Tenacitus

Elkon had no last name. He didn’t need one. He was a serf, a slave who had spent his life working endless hours in sometimes brutal conditions. Elkon was lucky, smart and tough. He had survived birth, childhood, adolescence and was now in his mid-thirties, ancient for a serf. If they survive childhood, most die in their teens and twenties. Among the serfs he was almost royalty. When he was a child he cleaned bilges, crawled into clogged piping, cleaned up waste and processed the dead. In his teens, when his intelligence and talent were noticed, he was taught to clean and perform basic repairs on minor ships equipment. His hands were nimble and his mind was quick to pick up new concepts. He was taught basic prayers of supplication by priests of the Mechanicum. As his talents increased he was allowed to clean and repair more complex systems and weapons of the great ship upon which he was born, lived and had never left. Always under instruction and the watchful eyes of the Mechanicum, he continued to learn. At the age of twenty-five he was moved into the Deathwatch armory and saw his first Lord, his first space marine. Serfs such as him were the ships rats, but now he had risen so far as to be allowed into their presence. He was stunned, speechless and felt blessed. At thirty-one he was posted for servant training, the highest possible position for a serf. He would be blessed with the responsibility of serving one of the great lords personally. For six months he was trained in the basic assembly and care of standard weapons and armor that the great lords used. Case histories taught him that each lord was different, each had different needs, and each was deadly in the extreme. He would need to read his lord's moods and desires, when to be at his side and when to stay out of his way. He was constantly reminded that he was only a serf and as such, expendable. When his assignment finally came, his instructors blanched, two wept, one hugged him and walked away. He was being assigned to a new Black Shield, a pariah among the Deathwatch, a man of unknown background and temperament who for some unknown reason had chosen to hide the Chapter from which he had come. All he knew was the lord's name, Dowat MacLynn. That was three years ago . . .

“It will be all right, my friend,” Jakab said, as he squeezed Elkon’s shoulder.

“Remember, report to his quarters at 0800. Be precisely on time. He’s been shipboard for sixteen cycles so he will have settled in,” Jakab said, as they continued the long walk to the training section lifts.

“Be humble, polite and do not jabber, especially to this one. I’ve heard he rarely talks. You’ll have to feel him out and develop some type of rapport with him,” Jakab added for the twentieth time.

“I know, Jakab, I know. We’ve gone over this many times. He’s the largest Lord anyone has ever seen, more ferocious than the Fenresian that accidentally killed poor Marvut and he lives alone down in some Emperor forsaken hole that no one has been near in decades,” Elkon replied and laughed.

“Please take this seriously, Elkon,” Jakab said.

“Oh, I do, believe me. I haven’t lived this long by being foolish. I will be polite, I will be humble and I will keep my mouth shut, just as you’ve taught me,” Elkon said, as he stopped and grasped his teacher by the shoulders with both hands.

Jakab was one of the few serfs that were older than Elkon. Nearing forty, he was bent and worn by his endless duty to the great ship and the lords it carried, but his mind was still sharp and his knowledge of ships affairs near endless. Jakab had spotted Elkon when he was young and had guided, counseled and prodded him for years.

“I’ll be all right, Jakab. Now let me go or I’ll be late. I’ll stay in touch. If he doesn’t kill me during the first ship cycle, we’ll be fine,” Elkon said, as he spun his old friend around and pushed him back down the hall.

Jakab turned back once, smiled, nodded and flashed the sign of the Aquila. Elkon returned the gesture, then turned and strode towards the distant lift.

“Holy Lord on the Eternal Throne . . . what have I gotten myself into. Why did it have to be a Black Shield?” Elkon mumbled, as he continued to walk down the long hall.

“Every Chapter has certain characteristics, likes, dislikes and superstitions. I’ve got nothing to go on, a blank data slate,” Elkon said as his pace slowed.

“I may offend him, be killed and never know why,” he told himself.

“I’ve done worse. I’ve survived worse,” he said, as he quickened his pace and checked the ancient chrono he kept in his robes.

“Six minutes, plenty of time,” he told himself.

Six minutes . . . plenty of time . . .

. . . . .

“Six minutes, boy! That’s all you got. Six minutes. But I’ll be watching. Ten meters of wall have to be scraped in each jump. If you don’t finish I’ll throw you in for six more,” the overseer yelled. He was a large man, heavily muscled with a brutal temperament.

The incinerator was still hot inside, very hot, over 180 degrees Imperial. It was one of a set of six rotating kilns and the others were still running. Internal temperatures reached 2000 degrees. The roar they made while in operation was deafening. The temperature in the room around them was over 110 degrees. They wouldn’t cool one down completely just for a bunch of serfs on a scraping detail, far too inefficient. Thirty young serfs were lined up outside the small entrance, the hatch unbolted and swung back on a davit arm. Waves of heat and noxious fumes poured from the opening.

“I can’t. It’s like climbing into a cooker. Please don’t make me!” Elkon pleaded.

He was the youngest of the group, five years old. None of them was over thirteen. His mother had died a year ago. Children of his age and circumstance were considered a resource. They could fit into small spaces, they didn’t eat very much and if they died, no one cared, just more food for the incinerator.

The overseer laughed as he pulled another boy from the opening. He was older, maybe twelve, all muscle and sinew. The boy fell to his knees and threw up on the overseer’s feet.

“Fracking scag!” the overseer yelled as he kicked the boy in the ribs.

“The scraper’s on the floor, boy,” the overseer yelled, and pointed into the incinerator.

“No please,” Elkon said, as he held up his hands and backed away.

The overseer grabbed him by the arm and yelled,” Get your fracking arse in there or I’ll double your time.”

Elkon ducked as he was thrown into the opening, banging his left shoulder on the way in. He yelped as he landed on the curved floor. It was ankle deep in hot flakes that had already been scraped from the walls. The only light was from the entrance. His lungs burned as he breathed in the sooty air.

He found the scraper. A long pole with a sharpened plate welded on the end. He picked it up, then dropped it when it burned his hands.

“Ten meters, boy. Ten meters and you’ll stay ‘til it’s done,” yelled the overseer from the entrance.

Two worn hide gloves were thrown into the incinerator. Elkon glanced and saw the face of the boy who had just left. The overseer cuffed the boy and started yelling at him.

“Ten meters,” Elkon said, as he picked up the gloves. They were far too large for his hands, but he put them on anyway.

“Ten meters,” he said again, as he picked up the scraper, still hot, but bearable.

The curved walls were caked with a thick carbon residue. It decreased the efficiency of the incinerator and had to be manually removed. The rod was heavy and unwieldy. He threw all his weight into each stroke, but the most he could remove was a few centimeters with each scrape. Sweat poured from his tiny body as he struggled to remove the stubborn scale.

“Times almost up, boy, but you’re friggin' stayin’. You’re not even half done,” echoed the overseer’s voice, his grinning face blocking the light from the entrance.

Elkon knew he was right as he paused and looked at the track he had made along the wall in six minutes. It was no longer than three or four meters. He coughed and tried to swallow, but his throat was as dry as the ash flakes around his ankles.

“Keep going,” he told himself, but he was getting weaker. Each thrust with the scraper was removing less and less material. He paused to catch his breath, then noticed sparkling flashes on the periphery of his vision.

“The Emperor’s Angels,” he said, as the room began to spin.

“If I was a Lord, a space marine, this would be easy. Do it all in six minutes,” he told himself.

He had never seen one, but his mother had an old, worn pict of one of the great warriors. It had disappeared after her death.

He shook his head determined to finish the task. Then he found himself on his knees and wanted to get up. He could feel the blisters forming on his bony knees, but could not summon the strength to move. His grip on the pole was the only thing holding him upright.

Two hands grabbed him from behind and dragged him toward the opening as the pole slipped from his hands. His head emerged into the blissfully cool air outside the incinerator as the sparkling flashes closed in and he passed out.

“All right, Jakab, my hero, you saved him now finish his ten meters. Then you stay and do ten more,” the overseer ordered as he pushed the older boy’s shoulders back into the incinerator.

Jakab snarled and tried to spit at the overseer, but his parched mouth was as dry as the overseer’s heart. He turned, picked up the scraper and began to work.

. . . . .

Elkon had to change elevators three times before he arrived on Minus 32. He had never been this far from Centerline, even when he was young. He used to wander the ship during sleep cycle and thought he knew everything there was to know about the old vessel. There were areas that were off limits to his kind and he wasn’t foolish enough to try to sneak into such places, but that was only twenty-five percent of the ship. He had considered everywhere else fair game and had drawn his own maps of areas he explored until he knew the ship like the back of his hand. But this was new. This he did not know. He wondered if access to this area had been recently restored for some reason.

As he exited the lift he turned left as per instructions. The air was stale, dry and cold. There was an odd smell that he couldn’t place. The structure was different, older, as if he was on another ship. The walls were dimpled copper studded with brass. The floor was textured steel. The ceiling curved into a graceful arch with brass supports and flourishes with ornate brass light fixtures at the peak of the ceiling.

“The priests would call this inefficient, a waste of material. Who built this section?” Elkon asked himself.

“Twenty meters, first right, then second left, then two hundred meters down an empty hallway, rooms on the right,” he said aloud, as he began to walk, repeating the instructions he had been given by Jakab.

Glancing at his chrono he saw 0758 and began to trot.

“Two minutes, can’t be late,” he said and began to run.

Halfway down the long hallway he slowed to a walk and checked his chrono once more.

“One minute-twenty, plenty of time, control your breathing. I must look calm and controlled,” he told himself as he adjusted his robes.

The only sound in the long hallway was his breathing, which was returning to normal, and the soft tread of his shoes. The constant thrum of the ship had always been a part of his life and was barely noticed. He stopped just short of the doorway, took a deep breath and prepared to step forward and announce himself.

As he stepped in front of the doorway, preparing to gently knock on the door, he paused, noticing that there wasn’t a door, only a broad opening. There were no hinges, but one side of the door frame had a deep slot as if something fit in the space. He looked right, back down the long hall, then left where it ended twenty meters away. Checking his robes once more he gently knocked on the door frame. When there was no answer, he knocked again, this time more firmly. Checking his chrono once more, he reached into his pocket and removed the meeting instructions.

“Day 188 at 0800, level Minus 32, left from the lift, twenty meters take a right, take second left down two hundred meters. Emperor protect me! Is this the wrong place?” Elkon said, as he took a step into the room.

“That depends, who you are and why you are here?” asked a voice from the hallway behind him.

The voice was not booming, like many of the Lords, but it was deep and the tone seemed to reverberate inside Elkon’s skull. He fell to his knees without turning around and touched his forehead to the metal deck plate.

“Elkon, great Lord. My name is Elkon and I am trying to find my new master. His name is Lord MacLynn,” Elkon said.

His eyes were screwed shut and he felt himself shaking from head to foot. There was a pressure inside his skull that felt like someone had their fist wrapped around his brain.

“At least you’re on time. Now get out of my way,” MacLynn replied to the shaking man, prostrate at his feet.

Elkon shuffled to his right until he was pressed against the wall. His forehead had never left the floor, but the pressure in his head was lessening.

“What the frack have they sent me? Get up serf. You’re not going to be of much use to me if you spend all your time on your knees,” MacLynn said, as he stepped into the room.

Elkon was still shaking as he lifted his head from the floor and glanced to his left. A huge shadow passed by as MacLynn walked into the room. He spun a dark cloak from his shoulders and tossed it onto a large table.

Rising to his knees, Elkon glanced around the room, the pain in his head reduced to a dull ache. Rising to his feet, he brushed off his robe in a vain attempt to recover his dignity.

“My Lord, my name is Elkon. I have been assigned to serve you for as long as you please. I have lived on this ship my entire life. Any resources you need, information, equipment, supplies, food, entertainment. I can supply it . . .” Elkon began, then felt the words dying on his lips.

“My Lord, I apologize. I don’t normally jabber. It’s just . . . you make me very nervous,” Elkon said, immediately regretting that he had opened his mouth and lowered his head.

The serf winced as the warrior chuckled and then stepped toward Elkon until the serf could physically feel his presence. He now knew what the ship rats had felt when he had cornered them as a child: a looming presence, knowledge that you had absolutely no control over your own fate. The rats he had killed for food and when he was older, for sport. He wondered at his own fate.

“Look at me,” MacLynn said, as he stood less than a meter from the trembling serf.

Elkon took a deep breath, determined to meet his fate like a man, not a ships’ rat. He then leveled his gaze and found himself staring at MacLynn’s waist. He unconsciously stepped back, his back bumping against the wall and looked up at his new lord for the first time. He was far larger than any lord he had ever seen.

MacLynn stared down at him, his hands behind his back. He was dressed in an armored body glove, metallic black, the same color as the cloak he had discarded upon entering the room. His scarred face, not unusual for veterans of the Deathwatch, was remarkable in two ways. First, his eyes were emerald green, the pupils the color and sheen of molten gold. Second, embedded in the center of his forehead were three imperial eagles. The first, just above his brow, was small and worn smooth, its golden surface sunken just below the skin. The second, also gold, twice the size of the first, was also worn smooth, but the outline was more detailed. The third, of equal size with the second, was newer, the surface details crisp and ornate. The color of old bone, this eagle seemed to grow from the skull itself rather than having been imbedded like the previous two.

Dowat MacLynn was a huge man even for a Space Marine, even for a member of the Deathwatch, who were known to have huge warriors. He was well over two meters tall, almost three. His hair, once red, now mostly white, was cut close. His face was square, blockish, heavy browed. His lips were thin as if he rarely smiled.

Those that dealt with him, even other members of the Deathwatch, felt the hackles on the back of their necks rise in his presence. Some thought him tainted by the warp and flashed the sign of the Aquila as he passed. The few warriors that had fought alongside him nodded their heads in respect. The ship’s crew avoided his gaze, lowered their heads, waiting for the storm to pass.

“Well . . . most serfs don’t have the nerve to look at me. Those that do merely glance then lower their heads. More than a few have pissed themselves. None has ever looked me in the eye and studied my face,” MacLynn said, as he studied the serf standing at his feet.

“You’re large for a serf and older,” he said, then laughed at some private joke.

“They wouldn’t send me a slacker. They knew that if they did they’d have to scrape his brains off the wall outside. We’ll keep this simple for now. You do what I tell you, when I tell you. Keep your mouth shut unless I ask you a question. Understood?” MacLynn said, as he turned and glanced around, as if inspecting the room.

MacLynn lived alone, his quarters in the lower half of the great ship, below his peers, below the crew, even below the serfs, just above the holds, bilges and abandoned sections of the ancient vessel known as the Montage. Three rooms, equal sized, five imperial meters on a side, each connected to the other by a single opening. There were no hinged doors. Even the entrance was kept open to any who dared to cross his threshold.

This section of the ancient vessel was different, older, predating the original construction of the vessel. Why this section, almost two percent of the total volume, had been welded into the interior of the ship was unknown or forgotten or more likely eradicated from all records.

Elkon followed his new master’s glance and looked around his new master’s quarters. The first room contained a large table, two meters on a side. The surface was ballistic steel ten centimeters thick with an intricate fringe of brass and copper inlaid into the surface. The legs were fluted, thick steel interwoven with a brass design identical the fringe on the table top. A large chair of identical design sat behind it, facing the entry way. The wall behind was filled with weapons of myriad design and function. Some were bladed. Others were projectile or energy weapons of strange design. Most were human from many eras and planets, others obviously alien.

A large banner, three meters on a side, adorned the wall to the right of the table, beside the entrance. It was ancient, of Terran make, and very worn. A herald filled the center of the design, the head of a huge black bull with massive horns. Below the head were crossed lightning bolts. In the center of the bulls head were two vertical lines, the golden thread faded and tattered. The background was a pale red. The words enwreathed ‘Robur et Virtus’ at the base of the design. The wall opposite the table was shelved from floor to ceiling. The steel and brass shelves were lined with books, scrolls, data slates and other recording devices from across the galaxy. Brass wall sconces, centered on three walls, provided what light MacLynn needed.

“I asked you a question,” MacLynn said.

“Yes, Lord, understood, do what I’m told and keep quiet,” Elkon replied.

“Good. I want this room straightened. Open nothing. Start nothing. Don’t touch the weapons. Damage anything and I’ll remove your head. One other thing, never enter the back two rooms without my permission,” MacLynn said, then turned and walked deeper into his quarters.

“Yes Lord,” Elkon replied. He almost asked where he was supposed to stay, but thought better of it.

MacLynn glanced around as he entered the second room and headed for the third. The second room was bare of ornamentation. A single sconce to the right of the entrance provided lighting. To the left of the entrance were three huge chests, each stacked upon the other. Two were black, the other white. The white chest was on the bottom.

The third room contained a hammock in the back right corner of odd design. Constructed of black wood and hair it stood erect suspended from the ceiling on heavy chains. The occupant would be sitting rather than lying down. It faced the open doorway. A small chest stood atop a table left of the entrance. Three objects were placed on top of the chest. The first was a ring. The color of old bone, it had once been covered with an ornate design. Time and use had worn the surface almost smooth. Images and glyphs could be guessed at, but not identified. The ring was overly large, even for a space marine, even for MacLynn. Its original owner had been huge, near Orgyn size. Beside the ring sat a book, its pages worn and tattered. It had been a gift from a great leader, a friend, a man from his far distant past. It was a book of wisdom and war. Relatively few words, less than a hundred pages, but with a complexity and depth that had continued to teach him long after his friend had crossed into the Emperor’s presence. Both objects had been with him for many centuries. The third object was new, its mysteries still unfolding. A cube the color of fresh ivory, ten centimeters on a side, was slowly spinning on one point. It always rested on a point, never on a flat side. When turned on its side it would flip up onto a point and stay there. MacLynn had started it slowly spinning four cycles ago. It was still spinning. It neither sped up nor slowed down. It was completely silent.

Left of the hammock, mounted on the side wall, hung a double-handed sword exactly two meters long. The scabbard was plain, well worn, its steel surface scratched and dented. The sword it held was something else. The cross-guard was ornately sculpted into an Imperial double eagle, the eyes were rubies the size of a man’s thumbnail. The grip was the hide of some ancient reptile. The pommel was fashioned of the same odd metal as the cross-guard. Twin claws of an eagle turned upward grasping a huge multifaceted emerald the size of a man’s fist.

That had been three years ago and Elkon was still alive.

. . . . .

“He always comes back the same way,” Elkon mumbled as he lowered the protective visor on his chem suit.

“Just once I’d like to see him come back clean,” he added as he verified the temperature on the solvent spray while supplicating the machine spirit with the fourth line of a minor Benedictus, one of his favorites.

It had taken him 38 minutes to properly install the various pieces of the Mark VI armor into the decontamination unit. It always took 38 minutes. After three years serving his Lord in the Deathwatch you would think he would be faster, but he was precise, meticulous and thorough. Everything had to be perfect, always perfect. Anything else would be an insult to his Lord and to the Emperor.

He silenced the pinging alarm, verifying that the solvent temperature was precisely 186 degrees Imperial. Experience had shown him that this temperature was perfect for removing any and all contamination from the armor.

This room, like many others on Minus 32, was different from the rest of the ship. The ship he had grown up in.

“Any surprises today?” he asked himself, as he verified the nozzle setting on the spray wand and began cleaning the ceramite soles of the boots, first the right, then the left, always the same order.

The soles told him more about his Lord’s activities than anything else, more than claw marks or weapon impact scars. The soles were durable, but very tactile, allowing his Lord to maintain his footing on wet or blood drenched surfaces. Deep indentations in the soles allowed maximum surface contact, but also became imbedded with any loose debris his Lord walked through.

“Mud, fine gravel, traces of red blood, nothing unusual,” Elkon said, as he lowered the pressure of the solvent.

He always started at the toe of the sole and worked his way downward, always. The sludge and grit fell in a slurry that he would later flush from the decontamination table. He collected unusual bits and pieces from each journey that his Lord made into combat, carefully labeling each item with dates, times and planet. His Lord never mentioned anything of his journeys, but other serfs and workers heard things and words were carefully shared amongst the lower classes. He added any stories that included his Lord to his collection. It was his way of participating in his Lord’s adventures.

He switched his attention from the right boot to the left, methodically spraying from left to right, then back again. On the fourth pass, a third of the way down the sole, he paused, then repeated the pass again, then again.

“A shard, metallic, two Imperial centimeters, maybe more. Imbedded pretty deep,” Elkon said, as he secured the spray wand.

He was starting to sweat, the chem suit was hot. It always made him sweat. Reaching to his left, never removing his eyes from the shard, he picked up the smallest of three sets of tweezers.

“This should work,” he said as he began gently prying the shard loose.

“That was easy, almost like it fell out,” he said, as he held the shard up to his eyes.

It was a metallic splinter and as he turned it in the light, it seemed to glitter or sparkle, almost seemed to move.

“Not possible,” he said.

Then it did move, beginning to squirm in the grasp of the tweezers. Startled he dropped the shard and instinctively caught it in his left hand. Immediately, it began burrowing through the thick glove of the chem suit. Elkon screamed as he felt a sharp stabbing in the palm of his left hand. He stood frozen as his hand rapidly became numb, then his forearm, then his upper arm.

His last words as his vision blurred and his legs collapsed were, “The Emperor protects”.

He awoke to find himself staring at the ceiling. At least he thought it was the ceiling. The inside of his visor was fogged up and he felt very hot. Rolling onto his right side Elkon reached up with his left hand and yanked off the visor. He flexed his left hand. It was very sore and his left arm ached as he sat up. He winced as he rotated the arm. It ached all the way to the bone and he felt very light headed. Staggering to his feet, he held on to the edge of the decon table as the room began to spin.

“I’m going to be sick,” he said, as he leaned over the trough and began to throw up.

He was shocked as a thick black bile began to flow from his mouth. The smell made him wretch and he had to hold the table with both hands as the room began to spin more rapidly. He threw up again and again, his body wracked with violent spasms. As the spasms subsided he dropped to his knees, his forehead resting against the edge of the cool table.

“What just happened?” he asked himself.

His whole body ached and the taste in his mouth was so acidic it was making his throat burn.

Once more he struggled to his feet. The vertigo was still present, but not as bad as before. He glanced at his Lord’s armor, still unclean, the feet and ankles now coated with his vomit.

“The shard!” Elkon said, as he began to shed the chem suit.

“I have to tell him,” he mumbled, as he staggered around while pulling the one piece suit from his body.

*“Then he’ll kill you,”* the voice said.

“What? What was that?” Elkon said, as he fell to the floor and began violently yanking the last of the suit from his feet.

He spun in a circle like a child, one foot still entangled in the suit, then crawled under the edge of the decon table. His head snapped back and forth, even looking under the table as he searched for the source of the voice.

“I’m sick. I’ve gotten some type of alien infection,” Elkon told himself, as he massaged his aching left arm.

*“Oh, I’m not an infection. I’m a blessing. I’m the best thing that has ever happened to you,”* the voice said.

“I’ve got to clean his armor. I have to finish cleaning it,” Elkon said, as he shook his foot free of the suit, grabbed the edge of the table and pulled himself erect.

“I’ll get a clean suit, finish cleaning the armor and then I’ll go see a medicae. That’s what I’ll do,” he said.

*“Yesss, clean the armor, or he would be suspicious, but you’ll see no one else,”* the voice commanded.

“But I’m sick. I . . . I have to go see . . .” Elkon began, and then screamed as a searing pain tore through his brain.

He fell to his knees and began retching, more of the thick black bile spewing from his mouth.

*“Clean the armor, clean this room, clean yourself, then sleep. We have work to do,”* the voice commanded.

Elkon awoke in his cot in MacLynn’s quarters. It was in the corner of the first room, opposite the large steel table. His few possessions were stored neatly below the cot. In three years he had entered the second room three times. He had never entered the third room.

He sat up and flexed his left hand. There was no pain. Swinging his feet onto the floor he stretched his arms and looked around the room. Everything was as it was supposed to be. It was clean, except for his Lord’s work table, of course. He was forbidden to touch the table, let alone anything on the table. The shelves to his right were neat and organized, as always. He cleaned the items every ten cycles. Occasionally, his Lord added new items, deleted others. He was given specific instructions about which items he could touch with his hands and which items were to be cleaned remotely and others which were not to be touched at all. This had been his world for three years.

He was smiling when his head was forced to the left, towards the entrance to the second room.

“No, I can’t go in there without his permission,” Elkon said, as the palm of his left hand began to itch.

Lowering his eyes, he stared at the thin black scar in the center of his hand. It severed the life line in his palm. Such ancient beliefs were forbidden, but many things were forbidden that were none the less talked about discretely amongst the serfs.

“If he finds out he’ll kill me,” Elkon pleaded.

*“He’ll kill you quickly. I’ll kill you for a thousand years, over and over and it won’t be quickly,”* the voice told him.

The pain in his head became intense, the vertigo and nausea returning as Elkon nodded in submission.

*“Enter the room,”* the voice commanded.

Elkon stood, turned and with shaking knees approached the second room. He had never disobeyed his Lord, not once. Tears formed as he approached the entrance. He stopped and the pain intensified.

“I won’t,” Elkon whispered.

*“You will!”* the voice replied.

The screams died in his throat as the serf felt his entire body burst into flame. Pain that he had never imagined ripped through him. He held his hands before him and watched as the flesh crisped and sloughed from his body leaving only bones behind.

He found himself on his knees, still staring at his hands. They were numb, but they were his hands, intact and whole.

*“You will!”* the voice repeated.

Elkon began to shake, tears streaming down his cheeks as he continued to stare at his hands, hands that he was so proud of, hands capable of delicate tasks or brute labor. Hands coupled with a clever mind that had allowed him to live past his share of years, allowed him to rise to his present glorious position, servant to a great Lord, whom he could not betray.

“I won’t,” he whispered, knowing what was to follow.

There was no chance to scream. No beginning or end to the pain. Pain was his only memory. Pain was his life and it was eternal. Burning, tearing grinding at his soul until it became his entire existence. It was all he had ever known, all he would ever have. He was dissected alive, burned slowly to ash, ripped and devoured by heinous creatures, over and over and over.

He awoke again and found himself lying in his Lord’s hammock. He struggled to rise, afraid of what crimes he had committed while under the control of the voice.

“Lie still. You need to rest,” the deep voice commanded.

Elkon turned his head to the left and saw his lord staring down at him, one great hand holding him down.

“You were possessed, demon controlled. It was the shard. I removed it from your hand,” MacLynn said, as he examined the bandage on Elkon’s left hand.

“I’m not dead?” Elkon asked. His whole body ached, his vision was blurred, but after what he had been though he felt fine.

“Well, I haven’t decided if I’m going to kill you myself, but as for right now, no you aren’t dead,” MacLynn replied.

“My Lord, forgive me. I didn’t want to enter here. It was forcing me,” Elkon pleaded, as he tried to rise from the hammock.

“I said lie still. Are you going to disobey me for the first time?” MacLynn said, as he shoved the serf back down.

“You never entered the second room. I found you curled up tightly in a ball at the entrance. At first, I thought you were sick, but when I saw your eyes I knew what was happening,” MacLynn continued.

“My first instinct was to kill you immediately, but when I touched your mind I saw what you were going through. You’re far tougher than you look. You should be dead,” MacLynn said, as he stood up.

“But what to do with you? That’s the question. By rights I should report this and turn you over as one who had been demon possessed, not exactly the specialty of the Deathwatch, but not unknown to us,” MacLynn said, as he turned and retrieved an ivory ring from a table by the doorway.

“You would be questioned, then tortured, then executed, if you lived through the torture,” he continued, as he tossed the ring up and caught it with his right hand.

“Had been . . . you said ‘had been’. So I’m not anymore. You know . . .” Elkon asked, loathe to say the word . . . ‘demon’.

“Are you a believer?” MacLynn asked.

“A believer? In the Emperor? Of course! Aren’t we all?” Elkon answered, as he almost rose, but thought better of it. He sensed that his life still hung by a very fragile thread.

“Unfortunately, no we aren’t. Unbelievers live among us, some in positions of great power. Others believe in . . . other things. You have now made the acquaintance of one of those . . . things,” MacLynn replied.

Elkon felt himself begin to shake. He stared at the ceiling and clutched his bandaged hand against his chest.

“Once touched, you are always marked. It leaves . . . a residue, a stain on your soul that the observant or the talented, can detect. People such as you are considered damaged beyond repair. Worse yet, dangerous,” MacLynn continued.

“Which leads me back to the main problem. I have many things that I need to focus on and I don’t need another. But . . . I’m curious. You’re either alive because the Emperor wants you alive or this demon wants you alive. The former, a blessing; the latter a curse and a trap. The easiest thing is for me to snap your neck and have your body incinerated,” MacLynn said, as he tossed the ring into the air once again.

“But first, we’ll try something else. Stick out your right hand,” MacLynn ordered.

Elkon had been counting his heart beats while listening to his Lord. The fact that he was still alive, that his heart was beating normally, was having a calming effect. He slowly extended his right hand. MacLynn grabbed his wrist, locking it in a vicelike grip.

Elkon’s eyes widened as MacLynn slid the enormous ring over the middle finger of his right hand. The ring was easily twice the diameter of his finger. MacLynn released the ring, dropping it onto his finger. His other hand still held Elkon by the wrist.

“Don’t move. In thirty seconds you’ll either be dead or protected, as the Emperor sees fit,” MacLynn said and locked eyes with his serf.

The ivory ring felt cold at first. Then it began to warm and glow. Elkon could only stare as the brightness intensified and the ring began to shrink. As it shrank, it glowed red hot. Elkon gasped and began to squirm, his flesh beginning to sear, but his hand was held motionless in MacLynn’s grasp. Memories of his torture by the demon flowed back into his mind, the smell of his own searing flesh. He began to groan as the fresh agony overwhelmed him, but a voice, another voice, a different calmer voice, entered his mind.

“YES, YOU WILL DO,” was all it said, and then was gone.

Elkon realized that MacLynn had released his hand, but he was still holding it out. He lowered his eyes and saw that the plain ivory ring had shrunk and was now imbedded at the base of his middle finger. It looked as if it had been there forever. The flesh had grown up around the ring. The ring was now imbedded in him. The smell of burnt flesh still hung in the air. But all the pain and fatigue that he had felt was gone. His torture, at the hands of the demon, seemingly seared into his psyche, was rapidly fading from memory like a bad dream. It was replaced with a calm serenity. Another presence, far more powerful, still lingered.

“I’ll just close my eyes for a minute,” Elkon told himself, still very aware that his Lord was standing right in front of him.

MacLynn smiled as his serf closed his eyes, settled into the hammock and fell asleep.

“Well, that was a near thing. Looks like one more for the crew,” MacLynn said, as he began removing the bandage on Elkon’s left hand.

The wounds, both from the shard and his surgery, had healed. The black wound from the shard was now a dark scar that he knew would fade in time. It was bisected by the long incision that he had made to retrieve the demon shard. It had also scared over and he knew that it would be there for as long as the serf lived.

“A new name for you, a new name . . . Tenacitus, I think. Yes that will do,” MacLynn said, as he stared at the sleeping serf.

Turning, MacLynn picked up a crystal vial sitting on the table by the entrance. The surface of the vial was inscribed with glyphs and symbols. The shard within sat inert, motionless. The shard and the demon within it were now imprisoned. As long as the vial remained intact the demon was helpless.

“One more for the collection,” MacLynn said as he entered the second room.