**Prologue**

The cruiser *Majesty’s Fury* drifted in the black void, motionless and silent.

Deep in the belly of the vessel were the forces of the Imperial Guard, rousing for their daily activities and training, in preparation for the coming deployment. Among them was the Cadian 109th, licking their wounds from the suppression of an uprising on Mirabar, a hive world choked with weapons and armor manufactorums. It had been long and bloody and more than half of the regiment had died, but the 109th came out ahead, just like they always did.

Unlike their more rigid and disciplined brethren, the 109th was renowned for their lack of formality. They were improper and crass but effective veterans that would fight to the last man for the love of the Emperor. They had no need of vindictive commissars because since the regiment’s inception they had never once retreated. Even once when armored support around them pulled back, the 109th had balked and fixed bayonets, charging with enough ferocity to singlehandedly rout their enemy. However, their suicidal bravery came with a high cost.

Standing impassively on the deck above the men were a pair of officers, one a grizzled veteran and the other a bright youth. The veteran stood watching the men under his command go about various tasks around their billets. Some were half-dressed, milling about, conversing with one another. Others, were still rubbing the sleep from their eyes. “Boy, how is the disposition of the troops?” the officer barked to his junior.

The adjutant fumbled in his satchel for the correct dataslate, taking an obscene amount of time as if somehow he had to hunt through an entire library to select the proper one.

“Here it is, s-sir.”

The officer took the slate, considering his new direct subordinate.

Major Thrask was an oddity among his Cadian bretheren. Where others of his unit were often stoic and pensive, Thrask had the unfortunate tendency of being anxious all the time. Though, his promotion through the ranks was no mere accident. Some of the foot soldiers would joke that Thrask being promoted was a way of keeping him from bumbling about on the front lines but in reality, Thrask had displayed unparalleled battlefield acumen which had seen him made adjutant well before his years. He still had the boyish face of youth that seemed just a little too rounded, a little too clean shaven. He didn’t have the rough edges of many of his comrades and for that he was certainly special. If the average guardsman was a lasgun; simple, effective, and expendable, then Thrask would be a Basilisk artillery piece; woefully ineffective in the front lines, but with the right application, worth more than legion. The comparison left a sour taste in the Colonel’s mouth. Something about Thrask was incredibly unsettling. Battle fazed the man as much as finding crumbs on his uniform, but it was merely his highly strung personality that others found to be grating. Like his brethren though, he had never been found wanting on the field of battle. He did have his pride, he was a Cadian afterall.

After a brief pause to scan readiness statuses of various units in his command and the scant few tactical reports of their destination, the commanding officer passed the slate back to his junior. Another uprising on another world to be stamped out under the Cadian boot.

“Caffeine, Colonel Grelkin?”

Somehow the adjutant had managed to find a steaming cup of brew in that damned satchel of his, offering it obediently. No one was entirely sure when or why the Major began carrying the damnable thing but he certainly had a habit of making use of it. More than one push had been sustained by spare energy cells or krak grenades that had just so happened to be on hand.

The Colonel took the cup and blew the steam away from the top of the drink, watching his men absentmindedly. “Do you have children, Thrask?” the Colonel said, off the cuff. He wasn’t overly fond of the Major but a certain mutual understanding could help when things got tense on the battlefield.

Thrask fumbled, as if he had been slapped. “I..sir?” The Major was nonplussed.

The Colonel held back a sigh but couldn’t restrain the roll of his eyes. Thankfully, no one had the vantage or was paying enough attention to witness the gesture. “Children, man, do you have any?” Grelkin replied gruffly, his patience with his junior thinning already.

“N-no sir. At least, not yet. Though, my wife is currently with child...” the adjutant trailed off as if he didn’t really understand the point his superior was driving at and was somehow uncomfortable with his direct superior taking any interest in him at all, feigned or not. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and back again, hands wringing in a sign of something that would resemble panic in any other man.

“Making good use of your leave time eh?” the Colonel chortled, rather amused at the idea of anyone laying with the Major, and sipped from the cup again, gazing out at his troops, his eyes suddenly narrowing pensively. “It’s a bloody galaxy we live in, Thrask. You sure you want to bring a child into that?” the Colonel voiced his private thought reflexively. Others may mistake his cynicism for a lack of faith in the Emperor, but it was simply his lifetime in the service of the guard that had made him feel a certain futility for their struggles. Xenos would be purged only to have their world colonized by humans who would turn to chaos who would then be purged who would have their world recolonized…the whole cycle was maddening. More than once he had set foot on the battlefield in defense of a city, only to lay waste to the same city in a few short years.

“C-colonel?” Thrask questioned, asking for clarification, his head cocking to the side in an expression of absolute befuddlement.

Grelkin sighed heavily and closed his eyes for a moment. For a brief moment on that vessel there was only the din of his men and the smell of caffeine in his hand. How he savored the simple quiet between deployments. He opened his eyes once more and turned toward his adjutant for the first time this morning, a weary smile like a crack in the wrinkles of his face. “Forget it, just the ramblings of an old man.” And old he was. How many decades had he been in the guard? Six? Ten? It had drained all of his youthful fiery spirit and sapped the color from his hair and face, but still he could not shirk his sense of duty. He would serve until his last breath escaped him. So many times he had survived suicide missions and final stands, and in retrospect he couldn’t help but feel some outside force was cheating him of the swift and honorable rest he had earned. Perhaps the God-Emperor just had a sense of humor.

Thrask stared at his commanding officer for a moment. His pale blue eyes held something like pity for the older man for a moment. Something in Thrask felt terror at the thought of living as long as the Colonel had; burying sons and soldiers as the years ticked immutably by. There was deep ache in Thrask’s chest for a moment at the thought of a similar fate affecting him, but he shook the thought away. The perpetual melancholy of the Colonel would not be his fate, he swore.

The adjutant cleared his throat and stood rigidly, shaking himself free of the gloom and drawing the Colonel’s attention. The Colonel reacted as he might to a child playing at soldier, a simple amused look and raised brow as he focused on the younger male. “Something to report?”

This time it was the junior who turned away, gazing out at the troops. Where the Colonel had only been absently watching the morning rituals of his men, the Major analyzed them. For a moment, his gaze was a lens of scrutiny and he found no son of Cadia wanting. “Simply that repairs are nearly completed and we shall be under way shortly. I’m told we’ll have Asartes and Mechanicus support for this operation. Supposedly a small rebellion has turned into a full scale cultist uprising. There’s even a whisper of a rumor that the Inquisition might have a representative join us on the planet but somehow I don’t find that very credible.”

If the Major’s satchel had a talent for producing unexpected objects of aid and value, his mind shared the same property. Whether this ever involved any kind of subterfuge was not the question, as that would be so simply contrary to the Major’s impeccable character.

“Alright, I want the men running drills by squad until we arrive. If they’re not running drills or maintaining their equipment I want them praying to the Emperor. I’ve a feeling we are being kept in the dark about what is going on, if there’s even a rumor that the Inquisition is involved. In my experience it is always best to treat their involvement like the gravest of omens. I’ll leave it to you to relay my orders to each of the commanders.” The Colonel turned and left with his cup of caffeine without another word, undoubtedly to tend to some tactical matter though Thrask had no guess as to what.

Just as the Colonel disappeared from sight, klaxons sounded, warning of the beginning of translation into the warp. Some of the Cadians looked up in annoyance at the sirens, others muttered prayers under their breath. Long times in the warp had a toll on any fighting unit but the Cadians, their entire planet hanging before the Eye of Terror, were as steeled against its influence as any human could be.

As Thrask mused on the different reactions of the individual soldiers, he couldn’t help but feel a secret sense of glee. This was his first chance at any real kind of command and he would see to it that everything ran successfully. Were he one of the particularly devout in his unit he might have said a prayer to the Emperor for wise judgment and more than a little luck in his first action as Major.

He should have. The *Majesty’s Fury* was never heard from again.

**Chapter 1**

To say that Nocturne was hot was to say that the heart of the greatest forge ever known was ‘hot’. A forge where only the purest and strongest of mankind could be forged into the Emperor’s weapons: the Adeptus Astartes. Those who lived on the death world found it difficult to simply survive day to day in the mildest of years. This was not one of those years. This, was the harsh prelude to the Time of Trials, a period once every fifteen years when Nocturne’s moon passed too close and threw the planet into a geologic cataclysm.

Upon the great expanse of the Arridian Plain, a single figure moved, shuffling through the sand. Little more than a bundle of rags, its footfalls were erased by the blasting wind, leaving no evidence of its passing. It moved sluggishly, as though it had long since died and moved on only through force of will. And still it move onward, inexorably towards the city. Minutes passed. Hours. Days. Still it moved onward. It would not relent, 0for being still even for a moment would mean death, either from the predators that stalked the plain or the coming fury of the world itself. Few things on the planet could survive the Time of Trials without the shelter of the great cities and it had moved far, too far from its home to turn back.

And so it walked. It walked and walked until it had reached the walls of the city and then it collapsed, impelled no longer by its will, whether through exhaustion or dehydration, it simply could not go on any longer. There, in the dunes around the great walls, sand licked at its prone form, already moving to erase it. What irony to have come so far and fallen so short. But as luck, or fate, or the hand of the Emperor would have it, one of the inhabitants of the Sanctuary City, an elderly but middle ranking member of the Administratum was performing an inspection on the exterior of the adamantine walls, verifying that everything was prepared for the Time of Trials and the cataclysm it would bring.

Agrimon had been tasked to ensuring the structural integrity of the walls, even though they had little to no purpose anymore. Since the coming of the Outlander and the erection of great void shields, the walls were mostly ornamental, but still he worked diligently, his work ethic ingrained by years in the Administratum. He had never been particularly fond of the heat, and he thought of transferring to somewhere a bit more temperate when he stumbled across something lying in the sand, a few short meters from the wall. He almost didn’t recognize what the bundle of rags was from the distance but as he approached it, terrifying realization dawned on him. It was the body of a human, a child. He was struck incredulous at the thought of a human laying outside the wall in the middle of the desert. Where had it even come from? He knelt beside the form and placed a hand on it, looking for any identifying markers. Some of the members of other cities would carry symbols of their home, or clan. Whoever the person lying outside the walls was, they weren’t of Themis, that much he was sure. No, this was far more likely a nomad of some sort, possibly an Ignean. The thought made bile rise in his throat, revulsion at the thought. Igneans were the lowest of Nocturne and as far as he was concerned, they contributed nothing to the Nocturnean way of life or the Imperium as a whole. He would have pondered the existence of the body further but he noticed something that had evaded him before. The body was moving. It was faint but definite; it heaved up and down with slow and steady breaths. He reached out with both arms and scooped up the bundle of rags, repressing the urge to let the poor useless soul die, the Nocturnean way won out in him. Agrimon carried the child, returning with haste to the city.

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Tarka found himself surprised at being awake, let alone alive. His eyes snapped open and he looked around, lying on his back. He was staring up at what little he could see of the Nocturnean sky, his view choked off by buildings around him. He found it odd that somehow he had moved inside the city in his unconscious state. It gnawed at him, telling him that someone had moved him. That could mean they were still nearby. Tarka lets his eyes slide shut for a moment, expanding his awareness around him. He could hear the way the wind moved through the buildings around him, he could smell the sun-kissed pavement and his own stinking sweat. He could taste the arid breeze. But, no sign of anyone else around him. He opened his eyes again and looked around to confirm his sensation. No, he thought, whoever had relocated him was gone. Next to him was a flask of water which he eagerly snatched up and drained. He stuffed the flask into the cloth wrapped around him and crouched low, like a predator looking for prey. His thirst had been sated, his savior had seen to that. His stomach growled in hunger, protesting at having been empty for more than a week. Tarka pulled his bandages tighter. His whole body was wrapped in them, covering every inch of skin save his eyes and mouth. Over this he wore only some light breeches and a cloak. He must have been strange to behold to the city dwellers and it struck a note of discord within him that he would be saved by a stranger.

The Nocturneans had always hated him and pitied him, a concept that was difficult to understand for the boy. They had always been willing enough to trade, though he had always sensed tension in them. Almost as if someone had been forcing them to, despite their misgivings. Whatever the reason, his blood was not theirs. He had far more in common with the fauna of the world than the natives. He had done what he needed to survive. His skin had blistered from the harsh sun and so he had wrapped every inch to prevent its harsh glare. When he was hungry he killed and when he was thirsty he sought out water. The nomad tribes had sheltered him long enough to teach him how to survive, but as soon as he was able he left their care. They were not his people, they were his mother’s. His blood was not theirs. This world was not his. He did not belong.

It had been so long since he had come into contact with other sentience that he found himself thrown off guard by it. His predatory nature raised its hackles at this, prepared for anything, his simple feral instinct taking over. He was within city walls. He had shelter enough. There was only one thing that was painfully absent from him. Sustenance.

The wind carried the scent of food to him and he wheeled on it, as if it had been attempting stalk him. His eyes narrowed as he scanned for signs of life in the alleyway. The shadows became his cloak as he moved, stalking the scent as if it were his prey. He crept along, keeping low and pressed along the walls, his cloak and bandages fluttered in the wind as he moved, edging closer and closer to the scent.

After what seemed to his empty stomach to be far too long, a street entered his vision. It was a large enough venue, large enough for any cart he had ever seen. Large enough for twenty men to walk abreast. Were he not near mad with hunger, he would have mused at the oddity, the city dwellers’ ways so different from his own. Figures passed, some male, some female, all much taller and bulkier than him. The Nocturneans bustled about, reminding Tarka of grains of sand impelled by the wind. In this sandstorm of bodies, he identified the source of the smell. At the far end of the street, several children were conversing and eating. They stood casually in a semi-circle, laughing openly.

Something inside Tarka despised them for their relative comfort, their squandering of precious resources to complete seemingly pointless tasks. He regarded their large, comfortable walls and opulent lifestyle. They did not know what it was to cling to life, to balance on a blade’s edge. He would take from them what he needed, he resolved, suppressing his fury with cold predatory instinct. Slowly at first, he left the shelter of the alley. The Nocturneans did not notice his presence or did not care as he made his way through them. They did not recognize the predator in their midst. They did not see the animal wearing their flesh as a threat.

Closer and closer he drew, and when he was five meters away he dashed, leaping at the last moment towards the dining adolescents. There were four of them, two were drinking as they talked, apparently finished with their meals. One had something half-eaten that Tarka did not recognize as food. The fourth boy held a large hunk of Sauroch meat which he gestured with as he talked. It was this that Tarka snatched as he leapt through their midst, his momentum carrying him from one side of the group to the other, landing back on both feet with quarry in his bandage wrapped hand. He turned sharply, knowing they would not surrender so easily. That was not the way of Nocturne, let alone Themis, city of warrior kings. It was one thing to discard something without care, another thing entirely to have it taken. Tarka had never known a person to give something up so easily, and so he prepared to fight.

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Sergeant Z’keln strode proudly among the citizens of Nocturne. Dried sweat crusted his body now that he was in the open air. His muscles ached from the swing of his hammer, but it was a good ache, the kind that came with the forging of a masterpiece. His blacksmiter’s apron did little to hide his ebon upper body, heavily scarred from past oaths and honored battles. He was large even compared to his Salamander brethren, his imposing form more than once the anvil upon which his enemies broke.

Beside him strode his apprentice, the young but eager Ru’ko. Ru’ko was a mirror of the ebon titan, skin blackened with soot from working the forge, eyes shining with youth and passion like bright embers.

Z’keln was positive that Ru’ko would pass his trials with little problem, and ascend to the status of Salamander. Of all the apprentices he had ever taken, Ru’ko possessed the most raw potential he had ever seen. The child devoured academics just as easily as he had taken to the forge, his mind like a fire, always hungry for more. On top of that, his devotion to Vulkan was greater than any at his age, even greater than some of his battle brothers, though he would never voice such an opinion. Something at the back of his mind told Z’keln that he was training a future Chapter Master, and that made his breast swell with pride. What’s more, the other apprentices knew it too and envied him. Ru’ko had taken to this without ego, in turn aiding the others in areas they had been struggling.

And it was this reason that Z’keln had seen it fit to reward the young apprentice with a bit of an outing. Today they would dine in the marketplace at one of the establishments there, a rare extravagance that Salamanders did not often partake in as they had little nourishment for such pomp. Their food was simple and nutritious, pragmatic like the Salamanders themselves. Z’keln honestly had no idea what type of food they served, as they mostly catered to off-worlders, but he was positive he could find something for young one to enjoy. The Sergeant was a believer of rewarding good performance in one way or another, especially such sublime skill as the young supplicant.

As they rounded the corner before the marketplace, Z’keln heard quite the commotion. Off to the side of the street there was a crowd drawing in a great circle. Z’keln thought he heard the sounds of combat.

“What is happening?” the apprentice questioned, straining to see through the throng of bodies.

“I am unsure, little one. Let us go find out.” Z’keln gently pushed his way through the crowd, some turning to see his great form and moving out of the way on their own. His apprentice was close on his heels, moving through the wake of his master’s passing. As he breached the ring of onlookers, Z’keln found himself caught off guard. In the center of the space formed by the crowd, there was five children. Two were doubled over in pain and another two were closing on the fifth, who held a piece of meat, mostly eaten. The fifth child was wrapped head to toe in what looked like crude bandages, wearing a cloak and breeches over them. His stance was that of a fighter, crouched at the ready, one fist bunched up as he brought the other to his mouth, tearing off a hunk of meat and devouring it. Never before had Z’keln seen such ferocity in a child, who though smaller and outnumbered by the other boys, held his own.

As they watched, one of the remaining children dashed out, attempting to catch hold of the cloth covered child with both arms, to hold him in place. Tarka dispatched the clumsy attempt with a knee to the boy’s face. The boy rolled onto the ground, clutching his nose as blood gushed out of it. He had never seen such pathetic attempts before. These city dwellers, though large, had no concept of fighting to survive, and had reeled at the most superficial of wounds.

Tarka stepped over his fallen opponent, giving the boy a kick to the side for good measure, squaring up with his last standing enemy. Finishing off the last bit of meat, Tarka brought both of his fists up, offering a more fair form of combat. He closed on the boy who did the same, raising his fists in mirror.

The other boy lashed out, a huge right cross, his superior reach well out of Tarka’s range, but the blow was clumsy and Tarka merely turned it aside. The larger boy threw a series of quick jabs that Tarka weaved between, closing to striking range. As the boy struck down at his face, Tarka darted under his guard and rammed his fist into the boy’s solar plexus, knocking the wind from his lungs. Wildly the other boy swung, trying to back pedal away from him. Again Tarka ducked under this, rising with a massive uppercut to the chin. That was enough to send the larger boy sprawling onto his back, in pain, but not defeated. As he attempted to rise however, Tarka kicked him savagely in the face, leaving the boy unconscious.

As he looked around for more challengers, Tarka noticed that a crowd had formed, as if his focus had been a singularly on the fight at hand. He stooped low to snatch up the drink and food, smelling it and wrinkling his nose at the smell. Whatever it was, Tarka somehow doubted that it was nutritious.

“Hold!” a booming voice called, though Tarka paid it no mind. He didn’t imagine it was calling for him, instead rising up to make his way through the crowd, appetite temporarily satisfied. The citizens looked at him in horror, backing away as he approached.

“I SAID HOLD, CHILD.” The voice was deep and commanding, enough to irritate Tarka. He spun on his heel, fists at the ready to lash out at the arrogant person when he stopped dead in his tracks. The one who had called out to him was a giant. Black skin and red eyes, Tarka would have mistaken the creature for something evil but at the back of his mind something pressed. A word. It rose to the surface slowly, something buried since his childhood, something he had been taught while he was still welcome in the company of the nomads. He hissed the word low and under his breath. Salamander. He knew they were supposedly something like the gods of Nocturne, great and powerful warriors. He also could not have cared less. They were not his gods.

The titan pushed his way into the ring, pausing just long enough to check that the fallen boys were still alive and well enough. Beside him, another boy stood, arms crossed over his chest in disapproval. Having got the attention of the victor, Z’keln spoke. “For what reason did you children come to blows?” he asked, a heavy note of scorn in his voice.

Tarka glowered back at the Salamander. He met the red eyed gaze of the behemoth with his own, fists instinctively forming at the perceived threat. Tarka was sure he could not best the man, but he surmised that he only had to elude the large creature who was surely less agile than he.

“I asked you a question, child.” The monster spoke again, anger rising in his voice. He took a large step forward, closing nearly half the distance between them. Tarka did not back away. He kept glaring at the man, his gaze more harsh than that of the Nocturnean sun. The beast narrowed its eyes and crouched slightly. “Can you speak?” the thought occurred to Z’keln that the child might be feral, and judging by his behavior that was a good guess.

Long, tense seconds passed. Z’keln frowned and took a step toward the boy, dwarfing him with his form, encompassing the boy in his shadow. This, Tarka reacted to. He reached into the folds of his bandages and drew out a short knife, adopting a threatening pose. If the Space Marine was fazed he did not show it outwardly. Tarka snarled intimidatingly bared his teeth. “Come, Salamander, and I’ll give you pyre fit for your kind.”

Z’keln was staggered a bit at the words. They were almost as surprising that the child could speak. Obviously the feral appearance belied his intelligence. He had never seen so much hatred in a Nocturnean, nor such hostility to his fellow man. He knew that the child was a danger of another kind, something that could not be allowed to roam freely. He reached out, catching the boy by the shoulder with blinding speed, lifting the child off his feet and fully a meter off the ground.

The boy twisted around, kicking the Salamander in the face as he made a deep gash along the arm that held him. He clearly intended this as some sort of escape maneuver but Z’keln was undaunted, the blows barely registering. He caught the boy by both wrists and held him firmly, raising the child up to his eye level. Tarka released the knife and it clattered to the ground. He was shocked by the strength of the beast, struggling to kick, and wrench free of the vice like grip. As he was brought up to bear with the Salamander, he was suddenly unsure whether he would survive another day. A feral terror built up in him at the realization. He had come too far to die at the hands of some city-dweller, god or not. His panic was suddenly broken as the Salamander smiled at him, giving a loud, boisterous chuckle. It caught Tarka by surprise, stunning him completely. Had he misjudged the situation?

“Come, little ones.” The massive figure said as he hefted Tarka over his shoulder like a sack of grain. From this vantage Tarka could see the faces of the crowd and the monster’s companion. The citizens were as baffled and shocked as he, the only exception the boy the Salamander had with him. Ru’ko glared up at him, fierce disapproval in his eyes and on his face, but he made no move to question the beast. Tarka’s gaze locked to the boy’s for a moment and he felt a burning rage inside him. They scowled at each other for a long while before Tarka looked away and hung his head in resignation.

Where he was going was no longer up to him, the beast carried him with no effort as they made their way through the crowd. The Salamander plodded along in silence, carrying the boy, with his apprentice at his side.

Ru’ko walked alongside, brooding quietly. He didn’t understand his master’s intentions, nor did he want to. He recognized the ragged, primitive appearance of the boy without asking his origins. The boy had to be Ignean, come to Themis for shelter in the Time of Trials. That in itself was unusual. Most Igneans took shelter in a network of caves in Ignea during the subsequent cataclysm. For the most part they stayed out of sight, and in his mind that was for the best. Igneans were the lowest of the low and had no place in the city of the warrior-kings.

When they finally stopped, in front of a large structure Z’keln set the boy down, holding him in place with a fierce gaze before turning and speaking to his apprentice. “Ru’ko, fetch the apothecary and librarian Har’tan. With haste, little one.” The boy departed and the giant fixed his attention back on Tarka, locking eyes with the Ignean for a moment.

Tarka felt his skin prickle at the look, doubting that he could have escaped the behemoth even if he had wanted to.

“What is your name, child?” the sergeant asked, his expression softening, using a soft and welcoming tone.

“Tarka Thrask.” The boy replied flatly, meeting the bold rubies in the Salamander’s eyes with his own aquamarine.

“That’s not a Nocturnean name, child. Where is your family? Your kin?” Z’keln asked, though he already had a fair idea of the answer.

“Dead.” Tarka said, with no particular feeling in the words, as if he had never known that life could be any different. For him, it was a simple fact of life that he was alone. This in itself was odd. The Igneans, for all of their failings, had a closely woven community. For Tarka to act so impassively, he must have been surviving alone for quite some time Z’klen reasoned.

The sergeant let out a long sigh and rose to his full height again, moving to enter the compound. “Follow me.” he said simply, as though that in itself would explain everything, and Tarka felt compelled to follow. For such a massive beast the man was not as cruel as he could have been, and the general kindness caught Tarka off-guard. There was something in Z’keln’s manner that stirred a part of Tarka that had long since slumbered.

The space marine lead him into the building, which was spartan to the extreme. To Tarka that spoke volumes of the character of these space marine, the pragmatism earning the boy’s silent approval. Occasionally another massive figure would pass by them, and Tarka felt ill at ease being surrounded by so many who could easily kill him. But there was something quieting about their presence, something that made him feel a sort of silent reverie for the compound, as though it was sacred.

His instincts were not wrong. This was a part of Themis that not many citizens saw. The 4th Company bastion was situated at the heart of Themis, a squat, bulky structure that was heavily armed, but did its best to blend in with the surrounding buildings. Tactically speaking, the location was not the most ideal for defense, being centered in the city meant that the Salamanders would have to wade through civilians to defend the city and that rapid deployment was difficult for any squad not in a vehicle.

That however, was not the main concern of the bastion. Its form could be seen from nearly any point in Themis and it was of equal distance to any part of the wall so that in times of strife no citizen would have to travel further than any other to find its shelter. This, was the Salamander way. This, was the Nocturnean way.

Z’keln guided them into a room that had a large table in the center, various tools of a menacing appearance resting nearby. He gestured for the boy to get on the table that was far too large for him, and the boy did as he was commanded with a little difficulty, a certain healthy respect for the space marine. The table was designed for someone of Z’keln’s size and the boy looked comically dwarfed, and his eyes darted about the room as a caged animal’s, as if looking for any other exit. There was none. Z’keln was about to address the boy when a scowling ebon figure entered the room. Ru’ko was in the giant’s wake, his gaze set firmly on the ground. Whether in reverence for the Salamanders or shame, Tarka was unsure.

“This had better be good, Brother-Sergeant. I don’t take kindly to being wrested from my meditation.” The newcomer spoke, venom dripping from his words.

“Apothecary Askelpios, always a pleasure to see your smiling face.” Z’keln sneered at the man. Though they were battle-brothers, Z’keln had no love for the Apothecary.

Askelpios was physically very similar to the sergeant, coal black skin, glowing ember eyes, and an absolutely gargantuan physique, rippling with thick corded muscle. Their physical similarities only made to offset the differences more. Where Z’keln was gentle and calm, a steady hearth flame, Askelpios was a wildfire, his gruff demeanor lashing out at those around him. Where Z’keln had a neutral expression and open face, Askelpios had a scowl that looked like it might be permanent.

The Apothecary growled in reply, crossing his arms over his chest as he regarded Tarka for the first time. The boy grew tense under the space marine’s scrutiny. “Must you bring your floatsam before me, Brother-Sergeant?” the apothecary snarled, apparently deciding that Tarka was as contemptible as his company. Despite that the apothecary respected few, he had always performed his duty without fail, though often more vocally than any of his brothers would like.

“Are you refusing to perform your duty, Apothecary?” the sergeant snapped back, failing to suppress his own anger at Askelpios’ demeanor. He respected the man, but had a severe dislike for the Apothecary’s abrasive personality. He had once brought it to the attention of the Captain of the 4th Company who had told him simply to witness the Apothecary in action firsthand. Z’keln had the opportunity shortly afterward, his company tasked with eliminating a band of Dark Eldar who had taken to raiding an agri-world. It was true, though the sergeant had seen more friendly volcanoes, the quiet calm the apothecary worked under was astounding. The radical shift in the Apothecary’s attitude as he tended the wounded had thrown Z’keln at first, and more than once he had seen the Apothecary reassure fallen brothers that they had performed their duty admirably before bestowing the Emperor’s Peace. The duality of the man vexed Z’keln but he knew that the Apothecary tended to those under his care as well as any ever could.

Askelpios glared at the sergeant for the insinuation. “You know that I..” he began, before clenching his fist tight and letting out a tense sigh. “Why have you brought the child here?” he asked, his anger subsiding, if only a little.

Z’keln relaxed as well, turning to eye Tarka as he spoke. The boy had not flinched during the exchange but was clearly aware of the tension. “I want you to examine the boy.” He stated simply and flatly.

“To what end?” Askelpios asked, missing the implied meaning. Perhaps he knew what the sergeant was hinting at, but refused to acknowledge this. “I am not a medicae. If the boy is in need of medical attention take him to the chirurgeons.”

Z’keln inclined his head, raising his brow in amusement, though there was no smile on his face. “The boy is my apprentice as of today, and I intend to submit him for aspirancy before the end of the year. As such, it is your duty to tend his…” he looked over to Tarka as he said the word. “injuries.” The word didn’t quite fit but it was all the sergeant could think of to describe the poor condition of the boy.

Tarka met the gaze of the sergeant though he had no real understanding of the exchange taking place. He knew what an apprentice was and had no real intent of becoming one, but he bit his tongue back, unwilling to draw the attention of either of the ebon giants. He saw the other boy turn and leave, stalking off with balled up fists.

The apothecary’s eyes narrowed to slits as if scrutinizing the very words that hung in the air. He paid a brief glance to Tarka and then looked back to the sergeant. “You know very well that is not how we recruit, brother. And even if the child could complete the task in time, he is not of our blood. He is not of Themis. He is only barely Ignean. You would sully our company’s honor by allowing him to join our ranks?”

There was a long silence for a moment before the sergeant spoke again, his voice heavy, as though burdened by what he was about to say. “There is no law to say that our recruits must be of pure Nocturnean blood. Nor that they must take years to complete their apprenticeship. You should take care of what you say out of your own bigotry, brother, lest you offend our Terran born predecessors. Or have you forgotten them?” He didn’t mean the words to be nearly as chiding as they sounded, merely to illustrate his line of thought.

Askelpios was about to speak, his brow deeply furrowed and fists clenched in anger before he took a slow, deep breath, his eyes never straying from the sergeant’s. There was a sort of resignation in his posture suddenly as he let his arms hang to his side. He knew the sergeant to be right, and that he had been too quick to anger.

Without a further word the Apothecary stepped forward, taking Tarka’s hand in his own. Tarka made to withdraw from the touch but the stern look the Apothecary gave him made him realize he had little choice in the matter. His feral nature screamed at him to run, the ire of the Salamander hanging about him like a thick sulfurous smog. He crushed the urge with his willpower, locking eyes with the Apothecary for a moment. There was a moment of mutual understanding. Neither wanted to be here, and both wished for the other’s death.

Deft hands unwrapped the cloth around Tarka’s left arm. He let the bandages be removed without protest, the cool air against his bare skin an unusual sensation. At the sight of the flesh, the Apothecary tensed up, sucking in air sharply through his teeth at the shock of the sight. Tarka’s skin was heavily burned and peeling away, doubtless the bandages were meant to serve as an additional layer of skin as well as further protection. And they covered his entire body. Even the boy’s face was masked with them. This was the price the boy paid for his impure blood. Though he had survived so long due to his Nocturnean heritage, he had done so only just. There was a resilience in the bodies of Nocturneans that gave them a small measure of tolerance for the death world. Though, skin so badly burned by the searing light must have constantly caused the boy immense pain. And yet, he was composed, calm even. Perhaps Z’keln had been right to take the boy as an apprentice, he had to possess a fierce resolve to survive the death world so long, and immense discipline and willpower to do so in such a poor condition.

As Askelpios undressed the boy, removing the ubiquitous bandages, he could sense the tension in the sergeant at his side. Were he to hazard a guess, he would say that the sergeant knew of the boy’s condition but not the extent. Even still, the sight was grim. “You may leave, Brother-Sergeant, your presence is not required.” Askelpios said dismissively, and he could tell as the other Salamander was relieved as he turned to depart. “You may want to look to your other apprentice in the meanwhile. I will send for you once my examination is complete.”

Z’keln had hardly noticed that Ru’ko had left but he could guess the reason why. It was customary for a Salamander to only submit a single apprentice once per Nocturnean year, and Ru’ko hadn’t much time left before he would be too old to become an aspirant. The boy must have taken his words to mean that he had intended to submit Tarka instead.

Tarka sat in silence, a mutual understanding between himself and the healer developing by the second, their silence speaking more than their words ever could. The salve was cool against his skin as the remaining Salamander applied it without a word and it even dulled the pain he felt, something that Tarka had come to terms with as a permanent fixture in his life, just like his isolation.

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Ru’ko entered the solitarium of his master. Normally, the sacred space was reserved for the private meditation of a brother of the Salamanders and their brander priest. The room was round and bare, save for an unlit brazier in the center of the room. Even though the fire was darkened, it was unbearably hot. Within seconds Ru’ko’s body was glistening with sweat under his blacksmiter’s apron. His skin shed black tears as his sweat mixed with the soot over his body and ran freely down his form. He knew that to stay in this room for any longer than a period of a few minutes put him at serious risk, even if he had remembered to bring water, which he hadn’t. For all his supposed perfection and the idolization of his peers and master, Ru’ko had a temper which was difficult for him to manage. Z’keln had once said that this was just the blood of the drake within him and it meant he was simply a true son of Nocturne. Even still, in his rare bouts of fury, Ru’ko found the quiet heat of the solitarium profoundly comforting and he would meditate for as long as he was able, his body seeming to expel the anger through his pores. Closing his eyes and kneeling in front of the brazier, Ru’ko tried to focus his thoughts on the teachings of the primarch Vulkan and recalled in particular those that mentioned anger. Though he too had the blood of the drakes, Vulkan was written of in his lessons as compassionate and noble. The primarch through some great power of will had forged his wrath into a fierce resolve, just as he would forge a blade, and to much the same effect.

Ru’ko thought deeply about this often. This was the legacy he and the Salamanders had been given by Vulkan. Though he had not yet joined their ranks, he thought himself a much kin with Vulkan as any Nocturnean could claim to be. He thought of Vulkan as a father, and the Salamanders as his many brothers and cousins.

The blood of the drakes put them at odds with their Nocturnean upbringing and was the cause of inner turmoil for some, whether they knew it or not. He resolved himself to walk in the path of his primarch, taking in the teachings of his clan and the fury within himself to forge himself into something new.

It was during these thoughts that he became acutely aware of someone else in the room. He didn’t need to turn to see who was there, only one person would come looking for him, let alone intrude on an occupied solitarium. “Yes, master?” Ru’ko spoke softly his voice startlingly loud in the quiet confines of the small cell. The large figure moved around from behind the boy and knelt across from him, so that the brazier sat between them. He said nothing but his gaze was not that of one who was upset.

Z’keln knew that his apprentice used the solitarium and did not mind, though it was a lapse of tradition to allow a mere aspirant to use the cells. The sergeant thought it best to encourage Ru’ko’s introspective nature, so that the apprentice may find the strength and resolve he needed to pass the trials on his own.

A moment passed before the Salamander spoke. “You are upset.” He said evenly, a statement, not a question.

The boy nodded his assent to the massive figure “I am, my master.”

This elicited a sigh from the Salamander, as he reached across the brazier to lay a massive hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Ru’ko,” he began before another sigh escaped his lips. “You know that I regard you fondly, as any master does his apprentice. But these years together have made me understand how Vulkan felt at the head of his legion. Such pride must have swelled in his breast as it does mine. You, are the first apprentice I have ever taken in my many years, and it wounds me that you would think I would discard that on such a whim.”

Ru’ko was about to snap out a retort but caught himself, realizing that again he was far too quick to anger. His head hung in shame as he sat silently, shrinking from his master’s gaze. He wasn’t sure why he had been so quick to jump to that conclusion but inside, part of him had been outraged at even the suggestion of the possibility, at the fear of being abandoned. Ru’ko could only let out a quiet, obedient reply. “Yes, master.”

They sat in silence for a moment longer, both of them damp with moisture from the heat, but neither making any motion to suggest a wish to leave. Slowly Ru’ko drew his thoughts together into something coherent, the retrospection much easier with his anger subsided. “Master, if you intend to submit me to the trials, what then of the…” Ru’ko knew the creature’s name but could not draw the proper word for how he regarded it. “…Ignean?” he finished, disgust dripping from his words like venomous ichor from a scorpiad’s mandibles.

Again the Salamander sighed. That was another flaw the boy possessed, his inclination to think that any who did not walk his path were somehow lesser. He spoke again, his own anger rising as he chastised the boy. “Do you think he chose to be born of Ignea, Ru’ko? Do you think yourself better by virtue of blood? The Arridian Plains are harsh and unforgiving to be sure, but do you think Ignea so much better? Do you think him soft for surviving on his own for so many years? No, I will not forsake my apprentice but your arrogance goes too far, young one. If he has survived this far, he has the makings of a Salamander, whether you may see it or not. He too shall take the trials with you, and he too shall become Salamander.” Though it was too late, the boy had fainted from the heat. Whether or not he had been conscious for the whole reprimand, Z’keln was unsure. He stood and gathered the boy in his arms, carrying the child out to the cooler air outside.

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