

"Virtus Ex Infirmirate," read the rusted inscription over the immense door built into a hill before the facility Bode and Stovoj had spent the better part of two weeks hunting down. The facility gave every appearance of being utterly abandoned. Not only was the inscription nearly illegible from rust, but the hinges and plates of the immense doors too had degraded from time, weather, and whatever violence had created enough of a blown-out gap in them for Stovoj and Bode to pry them open, although with considerable effort.

Bode had never imagined destruction on the scale of the Bozjan front lines was possible: craters stories deep, full of mud, shorn metal, bones loosely knitted together by sun-bleached strips of flesh. It was all an immense waste. Even after the fall of Garlemald, the IVth Imperial Legion flung bodies and steel in waves against the Bozjan homeland and its citizens, and Bode found it all hateful.

For Stovoj, though, all this ruination was utterly normal. He'd never known a time without war, occupation, or resistance. On their long and meandering path here, following vague clues and even more vague memories, he'd told Bode about the hushed whispers his parents spoke in when the lights were low and unfriendly ears might not hear. Modest merchants in the port city of Martvje, they had aided friends in the Resistance as best they could, though Stovoj didn't pick up on their involvement—or the existence of a rebellion at all, really—until he was nearly a teenager. But he remembered the heavy gray skies slick with oily smoke that blew from the front lines, the privation of war, and the perpetual risk of catching the eye of a Garlean enforcer whose day would be greatly improved by beating a Bozjan to unrecognizability on a curb.

Then, right here at this very facility, he had finally been introduced to the front lines in a personal, intimate way. Abducted scarcely out of childhood, experimented upon, inexorably altered, and reduced to a frothing berserker unleashed against his own people, he was glad his memories were at best foggy. But he remembered these immense doors, and that he associated them with comfort and nourishment even as they filled him with terror made his gorge rise. Nothing here was comforting or safe, but it felt paradoxically true all the same. With one final shove, the doors parted enough for Stovoj to wedge himself through.

"I kinda remember this place," Stovoj said, barely above a whisper. His ax slid off his back; Bode's blade and shield were already drawn. "Still real fuzzy, but I know I was here a lot."

Bode surveyed the hallway. Marred by claw marks and scorched by explosive rounds, something terrible had obviously happened here. The facility seemed to still be powered, if only barely. Sickly green lights flickered in the metallic hallways, barely strong enough to cast shadows. Bode's blade was a far better source of illumination.

"Do you think you can find your way?" Bode asked quietly.

"Not sure. Things come back in flashes," Stovoj replied. He palmed a metallic panel, dust and grime disturbed by his passing hand. Some of it seemed to be dried blood. It flaked away at

Stovoj's touch. "I think we go room by room. Doubt anybody's still in here, but if there is, we can help 'em or put 'em in the ground, depending on which side they're on."

Having seen what Garlemald had done to this place and its people, not to mention to his *own* people, Bode didn't argue.

Whatever this place had been, it was large enough to support hundreds of guards and staff. Stovoj and Bode had passed some of them by, or at least what was left of them: the remains of those who hadn't escaped the massacre were strewn about unburied, mostly dismembered. Most were guards going by their armor (which was clearly not up to the task of protecting them from being ripped in half at the middle or crushed against a wall). Going by the long, formerly white but now mostly burgundy-brown coats attached in strips to some of the other Hyuran remains, those who weren't guards tended to be in research or the sciences. Judging by the number of empty beds, plenty had gotten away. Going by the number of bodies, plenty also hadn't.

Further back in the facility, Hyuran remains weren't the only ones Stovoj and Bode happened across. Similarly unburied, waiting before a now-cold incinerator, languished the dessicated remains of Hrothgar men piled many dozens high. Ceremony gave way to efficiency in the Garlean war machine.

Stovoj dropped into a low crouch at the sight, covering his mouth and chin with one immense hand, his eyes wide and unblinking. Bode racked his brain for something to say, but found no words that could possibly help. How could words help one confronted by, what all appearances, was a genocide? Bode put a hand on Stovoj's shoulder, a pale comfort.

"When you have what you need, I think we bury this place. Bring the roof down," Bode suggested. "So it can't ever hurt anyone again."

Stovoj finished a silent prayer for all those boys he could have easily been among, a prayer he didn't know he'd been reciting. Planting his weight on the haft of his ax, he got to his feet.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Stovoj quietly agreed before leaving the charnel scene.

The furthest-back reaches of the facility were nearly sterile in comparison to what they had seen so far. Whatever caused it to become abandoned seemed to have started here, and any who could flee from it ran toward the exit at the front.

Many winding corridors later, they found themselves in a room full of consoles and displays. Some were violently shattered, but not all. This room hadn't been the target of what happened to shut this place down.

"This might be it," Stovoj said, hunching over a terminal.

"Do you know how to use it?" Bode asked. He certainly had no idea. Half a dozen engineers in the Drakes and none of them were here. So much for fate favoring him. And Stovoj, for all his strength and heart, didn't seem to be the brightest flame in the chandelier.

"It's been a bit, but I bet I can figure it out." He said, thumping his fist against a few keys.

The display flickered to life with a staticky hiss. It was asking for a password.

Bode frowned. All of this was quite foreign to him. "Like a riddle? Any ideas?"

"A few," Stovoj replied. "Not sure any of 'em are any good."

Bode watched him peck at the terminal with one huge, clawed finger.

"H-O-R-N-Y-F-O-R-V-A-R-I-S", Stovoj plonked into the console. That made Bode cock his head to one side in confusion. Stovoj shot him an idiot grin.

"Hey, they all are. Were, anyroad." He thwacked a button to confirm the entry.

The terminal blared a distinctly unhappy sound in response.

"Incorrect password. Failure to enter a correct password within the security window will prompt database erasure," read the terminal. It started at 60 before rapidly dropping to 59. 58 soon followed.

"What does that mean?" Bode asked, worried.

"Fuck! Byregot's burly bosom, it means we're *screwed* if we can't get the right code in before the timer hits zero!" He shot back, frantically trying more passcodes. Each time the terminal screeched unhappily.

"Well, what do we do?!" Bode asked, alarm rising in his voice.

Stovoj pounded one more code in with half the time already gone. But he hit the keys too hard in his panic, sending the keys flying across the room, mostly shattered.

"Fuck!" He hollered. "Screw this. There ought to be an override." He said, and flung the casing off the terminal with a horrible screeching of metal. Inside were a myriad of glowing crystalline

squares, most about the size of a pack of fortune teller's cards. Stovoj stared at them, seemingly dazzled by the lights.

"The time, Stovoj," Bode reminded him insistently. The timer was still counting down.

"Yeah, I know!" Stovoj barked out. He wasn't acting, only staring.

"Five seconds! Do something!" Bode yelled.

With a grunt of determination, Stovoj ripped out three crystal squares, transposing their positions. Not knowing what a database was, Bode fully expected the console to explode. He was already preparing a shielding spell when, to his shock, the terminal let out a hiss of aggressive static followed by a tiny musical trill.

"Welcome, administrator." Read the terminal. "Please input your command."

"Is--is that good?" Bode asked, blinking with surprise.

"You bet your ass it is! We're in!" Stovoj beamed at him, all fangs and joy.

"How did you know how to do that?" Bode asked, amazed.

"Heh. Turns out I didn't sleep through every engineering class after all."

Bode furrowed his brow in confusion. Stovoj had gone to some kind of school? He hadn't mentioned it. Stovoj muscled in on the terminal, politely pushing Bode to one side.

"Let's see what's in here. Uh. And help me find a new keyboard."

When the shattered keyboard had been replaced--a process which entirely mystified Bode--what they found was grim: a list of subject names, with related files for each, and the status of each young Hrothgar male who had been brought here. Of the hundreds and hundreds of files, only five had a status of "success." The rest were simply flagged as "failed." A closer look showed that "failed" meant their victim died under their captor's tender mercies. Stovoj's eyes narrowed with anger as he scrolled past the names of hundreds and hundreds of people, all victims like him.

Eventually his own name was highlighted on the list. His was the only entry with a status of "missing."

He opened the file. Contained inside was exactly what they had come for: all of the procedures performed on him. The list was extensive, scrolling for pages and pages. By each entry, there was a highlighted word: "VIEW RECORDING". Stovoj pulled one up, and an image of a young

blue Hrothgar strapped to a table sprang to life on the display. Bode flinched. He had a hunch for what was about to follow.

"You don't have to watch, Stovoj. There's no shame in it," Bode offered softly.

"The hell I don't," Stovoj rebutted quietly but firmly, iron in his voice.

So they watched, wide-eyed, as lab technicians worked over a Hrothgar who once might have been Stovoj. The video showed a Hrothgar who, despite otherwise being a dead ringer, was small and reedy for someone of his species. Doctors had strapped him to a table in full restraints, cut open his torso despite his still-wakeful begging and crying, and removed a wet lump of organ meat with swift, exact cuts. The lump of flesh was brought to a nearby room consisting of two vast tubes: one for Stovoj's freshly removed viscera, the other holding a slaving Voidsent. A switch was thrown. The essence of the Voidsent was extracted and infused into Stovoj's innards, then it was reinstalled into his body.

Bode could only watch two of the brutal procedures before he had to look away, but he could still hear the tinny speakers playing out Stovoj's screams as his older self watched his younger self's every bodily system be removed, changed, and replaced.

It felt like hours before the screaming finally stopped. When Bode looked up, Stovoj was shakily plugging his toimestone into the console.

"If I don't know what they did, I'm never going to be able to fix it," Stovoj said, without certainty.

He started the long process of backing up all the records his toimestone could hold, his own and those of every other so-called success.

The data center wasn't the last room in the facility by a long shot. Stovoj pulled them up before one more door. This one was made of the thickest steel they had seen yet, but that didn't seem to matter: it had been completely blown outward, hanging askew only from one enormous, warped hinge.

"Think there might be something in this one. Feels... familiar. I'm gonna check it out." Stovoj said, shouldering through the door.

"I'm right behind you," Bode said, but Stovoj didn't really seem to hear. Something in the room had consumed his attention entirely. Stepping in behind him, Bode couldn't quite see what was so compelling about the room. It was a metallic domed chamber with a broad, flat pad in the center of the room. Some mechanical device rested on a boom over the pad, but Bode had no idea what its purpose was. There was a faint aroma in the room Bode couldn't quite place, but it was unsettling.

"This room gives me a bad feeling. I don't think we should stay," Bode said.

"I'll just be a minute," Stovoj replied. The room was silent aside from their footfalls.

Stovoj circled the pad. On the one hand, he felt ill at the thought of stepping on. It made him feel the echoes of a vast pit deep in his stomach, infinite and bleak. At the same time as it made him hollow and despairing, something about that pad promised him relief from the very emptiness it made him feel. He felt his boots touch the pad. He was in the center of it without even realizing he'd moved there.

Bode knew something was wrong. His instincts told him even before he heard the heavy thunk of the plate Stovoj stepped onto as it sunk slightly into the ground. The machinery blared to life above Stovoj's head, and an inky un-light poured from it into Stovoj. The Hrothgar let out a groan of pain and ecstasy all at once as it flooded into him.

Bode could place that smell now: asphalt, misery, wet ash, rancid meat. It was pure void energy, and it was suffusing Stovoj's body entirely.

"Move, Stovoj! Get away from there!" Bode yelled out, but Stovoj didn't seem able to hear him. Already his body had changed considerably. His eyes burned like a forgemaster's furnace. His body had more than doubled in height and breadth. Most of his armor had exploded off of him. His jaw cracked and clattered as it fell open impossibly wide as he roared.

He was consuming the void-aspected aether, and it was empowering the berserk fury he dreaded and craved all at once. His fangs grew into tusks. His claws grew into flesh-rending talons.

Enough of that, Bode thought, and flung his shield as hard as he could into the boom, shattering the mechanism. It exploded, the heavy metal arm dropping onto Stovoj's head. Bode's shield ricocheted back to his waiting hand. Going by the murderous sneer on Stovoj's radically changed face, he was going to need it. He didn't seem to appreciate having his meal interrupted one bit.

Bode only had half a breath before he felt an urge hard-won experience had told him to listen to:

MOVE

Stovoj would come at his right. He knew it in his bones. He twisted left. If he hadn't, his towering companion would have grabbed him and ripped him in half.

"Stop, Stovoj! I don't want to hurt you!" Bode yelled, but Stovoj was insensate. He had forgotten how to do anything but kill.

This room was too big. He could use Stovoj's new size against him further in.

The nearest small room he'd seen was the data center. He only hoped Stovoj's totemstone had finished its transfer of data. But, as Stovoj ripped the immense door to the room Bode had just fled off his hinges and, his instinct told him, threw it—

JUMP

Bode lashed his boots to the wall with tethers of air and ran up it and forward. The door crashed beneath him with enough force to shatter every bone in his body had it hit. Moving as fast as his legs would carry him, he flung out a blast of ice to make the floor he was no longer bound to slick. Bode rounded a corner and Stovoj, unable to get traction, crashed past him. It only bought him a few seconds, but it was enough to keep him alive a little longer.

Bode dropped to the floor in a tumble, springing up nimbly despite his arms and armor. Stovoj was right on his heels as he ducked into the door to the control room, but he had enough time to drive Stovoj back with a blast of lightning he knew would kill most anyone. It flung the immense Hrothgar into the wall opposite the door, his huge body smoking, but it only slowed him down for a moment before he crashed through the wall entirely; his body was more than twice as big as the doorframe would accommodate.

Bode didn't dare get close enough to enter a melee with him—not yet, anyway—and blasted him with spells. They only seemed to make Stovoj angrier. Swords of pure light pierced his iron-thick hide, but he didn't notice his injuries. He didn't even bleed. Gouts of fire singed his fur and melted the nearby consoles unintentionally caught in the backdraft, but Stovoj just kept coming. He shattered ice walls Bode threw toward him. Even manipulating water to drain the blood from his brain—a sure if dangerous way to bring an enemy to unconsciousness—had no effect. Blood, it seemed, wasn't fueling him anymore.

Bode infused aether into his muscles, empowering him to dash across the room in an eyeblink. Stovoj lost him for a second as he moved too quickly to track, then found him flush against a wall. The giant set his feet and charged through a nest of consoles.

Bode waited for just the right moment—

LIFT

—and called up wings of pure astral aether to bear him briefly aloft. Stovoj crashed into and partly through the wall behind him as Bode touched down hard, planting both hands on the steel plates underneath him. Earth was his weakest element to manipulate, but it wasn't out of reach. He poured power into the steel and each plate it touched, feeling its strength, its malleability, its magnetism, and *pushed*.

The steel rippled like a pond disturbed, leaving only bare earth as it climbed behind him, solidifying into a cast around Stovoj's ankles. Still more metal poured from the walls and ceiling, entombing the now-thrashing giant as he tried and failed to escape a form-fitting steel prison. Bode hoped that he had enough air to survive while he worked. Or, more likely, that he didn't need air any more than he needed his blood.

Manipulating so much steel had left him aetherically winded. Thankfully, there was a plentiful source of aether thrashing near him, trying to escape so he could kill him outright.

"I'm sorry, Stovoj. I hope this isn't painful," Bode said as he placed his hand on the giant's back, reached for his aether, and *pulled*.

The void-infused energy was sour and metallic in the back of his mouth. He burned some of his own power to sublimate the umbral aspect away, and drank in the energy he was stealing from Stovoj. As he did, the Hrothgar fought viciously. His steely prison shook and cracked, but he only managed to get one arm free and Bode was able to dodge it without too much difficulty. As he imbibed his power, Stovoj calmed and visibly diminished in size. It wasn't much--he was still nearly twice the size he had been when he arrived--but after several minutes, he seemed to at least have his mind mostly back. Smaller now, he stepped out of the prison that had been molded to his much larger form. His eyes still burned, but the coals of his pupils were cooler.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry," Stovoj repeated. "I saw it happening and I couldn't stop it. Did I hurt you?" He asked, seemingly on the verge of tears.

"I'm okay, Stovoj. You didn't hurt me a bit. Only gave me a little scare is all," Bode said, trying to be reassuring. He hadn't been injured, but channeling that much earth-aspected aether was something he would feel the next day. He was just glad skill with power had managed to beat power alone this time. He couldn't reach Stovoj's shoulder to give it a reassuring squeeze, even on the tips of his toes, so he settled for his forearm instead. He still had to reach up to the height of his own shoulder.

"I'll be just fine, mmm? And you too, I hope?" Bode didn't have to obfuscate about that. Stovoj nodded in reply. He still seemed agitated, even scattered, but at least his berserker fury had left him.

"I think so," He said, looking himself over, confirming that any of the dozen injuries Bode had inflicted, all of which would have killed someone less resilient, hadn't done any lasting harm.

"Fuck. But the data!" He gasped, and ran over to the toimestone he had been loading the facility's database onto.

The cord connecting Stovoj's toimestone to the terminal had been shorn in half, and the toimestone was cracked and sparking. Worse, the console it was connected to had been nearly atomized in Stovoj's murderous charge. He tapped the screen with an immense, frantic claw.

"It's... it's not all gone. A lot of it is still here," Stovoj said, relieved.

"I only hope it's enough," Bode answered. "Do you still want to collapse this place?" He asked.

Stovoj nodded.

"More than ever," Stovoj replied.