



AN APOCALYPSE AUDIO DRAMA

THE SHAPE OF THE HUNT

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SCENE ONE (CHECHEG NARRATION)

ATMOS: THE FAINT SOUNDS OF DRUMS, A BEAT OF FOUR - THE TWIN HEARTBEATS OF A SPACE MARINE. THESE SHOULD BEAT STEADILY THROUGHOUT ALL THE CHECHEG-NARRATED SCENES, EXCEPT AS NOTED IN FX DIRECTIONS

My name is Checheg. Hear it and know the truth of my words and of my life. I speak for the Chapter. I speak for the storm. I speak for the khan whose life I ended.

My name is Checheg. The name has meaning. Look for it if you wish. My armour is the ivory-white of Chogoris. The scar that defines me crawls down my cheek. I am a son of the Great Khan.

I hear drums, loud and deep. The sound of victory. The khamar are dead. We have

killed them. We have won. We have lit a fire that will scour the khamar, the tau xenotype. It will never cease burning. The drums thrum through my ears and echo, long and low along the flatlands. These sounds widen the smile already stretching across the wind-beaten planes of my face.

We chased the faithless khamar to this place and gutted them. We taught them the lessons of the Khan and laughed as we ushered them into the darkness.

**FX - ANGRY VOICES, THE WORDS
INDISTINGUISHABLE**

Voices babble from the vox-link embedded in my collar. They sound angry. I ignore them with a smile on my face. They are the cage. They are the chains that bind. We do not like being caged. We make them, but we do not like them.

We will not be bound and so they babble. But I know you listen. I know you hear my words and catch the truths that I speak. Your stink corrals the Crows, but you will not control the White Scars.

My name is Checheg. Listen and I will tell you of the land called Voltoris and the death of khamar.

SCENE TWO

ATMOS: RUSHING WIND, MOTORCYCLE ENGINES

FX - A HORN BLOWS

Yeke rode before them all. He held a bronze carnyx close to his lips, sending one loud reverberating call lashing through the plains. The horn's head had been shaped to resemble the horse of the steppes, beaten rather than cast from a mould. The horn spoke for them, announcing their presence to the prey that fled.

SULJUQ: It is good to hear the horn again. To keep the old ways and the true ways. No shadows hide us. No silence. It has been too long since the horn has spoken for us. Too long since we have ridden.

Checheg came behind, white hair streaming in the wind.

CHECHEG: Aye, my khan. This war has seen us caged for too long.

SULJUQ: Too many Crows. I cannot understand them.

Suljuq, khan of the Brotherhood of the Running Star, mimed a beak with his hand. He barked an ugly crow sound.

FX - A MAN BARKING LIKE A CROW

SULJUQ: They talk and talk and then hide. Shadows suit them far too well. It is good to leave the cities of the Ironmen behind. Let them toil in their darkness and their heat.

Yeke's horn broke their conversation, leaving companionable silence in its wake. Speed rode in their hearts, wild and free. Away from the dead cities. Away from the caged battlefields. Far from the stink of the Ironmen, the Hidden and their dark cousins.

FX - BIKES GROWL LOUDER

Checheg's iron steed galloped through the fierce half-light of sunset. The sun dyed their armour in the hues of nature's fury. The stars above flashed with furious light. Many of the brotherhood stared at the sky, watching the night be torn by the fleet action that even now engulfed the heavens above Voltoris.

YEKE: They still fight. Even now. Even after their strength has been broken here. What discipline they keep in their hearts.

CHECHEG: You sound as if you admire the khamar, Brother Yeke.

SULJUQ: They are fierce foes. The khamar fight with purpose and drive, even an honour of sorts. One may admire the foe for such things.

The khamar were losing the skies even as they had lost the land. Khamar. The name meant 'nose' in khorchin, the language of Mundus Planus. To the xenophilologists of the Imperium, the aliens were called the tau. The once-proud tau navy was being hounded and shattered by the concentrated fury of Imperial guns.

Voltoris. Even now, even while the White Scars rode, the world was being hailed as a major victory. Histories were being written, propaganda scribed. Voltoris, knight world of the Ironmen, land of plains, cultivated jungle and city-mountains, defied the khamar.

Those histories were a lie. The propaganda was a lie. Voltoris was a stopgap measure. It reeked of desperation. The khamar had been caged, broken but not killed. They were a canny foe, after a fashion. They caught the Imperium unaware, spearing deep into its vulnerable flank while humanity's attention was elsewhere.

Worlds fell. Systems were lost. Names like Agrellan, Halfus and Ereghost echoed through the high halls of Imperial mourning. Voltoris very nearly joined them. But they were stopped here. Stopped, but not yet beaten.

So the brotherhood hunted. They rode over the sootgrass that coated Voltoris in polluted imitation of the steppes of their home world.

By all rights this world should have been full of glory for the Khan's sons. Instead, the glory had been stolen, turned black by the Crows. It was their Carrion Master's plan that had broken the khamar.

YEKE: No rest.

SULJUQ: No rest.

WHITE SCARS: No rest.

FX - AIRCRAFT FLY OVERHEAD. THE WHITE SCARS LAUGH

A brace of Imperial Navy Lightning aircraft soared overhead, bound from the hives behind them into the heavens above. The brotherhood waved at the flying machines with laughter streaming from their lips.

SULJUQ: Hunt well. Fly well. Kill well.

Yeke blasted his horn in an echoing farewell.

YEKE (laughing): A good omen. A good omen to see lightning during the hunt.

SULJUQ: Too obvious. STC machines do not count as omens. The lightning must be honest. It must be clear, stabbing through the sky.

Checheg bowed toward his khan.

CHECHEG: I was not aware you had joined the zadyin arga, brother, to lecture us on omens so. You are too literal, my khan. You do not see the humour in his words. Are we barbarians, to be so blind to truth? Do we seek omens at every turn? Do we cast bones, dance and caper beneath the full moon? Perhaps another Chapter would serve you better.

FX - WHITE SCARS LAUGH

The brotherhood riders nearby laughed.

FX - BIKES ROAR

Their iron steeds roared beneath them, throaty and loud. They were not subtle creatures. They never had been and they never would be. They were a weapon crafted for a single purpose and that purpose was not for quiet.

FX - HORN BLOWS

Checheg's white hair streamed in the wind. The carnyx sounded again, brought to lips chapped by the rushing air.

Suljuq, a cape of feathers flapping from his shoulders like wings, pulled alongside Checheg. The khan's mouth was a grim slit. The lightning scar down his cheek pulled tight. He pointed to a cloud of dust on the horizon.

YEKE (laughing): There is the prey. They have not run so far. This hunt will be short.

SULJUQ: No. I do not think this hunt will be so short, nor so easy. The khamar are clever. They are crafty. This Shadowsun is subtle. But perhaps we have made it tired, eh? Perhaps I am wrong.

There was no word from the Scouts, not yet. They ranged far ahead of us, hidden behind the khamar lines before battle had been joined at the hives. They watched for the retreat, and marked the hunt for their brothers. Their silence made Checheg nervous, insofar as he could feel such a mortal emotion.

The dust cloud, clear to their gifted vision, drifted away from them. It looked like panic. None were sure if the xenos could experience such an emotion, but it seemed they had the evidence before them. Checheg's smile grew. Suljuq said nothing. What needed to be said? They had sighted the khamar.

It was a small thing, barely worthy of being called a cloud, especially when compared to the great plumes of ash and

dust that drifted from whence they came. Voltoris yet burned.

A voice blared onto the vox, stern and ugly. It was Talow, one of the Crows.

TALOW: <<Return. Reconsolidate. The battle is over. Let the xenos run. We will catch them in orbit.>>

SULJUQ (lecturing his men): Such things serve a purpose. Those methods have a time and a place. But the khamar commander ran. The xenos cannot leave the system alive, not after what it has wrought, not after its crime of existence.

Suljuq ignored the requests for conference. The khan ignored the cawing of the Crows and the demands of the Hidden. He had taken what members of the brotherhood were available to him and rode.

SULJUQ (cont.): Time is a luxury. Time is a factor. The Crows forget this. They would see the khamar's audacity rewarded with life. Reconsolidation would let it leave. The tau commander must be brought to heel. Its life must be taken. It must be hunted.

They rode. They hunted. They did as they had done for thousands of years, a style of warfare perfected by the Great Khan.

Kor'sarro's words still echoed in Checheg's mind, the Huntmaster's voice

beleaguered and strained by the distance between them.

KOR'SARRO KHAN (distant, a memory):

Hunt. Kill the one the khamar call
Shadowsun.

The Huntmaster had spat the last word with disgust. Suljuq had answered with a smile. The brotherhood of the khans united them, but this situation was a novel one.

SULJUQ (distant, a memory): Of

course, Kor'sarro. The khamar will die. We'll finish your hunt.

Checheg could still remember the gruff voices of the Crows cawing in the background. He knew what it must cost Kor'sarro to be away from the hunt, to be drawn by duty away from his sacred charge. It was no consolation that another khan had heard his words and acted.

The dust cloud loomed in their vision. The Space Marines grew sombre. Their smiles died. Many donned their helmets, locking away the wind that clawed at their faces. A voice cut over the vox. Her accent was the mirror of their own, the familiar hints of Chogoris strident.

SARANGEREL: <<The Raven Guard are readying for redeployment, my khan.
>>

SULJUQ: We know, shipmaster. We have heard their words. I indulged their

arguments before. I saw merit in them. Now, they are wrong.

Sarangerel spoke from her place in the heavens, as shipmaster of the *Rubalkhali*, the strike cruiser that had brought them to this world. The ship, and its master, were young, newly forged and newly tasked. The khan blipped back an acknowledgement. Guns could be heard thundering in the background as the battle for the heavens of Voltoris raged.

SARANGEREL: << I will relay your respects and your refusal, my khan.>>

SULJUQ: Too slow. They waste time on words. They talk while the khamar run. We end this here. We end this now. I have had enough of cages. We ride.

CHECHEG: They will not take the prize. Shadowsun will not leave this world. We will ride it down. The Huntmaster has tasked us with this.

The khan agreed.

SULJUQ: It will not. Shipmaster, where are the Scouts?

His words, his question, were filled with deference. He was polite, to a fault, careful to use the titles and honours his servants had earned. This was the way of the brotherhood.

SARANGEREL: <<Following.>>

There was a strain to the shipmaster's voice, but she was calm.

SARANGEREL (cont): <<Auspex scans show them keeping pace with the khamar, my khan.>>

SULJUQ: Thank you, Shipmaster Sarangerel. For the Great Khan and the Emperor.

The shipmaster echoed the khan's words.

SARANGEREL: <<For the Great Khan and the Emperor. Ride well, my khan.>>

The vox no longer clicked and clacked back and forth with the laughter of the Space Marines. Now it was a thing filled with silence and the subtle hiss of static.

FX - HORN BLOWS TWICE

Yeke sounded the horn twice more before putting on his own helmet.

FX - ENGINES ROAR LOUDER. SLOWLY, A THRUMMING NOISE SOUNDS

Their speed increased, as if the Space Marines desired to get this over with as soon as possible. They did not want to linger. The iron steeds roared, promethium swallowed in great gulps, combusted and turned into speed. They passed into the dust cloud. Blue light pulsed ahead and an odd thrum filled the air. New voices passed into the shortwave vox. They had the sound of panic to them.

Yeke was the first to sight the cause of the dust.

YEKE: Mortals. Traitors.

He hissed the word over the vox, knowing that even as he said it, they would hear him. He knew, and did not care.

FX - CHAINWORD REVS UP

YEKE: The khamar no longer protect their own.

Yeke's chainsword gunned in his hand as he spoke. The khan was the first to begin laughing. It was an odd sound, deep and rumbling. There was no joy in his laughter.

FX - THE WHITE SCARS LAUGH

The other White Scars joined in. Some with true joy, others paying lip service.

Blue flares flashed into the sky from deeper in the dust clouds, summoning help that could not or would not come. The khamar's lackeys were desperate. The truth behind the xenos's Greater Good was revealed. There was no true place for humanity in its alien structure.

SULJUQ: It is time to teach, my brothers. Let us show these faithless dogs the price of their allegiance.

FX - BOLTERS FIRE AND CHAINWORDS REV

The White Scars' helmets speakers broadcast the laughter, throwing it

before them, roping and caging the prey. The eyes of the iron steeds opened and cut through the murk of dust and night. The White Scars, all twenty-two, split in neat groups of eleven and encircled the source of the dust. Suljuq was the first to open fire.

YEKE: Your name is well earned,
Destroyer!

The bolters mounted on the front of his iron steed chattered, cutting through the dust. The rest joined. Chainswords revved, held in impatient hands.

Checheg was smiling. The khan was not. They still broadcast their laughter.

FX - EXPLOSIONS. CRASHING FLYERS

Explosions split the night air as targeted fuel cells ignited, taken down by pinpoint shots from Yeke and Suljuq. The hovering transports, further proof of the blasphemy of khamar technology, groaned and collapsed into the grass and dust. They left long furrows in their wake. Yeke drove by, his tan skin pale and ghoulish in the darkness. One cheek was hollow and open, his smile a permanent gift from a tyranid bioform.

SULJUQ: I wish you would cover that scar, Yeke.

YEKE: This again, my khan?

FX - SPACE MARINES WHOOPING WITH JOY

The convoy stopped, transports burning

and broken. Dazed troops disembarked, wary, faces pinched and pale in the gloom. They were granted no respite, no chance to come to grips with their fate. The Space Marines raced around them, whooping in the night. They closed the eyes of their steeds and let the darkness keep them hidden. For a few moments, the only illumination came from the gently pulsing flares, burning transports and the muzzle flashes of bolters.

FX - PULSE WEAPONS FIRE

Torches lit up among the traitors, little pinpricks of light that did nothing to dispel the darkness but did everything to light them up as targets. They fired little stabs of blue light into the dust, after the whooping shadows that dogged them and laughed as they cut them down. But the traitors lashed back with alien rifles and alien words on their lips. This was tau technology, blasphemous and deadly.

**FX - CHAINWORDS SLICING THROUGH FLESH.
SCREAMS OF THE DYING. HORN SOUNDS
INTERMITTENTLY**

The brotherhood wove among them, culling and caging. Yeke drove through the heart of the milling traitors with chainsword buzzing and shrieking in the night. Blood flashed through the dust as bodies were brutally ripped apart.

YEKE: For the Khan!

Yeke was almost playful, dazing the mortals with the bronze carnyx. There was an edge to his laughter, an implication of feral madness.

CHECHEG: Focus.

FX - PULSE SHOT

A shot undercut the Stormseer's words, the pounding pulse of a tau rifle. It tore into Yeke's iron steed, jolting him forward. His laughter ceased, replaced by the snorting anger of the bull. Mortals milled around him, smiles lighting up on faces painted blue in imitation of their masters.

YEKE: Bastards! Faithless dogs! By storm and steed!

FX - BUZZING OF A POWER WEAPON'S ENERGY FIELD. LAUGHTER

Checheg, guan-do held high, cut through them in a flash. His golden eyes took in the filthy uniforms, the pinched faces and the marks of xenos allegiance. Pulse rifles of khamar manufacture were clutched in white hands. His guan-do, power field buzzing in the dust, carved head from shoulder and limb from body. He came out from the night like a laughing daemon, white hair streaming from his head.

FX - BOLTERS FIRING

Suljuq rode by his side, boltguns firing with thick thumps.

SULJUQ: For the Khan! For the Brotherhood! Die, traitors.

Then the skirmish was over, scarcely before it had even begun. Mortal survivors were lined up and ritually beheaded. They had thrown in their lot with the xenos and there was to be no mercy for such as them. The Space Marines then set about ending the fires caused during the battle. Their foe deserved no such honour as a funeral pyre.

Before they remounted, Yeke stooped and grasped one of the fallen rifles. He sighted down the alien weapon before aiming it towards Checheg. He mimed firing it and then laughed. Others joined him.

The khan beckoned Checheg to him. They stood over a pile of the beheaded enemy dead. The ground was slick with wet grass. Dust floated around them. After a moment, Suljuq spoke.

SULJUQ: They ran.

Checheg nodded in agreement.

SULJUQ (cont): They had no support.

Checheg wondered why Suljuq continued to state the obvious, looking for the deeper meaning behind the Brotherhood leader's words.

SULJUQ: This was no place to make a stand.

He was almost smiling now. Checheg's eyes widened.

CHECHEG: Sacrifices. The khamar threw them in our path to slow us down.

Suljuq nodded.

SULJUQ: We ride.

SCENE THREE (CHECHEG NARRATION)

ATMOS: AS SCENE ONE

CHECHEG: Brothers?

I call for my brothers with a voice that feels as if I have been swallowing mud. There is no answer. Some must live, I know. I hope. This lesson that we have taught cannot have been so costly. Suljuq. A khan. We have lost a khan. I have lost a friend. I have lost a brother. It is a momentous tragedy. Few hunts have been so costly. The thought lances into my mind. I keep the memory away. It is too soon. The loss is too near. Instead, I call for what brothers I hope to be alive.

None answer. My voice is hoarse. I despise the weakness that lurks there. I

switch channels, searching for our ship.

CHEHEG: Shipmaster?

My voice is almost begging.

CHEHEG (cont): Sarangerel? By storm
and steed...

There is a burst of static washing over
the wind, washing over the drums.

SARANGEREL: <<My... lord... Where?>>

The voice dies just as quickly, eaten
away by the static and drowned by white
noise.

FX - VOICES ON VOX, INDISTINGUISHABLE

Then hope comes. Voices blare out from
the vox in my collar. It dies just as
quickly. They are not the voices of
family. They do not speak the language
of Chogoris.

**FX - DRUMBEATS GET WEAKER AND ARRHYTHMIC
AS VOICES GET LOUDER**

The voices are becoming louder, but the
drums sound like they are moving farther
away. They are arrhythmic now, as if the
drummers grow weary.

FX - DRUMBEATS GET FASTER

They increase their pace. Faster and
farther. The frenetic tribal drumming
is a comfort. I wish they would come
closer. I wish the drums would come
back. They do not obey my wishes.

My mind swims, lost in a chemical haze.

The grief and the pain are held at bay.
By chemical dishonesty are they kept
corralled and caged.

**FX - BOLTERS AND LASGUNS FIRE IN THE
DISTANCE**

I can hear boltguns speaking and lasguns
firing. I grunt and try to stand. My legs
fail. I laugh, and try to ignore the
coughing that oozes wetly from my chest.
A voice calls through the fog of babble.

TALOW: <<Brothers.>>

The accent is strange. My grin slips. A
Crow is cawing.

TALOW (cont): <<Brothers.>>

FX - OTHER VOICES, INDISTINGUISHABLE

Other voices lace through and under.
Imperial accents. Imperial voices, no
longer the familiar comforts of my true
brothers. No longer the strange xenos
cadences of the khamar. These voices are
familiar in form. I have heard their
like a thousand times over my three
centuries of life.

INQUISITOR: <<Confirmation?>>

The voice is calm, the accent cultured.
I assume it is one of the Hidden. She
could be speaking about the weather.
She is not. We are hunted. They wish to
tighten the cage. The answer is short in
coming.

TALOW: <<Negative, inquisitor.>>

Another question slips through the vox,
unwelcome as a thief.

INQUISTOR: <<Survivors?>>

I do not like this voice, this person
that asks only one word questions. I
do not know what hold she has over the
Crows.

FX - FOOTSTEPS

I hear footfalls, twinned with the
sounds of servos grinding. I can hear
the answer now, not through the vox,
but through the heady growl of armour
speakers.

TALOW: Negative. Wait...

Boots trample on the blood-soaked grass.

TALOW (cont): I have found another
one. Brother?

FX - DRUMS GET LOUDER

The Crow tries to be soothing. He keeps
his voice pitched low, like a man
speaking to a skittish horse. I try to
stand again. The drums pound louder. I
ignore them. I ignore the pain.

My vision blurs. The Crow I face is
tall, his helmet a beaked skull, black
and white. Red shines out from the
lenses and vapour steams from the mouth
grilles.

TALOW (cont): Brother?

He reaches a steadying hand towards me.

TALOW (cont): Are you well?

He can see that I am not, that my body is ruined. The words do not matter. He speaks to keep my mind focused. I try to reach out to touch his thoughts, to catch a taste of the flavours of this man and his purpose. Something blocks me. Weakness. My mind is too weak, too traumatised. He makes the sign of the eagle against his chest, then nods.

TALOW: I am Talow, sergeant of the Sixth Company of the Raven Guard.
What is your name, son of the Khan?

I respond with a question.

CHECHEG: Why?

TALOW: Why?

He echoes my word back like a witless bird. He does not seem to understand my question.

TALOW (cont): Why what?

FX - CLICKS OF TALOW'S VOX

He cocks his head and circles, looking like nothing so much as the crow that he bears upon his shoulder. Vox clicks indicate a private conversation. To whom he speaks, I can only guess. His Crow brothers? The Hidden? I do not turn to follow him with my eyes as he moves in and out of shadow. The steam that comes through his mask grille bears the touch of the Hidden, dark and malignant.

His black-armoured hand latches onto my white shoulder. I grin again and feel liquid spill over my lips. There is a hiss as the Crow removes his helmet. His eyes are dark and flashing, his skin the pale of unhealth. It is the pallor of death, the broken white of shattered marble. I see triumph there, masked beneath concern. A great scar etches across his face, cutting through the beard that grows nightdark upon his features. I find comfort in that scar.

TALOW (cont): White Scar, what is your name?

He feigns concern.

CHECHEG: My name is Checheg.

I speak Low Gothic, but poorly. My words are slurred and sluggish, thick with a chemical taint. The ground rushes to meet my knees as I fall. I hear the Crow shout.

TALOW: Apothecary!

The drums take me into darkness.

SCENE FOUR

**ATMOS - JUNGLE SOUNDS - LEAVES RUSTLING,
ANIMALS AND BIRDS CALLING - AND BIKES
ROARING**

They left the plains of Voltoris behind and entered cultivated jungle, the game-hunting grounds of Voltorian nobility.

YEKE: Scout symbols! The path is marked.

Lightning scars, carved into the wood by monomolecular blades, drew them onwards. The sigil meant run. Race, this path is safe.

The lightning scar, the mirror of the pale mark that crawled down his own cheek, brought a smile to Checheg's lips. The Stormseer caught Suljuq's attention and pointed.

CHECHEG: There is your omen. Trust in that over the arbitrary marks of the sky.

Trees flashed by to either side. Branches whipped at their armour. Vines snatched at their iron steeds. The khan sneered at the display of wealth and privilege. Such things did not speak well to his Chogorian soul. Checheg could feel the waves of disdain flowing off the brotherhood.

YEKE: The wild should not be tamed. These Ironmen are fools.

CHECHEG: Their ways are not our ways.

They rode in a wedge, the formation resumed after the death of the traitors. The Scars, the tribal markings on their armour now joined by blood, were joyous. This chase spoke to their souls. This war, that had been devoid of honour, shaped and caged by their Crow brothers, was now more to their liking.

Sarangerel's voice, summoned from the heavens, whispered over the vox. The thunder of guns, evidence of the war above, had slackened. The stress bled from her voice, lanced like bad blood from a sour wound.

SARANGEREL: <<The Raven Guard gather for war, my khan. They have called all to counsel. They demand your presence.>>

Suljuq stiffened at the words.

SULJUQ: They demand? No one makes demands of a khan, save those of the blood of Chogoris.

The words were quiet and sharp as any sword.

SARANGEREL: <<Those are the words of their Chapter Master, my khan.>>

SULJUQ: Acknowledged, shipmaster.

SULJUQ (cont): We will not let the Crows dictate the shape of the hunt. We run. We ride. Tell them this.

His final message was curt, but the dismissal was not meant to cause offence.

SULJUQ (cont): Demand?

CHECHEG: Their ways are not our ways, my khan.

Suljuq waved the Stormseer's words away.

SULJUQ: I am through with hearing that excuse. Courtesy costs nothing. We are no Crow lackeys that they may demand we fly when they call.

Trees flashed by in the darkness to either side. Half-seen shapes caterwauled through the canopy shadows, affronted by this invasion. The Space Marines were watchful.

Checheg disliked this place. He disliked the cage of the trees that kept the open skies from shining above his head. The carnyx sent another blast soaring

between the trees, shaking branches. Dead leaves and insects fell. Night birds flapped away screeching. The trees were breaking up their formation, deforming the perfect wedge they had been riding in.

FX - RAIN FALLING

A rain squall flashed down, fat droplets spattering through the trees.

FX - THE AVIAN CALL OF KROOT

Avian calls sounded deeper into the jungle, in the direction they were heading. The brotherhood's cohesion was falling apart. Checheg rode near the khan. Suljuq spoke.

SULJUQ: I don't like those calls.

Yeke agreed.

YEKE: They sound familiar. We heard their like before, when we speared towards the khamar home worlds.

His teeth could be seen when he spoke, shining white through the hole in his face.

SULJUQ: Why will you not get that hole filled, Yeke?

It was a conversation the pair had danced through for over a decade.

YEKE: Why does it bother you so much? It is a scar, and it lends me a certain... *jaunty* air.

He used the Low Gothic word, pronouncing it awkwardly.

Suljuq sighed.

SULJUQ: Do you know what "jaunty" means, brother?

YEKE: The word means "more handsome than annoying brothers".

FX - CHECHEG LAUGHS

Checheg laughed at their banter.

FX - HORN SOUNDS. KROOT SOUNDS GET LOUDER THEN STOP

The horn sounded again from metres ahead. Tall trees, overgrown with moss, clustered closer, looming in the darkness. The avian noises increased and then fell silent. Something foetid suffused the air, drifting through the night. It smelled like wet sulphur and sweet citrus.

A flash lit the darkness before them. Trees fell, driven back by a shockwave. Yeke was yelling into the vox.

YEKE: Ambush!

FX - BIKE SQUEALS AWAY TO ONE SIDE

Checheg saw the White Scar nearly decapitated. The bronze carnyx fell from his hand as he veered his bike away, crushing an alien beneath the steed's heavy treads.

**FX - BOLTERS FIRE, KROOT SCREECH
(CONTINUING)**

The White Scars reacted instantly. Boltguns fired into the darkness while long, lean shapes dropped down from the canopy, avian screeches streaming from their misshapen maws. The citrus and sulphur reek was a cloying, choking mess in the air now.

Bolters destroyed the night as White Scars snapped to action. The brotherhood, their cohesion broken by the trees and the ambush from above, fought in twos and threes.

FX - LIGHTNING

Checheg extended his hand, palm outwards, and summoned the storm. A scrabbling xenos form was burnt, unwrought by the lightning. Yeke and Suljuq pulled by his side, their bolters chattering into the darkness, speaking the words of humanity's supremacy.

FX - KROOT LANDING ON CHECHEG'S ARMOUR

Xenos fell with choking cries. Checheg's eyes shimmered with stormlight. Something heavy landed on his backpack and a knife skittered towards his neck. The stuttered breathing of the xenos creature huffed in his ears. Up close, the cloying stink of rotten eggs and overripe citrus was almost overpowering, even to Checheg's transhuman biology.

Checheg twisted, reaching and grasping, but his guan-do was unwieldy in such close quarters. Yeke fired and blood

splattered, the alien's chest blown out by the grinning White Scar.

YEKE: You owe me.

FX - KROOT LANDING ON BIKE, CLAWS AGAINST METAL

Yeke opened his mouth to say more, but another alien leapt from the ground and landed with a *thunk* on the front of his iron steed. It scrabbled, claws screeching against the metal. Yeke fired, but the thing dodged.

YEKE (cont): By the Khan!

The rifle it clutched in its hands was bladed and the alien whirled the weapon in the air. An odd, keening note thrummed through the night. The kroot snapped at Yeke's face, avian beak cracking closed.

FX - WIND RISES. KROOT IS BROKEN AGAINST A TREE

He whipped the xenos with the butt of his boltgun, but it danced nimbly out of the way. Wind rose from nowhere as Checheg blew the xenos back and cracked it against a tree. The beast slumped and fell, spine broken by the impact. The Stormseer smiled.

CHECHEG: I owe you nothing.

YEKE: I would have been fine without your intervention.

Checheg laughed through the pain.

CHECHEG: Quite. You had breath enough to make oaths.

**FX - SCREAMING AND CHAINWORD REVVING
AND CUTTING FLESH**

Other brothers were dying in the distance. Their cries were accompanied by the thunderous buzz of chainswords, by the shrieks of avian monstrosities. Cracks sounded, undercutting the bolter fire. The xenos rifles were deadly and three White Scars had fallen, their bodies broken and bleeding.

FX - KROOT RIFLES FIRE

Xenos bullets rattled like hail off the trees, the iron steeds and their armour. Checheg grunted as a round ripped through his throat. Blood streamed down his front and his vision grew dark. He started to fall, his eyes closing. Then Yeke was there, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder.

YEKE: No rest. Stay awake. Who will save me if you die?

CHECHEG: No rest.

The Stormseer's voice was hoarse and slurred as chemicals flooded his system. He gave thanks to the honoured spirit that lived in his armour even as he wavered in the saddle. The wound was painful, but he had survived worse and he would survive this.

SULJUQ: We will not be caged!

The riders heard their khan's words. Checheg knew the ambush for what it was: a delaying tactic, more xenos sacrificed in the name of the khamar. The White Scars knew how the hunt would go now. Their quarry would not slip the noose.

FX - GRENADES EXPLODE, BOLTERS FIRE

Grenades flew into the darkness, buying breathing room with each explosion of shrapnel and wood. The eyes of the iron steeds opened again, dazzling and blinding in their brightness.

FX - BIKES ROAR LOUDER, KROOT CALLS INCREASE

The brotherhood broke and ran. Not for them the cold fury of the Iron Hands, nor the stoic belligerence of the Dark Angels. They would not be caged. They would not be held here. They would not be slowed. Nothing could catch a White Scar when he wished to run. The xenos gave chase, racing through the trees in loping strides. Their avian calls flitted back and forth, harsh on the ears.

FX - STRONG WINDS

Checheg sucked in a great breath. When he exhaled, he breathed out the winds of the Altak and the spirit of the Great Khan.

FX - BIKES ROAR AGAIN. KROOT SOUNDS DIMINISH IN THE DISTANCE

The iron steeds roared and lurched

forward, their speed multiplied by the fierce winds of Chogoris. The White Scars whooped and laughed, their hearts drawn back to their home on the steppes. The wild danced in their souls and a gleam lit in their eyes like lightning.

Winds drew them faster, out of the ambush and away from the xenos. Trees flashed by in a blur. The looping cries of avian perfidy grew wretched with xenos frustration.

There was no hunting call to chase ahead of them. The carnyx had been left behind, crushed beneath the wheels of a bike. A new horn would be forged. The lost White Scars, too, could be replaced, Scouts raised high to become brothers. New songs would be sung. New stories would be told of warrior skill and joy.

The White Scars rode with the breath of the Altak filling their hearts and limbs, whipping at their backs. The jungle flashed by, trees standing sentinel in the darkness.

The wind tasted sour to Checheg, rife with blood and the stink of the xenos. It was caged by the trees, bereft of the open sky, but it sang for them.

It sang for the sons of Chogoris.

SCENE FIVE (CHECHEG NARRATION)

ATMOS: AS SCENE ONE

FX - RAGGED BREATHING AND A TORTURED CRY

My heels drum against the grass and the blood-soaked dirt. A great wracking breath sucks raw through my throat and into lungs that I know are failing.

A cry escapes between my lips and it sounds like a bird, caged and trembling. The crow, her plaintive mocking echoing across the high mountains and bouncing from the steppes of the Empty Quarter. There are many stories we tell of the crow, around the low fires of the Altak.

One stands out and brings me no comfort. The crow - she is the thief of heaven. She steals the souls of the honoured dead. She unmakes them, turns them to

dark purposes at the behest of hidden masters. She is a thing of shadows and darkness.

It is an effort of will to control my movements. Weight presses on my chest and drums pound in my ears. They still sound like victory.

I open my eyes. The Crow is holding me down. I recoil and resist the urge to spit into his face. Instead I grin and the smile reaches into his soul.

TALOW: Why do you smile?

My answer is slurred and thick with a pain that I do not feel.

CHECHEG: I smile because I am the Great Khan's son. I smile because we have won here. I smile because I am free. No cage binds me.

His breathing is quick and shallow. For the first time, I notice blood on his own armour. The Crow answers the question that he sees forming in my eyes.

TALOW: A gift from one of the xenos mercenaries, made worse during the fighting for the hive.

He shakes his head.

TALOW (cont): Apothecary?

He says it into the vox. His attention is diverted, driven away from me. A new voice responds to him.

ASTANDER: <<Inbound, sergeant. Keep

the White Scar alive.>>

TALOW: Acknowledged.

I claw at his collar.

CHECHEG: The Hidden...

His black eyes ask a question, then understanding dawns. He nods.

TALOW: The Inquisition.

CHECHEG: They have shaped and moved you. They hold this campaign in their hands.

The slurring grows worse and there is a prickling sensation in my extremities. The chemicals that race in my blood are failing. My body is failing. I see the denial form in his eyes.

CHECHEG (cont): I heard her.

FX - LAUGHTER

He laughs, a deep chuckle that bubbles from his chest. He shrugs.

TALOW: We all serve the Imperium. They call, we fly. She argued for consolidation. The Codex, and our own tactical doctrine, agreed. Why didn't you wait?

My answer comes quickly.

CHECHEG: To teach a lesson.

The Crow, Talow, still stands over me. I see no triumph in his posture, and none in his eyes. I realise that I have

imagined it, blinded by prejudice. I laugh. There is no other gesture I can make. I was blind, caged by perception.

My eyes grow heavy. Darkness eats at my vision. Talow's voice, stained with concern, sounds far away.

TALOW (distant): What lesson?

CHECHEG: We will not be caged.

As I murmur the words, the heavens pull at my soul.

I close my eyes.

SCENE SIX

ATMOS - AS SCENE TWO

FX - BIKES SLOW TO A HALT (ENGINES IDLING)

The Scouts stood up from the plain. They shed their camouflage as a hawk molts. The brotherhood roared around them, wind and dust kicked up by the tyres of their iron steeds. Feet planted solidly on the ground, faces impassive, the Scouts stood stoic and faced the Space Marines.

None of the White Scars dismounted. Suljuq never took his eyes from the dust cloud on the horizon, even as he addressed Unegen, who led the Scouts. He inclined his head, locks of white hair rustling and bone fetishes rattling.

SULJUQ: The jungle was not clear.

Unegen, face craggy and worn, said nothing.

SULJUQ (cont): How many?

The khan nodded towards the cloud.

UNEGEN: Thirty of the khamar, mounted in their machines. Four of their walkers stride with them. They have lost the rest of their escort.

Battlesuits. They were expected, but unwelcome. At that, Suljuq rode closer. The khan removed his crested helmet. A smile was plastered across his face as he drew his sabre and pointed towards the rising sun.

SULJUQ: We ride.

SCENE SEVEN

ATMOS - AS SCENE TWO, BUT WITH ADDED SOUNDS OF FLYERS

The tau were drawn up in a square. They had stopped beneath the circle of flashing lights. Flares erupted from the centre of their mass, calling to their fleet above. Panic rolled from them in a stinking cloud. Staggered in their ranks were their transports.

They were broad-headed, piscine things. They hovered a metre off the ground and brought a hum to the air that was both disquieting and invasive.

The Ironmen had said that the khamar favoured plains worlds, that they had likely evolved on such a planet. They knew the plains, but they were not masters of them.

The White Scars were.

The sootgrass rolled beneath their galloping iron steeds. There was no variation to the landscape, not since the jungle had faded behind them like a bad dream. Flat and empty. Perfect. A man's thoughts rode long here, long and wild. Joy filled them, banishing away the sadness. They joined once more in formation, comforted by the close presence of brothers.

The xenos were walking wounded. Their battlesuits were sparking, grinding and clanking. Gone was the smooth and clean function. Smoke shot and spat from gouges in their armour.

SULJUQ: The khamar have paid for this world. They have paid for running.

CHECHEG: It seems as if they have had enough of flight. The prey has turned to face the hunter.

The tau looked like some proto-culture, one that had newly discovered blackpowder.

YEKE (laughing): They expect to withstand our charge!

Holding in the charge of cavalry. It was a sound tactical decision, one that had served the armies of ancient Chogoris well against horse and marauder. But the tau faced the brotherhood. They faced the White Scars, the fierce sons of Jaghatai Khan. Death charged them. The storm charged them.

The White Scars laughed in the face of their defiance.

SULJUQ: Death rides with us!

CHECHEG: For the Great Khan!

The whole brotherhood, all those remaining, shouted the last verse, casting the words and their laughter towards the waiting khamar.

WHITE SCARS: For the Emperor! For the Khan-of-Khans!

FX - BIKES ROAR AND BOLTERS FIRE

Iron steeds roared and their bolters began firing. Gaps opened in the xenos line as pinpoint shots from mass-reactive shells found their marks. They spread out, presenting a broad front, forcing the khamar to widen the square. All the while, they fired. All the while, they killed. All the while, they laughed.

They dashed in close, then they blew apart. They galloped out of formation, away from each other.

FX - TAU WEAPONS FIRE

The khamar did not wait for the Space Marines to enter melee range. Pulses of blue fire sheeted from the nearest face of the square. Columns of earth geysered into the sky as the largest walker threw shells at the racing White Scars. Noble Burilgi vanished, vaporised in fire.

Young Sal'din was next, his head stolen by a khamar rifle.

YEKE: Brother!

Checheg rode past, whispering invocations to the heavens, to the Great Khan, to the Emperor.

SULJUQ: Faster, Checheg! We must go faster! Call for the storm.

He prayed for more speed and the heavens answered. He pulled ahead of the brotherhood. The bolter mounted on his iron steed spat death. The bolt pistol clutched in his hands echoed its cries.

The brotherhood reformed, driving into a wedge.

They charged.

SCENE EIGHT (CHECHEG NARRATION)

ATMOS: AS SCENE ONE

Another Crow enters my field of vision. His face is pale and drawn. Sadness lurks in his black eyes. He tries a smile.

I greet him with a half-hearted raise of my hand, a welcome. On the Altak it would bid him acceptance at the fireside. Here, on the plains of Voltoris, I do not know what the gesture means. I make it anyway.

The awkward smile exposes the white teeth in his pale face.

CHECHEG: Do you hear the drums?

I break courtesy. I do not call the Apothecary what he is. I do not use his

title. He is too ignorant to notice the lapse. He cocks his head to the side, considering. His words, when they come, are not an answer to the question I asked.

ASTANDER: What happened?

His voice is a guttural grunt, thick with the cadences of the tribes of his world. I laugh, quick and full with a rasping cough.

CHECHEG: We won. Your brother asked me the same thing. I gave him the same answer. We won. We taught the khamar and the Hidden a lesson.

SCENE NINE

**ATMOS: BATTLE, BIKES ROARING, WEAPONS
FIRING, GIANT MECHANICAL WALKERS
CRASHING AROUND**

**FX - TAU WEAPONS FIRE, A BIKE WHINES
UNHEALTHILY**

Five hundred metres from the tau gunline, five more of the brotherhood died, culled by the xenos. Smoke gouted from Checheg's iron steed. A laboured whine came from its throat.

The Stormseer could see the khamar clearly. They were resolute, disciplined things, short and stocky, reassured by the presence of their machines.

Checheg called for the storm.

The storm answered.

FX - SILENCE, THEN A SUDDEN EXPLOSION OF THUNDER, GRADUALLY DYING DOWN DURING THE NARRATION

FX - RAIN STARTS AND CONTINUES THROUGHOUT THE SCENE

The light of the sun danced in Checheg's golden eyes. He holstered his boltgun and guided the iron steed with his knees. He drew his guan-do. Blood fell from the wound on his throat, reopened. Thunder rumbled. The dawnlight grew dim as clouds circled and boiled in the heavens above.

FX - LIGHTNING

Drums pounded. Lightning reached from the tip of his guan-do into one of the tau machines. The vehicle exploded, shards spinning into the aliens to either side, breaking and maiming. Xenos blood flew everywhere. A hole had been made.

FX - LAUGHTER

The brotherhood rode towards it, laughter streaming from their mouths. They dived towards the breach with the speed and skill of a striking predator.

The hunt was over. All that remained was the killing blow.

Checheg's guan-do carved through a tau rifle, and into the xenos holding it. The alien whimpered and died. The brotherhood was amongst them, carving

and laughing, killing and dying. Another brother died, broken by massed fire.

Then another, and another.

The Scouts were adding what they could to the fight, striking from a distance. Sniper fire killed khamar as surely as a bolt-round. Unegen danced into Checheg's field of vision, Scouts following with knives raised. The blades flashed as they caught khamar focused on the riding brotherhood.

The Scouts too, were dying. They lacked the protection offered by the armour of a true brother. It tore through their flesh and left burning holes behind. Each life, each stolen brother, left the brotherhood weakened. No hunt is without its scars.

The brotherhood faded, eaten away by khamar, torn from life and cast broken to the grass.

From afar, the khamar gunline was fierce, deadly. From afar, brothers had died, killed while they rode. But now they were close. Now they killed with bolter and blade.

Suljuq rode in their centre, cape flapping from his shoulders. It seemed as if the very sun shone from his brow. Light glinted off the sabre he clutched. Missiles fell from the sky, launched from the walker's shoulder.

Fire took his iron steed and the khan fell.

He rose, seconds later. His helmet was broken, torn from his head by the strength of the attack against him. Fire ate at the feathers woven into his hair, leaving an acrid smell behind. His face was a bloody mask, shards of iron studding it like nails from a board.

Suljuq Khan was smiling. He smiled through the blood pain that surely wracked his transhuman system. He began to laugh. His sabre crackled into life and light streamed from it.

CHECHEG: Suljuq!

Checheg tried to reach Suljuq. His iron steed died, overcome by the weight of tau gunshots.

CHECHEG (cont.): Khan's oath!

He jumped from the dying machine and ran. He was too far, too slow. Wounds stippled the pure white of Checheg's armour, blood and smoke dribbling from the holes. The Stormseer ignored them.

The largest of the alien battlesuits faced them down, light glinting from the lenses that served it for eyes. It was of the massive type first seen on the battlefields of Agrellan. Sparks glided between cracks and joints in its armour. Smoke poured from its weapon mounts. It settled onto its haunches.

FX - HYDRAULIC HISS

SULJUQ: For the Khan!

WHITE SCARS: For the Khan!

The ancient battlecry streamed from Suljuq's mouth, picked up by all his remaining brothers.

The walker struggled to position itself between the brotherhood and the remaining khamar. It was ready to sell its life so that its commander and comrades would survive. Something cracked inside the machine. There was a noise like thunder, like the breaking of the world, and the battlesuit ceased to exist.

FX - MASSIVE EXPLOSION

The world went white. The howling explosion overwhelmed everything. It stole thought. It stole Checheg's reaction.

Wind howled hot and wet, full of the smell of burned metal. Checheg blinked. He was blind. Sound leached out, drawn away by the explosion. Pain lanced into Checheg's side, hot and white as the light that kept him blind.

His hands groped for the wound and found a spar of xenos material, broken through the fibre-bundling that encircled his waist.

Nothing else remained of the battlesuit. For metres around, the ground was littered with the dead, tau and White Scars alike. The khan was a wreck. His legs and right arm were gone. The armour

that encased him from the front was burned away. He was a glistening lump of flesh, ruined and somehow still alive. Horrified, Checcheg could feel the khan's mind clinging on, refusing to leave his body until the hunt was finished.

CHECCHeg: Suljuq... My khan...

SULJUQ: Vur... ha...

The vengeance words of the tribes of the Empty Quarter. It was an appeal, an end to mercy. The khan uttered the words.

CHECCHeg: Vur ha!

The remaining White Scars echoed the words, let them dance deep into their hearts. Anger kindled, fierce and hot.

WHITE SCARS: Vur ha!

Transhuman instincts drove their reaction. They did what they were bred to do, what they had been born to do.

They charged.

FX - TAU SHOUTING. CHAINSWORDS AND BOLTERS

Tau shouted in their strange language. Frenzy gripped the White Scars. Their khan had fallen. Their brothers had fallen. The hunt was all that remained. Chainswords and bolters cried out with their fury. Battlecries, ancient words of the Chogorian steppes, rode from mouths that laughed and smiled as they murdered. They were proud and free.

FX - GRENADES DETONATE

Krak grenades disabled and destroyed the remaining tau vehicles. Checheg sprinted, the name of his khan on his lips.

CHECHEG: For Suljuq!

FX - ENERGY WEAPONS AND SNIPER FIRE

Three walkers faced him. Their weapon mounts spat at him, blue light fountaining forth. Scout fire supported him and one of the walkers shuddered as power lines were caught and cut.

FX - THUNDER AND LIGHTNING ADD TO THE WEAPONS FIRE

The second stepped forward. Checheg called for the storm. Frost froze the blood flowing from him. Lightning exploded from his hand and leapt the metres between him and the battlesuit. The walker jumped and juddered. It fell, smoking. The last fired. It blew a hole through Checheg's torso and the Stormseer nearly stumbled. As soon as it impacted, Checheg knew the wound was mortal. He would not walk away from this fight, but death must come later. Momentum and bloody will drove him on.

Running steps saw him up and over the smoking walker. The winds pushed him and he flung himself into the air, guan-do held before him. Stormlight blazed in his eyes, shards of frozen blood trailing behind him, the guan-do speared

before him. It crunched into the chest of the khamar walker, which shuddered and slumped forward. The lights that ran along its sleek curves died. It ceased its xenos chatter.

Checheg called upon the storm one last time. Lightning played about his gauntlet as he punched it into the wound he had made and wrenched the cockpit from its hinges. The pilot was still alive, blood flowing from its mouth. Checheg reached inside and pulled the weakly struggling alien from its cradle. He held it aloft and closed his hand, servo-muscles whining, crushing the tau's neck.

FX - CRACK OF BONE

The khamar commander, fabled Shadowsun, was dead, killed at the righteous hand of the brotherhood. The price was heavy, but they had won.

CHECHEG (whispered): The hunt is over.

The Stormseer fell to his knees and surrendered to darkness.

SCENE TEN (CHECHEG NARRATION)

**ATMOS: AS SCENE ONE, THE DRUMS OUT OF
CONTROL, ARRHYTHMIC AND CLASHING**

We both ignore the red flecks that stain my armour, that shine on the white of his. The drums still pound in my ears. They are arrhythmic now, dissonant and clashing. I find it hard to focus on his face, so I skim the heavens of his mind.

Duty features highest there, but there are other thoughts. There is concern, which I find curious, but also a sense of gloating. Something has been affirmed in his mind.

There are images too. A woman stands with gloved hands clasped together and dark eyes shining. One of the Hidden, I think. A battlefield. Dead tau litter

the ground, but here and there are white mounds, broken and torn. They rise from the field like hummocks.

My brothers. There are others that lie, already mouldering, in the jungle. The Crows have not found them yet. I reach forward, to impress this memory, to force the Crow to see. He ignores it and the visions move forward.

Yeke. Of all my brothers, he is the one I hoped to have survived. I did not see his death. I did not bear witness. Perhaps he lives. Perhaps he lies fallen, slumped and forgotten under a mound of dead aliens, still smiling that insufferable smile of his.

There is the khan, seen through the Crow's eyes, tinged with connotations of barbarism. His once noble countenance is stolen by fire and warped by death. Metal studs the remains of his face and his eyes are glassy. I want to weep, but I cannot summon the strength.

Instead I am wracked by great whooping breaths. Each exhalation leaves my chest on fire. The pain comes now, held at bay for so long by my broken armour. It is... horrifying. My only consolations are that we have triumphed here and that I will soon be dead. The chemicals leave my enhanced muscles, retreating before this great onslaught.

Muscles contort, drawn by firing synapses. My knee cracks. My fingers drum

against the dirt, tapping insistently, calling, writhing, writing. I cannot open my mouth. I cannot speak. The tendons stand out in my neck.

Talow comes back and holds me down, preventing me from harming myself further. The Apothecary is out of my field of vision. Something clicks into my neck and the agony loses its sharpness.

My thoughts are unravelling, pulsing in time with the pain. It is hard to grip the Crow's mind. My vision tunnels and I see the khan die again. I shove the images away.

Focus on the Apothecary. See as he sees, I tell myself, latching onto the thoughts. It distracts me from the pain.

Talow looks to his brother. Something flashes between them, some unspoken Crow conversation. The sergeant looks grave. His pale face is drawn, his eyes black and without an iris. It is strange to see someone so marked.

The sergeant makes eye contact with me. His smile is a ghoulish thing, pulling at the scar that drives through his beard. His presence is a distraction. I no longer see through the Apothecary's eyes. He is speaking, his mouth shaping words that I do not hear. It seems as if I can almost read them on the air, but they are in a language I do not understand. It is guttural and unrefined, the language of guerillas and ex-slaves.

I try to wave the Crows away. My hand flops weakly.

CHECHEG: Leave me be. Let me die. Let my soul go to my primarch's side.

They do not leave. I focus on the Apothecary and see one more thing.

SCENE ELEVEN

ATMOS: THE CALM AFTER BATTLE. DRUMS, AS SCENE ONE

Checheg awoke hours later, beneath the morning sun. Steam and smoke twinned into the sky, rising from corpse and machine. He faced the sky and was comforted that the stars no longer danced. The battle for the heavens was over. The battle for Voltoris was over, ended by the hunt. Checheg crawled, his body broken, bleeding and beyond repair. He could hear victory drums in the air. His smile was full and sincere. It splayed the wide planes of his face.

Each metre, each pull forward, left his mouth as a grunt and his vision swam. He stopped.

CHECHEG: Brother. My khan.

The words were heavily slurred, rotten with pain and twisted by the chemicals that kept his body functioning.

He received no response. He expected none.

The withered husk of Suljuq, khan of the White Scars, conqueror of a thousand battlefields, bled into the grass. His body twitched, ragged breaths escaping from between the clenched smile of his burnt face. In other Chapters, it might have been possible to save him, to grant the khan the undeath of interment in a Dreadnought.

The White Scars despised such a fate. It was the ultimate expression of the cage. They let their heroes die rather than linger in such unlife. Checcheg left the khan's mind alone. Out of respect, out of a desire to stay away from the agony that surely consumed his brother, Checcheg would not enter the heavens that Suljuq yearned for.

CHECHEG: We won, my khan. Shadowsun lies dead. The hunt is over.

The words were more for Checcheg's benefit than for Suljuq's. The khan was past hearing. His grip on life was tenuous. His soul strained for the heavens. Pain kept him shackled to this husk.

He needed a brother to send him to the Great Khan's side. Checcheg reached

towards Suljuq with apology lurking in his golden eyes.

FX - CRACK OF BONE

With the sickening crack of broken bone, Suljuq's spirit swam towards rest. The drums sounded quieter, closer and more triumphant.

Checheg fell backwards. He began to speak calmly into the vox, assured that someone listened.

CHECHEG: My name is Checheg...

SCENE TWELVE (CHECHEG NARRATION)

ATMOS: AS SCENE TEN

The final image swims forward and I smile as I recognise myself. Red runs over my blue lips. The scar that defines my face is livid and angry, pulled out by trauma. My body is a ruin. I see myself as the Crow sees me: a dead wreck, covered in fetishes and feathers. Stormlight flashes in my eyes. A smile stands across my lips, not the warm expression it has always been, but a rictus grin.

But I also hear as he hears. I hear the drums. His mind adds meaning. He knows the drums. They are the beats of my hearts, faint and distant but picked up by the keen hearing we share.

I steal his name as I leave his mind.

CHECHEG: Astander.

I croak the word. I dislike the weakness in my voice.

CHECHEG: We won.

He blinks and then kneels. He does not ask how I know his name. I honour him for this. He shakes his head.

ASTANDER: Who did you hunt?

CHECHEG: Shadowsun. We hunted the one the khamar called Shadowsun.

A rueful expression steals upon his face.

ASTANDER: Your hunt failed.

The drums, my hearts, stutter.

CHECHEG: No. We. I...

The words come fast, spilling over one another.

ASTANDER: You failed.

CHECHEG: I killed it.

TALOW: Shadowsun...

Talow's lips curl at the name.

TALOW: ...absconded off world shortly after the xenos were broken. You never hunted her.

There is no rancour to the words. The Raven Guard states the facts, relates them without judgement. His voice is

sad, but he offers no consolation. There is none to be had.

ASTANDER: I'm sorry.

TALOW: I'm sorry.

The Crows are sorry. I want to laugh.

FX - MECHANICAL CHATTERING

The device on Astander's gauntlet chatters then snicks forward. I meet his black stare with my gold eyes. My smile dies.

CHECHEG: Fire. Burn us. Brotherhood bodies must be burned.

He nods and then speaks into his collar, to the voices that babble at him, cage him. The device that is the signature of his calling snicks and clunks, preparing to fulfil its function. Our gene-seed will survive. That is the only consolation of this failed hunt.

FX - DRUMBEATS GROW STRONGER AND FASTER, THEN STOP

The drumbeats sound faster, growing strong again, just for a moment. One stops. Pain grips me, but also calm.

I do not know if I speak my final words aloud, but understanding dawns in his eyes just the same.

My name is Checgeg, I tell him.

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