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# The Ascendancy Veil

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## Chapter 1

They loomed through the smoke, shadows in the billowing murk. In the instant before they came charging into the hall, they seemed as demons, their forms huge and vaporous; but they were not demons. The demons were still outside.

The pitiful scattering of defenders met the assault with grim stoicism. Some had taken station on the balcony that ran around the room, but most were arranged at ground level behind a barricade they had assembled from toppled statues, plinths, and what small tables they had found. The Saramyr tendency towards minimal furniture had not worked to their advantage here. Still, they took what cover they could, and aimed their rifles, and filled the air with gunfire as the ghauregs came pounding towards them.

Once, the entrance hall had been exquisite, a cool and echoing chamber intended to impress dignitaries and nobles. Now its finery and ornaments were stripped, the walls scorched. The floor was cracked by the same explosion that had set fire to the hangings and tapestries near the doorway. A dozen or so monstrous corpses were scattered there. One well-timed bomb had dealt with the first wave of creatures; the rifles would take care of a portion of the next. But beyond that, the defenders' cause was hopeless.

The ghauregs thundered across the wide, open space at the centre of the hall and were cut down, their thick grey pelts ribboning with red as the rifle balls punched through them. But for each one that died there was another behind it, and several that fell got up again, their wounds only enraging them further. Eight feet high at the shoulder and apelike in posture, they were savage ogres of fur and muscle. Pain and death meant nothing to them, and they raced through the crossfire with suicidal fury.

The defenders managed to reprime fast enough for a second volley before the creatures crashed into the barricade and began tearing it apart, clambering over the top to reach the men behind. Rifles were dropped and swords drawn, but against the sheer size and power of the ghauregs there were too few blades. They knew this, and still they fought. They had been ordered to hold the administrative complex and they would do so with their lives. Saramyr soldiers would take death before the shame of disobeying orders.

The ghauregs punched and grabbed at their targets. Where the defenders were not quick enough to evade, they were bludgeoned to pulp or snatched up to be flung through the air like broken mannequins. Those who dodged away struck back with their swords, slashing at tendons and hamstrings. In moments, the floor was slippery with blood, and the cries of men were drowned by the bellowing of the beasts.

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The soldiers on the balcony picked their targets as best they could among the melee, but they had problems of their own now. For behind the ghauregs had come several skrendel: slender, nimble things with long, strangling fingers that swarmed up the pillars. What little support the soldiers could give the men below dissipated swiftly as they struggled to keep the newcomers away.

The beasts had destroyed the barricade now and were sowing mayhem. Outsize jaws bit and snapped, crunching through bone and gristle; enormous shoulders strained as they rent apart their small and frail prey. In less than a minute, the remaining half-dozen ghauregs decimated the tiny force holding the entrance hall, and only a few soldiers were left whose deaths seemed merely an afterthought. But as the ghauregs' small yellow eyes fixed on the final, defiant dregs of resistance, one of their number burst into flame.

The two Sisters of the Red Order swept into the hall from the back, an arrogant lethality in their stride. Both wore the sheer dark dress of the Order, both the intimidating face-paint of their kind: the black and red shark-tooth triangles across their lips, the twin crimson crescents curving over their eyes from forehead to cheek. Their irises were the colour of smouldering coals.

The other ghauregs shied away from the heat of their burning companion, and in that moment of hesitation the Sisters took them apart. Two of the beasts fell, spewing blood from every orifice; two more burst into white flame, becoming pillars of fire and smoke and bubbling fat; the last was picked up as if by some invisible hand and pulverised against the wall with enough force to shatter the stone. The skrendel began to scatter, winding back down the pillars and making for the entranceway. One of the Sisters made a casual gesture with a black-gloved hand and maimed them all, popping and cracking their thin bones and leaving them flailing weakly on the floor.

In seconds, it was done. The hall was calm, but for the restless industry of the flames, the mewling of the dying skrendel and the cries of wounded men. The remnants of the defenders regarded the Sisters with ragged awe.

Kaiku tu Makaima surveyed the scene before her. Her vision was poised on the cusp of the world of natural light and that of the Weave, overlaying one on top of the other. She looked past the battered and bloodied figures gazing at her, past the corpse-strewn hall to the doorway where smoke from the fire plumed angrily into the room. But beneath that veneer of reality she saw a golden diorama of threads, the stitches and fibres of existence: the whole hall rendered in millions of tiny, endless tendrils. She saw the inrush and exhalation of the stirred air as the living drew it into their lungs; the curl and roll at the heart of the smoke; the stout, unwavering lines of the pillars.

She flexed her fingers and tied up the frantic threads of the flame, wrapping it tighter and tighter until it choked and extinguished itself.

'Juraka has fallen,' she said, her voice ringing out across the hall. 'We retreat southwest to the river.'

She felt their disappointment like a wave. She had not wanted to tell them this. Their companions lay dead around them, dozens of lives sacrificed to defend this place, and she was the one who had to inform the survivors that it was all for nothing. Perhaps they hated her for doing so. Perhaps, in their breasts, they harboured a bitterness that she had arrived and made their struggles meaningless, and they thought: filthy Aberrant.

She cared little. She had greater concerns.

She left her companion, Phaeca, to explain matters in more sensitive terms while she walked through the dispersing smoke of the snuffed fire and out into the warm and bright winter's day.

Juraka had been founded on a hillside on the banks of the colossal Lake Azlea, an ancient market town that had begun as a stop-off point for travellers making the long trek from Tchamaska to Machita along the Prefectural Highway. In time, it had evolved a fishing and boatmaking industry, and sometime during the bloody internecine wars following the death of the mad Emperor Cadis tu Othoro it had been fortified and garrisoned. Latterly, it had become a vital part of the line which the remnants of the Empire had held for years against the Weavers and the hordes at their command.

But by the time Nuki's eye sank below the horizon today, it would be in the enemy's hands.

Kaiku swore under her breath, an unladylike habit picked up from her long-dead brother and never shed. She knew that the stalemate would have to end sooner or later, that eventually one side would devise an advantage over the other. She just wished the Weavers had not got there first.

The administrative complex was a sprawling, walled enclosure of several grandiose buildings in a circular formation. To her right, houses ran up the hill to the fringe of a small forest; to her left, streets and tiny plazas fell away in a clutter of ornamental slate rooftops to the vast expanse of the lake, which glittered sharply in the crisp daylight until it was lost to the haze of distance. Ships were battling out there in a slow dance, the sporadic crack of gunfire and the bellow of cannons drifting up to her. The shore was crowded with jetties and warehouses, most of which were smashed and burning now. Smoke rose in indistinct columns, cloaking the lower streets in a fug.

Kaiku's gaze roamed across the town, across the broken shrines and sundered houses, the streets where men and women fought running skirmishes with shrillings and furies and worse. Gristle-crows soared high on the thermals overhead, providing a literal birds-eye view for their Nexus masters. But these were enemies she knew, creatures she had dealt with many times in the four years since this war had begun. She turned her attention to the authors of the town's downfall.

There were two of them, one down by the shore and another rearing over the treeline on the hilltop. Feya-kori: 'blight demons' in the Saramyrrhic mode used for speaking of supernatural beings. They were forty feet high: drooling, lumbering, foetid things

in a mocking approximation of human shape, distorted figures with long, thick arms and legs that walked on all fours and seethed a dire miasma as they moved. They were formed of some kind of noisome, roiling sludge that dripped and spattered, and where it touched it spread fire and rot, causing leaves to crinkle and wood to decay. They had no faces, merely a bulge between their shoulders, in which burned incandescent orbs that trailed luminous gobbets. They moaned plaintively to each other as they went about their destruction, their mournful cries accompanying the slow, idiot savagery of their actions.

As Kaiku watched, one of them waded out into the lake. The waters hissed and boiled, and a black patina began to spread from where its limbs plunged. She felt her stomach sink as she saw its intention. It forged towards one of the Empire's junks, and with a doleful groan it raised one stump of a hand and brought it crashing down onto the vessel, breaking it in half and setting men and sails aflame. Kaiku closed her eyes reflexively and turned away, but even then she could feel the force of the demons' presence through the Weave, a blasphemous dark pummelling at her consciousness.

The other feya-kori was surging out of the forest, leaving a vile scar of browning foliage and collapsing trees in its wake. It smashed an arm into the nearest rooftops, wanton in its malice. Five of Kaiku's Sisters had already died attempting to tackle the feya-kori. All over Juraka the order to retreat was spreading, and the forces of the Empire were pulling back to the southwest.

Then she sensed the spidery movement of a Weaver down in the streets below, heard the distant screams of soldiers, and the rage and sorrow in her heart found a target.

If I cannot stop this, she promised herself, I will at least take one of them in payment

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She stalked away from the administrative complex, out through the prayer gate with its eloquent paean to Naris, god of scholars, and into the narrow, sloping streets beyond.

Blood ran in chain-link trickles between the cobbles, inching slowly downhill from the bodies of men and women and the foetally curled corpses of Aberrant predators. Kaiku experienced a moment of bitter humour at how Aberrants, which were created by the Weavers in the first place, were simultaneously their greatest resource and their greatest opponents. She and all the other Sisters were a product of the same process that had spawned monstrosities like the ghauregs. She was certain that the gods, watching from the Golden Realm, never tired of laughing at the way events had turned out.

She passed swiftly between the newly scarred buildings, little fearing the creatures that ran amok in the alleys. Wooden balconies and shop-fronts gaped emptily as if in shock at how they had been deserted. Carts and rickshaws were left where they had been abandoned in the rush to evacuate the townsfolk. A crackle of rifle fire sounded up the hill as dozens of soldiers wasted their ammunition in a futile attempt to hurt the demon that was battering its way towards the lake from the treeline.

The screams she had heard were louder now. She sensed the stirring of the Weave like coiling tentacles, the Weaver's ugly manipulation of the invisible fabric beneath the skin of the waking world. She hated them, hated their clumsiness in comparison to the Sisters' elegant sewing, hated their brutal way of forcing nature to their will. She fed her rage as she approached, concealing her presence from the Weaver with a few deft evasions.

The street opened out into a junction of three major thoroughfares. The heart of the junction was a cobbled area in which stood a bronze statue of a catfish, depicted as if swimming upward towards the sky, its torso curved and fins and whiskers trailing. It was the animal aspect of Panazu, god of rivers, storms and rain and – by extension – lakes. An appropriate choice for a town on the shore of the greatest lake on the continent. Two-storied buildings leaned in close, their shutters hanging open, cracked plant pots outside and wooden walls riven by holes from rifle balls.

This had been one of the critical defensive points of Juraka, and had been fortified accordingly with barricades and a pair of fire-cannon. But such measures were useless against Weavers. Without a Sister of the Red Order to counter him, the Weaver had muddled the soldiers' minds and thrown them into rout. Aberrants had overrun the unmanned positions and were tearing into their panicking prey. The Weaver was nowhere to be seen.

Kaiku did not waste time considering how this predicament had come about. There should have been a Sister here to protect the soldiers, but the Red Order were in disarray across the town. Instead she stood brazenly at one end of the junction and opened up the Weave. The air stirred around her, rippling her dress and ruffling her tawny hair where it lay across one side of her face. She surrendered herself to the ecstasy of Weaving.

The pure joy of disembodiment, of witnessing the raw stuff of creation in an endless profusion of glittering threads, was enough to drive the untrained to madness. But Kaiku had been there many times, and she had mantras and methods of self-control that anchored her against that first tidal wash of narcotic harmony. She saw the tears and rents left by the Weaver's passing, felt his influence extending into the golden stitchwork dolls that were the soldiers, twisting their perceptions, making them confused and helpless.

He was unaware of her yet, and she used that. She slipped closer, winding along fibres, darting from strand to strand so that the emanations of her approach would be subtle and widely spread, faint enough to be missed in amongst the throb of the demons' presence. She could locate him with ease: he was in the upper storey of an old cathouse overlooking the junction. This Weaver was young and careless, for despite his power he did not notice her until she was close enough to strike him.

She did not strike him, however. Even angry as she was, she knew the risks that facing a Weaver entailed. Instead, she slid into the fibres of the beams that held up the roof of the cathouse, securing herself along their length to obtain the necessary mental leverage. The best way to kill a Weaver, she had found, was to do it indirectly.

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In one violent twist, she ripped the beams apart.

The explosive detonation caused by shredding the fibres of the Weave created enough concussion to blow the shutters of the cathouse off their hinges. Flame billowed from the topmost windows; boards splintered and went spinning end over end through the air. The roof caved in, crushing the Weaver beneath it. The reverberations of the death flashed out across the Weave in a frantic pulse and slowly faded away.

One less of you, then, Kaiku thought, as the Weave faded from her vision.

The soldiers were coming to their senses, disorientated at finding themselves in the midst of an attack. Some were too slow to react, and were cut to pieces by the Aberrants that swarmed among them; but others were faster, and they brought their swords to bear. There were enough remaining to put up a resistance yet, and they did so with sudden and fierce anger.

Kaiku walked among them, slaying Aberrants as she went. With a wave of her hand she burst organs and shattered bone, tossed the creatures away or burned them to tallow and char. The soldiers, shouting hoarse rallying cries to one another, fought with renewed heart. Kaiku joined the cry, venting a deep and nameless hatred for what had been done to her, to her land, to these people; and for a time, she steeped herself in blood.

Presently, there were no more enemies to fight. She came to herself as if from a vague and shallow trance. The junction was quiet now, a charnel house of bodies rank with the stink of gore and ignition powder. The soldiers were congratulating themselves and watching her warily, suspicious of their saviour. One of them took a step towards her, as if to offer her thanks or gratitude. His step faltered and he turned it aside, pretending that he was shifting his feet. She could see them arguing quietly as to who should do the honourable thing and acknowledge her help, but the fact that no-one would do it of their own free will rendered the entire charade hollow. Gods, even now she was Aberrant to them.

‘We should go,’ said Phaeca, who had appeared at her shoulder. When Kaiku did not respond, the Sister laid a hand gently on her arm.

Kaiku made a soft noise of acknowledgement in her throat, but she did not move. The feya-kori from uphill was coming closer, its funereal moans preceding the jagged sounds of the destruction it was wreaking.

‘We should go,’ Phaeca repeated, quietly. Kaiku realised that she had tears standing in her eyes, tears of raw fury and disappointment. She wiped them with the back of her hand and stalked away, overwhelmed by a prescience that the desperate war they had been fighting for their homeland had just turned fundamentally, and not in their favour.