

The sailor, Martyn Oweland, sat before me in chains, his eyes sunken, his spirit broken, quite pale. I had seen deserters before, but none like this. His hands trembled as he spoke, his words tumbling out in a mix of fear and shame.

Barely above a whisper, *"It spoke to me. Not like any voice I've ever heard. It wasn't from the air, Marshal—it was inside my head."* He tapped his head with a finger. *"It promised riches, power—everything I wanted. And I understood it, though I shouldn't have. The words felt... old. Older than the seas, older than the stars. Thra..."*, his words stopped dead before finishing.

He simply stared down at his shackled wrists as if the words themselves weighed him down. *"Its voice burned. Like acid, it burned."* Breaking into whimpering, *"It told me I was weak, useless, that my comrades thought me a coward. And worse—it \*showed\* me things."* His face losing what little color remained. *"Dark things, things I can't even describe. It whispered, \*S-S-Strike d-down y-your f-family w-with m-my p-power, t-t-take w-what i-is y-yours and k-k-kill the sss-rest.\* I couldn't sss-stop it. I couldn't sss-shut it out-t. Worst, I could feel the urge to follow the voice."*



**W**ith a harse voice I let out, "You fled," though the answer was already plain.

**T**hrough tears streaming, "I had to," he choked. "I thought if I ran, I could escape it. But it followed me, Marshal. It's still here, even now. It's in my mind, repeating to me. It never stops." He looked up at me then, his eyes glistening with tears. "Please, sir. End this. Hang me. Send me to the gallows. I can't bear it any longer."

**I** closed my ledger and stood, fixing him with a steady gaze. "You deserted your post and abandoned your comrades in their hour of need. The punishment is death. May your god judge you for your actions."

**T**he words felt hollow as I spoke them. Martyn Oweland nodded, resigned, almost relieved. His fate was sealed, yet the burden weighed heavy on me. He had left behind a young, pregnant wife in Gyrax, a woman who would now face the world alone. Whether the child lived or died, they would grow up without a father. His sentence would serve the law, but it brought no justice to his family—or to him.

**M**artyn Oweland was executed at dawn, his body swinging from the gallows as a warning to others. But his words stayed with me, gnawing at the edges