

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration. It depicts a Necron character, a type of undead robot from the Warhammer 40,000 universe, standing in a museum. The character is wearing ornate, dark armor with a ribbed chest plate and a helmet with a visor. It holds a glowing, rectangular object in its right hand. The museum environment is dimly lit, with a large, arched window in the background showing a hazy, greenish landscape. A lamp is visible on the right side of the frame. The overall color palette is dominated by dark greens and blacks, with highlights from the character's armor and the glowing object.

WARHAMMER
40,000

WAR IN THE MUSEUM

A TRAZYN THE INFINITE SHORT STORY

ROBERT RATH

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WAR IN THE MUSEUM

By Robert Rath

VISHANI: *Phaeron, wise men say that common foes make common friends.*

NEPHRETH: *Wise advice – if one wishes to be common.*

– *War in Heaven*, Act V, Scene IX

Specimen rehydration at seventy-two per cent, lord archaeovist.

His arch-cryptek, Sannet, sent the thought as an interstitial message, preserving the silence.

Trazyn, Master of the Solemnace Galleries, Preserver of Histories, and He-Who-Is-Called-Infinite nodded and motioned with two metal fingers. The gesture opened Sannet's thoughts so that the glowing glyphs unfurled above his metal skull like a scroll. Trazyn liked what he saw there – they were getting close.

The organism's clawed hooves levitated a finger-width above the floor, held aloft by repulsor fields so gravity could not ravage its dripping corpse. Scalloped plates of chitin shielded the desiccated flesh of its limbs. A rock-ribbed exoskeleton encased shrivelled organs. Arms held wide, head erect, the hive tyrant dwarfed the metal giants that stood before it. A rehydration array elevated up and down its bulk, hissing as it sprayed the creature with anti-necrotic revivants.

This was, Trazyn reflected, likely the most dangerous restoration he'd ever attempted. Tyranid synapse creatures were known to reanimate from even the most extreme wounds, so there was no sense taking chances. Indeed, the reason the specimen was in such poor shape owed something to the tortured nature of its acquisition.

It had been quite a puzzle, acquiring an undamaged tyranid splinter fleet. Baiting it to the tundra world of Vuros had been simple enough; the real difficulty had been identifying and intercepting the tyrant's atmospheric entry pod on its way to the surface. With their synaptic overlord freeze-drying in the cold of space, the disoriented splinter fleet had been easy to lure into the tesseract fields. The downside, of course, was that the tyrant had needed nearly a century of rehydration until it was fit for display.

Trazyn had earmarked it as the centrepiece of his Tyrannic Wars exhibit.

Outside in the main gallery stood a full splinter of Hive Fleet Kronos, frozen in the moment of landing, a wave of blue-tinted claws and crimson armour about to crash down on an Imperial outpost. Undulating waves of rippers. Termagant packs. Genestealers emerging from tunnels in the loamy earth. Gargoyles circling overhead.

And if the plumping bulge of the tyrant's flesh was any indication, it would soon join them.

Trazyn's cowardly kin had warned him against it, of course. In fact, when Hive Fleet Behemoth bore down on Solemnace,

Trazyn's aeon-long rival Orikan the Diviner had even prophesied that the Great Devourer would destroy both Trazyn and his galleries. The mystic fool had been so disappointed when Trazyn simply triggered deep-space lures so the swarm parted around Solemnace, like a river around a stone.

They were correct about one thing, however – this restoration demanded extra security. He'd banished all but a pair of crypteks and four lychguard to minimise the chance of mishap. A full legion waited outside the galleries, along with a new surrogate body in case Trazyn needed to evacuate his consciousness quickly. In the event of a containment break, secure doors would seal this small band in, sacrificial offerings to be atomised by the spider-leg banks of gauss flayers pointed at the limp tyrant.

After all – if it awoke, who knew what might happen to the exhibits outside?

But it should not come to that. A century ago, Trazyn had personally supervised the crypteks as they'd drilled into the tyrant's armoured skullcap and implanted six mindshackle scarabs into its shrunken brain. Trazyn's metal fingers danced across the haft of his empathic obliterator, beating a delighted tattoo on the weapon. Was this perilous? Certainly. But eternity got dull without a hint of peril. And for an immortal necron, boredom was more dangerous than even the largest alien horror.

An alert sketched across his vision, overlaying the thoughts of Arch-Cryptek Sannet. Behind him, the lychguards' metal necks shifted in their ball mounts.

Movement in the central gallery.

'My lord,' warned the lych-captain.

'Yes, yes, I see it,' said Trazyn. 'Continue to guard the specimen, I'll investigate.'

'Allow me to accompany you, lord,' the lych-captain answered, the balefire in his oculars flaring with concern. 'Safeguard protocols state—'

'Don't fuss, captain.' Trazyn picked up his empathic obliterator. 'What's going to hurt me in my own gallery?'

Trazyn turned and walked into the dark, holding the glowing headpiece of the staff before him like a torch.

Normally, Trazyn would have lit the central gallery – but power was better spent on the restoration. He walked into the back line of the invasion, weaving between carnifexes that rose like hills in the shadowed darkness. Warriors, their limbs fused into deadly bio-weapons, posed in the act of firing clouds of flesh-boring organisms.

Trazyn skirted around a tyrannocyte drop spore half-buried in the tundra floor. Hormagaunts emerged from it, clambering over each other to join the living carpet of organisms that made up the bulk of the invasion force.

Trazyn was well used to wandering the galleries alone, but he was not yet accustomed to this exhibit. Its scale was almost hard to comprehend – so much so that when arranging it he'd navigated the scene by floating overhead in a Catacomb command barge. Now, inside the ravaging horde, he felt a novel tingle of fear. The soft glow of his obliterator reflected on long talons and venom spraying in arcs from baggy throat sacs. His heavy footfalls echoed back at him.

'Probably a wraith,' he muttered. 'Receivers go down and they default to their last task.'

He was being foolish, of course. These organisms were preserved in hard-light, encased like insects in amber. Touch a claw and it would cut you, but they could no more move than a wax figure could.

Unless there had been an earthquake. Unless a nexus fault opened a tesseract labyrinth. Unless...

The weight hit him from behind without warning, sending him toppling forward, pinning him to the simulated earth. Sensors wailed in agony as a scythe-talon as long as a gauss flayer punched through his shoulder with a shriek of bone on metal. Clawed feet dug into his scaled cloak.

Trazyn gripped the empathic obliterator, firing up the headpiece.

'Don't touch me,' he said, and struck blindly over his shoulder.

A clawed hand closed over his head and twisted.

Vertebrae servos whined and popped with strain, living metal groaning as it bent to its limit. Talons dug into his ocular sockets and green sparks burst in his vision.

Then with a crack, the tension broke and he could feel his head tear free from his shoulders, spine grating on shoulder guards as it slithered free. Phosphorescent reactor fluid spouted. Cables stretched like ligaments as the hand pulled his head upward and turned it to face the killer.

Trazyn got a glimpse of the creature – made kaleidoscope-mad by his shattered oculars – before the alien crushed his metal skull.

To be honest, Trazyn did not particularly like being murdered. The rush of transferring his consciousness from one body to another felt like free-falling through a planet's atmosphere.

The lychguard he'd possessed arched its back, limbs extending and metal skin bubbling as Trazyn's essence suppressed the host's personality-programs, rearranged the antique armour and refashioned the guard's warscythe into his own empathic obliterator.

'My lord. What happened?'

It took a moment for Trazyn to orient himself to who was speaking. The lychguard captain.

'A complication,' said Trazyn, rotating one wrist to test how it responded. 'It's the licitor. Flesh-Stealer. Vicious little creature.'

Hunted the tundric nomads for two years after the initial acquisition. At least only one hard-light field failed, and that bio-form was the only thing in—

‘Seal the door, arch-cryptek,’ the lych-captain ordered, his safeguard protocols overriding normal chains of command. ‘My lord, call in the legion.’

‘And let ten thousand warriors loose in my collection with gauss flayers?’ snorted Trazyn. ‘I think not. *Perhaps* the deathmarks.’

‘My lord,’ said Sannet, furiously making notes with his stylus. The great sleep had damaged his engrammatic matrices, and he could no longer remember information unless he wrote it. ‘I have diagnosed a nexus fault. The legion did not make its last check-in cycle. I’m not sure we *can* call the deathmarks.’

‘I’m going up.’ Trazyn let his consciousness flow into the nexus network, racing through cables and channels as if carried through an underground stream.

Then his spirit-algorithm stopped dead. He felt the data of his mind bunching up, boxed in, memories of past and present overlapping. He reversed himself before the code of his consciousness scrambled.

He opened his oculars. ‘We are locked in. Sannet, have you detected seismic activity?’

‘No, lord.’

Trazyn rubbed his chin, the alloy of his finger scraping his age-pitted death mask. He summoned a phos-glyph panel and scanned diagnostics. Normal, except he could not call data for anything past this floor. The shadow-clock was also two minutes behind planetary time. Clearly a fault had cascaded through the nexus, slowing the system.

Unless...

‘Cease rehydrating,’ said Trazyn. ‘Scan for brainwaves.’

‘None,’ said Sannet.

‘Could this creature cause a distortion?’

‘Previous specimens have not.’

‘We’ve never had a tyrant.’

‘What is our protocol?’ asked the lych-captain.

Trazyn thought for a moment. ‘This beast is no match for an overlord and his lychguard, eh? Sannet, you stay. Seal the door behind us so the thing cannot reach its master.’ He paused. ‘And how many mindshackle scarabs can you spare? Pity to waste a good specimen if it can be avoided.’

So it would be a hunt, like in the days of flesh. An overlord and his retainers, going forth to capture a great beast with naught but their might and their wits.

Pity, Trazyn thought, that we do not have a chariot.

Blackstone doors ground shut behind them, the cyclopean blocks meeting with a tone that reverberated through the chamber. They moved in a miniature phalanx, two lychguard up front with their shields and hyperphase swords. Trazyn on one flank with his obliterator, the under-cryptek with his staff on the other. The lych-captain guarded their backs, his warscythe held high in a guard.

Slow and cautious. Scrying for bio-signatures.

But there were bio-signatures *everywhere*. Each hard-light hologram encased real, living flesh. The hunting party flicked through visual filters. Heat. Radiation. Empyric field.

Trazyn ran an ocular scry over the mid-sized creatures arrayed in the back line. A brood of tyranid warriors stood, discharging foul ammunition. A lictor crouched, statue-still as if about to pounce. Tyrant guard circled protectively around the space where their master would soon reside.

Trazyn looked down the line, at the biovore battery with its fleshy spore-ammunition...

Wait.

That didn’t make sense. Lictors were infiltration organisms. They didn’t belong in the back line. How could he have made such a careless placement?

He hadn’t, of course. When Trazyn turned back, the lictor was gone.

‘On guard,’ he warned, bracing for attack.

The thrown spore mine arced out of the darkness. Trazyn’s ocular array analysed it in mid-air, noting the way its toxic sludge moved from chamber to chamber as it contracted. He saw its pulsing rapidly increase – like the heart of a panicked animal – as it neared the lych-captain.

Who raised his warscythe.

‘No!’

The lych-captain intercepted it with a perfect vertical slice. Had it been a grenade or shell, he might have scythed through the detonation cap. Instead the spore opened, rotten and steaming. Ropy splashes of bio-acid descended on the phalanx. The lych-captain took the worst of it, tarry ichor covering his chest and face. His metal body screamed as it warped and deformed, the armour plates of his front expanding so quickly it bent him over backward and snapped his spine. The cryptek to Trazyn’s left dashed away, one

arm a melting ruin.

And as soon as they broke formation, Flesh-Stealer was on them.

It came for him, and Trazyn gathered power in his obliterator, bringing it to the floor like a hammer. The layer of tundra parted before him, a billowing shock wave of jade energy throwing immobilised termagants away from the furrow.

The lictor dodged aside, the blast bubbling its chitin and mangling one leg. That did not stop it. Tendrils of flesh, each tipped with a hooked curve of bone, lashed out like amphibian tongues. They snared his arm and dragged him close.

Trazyn screamed a curse in Old Necrontyr.

A sickle talon stabbed down through his open mouth and burst the base of his skull.

Trazyn activated the cryptek's oculars and saw his old surrogate – now reverting back to a lychguard – sink to the floor. The remaining two lychguards were boxing Flesh-Stealer in with their shields, getting between Trazyn and the marvellous specimen.

Flesh-Stealer howled as a blade bit its rubbery muscle. It smashed down at one of the guards and he raised his shield to take the blow. The lictor vaulted off it, using the hulking guard as a springboard in its leap towards Trazyn.

Trazyn raised the cryptek's staff of light, unleashing a white-hot beam at the horror falling towards him. Lightning speared through the chamber, strobing on frozen tyrannid bodies. One of the lictor's grasping arms spun away, severed.

Flesh-Stealer still came down right on top of him, bone scythes burying deep in the space between his shoulder plates and ribcage. Then it heaved and opened his chest like a cabinet.

Before Trazyn activated his new oculars, he urged the hijacked body to run.

Scatter. He sent the communication as an interstitial command package, the new plan arriving in the remaining lychguard's mind instantly and fully formed. *It can only chase one of us. Head for the Imperial outpost display.*

Trazyn needed reinforcements.

He reshaped his legs for speed, not daring to look back. The lychguard was far to his left, heavy feet pounding the artificial ground. Trazyn weaved through packs of termagants, vaulted ripper swarms.

The settlement was close. Hab-blocks and bunkers emerged from the shadows. Trazyn pulled up a phos-glyph panel as he ran, keyed in an order. A bunker's plasteel double-doors drew open.

He could feel the beast behind him, gaining. Nearly there.

It caught his scaled cloak, dragged him down. This time he was smart enough to transfer *before* he died.

Trazyn did not even glance at the lictor savaging his former body. He leapt through the bunker's double-doors and keyed an order. They rolled shut with a reverberating clang.

'Welcome to our special exhibit, Imperial Heroes of the Tyrannic Wars,' said a voice. Trazyn's own voice, in fact. *'Please approach this gallery by starting on the left, and proceed in a shadow-clock fashion to see the greatest...'*

'Hush,' Trazyn said.

The voice cut off.

Trazyn didn't know why he'd installed the automated system. Dead Gods knew, no one came here without him as a guide. But a few millennia back he'd suffered an attack of conscience and began worrying whether anyone would understand his galleries if he were ever destroyed. So he'd taken on the responsible, if dull task of recording guides in every language known to the Necron Empire.

He passed warriors in blood-red ceramite and commissars leering under peaked caps. In one diorama, a group of snipers from the Catachan XVIII nestled in a shooting hide, their bio-signatures masked by the mound of termagant corpses piled atop the dug-out roof.

Trazyn stopped in front of a case, summoned a phos-glyph panel.

'Assigned to study the aquatic wildlife of a remote world, Magos V—'

'I said hush,' Trazyn snapped. Then softer: *'Awaken, my friend.'*

The magos biologists was hunched over the severed head of a tyrannid warrior, his crab-like servo-arms paused in the act of trepanning open the cranium with a surgical laser. It was his rust-coloured robe that stirred first, falling slack as gravity took it – no longer buffeted by the sea winds of his maritime fortress.

<Trazyn,> the magos signalled, using Mechanicus binharic cant. The words came to Trazyn as if through a bad vox-speaker, nowhere near as clear or elegant as noemic glyphs.

<Magos,> he responded. <I have need of you.>

<I wish you would leave me conscious.>

<Standing unmoving for a century would drive you mad, my friend,> said Trazyn. <And a madman is no good to me.>

<Have you any idea what I could achieve in a century of silent cogitation, Trazyn? No, of course not. Immortality has made you a time-waster. Well, if you need more guidance on hormagaunt swarming patterns—>

‘There’s been a breakout,’ Trazyn said, hoping auditory speech would break the thought-loop.

The magos paused. ‘I advised you not to refurbish the tyrant.’

‘It is not the tyrant. Though it may be... involved. There has been a nexus fault. We cannot signal the legion, I cannot transfer consciousness, and Flesh-Stealer has awoken.’

‘Only the lictor?’ The magos’ eye-lenses rotated in suspicion.

‘Keep staring at me like that, magos, and I’ll stop sending your little research packages to the Mechanicus. Or should I keep sending them, but add a little gift of my own – a jokaero code-virus perhaps?’

‘Lictors are precursor organisms,’ the magos answered, dipping his head. ‘Meant to operate at the limits of the hive mind. It is understandable that one might awaken from even a weak signal.’

‘It still should not have broken out of its containment.’

‘Tyrannids project a psychic energy, Trazyn. A shadow in the warp. Especially Hive Fleet Kronos. You artificials can’t feel it, but it disrupts more than psychic patterns. Technology, arcane devices, even languages can come under its effect. And what remains of my organics tell me that the shadow has fallen on Solemnace.’

‘I need warriors,’ said Trazyn. ‘Those experienced in battling the swarm. My lychguard were... too single-minded. My kind are not flexible, as you know.’

‘And poor in your understanding of organics,’ added the magos. ‘So you need a kill team.’

‘Indeed. But no Deathwatch. In fact, no Astartes. I want to save the gallery, not burn it down.’

‘Guardsmen, then?’

‘Not enough firepower. I have only two mindshackle scarabs...’ His gaze drifted. Settled.

‘You will not convince them, Trazyn.’

‘Their mind-training would help resist the shadow, they are resilient, manoeuvrable, and certainly have firepower.’

He stepped up to the case.

‘*Clara and Setine Fontaine,*’ said the automated guide. Trazyn let it play. ‘*Heroes of Okassis, nine years before the Great Awakening, Second Tyrannic War. Orphaned siblings raised in the schola progenium, they were recruited for the Adepta Sororitas in 968.M41 and fought two campaigns in the same Dominion squad. Last sighted on the walls of the cathedral-fortress, overrun and fighting against the hordes of Hive Fleet Kraken.*’

The Sisters stood back to back. Clara’s storm bolter chopped fire into the reaching claws of a genestealer pack, its muzzle flash stabbing out so far that it blackened the creature’s beetle-like armour. Setine loaded her final gas canister into her meltagun, her face tanned from its backwash and a carnifex lying at her feet, torso melted into a bubbling crater by her final shot.

<They hate xenos,> signalled the magos.

‘Exactly,’ said Trazyn. ‘And they have not heard of necrons.’

He released the scarabs. They skittered out of his palm and leapt, spidery legs finding purchase on the ornate power armour of the Sisters. They danced up embossed skulls and golden filigree until they nestled into the soft flesh of the humans’ cranial base and embedded their legs, injecting their nano-scarab payload.

‘Awaken,’ ordered Trazyn.

Their eyes stirred first. Fluttering, blinking. Disoriented and in the grip of stasis-sickness.

‘Hello, Sisters,’ said Trazyn. ‘I have a proposition for you.’

‘Steel abomination,’ growled Clara. She swung her storm bolter into Trazyn’s face and pulled the trigger.

Or she tried to. Her finger would not tighten. Trazyn could see it locked tight, the muscles tensed so hard her leather glove creaked.

‘I’m afraid that is not permitted,’ said Trazyn.

‘Perhaps a brief explanation, lord?’ suggested the magos.

Trazyn looked the Sisters over. Clara tensed with every muscle in her frame, trying to burst his head with a bolt-round. Her sister Setine stood in shock, wide eyes searching the alien forms in the diorama around her.

‘Very well,’ grumbled Trazyn. ‘You are correct, I am, to use your rather over-applied term, an “abomination”. An artificial life form called a necron. I am overlord of this world and curator of the galaxy’s greatest collection of historically and culturally significant objects – a collection of which you and your sister are a part. However, I have revived you because, much to my embarrassment, I need your assistance.’

‘Where is my sister?’ demanded Clara.

Trazyn gestured at the Battle Sister next to her, who seemed to be looking down the dead carnifex’s throat.

‘That is not my sister,’ she said, shaking. ‘What have you done with her?’

‘Ah, I had forgotten,’ Trazyn said. ‘Your sister was sadly not recoverable, and I had to substitute a stand-in to complete the scene.’ He gestured at the hormagaunts vaulting the dead carnifex. ‘Specimen recovery can prove quite difficult when the specimen’s opponent is so... voracious.’

‘She... is dead and I am alive? We swore an oath we’d die together.’ Clara’s jaw tightened, pushing at the mindshackle scarabs.

‘If it makes your grief easier to bear,’ he said, ‘your sister’s corporeal form is not entirely gone. You have her right hand, for

instance, plus one cornea and most of her organs.'

She dropped the storm bolter in shock, as if she could drop the hand that held it as well. 'You... you sewed pieces of us together?'

'It is a common enough practice. Even in human museums. If you have two incomplete carnodon skeletons, you combine them to make a full carnodon. The change is really only cosmetic.'

The false sister, meanwhile, seemed entranced by her own meltagun.

'Cosmetic? You have corrupted the sacred human form. The pinnacle of all organisms, made in the Emperor's image. A tainted species like yours could never understand such perfection.'

'Pardon me,' said Trazyn, 'But I would like to correct a few notions here. First, my kind are not a species. A species is naturally occurring. It has evolved. My kind are made, not born. Second, human perfection is, to be polite, debatable. Your kind are born defenceless and take an absurd amount of time to grow to adulthood, and even then, you spend a third of your lives unconscious. Everything you consume for energy eventually kills you, and your reproductive system is the same as your waste elimination system.'

'Dual-use systems are efficient,' the magos objected.

'But revolting,' Trazyn countered. 'Would you like to see the perfect organism?'

Trazyn waved in the air, calling forth a phos-glyph hologram. On it, his death memories of Flesh-Stealer played again and again, direct from his engrammatic matrices.

'This is the perfect organism. Humans are excellent generalists, without doubt, but this organism changed tactics every time it faced me. Which is why I need you to help me entrap it.'

The false sister approached the hologram, peering at it. She swept a hand through the image in wonderment.

'Entrap it?' said the magos.

'Very well... kill it. I suppose. For the good of the collection.'

Clara sneered. 'I died to stop the tyranids on Okassis, and did so gladly. But I did that for the Emperor. I care not if the swarm eats your little world.'

'Stop?' said Trazyn. He suppressed a chuckle. 'You think you stopped them?' He waved a hand to call up another mem-hologram. This one was a cathedral city, seen from the air. Streams of men boarded troop ships – behind them, a curtain of murderous biomass drew across the burning chapel blocks and monastery towers. 'Oh, your Battle Sisters killed the tyrant organism and managed to evacuate the Ecclesiarchy, but the world was lost. The Imperium declared it a great victory, of course. Humans have such a talent for revisionism.'

As he spoke, one of the holographic troop ships panicked and lifted off with its rear hatch still open. It banked towards the sky, spilling tiny clawing forms onto the city below.

'Afterwards, the swarm carried on to devour three more worlds.' He closed his fist and the hologram snuffed out like a candle, its spectral remnant twisting upwards in a waft of green smoke. 'Once this lictor kills me, for the last time, it is likely it will target the containment systems. The swarm will be unleashed on more Imperial worlds.'

'Sister,' said the false sibling. She reached out and touched the shivering Clara. 'For I may not be your sister in blood, but we are Sisters in duty. These tyranids are unfamiliar to me. My service was spent fighting the Heretic Astartes. But I know my duty – to protect my lord's life, and defeat all enemies of the God-Emperor. I know not whether my lord lives or has fallen to the heretics, but I can see that the enemies of the Imperium are outside that door.' She nodded at the plasteel, then turned to Trazyn. 'You, xenos. If we do this service to you, will we be free to make our own destiny?'

'I will not return you to this exhibit,' said Trazyn. 'I swear on my honour. I can reunite you with your lord, if you wish it.'

'I wish it,' said the Sister, with a nod. 'My name is Magdalena, by the by. And now, Sister...' She grasped Clara by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. Bright fires glowed within, the light of holy faith. A righteous certainty that stilled the nerves of her rattled companion. 'Let us kill this alien, Sister. For the Emperor--'

'For the Emperor,' echoed Clara.

'...and Lord Vandire,' Magdalena finished.

The doors ground open and the quartet edged out. Close skirmish order, wide fields of fire. Trazyn stood behind, sighting along a plasma pistol he'd liberated from an arms display. Trazyn was not fool enough to engage Flesh-Stealer in close combat again, but he still felt a certain amount of embarrassment about the crude Imperial weapon.

I'll instruct Sannet to leave that part out of the official chronicle, I think. Trazyn made a mnemonic note to preserve the thought.

'Increase your scans,' said the magos. 'It will try to hit us where we are not looking.'

'There are so many of them,' said Clara. 'God-Emperor help us if they wake up.'

'Kill this lictor and they won't,' said Trazyn. 'Magos, is your scanner picking up anything?'

'False positives,' said the magos. 'Close the door behind us, I'm registering interference from the room.'

Trazyn banished his obliterator to its dimensional pocket and summoned up a control panel, his metal fingertip hovering over a glyph. Interference would make sense, of course. There were several dead lictors in the Imperial Heroes display. But there was a

feeling he could not pin down.

So he looked up, above the open plasteel doors. To the fresh drops of ichor running down the rockcrete bunker face, to the shadowed form crouched at the top, breaking the bunker's roof outline like a gargoyle on an Imperial cathedral.

'Behind!' Trazyn shouted, mashing the plasma pistol's trigger.

He missed, unused to the warm-up before the fusion reactor unleashed its power. The beam chased the lictor as it sprinted down the steep glacis of the bunker, blackening rockcrete in its wake.

It leapt, camouflaged exoskeleton still the drab grey of the bunker – headed straight for Trazyn. Always Trazyn.

He ducked, rolled, came up behind the creature with his staff reforming in his hand – but it had already wheeled to face him, wobbling on the injured leg. Trazyn swiped the obliterator at its midsection, driving it back.

Into the encircling kill team.

A hail of bolter shells cracked into the creature from the side, blasting fist-sized chunks of armour plating off its thigh. Flesh-Stealer swung one grasping scythe backwards, catching Clara's breastplate and throwing her into a pack of frozen genestealers. Then it shrieked in pain.

A neon-red laser speared through its abdomen and struck the floor, kicking up a candle flame in the shallow dirt. Behind it, the magos advanced, chanting, directing more power into his dissection rig's surgical laser. His other servo-arm flicked through functions and settled on a circular saw. The sawtooth blade keened louder than the tyranid's howl.

The lictor went low, grabbing purchase on the dirt with its multiple limbs and leaping away.

Trazyn brought the empathic obliterator down two-handed on its bent spine. The charged head of the staff radiated so bright that it left an after-image in the air as it fell. Raw power, the power of a vanished race, hit the lictor's back like a lightning strike. A billow of cold emerald energy washed outward, stirring the magos' robes and blasting the floor of the chamber clean of dirt for a ten-foot radius.

The lictor broke, its midsection crushed as if a Leman Russ had rolled over it. Hooved feet kicked in spasm. Its top half, swirling as it searched for a camouflage pattern that might save it, tried to crawl away.

Magdalena stepped up, pressed her meltagun to its head, and pulled the trigger. She swept up and down, methodically rendering the bio-form down to a puddle of grease.

'Not so difficult,' she said. 'Our vow is complete.'

'Not quite,' Trazyn said. 'First we have to get to the Nexus Mundi.'

'The what?' said Magdalena, popping her hydrogen canister and fitting another.

'A control room, in crude vernacular,' said Trazyn. 'We can get there on my modified command barge. Once at the Nexus Mundi I can contact the legions, get us out of this gallery and fulfil my end of the bargain. Which reminds me.' He reached out with his spirit-algorithm. *Sannet. Confirm the tyrant is secure.*

'Xenos,' said Clara.

'One moment,' he responded. *Arch-cryptek? Please confirm.*

'Trazyn,' said the magos.

'Yes, yes. What now?'

The magos pointed with a spindly, data-jack finger. Trazyn followed the path.

A lone termagant wandered towards them, through the no-man's-land between the front of the tyranid swarm and the Imperial settlement. It stumbled, weaving drunkenly, then halted and bent over, stiff tail pointing high as it rubbed its face in the dirt. Confused. Disoriented. Perhaps sick.

'The eyes,' said Magdalena. Trazyn could hear the tremor in her voice.

Trazyn looked at the breaking wave of tyranids and saw a starfield of red jewels. Every elongated hormagaunt skull was turned towards them. Every armoured warrior glared, teeth showing in a snarl. Even the great carnifexes, bodies immobile, looked straight at the little knot of humanoids.

In the eerie silence, twenty thousand eyes fixated on them.

A deep boom shook the cavernous gallery. Great tomb doors slid open, stone grating on stone. Long, sickle-like talons hooked the blackstone door frame, steadying the desiccated hive tyrant as it pulled itself into the chamber.

One clawed hoof slammed down, still dragging the impaled form of Arch-Cryptek Sannet.

Though it was more than half a mile away, the tyrant's massive scale made Trazyn's central reactor cycle higher, preparing for a fight. The tyrant stood in the place he had set aside. And though he felt terror slip into the very code of his algorithmic soul, he could not help but feel pride in seeing his tableau complete. For a moment, at least.

'Its powers are weak,' he said. 'It's lost a great deal of fluid, with no way to regain it. We can contain it. The stasis fields are holding overall—'

A termagant weaved towards the tyrant, retching as if it had been poisoned. Others followed, staggering forward to hop at the feet of their synaptic overlord. Weak chirps and trills came from their throats.

The tyrant darted its head downward, snatching the broodlings two and three at a time in its dagger-fanged mouth. A termagant's

head burst between its jaws, ichor running down its barbed chin. The tyrant sucked at the still-wiggling body and ducked back down into the chirping mob. The termagants made no attempt to run.

‘Cannibalistic rehydration,’ said the magos. ‘Fascinating.’

‘They’re moving’ said Clara, her voice a harsh whisper. ‘They’re all moving.’

They ran, followed by the sound of thousands of chitinous hooves clattering on blackstone.

This is not an accident, Trazyn thought as he ran through the Imperial settlement. *This is sabotage*.

A ravener lunged at him out of an alley. It dragged its spasming coils behind it, clawing its way along the floor with sabre-like talons. Stasis-sick. Hungover from decades severed from the hive mind.

Trazyn shot a bolt of plasma through it, leaving an ashen tunnel in its chest that crumbled in on itself.

Another fine specimen, ruined. That’s what bothered him the most. Accidents happened. Seismic events. Raids. The occasional specimen insurrection. Dear Inquisitor Valeria, wandering in with her force – though in retrospect, he almost viewed her as a guest.

But this was a deliberate attack. The lictor, the perfect organism to tie him down while undermining the system. One that would emerge ready to fight, and could hide among the horde. Timing the rising during the one time when the tyrant could reanimate. And the door. No one but Trazyn and the crypteks could open the blackstone slab-doors that sealed off the refurbishment room. Certainly, the tyrant couldn’t.

And only the tyranids were awakening, flesh-and-blood bodies breaking free of their hard-light prisons. So far, apart from his thralls, the Imperials were still living statues.

A general tesseract failure would not be so selective.

‘Beware left,’ said Clara, firing across his front, bolt-rounds chopping into a knot of genestealers emerging from an outflow pipe. ‘Reloading,’ she shouted, as those behind tried to clamber past the bodies of their kin.

Magdalena moved in and cooked the thick metal pipe with her melta. When it glowed, she kicked the lip with a power-armoured boot, crimping the softened metal inward to cut off the passage. ‘They’ve become swifter.’

‘The hive mind is reasserting control,’ said the magos, toasting a lazily drifting spore mine with his dissection laser. ‘How far to the barge?’

Trazyn was searching his command protocols as he ran. Identified the barge. Connected. ‘There,’ he said, and pointed.

A scorpion-shaped craft rose above the settlement’s outskirts, rotated towards them, and shot forward. Light danced in pulses across the lines of its panels and bathed the roofs of the low hab-blocks emerald as it skimmed past.

Trazyn shoulder-rammed through a hab door and took the stairs two at a time. Within seconds he’d gained the roof, three storeys up.

Only then did he look behind. For a moment, he thought of the deserts during rain season, when flash floods swept the dry canyons. Tyranids coursed through the gaps between buildings, swarming so thick on the streets that he could not see the cracked pavement below the writhing tide of muscle and chitin.

Magdalena was last up the stairs. She slammed the plasteel door and welded it shut behind her. Below them, Trazyn heard the crunch of hooked talons biting into brickwork.

‘Climbers,’ said Clara, firing straight down, before swinging the storm bolter up to throw rounds at an incoming gargoyle. ‘Flyers.’

The building shook once, twice. Trazyn looked down to see a carnifex scaling the outer corner. Its bulbous wrecking claws punched holes in the building as it ascended, dusting its face with rockcrete powder.

A shadow passed over them. Trazyn ran to meet it.

‘Forgive me,’ he said, clambering up onto the command deck, and pointing at the empty wing-cradles. ‘I neglected to mention that there are only three seats.’

The magos hunched, leapt onto the command deck with surprising agility, and mag-locked himself to the scorpion tail. His surgical beam bisected a group of hormagaunts that tried to follow him. <Altitude, Trazyn,> he signalled. <Altitude. Altitude. Altitude.>

The Sisters were only half in their cradles when the carnifex cleared the building top. It swiped for them with a boulder-like claw. Foul breath, like rotting sea life, washed over the craft.

Trazyn adjusted their attitude, nursed the repulsor field higher, careful that he did not slip off the roof’s footprint too early and spill them all sideways. With his other hand, he aimed the plasma pistol straight for the carnifex. It cocked its head to look at them sideways like a bird, one jewel-red eye calculating distance for the next swing.

Trazyn held the trigger, cooking the shot. He felt the reactor grow hot and the grip vibrate in his hand as he sighted on the eye.

He let go of the trigger.

Blue-white light radiated from the coils, the vibration turned to a shake.

The magos snatched the pistol from Trazyn’s hand with a servo-arm and flung it away.

<Up!> he urged.

Trazyn shot them upward as the pistol’s reactor detonated like a small sun. It caught the carnifex under the chin, snapping its mammoth head backward like an uppercut so that it collapsed on the street, crushing the lesser creatures below.

Proximity alarm. Trazyn banked and a bone harpoon sailed past. A gargoyle dived onto the superstructure, latched on to a wing, and unleashed a blast of fleshborers that pattered harmlessly off Trazyn's metal body.

His fingers danced on the command orb, throttling up their speed so the gargoyle lost its grip, rolled along the hull and disappeared. He summoned a phos-glyph panel, keyed an entry code.

Before them, a wall half a mile high drew open as smooth as a curtain.

'Next gallery,' said Trazyn, as they swept past the doors.

Sparks danced in the darkness – and Trazyn heard the telltale whizz of bolter rounds passing.

The Solemnace galleries were awakening.

Trazyn kept them moving, skimming only slightly ahead of the tide that pursued them, heading towards the cylindrical bastion at the end of the gallery.

He didn't want the humans to see what was in this space, didn't even want them to think about it more than necessary. It appeared to be no less than a giant's library, with rows of shelves rising from the central plaza of fountains and sculptural gardens. Yet each shelf was the size of a starship hangar, and its contents varied from jungle to snowy plain.

Usually Trazyn cherished the quiet in this gallery – yet it was quiet no more. Battle raged in each diorama. Bolt shells and rockets sailed past the command barge less with intention to down the craft, and more because everyone was shooting everything.

In one hangar, an antique Dreadnought staggered as orks clung to its surface, beating it with pipes and wrenches. In the next, a group of Dusk Raiders, trudging through snow, had broken through to the adjoining display and engaged a troupe of Harlequins performing in a wraithbone palace. The next cubicle was a riot of motion blur. A pack of hounds leapt and snarled, slipping in and out of existence with each jump. One had blinked through the divider and was tearing at a t'au diplomat the water caste had unwisely dispatched to Solemnace.

The tyranid flood tide surged in after them, blanketing the floor of the plaza, covering the fountains, ornamental gardens and the plinths so recently vacated by their living statues.

From one of the side galleries, a torrent of bolter fire tore into the swarm's flank. Space Marines in blue power armour stormed out, driving a wedge into the tyranid advance. Trazyn took them lower and they saw strange plasma discharges – sun-bright bolts dancing across the spectrum of colours, matching the vertical stripes on the Space Marines' helms. A captain raised a crystalline power sword that shimmered with the iridescence of an oil slick.

Trazyn throttled forward, unable to watch his precious collection maul itself. Loss reports, triage priorities and restoration protocols filled his vision. He banished them with a thought.

Reach the Nexus Mundi, he thought. Stop the bleeding. Then, the restoration could begin.

Fighting raged outside the Nexus Mundi. Gunfire and artillery detonations rolled in from multiple floors. Imperial Navy interceptors and t'au strike fighters chased each other in the distant heights of the vault.

But all these battles were piecemeal compared to the tyranids. They alone drove straight for the Nexus Mundi, as if sensing its importance.

Trazyn stood at the control cartouche, pulling up system reports. Scanning for damage. A grinding sound reverberated in his throat.

'Can you fix it?' asked Clara, firing out a window slit.

'Not responding,' said Trazyn.

'Perchance at least close the front door?' asked Magdalena. She spun around a column and discharged her meltagun into a charging termagant brood, then limped back into cover. Fleshborers had made a mess of her leg. The magos, for his part, had gained control of the defensive gauss flayer battery, keeping the stairway clear even with two spike rifle rounds buried in his back.

'I have to enter the Nexus,' said Trazyn. 'Hold them. And do not try to move me.'

Trazyn doused the light in his oculars. Focused, rendering his essence down to code. Packaging his spirit-algorithm into the proper data format for the system.

He felt himself folded down, reformed, projected like one of his holograms. It was, in a strange way, not so different.

The chamber was all rough-hewn polygons in white and grey. A miniature of the galleries stood around him, rendered in data, small enough he could walk across one of the great chambers in a few strides and browse the displays as if they were terrariums.

Soft red warning lights were pulsing in two dozen displays – a sterile representation of the carnage occurring in the physical world. Only pure information existed here.

He drew his empathic obliterator.

'Do not make me flush you out,' called Trazyn. 'There has been enough unpleasantness.'

A figure stepped out from behind a databank, vertebrae tail twitching. The staff he carried against his shoulder was known, and feared, on a dozen dozen tomb worlds. Its starburst pattern and jewel lodestone were the symbols of a master chronomancer.

'Orikan,' said Trazyn. 'If I had known you wanted to visit, I would have invited you.'

‘You are not supposed to be here, Trazyn,’ Orikan answered. His voice scratched in his throat like the scrape of old pages turning. ‘I have cast zodiac calculations upon the stars, and they told me you and your archives would fall to the Great Devourer. Visions from the sands of the great hourglass revealed it in detail. Your doom has been written in both atoms and gas giants, I have read it in the very whorl of the cosmos.’ His metal teeth clicked in irritation. ‘And yet here you stand.’

‘Orikan, will you ever recover from that false prediction?’

‘Your fall was foretold.’

‘Foretold by Orikan,’ sneered Trazyn. ‘And Orikan is never wrong. For if Orikan is fallible, perhaps the stormlord should not gamble the fate of his dynasty on his visions. Perhaps all the tomb lords, the phaerons and phalanx captains that so hate and fear Orikan will realise that he does not see every assassin’s phase-knife before it comes. Or perhaps the being who cannot handle Orikan being fallible is... Orikan.’

‘I am not so petty.’

‘You are exactly that petty,’ said Trazyn, chuckling. ‘So am I. That’s why we loathe each other so. But we agreed Solemnace is sacrosanct – this is beneath you, Diviner.’

Orikan bristled, his golden headdress flaring upward like the hood on a particularly venomous snake. ‘And this juvenile collection – these insects you so love – should be beneath you. It damages our view of the future. All these things out of time, past their moment, they form a knot in the timeline. An obstruction to every astromancer. Solemnace is a cataract on the eye of the galaxy, Trazyn, a cloudy film that prevents us from charting a course into the future.’

‘And so you will force the future,’ Trazyn said, calling up a phos-glyph panel. ‘The gallery is now seven minutes behind planetary time. I dismissed that as a fault, but it’s a temporal bubble, isn’t it? Each time you failed to murder me, you went back, tried again. It’s why the lictor was so effective against my lychguards, but not against those from another time.’ He paused, looked at Orikan. ‘But why now? Why not alter the timeline and destroy this place when Hive Fleet Behemoth arrived? Why not...’

He paused, chuckled.

‘Oh, Orikan,’ he said. ‘You found out she was here.’

‘She knows so much. I can perfect the transformation. Transition us all out of these steel prisons and into beings of light. She knows the secret. I can commune with her.’

‘You can’t,’ snapped Trazyn. He recognised the balefire in Orikan’s oculars. The obsession that Trazyn knew all too well. ‘There is no life there. Her engrammatic matrices are of historical import, which is why she’s here. But she’s broken. No good to any–’

Orikan came at him without warning, a streak of light, bright as dawn on still water. The Diviner shined with golden radiance, a being of pure energy. The future Orikan wished for all necrons, the form he could only take when the stars were right. The astromancy he had used, Trazyn realised, to project himself to Solemnace.

Trazyn raised a tesseract labyrinth.

The light-being that was Orikan stopped, shimmering. ‘Those do not work here.’

‘My nexus,’ said Trazyn. ‘My rules. This is my second mind, Orikan, you didn’t think I’d leave it defenceless, did you?’

Orikan fled, streaming around the corner, pouring himself into a red-lit shelf in the gallery.

Trazyn followed, two spirit-algorithms chasing each other through circuitry and programs. Switching protocols. Slamming electro-gates behind them, worming through exploitations.

One moment they raced through a coolant system in a snow display, the next, a stasis protocol for a large green beast. Orikan switched the stasis field off, delaying his pursuer a microsecond as Trazyn reasserted it and charged on. He could feel Orikan cursing him in the wires. But that was no concern of his – he was focused on composing his security measures. He had the Diviner’s scent now, knew the signature of his code. Could close avenues and herd him.

He caught up, saw Orikan hesitate, cornered, then plunge into the only avenue open to him.

The mindshackle scarabs.

Trazyn took a different path.

He opened his eyes. It was strange to have flesh-and-blood eyes again, stranger still to get them when a genestealer was snapping at his throat.

Trazyn shoved the storm bolter under the genestealer’s chin and blasted its brains onto the ceiling. It was not just the eyes. There were thoughts, so many thoughts in Clara’s mind. Chief among them was *survive*, no surprise there, but just below that was *then kill the necron*.

Interesting.

He turned and saw Magdalena limping towards his helpless metal body with the meltagun.

‘Orikan!’ he yelled, surprised and delighted by the novelty of his new accent. He pointed the storm bolter and let loose a warning fusillade over the mind-slaved Bride of the Emperor.

Orikan turned, fumbled the meltagun, and Trazyn barrelled into him. Orikan hit Trazyn’s borrowed body with a rib shot that slammed the breath out of him – breath, that was new too – and Trazyn launched Clara’s thought-filled head into Magdalena’s chin, close enough to execute a mind-jump to the other woman’s mindshackle scarabs.

Two necron consciousnesses in one human mind, and all Trazyn felt was... peace. Magdalena's sense of self was a glassy lake. A lake on Ophelia VII, that lay protected in the hills near the monastery. A lake untroubled by the bodies that floated face up beneath the surface. All the men, women and children she had killed during the Reign of Blood. The Imperial Fists and Black Templars she'd gunned down on Terra with the word 'heretic' on her lips. None of it troubled her at all, for she had done so for the Emperor – and Lord Vandire.

And as Trazyn burrowed deeper, he could read Orikan's thoughts, as well...

Orikan fled screaming, terrified of what might be revealed. He tried to puppet the magos, but his techno-wards were too strong, and he instead jumped to Clara.

Clara got off her knees, her back to Trazyn and storm bolter dangling from one hand. She looked up.

The tyrant was in the doorway, long-limbed and rehydrated. Skull crackling with synaptic power that jumped in sparks from the mindshackle scarabs still implanted in its brain tissue.

Its four long, scything talons drew back for a blow.

Orikan turned Clara's head towards Trazyn and smiled, a grin with all the spite of an ancient mind turned to malice. Clara dropped, a puppet with its strings cut, and Trazyn saw a blur of grasping light shoot upward and suffuse the four mindshackle scarabs embedded in the tyrant's brain.

The swarm stopped moving, sprinting termagants slowing to a lope and turning their heads towards the tyrant. It hacked acid. Bit twice at something invisible. Shuddered so hard, Trazyn thought it might break its own neck. Then it threw its head back and screamed.

A lightform clawed out of the brain case, howling in pain and shock. Trazyn did not want to know what Orikan had seen in there. The endless galactic abyss? Hunger beyond satiating? Perhaps he glimpsed the hive mind – perhaps it spoke to him.

Whatever he saw, it was a vision he did not desire.

His light-ghost was already shooting out through the ceiling when Trazyn poured back into his own body and activated the stasis fields.

The tyrant was, as Trazyn knew it would be, a fine centrepiece. Majestic and powerful, a true representative of its species.

And he had outdone himself on the poses. Clara stood before it, the spent shells of her storm bolter frozen as they arced through the air. The magos, conscious this time as requested, leaned over the controls of his gauss flayer turrets, two spike rifle rounds in his back. Trazyn would remove them when the magos was needed again.

His own double, a surrogate, stood at the control cartouche. And Magdalena covered the back entrance with her meltagun. That back entrance hadn't existed in the real Nexus Mundi, but he wanted to position her so that she could see the tableau directly across: *The Beheading of Goge Vandire*.

He had, after all, promised that he would not return them to their exhibit – and this new feature, titled *War in the Museum*, was indeed not their original exhibit. So they stood with updated identification plaques, preserved for eternity.

There was only one missing touch.

Trazyn dragged a finger across the air, creating a glyph-plaque. With a flick, he sent it to rest just above the tyrant's cranium, where it would wait in empty space until Trazyn could complete the display.

It read: ORIKAN THE DIVINER.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Rath is a freelance writer from Honolulu who is currently based in Hong Kong. Though mostly known for writing the YouTube series *Extra History*, his credits also include numerous articles and a book for the U.S. State Department. ‘The Garden of Mortal Delights’ is his first story for Black Library.

AN EXTRACT FROM 'MARK OF FAITH'

An extract from *Mark of Faith*.



Darkness surrounds me, complete and heavy. Suffocating. I cannot see. Cannot hear. I cannot remember, either. Not how I came to be here, or where I came from. Not who or what I am. I am nothing, and no one. Little more than a heartbeat, inside a hollow shell. I try to speak. To make a noise of this nothingness, but I am mute as well as blind and deaf. No words will come. No voice, save for that locked tightly inside my mind.

Please.

And then, a sound. A voice, answering my silent plea.

Evangeline.

The name falls across me like a cloak, and I know instinctively that it is mine. I know the voice, too, despite how distant it sounds. How distorted.

‘Adelynn?’

My Sister Superior’s name escapes my throat and disappears into the unbroken darkness. Adelynn answers me once again with my own name, but this time she sounds even more distant. More distorted. I start to run, though I cannot see. Though the darkness mires me and pulls at my limbs like deep, cold water. But then I see it. A tiny pinprick of golden light, growing larger and closer until it resolves into a shape. A stone pedestal, draped in crimson cloth. That is where the light is coming from, only it is not light at all. It is an object. A shield, cast in steel and gold and engraved with the image of an armoured warrior bearing blade and aegis with a ten-pointed halo around her head. My heartbeat grows loud at the sight of it, for it is not *a* shield at all. It is *the* Shield. The *Praesidium Protectiva*.

The Shield of Saint Katherine.

‘Evangeline.’

I look up from the Shield and I see her. Adelynn is standing on the opposite side of the hallowed relic to me. Uplit in gold, she could as well be a statue, were it not for her emerald eyes.

‘Are you ready?’ she asks me, and she gestures to the Shield.

It is a question to which there is only ever one answer, but this time I find that I cannot give it. Because I am not ready. Not for this. I try to tell her so, but even that proves impossible. All that I can manage is an empty *oh* sound. The very definition of nothing. Adelynn’s face turns wrathful, then.

‘Are you ready?’ she asks, again. ‘Are you ready?’

Adelynn repeats the question over and over and over until the sound of it surrounds me. It suffocates me, just like the darkness. I cannot bear it, nor the disappointment in her emerald eyes, so I scream for her to stop and I thrust out my hands to take up the Shield, but the very instant that my fingertips come into contact with the gold and steel, I catch fire. It blossoms on my fingers first, before blooming across my hands and up my arms, golden yellow and flickering. It tracks over my shoulders and engulfs my body and travels up my throat until I am consumed by it in the same way that the air around me is. The fire burns fiercely, melting my armour and searing my flesh. It blinds me with its brightness, and deafens me anew with a roar that is not the roar of the fire at all, but that same dreadful question rendered in an inferno’s voice.

Are you ready?

I wake with a gasp, lying flat on my back. Still blind, no matter how I blink. Still deaf to everything but the overloud beat of my thundering heart. My teeth are chattering and my body is trembling completely from my head to my toes. I am soaked with sweat. I try to cry out, but no words will come. No sound at all. I get up, but something mires me. I fall hard onto my hands and knees,

completely unable to breathe. Someone takes hold of me, firm hands printing cold onto my feverish skin.

And then, a voice.

‘Be still, Sister. You are safe.’

It is a woman’s voice. One that I do not recognise. I try to speak. To fight her. But those hands hold firm and the voice speaks again.

‘Breathe,’ she says. ‘Just breathe.’

Left with little choice, I do as the voice commands me. I breathe. I allow myself to be still. And little by little, my senses return.

Touch, first. The cold floor under my hands and knees. Then sight. Bare steel treadplate, and my own hands, wrapped tightly in blood-speckled bandages. Scent. Incense and blood and the harsh tang of counterseptic. Other sounds filter in. I hear the click and hum of machinery, and the soft murmur of prayer. I am in a hospitaller’s ward. I exhale, slowly.

‘There we are,’ says the voice.

I look up at the owner of the voice. She is of the convents. Non-militant, but a Sister nonetheless. The hospitaller is pale as new marble, clad in robes as white as her hair. I cannot tell the colour of her eyes, because she will not meet mine.

‘You were dreaming,’ she says. ‘That is all.’

I try to tell her that I do not dream. That I haven’t since I was a child. Since before my Sisters and before Adelynn and before the convents. But all that I can make is the shape of the words. A rasp in my throat, like steel on stone.

‘My name is Lourette,’ the Sister Hospitaller says, her voice patient and calm. ‘Let me help you.’

I do not resist as Lourette helps me to my feet and sits me down again on the edge of my cot. This place is not so much a ward as a private room. The walls are clad with whitewashed flakboard and hung with linen drapes. Lourette gives me a plastek cup to drink from. The water is so cold that it makes me cough myself double. Lourette holds out a silvered bowl for me as I spit clots of blood and blackness into it until I can breathe again. When I do, I taste stale air. Recycled. All at once I know that I must be aboard a starship. That I am no longer on Ophelia VII.

At the thought of my home world everything returns to me. The Contemplation. The Last of Days. Losing my Sisters, one by one. I wait for grief to strike me, to sweep over me, but all I feel is emptiness.

‘Are you in pain, Sister?’ Lourette asks.

I wish I were. Pain is honest. It gives you focus. I am not in pain. In its place, all I feel is emptiness. That deceitful nothing. I cannot explain that to Lourette, so I just shake my head and ask a question in return. It takes three attempts, because my throat is so unused to speaking.

‘What ship is this?’

Lourette still does not look me in the eyes. She sets about changing my bloodied bandages with slow and deliberate care. Even that does not hurt.

‘The *Unbroken Vow*,’ she says. Her voice is soft and patient, with the clipped pronunciation of the convents. ‘It is a Dauntless-class cruiser sworn to the commandery of Canoness Elivia. We are holding at high anchor over Ophelia VII.’

The information sinks in slowly. Canoness Elivia. Like so many of my Order, she was far from Ophelia VII when the Rift opened and the darkness descended.

Very far.

Dread settles over me like a shroud.

‘How long have I been here?’ I ask.

‘You have been under our care for six weeks,’ Lourette says. ‘We kept you dreaming so that you could heal.’

I take a breath that hurts. Six weeks of slumber, as my world burned beneath me. *Six. Weeks.*

‘Then, the cardinal world?’

I say *the cardinal world* but I think *my home*. I steel myself, expecting Lourette to tell me that it is gone. Burned and broken to nothing, like my Sisters. But she doesn’t. Instead, Lourette smiles a small smile.

‘It was spared at the final hour,’ she says.

I remember the thunderclaps. The golden light that I mistook for the God-Emperor’s final mercy. ‘By who?’ I ask.

Lourette stops in her work and makes the sign of the aquila. Her bloody hands begin to shake, and the moment before she speaks seems long and charged, like the quiet before a storm breaks.

‘By Roboute Guilliman,’ she says softly. ‘The God-Emperor’s son is arisen.’

I feel blinded all over again at her words. Unable to catch my breath. My skin begins to burn as though I have a fever. I start to shake, too. From my core outwards.

The God-Emperor’s son.

‘Arisen,’ I say, because it is all that I can say.

Lourette nods. She does not try to prevent me when I pull away to make the sign of the aquila, too.

‘The primarch came from Terra, and brought with him a new crusade to wrest back what has been taken from us by flame and by sword. Countless warriors follow with him. The Adeptus Astartes. The Silent Sisterhood and the God-Emperor’s own Custodian

Guard.' Lourette takes a breath. Another awestruck smile pulls at her scarred face. 'And our Sainted Sister.'

Her words settle slowly on me. The God-Emperor's son arisen. The Silent Sisters and the God-Emperor's watchmen treading the stars. Saint Celestine, returned.

'It is a miracle,' I say.

Lourette goes back to removing the bindings around my arms. She still has not looked at me directly. Another long moment passes before she speaks again.

'I have heard the same word whispered about you, now and then,' she says.

I blink. My eyelids are still sticking. 'Why?'

'Because of how they found you. Ablaze, but alive.' Lourette finishes unwinding the bandage from my left arm and lets it drop onto a silvered tray in loops. 'I have never known a soul to be burned the way you were and live, much less heal.'

I look down and see where my skin has run and set again from the touch of the warfire. In places, I am patchworked to stark white, all of the pigment gone. There is no blood, though.

No pain.

'And then there is the matter of the mark,' Lourette says.

'Which mark?' I ask, because there are so many.

Lourette finally looks at me, then, and the expression on her face makes me wish she hadn't. Her limpid eyes are wide with fervour.

'You do not know,' she says. 'Of course you do not know.'

She stops her work and goes to fetch a mirror-glass from one of the equipment trays. She holds it up in front of my face, and I notice that her hands are trembling now too.

'Do you see?' Lourette asks.

I take the mirror-glass from her and look at my reflection, and the patchwork that the warfire has made of my face. All of the pigment is gone from around my eyes and across my cheeks, leaving bright white streaks against my skin that almost look like wings.

'It is the God-Emperor's mark,' Lourette says. 'A blessing.'

I stare at my reflection. At the shape of the eagle, so clearly writ into my skin. It is the God-Emperor's mark, just as Lourette says. A blessing.

'Do you see it?' she asks.

I nod, because I cannot speak. Because I can see the mark, but I cannot feel it. I cannot feel *anything*. I am nothing, and no one.

Just a heartbeat, in a hollow shell.

I realise that Lourette is still speaking, her words hurried by zeal.

'The God-Emperor saw you, Evangeline,' she says. 'He sent His son to spare you. Graced you with His mark and His favour.'

I put the mirror-glass face down on the cot and ask Lourette the only question I can think to ask. The only one that matters.

'And my Sisters?'

Lourette frowns, taken aback by my words, and the implied dismissal in them. 'They were lost,' she says. 'All save for one.'

My thoughts slow to a crawl once more. It is all that I can do to ask her who survived, and Lourette's frown only deepens when she says the name.

'Ashava,' she says.

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