

WARHAMMER
40,000



VAULTS OF TERRA

ARGENT

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Extract from 'Vaults of Terra: The Carrion Throne'

A Black Library Publication

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ARGENT

Chris Wraight

I come round, and the pain begins again. It is severe but manageable, so I do not request control measures. I look down and see my arms stripped of their armour, and that momentarily alarms me because I have been armoured for a very long time. I flex my fingers, and the pain flares. Both my forearms are encased in flexplast netting, wound tight, and there are spots of blood on the synthetic fabric. For a moment I look at the dark fluid as it spreads in spidery, blotted lines. My wounds will take a long time to heal even with the assistance of the medicae staff, and that is frustrating.

I realise that the drugs I was given have dulled my senses, and I blink hard and flex my leg muscles and perform mental exercises to restore mental agility.

I take in my surroundings. I am in a cell made of metal floors and metal walls, perhaps five metres by six. A single lumen gives off a weak light, illuminating a narrow desk and an even narrower cot, on which I am lying. The blankets are damp with sweat and tight to my body. I guess that I am back in the ordo command post beyond the Dravaganda ridgeline. I consider whether I am strong enough to move, and place my hands on the twin edges of my cot. Pushing against the metal tells me that I am not – the bones are still broken and incapable of supporting my weight. I could perhaps swing my legs around and stand, though. I would prefer to keep moving, to get my blood flowing again. I am not a child to be protected – I am a grown woman, an interrogator of the Ordo Hereticus, a warrior.

But I do not move, for the door slides open and my master enters. I can tell it is him even before the steel panel shifts, for his armour hums at a pitch I recognise. I believe that he could have chosen to have the telltale audex volume reduced, but he sees no use for stealth and sees many uses for a recognisable signature. To know that he approaches is a cause for dread, and I

have witnessed the effect often during actions on terrified subjects.

A part of me dreads his coming too, even now, after I have been a member of his retinue for over a year and served on numerous missions. Inquisitor Joffen Tur cultivates fear as another man might cultivate an appreciation of scholarship or the contents of a hydroponic chamber, and I am not yet entirely immune to his practised aura.

He enters, ducking under the door's lintel. He is in full armour – dark red lacquer, trimmed with bronze. The breastplate is an aquila, chipped with battle damage. His exposed head is clean-shaven with a bull neck and a solid chin. His eyes do not make a connection with me – as ever, he does not focus, as his thoughts are at least partly elsewhere. A man like Tur is always giving consideration to the unseen.

'Awake, then, Spinoza,' he grunts, standing before me.

I attempt to salute, and the pain makes me wince.

'Don't bother,' he says. 'You'll be useless to me for another week. Just tell me what happened.'

'On Forfoda?' I ask, and immediately regret it. My wits are still slow.

'Of course on bloody Forfoda,' Tur growls. 'You're in bed, both your arms are broken, you're a mess. Tell me how you got that way.'

I take a deep breath, and try to remember.

First, though, I must go back further. I must recall the briefing on the bridge of the *Leopax*, Tur's hunter-killer. This is only one of the vessels under his command, and not the largest. By choosing it he is sending a signal to the other Imperial forces mustering at Forfoda – this world is not the greatest of priorities for him, he has other burdens to attend to, but he deigns to participate in order to reflect the Emperor's glory more perfectly and with greater speed.

Tur does not place great store on courtesy, and I admire him for this. He knows his position in the hierarchy of Imperial servants, and it is near the top. One day I aspire to command the same level of self-belief, but know that I have some way to go before I do so.

We assemble under the shadow of his great ouslite command throne – myself, the assassin Kled, the captain of stormtroopers Brannad, the savant Yx and the hierophant Werefol. In the observation dome above us we can see Forfoda's red atmosphere looming, and it is easy to imagine it burning.

Tur himself remains seated as we bow, one by one. He does not acknowledge us, but rubs his ill-shaven chin as flickering lithocasts scroll through the air before him.

'They're torching everything,' he says in due course. 'Damned animals.'

I stiffen a little. He is not referring to the cultists who have brought this world to the brink of ruin, but to the Angels of Death who are now hauling it back to heel. I do not find it easy to hear those blessed warriors described in such terms, as used as I am to Tur's generally brusque manner. When I first heard that we would be in theatre with the Imperial Fists, I gave fervent thanks to Him on Terra, for it had long been a dear wish of mine to witness them fight.

But my master is correct in this, of course – if we do not extract the leaders of the insurrection for scrutiny then we miss the chance to learn what caused it.

‘I’ll take the primus complex,’ Tur says, squinting at a succession of tactical overlays. ‘We need to hit that in the next hour or it’ll be rubble. Brannad, you’ll come too, and a Purgation squad.’

I am surprised by that. Tur has been insistent for months that I develop more experience in conventional combat, and I had expected to make planetfall with him. He is concerned that my reactions are not quite where they should be, and that I am at risk of serious injury, and so I have pursued my training in this area with zeal.

He turns to me.

‘You’ll take the secondary spire. They’re scheduled to hit the command blister in three hours. Go with them. See they do not kill the target before you can get to her.’

I do not hide my surprise well. ‘By your will,’ I say, but my concern must have been obvious, for Tur scowls at me.

‘Yes, you’ll be alone with them,’ he says. ‘Is that a problem? Do you wish for a chaperone?’

I am stung, and suspect that I blush. ‘No problem,’ I say. ‘You honour me.’

‘Damn right,’ he says. ‘So don’t foul it up.’

The target is the governor’s adjutant Naiao Servia, whom our intelligence places within the secondary spire complex. Her master is holed up somewhere in the central hub, defended well, and thus Tur is correct to devote the majority of his resources there. I cannot help but think that my assignment is more about testing me than utilising our expertise optimally. That is his right, of course. He wishes me to become a weapon after his own design, and in the longer run that goal honours the Emperor more than the fate of a single battlefield.

So I ought to be thankful, and I attempt to remember this as I take my lander down through Forfoda’s red methane atmosphere towards my rendezvous coordinates. I do not know how Tur arranged it – he tells me only what I need to know – but he has persuaded the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes to let me accompany them, and that is testament to the heft his word carries here.

‘Accompany’, though, is a misleading word. I am to serve my master’s will in all things, and his will is that Servia is taken alive. I do not yet know how the Imperial Fists will react to this, and on the journey over I catalogue the many factors weighing on an unfavourable outcome.

I am a mortal. Worse, I am a woman. Worse still, I am a mere interrogator. None of these things are destined to make my task with these particular subjects easy, which is no doubt what Tur intended.

We make planetfall and boost across the world’s cracked plains towards the forward positions. In order to divert my mind from unhelpful speculation, I look out of the viewports. I see palls of burning promethium rising into the ruddy clouds above. I see the hulks of tanks smouldering in the rad-wastes between spires. I see the northern horizon burning, and feel the impact of shells from the Astra Militarum batteries. This front is heavily populated by both

sides – there must be many hundreds of thousands of soldiers dug in. A full advance would be ruinous in both human and equipment terms, so I am sure the commanders back in the orbital station would prefer to avoid it.

My transport touches down on a makeshift rockcrete plate set out in the open, ten kilometres behind the first of our offensive lines. I check my armour-seal before disembarking. Yx told me with some relish that I would last approximately ten seconds if I were to breathe Forfoda's atmosphere unfiltered. Only in the enclosed hives can the citizens exist without rebreathers, and our artillery barrages have compromised even that fragile shell of immunity.

I give my pilot the order to return to the *Leopax* and make my way towards a low command bunker. On presentation of my rosette I am waved inside by a mortal trooper in an atmosphere suit. His armour's trim is gold, and he bears the clenched fist symbol of the Chapter on his chest. Just catching sight of it gives me a twinge of expectation.

I am shown inside by more armoured menials, and taken to a chamber deep underground. I enter a crowded room, dominated by six warriors in full Adeptus Astartes battleplate. They are as enormous as I expected them to be. Their armour is pitted and worn, betraying long periods of active service, and it growls with every movement – a low, almost sub-aural hum of tethered machine-spirits.

Intelligence has already given me their names and designations. Four are Space Marines of a Codex-standard Assault squad – battle-brothers Travix, Movren, Pelleas and Alentar. The fifth is a sergeant, Cranach. The sixth is far more senior, a Chaplain named Erastus, and I immediately sense the distinction between them. It is not just the difference in livery – the Chaplain is arrayed in black against the others' gold – but the manner between them. They are creatures of rigid hierarchy, just as you would expect, and their deference to Erastus is evident.

As I enter, they have already turned to regard me, and I look up at their weather-hammered, scarred faces. The Chaplain's is the most severe, his flesh pulled back from a hard bone structure and his bald head studded with iron service indicators.

'Luce Spinoza,' Erastus says, his voice a snarl of iron over steel. 'Be welcome, acolyte.'

'Interrogator,' I say. It is important to insist on what rank I do have.

Cranach, the sergeant, looks at me evenly. I sense little outright hostility from the others – irritation, perhaps, and some impatience to be moving.

'Your master cares little for his servants,' Erastus says, 'to place them in harm's way so lightly.'

'We are all in harm's way,' I say. 'Emperor be praised.'

Cranach looks at Erastus, and raises a black eyebrow. One of the others – Travix, perhaps – smiles.

Erastus activates a hololith column. 'This is the target,' he says. 'The summit of the upper spire thrust. Here is the command nexus – too far to hit from our forward artillery positions, and shielded from atmospheric assault, so we will

destroy it at close range. Once the target is eliminated, we will move on, and the Militarum can handle the rest.'

'The adjutant Servia, present in that location, must be preserved,' I say. Best to get it out in the open as soon as possible, for I do not know how far Tur has already briefed them.

'Not a priority,' Erastus says.

'It is the highest priority.'

He does not get angry. I judge he only gets angry with obstacles of importance, and I hardly qualify as that.

'This is why we have been saddled with you, then,' Erastus says.

'Fought before, acolyte?' Cranach asks, doubtfully. He looks at my battle armour – which I am fiercely proud of – with some scepticism.

'Many times, Throne be praised,' I say, looking him in the eye. 'I will not get in your way.'

'You already are,' Erastus tells me.

'The Holy Orders of the Inquisition have placed an interdict on Servia,' I tell him. 'She will be preserved.' I turn to Cranach. 'Do not call me acolyte again, brother-sergeant. My rank is interrogator, earned by my blood and by the blood of the heretics I have ended.'

Cranach raises his eyebrow again. Perhaps that is his affectation, a curiously human gesture for something so gene-conditioned for killing.

'As you will it, interrogator,' he says, bowing.

So that is my first victory – minor, though, I judge, significant.

'Study the approach patterns,' Erastus tells me. 'If you come with us, you will have to be useful.'

'I pray I will be so, Brother-Chaplain,' I say.

'Why did you say that?' Tur asked.

'Say what?'

'*I pray I will be so.* That was weak. These are the sons of Dorn. They only respect resolve.'

'I did not consider my words.'

'No, you bloody didn't.'

Something in my master's tone strikes me as unusual then. Is his speech a little... petulant? I have spent some time with the Adeptus Astartes now, and the contrast cannot help but be drawn.

But that is unworthy. Tur is a lord of the Ordo Hereticus, a witch-finder of galactic renown, and on a hundred worlds his name is whispered by priests with a cross between reverence and fear. He speaks as he chooses to speak, and there is no requirement of an inquisitor to be decorous, especially to the members of his own retinue.

'Did you understand the attack plan?' he asks.

'It was a simple operation, suited to their skills,' I say. 'We were to approach the spire using an atmospheric transport, breaking in three levels below the command dome where the shielding gave out. From there to the dome was only a short distance. They would seize it, kill the occupants, set charges to

destroy the structure, then break out again to the same transport.'

'And you ensured they knew what I demanded?'

'A number of times. They were in no doubt.'

'Did they know the manner of corruption in the spires?'

'No. Neither did I. As I recall, at that stage none of us did.'

Tur grunts. He has a surly look about him, perhaps due to fatigue. He has been fighting for a long time, I guess, and there must be many actions still to conduct.

'Go on, then,' he says. 'What happened next?'

I strap myself into my restraint harness within the gunship's hold. Set beside the Space Marines I feel ludicrously small, even though my armour is the equal of any in the Ordo Hereticus and has performed with distinction in a hundred armed engagements on a dozen worlds.

We are transported in a mid-range assault gunship – an Imperial Fists Storm Eagle. The entire squad is assembled within its hold, and the craft is piloted by two of their battle-brothers whose names I am never given. The Space Marines do not volunteer much information, which suits me, as I am used to that.

We take off amid a cacophony of engine noise, and the entire craft shakes atop its thrusters' downdraught. The machine is heavily built, a mass of ablative plates and weapon housings, and so enormous power is required to lift it. Once moving, however, the speed is remarkable, and we are soon shooting across the battlefields. I patch in an external visual feed from the craft's auspex array, and see the war-blackened spires rush towards us. The plains below are scarred by mortar impacts, their rock plates burned and broken. Our target becomes visible – a slender outcrop of burning metal, jutting high above the rad-wastes like some sentinel monument.

I turn my attention to my companions. Erastus is silent, his skull-face helm glinting darkly under the glimmer of strip lumens. He holds his power maul two-handed, its heel on the deck. My eyes are drawn towards it. It is a magnificent piece, far too heavy for a mortal to lift, let alone use. It has a bone casing, scrimshawed with almost tribal savagery, and its disruptor unit is charred black.

Cranach is reciting some oath of the Chapter, and I do not understand the words – I assume he uses the vernacular of his own world. Movren has taken a combat blade and is turning it under the lumens, checking for any hint of a flaw. They are reverent, these warriors, and I find their sparse dedication moving. In my vocation I am frequently presented with sham piety or outright heresy, and it is good for the soul to see unfeigned devotion.

'*Vector laid in,*' comes a voice from the cockpit, and I know then that the assault will begin imminently. '*Prepare to disembark.*'

I tense, placing my gauntlet over my laspistol's holster. It is a good weapon from a fine house of weaponsmiths, monogrammed with the sigils of the ordo and fashioned according to the Accatran pattern, and yet it looks painfully small set against the bolt pistols and chainswords of my companions.

The Storm Eagle picks up altitude, still travelling fast, and we are rocked by

incoming fire. The lumens are killed, and the hold glows a womb-like red. I begin to wonder at what point our suicidal velocity will begin to ebb, and only slowly realise that it will not be until the very point of ejection. The pilot slams on airbrakes hard, jamming me tight against my restraints.

The Space Marines are already moving. They break free and charge across the bucking deck-plates with astonishing poise, given their immense weight. I join them just as the forward doors cantilever open and the flame-torn atmosphere howls in.

The gunship is hovering just metres away from a vast hole torn into the edge of the spire, and lasfire surrounds us in a coronet of static. Erastus is first across the gap, leaping on power armour servos and landing heavily amongst broken metal structures. The rest of the squad jumps across, until only I remain, poised on the edge of the swaying gunship's gaping innards.

I look down, and see a yawning pit beneath me, falling and falling, streaked with flame and racing gas plumes. That is a mistake, and my heart hammers hard. I curse the error, brace myself and leap, flying out over the gap and feeling the wind tug at me. I land awkwardly, dropping to all fours amid the tangle of blown rockcrete and metal bars. By the time I right myself, the Imperial Fists have already lumbered further in, their bolt pistols drawn and their chainswords revving. The gunship pulls away, strafed with lines of lasfire, and the backwash from its engines nearly rips me clear from the spire's edge.

I run hard, leaping over the debris. My breath echoes in my helm, hot and rapid. I have to sprint just to keep up with the Assault squad, who are moving far faster than I would have guessed possible. They are smashing their way inside, breaking through the walls themselves when they have to, making the corridors and chambers boom and echo with the industrial clamour of their discharging weapons.

By the time I get close again I can see their formation. The four battle-brothers are firing almost continuously, punching bloody holes through an oncoming tide of Forfodan troopers. Cranach carries a combat shield, and uses that in conjunction with a power fist to bludgeon aside any of them that get in close. But it is Erastus who captivates me. He is roaring now, and his voice is truly deafening, even with my helm's aural protection. His movements are spectacular, almost frenzied, and he is hurling himself at the enemy with an abandon that shocks me. His power maul is a close-combat weapon, and it blazes with golden energies, making the cramped spire interior seem to catch fire.

I am firing myself now, adding my las-bolts to the crashing thunder of bolt-rounds. I do some small good, hitting enemy troops as they attempt to form up before the onslaught, but in truth I do not augment the assault too greatly, for its force is entirely unstoppable, a juggernaut of power armour that jolts and horrifies in its speed and overwhelming violence. It is all I can do to keep up, and I struggle to do that, but at least I do not slow them. By the time we have cut and blasted our way to the target location, I am still with them. It is another small victory to add to the tally, though I can take little pleasure in it.

I see the approach to the command dome beckon, a long flight of white stone steps, over-arched with gold. I hear more gunfire, and glimpse movement from within – many bodies, racing to meet the challenge. At that stage all I think is that the defenders' bravery borders on madness, whatever foul creed they have adopted, for they are surely doomed to die quickly.

I do not know what we will meet inside, though. We have not got that far yet.

'You did not contribute much,' Tur says.

'I did my best.'

'Did they wait for you to catch up?'

'No.'

My master looks down at my broken arms, my blood-mottled bandages, and the heavy shadow of disappointment settles on his unforgiving face.

'It might have done you some good,' he says, 'just to witness them.'

'It did,' I say.

'They're crude things, the Adeptus Astartes,' Tur says. 'Don't believe the filth preached by the Ministorum – they're not angels. They're hammers. They crush things, and so we use them as such – never forget that.'

'I will not.'

And yet, I find his words lacking again. The warriors had not been crude, at least not in the way he meant. They were direct, to be sure, but there was an intelligence to their brutality that could be detected up close. They were incredibly destructive, but only as far as was required by the task. I almost tell Tur then what I thought I had gleaned from that episode – that their viewpoint may have been narrow, targeted solely on a limited set of military objectives, but within that ambit they were more impressive than any breed of warrior I had ever served with.

Since entering the ordo I have willingly embraced the diversity of our calling – its dark compromises and the necessity of working within flawed and labyrinthine political structures. I have accepted this, and learned to use the knowledge to my advantage and to the advantage of the Throne, but, for all that, when I saw the Angels of Death in action, and observed the purity of purpose they embodied, and reflected that the Emperor Himself had created them for this reason and no other, a faint shadow of jealousy had imprinted itself on me.

I am not proud of this. My vow is to eradicate it, lest it divert from the tasks I will have after Forfoda, but I cannot deny that it is there, and that it must demonstrate some kind of moral truth.

'You entered the command dome with them?' Tur presses.

'I did. I was with them at the end.'

He looks down at my shattered limbs, then up at my face again.

'Go on, then,' he says.

Erastus is the first one into the command dome. He is still roaring – in High Gothic now, so I understand fully what he is saying.

'For the glory of the primarch-progenitor!' he cries. 'For the glory of Him on

Earth!’

In isolation, those battle-shouts may seem bereft of much purpose, a mere expression of aggression that any thug from an underhive gang could match, but that is to misunderstand them. The volume generated by his augmitters is crushing, and it makes masonry crack and the air throb. The echoing, overlapping wall of sound is almost enough by itself to grind the will of our enemies into dust. The effect on his battle-brothers is just as profound, though opposite – they are roused by their Chaplain’s exhortations to further feats of arms, such that they fight on through an aegis of audio-shock, a rolling tide of sensory destruction. I am caught up in it myself, despite my status as an outsider. I find myself crying out along with the Chaplain, repeating the words that I recognise from the catechism where they occur.

‘For the Emperor!’ I shout as I fight. ‘For the Throne!’

And yet I am still appalled at what I witness. We have been misled, all of us, and did not understand the degradation that had been visited on Forfoda. Until then, we had been fighting human-normal troops, carrying standard weaponry, and our intelligence had told us the insurrection was of a political nature. I now see that this is a front, and that extreme corruption has come to this world. Among the standard troops there are now bloated and diseased things, their organs spilling from their flesh, their weapons fused to their limbs in webs of glistening cables.

I wish to gag, but I am surrounded by those who will not hesitate, who have made themselves impervious to horror. They tear into these new enemies, and I see their churning blades bite into unnatural flesh. That fortifies me, and I fight on, taking aim at creatures with lone baleful eyes and swollen, sore-crusted stomachs.

For the first time, we are tested. The command dome is crowded with these nightmare creations, and they come at us without fear. The air tastes like suppuration, and there are so many to slay. I stay close to Erastus, whose fortitude is undimmed. My laspistol is close to overheating now, and I reach for my combat knife, though I do not think it will serve well against these things.

The situation blinds me to the objective, and for a moment I am fighting merely to avoid annihilation, but then I see her for the first time – Naiao Servia, recognisable from Tur’s vid-picts, cowering among the capering fiends she has unleashed. She is obese, her lips cracked, her cheeks flabby with sickness, so I see that she has reaped the rewards of her betrayal. Lines of black blood trace a pattern down her neck, and I do not wish to speculate where it has come from.

Cranach is fighting hard, using his shield and power fist to great effect. His squad members work for one another, covering any momentary weakness of their brothers, carving into the horde of decay as a seamless unit. I see Pelleas go down, dragged into a morass of fluids by three pus-green mutants, and the others respond instantly, hacking their way to his side. They are selfless, a band of soul-brothers, trained from boyhood to keep one another on their feet and fighting.

It is then that I know they will prevail, for the enemy has none of this. These opponents are perversions, individually formidable but without cohesion. I keep firing, giving my laspistol a few more shots before it overloads, aiding the progress of Erastus towards Servia's unnatural bulk.

The adjutant has become huge, far beyond mortal bounds, a slobbering mountain of rotting flesh. Her tongue, slick as oil, lashes from a slash-mouth filled with hooked teeth. Her body spills from the ruins of her old uniform, and tentacles lash out at the Chaplain.

He leaps up at her, swinging with his crozius, and drives a gouge through her swelling stomach. She screams at him, vomiting steaming bile, and he fights through it, his injunctions never ceasing.

I move closer, aiming at the creature's head, trying to blind her, narrowly missing. Then one of her tentacles connects, wrapping around the haft of the Chaplain's power maul, grabbing it and wrenching it from his grip. The weapon flies free, burning through the corrupted blubber and making the fat boil.

Without it, the Chaplain is diminished. He fights on, tearing at the monster with his clenched fists. His brothers are fully occupied and do not see his peril. Only I witness the maul land, skidding across the fluid-slick floor and coming to rest amid a slough of fizzing plasma.

Servia can overwhelm her prey then, pushing him back. Bereft of his weapon, Erastus will be overcome. I feel my laspistol reach its limit. I look over at the maul, crackling still in a corona of energy, and know what I must do.

I race towards it, discarding my laspistol, and reach for the crackling weapon. Lifting it nearly breaks my ribs – it is as heavy as a man, and my power armour strains to compensate. Disruptor charge snakes and lashes about me, and the thing shudders in my grip as if alive. I can barely hold on to it, let alone use it, but Erastus is now in mortal danger.

'For the Emperor!' I cry, mimicking his strident roars, and throw myself at the creature.

I swing the maul at its spine, two-handed, putting all my weight into the blow. This betrays my ignorance – the weight and power of it is far too much, and as it connects I realise my error. My arms are smashed even through my armour, and the wave of pain makes me scream out loud. The released disruptor charge explodes, throwing me clear of the impact and cracking open ceramite plate. I cannot release the maul – it remains in my grip, locked by ruined gauntlets amid gouts of flame.

But the blow is enough. The creature reels, its back broken, and Erastus surges towards it, ripping the tentacles free of its twisted body. His battle-brothers fight through the remains of the throng, subduing the attendant horrors to bring their fire to bear on the leader.

I am in agony. I can feel my bones jutting through my flesh, my blood sloshing inside my armour, and I am lightheaded and nauseous. It takes all my strength merely to lift my head and stay conscious.

I see Erastus punching out, driving Servia back. I see the rest of the squad

level their bolt pistols, ready to destroy it.

'No!' I cry, raising a trembling, ruined arm. 'Preserve her!'

Erastus halts. He looks at me, then at the trembling mass of blubber before him. Cranach is poised to wade in closer, to rip its heart from its diseased chest. His battle-brothers make no move to comply. Soon they will kill it.

'Hold,' the Chaplain commands, and they instantly freeze. Servia shrinks back, crippled but alive.

Cranach moves to protest. 'It cannot be suffered to-' he begins.

Erastus cuts him dead. He nods in my direction.

I try to keep myself together, and know that I will fail. I see them looking at me, bristling with barely contained battle-fury. They want to kill it. They live to kill it.

'*Preserve her*,' I tell them, down on my knees in puddles of blood.

Cranach looks at the Chaplain.

'She has the crozius, sergeant,' Erastus tells him.

That is the last thing I remember.

Tur does not say anything for a while.

'When they brought you back here-' he begins.

'I remember none of it.'

He nods, thinking. 'They didn't tell me everything.'

'I do not think they speak of their battles,' I say.

'No, maybe not.' He is struggling for words now. I do not know if he is proud to learn what happened, or maybe disappointed. Tur has always found castigation easy - it is his profession - but praise comes less naturally.

'You did well, then,' he says eventually. 'The subject is on the *Leopax*, and I'll speak to her soon. She'll regret being alive. I'm not in the mood to be gentle.'

When is Tur ever in that mood? I might smile, but the pain is still prohibitive.

'And you are recovering, then?' he asks, awkwardly.

'Yes, lord,' I say.

He nods again. 'Weapons training,' he says. 'When this is over, you need more of it. Perhaps this is an aptitude I have overlooked.'

I do not say anything. I do not think it will be necessary, for reasons I will not disclose to him.

Do not misunderstand me. I remain loyal to my master. He is a great man in many ways, and I aspire to learn from him. One day, in the far future, my ambition is to be as devoted a servant of Terra as he has been, and to have a reputation half as formidable. I cannot imagine serving under another as dedicated to the Throne. Indeed, I find it hard to imagine serving under anyone else at all.

But I have learned much on Forfoda, and some lessons are still to come.

'As you will, lord,' I say, hoping he will leave soon.

It takes three weeks to subdue the remains of the insurrection. The Imperial

Fists linger in theatre longer than originally intended once the scale of corruption is revealed. Many of the spires are destroyed wholesale, and many millions of survivors are deported in void-haulers, ready either for slaughter or mind-wiping. Our strategos estimate it will take months to purge the world, and that the Ministorum will be required to maintain scrutiny for decades after that, but it has been retained, and its forges and its manufactoria remain ready for use by the Holy Imperium of Man.

I take much satisfaction in that. Once my arms heal, I begin the process of regaining strength. I take up my duties as fast as I am able. Tur does not visit me again, for he is detained with many cares. Yx tells me that Servia's testimony was instrumental in the recapture of the industrial zones north of the spires, and that gladdens my soul.

Near the end, I have the visitor I have been expecting. He also does not have much time, so his presence here honours me. When Erastus walks into the training chambers in the Dravaganda command post he seems even more gigantic than before. His armour is a little more worn, his angular face carrying an extra scar, but the energy in his movements is undiminished.

'Interrogator,' he says, bowing. 'I would have come sooner, but there were many calls on us.'

I bow in return. 'It is good to see you, lord Chaplain,' I say.

I notice then that he carries his power maul, the thing he called a crozius. It looks different to me – smaller, as if cut down somehow. Perhaps I damaged it. I know how much the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes venerate their weapons, and so the thought troubles me.

'This is Argent,' Erastus says, hefting the heavy piece as if it weighs nothing. 'It has been in the Chapter for a thousand years. For an outsider to handle it, even to touch it, earns the wrath of us all.'

He is still severe. Perhaps he knows no other way to be.

'I did not know,' I say, wondering why he has come here to tell me this.

'We protect that which is precious to us,' he says. 'But we also understand what is truly significant. Take it, and observe what has changed.'

I receive the maul again, and then see truly that it has been heavily adapted. It is shorter, lighter, its power unit truncated and the bone casing modified. Even then I struggle to hold it steady, and my armour-encased arms ache.

'Why have you done this?' I ask.

'Because it is yours now,' he says.

I cannot believe it. I move to give the weapon back, unable to accept such a gift.

'If you spurn the offer,' Erastus warns me, 'it will be a second insult, one I will not overlook.'

I look down at the crozius. The detail on its shaft is incredible. It is a thing of beauty as well as power. The gesture overwhelms me, and I do not have the words for it.

'You do me too much honour,' I say at last, and it seems like a weak response.

'I have only just started,' he says, standing back and regarding me critically.

'You hold it as if it were a snake. Grip the handle loosely. I will show you how to bear it without breaking your bones.'

It is then that I know why he has come. He will instruct me in how to wield it, and I understand then that it will henceforth become my own weapon, the one I shall carry in preference to all others.

It will hurt. I will damage the healing process by doing this. Tur will be angry, for he desires me back in service within days.

None of that matters. I do as I am bid, then look to the Chaplain. I do not know if such a thing has ever been done before. My soul fills with joy, and I determine to make myself equal to the gesture. Perhaps that will be my purpose now – to live up to this deed, to ensure that Argent is used as it ought to be used, for the glory of Him on Earth.

That would be a fine ambition, I think, one worthy of my high calling.

'Show me,' I say then, hungry for the knowledge.

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An extract from *Vaults of Terra: The Carrion Throne*.



Say nothing, listen with utmost care,' he said. 'You understand me. You are in danger – you know this. You can see the tools against the far wall. But do not look at them. Look at me.'

The speaker held the man's staring eyes with his own, which were deep grey and did not blink.

'I brought you here following testimony from those who know you,' he said. 'They came to me, and I am bound to listen. Their words have been recorded. You can see them on the tabletop, those volumes there. No, do not look at them either. Look at me. You are afraid. If you let it turn your mind, it will be the end of you, so I will ask you to remember that you are a human being, a master of your passions. When I ask you a question, you will need to answer it, and if you do not speak the truth, I will know. The truth is all I desire. You have one chance left, so hold on to it. Hold on to it. Clutch it. Never deviate from it. Do you understand what I am telling you?'

The man before him tried to do as he was bid. He tried to hold his interrogator's gaze, to keep his hands from shaking uncontrollably, and that was difficult. He looked ill, he stank. Two days in a cell, listening to the screams filtering up from the levels below, would do that to you.

He couldn't reply. His scab-latticed lips twitched, but the words would not come. He shivered, twitching, fingers flexing, unable to do what was asked of him.

His interrogator waited. He was used to waiting. He had overseen a thousand sessions on a hundred worlds, so giving this one a little more time would serve well enough. He sat back in his fine orlwood chair, pressed his hands together and rested his chin on the apex of his armoured fingers.

'Do you understand me?' he asked again.

The man before him tried to answer again. His face was ashen, just like all lowborn faces on Terra – Throneworld-grey, the pallor of a life lived under the

unbroken curtain of tox-clouds.

‘I...’ he tried. ‘I...’

The questioner waited. A thick robe hung from his armoured shoulders, lined with silver death’s heads at the hem. His hair was slicked back from a hard-cut face, waxed to a high sheen. His nose was hooked, his jawline sharp. Something faintly reptilian lingered over those features, something dry, patient and unbreaking.

Over his chest lay the only formal badge of his office – a skull-form rosette of the Ordo Hereticus, fashioned from iron and pinned to the trim of the cloak. It was a little thing, a trifle, barely larger than the heart stone jewel of an amulet, but in that rosette lay dread, hard-earned over lifetimes.

The bound man could not drag his gaze away from it, try as he might. It was that, more than the instruments which hung in their shackles on the rust-flecked wall, more than the odour of old blood which rose from the steel floor, more than the scratch-marked synthleather bonds, that held him tightly in his metal chair.

The inquisitor leaned forwards, letting polished gauntlets drop to his lap. He reached down to the belt at his waist and withdrew a long-barrelled revolver. The grip was inlaid ivory, the chamber adorned with a rippling serpent motif. He idly swung the cylinder out, observed the rounds nestled within, then clicked the chamber back into place. He pressed the tip of the muzzle against his subject’s temple, observing a minute flinch as the cool steel rested against warm flesh.

‘I do not wish to use this,’ the inquisitor told him, softly. ‘I do not wish to visit any further harm upon you. Why should I? The Emperor’s realm, infinite as it is, requires service. You are young, you are in passable health. You can serve, if you live. One more pair of hands. Such is the greatest glory of the Imperium – the toil of uncountable pairs of hands.’

The man was shaking now, a thin line of drool gathering at the corner of his mouth.

‘And I would not waste my ammunition, by choice,’ the inquisitor went on. ‘One bullet alone is worth more than you will ever accumulate. The shells are manufactured on Luna by expert hands, adept at uncovering and preserving the things of another age, and they know the value of their art. This is Sanguine, and none but two of its kind were ever made. The twin, Saturnine, has been lost for a thousand years, and has most likely been un-made. And so, consider – would I prefer to use it on you, and cause this priceless thing some small harm, or would I rather that you lived and told me all you know, and allowed me to put it back in its holster?’

The man didn’t try to look at the gun. He couldn’t meet the gaze of the inquisitor, and so stared in panic at the rosette, blinking away tears, trying to control his shivering.

‘I... told you...’ he started.

The inquisitor nodded, encouragingly. ‘Yes, you did. You told me of the False Angel. I thought then that we might get to the truth, so I let you talk. Then your fear made you dumb, and we were forced to start again. Perhaps

everything you have told me was a lie. See now, I am used to those. In my every waking hour I hear a lie from a different pair of lips. Lies are to me like teardrops – transparent and short-lived. If you lie to me again, I will perceive it, and Sanguine will serve you. So speak. Speak now.'

The man seemed to crumple then, as if a long-maintained conflict within him had broken. He slumped in his bonds, and his bloodshot eyes drifted away from the rosette.

'I made an... error,' he murmured, haltingly. 'You know it. You knew from the start. A mistake.' He looked up, briefly defiant. 'A mistake! See, how was I to know? They spoke of the things that priests speak of. I was confused, in my mind.' Once the words started to come, they spilled out fast, one after another, propelled by fear. 'It is hard, you know? To live, to... carry *on living*. And then someone comes and tells you that there's another way. There'll be rations – better than we have now. More hab-units, given to those that need them. And they'll stop the killings, down in the underhive. They'll send arbitrators down there, and they'll stop the ones that hunt us. You know that we're hunted? Of course you do. They find the bodies all the time, and no one does anything – they never have. So I listened to that, and I knew it was wrong, somehow, and that our only protector dwells on the Throne, but he's here, the Angel, now, and he listens, and I go to listen to what his preachers tell us. And if they gave us instructions to store supplies or carry weapons, then I did it because I wanted to believe. And I did. Throne save me, but I did.'

'Slower,' warned the inquisitor, dragging the muzzle of his revolver down the man's cheek and placing it closer to his lips. 'Order your thoughts. I have seen the results of your work. I have seen corpses with terrible things done to them. I have seen blood on the walls, smeared in mockery of holy sigils. These are not the work of cutpurses. They are the work of heresy.'

'No!' The eyes went wide again with terrible fear. 'You have it wrong!'

'Most strange, how many who come here say that.'

'It is true, lord, *true*. I know nothing of these... crimes, only that he told us we must arm against the dark, for no one else—'

'Does anything. But now someone is doing something. I am doing something. I would like to do more. I would like to root this out.'

'Yes, yes, you must root it out.'

'Where do you meet?'

'Malliax.'

'You have told me this already. You know what I need. The place. The place where you went to hear these things.'

'I do not...' The fear returned. 'I do not know the name. I cannot take you there.'

The inquisitor's grey eyes narrowed by a fraction. His finger, finely armoured in dark lacquered plate, slipped away from the trigger, but he kept the barrel pressed against the man's chin. For a long time the two of them looked at one another, one desperate, the other pensive.

'See, now I believe you,' the inquisitor said at last, withdrawing the gun and slipping the safety catch on.

The man took a sucked-in breath – until then, he had hardly dared to. He started to sweat again, and his trembling grew worse.

‘It’s true!’ he blurted, his voice cracking from fear. ‘It is true – I can’t take you there.’

The inquisitor sat back. ‘I know it,’ he said, easing the pistol back into its soft real-leather holster. ‘You are not foolish enough to lie to me. I could break you apart, here, now, and you could tell me no more than you have already.’ He flickered a dry smile. ‘Consider yourself fortunate you met me this day, rather than when I was a younger man. Then, I would have rendered you down to your elements to seek what you hide, just to be sure. Not now. I know when there is nothing left to find.’

The man did not relax. A different fear entered his eyes, one of new cruelty – a deception, one of the thousand that the agents of the Holy Inquisition knew and practised. There was no way out for him now – once a mortal man entered the black fortresses, that was the end. All knew that. Everyone.

‘I would tell you,’ he stammered, breaking down into tears, ‘if I could.’

The inquisitor rose from his chair, and his robes whispered around his ornate boots. Fine ceramite armour pieces slid across his body as he moved, each one as black as obsidian, each one edged with a vein of silver. His movements were precise, feline, barely audible despite the power feeds coiled tight inside every segment.

‘Yes, yes,’ he said.

‘Please,’ sobbed the man, slack in his bonds. ‘I would tell you.’

The inquisitor reached for the table on which the testimony parchment had been piled, and pressed a command bead. He looked over the scrolls absently – heaps of yellowed, scaly hides bearing the blood-brown scrawl of scholarly transcription, each one sealed with his own personal sigil of authority.

‘That is all I asked you,’ the inquisitor said, almost to himself. ‘You are free to go. You have done me some service, and you should reflect on that, when you are able, with pride. It is through loyal souls that we are able to do our work.’

The man stared at his interrogator, open-mouthed. Lingering suspicion played across his ravaged features.

The inquisitor glanced over towards him. ‘We’re not monsters. You have nothing more to tell me. If you recall more, you’ll come to me, I’m sure.’

The man began to believe. His eyes started to dart around – at his bonds, at the tools, at the barred door beyond. ‘Do you mean...?’

The inquisitor turned away, moved towards the door. As he approached it, thick iron bars slid from their housings and the armoured portal cracked open. A dull red light bled from the far side, snaking over the dark stone flags of the interrogation room. For a moment, the inquisitor was silhouetted by it, a spectral figure, gaunt and featureless.

‘All we wish for is the truth,’ he said.

Then he moved out into the long corridor beyond. The air was sterile, recycled down through the levels of the Inquisitorial fortress by old, wheezing machines. Black webs of damp caked the flagstones, and the filmy suspensor

lumens flickered. An augmetic-encrusted servo-skull hovered down to the inquisitor's shoulder, bobbing erratically and trailing a thin spinal tail behind it.

'*Hereticus-minoris*,' it clicked. '*Phylum tertius*. Tut, tut.'

At the end of the corridor, a man waited. He wore the thick-slabbed armour of a storm trooper captain, dun-grey, battle-weathered. His face was similarly seasoned, with a shadow of stubble over a blocked chin. His black hair was cropped close to the scalp, exposing tattooed barcodes and ordo battle-honours.

He bowed. 'Lord Crowl,' he said.

'Something keeps him from talking, Revus,' the inquisitor said. 'A greater fear? Maybe loyalty. In either case, it is of interest.'

'Will you break him?'

'We learn more by letting him go. Assign a watch, mark his movements until you gain the location. I want him alive until then.'

'It will be done. And afterwards?'

The inquisitor was already moving, his boots clicking softly on the stone as he made his way towards the next cell. 'Termination,' he said. 'I'll oversee, so keep it contained – I want to see where this leads.'

'As you will it.'

The inquisitor hesitated before entering the next cell. The sound of panicked weeping could already be made out through the observation grille in the thick door. 'But I did not ask you, Revus – how is your sergeant, Hegain? Recovered fully?'

'Almost. Thank you for asking.'

'Give him my congratulations.'

'He will be honoured to have them.'

The servo-skull bobbed impatiently. '*Numeroso*. Dally not.'

The inquisitor shot the thing a brief, irritated look, then reached for the armour-lock on the cell door. As he did so, he summoned a ghost-schematic of the next subject's file, which hovered for a second in an ocular overlay. Reading it, his lips tightened a fraction.

'I will need my instruments for this one,' Inquisitor Erasmus Crowl told Revus, then went inside.

Terra.

Holy Terra, marvel of the galaxy, heart of wonder. No jewel shone more brightly, no canker was more foul. At its nexus met the fears and glories of a species, rammed tight within the spires and the vaults, the pits and the hab-warrens. Spoil-grey, scored and crusted with the contamination and majesty of ten long millennia, a shrine world that glowed with a billion fires, a tomb that clutched its buried souls close. All the planet's natural beauty had long since been scrubbed from its face, replaced by the layers upon layers of a single, creeping hyper-city. The sprawl blotted out the once-great oceans and the long-hewn forests under suffocating mountains of rockcrete and plasteel, tangled and decaying and renewed and rebuilt until the accretions stretched unbroken from the deepest chasms to the exalted heights.

No part of that world was free of the hand of man. Viewed from space, the

planet's night-shrouded hemisphere glittered with constellations of neon and sulphur, while its sunlit hemisphere gasped in a hot haze of pale grey. Its skies were clogged with voidcraft and lifters, packed with the manufactures and commodities that kept the teeming world from starving itself. With those commodities came living bodies – pilgrims by the million, products of a migration that never ended, bringing souls from across the vastness of space whose only wish was to live long enough to reach the sacred precincts of the Palace itself; to somehow endure the crowds and the hardship and the myriad predators that circled them for just one glimpse, even the smallest, of the golden towers portrayed in the Ecclesiarchy vid-picts, before they died in rapture.

So few made it. Most died on the warp journey, either of old age or through the loss of their ships in the void. Those who reached the solar system waited for years in the processing pens on Luna, then the vast orbital stations within sight of the planet below. It was said that a man could be born, live and die within those cavernous holding centres, all while his documentation worked its way tortuously through the offices of scribes and under-scribes. Often it would be lost, sometimes stolen, a mere speck amid the avalanche of parchment folios that fuelled the administrative machinery of the Imperium's sclerotic heart.

And yet, those few who by luck or the will of the Emperor made it to the sacred soils of humanity's birthworld still numbered in the millions, such was the fecundity of the eternal pilgrimage. Like the forgotten tides of Old Earth, the flow waxed and waned, governed by the great festivals of the Ministorum, the feasts of the saints and the Lords of Terra. And of all the sacred days ordained for the masses to partake in, by far the most sacred was the remembrance of the Angel – Sanguinala, the Red Feast, the Festival of the Blessed Sacrifice. On that day, once every solar year, the numbers swelled beyond reason, and the pilgrims crammed like cattle into the feeder stations, clawing at the gates and screaming at the guards to let them in. The most exalted of all, so they said, would be permitted to approach the Eternity Gate itself, to witness the rites of remembrance performed on the site of the Angel's legendary stand as the feast reached its frenetic climax.

Now Sanguinala was just a week away, and the canyons of Terra's world-city were already bursting. Every looping thoroughfare and crumbling causeway was swollen with a living carpet of supplicants, chanting the rituals, swaying in unison, moving with the inexorable purpose of an invading army towards the cavernous maws of the Outer Palace itself. Over them all hung the attack craft of the Adeptus Arbites, the black-clad judges, more watchful than ever for the bad seeds hidden among the multitudes. Every passing hour saw them swooping into the throngs, dragging out a ranting disciple or witch-in-potentia and bundling them into the crew-bays of their hovering scrutiny-lifters.

The air was hot. Frenzy gripped the megapolis, and supplicants went mad amid the dust. Looming above the lesser towers, massive beyond imagination, the titanic walls of the Outer Palace soared in tarnished splendour, waiting for the inundation to crash against their flanks.

Interrogator Luce Spinoza watched those walls now, their outline half-lost in the haze of morning. The parapets were over fifty kilometres away, but still they dominated the northern horizon, as imposing as the mountains had been that now served as their foundations.

She stood before a floor-to-ceiling crystallex window set atop the highest level of a spire's crown, over a kilometre up, just one of thousands of towers that jostled and crammed the cityscape in all directions. Away in the east, the dim light of the world's sun tried to pierce the ever-drifting clouds of smog, casting a weak and dirty light across the steel and adamantium.

Spinoza had never laid eyes on the Palace before. To witness the holy site, even from such a distance, gave her a kind of vertigo. Somewhere within, she knew, buried deep inside that man-made continent, He endured. The thought of it was enough to make her weep for the sacrifice, as she had done, many times.

Spinoza was so lost in contemplation that the soft approach of her superior went unnoticed. On another day she might have been given penance for the lapse, but Adamara Rassilo understood the occasion, and made no note.

'You never get used to it,' Rassilo said, coming to stand beside her. 'Seeing it unfiltered, knowing what it holds.'

Spinoza bowed to her. 'I can only imagine, lord.'

Inquisitor-Lord Rassilo wore armour of deep crimson marked with the fleur-de-lys of her allied Chambers Militant. Her hair was olive green, sheer and close-cut, exposing a smooth face that gave away no determinate sign of age. Her rosette was a pearl-ringed jewel, at first glance as clear as glass, but which on closer inspection reflected the icon of an Inquisitorial skull from within its depths.

'How was the journey?' Rassilo asked.

The journey had been hell. Nine warp stages from the outer edge of Segmentum Solar, all taken in a battle-damaged ordo frigate with a depleted crew and an astropath who had gone mad on the run from Priax.

'It was fine,' Spinoza said. 'I am glad to be here.'

'And we are glad to have you. So, come, let us speak.'

Rassilo turned away from the viewing portal. Her chamber was large and luxuriously appointed. A patterned marble floor, worth a governor's stipend alone, underpinned an artful arrangement of Vandire-era furnishing, most fashioned from genuine organics and only a few betraying the telltale of synthesis. Wax candles flickered in wrought-iron holders, augmenting the always-weak daylight from the windows.

Rassilo gestured towards a chair for Spinoza, and the two of them sat opposite one another, framing a holo-fireplace that cracked and spat in an antique grate. Rassilo clicked her fingers and a diminutive dwarf-servitor scuttled to her side, arms stuffed with reams of parchment. The dead-eyed creature handed one to her, burred something, then wobbled away.

'Interrogator Luce Spinoza,' read Rassilo, leafing through the file. 'Admitted from Schola Progenium Astranta under the watch of Inquisitor Tur. Initial actions performed with commendation. Graduated to Explicator under Tur's tutelage, before his lamented death on Karalsis Nine. Thence several further

appointments – I will not list them all. Notable attachment with the Adeptus Astartes.’ She looked up at Spinoza. ‘The Imperial Fists, eh? How did you find them?’

Spinoza remembered every moment. They had been perfection to her, the very embodiment of His divine will. They had accepted her, too, in the end, and the alliance had been fruitful – so much so that Chaplain Erastus had gifted her his crozius arcanum, Argent, when they parted after the successful reduction of Forfoda, an honour beyond words. Even now, five years later, the gesture still humbled her.

‘They were true servants,’ she said, with feeling.

‘And dangerous ones,’ said Rassilo. ‘No world knows that more than this one. But it is good you are returned. The Throneworld has need of witch hunters. There are never enough.’

Spinoza stiffened. Returning to the heart of the Imperium had never been her plan – the void was where the true war was. And yet, in Tur’s absence, there was no resisting orders from the centre, for she was not inquisitor yet, and she had always known another mentor would be found for her.

‘No greater honour exists,’ she said, and that was truthful enough.

Rassilo nodded. ‘You’ve seen the state of things. This world is invaded every hour in greater numbers than our enemies could ever muster. Think on that. Every single pilgrim is screened, and screened again, but it can never be enough. All are suspect, all are dangerous, and if taint is suffered to flourish here, then we are lost.’

‘I yearn only to serve again.’

Rassilo closed the file and laid it on her lap. ‘You’ve been asked for by the Inquisitor Erasmus Crowl – do you know the name?’

Spinoza shook her head.

‘Perhaps not the master I would have chosen for you, but I cannot refuse him. He has been here too long, alone, but no servant of the Throne is more dedicated. He will drive you hard, in his own way, but he is fair, and you will learn much if your ears and eyes stay open.’

Spinoza’s expression never flickered. She remembered the killing fields of Forfoda, the glory of the Space Marines: unstoppable, a living wall of gold set against the parapets of faithlessness.

‘What does he require of me?’ she asked.

‘He has no retinue,’ said Rassilo. ‘For years he never demanded one. Now he wishes for an acolyte. Why? I do not know. It is his right, though, and I suppose he judges your qualities will balance his own.’

‘I will learn what I can.’

Rassilo smiled. ‘You need not hide your feelings, interrogator. This station will not last forever. Acquit yourself well here, and there are those in the ordo who will notice.’

‘My apologies, I did not mean—’

‘You are young, you have ambition.’ Rassilo clicked her fingers again. ‘Your time will come. In the meantime, let me make your path a little easier.’ The dwarf-servitor waddled back into the room, this time towards Spinoza. In its

chubby grey hands was another file, bound with snapwire and sealed with a thick dollop of wax. The servitor held it up and gazed at Spinoza with a vacant, dumbly sorrowful expression.

Spinoza took the file. It was marked in the ordo routine cipher: Crowl, E., O.H. 4589-643.

‘Read it,’ said Rassilo. ‘It will assist your introduction.’

Spinoza looked up at her. ‘Is this...’ she started. ‘Does he know?’

‘I doubt it.’ Rassilo leaned forwards in her chair. Her armour-plates were artfully made, and moved like folds of fabric around her. ‘Consider it a gift made in recognition of sacrifice. This is Terra, child – one gift given, another returned.’

Spinoza looked down at the file, and ran her finger down its spine. The servitor stalked off again, its bare grey feet tottering across the wooden floor.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

Rassilo waved that away. ‘I appreciate your vision of service. We talk and talk – puritans, radicals, whatever that means – but ignore the real divisions. We need those whose blood is hot.’

Rassilo rose from her seat, and Spinoza followed suit. The interview was at an end. The two of them walked to the door, Rassilo ahead, Spinoza following. Before taking leave, Rassilo embraced her formally, then studied her a final time.

‘There are many battlefields, interrogator,’ she said. ‘This is just another one – just as deadly, just as noble. Remember that.’

Spinoza nodded.

‘I will,’ she said.

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First published in Black Library Live! 2016 Chapbook.
This eBook edition published in 2017 by Black Library, Games
Workshop Ltd,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Original icon by Wayne England.

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ISBN: 978-1-78572-681-1

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