console, addressing the three officers there. “Hail the *Covenant of Blood*.”

The lead officer lowered his hood, as if deciding the traditional scarlet robe of a Corsair serf was no longer appropriate given the vessel’s new owners.

“Lord, the *Covenant of Blood* isn’t in hail range.”

“Auspex,” Talos ordered. “We cannot have arrived before them; the jump was too short.”

“Lord, the auspex is clean of ally and enemy alike. We’re in the deep void.”

“Scan again. We were supposed to break from the warp in the Reghas system.”

The Master of Auspex consulted a data-slate. A moment later, he transmitted his findings directly to the hololithic projector table. The *Echo*’s signifier rune winked, gold and lonely, far from anything else of any import. Even the closest star was millions of kilometres away.

“We are approximately two hours’ full sail from Reghas, lord.”

Every member of First Claw said the name in the same breath. “*Octavia*.”

She disconnected with a shiver, finding herself in the last place she wanted to be. The damp air moved through her lungs with the oily, cold feel of trapped mucus. Ezmarellda’s body, as with her pool of fluids, enriched the air with the spicy stink of old disease.

Octavia wiped her eyes on her sleeves, still trembling a little from the *Echo*’s eagerness. Once she’d opened herself to the machine-spirit, it responded in kind, leaping forwards with a fierce will. It reminded her of a horse abused by its former master, as if the simple act of running free from its master would cleanse its body of whip scars. The *Echo* bolted forwards with the merest touch of her mind, clinging to that same desperation: as if by putting distance between itself and the Maelstrom, it could escape the indignities of its own recent past.

And like a spirited stallion, it had been a nightmare to control at first. It wanted to run, and it didn’t care where. She’d managed to wrench its excitable kineticism vaguely in the right direction, but she suspected they were still a fair degree off-course.

Talos would likely be disappointed in her, but she couldn’t bring herself to care just yet.

Octavia retied her bandana. Like the rest of her, like the rest of the chamber, it smelled somewhere between bad and awful.

“Mistress.”

Hound limped over to her, sitting heavily by her side. She could hear the ragged rhythm of the little man's heartbeat in his quavering breaths. In the marshy half-light of the fluid chamber, he looked even paler, even sicker, even older.

"I am tired," he confessed, though she'd not asked. "Running through the ship to keep up with you all. It made me tired."

"Thank you for staying with me."

"No need for thanks. Staying with you is what I always do."

She rested her arm around his lumpy shoulders, leaned closer to him, and cried silently into his ragged cloak.

Awkwardly, he embraced her with his bandaged arms.

"I had a daughter once," he admitted quietly. "She sounded the same as you. Soft. Sad. Strong. Perhaps she looked the same as you, as well. I do not know. I have never really seen you."

She sniffed. "I've looked better, anyway." After a pause, she smiled slightly. "I have black hair. Did she?"

Hound's thin, chapped lips creased into a smile. "She was Nostraman. All Nostramans have black hair."

She drew breath to answer, but he hushed her with a quick *Shhh*.

"Mistress," he said. "Someone comes."

The door opened to reveal Septimus. Beyond him, Xarl and Uzas still stood guard further down the corridor. She heard their helms clicking as they no doubt argued in private. Xarl seemed to be trying to make a point. Uzas seemed to be ignoring it.

"Apparently," the other serf looked reluctant to speak, "we missed our mark. Talos wants you to be ready to guide the ship again."

Without a word, she reached for the connection cable. Until she fully bonded with the ship and had her own throne installed, it would have to do.

Brekash of the Bleeding Eyes moved down the corridor, walking bipedal but pausing every few steps to sniff at the foul air. Like First Claw, the Bleeding Eyes had boarded and found little in the way of sport, and nothing in the way of resistance.

Brekash paused again, sniffing to his left.

Something scraped within the wall. Something with talons.

Brekash sent a questing blurt of noise from his mouth grille, not quite speech, not quite a screech.

A growl answered, muffled by the metalwork. Something trapped within the ship's iron skin? Vermin, perhaps.

Brekash wasn't sure what to do. He reached for his chainsword in a half-hearted, irritated way, but didn't key the activation rune. Another grunt preceded three dull thumps, as if knuckles knocked on the other side of the wall.

In reply, he scratched his clawed gauntlet down the side of the corridor as a warning to whatever mutated vermin dwelled back there.

"Lucoryphus," he voxed. "There is... a thing inside a wall, here."

The leader of the Bleeding Eyes halted on his own patrol of the *Echo's* filthy decks.

"Repeat," he voxed.

Brekash's repetition came back garbled, and Lucoryphus let a mocking caw trickle over the vox. "You leap at shadows, brother."

Brekash gave a series of staccato, clipped shrieks—the most shameful sound Lucoryphus had ever heard a brother Raptor utter in his life, for it mimicked the distress cry of a Nostraman condor.

Then, with a porcelain crack of finality, the link went dead.

"Soul Hunter," the Raptor leader voxed, "something hunts us on this ship."

The warrior who'd called himself Caleb Valadan—among a host of other titles earned in service to the Tyrant of Badab—had not died the glorious death he'd always foreseen for himself. There was no heaped pile of enemy dead to stand upon while he bled his last; no cheering voices as his honoured brothers saluted and praised the victorious dead.

He'd not even had a weapon in his hand when the last of his mortality fled, as if he'd been some toothless old man dying in a sickbed, rather than a champion of two centuries' worth of battle.

Caleb had known two things as he died. The first was pain. The second was fire.

He was unable to determine where one ended and the other began, or even if the two things held any distinction given what had happened. But he remembered them above all else.

The ship had entered the warp.

He'd seen it coming. They'd all seen it coming; the way the stars twisted in their astral sockets, and the way the ship itself groaned right through to its metal core. A few of his warriors had leapt from the ship's back—sailors abandoning a sinking ship—to die a freezing death in the endless void rather than be dragged into the Sea of Souls.

One moment he was boot-locked to the ship's hull, axe in hand, hewing into the sloped iron to hack his way back in. The next he was drowning, asphyxiating in liquid fire, suffocating even as it disintegrated him from the outside and incinerated him from within. He died a dozen deaths in a single heartbeat, and he felt every single one of them.

As had his brothers. When the molten sludge flowed over the ship, blanketing them all, he'd seen most of them lose their grips on the hull. Warriors he'd served with for decades, even centuries, spun away in the boiling madness of warp space, screaming as they dissolved. Several lingered by their burning bones in a shrieking, spectral form, before the raging tides ate at their very soul-stuff, immolating even that, before carrying the residue away to be diluted through the tumbling waves.

He refused to let go. The molten flood tore his axe from his grip, then his armour from his body, but he wouldn't relinquish his grip. It stripped his body from his bones, and his bones from his soul. Still, he held fast.

Then came the shadow, vast enough and dark enough to eclipse the howling witchlight of unspace.

Caleb had opened his eyes to the stars once more. True stars, the winking orbs of distant suns, flashing in the night, and the ship's hull beneath his boots.

Not dead. Not dead at all. Wreathed in Corsair ceramite, axe in his grip.

Alone, though. Utterly alone on the ship's skin, weapon in hand but a brother to none.

Caleb had cut, and cut, and cut, descending deeper into the ship with each fall of the energised axe blade.

He found his first prey within minutes, and when that shrieking, clawed warrior was dead, the Red Corsair hacked the Raptor's body into ceramite-coated chunks, and scooped the meat into his maw with trembling fingers.

*Not enough. Not enough at all. He still hungered.*

He could smell something, something sweet but indefinable, colouring the air of the ship's corridors. Caleb breathed slower, savouring the scent, almost able to taste it. Something touched by the warp, sickly-saccharine in its resistance to corruption, and with the rarest, sweetest blood in the human species. Every drop of sanguine life squeezed from its crushed heart would be divine nectar.

The Red Corsair loped forwards into a feral run.



## XXIV

### VANDRED

The Exalted stalked the bridge, its many-knuckled claws clenching and releasing, forming gnarled fists one moment, and opening like ugly flowers in slow bloom the next.

The Atramentar—all seven that remained after Vraal’s death at Crythe—had assembled on the strategium to attend their lord and master, for their lord and master was furious.

One of the Terminators hefted a two-handed maul, resting the massive hammerhead on his shoulder guard. The pauldron’s sculpted face was the roaring visage of a Nostraman lion. Light reflecting from the hammer gave it eyes of staring gold.

“The prophet has not betrayed you, lord.”

“You cannot know that, Garadon.”

The Exalted still paced, albeit in a hunched, brutish stalk. Each of its footsteps sent a throb through the deck. The crew were growing uneasy, for the warlord scarcely left its throne unless something out of arm’s reach needed berating or destroying.

“We cannot linger here indefinitely. They will track us... Hunt us down... Huron has warp-cunning magi who can part the Sea of Souls.”

Malek, Champion of the Atramentar, had occupied himself thus far by triggering his lightning claws every few minutes, repeatedly inspecting them. They’d scythe from their housings on the back of his power fists, only to snap-slide back after yet another brief examination.

“You also have a warp-cunning magus, lord.”

The Exalted spat acid onto the deck, dismissing the very idea. “Ruven excels at three roles: that of a warlock, a traitor, and a waste of skin. If I have traded a genuine seer, a Navigator, and three dozen Bleeding Eye Raptors... in exchange for possessing *Ruven*...”

The Exalted spat again, and a crew member jumped out of the way of the lethal gobbet. “...then I will lose my temper,” the daemon finished. “And those around me will lose their blood.”

“Auspex lock, my lord.”

The Exalted’s wet-throated growl rippled around the bridge. “At last, they return.”

“A second auspex lock, lord. And a third.”

Limbless servitors slaved to the scanner table began to murmur in binary cant, tracking the inbound vessels with the cogitators embedded in their skulls. The Exalted tuned into the babble breaking out across the strategium, already returning to its throne.

“Cobra-class destroyers,” called the Master of Auspex.

The daemon licked its maw, as if seeking forgotten morsels of food left between its teeth. The creature’s tongue was long enough to lick the vitreous humours from its own eyes, which it occasionally did to clean them. Daemonic ascension had deprived the Exalted’s face of eyelids. It did not miss them.

“Outriders?” asked Malek. “Or the vanguard of something much more?”

“We will know after we destroy them.” Assurance flowed through the Exalted’s tone again. *Void war. A void war they could win.* The salvage alone from breaking a tri-Cobra squadron, if the vessels could be kept reasonably intact, would be the haul of a solar year. “All ahead full. Shields up, gun ports open, all lances online and weapon batteries live.”

A chorus of *Ayes* answered the creature’s decrees. The *Covenant* itself leapt to obey, engines opening up hot, bright and wide, bellowing plumes of promethium thrust-fire into the silence of space.

The ship moved now as it once had, before the decades of punishing crusades and patchwork repairs left her no more than a revenant with a majestic past. Between the Hell’s Iris crews and the raw material from Ganges, the Exalted had done exactly what it set out to achieve: the years of neglect and shame were finally being cast aside in favour of reigniting an ancient aggression. They were hunters again. *Void hunters.*

The daemon’s flesh-heart quickened behind the uncomfortable cage of its ribs. On the occulus, the three ships resolved into daggers of detail, their flanks, turrets and towers painted in the Tyrant’s scarlet.

“Do not target their weapon arrays. I want those for the ripest salvage. When they launch torpedoes, take everything on the forward shields, only rolling and yawing to starboard if they buckle below one-third strength. Precision shield-breaking lance strikes as we dive towards the lead ship, then a one-quarter volley from the broadsides as we cut through their formation.”

A multitude of hungers, each unified only by how fierce they felt, gleamed in the daemon’s black eyes.

“Lord, a new auspex lock. A cruiser, amalgamated class. And another, led by significant warp-wake... No, another three. It’s another destroyer squadron—parasites to the cruiser.”

“They’re a vanguard.” Malek cursed under his breath, but his tusked helm vocalised it as a buzzing sigh. “We should run, lord. The *Covenant* has only just been reborn. To win a fight while sustaining crippling damage will be no victory at all.”

“You are beginning to sound like the prophet.” The Exalted leered at the occulus, paying Malek little heed. “Six destroyers and a fat-bellied cruiser? We could run this gauntlet blind, and still come out unscathed. Still, I am not blind to the danger, here. After we destroy the first three ships, we will maintain a conservative distance until the scene is fully set. I have no wish to take an armada head-on.”

Several more auspex chimes rang out across the command deck.

“Lord...”

“Speak, fool.”

“Another nine ships have broken from the warp. Three of them are capital cruisers. We have a six-strong squadron of Iconoclast-class destroyers burning hot to flank us.”

The Exalted’s nasty, feral sneer died on its face.

“All hands to battle stations. All Claws to defensive positions, standing by to repel boarders. Inform the ‘Navigator’ that we will be needing his guidance very, very shortly.”

“Incoming torpedoes, lord.”

The Exalted licked corrosive saliva from its fanged teeth, and spoke the words it loathed more than any other.

“Brace for impact.”

She puked this time. It poured from her in wet, slapping chunks, spreading across the surface of the blood-tainted water.

“No more.” She breathed the words, unable to give them any truer voice. “No more. Please, no more. Not until the ship is cleansed.”

Hound wiped her lips with the cleanest edge of his cloak. Over the vox-speakers, Talos’ voice echoed around the befouled chamber.

“You did well, Navigator. Rest for now.”

“I don’t believe what I’m seeing.”

Cyrion said the words in an awed whisper. Slowly, he removed his helm, needing to look upon the screen with unclouded eyes. “I do not believe what I’m seeing.”

Talos didn’t reply. The occulus focussed on a distant battle, following the twisting, wrenching, burning hulk at the heart of it all.

The *Covenant of Blood* tore through the centre of the enemy fleet, its shields flashing with oil-on-water iridescence. Wounds along its midnight hull spoke of previous shield ruptures, as fire-trails burned in ravine cracks along the ship’s armour.

As they bore witness, the *Covenant* boosted even faster, pitching down at the last moment to glide beneath an enemy vessel of almost equal size. The bloated ship struggled in futility to come about in time, while the sleeker strike cruiser slipped underneath, rolling to present its starboard broadsides towards the enemy’s underbelly. Every cannon on the *Covenant*’s side raged across the scarce distance between the two cruisers, massed plasma streams and clustered laser-fire raking the Corsair ship’s keel.

“That’s a kill,” Mercutian said softly. “Watch, brothers. That’s a kill.”

The *Covenant* didn’t stay to observe. It thrust away, engines burning with unsustainable fury. In its wake, the Corsair cruiser rolled, cracked, and came apart along its underbelly. Detonations blazed along the length of the ship, as if it were a child’s toy to be pulled apart at the seams. Within a handful of seconds it was a fireball, crumbling in on itself, towers toppling into its burning core. The shockwave

of its exploding plasma core sent nearby smaller ships rocking, pushing them off course.

“Master of Auspex, how many enemy ships do we count?”

“Twelve, my lord. Wreckage shows four already destroyed.”

Talos stared at the *Covenant*, watching it burn.

“Accelerate to attack speed, and open a vox-channel to the *Covenant*.”

The Exalted played a dangerous game. It, the daemon itself, was no master of fleet warfare. It was a hunter, a predator, a killer without conscience or compare; but it was no void warrior.

To command a vessel in a void war was to immerse oneself in the absolute saturation of incoming information. Shouted numbers and binary codes were distances to and from other ships, pertaining to every vessel’s projected pitch, roll and yaw, as well as the intricacies and vagaries of each object’s estimated movements in three-dimensional space. The Exalted attuned itself to this state of ruthless focus by doing as it always had in the past: it reached back into the mind it now mastered, and peeled back the malingerer human presence to reveal the core of relevant lore beneath.

*Memories. Vandred’s memories.* While the understanding of these maddening astral dances was not something the Exalted possessed itself, it could flay its host’s brain open with a thought and rifle through the Night Lord’s psyche. Once inside, it took no more than a moment’s concentration to wear the memories and drape itself in the comprehension as if these thoughts had always been the daemon’s own.

Vandred possessed a wealth of such perceptions. In life, he’d been a void warrior without compare. It was what elevated him to the rank of Tenth Captain in the months following Malcharion’s demise.

The Exalted plundered its host’s mind with the same tenacity it plundered the Imperium’s material wealth. No difference existed between the two acts. The strong took from the weak—it was the way of things.

But with Vandred’s increasing withdrawal, the human’s diminishing soul took his fading memories with him to the edge of oblivion.

The Exalted remained unconcerned at first. Vandred was a nuisance, but his consciousness could still be looted at will. It only became a trial when the human’s remnant spark developed an irritating capacity for cunning. Vandred began to fall silent, instead of screaming uselessly, silently, at his former brethren for aid. He hid from the questing thought-tendrils the Exalted sent back into their shared brain. He buried his most valuable, useful memories, storing them away and defending them with vexing tenacity.

Even so, the Exalted tolerated it. It suspected enough of Vandred’s imprint remained in the physical brain to allow shallow memory-stripping, even if the Night Lord’s soul expired forever.

Their relationship of exploitive, hateful symbiosis had functioned—albeit with steady erosion—for over a century...

...until the moment sixteen Red Corsair warships shattered their way into realspace and locked weapons on the *Covenant of Blood*.

The Exalted watched the updating, evolving hololithic display, and while it could comprehend what it saw, it could infer little from its flickering runic displays, and could predict next to nothing. Without wearing Vandred's perceptions as a shroud over its own, the babbling behaviour of lesser species—the games of these flesh-things—made almost no sense at all.

Attack. Destroy. Plunder. The Exalted understood these terms. It grasped the basic precepts of void war. What it lacked was the comprehension of logistics; of strategy; of the masterful difference tactics, knowledge and prediction would make to any battle.

The warships came closer.

The Exalted reached back into its host's mind, and found nothing.

Mortal bridge crew began to request orders. The Exalted delayed them with irritated snarls, and ransacked the shared brain. Nothing. No memories at all. Vandred was still hiding, or gone completely.

It took several seconds in the material realm, and a great deal longer in the daemon's own time-loose psyche, but the Exalted closed its claw around Vandred's shrunken soul at last. The Night Lord put up little in the way of struggle, for erosion had weakened it unto extinction.

No matter. The Exalted peeled lore from its presence, layering its own essence with stolen understanding. This was a ritual between carcass and carrion-feeder that the two of them had played out many times before, even at Crythe, when the *Covenant's* assault impressed even the Warmaster.

And as always, Vandred released his life's knowledge in weak spools for the Exalted to devour.

But it wasn't enough. The blinking runes made sense; the creature could guess the likeliest actions of the enemy vessels based on their bulk, armament and support craft; but it wasn't enough. To the Exalted's blossoming comprehension, every analysis it made of the situation led to the same result.

It was going to lose.

The Exalted was going to be destroyed here, cast back into the turmoil of the warp, forced to linger in the chaotic nothingness until another ideal host-husk made itself known.

The daemon clutched at the fading soul, leeching its life in a panicked suction for answers.

Vandred's embers resonated amusement. *The Covenant cannot stand against sixteen ships. To face the four cruisers alone would be mutually assured destruction. Their escorts tip the balance in the enemy's favour.*

Lies.

The Exalted could not, would not, die here.

*What do you want from me, daemon? The Covenant is a prince of ships, born in a greater age. But it is not invulnerable. You have spent decades breaking it apart, piece by piece, only to lose it completely mere days after its resurrection.*

Panicked now, the Exalted ignored the demands of its bridge crew, ransacking random memories in the hope of finding something, anything to use as a weapon to

save its own existence. For the first time in a century, the daemon had shown weakness. It had a brief, terrible second to sense the Night Lord's smile.

Vandred struck with the full force of everything he'd been hiding back. Memories of brotherhood, of wars waged under burning skies, of void duels won in the name of a Legion he would willingly die for. The full spectrum of human emotion and experience, from a child's barely remembered fears to the murderer's pride in the way blood trickles down pale flesh.

Memory after memory, perception after perception, spilled into the shared mind. And none of them belonged to the Exalted.

Vandred screamed. The cry began in his mind...

...and left his monstrous jaws in a roar.

The first thing to hit him was the way it felt to breathe. It hurt. His lungs burned. Sensation flooded over him as if he'd just been pushed from the womb into the bright, cold world. He roared again, and this time it ended as laughter.

The ship was shaking around him, already taking damage. The Corsairs were wily bastards; they knew how to strike, and it wouldn't be long before the *Covenant's* warp engines were rendered worthless by enemy fire. If Vandred tried to run, he'd only hasten his death by offering a ripe target.

The other choice was the only choice. Stand. Fight.

"Gunnery Officer Jowun," he growled through a lion's smile.

The man flinched as he was addressed. "My lord?"

Vandred gestured to the hololithic, forcing himself not to be distracted by the clawed monstrosity that his right hand had become.

"We will begin with that Murder-class cruiser, Jowun. Ready the lances."

The *Covenant* burned, and still it fought.

Its port broadsides were a black, smeared scar along its hull. Two of its primary booster vents were melted slag, causing fires throughout the enginarium deck and untold deaths among the most menial of the slave crew. Much of its battlement architecture and statuary simply didn't exist anymore, torn from the ship's spine by massed enemy fire. Sections of the aftcastle had suffered a similar fate. Barely a square metre of armour plating had escaped charring, scoring, or outright ruination. Much of the vessel burned with ghostly, void-sucked flames, while water and air pissed and breathed into space from canyons carved in its hull—the former freezing to become streams of ice crystals; the latter dissipating, dying in the breathlessness of the deep void.

The destroyer *Lachesis* lost half of its superstructure in a reactor explosion, cut apart by the *Covenant's* forward lances. Half a minute later, the strike cruiser rammed its way through the frigate's spinning wreckage, pounding into the remaining hull section, batting it aside with its cracked prow as if merely swatting an insect.

Even limping, her legs broken and her skin aflame, the Night Lord warship clawed at the prey within her reach.

The cruiser *Labyrinthine*, now deprived of its last support ship, dived its ponderous way down onto the slowing *Covenant*. A volley of plasma cannon fire

twinned with a knifing cut from its lances to rain devastation on the ship below. Too crippled to escape, the *Covenant* rolled with what little momentum remained, preparing for a final lance burst in spiteful retaliation.

The *Labyrinthine* fired again.

And missed.

Its entire payload splashed harmlessly across the rippling shields of another vessel—a warship twinned in size and lethal elegance to the dying *Covenant*. The intruder ship raced between the two cruisers, forcing them apart with proximity alarms wailing on both bridges.

After taking the kill-shot and letting it bleed across its shields, the newcomer lashed back with a withering hail of laser battery broadsides. The *Labyrinthine*'s shields burst, and the ship rolled hard to starboard, desperate to avoid another barrage.

On the *Covenant*'s bridge, a voice rang out over the hissing, spitting speakers.

“This is Talos of the Eighth Legion, warship *Echo of Damnation*.”

The reply crackled back on a wave of ravaged vox. “Very amusing. But you should have stayed away from this battle, prophet. No sense in the Legion losing two ships this night.”

Xarl and Uzas listened to the newest slice of madness coming down the vox. The Bleeding Eyes, several of them at least, were filling the communication channel with the most annoying, piercing shrieks.

“What’s your location?” Xarl was asking, and not for the first time. “This is Xarl of First Claw; what’s your location?”

The shrieking fell silent again. This had happened several times now, with each bout of eagle-crying rage preceded by talk of “hunting those who would become hunters themselves” and “stalking the prey with the broken soul”.

Xarl hated the Raptors.

“I hate those things,” he said. This, too, was not for the first time. “I hate the way they talk, I hate the way they think and I hate the way they tell that tale about being first on the walls at the Emperor’s Palace.”

Uzas didn’t reply. He was trying to listen to the Raptors, as well.

“Their hunt is not going well,” he mused.

“Thank you for the translation, brother.” Xarl reached for his hand-held auspex, thumbing the activation rune. “Wait here. I’ll be back soon.”

Uzas tilted his head. “Talos ordered us both to remain here.”

“*You* are lecturing *me* on appropriate reactions to orders?” Xarl made a show of looking around. “Are you possessed, brother?”

Uzas didn’t reply.

“I’ll be back soon,” said Xarl. “I want to join in the Bleeding Eyes’ hunt for... whatever it is they’re hunting. It sounds as if it’s ripping them to pieces, and I like those odds.”

“I wish to hunt, as well.” Uzas grunted, sounding particularly petulant. “You stay here. I will hunt with the shrieking idiots.”

Xarl shook his head. “I think not.”

“Why?” Uzas asked. “Why should I stay while you go?”

“Because even on my worst days, I’m the best with a blade. You, on the other hand, run around with an axe, screaming about gods while you butcher your own servants.”

Without waiting for a reply, Xarl strode off down the corridor, boots thudding on the deck.

Vandred was one of the few still alive on the *Covenant*’s bridge. Flames coated the walls in a second skin, beginning to eat into the bodies of those who died doing their duty. He was half-blinded by the light of too many fires, and he could smell his ship’s last breath in the acrid smoke.

Despite this body’s raw strength, blood loss from several vicious gash wounds made it difficult to get back to his throne. The blood itself smelled foul, and dripped from his wounds in thick, adhesive clumps, barely liquid at all.

The remaining command deck crew were all servitors, their limited behavioural protocols keeping them bound to their duties no matter what external stimuli were at play. Two of them were burning, literally aflame as they stood at their stations: metal parts scorched, flesh blackening and bleeding. They keyed in commands to fire gun turrets that no longer existed.

Vandred hauled himself into the throne, and his wounds began to leak onto the black iron. The ship trembled again. Something burst in the occulus wall, venting pressurised steam.

“Talos.”

The prophet’s voice came back choppy, but the fact it came back at all was close to a miracle.

“I hear you,” he said.

Vandred spat blood. It was difficult to speak with all these teeth. “The *Covenant* is gone, brother. They’re not even boarding us. They want us dead, and they’ll get that wish very soon.”

Talos snarled. “Run. We will cover your escape. The twin-jump will work this time, you have my word.”

“Why is there this maddening devotion to lose both ships? The *Covenant* can barely crawl, let alone run. Save the worthless heroics for when you have an audience to appreciate them, prophet. That night may yet come, but it is not tonight. *You* run. I will cover *your* escape.”

“As you command.”

“Come about to these coordinates. Stay out of the fight, keep the enemy at bay with lance strikes, and be ready to receive survivors. Do not engage. Do you understand?”

A pause. “You will be remembered, Vandred.”

“I would rather not be.” He terminated the link with his bleeding claw, and switched to the shipwide vox, wondering just how many people remained alive to hear it.

“This is the captain. Seek succour aboard the *Echo of Damnation* at once. All hands, all hands...” He took a shivering breath.



“Abandon ship.”

## XXV

# LOSSES

The first craft to spill from the *Covenant*'s burning form were the vulture silhouettes of the Legion's gunships. They shot out into the void, their engines streaming with comet-tails as they raced to put distance between themselves and their doomed vessel.

Talos watched them bank and turn, no evidence of formation in their selfish flight, as they each adjusted their course to aim for the sanctuary offered by the *Echo*.

"You have just inherited several Claws," Mercutian pointed out.

Talos could tell the gunships apart by the pinions painted on their wings. He wondered if Ruven had managed to beg his way onto one of them.

Serf civilian craft came next, drifting from the launch bays, laden with supplies and refugees, their slow progress nothing like the racing dives of the Legion transports. The one exception was *Epsilon K-41 Sigma Sigma A:2*, Deltrian's armoured box of a ship, fattened by an expanded cargo hold and bristling with a ridiculous array of weapon turrets, as if it were a small mammal protecting itself with defensive spines. The *Epsilon* powered ahead of its contemporaries, fat-mouthed engines flaring. The automated turrets coating its structure like barnacles shot down any missile that came within range. Purely as a by-product of mechanical efficiency, the tech-adept saved more crew lives than any other evacuee.

All the while, the *Covenant* crawled on, its final volleys reaching out to strike home against the regrouping enemy fleet. The Red Corsair vessels returned long-range fire, setting more decks aflame, and several of the serf escapee shuttles had barely cleared the *Covenant*'s hull before they perished in the firestorm still tearing their mother ship apart.

Last came the escape pods—smallest and most numerous of all, and easily the most scattered. They spat into space, flitting on random trajectories, too small to attract notice but too slow to race for solace.

The *Echo of Damnation* ran as Vandred had ordered, withdrawing from the battle, absorbing these lost souls into its two functioning launch bays.

The prophet met many of the refugees on the primary port deck. His first concern was that he saw no sign of the Atramentar. His second concern wiped the first one away, stirring him from concern to outright anger.

Deltrian descended his vessel's gangramp at the head of a servitor parade: a hundred of the lobotomised slaves dragging his equipment with them. Cargo loaders on anti-gravitic runners carried the disassembled pieces of his largest relics, and the

prophet was certain he saw a Dreadnought's arm on one of the transport pads. On another: a medical amniotic fluid cylinder, containing the drifting, sleeping form of the Titan princeps First Claw had offered Deltrian as a gift.

Several of the augmented servants had been fitted for industrial lifting work—these worked in small teams to bear the immense weight of mid-range machinery. Two packs of them carried ironclad coffins with eerie, dead-eyed reverence.

Talos watched the second team—and their burden—with narrowed eyes.

Before he could intercept the tech-adept, one of his brothers blocked his way.

"I survived, Talos!" Ruven was jubilant. "What more evidence do we need of fate's hand at work? We shall both live to fight together again."

"A moment, please." Talos moved past, getting a second, better, glance at the burden being hefted by six of Deltrian's servitors.

"You traitorous bastard," he whispered. Deltrian, far across the chamber, heard nothing. The tech-adept continued to inventory his salvage.

The prophet's vox crackled live, stealing his attention but lessening none of his anger. Xarl's name rune flashed.

"Xarl, you will not believe what Deltrian has done."

"I doubt I'll care, either. This is much more important—brother, the Bleeding Eyes have found something down here. It's already killed eight of them."

"What is it?"

"I barely saw it myself, but I think it's one of the Neverborn. And a damn ugly one, at that."

Lucoryphus hunted with no regard for gravity. Denied flight in most of the confining corridors of shipboard pursuits, it made no difference to the Raptor whether he crawled along the ceiling, the walls or the floor. His jointed claws made all surfaces equally effortless.

As he clung to the roof of an empty serf refectory chamber, he tilted his head in aggressive, snapping movements, seeking any sign of motion below.

He could see nothing moving, and smell nothing bleeding. Neither of these things made sense. The wounded creature had fled into this chamber, and Lucoryphus had gathered packs of his Raptors to watch over each of the three exits. He'd entered alone, immediately rocketing up to the ceiling and sticking there.

"I see nothing," he voxed. "I hear nothing. I smell nothing."

"Not possible," Vorasha snapped back.

"It hides," rasped Krail.

Lucoryphus crawled across the roof, clicking quietly to himself in contemplation, his weeping faceplate staring at the deck below.

Caleb was slowly coming to terms with what his new form could do. The Pantheon had blessed his resurrected flesh with corporeal vitality, as they did for all of their servants, but with a twist of thought, a flash of concentration, the Corsair could reshape reality itself.

He knew a life of faith would be rewarded with great beneficence upon death, but this was no mere possession. He walked in the province of daemonhood now, mastering gifts no mortal should know.

The first thing he'd learned to do was to keep the flies quiet. They grumbled and droned in an ever-present cloud, hiving themselves within the cracked holes of his ceramite. The Night Lords had tracked him by the sound, until he'd learned to focus on it, rendering the insect host unheard with a flex of concentration.

They'd tracked him by smell, next. His veins bulged through his armour, as if the ceramite itself was a second layer of skin, and they writhed with his fluctuating heartbeats. The smell rose from this organic cabling beneath his skin, for his body couldn't contain the sulphurous reek of his own blood. One of the Raptors had managed to strike him, ripping strips of his neck away with a flailing talon, and the blood had bubbled in contact with the air, hissing and boiling away like evaporating acid.

Outside of his body, his blood simply burned away to nothingness, unable to exist unanchored to the material universe.

He'd blessed and thanked the Raptor, before strangling it with a smile. The lesson had been learned. Caleb was no longer a creature of this realm. His powers were unnatural for a mortal; they were entirely natural for a warp-spawned avatar of the Pantheon. He obeyed laws of a different reality now.

The next thing he'd learned had been the most useful. In seeking to hide from the gathering hunters, he'd rendered them blind to his presence. Unlike the other instinctive powers, this took his full focus, chanting the names of the Pantheon and deeds he would perform in their honour, if they'd bless him with the chance to reach his true prey.

And it seemed they had. Caleb drifted through the ship's walls, his boots soundless on the decking, until at last he felt his eyes, his fingertips, his beating heart all *pulled* in one direction, tugged by secret strings.

He let his focus slip free, and manifested in a corridor deep in the ship's body. The corridor was darker than any other, because someone had recently shot out the overhead lighting strips.

He turned at a sound from behind, a sound he knew very well indeed.

The chainaxe roared as its teeth ate air. Uzas shifted his grip, holding the weapon with both hands, ready to chop the creature in two the moment it dragged its filthy-looking carcass closer.

"Move," it laughed at him. Flies had made a nest of its mouth.

"Protect the Navigator," he said. Septimus and Maruc both fled behind the bulkhead, sealing it shut.

"Move," the creature said again, walking towards him. He didn't comply. Instead, he gave the air an experimental hack, as if warming up his muscles.

Uzas expected a grand duel. Even with his consciousness torn, he sensed a battle he would remember with wrathful pride for the rest of his life. He didn't expect the creature to care so little for pointless violence that it would smash him aside with one blow and vanish, but that was exactly what happened.

The thing's claw took him in the chest, hurling him back into the wall hard enough to leave a two-metre long dent. Uzas had several seconds of consciousness, which he used to try and regain his feet. A broken skull, and the nausea it brought with it, denied him even that. A blow that could render a Legiones Astartes warrior out cold would be enough to kill a human, or put a hole in an armoured transport's hide. Uzas passed out—still furious—without even thinking to vox for aid.

The humans heard the dull clang of something heavy hitting the wall. Then came the smell, and yellow smoke sifting through the closed bulkhead.

Octavia stepped around the pool's edge, holding her pistol. The others were all armed, all ready, without knowing what they were ready for.

"Where do we shoot it?" Maruc asked.

Septimus didn't answer at first, and when he did, it was only to shrug. "The head. I'm just guessing, though."

"Uzas will stop it," said Octavia. Even to her own mind, her voice held no sincerity. She sounded desperate to convince herself. She wanted to admit that she'd seen Uzas kill her warp-ghosts before, that she was sure he'd be able to kill this one as well, as long as it was still weak.

But that would mean admitting this was all her fault. She was the one drawing these restless dead upon them, and she was the one giving them strength every time she opened her third eye.

"The *Covenant* cursed me," she said. It left her mouth as a strangled whisper. No one heard. They were all watching the smoke manifest into something loosely humanoid.

"I think that clang was Uzas trying and failing," said Maruc, backing away. He raised his lasrifle.

The *Covenant* had the advantage of size, speed and power over each ship in the enemy fleet, but it was alone, encircled, and wounded unto death.

One of the destroyers made to break past, disengaging from the burning hulk to make a run for the *Echo of Damnation*. The *Covenant* dissuaded them all from such a course of action, protecting its sister ship by jettisoning its warp core. The destroyer veered away, as nimble as any vessel of that size could be, arcing away from the tumbling machinery.

It almost made it.

The *Covenant* fired the last of its defensive stern turrets, clipping the volatile engine core and setting it alight. The explosion lit up the void with purple-white flames, riding a spherical shockwave, catching two vessels in its anger. The first was the Cobra-class *Magnate*, which found itself bathed in nuclear fire, hurled off-course, and depleted of a third of its crew who died over the course of the next several minutes, fighting the flames threatening to take the whole ship to the grave.

The second vessel was the *Covenant* itself. Facing the enemy fleet, it found itself drawn further away from the *Echo*, but its limping pace was no match for the Red Corsair cruisers. They picked at it with long-range weapons, outrunning its feeble attempts to charge.

Lacking the speed to initiate a suicidal ram by traditional means, Vandred's only choice was to cheat.

The *Covenant*'s rear was fully immersed in the spreading detonation rising from its own purged and destroyed warp core. The shockwave smashed into the *Covenant*, breaking its rear half to pieces, powering the remaining hull wreckage forwards like a dying shark riding a wave crest.

The Red Corsair fleet turned, banked, opened fire—all to no avail. The *Covenant of Blood* speared right into the *Skies of Badab*, ramming the cruiser in the flank as it tried to turn away, and destroying both of them in an explosion that rocked the Corsair fleet to its heart, completely ruining their formation as every other ship sought to escape yet another critical core breach.

The only souls to hear Vandred's final words were the servitors still alive on the *Covenant*'s command deck, and it was uncertain if such wretches had souls at all.

As the oculus swelled with the image of the *Skies of Badab*, Vandred finally gave in to the urge that had plagued him every minute of every hour, every night of every year, for a century. All this time, he'd been fighting merely to exist. Now, he *let go*.

"I hope this hurts," he said, and closed his eyes.

The body twitched. Its eyes opened again.

The Exalted's last words were a wordless scream devoid of anything except pain.

The creature took shape. It was, roughly, one of the Red Corsairs.

All four of them opened fire, filling the pool chamber with the *crack-crack-crack* of las-weapons. Each bolt-beam slashed and scorched against the Corsair's armour, but did little beyond breeding a rain of burning flies from every wound.

Hound's weapon gave a throatier, angrier *boom, click-chuck* with each shot fired. Each shotgun shell scattered the flies for a moment, and hammered scattershot into the fleshy ceramite. The blood stank. Even over a lifetime spent on the *Covenant*, even above several hours spent in the same chamber as Ezmarellda's corpse, the creature's blood reeked like nothing else in life. Maruc vomited, firing blind as he did so.

The Red Corsair ran, untroubled by the slippery edges of the dank deck, and reached for the former station worker. Maruc screamed, inhaling flies as he was dragged from his feet with the creature's grip on his ankle. Hanging upside down, Maruc still fired through the flies, each shot stitching into the armour and doing nothing.

"Not you," the Corsair told him. He slammed Maruc against the wall, breaking his head open, and tossed the ragdoll body into the sick fluid pool. "Not him."

Hound had to reload. His bandaged hands worked with surprising efficiency, slotting home shell after shell as he backed up, careful not to slip. Just as he cracked the shotgun straight and chambered a round, the Corsair leapt for him.

He didn't scream, or thrash, or soil himself as Maruc had done. He let the creature lift him, and once brought up to the monster's face, he fed it his shotgun barrel.

No defiant last words for Hound. No quip or courageous laugh. He clenched his teeth, stared with blind eyes, and pulled the trigger over. The first shot blasted the beast's fangs to powder and made mincemeat of its tongue. The second blew the contents of its maw out the back of its throat.

There was no third shot. The Corsair hammered its fist into Hound's chest with a wet, snapping *crunch*, and hurled the body aside with far greater malice than it had thrown Maruc. Hound missed the water completely, pitching clean over the pool and hitting the far wall with an ear-aching crack. He tumbled to the decking, boneless and still.

Septimus stood next to Octavia, their fire twinned and achieving next to nothing.

"Your eye..."

"Won't work," she breathed.

"Then run."

She stopped, almost trembling, a question in her eyes.

"Run," he whispered again.

The Red Corsair sprinted for Septimus. He backed away, still firing, as Octavia reached the sealed bulkhead. It opened the moment her fingers touched it.

"Out of the way!" Uzas shoved her, pushing her down onto her backside. He hurled his axe.

He could still feel pain.

Though the gunfire did little more than ache like scratches upon the skin, the little bastard's shotgun blasts left him reeling, muted by the wounds, and trembling with the lingering agony. It fuelled his anger, as was only righteous, but Blood of the Pantheon, it also *hurt*.

The axe cracked against his head with the same kind of kicking, slamming pain. He had a single second to grunt, before he realised the blade was still live. The teeth snagged in his skull right after impact, clicked once, twice... then started chewing.

The pain of his jaws and throat being blasted apart turned out to be nothing, after all, compared to the feeling of metal teeth eating inside his skull and shredding his brain into paste.

The creature roared, though no sound emerged from the remains of its face. Its head had a shattered eggshell look to it, while its throat was a bleeding mess of blood-gushes and abused meat. It turned from Septimus, feral and enraged, hunting the greatest threat—the causer of the greatest pain. To reach Uzas, it ran forwards, spilling into the pool of water, turning its charge into a thrashing wade.

Uzas was already firing his bolter. It crashed and bucked in his grip, spitting mass-reactive shells into the daemon's body. Each one popped inside its torso with no apparent effect. The soft, crumpling thuds of bolter shells bursting harmlessly were almost disheartening.

Xarl was at his brother's side, his two-handed chainblade ready. "Give it up," Xarl told him.

"It wants the Navigator." Uzas reloaded, taking aim to fire again. His head snapped back as Xarl crashed an armoured elbow into his faceplate.

*“Give it up,”* the other Night Lord hissed again.

Uzas shook his head to clear it, glancing between Xarl and the nearing daemon. He scooped Octavia up by her throat, carrying her with neither grace nor kindness, and followed Xarl back into the corridor.

Caleb had nothing left except for his rage. He hauled himself from the pool, hurling himself through the door...

They were waiting for him. The things he'd hunted, gathered now into a great pack. They crouched on the deck, they gripped the walls, they clung to the ceiling—twenty sloping, iron daemon-masks, each one with two red eyes crying painted tears of silver and scarlet.

They chattered, and growled, and hissed and spat. In the midst of them, two Night Lords stood with bolters raised in one-handed pistol grips. One of them held his prize by the throat, heedless of her kicking and squirming.

Her blood smelled divine, but he couldn't focus on her. The pack tensed, moving in bestial unison. His anger drained, like pus from a lanced infection. It was as if the Pantheon abandoned him, sensing his worthlessness.

Caleb tried to summon it all back, to harness the anger again, to block out the pain and feed his muscles.

The bulkhead closed behind, sealing him in with the Raptors. The Red Corsair looked over his shoulder, seeing their armoured leader holding onto the ceiling, reaching down to shut the door with one claw.

*“I am going to eat your eyes,”* Lucoryphus promised him.

The Raptors dived as one.

Speaking was difficult, but she gave it her best.

*“Hound?”* She squeaked his name through a harsh throat. *“Hound, it's me.”*

She rolled him over. He'd never been pretty, but there was even less left of him now. She caught at his trembling hand, squeezing it tight.

*“Tired now, mistress.”* His voice was as weak as hers. *“Thank you for my name.”*

*“You're welcome.”* She had tears in her eyes. Tears, for a mutant heretic. Oh, if her father could see her now. *“Thank you for taking care of me.”*

*“It is dark in here. As dark as Nostramo.”* He licked his bruised lips. *“Did it die? You are safe now?”*

*“Yes, Hound. It died, and I'm safe.”*

He smiled, squeezed her hand with weak, dirty fingers. *“It is raining, mistress,”* he chuckled softly.

Octavia wiped her tears from his scarred, wrinkled face, but he was already dead.



## XXVI

### AFTERMATH

Uzas turned to face the opening door. He'd been standing in the centre of the cell, staring at the wall, thinking of blood's scent, the thin-oil feel of it on his face and fingers, and the stinging, addictive warmth of its bitter sweetness running over his gums and tongue. A god's name hid within that taste, within the touch, and within the scent. A god he loathed but praised, for the promise of power.

"I knew you would come," he said to the figure in the doorway. "After Vilamus. After what you said in the fortress. I knew you would come."

His brother entered the small chamber—a spartan echo of Uzas' former bare cell back on the *Covenant*. Truly, it took little effort to recreate such a lack of comfort; all it lacked was the heap of skulls, bones and old scrolls forming a midden in the corner.

"I didn't kill him," Uzas murmured. "Does that matter?"

"It would matter if it was the truth."

Uzas hunched his shoulders. Anger threaded through him at the accusation, but true rage, let alone wrath, was sluggish in his veins this night. He didn't rant and rave this time. He didn't have it in him; what use, to rebel against the inevitable?

"I did not kill Arkiah," Uzas said, taking great care with each word. "That is the last time I will tell you, Talos. Do whatever you wish."

"Arkiah was the last in a long, long line, brother. Before him, there was Kzen and Grillath and Farik. Before them, there was Roveja. Before her, Jaena, Kerrin and Ulivan. You have butchered your way through the *Covenant's* crew for more than a century, and you carry the blame for the deaths of Third Claw. I will not let you do that on the *Echo of Damnation*."

Uzas actually chuckled. "I am to blame for every murder that ever took place on the *Covenant's* hallowed decks, am I?"

"All? No. But blood is on your hands from a great many of them. Do not deny it."

He didn't deny it. Denial would neither serve him nor save him, anyway. "My trial is done, then. Carry out the sentence."

Uzas lowered his head, feeling both hearts beating harder. This... this was it. His skull would roll free. No more pain. Never, ever again.

But the prophet didn't reach for his weapons. The silence made Uzas raise his eyes in dull, slow surprise.

"You have been judged," Talos said the words with a care equal to Uzas' denial, "and you are bound by Legion law."

Uzas stood impassive, saying nothing.

“The judgement is condemnation. You will stain your gauntlets with the red of a sinner’s last oath, and when your lord demands your life, you will offer your throat to the edge of his blade.”

Uzas snorted, not far from a laugh. The tradition was rare even in the Eighth Legion’s glory days, and he doubted many warbands carried the practice with them down so many centuries. On Nostramo, members of gangs or families that betrayed their sworn oaths would sometimes be sentenced to delayed executions, so they might work off their sins in purgatorial duties before final justice was done. The home world’s tradition of tattooing the condemned’s hands bled into the Legion as a more obvious repainting of his gauntlets. To have hands stained sinners’ red was to show the world that you lived on the sufferance of others, and that you could never be trusted again.

“Why not just execute me?”

“Because you have duties to fulfil for the Legion before you are allowed to die.”

Uzas mused on this, insofar as he ever mused on anything anymore. “The others wanted me dead, didn’t they?”

“They did. But the others do not lead. I do. The judgement was mine to make.”

Uzas looked at his brother. After a time, he nodded. “I hear and obey. I will stain my hands.”

Talos turned to leave. “Meet me on the bridge in one hour. We have one last matter to deal with.”

“The Atramentar?”

“No. I think they went down with the *Covenant*.”

“That does not sound like the Atramentar,” Uzas pointed out.

Talos shrugged and left.

The door slid closed, and Uzas stood alone again. He looked down at his hands, seeing them for the last time in midnight clad. The sense of loss was real enough, cold enough, to make him shiver.

Then, with a moment of confusion, he glanced around and wondered where he was going to find red paint.

The back of her head thumped against the wall, hard enough to make her wince.

“Sorry,” Septimus whispered.

Octavia’s eyes were watering despite all the blinking going on. “Idiot,” she accused with a grin. “Now put me down.”

“No.”

Their clothing whispered as it met. He kissed her, barely, the faintest brush of his lips on hers. He tasted of oil and sweat and sin. She smiled again.

“You taste like a heretic.”

“I am a heretic.” Septimus leaned closer. “And so are you.”

“But you’re not dead.” She tapped the corner of her mouth. “That whole Navigator’s Kiss thing was a myth, after all.”

He answered her smile with one of his own. “Just keep your bandana on tonight. I don’t want to die.”

The door chose that moment to open.

Talos stood in the arch, shaking his head. The towering warrior gave an irritated grunt.

“Stop that,” he said. “Come to the bridge at once.”

She saw several of her attendants at his heels. Not Hound. The nameless ones. The ones she didn’t like. She wilted in Septimus’ arms, listening to his racing heartbeat with her head against his chest.

Closing her eyes was a mistake. Again, she saw Ezmarellda. Desire died within her, wholly and absolutely.

Ruven was the last to enter. He raised a hand in greeting to First Claw, who lurked in a loose crescent around the hololithic table.

A throne that mirrored the Exalted’s seat of blackened bronze stood empty, as did the raised dais, once the province of the Atramentar. *That will change soon*, Ruven thought. *Talos may refuse that throne, but I will not.*

The thought was worth musing on; the prophet had never expressed any desire to lead, and First Claw would likely be honoured by promotion into the Atramentar themselves. They would be effective bodyguards for the time being, at least until the next generation of Legionaries was raised from the fresh influx of infant slaves.

Ruven watched the strategium crew at work, taking note of the various uniforms on display. Most of the mortals were either in the insignia-stripped Naval uniforms of *Covenant* crew or the dark fatigues worn by the Eighth Legion’s serfs, but several dozen spread across various stations were clearly former Red Corsair slaves. Most of the latter wore the red robes of that fallen Chapter’s servants.

The last time Ruven had walked the decks of a Night Lord vessel, the *Covenant*’s crew stank of misery—that heady compound of exhaustion, fear and doubt, forever in the air when mortals stood in proximity to the Exalted. A nectar of sorts. Here, it was an undercurrent to the salty scent of tension. The sorcerer pitied them, so enslaved to their terrors. Such an existence would surely be intolerable.

He stood with First Claw at the hololithic table. Lucoryphus was present, crouched in his gargoyle’s hunch on a nearby console. The two slaves, the seventh and eighth, were also present. He disregarded them without a greeting. They shouldn’t even be here.

“Brothers. We have much to discuss. With a ship of our own, free of the Exalted’s tedious paranoia, the galaxy is ours for the taking. Where do we sail?”

Talos seemed to be considering that very question, studying the transparent imagery of several nearby solar systems. Ruven used the moment to steal a glance at the others.

All of First Claw was looking at him. Mercutian, straight and proud; Xarl, leaning on his immense blade; Cyrion, arms crossed over his breastplate; Uzas, leaning forward, red-handed by Legion decree with his knuckles on the projector table; and Variel, their newblood, standing in midnight clad, his armour repainted and the Red Corsair clenched fist icon on his shoulder guard now shattered by hammer blows. The Apothecary still wore his narthecium vambrace, and was absently closing and opening his fist, triggering the impaling spike to release every few seconds. It *snicked* from its housing, retracting a moment later, before Variel’s clenched fist deployed it again.

Even the slaves were watching him. The seventh, with his machine-eye and worthless weapons strapped to his frail, mortal shell. The eighth, pale and drawn, with her warp conduit hidden behind black cloth.

Ruven backed away from the table, but the prophet was already moving, a crescent of crepitating gold flashing out from his fists.

Talos stood over the cleaved body, watching its hands still working, clawing at the decking.

“You...” Blood bubbled from Ruven’s mouth, drowning the words. “You...”

The prophet stepped closer. First Claw closed in with him, jackal-eyes glinting at the promise of carrion.

“You...” Ruven gargled again.

Talos rested his boot on Ruven’s chestplate. The body ended there—everything from below the sternum had toppled the other way, leaving what was left to fall, crawl, and take almost a minute to die. Talos ignored the severed legs, only paying heed to the bisected less-than-half still capable of speech.

Blood ran in a forceful flow, pooling around the fallen halves, but gushing most fiercely from the cleaved torso with its straining, flapping arms. Discoloured innards spilled out with the sorcerer’s thrashing, slick with blood still being uselessly regenerated in the dying body. A glimpse of bone led to the broken remnants of the ribcage, sheltering the dark, pulsing organs. Two of his three lungs had been halved by the single chop.

Talos kept his boot on Ruven’s chest, preventing any more futile crawling. Xarl and Mercutian each placed a boot over Ruven’s wrists, pinning him completely as his life flooded out onto the deck.

A crooked smile crept over the prophet’s lips—his bitterly sincere, maliciously amused expression of subtle delight.

“Do you remember when you murdered Secondus?” he asked.

Ruven blinked, his shattered chest shaking as breath heaved through wounded lungs. Over the taste of his own blood, he supped the acrid iron of Talos’ stolen sword, as the prophet rested the blade’s razor tip against his lips.

“You sound just like he did,” Talos said. “Gasping through dying lungs, panting like a beaten dog. And you look the same, eyes wide and flickering, dawning awareness of your coming death breaking through the pain and panic.”

He slid the blade’s tip into the sorcerer’s mouth. Blood gouted onto the silver metal. “This is the fulfilment of a promise, ‘brother’. You killed Secondus, you caused harm to sworn servants of the Eighth Legion, and you betrayed us once, just as you surely would again.”

He kept the sword in the sorcerer’s mouth, feeling each flinch as Ruven split his lips and tongue on the blade’s edges.

“Any last words?” Xarl grinned down at the fallen sorcerer.

Incredibly, he struggled. Ruven thrashed against his confines, against the inevitability of his own demise, but strength had fled, carried out by his spilling blood. Half-summoned warp-frost plastered his gauntleted fingers to the floor.

First Claw remained with their prey until it died, wheezing out its final breath, finally resting back onto the deck.

“Variel,” Talos said quietly.

The Apothecary stepped forwards. “Yes, my lord.”

“Skin the body. I want his flayed bones to hang from chains, above the occulus.”

“As you wish, brother.”

“Octavia.”

She stopped chewing her bottom lip. “Yes?”

“Return to your chambers and prepare to sail the Sea of Souls. I will do what I can to ensure you are not overexerted, but the journey will not be an easy one.”

She wiped sweaty palms on her trousers; her nose still wrinkled at the sight of Ruven’s bisected body. Variel on his knees, cutting away armour and going to work with a flesh-saw, didn’t exactly help.

“What’s our destination?” she asked.

Talos called up an image on the central hololithic. Glittering stars cast a malignant glow down on upturned faces and faceplates.

“I want to return to the Eye, and make contact with some of the other Eighth Legion warbands. But for now, I do not care where we go. Anywhere but here, Octavia. Just get us there alive.”

She saluted for the first time in her life; fist over her heart, the way the Legion’s warriors once saluted the Exalted.

“Quaint.” Talos’ black eyes glinted in the reflected artificial starlight. “To your station, Navigator.”

This time, she performed a Terran curtsy, as if she were back in the ballrooms of the distant Throneworld.

“Aye, my lord.”

Once she’d left the bridge, Talos turned to his brothers. “I will return soon. If you need me, I will be with the tech-priest.”

“Wait, Talos,” Variel called, wrist-deep in the traitor’s chest. “What should I do with his gene-seed?”

“Destroy it.”

Variel squeezed, bursting the organ in his fist.

The Echo’s Hall of Reflection echoed, just as the *Covenant*’s Hall of Remembrance had echoed before it, with divine industry. Red Corsair plunder was dumped on the floor to be cleansed when Deltrian had time to attend to such insignificant details. Meanwhile, he observed his servitor army installing his precious Legion relics in places of pride.

The loss of every single artefact caused him a categorised host of digitally-interpreted approximations of negative emotion—what a human might call *regret*—but he was pleased with the modest horde of equipment he’d managed to salvage.

On an exceedingly positive note, the *Echo of Damnation* boasted an extremely well-appointed chamber for housing the treasures of his trade, and although rot had set in across the ship during its years in the Corsairs’ clutches, nothing was ruined beyond the application of careful restoration and routine maintenance.

Deltrian passed a life support pod, stroking a steel finger down the glass. The way a man might tap to catch the attention of a pet fish, Deltrian's fingertip *tink-tink-tinked* on the glass as he admired one of the true gems in his collection. The Titan princeps, naked and hobbled, drifted unconscious in the amniotic ooze, curled almost foetal around the input/output cables implanted within his bowels and belly.

The sleeping man twitched at the second set of taps, as if he could actually hear the greeting. That was impossible, of course. Given the amount of narcotics flooding the princeps' bloodstream, he was locked in the deepest coils of a chemical coma. If he *had* been even remotely conscious, well, the pain would be indescribable, and almost certainly a detriment to sanity.

Deltrian watched the man twitch again. He made a note to monitor his unconscious ward closely in the coming nights, as they all acclimatised to their new sanctuary. The tech-adept moved on.

Lifter servitors were heaving one of the two saved sarcophagi into stasis racks. This one... This one caused Deltrian some degree of concern. *Legiones Astartes One-Two-Ten; preferred appellation: Talos* was in command now, and the existence of this particular sarcophagus directly contravened his emotive desires expressed at a past juncture.

Still, such an eventuality would be dealt with when the time arose. Deltrian considered the sarcophagus to be his finest work: a perfect representation of the warrior within. The Night Lord image engraved on the burnished platinum stood in a posture matching representations of heroic and mythic figures from at least sixteen other human cultures, with his limbs and armour sculpted to exacting standards. His helmed head was arched back to suggest some mythic roar of triumph aimed up at the heavens, while he clutched the helms of fallen warriors in each hand. His boot rested upon a third, signifying his absolute victory.

Yes, indeed. Deltrian was adamantly proud of his work with this particular unit, especially in the ferociously complex surgeries required to save the living remnant's life during the one and only time it had conceded to activation.

The tech-priest froze as the immense double doors opened on grinding hydraulics. In a curiously human gesture, he reached to pull his hood up around his features.

"Greetings, Talos," he said, not turning around.

"Explain yourself."

That made him turn. Not the anger in the prophet's voice, for there was none to be heard, but the gentility of the demand, that was most intriguing.

"I infer that you reference the continued existence of Sarcophagus Ten-Three. Correct?"

The prophet's black eyes flickered first, then his pale features turned to follow. He stared at the ornately rendered coffin for exactly six and a half seconds.

"Explain yourself," he said again, colder now, his voice undergoing a significant reduction in vocalised temperance. Deltrian decided to frame this in the simplest terms.

"Your orders after the engagement at Crythe were countermanded by a higher authority."

The prophet narrowed his eyes. “The Exalted would never order such a thing. His relief at Malcharion’s destruction was palpable. Satisfaction poured off him in waves, tech-adept. Trust me, I saw it myself when I informed him.”

Deltrian waited for an acceptable juncture in which to interject his own words. “Incorrect assumption. The higher authority you are referencing is not the higher authority I inferred. The order to repair and sustain the life of the warrior within Sarcophagus Ten-Three did not originate with the Exalted. It was a command issued by Legiones Astartes *Distinctus-One-Ten/Previous-One*.”

Talos shook his head. “Who?”

Deltrian hesitated. He didn’t know the warrior’s preferred appellation, for he’d never been told of it. “The... Atramentar warrior, first of the Exalted’s bodyguards, Tenth Company, previously of First Company.”

“Malek? *Malek* ordered it?”

Deltrian flinched back. “The modulation of your voice indicates anger.”

“No. I am surprised, that is all.” Talos returned his gaze to the enshrined sarcophagus, already being attached to stasis feeds. “Is he alive in there?”

Deltrian lowered his head and raised it, in the traditional human signifier for positive agreement.

“Did you just nod?” Talos asked.

“Affirmative.”

“It looked like a bow.”

“Negative.”

“So he’s alive?”

Deltrian despaired, sometimes. Slowed by their organic flaws, these Night Lords were woefully difficult to deal with.

“Yes. This unit is ready for activation, and the warrior within is—as you say—alive.”

“Why wasn’t I told of this? I walked the *Covenant*’s Hall of Remembrance many times. Why was his sarcophagus hidden?”

“The orders were to maintain silence. It was believed you would react violently to the knowledge if exposed to it.”

Talos shook his head again, though the tech-adept guessed it was an accompaniment to thought, rather than an indication of disagreement.

“Will you react with violence?” the tech-adept asked. “This is sacred ground, already consecrated to the Machine-God, in honour of the oath between the Mechanicum and the Eighth Legion.”

The prophet’s gaze lingered on the Dreadnought’s sarcophagus.

“Do I look like a violent soul?” he asked.

Deltrian was unable to discern the exact ratio of sardonic humour to genuine inquiry contained in the Night Lord’s question. With no comprehension of the question’s nature, he couldn’t formulate a customised answer. Lacking any other recourse, he answered honestly.

“Yes.”

Talos snorted, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. “Awaken Malcharion if you are able,” he said. “Then we will discuss what must be done.”

## Epilogue

### FATE

*The prophet sees them die.*

*He sees them fall, one by one, until at last he stands alone, possessing nothing but a broken blade in his bleeding hands.*

*A warrior with no brothers.*

*A master with no slaves.*

*A soldier with no sword.*

*Cyrion is not the first to die, but his death is the worst to witness. The inhuman fire, burning dark with alien witchlight, eats at his motionless corpse.*

*An outstretched hand rests with its fingers blackened and curled, just shy of a fallen bolter.*

*Xarl, the strongest of them, should be the last to die, not the first. Dismembered, reduced to hunks of armour-wrapped meat, his death is neither quick nor painless, and offers only a shadow of the glory he so craved.*

*It is not a death he would have welcomed, but his enemies—those few that still draw breath when the sun finally rises after the longest night of their lives—will remember him until their own eventual ends. That, at least, is a comfort he can take beyond the grave.*

*Mercutian is not the last, either. Miserable, loyal Mercutian, standing over his brothers' bodies, defending them against shrieking xenos bitch-creatures that take him to pieces with curved blades.*

*He fights past the point of death, fuelling his body with stubborn anger when organs and blood and air are no longer enough.*

*When he falls, it's with an apology on his lips.*

*Variel dies with Cyrion.*

*The watcher feels a strange sorrow at that; Cyrion and Variel are not close, can barely stand to hear each others' voices. The same flames that embrace the former leap to embrace the latter, bringing death for one and pain for the other.*

*Variel dies unarmed, and he is the only one to do so.*

*Uzas is the last. Uzas, his soul etched with god-runes even if his armour is not.*



*He is the last to fall, his axe and gladius bathed red in stinking alien blood. Shadows dance in a closing circle around him, howling madness from inhuman throats. He meets them with cries of his own: first of rage, then of pain, and at last, of laughter.*

*The Navigator covers both her secrets in black, but only one can be so easily hidden. As she runs through the night-time city streets, beneath starlight kinder to her pale skin than the Covenant's un-light could ever be, she looks over her shoulder for signs of pursuit.*

*For now, there are none.*

*The watcher feels her relief, even though this is a dream, and she cannot see him.*

*Breathless, hiding, she checks her secrets, ensuring both are safe. The bandana is still in place, sheathing her invaluable gift from those who would never understand. He watches as her shivering hands stray down her body, resting at her second secret.*

*Pale fingers stroke a swollen belly, barely concealed by her black jacket. The watcher knows that coat—it belongs to Septimus.*

*Voices shout for her, challenging and cursing in the same breath. A tall figure appears at the mouth of the alley. He is armoured lightly, for pursuit and the running gunfights of a street battle.*

*"Hold, heretic, in the name of the Holy Inquisition."*

*Octavia runs again, cradling her rounded stomach as gunfire cracks at her heels.*

The prophet opened his eyes.

Around him, nothing more than a chamber—the cold comfort of his personal cell. The walls were already touched by Nostraman cuneiform, the flowing script written in some places, carved in others. The same etchings and scratchings were visible on the warrior's own armour, scrawled in mindless, prophetic decoration.

The dagger fell from his hand to clatter on the floor, leaving the final rune incomplete. He knew the sigil, and it wasn't one drawn from his birth-tongue.

A slanted eye stared back at him from the wall. It wept a single, unfinished tear.

An eldar rune, symbolising the grief of a goddess and the defiance of a species exiled to sail the stars.

Months of fever-dreaming suddenly made sense. He turned to a spiral carved into the steel wall, ringed by a crude circle ruined by its own elliptic sides.

Only it was not a spiral, and not a circle. It was a vortex that stared with one malignant eye, and a presence in orbit around it.

He traced his fingers along the orbiting oval. *What circles the Great Eye, trapped within its grip?*

"The *Song of Ulthanash*." Talos broke the silence of the cold room, looking back at the weeping goddess.

"Craftworld Ulthwé."

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## About The Author

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is a British author with his beginnings in the videogame and RPG industries. He's been a deeply entrenched fan of Warhammer 40,000 ever since he first ruined his copy of Space Crusade by painting the models with all the skill expected of an overexcited nine-year-old.

He lives and works in Northern Ireland with his fiancée Katie, hiding from the world in the middle of nowhere. His hobbies generally revolve around reading anything within reach, and helping people spell his surname.

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