

Chapter 1: Heretics Divided

Mud in my mask. In my boots, my gloves, my long-coat. Mud in my mouth. Maggots in the mud. Bacteria and viruses in the maggots. Saw them squirming on my muddy goggles, mashed against the ground. Imagined them in my air filters. Crawling into every crevice. Burrowing into my skin and infecting me with unholy disease. War all around me. Grenade blasts and shrapnel, hot slugs hurled through the air. A halberd blade inches from my throat. Ancient weapon. Powerful. Noxious green flames licked up the blade. Cast sinister light on the tactical dreadnaught armor towering above me, pinning me down. Boot crushing my shoulder. I gritted my teeth. Glared. Thick plates of ceramite engraved with battle prayers. Lined with rust. Ribbons and parchment scrawled with blessings fixed to every surface fluttered in the foul-smelling wind. He had shoulders broader than most men are tall. Was twice their height. Helm with lenses glowing the same wicked green as the fire blazing across his blade. He loomed over me. Cast a cold shadow. Chilled me through my gear.

Ithacus. Grandmaster Ithacus. Highest rank in his chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. His chapter was a secret. Outside the Inquisition, knowing about them meant death. Maybe they get in your mind. Steal your memories. A gift. The Emperor's last gift to humanity. Supposed to be incorruptible. Purported to be anathema to daemonkin. The tip of the spear humanity would throw into the heart of the daemons. But something went wrong with Ithacus.

He pressed my shoulder under his boot. Pain shot through my arm and neck. Didn't bother dispensing pain-killers from my implants. I let the pain keep me warm. Let it fuel my hate. I'd need it. Heard groaning from a daemon like the undead. It was close. Tilted my head back in the mud and saw the limping, wretched thing upside down. It droned on and on. Didn't breathe in, just made continuous noise. Its tongue was a worm. Hung through a hole in the bottom of its jaw. Craned round and round like it was trying to escape. Heard gunshots louder than conventional canons. A tracer round zipped in and punctured the daemon. An explosion from within burst the thing apart.

"Inquisitor," Ithacus said. His voice boomed like a tyrant's. "Care test your human reflexes against mine? You grip that plasma pistol so desperately. Here, let me free you from temptation." He stepped on my wrist with his other foot. I felt a crunch. Bit my tongue. Didn't make a sound. Arm went numb. Cold, unfeeling fingers still held the pistol. I think. "It is a shame," he continued, "you have no one to throw onto my blade to save your flesh, coward. You have shoved the last of your faithful soldiers into the rotting hands of the god of plague."

"My men gave their lives in service to--"

"Their lives you took! That is your office to hold. My men owe you nothing!" Blade drew closer to my throat. Crackling energy coming off it. Like static. "Never again will you shield yourself with their armor and their lives."

Found the bastard's button. Only pushed it once. That was what it took to get under his skin.

Burst of flame erupted from a knight's incinerator. Nearby. Felt the heat. Rush of fire ignited the rotting monsters. They surged forward. Oblivious. Fire seared what little meat they had left. Stench would render any normal man unconscious. Filters helped, but not enough. Microbes that bore the stench would do far worse. Filters helped there too, but barely enough. Men with incinerators cut the fuel feed. Other knights stepped forward. Blades blazed green fire like Ithacus' did. They raised their left arms. Wrist-mounted guns with huge clips protruding from them. The guns roared to life. Hurling forth a torrent of bolts. Like miniature missiles. Worlds apart from usual weapons. Deafening. The slugs sank deep into rotting meat. Slight delay. Ammunition detonated and their bodies exploded. Man-sized fountains of half-dried guts and gelatinous fluids. I smirked. The Emperor's work be done.

Jolt of pain. Couldn't get up. Shoulder was still pinned. "Damn it Ithacus!" Nothing I could do. Fire in my stomach, under my skin. Mouth dry. "Have I skulked in the shadows? Leered at your soldiers and licked my fangs? What have I done to provoke your ire? You are crushing the bones of a man who fights at your side." At his side. Good lie. He let up a little off my shoulder. "In hatred of daemonkind you have no other equal—"

"You are not my equal." He stepped harder again. Overdid it. Damn.

"I should expect no less pride from the Astartes. It will be your tragic—"

"You misunderstand. *You* are not my equal. You and the rest of the Inquisition are to the Imperium what the plague god's rot is to this planet. I remember now. Being king of Odyssea. I could feel it before, some obligation, some sense of duty, some love calling me back. A king's love beckoning me back to my people. Even were I still just a man, you and I would never be equals."

I spat warm dirt into my mask. Clenched a fist around my pistol grip. "You openly admit to an inquisitor that you remember your life before becoming an Astartes. Do you realize what that implies about your order? About the rites of passage? Do you understand what accusations of heresy it invites if even one of you is flawed? You can't impale the entire Inquisition on that blade." Would like to see him try. I laughed dryly at the thought.

"I do not need to. I will put down the only devious, mistrusting worm that knows and then I will go home to pay my respects to my queen. I shall shower my world with gifts like they have never known. My crusade will clear a path from there to the Black Gate."

"It's not a crusade if it isn't sanctioned! You're rampaging through the stars with a regiment's worth of the Imperium's best resources! Killing what you *feel* is evil! Where is the investigation? The process? This is not the Emperor's justice."

"Must I investigate this rotting cesspool to know what work needs done?"

"My investigations led you here! *I* am responsible for saving this sector!"

He laughed at me. Said nothing. I felt hot hate boiling bile in my stomach.

"You were righteous—" I said.

"I am righteous still! There are no purer minds in the galaxy than those in my order. Look there, see them purge this world of its disease!" He pointed. My head followed the gesture. Side of my face hit the mud with a splat. World turned sideways. Astartes waging war not far off.

Couldn't deny them their excellent brand of death. Sound tactics. Advantages in their equipment. Training too. Made use of every bit. Couldn't deny them that. They fought like the tides. Ebbd away from the enemy. Air in between erupted with frothy explosions. Like sizzling suds on the shore. When the daemons closed in they flowed. Rushed ahead. Blades raised and raging with terrible energy. Skillful, determined, disciplined—couldn't deny them that. But pure and righteous? Lies of the most heretical degree. They were corrupted. Was his fault.

Undead didn't know pain. Didn't pay any mind to a second death. Stumbled and limped. Staggered through a hail of destruction. Smoke drifted from their bodies. Like they were seared solely by the knights' presence. Undisclosed weaponry. Psychic techniques, maybe. More secrets kept from the Inquisition. Magnified feed from my visual implants. Undead flesh crawled with worms and maggots. Erupted spontaneously with boils that burst with virulent infection. Like bubbles emerging from water. Constantly in motion. My bioengineered viruses didn't compare. Can't compete with witchcraft and the Warp.

Turned my attention to the knights. Felt disgust. No, pity. Maybe remorse. Ithacus had ruined something good. I could admit--their deeds were right. Couldn't say the same for their intent. It is said that we are made of what we do. Does not follow that it makes who we will be.

A soldier might kill the right enemy with wrongness leaking from every pore in his skin. He will blast the brains from his enemy with righteous fervor. Helm will gleam in the light. As if he were a saint of battle come to save the wicked from their own existence. But inside he will thirst. For glory, for opportunity perhaps. To prove himself. For some, however, that will not satisfy. The soldier will become the heretic. He will thirst for much else. Glory and gain may lead him into heresy. But once arrived the suffering and carnage of others will be as drugs to the afflicted of the hive worlds. Bringing death to the defenseless will be mechanical. A reflex or habit. Some will crave it and others will resist. All heretics are unique. But whether they know or not, they have lost themselves. Lost to urges they do not understand. Probably don't even come from within.

The people of this planet had once been very lucky. Met their governor many years before. Saw pride in him. Like I see in Ithacus. This world had been rich. Prosperous resources and an ideal atmosphere. These people led some of the best and most comfortable lives to be led in the Imperium.

But a storm raged from the warp in this sector. Cut them off from trade and supply. Their population swelled with their excess. Demands on their planetary stocks were too great. They blamed each other. Argued. Should have established a realistic plan for self-sufficiency. They fell into civil war. Winners blamed the defenseless and they fell into fascism. Defenseless became the aggressors and rose into rebellion. Overthrew their tyrants. Reestablished control through genocide and fell back into fascism.

Numbered nearly two dozen billion. They lived in filth. Disease coursed through the population and the people despaired. They cried at night. Out loud and in silence. Begged to be delivered from their pain and suffering. They prayed and were heard. The plague which already ravaged the planet mutated rapidly. Almost instantaneously when the people's despair peaked. Nurgle, the god of plague, gave them what they wanted. Gave them what interrogated heretics invariably call a "gift." The disease he beset on them relieved them of pain. But it corrupted their bodies with hives and rashes. Within an hour the afflicted flesh ripped open. Bodily fluids flowed freely. Infected every surface they touched as they writhed, wracked with involuntary convulsion. Their selfish prayers for themselves were answered. They lifted their bodies, falling apart and oozing with infection. They walked the streets. Shared their gift to heal the pain of their friends and family.

Or so I expect. Can guess based on my last visit. Process never varies. This world is not unique. Like thousands of others across the galaxy. Came here with Ithacus. Thought there was something to salvage. Erred in my judgement. Heresy here accelerated his own. Didn't anticipate that.

Fighting flared up. Looked at the Astartes again. Knights there steadily backpedaled. Led the enemy by

some meters. Pumped round after pompous round, into the staggering, rotted bodies. Could easily imagine their sneering faces. They delighted in inflicting death on death itself. A mechanical reflex, like the hungry junky's.

Sly. They led the daemons on until the enemy ranks were over-committed. Spread thin. They exhausted the advantage of distance. Readied their swords and braced themselves in defensive stances. One foot back. Two-handed grips. They received the charge. Then waded into the horde of monsters. Swear I could hear the thrill in their breath. Excitement in the forced dry tone of their battle hymns. Each stride came with a sweeping strike. Decayed arms, heads sent soaring through the air.

Spotted the sergeant among them. Was easy. He fought with skill and passion. Swung his weapon precisely. With purpose. No motion wasted. He began with a single stride forward on his right foot. Brought his sword down diagonally with both hands. Sword blazed. Burned. Roared. Sliced through the torso of a daemon. Singed it clean. Wafts of smoke and stink of burning, rotted meat. Another daemon came from his left. Reached out with virulent, drippy claws. Mouth moved in silence. The sergeant pivoted on his left foot. Effortless. Momentum in his legs became power in his arms. Sword sung up through the air. Completed the cut he began carving with the first swing. Severed the daemon's hands. Brought his sword to rest by his left shoulder. Turned his sword with a snap. Returned weight to his right foot. A horizontal slice sent the creature's decaying head soaring through a jet of flame from an ally's incinerator. It disintegrated. Blew away as ash.

"Death does not convince me," I said. "It doesn't matter how well it is wrought. Heretics may well have talent in bloodshed. You are risking their souls with your insane war."

"Absurd! I cannot risk what cannot be gambled. The psychic wards of our order are unbreakable." A thin brown fog drifted in. Enveloped the grandmaster's boots. Flowed over me. Ominous. Reeked differently than all else around. "You are investigating men more righteous than yourself! The only heresies committed have been yours: your fantasies of chaos behind the eyes of the faithful around you. And the whimsical sacrifices you offer the daemons when you hide behind others."

"Ithacus, your heresy is no fantasy to me. It is a nightmare I watch in waking. In the sick green glow of your force weapon and in the corrosion of your armor, I have seen it. Show me ceramite that rusts! Anywhere in the galaxy, show me! The Plaguefather beckons and your soul listens! Your reply may be forthcoming, but it will come eventually. Time is His currency and He has invested heavily in you already." There was a screeching wail as if in reply. No, more like a hundred of them in unison. Gunfire and the sound of metal crumpling.

"Is that what your shifty little eyes have watched over these long years? The paranoia of the Inquisition poisons your mind. You accuse me and my knights of--"

"The Astartes are no more unerring than the rest of mankind, no matter what you may think of mere humanity. And it seems you are no different." I spat the words through my teeth. Heard my hissing, seething hate in my breath. "I will put you before a tribunal. The Inquisition will judge you righteous or not. No one is above their obligation to the Imperium."

"You have no authority to judge even the lowest of my order! Do not confuse us for the common Astartes. And do not mistake me for a fool. The Inquisition holds no trials. There are only sentences to one death or another." The brown fog rolled in thicker around his feet. Grew hazier beyond him. Shrouded the battlefield. I saw movement. Something huge. Hunchbacked and lumbering. Saw its silhouette pick up a man and pluck his limbs off. It reared back and I heard again the howling chorus. "How many do you think they would purge afterward? If they convince themselves that the Emperor's infallible knights could be corrupted, how far would they go to keep it secret? How many would die to their paranoid delusions, their fits of terror at every shadow in the night?"

"Terrors in the night? You know what terrors we guard against. It's a preemptive battle that we wage. A war against the intangible, the unintelligible and the unforgivable!" I shouted. Shook with anger. Pictured my knives in his neck. Pistol under his chin. Grenade in his mouth. It brought a wave of false satisfaction. Quashed by frustration and returned feeling in my hand. Still uselessly gripped my gun. I told him, "Every witch we burn, every heretic we bleed out is a world saved from the daemons that they may bring from the warp. It's a messy job. I do it well. Well enough to know you can't be allowed to wield chaotic power."

"There is no reasoning with you! Do I not kill daemons for His glory? Is my skill, my dedication not unparalleled in battle? If you can't see me as other than a heretic, at least you won't harm the Imperium from hell. When we return to Odyssea, it will be triumphantly. No daemon, not even their gods shall stop us. And I will raise a monument to the inquisitor who gave his life valiantly to turn the tides of battle for the Emperor. This fiction will have little to do with you, but perhaps it will satisfy your puppet masters. Hopefully, they will keep their dementia to themselves and out of my crusade."

Ithacus put his weight into my shoulder. Bones bent. Eyes rolled back. Tasted blood and realized I was biting my tongue again. To hell with it, I thought. Dispensed local anesthetic through implants. Wasn't helping yet. Heard howls again. Very close this time. The brown cloud of rot rolled in thick. Obscured everything. All but the

green fire of the halberd blade and the dim glow of his eyes. Couldn't lift the pistol. Held down by a heretic. Execution coming. And I couldn't do a damn thing about it. Frustration boiled my insides. Heard howls. Didn't know what else to do. Fired blind shots along the ground in that direction. Howls turned into enraged shrieks. Pierced the ears like spikes. The earth shook. There was movement and a gust of air. The plague fog parted. A massive limb swept into Ithacus with a crash. Sent him soaring through the dust cloud.

I stood and stumbled a few steps through the mist. Wiped the lenses of my mask. Smearred mud across them. Undead hands reached blindly through the fog. I shot plasma into the creature. Kept moving. Heard more shrieking and sprinted the other way. Eventually this filthy fog would seep into my armor and equipment. Let my imagination get carried away with what it would do to me. Pushed it out of mind. Ran.

The cloud thinned. I looked back over my shoulder. Saw it. It towered above the plague mist. A gargantuan beast of legion. It was made of rotting flesh. Bodies. Must have been a hundred corpses. Its head was one singular thing made of dozens of human bodies. So, so many faces. A face of faces. Ironic, I thought. The plague god has but one face. One that in their despair, the people of this planet will never look into again.

The giant swung a massive tentacle limb like a rotting rat tail. Size of a tree. Came rushing down overhead. I winced. Anticipated the crash. It didn't come. Only a wail of fury surged through the landscape. It echoed through the valley below and reverberated with decaying resonance. Slowly faded into a silent death. The mist cleared. I saw Ithacus with his halberd braced over his head. The end of the monster's tentacle lay at his feet. Sheared off and steaming.

If his knights fought like the tides, Ithacus fought like a river. Fluid. Powerful. Absolutely unceasing in his rushing onslaught. The giant daemon was almost pitifully helpless against his full attention. He rushed the monster. Gripped his halberd widely. Dropped low on the toes of one foot. Balanced himself with a sweeping kick from the other. Kick lowered his center of gravity. Positioned that absurdly long polearm. He spun. Struck low. A cyclone of violence.

The maneuver severed both of the creature's feet. By the time it was sliding off the seared stumps, Ithacus rebounded. New momentum. Dragged his halberd's blade across the soil. Left a sizzling trail of singed earth. He slashed a crescent-shaped uppercut. It split the daemon's gut vertically. Bloated gremlin-like creatures poured from the wound. They gibbered and bounced. Round little balls of putrid green and brown rot. They seethed with excitement at their release. A chance to taste live flesh. I thought briefly, might have once been human. It was wasteful. Their own damn fault, but a waste anyway.

They overflowed from the giant's belly. Ithacus ignored them. His weapon was already raised at the end of the sweeping slash. He followed the momentum. Leaped. Plunged the halberd through the center of the daemon's head. Through that mass of corpses. Braced his feet against the giant's chest. Leapt off. Raging howls drowned out by the sound of gushing gelatinous blood. Goopy innards. He had sliced his halberd out of from the thing's head. Cleaved it open. It spewed out a geyser of fluids and gibbering daemons.

The giant collapsed. Became a miniature mountain of corpses. A volcano. Erupted small, maniacal daemons. Scores of them carpeted the ground around Ithacus. They swarmed him and met his halberd. He carved swaths of them in two. Raised his arm. Wrist mount fed them explosive gunfire. But the daemons were closing the gap. One leapt at his face. He caught it mid-air and crushed it. Sick wet juice sprayed from his gauntlet. He killed dozens. Dozens more clung to his armor. Swarmed over him. Wasn't long before I couldn't see him at all.

I took aim. Grinned. Couldn't help it. Tough shot with plasma. Pistol nonetheless. Too far. Still I had to try. Smirked. This was going to feel good. Imagined his smug face, towering over me. Crushing my shoulder. My arm. Considered his heresy too. If he were to return to Odyssea his world would surely follow into hell the damned king they think they know.

Decaying fingers rose from the loose dirt. Clawed at my boots. I tuned it out. Focused. Imagined his smug face. I squeezed the trigger and a bolt of plasma roared through the air. It crashed into him. Scattered swarming daemons from his body. Knocked him off balance. Through the steam and smoke I could see his wicked, glowing eyes. They glared in my direction and suddenly he began to sprint. I snapped off a couple more shots. Missed.

He was barreling toward me. I turned to run but hands tugged at my boots. Nearly tumbled to the ground. Kicked at the arms and broke one in half. Ejected a combat knife from my forearm implant. I severed the tendons of one arm. Slashed the fingers off the last. I struggled free and began to run.

Ithacus chased. Sprinted, pumping his arms and legs. Left behind a trail of bloated daemons. He gained on me. Became faster with each daemon that lost its grip. He was a different breed of man. Even for an Astartes. His pride was not for nothing. I needed some other advantage.

All around the dead rose from the earth. Bodies of soldiers long forgotten after the rebellions. They struggled through moist earth. Crawled with carrion. I weaved my way through them. Hamstrung them as I passed by. Left behind undead traps. Glanced back and saw them claw at Ithacus in feverish frustration. Some he trampled

into organic sludge. Others gripped tightly onto his armor and slowed him. Still others left behind their severed arms. Reflexively clasped his armor. Added to the mass weighing him down. He could no longer keep up. Must have known it because he stopped and had an Astartes with an incinerator torch the gnawing little monsters from his armor.

I had to flank my way around the main battle front. Acquire transport from the planet. Ithacus would survive. Smash his way through the galaxy all the way back to Odyssea. I had to prevent that from happening. Had to alert the Inquisition. Keep that arrogant heretic away from his throne. If he remembered his old life there was something wrong. No telling how he would react if he found out what had happened to his home world.

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Path to the ship was blocked. A sea of the undead. I'd run aground. Didn't have the means to break through. I was on the edge of a rocky cliff. Leering horrors of disease before me. A chasm behind me. I backed up until my heels hung off the edge. Raised my pistol. Felt the trigger under my finger. Put my hand on my grenade belt. Then the rocks under my toes gave way and I fell. So much for glory. I tumbled and turned. Passed jagged rocks. Each narrow miss a gift. Gave me some time to think. I thought of Ithacus arriving at Odyssea. Imagined his fleets bombing neighboring sectors into submission. Emerging with greater strength. More ships, more men, more factories. Multiple sectors lost. Before he even sells his soul for power. A light appeared below me. Periodically came into view as I spun. The cliff face sloped away. Receded from me. The light grew as I drew near. Could tell it was big. Looked like the containment field around our ship's plasma reactor. So, I thought without comfort, I will vaporize rather than splatter.

I passed into the field. Felt a jerk sideways. My guts spun first. Then lurched along with me. Faster and faster I accelerated until I felt divorced from my own body. I lost my mind. Not my sanity, the location of my consciousness. My sight flickered sporadically. Like a faulty comm channel. I heard a chorus of noise. The familiar voices of anyone and everyone I knew. They spoke at the same time. In fragmented sentences. Couldn't understand. Wondered what it meant. What they were all trying to tell me. My skin crawled and I wished to stretch my bones as if they were muscle. I tasted foods I'd never known. Smelled odors of every kind. At once pleasant, intoxicating and repulsive.

Then an utter failure of all senses assailed me. Stimuli became a foreign language. My mind struggled to make sense of it. Like a child smashing a cube into a circular hole. Then wondering why the sound makes the cube taste like blue. I received responses across my senses that were jumbled. Fragmented and misplaced. I could hear colors. The perfect gradual hues of the spectrum were an audible and constant climb in pitch. I saw, no, I heard a spattering of immaculate geometrical shapes. They appeared to me as a series of tones in staccato. Textures too. Arose in my memory as sound effects. Both comforting and terrifying. The sounds prickled my body with spines that could have been made of either chitin or cotton for all I knew. All of this supra-existential music simultaneously fed my senses. Flavors were misinterpreted as colors, though I processed them as odors. Then they seeped into my skin. I tasted them with my fingers as the recoil of my pistol. As the cold of my implants. As humiliation. And vengeance.

Sense made no sense and I knew this place was not fit for man.

My sight returned to me. I had a vision of my myself from behind. I was zooming through a winding tunnel of energy. It looked like water in zero gravity. Wavered and rippled. Beyond its edge was a swirling mass of color. Contorted space-time. The Warp. I'd only ever seen it from the safety of a ship's Gellar field. Magnificent and terrible. Silhouettes of hideous creatures raked lecherous claws against the field. Skimmed along the edge of the tunnel. Kept pace. They sought a crack, I thought, or a weakness in the field. Meant to pry it open. Invade.

The tunnel split into two paths. I saw my body swerve left. The shadowy creatures split up. Majority followed me hungrily. I sped along. Sometimes curved widely along broad paths. Sometimes jerked down narrow off-shoots. Changed direction many times. Lost my bearing. Then the force pulling me stopped. I came to an abrupt halt. Consciousness slammed back into my body.

Tunnel was slightly broader here. Had no idea where I was. Obviously not real space. Not the Warp either. The daemons that followed me made an accidental pass. Looped back around like ravenous creatures of the sea. By the time they returned, more had arrived. They slowed. Leered at me. Got my first good look at them. They had distorted feminine faces. Unnaturally long arms. Thin needles for claws. Long as my forearms. They had no legs. Just a murky, flowing mass of shadow. Like ink drops in water.

So many of them. They blotted out the colors of the Warp swirling behind them. Swam like a school of sharks. Swooped. Dove. Swarmed in their frenzy. Dozens of them crawled all over the tunnel. Pulled themselves

with their long limbs. Deliriously they scratched at the field. Searched for a way in. They clawed with ravenous fury. One or two in front were ripped apart by the monsters in back mindlessly clawing through them.

Suddenly a thin, needle-like claw punctured the force field. It retracted. Punctured the field again. Retracted. A pair of needles came through. A set of five. Two sets. Over and over again they pierced. Made the holes wider. The claws stabbed through again. Up to the hands. The daemon heaved. It pulled its head and shoulders inside. Hissed and screeched at me. Black, glassy eyes spun. Thirsted for my soul. Then the thing lost its grip against the field. The hole contracted. Instantly the beast's torso was cleaved in half. Just below the shoulders. Purple blood erupted from the carcass. The severed upper body drifted weightlessly until it faded away. Dissolved into nothingness.

Brief moment of relief interrupted. Realized the damage had already been done. Hole wasn't closed. Already three more daemons were tearing at it. Hauling themselves inside. Other holes being torn open. More than a hundred daemons crawling on the field. Hundreds more besides swooping and diving in the aether beyond.

A daemon slipped in. Fell from the hole it tore open. Tumbled into the tunnel. It righted itself and leered at me. Screeched. Dove at me. Claws of needles and teeth of knives came at me. Its jaw was dislocated. Opened wide enough to fit my head inside. Her teeth glistened with saliva. Anticipation of feasting on my skull. I shot a blast of plasma from my pistol. It fit neatly into her gaping mouth and blew her head apart at the jaw.

Her form dissolved into the air and a few more of the creatures dropped into the tunnel. Dropped into the blast of a hallucinogenic gas grenade. My own concoction. I smirked proudly. The results varied little from the testing I conducted on volunteers from the Imperial Guard. The daemons inhaled the noxious fumes. Scratched at their faces. Razor-tipped claws dripped their own blood. Then they shredded one another maniacally.

I fired on the next bunch with lasers. Discharged my digital weapon implants. Have several dozen of them hidden in my body. Another dozen in my equipment. Got them under my fingernails, in my knuckles, my wrists, elbows, knees, several more in my face. You can never be too careful. Hands might be full or bound. Might be severed. I've got them in my boots, gloves and mask too. Fired those first. Can't know what's in the air out there. Can't risk putting holes in my gear. The lasers are weak. With the right targeting implants though, several shots can bore a hole in stone. I hit a pair of daemons coming into the tunnel. Adjusted targeting through my optical display. Fired off four more quick volleys into the flesh singed by the first. Near-white blue beams flickered out. The two daemons had minuscule holes straight through their heads. Their carcasses floated off. Dissolved.

Next group was bigger. Fed them my fragmentation grenades. Didn't have that many. Threw them the whole damn belt. Aimed it to soar past a daemon in front. It shielded me from the shrapnel, but was launched straight at me. I was ready with a pair of knives. Put them deep into its neck. Expected the impact to send me sprawling in the tunnel. Zero G and all. But I felt some resistance holding me in place. Like I was pinned in a magnetic field.

Heat of the moment. Hadn't noticed when I fired my pistol. Or when I threw my grenades. Wasn't in zero gravity. Controlled gravity, maybe. Advanced tech. Not imperial. Inertia was no issue, I realized. Could ignore recoil. I let loose hot plasma fire from my pistol. Unleashed blast after blast on the bottle-necked breaches. Splash from the impacts was damaging the force field. The daemons slipped in more easily. Four or five at a time. I fired plasma as fast I could pull the trigger. Threw caution to the warp.

My pistol overheated. Discharged a hot, blue jet of fluid fire from the exhaust. Seared my arm. Made me drop it. My only firearm. It drifted away. Smoothly and solemnly. Left me with only my fists. Hidden knives. I cursed.

Several daemons were slipping into the tunnel. Soon there would be several more. And then dozens. I would meet death and she would take from me time. Time I need. Time I've spent. And time I've taken from others. I remembered my childhood. Thought of the first heretic I ever denounced. A witch. Manipulative and full of lies. Thought of the second heretic I ever denounced. A cultist. Subversive and lost from grace. The witch tried to pervert my mind. Used her power to control me. She would have forced me to kill innocent people. The cultist tried to pervert my soul. Wanted to open my mind to the dark gods. He said he would give me new perspective. Show me where I fit in the universe. I remembered their faces when the police arrived. When they were hauled out from their hiding place. Remembered the fear. And time I took from them. Time they would have invested in unholy sedition. I remembered.

As the host of daemons closed in around me, a glowing haze approached. Came from the direction I'd been going. It came closer. Much closer. Such incredible velocity. Now it glimmered. Shimmered. Shined like the sun through shattered glass in the wind. The daemons flinched. Cowered from its brilliance. Recovered. Began to scatter. What horror could cause a daemon to flee? I waited as the answer rushed toward me with blinding speed. It flowed around me. A cloud of crystalline creatures. Innumerable. They crashed into the daemons and I saw them as a swarm. Like locusts on a harvest. They covered the demonic entities and fed on them. The daemons writhed.

Howled as they dissolved. Their limbs broke apart and drifted away. Were consumed by the crystal insects. In moments they devoured the daemons. Set about repairing the breaches in the force field. They were methodical. Mechanical in their precision. It was a truly beautiful sight of creation. Despite their ominous arrival. Like spiders spinning webs. They rushed about the edges of the holes. Clicked away with tiny legs. Scurried to new locations. Begin again. And again. Until all had been sealed.

The spiders then rushed to me. Swarmed over my entire body. Crawled, clicked, scurried. Scattered all over me. Brought to life every nerve in my flesh. A terrifying thought came to mind. That of ants and their propensity to strike simultaneously. Signaled by pheromones. I waited for that moment. My breath choked me, caught in my throat. I waited. Listened to the sound of crystal spiders clicking their mandibles in my ears. Felt their sharp legs like a million pins puncturing only the finest layer of my skin.

I waited.

The spiders stopped in unison and there was silence. Silence such as I have never known. I became uncomfortably aware of the noise my own body made. Heard the spurious, irregular beat of my heart. Creaking in my bones. Dry breath in my throat. And then they dispersed. Some hidden duty done. They drifted from my body. Glided off en masse as they had come.

I felt a tug. A force that pulled at all of my body equally. I resumed my course. This time the ride was slower. Smoother. I didn't lose myself. Relieving. Getting here, the pace must have been a safety precaution. Against pursuers, I thought.

Around a bend I came to face a wall of light. Purple, pink and white. It flowed like the walls of the tunnel. Like water in zero gravity. Another force field. Blocked the only path. As I neared it, I braced myself. Then passed through it harmlessly. I was now in a short segment of the tunnel. Faced with another field. I passed through it. Found yet another. Another. Another. Passed through ten or more until I came to a platform. It was a veranda. Maybe a docking bay. It was made of the smoothest of surfaces. Not polished, but a soft matte. Mix of browns and creams. Looked old, judging by the colors. But was without scratch. Without cracks or any other structural mar. In it were cut lines. They divided the platform into large plates of several square meters. Near the edge I found round protrusions. Same material. Housed glowing gems, polished and perfect in their contours.

I was brought to float above the dock. Gently set down on my feet. Journey had weakened my balance. Upset the nerves. Hands were shaking. Last thing I needed. Preparation is the next best thing to luck in combat. Instructed implants to release a cocktail of drugs. Stimulants and anxiolytics mostly. Hands steadied. Mind felt sharper. Heart beat fast. Little too fast. Made a mental note to tweak the recipe.

I righted myself and looked ahead. Another energy field. I strode up to it. Peered in. At my own flowing, contorting reflection. I shielded my eyes. Tried to look through the glare like it was glass. Field then began to fade away. Faded so smoothly I could hardly tell it was changing. I reached out. Laid a hand on it. It *was* like touching glass. Like electrified glass. Tingling sensation through my arm. Some time passed. The field settled into a near-transparent state. Behind my mask, my jaw gaped open.

I'd somehow arrived before a massive city. Stood in an open plaza. Buildings and towers beyond. Sculpted of the same surface as the dock. Smooth yet matte. Pristine yet ancient. Towers stretched to an unblemished blue sky. Brought to mind images of ribs protruding from a carcass. Curving toward the heavens. Smooth, matte, bleached light by the sun. The towers too were divided into large plates. Segmented by engraved lines. Encrusted with the most glorious gems. Sparkling with sheen and pulsing with light. The city glittered with these stones. Stretched into the distance until the structures blocked the horizon. The curves of the place were fluid. Voluptuous. Unlike any architecture or vehicular designs found in the Imperium. I've seen Tau vessels. Seen the craft of dozens of races. None of them express such an appreciation for elegant curves.

Concentration broken. Attention suddenly seized from the magnificent city. Open plaza before me. Nine slender figures approached. They were deceptively tall. Robed in black. Wore helms and light armor. Intricate runes on them. Same mysterious bone-like substance. Their faces were covered by flat bone masks. Eye lenses pulsed with soft purple.

They came close. Stood in a large semi-circle. It was easy to tell which of them ranked highest. Armor gleamed with polished gems. But I'd have known regardless. Couldn't understand why, but I'd have known. Like his presence told me.

He tilted his head slightly. As if he nodded at the air lock itself. Then I heard a soft hiss. Saw a swirling mix of pink and purple gas flowing into the room. Came in between the plates in the floor. Panic spread in my mind. I crashed my fist into the translucent force field. There was a faint ripple that emanated from the point of impact. Pain rushed through my hand. I kicked the field. Got no better results. I looked to the leader of the robed figures. He nodded his head however minutely at me. By his side, his hand raised at the wrist. He extended his thumb and forefinger. I felt a tug at my head. Mask exploded off of my face.

I closed my eyes. Held my breath. Then I drained the charge in my digital weapons. The ones in my face. Blindly fired at the force field. Probably the walls and ceiling too. Couldn't hold out any longer. I opened my eyes. Room was misty purple with gas. I took a deep breath. It tasted sweet. Could feel the gas burning my mouth, throat and lungs. With each breath my imagination burst into life. Fear. I knew the Inquisition's experimental gasses. Made many myself. Memories flashed at me. Test subjects vomiting their insides. Their guts came out the other end too.

Then suddenly I felt a wave of unfamiliar emotion. Something like disappointment. Weaved into reassurance. Carried context. Specifics like cultural mores and expectations. I had something of a vision. I witnessed a barren world. Purple atmosphere. My sight zoomed from the macro to the microscopic. I saw a virus unable to penetrate the cell walls of healthy cells. It was withering. Finally died. I watched the world's history in both reverse and fast-forward. Simultaneous. I saw its birth, collapse and rebirth all at once. I was made to know the nature of the gas. Its role in cleansing the contaminated. Those infected with Nurgle's Rot. I was assured of my safety.

Then for the first time he spoke to me in words. "Inquisitor Kashaph Shinuy. Welcome to the Eldar Craftworld Uram Woharas. Your stay shall be long and unpleasant for all, but you will be allowed to return to your purpose in time." As he spoke I felt violent pain in my head. A rush of images emerged in my mind. Some still. Others in full motion. Saw myself in battles I didn't recognize. With company I didn't know. Felt emotions that weren't mine. Powerful beyond anything I had ever felt. At the utterance of his people's homeland I knew pride unparalleled. At mention of the Inquisition I knew hatred so heavy it pressed the air from my lungs. I recovered. Took a deep breath. Tried to speak but was dismissed.

He told me to sleep. Must have. I remember nothing else of our meeting.

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The farseer stood over the shattered soul stones of two dead eldar. He watched them with his eyes closed. He allowed the psychic imprint left on the atrocity to flow into his mind. Uncountable glowing, feathery lines like strands of DNA were weaving, curving and colliding, coalescing here at this pivotal juncture. Yohsok followed the interwoven strands of fate until he located the primaries, the prime causalities. He picked one carefully and rode it backwards from this moment. On the periphery he could see other fates that had not come to pass. Coincidences that had not coincided. Pushing them farther out he followed this one that had come to be. He watched over and again the Inquisitor's confrontation with Ithacus and his subsequent journey to the craftworld. There had been other less violent strands that bound Kashaph to his arrival here. It was unfortunate that he rode one slicked with blood.

Yes, unfortunate, the farseer thought and coolly exchanged his rage with focus. He delved the multiverse of potential futures he would investigate in order to find the inquisitor and steer him down a more agreeable strand. Finding him would be difficult. His mind was lost and its shifting prismatic nature meant that his future was entirely unpredictable. Yohsok retreated from the strands of fate and returned to his body.

"We will do this the hard way," he told the two seers beside him. "We will have to follow the truth he has left behind rather than anticipate the lies he has yet to tell. We are going to track him down." He looked again at the shattered soulstones and reconstructed them in his mind. The destruction of these stones was the worst fate for any eldar. A soulstone catches the spirit of an eldar when he dies and preserves it, saving him. These two were lost forever to an eternity of suffering, an eternity being devoured by She who Thirsts. He considered the hundreds of thousands of futures he did not wish the present to become. Many of those futures saw his whole craftworld lost to the same fate as the deceased before him. It is not only a matter of how much death there will be. If we are to die, I would have it be the right death, he thought. There is no ending this well.