



Warriors of the Balance



SAMSUN LOBE

The Old Enemy

The cockpit shook violently as the small craft materialised inside the cradle of the enormous jump gate. The small fighter was microscopic in comparison to the skeletal arms that hung down around it. They resembled steel ribs arching out from a colossal and complex mechanical spine.

The jump gates provided almost instant travel across the Shakari galaxy. Initially few in number, they were crude and restrictive in construction but their invention had allowed the Prime worlds to explore and colonise space. Now more than seven thousand years since their inception, a vast network linked the many star systems that formed the Federation of United Republics - FOUR.

A blue glow popped into life around the outlet cones of the small craft's fusion engines. The blackness seemed to fold in around them as the attached density drives fired and the tiny fighter started to accelerate forwards. The fusion engine provided the propulsion and the density drives had the job of altering the molecular volume of the craft, the faster it went the lighter it became.

There was no mistaking the purpose of the compact spacecraft. To kill. The whole design was aggressive in look and function. Gaping barrels of lethal Volt cannons were slung under the nose and two more arranged side by side, occupied a blister turret under the rear fuselage. The ship had arched wings that jutted out from behind the cockpit. In the shadows beneath them sat an arsenal of projectiles. The whole thing resembled a mechanical hornet. It was called the Apocris.

It was the personal transport of Ecclesiarch Srisk Montellar. He was a servant of the veiled Noxvata. He was a clandestine warrior of the balance. A myth. A bringer of death.

Srisk twisted the wrench in his hand to tighten the hex bolt on the forefinger of his left gauntlet. The power armour he wore was new, as his old suit had suffered catastrophic failure on his previous mission. He missed it. Despite its antiquated technology and lack of features, it just felt better. The new armour seemed to have constant glitches and the need for permanent adjustment. Maybe he just preferred old things, or maybe it was all in his mind. Maybe his mind was as mutilated as his body.

As he moved his arms he felt the tightness of fresh scar tissue across his chest and inside his ribcage. He had nearly died in his last encounter. Perhaps that would have been a blessing. He had served his masters, the Noxvata, for centuries. He had followed their every word, preaching their laws and delivering their justice. He knew they no longer trusted him, that he was no longer their champion of choice. It didn't matter. He had never served from loyalty or for a higher purpose. He served because he carried the guilt of a lost civilisation. He served to atone for his perceived sins.

He looked out from beneath his heavy black hood at the small scarlet reptilian creature that sat in the pilot's position. Its long tail poked out through the back of the chair. Srisk ran his gauntleted fingers along the frayed edge of his cloak. It was the one thing that he had salvaged from his old suit. It had no place alongside the modern power armour; it was a relic from a forgotten world. It gave him comfort as well as hiding his countenance from view. Only the pallid orange glow of his augmented eyes were visible in the dark recess of his face.

"How long?"

Srisk's voice was a mechanised monotone, devoid of emotion. The small creature looked over its shoulder. The green and blue hues of the cockpit lighting danced across its bulbous eyes.

"Not long Master. We are entering the Katayama System now. Approximately twenty-six hours, forty-two minutes and thirty-one seconds until we reach orbit over Kalleeka.

"That's approximate?"

"There is always a chance of an unforeseen event Master. Things change."

Srisk smiled an unseen smile. 'How true' he thought. He had saved the small reptilian creature some years back. The Noxvata had wanted it balanced. He had disobeyed them. The red creature was no threat to anyone. He had an uncanny knack with technology and could pilot the Apocris adeptly. Better even than the Ecclesiarch himself. The creature's name was Liktus.

"Master?" The question trailed off. Srisk knew this was the start of an inquiry.

"What is it Liktus?"

"Apart from our destination you've not told me anything about this mission. Should I be concerned?"

"No more than usual" replied Srisk.

"You do know that your need for theatrical mystery is not helpful?"

"Neither is this inquisition."

The servos in Srisk's armour whirred as he pulled himself up in his chair. He had worked alone since he had left his home world in the distant past. He had refused the Noxvata's continued calls for him to lead a team. He didn't want that burden. If things went awry, then he only had himself to blame. He didn't want the responsibility for others. His heart had no more room for guilt.

Liktus held his stare. His eyelids closed and slowly opened, his gaze piercing the Ecclesiarch's hooded cowl. The creature's lip curled in an awkward smile.

"Wake me when we arrive. I will make a jump from the thermosphere" declared Srisk.

"This is a category four planet Master. I can land safely on the surface. They do not possess the technology to detect our presence."

"As always my scarlet friend you are right, but things change."

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The short transition from the cockpit into the rear fuselage was awkward. Srisk was almost seven feet tall. Encased from head to toe in power armour added another foot. The narrow neck of the ship caused him to knock and bang his elbows and shoulders as he made his way through. Srisk thought it was about time he dulled the newness of his suit. He almost fell into the cargo hold and breathed out as he stood upright. The rear of the ship was designed to carry six fully armoured soldiers. It was empty apart from Srisk's equipment. He grabbed the large whisper rifle and mag-locked it to his back along with his molecular sword.

His suit would allow him to survive in the airless environment but to slow the long descent to the planet's surface he would need additional

help. The motors in his arms and legs whined as he hoisted a burner pack above his head and clamped it down onto his shoulders. His mind automatically acknowledged the additional equipment and a small icon blipped on his ocular head-up-display. Srisk was cybernetically linked with all of his gear. A simple thought was all it took to operate it. His Recit crackled into life.

"Can you hear me Master?"

"All clear" replied Srisk.

"What are your instructions Master?"

"How long is a day on this world?"

"Thirty hours Master."

"In that case, remain in orbit and then come and get me in four days. That should be plenty."

There was a moment's silence.

"What if that's not enough time Master?"

"If that is the case, then you are relieved from my employ and free to do as you so choose."

Liktus did not reply.

"Open the bay door" instructed Srisk.

Pistons hissed as the door popped its seal and the air was sucked from the hold in a nanosecond. Srisk's magnetic boots clanked against the chequer plate as the orange halo of Kalleeka filled the view. Without another word Srisk dived into the alien world.

Srisk's destination was pre-programmed into his nav-system and the shoulder mounted jet-pack flared to steer his descent.

Exploring new worlds had once held excitement and trepidation for the long serving Ecclesiarch, but even the magnificent view of the orange and red planet failed to stir his emotions. Perhaps that was another thing he had lost forever.

As he slid through the stratosphere, he felt an increase in heat due to the thicker air. He made a mental adjustment to his shield and cooling systems. The shoulder jets fired slowing his speed. One of the vents spluttered and a warning node pulsed in Srisk's eye indicating its failure. The Ecclesiarch employed a technique he had learned over his many years in the field and thumped the jet with his fist. It sparked, coughed and then re-ignited.

The rest of his descent went unhindered. He surveyed the landscape of the category four world. All known worlds in the Shakari galaxy had been classified. Category or level four meant that there was an intelligent life form in existence but as yet they had not evolved any significant technology.

Massive mountain ranges stretched around the orange globe. They were the only visible geography. The rest of the world seemed devoid of all features. Vast deserts sprawled across the majority of the surface. Only the occasional black stain pockmarked the smooth landscape. Srisk started to wonder if this was another mission of subterfuge by the Noxvata. Were they sending him here to his death? Probably, he surmised.

The jet-pack roared and swallowed the last of its fuel. The immense sudden burn slowed the metal clad warrior and his leg hydraulics extended to absorb the impact. Srisk thudded into the sandy desert. Dust swirled skyward and as the Ecclesiarch straightened he released the mag-lock on his pack and it smashed into the ground. The landscape was flat and featureless in every direction. The surface was baked and cracked and dust devils danced with each other. Srisk held his forearm in front of him and a holographic map fizzed into view. He was in the right location, at least the location he had been given. There was nothing here. There was nothing for miles. He had seen a mountain range far to the North as he had descended. That seemed like a logical destination.

Srisk's long cloak billowed behind him as the giant warrior strode across the desert. His eyes constantly scanning the horizon for any signs of life. The heat haze was hampering his optics. He had walked in a straight line for three hours and had seen nothing but dried mud and sand. Eventually far in the distance the mountain peaks came into view. They looked as if they floated in the sky as the reflected heat created a band of illusion. Srisk cycled the filters on his ocular implants. He had thought he had noticed movement. Thermal was unusable as was infra-red and ultra-violet. He toggled the view to a de-saturated spectrum. It was the clearest view yet. He had been correct. There was movement ahead. He

reached to his back and grabbed the pistol grip of the huge whisper rifle. The gun was almost as tall as the Ecclesiarch. It was a type of assault rail gun. It fired magnetic projectiles and super-sonic speed. It also came equipped with an under slung explosive launcher and a powerful set of scopes. Srisk knelt down with one knee and placed his elbow on the other holding the rifle steady. He linked to the scope with his mind and zoomed in on the image. Srisk cursed. At least the Noxvata had been correct about one thing.

Through the scope he could see what he deduced was a female native of Kalleeka running for her life. She was small, bipedal and her skin was a similar red to Liktus. She had piercing golden eyes and her dust covered face was streaked with tears. Her long black matted hair trailed behind her as she ran. It was the creature that pursued her that had got Srisk's attention. It was Moretti and it was a Marauder.

The early history of the Galaxy recorded several skirmishes between the Prime worlds as they reached out into space, but a lasting peace had followed coupled with the integrated expansion of those races. It wasn't until the arrival of the Moretti that everything changed. They flooded into the Extomis Arm of the galaxy destroying everything they encountered. Srisk's home planet of Ventor was one of the first Prime worlds to succumb. The Moretti were an unstoppable force. They seemed to have no other agenda other than expansion and destruction. World after world fell under their onslaught. The remaining Prime worlds were forced to collaborate and the fledgling alliance of the Federation was born. The combined might was enough to stem the rampaging tide of the Moretti. The ebb and flow of conflict consumed everything in the West of the galaxy, until one day the Moretti suddenly and inexplicably stopped their advance. Whether that was due to the actions of the Federation was unknown. Some concluded that the Moretti had spread themselves too thinly and were fighting in other galaxies. Whatever the reason the thousand years of bloodshed subsided. The Moretti remained in the worlds they had conquered but their lust for conquest had been extinguished. An exclusion zone was enforced by the Federation to act as a buffer which became known as Dark Space. Massive gun platforms and moon-sized space stations were built to protect the Federation allies. It was known as the Defensive Necklace. It remains unused.

Srisk had fought the Moretti on his home world before it had been overrun. He had enlisted in the Federation army of Theocentricus and battled the fearsome foe for another hundred years before his induction into the employ of the Noxvata. He knew firsthand what

lethal killers they were. The Noxvata had promised him revenge on the enemy that had slaughtered his people. They had delivered on that promise. Srisk had killed countless Moretti. When the war ended the Noxvata slid into the shadows and now pulled the strings in the galactic politics of the Primes. Srisk knew there was much more to the nebulous organisation than would ever be revealed.

That the Moretti had once again decided to show themselves was a serious concern. The fact they were here on an inconsequential world inside Federation space was confusing. It was the reason the Noxvata had sent him. To return to the Ninth Cloud with the leader of the Moretti force on Kalleeka. A Guardian.

In his years fighting the Moretti, Srisk had studied his foe in depth. They were upright bipedal creatures, most in excess of six feet tall. They had bony extrusions covering their bodies like they wore their skeletons on the outside. Their jet black eyes contrasted the pale white outer carapace and gave them the appearance of the living dead. They were powerful, determined and skilful fighters but their main strength came in overwhelming numbers. Every time Srisk had met them in battle he had been awed as wave upon wave of the rampaging foe poured into the fray. Thousands upon thousands. No matter how many they killed, more came.

Not much was known about their social make up. All that was known was that there were different kinds of Moretti:

The Paragons: Mythical leaders of the Moretti. None had ever been seen, they were known in rumours only. Guardians: The strongest and most intelligent of the Moretti. They formed the backbone of command. Thankfully there were very few of this type of warrior. The Thornbred: those that made up the majority of the ground troops and wore spiky armour. The Sentinels: taller than the other Moretti were believed to be able to organise the forces telepathically, linking the horde as one entity. The Resonators: formed the support duties of the main force. They operated the bio-mechanical weapons, artillery and controlled the terrifying beasts that often accompanied the larger armies. The Marauders: they were infantry. Unlike their compatriots, the Thornbred, they chose to face their enemies without armour. They daubed themselves with unreadable obscenities, and these bare-chested, bone clad warriors were often the first to the fight. It was one of these soldiers that was closing on the native female ahead.

Srisk's finger hovered over the trigger. His reticule lined up on the

forehead of the sprinting Marauder. This was not his fight. It would just complicate his mission. If the indigenous population had endured any time at all under the yoke of the Moretti then a swift death for this woman would be a blessing. He looked back through the sight. The Marauder had caught the female. She was scrambling on her hands and knees in the dust. The painted warrior removed a hooked sword from his back and raised it over his head. Srisk looked away.

A second later he pulled the trigger. A faint thwip resounded from the rifle as the solid round left the barrel. An instant later the back of the Moretti's head erupted in a fountain of blood, brain and bone.

The scarlet skinned female sat in a stunned trance. Staring motionless as the dead body of the Marauder slowly fell to its knees and then face first into the desert floor. She then turned quickly trying to ascertain from which direction the saving shot had originated. Srisk had made the shot at well over a mile and half. She could not see him, even if she had known in what direction she should have looked.

The Ecclesiarch returned the whisper rifle to his back and started to lope across the desert towards his kill. With his enhanced suit and his long stride he closed the distance in less than three minutes. The female had seen him coming and had fumbled for the dead creature's side arm. She struggled to hold the heavy weapon out in front of her.

"I mean you no harm" announced Srisk.

The female frowned from her lack of comprehension.

"Get away from me" she warned. Her language was a derivative of the Seeda System. Srisk's audible implants quickly translated her speech, not that he needed speech to communicate. Srisk was a powerful telepath. He reached out to the native.

< I mean you no harm > he repeated.

"How are you doing that?" said the frightened woman.

< You are hearing my thoughts. It is nothing to fear. It will be a few more moments before my implants adjust to your language >

The woman scrambled backwards still levelling the pistol at the Ecclesiarch.

"That's better" declared Srisk. The female's golden eyes widened.

"I can understand you" she stammered.

"As I explained. It takes a few moments for my vocal chords to attune." Srisk noticed the bite and claw marks covering her legs and arms. The Moretti had been using her for sport. "You can lower that weapon. It won't do you any good." He leant forward and reached out to take the gun. The female pulled the trigger. The pistol clicked as if it were empty. Srisk gently pried her fingers away and took the gun. He swivelled and threw it out into the desert. "Their weapons are organically linked. Only a Moretti can fire a Moretti weapon."

"You are not one of them then?" asked the woman.

"No my dear. I dare say I am something much worse. However I am not here to harm you. I am here to find the creature that leads the others of this kind." Srisk indicated towards the dead body. "My name is Srisk."

The female scrambled to her feet and dusted down her ragged clothes.

"I am Lelani. The one you seek has taken the Sacred Spires." She pointed to the mountains in the distance.

"Thank you" said Srisk. "Tell me Lelani how did you escape?"

The red skinned female looked sadly towards the ground.

"They arrived less than twenty moons ago. They killed without mercy. Those that did not escape to the tundra were held captive in the Spires. They killed my family. They killed everyone" Tears once again ran down her dirt encrusted cheeks.

"They are without conscience" said Srisk.

"They used the rest of us as sport. They made us run into the desert. They used us as target practice. The plain that lies before the Spires is a field of carnage. I ran as the moon rose and ran through the night. I thought I had escaped." Once more tears welled in her eyes. "Why? Why have they done this?"

"That is what I am here to discover" assured Srisk. "And my dear

Lelani, you have escaped." A brief smile illuminated her dusty features. The female reached out and took hold of Srisk's metal gauntlet.

"How will you kill them all? You are just one."

Srisk wasn't prepared to tell her he was only here for a certain individual. It was not his remit to engage the entire Moretti force on this planet. When he left this place, she would die, as would eventually the rest of her kind. Even if the Federation knew of the Moretti's presence here, they would be cautious in their approach. Another war was something they would avoid at all costs. Even if that meant sacrificing an entire world.

"It only takes one person to turn out the lights" replied Srisk.

"What does that mean?" asked Lelani.

"It is an old saying from my past. It means that it only takes one person to plunge a world into darkness."

"Then you promise you will kill them?" begged Lelani.

"I will do what I can" answered Srisk.

"Then come with me. I can show the way to the mountains."

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The strange couple walked for almost an hour in a Westerly direction. Srisk had suggested that they were moving away from the mountains, but was happy to be reassured by his native guide. Kalleeka's star was high in the sky and Srisk's suit was struggling to keep him cool. The sooner they could get to the shade of the mountains the better. His small companion seemed completely unfazed by the intense heat. She reached into her tunic and took out a small mirror. She placed the instrument on the ground and lay down to look into it. She scrambled to her feet and paced around the area staring at the ground like she had lost something. Lelani spotted what she was after and ran ahead. She moved a thin covering of sand with her feet to reveal a flat stone. She did the same thing again slowly revealing an obscure pattern set into the slab.

"I'll need your help" she said looking back to the confused Ecclesiarch.

He strode to her location and then noticed the strange stone set into the floor. Srisk cycled his sensors surveying the horizon. There was nothing to detect. He bent down and lifted the slab clear. Dust swirled into the humid air forming a mini vortex before suddenly collapsing into the hole that he had uncovered.

Srisk peered into the shaft. It had been hewn from the solid bedrock. Semi-circular recesses had been carved into the walls and Lelani was already climbing down using them. She beckoned him to follow.

The Ecclesiarch's power armour hissed as he leapt into the pit. More compressed air vented as his suit took the shock of landing. Dust and debris filled the immediate area as the huge warrior's armour started to illuminate in the gloom. He needed no help to see in the dark, but the system reacted automatically to the low light level. They moved into the tunnel away from the rectangular beam of light from above.

"Can you switch those off?" asked Lelani.

"Of course" replied Srisk instantly plunging them into a temporary darkness. Several moments later the Ecclesiarch became aware of a subtle illumination. He reached out a finger and touched the bioluminescence that coated the walls and ceiling. His suits sensors sampled the substance.

"Bacteria" said Srisk.

"I don't know what that is" said Lelani. "We call it Soulfire"

"Of course" acknowledged Srisk.

Ahead of them the tunnels opened out. There was a large cavern with multiple offshoots, some showed evidence of tooling marks whilst others were scoured smooth. He walked forward and reached up to touch the circular roof.

"Some of these were made by water" he observed.

"Yes" said Lelani. "Our Songwords say that once our home was covered in water. That it flowed through the ground making these passageways."

"Do you still have water?" asked Srisk.

Lelani looked suspiciously at the metal clad warrior. Srisk could sense her reticence.

"I understand" explained Srisk. "On a desert world, water would be a most valuable commodity; you do not need to answer."

"They are sacred sites" confessed Lelani.

"Of course" agreed Srisk. "Do you have anything else of value?" Again Lelani was suspicious of the question.

"For example do you mine precious metals, stones or liquids. I am trying to discern possible reasons as to why the Moretti would risk a war by coming to this place.

"Maybe they don't care" suggested Lelani.

"More than likely" admitted Srisk.

The Ecclesiarch turned to his side and suddenly thousands of minute drones buzzed upwards in a swarm. Lelani jumped backwards. The cloud of drones quickly flew ahead, dissolving into smaller groups as they reached each tunnel intersection.

"What were they?" asked a stunned Lelani.

"I am assuming this labyrinth of tunnels will lead to the mountain range. They were tiny sensors. They will map this cave system and send the data to my navigation system."

"I will show you the way" insisted Lelani.

"I know you will, but I never do anything without a contingency plan."

Judging by the blank expression on her face, it was clear to see she had no idea what he was talking about. The two companions made their way deeper into the cavern. Srisk stopped at regular intervals to allow the returning drones access to his suit.

Srisk ducked through a low opening and stepped into a large cavern. The ground fell away sharply and the trickle of water could be heard from below. The incandescent light illuminated a crude stone bridge that crossed the chasm. Lelani was already half way across. She stopped and

turned to the alien warrior.

"Are you from the same place as the Bone Devils?"

"Where do you believe they are from?"

"From across the sea" said Lelani.

Srisk smiled at the reference and at the innocence of a civilisation that had yet to think beyond the limits of the planet that gave them life.

"By sea, I assume you mean the dustbowl we were walking across?"

"Yes obviously" said Lelani.

"I am not from across the sea, nor am I from the same place as the Bone Devils."

"Then where are you from?"

"That is not an easy question to answer."

The Ecclesiarch knelt onto the stone bridge. He drew two circles with his finger.

"This is your star. This..." he pointed to the second circle. "Is your planet. When you look to the night sky, what do you see?" he asked.

"Lights. Thousands of lights."

"They are stars. Like the one that heats your world. Most of them have a planet like yours. I am from one of them. Far away from here. The Bone Devils are also from across the stars."

Lelani looked up into his dark hood. A wide grin spread across her face.

"Sure" she said still smiling. "Why do you hide your face?" she said suddenly.

Srisk stood.

"Some things need to remain hidden."

Suddenly the Ecclesiarch spun as his motion sensors flashed on his ocular head-up display. He dropped to his knee as the Thornbred warrior rushed from the darkness. The lone Moretti's serrated blade passed over his shoulder pad tearing a strip from his cloak. An instant later a solid round thumped into his chest armour knocking Srisk onto his back. Several more whistled over his prone form before the Ecclesiarch reached out and grabbed the Thornbred soldier who was recovering from over-stretching. Srisk reached to his back and the hilt of his mag-locked molecular sword thumped into his gauntlet. It hummed as it came to life.

It had two modes of operation: One which produced a crackling electrical field. The second, its main function, caused the molecules of the metal to vibrate at impossibly high frequencies. The moving edge would then cut through anything as it separated the molecules of anything it came into contact with. It was an old, crude weapon, but very effective.

Srisk rammed the wide, almost cleaver-like blade up into the Moretti's ribcage. The edge shimmered as if it skipped between realities. It slid with ease through the soldier's Graphene armour cleaving his life-core in two. Srisk pulled the dead body towards him as a salvo of rounds thundered from the darkness. The Thornbred's armour spalled and splintered as multiple slugs thumped into it. Srisk's arm servos wheezed as he flung it forward throwing his sword at his hidden attackers. He knew the Moretti would avoid its path, but he needed time. Just a nanosecond. His optics cycled to infrared and the heat signatures of four soldiers popped into view.

The Ecclesiarch slid his whisper rifle into his hand and pulled the trigger. At such close range he didn't need to aim. Several dozen magnetic rounds punched holes through the surprised Moretti. They were used to their armour repelling the majority of ammunition.

Srisk stumbled forward as two more slugs hammered into his back plate. Cursing, he pivoted and threw the dead warrior he had been using as a shield out towards the two approaching Moretti. Swinging his rifle down onto his other hand, he pumped the lower mechanism and a high explosive round shot out. It exploded as it hit the lifeless body of the Thornbred warrior disintegrating his carcass and sending fragments of his armour into the two other soldiers. The force of the blast caused the thin stone bridge to crumble and the rearguard Moretti disappeared in a plume of dust, shattered bone and blood.

Srisk span. Rolling to his right he avoided a poorly aimed shot from one of the remaining injured soldiers. The aging Ecclesiarch closed the distance in a second and kicked out at the warrior sending him flying back into the cavern wall. Srisk cycled his optics once again. Two of the Moretti Thornbred were already dead. One was trying to crawl away and the last was trying to stand after his impact with the rock wall. The Ecclesiarch stalked towards him and levelled the barrel of his gun against the warrior's spiked helm. A single round smashed through the soldier's brain and buried itself deep in the bedrock behind.

Srisk reached down and retrieved his still humming sword. He strode towards the last warrior. The Moretti was struggling to move his weight with one arm. The Ecclesiarch's rounds had shattered his left arm and pelvis. Srisk flipped him over with his foot. With a finessed precision he swiped the molecular blade across the side of the soldier's helm. The painted visor fell away revealing the jet black eyes, and the white, bone clad face of the Thornbred.

"Anach vey molessen" The words spat from the dying soldier's mouth like acid.

Srisk replayed the message on his Recit. It was a form of Moretti speech he had not encountered before. He knew they spoke in various dialects and over time had added many to his language database. The audio diagnostics quickly decoded the unique speech patterns. It translated as: "War is coming."

The Ecclesiarch looked into the dark eyes of the Moretti. He would tell him nothing more. They were hardened soldiers; no amount of torture would loosen its vile tongue. Not even Srisk's telepathic skill could unlock the warped mind of the Moretti.

The Ecclesiarch knelt down so that his hooded face was all that the stubborn Thornbred could see.

"I will be ready"

Srisk slid the wide blade into the soldier's core and twisted the handle. He watched as pain was replaced by euphoria and then finally life fled from the soldier's glassy eyes.

The whole encounter had taken less than twenty seconds. It was as if it had happened in slow motion. He scanned the chasm below to ensure the two Moretti that had fallen were dead. He detected two lifeless

bodies. The third warrior was scattered throughout the cave. The Ecclesiarch knew that Lelani was gone. He heard a faint scream. The sound came from the labyrinth of tunnels that lay ahead. She was still alive. At least for the moment.