


Text copyright © 2019 James Aichinger

The right of James Aichinger to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form, or by any means with prior permission in writing from the Author or in the case of reprographic production in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licencing Agency and may not be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.



*Edge of the
Flame*

Listen. Listen to the voices in the dark.

They were abandoned.

They were imprisoned.

They were forgotten.

Can't you hear them breathing?

Can't you feel their shadows on your back?

One of them is reaching out.

His smile is cold and pitiless as the slopes of hell.

And he is dying to hear you scream.

The darkness is rising.

Hope is fading.

And in the depths of his slumber, Azrael is stirring.

The Time of the Valkirien has come again.

Adanis screamed as the words seared across his mind. For a moment, a single everlasting moment, he felt the oppressive weight of a metal mask burning into his skin. The world around him turned to ash beneath his fingertips.

The darkness returned.

*

*

*

There was no noise, only a howling silence. Adanis opened his eyes and stared at the rocky ceiling a few feet above him. A clammy, invasive coldness had soaked through his body, leaving him numb and lifeless to his core. His muscles, hardened by months of manual labour in the mines, were cramped and filled with a dull, aching pain. He opened his mouth to groan and felt a gentle trickle of rock dust pour into his throat.

Choking, he rolled onto his side as the ceiling above him gave a warning creak. His arms and legs twinged with pain as blood began to flow through them again. Muzzily, he tried to make sense of the situation.

Dark and quiet. No other sounds of movement. Cracked ceiling. Cave-in? He raised a hand to his face and felt the sticky wetness that clung to it like drying paint. Another damn head injury. He flexed his arms and legs. No other serious ones.

His eyes were growing accustomed to the gloom now. He could just about see a beam of second-hand daylight. It wasn't much, barely granting texture to the darkness, but it was coming from somewhere nearby.

Adanis pushed himself to his knees and immediately fell sideways as the world spun around him. Concussion then; best to rest it off. Adanis' eyelids began to sag. No, he couldn't. No one was coming for him, he couldn't let himself fall asleep.

He brushed his coarse black hair out of his eyes and began to crawl through the mud and dust towards the tunnel entrance. It couldn't be blocked by more than a few feet of mud; the rocks were cracked but

still holding. He could dig himself out with one of the emergency kits that were fixed into the walls. Almost without thinking, he reached for the belt of his harness and the button that activated his emergency beacon.

Everything further down must have been completely buried, but up here the heavy duty props had held and prevented a complete collapse. He reached up and pulled a shovel off the wall. Standing up would be foolish, he was tall enough to brush the ceiling in most buildings, let alone in the mine. He crawled forwards until his hand touched something cold and wet. He looked down and had to turn away as the bile rose in his throat.

The corpse beneath his fingers was once a Soligarnan. Hunched and hairless, he was almost as broad as he was tall, with long arms and large three-fingered hands. His leathery skin was covered in blood from the cave-in and his eyes were staring at something no mortal could see.

With the professionalism of an experienced miner, Adanis undid the man's ID tags and continued crawling. At least he wouldn't have had to worry about cracking his head on the ceiling, Adanis thought bitterly; no one around here even came up to his chest. He reached the wall of mud and rocks that marked the way out and set to work.

It was hard being different. It wasn't just the height or the extra fingers, it was the patch of fur on his head that made him stand out from the crowd. On the plus side, he seemed to have almost limitless endurance. So his mutation wasn't all bad.

Half an hour later, the final rock fell out onto the gritty red sand that covered the Dustbelt of Soligarna. Adanis poked his head into the fading light and breathed deeply. All around him the coarse grass whispered in the breeze.

Most of Soligarna that wasn't sea was a single huge continent, with scrubland and deserts in the centre where the rain never reached. It was there were the mountains and canyons reared, promising wealth and security to those who dared mine for riches. Metals and stone all

flowed from the scrublands that ringed the desert with the jagged teeth of the earth.

Adanis hauled himself out of the hole and lay panting in the sparse shade of a nearby bush. By the looks of it the main drill engine had blown, leaving a glassy crater in the side of the mountain a few hundred metres from the tunnel entrance. He glanced away, not wanting to stare at the dozen or so charred corpses littered around it. Away in the distance Ki'mothrii, the foremost trading post and industrial centre in the Dustbelt, stood silent and smoking.

Adanis narrowed his eyes as a sudden gust swept fistfuls of sand up into his face. Where was everyone? The mine should be teeming with people trying to dig out survivors after a fall like that.

He started down the rough track towards Ki'mothrii, keeping his arms up to protect his eyes from the worst of the dust. It was over a mile back to town but darkness was already sweeping in; the long afternoon was drawing to a close. Staggering and slipping on the loose rocks, Adanis nonetheless kept walking, willing his legs to carry him a little further. There was no telling what might find him if he stayed the night outside in this condition: one thing there was no shortage of in the acrid scrubland was predators.

Off in the distance something howled.

Just a bit further, just a bit further. He lived on the outskirts of the town with his mother. She would come and find him. She always did.

Adanis could feel his thoughts growing fuzzier. The world around him seemed to pitch and sway, threatening to tip him off his feet. His skin felt hot and clammy, as though sweat was pouring off him in rivers. Something hard and hollow bounced off his foot and rattled away into the brush.

She had the same mutation too, didn't she? His mind oscillated wildly from one tangent to the next as the delirium took its toll. Strange how he had never thought about it until now.

Something bleached-white and branch-like splintered beneath his shoes as he stumbled onwards, wondering if his father had been like

him too. His mother had refused to speak about him, or anything else from before the accident.

There was the sign. Only a few metres more.

She always said the mines would be the death of him. A slightly manic smile creased Adanis' grime-smeared face. Not today though. She always seemed so worried to let him out of her sight.

Something shifted beneath his feet. He slipped and fell to the hard-packed earth, feeling the stones dig deep into his knees. Just at that moment, the wind dropped and Adanis found himself staring into the face of a skull. It ginned back, strands of blood and flesh still clinging to it. Adanis looked up and felt his own blood run cold.

His house was a burning husk, gutted and torn to shreds. Behind it, the rising vista of Ki'mothrui looked like the entrance to hell in the twilight. Barely a single building was left standing; the whole place was one big pile of rubble. No, not a pile of rubble, a tomb. The bodies of hundreds, maybe thousands were littered across the streets. The smell of burning flesh clawed its way into his nostrils, making him choke and gag.

Unseen behind him, a figure dropped from a nearby ledge. Adanis felt a hand close around his mouth and before he could shout a needle pierced his neck. The last thing he saw was a man with dusty red hair and eyes as black as the space between stars.