

# The Weak and the Strong

By Mitch Denton

Fenton stacked up behind the lead members of his squad, the three of them pulling in tight to the bombed out administratum building. The Caphorian sergeant felt the adrenaline levels rising within him, his focus tightening as the tunnel vision started to kick in. For some, the rush of combat made them jumpy and on edge, but Fenton had always found that it gave him an incredible sense of clarity, as though battle brought him closer to the Emperor. Cinching his lasgun up into his shoulder, the sergeant adjusted his stance and tapped the back of the soldier in front of him.

Within seconds the group were moving, rapidly stepping through the structure's blown out doorway, their motions tight and synchronised with one another. As soon as the point trooper crossed the threshold she spun to one side, directing her attention to the hidden corner of the room. The soldier kept moving, clearing the way for the trooper behind her to enter. The second Caphorian did the same, breaking in the opposite direction and covering the other side of the room.

Fenton's ears rang with the harsh clatter of autogun fire, the noise far too deafening in the close confines to gauge any sense of its location. Trusting his comrades to clear their sectors, the sergeant kept his focus on the view directly ahead of him and stepped forwards into the space. Keeping the sights of his weapon locked to his eye movements, he scanned the corridor that lead down towards the rest of the administratum quarters.

Somewhere deep within his core, Fenton felt a curious force compelling him onwards into the darkened passageway, and he soon found himself slowly putting one foot in front of the other. One of the other soldiers from his squad joined him, pressing her body up against the other side of the corridor and matching her sergeant's steady advance.

In spite of his muffled hearing, the sergeant could just about make out the sound of thumping boots hitting the floorboards above him as the other squads stormed the upper levels. But he struggled to hear anything from the rooms leading off from the passageway before him. The air began to feel hot and stifling and he fidgeted nervously, adjusting his stance in an effort to settle back into his weapon's gunsights.

'Sarge...' the trooper next to him started, a note of concern edging her voice.

Suddenly the sharp, jarring sensation of being under threat came over Fenton, and he spun on his heels, bringing his lasgun around in the direction of his teammate. 'Get down!'

As the other soldier threw herself to the deck, the sergeant opened up, lacing the wall behind her with las-fire and punching scorched holes in the flimsy material. Without forethought, Fenton was already moving, pushing up on the doorway that led into the adjacent room and stepping through without waiting for the other Imperial Guardsman to get into position.

He came to a stop when he saw the crumpled body laid out upon the ground, but kept his weapon raised, searching for the slightest sign of movement. The sickly looking thing could pass for Human at a distance, but the ugly, ridged forehead and off-colour skin clearly marked it out as one of the xenos' degenerate sycophants.

His teammate came barrelling into the room. 'What in Throne's name was tha-' she trailed off, slowly approaching the body to take a closer look at the prone form. 'Sarge, you got it right in the head!' The soldier looked back and forth between the damaged wall and Fenton with astonishment. 'How on Terra did you even know that thing was here?'

Fenton, perturbed and equally bewildered, simply stared at the lifeless creature, before replying unconvincingly, 'I heard a noise...'

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As Fenton and his squad exited the cleared building, a commotion was brewing between their platoon commander and the new commissar that had been assigned to their division, a man by the name of Krenlan. The political officer was a broad-shouldered individual, a stout man who carried himself with an air of constant control that hinted at a suppressed brutality simmering beneath the surface.

'Commander, you were expected to have made inroads into the manufactorum district days ago. Your orders are clear!' The commissar was practically screaming in their commander's face, causing the soldiers to share worried looks.

'Yes, they are!' The Imperial officer stood his ground before the verbal onslaught. 'Our instructions are to secure this city, that means going from building to

building and making damn sure we clear out every one of these scum.'

Krenlan bristled with barely suppressed fury. 'You are not—'

'What I am not is taking orders from some jumped up politico,' the platoon's leader cut in. 'Let me remind you, commissar, that you have no power to supersede my orders in this matter. I will not jeopardize the safety of my troopers by leaving enemy forces at our backs. Now get out of my way!'

Before the man had made it more than a few steps, the commissar turned on him, pulling out the squat bolt pistol that he kept chained to his body armour. The platoon commander barely even had time to react before the barrel was levelled in his direction and the weapon bucked violently as it discharged a round.

Fenton watched in horror as he saw the body of his commanding officer hit the floor. Krenlan turned and addressed the soldiers that lined the street, a cold fire burning in his eyes. 'Let me be clear, cowardice has but one reward in the Astra Militarum! Up to this point, you have been lax in the persecution of your duties, and the time for that has now passed. You will follow my orders, is that clear?'

Fenton caught Krenlan's gaze as the man finished his speech. The madness he saw there chilled him to the bone.

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That night, Fenton and his squad took refuge in the remains of a still largely intact manufactorum compound. A small fire burned in the middle of the assembled group, its cloying stink laying thick in their closed-in environs, yet everyone was grateful for the warmth it provided. The soldiers sat quietly, each lost in their own thoughts from the day.

Eventually one of their number spoke. 'You know, I hear they lost contact with a number of the orbitals out beyond the rim...'

The mood grew sombre. They all knew what that meant.

'Could just be the rad flares again,' another offered, although even she seemed to doubt the plausibility of her own words.

The original speaker looked over. 'You really think that's true?'

The other soldier merely shrugged in response.

A cold voice cut through the air from beyond the periphery of their small circle. 'I would suggest, Sergeant, that you do not allow your charges to engage in such pointless and potentially subversive topics of conversation.'

Krenlan stepped into the gathering, the flickering light from the fire lending his already stark features an even crueller bent.

'I hear you had a close call today, Fenton.' That cold, calculating look was back in the commissar's eyes. 'Saved by some almost prescient reactions on your part, so I'm told.'

Fenton could feel the man's clinical eyes appraising him, cutting into his core and weighing him up. In truth, the sergeant could not explain what had happened any more than anyone else. The sensations that had run through him in that moment were unlike anything that he had ever felt before. He also had a strong impression that, were he to disclose any details of what he had experienced, events might turn out rather poorly for him at the hands of their ruthless commissar. But Krenlan was still watching him, waiting expectantly for a reply, and Fenton could feel the heat rising up within him again, the room closing in around him as his brain started to buzz.

He was beginning to feel himself losing control when one of his squad, sensing the trouble brewing, interjected. 'It's the luck of the Emperor, sir. Sarge has always had it.'

Others nodded in agreement, but the commissar's gaze never strayed from Fenton's. 'Is that so?'

Krenlan turned to leave, but stopped briefly to cast one last look back in the sergeant's direction.

'I'll be watching, sergeant. I am eager to see your performance on the battlefield, especially in light of recent events.' And with those parting words, the commissar left.

Fenton let out a long breath as he felt his body relax, suddenly exhausted beyond measure. 'I'm going to turn in.'

He traipsed away from the group, a cold feeling of dread filling his gut as the sound of the soldiers' quiet conversations faded into the distance.

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The sensation of falling was palpable. The pitch blackness of his surroundings yielded little clue as to where he was, but the hot, stinking air rushing past his face indicated the horrifying speed at which he was plunging downwards. Fenton's initial response had been to panic, flailing futilely as he attempted to slow his descent. Amidst the terror-fuelled fog that clouded his mind, he had little opportunity to consider how he had come to be in this place. All he could think of was whether he would hit the bottom first, or whether it would be the collision with the side of whatever structure he had been thrown from that would end his harried existence.

Slowly, the rational part of his brain started to reassert itself. Fenton's body was still awash with a heady mix of fear and adrenaline-soaked confusion, but he began to notice more about his immediate environment.

What he had initially taken to be buffeting currents of air whipping by seemed to have an ebb and flow to their passing, which made no sense if he was falling. If anything, he would have expected the ferocity of its passage to be steadily increasing as he continued to pick up speed, but the soldier had begun to notice a semblance of rhythm to the gusts that shook his body like a ragdoll.

It almost felt like the foetid breaths of some vile corpse-scavenger, its giant, heaving breaths engulfing him in wave after wave of nausea. But that did not explain the weightlessness he felt, nor the fact that his clothes seemed to be motionless, in spite of the sense of movement. Nothing about this place made any sense.

Suddenly, Fenton felt his arms and legs pulled violently outwards, the muscles in his limbs spasming in protest at the sudden and unexpected force being applied to them. He could feel the ligaments straining at the effort of keeping his body held together as his form was torqued and stretched, and he instinctively closed his eyes, in spite of the darkness, to let out a gut-wrenching scream of abject pain at the immense stresses being placed upon his frame.

Seemingly in response, a plethora of lashing whips reached out from the inky blackness and wrapped their way around, first his torso, and then the rest of him. Sharp barbs and hooks lined the inner side of

the vicious tendrils, digging their way through his clothes and biting deep into the tender flesh beneath. They enveloped his face and head, crushing the air from his lungs as they squeezed tighter and tighter, delving into the very core of him and leaving burning striations along every exposed muscle fibre.

Fenton's mind exploded with fiery pain. Somehow he was still conscious, but his entire being was filled with a wretched sense of dread that was almost worse than the smothering panic that had swallowed him moments before. He tried to lash out, to break free, but his limbs felt weak and ineffectual, their movements slow and uncoordinated.

As he was certain he was about to succumb to the torments being inflicted upon him, Fenton felt a sudden rush of air fill his lungs. His vision slowly returned and he realised that he was able to move again as he looked around, dazed and confused.

It was night and surrounding him were his squad, all of them soundly asleep. His lungs were still desperately hitching up and down, trying to pump oxygen to the rest of his body. The sergeant tried to piece together what had happened. His head ached terribly, and in those waking moments the horror of the dream still felt as real to him as it had when he was trapped within his subconscious.

Fenton blinked away the tiredness and tried to stand up, a strange, scratching itch burrowing away inside his mind. Staggering to his feet, the soldier felt sharp, jabbing pains poking at him from all over his body. Carefully, not sure what he was hoping to find, he undid his outer jacket and looked down at the ruined form of his chest beneath. He halted sharply and, upon seeing what lay beneath, immediately began to hyperventilate again.

Laid out in wildly irregular spacings, a criss-crossing network of lacerations cut their way across his skin. Along these bleeding sores were ragged tear marks where some kind of vicious barbs had evidently dug their way into the meat beneath.

Fenton managed to make it out of the ramshackle building and far enough away from the others that he would not be overhead before retching his guts out all over the city street. He lay there, shaking, the cold air raising the hairs on the back of his neck as the slow, steady sound of booted footsteps approached.

'Well, what have we here?' Krenlan asked in a smug tone.

'Stay away from me!' Fenton pulled himself to his feet, hurriedly pulling his jacket closed to hide the

marks that lined his body, his head pulsing as the pressure built. 'Do you know what I think, Sergeant?' The commissar's eyes glittered in the moonlight. 'I think you've been keeping a secret.'

Krenlan started to calmly circle the man, and Fenton, noticing that he had left his sidearm back with the rest of this gear, suddenly felt like prey caught in a much more dangerous predator's trap.

'Secrets can be dangerous.' The sergeant watched the commissar fingering the hilt of his power sword. 'For everyone involved.'

'I don't know what you mean,' Fenton gasped.

'Oh, I think you do.' Krenlan gave a sigh of resignation, then stopped and looked at the sergeant with genuine interest. 'Did you think you were the only one?'

Fenton could feel that nauseating buzz creeping up within his head again, the air around him starting to crackle with barely controlled energy.

'We've seen this a lot with the recent hive fleet incursion,' the commissar continued. 'Ever more increasingly in the weak and the corrupt, such as yourself.' That cold smile was back. 'Losing control of what little command they have over their perverted abilities.'

'What are you saying?' The sergeant felt his fear turn into something hard and strong.

'You know what I have to do,' the commissar replied, tightening his hand around the hilt of his power sword.

Fenton lunged towards Krenlan, his brain searing with a burning pain and the world around him exploding in a great ball of light. He was dimly aware of his body flying backwards, of his consciousness fading – into what he had no idea – and of the whispering, rustling madness that was rising up from within him, to scour away any sense of self he might once have possessed.

