

# SALVATION

*A Necromunda novel by C S Goto*

Zefer Tyranus is an inquisitive man and an able administrator. His family has been in the service of the Noble House Ko'iron for generations, acting as curators, record keepers and occasionally spies for the famed scholars and poets of that glorious house. His position affords him residence in an exclusive zone of the Spire, enveloped in luxury, and very close to the walls of the ruling House Helmawr.

However, Zefer's comfortable world is turned upside-down when he hears tales of an ancient artefact that could possibly link House Ko'iron to the founding fathers of the Spire itself. Sent out on a dangerous mission to retrieve it, Zefer must learn the hard way that the Underhive is no place for a simple curator!



*Cassern S Goto lives next to the giant television screen at Shinjuku station in Tokyo. In his endless search for ways to avoid the paroxysms of city life, he has discovered writing and cats. Salvation is his second novel following the Warhammer 40,000 epic Dawn of War.*

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## *from SALVATION*

ZEFER COULDN'T SLEEP. He hadn't even gone home. Instead, he had walked around the winding, undulating streets of Gwentria's Fringe – an affluent sector of the Ko'iron domain that lay up against the edge of the exterior wall of the Spire itself – muttering to himself and wringing his hands. He couldn't get the book out of his head.

Before he knew where he was, he found himself propping up the bar in the Quake Tavern with a frothing tankard in his hand. The place was bustling with people, just as it was every night. The locals were chattering boisterously about money and trade, and small pockets of strangers were huddled around tables in the darkened corners, talking conspiratorially about their adventures in the lower reaches of Hive Primus. Zefer had once found himself in the middle of such a group, since it had descended upon his table as he sat quietly next to the fire nursing his drink. One of the men had claimed to be from Hive City, on the other side of the great Wall that separated the unsanitary masses from the civilised people of the Spire. He had told some remarkable stories about his adventures in the Underhive, where he claimed to have found ancient archeotech from the time of the Emperor himself. Zefer had assumed that it was all nonsense, but he had subsequently seen the man in the Ko'iron librarium, evidently in the employ of the Acquisitions Section.

Zefer surveyed the scene absently-mindedly, wondering vaguely whether he should go and find a seat somewhere. As he turned to face the room, a dark-hooded figure brushed past him, jolting his arm and sending his drink flying. The man gave no apology and seemed not even to have

noticed, leaving Zefer standing forlornly in a puddle of mead, with his arm still outstretched, clutching nothing.

As the hooded man approached the bar, the jostling patrons almost fell over as they pushed each other aside to make space for him. The man behind the bar came rushing over at once, leaving a drink half-poured on the counter in front of a fetching young woman in a distractingly revealing red shirt. For a second, Zefer and the woman shared a glance of annoyance at all the fuss being made of the Delaque venator, but Zefer dropped his eyes quickly, suddenly searching the ground for something that he hadn't dropped.

It's no good, thought Zefer as his glance jumped around the room in agitation and the mead soaked slowly into his cloth boots, there are too many distractions in here. He needed a place to think.

There was a sign above the bar that read: *Simple rooms – comfortable beds*. Somebody had scribbled a broad smile and an exclamation mark onto the sign in a childish or drunken hand, but Zefer didn't care about the innuendo tonight. He lent over the shoulder of the hooded figure at the bar and slapped a fistful of money onto the counter. The barman stared at him in something approaching awe as Zefer rested one hand on the shoulder of the venator to push himself back away from the bar again. The hooded agent paused momentarily, with his drink just licking at his lips. With an eerie slowness, the venator turned his head to face Zefer, and the Quake Tavern fell into silence. Their faces were so close together that Zefer could clearly see the little red snake tattooed under the venator's left eye.

To the barman, it seemed that the venator affected a slight double-take when he saw the exhausted features of Zefer next to him. There was only a fraction of a second of hesitation before the venator turned his gaze back to his mead and took a deep draw on the foaming liquid.

Zefer hardly seemed to notice the minor miracle of his continued existence, as he dragged himself up the tavern stairs towards one of the guestrooms, he just wanted to rest but the rest of the Quake immediately broke into urgently

whispered gossip. The woman in the red shirt watched him go in admiration, wondering whether all the bravado had been for her benefit.

At the top of the stairs, Zefer just pushed open the first door that he came to and stumbled into the room. He trudged through the incredibly deep pile carpet and flopped onto the bed, letting the curtains around the bed-frame close in around him. For a few minutes he lay on the edge of sleep, as nervous exhaustion fought with nervous energy for control of his consciousness. He rolled fitfully, and moaned, clutching at his head with his hands, as though trying to bring his racing thoughts under control with sheer physical pressure.

The click of a latch being released brought him back to his senses and he froze. Although Zefer could see nothing through the heavy drapes around the bed, he was certain that somebody had entered the room. They were light on their feet, but Zefer could just about hear the deep carpet compressing as they walked carefully around the edge of the bed. After a few seconds, the intruder made it to the other side of the room and there was the sound of another latch clicking, and then the clunk of a closing door.

Zefer pulled back the curtains around the bed and hastened over to the door, sliding home the intricate series of bolts and locks that peppered its surface. Then he rushed over to the window on the other side of the room, tripping slightly in the heavy carpet, and clicked its lock into place. He had been through enough today already, and really couldn't cope with any more excitement. He just wanted to sleep.

THE TUNNEL WAS dark and damp, and the floor was an uneven patchwork of cracked rock. Through the optical enhancers built into her visor, Krellyn could see the hazardous passageway clearly. She could even see the glaring structural weaknesses that would cause the corridor to rupture and collapse if there was ever another sizeable hive-quake in the area. As she stepped carefully over the cracks and ducked under the splinters of stone that stabbed down from the ceiling, she thought about the five miles of open air that lay beneath the weathered passageway under her feet. She walked a bit faster,

keen to get across the invisible drop and into the firmer structure of the Ko'iron librarium on the other side. Like the vast majority of people in Hive Primus, Krelyn had never been outside the immense edifice, and any reminder that there was an outside made her slightly nauseous. Like most people on Necromunda, she was intensely agoraphobic, and the thought of five miles of open space beneath her feet made her eyes bulge as she dashed through the last few metres of the tunnel.

Once inside, Krelyn found herself on a dim landing, with a wide, spiralling, stone staircase twisting off to her left into the upper-levels and down to her right. The mouth of the tunnel itself was perfectly in line with the landing – so the architects clearly had known what was going on inside in the librarium, even if they had not been not so sure about the structures in the Spire itself – but it was hidden behind a large hanging tapestry. As Krelyn looked back from the landing, she winced slightly when she caught sight of the giant, embroidered face of Hredriea, an old, long-dead matriarch of House Ko'iron, flapping slightly in the breeze from the tunnel behind it.

Where to begin? Krelyn peered through the darkness of the unlit librarium, looking for some sign of where the curator might have been working. Sitting outside on the rooftop, night after night, Krelyn had not really appreciated how huge this place actually was. She had imagined a pokey little tower with a few curators at rickety old desks. But the tower from her imagination would have fitted easily into this huge landing, the vaulted ceiling of which disappeared into the shadows far above her head. A little sign on the wall showed the number sixty-five next to an arrow pointing to the right, and Krelyn shook her head in disbelief.

Clicking to infra-red on her visor, Krelyn studied the marble steps. The stone showed no trace of footsteps – it was an incredible heat-conductor and thus a tracker's nightmare. However, there was a thin strip of carpet that ran up the middle of the stairs, and Krelyn could just about make out the telltale pink of human thermo-prints heading up into the upper levels. Five nimble spies and a heavy-footed curator left just about enough of a heat trail, even after half an hour.

Springing up the steps two at a time, but keeping her eyes trained on the ground to keep track of the thermal images, Krelyn rapidly ascended into the upper levels of the librarium. Had she looked up, she would have noticed a distinct change in the decoration after level seventy, marking the beginning of the restricted-access collections, open to only the most trusted of curators. These levels lacked the overbearing grandeur of the fifties and sixties; they were austere, dusty and undecorated, but the carpet was deeper and less worn. Krelyn could actually see physical footprints in the pile, just as she had noticed in the decadence of the Quake Tavern.

The footprints stopped ascending and shuffled off into one of the reading rooms. Krelyn looked up and made a mental note of the number on the grubby little sign that indicated the librarium level – seventy-three. She stared long and hard at the staircase that ran up to seventy-four, even running her hand lightly over the surface of the carpet. There was no sign that even a single foot had compressed that pile in recent days, or even recent years, reflected Krelyn.

The prints led directly to the fourth reading room on level seventy-three, and Krelyn began to detect more agitation in the gait of the curator who had left them. As soon as she entered the reading room itself, the prints of the associated spies broke away from the main track, spraying out into different parts of the room as though scattered by an orderly explosion. Krelyn smiled at the neat organisation, as she realised that each of the spies had taken a different direction automatically, clearly fully aware of where the others would be and unwilling to tread on anyone's toes. This kind of pattern suggested that there was a regular routine at work – after all, she herself had been watching Curator Tyranus for over four years, and the spies had been around for at least that long, presumably without bumping into each other.

The curator's wooden desk was still glowing with an excited pink imprint, suggesting that the man had been pretty agitated by something before he left it. There were hand prints all over the place – not all of them from the same hands. However, glowing brightest of all was the book on the desk,

its paper having absorbed the sweaty attentions of all six of the night's protagonists.

Krelyn carefully picked up the stylus that had been laid across the cover of the book, placing it onto the desk with a faint clink. Then she picked up the book itself, turning it slowly in her hands in case there was something physically special about the tome. It felt like a normal book to her. Perhaps slightly heavier than a comparably sized volume made in recent years, but she was willing to believe that older technologies were heavier than modern ones. *Paradoxes of the Spire* looked older than most.

The thermal prints on the pages stopped about half way through the text, so Krelyn was confident that nobody had read beyond that point. The first line on the last page to have been read caught her imagination: *When you look up, there is nothing but the sky.* In her mind's eyes, this was the privileged view of House Helmawr – the only House in the spire without anything built above their glorious domain. To her, it sounded very boring up there.

A noise made her start and turn her head back towards the stairs. Had she been followed? She froze, straining to hear. In her ear, she could just about discern the faint whirring of the aural implant that amplified and filtered sound; it was slightly faulty now and the whine of the device seemed to obliterate every other sound in the silence of the dark librarium.

There were heavy, dragged footfalls, and she could also hear some wheezing. Whoever it was, they were not very fit. It was very unlikely that this was a dangerous pursuer, but it seemed equally unlikely that it would be some kind of menial, up here in the upper levels of the librarium.

Krelyn closed the book quietly and returned it to the desk. She took a couple of steps towards the heavy darkness between two of the dustiest and least consulted-looking book stacks but then stopped. She hopped back to the desk and snatched up the stylus, placing it carefully across the cover of the book, just as she had found it.

By the time Zefer staggered up to his desk and slouched down into his seat, Krelyn had retreated into the shadows to watch him, with her cloak wrapped around her like a death-shroud.

HE HADN'T BEEN able to sleep. At first, the thought of the stealthy intruder had kept him awake, hidden behind the thick drapes around the bed waiting for silent death to come upon him. But his mind was a mess of activity, and he wouldn't have been able to sleep anyway. He had just laid there, twisting his body under the covers with each convoluted contortion of his brain, working himself into a fever and bringing on the prefigurings of a migraine.

The words of the book had swum in and out of his mind, taunting him with their nonsense and goading him with the fact of his astonishing discovery. He might be the only curator of his generation to have discovered a new piece of authentic historical text. Its authenticity was beyond question, of course, since it was contained within the very pages of one of the most lauded volumes in the Ko'iron collection.

And there was also the question of the stylus. Zefer had been torturing himself about having left the little device on top of the book. If there was anything that was going to draw people's attention to that particular tome, he thought, it would be the unexpected and inexplicable appearance of a wayward stylus on its cover.

He had thought that his careful positioning of the stylus would permit him to work out whether anyone tampered with the book whilst he was away – in much the same way as he had often left it sitting on *his desk* in the past. However, it gradually dawned on him that he didn't want to know whether anyone else had tampered with the book, he simply wanted to make sure that nobody else looked at it at all.

That was the realisation that had finally got Zefer Tyranus out of bed and stumbling urgently down the stairs of the Quake Tavern toward the librarium. As he entered *his floor*, he was breathing heavily and muttering to himself, rehearsing the now-obvious non-sequitur over and over again in his head: '*Though it may be lost, salvation is always found... When you look up, there is nothing but the sky.*'

As he sat down at his desk and snatched up the stylus from the cover the book, Zefer wondered about that last sentence – the one that followed the newly discovered pages. As far as he could tell, it must be referring to one of two places. It was



either a spatial reference to the House of Helmawr – since the only thing higher than the House of the Lord Guardians was the sky itself. Or, alternatively, it could be a temporal reference to a time before the hive had even existed – at such a time, there would be no hive to look up to, so when you looked up there would be nothing but sky, no matter who you were.

Flipping through the pages to find the rough edges of the freshly torn paper that he had sliced earlier that night, Zefer found himself trembling with excitement about the possibilities contained in two entire sides of new, unread lines of the *Paradoxes*.

He found the page and stuffed his nose down into it instantly, savouring the unusual smell of discovery. He recoiled slightly from the scent, snapping his head up out of the book and scrunching up his nose in appalled confusion. He paused for a moment and then sniffed again, just to make sure. There was no doubt: someone had touched the page since he was last there.

Of course, he realised suddenly, casting his mind back to the moment when he had slumped back into his chair, the stylus had moved too. He had very deliberately left it diagonally across the top left-hand corner. When he had returned to the desk, it had been laying perpendicular to that corner – close to where he had left it, but not exactly in place.

Zefer looked nervously over his shoulders and peered into the almost featureless darkness around him. He screwed up his eyes, looking for some variations in the shades of black, but it was hopeless. There was nothing. Whoever had been spying on him was probably long gone by now. In any case, Zefer was too excited to worry about anybody else watching him – the most important thing was that he had the book and that he could spend the whole night poring over it. Whoever else had touched these secret pages, they could not have understood their significance or the meaning of these lines. Zefer had spent years of his life without even daring to dream that this night would come.

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