

Gone Dark

By Dirk Wehner

The lumen under the barrel of Gerrikan Orzan's lasgun pierced the utter darkness of the corridor before him. Drifting particles of dust danced lazily through the cold light as the sergeant signalled his squad to follow him into the bland octagonal hallway leading into the innards of the *Advent Imperatus*. The ship was completely dark – not even emergency lumen lit any of the halls and chambers they had passed so far. The boots of the five highly trained soldiers rang on the steel-plated floors. Other than that, everything remained eerily quiet.

'This is like a ghost ship,' Guardsman Miika voxed to the rest of the squad. 'Did you see the hull on our way in? Not a single scratch on her. No battle damage. Nothing.'

'I know,' Tsararel agreed. 'And how did a single frigate become stranded so far out here? What happened to the rest of the fleet?'

'I know what will happen to you if you don't start maintaining vox discipline soon,' Sergeant Gerrikan barked.

The five guardsmen went on in silence, deeper into the vessel and further away from the safety of their dropship back in the hangar bay. *It is strange though*, Gerrikan thought to himself. The lonely Tempest-class ship had just appeared, drifting through the stars, dark and inert. Imperial authorities had tried hailing the frigate, but to no avail. Eventually Gerrikan's squad had been despatched to investigate where the *Advent Imperatus* had so suddenly come from. They hadn't met any resistance when their craft entered the hangar bay.

Upon arrival, they had found that the ship's generator still idled, powering the emergency protocols that maintained the flow of recycled air and a stable gravity field, but that was about it. So far, they hadn't found any sign of the crew.

After a short while they reached a junction. One passage led towards the bridge while the other went deeper in to the guts of the frigate, where the crew compartments and medicae stations would be.

'Tsararel, Izzren, you check the lower decks,' Gerrikan ordered. 'Miika, Holt, you're with me. We'll see if there's someone on the bridge. Keep your weapons' spirits watchful.'

'Come on, Izz,' Tsararel said, shouldering his plasma gun as he marched into the left corridor. As Izzren followed, Gerrikan caught himself looking after her longer than he intended. His younger sister had joined the 105th Falkenberg Wardrakes not too long ago, and the pride he felt was still fresh. She had doggedly fought her way through the harsh recruitment tithing and the brutal training of the regiment in the very next intake after Gerrikan himself, determined that she should join the same tithe uptake – and thus the same regiment – as him.

Izzren hadn't done this out of some misplaced need for his company or protection. Rather, she had always been determined not to let Gerrikan outpace her in anything. Sure enough, she was an exceptional soldier. But the sergeant could not simply brush aside the fact that he was her superior now. He couldn't treat her differently than any other of his warriors.

'You coming, sarge?' Miika asked.

'Does the Emperor sit on a Golden Throne?' Gerrikan replied. 'Move, to the bridge.'

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The bridge of the *Advent Imperatus* seemed as dark and lifeless as the rest of the ship. 'Emperor's eye, I don't understand this,' Gerrikan muttered. 'Let's spread out, Vigilantus pattern. Miika, you take the right flank, Holt, you're left.'

The two other guardsmen acknowledged his command with short vox-clicks, and lifted their lasguns. Miika prowled off to the far right side of the bridge. His lumen danced over dark screens and servitor stations.

'Do you see that?' he voxed. Slumped servitors hung in their mountings, still connected to tactical data-shrines and cogitator stations. They looked malnourished and dead, but there was no obvious cause.

'Hold position, Miika' Gerrikan voxed. 'Holt, investigate the other flank.'

As soon as his voice ceased, Holt was off to the left. Her lumen swivelled through the darkness as she made for the next vantage point. The light suddenly jerked upwards as she fell.

'Holt, come in!' Gerrikan called.

'I'm alright,' she answered, breathing heavily. 'I... I tripped over someone. He's dead, like the servitors.'

Gerrikan advanced to Holt's position, heart thudding against his ribs.

What in the Emperor's name is going on here?

'He looks as if he just lay down and never got up,' Holt commented as he arrived. She was right; the man just lay there, collapsed like a forgotten rag doll.

Gerrikan nodded and snuck forwards silently to check the rest of the bridge. He kept a keen eye on his surroundings, but there weren't any life signs, just more dead crew members. The corpses all looked gaunt and haggard, as if they had simply fallen into a coma or starved to death, sunken over their stations. 'No life signs,' he voxed as he reached the command throne in the centre of the bridge. He frowned as he looked upon the ship's deceased commander. The shipmaster's eyes were wide open, glassy, staring at the ceiling. Gerrikan shuddered. 'At ease, Wardrakes. There's no one here but the dead. May the Emperor protect their souls.'

'There must be a reason for all this, sir,' Holt replied. 'People don't simply fall over and die...'

Gerrikan nodded. 'I agree. Miika, awaken the data extractor and hook it up. Let us see if we can get some of the cogitator banks up and running. Maybe they can spit out anything about what has happened here. In the meantime, let's hope that Tsararel and Izzren have more luck.'

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The plated doorway before Izzren opened with a soft hiss as she punched the activation rune. 'Alright,' she muttered. 'We should find the medicae station down there.' *And maybe some answers,* she thought.

Tsararel nodded. 'Quick sweep of the outer chambers then advance to the crew compartments. The sooner we're done here, the better. I don't like this place at all.'

Izzren nodded. 'You'll take point,' she decided. 'I'd prefer to have your plasma gun between me and... whatever we find down there.'

Tsararel shrugged and lifted his weapon, thumbing its activation rune. The plasma coil illuminated their surroundings in soft blue light and hummed gently. The squad's weapons specialist took a step towards the doorway.

'Tsararel Crestlan of the 105th Falkenberg Wardrakes speaking,' he shouted into the darkness, his voice augmented by his helmet's internal vox-gear. 'Can anyone hear me?'

The silence only seemed to become louder. Izzren could almost feel it breezing over her from the darkness like a chilly wind.

Tsararel looked back at her. The red shimmer of his bionic eye implant mixed with the blue glow of his plasma weapon.

'Let's go,' he said, and advanced into the next chamber.

Izzren followed him and let her lumen wander over the hall that opened behind the doorway.

'I think we found the crew... ' Tsararel breathed as he took in the scene before them.

Izzren's skin crawled as the light of her lumen travelled through the medicae station, brushing over row after row of dormant figures on gurneys. They were hooked to blinking life support shrines. Several gurneys had toppled over. People were strapped to some of them, alive, but completely inert. Others had rolled from their sick beds, ripping out the life support wires in process. They seemed to have starved where they lay. Strewn between them were the medicae themselves, as gaunt and malnourished as their patients. A thin film of spilled nutritional liquid covered the floor and dripped from life support systems only half hooked to people who wouldn't need them anymore.

'It looks as if... something made them just drop into a sort of coma, one after another,' Izzren whispered.

'They must have known,' Tsararel said, nodding towards a dead medicae adept on the floor. 'They tried to save as many as they could before it took them as well. Anyone not hooked into life support just starved.'

'But why?' Izzren wondered, still trying to process the macabre scene in front of her. 'What happened?'

'Only the Emperor knows,' Tsararel replied. Izzren noticed that his grip around the plasma gun had tightened. 'Better let the sergeant know what we found.'

Izzren nodded and opened a vox connection. 'Izzren to Gerrikan.' A short click indicated that her brother was listening.

'We've found an improvised medicae station on the crew decks,' she continued. 'Multiple dead, other crew hooked into life support, but they're dormant. Everyone who's not connected to life support is dead.'

'... suggest... wake...' Gerrikan's voice came in chopped.

Izzren tapped on the vox bead of her helmet. 'Gerrikan? Sergeant!'

'... repeat... wake ...'

'Blasted thing,' she cursed. 'Something's blocking the vox signal down here, Tsararel.'

Tsararel nodded. 'Think we should try waking one of them up for questioning?'

'I suppose,' Izzren answered and approached the closest gurney. She carefully avoided stepping onto a rotting medicae servitor next to it and eyed the blinking control station of the life support system the man was hooked into. 'Medela pattern, type four...' she muttered. Izzren punched a series of Imperial standard codes into the control panel and intoned the few catch-all prayers she knew for rousing machine spirits.

'This should bring him back to the Emperor's service.'

A soft hum came from the life support system as it pumped drugs into the dormant patient. Izzren took a step back, lifted her lasgun and aimed it at the comatose man. A side glance told her that Tsararel had his weapon aimed at him as well.

A few moments passed, but the man just lay there, as unmoving and inert as the ship itself.

Izzren took a deep breath and closed in on him, almost reluctantly. Ever so slowly, she bowed down. Eventually, she could hear his breath coming in a slow, flat rhythm. His chest barely moved, but he was definitely alive. He just didn't seem to actually be in there.

Izzren was about to say something, but the words caught in her throat as Tsararel groaned behind her.

She whirled around, instincts kicking in instantly as she aimed her lasgun. Cruel silver claws protruded from her comrade's stomach. Before Izzren could react any further, Tsararel was violently lifted and hurled across the room, crashing into a row of gurneys.

That was not the reason why she started screaming.

Izzren squeezed the trigger of her lasgun, aiming it towards Tsararel's killer as it sprung into sudden motion and rushed towards her.

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'Izzren? Izzren! I repeat, don't try to wake up anyone down there!' Gerrikan shouted into his vox, although he knew that the connection had been interrupted.

'Emperor's eye,' he cursed, looking back onto the unsteadily flickering monitor of the cogitator systems. He felt a thick knot tightening in his throat. 'Pack everything together, Miika. We have all the information that we need. Let's rendezvous with Izzren and Tsararel, then we'll evacuate.'

Miika nodded and started furling up the data extractor's cables with practised movements. Gerrikan was glad he did not have to look at the images they had extracted from the cogitator banks any longer. The Imperial authorities had to know as soon as possible.

'Extractor is appeased and quiescent, sarge,' Miika said eventually.

'Acknowledged. Move out, Wardrakes. Let's get our comrades.'

Holt hesitated. 'Wait a second,' she said. 'The auspex is picking something up.'

She hadn't even finished her sentence when Gerrikan felt a sudden tingling sensation in his stomach, as if he was dropping into a deep abyss. The air around them sizzled.

'Move! Now!' the sergeant shouted, breaking into a run.

Three blinding green flashes of energy burst in mid-air and nightmarish creatures stepped from them. They were humanoid in shape, but their bodies were cast from a brass-coloured metal alloy. As Gerrikan looked in horror, one of the things turned towards him, its single eye glowing unsympathetically as it raised a ghostly glowing gun and fired.

Gerrikan skidded beneath the burst of deathly energy and cursed as sparks from a damaged console behind him rained down on him. Holt had no such luck. One of the metal creatures shot her in the head and she collapsed, dead before she hit the ground.

Miika managed to loose a salvo of lasfire into the back of Holt's killer. A row of molten craters appeared on the stooped thing's carapace, but the metal started moving and flowed back together. Only seconds later, it seemed as if Miika had never fired any shots at the creature. The thing turned towards the guardsman impossibly fast, methodically returning fire. It unerringly hit Miika's head. He silently fell against a navigation console and lay still.

Gerrikan cursed and drew his power sword. The three metal figures ignored him for the moment and stalked towards Miika's body. *They want the data extractor*, Gerrikan realised. He had to act fast.

'For the Emperor!' he shouted, and ran towards the nearest creature. The metal warriors turned to face him, and two shots cooked the air over his head as he let himself fall. His momentum carried him onwards and his power sword sliced through the shins of one of the metal monstrosities. As the thing collapsed, Gerrikan rushed towards Miika and grabbed the data extractor. Then he was at the bridge door, diving headlong through its frame as more energy beams punched into the surrounding walls. Gerrikan responded in kind, tossing a frag grenade behind him.

'That ought to keep those blasted things occupied,' he muttered to himself.

As he rushed down the dark corridor, his thoughts wandered to his sister. He wanted to go get her, wanted to escape with her, but he knew his duty. He clutched the data extractor tighter. Duty always came first.

He couldn't treat her differently.

He had to reach the dropship, had to get out of this ship and report what he had seen.

The light from his lumen jumped through the black corridor unsteadily. Gerrikan panted heavily as he pressed onwards. His heart hammered in his chest and he expected his life to be snuffed out by a shot to the back of his head any second. But the shot never came, and he eventually reached the *Advent Imperatus*' hangar bay.

'Get the engines running!' Gerrikan voxed as he ran towards the waiting craft.

The hatch of the dropship's crew compartment opened, and a hunched silhouette stepped outside, unrecognisable in the darkness of the hangar.

'What are you doing? Get the engines running!' Gerrikan repeated, hurrying closer.

'Gerrikan, I'm so glad you made it,' his sister answered. Gerrikan stopped in his tracks, and his heart seemed to skip a beat.

'Izzren?' he whispered. She made it after all! She actually survived! They would escape this nightmare together.

'Yes, brother,' the figure said and came closer. As it stepped into the light of Gerrikan's lumen, the sergeant felt his strength sapping out of his body, and he sank to his knees.

'No... Izzren, no.'

The skin of his sister was draped around the metal frame of the thing that prowled towards him. Beneath the empty holes where her blue eyes once sat, callous green lenses watched him, observing his every reaction with cold intent. With each step, blood dripped from the nightmarish apparition.

'Brother,' the monster repeated, modulating the voice of his sister to perfection.

Gerrikan closed his eyes and welcomed its embrace.

