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INVOCATIONS

**DAVID ANNANDALE
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• **THE VAMPIRE GENEVIEVE** •

by **Kim Newman**

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GENEVIEVE UNDEAD

BEASTS IN VELVET

SILVER NAILS

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INVOCATIONS

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LORA GRAY † NICK KYME † STEVEN SHEIL † PETER McLEAN
RICHARD STRACHAN † JAKE OZGA † RAY CLULEY**



A dark bell tolls in the abyss.

It echoes across cold and unforgiving worlds, mourning the fate of humanity. Terror has been unleashed, and every foul creature of the night haunts the shadows. There is naught but evil here. Alien monstrosities drift in tomblike vessels. Watching. Waiting. Ravenous. Baleful magicks whisper in gloom-shrouded forests, spectres scuttle across disquiet minds. From the depths of the void to the blood-soaked earth, diabolic horrors stalk the endless night to feast upon unworthy souls.

Abandon hope. Do not trust to faith. Sacrifices burn on pyres of madness, rotting corpses stir in unquiet graves. Daemonic abominations leer with rictus grins and stare into the eyes of the accursed. And the Ruinous Gods, with indifference, look on.

This is a time of reckoning, where every mortal soul is at the mercy of the things that lurk in the dark. This is the night eternal, the province of monsters and daemons. This is Warhammer Horror. None shall escape damnation.

And so, the bell tolls on.

THE HUNT

David Annandale

The screams are growing louder.

You know they are. Ever since they began, more than a month ago now, the wails have torn the nights apart with greater ferocity. The sounds claw at the darkness. You can almost see the gashes, bright as lightning, lingering as guilt. You can *almost* see them. When you close your eyes, they are there in your personal darkness, flashing and throbbing with each peak of the howls. You don't close your eyes often, though. Not if you can help it. Because there is something you *can* see.

You see what is screaming. You see the spectral host. The screams are louder because the phantoms are closer. Night after night, they draw nearer. They are coming for you, Bered Davan. They first appeared as a foul glimmer on the horizon, barely visible to you, invisible to anyone else. With each fall of dark, they have closed in. It has been a gradual approach, though they are close enough now that you can see that they are racing wildly to reach you. The ground they cover is not the same as that which you tread. They must cross great ethereal distances before they reach you. That is a small comfort, but at least it exists. You still have some time. A little, but it is yours to act in, however you choose to do so.

Have you been choosing wisely? You think not, though it is becoming more and more difficult to think. You have slept so little since the howling began. You never sleep at night now, and only in brief fits during the day. Time, yes, but so little. So very, very little. Like a tide, the host's approach is imperceptible moment by moment. Like a tide, it cannot be stopped. Unlike a tide, it will never recede.

The spectres will come until they fall upon you. The end will be bad. You

should try to fight them. You don't think you can. You know you cannot defeat such a horror on your own. You know you are strong. But you also know that you lack strength enough to try. And so your portion of shame grows, for this, witch hunter, is not how you should face your end.

You have been at the casement of your bedchamber all night. Your quarters, in the peak of a thin tower near the centre of the Free City of Everyth in the realm of Ghyran, give you a fine perspective of encroaching fate. You have spent the hours of darkness looking out over the steeply gabled, moss-covered roofs below, watching your doom, futilely covering your ears against the shrieks. You watch the host as you would a storm. Its movements are furious, though it closes in slowly. You can see it far better than you would like. What started as a glow, and then a mist with dreadful purpose, has become an army. You see the shapes of spectres.

You see the thing that leads them. It is the thing of screams. It is the thing that will destroy you. You even have a name for this horror. *Banshee*.

This knowledge grants no power. It brings only greater terror.

Dawn breaks, the arrival of grey in the sky that you await with such fervour every night. You try to think of it as a surcease, though you know it is an illusion. The fear is undiminished. The gift of dawn is the silence of the screams, the vanishing of the host. The absence is a lie, because the spectres will be that much closer when night comes again. If you cannot see them, though, and you cannot hear them, then perhaps you will sleep, if only a little. In the slow, twilight hour when Hysh and Ulgu exchange their roles in the dance, when night sighs its last and day gathers its breath, you have found the pause between vigilance and duty. Here alone is the pitiful fragment that is all that remains of rest for you.

You rise from your casement chair and stumble towards the straw mattress that lies in the corner of your chamber. Your quarters are an elevated cell. You disdain luxuries. The chair and the table are carved from aged, fallen timber. A chest holds your clothes and your weapons. There is nothing else. You need nothing else. Nothing else except sleep.

On this day, that is denied you. You lie down, and there is a knock at your door. You contain your sigh, because it might be heard, and you rise again. You take a moment, seeking to gather your energy and your dignity.

As if there were any way to hide the haggard sag of your face.

Your sunken, haunted eyes.

You open the door to Kolth, your servant.

‘Forgive me for waking you, witch hunter,’ he says, his eyes lowered. He has never had the courage to look directly at your face. He is loyal, and he is fiercely proud to serve you as you serve Sigmar, but he fears you, too, and the judgement that you wield. ‘Your help is urgently needed.’

‘Who by?’

‘Thevena Pasala, master.’

It is good that Kolth stares at the floor. Otherwise, he would see your eyes widen at that name. For a long time now, since before even you became a witch hunter, it is a name you cannot hear without a painful spasm of guilt. Today, though, hope flares in your chest. She has asked for you, for your help.

You never dared look to her for redemption. Now, perhaps, it is offered.

You cannot help but think this is a sign. There might yet be a way of halting the doom that comes for you.

Your carriage travels through the twisting streets of Everyth, heading for Rissilant, the manor house that is the home of Thevena Pasala. The journey is frustratingly slow. You have to fight down the illusion that you would get there faster on foot.

Everyth is built on a hillside, its streets not carved out of the rock, but following the natural ridges of the slope. As if in exchange, the ridges are plentiful and level, the hill inviting the presence of a city. Everyth bears the scars of the Age of Chaos, but some of its former beauty has returned. Everyth withstood the long night that preceded the coming of the Stormcast Eternals. Long besieged, it never fell, and it has grown strong again in the new age.

You are part of the reason why this has happened. You are one of Everyth’s saviours. Yet you feel no sense of pride. You feel only guilt. You made a decision, once. It was the correct one. It is the one for which you are desperate to be forgiven. And maybe, today, forgiveness will be yours.

You were not on the ramparts of Everyth when the forces of Sigmar and the hope they brought struck like a cleansing storm in this region of Ghyran. You were at Grenholm Keep, two leagues distant from the city, crowning a lower, rocky promontory overlooking the Allasha river. Grenholm Keep blocked the advance of the Ruinous Powers to Everyth.

The siege it withstood went on so long, it seemed to you and your comrades that it was truly eternal. But then the Hallowed Knights marched into Ghyran. The people of Everyth and its environs rallied together into a new army.

This is when you made your decision. You have relived it ten thousand times since that day, and you do again with renewed pain now. Your pulse beats harder as you draw near to Rissilant. This is not fear that shakes you. The spectres at your heels leave no room for you to fear anything but them. If not fear, then this is anxiety compounded of hope and shame.

The choice you faced was simple in its alternatives, complex in its costs. You could continue to defend Grenholm Keep, but its strength was expended. Its fall could not be long in coming.

(You insist on telling yourself this even now.)

Or you could abandon Grenholm to the inevitable, and join what would become the Freeguild of Everyth and fight to save the city.

Your comrades refused to abandon their posts. You were swept up in the great fervour for Sigmar. You fought for Everyth, and Everyth prevailed.

And Grenholm Keep fell.

Thevena Pasala was your oldest friend. You would have died for each other. Yet you left her with all the others in Grenholm Keep. When the daemons of the Plague God, Nurgle, were finally thrown back, and the shambling, festering horrors were purged from the guttering ruins of the keep, Thevena was one of the few mortals to emerge from the rubble. Even with your blood burning with the flames of victory and of faith, you could not bring yourself to face Thevena. You did not speak to her then, nor on any occasion since. You knew what she and the few other survivors would think of you.

Even when you became a witch hunter, and your name was spoken in whispers across Everyth, you did not seek her out. How could she forgive you? Had positions been reversed, you would not have forgiven her.

Today, though, something has changed. Something is different. Miracles are possible today.

Thevena is waiting on the steps of Rissilant when your carriage arrives. You alight, and she descends the stairs with her arms reaching forward. You hurry to her, and you embrace. You do not care who witnesses this unguarded display of emotion in the fearsome witch hunter. There is no

time for dissembling and a denial of what you feel. The warmth of her welcome is more than you ever dared to hope for. It is more than you deserve, and you tell her so a short while later, when the two of you are sitting in the withdrawing chamber on the second floor of Rissilant.

‘We faced hard choices in the end, at Grenholm,’ Thevena says gently. ‘You did what you thought was right.’

‘Do you think it was?’

She laughs. ‘How can I judge a witch hunter?’

‘I’m asking you to.’ Your voice has dropped to a murmur.

She sees that you are serious, and that you put much stock in her answer. The seconds pass while she thinks. At last, she says, ‘I know what I felt on that day.’

You wince.

‘But I survived,’ she adds quickly. ‘And look.’ She waves a hand to take in the chamber. ‘I have done better than survive. I am thriving.’ It is true. Over the years, she has become one of the most prosperous merchants in Everyth. She and you were born under the tyranny of the Ruinous Powers. You never knew anything except the privations of struggle and war. She has become wealthy. She could not be what she is now if there were no longer an Everyth. ‘If there had not been a rush to defend the city, perhaps it and the keep would have fallen. Maybe you saved me by abandoning me.’

She smiles, but you cannot.

‘I cannot judge,’ she says. ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t.’

Can you forgive? you want to ask. The dread of *no* holds your tongue. Thevena’s equivocation makes you question the full depth of her welcome. Even with her wealth and position, she can no more cross a witch hunter than can Kolth.

There are so many things you wish you could say. *Don’t be afraid of me. I’m Bered. Just Bered. If I could change what happened at Grenholm Keep, I would, but I can’t, and I need you to understand I did what had to be done. You believe that. You must. Don’t you?*

Instead, you say, ‘Why did you send for me?’

‘Because I have evidence of a cult devoted to Chaos at work in the city.’

‘Show me.’ You are on safe ground. You can speak with authority again.

Thevena rises and pulls a chest across the floor to where the two of you

are seated before her ivy-covered balcony. She lifts the lid and reveals a jumble of food cases and the bottoms of barrels.

The reason for her concern is obvious. Dark runes have been burned into the surface of every object in the chest.

‘This is all from one shipment,’ she says. ‘We had an entire caravan of provisions prepared for the journey east, towards Mhurghast.’ The plague daemons have been pushed back many leagues in that direction. Thevena does much to supply the efforts of Everyth’s Freeguild to purge the spawn of plagues from Ghyran altogether. What she has found in here is serious.

‘And the provisions?’ you ask.

‘Tainted. Turned to poison. I would never have known if a barrel had not fallen from a wagon and broken. When we saw what was inside, we checked the rest. We might have killed hundreds...’

‘Who is your cooper?’

There will be no further talk of forgiveness or the past. You will do what your calling demands of you, and cling to the hope that forgiveness *does* lie down this path, and with it escape from the screaming dead.

You reach the cooper’s not long after work for the day has begun. It is a warehouse and workshop combined. This is a prosperous enterprise, but Thevena has warned you that she suspects the owner, Aran Folkene, has ties to dubious elements in Everyth. His buildings are at the edge of the artisan quarter of the city, and its back looks out upon the narrower, darker alleys that twist through areas heavily damaged during the wars. Fire has swept through this part of the city more than once, and much of it still lies in ruins. The people who live here do not have the means to rebuild, and few in the rest of Everyth have the interest or the will.

You enter the warehouse from the rear doors. Silence falls as if cast by your shadow. The workers stop in mid-task, their faces stricken by the sight of your dark cloak and wide, feathered hat. You stand in the doorway, waiting, letting the simple threat of your presence do its work.

You have done this so many times before. You are good at it. Today, you can barely concentrate. The night is still a fresh memory. The phantoms were so close.

It is only morning, but the night to come is rushing for you, the hours flowing away like water.

Whispers spread through the warehouse, and it is only a short time before Aran Folkene trots across the floor to you, his hands clasped in obsequious modesty, his head bowed.

‘Witch Hunter Davan,’ he says, ‘you honour us. How can I be of service?’

You stroll past him, towards a row of completed barrels. You raise the lids one by one. ‘I have seen containers bearing the marks of Chaos. Containers supplied by you.’

He turns pale.

‘There must be some mistake. We are loyal servants of Sigmar, all of us.’

‘That would be reassuring,’ you say, ‘if I believed you.’ You look back at the entrance, and the blackened ruins beyond.

‘I do not judge my workers by their origins,’ Aran says quietly.

‘Perhaps you should.’ You turn back to the barrels. You have seen no runes yet, but your work has just begun.

You raise your voice, addressing everyone in the warehouse. ‘You will leave this space. You will wait for me in the front of the shop. All of you. Wait, and be ready to answer my questions.’

‘Witch hunter...’ Aran begins.

‘You too.’

You stare at him until he complies.

Once you are alone, you move quickly through the rows of barrels and crates, torch in hand, prying open lids at random. You find nothing. It is possible that no tainted receptacles remain. This would be unfortunate. The less evidence you find, the more forceful your methods of interrogation will have to be.

There is a pyramid of barrels against the far wall. You stop at the foot of the pile. It is constructed in steps, making it possible to climb to the top row and pull the barrels down. If there are any more of the unclean objects still in the warehouse, this would be a good place to hide them.

You start to climb, torch still in hand. The shadows are thick here, and they waver in the light of the flame. You are three levels up when one shadow, next to the wall, detaches itself from the others and hurls itself at you.

What chance does a mortal attacker have against you? You, who have been claimed as prey by the dead?

You thrust the torch into the face of the assassin. He screams as his hood

catches fire. Yet he does not retreat. He attacks still, already dying and maddened with pain, but driven to kill you by some greater force than his own will to live. Blind, he slashes at you, forcing you back a step. You draw your sword and drive its point through the man's neck.

The corpse tumbles down the barrels to the ground.

You descend, stamp out the flames on the smouldering cloak and hood, and examine the assassin. His features are burned beyond recognition. His clothes are finely sewn, though. This was a man of means. You were too quick to make assumptions about Aran's workforce.

You continue your examination. The man bears no jewellery, though there are veins of ur-gold in the hilt of his sword. When you cut open his tunic, you find tattoos. You grunt twice, first with satisfaction, then with shock. You expected to find the runes of Chaos, and indeed the slithering shapes mark this wretch as a worshipper of Slaanesh.

You did not expect to find the sign of vines entwining a mace.

The sign of Grenholm Keep.

You step back from the corpse, breathing heavily. The path before you is clear, and you dread it.

You must return to the keep.

The night and your past are reaching out to seize you.

Day is failing as you climb the hill towards Grenholm Keep. How can the hours have slipped away so quickly? How could it have taken you so long to prepare, and so long to travel to the keep? How could you have been so spendthrift with your waning time?

If there are answers, they do not matter. Soon, the screams will return. Soon, you will see the host. You do not know if they will reach you this night. But they might. They are so close now.

At least you are not alone. Thevena is at your side, armed as she has not been since the siege. Her chain mail was once a verdant green, but it was battered and bloodied so during the siege that little of its original colour remains. Thevena kept it as a memorial to the dead of the keep, and she has donned it again in their honour, and, she has explained, as a symbol against the betrayal of Grenholm's spirit that you found marked on the assassin.

You should not have gone back to Rissilant. You should not have told her

what you found. This is not her fight. You should have made your preparations and headed out. But the dread of the night was too strong.

You feel the cold breath of fate on your neck. You feel the end approach. And if this night is to be your last, though it fills your soul with shame to give in to such craven emotions, you could not bear the thought of disappearing into silence. You wanted someone to know where you had gone and why. So you spoke to Thevena.

There was no one else. Your path has been a lonely one. You had comrades in Grenholm Keep. Since then, you have not. You have only had suspects and servants. Kolth has been loyal, but you do not see him as your peer. You need to be remembered by someone worthy.

But most of all, you need to be remembered by Thevena, and remembered without hate.

You did not expect her to accompany you. So you tell yourself, repeatedly, until this seems to be something very like the truth. You are glad she is there, though. For so many reasons, you are glad. If she has not explicitly forgiven you, she has not condemned you, either. You will follow the trail of the Slaaneshi cult and exterminate every member, and she might well bear witness to that, and though what you do, you do for Sigmar, if this helps her too... well, that will sit well with you.

And you will not be alone on this night. You will not be alone.

You think you might be performing your final tasks as witch hunter. If you can act honourably until the end, you tell yourself you will be satisfied.

The ruins of Grenholm Keep loom before you. The green has not covered them. The fallen towers and tumbled walls remain bare, like the bleached bones of a leviathan. The destruction the forces of Chaos wreaked here was too savage. The land has not been able to begin healing yet.

‘How many survived?’ you ask Thevena.

‘I don’t know. I saw no one else when I emerged, but that means little. I was below ground, alone, for days.’

There is no adequate response to that statement, so you make none.

‘To fight so long against Chaos, and then betray the cause when the light of Sigmar has come to us...’ Thevena sighs. ‘I do not like to think any of our comrades on the ramparts had it in them to be so treacherous.’

‘Nor do I.’

The talk of betrayal makes you uncomfortable, even though it is treachery that you have come here to find.

The last of twilight fails when you are less than a hundred yards from the ruins. The darkness of Ulgu covers Ghyran. You have been bracing yourself these past moments, and yet you are not prepared for the fury of the scream. It is enormous. It is as if the firmament itself howls in anger. You stagger. You gasp.

‘Bered?’ Thevena asks. ‘What is it? Are you ill?’

I am not ill, you think. I am doomed. You look behind you. The spectral host is at the bottom of the hill, closer than it has ever been before, and encircling the rise. This is the night, then. This is the reckoning. There will be no escape. You cannot descend from Grenholm Keep, and you do not doubt that the phantoms will reach the ruins before dawn.

The banshee points up the slope, her hair and robes billowing in the ethereal wind. She sees you, and her scream surrounds you, consumes you, and scrapes you hollow. You turn away with a groan, stumbling again, and Thevena holds you up.

‘Do you not hear them?’ you ask. ‘Do you not see them?’

‘See what?’

You shake your head. ‘Nothing. Nothing. An attack has begun, but it does not concern you.’ It is better that she cannot see what is coming for you. It would be wrong for her to become an innocent victim of your fate.

Of what am I guilty? you want to cry out. You do not, because you know the answer. The truth is all the more obvious since Thevena sees and hears nothing. The dead are the comrades you abandoned. They have been waiting for you to return to Grenholm Keep to exact their revenge.

I betrayed nothing. I fought for Ghyran. I fight for Sigmar.

You wish your protestations carried more conviction in your heart.

How can the truth feel so much like a lie?

No matter. No matter. You have a calling, and you will not abandon it now. You steady your breathing. You walk more quickly, as if even a small increase of distance could diminish the intensity of that shriek. You will learn what there is to learn in Grenholm Keep, and if you must die here, then you will charge Thevena to carry the knowledge found here back to Everyth, to raise the alarm, and to take the battle to the cult.

You reach the gate of the keep. It is open, and passing through it no

longer leads to a courtyard beyond the walls. Instead, the collapse of the keep has created a dome of rubble. You and Thevena penetrate into the darkness, your torches a weak circle of light revealing the angles of shattered stonework, scarred with burns. You see window frames turned on their sides and filled with boulders, fragments of staircases scattered like wheat, hints of corridors leading off like web strands into abyssal blackness.

Thevena's breath catches. She pales, and it is clear now that she is finding each step as difficult as you are. 'I had hoped I would never be here again,' she says.

You can see the nightmare of her final days in the keep surfacing in her memory, attacking her as savagely as the shriek that is calling for you. 'You should go,' you say.

She shakes her head. 'This is too important.'

Then you will face your ordeals together. You raise your torch higher, spreading the light a bit further. You examine the slumped walls of rubble, looking for any sign of your prey. It is almost impossible for you to concentrate on your task. The scream is growing louder and louder. You are running out of time.

Why have you come here? Why have you hastened your end? Why are you still trying to finish a struggle that you cannot win in the time remaining to you? Why do you not flee?

Your breath is coming in quick gasps. Inside your leather gauntlets, your palms are cold and covered in sweat.

Then you see it. Where the broken cobbles drop away in a steep slope, a rune, malevolently sensuous in its curves, has been daubed in blood on a broken slab.

'There,' you say, and then stop.

The shriek is in the ruins with you. It shakes dust from the roof of stone. There is too much light, and it is a terrible light, the sickly glow of sepulchres. You turn, and the banshee is in the gateway, phantoms raging about her.

'No,' you say, and take a step backward. 'Help me,' you beg Thevena.

You do not want to die. Not like this. The last of your discipline breaks. You thought you could fight until the end. You were wrong. The terror that has come is too great. You resisted until the moment came, and here is

your limit. You are not the warrior you were called upon to be.

You experience a moment of clarity that you have been suppressing for years. You know the answer to the question of whether you rushed to join the Devoted of Sigmar, or fled Grenholm Keep.

The knowledge snaps you in half.

‘Can’t you see them?’ you cry hopelessly. ‘Can’t you hear them?’

And then, suddenly, gloriously, you are no longer alone.

‘I do,’ Thevena says, and her eyes are wide with fear. She covers her ears.

‘They are here for me,’ you say.

Two things happen at once. The host bursts into the ruins, and Thevena takes your arm and the two of you run, sliding and slipping down the slope. The banshee howls in rage, her hands snatching for you, and missing by a breath.

Down you flee, and surely it is Sigmar who guides your footsteps and keeps you from falling, for you succeed in putting some distance between yourselves and the spectres.

‘I’ll hide you!’ Thevena shouts. You can barely hear her.

‘How?’

‘Where I sheltered from the Maggotkin.’

You can think of nothing better, and to follow in Thevena’s footsteps somehow seems fitting. You will repeat her ordeal, and it was one from which she emerged.

The rune you saw is unimportant now. If you survive, you will hunt again.

You descend deep in the dark. The shadows thicken, pushing against the light of the torches. You can barely see two steps ahead, and the scream of the banshee threatens to shatter your skull in two.

You reach a lower vault, one that is still relatively intact. Water is trickling in from somewhere. It is an inch deep on the floor. Thevena splashes across the vault to the far wall. She kneels and pushes a stone aside, revealing a cavity in the base of the wall. ‘In here,’ she says.

You approach. You look into blackness. You hesitate.

The glow of the phantoms fills the vault. There is no more time, and there is nowhere else to run.

There is a sudden, slicing flash of pain in the back of your legs and you fall, twisting. You land on your back, and Thevena is standing over you, holding the sword she used to sever your tendons. She glances back at the

phantoms and hurries to push you into the hole.

You shake your head. You want to plead, to beg, and to ask why, why, *why*? The words do not come, but Thevena answers all the same, because she wants you to know, she *needs* you to know.

‘There is ecstasy in purest revenge,’ she whispers. ‘I have given my worship for this ecstasy. It is glorious.’ She hisses in delight and gives you a final push.

As you slide into the dark, your last sight of Thevena is of her exultation just before the spirits fall upon her, screaming in rage.

Too late, you understand. The host was a warning, its ghostly arms seeking futilely to arrest your fate.

You slide until you come to a jarring stop, your head jerked to a sharp angle and held tight between stone. You are wedged upside down between tonnes of rubble, the jagged texture of the stone pressing against your back and chest. Foul water trickles into your mouth. You choke and gag, but you catch rasping breaths in between retching.

In your mind, you are screaming, believing yourself to be absolutely alone.

You are wrong. I am here with you. I am a keeper of secrets, and you will be my secret plaything for an age of exquisite torment.

THE CONFESSION OF CONVICT
KLINE

Justin D Hill

The convicted woman was bound to the chair of judgement by hand, foot and forehead. Her eyes were stitched open. Her teeth had been ripped out, her mouth gagged with the holy aquila in black leather. The places where her fingernails had been were bloody wounds. Despite these precautions, there was a dreadful and unholy menace about her. The look in her bloodshot eyes was of cold hatred.

Confessor Thanaton knew it was no idle threat. The woman was a psychopath – devoid of emotion, perhaps, but not devoid of evil. This one was a condemned murderer. A serial killer of terrible and ruthless achievement. Her favourite predations had been the lower hab-blocks of District XV, which housed the Munitorum workers from the ammunition factoria. – cramped, foetid slum dwellings made positively unwholesome by the influx of refugees from the Spinward regions. She had preyed on their denizens throughout the hot summer months, a terror in the shadows who drew no distinction between street children, beggars and honest factorum workers.

Confessor Thanaton stood over the bound figure, and from the ocular feed of his data-monocle he briefed himself on her crimes. His line of work inured him to gory details but the particulars sent a tremor of fear down his back. He made the sign of the aquila. Although the condemned showed no signs of the five common traits of known heresy, she was unquestionably unworthy of life. She was guilty. Of that there was no doubt. The important question to consider was whether or not she was *corrupt*. The answer that he came to would decide the manner of her death.

Confessor Thanaton was standing in the confinement pits beneath

Penitentiary Block Alpha on the planet of Telken's Rest. Two guards flanked the chair where the condemned woman sat. They were veteran warriors of the Astra Militarum dressed in black body armour, grilled, open-faced helmets and steel-toed boots. Mini-shrines marked with the skull of the Emperor and fluttering penance scripts were affixed to their shoulders. Their belts were hung with the tools of their trade: stun-rods, restraining clamps, spiked gags, neuro-cuffs and captive bolt pistols. They were virtuous, ruthless and brutal. They had to be. All those brought to this warded chamber were criminals of a similar ilk to the woman before him. Great care was needed with these captives. Their unstable sanity made them a magnet for the Neverborn. A weak link in the Imperium of Man. A conduit of unholy forces lurking beyond the immaterium.

Just the act of gathering them together in this place created a dangerous instability. The Neverborn feasted on human emotion and even though Ecclesiarchy doctrine stated that psychopaths, devoid of emotion, presented some difficulties to the creatures of the warp, their crimes made up for their lack of feeling.

The walls were warded with sacred scripts, the tiles sprinkled with holy unguents, and the empty corridors echoed with the looped plain chant of choir servitors set into alcoves in the walls. The High Gothic canticles drowned out the stifled sounds of punishment and insanity and confinement. Between songs came the echo of gagged voices, muffled pain, the high, mad cackle of the insane.

Confessor Thanaton's challenge was to bring this soul back from the edge of heresy. He was a front-line warrior in this vital role, armoured with faith, buttressed with conviction, shielded with dogma, divine in his mission. He stood above the woman and waved Cithaeron forward. The servo-skull hummed as it circled the room. A brass censer marked with holy scripts and wards was slung beneath it. It dragged a tail of fragrant incense smoke in the cool air. Thanaton made the sign of the aquila before his captive and intoned, 'In the Name of the Holy Emperor and all His saints.'

There was an art to getting a confession. Curing a heretic of their insanity. The air grew chill as he invoked the Emperor's name. It was serious work, bringing a soul back to the Emperor. Robbing His enemies of the nourishment of the condemned. It was something that Confessor

Thanaton excelled in. He had a way of gaining the confidence of those whose souls teetered on the very lip of destruction. Of coaxing them back from the edge. For over the brink lay insanity and oblivion.

He listed the major saints of the Imperium while the convict snarled and slathered. She did not react to any of the names he had invoked. None of their examples broke through the darkness that enclosed her mind. He ended his standard lecture with the words, 'Let my cry be heard, let this sinner's pleas be heard.'

The convict threw herself against the restraining bonds. She thrashed and snarled, and as she did so her whole body tensed; each muscle leapt out from her emaciated frame. They were like knots in ancient wood. If she could have spat at him, she would have. Bloody drool hung from her gagged mouth. She wanted to tear his throat out with the broken stumps of her teeth.

One of the guards started forward but Confessor Thanaton motioned them back with a wave of his hand. He gave her one last chance. 'Can you see the light?' he demanded. 'It is a small chink. A candle flame in the vast night. A flickering glow in the storm of insanity. But it can save you. The Emperor is that light and He loves you. He wants you to confess. He needs your contrition. Can you give me a sign? A flicker. A moment of calm.'

All through this the condemned woman snarled and slavered like a wild beast. Ropes of bloody spittle hung down her face. She rejected hope, rejected the salvation he could offer, and at last Confessor Thanaton stood. 'If you will not let me save you then your soul will be lost to the Emperor. The Ruinous Powers will rend it into shreds. The mortal pain you feel here will be magnified ten thousand times. Your soul-death will last centuries. The exquisite pain will be a nightmare from which you will wish to be released. Only the God-Emperor can save you. His Light will protect you. Find it. Look. Search through the darkness. There is light. There is hope. There is a final chance.'

The slaving struggles of the convict went on throughout this monologue. The raw wounds where her teeth had once been gaped red. The mad eyes glared at him. The bindings creaked and stretched as she threw herself against the restraints. She was utterly lost.

Confessor Thanaton was close to giving up. He bent to the bleeding eyes. In the dark pits of her pupils he saw the reflected candle flames, flickering

yellow. Thanaton felt the Emperor's love flowing through him as lava flows, and he put his open hand onto the forehead of the condemned. 'The Emperor loves you,' Thanaton told her.

A truly contrite mind had many uses. The penitent could be turned over to the flesh-wrights, who would soothe their madness, like a stormy sea turning calm. But this one refused all benediction. At the end Confessor Thanaton raised himself to his full height and held her insane gaze with his own. 'You are a miserable, unholy, ungrateful wretch,' he declared, and the bound figure lashed and leapt against the thongs. 'You are a beast. You do not deserve the Emperor's love. You deserve death.'

He made the sign of the aquila once more and spoke a simple prayer of Consolation in the Face of Heresy. At the last he took a cloth, sprinkled it with holy water and wiped his fingers clean, saying, 'If you cannot find the Emperor's Light, then I can do nothing more for you. I condemn your soul to darkness.'

He motioned to Sergeant Nyxx. She was a purse-mouthed, no-nonsense veteran with hooked nose, severe, brown, deep-set eyes, and a military-grade haircut under her flak armour helm. It was clear that she had been itching to do this since they walked in. She stepped forward with the attitude of someone who had known all along that this was a waste of time. Her fingers found the butt of her captive bolt pistol and pulled it from its leather holster. With one swift movement she loaded the firing charge, clicked the bolt into place, and put the barrel to the condemned's temple.

Her weapon's name, Emperor's Blessing, was etched in silver ornamental lettering along the barrel. It glittered as she held the muzzle to the prisoner's head. It was like slaughtering a beast. There was an explosion of compressed air as the bolt was driven through the skull. The effect was immediate and destructive. The captive's head was thrown sideways against its restraints and then it hung there, dead.

In an instant all the anger, the hatred, the tension had gone. Blood leaked from the neat round hole and the captive bolt was wiped clean and pulled back into the gun.

The confession was at an end.

The murderer's name was now to be struck from all Imperial records, her body sent for the three rites of total incineration. The dispatched convict had been consigned to the hell of the Ruinous Powers. There were other

souls to save this morning.

Confessor Thanaton paid the dead body no attention. He wiped his hands, pinched out the candles he had lit in the corners of the room, and motioned Cithaeron to follow him.

The second guard, a dark-skinned man with vivid green eyes and a sombre manner, named Acklys, went out first, bending low to pass through the dressed stone doorway. Confessor Thanaton followed him outside. The chanting still echoed down the corridor, with the canticles and the ambient sounds of singing, muffled screaming and insanity. They moved along the corridor until they reached the next metal-bound portal.

There were nearly fifty condemned to be sorted that day. It was too many. The accumulation of murderers in one place raised the danger of unholy manifestation beyond acceptable risk. But these were the times they lived in. It had been four years since the Great Calamity. The fabric of their world was straining.

Acklys stopped at the cell which held the next convict. He unlocked the heavy door and pushed it inwards. 'Emperor help us,' Confessor Thanaton breathed as he bent inside.

Confessor Thanaton judged each of the fifty condemned that day. He treated each with the same level of intensity. Invoking the Emperor and the Imperial Saints, looking for a name that might cut through the darkness.

Most of them were beyond help and were dispatched in the same way as the first: Emperor's Blessing smashing neat round holes through their corrupted skulls; their bodies dragged away, smearing the stone floor; their naked and unshriven flesh burnt through to a fine grey ash, which was then incinerated once again until nothing remained, so that no trace of their crimes could remain.

As for their souls... Confessor Thanaton took in a deep breath. No doubt their souls were already being shredded in the claws of the Ruinous Powers. He had offered them a chance but some were too stubborn to take even that. Their eternity of torment had already begun. He had done his best. Of the judged, eighteen had stepped back from the brink. They had given him a sign. A flicker of the eyes. A nod. They had kissed the aquila he put to their lips and they had returned to the Emperor's Light. The moment of revelation brought a powerful joy to him. A soul saved. A last

chance taken. It was beauty of a kind.

It served a function too. The Imperium of Man did not like to waste life when it could yet serve.

‘I pronounce you saved,’ he declared and guardsmen of the Ecclesiarchy had been summoned inside.

They were cowed menials whose faith was robust but whose intellect and abilities did not find another useful function. Between them they carried a brazier of blessed coals, which they set down before Thanaton. The heat from the blazing cinders was on him as he turned and invoked the Emperor. It was a solemn moment as Thanaton took the brand and presented the glowing metal to the bound prisoner. ‘I name you penitent,’ he intoned as he pressed the red metal into their skin.

A foul-smelling smoke would rise as the skin hissed and burned, and the saved soul rejoiced.

Afterwards they were fitted with neuro-clamps before being unbound, and then the menials dragged them away to the flesh-wrights of the Ecclesiarchy for penance processing.

The most penitent would serve as servitors, but the majority would have their skulls cut open, the prefrontal cortex burnt away, the spinal column rewired with stim conduits and frenzon injectors. A process that resulted in an arco-flagellant, one of the most terrifying weapons that the Ecclesiarchy could unleash. Once their brains were tamed, their hands would be cut away and cauterised and replaced with terrifying weapons – electro flails, adamantium blades and whips of razor wire. Only then were they ready to be thrown into battle against the enemies of the Imperium.

Their anger was kept in check by their pacifier helms. These were drilled onto their skulls and lulled them with looped hymnals and prayers and images of saints soothing their mind. But when the time for battle came, the pacifier helms reminded them of their ingratitude and the guilt turned them into frenzied berserkers. Sinners in life, in death they would seek redemption through berserk rages, consumed by a desire to rend the enemies of the Emperor into bloody shreds.

Such was contrition in the Imperium of Mankind.

One by one the occupants of all the cells were processed and emptied.

The murmurings of the insane were now still. Only one cell remained.

Just one last soul... Confessor Thanaton thought as he heard the grinding of grit underfoot. It had been a long and exhausting day. Acklys and Nyxx went before him. Their heavy footsteps echoed on the stone flags. They were all starting to show signs of exhaustion. Cithaeron hummed in the air behind him, the last drifts of incense trailing behind it.

Before he unlocked the door, Guardsman Acklys spoke in a low voice. His face was full of warning as he said, 'Father. This last prisoner is Helleb Kline.'

It was not fitting to give the prisoners the honour of names. Through their actions they had made themselves non-persons and Thanaton's immediate reaction was one of disgust at the transgression. But as the name echoed inside his head, he realised there was something familiar about it.

He paused. He couldn't quite place it.

Sergeant Nyxx leant in. She whispered, 'The Nightkiller.'

Confessor Thanaton muttered a quick prayer of shielding. He knew immediately who he was up against.

The Nightkiller had terrorised the Ecclesiarchy habs of Telken's Rest with a spree of ruthless murders. Menials returning from the grog-shops. An infirm widow on her way back from a late shift in the Munitorum factorum district. A lay priest known to Confessor Thanaton by sight from his days in the seminary.

That victim's name had been Kiaren Mgee. A thin, quiet man, who had come home after a night of prayer and had never been seen again. It was not until he had been missed from his prayer rota that investigations had been made. 'I found him,' Father Kakos had told Confessor Thanaton outside the confessional block on the west side of the cathedral. 'It was brutal. Sadistic. And what is worse, I fear it was one of us...'

'How can you tell?'

'It happened during curfew.'

'Are you sure?'

Kakos had nodded. The killer was hiding amongst the ranks of the holiest men and women. He had picked on the weak. The infirm. There had been no mercy for old or young, virtuous or righteous, celibate and blameless.

Thanaton had been careful then. He had fought for the Emperor before his conversion to the Ecclesiarchy. He had killed many men, some by hand. He knew how to defend himself. He had taken precautions. He carried a

knife within his robes. Walked down the middle of the lane. Checked inside his house as he returned home. Set twigs against his door to check if it had been opened while he was away.

If the killings had gone on then they had been hushed up. Any hint of the killer's identity had been cruelly suppressed. Surely this last soul was beyond hope, beyond saving; surely they deserved no second chance.

All this went through Confessor Thanaton's mind in a moment. Nyxx caught the look on the confessor's face. She astonished him by saying, 'He's a quiet prisoner.' There was a pause, and Confessor Thanaton could tell that there was more to this story. 'He came to us from the care of Inquisitor Grime.'

Thanaton nodded. There was a longer pause. The Inquisition were ruthless in their extraction of truth. After consideration, Sergeant Nyxx added, almost with a touch of softness to her voice, 'There is not much left.'

Confessor Thanaton drew in a deep breath. 'Well. Let me see.'

Acklys nodded and took the keys from his belt, selecting a heavy brass bow with a bit in the shape of the aquila and words of warding etched along its length. They caught the light as Acklys put it to the keyhole and twisted, then he put his shoulder to the door and shoved. The door creaked open.

A voice called out from within. 'Thank the Emperor! I am here! I have prayed that you would come.'

The note of joy and expectancy in the voice disturbed Thanaton.

'I am ready to confess!' the condemned called out.

There was a soft thud and a cry of pain. 'Prisoner shall remain silent!' Nyxx admonished, then called out to Thanaton, 'Prisoner is secure.'

The confessor made the sign of the aquila as he bent under the lintel and stepped inside. The damp was worse at this end of the cells. The air was cool and dank. In the middle of the small cell was the chair of judgement, and to it was lashed the one known as the Nightkiller.

Confessor Thanaton braced himself. The Inquisition were nothing if not thorough, but the sight before him was shocking.

The Nightkiller was a wreck of a man.

Nyxx was right. The Inquisition had made a mess of this one. They had broken him mentally and physically. His musculature was nothing more

than wasted flesh on an emaciated skeleton. The scrawny neck made his head seem over-large, his scalp was shaved and stubbled. His bones were draped in folds of pasty white skin that was blotched with scars, and purple and vivid red bruising. Each scar and bruise spoke of a vigorous interrogation. His teeth had been removed and where his gums met in the middle, they gave his face a collapsed look.

But most striking was the fact that his hands and feet had all been amputated, the stumps cauterised, the bones drilled and looped with chains, the flesh fixed down into the arms of the chair with large steel screws. Dried blood caked each penetration wound. Fresh blood leaked out. Thanaton's gaze fell upon the man's eyes. The skin hung in bags about them; they were wide and watery and pale – but the look within them was nothing like the others he had seen earlier that day.

The others had been a mix of wary, aggressive, insane and furious. The Nightkiller looked sad, weary, contrite. Almost uniquely, he looked *sorry*.

Cithaeron circled the room, dragging its brass censer.

The Nightkiller managed to smile despite the agony he must be in. His tongue slithered out of his toothless mouth and wet the cracked lips. 'Thank you,' he mouthed silently. Then he closed his eyes and inhaled the incense, and whispered in a thin voice, 'I have missed that smell.'

Thanaton almost forgot himself. He swallowed and made the sign of the aquila and intoned, 'In the Name of the Holy Emperor and all His saints, I am here to hear your confession.'

The prisoner swallowed and nodded. 'Thank you. I am ready. The flesh-screws have mortified my sinful soul. Only what I deserve,' he said quickly, and gave the screws in his handless forearms a weary look. 'I am ready to confess everything.'

'You will make a full and frank and honest confession?'

'I shall.'

'Cithaeron,' Thanaton stated. The servo-skull came to a rest in the air behind him. There was a whine of cogs as its response conduits were activated. 'Please record the convict's confession.'

Logic circuits whirred, a bell chimed to signal that the remembrance cogs were ready, and Thanaton started in an official voice. 'It is the seventh day of the ninth month. We are in cell Seventy-Six A, planet of Telken's Rest, in the Gallows Cluster, Segmentum Solar. You are Prisoner 39987H. You

were once known as Father Kline of the penitentiary branch of the Ecclesiarchy. You were born on the world of Regis Prime, and you state that you are ready to confess your crimes.’

The prisoner nodded. His voice was almost giddy as the words tumbled out. ‘Yes. That is correct.’

Confessor Thanaton was cautious. ‘First let us confirm you are who you state you are. How long did you serve in the Astra Militarum?’

‘Seventeen years. I was a dragoon with the Fifteenth Richstar Dragoons. We fought on Ening and Rampo. And...’

Confessor Thanaton’s eye glowed green with reflected light as Ecclesiarchy records reeled down his data-monocle. ‘Which action were you commended for?’ he asked after a moment.

The Nightkiller considered the question in silence. ‘I led the charge on Pallas Four. I was severely wounded. Hospitalised. And then I rejoined the unit for the Gyges campaign.’

‘You were commended by your superiors. Field promotions to sergeant and lieutenant.’

The prisoner frowned as if struggling to remember. ‘Yes. I was. Father. That is correct. We were fighting the greenskins.’ His words ran out as the terrors of that campaign flickered in his mind. ‘I did my best. We all served the Emperor as best we could...’

There was a long pause as the data-reel lit up Thanaton’s eye once more. ‘Educated within the seminary on Ignatz. Summon notes.’ He paused again. ‘You were first in your class.’

The prisoner’s head hung down. ‘Yes.’

‘And you were promoted to priest and then confessor.’

Tears began to fall from the convict’s face. ‘Yes,’ he said at last. ‘That is correct, father.’

‘And you came here—’

‘Seven years ago,’ Kline put in.

Thanaton was curt. ‘Do not interrupt. Prisoner is chastised.’

Sergeant Nyxx moved in a blur, the stun-rod coming out and crackling as it touched the bare skin of the clamped figure. The figure leapt against his bonds. There was an involuntary cry of pain, followed by moans of agony as fresh blood welled up from the screws.

‘You will answer when spoken to. You will not interrupt. Do you

understand?’

Kline’s eyes were pressed closed. He swallowed again, his Adam’s apple prominent in the emaciated neck. ‘Yes, father. I do.’

‘You have been convicted of a spree of killings...’

Kline nodded. ‘I have.’ His head hung down.

Confessor Thanaton motioned to Nyxx. She lifted the prisoner’s face. His eyes opened. ‘You sound contrite.’

The convict sighed. ‘I am. Very. The severity of my crimes is like a weight on my chest. I can barely breathe. I am ashamed and appalled.’

‘So you accept your guilt?’

‘I do.’

Confessor Thanaton spoke to Cithaeron. ‘Please note that the prisoner paused before answering.’

‘My pause was not confusion. No. I have waited for you. I want to confess everything...’

‘Silence! If I am to offer you the chance of redemption then I must hear a full and frank confession. Do you understand?’

Nyxx engaged her stun-rod again. There was another cry of pain. The blood began to drip from the arms of the chair onto the floor. The prisoner whispered, ‘I do.’ He fell silent for a moment as he composed himself. ‘I am guilty of everything. I want to make that clear. I am guilty of absolutely everything.’

Thanaton regarded him. He had been warned against cases like this. Criminals who appeared contrite but were secretly hiding corruption. ‘Tell me about the first person you murdered,’ he prompted.

Kline’s head lifted slowly. His tongue wet his lips once more. The light in his bloodshot eyes changed as he went back to that first act of murder. His voice came falteringly at first. ‘I had worked late. There was a family in my hab-block. They lived beneath me. They were always shouting. There were two children and their mother. Their shouts went on and on. I had spent a long day... dealing with...’ He looked about the cell. ‘*This*.

‘I had heard a last confession and then came home. I felt troubled by what I had heard. I needed to sleep, but before I did so I knelt and prayed. The Seven Psalms of Redemption. But all the time I was praying, they kept shouting at each other. My thoughts became more violent. I spent each night imagining killing them. I knew it was wrong. But I could not

stop thinking about how I would do it. When I was at work I was focused and my mind was pure. But when the night fell then I became restless. That night I paced up and down. I chastised myself. I went through my holy texts. I unfolded my triptych and meditated on the images of the Holy Emperor Divine, All Conquering and Resplendent.

‘I went downstairs. I was just going to ask them to be silent. I went to the back door. The children were out. I could see the mother. She was washing the bowls. The slab pot was on the cooker. She was calling out over her shoulder about her work. She had an apron on. It was stained. I was just going in to ask her to be quiet. But they had a dog and it started barking. I just wanted quiet. That’s all I wanted. I ordered them to put the dog out. They were shouting at me to leave. The wife started screaming. I explained that I just wanted to talk to them about being quiet. The father came home. I had my gun in my belt. I took it out and threatened them.

‘I took them into the kitchen. I told them to lie down. I tied them up. They tried offering me money. They said they had a ration book they could give me. They didn’t understand. I was trying to explain to them what they had done and they started to complain. I loosened their bonds. The father said he had a cracked rib from a furnace accident. I tried to make him comfortable. But he wouldn’t listen. I got increasingly angry. They kept talking. I shouted at them to shut up. But then they were breathing so loudly. All I could hear was the hiss of their breaths. In and out. Louder and louder. I couldn’t bear it. It was so loud. They were doing it to infuriate me.

‘I would have to kill them or I would never be free of their din. I had served, as you know. I had killed many times. But always with blade or barrel. I had never strangled someone before. I didn’t know how hard you had to push. I strangled the father and as I did so the others started to panic. They were struggling and rolling about and they were shouting out for help. I strangled the father and he passed out. I thought he was dead. But then when I was dealing with the wife, he came back round again. I didn’t want to shoot anyone. That was when I saw the knife... They told me they loved the Emperor. They said they were good people. They went to the chapel each prayer day. They paid their tithes to the Ecclesiarchy. I hated them for their impropriety.’

Confessor Thanaton’s jaw was set as he listened to the particulars. ‘You

murdered them all.'

Convict Kline nodded. 'I did.' He paused for a long moment. 'Next was an old man who lived alone. I did the same thing. I eased him in to make him feel better. I promised him that he would not be hurt. I didn't have my gun on me. I had to find a knife. He broke free as I went to his kitchen. I came back and he leapt up at me. I stabbed him two, three, maybe four times.

'Yes. I stabbed him under the ribs. It was a mess. He was bleeding. There were voices. The front door was open. I looked out but I could not see anyone. I went back inside and dealt with him then.'

Kline went on and on listing the details. It was getting late. The canticle choirs switched into the evening psalms. The mournful lyrics seemed to intensify the confession. Kline's voice was small, quiet and regretful. His eyes were open, but he seemed far away as he relived the precise details.

'What was the name of that last man?' Thanaton asked after a while.

'Joakab Frinz.'

Thanaton put up a hand. 'That is impossible. He was murdered while you were on Rampo with the Richstar Dragoons. You cannot have been responsible. Interview paused,' he snapped. He beckoned Nyxx forward. She engaged the stun-rod again.

Each time the rod touched flesh the prisoner let out a yelp and tensed painfully.

Confessor Thanaton counted out seven chastisements. By the end, the blood dripping from the flesh-screws had become a steady stream.

Thanaton's voice was severe. 'We are restarting this interview. I state again. You have been wasting my time. This is your last chance. I need a full and *honest* confession.'

Convict Kline shook his head. He started weeping. 'I am sorry. I am trying. All I want is forgiveness. I will do my best. I am trying. Please do not give up on me. I cannot live without the Emperor's Light. All I have told you is true.'

'How dare you speak of the Emperor!' Confessor Thanaton was stern, then furious. 'Tell me now. Who was the first person you killed?'

Kline tried to answer a number of times. But they were murders that were thirty years old. Murders that were older than he was!

'The truth now!' Thanaton shouted.

Nyxx chastised the prisoner seven more times.

At the end the Nightkiller hung weakly in the chair. He shook his head and started crying. 'I... I... I cannot remember. There are so many of them. How can I know where I started?'

'Her name was Euphorb,' Confessor Thanaton told him. 'She worked in the kitchens of the Saint Ignazio Hospice. She stayed late to set the benches for the next day's breakfast. And you were waiting.'

The prisoner started to shake.

'You waited for her as she changed into ordinary clothes. You waited for her in the alley behind the public bath house on Terra Street.'

Convict Kline's face was pale. He seemed genuinely unaware. 'I did?' The prisoner started to shake. His forearms tugged as he shook. The blood ran freely. 'Yes. I did. I'm sorry. I'm a little confused. I don't remember clearly. I wish I did. But I don't.'

Confessor Thanaton lost patience. Kline was wasting his time. It was pointless. 'If you cannot find the Emperor's Light, then I can do nothing more for you.'

Confessor Thanaton motioned to Sergeant Nyxx. She stepped forward, pulling Emperor's Blessing from its leather holster. She loaded the firing charge, clicked the captive bolt into place, and put the barrel to the temple of the killer.

'Give it to me,' Thanaton said. Kline was one of their own. It seemed only fitting that this execution was carried out by him. He took the gun. The butt of the pistol was cool in his hand. He lifted it to the prisoner's temple and pressed it against the skin. 'This is your last chance,' he stated. 'The Emperor wants your full contrition, not lies.'

The man said nothing.

Confessor Thanaton scrolled through the last of the data files. 'I see in your files the name "Valgaast".'

The word had an immediate effect. The Nightkiller started to shake with terror. He bent double as if to stop his ears, but the flesh-screws had his arms pinned tight and blood began to flow as he thrashed against them. He moaned as if in pain.

'Who is Valgaast?' Thanaton demanded.

The word threw the Nightkiller into fresh spasms of pain. He lashed about like a nailed snake, flung his head back and forth in a banging

motion, and as he bit through his tongue, gouts of blood began to pour from his mouth.

Thanaton was disgusted. ‘For the Emperor,’ he said, and pulled the trigger.

Menials were waiting outside to remove the body.

Thanaton sighed. He was dead tired. It was long past the end of his day.

‘Let us go,’ he said, and the two guards followed him out into the corridor.

They walked along it, each lost in their thoughts, Cithaeron humming in the air behind them.

The servo-skull returned to its alcove, data sockets unloading the information from its data spools. The name of Helleb Kline was struck from all Imperial records, the body sent for the three rites of total incineration. The blot on the record of the Ecclesiarchy was expunged.

Thanaton walked up the steps from the cells with Nyxx and Acklys. ‘For the Emperor,’ Confessor Thanaton said to them as they approached their guardroom. They both made the sign of the aquila, and then turned to go.

The confessor’s vestry was at the end of the corridor. It was an arched stone chamber with a great semicircular wooden robe chest positioned against the north wall. There were candles set in cast iron braziers, casting a flickering light and filling the air with the scent of burnt tallow, moth balls, old robes and unlit incense.

Confessor Thanaton removed his surplice and robes, and then knelt before the image of the Golden Throne. He spent an hour in prayer and when he finally left the penitentiary establishment the bells were ringing curfew over the city. The first moon had risen. Acid rain was falling. The pollution index was high. Storms were forecast.

He stopped at the threshold and looked out. Behind him the vast mass of the Ecclesiarchy establishment – cloisters, domes, chapels and churches – reared up, black against the skyline. The glow of stained glass lit the darkness. A klaxon sounded. The sound of singing drifted down from the halls of the Adepta Sororitas. And beneath the steep encircling walls, hab-blocks huddled.

Confessor Thanaton paused. His home lay two circuits away. The rain was too heavy at this time of day to walk. The awning dripped dirty brown

water. A scum of filthy tox-bubbles swirled in the gutters.

There were rickshaw drivers at the bottom of the steps. He took the first one: a thin, hollow-cheeked man with an oilskin poncho and a dirtcycle that was affixed to a covered chair.

Confessor Thanaton said, 'Potence Block Forty-Five. The rear exit. Do you know it?'

The man nodded and gestured for Thanaton to climb in. The fumes from the dirtcycle mixed with the brown-soot taste of the local air. Thanaton had a headache. He shouldn't have wasted so much time with Kline.

He yawned and felt his jaw click. His eyes were tired. He rubbed them with thumb and forefinger, and yawned again. It was late.

By the time he reached his hab-block the fumes had made his headache worse. The bike pulled up under the awning and he counted out the credits, and handed them in a little stack to the driver, with one extra.

'For the Emperor,' he said as a casual blessing, and put his hand to the other man's head. The driver nodded, and swung back out into the puddle-lined street as Thanaton made his way up the zigzag steps to his door.

As a confessor he lived in a reserved hab, but this was no longer the luxury it had once been. The worlds of the Gallows Cluster were straining under the trials of the latest crisis. Defeat brought many planets to their knees. Each household had been required to take in refugees and lodgers. Only Confessor Thanaton's rank had ensured he remained alone in his house. But the neighbours downstairs had taken in another family, and somehow they had found a chicken for eggs. The creature was kept in a woven wire basket on the staircase.

It squawked as Thanaton passed it, moving sideways along the neat stacks of coal bricks. The gritty coal dust crunched underfoot as he started to climb. Faded paper posters hung off the wall in strips. *Thought for the Day: the Dissident invites only retribution*, one said. Another proclaimed, *Rejoice in Service! Reason is the cloak of Traitors*.

At last he got to his door on the fourth floor. The twig was there. He unlocked the door and the heavy metal portal swung inwards. He had been thinking of food, but his headache had grown steadily worse. It was a skull-splitting pain in the back of his head that lanced forwards to behind his eyes. He went to his bed and lay down, thinking that this would make his head feel better. He closed his eyes and muttered a psalm of fortitude.

His head did not improve. Worst of all he could hear that damned chicken squawking away two floors beneath him. He tried to ignore it but it got louder. The family beneath him were reading the *Deeds of St Thor*. All he could hear was the boom of their voices, the sharp rustle of paper pages being turned. He could not understand how they could be making so much noise.

He would go down to them and ask them to stop, he told himself.

That night he had dreams. Terrible dreams.

Confessor Thanaton woke to find himself lying in bed. The morning light was grey in his window. His headache had gone. The absence of it was like cool water on his head. He sat up. He had fallen asleep in his clothes.

He moved to throw the blanket back and realised that there was something on his fingers. It was dry and cracked and pulled at the hairs on the back of his hand. He looked down. It looked like dried blood.

He remembered holding the gun that killed Kline, but there had not been so much blood. And he had washed his hands in the vestry.

Thanaton sat up quickly and moved from his bedroom to the small cell garderobe, tipped water from a jug and washed his hands and face. He must have been more tired than he remembered, he thought, not to notice all this.

Where had all this blood come from?

Confessor Thanaton's face was scratched. One eye was blackened and bruised. His lip was split and scabbed.

There was a scream from downstairs. Someone was calling for help. There were footsteps on the stairs.

Moments later there was hammering on his door. 'Are you all right, confessor?' someone shouted.

A cold shiver passed through him. He had had such lurid dreams... Such brutal and vivid dreams. Confessor Thanaton looked at his hands. The knocking grew louder. It was a thunder of fists. At last an enforcer's voice called on him to open the door.

It didn't make sense. Confessor Thanaton began to shake. This couldn't be happening. He was a good and loyal servant. He was a confessor of the Ecclesiarchy.

'For the Emperor,' he said in prayer, except those were not the words that

came from his mouth.

HE FEASTS FOREVER

Lora Gray

In the king's kitchens, the hearth fires roared. Row upon row of lambs sizzled on spits, their small bodies skinned and dripping. Racks of suckling pigs, their throats knotted with garlic and thyme, roasted high above the coals. Sauces simmered. Stews roiled. In the hazy dimness, snug in the flesh-sweet smoke, the kitchen boys scurried, a clattering chaos of chopping and shouting, cursing and laughter.

There was nowhere else Dedric would rather have been.

He was smiling, slicing a tray of goose livers with Milo, the slaughterer, when the kitchen door slammed open with a burst of fresh air and light.

Hodge hulked into the doorway like a thunderhead, a stag draped over his shoulders, the aborted stumps of its young antlers rattling against the door frame, its broken neck swivelling. Even with the light at his brother's back, Dedric could see the irritated, impatient set of Hodge's jaw. For an uneasy beat, the kitchen stilled. Hodge may have been the king's favourite huntsman, but his temper was as vicious as his marksmanship. It was an unspoken rule that he only delivered his kills early in the morning when everyone but Dedric or the occasional, unfortunate scullion was still asleep.

Milo elbowed Dedric. 'Best see what Hodge wants,' he whispered. 'Before Old Poldrake crosses him.'

Dedric glanced over his shoulder to where Old Poldrake stood at the main hearth. The royal chef's arms were folded. A scowl puckered his jowls and he puffed his chest as he faced Hodge across the hazy kitchen. The king had been gone for months, leading his armies and fighting for the glory and honour of the realm, and Old Poldrake was intent on making his

victorious homecoming an event to remember. Every dish was carefully curated, every moment of the preparation meticulously timed. Hodge's appearance was unscheduled and Old Poldrake's temper rivalled Hodge's when the rhythm of his kitchen was compromised.

A fight between the two of them would do nobody any good.

Dedric tentatively raised his hand. Old Poldrake's gaze snapped between him and his brother. With a small snort, Old Poldrake gave Dedric a reluctant nod and then shouted for everyone to get back to work.

Dedric murmured an apology as he stood, the goose liver slipping, wet and plump, from his fingertips onto the tray. Milo simply shrugged and began slicing it himself. It wasn't the first time Dedric had been forced to intervene when it came to his older brother.

Wiping his hands on his apron, Dedric hurried across the kitchen, dodging a pair of scullions scrubbing a splotch of red mud from the tiles beside the door. Outside, the sun was thin, the sky a bright wash of amethyst. Dedric squinted against it as he closed the door behind himself.

Without pretext, Hodge grunted and moved to shrug the dead deer into Dedric's arms. 'For the feast,' he said.

Dedric stepped back and shook his head. 'I can't.'

Hodge's expression sharpened. Dedric knew that look all too well. It meant a clean shot. Or a slap. Or a fist to the gut.

'The larder is full, Hodge,' Dedric continued quickly, his voice cracking. 'There's no space to be had in the smoke house or the kitchens. Old Poldrake is working us sunup to sundown. Nobody will have time to cook it properly.'

Hodge sneered and crowded Dedric against the closed kitchen door. He was a full head taller and nearly twice as broad as Dedric and his bulk blocked out the sun as he leaned in. The dead stag's head swung between them, the gamey smell of blood-wet fur smothering Dedric like a damp blanket. He could see himself reflected in the deer's dark eye, small and cringing against the door, the inky pupil tracking the anxious hitch of his shoulders.

'Then make time, little brother,' Hodge said. 'Do you know where I'll be sitting at the feast?'

Dedric peeled his gaze away from the stag's eye and shook his head.

'Perhaps I'll be at his majesty's right hand.' Hodge grinned, but the nasty

curve of his lip made the joke sour. 'Perhaps he's going to gift me a cup of royal wine. Royal. Wine. Detric.' Hodge poked his finger between Detric's eyes to emphasise each word. 'Have you ever even seen royal wine? Red as blood? Sweet and dark? It will be my reward for my loyalty and service to the kingdom. When was the last time the king offered *you* a cup of royal wine?'

'N-never.'

'That's right. Never. Because I'm the king's best huntsman. And what are you? A cook. So do your duty and *cook*.' Hodge slugged the deer unceremoniously into Detric's arms.

Detric staggered, loose bone and wet fur shoving him against the door as his brother strode away from him and across the courtyard.

Detric looked down at the dead stag, heavy as a sleeping child against him, its neck twisted round, fur pale as cream. Its mouth was parted. A fly crawled over the pink of its tongue. Its eyes were baleful and cold.

He tried not to think about the way they seemed to follow him as he went back inside.

It was well after midnight when Detric startled awake. The raucousness of the daytime kitchen had been replaced by lonesome clanks as a handful of the youngest spit boys tended the long-roasting meat. From where he was on the opposite side of the huge room, Detric could barely hear their sleepy murmurs.

Butchering his brother's stag had taken longer than he'd expected and by the time he'd finished the duties Old Poldrake had assigned him, Detric had already been droop-eyed and yawning. Still, he hadn't meant to fall asleep, and he stood quickly from the corner he'd slumped into, embarrassed; but the younger boys were far enough away from him that none of them seemed to have noticed.

With a sigh, Detric returned to the butcher block where he'd been working. He'd already parcelled the stag's body and steeped the choicest cuts in a marinade to tenderise them. The tang of it pinched saliva from the corners of Detric's mouth. He considered pressing a headcheese as well, though it would have been ambitious considering the time he had. He turned the stag's disconnected head over in his hands, the spine slithering across the cutting board. How best to boil it to softness? How best to

scrape out the tongue and pare away the cheeks? But every time he caught the stag's eyes, wet and gummy in the flickering light, the air felt somehow too thick to breathe.

Dedric bit back a wave of uneasiness and shook his head, moving to the small hearth where he was boiling the stag's bones to broth. The scent of marrow and cloves wafted up to meet him as he stirred it, and it was then that Dedric realised he wasn't alone in his corner of the kitchen.

Tucked into the shadows between the hearth and the butcher block, was a small boy. For a moment, he was so still that Dedric thought he was a dream clinging to the edges of his exhausted brain. But no, that pale shape was most definitely a boy. His skinny knees were pulled tight to his chest; his round face was upturned. His eyes, glistening and dark as the young stag's, peered at him with such unblinking intensity that Dedric had to fight the urge to back away.

Dedric shook himself. He was overworked and his imagination was clearly getting the better of him. It was just a little boy. What harm could he possibly be?

'What are you doing back there?' he asked, kneeling down to better see him.

The boy's eyes followed him, but he didn't speak.

'Are you one of the new scullions?' Dedric asked. 'You shouldn't be here unsupervised.'

The boy didn't move.

Dedric's belly curled and the hairs on the back of his neck prickled. He worked the moisture back into his mouth. 'What is your name?'

The boy simply stared and Dedric felt like he'd been pinned by those eyes, wide and bottomless, urging him to look back. No boy should have had eyes like that. They were wild eyes. Animal eyes.

Dedric stood quickly and made a show of brushing off his apron as if he could convince himself he wasn't as unnerved as he felt. It was just a boy. Just a boy. 'I suppose I'll have to fetch Old Poldrake, then, won't I? He hates untended children fiddling about in his kitchen. Why, the last one who—'

'Don't you remember me?' The boy's voice slid over Dedric like cold air in a draughty room.

Dedric fought a shiver and cleared his throat. 'So you *are* one of the new

scullions. Though I can't say I recall having met you before.'

The boy's eyes narrowed. 'We've met.'

Dedric tried to tell himself that the malice in the boy's expression was a trick of the light. 'Where?'

'The Eastern Road.'

Dedric frowned. 'The Eastern Road?' The bone broth bubbled fitfully and he gave it a quick stir. The stag's bones clinked softly against the cast iron.

The boy flinched, his attention flickering to the pot for a quick moment as he tugged his legs closer to his body. 'I was with my family,' he said. 'My mother. My father. My sister.'

'You came here to apprentice?'

'No.' The boy's voice was brittle as he looked towards the stag's head on the butcher block, dark, unblinking eyes fixed on dark, unblinking eyes. 'I was lost.'

Dedric gripped the spoon tightly. 'We should tell Old Poldrake. Perhaps he'll know where your family...'

The boy's gaze moved slowly back to Dedric and, yes, there was malice there, sharp as a cleaver. 'They're dead. They died on the Eastern Road. You don't remember?'

'I have never travelled the Eastern Road.' There had never been a reason to leave the castle. Dedric was perfectly happy here in the kitchens surrounded by his friends and the beautiful chaos of the feasts, familiar smells and sounds. It was comfortable. It was home.

But there, niggling at the edge of his thoughts, was a memory, a watery impression of a golden road stretching out before him. It was just a single, hazy vision. He couldn't remember much else. He couldn't recall much of his past at all, he realised with a jolt. Just this castle. This kitchen. Before that, nothing.

The room felt unsteady around him. The floor wavered beneath his feet. Sweat blossomed on Dedric's forehead and upper lip. He felt clammy. Sick. And that boy was still staring at him, swaying in time with the spoon Dedric was using to stir the bone broth. Back and forth. Back and forth.

'Dedric!'

Dedric started so badly, he dropped the spoon. Broth splattered into the coals, the fire flaring and sputtering. One of the spit boys had finally spotted him from across the room. Dedric's heart was thundering so loudly

in his ears, he almost didn't hear him.

'That the stag your brother killed?' the spit boy asked. 'I heard tell it was a good one. You roasting it?'

'Yes.' Dedric's voice shook in spite of his efforts. He opened his mouth to ask if anyone knew anything about this strange, orphaned boy crouched in the shadows beside him, but when Dedric turned, the boy was gone.

Dedric was gathering herbs at the edge of the field, where the courtyard met the wasteland, when he saw his brother emerge from the forest. He watched him for several seconds before gathering the courage to speak.

'Hodge!'

'What?' Hodge's voice was pinched as he turned to look at Dedric from across the grey field, the castle towering behind him.

Dedric was certain Hodge had seen him crouched in the tall grass. He was equally certain by the way Hodge's hand tightened around his bow that he didn't want to talk. His quiver was full and he was clearly on his way to a hunt.

But Dedric had to ask. He'd been haunted by the memory of the strange boy all day. Where had he gone? Was he following him? Paranoia crept over Dedric in waves, the world around him mercurial with his exhausted delusions. An eagle circling overhead seemed as intent on him as a vulture over rotting meat. A palm of rosemary seemed like a handful of fingernails. Fennel became splinters of bone, the fronds smooth as shaved marrow.

And every shadow held a pair of dark, unblinking eyes, whispers of the Eastern Road Dedric should somehow remember.

Except that Dedric couldn't recall much of anything, let alone how he'd come to this castle. It was as if a curtain had been drawn over his memories and he couldn't, for the life of him, see past it, except for those hazy impressions of a golden road.

That strange boy had seemed so certain when he insisted that they'd met there.

Dedric gathered his courage and stood, his satchel clutched to his chest like a shield as he faced his brother across the grey field. 'Do you remember how we came to the king's castle?' Dedric asked. 'Was it by the Eastern Road?'

A tendon corded dangerously on the side of Hodge's neck as he clenched his teeth. 'Go back to your weeds, little brother. I have work to do.' He shrugged his quiver higher on his shoulder and turned to continue towards the forest.

'I remember a road,' Dedric continued, his voice trembling. 'A golden road. But nothing else. Nothing but this castle. No childhood, no family, except for you.'

Annoyance snapped through Hodge's posture as he turned and strode towards him.

Dedric flinched and shrank back, his voice small. 'We can't have been here forever. Where are our mother and father? Surely there is more to our lives than this place.'

Hodge was on him so quickly, Dedric barely had time to react. He grabbed Dedric by the wrist, wrenching his arm behind him before grabbing the scruff of his neck with his free hand. He forced Dedric's body down, yanked his head up.

It was as if somebody had ripped the curtain in Dedric's head aside. Memory flashed through him, a clawed hand on the back of his neck, digging into his skin, that golden road splayed all around him. Someone forced his jaws apart. Everything smelled like blood. There was screaming, high-pitched and ragged. Pale figures crowded around him. Monsters. Monsters opening his mouth, shoving raw meat past his lips. Dedric clenched his teeth, but gore spurting between them and filled his mouth, his throat. He choked. Heaved. Blood gushed over his lips, a long vein slithering over his chin. On the ground, there was a pile of raw meat and a severed, human hand. Dedric's heart hammered him away from the terrible vision.

'Look at it.' Hodge tightened his grip.

He wasn't on the golden road. He was in a field and Hodge was forcing him to look up at the king's castle, looming dark against the amethyst sky.

'What more do you want?' Hodge growled in Dedric's ear. 'Are you saying his grace isn't good enough for you? That you'd rather be elsewhere?'

'No,' Dedric whispered. His eyes watered and even he wasn't sure if it was from the viciousness of his brother's grip or the memory that had snapped through him.

Hodge pinched Dedric's neck mercilessly and wrenched his arm until pain lanced through the socket. 'I couldn't hear you.'

'No!'

Hodge shoved Dedric and he stumbled, losing his balance and landing on his hands and knees, the herbs he'd gathered scattering in the tall grass. Rosemary. Thyme. Bones. Fingernails. The tall grass was grey. The earth beneath was red as wine. Red as blood. Dedric closed his eyes and tried to swallow the sick creeping up his throat.

'I'm in the king's favour, Dedric,' Hodge said, his eyes narrow, his teeth bared. 'If I ever hear you disrespect what he has given us again, if you ruin this for me, I'll cut out your tongue, you ungrateful little cuss.' Hodge turned, his shoulders drawn to his ears, and stalked across the field towards the forest.

Dedric watched him leave, his breath tight in his chest. For a moment, he had seen fear in his brother's eyes. There had been a twinge of panic in his voice that had nothing to do with Dedric ruining his brother's position as the king's favourite huntsman.

Dedric knew, with a horrible certainty that curdled in his belly like sour milk, that Hodge couldn't remember how they'd come there either.

It was night by the time Dedric returned to the castle. He was so distracted by the memory of the golden road, the way the taste of uncooked flesh seemed to cling to the roof of his mouth, that he hadn't managed to collect all the herbs he'd needed. His satchel was only half full. Tugging the cowl of his cloak more securely around his face, he tried to distract himself with the few herbs he'd managed to find before the sun went down. He didn't want to think about sinew squishing through the gaps of his teeth or the thick river of blood flowing down his throat.

The kitchen was strangely empty when he opened the door. The cook fires were crackling but abandoned.

All was quiet.

Only there, beside the butchered remains of Hodge's prized stag, was that strange boy, that horrible boy who'd pulled the memory of the Eastern Road from Dedric's head, who had no business in the kitchen in the first place. He stood, still as stone, beside the hearth, his arm immersed in the boiling bone broth.

‘Get away from there!’ Dedric rushed forward. The boy was burning himself! Scalding himself! Spoiling the broth!

Before Dedric could snatch his arm away, the boy pulled back. His flesh was whole, seemingly unhurt. His hand was dry as he stepped to the other side of the hearth, his eyes steady and furious.

Dedric grabbed a spoon from the rack beside the hearth, brandishing it for a moment, before frantically stirring the broth as if he could somehow purify it. Bones bobbed to the surface, but the femur there was too long and too thick for a deer’s leg. Where were the hooves? Instead, there were small, flat ankle bones and... wrists? Knuckles? Fingers?

Dedric rounded on the boy. ‘What did you do?’

The boy didn’t move. ‘What did *I* do?’ His lips curled and Dedric wasn’t sure if he was smiling or snarling. ‘What did *you* do?’

The kitchen walls seemed to swell, the thick stone throbbing with heat, the air thick as pudding.

The boy stepped closer. ‘We were on the Eastern Road,’ he rasped. ‘Travelling to visit my uncle. We stopped to rest for the night and I left my mother, father and sister to find blackberries for our supper. They were my sister’s favourite. When I returned you were there.’

Dedric’s stomach roiled, unsettled as the broth in that heavy pot. It felt as if the kitchen itself were pulling sweat from him and adding it to its own terrible swelter. For the first time in what he remembered of his life, Dedric didn’t want to be in that kitchen. He wanted to run, but, try as he might, he couldn’t look away from the boy.

‘You were there,’ the boy said. ‘You and the other monsters.’

No.

No.

‘You’d torn my father in two,’ the boy continued. ‘I found his legs first. His shoes were missing, along with his toes. My mother’s arms were threaded through the wagon wheels like ribbons and I found her head in the weeds. Her lips had been bitten away. My sister’s hair was strewn all around you and they were feeding you her flesh.’

Dedric shook his head, but the memories punched through the heat of the kitchen. A carpet of blonde hair all around him like a golden road stretching in all directions. Pale hands, long fingers, clawlike and barely human. Monsters holding him down. *Mordants*. The word swam to the

surface with such clarity, Dedric clutched his head. Mordants were prying his jaw wide, pressing that girl's flesh into his mouth. And he didn't want it. He didn't want to be one of them. He didn't want to be a monster, but Dedric could feel that girl's gristle against his lips, could see her torso heaving sideways as they ripped her leg from her hip, muscle popping away from her thigh bone like broken twine. He remembered Hodge beside him too, full to bursting with human flesh and panting.

'I tried to stop you,' the boy whispered, so close Dedric could feel his breath like ice through the unbearable kitchen heat. 'I tried to kill you, but your brother shot me. Like an animal, he shot me, and what did you do?'

Dedric's breath hitched. He glanced to the pot beside him, into the broth, at those bones that couldn't possibly be a stag's bones. Trembling, Dedric looked to the butcher's block where he'd left the deer's head and there, in its place, was the decapitated head of the young boy, cheeks sagging to rot, eyes bulging past their lids like half-peeled grapes, black and unblinking as the stag's had been. Roasting in the hearth were a little boy's legs, ankles dislocated, feet bent backward and dangling.

Only now, Dedric saw the truth.

The comforting heat of the Ghoul-King's kitchen, all that familiar smoke, had dissolved like lifting fog. The room was suddenly, undeniably, frigid. The walls that had once felt as secure as an embrace were ruined and crumbling. The hearths, whose fires should have been glowing merrily, were nothing but piles of mud and twigs. The spits were nothing but broken wagon wheels and the rusted remnants of swords and, on every one of them, instead of ham hocks or fat chicken breasts, Dedric saw severed human arms and naked torsos, the ribs cracked and bowed towards the earth. On a chopping board, what were once carrots were now fingers, nail beds putrid, maggots squirming from cuticles. A basket of onions was now a pile of human hearts, lumped together and sticky. There were kidneys glazed with offal, carefully arranged atop a bed of flayed and spongy lungs. Tongues hung from a drying rack like squab and all around him was the stench of rotting meat, cloying and thick.

Dedric's pulse galloped into his throat. His mouth was dry. For a frantic moment, Dedric thought that if he could rid himself of that horrible, gheistly boy, slice him out of existence, the nightmare around him would disappear too. Dedric fumbled a rusted sword from one of the spits and

slashed at the boy's belly. His chest. His demented, smiling face. But with every stroke, the boy's body parted and reformed as easily as a puff of steam.

Dedric stumbled away from him, away from the hearth and the nightmarish feast all around him, his hands plastered over his mouth, his gut threatening to heave. The boy's gheist smiled, smug and satisfied as he began to fade. He was as thin and insubstantial as a shadow as Dedric turned and fled.

Dedric careened out of the kitchen and into the courtyard, trying to ignore the way his body felt somehow bigger than it should have. Were his hands ever quite so long? Was that metallic heat on the back of his tongue blood?

The castle loomed above him, the towers now little more than a mountain of rubble heaving up from a burnt and barren landscape. Emerging from a crooked jumble of unearthed tree trunks was a mordant, and another and another, their bare skulls and hulking shoulders gleaming in the moonlight, their teeth dangling with flesh. Their eyes were hungry.

'What's wrong?' one of them asked. Dedric knew that booming voice, though it was distorted and monstrous, as if the vocal cords had been shredded. It was Old Poldrake.

Standing beside him was Milo, the slaughterer, his friend. Milo tipped his head, his clawed hand outstretched. 'Are you all right, Dedric?' he asked. 'You don't look well.'

Dedric tripped over his own feet and scrambled away from them. Into the night he fled, away from the castle and the kitchen, away from all those familiar things, their glamour stripped, away from the gheist of that boy and his dark, unblinking eyes.

Dedric sprinted through the courtyard turned graveyard, dirge songs following him on the night-time air. He was halfway to the forest when Hodge appeared.

'Little brother!' Hodge's face was distorted, pointed and pale, more monster than man. His quiver was empty. The gutted body of a woman was slumped over his shoulders, her mutilated neck swinging. Her wet hair roped over her face. Her belly gaped like an open, screaming mouth.

Dedric choked back a groan. Spots blossomed over his eyes as he turned, sprinting away from his brother and the Ghoul-King's castle. His kitchens. His home.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ Hodge’s voice echoed behind him. Dedric did not turn back.

It was nearly morning when Dedric reached the Eastern Road. The moon was small and descending. The road was an uneven ribbon of grey in the dimness. Exhausted, Dedric staggered onto it.

He half-expected someone – Hodge, Old Poldrake, or Milo – to follow him through the forest. Every time he lost his footing or stumbled, Dedric looked over his shoulder, terrified that he’d see their pale faces, twisted and only vaguely familiar, with those monstrously long jaws, and those sharp, dripping teeth.

But nobody came.

So Dedric continued, fear driving him like a heavy whip. He was hungry. His legs began to wobble, but he pressed on, hugging the edges of the road, brambles snagging the hem of his cloak and thorns ripping at his already tattered clothes.

The sky had just begun to brighten when a singular, golden light appeared on the road ahead of him. It crested the low, rolling hill, bobbing, buttery and wholesome, in the darkness. It took Dedric a moment to realise it was a lantern, swaying high atop a wagon. As it drew closer, he could hear wheels creaking, a horse’s shod feet and voices, meagre and thin in the predawn hush.

Human voices.

Dedric’s first instinct was to run towards them, to scream for help, to beg somebody to take him farther from that terrible castle faster than his spent legs could carry him.

But what if they didn’t believe him?

What if they thought he was a monster too?

Dedric tried to ignore the paleness of his own hands as he pulled his cowl tighter to hide his face. He tried not to think about the way his fingers, nails sharp and impossibly long, snagged the cloth as he sank into the cover of a thicket beside the road. Maybe he should have remained hidden and let them pass, but he had no place to go but that pile of broken stone and rotting flesh that he had believed was his home, and he couldn’t possibly go back there.

He was cold.

And hungry.

So very hungry.

The wagon rattled closer and he could hear their voices more distinctly now. A man. A woman. At least two children. He could see them, their faces surfacing like dumplings in a stirred pot.

And, oh.

Oh, he could *smell* them. Their scent was like roasting meat drifting through the cool morning air, fresh and sweet as spring lambs, juicy as those tender, suckling pigs he had helped Milo skewer so very carefully two days before. Detric's stomach grumbled. His mouth watered and he stepped onto the road, his cowl low over his face.

The horse startled, snorting as it tossed its head and danced away from Detric.

The driver cursed, snapping the reins taut and shouting, 'Whoa!' He squinted, trying to see Detric in the dimness, his hand producing a dagger from his belt. 'Who goes there?'

The woman clasped a child to her. 'We haven't any gold!'

Detric cleared his throat. 'I'm not going to rob you.' His voice was rough and painfully uneven.

Now that he was closer, he could see the family more clearly. The man's forearms were as firm as mutton. The woman's breasts were as smooth as boiled hare's belly. A child peered down at him from her mother's embrace, her cheeks as tender as slivers of fatted veal.

Detric swallowed heavily. 'I need passage to the nearest town.'

'We're travelling to Mhurghast,' the man said, shifting in his seat and exchanging an uneasy look with his wife, his hand tightening on the hilt of his dagger. 'We're not in the habit of letting strangers ride with us. At least not for free.'

'I don't have any money,' Detric said.

The man reaffirmed his grip on the horse's reins, readying to steer their cart well around him, to continue down the road, but Detric stepped forward with more strength and speed than his exhausted body should have been capable of. He gripped the edge of the cart. The wood creaked beneath his hand.

'I could work for my passage,' Detric said as he looked up at them. The lantern light flickered merrily as a hearth fire, basting their skin. Hunger

curled through him like a fist and Dedric inhaled deeply. They smelled so good. So savoury. So deliciously sweet.

The man looked down at him uncertainly. ‘What are you offering?’ he asked, his voice trembling.

Dedric licked his lips and replied, very softly, ‘I’m an excellent cook.’

STITCHES

Nick Kyme

Bucher sluiced blood from the slab. Frothing, foaming, runnels spilling this way and that, it took three buckets before the water had turned from pink to clear.

‘Dead...’ he announced to no one in particular, a las-wound to the corpse’s throat leaving no doubt as to the prognosis, and moved to the next slab. Bucher checked his chrono. ‘Twenty-three hundred hours, to the second.’ He shrugged, mildly diverted.

A soldier gaped up at him from the next cot. His eyes widened in hope when he saw the stylised brass caduceus of the Imperial medicae pinned to Bucher’s red-flecked coat. He reached for him, fingers grasping like a drowning man reaches for air, but Bucher deftly stepped away. The man clutched at his chest with his other hand, where a poorly wrapped dressing, dark with blood and other less salubrious fluids, had been bound.

‘This needs to come off,’ Bucher muttered, adjusting the plugs stuffed up his nostrils. Throne, it was rank. Even the waft of watered-down counterseptic couldn’t touch the stench.

Firmly pressing down the man’s flailing arm, Bucher picked up the surgical scissors and began to cut. The bindings were tight and tough; at least a decent corpsman like Renhaus had done a passable job of patching this poor bastard up. As he severed the bandage and gauze, Bucher fancied he recognised this one. Not the name, he never remembered their names, but their parts, their roles. He always remembered that. The pieces. He was good with pieces. A vox-operator, he thought. Young, too. Barely twenty Terran-standard. Barely a man at all. Part of the Valgaast reinforcements sent to bolster the line, judging by the regimental insignia. He didn’t know

much about the war, cloistered as he had been in the medicae ever since they had arrived, only that it had been raging for a long time. If the regular influx of wounded was any barometer, the breakthrough was about to happen anytime soon.

‘Let’s have a look then...’ Bucher murmured, grunting with the effort of cutting at the wrappings. Whatever was beneath had thickened the last layer of bandage, hardening it like a crust. It was like shearing through flakboard. ‘Holy Emperor,’ he breathed, exhaling in relief as he got through it.

Even before he had gingerly pulled the cloth aside, Bucher knew the boy was as good as dead. That stench! Throne, but it reeked. Trenchrot had got in. And something else too. It was pupating in the exposed muscle mass, which was visible on account of the missing flesh and bone of his torso.

‘Emperor’s mercy...’ he hissed, recoiling as something beneath the skin caused it to undulate, its passage a steady but slow-moving hump. The body convulsed hard, a heavy slam resonating against the table. Still the writhing persisted under the flesh.

Bucher backed up a step, holding the scissors out in front of him, finding his own fear reflected in the boy’s ever-widening eyes.

The trooper’s voice was a shallow croak. ‘Please...’

‘I can’t help you,’ Bucher rasped. ‘I can’t...’

Another convulsion wracked the boy, sending tremors through the table, and now something was really pushing. Tiny fumaroles opened up in the skin and the gory matter beneath, venting gas and particulate. Bucher didn’t know from what. Transfixed by fear, he pulled up his surgical mask, fingers trembling, a desire to keep whatever was emerging from the boy’s body from surging forth.

Foam bubbled on the boy’s lips. His back arched, his body a bridge between the two short ends of the medical slab. The carotid artery stuck out, thick and livid, in his neck. He was choking, a gelatinous bile bubbling up from his throat. Small, black flecks like frogspawn floated in the mass.

Bucher bumped into the slab behind him, the firmness of the metal and the brush of a cold, dead hand against his skin suddenly focusing his attention.

‘Flamer in here!’ he bellowed. ‘Right bloody now!’

His fingers found the alarm and pulled it hard. Then he scrambled back, eyes locked on the boy, a shuddering, bent-backed, claw-handed image of agony.

‘Holy shitting Emperor... now...’ he whimpered, too afraid to turn his back and using the gurney rail to guide him. He yanked at the alarm until it cracked apart and broke off. He barely took notice of the siren, so fixated was he upon the boy, who turned his head and gave Bucher a look of utter despair.

‘I’m sorry...’ Bucher whispered, so quietly that he couldn’t swear he had spoken at all.

Three Guardsmen barrelled into the medicae block a few moments later, a sergeant and a two-strong team with a flamer rig.

‘Out, out!’ the officer shouted, seizing Bucher by the shoulder and dragging him back as the flamer team moved up. ‘Torch it!’

An intense roar filled the block, the heat prickling the wiry hairs on Bucher’s chin. Smoke spread everywhere. The wounded were choking on it. A couple of corpsmen had found their way in too and were ferrying out the most able-bodied. The rest burned or suffocated to death. Bucher’s last sight was of the boy’s body wreathed in flame. A smudged brown outline remained, lurching and convulsing. As Bucher was bundled out of the block, he heard the very slightest suggestion of a shriek, like air escaping the narrow aperture of a balloon, just audible above the noise of the conflagration.

Bucher returned to the medicae block two days later. It had been thoroughly cleansed, though he could still detect the faint aroma of burning flesh over the chemicals, like pig’s rind and wax. He frowned, eyes narrowing at the rime of mould the ablution servitors had missed. It lurked in the tile grout, obstinate and irritating. He considered using his knife but thought better of it. His patients would probably prefer clean instruments, at least for as long as he was able to keep them that way. He took in the room. Eight fresh slabs, sluice buckets at the ready. He took a drag on a lho-stick pinched between two thin, trembling fingers. The boy’s death... That had been a bad one. One of the worst. But the war drove on, and men needed stitching up and sending back to the line. Rather here with them than out there in the dirt and the horror. Two more drags on the lho-

stick and Bucher relaxed. He crushed the stub beneath his boot, sweeping a grimy coat around his narrow frame, and prepared for the slaughter to come.

It didn't keep him waiting long.

Bodies lay everywhere in varying states of dismemberment. A heavy barrage had rolled up the line, tearing Guardsmen into ruined meat. It had hit the Valgaast worst. Most had died to the enemy ordnance. Those that hadn't ended up in the medicae block. Bucher didn't even know what they were fighting for, beyond the love and protection of the Immortal God-Emperor, of course. He had been shipped here like all the rest, assigned to the medicae block and that was it. No sky, no earth, just whitewashed walls, tiles and a poorly stocked refectory. He ate here, slept here, worked here. With the dead. That suited Bucher just fine.

As he cut into the trooper in front of him, Bucher reflected that he badly needed a win. His episode with the boy had spoiled his already lowly reputation. Even to think on it still made him queasy. He scratched at the back of his neck for the umpteenth time. A rash was growing there from the continued attention. It itched like hell, but hurt to touch now. He had overheard talk recently of shifting him out onto the line and a corpsman like Renhaus being promoted up to medicae primus. Elbowing him out.

'You'd like that, you bastard...' he muttered, cutting into flesh. It was soft, yielding. It didn't judge him either. Blood ran almost up to his armpits he was so deep in the chest cavity, trying to tie off a bleed. After considerable effort, Bucher managed to clamp the vein and staunch the flow but the trooper looked pale and weak. He wasn't breathing too well either, making tiny gasps for air.

Then the breathing stopped altogether.

'Shit!'

Bucher started compressions, not knowing if it was the bleed or something else that was causing the problem.

'Come on, come on...' he urged. 'I need this.'

After a few minutes he slumped back, exhausted. A blank pair of eyes regarded him from the gurney.

And the dead man wasn't alone. No one brought into Bucher's care had lived. Seven dead. He knew he was incompetent, he had just thought he

could convince the officers that he wasn't.

'They're going to put me on the line. Holy Throne, they are...'
Trembling, he was reaching for a lho-stick tucked in his top pocket when he heard something rattle against a metal surgical dish. At first he thought it was a survivor and he turned desperately, performing a full three hundred and sixty degree rotation of the room, trying to hook his lifeline.

Nothing. Just dead eyes and slack expressions lathered in blood. But then he heard it again. A wet slap, like something soft hitting something hard.

'What in the warp...?'

Bucher nosed around, feeling the old fear rising, one hand clasped firmly around a scalpel. The slap came again and this time he found the source, hiding behind the leg of a gurney, discarded and forgotten, a glistening red human lung.

It flopped like a landed fish and Bucher sprang back, reviled and fascinated at the same time.

'How is this possible?' he asked aloud. It looked healthy, and, he realised with horror, it breathed. Ever so gently, like it belonged to someone who was sleeping.

He shrank back, immediately disturbed, and reached for the alarm.

Then stopped.

Nothing stirred in the medicae block except for Bucher's shallow breathing and the gentle motion of the lung. He felt a sudden compulsion to pick it up and examine it. Shuffling forwards again, he reached out with tentative fingers, glad for his surgical gloves. It was warm to the touch even through the thin rubber, the slow and impossible susurrations of breath just audible as the lung inflated and deflated. The lobes looked healthy, the main bronchus intact. He regularly harvested the viable body parts from the men he couldn't save and housed them in a secure locker against the medicae wall, each one kept in preservative fluid. There were a lot. Bucher had excised several organs and left them in a surgical dish next to the patient. This one had slipped off the slab somehow. It didn't explain how it was still functioning though.

He regarded the softly pulsing organ in his hand, curious and repulsed all at once. Then he looked at the dead man lying on the gurney. The trooper's body still lay open, its inner heat somehow cooler under the medicae's dull overhead lamps. A thought, an insidious little idea, infiltrated his mind.

Setting the healthy lung down on a fresh surgical dish, Bucher opened the trooper up. His lung looked bad. Punctured and deflated. Bucher wasn't sure how he'd missed it, and then he remembered how he was a poor surgeon and that this was the only explanation needed. Nevertheless, he got to work removing the bad lung and then, with a deftness he had never before displayed or knew he had, he transplanted the healthy lung. Bucher then proceeded to stitch the trooper back up... and waited.

Nothing happened, and the sudden realisation that he was expecting it to pulled Bucher from this moment of insanity.

'What the hell am I doing?' He rubbed his forehead, forgetting he was covered in blood and smearing it over his face. He scowled. 'Damn it!' Shuffling over to the wash basin, he removed his gloves and scrubbed his hands and face, annoyed at making such a stupid error and considering that he might be genuinely losing his mind. He was drinking too much. A nip here and there to steady his frayed nerves had become half a bottle and then a habit.

He stopped the meagre water flow and towelled off his hands and face. Then he leaned against the basin, arms locked and braced, head down.

Something was wrong with him. He wondered if seeing the boy, that horrible, horrible death, had marked him in some way, and it was only now that the effects of that experience were beginning to manifest. Alone and isolated in the medicae for hours, sometimes days, on end, it was no wonder he was finally going insane. He wondered how long he could go on fooling the others that he was both capable and of sound mind before they caught him and carted him off to the Commissariat or worse.

He exhaled a deep breath, then heard the sound reciprocated a few feet away.

Bucher whirled around, stray water globules studding his face and giving him the appearance of a man in a fever sweat.

The dead trooper's finger twitched – just a last tremor of nerves, Bucher told himself, heart suddenly thumping... But then the corpse shuddered, like a ripple of electricity was rushing through the body. The chest *heaved* and there came a gasp, a definite lurch for air.

The trooper was breathing! Slow at first but with increasing confidence and vigour. He moved again, and Bucher gave an involuntary squeal of shock. Then the man lifted himself up off the slab, stitched up, half-

butchered, but alive.

‘Medic?’ the trooper asked, blinking, a hand slipping down to the roughness of his torso. ‘Am I... all right?’

‘Y-yes...’ stammered Bucher. ‘You are, son,’ he added more confidently.

‘Can I fight?’

Bucher slowly nodded.

‘Report to the Munitorum overseer and return to the line...’ Bucher caught a glimpse of the ident-tag still hanging around the trooper’s neck. ‘Gruemann.’

Trooper Gruemann nodded. ‘I will, doc.’ He swung his legs over the edge of the gurney, barefoot and only wearing the bottom half of his fatigues but brimming with vim and purpose. ‘For the Emperor,’ he said, throwing a fervent aquila salute Bucher’s way as he left the medicae block.

‘May He protect,’ Bucher replied, still bemused but starting to feel euphoric. He approached the slab to run his finger through the blood. It was dark, thick, arterial.

‘Wounds should’ve killed him.’

That trooper had been dead. He’d seen it with his own eyes. Dead. And now he was back, and more devout and determined to serve the Imperium than ever.

‘Am I a living saint?’ Bucher asked himself aloud, stopping to marvel at his hands, his miracle-working hands. ‘A vessel of the divine Emperor?’ He laughed, mildly hysterical, and thought again about his alcohol consumption.

Then he heard something rattling in another surgical dish. Cautiously, but with growing interest, he tracked down the disturbance to a heart. Impossibly it was still beating and separate from its former owner.

There were more bodies in the medicae, cooling but not yet cold.

Bucher looked at his hands again.

A vessel of the divine Emperor.

And then he got to work.

He toiled tirelessly, stitching up the dead, filling them with animated body parts. Lungs, hearts, intestines, every organ gently pulsing in his sainted hands. He had no shortage of supplies. The death toll of the war to that point had been egregious. One by one the men arose, alive, vital and eager for the fight. Seven casualties, torn apart by mortar bombardment

with little hope of recovery, became seven infantrymen, ready for the meat grinder. Then seven more. And so it went.

Bucher was ebullient. Truly, he had been touched by the Emperor's grace and given a healing gift. None left his care in a corpse-bag now. Every trooper, no matter the severity of their injuries, was patched up and sent back into the fight.

On the third week of this miraculous turnaround, Bucher received a visitor.

'Renhaus?' The sour look on his face said it all as he regarded the corpsman who obviously coveted the medicae's position.

'Doctor Bucher,' said Renhaus, and stepped aside crisply to admit Colonel Rake.

'Sir!'

Both medical men snapped a salute, heels clicking together in the same motion.

Rake waved away the formality. He was a stout man, broad of shoulder, not wiry like Bucher but strong and born into military service. Bucher had never seen him out of his uniform, which was always pristine in the crimson and grey of the Valgaast 66th.

'You're to be commended, Bucher,' Rake began. 'Fine work you're doing here.' The colonel looked around, as if taking in the scene of the medicae's recent triumphs. 'Fine work.'

'Thank you, sir. I serve at the Emperor's grace,' Bucher replied with a short, reverential bow to his commanding officer.

'As do we all, as do we all.' Rake straightened his uniform, his eyes firm as he regarded the medicae. 'You're to receive help, Bucher,' he said, and gestured to Renhaus.

Bucher clenched his jaw so tightly, he almost broke a tooth. His heart drummed so loudly that he feared that Rake would hear it. After a few seconds he dragged out a sentence. 'Sir, that really is unnecessary, I can—'

'Nonsense, Bucher,' Rake cut in. 'You've practically patched up half the regiment, man. More even. We're still in this fight because of you.'

Panic came swift and cold in the wake of Bucher's anger. He felt suddenly feverish, his head throbbing, a whiny tinnitus forcing his eyes to narrow. Sweat slicked the back of his neck and he scratched at the wound, reopening the scab. The pain brought him to his senses.

‘I... er...’ he garbled, before the ceiling shook. Motes of dust descended earthward like little clouds of minuscule flies. Another mortar barrage had hit, providing a timely reminder of the war Bucher actively wanted to avoid. It was an ever-present companion, the faraway sound of war. Bucher felt it creeping closer. He had not known he was partly responsible for its perpetuation. It was that or death at the hands of the enemy, he supposed.

Rake raised his eyes to the ceiling, scowling. ‘Those heretic bastards are hanging on too. It’s attritional, Bucher,’ he said, fixing the medicae with the rapier point of his gaze. ‘And one thing wins a war of attrition. Men. Blood. Flesh. Bodies, Bucher. Do you understand?’

Bucher nodded dully. ‘Yes, sir, but how does—?’

‘Renhaus will assist you. Whatever you’re doing, teach him to do it too.’

No!

‘Think what you could accomplish with twice the manpower,’ Rake went on. ‘We’ll have this war won in a matter of months.’

‘Months?’ asked Bucher, his gaze flickering to Renhaus, who looked studiously neutral, and then back to Rake, who appeared inordinately pleased with himself.

How can I keep this up for months?

A cold knife of dread slid into Bucher’s back as he suddenly grappled with the full import of what Rake was saying.

In the privacy of his own sanctum, his work had felt divine, righteous, but Renhaus tainted that. Bucher could not risk exposure. His gift might be denied to him, to the men he would otherwise save. He walked a tightrope, and the weight of Rake’s words threatened to unseat him and send him tumbling to oblivion.

‘Sir, I’m sure that the corpsman could be better employed—’

A flash of suppressed anger lit the colonel’s face like a muzzle flare. ‘Are you questioning a direct order, Bucher?’

‘No, sir, of course not, I just believe...’ He didn’t have the will to fight it. That old, spineless wastrel that Bucher knew he was took over again and he crumpled like a broken kite.

‘Very good,’ said Rake. ‘The regiment is making another push at dawn...’ He checked his chrono. ‘That’s four hours from now. I expect it to be bloody. You’ll be glad of the corpsman’s help then.’

‘I am ready to assist in any way, doctor,’ said Renhaus.

You obsequious little shit...

Bucher felt a sudden urge to bury a scalpel in the corpsman's face and keep churning until he was red and raw and bleed—

He stopped himself. Blood dripped from his clenched fist, the scalpel blade having taken its fill without him realising. He deftly clasped his hands behind his back to hide the wound.

'We should prepare then,' said Bucher, and Rake gave him a curt nod.

'You know,' Rake said, as he was leaving, 'I once thought you were a weak, ineffectual man. I expected to have to throw you back onto the line with the rest of the regiment. But you have proved me wrong.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Bucher, feeling the heat resurge, but Rake had already taken his leave.

He glared at Renhaus, before hurrying to the basin to wash his cut hands and patch them back up.

'Doctor...' The corpsman sounded alarmed as he followed Bucher. 'Are you injured?'

'It's nothing,' said Bucher, running the water over his hands as he caught Renhaus' reflection behind him in the grimy mirror. A crack ran down the glass, cutting the corpsman's mirrored face in two. Bucher imagined smashing his skull repeatedly against the glass until his face collapsed entirely and nothing remained but a gaping red maw and then he'd grind the— Bucher blinked, blood boiling, and took a deep breath.

'You look weary, doctor. Perhaps you should rest. I can take care—'

'I'm fine!' snapped Bucher, then repeated himself more calmly when he saw how pale Renhaus looked. 'I'm fine. Thank you, corpsman.'

Renhaus was young, eager. A thin wash of stubble peppered his skin but it was soft and fair. In the corpsman, Bucher saw everything he wasn't. Competent, hopeful, devout. Bucher saw his replacement.

His tongue felt dry, thick like a wad of cloth. He wanted to be sick. Bucher pushed the feeling down, blaming it on his fatigue. He had barely eaten or slept in the last three weeks, so consumed was he with his work. His gift. A kernel of fear knotted in his gut as he realised there'd be no more of that. He couldn't risk it.

'Patch them up,' said Bucher, still staring at his reflection, wafting a hand vaguely at the two flesh wounds that had just come in.

'At once, doctor,' said Renhaus, moving swiftly to his post. 'I will prove

my worth, I swear it by the Emperor.'

'May He protect...' murmured Bucher, and reached for a lho-stick.

The next few days were bloody. Rake's promised 'push' brought fresh wounded by the score and turned the medicae block into a charnel house. The bodies stacked up like sandbags in a defensive redoubt. The stench of death and rot pervaded.

'Clamp it, Renhaus,' snapped Bucher, the trooper's chest cavity filling up like a red well. 'I can't see a damn thing in here.'

Renhaus fumbled in the gory morass of the trooper's innards. Bucher was trying to tie off his stitches, which were slipshod at best, one hand on the needle, the other holding the screaming missile loader down.

'Throne, Renhaus, will you please—'

'I've got it.' The corpsman started calmly draining the fluid. 'You nicked a second artery when you cut him,' he said.

Bucher glared. Renhaus looked grey, like funeral ash, and dark rings circled his eyes like little pits of darkness.

What do you see? Eh? You think I don't know what you reckon of me?

Bucher had jabbed a syringe of morphia into the missile loader, and it settled the trooper right down. His chest still moved feverishly, like a scared rodent caught in a trap. No longer needing to hold the patient steady, Bucher stabbed a finger at the corpsman.

'I did not,' he said, his voice dangerously level.

'With respect, doctor—'

'Now, you listen to me, Renhaus. I run this medicae. Me. Not you. Ever since you got here you've been a hindrance. Three days of this, and we're losing every other soul. That's one in every two, corpsman. What do you say to that?'

Renhaus only half-listened. His attention was on his task, draining the wound, clamping the rogue artery. He only looked up when the rapid chest movements came to an abrupt halt.

'He's dead,' he announced, exhausted, and sagged like a drained waterskin.

Bucher blinked.

'He's what?'

Renhaus met his disbelieving gaze. 'Succumbed to his injuries. They

were severe.’ He made the sign of the aquila. ‘Only in death does duty end.’

Bucher looked at the corpse like it was a foreign object. The trooper’s eyes were open, flashing like little silver coins of light where the stark overhead lumens touched them. Blood flecked the face, the body cracked open like a broken egg, fluids spilling and slopping over the edge of the slab.

‘Is that the last of them?’ asked Bucher, a sudden millstone weight around his shoulders.

Renhaus nodded. ‘For now, at least.’

A hollow silence fell, where only the breaths of two defeated men and the distant thud of heavy weapons could be heard.

Then... a tiny beat sounded, faint but discernible in the quiet medicae block.

Renhaus squinted, canting his head like a hound that had caught a scent.

‘What was that?’ he asked, turning to try to pinpoint the noise.

‘What was what?’ said Bucher, bleary-eyed and slow to make the connection.

Cold ice woke him though. It seized his every nerve ending and thrust him up ramrod straight. ‘I don’t hear anything,’ he said too quickly, too urgently.

He mustn’t know. He mustn’t know.

‘Probably just vermin,’ he said, trying to sound casual. ‘They get in everywhere.’

‘I don’t think it’s vermin...’ Renhaus took a few steps, listened.

Two tiny beats sounded, soft like a child’s finger tapping against a window.

Du-dum.

Then again.

Du-dum.

‘That definitely wasn’t vermin,’ said Renhaus, intrepid now, vowing to catch his softly drumming quarry. He gave a side glance to Bucher. ‘Can’t you hear it?’

‘Must be from the guns, an echo in your eardrum perhaps. Here, let me take a...’ Bucher reached out but Renhaus had already moved on and was heading for the organ cabinet where the biological material for

transplantation was stored.

‘Nothing in there but empty, briny jars,’ Bucher said, still disassembling, still scrambling.

Since his recent successes, the last three days notwithstanding, he had begun to run out of intact body parts. Not that it mattered with Renhaus watching him like a bloody servo-skull.

The beat came again, a dull thud, an innocuous little noise but hard to deny. It struck Bucher with all the finality of a gunshot.

‘There...’ said Renhaus. ‘You must have heard that?’

Bucher shrugged, opting for nonchalance. ‘This place is always creaking. It’s taken a few hits.’

Renhaus was shaking his head. ‘No...’ he said. ‘No, it’s definitely coming from that cabinet. It sounds like there’s something in there.’ He edged closer, a poacher uncertain of what was in his snare.

Bucher’s expression turned blank, a canvas bled of all its colour.

He knows...

Renhaus had grasped the cabinet’s handle and was opening the door.

‘Be careful...’ said Bucher.

He damn well knows...

He reached for the bone hammer. It felt cold in his grip, but something hot inside him urged him on.

If he sees...

‘Definitely something in here...’ Renhaus was squinting at the darkened interior of the cabinet at the strange, ugly shapes floating in the cloudy liquid inside the jars. Only a few were occupied. One was tapping against the glass, half a heart, its aortic valve enlarging and contracting like a tiny mouth sucking at the wall of the jar. ‘Holy Emperor...’ Renhaus breathed, backing up and making the sign of the aquila. He sounded scared. ‘There is corruption here, there is taint—’

Bucher struck him hard across the back of the head. Renhaus went down like a felled ogryn, bouncing off a gurney rail on his way to the floor. And there he lay, as still as the dead.

‘Throne, what have I done?’

Bucher nearly fell, slipping on the pool of blood oozing from the corpsman’s cracked skull. He reached out, debating whether he could patch him up. He could claim it was an accident, he could—

Renhaus stirred, half-conscious, face bloody.

Bucher hit him again, crouching in close and swinging the hammer one-handed until the skull came right apart. Then he swung five more times. Gore and brain matter spattered his coat, the medicae walls. He was practically swimming in it by the time he came to his senses. Renhaus barely had a head left. It was just red pulp and bone fragments. Bucher dug a piece out of his face, feeling the sting as he wrenched the skull splinter loose.

‘Oh, shit...’ he gasped, chest heaving, heart thudding louder than the artillery batteries outside. ‘Shit, shit, shit, shit!’

They’d hang him for this or shoot him or worse. Rake would make him suffer. No way he could spin this. He’d murdered Renhaus, bludgeoned the poor bastard when his back was turned.

He knew though, didn’t he. He knew what you’d done.

‘Yes... he knew,’ Bucher uttered aloud.

He would have exposed you. He would have stopped your healing gift.

‘I had no choice...’ he said, feeling calmer.

No choice at all.

Bucher swapped the hammer for a surgical saw. He got to work.

The bone was tough. He didn’t bother dragging Renhaus onto a slab and just dismembered him on the floor. He cut the narrow joints, the wrist, the elbow, the ankle, the knee. The sheared bone gave off a plaintive shriek. He ignored it, took the partitioned limbs and bisected them. Then he did so again. Kept the pieces small enough to fit. Everything needed to fit. It was hot work and sweat sheathed him in a cloak of body odour and desperation.

‘Come on, come on...’ he urged himself, the bite of the saw wearing at the web of skin between thumb and forefinger. It began to bleed. ‘Come on...’

He kept at it, praying to the Emperor that no one would come, that for now the injured would wait. It took hours, and when he had finished his white coat had turned a ruddy pink. His eyes burned, dry from staring. He needed a drink, but he wasn’t done. Not yet. Fingers trembling, he dropped the saw and went for the jars, their preservative fluids sloshing noisily as he took them from the cabinet and lined them up on the medicae floor. He worked hurriedly, unsealing each one, holding his nose against the acerbic

bite of the liquid and then dropping Renhaus in, piece by ragged piece. He had just about bundled the last jar back into the cabinet and locked it shut when he heard a gentle tap.

Du-dum.

An innocuous sound really. Almost dulcet.

Du-dum.

But it wasn't dulcet. Not soothing at all.

Du-dum.

It gnawed, like nails raking against glass.

Screeeeech!

Bucher stuffed his ears, trying to block it out. Oh, Throne... He could smell the blood on him. They would smell it too. They would know what he had done. Killed a corpsman and then cut him into pieces. Emperor's mercy... that bone shriek.

Du-dum.

'Shut up...' Bucher pressed his ears so hard that he grew dizzy from the pressure against his skull. Blood thundering, he let go.

Du-dum.

'Shut up, shut up...'

He turned on the medical saw and let it whine, scything the air.

Du-dum.

Like a parade inside his head, beating out the tattoo of his guilt.

Du-dum.

'Shut up!'

Bucher scrambled to his cabinet, slipped and hit his head. Fire burned through his skull, like a dozen hot pins had been thrust into his scalp. He got to his feet, groggy, nauseous.

Screeeeech!

The nails again. His nails. The image of a dismembered hand clawing at the glass filled Bucher's mind.

'Please...' he hissed, a plaintive whisper to the dark. The cabinet sprang open on the third attempt, Bucher's fingers raw and bleeding with the effort. He threw aside the doors, exposing his tormentor...

The jars were still. Nothing stirred. He waited. He watched. Renhaus, his accumulated biological matter, simply floated. Tiny pieces of him had broken off and bobbed around in the briny fluid. It was murky, like dirty

sea water, churning with filth. He checked every jar, holding it up painstakingly to the light, examining the cloudy morass within. Just parts, savaged and separated, but just parts. A foot. A piece of jaw. An eye... Oh, holy Emperor, did I really do this?

Bucher slid to his knees, sloughing down into the gory matter underfoot, a man melting under the weight of his own misdeeds. He let it cling to his clothes, his skin, begging for the filth to consume him.

For a few seconds, there was silence. Then his weary gaze caught sight of that mark again. That little rime of mould, a reminder of the boy, his back arched like a bridge of flesh and bone, the path to his agony and horror. Was it... a little larger than before? No, it had changed though. One patch had become three, a grimy little triangle of dots.

He crawled over for a closer look, and was about to reach out when—
Du-dum.

Bucher sprang to his feet. He had left the cabinet open and grabbed the bone hammer on the way up. Its head was still matted with some of Renhaus' hair. Roaring, he smashed the jars. Brine and body parts spilled out in a gruesome flood. He felt it touch him, the soft flesh slapping at his coat, the fingers snagging, the teeth biting. A grisly moat of biological matter and shattered glass separated Bucher from the rest of the medicae block. He laughed, too loud, too hysterically.

'Now, you'll shut up...' he said, a triumphant, mildly unhinged lilt to his voice he didn't entirely recognise.

There was silence then, blissful silence.

No, wait...

It was actual silence. Not just the empty echoes of the medicae block, but outside too. No bombardment. No dull thud of artillery. It had become so constant that now it was gone Bucher found he missed the percussive refrain of the guns.

Frowning, he carefully edged through the mess he had made. Bits of glass – or was it bone? – crunched under his feet.

He walked out of the block. Still he heard nothing. A long corridor led out to the camp, to the trenches. He took it, still listening, still hearing nothing. Blinking, he stepped out into the light of a cold day. The sky looked ill, jaundice yellow with brown smears of cloud like a dirty rag had been dragged across it with a god's hand. The regiment were there. They

were waiting for him. Silent.

So was the camp. No guns shook the earth with their thunderous recoil. No orders barked back and forth. No one even moved. They stood before him in their ranks, a perversion of parade ground discipline.

They had changed, the Valgaast 66th. Pale skin, sunken eyes and withered limbs. Ragged uniforms blotched by patches of mould in that same pattern he had seen on the medicae wall. He noticed Gruemann, the vox-operator. His arms and legs had wasted to skeletal thinness but his stomach bulged, bloated with putrefaction. Languid flies drifted on air that smelled like fever sweat. It was thick. You swallowed it rather than breathed it. Bucher took a pull and gagged.

Rake came forwards. He shambled, to be precise.

‘S-sir...’ Bucher rasped, fear constricting his throat, or was that just the stench? Rake smelled bad. Like milk left in the sun or eggs turned rotten. The image of flyblown meat surfaced uncomfortably in Bucher’s mind. Then the silence broke and the beat resumed.

Du-dum.

Louder.

Du-dum.

Two dozen hearts beating at the same time. A chorus of lungs heaving ragged breaths. The pulse and throb of life, except it wasn’t life, Bucher knew that now, faced with Colonel Rake in his malodorous state. His shrunk, decaying flesh, his black nubs for teeth. It was un-life or un-death.

It had taken them, some kind of ague.

‘It was the boy, wasn’t it?’ said Bucher, hot tears running down his cheeks.

Rake nodded, opening his mouth to reveal a thick, grey tongue like a slug lolling inside, too fat to fashion speech. Black flecks collected at the corners of his mouth, cracking the skin and releasing tracts of watery pus as he grinned.

‘He had the taint. Something in him,’ said Bucher. ‘It lingered afterwards, after the fire... Emperor’s mercy, I did this.’

Rake turned, seemingly uninterested in Bucher’s confession. Instead, he gestured with a bony finger to the mists beyond the trenches. They were silent too, but figures were moving inside the miasma, bulky, heavily

armoured figures. Poxed men, the dread force they had come to defeat, advancing unhindered. Welcomed. Two armies had become one.

‘Silence...’ begged Bucher, gritting his teeth against that horrific beat.

Du-dum.

‘Please...’

He turned back in time to see Rake’s sidearm blur across his vision. Everything went to black.

Bucher awoke. His chest hammered, eyes blinking against a sudden flare of light.

‘Sweet merciful Emperor,’ he gasped, feeling the softness of his bed beneath him. Then he tried to move his arms and found they were strapped down. The same with his legs. It wasn’t his bed. It was a slab.

‘No, no... ple—’

A rancid gag stuffed into his mouth choked off his pleas. A cold hand pressed firmly against his forehead. He looked up into Rake’s face. The regiment surrounded him on all sides, looking down on him as if he were a specimen to be examined.

A muffled groan escaped Bucher’s lips, as he realised the Emperor had forsaken him.

Rake nodded. The dirty scalpel in his hands flashed in the grimy light.

THE HEALER

Steven Sheil

The dusty path that led down from the Black Hills to the edge of the village was long and winding, and was loomed over on either side by the tall, thin trees of the forest, which grew closely together here, like hairs on a hide. Adirene sat at the trunk of one of the trees, her small, bare feet scuffing the sun-parched dirt. Her hands picked through the wiry needles that the trees had shed, finding the best ones, which she wound and knitted together to form an effigy of Sigmar, the God-King, just the way her mother had taught her. Every now and then she would look up, peering into the quickly settling gloom of the afternoon, searching for any movement on the path. When no movement could be seen, she would return to her winding, her fingers nimbly shaping the needles into head, torso, limbs and hammer. So engrossed did she become by the figure she was crafting – plaiting two needles together to form fingers, pressing her thumbs into the oval of a head to create two unseeing eye sockets – that when the traveller she was waiting for did eventually come down the long, winding and dusty red pathway, it was only the sound of hooves and wheels thudding and cracking on the dried dirt beside her that alerted her and brought her clambering quickly to her feet.

‘Stop! Oh please, stop, stop!’

The woman who sat atop the small covered wagon pulled back on the reins, signalling her horse – a scraggy-looking thing, hide worn bare in places – to come to a halt. She peered over the nag’s back at the small, dark-haired child, no more than five or six years old, standing in the dirt in front of her, hands clasped together as though in prayer.

‘Are you – please, missus – are you Mother Zinka?’

The woman took a long moment – during which Adirene could feel the newcomer’s deep brown eyes penetrating her through to the gut – then smiled. A kindly smile, one that spoke of warmth and compassion.

‘I am Zinka. Do you have need of me?’

Adirene nodded. She pointed down the muddy path, towards where it branched to turn into her village. ‘My father. He’s... he’s sick.’

Mother Zinka reached down her hand towards Adirene, inviting her to join her on the seat. ‘Show me.’

Adirene took Mother Zinka’s hand and was lifted up almost effortlessly to sit beside her. The old woman gave a flick of the reins and the hide-worn nag trotted on, pulling the covered wagon along the path towards the village.

The effigy of Sigmar, which Adirene had spent hours crafting, lay discarded on the road behind, its unseeing eyes pointed up towards the looming treetops and the glowering firmament beyond.

It was a short way to the village from the hill path, but Mother Zinka’s nag trotted slowly, with a steady, unhurried pace, allowing Adirene the opportunity to inspect her new companion. She had heard tell of Mother Zinka since she was a little girl, since before she was old enough to clean and make soup and fetch wood. Mother Zinka’s name was heard whenever someone fell ill, often as a kind of invocation – ‘Sigmar, send us your healer. Sigmar, bring us Mother Zinka’ – or in the prayers whispered around sickbeds. Adirene knew that Mother Zinka was a fabled healer, the greatest to ever traverse the Great Parch; that Mother Zinka had the ability to draw the sickness from a body as though sucking juice from a fruit, leaving the sufferer purged of all that had ailed him. In her mind she had conjured up an image of Mother Zinka that befitted this miraculous reputation: a towering figure, flame-haired and alabaster-skinned, with long, pale fingers and hands that glowed with power.

But the woman who sat beside her was no imposing heroine. Her face was small and sharp, with a large nose curved like the blade of an axe. Her skin was sun-darkened, mottled and leathery, and was covered all over with lines of age, some deep like the marks made by a carriage wheel through mud. Her hair – dark like Adirene’s but streaked through with silver – was tied up behind her head, held tight by a piece of twine. The only part of her

that came close to Adirene's imaginings were her eyes – those eyes which had felt like they'd seen through Adirene, clean to the bone. The eyes were dark and clear and held the promise of magic.

As they rode on, Adirene turned to look at the covered wagon behind them. It had a curved wooden roof, with a sheath of varying materials drawn tightly across it – stretches of canvas woven side by side with animal hides of leather and suede – which gave it a patchwork look. There were no gaps in the covering, no window or entrance save a small door in the rear. It reminded Adirene of the shell of a snail.

'Is that where you keep your...' she hesitated at the word, as though to say it out loud were to break some kind of spell, '...your potions?'

Mother Zinka looked down at her. 'Potions, child?'

Adirene could feel herself reddening under Mother Zinka's gaze. 'For... for healing.'

Mother Zinka looked away, gave just the slightest shake of her head. 'There are no potions, child. I'm no sorcerer.'

Adirene's brow creased. 'Then how...?'

Mother Zinka smiled, nodded towards the path ahead. 'Here?'

Adirene looked up. They were at the edge of the village. A group had gathered in the middle of the path, alerted by the sound of the wagon. Adirene's mother, Jayla, was at the head of the crowd. Her face was taut with worry, but at the sight of Adirene on the carriage seat a grateful smile came to her lips. She hurried over to meet them.

'Mother Zinka, thank you. Thank you for coming.' Jayla lifted Adirene down from the seat and clasped her tightly to her breast for a moment. Her lips pressed against Adirene's cheek and she whispered in the child's ear, 'Good girl.' Adirene felt herself burn with pride. Jayla put Adirene down beside her, still gripping her hand tightly. 'Mother Zinka, it's my husband, he...'

But even as Jayla spoke, Mother Zinka was holding up a hand to quiet her. 'I must prepare,' she said. 'Find me a place where I can keep my wagon. Not in the village but nearby. I must be alone for a time. Then,' she gave a kindly smile, 'I will give you all the help that I can.'

Jayla nodded, almost curtseyed as though before a noblewoman. 'Yes, Mother Zinka.' She called one of Adirene's brothers to show Mother Zinka to the barren place near the banks of the molten river at the far end of the

village.

As the carriage rode on, past the dwellings that lined the path, the people of the village stood and watched. An air of excitement seemed to flow through them all. It had been years since Mother Zinka had been this way, and it might be years more before she came again. They all felt the frisson of what was about to happen, the sense of a tale in the making.

But as Mother Zinka followed the boy to the barren place, she saw one house whose door did not open as she passed, whose occupant gazed instead from his window, eyes fixed on her with cold suspicion. She asked the boy, ‘Who lives there?’

‘Konrath, the smith,’ said the boy. He glanced up at Mother Zinka. ‘He don’t mean no harm, mother.’

Mother Zinka felt the eyes on her, and hoped that was true.

The figure that lay on the bed was barely recognisable as a man, but it made a man’s sounds as it twisted and shuddered and writhed, casting shadows that jumped and leapt on the walls of the room like fleas dancing in candlelight: bone-deep groans of pain; hoarse, rattling breaths; wet gulps of blood and air, which tugged at the nerves of those who watched on and sparked fears for their own mortality.

Mother Zinka knelt beside the low wooden bed – barely more than a spread of dirty straw on a frame of mossed and splintering logs, wedged into a corner of this cold and dirty outbuilding – and reached a hand to touch the man gently on the forehead. He spasmed beneath her touch, as though branded by a piece of white-hot iron, and she gently shushed him.

‘How long has he been like this?’ she asked.

Jayla – who stood in the doorway, a piece of linen held to her mouth, as though afraid to breathe the same air as her husband – shook her head helplessly. ‘Like this? For a week, perhaps longer. But he has been sick for a long time. It was only recently, when those appeared,’ she pointed to the growths that covered the man’s twitching arms, ‘that he lost all ability to walk and to speak. That’s when we moved him here. We were afraid, we all were. With the children and all...’

Mother Zinka raised a hand to Jayla – *enough*. Jayla nodded, once more covering her mouth and moving a step back from the door. Mother Zinka

moved her hands down the man's body, feeling the bulbous tumours that covered his exposed skin. They were long, bloated, livid red, bulging as though inflated from within. They covered his hands, his arms, his legs, his face, distorting his appearance, giving him the look of a man turned somehow inside out.

'Can you... can you help?' Jayla asked.

Mother Zinka turned to look over her shoulder. Her dark eyes were filled with tenderness and something else – a blaze of conviction.

'Yes, my dear. I can.'

Adirene had been told to stay away, to help her sisters prepare the meal for the evening. But being the one who had brought Mother Zinka to the village had given Adirene a proprietorial feeling about the old woman, and when she saw the crowd gathering around the doorway to the outbuilding where her poor father lay, she resolved that – in spite of any threatened punishment – she had to see what was going on in the room beyond.

Pushing between the bodies of the villagers, Adirene scabbled her way to the front of the crowd, coming to stand beside the legs of her mother, who stood on the threshold, first witness to the scene within the room. Even as Adirene's eyes adjusted to the darkness inside, she could hear the low, murmuring voice of Mother Zinka coming from the furthest corner, where the bed lay. It was hard to pick out the words, but the rhythm and cadence of the old woman's voice suggested an invocation of some sort, or a mantra – the same phrase repeated over and over with growing intensity.

As Adirene's eyes grew more accustomed to the gloom, the shape of Mother Zinka began to form. She was kneeling beside her father's sickbed, her head bowed down, her hands outstretched, pressed against the bare skin of his arms and chest. His face was obscured by Mother Zinka's body, but Adirene could hear his breathing – the scratchy, rasping rattle, which sounded like a knife being scraped along a bone. As Mother Zinka's invocation grew more intense, so did the rapidity of his breathing, until it began to sound as though he were approaching some kind of seizure. Adirene felt a hand grip her shoulder, hold it tight. She looked up and saw her mother's face – pale, tear-streaked, filled with fear – and felt the same fear leap to her like a contagion.

The voices – Mother Zinka's and her father's – grew more and more

intense. Adirene saw her father's legs tense and stiffen. An impulse came over her to run to him, to push the old woman away, to throw her arms around him and quiet his pain; but her mother's hand held her tight, pushing her down, keeping her pinned to the threshold. Then, when the intensity reached its peak, when it seemed as though her father were going to crack and burst open, there came one last, giant, wrenching breath from him – a sound of release, of delivery, like the first cry of a newborn baby. At the same time, Mother Zinka's head jerked back, her greying hair whipping against her shoulders, her face – eyes closed tight, mouth open in a cavernous 'O' – pointing towards the ceiling.

For a long, suspended moment there was silence. Then Mother Zinka's head fell back, her arms drew away from Adirene's father's body, and the sound of his breathing again filled the room.

This time, though, it was no hoarse rattle, no bone-scrape of imminent death. The sound that came was being pushed out through strong and healthy lungs. Jayla's hand came away from her mouth. She looked nervously to the figure of Mother Zinka. 'Is it... is it done?'

Mother Zinka made no reply. Instead her hands reached into the pocket of her skirt and pulled out a scarf, which she began to wrap slowly around her head. Adirene could stand it no longer; she pulled free from her mother's grip and ran to the bed, where she was greeted by her father's face – tired, dirty, but free of the tumours that had covered his skin – and by a sight she had almost forgotten: his smile. 'Hello, little one,' he said.

Adirene threw her arms around him and hugged him with all her strength. And, as she buried her face into his neck, her eyes looked across to Mother Zinka. She wanted to hug the old woman too, to tell her how thankful she was to have her father returned to her. But the old woman's eyes, now the only part visible between the layers of the scarf that she had wrapped around her head, avoided Adirene's direct gaze. It was only in the instant before she turned away that Adirene saw that where before there had been understanding and compassion, there was now only a deep and profound pain.

As Jayla helped Mother Zinka back to her covered wagon at the edge of the village, Adirene followed on behind. As much as she was happy to have her father healthy again, the seemingly miraculous abilities of the old

woman had captivated her. She wanted to know the woman's secrets, the source of her powers, how she had become who she was. She wanted to have every mystery explained, every question answered. But when they reached the wagon, Mother Zinka told Jayla and Adirene that she needed to rest for a time, that solitude was the best method of recuperation from her efforts. Jayla promised to bring Mother Zinka food, water, any provisions she needed. Mother Zinka thanked her, said that a small supplement to her rations would be enough – she expected no further payment for her deeds.

As Mother Zinka moved towards her wagon, Jayla told her that there were others in the village and nearby, others who needed her help. 'What may I tell them?'

Mother Zinka's body seemed to sag a little at the words, but she turned back to Jayla, and with a tilt of her head said, 'Tell them I will provide help where I can, and comfort where I cannot.'

Jayla nodded. 'Thank you, Mother Zinka.' She took Adirene's hand and started back for the village. Adirene glanced back once, to see the old woman watching them leave, waiting until they were two dozen steps away before she opened the door in the rear of the patchwork-covered wagon and climbed inside.

'You bring unnatural forces to this village, Jayla.' The voice – loud, resonant, sharp-toned – boomed out across the village as Jayla and Adirene passed. Adirene looked and saw the smith, Konrath, at the door of his workshop, his leather apron tied tight to his waist, his hands black from iron and smoke. He pointed towards where Mother Zinka's wagon stood. 'You think there's no price to pay for what she's doing?'

Jayla's face hardened. She marched over to Konrath and eyed him directly. 'Mother Zinka asks nothing from us, nothing but a small basket of provisions. You think that's too much to pay for a miracle?'

A black laugh burst from Konrath's throat. 'Miracle? What she does is no miracle. It's a perversion.' He stepped forward, closer to Jayla, his heavy, dark brow almost touching her forehead. 'Plague and sickness, death and decay, they are part of the nature of things. The Lord of Decay, Grandfather Nurgle...'

Now it was Jayla's turn to laugh in Konrath's face. 'Nurgle is no lord of

mine, nor of the others in this village...’

Konrath, unperturbed, raised his voice, boomed louder.

‘...he sees fit to send his diseases upon us. Who are we to resist him? Who is she?’ He pointed a finger towards the wagon. ‘Where does she come from? Do you know what magicks she employs to work her “miracles”? Do you know what other contagions she brings to this village from her travels amongst the pestilent? Do you?’

Jayla’s eyes grew cold. ‘I know only that she healed my husband when all seemed lost. That is enough for me.’ She turned on her heels, pulling Adirene along with her, back to their home.

Konrath watched them go, a look of scorn crossing his lips. ‘You will see, Jayla. There will be a price to pay.’ His voice rang out across the village, its echo hanging in the distance between them.

Candlelight threw the shadow of Mother Zinka against the patchwork canvas that covered the interior of the small wagon. The shadow moved slowly, deliberately, as though in great pain, a trembling hand unwinding the scarf from around the dark lump of its head. On the other side of the wagon flickered another shadow, another dark mass, but this one moved only with the steady throb of a pulse – the rise and fall of a prone but animate bulk.

Mother Zinka let her scarf fall to the floor and peered down at her hands. The tumours which had colonised Adirene’s father’s skin were now beginning to grow on her own, thickening and bulging even as she watched. The same tumours were spreading across her face too, pulling down her lower lip as they grew heavy on her chin, expanding the skin of her brow so that it began to sag and overhang her eyes, almost blinding her. She had to work quickly.

She shuffled forward on her knees towards the bulk which lay on the floor of the wagon. ‘It’s time,’ she said. A rumbling moan came from the bulk, like the lowing of a bull. Mother Zinka reached forward her hands, found a lump of clammy, pocked flesh and pressed her fingers against it. The bulk lowed once more. Mother Zinka whispered in the candlelight, ‘We shall be reborn, you and I. Our sacrifice is great, but our reward shall be greater. Sigmar watches over us. Sigmar sees all our good work, all that we do in his name. We shall be reborn in glory, golden and immortal. We

shall be Stormcast Eternals, you and I.’ The bulk moaned louder. Tears brimmed in Mother Zinka’s eyes. She pressed her fingers tighter against the skin, and began her invocation.

Adirene’s mother and father, finding much to occupy them in their reunion, slept late the next morning, and so there was no one to stop the little girl from leaving the house early and making camp on the edge of the village, from where she could observe the covered wagon of Mother Zinka. Perched on one of the rocky outcrops which marked the boundary of the village, she did not have to wait long for a sight of the old woman, who emerged from the door at the back of the wagon and stepped into the humid morning air looking much revived from her night’s sleep. Where yesterday she had shuffled back across the mud to her wagon – shoulders hunched, hands claw-clenched in tension – she now appeared much as she had on her arrival: dark eyes gleaming with compassion, back held straight with purpose. On seeing Adirene she gave a smile, and the little girl smiled back. Mother Zinka approached her. ‘Your mother said there are others who need my help?’ Adirene nodded. Mother Zinka took the little girl’s hand. ‘Show me.’

Over the next few days Mother Zinka worked her healing powers on all those who were afflicted in the village. A severe case of ash-lung suffered for many years by one of the village elders, brought on by the ash clouds that passed daily over the village, carried by the hot winds blowing down from the Duardinia Mountains; a scabrous rash affecting the children of the village’s poorest family, which their mother put down to the pile of rotten bones they’d discovered at the edge of the nearby swamp, and used as playthings; even a case of scold-tongue that had rendered Jayla’s sister mute ever since her husband, in a drunken stupor, had attempted to force her to drink from the molten river in an attempt to quell her complaints once and for all – all were drawn away by Mother Zinka’s touch. And after each session, the same procedure: Mother Zinka would return to her covered wagon, where she would recuperate for the rest of the day before emerging, ready once more, the next morning.

It quickly became a routine. For though she had made it known that her initial plans were to remain only a day or two in the village, the growing

needs of the people demanded she extend her stay. Dark forces were rumoured to have encroached upon the area, and it was feared they were responsible for the surge in afflictions; but whatever the truth of the matter, the reality was that the healing hands of Mother Zinka were needed there – and she seemingly could not refuse to lend them.

And with each new example of her magic – for Adirene knew that there was magic involved, no matter what Mother Zinka claimed – Adirene’s fascination with the old woman grew stronger. She began to dream of the covered wagon, of sitting beside Mother Zinka, accompanying her on her travels around the Great Parch – and even, dare she think of it, beyond! – of becoming her apprentice and growing into adulthood beside her. It wasn’t long before the dream-version of Adirene and the dream-version of Mother Zinka became combined into one. It was her destiny, Adirene knew, to become a great healer. She just had to learn the secret.

News of Mother Zinka’s presence had spread to other villages and on the evening of the fifth day of her visit, a cart arrived driven by a woman and her young son, who had travelled from the other side of the forest to seek her aid. Carried in the back of the wagon, covered by a thick blanket and tied by both arms to an iron ring which had been bored into the wagon bed – for his own protection, the woman said – was a man, the woman’s husband. The woman was desperate for Mother Zinka’s help and though she had asked to be left undisturbed throughout the night – having healed an old man’s weeping, pustulant sores only that morning – the sound of the husband’s cries and the wife’s exhortations brought movement from the wagon and, for the first time under cover of darkness, Mother Zinka emerged. Though visibly tired from her earlier exertions, she listened to the woman’s plea and, mindful of the increasing frequency of the cries that came from the wagon, promised to treat the husband that night. A space was made in a stable for the healing to take place and the villagers gathered once more to see Mother Zinka at work.

Missing from that gathering was Adirene. Hearing the man’s cries, she had left her bed and gone to the window in time to see Mother Zinka acquiesce to the desperate entreaties of the wife and move with them to the stable. Usually, Adirene would have followed the crowd – she had become a constant presence at Mother Zinka’s healings, claiming a prime position at the forefront of the onlookers, eager to drink in every moment

of each performance – but tonight a different urge came over her. Careful not to be seen, she slipped out into the darkness of the night and made her way through the village, past the stones that marked its boundaries, and up to the doorway of Mother Zinka’s wagon.

Adirene could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She knew that what she was doing was wrong – that she was betraying any trust Mother Zinka had put in her. But the compulsion to learn something of the old woman’s secrets, to catch even a glimpse behind the veil of mystery that surrounded her, was too hard to resist. Adirene climbed the two short steps that sat beneath the wagon door and reached up to pull the handle. It didn’t move. Adirene looked closer, saw that a chock of wood had been tightly wedged across the latch. She knew she should turn back, return home, leave Mother Zinka’s secrets undiscovered, as the old woman obviously intended. But she knew this opportunity might never come again. She pressed her shoulder against the door and pushed both hands against one end of the wedge, straining with all the strength in her little body.

At the same time, Mother Zinka was preparing to carry out her healing. The husband had been transported – with some difficulty – from the wagon to the stable. The men who had carried out the task looked pale and sickly, rushing from the room as Mother Zinka entered, heading for the nearest water butt to cleanse their hands of what they had touched. The wife and her son stood just inside the doorway and looked on in fear and concern as Zinka approached the man, their faces pale, their eyes dark-ringed as though having been witness to terrible things.

Mother Zinka hesitated at the sight of them. Something heavy lay in the atmosphere of the room, something foetid, something evil. An instinct tugged at her to turn and run. But, remembering her pledge to Sigmar, her duty to perform these tasks in his name, she fixed her resolve and stepped forward towards the darkness in the corner of the barn. She carried a small lantern and lifted it high as she approached, but what she saw in its flickering light made even her stomach crawl with repulsion.

The man was clothed in rags that glistened with blood and hung from his body like flayed skin. Whole chunks of flesh from his arms and legs had been torn away, revealing muscle, tendon and even clean bone beneath. His body was hunched over in the corner, his hands held up to his mouth, his

lips moving quickly and noisily, like insects feasting on an animal's corpse. It took a moment for Mother Zinka to understand what he held in his grasp, what his tongue licked and teeth gnawed, for what she thought initially was a wound beneath his eye was actually the wet stem of his eyeball, plucked from its socket.

As her mouth muttered an instinctive prayer to Sigmar, the man turned his face towards her – the blank hole where his eye had been like a bottomless dark pool, the eyeball in his hand, half-chewed, staring lifelessly out at her – and spoke one word, in a voice which sounded like it came from some other place, somewhere no hope had ever been known: 'Mhurghast...'

She had never heard the word before, had no idea what it meant, but the very sound of it sent a feeling of unholy doom juddering through her. 'I'm sorry,' she said, as she turned and rushed from the stable, her stomach lurching, 'there is nothing to be done.'

With a loud crack, the wedge that held the wagon latch closed shifted, came loose and tumbled to the earth. Adirene first looked around to check that the sound had not alerted anyone from the village, then clasped the handle and pulled open the door.

It was dark inside the covered wagon, with only a small candle near the door to illuminate what lay within. As Adirene stepped inside, she was hit by a dank and rotten smell, like spoiled meat, which hung thickly in the air. She found herself recoiling instinctively, her stomach turning over, threatening to expel the broth she'd had for dinner that evening. She put a hand to her mouth, reached down for the candle and lifted it in front of her. She had to see, even if it was just a glimpse. She had to know. As she stepped forward with the candle, she began to discern a shape at the rear of the wagon, a dark bulk that throbbed and pulsed and shifted beneath a cover of a thick hessian blanket, like rats mingling in a sack. A spasm of fear went through her and she knew that she was in the company of another presence – something monstrous and inhuman – but even as the realisation came over her, pricking her to take flight, she found herself unable to look away, unable to run. And then, as Adirene stood, trapped in her paralysis of fear, the thing beneath the blanket lurched forward and sat up.

Mother Zinka heard the scream as she approached the wagon. The encounter with the man in the stable, added to the exertions of the past days, had sapped a great degree of her strength. Even so, at the sound of the child's voice and with the realisation of where it had come from, a lightning bolt of energy seemed to go through her and she began to run.

As she passed the marker-edge of the village, she saw the child Adirene stumble and fall from the wagon door, then pick herself up and begin to run back towards her. As she neared, Mother Zinka could see the terror in her eyes and knew what she had seen. She tried to reach for the girl – knew she had to explain, had to quiet the girl before she could tell of what she'd seen, before she revealed what could never be revealed. Mother Zinka grabbed the girl's arm, attempting to stay her run. But on seeing the healer, Adirene's hysteria only grew. She desperately pulled away from the old woman's grasp, wriggling from her grip, kicking and scratching like a wild animal.

Mother Zinka tried to pull her close, tried to quiet her, but her strength was ebbing. With one last, desperate wrench, Adirene freed herself from Mother Zinka's grip. But the force of her escape unbalanced her, sent her stumbling and falling. With a sickening wet thud, Adirene's head cracked against the marker stone at Mother Zinka's feet.

Torchlight flared across the scene and Mother Zinka saw, in a frozen moment, the spray of blood which coloured the rock and the dull cloud that now covered the girl's eyes as the last spark of life was extinguished. Then she heard the voice of the smith, Konrath, boom out across the night.

'She has killed the girl!'

Mother Zinka shook her head. 'No, no...' But the sickness which racked her body, combined with the shock of the girl's accident, rendered her voice but a hoarse whisper. She could barely find the strength to resist as hands grabbed at her arms and held her firm. Even when the girl's mother ran forward to cradle her dead child, even as her cries of grief rang out across the village, Mother Zinka could not find her voice. She could only watch helplessly as Konrath stepped forward, put a hand on Jayla's shoulder to quiet the sobs which shuddered through her, and fixed Mother Zinka with a cold eye.

'I warned that there would be a price,' he said.

Jayla looked up at him, then across to Zinka. Her face was sodden with

tears, contorted in incomprehension. ‘Why?’ she cried.

‘The girl saw something,’ said Konrath, looking past Mother Zinka to where the wagon door still clapped back and forth. He lifted a thick finger and pointed. ‘In there.’

The men who held Mother Zinka yanked her arms tighter behind her back. ‘What secrets do you keep, old woman?’ one of them hissed in her ear.

‘I’ll look,’ said another.

Mother Zinka saw him stride past her towards the wagon, unsheathing a knife as he went. She forced a word from her parched lips – ‘No!’ – but her arms were yanked tighter again.

Konrath strode over to look down at her face, now fever-ridden and clammy with sweat. ‘Now we’ll see what unnatural magicks you have brought to this place.’

‘Please,’ whimpered Mother Zinka, ‘please, don’t...’

But her pleas were drowned out by the sounds that now came from inside the wagon. Cries of agony from the man who had entered, mingling with the thwacks and thuds of some violent confrontation. Before any of the other villagers could make a move towards the sounds, there came another noise – the rending of fabric.

As the gathered crowd looked on, the wagon seemed to bulge and split open, as though giving birth, and something wet and red fell to the earth beside it. There was a scream from someone in the crowd as they recognised the body of the man who had entered the wagon, his skin now lacerated and torn almost from his bones. And even before that scream had faded away, there came another and another as the villagers saw what was emerging from the ripped canvas above him.

It barely held the shape of a man, so distorted were its limbs, so twisted was its body. Its skin bulged with tumour upon tumour, some livid purple, some black with decay, some foetid green with rot. Where no tumour grew, the skin was pockmarked with scabs and lesions, weeping wounds that oozed pus and vile-smelling secretions. On one arm the bones seemed to have grown wild beneath the skin, splitting and fracturing and reforming so many times that it ended not in a hand but in a kind of mass of rigid tentacles, points sharpened like claws – claws wet with the blood of the man on the ground. It had no face to speak of, just a single large, rheumy

eye – looking out from amidst the putrid collection of growths that formed the mass where the head might have been – and a little below that a gaping, lipless hole, which overspilled with yellow, cracked and razor-pointed teeth. As the thing looked out from the wagon and its eye fell on Mother Zinka, her arms restrained behind her back, agonies of fear roaming across her face, it let out a shriek of anger and desolation such as no one in the village had ever heard.

Half of the villagers fled at the sight of the creature; the other half grabbed for weapons, ready to strike it down. As they moved on the wagon, the creature jumped down and began to lumber towards them, its clawed arm outstretched. For a moment it seemed as though the creature would be overwhelmed by the sheer numbers that attacked it, but then came a cry of agony from one of the men, who fell to the ground, his throat gashed by a bone-claw. Then from another, gut-torn, and another, eye-gouged.

The creature was cutting a swathe through the villagers, pressing forward always, its bulk lurching from side to side, threatening to topple over at any moment. Jayla, who still cradled the lifeless body of Adirene in her arms, looked on in horror. Not only were the men being torn and slashed by the creature, but their skin had begun to bubble and roil with tumours and lesions and livid pustules. Every disease that Mother Zinka had taken from them, every disease she had deposited in this thing, was now spreading amongst them all. Konrath's hands dropped away from Mother Zinka as he watched the creature spread its contagion. There was a kind of awed wonder in his eyes.

Other hands grabbed hold of Mother Zinka. Adirene's father, the man whose life she had saved not days before, said, 'Call off your creature.' He put the point of his knife to her belly. 'Call it off or, no matter what you did for me, I'll see you dead.'

'Let me go to him. Only my touch can soothe him,' she said.

The creature was in front of them now, its claw-hand gripping a villager by the throat, lifting him off the ground so that his legs kicked like a landed fish. Across his face the skin began to mottle and split as the diseases took hold and began to spread.

'Let me go,' pleaded Mother Zinka once more. 'We are connected, two parts of the same. I can help him, I can...'

Her breath was cut short as the knife plunged into her belly. She felt the wetness of her blood against her skin and the pulse of its flow from her wound. Her legs, already weak from the fevers she had absorbed, now gave way, and she fell to the ground.

Adirene's father wiped the wet blade of his knife against his tunic, then ran towards the creature. Zinka saw him raise his arm to strike – then buckle in two as the claw-hand ripped open his guts and spilled them to the earth.

He was the last of the men, save one. All was quiet for a moment, except for the sobbing of Jayla. Then Konrath dropped his torch on the earth beside Mother Zinka and walked slowly towards the creature. Through the haze of the flickering flame, Mother Zinka saw Konrath step forward, then fall to his knees and open his arms as though in adoration. There were sounds all around – the screams of children, the moans of dying and diseased men – but all Mother Zinka could hear was the slowing pulse of her heart. Her eyes began to cloud with tears. 'My boy,' she said. 'My only boy.'

But the creature that was her son couldn't hear her. Instead its eye was focused on the kneeling Konrath, who was talking in a low, quiet voice. 'You are a marvel,' he was saying. 'You are perfection. You shall make a great soldier for Grandfather Nurgle.'

'No,' said Mother Zinka, her voice a barely audible gasp, 'this is not what was meant to be...' But Konrath's words seemed to soothe her son's anger, and when the smith climbed once again to his feet and gestured an arm towards the forest, the creature moved in the same direction – away from her, forever.

As the figures of Konrath and her son merged into one and dissolved into the darkness beyond the torchlight, Mother Zinka managed only one final, hollow wish, a dying dream of sacrifice rewarded, which only the grass would ever hear: 'We were meant to be eternal...'

BLOOD SACRIFICE

Peter McLean

After Baphomet, he was redeployed. There was no respite in the Astra Militarum, no end to the killing. Not ever.

Death and death and death, the unofficial mantra of the Imperial Guard.

Corporal Cully looked out over the relentless grey of the out-habs, and sighed. Behind him, the main spine of Hive Lemegeton reared majestically into the clouds, but Hive World Voltoth remained one of the most depressing places he had ever seen in his life.

Below the chunk of broken ferrocrete he stood on, One Section dug latrine pits. He caught Steeleye looking up at him. The master sniper's bulbous, augmetic eye glinted metallicly in the polluted twilight before she turned away. Above them, a huge hololithic display flickered with daily production targets, hourly quotas, shift rotation patterns.

'Toil in the Emperor's name is a virtue!' the public address system announced. 'Sixteen cubic tons of further production required by nineteen hundred hours. Toil in the Emperor's name is a virtue!'

Cully glanced at his chrono. It was seventeen forty-five, local time. On the manufactorum wall was a mural showing handsome, square-jawed Imperial men and women marching proudly off to war in starched uniforms with freshly stamped lasguns over their shoulders. The caption below read: 'Their lives are in YOUR hands.'

Hive worlds like Voltoth kept the war machine turning. Cully knew that. Boots, uniforms, flak armour, ration packs. It all had to come from somewhere. The forge worlds turned out tanks and troop ships – but you couldn't wear those, or eat them. The hives kept the Imperium alive.

They had been there for three months, digging in. Cully was utterly sick

of the place. The waiting was the worst. Give him something to kill and he'd be as good as he got, but the waiting was wearing Cully's nerves to ragged ends.

Away behind him a klaxon blew three long blasts, signifying shift change at another manufactory. The line of workers waiting to enter stretched the length of the street, all of them bent and hungry-looking in their thin, grey work smocks.

Great doors banged open and the workers trudged inside in double file as the manufactory excreted the previous shift from another set. From inside, Cully could hear the ceaseless chatter of the power looms.

'Notice of production quota increase,' the public address system blared. 'Overseers to your stations. Toil in the Emperor's name is a virtue!'

Cully shuddered. This life was exactly what he had hoped to avoid in the Astra Militarum.

He was aware of Steeleye climbing up the ferrocrete to join him, an entrenching tool over her shoulder where in any sane world her long-las would have been.

She paused at the top to spit snot out of the ragged hole where her nose had been before an ork had bitten her face off two years ago, on Vardan IV. That done, she turned to survey the industrial wasteland of smoking manufactoria and crumbling, impoverished dwellings that made up the out-habs.

'Shithole,' she pronounced it. 'I almost miss Vardan Four. At least the jungle was green.'

'It's better than Baphomet,' Cully said quietly.

Steeleye shrugged. 'Wasn't there,' she said.

'Lucky you.'

'Sorry,' Steeleye said. 'I know you were the only survivor. The sergeant...'

'Leave it, Steeleye,' Cully said.

He scratched at the scar on the back of his left forearm, the crude aquila he had carved into his raw flesh with his own bayonet in a moment of post-traumatic madness.

The sergeant, indeed. All Cully's woes could be condensed into those two words.

The sergeant.

Sergeant Rachain, Cully's oldest and only real friend, and the best mentor he'd ever had. Cully had killed him himself, on Baphomet. He knew he would never be able to forgive himself for that.

The sergeant.

Sergeant Kallin, Cully's new leader. Kallin was a tough veteran but he had a bayonet so far up his arse he could taste steel when he coughed. Kallin, who had the best sniper in the entire Reslian 45th digging latrine pits because paragraph six hundred and ninety-four, clause sixteen, sub-clause eleven in the regulations, or whatever it bloody was, declared that fair rotation of fatigue duties applied to everyone regardless of enlisted rank, merit, or having better sodding things to do.

Cully and Kallin, it was fair to say, were never going to get along.

'Why are we digging in this far behind the perimeter?' Steeleye asked. 'There's miles of out-habs beyond where we're preparing a front line.'

'Too many miles,' Cully said, 'and not enough of us to hold them. The main spire is the important thing. You know, where the rich folk live. We just need to hold that, and we need to be *seen* to be holding it. They're starting to panic already up there, so I hear.'

'All those workers,' Steeleye said, gesturing at the manufactoria. 'Knowing their homes will be abandoned to the enemy when the ork warband arrives, knowing they're going to lose everything. Working anyway, day in and day out.'

Cully shrugged.

'They want to eat,' he said. 'No production, no rations.'

Steeleye wiped her oozing, ragged snout on the back of her already crusty sleeve.

'Makes you appreciate life in the Guard,' she said.

Cully just nodded.

'We're the lucky ones,' he said.

He meant it, but he swallowed all the same. Orks again. They had faced orks on Vardan IV. For three long, grinding years of misery they had fought the greenskins in the reeking jungles, and left over two million of their own dead or missing in action. Now they would face them again.

We're the Astra Militarum. Dying is what we're for. Cully had used to tell the new boots that, back on Vardan IV, to spook them. He had thought it was funny at the time, right up until he realised that it was true.

Dying is what soldiers are *for*.

Death and death and death.

Cully sat down and lit a lho-stick, resting his back on the wall behind him. It was painted with the mural of a proud Guardsman rearing up to hurl a grenade at an unseen enemy. The caption above read: ‘Emperor help me if this is a dud.’ Below, the ever-repeated slogan: ‘His life is in YOUR hands.’

There are only so many times a man can push his luck, Cully reflected. Only so many battles he can survive. Cully had been in the Guard for nearly twenty years, and he wondered just how much luck he had left.

Being forced to kill Rachain had all but finished him, he knew. With the older man at his side Cully had felt invincible. A survivor. An avatar of the Imperial war machine. Without him, he was just a soldier like any other, and he knew how long *they* lived.

‘We should be grateful,’ Steeleye said after a moment. ‘Without these people, their work, we couldn’t fight.’

‘I know,’ Cully said.

I was good with a power loom. Remember me.

Cully blinked back a tear and took a drag of his lho. Memories of Baphomet were the last thing he wanted just now. Memories of anything. All Cully wanted was something to kill, something to hurt to take his own pain away if only for a little while.

‘Corporal!’ an all-too-familiar voice barked. ‘Put that out! No smoking on duty.’

Cully mashed his lho angrily into the ground and made himself stand up and salute, aware of Steeleye doing the same beside him.

‘Yes, sergeant,’ Cully said.

Sergeant Kallin glared at them both, his regulation helmet perfectly set atop his regulation haircut, and his regulation blue eyes shining bright beneath its brim.

‘Why aren’t you working, trooper?’ he demanded.

‘Latrines are done,’ Steeleye growled. ‘Sergeant.’

‘Then find something else to do,’ Kallin snapped. ‘Corporal, detail your section to inspect the ammunition dump. I want every power pack and grenade logged in triplicate and checked against the Munitorum manifest. Jump to it! The enemy makes work for idle hands.’

Kallin turned on his heel and marched away at a regulation pace as the public address system once again intoned that toil in the Emperor's name was a virtue.

'His family own a garment manufactorum back home, so I heard,' Steeleye said.

'You don't say,' Cully said.

At twenty-one hundred hours local they were rotated off fatigues at last and sent back to camp. D Company's billet was a series of empty storage sheds that crouched in the filth beside the great engines that drove the hive's eastern spire elevators. It was never quiet, and the air reeked of promethium exhaust night and day.

Cully took his helmet off and tossed it onto his bunk, and sat down with a sigh.

'Inspect the ammunition dump, Corporal Cully,' he muttered. 'Log it in triplicate, Corporal Cully. Paint the engine grease white, Corporal Cully. The sergeant makes work for idle hands, Corporal Cully.'

He lit a lho and blew smoke angrily into the tin cup of thick, oily recaff he had snagged on his way through the camp. Everyone else said the stuff was horrible, but Cully had found a new appreciation for Guard-issue rations since Baphomet. A man who has known thirst and starvation is grateful for any sustenance, he supposed.

'Talking to yourself again, Cully?' Corporal Lopata asked.

He was a huge man, prodigiously strong, and regimental legend had it that he had been an enforcer for some big-time ganger back home before he joined the Guard. It was said he had killed an ork in single combat on Vardan IV. Cully wouldn't have believed that if Varus hadn't been there to see it with her own eyes, but she had and he trusted the veteran scout more than anyone in D Company except for Steeleye, so he supposed it must be true.

'Don't mind me, Lopata,' Cully said. 'Just having a grumble about sergeants. That's a corporal's prerogative, that is.'

Lopata snorted and lit a lho of his own. He had good ones, Cully noticed, not the ration-issue smokes that were as likely as not to fall apart in your hand before you could even light them. Lopata always seemed to have good kit, and if you wanted some extra sacra or more smokes or whatever

then he was the man to go and see about it. Every regiment had its black market man and had done since armies were invented. Cully knew that and he turned a blind eye to it. Kallin wouldn't, though.

'Don't flash those around where the sergeant can see,' he cautioned. 'He's the sort to have you up in front of the commissar for racketeering.'

Lopata laughed.

'They're only lhos,' he said, but he tucked the pack away inside his uniform all the same.

'Where did you get those, anyway? You didn't have any left when we were on the troop ship.'

'I met a guy,' Lopata said, with an expressive shrug.

'You always *meet a guy*,' Cully said. 'Nice skill to have.'

Lopata looked at the other corporal for a moment, his brow furrowing in thought.

'You want in on something?' he asked after a moment.

Cully coughed to cover his surprise. He and Lopata had been in different platoons back on Vardan IV and he had only vaguely known the man then, and even since they had been in the same unit they hadn't had more than a professional relationship.

'Maybe,' Cully said, after a moment. 'Why me?'

'You don't like Kallin any more than I do,' Lopata said. 'People like him are bad for business, but I reckon old Cully knows which way is up.'

'What is it?' Cully asked.

'Just a pickup,' Lopata said. 'This guy I met, he's got a drop coming down right on the edge of the out-habs. He wants something collecting and bringing back to the spire, that's all, but the out-habs aren't too safe at the moment with all the security pulled back behind the new front line. He saw all these bored soldiers hanging around and reckoned we might like an early payday. Varus is already in, and I'm talking to Steeleye and a couple of the others as well. It's easy money, Cully.'

'We'd have to be bloody careful,' Cully said. 'Make sure we get there and back while we're scheduled to be off watch. The commissar is all over the attendance rolls since Sharrik and Ells deserted. I'm not risking her bolter up my arse however good a payday it is.'

Sharrik and Ells, that had been bad. They were both veterans, tough men who had been through Vardan IV the same as the rest of them. Why they

had chosen to desert shortly after the regiment made planetfall on Voltoth was a mystery, but Cully supposed that if you were going to cut and run then a hive world was the place to do it. It would be easy enough to lose yourself amongst the vast population of a hive, but how they thought they were going to live after that was beyond him. Still, they weren't from his section so it wasn't his problem, and thank the Emperor for small mercies.

'It'll be fine,' Lopata assured him. 'We're making the pickup from an abandoned community medicae facility in quadrant nine. That's only five miles out, we can easily do it in an overnight watch, even on foot.'

Cully agreed. They would never get away with 'borrowing' a halftrack when they were off watch, not in Kallin's platoon, and Lopata had obviously realised that. He ground his lho out on the dirty rockcrete floor and nodded.

It was better than the endless waiting, and the relentless horror of his memories.

'Yeah, we can do that,' he said.

'So you're in?'

'I'm in,' Cully said.

What was the worst that could happen?

Dying is what we're for.

It was two days until their next overnight off watch, and Cully spent that time counting things that didn't need to be counted and making his men polish things that didn't need to be polished and got almost instantly dirty again anyway. His simmering resentment continued to grow, and every time he so much as saw Sergeant Kallin he grew more convinced he had been right to throw his lot in with Lopata. This make-work was all just so *pointless*; he might as well use the time for himself while he had the chance. Emperor knew he couldn't rest at nights anyway. Nightmares of Baphomet tortured him through every sleep cycle, until he was glad to wake and work just to put an end to them. The orks would be there soon enough, and then there would be no time for anything but killing and dying.

They met at the edge of camp at twenty-two hundred, him and Lopata, Steeleye and Varus and the four other men Lopata had talked into coming with them. They wore full combat battledress, and all of them had their

weapons with them. Steeleye had her specially customised hotshot long-las over her shoulder, where it should be, and Strongarm had his bandolier of grenades. Lopata raised an eyebrow at that.

‘We’re not going into battle, man,’ he said.

Strongarm just shrugged. ‘Better safe than sorry,’ he said.

‘Whatever,’ Lopata muttered. ‘Right, we’ve got eight hours until we’re due back on watch, local standard. Let’s get marching.’

Cully fell in beside his fellow corporal as they headed out of camp and along the cracked ferrocrete road that led into the out-habs. There was a Guard checkpoint there, but in their full battledress they looked so much like an official patrol that they were waved through with no questions.

Discipline was getting lax, Cully thought.

If Kallin was half the sergeant that Rachain had been then he’d have been worrying about things like that, not whether the latrines had been polished today, but he wasn’t and that was all there was to it. Cully lazily saluted the trooper on watch and made a mental note to kick his arse when they got back.

The streets were shadowed, but it never really got dark on a hive world. The manufactoria ran around the clock, and the glow from the millions of windows in the towering main spire illuminated the out-habs for miles in every direction. The Reslian 45th were infantry to the core, and their marching pace ate up the five miles to quadrant nine in barely an hour.

They gathered under a buzzing orange street light, just a caged bulb bolted to a crumbling wall adorned with a mural of a hard-eyed Imperial Guardswoman, her stern face unrealistically devoid of scars.

The caption above read: ‘She fights the enemies of the Imperium. Don’t let her fight alone!’

Below, a pitted brass arrow pointed towards a long-abandoned tithing station with the words ‘Join the Astra Militarum today’ spray-painted over in blood-red graffiti with ‘To Valgaast, nine miles.’

Steeleye looked up at the mural and slowly shook her ruined, lopsided head. The medicae corps had put her back together again as best they could, back on Vardan IV, but her skull had been half crushed and her eyes torn out along with her nose, and there was only so much that could be done with augmetics and synth-skin.

Varus sneered at the mural for a moment, but said nothing.

The bezel in Steeleye's single augmetic eye clicked as it rotated to switch to night vision and scan the deepening shadows. This close to the edge of the out-habs the light was bad, and some of the narrow alleys between the long rows of hab-blocks could have concealed anything.

'Which way?' Cully asked.

Lopata consulted his map and compass for a moment before pointing east.

'Down there,' he said. 'Look for an old medicae facility. Varus, take the point.'

The veteran scout nodded and slipped away into the shadows, silent as a ghost. They followed a moment later, lasguns in their hands. There was an unspoken understanding between them that gangers weren't necessarily the most trustworthy of the citizens of the Imperium, and also that the weapons and equipment they carried had a significant black market value. It was best to be careful.

Varus voxed back a moment later, her voice soft in the beads in Cully and Lopata's ears. Steeleye had one too, but Cully didn't think she had activated it yet.

'I see it,' the scout reported. *'Three hundred on the nine, end of the street. Looks mostly derelict.'*

'Yeah, that's what my guy said,' Lopata said. 'Sounds like the place.'

Cully turned to Steeleye.

'Find a roof, cover the entrance,' he told the sniper. 'And switch your vox on. Report when you're in position.'

She just nodded and followed her orders, vanishing silently into the shadows. Vardan IV had been hell, but it had taught them skills that most Guardsmen simply didn't have.

'How much do you trust your guy?' Cully asked Lopata. 'Really, I mean.'

'I don't trust anyone outside the regiment,' Lopata said. 'Still, I think this is on the level.'

Cully grunted and waited in cover behind a low wall until the vox-bead crackled in his ear.

'Steeleye, in position.'

He tapped his bead in acknowledgement and gave Lopata the nod.

The two of them moved together, sweeping the deserted street with their lasguns as the rest of their squad formed up behind them, Strongarm and

Tarran, Merrith and Esannason, all with their weapons raised to their shoulders as they moved. Varus was two hundred yards ahead of them and she stayed out of sight until they passed her position, then leapfrogged ahead once more until she was within throwing distance of the main entrance. She had a frag grenade in her hand, Cully noticed, just in case.

Better safe than sorry, he thought bitterly.

Vardan IV had been a harsh teacher indeed.

'Looks clear,' Varus reported over the vox, her voice a low whisper. *'No movement.'*

Cully nodded and led the other five towards her position, with Strongarm right behind him and Lopata on rearguard duty. Somewhere, and he had no idea where, Steeleye would have her long-las dialled in on the shadowy entrance of the abandoned medicae facility.

The single caged bulb over the entrance was flickering like a dying ember, making the shadows twitch and jump. At least it told him the place still had power. Cully gave a hand signal and Varus rose out of cover and crossed the fifty yards to the pitted, brown-stained steel doors in a low crouch. She pushed the left-hand door and Cully winced as it swung open with a rusty scream of unoiled hinges.

Varus flattened herself to the wall with her lasgun tight to her shoulder, but nothing happened.

A moment later she stepped inside.

'Clear,' she voxed back, and Cully felt himself relax slightly as he led the squad after her.

The corridor inside was in near darkness, lit only by a flickering glowstrip in the tiled ceiling maybe twenty yards away. There was an abandoned hospital gurney against the wall, its once-white paint peeling to expose ancient rust below. This place had obviously been disused for a long time, Cully thought. Somewhere in the distance he could hear water dripping from a broken pipe. He turned and looked a question at Lopata.

The big man shrugged.

'Pickup for Bastian DeMarr,' he called out. *'Dulce et decorum est pro Imperator mori.'*

High Gothic had never been Cully's strong point. 'What's that mean?'

Apparently it wasn't Lopata's strong point either.

'No idea. Some devotion to the Emperor, I suppose. It's the code phrase

for the pickup.'

'Oh.'

Cully cocked his head, listening. He could hear footsteps approaching, one leg dragging with each step as though whoever it was were injured, or crippled.

'Here he comes,' he said.

'About time,' Lopata muttered.

A hunched figure emerged in the shadows beyond the buzzing glowstrip, dragging its right leg and walking with a pronounced lurch. There was something wrong with its left arm too, but Cully couldn't make out what it was.

'Pickup for Bastian DeMarr,' Lopata called out again. 'Are you Klassian?'

The figure started to lurch faster towards them. As it passed under the glowstrip Cully saw it was wearing a tattered white smock with the red aquila of his regiment's medicae corps stencilled on it. It was bald, and the skin of its peeling scalp showed a pallid grey in the fitful light.

'What the—' Varus began. The thing raised its left arm.

Not an arm – an articulated servo-manipulator that ended in a cluster of long, filthy needles where the hand should have been.

'Nuuuurrrse,' it rumbled.

'I don't like this,' Cully whispered, his hands tightening on his lasgun.

'It's a servitor,' Varus said.

'Not my guy, not my problem,' Lopata said, and raised his lasgun to his shoulder.

He put a three-round burst into the chest of the advancing monstrosity. That, Cully realised a second too late, was a bad idea.

'Nuuuuurrrrrse!' it roared, and charged them with its fist of needles raised to plunge into the first person it could reach.

'Fire!' Cully ordered.

The wall beside him exploded into fragments as something crashed through it.

Cully was thrown backwards by the force of the impact, and a huge shape tore into the abandoned gurney with a shriek of grinding gears. The light flickered sickeningly as the thing ripped its way through the wall, a hunched and lumbering nightmare of heavy augmetics and withered,

greyish flesh that screamed as it came on. It too wore a stained and rotting medicae smock, with the word 'psychiatric' stencilled across it. Lopata turned and put a burst of full-auto into it before it lashed out with the heavy restraint grips that made up its left arm and dashed him to the floor.

'Kill, kill, kill!' Varus shouted, her lasgun cracking in her hands.

The las-bolts flashed and sparked off the monstrosity's built-in armour, and it turned its plated back on the scout as the huge amputational chain scalpel where its right arm had been spun up with a howl.

'Nuuuuuurrrrrse!' it howled. Behind it the other stabbed with its needles and missed Strongarm by a whisper.

The huge thing lunged at Trooper Tarran from Lopata's section and rammed the monstrous scalpel through the man's flak armour and into his chest. A whirlwind of blood sprayed from the hapless trooper as the heavy instrument punched straight through him and out of his back.

'Retreat!' Cully roared, his lasgun barking even as he moved. 'Draw them outside!'

Trying to fight the maddened medicae servitors at close quarters was suicide and he knew it. Out in the street they could cut them apart with their weapons, but at this range...

Trooper Merrith shrieked as the huge psychiatric servitor's restraint grips caught him around the leg and dragged him back. Lopata moved to go after him but Cully grabbed his arm.

'Don't be a fool,' he snarled.

The servitor stomped a huge metal foot down on Merrith's chest and ripped his leg off as if it were pulling a ration bar in half. Merrith's screams echoed in the corridor as Cully ran for the entrance with his squad on his heels. The servitors came lumbering after them, the larger of the pair drenched in gore and with its chain scalpel roaring.

'Steeleye!' Cully shouted into his vox. 'Company incoming! Two targets!'

Steeleye tapped her bead in acknowledgement. Cully could imagine her lying prone on some filth-stained flat roof, her view of the world narrowed to the unwavering point between her crosshairs. He needed to get the servitors into that point, and not lose any more men doing it. They burst through the doors and into the gloom of the street with the monstrosities barely yards behind them.

‘Scatter!’ Cully yelled.

Troopers went in all directions and Cully turned and ran backwards from the entrance, shooting on full-auto as he went. The huge psychiatric servitor crashed through the doors behind him, chunks of metal and dead flesh flying from its hideously twisted body but not slowing, relentless in its pursuit. Behind it the other followed, the rhythmic dragging of its crippled leg making Cully’s nerves scream.

There was a searing flash as Steeleye unleashed the killing power of her long-las with a bellow like furious thunder. The full-charge hotshot blew half the psychiatric servitor’s head away.

It kept coming.

‘*Reloading,*’ Steeleye said over the vox.

The servitor raised its screaming chain scalpel and roared with fury.

‘Nuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrse!’

Cully turned and ran for his life.

‘Cover!’ Strongarm yelled as he reared up and hurled a krak grenade.

Cully threw himself over a broken wall and rolled with the impact, flattening himself on the ground with his hands over his head. The high explosive grenade detonated between the two horrors with a tremendous blast and Steeleye put another two hotshots into what was left, and silence fell.

‘Emperor’s sake, what have I got myself into?’ Cully muttered as he got up and dusted himself off, and turned to look at the damage.

Dying is what soldiers are for.

The krak grenade had left a shallow, smoking crater in the ferrocrete street, the ground around it streaked with gore and strewn with bits of shattered metal. Even so the shapes of the servitors were still discernible, carapaces cracked open and the withered organs and broken spinal cords inside horribly recognisable. Cully had never cared for the man-machine creations of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and seeing the reeking insides of them was enough to remind him why.

Cully rounded on Lopata.

‘I take it *your* guy didn’t mention this?’

Lopata shook his head grimly. ‘When I get hold of him... Come on, we’re still doing the thing.’

‘You honestly think whoever we were supposed to be meeting in there is

still alive, with *those* things on the loose?’

‘Honestly, no,’ Lopata confessed, ‘but I need to at least check. We’re the fearless Astra Militarium, remember? This is what he hired us for.’

Varus joined them, and Cully voxed Steeleye to come down from wherever she was hidden.

‘Why did they attack us?’ the scout asked. ‘These things are supposed to be docile, aren’t they?’

‘Malfunction, I suppose,’ Cully said. ‘There’s no saying how long they’ve been here. Abandoned, like everything else.’

Varus frowned at that, but said nothing.

Steeleye joined them a few minutes later, and Cully led her and Lopata, Varus and Esannason and Strongarm back into the facility. The hallway was drenched with gore where Merrith had bled out on the ground. The glowstrip down the corridor continued to buzz and flicker unsteadily.

‘Which way?’ Cully asked the big man.

Lopata shrugged. ‘Don’t know,’ he said. ‘My contact was supposed to be right here.’

‘Well, he isn’t,’ Varus snapped.

‘We’ll sweep the ground floor and give it up for dead if we don’t find him,’ Lopata decided.

Cully grunted in agreement and took the point, heading down the long corridor towards the buzzing glowstrip. He thought he could hear something else now, too. He frowned and took another few steps, trying to shut out the noise of the light so he could concentrate on the other sound. It was faint, but... yes. There.

‘I hear someone,’ he said.

A human voice, crying out in pain. Varus joined him and cocked her head, listening.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Someone screaming.’

Their eyes met for a moment as they exchanged a look. *This can’t be good*, that look said.

‘Is this really our problem?’ Varus whispered. ‘We’re not even on watch.’

‘That’s an Imperial citizen, Varus,’ Cully said. ‘The Emperor protects, and we are the mortal instruments of the Emperor on Voltoth. This is what we’re *for*.’

Dying is what soldiers are for.

He wiped his hands on the trousers of his battledress, feeling the sick sweat of dread and the creeping thought that he had reached the end of the line at last. *Shut up, Cully. Just shut up and work.*

‘Too right,’ Lopata said, but there was a haunted look in his eyes as he said it.

Cully thought the big man probably had some regrets of his own to deal with, but that was Lopata’s business and nothing to do with him.

‘Come on. Let’s go to work.’

Lasguns at the ready, they walked on into the flickering darkness across a floor of cracked tiles, littered with stained bandages. The dripping noise intensified, until they rounded a corner and found a hole in the ceiling where the tiles had collapsed under the weight of leaking water. The ruptured pipe bulged overhead like a cirrhotic artery, and brackish, brown water fell to pool on the floor below, drop after drop after drop.

Not brown, Cully realised. Dark red, like the outflow from a surgical drain.

‘I think there’s someone still working here,’ he whispered.

Lopata nodded. ‘Then we go up.’

They found the stairs and ascended, breathing through their mouths to block the ammonia stench of stale urine that clung to the concrete stairwell like a rotting shroud. The walls were dark with graffiti, old ganger slogans in the main, but near the top of the steps someone had simply written, ‘It hurts.’ The words were brown and crusty, as though they had been written in blood.

‘What kind of hospital was this, exactly?’ Varus gagged as they finally reached the door that gave out onto the second floor landing.

Written on the inside of the door, in the same hand: ‘Turn back.’

‘A very, very cheap one,’ Lopata said.

Cully thumped his shoulder to tell him to shut up, and he pushed the door open and eased out into the hallway with his lasgun held tight to his shoulder. There were two glowstrips still working here, both of them strobing and out of sync with each other. It gave the light a broken, battlefield staccato quality that made his head begin to hurt almost at once. The walls were lined with gurneys, their once-white paint peeling over blistered, rusty frames. Some were stripped to bare, dark-stained mattresses, while others bore heaped mounds of reeking bedding.

Down the hall, something shrieked behind a closed door.

‘Careful,’ Varus cautioned in a low whisper, her hand on Cully’s elbow to stay him. ‘It could be a trap.’

‘You can’t fake agony like that,’ Cully replied, and shook her off as he began to advance down the corridor.

They found the operating theatre, the source of both the surgical drain and the screaming.

There was something strapped down on the table, and it was still alive. A man, Cully saw, or at least some of one. The room was filthy with dried blood and old, rotting offal, but the equipment and surgical machinery looked well maintained, gleaming with sacred unguents and bedecked with fresh purity seals. The poor bastard on the table was mewling in agony, unable to form words with his lower jaw surgically removed, but his lidless eyes were open wide in mute appeal.

He had been bisected at the waist, his pelvis and everything below removed, but the base of his spinal column and his tailbone still thrashed helplessly in a pool of seeping fluid on the stained and rotting leather beneath him. His right arm was gone too, the stump freshly sutured into a flesh-welded steel socket from which brightly coloured cables protruded like raw nerve endings. Tubes ran in and out of his mutilated body carrying blood, spinal fluid, nutrients. It was plain that none of them contained anaesthetic.

‘Emperor save us,’ Cully whispered. ‘Someone’s turning him into a servitor without lobotomy first.’

‘Who... who would *do* this?’ Lopata asked.

Varus just turned and vomited on the floor while Steeleye looked on impassively beside her.

The thing on the table drew in a great breath and let out a warbling moan.

‘Kuuuuh muuuuhhh! Uuuuz kuuuuh muuuuhhh!’

Cully swallowed, and shot it through the head with a three-round burst that put a final end to its suffering.

‘The Emperor’s Mercy,’ he whispered.

‘We are not leaving until we make this right,’ Steeleye rasped.

‘Agreed,’ Cully said. ‘Move out.’

The further into the facility they went, the worse it got. A maddened buzzing sound drew them to a closed room. When Cully forced open the

door, a swarm of bloated black flies burst out into the corridor around them. He gagged at the stench of filth and rot that enveloped him.

The room was lined with open, reeking medical waste bins. A severed human arm lay atop a pile of flyblown offal, the pale skin bright with crude ganger tattoos. Hooks along one wall were hung with the bloodstained grey smocks of manufactorum workers.

‘Oh, Throne,’ Varus choked.

Even Lopata was retching, but all Cully could do was stare.

Cully had been starving to death, on Baphomet. He had eaten human flesh to survive. They all had. The Emperor protects, but He does not forgive. Cully could feel his punishment coming down on him like a hammer from the heavens.

‘These are the remains of local people,’ he whispered. ‘Gangers. Workers.’

‘I wish we had a flamer,’ Strongarm muttered as he hauled the door closed again. ‘It needs burning.’

‘This whole place needs burning,’ Cully said. ‘Come on.’

At the end of the corridor they heard thrashing behind a closed door, the metallic screech of unlubricated gears meshing as something woke as though from a long sleep.

‘Nuuuuuuurrsse!’ it roared.

Strongarm pulled a frag grenade from his bandolier and primed it, held it in his hand to cook for a second then booted the door open and hurled it inside.

‘Cover!’ he shouted.

The others flattened themselves to the solid concrete walls as the grenade detonated, filling the enclosed space of the room with hyper-velocity shrapnel.

Strongarm swept around the doorway and sprayed the room with a burst of full-auto.

‘Clear,’ he said.

The others moved to join him. The medicae servitor was lying on its back in a spreading pool of blood and viscera, its organic parts shredded by Strongarm’s grenade. The room was filled with broken cogitator equipment, smashed screens and buckled metal cabinets that spewed yellowed fanfolds of ancient paper records.

‘Throne,’ Strongarm muttered as he took a step forwards to stand over the fallen nurse.

‘Nuuuuuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrsse!’

Its chain scalpel roared into life and plunged into the inside of Strongarm’s thigh, severing the femoral artery in a great fountain of blood.

‘Run!’ Strongarm was bleeding out in a life-ending crimson spray before Cully’s horrified eyes. He pulled the pins on his bandolier of krak grenades one after the other even as he collapsed, his mouth set in a grim line of determination.

Dying is what soldiers are for.

‘No!’ Cully shouted, but it was too late. They ran.

The explosion took out three walls and brought down a section of the ceiling, filling the corridor with choking dust, and Strongarm went up to the Emperor’s glory riding a comet of high explosive fire.

Into the smoke and chaos came the bark of a heavy automatic weapon and a hail of autocannon rounds that all but vaporised Trooper Esannason where he stood.

‘On the six!’ Cully roared. ‘Return fire! Kill, kill, kill!’

They blazed on full-auto, las-shots slicing through the choking miasma of dust and blood and fragments of chewed-up ferrocrete at a shadowy, half-seen figure that responded with another thunderous roar from its autocannon.

Steeleye dialled in and blasted a hotshot straight through it, knocking it back three or four paces, and Varus arced a frag grenade after it. They hit the deck, covering as best they could in the enclosed space of the corridor. The explosion went up and out and brought more of the ceiling down in a shower of broken, filthy tiles, and Cully came up on one knee and emptied his lasgun’s power pack into whatever was left until it stopped moving.

Cully lowered his smoking weapon and paused to wipe sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

‘Reload,’ he ordered, and they did as he said.

‘Strongarm,’ Varus said quietly, and Cully could only nod.

He hadn’t known Esannason, not really, but Strongarm had been in his section back on Vardan IV and they had fought some of their bloodiest battles together. He had been a good man, a good soldier.

Death and death and death.

He went forward to see what they had killed.

The thing was perhaps six and a half feet tall and had obviously once been a woman. She was less heavily modified than the nurses, but even so her right arm had been taken off at the shoulder and replaced with an articulated heavy weapon mount that ended in the autocannon. Its feed belt passed clean through her metallicity augmented torso to the ammunition hoppers that bulged out of her left hip and lower back. The skin there was stretched to ragged edges where the metal met her flesh in a way that hurt to look at. The sutures and flesh-welds looked new and painful, and there was even still a tinge of sickly colour to the remaining exposed skin of what was left of her human body. Her flesh was burned raw with weeping blisters where the feed belt had ripped through it at the terrifying cyclic speed of the cannon firing on full-auto.

‘This one’s a dedicated combat servitor,’ Cully said.

‘Was,’ Lopata corrected him, and grinned.

The big man had killed an ork in single combat, Cully reminded himself. Not much was likely to frighten Lopata, but personally he found his stomach rebelling as he looked down at the mostly organic face of the dead woman. She was just some plain-faced hive worker; she certainly didn’t have the look of the hardened criminals and blasphemous heretics who were usually condemned to servitude under the Adeptus Mechanicus and turned into these necessary abominations.

‘Not a heavy one,’ Steeleye rasped. ‘I’ve seen those, when the engineer was repairing our firebase’s Earthshakers under enemy fire back on Vardan Four. They’re like half-human tanks. This one looks like it was put together in a hurry.’

‘Or as a prototype experiment,’ Varus put in.

The others turned to look at her.

‘What?’ Cully asked.

‘That feed mechanism,’ Varus said. ‘I’ve seen combat servitors too, but I’ve never seen *that* before.’

Lopata shrugged. ‘So what?’

‘I don’t know,’ Varus admitted. ‘But I don’t like it.’

‘I don’t like any of this,’ Cully said, ‘but we’re here now and something is obviously very wrong. We’re going to find out what it is, and we’re going to put a stop to it. Move out.’

‘Why would anyone do this, though?’ Steeleye growled quietly as she matched Cully’s stride through the echoing halls.

‘The answer’s always the same,’ Cully said. ‘Follow the money. There’s an ork warband on its way and only us poor bloody infantry here to stop it. The uphive is in panic, that’s no secret. If you were a filthy rich uphiver under siege and afraid for your life and the lives of your family, and someone offered to sell you a heavy weapons combat servitor... what *wouldn’t* you pay?’

‘If who offered?’ Steeleye asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Cully said, ‘but if someone did... I’m just guessing here, but those body parts and work smocks in the waste bins were all local. This is a hive world, Steeleye. There are gangers here. People who might just do a thing like that.’

‘You honestly think someone is creating experimental combat servitors to sell to the uphive families?’

‘I don’t know,’ he had to admit, ‘but I wouldn’t rule it out.’

‘But *who*? Who would even know how?’

Cully didn’t know. All he could do was shoulder his lasgun and advance. It was in the Emperor’s hands now.

Dareus Vorn swallowed bile and tried not to look.

The Genetor was bent over the operating table again. Long mechanical tentacles reached out of her hunched back through the slits in her floor-length crimson robe, whirring as they manipulated the instruments they held. Mechadendrites, he had learned those were called, and he knew they were fused directly into the Genetor’s spine. The very thought of it made him feel sick, but that was nothing compared to... well, everything else.

The subject was shrieking again. Without looking up, the Genetor reached out an unnaturally lean, elongated metallic hand and stabbed a button with a fluted, claw-tipped finger. The narthecium’s injector pistons hissed as they moved to drive their long needles home, and the subject fell silent once more.

Below, somewhere in the facility, Vorn could hear shooting. He ignored it, but all the same his hand wandered to the ornate bolt pistol holstered at his side under his elegantly cut coat. He was a heavy operator back in Hive Lemegeton, one of the top gangers on the planet in fact. He was still

scared out of his mind.

The Genetor put down her instruments and turned to face him.

Vorn thought of the Genetor as 'her' because she used a feminine name, but that was all. So little of her was still organic that it was utterly impossible to tell otherwise. She said her name was Babette Vitzkowski, and she was the main reason why Vorn felt ready to soil his well-tailored breeches in fear. She straightened up to her full seven feet, her mechadendrites arching over her shoulders as she regarded him through a vision slit from which a tight burst of low-intensity laser light flickered and pulsed, as a stream of squealing binary machine language emitted from the grilled speaker where her mouth had once been.

'Forgive me, Genetor,' Vorn said. 'I lack the knowledge to understand the holy binharic cant.'

She knew that, of course, but over the last few months Vorn had learned that when the Genetor was lost in her work she could grow forgetful of mundane, human things. She regarded him for a moment before she spoke aloud, her vox/synth emitter crackling slightly.

'Ensure that noise is what it is supposed to be,' she said.

Vorn nodded.

'At your command,' he said, and went to check.

Any excuse to flee her presence was something he took gratefully and without question, every single time. When something looked too good to be true it always was. Vorn should have known that at the time, but greed had won out in the end. It was, he knew, far too late to back out now.

His control room was on the third floor, the same as the Genetor's experimental operating room, whereas servitor production happened downstairs on level two. It sounded like that was where the shooting had come from. The earlier gunfire had been on the ground floor and outside where it didn't matter, followed by an explosion and three high-discharge las-shots that told him they had a sniper in their squad.

That was good.

That was potentially *very* good, if he knew his buyers half as well as he thought he did. He had to find *something* left in this for him, after all.

Vorn's mouth sagged open in relief as he watched them on the vox/pict-feed in his control room. The laboratory, the machine shop and the operating theatres belonged to the Genetor, but this place was his. He had

pict-casters and vox-relays rigged up throughout the facility, the same way he spied on his blackmail subjects back in the heights of Hive Lemegeton. He knew what he was doing, but the Genetor was not one to forgive mistakes. If he had been wrong about this it would have gone agonisingly badly for him. He understood that all too well.

‘Keep coming, corporal,’ he whispered to himself. ‘Just keep on coming, and I might yet live to see another day.’

He heard a burst of buzzing machine noise from the doorway, and turned to see the Genetor looming there with her crimson cowl pulled up over her gleaming metallic skull and her mechadendrites swaying slowly in the air over her shoulders. Her comm-laser flashed a tight burst of incomprehensible binary into his eyes.

He swallowed, to see her outlined there in the doorway of his own inner sanctum. He might be profiting from this but it was *her* operation. He knew that, and he well understood that he was just her meat puppet, to be tolerated only so long as he continued to be useful to her.

‘Genetor,’ he said, and it seemed she remembered once more.

‘Report,’ she demanded.

‘Everything’s going to plan,’ Vorn said.

The Genetor regarded him in brooding silence for a moment, then turned away.

Vorn wiped sweat-slick hands on the thighs of his expensive breeches and fought down the need to sob.

‘Oh, dear Emperor,’ Varus whispered. ‘Oh no.’

Cully felt his stomach turn over as he looked into the ward. There must have been twenty or more tormented human bodies in there, all of them in various states of vivisection. The air was thick with flies and the reek of rot and pus. Many hung from hooks suspended from a motorised overhead trackway, while others lay helpless on the stained, wet bedding that covered their rusty cots. Those who still had eyes flickered them open as the troopers entered the room. Other heads turned blindly towards the sound of the door opening. The poor bastards were limbless, in the main, their stumps either flesh-welded into sockets or simply open and seeping blood and corruption. Thick ropes of drool hung from the mouths of those who still had mouths at all, and the floor was dark with excrement and old

blood.

‘This is sick,’ Lopata said.

‘Please,’ a man croaked, one of the broken limbless horrors hanging from its hook like a side of grox. ‘Make it stop.’

‘Make it stop,’ another echoed, and the chorus was taken up.

‘Make it stop!’

‘Who are you?’ Cully asked.

‘Just a loom mill worker,’ the man whispered, the breath labouring in a chest that had a number of thick, ridged tubes emerging from it between the broken second and third rib. ‘Not... not a criminal. Please, just a worker.’

‘It hurts,’ something moaned, and Cully honestly couldn’t have said if it had been man or woman before the surgeries began.

‘How did this happen?’

‘Abducted,’ the man wheezed. ‘We all were. Please, it hurts. Please, please. Make it stop.’

‘Make it stop,’ they echoed, these living damned who could still speak at all. ‘It hurts. Make it stop!’

‘Abducted by who?’

‘Don’t know. Please, it hurts. *Please!*’

Varus raised her lasgun and ended it with a single shot.

‘He might have told us something useful!’ Lopata protested.

‘I can’t,’ Varus said, as tears tracked down her grimy cheeks. ‘I can’t do this. I can’t *look* at this. In the Emperor’s name!’

She flicked her lasgun over to full-auto and went to work. After a moment Cully joined her in administering the Emperor’s Mercy. They fired until the ward resembled an abattoir, until their lasguns were hot in their hands and the very air was red with misted blood, and it was over at last.

Varus dropped her smoking weapon and put her head in her hands, sobbing.

‘This is blasphemy,’ Cully whispered. ‘It’s probably *heresy*. We have a duty to stop it.’

‘How?’ Varus asked.

‘We’re the Astra Militarum,’ Cully said. ‘We do what we do. We find them, and we kill them.’

He'd said something like that once before, he remembered, back on Vardan IV. He gritted his teeth and forced down the memories, forced himself to stay resolute.

One more time, he told himself. *You can push your luck that far, Cully.*

Lopata blew his cheeks out and sighed.

'If there are many more of those things we'll lose, and then we're dead, every one of us. If we're lucky. If we're not, we'll probably end up like these poor bastards, lobotomised and amputated and—'

'We won't lose,' Steeleye said, and Cully nodded.

'We have to stop this,' he said. 'Someone is sweeping workers off the streets and doing *this* to them. Someone is selling the end products to the uphivers. That's war profiteering, and we're going to put a sodding end to it.'

Lopata nodded slowly.

'Yeah,' he said. 'I'm with you there.'

'War profiteering, am I?' Vorn sneered as he watched them over the vox/pict-feed in his control room. 'Well, aren't I a bad boy, Corporal Cully, you self-righteous prig. And you, Corporal Lopata, you nearly bit my man's hand off for an easy payday, so don't you come on all holier than thou now. I'm just trying to stay alive. You're no better than I am and you know it.'

He pushed himself back from the desk and got to his feet, drew his bolt pistol and checked it held a chambered round. They would be on their way up soon, and he had some people he wanted them to meet.

Vorn crossed the corridor to the special holding room, the space that had once been the medicae facility's secure mental ward, and looked through the armourglass viewport in the heavy ceramite door. They were both docile now, but he knew how easily that could be changed. They waited side by side, drooling as they stared vacantly into space. They had changed so much since he had brought them to the facility.

Vorn had known servitors before, of course, but these two were something different. Something *new*, in an existence where innovation was far from encouraged. They were highly trained, highly skilled, and they were un-lobotomised. The Genetor's new drugs alone had been enough to break them but still leave their combat training intact. It had been easy

enough to lure them away from their posts with promises of a high-stakes game of Crowns and all the amasec they could drink.

The enemy makes work for idle hands, after all.

‘We need to go up again,’ Varus said. ‘This facility is a three-storey building, they’ll be on the top level.’

‘So find the stairs, scout,’ Lopata growled.

The stairwell they had taken from the ground floor didn’t go any higher, and Cully could only assume that the top floor had once been the secure section of the medicae facility and off limits to both the normal patients and what few visitors they may have had.

Varus led them away from the horrors of the ward and down another flyblown corridor until she found the access stairs that led up to the top floor.

‘There,’ Steeleye said. ‘See that?’

Cully shook his head.

‘See what?’

The veteran sniper’s augmetic vision often detected things the natural human eye missed, and Cully always listened to her when she spotted something.

‘That little hole in the corner of the ceiling,’ Steeleye said. ‘It blinked, just for a second. That’s a concealed vox/pict-caster.’

‘Great,’ Lopata muttered. ‘So someone’s watching us. Probably has been since we got here.’

‘This just gets better and better,’ Varus said.

Cully lifted his hand toward the camera and made an obscene gesture.

‘Hey, arsehole,’ he shouted. ‘We’re the Imperial bloody Guard, and we’re coming for you! Death and death and death!’

‘Kill! Kill! Kill!’ the others chanted.

Cully raised his lasgun and shot out the camera. The stained and filthy ceiling tile exploded as the las-round tore through it, and a length of sizzling cable snaked down from the cavity above and swung in the air, smoking.

Lopata kicked the door open and led the way up the stairs.

Vorn jerked back from his screen as the pict-feed went out with a blinding

flash of searing white energy that threatened to overload his display equipment.

He reached out and flicked the vox-switch.

‘They’re coming, Genetor,’ he said. ‘The best subjects you’ve ever had – two veteran corporals, a scout, even a sniper. I have programmed the new servitors to take them alive.’

‘I will prepare the operating theatre,’ the Genetor replied. *‘I want them within thirty minutes.’*

‘I don’t think it will take that long,’ Vorn said, and hit the switch that threw back the bolts on the ceramite door and triggered the attack servitors.

Cully stepped out of the stairwell into a vision of hell. The two things that charged them were abominations. Each was limbless, welded at the waist into a scaled-down, tank-tracked chassis that clanked and rumbled and tore tiles up from the floor beneath it as it advanced. Their left arms had been replaced with articulated blades, while the right arm of one was a heavy autocannon and the other a reeking, promethium-dripping flamer. Their greyish chests were bare, and the one with the cannon bore a crudely inked aquila tattoo across its right pectoral.

‘Sustained fire!’ Lopata ordered, and opened up on full-auto.

The two charging servitors twisted in the blistering hail of las-shots, but kept coming.

‘Throne!’ Varus shouted over the blaze of las-fire, ‘I recognise that tattoo! That’s Sharrik!’

‘*Was,*’ Lopata stressed, ‘and I’d lay odds the other one was Ells. That was then – they ain’t our mates now!’

‘Shut up and kill!’ Cully bellowed, squeezing the trigger of his lasgun harder as though that could make it shoot any faster.

Steeleye launched hotshot after hotshot into the grinding, relentless foe, speed reloading again and again in a blur of hyper-focused intensity that spoke of her consummate skill.

Chunks exploded out of the wall as the monster that had once been Trooper Sharrik unleashed its cannon, sending Varus to the floor in a heap as a ricochet slammed into the side of her helmet and dropped her, stunned.

‘Back!’ Lopata roared. ‘Don’t let them close the distance or we’re done!’

They fell back, still shooting, leaving Varus slumped on the ground. The servitors swerved around her prone body, and somewhere in the back of Cully’s head the coin dropped.

‘They want us alive,’ he said. ‘We... Emperor’s teeth, we’re next! This bastard wants us for the operating tables. We’ve been lured here as subjects, Lopata!’

The big man uttered a roar like a bull ork and charged, his lasgun clamped in his right hand and still shooting as he ripped his bayonet free with his left. He blasted the nearest servitor, the one who had once been Sharrik, forcing it back under the hail of sustained fire until he could ram his bayonet through the flesh-welded joint where the autocannon met its shoulder. A flash of sparks erupted into the air and the weapon died. The hideous thing drove a long, wicked blade through the meat of Lopata’s thigh, pinning him to the wall. He screamed in pain, but still somehow found the force of will to ram the muzzle of his lasgun into its mouth and blow the back of its head out with a savage burst of full-auto.

‘Kill, kill, kill!’ he bellowed.

Varus was unsteady but back on her feet then, and she and Steeleye and Cully turned their weapons as one on the thing that had been Ells and tore it to ragged chunks of burned meat and blackened, smoking augmetics, and it was done at last.

Death and death and death.

There would be no mention on the roll of honour for Sharrik and Ells, and no one would send the Letter to their next of kin. No one in the Astra Militarum could ever admit that this had happened, Cully knew that. They were wretched, honourless deserters. That was how it had been recorded, and that was how it would stay. The Munitorum’s word was law in these matters.

He lowered his smoking weapon and looked down at the blackened, twisted remains of his dead comrades while Lopata wrenched the blade out of his thigh and limped towards them, the leg of his battledress trousers running red.

‘We always kill our own. Death and death and death,’ Cully whispered. It was like Vardan IV all over again. Like Baphomet. ‘Emperor protect us.’

He felt Steeleye’s hard hand alight on his shoulder, bringing him back

from the poisoned brink of memory and madness.

‘We’ve got a job to finish,’ she rasped.

They met no more resistance until a single bolt-round blew Steeleye’s head apart.

She fell in a spray of red mist. The bulbous, broken mechanism of her eye hit the ground and rolled across the tiled floor to come to rest against the side of Cully’s boot.

Lopata put a long burst of full-auto through the doorway the shot had come from, and Varus and Cully swarmed down the corridor to contain the threat while the big man limped after them.

‘Come out, you bastard!’ Cully shouted. ‘You might want us alive, but I don’t care either way about you. Three seconds and I’m rolling a frag grenade in there!’

‘I have money,’ a man’s voice called out, and there was a note of terrified desperation in his tone. ‘Lopata, listen to me! A thousand crowns, right now! Ten thousand, if you can get me back to the hive. Get me out of here, please! We can still do business!’

‘I’ve got grenades too,’ Lopata snarled. ‘Steeleye was my mate.’

‘I can...’ the man said, and Cully lost his temper.

He kicked the door in and charged, shooting high but laying down enough suppressing fire to send the lone man inside face first to the floor.

Lopata landed on him like a Rhino dropped from orbit, knocking the air and the fight out of him all in one. Cully stamped on his hand until he let go of his bolt pistol, and they held him fast with field restraints.

Cully knelt down beside their captive, drew his bayonet, and pressed the tip into the corner of the man’s eye. There was no mercy in Corporal Cully’s gaze just then, no compassion and no hesitation. He was Astra Militarum, and the thing needed to be done. Just like it had on Baphomet.

‘Name?’ he demanded.

The man’s jaw clenched in empty defiance.

‘Your name, or Emperor help me I will blind you,’ Cully promised.

The ganger held out until Cully’s blade drew blood from the corner of his eyelid, then he finally seemed to think better of it.

‘Vorn,’ he said at last. ‘Dareus Vorn.’

‘Who else is here?’

‘I’m alone,’ Vorn said.

Cully pressed the edge of his blade back to the man’s face with a snarl that was just this side of deranged.

‘You’re no chirurgeon,’ he growled. ‘You’re the money man, I can see that just from the way you’re dressed. The chirurgeon! What’s *their* name?’

‘Babette Vitzkowski.’

‘Where is she?’

‘Go sit on a grenade,’ Vorn said.

Lopata kicked their captive so hard Cully could actually hear the man’s ribs shatter.

Vorn howled.

‘You’ll answer him,’ Lopata promised, ‘or you’ll answer to me. I was a ganger too, back on Reslia. I know tricks with bolt cutters and needles that would make you beg for death, you piece of filth. *Answer him!*’

‘Operating theatre,’ Vorn admitted at last. ‘Fourth door on the right. That’s where she does the work. This is all her. I just sell the things!’

‘How could you?’ Varus asked.

‘How do you think?’ Vorn snarled. ‘For money. To get rich. To not have to live like them. Like *you*.’

‘Let me show you how I live,’ Lopata said.

Then the beating started. It went on for a long time.

When it was done, Lopata’s fists were red and dripping. Vorn was dead. Cully put a round through his forehead anyway, and turned away.

He had a chirurgeon to kill.

They found the operating theatre in darkness.

Cully stepped cautiously inside with Lopata and Varus behind him, their lasguns held tight to their shoulders as they advanced.

‘I see something,’ Lopata said. ‘There’s—’

The searing purple flash of plasma fire all but blinded Cully. He threw himself to the ground, barely biting back a scream as his hands landed in boiling liquid.

When Cully realised that molten liquid was all that was left of Lopata, he went berserk. He came up on one knee, clutching his lasgun in his already blistering hands and blasting into the darkness on full-auto. Somewhere at

the end of the room sparks flashed from something moving.

‘Lopata’s gone!’ he shouted at Varus, who bellowed and hurled a grenade.

The explosion smashed the operating table into scrap metal and shattered a long row of glass jars, spilling preserved organs and slimy fluids into the air.

In the sudden flash of light Cully saw that there was something huge standing at the end of the room. It had a plasma pistol in its unnatural-looking hand.

The pistol discharged again just as Cully was rolling. The beam of searing light only took his left leg off at the knee instead of vaporising him altogether.

He shrieked and crashed to the ground, barely able to draw another breath for the agony that sent his lungs into spasm. He could smell his own flesh cooking as the intense heat of the weapon’s beam cauterised the ragged wound.

Cooking human flesh.

Baphomet.

He had always known it would come back on him, in the end.

‘Always shoot the big one first,’ a vox/synth voice said, away in the darkness. ‘That is how one deals with orks, and you are little different in the eyes of the Omnissiah.’

Cully’s vision greyed with unspeakable pain.

Little different to orks. Since Vardan IV, since what he had done on Baphomet, Cully could almost believe it. Was this it? Was this the Emperor’s judgement, at last?

No, Cully told himself. No. He still had his lasgun. He was still a Guardsman. He could fight. He dragged himself forward with his elbows, the weapon clutched in his weeping, burned hands, biting back a scream as the exposed bone of his ruined leg scraped against the tiled floor.

Varus was shooting, somewhere in the darkness.

‘Such waste,’ the mechanical voice said. ‘At least I still have two subjects.’

A drill whined: the high, piercing shriek of the dentist’s chair. Varus howled.

Cully fired blind, the staccato light of las-shots showing him a towering robed figure bent over his squad-mate. Arching mechanical tentacles

reached over its shoulders and took Varus' lasgun away from her even as the drill went into her forehead. Cully's shots ricocheted uselessly from the figure's armoured carapace, doing nothing but putting holes in its crimson robe.

Varus slumped to the ground, subdued and drooling.

'No!' Cully howled. 'Emperor's mercy, no!'

'The Emperor has no mercy,' the monstrosity declared.

It began to walk slowly towards Cully's prone form.

His lasgun's power pack died, leaving him without even the light of gunfire. The heavy tread of steel boots brought the horrific surgeon relentlessly closer.

The darkness reminded him of Baphomet, and of what he had done there.

Cully found that he was weeping uncontrollably. For Varus, for Steeleye and Lopata and Strongarm and all the countless others he had lost over the years. Most of all, he wept for Sergeant Rachain.

The Emperor protects, but He does not forgive. This was the Emperor's judgement, come at last.

For Baphomet.

For everything.

Death and death and death.

Corporal Cully began to scream.

THE GROWING SEASONS

Richard Strachan

FECUNDITY

Crowds were gathering in the lower field. From the window as he dressed, Fletch could see a patchwork of colours from the costumes on display – emerald-green garlands, trains of vivid red and gold. Some of the villagers bore great feathered wings that they'd woven from last season's grasses, dyed and painted during the dull hours of the Fallow just past. And now on this bursting day of lush new life the costumes had been unveiled; the drums were beaten in the viridescent fields, the flutes and the reed pipes trilled their echoing song into the fecund air. Everything was ready.

'What do you think?' Peer asked him. Fletch turned from the window to see his son standing in the doorway. He was nearly as tall as his father, but he seemed as excited as a young boy, proudly bearing the mask he had been carving for months. Wooden tendrils rose from its scalp like a crown of antlers. The mask's face was a trio of savage scars, suggesting hollow eyes and a screaming mouth. The boy's hands were gloved with woven sticks and he had wrapped lengths of ivy and catchweed around his body.

'You look wonderful, lad,' Fletch said. 'A very vision from the forests!' He clattered his son's back with his wooden talons, and then with Hedda's help lowered his own mask onto his head. Great curved horns rose from its temples, so heavy they pulled his weight forward. The plumes of his headdress rose almost to the ceiling. Fletch steadied himself. Through the vision slits in the fanged mouth he saw his wife cloaked in leaves, her face blue and her mouth a slash of scarlet. She raised her hands to steady him.

'Can you manage?' she said. 'By Life, it seems even heavier than it was last year!'

'It's not as bad as it looks,' Fletch said. His voice boomed back at him

from the confines of the mask. Petra, his daughter, recoiled from him. She was dressed as a weaver bird, her costume flecked with shards of iridescent blue.

Fletch clacked across the floorboards on his wooden hooves and stepped into the streaming air, the sun bright and hot now, a smell on the breeze of fresh earth and clean, unspoiled air. As he passed across his land, he saw the gathered valley-folk turn and pay obeisance, kneeling to the Great Green Hunter and the beginning of the Fecund Procession. He grinned behind the mask, feeling a tug of pride that he should be so trusted to lead them in this most vital task. He would not let them down.

On three sides of the valley rose the mountains' velvet peaks, and on the fourth was the tangled forest. Between them the valley lay cupped in an emerald oval that stretched for ten miles at its longest point and five at its widest. It was a circuit of this distance that the people walked in the season of Fecundity. Fletch, pacing himself on his wooden hooves, led them stage by stage. Some of the villagers, like Torvald and Nora, were too old to make the procession, and they walked instead with sprightly enthusiasm down the central track to meet the rest of the valley-folk at the Blessing Ground. Hedda and the children waved them off. Old Henrik the farmhand was already in his cups, capering about with a ragged staff in one hand and a jug of moonshine in the other. His beard was wet with drink, and he cackled and danced as he went. On they all walked, banging their drums and ringing their bells, the flute-song skirling wildly about them, the air filled with discordant music. At each field they stopped to scatter libations and chant prayers to Abundant Life. The land seemed to be waking up around them as they passed. In the verges Fletch could see flowers blooming: bloodwort and tussle, lamenter's cup, even the strange pale flowers of three-petalled blight, stinking in the breeze. The first green shoots of the crops were strong and bold, breaking ground already. It would be a good harvest this year.

Inside the mask Fletch's face was streaming with sweat. Every now and then Hedda made him pause to drink water through a reed straw, stooping to check on his feet, which were chafed bloody and sore from the wooden hooves. Bloatflies skipped up from the manure in the fields and droned away, and at each fence the kyne paused to consider them with their sad

brown eyes. Sometimes Petra would come up and hold on to Fletch's matted skirts, or she would skip off to join her brother as they teased old Henrik, who laughed and shook his staff at them, and then slaked his thirst with another slug of moonshine. His hair was spiked up with sweat like a crown of thorns. On and on they marched, from top to bottom of the valley, until finally they reached the dark line of the forest. Here in its cold shadow was the Blessing Ground, where the libation-tree was stained with centuries of offerings. With reverent silence, the procession came at last to an end.

The libation-tree was an ancient, blackened stump. Legends claimed the original tree had been used to build the first farmhouse in the valley, felled by the wanderer who had discovered it, although his name was lost now in the deeps of time. At this moment Fletch felt that he was standing at the end of a line which stretched back centuries, and he felt the weight of those centuries more powerfully than he felt the weight of the mask against his face. So much depended on him. It was a burden, he sometimes thought, that no one should have to bear.

He raised his arms. In one hand he held the libation cup, brimful of blessed waters. In the other, he held the holy aspergill.

'Friends,' he called out in a strong, clear voice. 'Settlers of the Hidden Valley, farmers of the Living Realm. Hear me now. For what I say is—'

There was a crash of broken branches. A long and plaintive cry pierced the air.

Fletch whipped around, his blood racing. At the woodland's edge a ragged figure tipped forward from the treeline and fell onto its face.

He looked back at the congregation, and it was like a shock had passed through them. Some started backwards, their arms raised as if to protect themselves. Others reached for staffs and cider bottles and pressed forward, forming a cordon around the libation-tree. Fletch gestured for quiet, and with Hedda's help he took the mask from his head.

'Get back,' he said to the nearest villagers. He kicked the hooves from his bleeding feet. He noticed young Johann, a sturdy and straw-headed carpenter from the lower valley, and beckoned him forward. Together they crept across the Blessing Ground to the treeline. Fletch held the aspergill back like a mace, ready to strike. He looked again at the crowd behind him, and what had just moments before seemed holy and pure, the living

symbol of this valley's sacred protection, now seemed somehow fragile or vulnerable, touched by the taint that had emerged from the forest. You are protected, he wanted to tell them. Trust me, you are still protected, I swear.

The figure was trying to raise itself onto its hands and knees, retching and shaking its head, and when it tipped over and rolled onto its back Fletch saw that it was a young man. He coughed and sighed, blinking against the soft sunlight. He had a long scratch against his forehead, the blood scabbed and dark. His dusty hair fell against his eyes.

'Who is it?' Johann whispered harshly.

'I don't know, it's...'

Hedda ran up and caught at Fletch's arm. 'It's Eilert!' she cried. 'Don't you recognise him? By my Life, to think he's made it back!'

Fletch stared down at the figure.

'It's your son!'

Eilert... When Fletch had seen him last he had been a young and restless soul, chafing against the hard labour of farming his parents' land. There was a whole realm out there, he had argued. There was more to life than this drudgery. He had scorned his responsibilities as the headman's son, had mixed with the children of the landless families in the lower valley. The arguments between them, the shadow his behaviour had cast on Fletch and Hedda; it had been an awful time... And then, shouldering his pack with much boastful fanfare, he had set off one quiet day past the valley's borders, oblivious to the fact that no one seriously thought they would ever see him again. He had passed into the darkness, and now he was back.

Eilert's face seemed to clear, as if the recognition had placed him more firmly on the earth. He wiped a string of spit from his mouth and shivered. Fletch couldn't quite believe it, but he was smiling at them.

'Father,' he said. 'You cannot *possibly* imagine the things I've seen out there.'

'Let the spirits of the forest deal with him!' some argued. 'He cannot come back, he must be cast out!' Others, worried that he might have led outsiders to the valley, argued that he should be killed on the spot. 'Foul is the evil out there! We have no idea what he might have tracked back in.' Old Torvald and his wife Nora, kindly souls that they were, offered to put the young man up until he recovered. He was obviously sick, they said,

although Eilert protested that it was nothing a hot meal couldn't cure.

'The distances I've walked,' he said, his hands spread wide. 'It's a wonder I'm not mere skin and bones!'

In the end, Fletch took charge and said he would house Eilert in his barn. 'For a few days at least,' he told his wife. 'I won't have it said that we have no charity here, or that we turned aside someone in need.' He paused. 'He is our son, no matter what he's done. No matter what anyone says.'

Hedda, although she seemed apprehensive, agreed. 'We can set him up in the hayloft, there's space.'

'Why are we letting the sprite stay, father?' Peer asked. 'He'll kill us in our sleep, won't he?'

'I'm no more a sprite than you are, boy!' Eilert said. 'Much less, judging by that wonderful costume. Do I really look like someone who would kill you?'

'This is no sprite,' Fletch said. 'He's... This man is your brother.'

'That's right,' Eilert said. He looked on Peer and Petra with something like wonder. 'We're blood, you and I.'

The procession broke up into small, uncertain groups. Fletch and Peer supported Eilert as they took the central path back up the valley. Capes and masks from the costumes were abandoned in the fields, and near the crossroads they found old Henrik snoring in a ditch with his empty jug clutched to his chest.

As they walked back, Eilert leaning heavily against him, Johann appeared at their side.

'You didn't finish the ceremony,' he said in a low voice. 'The libation-tree's still dry – it hasn't drunk from the sacred waters.'

'It's nothing to worry about,' Fletch reassured him. 'Have faith, my friend, the intention is what truly counts. Isn't it? We did everything else. We did it perfectly.'

Eilert stumbled and Fletch caught his weight. The younger man gave him a weary grin. He smelled, Fletch thought, like something rotten – like dead earth in a fallow field.

'Thank you for this,' Eilert said, in a quiet and almost conspiratorial voice. 'I won't forget your kindness, father. I promise.'

They pressed on. Further up the valley, scudding over the mountain peaks, came a drift of cloud as livid as a bruise.

FERVIDITY

Through the wooden slats he could see its rheumy eye, the mucus that flowed from its muzzle. He could smell it, a queasy brew that reeked of vomit and fermented fruit. The heifer lowed once and Fletch caught a blast of its stinking breath.

He had quarantined her two days ago, as soon as she had staggered from the barn with a lolloping gait that had seemed utterly unnatural. He hadn't decided what to do with her yet. I won't kill without good reason, he thought. She may yet recover.

There was a humid breeze, even at this late hour. He wiped the sweat from his neck as he passed from the quarantine shed and crossed the lower bounds, coming onto the main track. A swatch of stars gleamed high above the valley. Two or three miles further down he could see the lights of the tavern at the crossroads, and in the stillness of the night he could even hear the rise and fall of laughter, like a distant tide.

Eilert, he thought. Entertaining the locals.

Every one of his stories was worth a drink at least, and he had so many of them it was doubtful he would ever go thirsty... The great, boiling waters of the Shimmerfalls, by which he had stayed for a season; the Living River, tributary of the Threadwyrn as it writhed into the Tendril Sea. If you believed what he said, he had walked the forest groves of Neos and crossed the Erosian Plains with the Pilgrims of Mhurghast, and there was barely a corner of Ghyran where they didn't know his name. But simple people don't care for what's plausible or true with such tales. All they want is the unfamiliar, told in a confident voice.

He had stayed in their hayloft the best part of a fortnight. He'd slept most

days, eagerly drinking the broth Petra took to him and then subsiding once more into feverish dreams. When his strength was up he started taking long walks through the valley, as if discovering it all anew, striding from Fletch's farmland and the cattle fields all the way down to the Blessing Ground and the border of the forest; from the flinty shrubland on the valley's eastern flank to the pastures of the west. Eilert paced the bounds of a place he said he had never forgotten. 'Always,' he told Fletch one morning, 'wherever I was in the realm outside, I rarely turned my thoughts from this stretch of land.'

'It was kind of you to keep us in mind,' Fletch said, trying to keep the bitterness from his voice.

'Of course I would. This is home.'

'Then why did you leave in the first place?' Fletch asked.

The younger man had looked at him as if burdened by a knowledge he couldn't share. 'You wouldn't understand,' he said, 'I mean, you refused to understand. I felt there was nothing for me here. I saw my life stretching out like a line in front of me, arrow-straight, featureless. You would age and die and I would take over your duties, and then I would age and die... But you have to leave somewhere to see what it truly means to you, and maybe to discover that life isn't a straight line heading in one direction after all. You'd never do that, would you, father? You'll never leave.'

'No,' Fletch told him. 'They'll bury me in this valley.'

After that, as far as Fletch knew, he had lent a helping hand around the community, staying awhile in spare rooms or bedding down on farmhouse hearths, or even, it was said, sleeping out under the stars when the weather was clear. He was here to stay, it seemed.

Fletch turned from the track now and headed up towards the goat pens, walking into that sharp and pungent musk. He checked the feed trays and water troughs. Henrik had changed the straw, and the gnarled old man sat now on the low wall at the front of the pens smoking his pipe, the stench of his tobacco almost as powerful as the smell of the goats. Fletch looked over the Fervid Gift, inspecting its teeth and horns, raising the lamp to gaze into the black slots of its eyes.

'He looks dull,' he said to Henrik, joining him by the wall. 'Tired somehow, and he's fatter than I would have liked. Have you been overfeeding him again?'

‘I slip him an apple or two, it might be,’ Henrik admitted. He puffed away at his pipe. ‘That goat’s got an important job tomorrow, only fair to give him a treat now and then.’

‘He does that,’ Fletch said. ‘The Fervid Gift for the harvest season... It’ll go well, I know it will. It has to.’

In silence they sat and gazed down at the darkened spread of land, where Torvald’s fields swayed and rustled, whispering in the breeze. Shoals of insects swam in the lamp’s amber glow.

‘Erik and Anja have caught it,’ Henrik said, in a blunt voice. ‘That’s four altogether from the lower ground. Two up here.’

‘I’d heard,’ Fletch said. His stomach tightened.

‘The murrain...’

‘Don’t say that,’ Fletch snapped. ‘The heifer’s one thing, but this is another.’

‘It can happen,’ the old man said, biting on his pipe. ‘The disease leaps from man to animal, and back to man.’

‘Well, I’ve never heard it. Erik and Anja are just sick, a passing ailment – nothing more.’

‘You should tell them that. And the heifer?’

‘I’ll deal with it tomorrow. After the sacrifice.’

‘Harvest at month’s end,’ Henrik told him, as if Fletch didn’t know. ‘We need every hand to spare.’

Fletch leaned forward, elbows on his knees. ‘What are you saying?’

‘Not I. But others say if an animal can be quarantined for the good of the herd, so can a person.’

‘Tomorrow,’ Fletch said quietly. ‘After the sacrifice. We’ll deal with it then.’

He left the older man to lock the pens, and decided to take a last circuit of the cattle fields before turning in. Henrik’s words weighed uneasily on him. *The murrain...* If people were calling it that, then they had already decided there was a problem. He pictured Margrete Olsen, who had collapsed in the market a fortnight ago, spewing out a thick green paste that stank of rotting cheese. Her skin was like risen dough, he had heard, practically sloughing off the bones. Overwork, Sigurd the healer had claimed. The strain of the coming harvest was hard on everyone. But then there was the myrtle vine farmer, Holstein, with his swollen yellow eye,

that goitre on his neck; and now Erik and Anja, a healthy young couple in the prime of their lives with those lesions on their faces... All of a sudden, the laughter that he could hear from the distant tavern had something shrill and frantic about it.

He leaned against the gate and smelled the sweet fragrance of the cattle in the field. But no, he thought. The sacrifice tomorrow would go ahead and everything would be fine. The harvest would yield a full bounty, and everyone would in time get better. This was a blessed place, truly.

He looked up and saw a silhouette framed by the pale peak of the mountain.

‘Henrik?’

‘No,’ a voice said. ‘Just me.’

‘Good evening, Eilert,’ Fletch said. ‘I thought you’d be down at the tavern, telling your tales.’

‘Storytelling gets dull after a while. The voice of your own thoughts can often be quiet, and you need peace to hear it.’

Eilert came to the gate and leaned next to him. His skin was pale and there were dark circles under his eyes. They both stood and stared into the shadowed field.

‘Well, you’ve certainly made yourself popular,’ Fletch said. ‘To think there were some who wanted you thrown back into the forest when you turned up. And now a hot meal every night, up and down the valley, if I’ve heard right. All for the payment of one of your stories.’

Eilert laughed softly to himself. ‘Never underestimate people’s craving for novelty, even in this place.’

‘How are you managing for work?’

‘There’s plenty to go around. Odd jobs here and there, you know how it is. There’s always an outhouse that needs a new roof, a dead tree that needs cutting down.’

‘I’m sorry about the barn, it’s just that we need the space, and—’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ Eilert said mildly. ‘You’re more than welcome to it. No,’ he sighed. ‘I’m not here just to move back in with my parents.’

‘What are you here for then?’ Fletch said. ‘If you don’t mind my asking.’

‘I don’t.’

‘It’s just... it’s not that we don’t welcome the sight of you, but there are many who still have concerns, what with you having spent so much time

out there. Why did you come back?’

‘This is where I’m from,’ Eilert told him. ‘Why shouldn’t I come back? There’s no law against it, is there?’

‘No,’ Fletch admitted. ‘None to my mind.’

‘I didn’t exile myself. A man can travel and explore, but home is still a fixed point on the map. And perhaps,’ he said slyly, ‘I just couldn’t bear to think of you all living such boring lives, and I came back to liven you up!’

They stood there a while longer, saying nothing. He was a hard man to like, Fletch thought, and the thought pained him. There was nothing objectionable about him, nothing specific. But whenever Fletch spoke to Eilert, or even when he raised a hand on seeing him cross a field, he felt there was nothing there a normal man could respond to. Perhaps he had just seen too much, out in the wider realm? He was no longer of this place. He was *other*.

He was about to go when Eilert stayed his arm. He spoke earnestly.

‘You think this a fertile land, don’t you? This valley, it’s a rich place to you, isn’t it?’

‘Of course. We’re blessed to be here, you know that. We make obeisance to Life and she blesses us in turn. She looks after us, gives us her bounty.’

‘Let me tell you, father, you scratch but the barest living here. I have opened my mind to extraordinary things out there... Fields where a handful of seeds planted at midnight will be a forest by the morning, where the livestock pour out their young as fast as they mate, and where the very air seems thick and brooding with life. Oh,’ he whispered, ‘if you were to see the Living City in the risen dawn you would witness one of the great wonders of our age.’

‘I have no need of those places,’ Fletch muttered. ‘And I doubt they have much need of me either.’

‘I remember the four festivals here,’ Eilert went on, as if Fletch hadn’t spoken. ‘But out there the seasons blend and mingle a hundred times over, like a tapestry, and nothing is so simple as just “Fecundity” or “Fallow”. You live in a high, dry place here, I tell you, and you don’t even know it.’

‘I know it well enough,’ Fletch said angrily. ‘I know that out there is disease, and death and violence and torment! Where people kill for their creed or for land, or for the sheer bloody pleasure of it. Out there is of no interest to me, or to anyone who lives here.’

Eilert shook his head. ‘The realm is bigger than you can possibly imagine. *Out there* everything lives and dies and lives again, and if you were witness to the true cycle of Life and not this faded remnant, it would simply blind you with its brightness...’

His eyes seemed to glow in the dark, and as Eilert talked Fletch smelled again that scent of rot. Cloying, he thought. Feverish.

‘We have all the Life here we’ll ever need,’ Fletch told him, pulling his arm away. ‘More than enough.’

He wished his son goodnight and left him smiling by the gate. As he walked back up the track to his home, Fletch turned his mind from everything Eilert had said. He was wrong, it was that simple. Instead, he focused on the day to come.

Tomorrow was the most important day of the year.

The day of the Fervid Giving dawned drear and cold. A thin rain smeared the air, settling to a drizzle by mid-morning. A wan light emerged from the clouds above the peaks, and it made everything seem pale and insubstantial.

He sat at the table with his family and ate quickly. With this weak sun they had all overslept and he felt listless. There was a headache building up behind his eyes. He thought of the argument he’d had with Eilert the night before, of Henrik’s words up by the goat pens, and it stoked the anxiety in his stomach. What awaited him this day felt like no more than a test he was bound to fail. The shadow that had fallen on him when Eilert first left had darkened again with his return. They’ll be watching, Fletch thought. How can a father who fails to control his son be trusted to shepherd his people and keep them safe?

‘You know,’ Petra began, ‘Eilert says that there are some parts of the realm where people have a different festival every single day.’

‘Why’s that?’ Peer asked her. Behind the boy’s frown Fletch could see a low excitement. To imagine such a wonderful thing was almost beyond him.

Hedda was talking about Anja, how she didn’t even want to be seen out of doors, so ashamed was she of the lesions on her face.

‘Not painful, she says,’ Hedda told him. ‘But the thought of anyone staring, she just can’t bear it. But then, to see her stroking the skin you’d

almost think she was proud of it.'

'Because,' Petra patiently explained to her brother, 'out there it's not just *people*, but it's *aelves* and *duardin* and...' She frowned in turn. The names were just words to her. 'Eilert told me. He's been everywhere, you know.'

'There's no such thing as aelves,' Fletch said automatically. 'You've talked to her? Anja?' he asked his wife.

'What are *dwardins*?' Peer laughed.

'I took her some bread, a pot of broth,' Hedda said. 'Her and Erik. To keep their strength up.'

'What did you do with the dishes?'

'They're evil little spirits made of fire,' Petra confidently explained. 'They dwell under the ground, and when it rains they scream up into the air in metal balloons so they don't get wet! If you see one, they'll burn your eyes out...'

Peer nodded sagely, taking this in, although his father saw that it sat badly with him that his sister knew more about the subject than he did.

'Well,' Hedda said. She stood by the table, her hand resting abstractedly on top of Petra's head. The girl dragged her fork lazily through the congealed yolk on her plate. 'They still have them. I was going to pop round after the sacrifice and pick them up. Why?'

'Don't,' Fletch said. 'Leave them for now.'

Hedda looked exasperated. 'But why?'

'Father, is that true?' Peer asked him. 'Father? Father, are there little fire-spirits out there who live in metal balloons?'

'Because I damned well said so!' Fletch shouted. 'Leave them, and don't go round again until I've had a chance to think.'

Hedda stood open-mouthed.

'Fletch, whatever is...'

'Come on,' he said, getting up from the table. His mouth was a thin line. Petra and Peer stared down at their plates. 'We're going to be late.'

Henrik was waiting for him by the goat pens.

'Go on and join the others,' he said. 'They're heading down now. I'll bring the Gift.'

Henrik nodded slowly and ambled off towards the track. Hedda and the children were already walking to the crossroads, Peer and Petra subdued at

their mother's side. He could see others converging from across the valley, small figures in sombre greens and browns. He shivered. The Fervid Giving was always a serious festival – so much depended on it – but the air around him felt tired, and the valley in this dim morning looked a sullen, dismal place. He begged the sun to shine, but the sky stayed bleak and grey above him.

The goat was huddled in its pen. He held out a fire-apple and it bobbed its head, as if refusing.

‘That silly git Henrik’s stuffed you full,’ he muttered. ‘Come now, out!’

The Gift looked bilious, apathetic, as if the animal knew this short journey led only to the butcher’s blade. ‘Come on, you damned thing!’ The headache was high in his temple. ‘Get yourself out of there, now!’

His vision suddenly red, Fletch reached in and cuffed the goat a savage blow across the muzzle. He grabbed its horns and dragged it from the hay, breath heaving in his chest. When his vision cleared, he looked fearfully around, but no one had witnessed his shame. He passed a hand over his eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered. ‘But this *has* to be done.’

The goat gave a mournful bleat and shivered.

Fletch tied the guiding myrtle vine around its neck and dragged it out onto the path. Once it was on firmer ground it seemed to resign itself to its fate. It hobbled after him as they took the track down to the crossroads, where the tavern loomed and where the crowds had gathered for the Giving. There were fewer people this year, he thought, than he had ever seen before.

There were no ceremonial robes for this occasion, just the plain dress of the working day. There was no music and celebration, no jugs of moonshine, no furtive gropings in the fields (and no babies born nine months later). The Fervid Giving was a grave moment, an earnest time of humble thanks and beseeching. Around them, on all four sides, the crops rose high and bright: buckwheat and barley, spyllet, red-peas and beans.

So much depends on this...

The goat’s slotted yellow eyes rolled back in its head as Henrik helped him lift it to the altar. Its jaw champed the air and the legs kicked out feebly. As they laid it down Fletch noted the worn, rusty tide against the stone, the mark of thousands of these occasions, year after year, for all the

time that people had been living here. His father, and his grandfather before that. And now him.

The goat bleated again to see the knife. Fletch pressed down on its back, straddling the creature, one hand lifting its head, the other hand raised in the air, the knife gleaming dully in the weak sunlight. There was absolute silence. The crowd pressed very close – it was said that to be spattered with the Gift’s blood was good fortune for the rest of the year.

‘Friends,’ Fletch said in a solemn voice. ‘Let us this day give thanks for the growth of our crops, and meekly ask for Life’s blessing on those crops that we soon harvest. Let this bounty fill us, and in turn let us give a portion of that bounty back in this humble sacrifice. Give thanks to the Life that is given, as it gives Life to us.’

‘As it gives Life to us,’ the crowd intoned.

He looked up. Eilert stood with folded arms, faintly smiling, near the back. Fletch met his eye, and as their gaze held he plunged the blade fast and deep into the creature’s throat; but then, as the goat screamed and gurgled, rending the air with its pain, Fletch looked down in horror at what he had unleashed.

Like a brackish tide, a wave of maggots came pouring from the wound in its neck. There was a stink like the foulest carrion-pit, and then the goat’s bowels shuddered, releasing a cascade of slime and boiling filth; and as the crowd reared back, some coughing up the maggots that had spilled into their screaming mouths, Fletch threw himself from the altar and spewed into the grass. He heaved and heaved, until there was nothing left in his guts but a sense of dread and loss, and, beneath that, abject shame. He had failed.

The crops soon died in the fields.

It was the maggots, some said, wriggling into the soil and poisoning the roots. Others claimed it had been the pestilential air breathed by the Gift as Fletch led it down from his farm. Whatever the reason, by day’s end after the sacrifice the ears of corn were drooping, and by next morning most fields were a morass of slime and rot. Some maggots still squirmed and undulated in the mud at the crossroads, easy prey for the valley children, who laughed as they crushed them underfoot. Each maggot burst like a bag of pus, and they died with a gagging smell of sour dough.

Eventually the children's parents dragged them away, leaving the crossroads slick with a tawny sludge. Later, in the shrivelled fields, some of the farmers found weird, globular pupae hanging like jaundiced seedpods from the withered stalks of their crops. Within days they had hatched into festering bloatflies bigger than any the villagers had ever seen before, and for weeks the air hummed with their droning talk. They were so fat and distended that they could only buzz around at hip height, and if they ever landed on bare skin they would leave a nasty, mouldering bite.

Even the flowers on the verges sickened and died, all except the three-petalled blight. Some started hanging those lank blooms in greasy bunches above their doors, claiming it was protection against the disease that soon rippled through the livestock. Cattle across the valley weakened and died, their carcasses swelling rapidly in the heat and bursting in another tide of burrowing maggots. A green haze seemed to hang over the valley, rich and pungent, tainted with the smell of burning meat as the farmers cremated their herds.

All was rumour and confusion. One farmer in the valley's lower ground swore he had seen a goat rushing across his fields on two legs, its mouth foaming with blood, its stomach split open to reveal a second mouth that was choked with fangs. Coming back from quarantining yet more of his sickened kyne, another farmer claimed to have heard his neighbour talking to a tumour that had developed on her leg – and the tumour, in a low and giggling voice, talking back. Across the valley all was fear and blame and a creeping sense of dread. It was the murrain, some said – although others had started calling it 'the Rot'...

In the tavern's smoky, wood-panelled common room, Fletch finally called the community to account. Around every table sat ackermen and planters, hidecrafters and woolcombers, hired hands; men, women and children, all the people of the valley who had been able to come. Fletch stood on the short stairs that led up to the mezzanine, which was already crowded with the overspill from the main room. Everyone was looking at him, and on every face as Fletch turned to meet its gaze was an expression of fear, or, for those who had already lost family to the disease, a resigned grief that was somehow more terrible. Things like this don't happen here, he

thought. I've made sure of it. He clenched his fists and shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other. They all look to me for answers, and I don't have the first idea what to do.

He cleared his throat and the chatter of voices died down.

'Everyone, please,' he called out. 'First of all, thank you for coming here in this troubling time. Secondly, I know there isn't one among you who doesn't have questions and who doesn't feel the need for answers—'

Several voices shouted out at once: 'What should we do?' 'Why is this happening?' 'We don't deserve this!'

Fletch raised his hands for calm.

'I know,' he said. 'None of us know why this is happening, but we have to deal with it and that's why we're gathered here today. To talk, to find a solution. It's how we've always done things, and it's how we'll continue to do things, no matter how bad it gets.'

He made a gesture to a middle-aged man with a sharp white beard who was sitting near the front of the common room. He got to his feet and joined Fletch on the stairs.

'Most of you know Sigurd here, our healer,' Fletch said. 'I wanted him to speak a few words, about—'

He couldn't say the word; it stuck in his throat. Sigurd nodded and stepped forward. When he spoke, his voice was dry and thin, and he was met with calls from the back of the room to speak up. Fletch saw Eilert cradling an ale at a table near the front.

'This disease,' Sigurd said, 'has come on us very suddenly, and I have to admit that it's not like anything we've seen before. We've had dry-mouth and blackleg, and hoof-rot of course, and amongst ourselves any number of ailments – but nothing like this.'

There was wild muttering amongst the crowd.

'What's your answer then?' someone called out. 'What can we do?'

'It's never a bad idea to stick with the old ways in such cases,' Sigurd said. He gave a reedy smile. 'Letting blood, of course. Herb-packets tied around the neck. Hanging three-petalled blight above the door seems efficacious. I would argue against bathing as well – it's important to keep the pores closed against the miasma, if that's what it is.'

'How does it spread?' Fletch asked him. 'We keep our cattle separated, but it makes no difference.'

‘It’s the flies!’ came a shout.

‘It’s not the flies, it’s the damned field mice!’

‘Birds spread it, everyone knows that! They bring it from outside!’

‘At night, I’ve seen them – chuckling little imps that scamper through the grass, suckling at the kyne—’

Sigurd, by now settling into the role, put his hands behind his back. ‘Well,’ he said sharply. ‘It is difficult to say at this stage, but contact does seem the most likely cause. The solution to which is, of course – quarantine.’

‘Then why bring us here?’ a woman in the crowd screamed. Fletch looked into the dim light of the hall. There was a commotion, tables overturned, as two or three people dragged their children to the door. ‘Any of us could be passing it on now. You’ve condemned us all!’

‘It’s because we’ve offended Life!’ came another voice.

‘Aye!’ Henrik nodded. ‘We’re being punished for our impiety!’

‘In Fecundity, after the procession – the tree was never wetted!’

‘And the Gift was rotten at harvest time, it’s a sign to us all!’

‘And what about your boy?’ another voice shouted. ‘Young Eilert, always sneaking around, poking his nose in where it isn’t wanted. How do we know he didn’t bring it back from the outside?’

Eilert, amused, shook his head.

‘We have never been impious!’ Fletch shouted back. ‘We keep faith with Life, don’t we?’

‘How do we know Life’s kept faith with us?’

‘Life has abandoned us!’ shouted another voice. Fletch saw a young man, skinny and feverish, stand and jab his finger at the crowd. ‘We’re falling into stagnation here, turning our backs on what Life truly is!’

Sigurd shrugged; Life was really none of his business.

‘Please, friends,’ Torvald quavered. ‘There is no need for us to argue, surely we can find a way through this?’

Fletch looked to Henrik, who was sat near the front still calmly smoking his pipe. Were they right? Had Life abandoned them? They’d failed the Fecund ritual; perhaps faith, as he’d told Johann, wasn’t enough in the end? Hedda had her arms around the children, and she looked up at him with an expression that Fletch couldn’t read. Beseeching, offering encouragement? The crowd was on the verge, he knew, on the very edge of

collapse. The skinny young man, his voice cutting through the noise like a blade, said: ‘We should abandon this place – it is cursed!’

‘No!’

The voices faded away and all eyes turned to Fletch. He held their gaze.

‘We may not know much about this illness, but if there is one thing of which I am absolutely certain, it’s that we cannot leave the valley.’

He let the silence build. The young man sat down and grumbled into his ale.

‘If we leave, we risk spreading this disease to every corner of the realm. We cannot do that. This is our burden now. No matter what, we owe it to ourselves, to our way of life – to Life itself – not to let others suffer as we are suffering. If we have failed Life, then let us make amends.’

Down in the crowd, Henrik gave him a rare and respectful smile. Fletch looked to his wife and children and there was no mistaking their expressions now: simple pride.

‘I propose we seal ourselves off in this valley,’ he continued. ‘We quarantine anyone who shows signs of the disease, and we enforce that quarantine absolutely. I’m sorry – but it’s the only way. And I promise you that we will get through this. We will come out the other side a stronger people for it.’

Into the hush that met these words came the sound of two hands slowly clapping. Fletch looked down to see Eilert leaning back in his chair, a satiric grin on his face, leading an applause that quickly built to a crescendo.

They’re all scared, Fletch thought. All of them. But we *will* get through this.

FADING

He could hear Johann running around to the other side of the cottage, pounding over the hard-packed ground.

‘He’s gone that way!’ Johann shouted. ‘Past the shed and onto the lower field!’

Fletch paused, his chest heaving. Beside him, Peer held up his warding stick. He could hear the boy’s breath coming heavily through the canvas mask. He was scared. Fletch didn’t blame him.

‘Cut him off!’ he shouted back. He heard Johann pivot and scramble across the barren field, heading for the murky shadows at the bottom of the slope. It was dark, and curfew was two hours old. A truculent vapour had clung to the ground all day, and now, as the night folded itself across the valley, the mist seemed to billow and rise like a foul breath exhaled from the very earth. Behind his mask, which was soaked in tinctures and herbal ointments, Fletch’s face felt cold. He looked back at the cottage, the broken door yawning from the hinge.

‘Stay here,’ he said to his son. Peer nodded, knuckles white against his warding stick. ‘You’ll be fine. All you need to do is shout if anyone comes out of the cottage and I’ll come straight back. Can you do that?’

‘Yes, father,’ he trembled.

‘Good lad.’

‘W-what if *he* comes back?’

‘He won’t,’ Fletch reassured him. ‘But if he does, then... just run. And don’t let him touch you.’

Johann was calling again. Fletch set off at a jog down the central track. He hated leaving Peer in such danger, but the boy was tough and he was

old enough now to look after himself. He had to be. If the nightmare of the last three months had taught him anything, it was that even children weren't safe from this disease, or from what the disease did to the people it ensnared. Nothing was.

The dead fields stank around him as he ran. Limp grass slobbered on the verge. The mist broke apart and closed behind him, and in the distance it thickened from the smoke of the burning pit, where all the valley's dead were cremated.

He had lost track of Johann's position and called his name, his voice muffled by the flat, dead air. After a moment came a distant, 'Aye, this way!'

'Any sign?'

'No, nothing. I'm at the culvert past the paddock, but I can't see him.'

Fletch stopped at the point where the track veered off to the right, towards the Karlsson farm. The chill air was in his bones. He rubbed his hands together, leaning his warding stick against his shoulder – six feet of polished hazel, blunt at both ends. Johann had crafted them for each of the patrols.

He tried to listen, but all he could hear was the faint whisper of a sudden breeze that drifted through the windbreak at the field's southern border. The mist, agitated by his passing, settled again into the dips and hollows of the track. Further down, a mile or two distant, he saw the swinging glow of a storm lamp – one of the other patrols, cutting by the crossroads.

An eddy of the breeze parted the mist and Fletch caught sight of movement, further back the way he had come. A shadow, slipping from cover. There was a sour smell in the air, the noise of a shuffling tread, a soft gurgle like water in a ditch – and then Peer was screaming. The boy's high, thin voice flashed out against the night.

'Johann! He's gone back to the cottage!' Fletch shouted as he ran, sprinting up the incline. 'Peer, run, boy – just run!'

When he got there, pounding back up the track, Peer was sobbing on the ground. His warding stick was in the mud at his side and the mask had slipped from his face. Fletch could see the horror on his son's face. In front of him stood a man, and the man was reaching forward as if to give the boy a helping hand – except it wasn't a man, Fletch knew, not any more. And what it held out wasn't exactly a hand either.

‘Torvald,’ Fletch said as he came close. He kept his voice level, the warding stick extended in front of him like a spear. He risked taking off his own mask. Perhaps if his old friend could see his face...

From the corner of his eye Fletch could see Johann sprinting around from the other side of the cottage, but he held out a warning hand to hold him off. ‘Torvald,’ he said again. ‘It’s me, Fletch. Come now, old man, you know the rules – we all do. You have to go back inside.’

Slowly, the thing that had once been Torvald shuffled around to face him. The voice when it came was a bubbling gasp:

‘...Fletch...’

‘Oh, my Life,’ he whispered.

He had always been a spry old thing, Torvald. Clean living and hard work had made him rangy and slim, and although old age had bent his back and weakened his bones, he had always been to Fletch an image of what the valley meant as a whole: a good, clean place, a safe and decent country where men and women could grow old after a lifetime of honest labour. When they died, they would be treated with honour and respect, their bones planted in the very soil that fed the crops that fed the rest of them in turn. That’s what Torvald was.

But this...

They called it ‘the Rot’, but in truth it had nothing in common with decay. The disease was more like a mad abundance. As Torvald turned to face him, Fletch, his mind already bent with all the horrors of the season, idly wondered how he had got so fat. But then as the blackened, tumescent skin across Torvald’s stomach split open and broke apart, leaking out a thick, viscous slime that pooled around his bloated feet, Fletch realised that all this bulk was just the thriving profusion of the Rot. The old man was riddled with it, and what stood and faced Fletch now was not so much his friend but in some way the disease itself – the Rot in a human skin.

‘*She’s gone...*’ he blubbered. ‘*She died... in there...*’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘*Nora... You killed her... You did this...*’

‘It had to be done. It *had* to be done, for the good of all.’

‘*For the good... of all...*’ Torvald said, and the ruin of his mouth split into something like a smile. ‘*Yes.*’

Fletch raised his warding stick and pressed it deep into the flabby skin of

Torvald's chest, releasing a smell of marsh gas and nightsoil. Johann had circled around, and he gagged as he helped Fletch push the old man back towards his door. Fletch tried not to look at his one remaining eye. And his arm... So swollen that it looked like a bifurcated tentacle, the oily, dark limb flapped and twitched at Torvald's side. He shambled back into the cottage without any protest, quiescent as an old ram taken to the slaughter, and as they barricaded the door they heard him crying in the dark, muttering and singing to the corpse of his rotting wife. The stench was overpowering.

They had been married for fifty years, Fletch told himself. Fifty years.

Through his tears he said, 'Nail it shut. Don't let him get out again.'

On past the farmhouses and cottages they went, their warding sticks on their shoulders, their tintured masks pressed tight to their mouths. Dead trees starkly broached the night around them, and in the fields they heard the slithering progress of scavenging things. The air hung dank and heavy, threaded with evil smells. Far off they sometimes heard the rise and fall of screaming, or nearer at hand the drip and burble of rank liquids passing in the ditches. Great leathery moths, like scraps of rags, came scouring at the glow of their storm lamp, and underfoot, where the lamp cast its soft light, they trampled the horrible, crawling things that quickened in the mud. If they found any bodies they marked the spot for later collection – fresh passengers for the corpse-cart.

The whole valley was shrouded in stench and misery. It was a chill and yet somehow humid place too, cold as the grave and as sultry as any rainforest on Ghyran's tropical rim. Across the valley, like a shuffling tide, the mist rippled and fell still. Fletch stretched his neck to see the dark, dappled sky; the sliver of moon, the scattered stars, the faint and crystal glow that some claimed was far Hysh shining in the reaches of the cosmos.

They were heading back towards the crossroads when one of the western patrols called to them from the fields. It was Henrik, with two men whose names Fletch didn't know – Henrik's cronies from the tavern, no doubt. Between them they drove another man whose hands were bound.

The man stumbled and fell and the other two helped him up, but when they got closer, they threw him to the ground. He rolled onto his back, laughing at them. Fletch saw at once that it was Eilert. Powerfully he was

reminded of the day his son had reappeared, staggering from the trees at the Fecund Procession. He looked tired, faded somehow, sallow and weak.

‘Caught him sneaking around the top grounds,’ Henrik spat. ‘Creeping around Thom Kersen’s plot, trying to prise the boards from his quarantine sheds. The gods know why though, there’s nowt alive in there now.’

‘Not even Thom Kersen, I should imagine,’ Eilert sniggered.

Henrik caught him a square blow across the shoulder with his warding stick. Eilert yelped and shuffled away from him across the mud.

‘Are you just going to take this senile old fool’s word for it?’ he protested to his father. He raised his tied hands. ‘I was creeping nowhere. I heard a noise and I was investigating, or haven’t you noticed that someone’s been freeing these people?’

‘Aye, you!’ Henrik snarled. ‘It’s you doing it, you maggot!’

‘You know there’s a curfew,’ Fletch said. ‘What were you doing out?’

He tried not to think of the truth in Eilert’s words. Somehow, the quarantined victims *had* been getting out. There was no way Torvald could have forced that door alone.

Eilert sat up and slowly gained his feet. He rubbed his shoulder.

‘Maybe I think your ragged militia needs all the help it can get. Nothing but a gang of drunk old men and scared young boys, from what I can see.’

‘We’re not a militia.’

‘I should say not,’ Eilert smirked. ‘If you really had to defend this place, how well do you think you’d do? Blunt sticks against... Well, I won’t say. I wouldn’t want to frighten the lad.’

‘I’m not scared,’ Peer said.

‘Never mind that,’ Fletch frowned. ‘There’s no call for such talk, we’re not under attack, not in any way.’

‘Aren’t you...?’ Eilert raised an eyebrow. ‘Are you so sure?’

‘There’s truth in that,’ Henrik admitted. There was a glint in his eye, and his hand strayed up to the pendant hanging from his neck. The branched crown of the Everqueen, Fletch saw. Some had always kept to the old ways, it seemed. ‘None of this is natural.’

‘It’s an illness,’ Fletch protested, ‘a disease! We just have to ride this out, and—’

‘That’s all you think this is!’ one of Henrik’s comrades said. Fletch recognised him then, the skinny young man from the gathering in the

tavern. Evidently, judging by the pendant around his neck, he had embraced the old ways too. ‘The very ground underfoot is sickened and befouled, and to take but a step on the good earth is to wade through a midden of filth! This is Life’s vengeance, you cannot doubt it!’

‘And what do you suggest?’ Fletch said, rounding on him. ‘Abasement? Prayer? What difference do you think that would make?’

‘Sacrifice,’ the young man said, suddenly calm. ‘The just punishment of those who have done us wrong.’

He stepped back and whipped a blade from his sleeve. Eilert raised his hands and backed away, still laughing.

‘You can’t mean me, surely? What have I ever done but tell a good tale for a flagon of barley wine! You bumpkins are all the same, curse you. So damned suspicious...’

Henrik, hunched and menacing, took a step. ‘It all started when he came. He brought this filth from out there. He’s been seen in every corner of this valley, spreading it far and wide. At night he slithers from whatever outhouse or hedgerow he’s hidden himself in and spews his poison into the grass and the air and the water. It’s him, you know it is! He has always hated this place!’

Fletch swung his warding stick round to protect his son, and at his side Johann drew his own knife.

‘Just him then, is it?’ Fletch asked them. ‘Just him and it’ll be over?’

‘Aye,’ Henrik muttered. ‘It’ll all be over.’

‘Is that right? And what of Simple Lars then, lynched at the crossroads not one week past? Or the widow Maria, beaten to death in her own fields, accused of witchcraft? What about them?’

‘She *was* a witch!’ the young man screeched. His eyes were bloodshot, his face red. ‘She’d been seen communing with a bloatfly as big as your head! And in the fields she did dance naked with the rotting corpse of her own son!’

‘Lies!’ Fletch told them. He felt desperate, untethered. ‘Lies told by frightened people who don’t know any better!’

‘And you do?’

The young man lunged then, swinging the knife. Fletch dodged and launched an uppercut with the warding stick, the pole cracking smartly against the man’s jaw and sprawling him out in the muck. Henrik and the

other man took a step back. They all stood with weapons ready, hatred in their eyes.

After a moment, Fletch told Johann to cut Eilert's bonds. Eilert, uncertain, rubbed his wrists.

'Run,' Fletch said. 'Seal yourself off, if you can. Find somewhere to hide until this is over.'

Eilert nodded. 'That's twice now, father. I won't forget it,' he said, and into the parting mist he ran, his footsteps soon fading in the flattened air.

Fletch looked at the others. 'Go, all of you,' he said. 'Pray for deliverance, and good luck to you.' He threw his stick into the mud and took Peer's hand. 'Come on, son. Let's go home.'

Later, the farmhouse barricaded as best they could, Fletch, Hedda and the children sat around the kitchen table and held hands. They said a prayer, such as it was, an old litany to the spirit of the green. When they were finished, they gathered up a few nuts and berries and left them on the windowsill outside. The Fading festival had always been a joyous occasion. Gifts of the past harvest were donated to the forest, to the mountains, to the streams and the grasses and the long, sweet meadows of the valley. This was a meagre substitute. The bounty had always been made ready against the coming Fallow, but Fletch did not allow himself to think of that hard season, advancing on them like an army, pitiless and cruel.

'We'll survive,' Hedda whispered as they stood at the window. 'We have enough to eat. We have each other.'

Fletch grasped her arm. Petra came over to take their hands, and Fletch smiled to see his daughter so undaunted. They would survive.

Peer grinned at him from the doorway, irrepressible. As Fletch approached to embrace him, the boy winked, and then his hand darted up to his eye. He bent over, gasping.

'What is it?' Fletch said.

'Nothing,' Peer said, 'just... there was something in my eye, it – no, that's it.'

He held out his hand. There, between forefinger and thumb, pale and no bigger than a seed, wriggled a maggot.

FALLOW

‘...silence, silence, silence...’

Sometimes they called his name. At night, while he tried to sleep on the rushes in the kitchen, he would hear them whispering through the gaps in the floorboards above. He didn’t think they ever slept. No matter the hour, he could hear them shuffling backwards and forwards, groaning, knocking things over, bumping into the furniture. Then whispering, calling his name. He closed his ears to it. Whatever was left in him that could feel pain or grief, it was gone now. He couldn’t say what remained.

One morning he stood at the back door and gazed at what had once been the valley. Tendrils of smoke curled lazily across the bogs that mouldered where the fields had lain. Jungles of creepers and vines choked the old farmhouses, and strange cries rolled through the air like the bellowed calls of mourning animals. The air was thick with flies. Every surface was matted in a carpet of filth, glistening with iridescent creatures – fleas, ticks and mites. Everywhere Fletch looked there was a grotesque and exuberant richness, a rotting stew of plenty. It was a wasteland.

There was wood stacked in the outhouse, fuel stores laid in against a winter that had never really come. He took the bundled sticks and laid them around the farmhouse, inside and out. Sometimes, as he moved from the outhouse to the door, he saw shadows pass across the upstairs windows, where tapping fingers left smears against the glass. He ignored them.

‘...silence, silence, silence...’

He wasn’t even aware of the words he was muttering. Now and then though, when he paused in his work, he felt the itch of something growing

at the back of his mind. It was the beginnings of a voice, perhaps, the first mumbled suggestions of something slowly taking form.

‘...silence, silence, silence...’

It promised the still, inward gaze of illness, so peaceful and quiet, so free. He shook his head clear and wrapped the bandages more tightly against the ulcers on his hands.

‘No,’ he mumbled. ‘No.’

He kept gathering wood.

Eilert, his son, had been much on his mind these last days. Explorer, tale-teller, entertainer, idler. Fletch wondered if half those stories had been true. Poisoner? Henrik had been so sure. If he was right, then what had Fletch cast into the valley that day when he helped him up at the Blessing Ground? Had his son freed those quarantined victims, helping the disease to spread so rapidly? If so, why? It didn’t make any sense.

No, he couldn’t believe it. He was probably rotting in a ditch by now, his corpse some wild fermenting brew of mutating forms. There was no way he could have survived this madness. At times, it was a wonder to Fletch that he was still here himself; but then he felt the pain in his hands, the numbness, the stink. That voice creeping through the back of his mind.

He heard a thump across the floorboards above him, a slobber of agony. Foul liquid dripped through the gap.

‘Not long, not long,’ he mumbled.

He struck flame to the kindling from his tinderbox, carrying the small blaze as tenderly as a newborn child from corner to corner. He lit each stacked pile of wood, blowing on the flames with lips that were necrotic and black. He could feel things squirming under his skin.

The smoke rose around him. There was something clean about it, he felt. It was the honest smell of burning wood, the smell that would call him across the fields when the day’s work was done, where Hedda and his children would be waiting for him.

He heard his family moan as the flames took hold, screaming from the barred room above, and even now there was some small, selfish part of Fletch that wanted to run. He clenched his fists, hissed at the scorch of fire across his flesh.

‘I’m sorry, I am so sorry.’

No. They had sealed themselves off in the valley for a reason. All of them now were surely dead, and the only victory against this thing was the thought that it would die here when they all died. It would get no further. The world outside would be safe, and even if no one ever heard their story or knew what they had done, that victory would be enough.

There was a wild scream somewhere near at hand, and it was only as the flames crisped the hair from his head that Fletch realised it was coming from him.

There would be no mid-Fallow festival, he thought absurdly. Because this was not Fallow, and there was nothing to celebrate, and no one to celebrate it with...

Then, through the cracked pane of the blackened window, he saw Eilert strolling across the field. He carried a pack on his back, and he was smiling. His skin hung off him in blubbery folds, and a trio of yellow pustules had swollen his face. He looks so happy, Fletch thought. He looks whole.

Eilert raised a hand to wave and even through his agony Fletch found himself waving back – although the hand he raised was now a candle streaming in the inferno. As the fire consumed him, he heard a strangulated wail lifting from his throat, lancing into the rising smoke: a scream of rage at the man who had betrayed them; rage and sorrow, and pity for all those across the valley and across the realm who they had failed to save and who would suffer now in turn, over and over and over in the never-ending cycle of Life, which only now, as the flames rampaged across the farmhouse, he truly saw – and, as Eilert had promised, it blinded him with its brightness.

Eilert shouldered his pack and took the path down to the lower ground, where tangled tracks led through the forest to the wider world. It was a beautiful day, he thought.

Behind him, the screams faded like mist in the sun.

SUPPLICATION

Jake Ozga

The man's hands are covered in gore as he kneels by the side of the dying beast. The animal's flank rises and falls, blood-flecked spittle bubbling from its mouth. The man holds the knife in white knuckles. He looks into the animal's upturned eye: wide and dark and sad. It is beyond fear now and seems almost calm. His other hand is stroking its throat and he makes soothing noises but he knows that there are words he is meant to say. Black blood pulses slowly from its neck, then slower still.

Eventually the beast's eye rolls up to white and it takes its last breath. The man has been breathing along with it and for a moment he also stops, but then he sighs and wipes the knife clean on the grass, before putting it down and cleaning his hands. They are old hands, horned with calluses from scythe and felling axe. He has broken them before over the years and they have not always healed straight. They are crossed with scars, some of which contain a story, but most he does not remember. Bloodstains on an old man's hands, he thinks, and the memory of blood feels so familiar, but the old, weatherworn hands seem like they must belong to someone else.

Once, in another life, he had been a soldier. Before his tribe were farmers, they were warriors and though he was too young, he had gone to battle alongside them. But they had given up their wars and crossed the mountains to hide here in this remote corner of Ghur. He had been a youth when they had laid down their arms and taken up ploughshares, and he had not found the change easy, though it was all he had known in the decades since. Farming ill-suited him, he thinks, and this then is an end to it: it ends in blood, as all things will. His tribe had always believed there was power in blood.

In the fields around him his few animals lie still, their deaths as clean as he could give them. In the end it had not been a ritual but a mercy. At the edges of the fields the trees are beginning to show signs of corruption for the first time in the decades he has lived here. Leaves turn black and drop from withered branches, roots drink deep from some unseen taint below the earth. Poison in the land and in the air. It will not be long before the corruption of the Dark Gods spreads across this sanctuary, and he has seen what this poison does to animals. And to people. It is no longer safe for him here.

There are words he should say, but it has been so long since he last offered anything to the god of his youth. His tribe had turned their backs on their deity long ago. They had claimed to have no more use for a warrior-god, but he wondered if that was true, or if they had been shunned as a punishment for their cowardice.

Away down the track from where he kneels, his home is burning and in the scorched timbers lie the bones of the woman he has loved for all his life. He cannot bear to watch the fire: it is a violent intrusion in the grey landscape, a last ember in a long-extinguished and cooling realm.

Beside him – placed with care on a small cairn of stones, and wrapped in cheesecloth bound with twine – is the skull of his wife, taken from the funeral pyre before the flames claimed it. She had known that he would do this – that he needed this symbol, this sign that she was still with him. She would have said he was foolish but she would have had sympathy for his superstitions. He feels the skull regard him now, empty sockets blindfolded by filthy mesh.

‘So, it is done,’ he says aloud, though there is no one to hear. She might once have teased his solemn tone, but she is dead and gone.

The animal blood pools into the poisoned earth and he says, ‘If there is a god watching, I have given him all that I have. What god could ask more than that?’

He picks up the axe he uses for cutting wood and the small amount of provisions he has prepared and packed in a small satchel. He ties the skull to his belt with a leather thong cord and hangs the axe from a loop in his belt. He slips the knife into a sheath concealed in his boot. He has taken the blanket from their bed, rolled it tight around a small iron pan and cup and a flask of rainwater, and strapped it to his pack. He wears a heavy coat

of coarse wool against the cold as the year ends and the sun dwindles to a pinprick through thick cloud. This is all he has. The food will not last long.

Even though they had both known this day would come, he feels unprepared. His wife had been dying for a long time as her body fought a losing battle against the corruption. He had watched over her sickbed day and night for years as she became too frail to move or speak, the sickness in her body a reflection of the sickness in the land: sickness that she kept at bay with the gift of her magic, her witchcraft. When he had been a young man her witchcraft had appalled him, but it was her gift that had kept them both safe when all around them was lost to Chaos, and it was her magic that kept the corruption at bay so that they might have a life together even as the realm beyond the outskirts of the farm fell to ruin. And so it had been these past decades – how many years he cannot be sure – as he worked the land and tended to their few animals and she became frailer.

There is a single trail that leads from the farm and it is overgrown, hidden and winding through great tall trees to climb out of the valley. The man uses a gnarwood stick to beat back the brambles and hookvine that snare his clothing but which break and crumble as brittle as old bone. The trees are black and disfigured, branches twisted to grow inwards or towards the earth. The corruption has crept closer to their sanctuary every year and the forest slowly dies an unnatural death. The great beasts that once lived in the woods have long since fled or been corrupted into twisted things that thrash and writhe. It has been many years since he last heard the keening moans of these wretched creatures echoing through the valley.

He walks on through the night, at times groping blindly in the dark when the branches, though leafless, grow thick enough to conceal the moon, so that he seems to be walking through a tunnel winding deep into the hillside. He worries that the funeral pyre will attract unwelcome attention, although he does not truly know if there is any living creature anywhere in the land, and a part of him is now convinced that he is the last, the last living thing in the realm.

You are not alone. She speaks in his head. Her words are tinged with deep sadness. *You are not alone, my love.*

After a moment the man speaks aloud. ‘It is good to hear your voice. I thought I would never hear it again.’

It was his habit to speak to her throughout the day, to tell her about his work or about any triviality he could think of, even in the recent years when the sickness was so painful that she could no longer answer.

He thinks for a moment and picks his words with care so as not to break the spell with his gracelessness. Words do not come easily to him.

‘When you were alive,’ he says, ‘I would sometimes hear you even when you were not there or when you could no longer speak. I thought maybe it was madness, but I did not mind. I thought I would gladly go mad if it meant I could talk with you again.’

She laughs gently. He smiles. It had been her habit to laugh at his foolishness even though she would try not to. Laughter had once come easily to her.

It is not madness, my love. I am here with you now. I was trying to speak to you before but it was so hard to make myself heard. I heard you though, I always heard you. Death has changed things. I am here with you now and I will never leave you. No, it is not madness, my love, madness would be too easy.

It is the most natural thing in the world to talk to her.

At night the temperature drops further and he has to keep moving or the cold will set in: needles of ice already pierce his frozen feet. He wraps himself in the blanket and tries to walk but it snags endlessly on brambles, so he packs it away again. He anticipates her teasing him about this but she says nothing. The night seems to last forever, with no moon to be seen and no sounds save for the sounds he himself makes, and in the distance the rumble of thunder. Through the night he speaks to her, his passage marked by whispers into the darkness, interrupted only by the cracking of branches and the distant storm as it echoes around the hills and the mountains.

He remembers another storm, witnessed a long time ago. He and the young woman who would later be his wife had run away together, as they had done many times previously, to find some time alone, away from the prying eyes of the people of his tribe. They had come to a point they knew at the top of a hill where they could be hidden together and they looked out across the valleys at the town, still new and half-formed, nestled among the endless green forests. As the rain beat down on the verdant canopy they held each other, and as the thunder rumbled they talked through the

night. It was then that she revealed to him what she knew of her gift and he was ashamed as he remembered the things he had said in response to her confessions.

You were angry, she says in his head. I knew you would be and I told you those things anyway, because I knew you would not let anger overwhelm you. I knew that you would be the only one I could confide in. It was ever the curse of your tribe to be so wrathful.

The sun rises and there is no birdsong to greet the daybreak. He walks through the dead trees and brushes past skeletal fingers of bracken. Soon the storm catches him and rain begins to fall from the clouds that hang heavily in the grey sky, broken only occasionally by the last, hopeless light of the dying season. The rain turns the trail to thick mud, which sticks to his boots like tar and stinks like foetid breath. The forest closes around him like a great, slow beast drawing him into its breast and it scratches and gropes needfully at him with claws of rotten wood. He walks on, pushing forward into the splintered teeth of broken branches, into great jaws stretched wide.

All the while they speak of their life together and though her life has ended, he feels as if a new chapter has now begun, as if the death of her poisoned body has freed her from a prison and now a weight is lifted from her. But despite this, he worries. He pictures her on her deathbed.

‘You do not have to fight any more,’ he says. ‘You gave us a life together but it cost you so much. You don’t have to do that any more. if you are holding on for me...’

I have become used to pain, she says. But we can escape this suffering together. I will fight for you for a while longer, and then we will both be free of this. I promise.

He thinks that she sounds uncertain, but he doesn’t say anything. He has never known her to be less than certain. But death, he agrees, will surely change things.

Eventually he can walk no further. That night he builds a small fire and he lies at the foot of an ancient tree. Crushed glass eyelids close over eyes dry and tearless. The creaks and groans of the forest in the airless night infiltrate his sleep and contaminate his dreams. He dreams of strange stars and a dark pit under a sunless sky, and when he wakes, he struggles to

shake off the darkness.

It was in the mornings that he felt the pain of the life he had lost with his wife most profoundly. Before their bed had become a sickbed and when they still lay together, it was in the mornings that he would sometimes see into her dreams. She had dreams of divination, dreams so vivid that they leaked while she slept, as if too powerful to be contained. For a few moments before she woke he would share her visions of the future, and though all he saw were abstractions they were so full of life and passion and pleasure he wondered if they could truly be prophecy.

When her gifts had been discovered, the tribe had shunned her. She had offered to use her gifts to help them: her visions of the future warned of a coming danger; and she swore her affinity with the land could be of use to help keep them hidden and safe. But his tribe had never trusted in magic and though they were greatly changed since their exodus through the mountains, there were some prejudices that ran too deep. They cast her out and they said that this was a mercy, and that they had spared her the iron collar and black metal nails that would seal the fate of a true witch because they could not bring themselves to call a beloved child an abomination. To be cast out alone was a death sentence, but he had never seen his people so merciful. So as a girl of eighteen years she was exiled and left to the justice of the wilds. And as a lovestruck boy not much younger than her, he had slipped away in the night without saying farewell to his family or friends and had gone with her. And they were soon married, the two of them, by a stream through a meadow with no one to witness but the birds as he stumbled over his words and she smiled and rolled her eyes, and there were no vows made, just an understanding that life was often brutal and cruel and that they should make of it what they could and that they would do that together.

He rekindles the fire enough to make tea in his pot from herbs he has grown in the garden next to their house, adding a pinch of bitter Mhurghast root as his wife had always done, though in truth he never acquired the taste for it. The pot is a simple thing of iron, scratched and marked a thousand times or more; he has had it since he was a boy. He eats strips of dried meat and drinks bitter tea from his cup, swilling the leaves as if they may form shapes and from those shapes he might make some sign or derive some form of guidance. Once they would have eaten

breakfast and drunk tea together and shared a few moments before the day began. But eating alone is familiar to him now. She does not talk to him that morning but he knows she is watching over him and he is comforted.

That day he walks until the sun is beginning to set, and in all that time he does not see or hear another living creature. Dark woods and thickets separate only briefly to reveal a view down into the valley, where he thinks he can still see a column of smoke rising. The forest begins to thin towards the end of the afternoon and the path becomes wider and then emerges from the trees to meet with a dirt road. In the gloaming he sits on a stone at the side of the road and removes his pack and rubs at a pain in his shoulder. He stares for a while, looking at nothing, lost in his thoughts. The grey light of day fades into the gloom of evening and still the man does not move except to wrap himself in a blanket against the cold. To the east the road leads into more forest and down into the foothills, where the woodland will eventually give way to farmland and then, after a few days' walk, lead to the town that he left as a youth. To the west the road trails off towards the mist-draped mountains that marked the edge of this hidden land, snaking across the crests of hills like the broken spine of an ancient god.

It was from those mountains that he had arrived as a boy, carrying his grandfather's axe for the last time, forging a path into the hidden green lands that they thought would keep them safe. And it was from those same mountains that, years later, the apocalypse had caught up with them.

The apocalypse would rage forever and consume everyone and everything, and when there was nothing left to be eaten it would consume itself and the realm would be a carrion corpse, picked clean of meat. The Dark Gods waged war without end and his grandfather and the others had been those few that had understood this and wanted something else. He could scarcely remember the crossing but that it was arduous and at times they had thought it may be impossible. When they finally descended into the remote valley they thought that surely the apocalypse could not follow them here. They threw down their weapons and sought to become farmers and gave up on war and gods, and for a time their life was quiet and simple. And when the hordes eventually descended from the mountains – mad and starving, man and beast and things worse than beasts, worshippers of pain and slaves to darkness – all that followed was a

massacre.

It was from a vantage like this one that he had watched the walls of the town come down. Timber palisades collapsing under the press of the beasts that walked like men before the real slaughter began. He did not go to help, because what could he have done, a boy alone with impotent rage and a woodsman's axe? She did not go to help and her reasons were her own. He wondered, is this the price you pay for abandoning your god? Is this the price of cowardice?

He sits for a while longer, looking out across the road towards the mountains as it stretches off ahead of him, looking for signs of life: smoke from a fire or movement such as of a bird in the trees, but there is none. Mist hangs heavily in the airless day and milky light congeals across the vista. Shadows stretch and then recede. He thinks of the journey he will make across the mountains and what will come after. He wonders if there is anywhere left in the realm that has not felt the touch of the wars of the Dark Gods, if there are any free people left. He feels the anger inside him, ever-present in the core of his being. The anger of a child born into war and a boy beset by death and injustice. The anger of a man powerless to fight against things that cannot be controlled. He has lived too long and has been forgotten by the realm and by time and by the gods, and he feels that there is no one for him to ever love again and nothing of significance left for him in his life.

'Could you have saved them?' he asks. 'When the enemy came, could you have hidden the town like you kept us hidden all these years?' He has never asked this before. It is a question dredged from the depths of his misery.

I would have tried, she says after a while. If they had not sent me away. I did not owe them anything.

The man sits in silence for a while. Then, with the slow, halting speech he uses when he is picking his words carefully, he says, 'There is something else, something you are not telling me.'

There is.

He waits, watching mist pool at the base of the mountains, thick as soup. The snow-covered peaks of the mountains are hidden in cloud and this makes them look spectral. Jagged phantom teeth. The edge of the world he knows and the land beyond nothing but ghosts.

They are not dead, she says at last. They are perhaps not alive but they are not dead.

‘Like you? Do they remain as you remain?’

I don't know.

‘Have you...’ he asks, searching for the words, ‘have you seen them in a dream?’

I don't think so.

‘How can it be that they are... not dead?’

I don't know.

‘We know what came for them, we saw the enemy. There would be nothing left of them. Any that survived the fall of the town would not have lasted long. Are they still there?’

I'm sorry. All I have is a feeling.

‘They were my friends, my family. I should look for myself.’

There is no reply.

He nods slowly. ‘I should go and look.’

He conceives a pathway to redemption.

He makes camp at the side of the road for the night but lights no fire and keeps well back from the path even though it does not look like it has been used in months or even years. The weather feels warmer, though damp in the aftermath of the storm, and he lies on top of his sodden blanket. That night he dreams of his father and mother, who had died when he was an infant, and his grandfather whose axe he had carried until he was to be old enough to have an axe-carrier of his own. He dreams of friends he had known from the town as a boy and as a young man. Of the blacksmith's son with whom he had fought often but who was too gentle and too soft to ever be a blacksmith himself. In his dream he cannot recall their faces and their features shift and change. The faces of everyone he had once known deform and melt together endlessly, reshaping as if beaten by the hammers of the forge until they lose their old shapes entirely and become something new.

In the morning he drinks cold, bitter tea and packs away his camp, such as it is, before striking out to the east in the direction of the town with a sense of purpose that has reinvigorated him, and that combined with the descent

of the path means that he makes swift progress. By midday he reaches the foothills and the mountain path is far behind him. The trees are sparser and the ground becomes hard and rocky so that at times he scrabbles down inclines of loose stone and shale.

He eats a lunch of sour bread and cheese and remembers how in his youth he had scavenged for gorseberries on hills such as this, but there are no berries to be found now. He turns over a heavy stone and underneath the poison is evident, like a sweet-smelling mould just below the surface, choking the life from the land. He wonders how long he can walk through such a place before it gets inside him, before he breathes it in like the flower seeds that would drift in the air in the summer months and get in his beard so that he coughed and sneezed and she had laughed until his coughing became so severe that she doused his head with the water urn she had been carrying, back when she could still carry such things, and then laughed again. He wonders, if his head was now split open, would it be full of the same sweet-smelling mould? She has not spoken since her confession the other night. He eats in silence knowing that she is giving him time with his thoughts.

He asks her, 'How long have you known about what happened to the townsfolk? Did you not tell me this thing before because you thought I would leave you to go and find the truth for myself?'

This must be the wrong thing to say, he thinks, because she does not answer.

'I would never have left you,' he says.

But a part of him is thinking of people laughing and dancing and touching and there is a real pain there, a pain he had not realised he carried before but which now he understands is a vast weight that he carries every day and which he has carried for a long time.

In time he sets out again along a trail that snakes down the hillside, and as the sun begins to set he becomes aware of a noise coming from lower on the path. A bell tolls, the sound made flat and muffled by the mist so that it is strangely discordant. At once he hears footsteps on the stony road and he freezes and at the same time he hears her in his head as she warns him of the danger. He wonders how long she has been calling to him while he has been lost in melancholia. He looks back along the way he has come for a place to hide, and with great care to move quietly rather than quickly

he steps off the path at a point where it doubles back on itself, and where he is concealed by a bank of loose earth. He feels calm though his heart is pounding, and he spends a moment to erase his footprints in the soft dirt though it is unlikely that anyone will see them unless they are looking for them.

At the far end of the path, figures come into view – a procession with the bell-carrier at the head, a silver bell, strangely small and incongruous atop a long and twisted pole, pealing out as the carrier shuffles forward with slow, unsteady steps. With him walk six or seven other men and women, some wearing straps of leather armour, others naked or immodestly covered with shreds of faded purple cloth. They are emaciated, their exposed ribs and hips stark against thin alabaster skin, their eyes bulbous and possessed with insanity. They have greasy golden hair or shaven heads tattooed with intricate patterns, not the thick black hair of his tribe. Some are missing limbs, their stumps wrapped in purple cloth. They stagger, close to death, like puppets motivated by the crude manipulation of strings and the bell rings out with every jerking motion. On some he sees the symbol of the enemy: an orb with crescent moons, tattooed or scarified, raw and red on pallid white flesh. Behind them they drag a trail of shackles on long and rusted chains and the hooked barbs carve deep scars into the earth as they pass.

He has his axe gripped tight in one hand, his fear having given way to anger.

My love, she whispers, do not be so hasty to throw your life away. You can control your anger.

‘Those shackles are meant for human prey,’ he whispers. ‘Who do they hunt?’

They have turned on each other, she replies. Their appetites are not sustainable. They hunt for others like themselves. They have been here too long.

He holds his breath until they have gone, the bell fading into the distance. To see other people for the first time in decades and to see them so ruined and depraved sickens him deeply.

That night he makes camp away from the path, hidden in the rocks as best as he is able. He eats dried meat and figs from his farm and drinks water from the flask that is now almost empty. He lies with his back to a gnarled

tree and with one eye on the road. After a time he sleeps, though fitfully, and dreams of the silver bell.

By the afternoon of the fifth day he arrives into the lands that he recognises from his youth, but the realm seems changed and though he sees views that he thinks must be familiar, they seem alien also. Anaemic sunlight bleeds pale and watery into the pools between trees and the mist clings to his boots as he wades through it. The air itself feels thick and wet and there is a cloying, unseasonal warmth such that he takes off his coat, and after some consideration, leaves it hidden by the side of the road. He reasons that he can collect it again if he returns this way to attempt the mountain passage, but he does not mark the spot.

He walks through lands half-remembered, as the landscape begins to level out and the great forest fractures into woods and thickets. The path straightens and at times now shows signs of use: the shallow ruts of cartwheels and then a broken cart itself, discarded and pushed to one side, the yoke splintered like a toppled tree, iron-bound wheels separated from the axle and the bed of the cart stained the colour of rust. White orchids grow among the debris, the first flowers he has seen since the farm. They are refulgent and glistening, dripping with oily liquid.

He eats sparingly and sleeps when he is able, finding shelter at the foot of a tree or one time in a stone circle that may have once been a shepherd's hut, spreading the blanket across the top of the stones to keep out a persistent drizzle so invasive that the cover seems to make little difference and he is soaked through. He drinks from a stone trough that has collected rainwater and refills his flask. Around him the landscape feels familiar and strange at once – it is ancient, sempiternal yet somehow transient as though it is a place from a dream or painting. Details are strangely rendered: he sees a meadow of long grass that sways and shimmers despite the stillness of the day and more flowers that bloom in nauseating hues only to wither and fade into rot at his approach. Once, in the distance, he sees what he takes to be horses, but their gait is awkward and their silhouettes seem deformed against the backdrop of the incessant glaucous sky.

One day he comes to the first of the bone piles: a dead bird on the road, tiny and delicate, its skeleton undisturbed by scavengers. The bones of its wings are spread wide, pristine and lucent in their whiteness. More

skeletons soon follow, so that he loses count, and at times in the dark the small bones are so numerous that they crunch underfoot, birds and small animals.

They are so perfectly intact, she muses.

‘There are no scavengers here,’ he replies. ‘Something keeps them away.’

Eventually a night begins to spread across the land that is darker than any he has known, and it is empty of stars. He walks under the jaundiced glow of a pale moon. Cast in this light, the realm seems a small and sickly thing, frail, helpless. He an unwelcome presence, like an intruder at a deathbed.

The blind-white eye of the moon holds him in silent regard and he in turn keeps his eyes downcast to watch for the path its meagre light illuminates. As he continues to put one foot ahead of the other, the sounds of dirt and grit and the occasional bone under his boots, along with his steady breathing, are the only noises to be heard in this yawning, abyssal place.

Gossamer threads brush his face, trails of cobwebs across his skin, down the back of his neck. He feels a sting that shocks him to wakefulness. He sweeps away a barely visible thread, translucent in the moonlight as it drifts and dances in the breezeless night. He realises he has strayed from the path and into woodland and that the trees here are draped in this ethereal lace, enmeshed in ropes that weave and twist and now seem to reach out towards him, caressing him with tendrils like the stinging arms of a jellyfish. His neck, cheeks and hands burn and he feels a snaking appendage push into his beard and into his mouth, and he turns and flees in horror, pulling at the strands which split and tear and vanish into watery nothingness in his fingers, until there is no trace save for the pain where he has been stung.

He finds the path again not far from where he had strayed in his somnambulance, and from its safety he watches the trees and the tendrils that seem to twist towards him. He sees how some are as fine as spider-silk and others are thicker, and these thicker ones do not drape from the trees but rather emerge from them in place of branches, and he sees at the base of one tree the partial skeleton of a man or woman. He understands that the trees are themselves things of Chaos now: carnivorous and hungry, groping in the night for the unwary.

The stings begin to itch and when he looks at them by holding his hands

close to his face in the weak moonlight, he sees the flesh dancing at the edges of the red marks, becoming spirals and the spirals splitting into further fragments, and when he moves his hands he sees their trails. He sits on the path and tries to steady his breathing as he feels panic try to take hold. Around him the realm shifts and he knows that he has been poisoned by some venom. With shaking hands he drinks from his canteen and as the first sunlight breaks over the fields, he sees the light refracted in the crystalline mist and the land is remade in unnatural hues of greys and pinks and purples. The path winds through this place like an eel and he a morsel in its gullet.

His clothes are plastered to his skin and cold rivulets of sweat run across his brow and down his back. The air is thick and wet, changed somehow and no longer meant for men. He drinks it in rough, open-mouthed gulps. The sky is not the same sky he had once lived under. The sun is not the same sun and it too traces myriad trails through liquid heavens. Light seems to come to this place from an impossible distance or as if filtered through the depths of an ocean.

He tries to fend away phantom hallucigenia that flicker around him as he stands, his flailing serving only to create more prismatic distortions. He stumbles from the path into long grass, but when he looks he sees it is not grass at all but bones that snap as he steps through them, long and impossibly thin and hollow like the bones of a bird. He comes to a stream, the water crystal clear. He submerges his head in the cool liquid. The banks of the stream appear spongelike but are brittle and sharp and his hands bleed into the water, and as he watches infinitesimally small growths emerge from the porous stone to drink at the wisps of blood, thirsty polyps tiny and translucent until engorged, and then coloured crimson they swim like eel spawn along the tracteries of the blood back to its source before they slip into the scratches on his hands and vanish beneath the skin.

He becomes aware of a sound, the protracted, sorrowful moan of a person taken beyond reason by suffering. The copse of trees that the stream runs through resonates with this sound as though it is music and he sees that among the trees are growths of something like coral and what he had taken for branches are not branches but limbs, outstretched and skeletal with blades of bone wrapped in a diaphanous memory of human skin. From the

nearest column the sound comes again, resonating with mournful beauty and he sees the shape of a man fused into the coral as if he were planted like a scarecrow in the earth with arms outstretched, then left for a thousand years while it calcified and crystallised around him. On the coral, polyps blossom and bloom with flashes of crimson, purple and pink, translucent tentacles tasting the air.

A crushing sense of dread takes hold of him and he turns from the stream to hide among roots and skeletal grass, the woods singing around him. A movement catches his eye, like silk caught in a breeze, and he realises he is looking at a figure dancing as if to the music of the tortured souls. The figure is lithe and pale, near naked and neither male nor female but somehow both. He is entranced, mesmerised by its beauty and grace. Then it pauses at one of the outcrops, where the torso of an emaciated man with stringy golden hair and wild blue eyes emerges from the coral, and he sees for the first time the claws that the dancer has instead of hands and the cloven feet and horned, noseless face and he knows he is looking upon a daemon. The golden-haired man wails, the noise discordant and inharmonious, and the daemon hisses in displeasure. It brings the claw of its left hand up, placing the tip of the pincer on the forehead of the wretched man and pressing until the blade of the claw pierces his skull. With the great care of an artisan, the daemon twists until the pitch of the wail changes in intensity and then with a smile of satisfaction it withdraws the claw, leaving a hole the size of a child's fingertip that pulses for a moment with viscous black blood.

The chorus drones on and the daemon dances as the man hides and watches with wide eyes, unable to look away. And then the daemon turns to him and walks straight to where he is hidden without prelude or ceremony, its eyes black as obsidian, its lip curled with cruelty, revealing barbed fangs and a serpentine tongue. It reaches for him with a claw half the height of a man, its head cocked in amusement. It speaks and its mouth moves asynchronously to the words.

‘You are all alone. I can taste the sorrow and the anger in your heart.’ Its voice is sibilant and melodic. The claw gently caresses his cheek.

‘Where have you been hiding? It has been so long since I have had a new toy to enjoy.’

He is paralysed – the realm exists as a pinprick of light at the end of a

tunnel and that light is the daemon and he cannot look away. Its voice makes him want to weep; its touch makes his body tense with concupiscence. He had thought these sensations were lost to him forever.

Then the daemon stops and flinches as if struck.

‘No, you are not alone.’ Its eyes search, flickering with insectile speed, and then lingering on the skull that the man now holds clutched in his hands.

‘Such a shame.’ The daemon sounds petulant. ‘I am so bored. The pleasures of this realm are tarnished with familiarity. But, I am not to have you. You are special.’

The daemon shudders with a sigh.

‘A far more beautiful thing awaits you.’

The daemon laughs then as the man lies helpless in the coral and colour bleeds away until only darkness remains. The dirge of the tortured souls rises in intensity, reaching a crescendo when a monstrous claw closes slowly between his legs and up across his torso, pressing through his flesh like the flesh of overripe fruit, bloodlessly and painlessly until finally he is bisected and the two parts of him fall away and away into the void.

He wakes with a cry, wild-eyed in blackness. The sky is dark and his heart races. There are no stars. The land shimmers with an unearthly iridescence. He stands unsteadily. The path leads on into the night and he staggers along it. He touches his forehead tentatively: he expects to find a hole, but there is none. He trips and scrambles back to his feet. The night is silent save for the crunch of bone underfoot. In time the urge to flee fades and his flight becomes a walk. He no longer has his pack but he is gripping the cloth-bound skull with a desperate tenacity. He does not notice at first that the land to either side of the path no longer exists, that the path is a causeway across nothingness. He stumbles again but when he sees that to the side of the path there is nothing but a drop into unknown darkness, he regains his feet with care and for a moment he stops and stares into the void. Far below, in the illimitable depths of an unknowable expanse, a great shape stirs, uncoiling infinite lengths. He falters.

‘What is happening to me?’ he whispers.

Do not go mad, my love. Her voice is a balm. Remember who you are and why you are here. Draw upon your anger. You are almost at the end of your

journey.

He does as he is bid.

The pallid light of day gives form to the realm again. The night recedes into dreams and the man regains his strength. At last, the path leads the man through barren fields to the broken palisades of the town he had last seen as a boy, its gate thrown wide and defiled with symbols of the Dark Gods. Illustrious above the center of the town an icon showing the orb and conjoined moon symbol of the enemy has been erected, twice the height of a man and mounted atop an unfamiliar mound. He steps over the skeletons of animals, more numerous now and stacked up against the walls of the town and the buildings inside. Against the walls of the blacksmith's shop the bones of a great beast are arranged. He has seen this type of creature before, in his youth. Docile giants, unperturbed by the intruders in their domain. The skeleton is immaculate as if the beast had laid down to die so long ago that the sun has bleached its bones clean. He knows, instinctively, that this was the last of them.

He steps over the debris of a battle fought long ago and walks among streets changed by the malign touch of the Dark Gods. Discarded weapons, axes and spears. Barricades of crates and barrels. Broken arrows cascade across an opalescent pavise, profane with glyphs and blasphemous scrawl and toppled to shelter a crop of white orchids that glisten and drip sap into the dirt. And around him the buildings themselves, foundations turned to coral and walls becoming a fleshy spongiform, puckered with heliotrope papules. Broken beams are all that remain of some structures, blackened timbers reaching to the grey sky like the fingers of a skeletal giant.

Near the center of the town he sees the icon, mounted atop a structure formed from more bones. Birds and small animals then larger beasts, then human skeletons, all artistically and intricately arranged. Some bones seem fused together and then he realises he is looking at the skeletons of beastmen, immaculately picked clean. The arrangement fills the town square, as tall as a house. He realises it is an offering, an altar.

As he approaches the structure he hears the chime of bells, and cultists emerge from the ruins to surround him. They stagger to confront him, uncoordinated and pathetic, a trap sprung too soon without guile or strategy. They are hollow men and women – whatever had once made them human has been cored out and replaced by insanity and perversion. They

debase themselves. The sight of them sickens him and he feels indignation spread through his heart until he burns with cold rage. Two dozen pairs of febrile eyes regard him with lunatic intensity.

He takes his axe from the loop on his belt and weighs it in his hands: a woodsman's axe, but robust and sharp and he has strength to swing it. The cultists are nauseating to look at, mutilated and decrepit. There are far too many. He understands that he will die here. He is older now than his grandfather was the last time he saw him.

A swing from his axe severs a leg and leaves a shaven-headed woman bleeding and screaming. Her cries are euphoric. She clutches at the severed limb, cradles it like an infant. Another blow staves in a naked man's malnourished chest, the ribs cracking like kindling. For a time he does not seem to notice; he has a small golden knife that looks more like a table implement than a weapon of war and he slashes with it recklessly until he suddenly coughs a mouthful of gore and drops to his knees, a look of surprise on his face.

There are too many of them. They press against him and foul the swings of his axe until all he can do is push them back. A knife slices across his back; the cut is shallow but stings like venom. He staggers. And then they have him. Slender fingers stronger than they appear. Cracked, black fingernails. Hands grip his arms, his hair, his clothes. Delirious whispering. A smell of perfume and necrotic flesh. They take away the axe and discard it and it lies there in the street, anonymous among the weapons of his tribe. They lead him to the icon.

He is standing at the top of the altar made of bones. In the presence of the icon his heart pounds, pulsing in his chest – drowning out all other sound. The realm throbs along with it, skin pulled taut over the hollow of a drum. He clenches his teeth until he tastes copper. Colours fade to grey and yellow. Nausea blossoms in his gut and he retches, his eyes clouding with tears as he convulses.

This close, the symbol looks like a construct of luminescent coral and polished bone forming an orb and crescent moons speared through. No, not moons he realises, but claws. The orb trembles and begins to unfold, uncurl. Petals peel, husk sheds, cracking like a cocoon. It metamorphoses from a chrysalis into a figure, a silhouette of something almost human but too slender, far too tall.

It is impossible to look at the entirety of the figure. His mind recoils, protests, his thoughts skitter away: a shoal of fish scattering before a predator rising from the depths. Waves of unconsciousness wash over him, threatening to sweep him into oblivion. Blood-red parasites swim at the edges of his vision and he fights through the encroaching darkness. Taking in details: an equine hoof, a serpentine tail, slender claws as sharp as splinters of broken glass.

The figure moves in the unmeasurable moments of time between his racing heartbeats. It twitches as if palsied, oscillates, shimmers. Its every step a spider's dance, its stride as purposeful and violent as murder. Around it swarms a kaleidoscope of phantom butterflies, tracing luminous patterns on his retina. He cannot follow the creature's movement with his eyes. It appears and disappears, stepping between liminal spaces as it transcends the limitations of the mundane and reality distorts in its wake. Around the creature his vision refracts and coruscates into a halo of strobing scintilla so vivid that he thinks he will suffer a seizure or go blind.

Before he can breathe, it is upon him and he sees its face. Milk-white skin pulled taut into a featureless mask, pallid as a dead thing dredged from the depths of the ocean. Its eyes wide and ravenous and black as the abyss. He sees himself a thousand times reflected in their insectile lenses, fragmented and splintered to infinity. He holds his breath and the mask splits – tearing like wet parchment – bisecting the face to form a lipless wound of a mouth: a crimson gash filled with needle teeth that drape viscid strands of saliva. And it wears an intimate smile, as if in anticipation of a lover.

It is alone, like you. A prince, abandoned by its god, it seeks to make amends. All this is its doing – the perfection of death is its act of worship. His wife's voice in his head.

It has been here for all this time and it has killed... everything. Every living thing. Save for us. Save for you.

He sees a second set of slender arms, childlike and delicate, split from the creature's abdomen, unfolding and unfolding again. Lithesome fingers reach towards him and with all his heart he wants to run, to close his eyes. But he knows he will not run: he will not even try. He feels the creature's breath against his neck – hot and wet and with a scent as sweet as rot. Its

fingers brush against him, unpicking and unwinding his clothing carefully until he is stripped to the waist and they find what they are looking for. Its touch sends shivers across his skin and he despairs as a small part of him thrills at the intimacy.

The daemon creature hisses in pleasure and takes the skull of his wife. A tongue spools out of the ragged slit of its mouth: a proboscis that slithers through the empty eye sockets of the skull. The mouth splits open wider than seems possible and for a moment he sees hundreds more minute teeth lining the maw of the daemon, spiralling deep into its throat. And then the skull is gone.

There were words that his people used to say in rituals before a battle when they would call for the regard of their warrior-god. He doesn't remember them all, he had been just a boy when he heard them last. But he remembers their essence, he remembers how the prayer is formed and how it must be delivered.

'Blood!' he screams, and a rage long suppressed rushes to the surface. 'Blood for the Blood God!'

He draws his concealed dagger and drives it into the daemon's neck. He saws the blade with all his strength, tearing a ragged crimson gash until the point sticks in bone and then he twists until his hands are covered in thick, black arterial blood. The daemon makes a grotesque sound, the shriek of an animal in pain merging with a watery gurgle as viscous ropes of bloodied yolk glug from the wound of its lacerated throat.

He hears his wife's voice in his head. *Your pain is the pain of a hurt child.* She laughs and her laughter is heartless. *Your god cares not for your tantrums.*

And then he stops and it takes him a moment to understand why. His arms end in bloody stumps, wrists severed by a flick of a claw. He staggers, his strength deserts him. The daemon's screams change and now they are pain and pleasure at once and the sound of it threatens to drive him mad.

'Slaanesh!' The daemon is crying out for its god in perverse exhortation. The word is a keening wail and an obscene prayer. 'Slaanesh!'

It is on its knees, its body wracked with convulsions. It plucks the knife from its throat and discards it with disdain. Its head flops pathetically on the macerated ruin of its neck, where blood still gushes like water. Even still, it takes his severed hands from where they have fallen and tosses

them into the crowd of cultists. The cultists fall upon them and devour them. The daemon continues its prayer; the appalling word uncoils inside his head – it unwinds in his brain, scraping against the inside of his skull. Pressure against his eyeballs. His vision is fading to black.

You think you know of pain but what was your suffering compared to mine? His wife's voice, breaking with emotion; her words echo with the daemon's blasphemous cry until their voices sound as one. You cannot conceive of it. You said I was a fighter, but it was not a fight. It was a massacre. You said I was a fighter as if this was the highest praise you could muster but there is beauty in surrender, in submission.

He sees a pinprick of light in a realm of darkness and the light is the daemon and it burns into his retinas. It thrashes, it staggers to its feet. It bellows. The earth vibrates as it strides towards him.

I gave in to the pain a long time ago. Alone in agony until one day I was alone no longer. My prayers were answered. You think I fought for our life together? I bargained for it.

It grips his bloody wrist and leads him away like a child. He sees then what has become of the townsfolk, his tribe. Not dead but not alive – something other. In a pit in the center of the altar of bones, the spawn writhes and undulates, an elephantine mass of mucilaginous flesh. Within it, human forms, twisted in orgiastic disfigurement, amalgamating and then dissolving as if sculpted in wet clay. Liquescent skin sloughs from the abomination to pool around his feet and it shivers. He is held to it. Its touch is glutinous and numbing. His eyes roll up to white. It consumes him.

An eternity of agony awaits us, my love. A voice in his head. It is everything we have ever wanted. In time I learned to love the pain. In time, you will too.

He feels the loneliness and the frustration melt away. He feels the anger, a constant noise in his head that he'd known since he was a boy, go still. This anger, meaningless, misguided. And he lets it go. For a blissful moment there is silence like he has never known. And then there is a new sound, a single hateful word that starts as a whisper and then builds until it reverberates throughout his being in a chorus of voices, all of them familiar and all of them his own.

FROM THE HALLS, THE SILENCE

David Annandale

She walked anticlockwise around the chapel three times before she saw what she was looking for. Inquisitor Evenya Kaelstrom stopped outside the ugly shambles of a building that leaned, as if seeking shelter and begging for alms, against the Chapel of Eternal Submission. She was half-convinced she was mistaken about the location. She verified her position with the servo-skull hovering in attendance above. It chattered confirmation. This was the place.

The storm that had been threatening for much of the day had broken. Foul rain poured from the sludgy, polluted clouds, and the wind lashed it down the alleyways of Stagnum. Drops rattled against the windows of the presbytery, the ones that were not broken. The wind shrieked through the fissures of the pitted, cracked rockcrete of the building. In its decrepitude, the structure looked more like a shack than a presbytery. It might have been sturdy in its early days. Now it looked ready to fall if she kicked it hard enough. The walls of the chapel, though, were in good repair, even though they had been eroded by centuries of acid rain. It appeared that the preacher for the Eternal Submission parish had put what resources he had to the upkeep of the chapel. That was in keeping with what Kaelstrom had heard about him, and so it was even stranger that she needed to be here.

An Ecclesiarchal serf opened the door for her. The man was dressed in a simple brown robe, heavily stained. He wore a chain around his waist. His head was shaved, and his scalp and neck were lined with scar tissue, the raised traces of the lash. He was a flagellant. He bore a number of fresh wounds, glistening and raw. He had already begun the process of mourning.

‘Am I too late?’ Kaelstrom asked.

The serf shook his head. He smiled sadly and opened his mouth just enough to show he had no tongue, excusing himself for the lack of formal address.

He led her down a short corridor to the dying man’s room.

The chamber was a small prayer cell. The old preacher lay on a wooden slab of a bed. There was a stool beside him, and a simple table holding a massive illuminated manuscript, the *Catechism of Sacred Punishments*. There was nothing else in the room except an altar to the Emperor that dominated the wall facing the bed. There was a small, boarded window high in the wall opposite the door.

The serf knelt before the preacher and kissed his withered hand. Then he bowed to Kaelstrom and withdrew.

Tabin Granthias lay under a threadbare blanket. He was trembling, though it was hot and close in the cell. His eyes, piercing and clear, looked out from deep, sleepless hollows at Kaelstrom. His few strands of hair were lank, draping over his scalp to his shoulders like spiderwebs. His skin was wrinkled, pale and clammy. He breathed with a thick, wet rattle.

So this was the saint of Stagnum. Kaelstrom had consulted the records before coming here. Granthias’ unblemished history was reflected in the fact that she had found so little about him. He had served on the world of Caligo for as long as he had been an ecclesiarch. He had been a fiery evangelist for the Imperial Creed behind the pulpit, and had worked tirelessly with and for the people of his parish outside of the chapel. He had been proffered advancement several times, and had always turned down the honours, choosing to serve where he was, impoverished though that meant his life would be. Kaelstrom had never heard of anyone so apparently devoid of ambition. That in itself made her curious. She was used to being doubtful about saints.

‘You are the inquisitor?’ Granthias asked. His voice was weak, though he spoke urgently.

‘I am.’

‘You are suspicious of me?’ With a weak movement of his hand, he invited her to sit.

‘I am surprised that you asked to see an inquisitor,’ Kaelstrom said.

‘I need to make a confession.’

‘I assume that I don’t need to point out to you that you should be looking elsewhere for spiritual succour.’

‘It is not that kind of confession. I shall be clear. I wish to confess to a representative of the Ordo Malleus.’

Kaelstrom gave Granthias a hard look. He returned a sorrowful smile.

‘The Ordo Malleus is no secret to me,’ he said. ‘I was once of its number.’

‘You were an inquisitor?’ Kaelstrom asked in disbelief. She could not see the diminished man before her, who could never have been very strong, as a daemonhunter.

‘No,’ said Granthias. ‘I was not. I was factotum to Inquisitor Herod Nestyr.’

‘Retrieve records of Nestyr, Herod,’ Kaelstrom instructed her servo-skull.

‘You won’t find any,’ Granthias said.

‘Was he stationed here?’

‘No. On Rixa.’

‘That’s on the other side of the Imperium.’

‘I know.’ Granthias sounded as if he wished the distance were even greater.

‘Very well. What is it that you wish to confess?’

‘To being a coward.’

The wind rattled the tiny casement. Granthias looked at the boards fearfully.

‘Go on,’ said Kaelstrom.

Granthias turned his face to the altar. He took a breath. His voice weak, faltering, but determined, he began to speak.

‘My master and I were dispatched to Solus during the reign of Planetary Governor Lady Garwinn Strock. This was a long time ago. I was young. I suppose I had reached manhood. Barely. But I had served in the halls of the Inquisition since earliest childhood.

‘Herod Nestyr was a master who inspired devotion. He was uncompromising. To all that was tainted and daemonic, he had no mercy. He was also wise, and he was fair. He was particularly wary of any possibility of the Inquisition becoming a pawn in the games of planetary

politics.

‘I learned much from him. He encouraged me to think deeply about what I saw in his service. I sometimes think that perhaps he saw a future for me as an inquisitor.

‘Even the wisest among us can be mistaken.

‘We went to Solus because of anonymously sent accusations aimed at the House of Strock. Nestyr took the unusual step of letting me see copies of the accusations, and I thought about them during our entire journey to Solus, and then during our descent by private lifter from orbit to the city of Valgaast, where we were transported to an Inquisitorial safe house.

‘Our base looked like a nondescript, decaying hab-tower midway between the city centre and the northern edge of Valgaast, where sat Malveil, the seat of the Strocks. It gave the appearance of being largely empty. The apartments that were not abandoned were occupied by Inquisition serfs. The upper two floors, which could be sealed off from those below and protected by hexagrammic wards, were where we would stay.

‘We had barely arrived when Nestyr’s servo-skull spat out a message on a ribbon of parchment. My master’s face darkened as he read it.

“‘Bad news?’ I asked.

“‘Indirectly. We have received an invitation to dine at the Silling, the house of the Montfor family.’”

“‘How did they know we were here?’”

“‘Precisely.’”

“‘Will you accept the invitation?’”

‘Nestyr shook his head once, with a sharp, emphatic jerk. “Absolutely not. The Montfors’ reputation is as dubious as the Strocks’ is unblemished. We will have nothing to do with them.”

“‘Have they been investigated in the past?’”

“‘They have. Multiple times. That may partly explain why they know about us. The Montfors have had more to do with the Inquisition than is normally healthy for a family.’”

“‘They have never been found guilty of anything?’”

“‘No. They have always stopped short of engaging in actual heresy or worse. However,’ he held up a finger, “‘their behaviour is why it is necessary for us to be here.’”

“‘You think they are the source of the accusations against the Strocks?’ I

asked.

“It is a possibility. I asked you to read the accusations. What did you make of them?”

“I found it difficult to make anything of them, master,” I replied. “They manage to be serious and vague at the same time.”

‘Nestyr looked pleased. He moved to the north-facing window. In the distance, we could see Malveil’s hill rising beyond the manufactoria of Valgaast, and the stern silhouette of the great house. “You have understood them perfectly, then. They are of a nature that we cannot ignore, yet they are so shrouded in ambiguity, their source so careful to protect their anonymity, that the accusations themselves are our prime source of suspicion. So our investigation must follow two simultaneous paths. We will cast a rigorous eye upon the Strocks, and we will seek to learn the source of the accusations.”

“Do you think there is any chance the Strocks are corrupt?”

“There is always the chance. Never presume innocence. I surveyed pict-feeds of public events before we left Rixa. Lady Garwinn’s appearances have become a rare thing of late.” He grimaced. “On the other hand, her record of governance is beyond reproach. We will tread cautiously, so as not to fall into a trap.”

“How do you intend to begin, master?”

“As I always do. I choose to know as much as I can before I ask the first question.” He pointed north. “We will begin with Malveil.”

‘We walked past the high rockcrete wall surrounding Malveil, slowing as we neared the gates. Nestyr had decreed that we should be as anonymous as the accusers. We were dressed as manufactorum serfs, and our walk coincided with the evening shift change. Sunset had turned the sky a dirty grey and orange, and the huge moon of Luctus had risen, its amber light deepening the hues, and casting long shadows.

‘Though the mining of Malveil’s hill, in years gone the principal source of Valgaast’s industrial activity, was not flourishing as once it had, there were enough manufactoria still functioning to ensure a steady stream of serfs moving up and down the road. We were two unremarkable figures among many, and if our pace was slow, that was simply due to exhaustion, as was true of everyone around us.

‘We shuffled along, head down. I did my best to do as my master had taught me and take in my surroundings through quick glances. I was not as good as he was. I had a rough idea of where we were, and that in another hundred yards we would pass by Malveil’s gates. Nestyr, I had no doubt, had a detailed awareness of our surroundings and of everyone nearby.

‘We slowed a bit more as we reached the gates. Through them, I saw the road winding up the hill between the excavations and mine shafts. The heavy grumble of machinery reverberated across the grounds, but even this cursory glance showed me that some of the mines were exhausted, the iron frameworks around them idle as tombstones. I had a quick impression of the house, a massive structure of frowning gables and thin spires connected to a tower on its eastern side.

‘I saw nothing that struck me as unusual, beyond Malveil’s character itself, which involved what had been the single highest concentration of mineral resources on the planet located in grounds owned by a single family. Nestyr, though, stumbled as we crossed in front of the gates. I thought this was part of his act, a way of getting a few more moments of observation. I followed his lead and caught him, one serf supporting the collapse of another. But when he leaned against me, I realised this was no act. He had turned pale, and his breath was laboured. I draped his arm over my shoulder and half-carried him until we had put a few hundred yards between us and the gates.

“‘What...?’” I began, but he shook his head, silencing me. We did not speak until we had returned to our base. There he stood at the north window for a long time, glowering at the hulking shape of the hill and the mansion on its peak.

‘Without turning his gaze from Malveil, he spoke at last. “Did you feel nothing when we were in front of the gates?”

“‘No, master.” It would not be the first time this had happened. Nestyr was sensitive to the presence of forces that I, by the blessing of the Emperor, could not detect at all. Even so, Nestyr seemed surprised that I had felt nothing.

“‘Not even an instinct to depart?”

“‘No.”

“‘I see.”

‘He said nothing else, and retired to his chamber not long after that.

“There is some research at the palace of the Adeptus Administratum that I must undertake,” he told me the next morning. He did not offer any details, nor did he discuss what had happened to him outside Malveil. I knew better than to ask. “Remain here,” he said. “Await my return.”

“Is there nothing you want me to do in the meantime?”

“No. We must be very cautious now, and avoid any action, no matter how insignificant, where we cannot foresee the consequences.”

“Is that even possible?” I wondered.

“I wish it were. But we can limit the possibilities of unintentional error. I will tell you more when I can.”

I did as I was bid. It was evening when Nestyr returned, and he looked grim. “There is something wrong here,” he confirmed. “And it has to do with Malveil.”

“Are the Strocks involved?” I asked.

“It is very difficult to tell. Everywhere I turn, information is missing. There is a daemonic menace present. Of that I am sure. But its work is subtle, and much is hidden, and in such a way that it is hard to know not just what the secrets are, but whether they exist at all.”

“What must we do?”

“We must be even more careful than I said earlier.” He turned to the window once more, his face uneasy. “There are things I must satisfy myself about regarding Malveil.”

“You plan to go there?”

“Sooner or later, I must. I do not think I should cross its threshold just yet. But I may have to.”

“How is it Lady Strock lives there if it is so dangerous?” I said. “Is that a sign of her corruption?”

“It may be. She may also be a victim. Or...” He sighed in frustration. “There is too much that I don’t know, but must.”

He opened his equipment chest and began to arm himself. I began to follow his example, but he stopped me.

“I need to do this alone,” he said. “Wait here.”

“I have done nothing for you since our arrival, master.” I had cleaned and prepared his weapons and his flak armour, and that had been the only useful thing I could do while I waited. I felt that I would be failing him to be idle yet again.

““When I feel I can use your aid, I will let you know,” he said. “For now, be patient.”

‘He left. I watched from the window, seeing him head off in the street below, and then nothing more as he disappeared towards Malveil. Night fell, and I waited, remaining by the window, peering into the darkness for the return of my master. I estimated how long it should take him to reach the wall of the estate. I told myself I should count on his needing at least an hour before he started back. And then there was the time of the return journey.

‘It was sometime after midnight, then, before I began to wonder. Two more hours went by, and I grew anxious. I waited and waited, feeling helpless and useless. Shortly before dawn, I tried to sleep, but I was woken by a nightmare whose substance I could not remember except for the sense of being watched, and then pursued.

‘Nestyr had not returned, nor had he when morning came. I paced our quarters, impatience and anxiety making time pass at a crawl. By the afternoon, I was convinced something had happened to him. I disobeyed his orders and left the hab-tower. I headed north, with no concrete plan or hope. When I was less than a block away from the road before the wall at the base of Malveil’s hill, I stopped. It was the middle of a work shift, and there were few people about. I would not have the camouflage of a crowd before the gates. Nestyr had urged caution, and I was being reckless.

‘I turned back. When I was in our quarters once again, I saw that Nestyr’s chest was gone. He must have been there in my absence. The surge of relief I experienced was far stronger than the shame of having disobeyed my orders. I waited with an easier heart.

‘But then night fell once more, and there was no sign of my master.

‘I moved through our chambers, looking for a note, or anything at all that might tell me what I should do. I found nothing.

‘Really and truly, *nothing*. It was not just his chest that was gone. So were all of his possessions. There was no sign anyone but me had ever been there.

‘We had not spoken at all to the Inquisition serfs living in the lower apartments. Their role was to give the hab-tower the appearance of normality. Under normal circumstances, that was their sole function. But I decided circumstances were far from normal now. I headed downstairs,

and spoke to each group in turn.

‘No one had seen Nestyr come back in my absence. What was more disturbing, though, was that none of the serfs could remember seeing him at all. When I questioned them further, I found that they had only the vaguest recollections of my own comings and goings.

‘I had nothing to prove Nestyr had ever existed...’

‘Nor do you now,’ Kaelstrom interrupted. She looked at the parchment ribbon that her servo-skull had just produced. ‘I have widened the search parameters for records of your master. I have found nothing.’

‘I don’t expect you will,’ said Granthias. ‘The only things left in our quarters were my few possessions, and I had no way of communicating with the Inquisition. I tried to report in after I left Solus, but my attempts to do so were futile. No one had ever heard of my master. I was fortunate in that I bore the markings of an Inquisition serf, so it was clear that I was not lying about who I was. I was held and questioned on Rixa, and in the end it was determined that I had delusions above my station. Herod Nestyr walked off into the night on Solus, and fell into the most complete oblivion.’

‘So you have no proof of what you are telling me.’ Kaelstrom had no choice but to be sceptical. At the same time, she saw no reason for the old preacher to lie. She wasn’t sure which was harder to believe – what Granthias claimed, or that he decided the last thing he wished to do before he died was spin a tissue of lies for an inquisitor.

‘I have something,’ Granthias said.

‘Show me.’

‘I need to explain more first,’ he said, and continued.

‘I was caught in a limbo of inaction. I did not know what to do, yet I could not stay in our quarters and do nothing. I paced again, praying to the Emperor for guidance. I wondered if I should make contact with the Montfors. They knew we were here. They had sent a message directly to my master. But Nestyr’s suspicion of them held me back. For all I knew, they were the ones responsible for his disappearance. If the accusations had originated with them, arranging things to make it seem that the house of the Strocks had taken him would be an effective way of throwing

suspicion on their enemies.

‘I would, in time, see how faulty my logic was. Erasing the memory of Nestyr’s existence, even if that were possible, would hardly work to the Montfors’ advantage. But my thoughts were distracted. I was on the verge of panic.

‘Every time I passed by the window, I looked out towards Malveil. I could not see the shape of the hill in the dark, but I knew where it was. And I thought the house also knew where I was. I could feel its presence, and I could feel its gaze. It held the secret of what had happened to my master. It taunted me with its knowledge.

‘I told myself not to succumb to the temptation. I told myself I was not being called. I could not hope to accomplish anything by retracing Nestyr’s steps. I was not an inquisitor. I had no skills, and no weapons.

‘I told myself all these things repeatedly, and they were all true. But then I was in the streets, making my way north again. To this day, I cannot recall making the decision to head for Malveil. I remember being in the hab-tower, and then being in the manufactorum zone. I might as well have covered the miles between in a trance. When I realised what I was doing, I slowed down, but I did not stop. The need to know called me on.

‘So did something else. I am sure of that now. I feared it then.

‘The chimneys of manufactoria poured flame into the night. The road I was on passed between two complexes that had been shut down. I walked with massive iron and ferrocrete silences on either side of me. They were dead presences. The presence that waited on the top of the hill was of a different kind. I had felt nothing when Nestyr and I had passed by it, but that was before fear had entered my soul. I could not articulate what was waiting for me, but I knew something was.

‘The fifty-foot gates were closed, as of course they would be, guarding the grounds of Malveil from intruders. I was relieved. I would not be going inside.

‘I looked between the bars of the gates. Red lumoglobes cast dim illumination over worksites that were still active, though they had shut down for the night. Caverns yawned, open throats of darkness. At the top of the hill, Malveil cut a brooding silhouette against the disc of Luctus. A single light shone from a window on the upper floor. A cold eye glinted at me.

‘I shuddered. There was nothing to see here, I told myself. There was nothing to do here. I should go.

‘I stayed where I was, held by a predator’s gaze. Yet even then, I could not truly say that I felt a presence. I saw the house as malevolent in the way that one views any threat. I knew it must be dangerous because my master had said so.

‘Still I could not move. It was as if I had a task to accomplish here, and I could not leave while it was undone.

‘What could I do? The gates were shut. I could not pass through. And there was nothing for me to do beyond if I did.

‘With a grunt, I tore my eyes from Malveil and took a step back from the gates. As I did, my eyes fell on something shining faintly on the road up the hill, just at the edge of the red light surrounding the nearest mineshaft. I squinted, trying to make out what the object was.

‘With a heavy clank and a metallic grind, the gates unlocked and swung open, just wide enough for me to pass through.

‘My mouth dried. I turned around. I would not go in.

‘But my master had vanished. I had nowhere to go. After everything he had done for me, everything he had been to me, I had to try to find out what had happened to him.

‘There have been few moments in my life where I believe I have been truly brave. I know my reputation here, and I wish I could say it was deserved. I know my heart, and I know the fear that lives there. I am not brave. I do think I was brave that night, though. I was brave when I turned back and walked through the gates. I was also an utter fool. There is no incompatibility between the two states.

‘I walked up the road, the crunch of gravel deafening in my ears. I had trouble swallowing. I kept my eyes on the object on the ground. I drew close, and saw that it was Nestyr’s Inquisitorial badge. The skull in the ‘I’ looked blankly up at me. The Emperor forgive me, but it seemed so small and weak a thing. No longer the mark of unlimited authority.

‘I picked it up. I brushed the dirt from it, then put it in my tunic. I looked around. So Nestyr had passed this way. I wanted to call out to him. Instead, I took another few steps forward. I tried to pierce the darkness for another clue.

‘The night was still, and so the gust of wind that came at my back was an

unwelcome surprise. It passed after a few seconds, though not before causing movement on the ground ahead of me. Something stirred, sluggish. At first, I thought it might have been a tarpaulin blown from a worksite. But it had not been shapeless. It had seemed to beckon at me.

‘It was beyond the glow of the lights, and I had to walk slowly. Luctus shone frigidly over the land, but the shadow of Malveil fell the entire length of the hill. I could barely see where I was going. The thing that had moved was a vague shape on a vague road, a shadow amid shadows.

‘When I reached it, I had to bend down to see what it was.

‘Nestyr’s greatcoat.

‘Then, at last, I felt it. I felt the presence. Something *was* waiting for me here, and it was not my imagination. It was luring me. With one relic of my master at a time, it was guiding my steps up towards Malveil, and then it would have me. It was gathering in the darkness, vast and knowing, its jaws eager to claim its latest prey. The night was taut as a muscle.

‘Something was about to move. Something was about to reveal itself.

‘I fled. I did not look back. I ran, whining in terror. I had no thought of my master, no thought at all. I had nothing except the instinct of flight. Something huge began to draw itself up behind me, and though I could not spare the breath, I screamed, because to hear what was coming into existence would have been worse. I screamed, my cries vanishing into the abyss of the night. There would be no help for me, for I was not alone.

‘The Emperor granted me mercy, for I reached the gates and tore through them even as they began to close. They slammed shut behind me with sepulchral finality.

‘I kept running. I ran until I collapsed against a manufactorum wall, my lungs scraping for air. I threw up, then staggered on. I was terrified the thing in the night of Malveil was following me.

‘I fled, and never looked back. I never have, because the worst thing would be to see it...

‘In truth, I never stopped running,’ Granthias told Kaelstrom. ‘I got away from Solus, and when the Inquisition was no longer interested in me on Rixa, I ran from there too. It was still too close to Malveil. I ran into the arms of the Adeptus Ministorum, hoping for the shield of faith. I ran to here, on the far side of the Imperium from Malveil. And for my entire life here, I have been ready to flee again should I feel that horror’s approach.’

He paused, his breath harsh and full of phlegm. ‘Now, at last, I think I can rest. My end is near, and I am grateful. I hope, very soon, that I will be rejoining the Emperor, though I fear I am not worthy. That is why I needed to speak to you. I could not die without telling someone what happened on Solus. I don’t know if anything can be done, but it could not all fall into silence.’ He looked at Kaelstrom and her servo-skull with pleading eyes. ‘You have recorded this? All of it?’

‘Yes.’ Every raving word. ‘You said you had proof of this?’

‘Proof of something. It is on the altar.’

Kaelstrom crossed the room. There was a small box on a level beneath the winged skull. She opened it. Inside was a badge of the Inquisition.

‘This proves a connection between you and the ordos,’ she said.

‘But that must count for something,’ said the old man. ‘It...’

Outside, the wind screamed. The boards of the window rattled with a sound like claws. Granthias cowered. ‘No,’ he whispered. ‘Please. Please...’

There was a crash from the other side of the house, as if a battering ram had smashed open the door. Kaelstrom rushed from the room, plasma pistol in hand. Granthias’ serf was already there, staring at the door with wide, terrified eyes. It was intact.

The scream that came from the bedroom chilled Kaelstrom’s blood. It was a shriek of pain, and of an entire lifetime of fear suddenly reaching its apotheosis. And the roar that silenced it was even worse. It shook the house, and it shook Kaelstrom’s soul. It took all her strength from all her training to turn and run back to the preacher’s cell.

The roar and the scream ended before she arrived. She walked into a silence that was even worse. The room seemed calm. The boards over the window were untouched. But her servo-skull lay shattered on the floor, its recording destroyed, and the box that had held the badge was empty.

So was the bed. Granthias was gone. His scream echoed in Kaelstrom’s mind, a final echo dropping into the silence that had, at long last, claimed its prey.

A SENDING FROM THE GRAVE

C L Werner

A half-remembered ballad stumbled across Yuri's lips as he slogged through the brackish marsh. There was a strangeness in the air today, a nebulous oddity that he couldn't quite place. The feeling of unease made him forget lines, moving him to take a slug of *kvass* from the clay bottle slung across his shoulder.

Yuri lost the ballad entirely when his foot dropped into a hole and he almost fell face first in the marsh. He did lose his grip on the rod he carried. A livid curse hissed across the grassy knolls that peppered the swampy ground as he steadied himself. Before he could do anything else, he'd have to recover the rod. Cursing again, Yuri leaned over and groped about in the mud for the missing tool. When he recovered it, he took several minutes to scrape the muck away from its ribbed sides.

The most important asset of an ironhunter was a finding-rod. Yuri had offered everything but the clothes on his back as collateral to procure this one. It was a magnificent instrument, duardin designed and crafted. The Ironweld Guild sold them only to the best ironhunters. Yuri wasn't close to such acclaim, but sometimes a man who'd bought one of the rods died or retired. When that happened, even somebody of Yuri's humble means could get his hands on one and try to make his fortune with it.

When the duardin crafted these tools, they were endowed with a magnetic charge. The mud in the Cosmoilyet Marshes had traces of metal running through it that could confuse that charge, so it was vital for the finding-rod to be kept clean. If it gave a false start, the ironhunter carrying it would waste considerable time poking about looking for something that wasn't there.

Yuri gripped the magnetised rod in one hand and held it outwards. He could feel slight tugs coursing down the tool into his hand. An expert ironhunter could tell from subtle variances in the pull if it indicated an inconsequential trace of ore that was close by or a substantial claim farther afield. He wasn't an expert though. He had to depend solely on the strength of the pull and follow it to the source.

The treasure Yuri sought was meteoric iron, borne into the marshes by what the people of Azyr called 'starfall'. Something about the metal-laced mud and brackish water attracted the celestial ore when it hurtled from the heavens. The people of Sigmarograd watched constantly for the fiery streaks of falling meteorites. Spring and autumn were the best times, when every night would see several starfalls. The ironhunters would do their best to gauge where the meteorites crashed. A good guess the night before could save considerable time dowsing across the marshes seeking the submerged ore. Starfalls almost never occurred during the day and seldom impacted on dry ground.

A sharper tug on the finding-rod brought a grin to Yuri's face. He took another swig of kvas and headed off towards his left. There was a big knoll ahead, large enough to support several trees as well as tall stands of grass. The pull had him circling around the little knob of land and out into the mire further on. Yuri reached into his backpack and removed a long stick with a flag at its end. He expected he'd have to lay down his stake soon and establish his claim. The rod was vibrating more fiercely than he'd ever known.

A peculiar glow arrested Yuri's attention when he rounded the tree-bearing knoll. At first he thought it must be swamp gas, a will-o'-the-wisp flickering through the miasma. The light, however, was much too bright. Perhaps it was starfall, one of those rare daylight crashes? But, no, this light was too persistent. Starfall that near to earth should have faded already.

Yuri felt a strange tingling that made all the hair on his body prickle. It was like the magnetic pull of the finding-rod, but all over. The metal stopper in the kvas bottle suddenly popped off and stretched down towards his belt buckle. As the charge in the air increased, he saw a nimbus of blue light gathering around the rod. A snap of static against his fingers made him drop the tool. Yuri cursed and started to reach down to recover it from

the mud.

The ironhunter froze before his fingers touched the water. Fear closed around his heart. He was looking towards the light. Far from dissipating, it had grown brighter. Closer. While he watched, the source of the light emerged from behind one of the knolls. It was a crackling mass of electricity, a sphere of lightning. He could hear the snap and snarl of the slender strands of energy as they flashed across the water. He could see the grass smoulder where the ball passed close to it. A howling wail filled his ears, an elemental moan of wrath and pain.

Fear swelled into terror when Yuri realised this strange manifestation was moving towards him. He spun around and slogged his way through the marsh. He ran to the big knoll, the thought in his mind that if he got onto dry land he'd be safe from this apparition.

Yuri scrambled up the side of the knoll. He glanced over his shoulder and a scream of horror was ripped from his lungs. The crackling ball of golden lightning flew straight towards him. The nearer it drew, the more distinct it became. The snaking strands of energy adopted definition – the ends resembled dozens of clenched fists, the coils that writhed back to the core now arm-like tentacles. Shapes pushed out from the central mass, a crazed confusion of images that had no coherency to them. Yuri's mind rebelled at the insane medley that extruded from the phantom.

The howling wail grew more intense. The crackle of energy in the air became stronger. Sparks leapt from the metal Yuri carried, burning his skin. He tried to climb higher onto the knoll, but height was no impediment to the floating apparition. It swept up after him. Branches from the trees cracked and exploded as the tentacles of lightning struck them. Scorched splinters pelted the ironhunter and knocked him down.

Yuri rolled over onto his back and tried to crawl away. The crackling sphere of amok power would not be denied, however. Its coils lashed down at him, striking him with electric fists.

Yuri screamed as death sizzled through his body. His cries echoed across the marshes. The few people who heard him had never before heard such dreadful sounds.

Soon they would hear many more such screams.

Death had come to the town of Sigmarograd.

‘...couldn’t even tell it was him except by the boots he was wearing.’ Kulik’s voice was a low whisper, fear dripping off each word. He paused and glanced around the assayer’s workshop to assure himself nobody was eavesdropping.

Ivana leaned against the timber counter and waited for the grizzled ironhunter to continue. Kulik was normally a taciturn man who kept to himself. For someone of his nature to feel garrulous was proof of how uneasy he was.

Kulik rubbed his fingers against the lucky ring he wore, a band of celestial iron etched with the holy warhammer Ghal Maraz. Piety was one of the ironhunter’s few virtues and he’d had the token made from part of his very first claim some twenty years ago. Ivana’s father had been assayer of Sigmarograd back then, and she could vividly remember listening to Kulik argue for a small part of the ore before it was evaluated and consigned to the Ironweld Guild.

‘Sigmar knows what happened to poor Yuri,’ Kulik shuddered. ‘Looked like something went and ripped him to pieces, and while it was doing so it burned him to a crisp. Never seen anything of its like. Heard a few idiots suggest it was bog-crawlers, but there wasn’t a bog-crawler hatched that could do that to a man’s body, much less barbecue him while it was doing it.’

‘Then what did kill Yuri?’ Ivana wanted to know. She’d been hanging on Kulik’s story for most of an hour now and would hear his opinion on the mystery.

It transpired that Kulik had none. Imagination wasn’t one of his few virtues. ‘Something’s out there, that’s all I know. Maybe it went away, maybe it didn’t. Either way, I’m not going to tempt it into looking for me.’ He turned a frank expression on Ivana and looked over at the heavy ledger resting on the counter near her hand.

Ivana understood. Kulik’s thirst to gossip had been quenched and now it was back to business. ‘Your eighteenth flag of the year,’ she noted as she wrote down his claim. She consulted the map on the wall behind her and copied the duardin runes that corresponded to the location in which he said he’d planted the flag. She paused when she noted how close it was to where Yuri’s body was found. ‘Do you think he was searching for this node when...’

‘Yuri didn’t plant a flag,’ Kulik grumbled. ‘His heirs have no claim on that node.’ Charity wasn’t a commodity he dealt in. ‘You just put up a notice and let anybody interested know I’m willing to sell my stake in that node for a fair price.’ Courage was something else Kulik didn’t deal in.

‘I’ll make it known,’ Ivana stated. She finished making the notations in the ledger. Kulik left the assayer’s while she worked. It was even odds whether he was headed to the temple or the tavern.

Ivana looked up from the ledger and glanced across the workshop. Perhaps she’d been unfair to think Kulik wasn’t brave, or at least less so than the other ironhunters. On a typical day there’d be ten or fifteen prospectors lined up anxiously waiting their turn to stake a claim or have a fragment evaluated. The workload was such that she often felt overwhelmed. Today it was desolate enough that her friend Olga Timoshenko came inside after Kulik left.

‘This is one day when I’m not going to get after you to hire some help,’ Olga joked as she looked around the deserted room.

Ivana shook her head and gave Olga a reproving look. ‘Or to make other arrangements to share the work?’

Olga frowned at Ivana’s question. ‘Stay as stubborn as you like, but you know I’m right. You should get married.’ She plucked at the hem of her dress, the better to display its rich embroidery. ‘Anatol got this for me. I mentioned seeing it in the market last month and today he surprised me with it. If you had a husband, he could do these little things to surprise you.’

‘I’m waiting,’ Ivana told her.

Olga’s frown deepened. ‘Ivana, you’re nearly thirty.’ She gestured to the street outside. ‘You’re well past the age when most of us have started our own families.’

Ivana normally met such talk with some vague and meaningless comment. She was continually being upbraided by friends and family on the subject. Few were as direct about it as Olga. Bluntness was a privilege of their long friendship.

‘You know who I’m waiting for,’ Ivana said.

‘He’s been gone ten years now,’ Olga reminded her. ‘Vassili joined the Freeguild and went away to fight the God-King’s enemies. You don’t even know if he’s coming back.’ Olga stopped short of questioning whether he

was even still alive.

‘Vassili will come back,’ Ivana said. ‘He promised me he would. We stood beneath the crippled oak where we always met.’ Her eyes took on a distant look as she pictured that long-ago scene. ‘He took my hands in his and we watched the moon rise over the marsh and he vowed to return to me.’

‘That was ten years ago,’ Olga repeated.

Ivana opened her eyes and looked at her friend. ‘It wouldn’t matter if it was only yesterday. Time hasn’t dulled my love for him. I made my choice. I dream of the day Vassili comes back. Then everything will go back to the way it should be.’

Olga sighed. She glanced about the empty workshop again. ‘You should get out of here. Go someplace where you can have some fun.’

‘I have too much work to do,’ Ivana said, picking up her stylus.

Olga rolled her eyes. ‘There’s no talking to you when you get like this.’ She turned and walked out to the street, leaving Ivana alone with her thoughts. Her memories of happier times.

It was several hours before Ivana closed the ledger and stepped out from behind the counter. She walked over to the strongroom at the back of the workshop. Unlike the rest of the building, it had thick stone walls instead of plaster-covered timber. A row of shelves held scores of metal fragments from the marshes while a rack at the back supported half a dozen larger nodes that had been dredged out of the mud. Each was labelled with the mark of the ironhunter they belonged to and the evaluation Ivana had assayed their finds at. When representatives from the Ironweld Guild arrived, they’d make a final judgement before paying. There was always trouble in other towns when the duardin judged finds to be less valuable than the assayer, but Ivana was capable enough that Sigmarograd never had that problem.

The steel door to the strongroom groaned when Ivana closed it. Her hands spun the cog-work wheel on its face and the bolts that secured it slid outwards like the rays of a star, before coming to rest in the sockets set into the surrounding frame. A final touch, brushing her fingers across the clutch of bronze rune-plates set beneath the wheel, locked the door. It couldn’t open now until the cog-work mechanism completed its cycle and

the correct sequence of runes appeared. Ivana never ceased to be amazed by the wondrous ingenuity of the duardin.

Her mind drifted away from the duardin and their inventions when she stepped out into the streets of Sigmarograd. Timber buildings crowded close on either side, their upper floors projecting several feet out from their foundations and encroaching still farther into the lane. A few pedlars were still making the rounds, eager to sell what remained of their wares. A baker pushing a handcart was offering the last of his pretzels at a sharp discount while a milkmaid rolled a big keg across the cobblestones and tried to find dairy buyers.

Ivana walked past the baker and headed in the direction of Sigmarograd's town square. She had a ritual to perform. A ten-year tradition of going to the temple and praying to Sigmar that he would keep Vassili safe.

Ten years. There were times when Ivana felt foolish for her resolve, when she questioned her faith that Vassili would return. Sigmar was the mighty God-King, with far greater concerns to draw his notice. Of what consequence were her hopes and dreams? She should accept, listen to her friends and family and be pragmatic. But it was one thing to know what she should do and it was another to *feel* it. She still loved Vassili and she was convinced he would return.

Ivana's path took her past the source of her misery. She paused when she saw the white-plastered walls of the wainwright ahead of her down the street. The shop of Vladimir Petrovovich, Vassili's father. The Petrovovichs lived in the three floors above the workshop. Ivana could see a light shining from the window above the wagon wheel that hung over the shop's entrance. Very faintly she could hear the sounds of laughter within.

Vassili's family had opposed their marriage. Vladimir wanted a more lucrative engagement with a rich dowry, something Ivana simply wouldn't bring to the Petrovovichs. To keep the lovers apart, Vladimir sent Vassili to join a muster of Freeguild soldiers.

The hate that burned inside her when she looked at Vladimir's home, when she listened to the Petrovovichs laughing, was something Ivana wasn't proud of. It wasn't something she could stop, either. They had taken the happiness she and Vassili could have had. She would never forgive them for that.

Intent upon her own thoughts, Ivana wasn't certain when she first saw the

weird light that flickered about the window. It flashed and flickered, shifting through a spectrum of colour as she noticed it. Because it was so bright, she couldn't say how large it was, or whether there was a substantial core to it. It might be anything between the size of her hand or the barrel the milkmaid had been rolling.

The first thought that occurred to Ivana was that it was some weird effect of the setting sun. Dusk over the Cosmoilyet Marshes caused weird reactions as light passed through the swamp's miasma. She grasped at this explanation, but an instant later rejected it. If there was some sort of core to the light, then it was now generating extensions, little strands of crackling energy that slithered and snapped about the panes of the window.

Ivana was aware of a charge in the air. Her hair prickled as though brushed by leathern wings. She could feel a marked increase of heat, utterly at odds with the approach of night. A sound, low and indefinite, reached her ears. Somehow it struck her as both mournful and menacing.

There was motion behind the window now. Ivana saw Vladimir walking towards the glass, a confused expression on his face.

At Vladimir's approach, the eerie light flared into violent life. The glowing core expanded, increasing until it was several feet across. Ivana thought she could see pulsations rippling through it, altering its shape. The wispy strands of energy now became snarling lashes of electricity. They scratched and crackled about the window for a moment, then the glass exploded outwards. Ivana grabbed her cheek as one of the flying shards slashed her. The soft noise she'd been hearing now swelled into an anguished howl. She forgot her bleeding face and clamped her hands against her ears to deaden the sound.

Vladimir stood transfixed behind the window pane. The crackling strands of energy coiled around him. He screamed as he was dragged from his home and lifted into the air. The whole street was buffeted now by a hot wind, a discharge of static that knocked over signs and rattled doors. Ivana was pushed back by the tempest, but still she couldn't take her eyes away from Vladimir's tortured figure. The wainwright was writhing in the bands of sizzling energy, his body being twisted into bone-snapping positions. Smoke boiled off him as his skin blackened and his hair smouldered. Burning clumps of clothing fell onto the cobblestones, cooked right off the old man's body. A moment later there was a vile, wet noise as the corpse

fell and smacked the ground. The crackling light drifted away from its victim, rising towards the rooftops.

‘Grandfather!’ The scream rang out from the house. A young boy stood framed in the shattered window, staring down in horror at the charred corpse.

‘Get back, before it gets you too!’ Katerina Petrovovich shrieked as she dashed to the window and pulled her son back. Others of the family stood in terrified silence as they gazed at the dead patriarch.

Before Ivana could recover from the shock of what was happening before her eyes, it was over. Vladimir’s mutilated body was lying in the street, smoke rising from his charred flesh. The town echoed with shouts of alarm as people began to flock to the scene.

Ivana saw one last flicker of the weird light, the crackling phantasm that killed Vladimir, as it flickered away across Sigmarograd.

A thousand questions shivered through Ivana’s mind as she watched the light withdraw, but with those questions came one answer. There was no longer any mystery about what had killed Yuri. And now the ironhunter’s killer was loose in Sigmarograd.

Ivana peered through the boarded windows of the assayer’s. The street outside was deserted. No traders trying to sell their wares, no labourers hurrying home from the farms they worked. Sigmarograd was as desolate as an ancient ruin. It was as if a plague had broken out. People cowered in their homes, afraid to stir lest *it* take notice of them.

‘Perhaps it is only coincidence.’ There wasn’t much conviction in the boyar’s tone when he made the suggestion. Boris Kolov sat in Ivana’s best chair, his fur-trimmed coat pulled close about him, the golden pectoral dangling around his neck. A page held his staff of authority with its jewelled dragons and fiery comet crest. Two armoured militiamen flanked him, swords hanging off their belts. Yet for all the trappings of power and authority, Boris had the look of a frightened child.

Ivana walked away from the windows and addressed her noble guest. ‘There have been six murders since *it* came into town. Four of them have been Petrovovichs. Something is hunting that family. Trying to destroy them.’ She was quiet as she remembered the ghastly bodies the killer left in its wake. She’d seen three of them with her own eyes. In the weeks

since Vladimir was murdered, the fiend had come every second night to take another victim. For the first time in ten years, she was thankful Vassili was gone. She needed to believe he was safely away from this terrible doom.

‘The lass has the right of it. Too many for it to be chance.’ The statement came from Ivana’s other guest. Grumbuld Stoutforge was the sergeant of the duardin thunderers sent by the Ironweld Guild to protect their interests in Sigmarograd. He was a solidly built example of his people, with a full black beard that fell past his belly and a crooked nose that had seen one too many brawls. His face was peppered with little black spots, the legacy of a firearm that had discharged too close to his head. Instead of the opulence effected by Boris, he wore a simple leather jerkin and a coat of mail. A breastplate with the rune of his family was the only hint of hubris the duardin indulged in.

‘What about the ones who weren’t from Vladimir’s family?’ Boris objected. ‘Yuri and the others?’

‘Bad luck,’ Grumbuld shrugged. ‘Wrong place at the wrong time. We have to accept that there is a pattern here.’ He nodded to Ivana. ‘In all the panic, seems your boyar forgot two of the victims were Vladimir’s nieces.’

Ivana was sombre when she replied. ‘I played with them when I was a girl. I was very close to the... Petrovovichs... at one time.’

Boris wrung his hands together. ‘Accepting that this is true, how does it help us? My soldiers have tried to stop this thing, but to no avail. It swats them aside and slips back into the marshes. The hunter I sent to follow it to its lair never came back.’

Grumbuld smiled and patted the pistol on his belt. ‘I’m sure you’ve tried what you could, but this monster of yours hasn’t met duardin. If we’re right about who it’s after, we can lay a trap for it.’ He laughed and winked at the boyar. ‘With twenty guns cracking away at it, I think your monster is going to regret coming to Sigmarograd.’

Ivana wished she could share Grumbuld’s certainty. Instead a cold chill slithered down her spine. ‘What if you can’t stop it? That will put the rest of the Petrovovichs in terrible danger.’

‘Only the same danger they’re already in if you’re right,’ Grumbuld stated. ‘At least this way, we’ve got a chance to end that danger once and for all.’

Ivana welcomed the chill in the air as she stood watch in the temple's bell tower. It meant that the monster wasn't around. No two witnesses of the thing's attacks could agree on what it looked like, but all described the heat that accompanied it. If she still felt cold, then it meant there was no danger.

Yet.

The Cosmoilyet Marshes were off to her left. From the tower she could see far out into the dank mire. Of course, with night stealing across the land, they were little more than a dark smudge stretching away to the horizon. A few streaks of light flashed through the sky, starfalls hurtling into the swamp. If Grumbuld's plan worked, perhaps tomorrow there would be ironhunters rushing out to stake new claims.

Ivana glanced down at the square in front of the temple. A dozen of the thunderers were stationed there, hunkered down behind barricades. The other eight were ranged around the sides and back of the structure, more to delay the monster until the main body of duardin could join them than from any idea of subduing it on their own. Somewhere in the building below, every member of Vladimir's family was gathered in the sanctuary under the guard of Sigmarograd's best soldiers. The boyar had decided to absent himself from the proceedings.

A flicker of light far out in the marshes caught Ivana's attention. At once she was alert, her gaze trained upon the distant glow. Unlike Boris, she'd demanded a role for herself in Grumbuld's trap. Her keen eyes got her the post of lookout. She felt responsible for what would happen, more than a little guilty that she still couldn't shake her resentment of the Petrovovichs. To do something useful eased her troubled conscience.

She hesitated to ring the bell and alert the duardin. Ivana wanted to be certain the light she saw wasn't simply a will-o'-the-wisp. She didn't want to send a false alarm. Keeping her eyes trained on the flickering light, she waited for it to disperse. Instead it started racing across the marsh, streaking straight towards Sigmarograd.

'It's coming!' Ivana called out as she rang the bell. The dolorous notes boomed across the town. Houses fell dark as their inhabitants snuffed out their lights and locked their doors. Only the people at the temple were eager to draw the monster's attention.

The light sped closer to the town. Now Ivana slowed the ringing of the

bell. The alert was given. She used the clapper to sequence signals to the waiting duardin. Three rapid tolls to let them know the monster was now inside the town and flittering from rooftop to rooftop. Two slower notes to tell them it was coming up from the direction of the smelters.

The thunderers readied their weapons and prepared themselves for the monster's attack. Ivana saw Grumbuld draw his pistol and motion to his duardin. He kept his fist raised in the air, waiting for the moment to give the final signal.

The crackling sphere of energy spilled down from the rooftops and into the square. Snakes of lightning sizzled away from it in every direction, charring the cobblestones. The heat from the monster created a violent whirlwind that whipped around it and sent leaves flying through the streets. A wailing screech wafted from the flickering light, growing in its stridency as the entity approached the temple.

Ivana clenched her teeth when she saw Grumbuld drop his hand. The thunderers opened fire on the monster, the roar from their volley matching the elemental fury of a storm. Sparks flared from the glowing monster as the bullets struck it. For an instant the light started to dim.

A shuddering howl ripped across the square as the roiling core flared into blinding vibrancy. More strands of lightning flashed out from its centre and whipped across the cobbles. The monster surged forwards and ignored the scattered shots the duardin hastily sent into it. The streamers of energy lashed out, tearing and burning the barricades. Ivana saw the thunderers tossed aside, thrown through the air like rag dolls. Electricity crackled across their armour and flared down the iron barrels of their weapons. Some of the duardin were immolated by the violent discharge pulsing from the monster, just blackened husks when they struck the ground.

The thunderers who had been stationed around the temple now came rushing into the fray, desperate to support their ravaged kinsmen. Ivana watched their first volley, watched it have as little effect as the others. The plan was a failure. She rang the signal, but even standing right beside the bell, she could barely hear it above the monster's deafening howl. She abandoned the effort, pulled open the trapdoor in the bell tower and ran down the winding stair. She had to warn the people in the sanctuary. She had to let them know the trap had failed. She had to tell them to run.

In her haste, Ivana stumbled and crashed against the wooden railing. For

a desperate moment she found herself slipping over the side, but a frantic grab at the guardrail kept her from hurtling to the floor thirty feet below. She drew back onto the steps and gasped at the closeness of her escape.

The sound of the temple doors crashing inwards had Ivana hurrying even faster than before. Recklessly she lunged down the stairs, ignoring the possibility of falling. She had to get to the sanctuary. She had to warn them.

Ivana still had two flights of stairs to descend when the screams reached her. Louder than the throbbing howl of the monster, the shrieks were piteous in their expression of anguish and horror. She knew it was too late the moment she heard those cries, but still she dashed to the bottom of the tower and flung open the door.

The sanctuary was a shambles. Charred, mangled bodies were strewn everywhere, smoke rising from scorched flesh. The walls, the floor, even the ceiling were streaked with burns. Parts of the masonry looked as though it'd been melted by the monster's lightning.

Ivana looked away from the massacre. As she did, her eyes found the murderer. The glowing sphere hovered above the altar, reflected in the stained-glass window that was the pride of Sigmarograd's faithful. For an instant, she could discern shapes in the boiling light. She saw the emblem of Ghal Maraz appear within the luminous core. Then the warhammer transitioned into the stern visage of Father Nikolai, who had ministered to the town until his death five years ago. Finally, for a moment, she thought she could see a great chapel built around a wondrous forge.

The images collapsed back into writhing electricity. Without warning, the monster flew into the stained glass. It exploded upon contact with the monster's charge, showering the streets outside in a rainbow of debris. The crackling core of the entity sped onwards, leaping over the roofs as it headed back into the marshes. The air around her grew cold again.

Slowly she turned away from the shattered window. Ivana felt hollow inside when she looked at the massacre. Vladimir's entire family. It was her idea to bring them together, to use them as a lure for the monster. It was her responsibility that they were all dead. Instead of taking a lone victim, the fiend had taken them all in one ghastly spectacle.

Ivana wished the monster had taken one more victim before retreating back into the swamp.

Intent upon their grim purpose, their heads bowed in sorrow, the funeral procession that moved through the streets of Sigmarograd did not stop to marvel at the golden knight as he marched down the lanes. For his part, the visitor did not interfere with the sombre ritual, though there were many questions he would have posed to them. The number of coffins borne by the mourners told a tale of their own and made Knight-Incantor Arnhault confident about his theory.

Perhaps there might still be a way to extract some good from all this death and misery.

The Stormcast wasn't without empathy for the suffering of these people, but he knew the importance of what they were going through. That their community – and no other – was beset by this sinister phenomenon presented daunting possibilities. Arnhault felt he might be on the cusp of a great discovery, closer to unlocking a secret the Sacrosanct chambers had devoted themselves to learning.

Arnhault stopped one of the few townspeople he encountered who wasn't part of the funerary ritual. The man bowed in deference to him, his lean body trembling in awe to be in such proximity to one of Sigmar's reformed champions. It took him some time to find a path through the skein of courtesies and honours he was being paid to finally pose his question to the man.

'Tell me, does an Ivana Drugov still live here?' Arnhault braced himself for the answer as he thought of the long line of coffins.

'The assayer?' The man was obviously perplexed by the question, but after a moment's thought gave directions to the workshop. 'It'll look all closed up on account of these attacks, but she'll be there. Part of her work is to watch over the ore until the Ironweld come for it, and she takes her duties very serious.'

Arnhault took leave of his informant and proceeded to follow the directions he'd been given. As he navigated the closed-in streets, he noticed a house with a missing window on its upper floor. The wall around the missing frame was burned and blackened in a fashion that was only too familiar to him. Whatever doubt might have been lingering at the back of his mind was banished now.

The assayer's workshop was a two-floor, timber-walled structure a bit further along the same street. A beam protruded above the door with a sign

hanging off it that depicted a set of scales. Faded lettering under the picture read 'Drugov, Assayer'. Thick boards covered the windows of both floors. The door was locked and bolted when Arnhault tried it. A few raps of his gauntlet against the panels was rewarded by sounds of activity from within.

The door slowly opened and Arnhault had his first look at Ivana Drugov. It was not the first time he'd seen her face. Her eyes widened with shock. She took a hurried step back and then bowed her head in respect.

'There is no need for courtesy,' Arnhault told her as he entered the building. His eyes roved across the workshop, his attention lingering for a moment on the vault in the back with its heavy door. He noticed that Ivana remained deferential. He motioned for her to rise. 'Please, it will be easier if we could speak openly. There is little time to indulge in ceremonies of rank and custom.'

Embarrassment showed on Ivana's face. 'Forgive me, but I don't know how to receive one of Great Sigmar's holy warriors.'

The choice of words was more ominous than Ivana knew. Arnhault tried to keep his own expression warm and comforting, but what she'd said felt to him like a portent of doom. A doom he would try to avert, if he could.

'I am not unfamiliar with the Cosmoilyet Marshes and the ore that is dredged from its depths,' Arnhault said. 'It takes a smart person to evaluate the nodes and fragments. I am in need of a smart person. Someone who knows the people of Sigmarograd and can tell me what I need to learn about these murders.'

A relieved smile spread across Ivana's visage. 'I knew you'd been sent here to stop the monster! I knew Sigmar would answer our prayers! Whatever questions you would ask me, I will answer them if I can.'

Arnhault nodded. 'I would know more of the people who were killed. How and when they died.' He paused and stared at her face, that face that was known to him before he ever set foot in Sigmarograd. 'Tell me of the... monster.'

The Knight-Incantor was cautious in how he conversed with Ivana. Above all he wanted to keep her from the truth, the truth that shouted back at him with every answer she gave. He fished for details and connections that even Ivana hadn't made. She knew something had hunted the Petrovovich family, but she didn't connect the other victims. She thought they were

mistakes by the ‘monster’. She didn’t see how they all fitted together.

One and all, those killed by the entity had been friends and family of Vassili Petrovovich.

Arnhault felt the burden of keeping that revelation from Ivana. She didn’t know that Vassili had died or that his spirit had possessed such valour and faith that he had been reforged as one of Sigmar’s Stormcast Eternals. He’d fallen again, valiantly striving against the God-King’s enemies far from Azyr in that blighted land called Mhurghast. It was from that second death that the horror began.

Vivid in Arnhault’s mind was the scene that unfolded, for he had been there when Vassili’s spirit cast itself off the Anvil of Apotheosis. A raging lightning-gheist, it had stormed through the reforging chamber before escaping. He had been one of those present who had tried to restrain the anguished ghost. He’d seen the images that formed within the crackling sphere of energy. Houses and streets that had once been familiar to Vassili, people and places that had been important to him in his mortal life. Foremost there was Ivana’s face, young and vibrant.

Memories of the past, partitioned from Vassili’s mind as a Stormcast but still powerful enough to be felt by the lightning-gheist. It was an enigma that Arnhault wanted to solve. How much awareness was there in the amok ghost? Was there volition, or simply a kind of blind instinct? Thought or simply reaction? Did it truly know at any level what it was doing and to whom? Was it seeking help, oblivious to the havoc it inflicted, or was it driven by revenge, striking out against those who reminded it of the life it had lost?

Arnhault didn’t know the answers, but if he could solve them, he might find the key to what happened when a soul was reforged. He might learn why the Stormcasts lost more of their connection to their mortal past each time they were remade.

As he listened to Ivana, Arnhault considered one fact that made him believe the lightning-gheist was more than a mindless, frenzied force. He remembered how distinct her face had appeared in that crackling core of images. Yet Vassili’s ghost had not visited her. It had afflicted others with its destructive presence, but not her. On some level, there had to be restraint and control by the spirit. If there was, then it might even be possible for Arnhault to recover Vassili’s soul.

To test his theory would require an awful experiment. The lightning-gheist would have to be drawn to the one person it was avoiding. There was a grisly method he could use, a charnel preparation he could derive from the bodies of the ghost's victims. It was strange, but that morbid ritual was less repugnant to him than what would have to follow. He could prepare a lure from the clay of the dead, but the bait in his trap would need to come from the living.

Arnhault laid his armoured hand on Ivana's shoulder. His visage was grave as he posed to her his intention. 'There may be a way to end these tragedies, but I will need your help and the danger will be considerable...'

Boris and the other leaders of Sigmarograd insisted on offering Arnhault all the help they could provide. At least until they learned of his plan. Then they were content to limit their help to clearing the occupants from the buildings around the assayer's workshop and keeping everyone away. He didn't want anyone exposed to the coming danger. He regretted the necessity of the threat Ivana had to encounter.

The Knight-Incantor had taken all the precautions possible. The protective circle shaped from powdered Stardrake sheddings would act as a barrier against any spectral enemy – at least for a time. The arcane ward had served Arnhault in the past against wraiths and daemons, but he'd never tried its efficacy against a lightning-gheist. Wraiths were entities saturated in the dark magic of Shyish while daemons were foul spirits from the Realm of Chaos. A lightning-gheist, however, was a spirit of Azyr. This was its realm, and that link could be enough to render many of his spells and protections ineffective.

Arnhault kept any doubt from his face when he spoke to Ivana. He was impressed by her bravery as she stood within the circle. She displayed absolute confidence in the Stormcast. This trust brought with it a pang of guilt to Arnhault's conscience, but even now he wouldn't confess to her the identity of the amok spirit. He simply didn't know how she would react.

'Are you ready?' Arnhault asked. The tension in the air was palpable. This was the night when, if the lightning-gheist remained true to the established pattern, death would again steal across the rooftops of Sigmarograd. Ivana's reply to Arnhault was a brief nod.

Close to the doorway, Arnhault set the beacon. A cage of thin bars fashioned from sigmarite, inside there burned a substance that gave off a greasy smoke. The stench was sweet and vile – revolting to anyone human. It was the physical residue distilled by his magic from the bodies of the Petrovovichs. Arnhault had prepared it, this scummy paste from the dead, invoking Sigmar’s holy name at every stage of the process. Only by the God-King’s grace could even an Anvil of the Heldenhammer dare a ritual that skirted so near to the profane. There was no other course to follow. As with any ghost, the lightning-gheist retained connection between spirit and flesh, even the flesh of its slaughtered family. More tenuous and fragile than that of a chainrasp haunting its grave, but a bond just the same. He needed to direct the lightning-gheist’s attention to the workshop. After that, he was confident that the presence of Ivana would keep Vassili’s interest.

Hours fell away. The bells tolled once more in the temple.

‘Do you think it’s still going to come?’ Ivana asked. The long vigil was taking its toll upon her resolve.

‘Which troubles you more? That the ghost comes or that it stays away?’ Arnhault asked. It was easy for a Stormcast to forget the frailties and limitations of mortals. Another flaw in their Reforging.

Ivana shook her head. ‘I’m afraid that if it doesn’t come here, it’ll go somewhere else... and kill.’

Arnhault gave Ivana a reassuring look and turned back to the window. ‘It won’t,’ he said. ‘If it doesn’t come here, that will mean it has expended too much energy when it attacked the temple. It may already have dissipated, unable to sustain itself. Or it might be back somewhere deep in the marshes, replenishing its strength. It might be years or decades before it is strong enough to return.’

‘You don’t really believe that, though,’ Ivana said, displaying more perception than Arnhault had expected.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m sure it’ll be back, just as I’m sure it’ll come here when it does.’ Arnhault was depending upon it. He would be needed elsewhere by the Anvils of the Heldenhammer. They couldn’t spare him for months on the chance that Vassili would return.

It was this dire possibility that Arnhault was contemplating when he saw the flicker of light above the street. He knew that crackling pulse. ‘It is

here,' Arnhault warned Ivana. He backed away from the door. The short, rodlike staff he carried glowed with energy as he conjured a spell of binding to restrain the lightning-gheist when it entered.

Arnhault expected the spirit to come through the door. He realised his mistake when he heard glass shatter overhead. The next instant, the ceiling above exploded in a shower of splinters. The lightning-gheist seeped down into the workshop in a rain of sparks and crackling electricity. Arnhault swung around to confront the entity. He raised the staff to direct a band of constricting energy at the spirit's pulsating core. Ribbons of sapphire magic sped towards their target.

Before the spell could strike, a pulse of coruscating power exploded from the lightning-gheist. The wave of searing energy knocked Arnhault's armoured frame through the timber counter with such force that the staff was ripped from his steely grip and sent spinning across the floor. The spell he'd conjured withered into nothingness when his concentration was broken.

Blood seeped from a gash in Arnhault's forehead and his entire body tingled from the shock of the spirit's electric discharge. He could feel a cold numbness rolling down his right arm. A glance told him it had been dislocated by the impact with the counter, which lay in ruins around him.

More than his own wounds, it was Ivana's condition that was foremost in Arnhault's mind. He could see that she'd been cut by the splinters from the ceiling, but at least the circle had spared her from the violence of the electric pulse. She stood within the barrier and watched in obvious terror as the lightning-gheist came closer. Strands of energy arced away from the spirit, scorching the floor and walls, but crackled harmlessly against the magical bubble that surrounded the woman.

Though Ivana was keeping her head and didn't try to flee from the spirit, Arnhault felt impending calamity in the air. He spotted his staff lying on the floor. Beside it was the spectre-lamp he'd brought to confine the lightning-gheist. He hoped the warding runes engraved upon the sigmarite lamp would be enough to hold the ghost of Vassili. To use it, however, he would need both arms. He clamped his teeth tight and pressed his hand against his dislocated shoulder and used his mighty strength to force it back into the socket.

While Arnhault tended his injury, the lightning-gheist rolled towards

Ivana. He could see a flurry of shapes ripple across the glowing core. One image lingered longer than others, an image the assayer would recognise. It was a view of a crippled oak tree overlooking marshland with the moon rising above it.

‘Vassili.’ The name left Ivana’s lips as something between a gasp and a groan. A new quality of terror filled her eyes, an awful revelation that Arnhault had tried to keep from her.

The Stormcast dived for the spectre-lamp, intent upon stopping the tragedy he dreaded. Arnhault flipped open the latch and turned the azure rays of the lamp upon the lightning-gheist. The crackling spirit flashed and flickered, its core distorting as it fought against the pull of the lamp.

‘No!’ Ivana screamed. ‘You’re hurting him! It’s Vassili and you’re hurting him!’

In her panic, desperate to save her lost lover, Ivana rushed forwards to stop Arnhault. The instant she left the protective circle, the rampant strands of electricity crackling about the lightning-gheist slammed into her. Her body stood frozen for a moment, then began to jerk and writhe as pulses of energy seared through her. Her clothes and hair caught fire, her eyes boiled in her skull. When at last the lethal connection was spent and her corpse wilted to the floor, she was naught but a blackened husk.

The death of Ivana caused the lightning-gheist to swell outwards and exhibit a renewed frenzy of power. Arnhault was never certain if this redoubled intensity was provoked by some flicker of awareness in the crazed spirit or simply a by-product of the killing. Whatever the cause, the spirit surged towards him, not drawn by the lamp, but fuelled by the murderous impulse that had lain behind its other attacks.

Electricity lashed across Arnhault, sizzling over his armour and burning inside his flesh. A bolt of power knocked the lamp from his hands. He dived aside as the lightning-gheist charged for him in a storm of rampant fury. Behind him was the vault, with its door standing open. The spirit swept past him, drawn now by an attraction more powerful than that of the lamp.

Arnhault looked up as the crackling ghost was sucked into the vault and hurtled straight into the shelves of ore nodes. The lightning-gheist crashed against the rack of meteoric iron. There was a blinding flash of light and a deafening roar. When the glare dissipated enough that he could see again,

all that rewarded Arnhault's vision were burnt shelves and a few lingering sparks. Vassili's energised spirit had been diffused by the metal stored in the vault, dispersed through their magnetised veins until nothing cohesive remained.

Arnhault rose from the floor and stared at the last fading sparks. Vassili was gone, his once valiant spirit annihilated beyond recall. Beyond redemption. Until the secret of why some spirits escaped the Reforging process and became lightning-gheists was unlocked, this was a doom that hovered over all Stormcasts.

Arnhault turned and stared at the charred corpse of Ivana. She had made a terrible sacrifice. There was only one mote of solace to be had. She had waited ten long years for her hero to return to her.

Now the waiting was over.

FLESH AND BLOOD

Ray Cluley

It was cold on the docks, and an ever-present wetness hung in the air. Loukas' clothes were damp with it as he stood peering into the distant mist. The sea-frets that people blamed for the lung-rot so many suffered from in Broken Cove obscured much of his view, but occasionally they parted enough for him to think he glimpsed a ship against the purple sky.

Not many ships came to Broken Cove. For the most part they avoided the Thrice-Cursed Islands altogether, islands that were most aptly named. The sea-frets that brought sickness when they swept into the town also made the coast dangerous, cloaking the more treacherous rocks that protruded offshore like broken teeth, and despite the lighthouse there had been many wrecks in those black waters. But when it came to dangers, the most fearsome threat came from the ghouls of the neighbouring Mute Island. They had once sailed themselves in years gone by, ravaging the seas in ghastly galleons, the sails stitched patchworks of flayed skins and the decks awash with blood and bones. It had been many years, now, since they'd haunted the waters – the creatures had retreated into their own deranged, contained territory where they feasted on the flesh that came to them and engaged in bitter disputes amongst themselves – but stories of their appetites and piracies were still whispered around places like Broken Cove. Loukas had grown up listening to such tales from his mother as she fixed nets or prepared the fish she'd caught, and it was still a common threat used to scare unruly children into good behaviour: do as your elders tell you, or the ghouls will get you. Behave yourselves, or the takermen will come and ship you away...

Loukas' smile turned into a grimace of pain as his barely healed split lip

opened afresh. He touched it, checking for blood. Although he was gentle, his bruised jaw throbbed with low pain.

‘It’ll never heal if you keep touching it.’

Loukas turned to see Bale by his side.

‘Got some colour to your eye, too, I see,’ the man said, and laughed. ‘Must’ve been a good couple of punches.’

‘How long have you been there?’

‘I was here first, you just didn’t notice me. Too busy staring out there.’ He nodded out to sea. ‘Thinking about whoever gave you that, probably.’ He pointed, not at Loukas’ wounds this time but to the flower he wore in one of the buckles of his jerkin. ‘That pretty girl in the market? What’s her name, Amberyn?’

Loukas ignored the questions. ‘There’s a ship out there, I think.’

Bale looked with him. ‘Can’t see anything but a whole lot of lung-rot.’

‘Not a good day for beach-sweeping,’ Loukas agreed.

Like many of the town, Bale scraped his living from the rocks and sands of the cove. There were occasional treasures to be found there, if you knew where to look, trinkets and precious pieces washed ashore from some forgotten wreck or, as Bale believed, some sunken city.

‘Trianne says she saw another one of those things in the cove.’

‘Trianne takes a bottle with her when she goes beach-sweeping.’

There was talk of pale-skinned water-breathers who dwelled in the deep, and there were those of Broken Cove who claimed to have seen them, watching the town from the sea or lurking closer, in the darkness of the caves. Some feared that one day they would rise from the depths to reclaim their treasures. It made for a popular tale in the taverns, anyway.

‘She does like a drink,’ Bale admitted. ‘But I don’t know...’

‘You don’t know what?’

‘There’s a lot out there wants to kill us decent folk. Makes it easy to believe people like Trianne.’

Loukas grunted his agreement, but added, ‘Who said you were decent?’ He tried to smile at his friend but it hurt. He winced.

‘Serves you right.’

‘Anyway, no need for monsters with weather like this.’

Wherever the jewellery came from, the takings were richer after a good storm, so long as the frets weren’t in. A lungful of that, and each breath

would bubble with brine forever after until the day you drowned, coughing up your last in some sweat-wet sickbed. Right now, the frets seemed blanket-thick, a second sea over the surface of the first.

‘There it is again. Look.’

‘What? Oh, I see it.’

The shroud of mist had parted around a listing ship, tattered tendrils trailing in its wake as it approached Broken Cove. It churned waters black as oil into dark froth as it came.

‘Is that the *Ocean Crow*?’ Bale asked.

Loukas would know. He loaded it every month. ‘If it is, it’s early.’

‘Maybe the tithe was short.’

‘It wasn’t.’

He nursed his swollen chin, working his jaw around carefully. Loukas was a tithe-marshal. A takerman, as local parlance would have it. Injuries like his were part of the job. For all the people who came willingly enough – accepting the inevitable, accepting town law – there were always a few who didn’t want to go. And there were always a few unwilling to watch it happen.

‘I heard they attacked the *Crow* last time because it was short.’

‘Mm.’

‘I heard they took a couple of the crew.’

Loukas looked at the man. ‘Just a story. The captain’s fond of them. You should hear what he has to say about Mhurghast...’

‘But why lie about lost crew?’

‘He wanted more money and invented an additional risk to justify it.’

‘Risky enough as it is, in my opinion. I wouldn’t want to sail anywhere near Mute Island, let alone dock there. Even if Sigmar himself told me to do it, I’d have to very politely decline.’

Loukas laughed, then cursed at the pain.

‘I also heard the ghouls are dying out,’ Bale added. ‘Starving.’

Loukas said nothing. He had heard the same rumours. He heard ones like it every month.

‘Maybe that means we won’t need to pay a tithe any more,’ Bale offered.

‘Maybe it means we’ll need to pay more.’

The ship had vanished again, swallowed up into the mist that had borne it.

Many years ago, when Broken Cove was still young, a terrible deal had been struck to keep the townsfolk safe from their monstrous neighbours on Mute Island; a price paid in flesh and blood as proof of fealty. The old, the sick, the dying – all were given up as a gruesome tithe to keep the ghouls at bay. People were loaded like livestock onto any vessel with a captain brave enough to take them.

Vessels like the *Ocean Crow*.

It came again, emerging and descending from the mist like a dark wave. Loukas could make out the figurehead, the black bird of its name thrusting its skull head and beak forward, its wide wings back. Loukas thought he saw something draped over one of them, a man perhaps, but it was hard to tell for sure in the mist and the ship was coming in at speed. The sails were strangely ragged, rent down the length and tattered where the ropes pulled them taut, and yet they managed to hold the wind that brought it in.

It was coming in too fast.

‘Loukas—’

‘I know.’

Loukas turned and yelled for people to move, to get out of the way, to move, move! The nearest fishermen unloading their catch glanced at him but otherwise carried on about their business, slow to recognise the danger. Bale ran to them, pulling men to their feet, shoving, while Loukas pointed behind himself at the approaching ship, shouting. He saw their moment of realisation and looked back at the ship again himself.

It was suddenly upon them.

It came crashing into the docks. Boards broke around its prow with a thunderous shuddering, snapping like kindling as the ship ploughed through the pilings of the pier. Walkways were wrenched asunder, rippling beneath Loukas’ feet as he stumbled backwards. He steadied himself, then turned and ran.

Bale was clinging to one of the fishermen, both of them staring at where the ship sheared the wooden platform they stood upon, planks splitting and thrown into splinters. The others were running, and Loukas waved them on before him. He tried to pull Bale with him as he passed but the man was anchored to the spot and Loukas was spun with the effort.

The *Ocean Crow* had stopped, its momentum finally halted by boards that now held it. The figurehead faced them, perched as if ready to fly from the

sudden stillness, while in the brief moment of calm, hidden debris tumbled from somewhere underneath them into the sea.

Bale exhaled a long sigh. ‘That was—’

Whatever he intended to say was lost to the wave of horrors that descended from the ship, a sudden tide of near-naked bodies, all of them screaming their hunger as they vaulted the gunwales and dropped to the docks. Their monstrous shrieks tore the moisture from the air and were echoed in terror as men and women fled before them, running for their lives.

‘Ghouls!’

One of them leapt upon Bale, hooking claws from all four of its limbs into the man and slamming him down. Loukas was running before his friend even hit the ground, pursued by the wet sounds of tearing flesh and gargled cries.

‘Move, move, move!’

It was an unnecessary command; he was running with part of a small crowd now, people stumbling beside him, sprawling forward as hungry creatures fell upon their backs or tackled them down. He saw a man roll in a tangle of limbs, taken to the ground by two ghouls, while another beside him was knocked over the edge of the pier. The man grabbed at Loukas in an effort to save himself but Loukas shrugged him off violently before crashing to the docks himself. He managed to get one arm under him to break his fall, kicked at whoever or whatever snatched at him. A man convulsed beside him, arching in agony while the ghoul squatting on his body dug at his stomach and chest with quick dragging motions. Loukas saw ropes of entrails cast up by bloody claws before he could scramble to his feet and get running again.

With flagstones beneath his boots, he dared a glance back at the docks. People had become panicked prey and the ghouls fed upon the fallen. The creatures were lean, the yellowed, putrid skin of their bodies stretched taut over jutting bone and knots of muscle. Those with victims wrenched at the flesh held beneath them, bit down on exposed throats and bellies, while the others pursued the fleeing crowd. Quayside, they spread out, the more frenzied of the creatures throwing themselves at the windows of stores and homes, crashing into rooms amongst a chorus of horrified cries and screams.

Cooper Street. Loukas ducked down behind a group of barrels to catch his breath, to think, to hide. He had a club at his belt, the only weapon permitted tithe-marshals, and he fumbled at the leather strap that tied it in place. When facing the angry family members of those to be taken away, the club provided Loukas with a sense of security. Now it was little more than something to hold. Something to make a fist around while he waited for death.

The barrels around him toppled. Someone had fallen or been thrown into them and they rolled away with much of Loukas' cover. Someone else grabbed at what remained and began throwing barrels into the street, a hasty barricade of scattered obstacles, before abandoning the idea and running again. Loukas had no choice but to run with them. Most of the pursuing ghouls leapt over the barrels with ease but some of them stumbled, distracted by a woman who could only stand and scream as they swarmed the street. She held a wailing baby close to her chest, but only for a moment.

Loukas looked away.

The town bell was ringing, summoning people into the streets when the danger it warned against was already amongst them. Still, maybe it would slow the attack. More people meant more distractions for the creatures, more prey, providing Loukas with the time he needed to get to—

‘Over there!’

The yell came from a young man running beside Loukas. He was dressed in the uniform of the town militia, what they had of one, pointing ahead with a bloodied sword to Mourners Walk where others were pushing carts together across the street. The carts were loaded with coffins. Behind them, a small group raised crossbows. Loukas ran towards them with his hands up in front of his face, for all the protection such a pathetic gesture would offer. When they fired, he felt the air displaced around him as bolts struck home somewhere behind. He heard the angry, pained shrieks of wounded ghouls, and the reassuring sound of bodies falling. Then he was at the barricade and leaping, clambering over coffins, falling over the carts. On the other side, someone thrust a crossbow into his hands. Loukas stared at the weapon while the woman who'd given it to him hefted crates from one of the carts to block gaps in the quick fortification.

‘Can you shoot?’ a man asked. He wasn't uniformed, but he held a

crossbow too. Without waiting for an answer, the man handed a fistful of bolts to Loukas before reloading his own weapon. Loukas struggled with the ammunition, trying to load with all of the bolts still clutched in his hand.

The woman snatched them from him and handed back one – ‘Here!’ – stabbing the rest into a sack of horsefeed on the cart where they’d be easy for him to reach.

‘Wait,’ she said, drawing back from him. ‘I know you.’

It took a moment for Loukas to recognise her.

‘You’re the takerman that came for my da,’ she said.

She was the woman who had tried to fight, landing two punches on Loukas before his companions could restrain her.

One of the men, pressed close against the cart, yelled, ‘Fire!’

The order focused their attention on the street. Loukas raised his crossbow and aimed.

The street was usually a solemn one, each of its paving slabs a memorial stone to someone lost at sea or taken to Mute Island. Now, Mourners Walk was host to the actual dead and dying. Some of the ghouls were gathered around bodies to feed, but there were many still in the hunt. They hurtled towards the improvised blockade, some of them bounding on all fours like animals. Where their backs arched, curves of bone protruded from the pallid flesh binding their spines, and bony spikes jutted from where their arms flexed at the shoulder and elbow. Others hurried in a loping gait, lunging with their arms wide for the attack.

Loukas fired at one of the creatures in the lead. The bolt flew true. It struck the ghoul in the chest and the creature stopped, though only to stare at its new injury. With a hand that was all claw, it grabbed at what stuck from its chest and yanked the bolt free while its brethren swarmed around and past.

‘Fire!’

Loukas fumbled another bolt ready and brought the crossbow up to fire but released it too soon. It struck only the remembrance stones of the cobbled road.

And then the ghouls were clambering at the blockade. They threw themselves at it, over it, over each other, a mass of them climbing, pulling coffins down as they went. Someone close to Loukas thrust at them with a

sword but the creature that fell only became a bridge for the next one scabbling over. Loukas struck at another with his crossbow, bringing it up and under the creature's jaw in a wild swing that went wide and took him off balance. He tried to recover with a vicious backhand, smacking at the creature's claws as they came in to slash at him. They missed his flesh but knocked away the crossbow instead. Loukas grabbed for his club.

Beside him, the woman who had recently paid tithe was yelling and swearing, stabbing at every near beast with a knife long enough to be a sword.

'They're supposed to leave us alone,' she snarled. 'You said they'd leave us alone.'

At his other side, a man barely old enough to grow a beard poked a spear at the ghouls on the carts. Feeble thrusts, weak with panic. The weapon was yanked from his hands and his hands were torn ragged by claws that pulled him in close. The slathering ghoul snapped its jaws over the man's throat and shook him away.

'But we paid the tithe,' Loukas said.

The bloody-mouthed ghoul nodded its head back to swallow flesh.

Loukas stepped away, his club held low and useless at his side.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

Nobody heard him. They were too busy, fighting and falling. He took another step back. Ghouls were dropping down on his side of the carts now.

The woman had noticed his retreat. 'Where are you going?' She slammed herself against one of the ghouls, drawing her blade across its belly and knocking it down. It flopped by her feet, shuddering violently as it clutched at itself.

'She needs me,' Loukas said.

'*We* need you!'

As if to prove her point, one of the carts they were fighting over and around collapsed. With the sudden crack of splintered wood the fortification slumped where the wheel gave way, crates and coffins toppling and carrying with them a spill of hungry beasts. Two of the militiamen were buried under them with a cry.

'I'm sorry,' Loukas said a final time.

He ran.

Loukas fled towards the market at the town's centre, hoping most of the fighting was still snarled up in the streets. Hoping those behind him would delay any pursuit. Hoping he would make it in time. He would cut across the square. There would be cover amongst the stalls and, if they hadn't yet fled, the people gathered there. The hawkers and fishermen and—

Amberyn.

Was she safe? Did she even know, yet, what was happening? He imagined her handing out flowers when the bells began to toll their warnings. He imagined her confusion, her panic.

'Takerman!'

Loukas risked a look behind as he ran. The woman from the barricade was struggling with a ghoul that had her pushed against the wall of one of the townhouses. She held its arms away from her and kicked at its legs but it writhed in her grip, attempting to sink its teeth into the meat of her. She was looking at Loukas as she fought it, not calling for help but taking strength from a hatred she aimed at him.

'You took my father for this!'

She stamped at where a crossbow bolt protruded from the creature's knee – once, twice, three times – eventually doing damage enough to bring it down. She kicked its bony chest to send it sprawling, but not far. These creatures were tough.

'You took him! And look! Look at what's happening!'

She moved towards Loukas but the ghoul at her feet grabbed her shins and brought her hard to the ground.

Loukas ran for the market.

'Takerman!'

Someone else needed his help. He tried to block out the cries he heard behind, though they seemed filled more with rage than pain. There were plenty of other screams and shrieks to smother hers. The air was thick with them.

Yet the market square, it seemed, was slow in reacting to the attack. A few people were moving tables into defensive positions, lowering tall-framed stalls onto their sides, but elsewhere people stood as if merely interrupted in their trade or they looked around in confusion at the few frightened people who had made it this far, some of them bloody, words spilling from them in a senseless mess of disorder if they took the time to

talk at all.

Loukas pushed past them, shoving his way through the throngs he couldn't avoid entirely, until a sharp scream cut through the crowd and suddenly everybody was running. He was spun in the chaos of their panic to see that there – and there – there! – the ghouls had broken through into the town's centre. They leapt onto stunned spectators, ripping into the clothes and skin and flesh of those who collapsed beneath the onslaught. Blood arced in quick, thick lines from opened throats and was cast far and wide by frenzied claws that tore and shredded, digging bodies empty. Loukas was struck by a whiplash splash of it, hot on his neck and face, and he turned away from the sight of a man whose chest was wrenched open like cupboard doors.

He staggered away in shock, stumbling from one person to another in his feeble attempt to flee the scene before him. There was Amberyn's flower stall, pretty sandblossoms laid out in rows and wreaths of storm-cress and coral-thorn hanging from the cloth canopy next to delicate sprigs of wrecker's-fire and sprays of everblossoms. Of the young woman there was no sign, though an array of overturned buckets on wet cobblestones suggested a hasty departure. Loukas was glad.

Beyond the flowers, a few armed men and women of the militia hunkered down behind a market stall and a nearby line of crates, waving the people of the marketplace left and right while they prepared crossbows. As the people parted, Loukas was given a clear view down one of the connecting streets: a horde of scurrying ghouls, closing in on the gathered crowd. And in their midst, stalking forward at a slower pace, was a larger creature. Ghoulish, still, with pale sickly skin and long limbs, but fleshier in the body, a ragged shroud hanging in tatters and draped like a shawl over flat, sagging dugs. She held a human infant to these as if to suckle it, looking down at its wailing face as she pressed it close to her chest again, and again, while it refused to take whatever foul nourishment the monster offered. Lank hair the colour of cobwebs hung limp from the misshapen head and a circle of curved bones protruded from the skull like horns. Like a vicious crown. The rushing ghouls parted like a river around rock to pass her. This monstrous queen. This gory blood-mother.

She looked up as if Loukas' thoughts had caught her attention, absently discarding the child held at her chest for others to feast upon at her gnarled

feet. For a moment Loukas saw tiny eyes blaze in the hollow cavities of the creature's face, and a thick tongue as long as a belt lolled wet and slavering from her open mouth.

At that moment, one of the guards sheltering behind cover yelled an order to, 'Shoot them!'

The ghouls closed in around their leader, protecting her with their own wasted bodies and falling as the crossbow bolts struck, only for others to leap over them, leap over each other, over stalls and crates and barrels, to engage with the fresh untasted meat at the makeshift barricades.

'Takerman!'

The woman from earlier, the one whose father Loukas had loaded onto the *Ocean Crow* not a month ago, stood bloody, her leather armour shredded at her chest and shoulders. She held a broken shaft of wood like a club, some improvised weapon slick with blood that dripped at her side. She raised it to point at him.

'Wait,' Loukas said.

With a scream built of rage, she ran at him.

Loukas sprinted for the door of one of the warehouses edging the square, hoping it wasn't locked, hoping that if it was, it would give way under the weight of his charging body. He was in luck – it crashed open, the driftwood boards weak with age – and he stumbled into the dark, open space before colliding with a wall of stacked crates. He rolled around these to rest against a rack of shelving as the woman stepped into the building. For a moment she was a silhouette in the doorway, but as she crossed the threshold she slammed the door closed behind her and they were both alone in the gloom.

Her voice was soft, and strangely calm, when she said, 'You'll pay for all those you've taken.'

'It's town *law*. I was doing my duty as a tithe-marshal.'

'And this is my duty. As a daughter.'

She struck at him. Loukas brought his arms up, one to shield his face from her club and the other to grab at the arm wielding it. He was partially successful, getting a grip at her elbow but only managing to slow the hit to his head. He wrestled with her, dazed, trying to disarm her, while she, snarling, came in at his face with her own as if to bite him. He shoved her away, unable to take her weapon or force her to drop it, wanting to put

some distance between them. It barely interrupted her; she was on him again instantly, crazed with anger and fear and the grief she still held from the last tithe-taking. Loukas managed to hold her off, gripping at the rents in her leather jerkin, and they staggered together in something like a drunken dance.

‘Wait!’ Loukas tried. ‘Please.’ He tried to explain, ‘The ghouls!’ but it was a struggle to say much more.

Over the sound of their panting, Loukas thought he heard another movement in the warehouse with them. The woman was growling her frustration and intent as they struggled but Loukas thought he heard another noise behind it. Behind them. The scratch of claws. Some feral whine that became a low howl. It distracted him enough that his grip loosened and she brought her elbow up hard, striking him under the chin before swinging her weapon at his face. He ducked back from most of the blow but she still cracked the side of his head. Loukas stumbled. A crate caught him behind the legs. He fell. He tried to grab at something, anything, but only brought one of the shelves down over him. For a moment, sprawled amongst fat sacks of grain and boards of splintered wood, he saw his opponent standing over him. She was breathing hard, but then she turned her head as if to look elsewhere in the warehouse, somewhere behind. At that moment, the shadows pressing at the edges of his vision came in for him and Loukas succumbed to the dark.

He dreamed.

He was in the marketplace, at Amberyn’s flower stall. She was busy with other patrons but she paused in serving them to hand him a bouquet of sandblooms. It was wrapped in bloody rags, the flowers wet with salt water. He brought them to his face and inhaled, the scent as thick as the sea-frets and carrying the same smell of brine. Of tears.

‘She must be a special lady,’ Amberyn said, just as she always did, and Loukas completed the routine by plucking one of the flowers from the bunch to hand back to her. Only this time, instead of responding with more flirtation, a coy ‘Won’t she mind?’ or ‘I really shouldn’t...’, Amberyn backed away from the offer. ‘I don’t want that,’ she said, and ran, knocking over buckets as she fled with the crowd around her.

Loukas looked to his hands and saw the flowers had become a bundle of

bones. Each was gristled with wet flesh and laced with thin strings of sinew, the whole mess running red with blood. He dropped them in horror and watched them fall and fall, clattering to the cobblestones of the town square where the creatures gathered around him shrieked and screamed and gibbered and—

He woke.

When Loukas came to, he was sprawled on a debris of boards and spilled grain. He remembered everything immediately, memories rushing upon him like the ghouls he'd seen in the market. He tried to sit up, to get to his feet, to run, but the instant he moved his head the world around him wavered in a spell of dizziness that made bile rise in his throat. So he lay resting. Listening.

The noises outside had diminished as if the distance between him and the fighting had grown. But from the stillness of the warehouse came a slow and quiet sound. Like breathing. He thought, first, of the woman who had attacked him and was able to sit up carefully, but he saw no sign of her. The sounds were wet, as if the breather suffered with lung-rot. But no. He was all too familiar with that sound and this was not the same. Not quite.

Loukas gradually found his feet and stood. He lost his balance briefly and put a hand to the side of his head. It was sticky with blood where the skin of his scalp had split. He stepped carefully around the shapes of broken boards and shelving, more accustomed now to the dingy interior of the warehouse.

The woman was lying upon one of the larger packing crates, her arms and legs hanging limp over the sides. Leaning across her body, with its face buried in the exposed soft meat of her stomach, was a ghoul. It chewed at her flesh, its breathing ragged as it took in air around hungry mouthfuls. When it raised its head from her, a length of entrails came with it, coils caught in its teeth. It looped these into its bloody mouth with clawed hands. This was not the slaving frenzied feeding Loukas had seen on the streets but rather the slow and deliberate feasting of a creature whose appetite had been momentarily sated. It was eating, now, not from hunger but for pleasure.

Loukas looked around for a weapon he could use, though he had no intention of fighting; if he was careful, there was plenty of cover he could

use in a slow and quiet escape. There were several broken boards at his feet, but better was the discarded club the woman had been using. Slim, but heavy. The handle was tacky with blood so he wiped it with a scruff of his woollen shirt. He did not want to lose his grip at a crucial moment.

The feasting creature licked the palm of one clawed hand with its long tongue. The other it dragged down the woman's body, peeling more meat from her. It unpicked these strips from her torso and draped them into its open mouth.

Loukas made an involuntary sound – a gasp of revulsion, a retching noise, he wasn't sure – and caught the attention of the flesh-eater. It collapsed into a sudden crouch and hissed from behind the crate that had become its table. When it saw Loukas, the ghoul leapt onto the body on the crate, perching as if to defend its meal. It made sounds like gurgled speech before opening its grisly maw and emitting a long shriek that was either a threat in prelude to attack or a call to others of its own kind. Either way, Loukas didn't wait. He lunged forward, hoping to surprise the creature with an abrupt attack of his own.

The ghoul leapt at him but launched itself too late for an effective counter-attack, merely evading the full force of Loukas' swing. Its reaching claws were knocked away by the blow, and though Loukas was hit hard by the bulk of the creature, he was able to get another swing in before he fell. This one struck the creature's brow. There was a loud crack and the ghoul howled its pain, exhaling the hot stench of it onto Loukas as the two of them tumbled to the floor. Loukas tried to roll so he landed on the creature but only managed to get out from under it. They faced each other on their sides. The ghoul had a grip on Loukas' chest that was mostly clothing but he also felt the sharp sting of its talons in his skin. It brought its feet up to scrape at Loukas' legs and belly. Loukas stabbed at the thing, using the improvised club as though it were a knife, striking down over and over on the ghoul's head and neck and shoulders with one hand while trying to push away at its legs as clawed feet tore at him. When the foul thing snapped its teeth onto Loukas' arm, he pulled it closer to him then slammed its head back against the ground. On the third hit the ghoul unclenched its teeth and fell slack.

Loukas wasted no time throwing himself clear. On his feet, a short distance away, he watched the ghoul but it did not stir. A pool of blood was

spreading from beneath its head.

Clutching at the claw marks in his stomach, feeling blood run down his legs from his thighs, Loukas took clumsy steps towards the door. He glanced back at where the woman lay, flayed and open, her insides spooling to the floor, and lurched back out into the streets.

The fighting had moved past the market square. Various carts and stalls lay in broken heaps. The bodies of dead ghouls and townspeople, more of the latter, lay in dark pools. The people had been partially eaten but otherwise left where they fell, though across the open, empty space of the square, at the head of one of the streets, Loukas could see a huddle of filthy creatures sharing some red ruin between them. They were too distracted to see him, and he made his way quickly but quietly.

Somewhere ahead the fighting continued – he could hear the screams, the occasional bellowed order or monstrous shriek – but for now Loukas travelled in the wake of it. In the alcoves and doorways, or crouching in the shelter of some fallen fortification, Loukas saw straggling ghouls feeding on those who had fallen. He was able to avoid them for a short while, ducking down behind a flight of front door steps or pressing his back flat to a wall, taking advantage of the mist that had permeated the streets, the sea-frets that crept into town. At a crossroads, though, where a number of creatures glutted themselves on a wide spread of corpses, he was seen. The ghoul, busy scooping at internal organs, only hissed at him but it drew the attention of others. Some rose from where they squatted, settling into a threatening half-crouch. One of them waved a severed limb at him as if to warn him away and Loukas backed slowly up the nearest street before others stood to pursue him. As soon as there was a wall between him and them, he ran.

He passed doors that had been forced inward, and many of the larger windows at ground level had been smashed. From inside some of these buildings he heard things topple, brief screams, yells of pain cut short. He heard wet sounds, and shrieks of a hunger satisfied. But he could only continue forward, hurrying to his own building. Hoping he wasn't too late.

At the next turning he was momentarily confused; he felt he should know the way from here but the wreckage at the corner, the blood on the road and up the stone walls, the bodies spiked with crossbow bolts or torn asunder by vicious teeth and claws, all combined to disorientate him. He

was dazed from his head injury and the loss of blood from his open wounds. The clarity of his thoughts faded in and out under the influence of his pain and fear until – yes! There! That door!

Home.

Limping across to the building, Loukas cast a look behind him. The way he had come was blocked now by the turn he had taken, but looking down the length of street he saw no immediate threat – just more of the same carnage he had seen elsewhere. *Everywhere*. The gutters ran with blood. Loukas had left his own trail of it across the muddied flagstones of the road; he would need to bind his wounds as soon as he was inside. But first, he had to get in. He had to get upstairs.

The door opened easily. No attempt had been made to fortify it, and he took little time to do so now, merely shoving a hall table across before stumbling up the stairs, pulling himself up by the banister as much as he was climbing the steps.

He fell against the first door on the landing. He used the wall to steady himself the rest of the way to another door at the far end, one arm cradling his wounded stomach.

‘Mother!’

He could hear whimpering ahead. It spurred him on; he leaned forward and moved at a pace that threatened to topple him until he collapsed against the closed door. He yanked its handle and staggered into the room.

She lay wrapped in her bed linen just as he had left her, the sheets soaked through with sweat. The sharp tang of brine lingered in the room, a thick sea smell, as if the frets that had given her lung-rot seeped from her pores as well as each exhalation. She was turning her head left and right on the pillow at the noises outside and muttering to herself between frightened mewling noises that were terrible to hear – worse than the gurgling noise the sickness gave her breathing. It slowed her speech, too, every sentence a struggle.

‘Loukas? Is that... you?’

‘It’s me.’

‘They’re... coming for me... aren’t they...?’

They were coming for everyone. They would run down all they found in the streets and then move into the buildings. With nothing to stop them, the ghouls would take Broken Cove.

But his mother didn't know about the ghouls. Not yet. She wasn't talking about them.

'You won't... let them... take me?' she said. 'The takermen.'

Loukas had never told her what he did for the town. She thought he was still a fisherman, trawling the sea with nets instead of rounding up the old, sick and dying.

'No, mother. I won't let them take you. Never you.'

He crossed the room to her and part-knelt, part-fell at her bedside. He brushed the damp hair from her forehead. He had kept her sickness secret for weeks. He couldn't let them take her. Not his mother. She was his flesh and blood. She was all the family he had left in the realm.

She stirred beneath his hand, knocking it away from her face, and struggled to sit up.

'You're bleeding.'

'It's nothing, mother.'

'You're bleeding.'

He looked around the room for something they could use for crutches. 'We need to get you away from here,' he said.

He hobbled to the doorway, intending to check the other rooms, but movement below drew his attention.

A ghoulish creature squatted in the threshold of the open front door. It was sniffing at the floorboards where lines of blood stained the wood.

Loukas stepped back from the banister as the creature hunkered forward, following the trail. He eased back into his mother's bedroom and pushed the door to, worried the click of it closing would be too loud in the quiet house.

'Loukas... You're all... torn up.'

Loukas put a finger to his lips. He looked around for something he could use as a weapon before remembering he still clutched one. His knuckles were white around the grip of the club. If he were to let go now, the pain in his hand would be excruciating, he was sure of it; he had been gripping the weapon so tightly. It didn't matter. He had no intention of letting go, not yet.

'What's...?' She couldn't get her breath for long moments after the pause. One of her thin hands clutched at the bedsheets and the other reached for her son as she struggled to breathe around the fluid that cursed her lungs.

Loukas went to her and held the grasping hand. She was trying and trying to inhale but the breaths were short and bubbling. People with the lung-rot could drown in their beds.

If that's what's happening, Loukas thought, perhaps it's for the best.

The boards of the stairs creaked as if to support his thought. He heard the front door knock against the wall downstairs; another ghoul had entered the house.

The room had very little by way of furniture: a set of drawers, a small table and the bed. Loukas' attention lingered on the window. He could never get his mother out there, but if he was quick...

No. He wouldn't leave her.

The bedroom door swung inward. Loukas rushed at it just as the ghoul lurking there hissed and threw its arms wide, ready to leap. He slammed against the door and the door slammed against the creature, catching one of its sinewy arms and trapping it in the doorway. The claws slashed blindly at him but he leant all of his weight to the door and beat at the limb with his club. The flesh of it sagged as if the muscle had atrophied, splitting where open wounds festered, but the ghoul did not lack strength. Not until one of Loukas' blows broke the bone of its wrist. The howl that came with the pain was accompanied by a sudden thumping against the door and it bumped open several times despite Loukas' efforts.

'They're... here.'

'I'm sorry, mother.'

She settled back into the bed, fighting all the more to breathe now that panic had her in its claws. She closed her eyes against it.

Loukas lurched away to grab the small table, intending to wedge it in his place at the door, but the moment his weight had left it the pathetic barricade was knocked aside. There were more of them out there now, the hallway filled with bodies that surged into the room as a monstrous, hungry tide.

Loukas rushed to his mother, raising the club for one final act of mercy. Her eyes were still closed. Her breathing came in shallow gasps. Before he could bring the weapon down, though, he was hit by the horde and brought to the floor. He tried to fend them off, striking at one and then another, another, but there was little room to manoeuvre beneath the press of their bodies. He tried to crawl from under them as others sprang onto the bed.

His mother screamed. She had breath enough for that. Her eyes were wide open now. Loukas thought he might be close enough, he might, and he raised the club as best he could under the weight of the creatures upon him, despite the fire of pain he felt in his stomach, the blaze of agony that seared his back.

A wet warmth enveloped his lower body and his strength left him, draining in a gush that left him suddenly cold. The club fell from his feeble fist before he could complete the swing.

A ghoul knelt atop his mother, a line of bloody drool dropping from its open mouth. She turned away from it and faced Loukas, holding his frightened stare with hers until one of the creature's hands pressed down on her head. Loukas saw one of the long-fingered talons disappear into his mother's eye and they both cried out. The remaining claws disappeared into her cheek and open mouth. The ghoul tightened its grip there and pulled upwards; Loukas closed his eyes too late against what he saw. When he opened them again, the creature was feeding a red mess of face into its own while another ghoul joined the first upon his mother. It brought its fists down again and again onto her head, raining blows upon her skull until it cracked and opened.

Loukas fell back to the floor. He stared past the bed, where blood ran from sodden sheets, and focused as much as he was able on the slice of sky he could see outside the window – the pale amethyst of it, the swollen shapes of black clouds. He watched muted light flare and die in those clouds until the yanking at his own body drew him away to the sound of mumbled thunder. He felt a rummaging at his chest and bowels, felt the full intrusion of something grasping at him from within. The grip fastened on his ribs and tugged.

The last of Loukas' wet breaths left him with everything else that was scooped out from inside. He tried to say 'mother' with it but the word was blood in his mouth and then, just like him, it was gone.

THE SUMMONS OF SHADOWS

David Annandale

On the day that would have marked thirty years of their union, and did mark twenty years since the tithe-giving, when his family had departed to bear arms for the Emperor, Hakob Maltenus saw the shadow of his wife.

He was in a transcription chamber of the Administratum palace complex, seated on a pew with a dozen other scribes around a long iron table stacked high with piles of manuscripts. Servo-skulls hovered over the scribes as they dictated summaries of reports, correspondence, regulation amendments, and every other form of bureaucratic minutiae generated by a dying forge world in an Imperium under siege. The servo-skulls preserved the information, and then the parchments were either destroyed or archived, depending on their importance. The documents Maltenus was working on were decades old. Many of them detailed forgotten transactions between deceased individuals. But no record could be ignored. All must be catalogued.

A precious lumoglobe stood in the centre of the table on an iron stalk, casting little more than a dim, brown glow. Tallow candles mounted on tall candelabra illuminated the rest of the room with a flickering light, barely enough to read by, and their cloud of dark, acrid smoke hung below the ceiling.

Maltenus finished with a report fifty years out of date about the decline of vermin since underhivers had begun eating them. He barely paid any attention to what he was dictating. He was thinking of Velya, the melancholy ache of her absence undiminished by time.

'Hakob.' The whisper came from right beside his ear. Startled, he looked up and saw her shadow.

Velya wasn't there. He knew that. She hadn't been on Fumus for twenty years, not since she and their twins, Ballan and Ulys, had departed. The boys had been only ten. They should have been too young to fight, but the dwindling population of Fumus meant that the tithe had swept up children too, so long as they were healthy. They had left, and Maltenus had mourned this parting every day of every year. He was proud of them, as he was of Velya. He could not fight for the Imperium. His heart was fragile. His lungs were weak. Arthritis curled and swelled the joints of his fingers. His duty was to serve in the bowels of the Administratum, and to be patient in his sacrifice.

But the shadow.

The woman's silhouette was eerily motionless in the wavering candlelight. It was too angular. There was nothing about it that should have made him think that Velya was here. Yet he was sure the shadow was hers. It was her voice that had whispered in his ear, though the sound had been cold as wind over snow.

Maltenus twisted in his seat, turning so violently he knocked a handful of parchment off the table. Other scribes glanced up in disapproval.

There was no one behind him. When he looked back, the shadow was gone.

'What troubles you, Hakob?' Artur Tissein asked.

'Nothing,' Maltenus said. 'An archival reference I forgot to check.' He stood and walked slowly away from the table, heading in the direction the shadow seemed to have come from.

It wasn't her. She can't have been here.

He moved between the towering storage archives. They were monoliths, over fifteen feet high, with rail-mounted ladders giving access to their drawers. Servitors climbed over them, retrieving and replacing documents. The grind of moving ladders and the slam of drawers was swallowed by the space of the chamber, the sounds reduced to the distant fall of pebbles into a dark, fathomless pool.

A short distance in, Maltenus crossed paths with Availa Reveken. She nodded in greeting.

'Marking your day with thanks and contemplation, Maltenus?' she asked. Her tithe-giving had come at the same time. She, too, had seen her family go. Her friendship with Maltenus had been forged through shared pride,

and loss.

‘I am,’ Maltenus said, distracted, looking past her. ‘I trust you are, too.’

‘My thoughts are with Velya and your sons. The Emperor protects, brother.’

‘The Emperor protects,’ he answered, smiling weakly, and moved on.

The Emperor protects. Maltenus kept his spirit alive on the hope embedded in that promise. The Emperor would protect his family. Maltenus would see them again. He had not heard from them once since their departure from Fumus. But he had to believe in this dream. It gave his existence meaning. Without it, he might as well be a servitor.

Maltenus stopped at an intersection of paths through the archives. *What do you think you’re doing? You were imagining things.* He turned around to head back. As he did so, he saw, out of the corner of his right eye, one of the twins standing at the far end of an aisle.

Maltenus whirled. There was no one there. But there had been – he was sure he had seen...

Seen whom? Which twin? To his horror, he did not know. He realised, with piercing shame, that Ballan and Ulys had blurred in his memory into a single being. If he saw them today, he would not be able to tell them apart.

If you saw two men of thirty... But that was a child.

A child. He had seen the twin as he had been twenty years ago. *Thought he had seen.* He was mistaken. Clearly. He should go back. He had been gone too long from his post.

Even so, after a furtive glance around, he walked down the aisle to where he had seen the child. One of the drawers near the bottom of the archive unit was open. He looked inside. It held a large stack of unsorted documents, labour waiting for another day, or another year. His mouth going dry, Maltenus picked up the top sheet of vellum.

It was an accident report, originating from Valgaast, concerning the troop transport *Exaltation of Faith*. Sealants on the ship’s plasma reactor had been found to be fractured. The supervising tech-priest had ordered them ‘to be replaced’. At some point, a transcription error had occurred and the sealants had been registered simply as ‘replaced’. The ship had left with the flaw unattended to. The *Exaltation* had survived as long as its first warp jump, but when it translated back to the materium and fired up its

plasma engines again, there had been a rupture. Fire had raced through the ship's decks, killing all hands.

The report was from twenty years ago.

Maltenus stared at the page and the long columns of casualties. Then, he gaped. His throat closed in grief and the scream that shook his body emerged as a strangled hiss. There, listed among the dead, were the names of his wife and sons: *Velya Maltenus*, *Ballan Maltenus*, *Ulys Maltenus*. They had died *twenty years ago* – and their deaths had meant nothing. They had not perished as heroes, fighting for the Imperium. They were victims of a stupid mistake. Their tragedy had no importance. It was a loss among many, an incident barely worth noting. The names clouded before him. He slumped against the archive unit, the parchment crumpling in his clawed hands.

‘Scribe Maltenus, you are damaging an Imperial document.’

Maltenus jerked upright, his breath hitching. Overseer Tarasyn stood at the other end of the aisle. Her skin was grey, her hair was grey and her robes were grey. She was as forbidding and pitiless as lead.

‘I-I was...’ Maltenus stammered, barely able to think.

‘Return to your post at once.’

‘Yes, overseer.’

Maltenus had no consciousness of going back to his tasks. Yet he must have. Somehow, he worked again. He was not aware of doing so. There was no room in his mind for anything except anguish and an overwhelming sense of meaninglessness.

And rage. He felt rage at a galaxy that would reduce every dream to ash. Rage at the lie he had lived for twenty years, a lie supported by an even greater one.

The Emperor protects.

The Emperor protects.

No. He does not.

The refrain tormented Maltenus throughout the drudgery of the day. It pursued him still after nightfall, as he made the long walk through the dark and the bitter cold towards his quarters. The streets here were narrow, squeezed between high, decaying hab-towers. The pavement and the façades were grimy from the soot and smoke that choked the air. Filthy,

grey smog rolled through the alleys, and Maltenus could often not see more than a few yards ahead. Snow fell in thick, sodden flakes. They left black smears where they landed on his cheeks and slid down like thick tears. He had none of his own left. The grief was too big. So was the hate.

The population of Fumus was diminishing as its resources were depleted, and much of Maltenus' sector was close to deserted. Entire hab-blocks now stood abandoned. Their windows, broken and dark, were the blind sockets of skulls. Snow drifted in over the sills. Even in Maltenus' building, fewer than a tenth of the residencies were occupied, and there were no other inhabitants on his floor. It was not unusual, then, for him to be utterly alone in the streets on this last part of his journey home. He did not expect anyone else to be around – just the rats, scavenging through piles of old refuse against the base of the tower façades.

At a cross-street, Maltenus looked up at the sound of human footsteps. To his left and right, half-hidden by the fog, he saw the twins. They stopped walking when he did and stood motionless, each a block away. Then, as he stared at them directly, they disappeared, shadows carried off by soot and snow. When he started walking again, the shadows returned. The twins kept pace with him, lurking at the edge of his vision.

They are not really there. They are what I want to see.

Even that conviction brought no comfort; it merely exposed his weak memory of his children. The two shadows, one on either side of him at the intersections, were indistinguishable because he had lost the identity of his sons.

Velya was here too, always behind him, always gone when he turned to look, though the length of her shadow kept falling over him like a judgement.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. But it's been so long, Velya. I remember you, though! Won't you let me see you?

Oh, to see her again. To see all of them. Now that he knew he never would, there was nothing to keep him going, to support his loneliness.

An endless void of mourning opened up before him, and he could not go on. He fell to his knees.

'One more time!' he cried to the empty night. 'I would give anything to see you, all of you, one last time!'

He did not pray to the Emperor. He felt too great a betrayal to turn his

thoughts that way ever again. But the perversity of his loved ones' deaths, and the strange, chance discovery of that report, was too strong for him to believe there was no controlling hand at work. There was no coincidence here. There was a will, a shaper of fate.

'Grant me this boon,' he prayed to that shaper, and his cracked whisper seemed huge, as if it would claw furrows in the rockcrete of the abandoned hab-blocks. 'Let me see them one more time.'

The instant that he formulated the prayer, the shadows vanished. A heavy silence fell with the snow. He was completely alone, with not even the imaginings of his grieving mind for company.

A heavy, dragging tread from some distance behind him broke the silence. Maltenus looked back, staring into the swirling dark of the night. The noise drew closer. It was something large, clumsy. Sometimes it sounded as if it were limping on two feet, and sometimes there was a clumsy, rapid patter between the steps.

There was a scream of pain and anger from a voice that was like a woman's, or might once have been a woman's, but was no longer.

Maltenus ran. He must not see what was approaching through smoke and snow. He ran faster than he had since his youth. Before long, his heart was hammering a painful, irregular beat, and his lungs were rasping wetly with the effort to draw breath. He would have collapsed, but the heavy steps and the scream were drawing closer. And terror kept him running.

He reached the rusted, flaking entry to his hab-block and staggered up the six flights of stairs. Long before he reached his floor, he heard the thing begin to climb. A thump, a slipping patter, and then another thump of steps echoed up the stairwell. The scream came again, but it was changing. More than a wail now. A choking, gargling growl. There was a throat, trying to form words.

Maltenus covered his ears as he stumbled down the dark hall to his apartment. The lumen strips of the corridor barely functioned. They flickered a pulsing grey, struggling and failing to push back night. Maltenus knew the hall well, though, and he tripped only once. Sobbing, he fumbled with his keys, unlocked the plasteel door and slammed it shut behind him, locking it again.

Gasping for breath, he backed away from the door. The shambling thing was drawing closer. How pathetic he had been to act as if he could find

refuge in his home! A hand scraped at the other side of the door, and he froze, a prey at bay.

The door flew open, knocked off its hinges. The horror entered.

It was his wish granted. It was his one last look at Velya, and Ballan, and Ulys. His wife and his sons had come back to him, fused into a single being. Velya staggered forward, her steps heavy with the weight of her sons melded with her torso. Their legs scrabbled for purchase on the floor, sometimes finding it, sometimes not. Three pairs of arms stretched out, hands clawing to reach Maltenus. The heads of the boys melted into Velya's lower jaw, and their mouths had become one terrible, distorted maw. The flesh of the monster was burned black. Crisp pieces of it broke off at Maltenus' feet.

The maw opened wide, and at last the scream became words. *'You did this!'* Maltenus' family screamed. Six eyes fixed on him, hating him and his wish that had brought them back in this agony.

And then they were upon him, dragging him into the mass.

His screams were muffled quickly in the nightmare of reunion.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Annandale is the author of the Warhammer Horror novel *The House of Night and Chain* and the novella *The Faith and the Flesh*, which features in the portmanteau *The Wicked and the Damned*. His work for the Horus Heresy range includes the novels *Ruinstorm* and *The Damnation of Pythos*, and the Primarchs novels *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar* and *Vulkan: Lord of Drakes*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Warlord: Fury of the God-Machine*, the Yarrick series, and several stories involving the Grey Knights, as well as titles for The Beast Arises and the Space Marine Battles series. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written *Neferata: Mortarch of Blood* and *Neferata: The Dominion of Bones*. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

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Ray Cluley is a British Fantasy Award winning horror writer. His short fiction has been printed and reprinted in various venues and has been translated into French, Chinese, Hungarian, and Russian. He currently lives and works in Wales.

An extract from **Dark Harvest**.



When I awoke, the rain was pattering against the canvas overhead. The wagon smelled of ghyroch and gunpowder. My back ached, and my head was ringing like a duardin smithy. I could taste last night's mistakes in the back of my mouth, and my skin had that greasy, gritty feeling that comes from too many baths in water barrels.

For a moment I looked around, wondering what had woken me. Then I realised that the wagon wasn't moving. I cleared my throat and called out, 'Have we stopped?'

No one answered me. Then, 'Blackwood? That you?'

'It's me, Lucio,' I said.

The drover leaned through the front flap and gave me a tepid smile. 'I thought you'd sleep right through it.'

'Right through what?'

'Come up and see.'

I sat up and winced. Everything hurt, the way it always did when I slept rough, which was altogether too often for my liking, these days. Sometimes it felt as if I'd spent half my life sleeping in the backs of supply wagons or in tents. At other times, I realised that was a charitable estimate. I tried not to think about it too much.

I squinted against the gloom. There was no lantern, and for good reason. The wagon was packed to the canvas with crates and barrels full of guns and gunpowder, the primary exports of Greywater Fastness. If it belched fire or spat lead, it came from the foundries of the Fastness. Business was good, especially these days. The dead rested uneasily in their graves, and shot was more effective than prayers.

I wasn't the only one sleeping in the back with the merchandise, though I

was the only one awake. When they were off-duty, the drovers were allowed to rest in the wagons, if there was room. I made my way to the front as carefully and as quickly as I could, trying not to disturb anyone. I had enough problems as it was. The last thing I needed was an angry muleskinner trying to knife me.

I didn't like leaving the city. Especially to go into the wilderness. I'd had enough of that to last me a lifetime. But sometimes you have to do things you don't like. Life is like that. And then you die.

The buckboards were wet when I hauled myself out onto the front of the wagon. So was Lucio. He wore an oilskin cape and broad-brimmed hat, but neither had done him much good. He didn't seem to mind. He offered me an apple. 'We got us a right fine quagmire here.' I didn't bother to ask where 'here' was. I'd realised where we were as soon as I saw the gun-towers – Mere Keep. The edge of civilisation, as far as many inhabitants of Greywater Fastness were concerned; where Sigmar's light faded, and the dark of Ghyran began.

The immense gatehouse-keep straddled the only road out of the city, its foundations set deep in the muddy ground the way only duardin stonemasons could manage. Built of heavy, black stone, dredged from the marshes centuries ago by labour gangs, it held a dozen wide portcullises within its sturdy frame. Each of these gates was closed at the moment, causing much consternation among the waiting travellers.

Above the portcullises, a long, reinforced parapet supported a battery of cannons and their crews. Greycaps, armed with handguns and fire-casters, patrolled the palisade walls and gun-towers that stretched out to either side of the gatehouse and folded back along the road leading to the city like the walls of an immense corridor.

Once, the road had been bigger and there had been others. Now there was only one thin snake of raised stone and packed earth, squeezed between two expanses of blasted heath and mire. One way in, one way out. Even that had cost a generation of blood and fire to keep, and annual sacrifices to maintain.

I rubbed the apple on my sleeve, trying to find an unbruised spot to bite. 'So what's going on? Why aren't the gates open?'

Lucio shrugged. 'Don't ask me. I just drive the wagons. Scribe made a mistake somewhere, probably. Chantey is fit to be tied.'

‘I bet.’ Chantey was the master of the caravan I was hitching a ride with. He was unhappy at the best of times. Most caravan-masters were. It wasn’t the sort of job that attracted those of cheerful disposition. ‘Where is he?’

‘He and some of the other masters went looking for somebody in charge.’ Lucio leaned over the side of the buckboard and spat. ‘Good luck to them, I say.’

‘You get paid either way, right?’ I said, and he laughed. I bit into the apple and watched as Greycaps and scribes threaded their way among the line of covered wagons that waited to depart through one or another of the portcullises. The apple had a bitter taste, like much of the fruit grown in the city’s allotments. Something was wrong with the soil, but everyone pretended not to notice. Or maybe we’d all just grown used to it, like the rain.

I risked an upward glance. The sky was the colour of slate. Grey on grey. Some said the weather was proof that Sigmar had abandoned us, that he was angry with us for our crimes. Though just what those crimes were, no one really knew. Others insisted it was punishment from the Everqueen, or even Elder Bones. All I knew for sure was that I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen the sun, or felt anything other than damp.

‘Is it true you used to be a priest?’ Lucio asked me.

I laughed. ‘Who told you I was a priest?’

‘Just something I heard.’

‘Gossip is a sin,’ I said.

It was his turn to laugh. ‘I just thought it was funny is all.’

‘Why?’

‘On account of you breaking legs for Caspar Guno.’

I took a bite of my apple. ‘You shouldn’t say such things. You never know who might be listening.’

He had the good sense to look afraid. The truth was, I didn’t break many legs, if I could help it. A man who can’t walk can’t work. Arms were my speciality. And occasionally necks. But only rarely. Most people were only too happy to pay tithe to Caspar Guno. Those that weren’t... well. Guno employed men like me for a reason. In my learned opinion, working for him wasn’t much different to serving Sigmar.

Atop the palisade, Ironweld cannons began to boom. Lucio started in his seat, and the ghyroch pulling our wagon began to lurch. The great bull-like

beast was covered in shaggy, moss-like hair and had a rack of branch-like horns that rose higher than the top of the wagon. Massive, stony hooves splashed mud everywhere as it stamped in growing agitation.

It wasn't the only one doing so. Animals up and down the line of wagons began to bellow, squawk and whinny. I saw two Chamonian axe-beaks claw at the mud with their talons, their metallic feathers shimmering in the rain, and a half-grown demidroth drool acidic spittle and lash its scaly tail as its duardin rider tried to calm it.

Lucio extended his goad and scratched the ghyroch between its shoulders, soothing it. 'There's something on the wind,' he said, softly. As if afraid someone might hear him.

'Besides gunpowder?' I said, as the stink of the volley washed back over us. Living in the Fastness, you got used to the smell quick, or your sinuses burned out. It was everywhere in the city, in every stone. It wafted across the Ghoul Mere in black banks of powder-fog, staining the trees and turning the rain to acid. Was it any wonder the sylvaneth hated us?

'They say the treekin are on the march.'

'Who says, Lucio?'

'Greycaps,' Lucio said.

'How drunk were they?'

'Less than me.' He looked around. 'Listen to that.'

I didn't ask what he meant. I could hear it well enough – had been hearing it since I'd woken up. I'd thought it was just the rain at first, but it was the sound of trees. Of branches swaying in the rain and wind. Only there was no wind. The sound beat against the air with a constant pressure beneath the more bellicose thunder of the guns.

Maybe Lucio's Greycaps were right. I wondered if I ought to cut my losses and go back to the city. But that wasn't an option.

'It's nothing,' I said. 'Just a lot of noise.'

'Doesn't sound like nothing. I haven't seen them this agitated since...'
He trailed off. I knew what he'd been about to say. Since the last time the treekin had decided to tear the Fastness down, stone by stone. They'd failed then, as they always failed. But we lost ground nonetheless. We always lost ground.

'Guess I picked a bad time to leave the city.'

'You after somebody?'

‘Why would you say that?’

‘Only reason I can think of that a man like you goes anywhere is if you’re after someone – or they’re after you.’ Lucio looked at me. ‘So which is it?’

‘Bit of both,’ I said, after a moment.

It had started with the coin. A message from a dead man. Or someone as good as.

When it found me, I considered ignoring it. I’d broken almost every oath I’d taken when I’d abandoned the azure, after all. What was one more? I wasn’t a priest any more, and the promises I’d made while I was one were just ashes as far as I was concerned.

But here I was, on a southbound wagon. I took the coin out of my pocket. It was Aqshian, a kind minted in some backwater city of the Great Parch. Not even real gold. It was stamped with the face of some petty king who’d probably long since been forgotten. Only, the face had been scratched out. That was how I knew what it meant.

I flipped it across my knuckles, trying to distract myself. Ten years on, I was fairly good at it. You can ignore almost anything, if you convince yourself there’s no point in seeing it.

I knew who the coin was from, even if I didn’t know who’d sent it, or how they’d found me. I’d spent a decade making myself hard to find and thought I’d done a good job of it. I’d even changed my name. ‘Blackwood’.

The coin said otherwise.

I didn’t like that, people knowing where I was. Who I was, or who I had been, for that matter. The coin was from someone who should’ve known better. I intended to tell them so. That was part of the reason I was going to Wald. Or so I told myself.

The truth is... the past, like the dead, doesn’t always rest easy. There’s always someone looking to dig up what’s better left buried.

I tossed my finished apple to the ghyroch. ‘I’m going to go find Chantey. See what the hold-up is.’

‘He’s in a foul mood,’ Lucio warned.

‘So am I.’

As I climbed down, I looked back, past the wagons and inner defences, towards the distant forge-glow of the city. Greywater Fastness crouched at

the end of the fortified road like a tiger herded into a cage.

I made my way around the wagon, sinking into the mud with every step. I pulled my coat tight about me, grateful for the heavy magmadroth leather. It was tough enough to turn aside most blades smaller than a sword, and kept out all but the worst of the weather.

I looked around. The gatehouse was a fortress in and of itself. Stables and animal pens occupied the north, while a forge anchored the south. Even with the rain, it was busy. Hammers rang as horses were shod. Block-and-tackle frames lowered goods to waiting wagons, as scribes hurriedly weighed cargoes and noted the results in logbooks.

It had to be self-sufficient. Every year, a little more of the mere vanished. Every year, the trees pressed closer to the road, further isolating the city from the rest of the realm. Every year, the Greycaps demanded more funds for guns and towers and walls to defend what was left. And every year, the Council of the Forge and the Grand Conclave gave it to them.

Given that they'd started out as a regiment of backwater handgunners it was almost impressive. The Greycaps had gone from a shifty crew of garrison soldiers to overseeing the defences of a city of several million.

The forecourt was crowded – drovers and sellswords diced or argued; food-sellers circulated, offering steaming bowls of broth for cut-rate prices; pilgrims gathered against the walls and sang hymns, rang bells or simply read loudly from the Canticles of Thunder. A steady tide of humanity, filling an ever-shrinking space – a microcosm of the realms themselves.

Despite the crowd, I spotted Chantey easily enough. He was right in the middle of all of it, as usual, along with a few other caravan-masters. They surrounded a put-upon Greycap in a vaguely threatening manner, and took turns yelling at the stubbornly unresponsive soldier. Several of them were waving scrip papers or badges of licence, as if it would do any good. If the Greycaps wanted the gates closed, they were staying closed.

Chantey turned as I drew near. He stepped away from the others, a sour expression on his hatchet face.

'Blackwood.' He said my name as if it were something unpleasant. I didn't hold it against him. Fallen priests aren't exactly high on anyone's list of desired companions. And I'd fallen harder than most.

'What's going on?'

‘Something has the Greycaps riled up.’ Chantey ducked his head and water spilled off the broad brim of his hat. ‘Troggoths again, maybe. Or a mere-gargant...’

‘Or Pale Oak,’ one of the other caravan-masters said. Everyone fell silent at the treelord’s name. If the sylvaneth were on the warpath again, there wasn’t much chance of anyone going anywhere except back to the city.

‘Whatever it is, it’s something that ought not to be so close to the road, this time of day,’ Chantey said firmly. ‘They’ll see it off, never fear.’

‘Are they still going to let us through?’ I asked.

‘Eventually. Might be a few hours.’ Chantey was from somewhere else, and his accent was a medley of all the places he’d ever lived. He fished a filigreed pocket watch from his coat and popped it open. The hands of the watch were stylised lightning bolts, and the runes were Azyrite. The Fastness was on celestial time, like all of Sigmar’s cities. ‘It’s going to play merry hell with my schedule.’

Chantey led convoys south to Headwater Breach and back twice a month. That was the direction I needed to go, so I’d wrangled a berth aboard one of his wagons.

I flicked rain from my eyes. ‘We’ll make it in time, though?’

He looked at me. ‘I said we would.’

‘You also said there’d be no delays once we got past the New Fen Gate.’

‘You can walk, if you like.’ He snapped his pocket watch shut and put it away.

‘If I thought it’d get me to Wald faster, I might.’

Chantey grunted. ‘Don’t see why you’d want to go there, of all places, anyway.’ He looked at me speculatively. ‘There’s nothing in Wald except eels and moss.’

‘My business, isn’t it?’

He grunted again, but didn’t press the issue. Chantey had once had a profitable side-business delivering the bodies of vagrants to the ash-grounds for cremation. I had helped him out a few times, enough to earn me some goodwill, along with a ride.

Up on the palisades, Greycaps were ringing bells and shouting. Handguns popped and cracked, splitting the curtain of rain. I heard a sound like trees bending in a great wind. I knew that sound. We all did, everyone who made Greywater Fastness their home.

The caravan-masters shared nervous looks. Even Chantey had lost the usual pugnacious gleam in his eyes.

‘They’re not attacking,’ said the Greycap, the one Chantey and the others had been berating. His voice was soft, as if he weren’t speaking to anyone in particular. ‘They never do. We have a truce.’

And then he laughed. A sort of high-pitched, raggedy sound. He looked worn out and worn down. Unshaven, his uniform threadbare and stiff with stains. His hands were shaking and his eyes moved quickly, as if searching for something.

All of the soldiers looked the same. They were men riding the broken edge. They’d been out here too long, enduring the wild hours with no relief. I’d felt that way myself, often enough. There was only so long you could bear it. Every man had his breaking point. I knew that better than most.

Something slammed against the eastern wall. And then to the west. An echoing boom that made the wooden walls bow and flex alarmingly. Greycaps scrambled back from the ramparts as cannon crews redoubled their efforts.

‘If they’re not attacking, they’re doing a pretty good job of making it look like they are,’ Chantey spat.

‘They can’t attack,’ the Greycap said dully, as if it were a mantra. ‘We have a truce.’

I heard something like the skitter of leaves over lead roof tiles and felt a chill race through me. I knew that sound. The treekin were laughing.

‘Maybe somebody needs to remind them,’ I said, as my hand fell to my knife. It was the only weapon I carried these days. It was a good knife, but it was still just a knife. I had never been any good with a sword, and I wasn’t about to pick up a hammer again. I couldn’t afford a pistol and wouldn’t have known how to use it, even if I’d had the comets to spare.

Chantey had his own blade half-drawn when the gun-towers on the palisade walls started up. The ghyrochs lowed in plaintive agitation. Everyone was nervous, even the beasts. Whatever it was was moving past the gatehouse, along the western walls. Greycaps scrambled to keep pace, and I could hear the order to fire being given.

‘They’re not attacking,’ the Greycap said again, his voice high and thin. ‘Not really. They’re just... just playing, you see. Trying to draw us out. It’s

harmless. Harmless.’

‘Doesn’t sound harmless,’ Chantey growled.

The volleyguns in the gun-towers spat rhythmic hails of lead into the rain. I heard the sound of trees in the wind again – a vast sighing that seemed to grow deeper and louder with every passing moment. It echoed through my bones and I felt it, down deep inside me. Like the memory of a song once heard and never forgotten.

The sylvaneth were singing. Somewhere out in the rain, out among the trees, they were singing. I wasn’t the only one who heard it. I thought the Greycap was weeping, but it was hard to tell in the rain. Chantey pulled off his hat and closed his eyes. The guns stuttered to silence, as the song danced across the ramparts.

I’d heard that melody before, once and in another realm. But it had the same anger, the same sadness I’d heard back then. They hated us so much that it hurt them to feel it. Like a wound that never healed. The song – the attack – was a way for them to remind us of how much they despised us. How little we mattered.

The song reverberated through me, louder and louder, until I thought my head would burst from the pressure. And then, suddenly, it was done. As quickly as a man might snap his fingers, the song ended. The bells on the walls fell silent and the only sound was the rain and the lowing of ghyrochs.

The Greycap wiped his eyes, and made the sign of the hammer. Chantey put his hat back on, and I realised he’d been praying. I released a breath I hadn’t recalled taking.

Chantey was the first to speak. He looked at me. ‘Still want to go, then?’

I didn’t trust myself to reply, so I just nodded.

Behind us, the portcullises began to open. The swamp road was clear.

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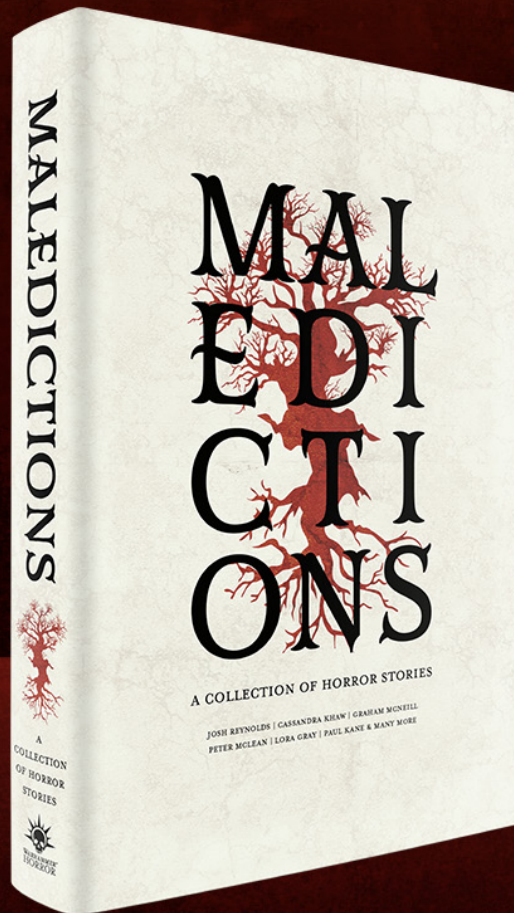


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