

JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

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Jonathan Green's first story for Black Library appeared in the very first volume of the original Inferno! magazine back in 1998, and we are thrilled to see him return to Inferno! with this mind-warping tale of that most psychically gifted of Chaos Space Marine Legions, the Thousand Sons.

Three sorcerers converge on an ancient necron structure in the hopes of retrieving something of great value to all three of them. But they will find that though dormant, the necrons do not give up their treasures easily...

The orb designated as the Godstar tumbled through the void as it had done for countless aeons. More artefact than world, it was not bound to the gravity well of any one celestial body. The light cast by dying suns barely penetrated the oily green corona surrounding it, painting the monolithic structures covering the comet-sized construct's surface with their suffused luminescence.

Below the protective shield, before a smooth obsidian pyramidal edifice, space-time deformed and buckled. Strands of coral-coloured warp matter and aquamarine etheric energy bled out from a rent in reality. Forming into tendrils, they behaved like the tentacles of some deep-sea cephalopod testing the limits of their new habitat.

The writhing corona of kaleidoscopic colours widened, as the hole opened in front of the pyramid. With ice crystals frosting the void-black stones of the processional avenue onto which they stepped, three figures emerged from the portal.

First through was Prototokos the All-Seeing, warp-mage of the Thousand Sons Legion. Eerie green light cast by carved channels in the blockwork of the pyramid reflected from the greaves and vambraces of his turquoise battleplate, while the shimmering cloth-o'-gold icon banner tied at his waist undulated in the unseen breezes of the warp as he walked. So too did the blood-red cape that hung about his shoulders. In one gauntleted hand Prototokos carried a heavy, curse-bound, star-matter blade, which seemed to draw light into itself.

Second, and more impressive still, came Sorcerer-Magister Opados. He was clad in an elaborately ornamented suit of Terminator armour that had

survived the fall of Tizca and the burning of Prospero, its myriad battle scars and subsequent repairs adding a gravitas that only age and experience could bring. The crimson cape secured to his auto-reactive shoulder pads flapped in the warp wind. A pair of flattened golden horns, inlaid with platinum and lapis lazuli, rose from his turquoise helm. These features were echoed in the projections that crowned the force stave he carried, the emerald eye-stone set within the tip of the staff rolling and blinking erratically. Standing ten feet tall, Opados was still dwarfed by the edifice that rose before him to more than twenty times his height.

Arch-Magister Tritos, the last of the three, did not step from the portal but glided through it, his feet placed firmly on the back of a thing that was a warp-born amalgam of impossible flesh and gold-chased steel. It resembled a circular platform but with nine great gilt blades rising at equidistant points from its rim, while between those, nine watery eyes bulged and blinked – every part of them painted in shifting shades of blue, from their fleshy lids to their whites and malformed irises.

And the master of the daemon was no less awe-inspiring than the warp beast he had tamed. The sorcerer was clad in a turquoise war-suit, trimmed with gold and inlaid with precious gems, the serpent sigil of the Thousand Sons Legion that adorned his left pauldron turning slowly as it chased its fiery tail. The pauldron protecting his right shoulder bore the Cult of Time's own writhing icon, a swollen snake pregnant with the possibilities of myriad futures.

Great golden horns, so intricately detailed they looked as if they had grown from the sorcerer's head rather than having been cast by an artisan of the forge, rose from the crown of his helm, while other antler-like growths curved downwards to frame the front plate of the exalted one's visor.

His ornate armour was half-hidden by the heavy robes he wore. The gold-embroidered scarlet chasuble gave him the appearance of a scholar or a priest, as much as his battleplate marked him out as a formidable warrior.

Adorning the plastron of his war- and warp-scarred armour was a scarab beetle as large as a man's head. Sculpted from a single piece of red alabaster, it seemed to cling to the front of the sorcerer's carapace, looking like it might suddenly crack open its wing cases and take flight at any moment.

During the Faronic Age of ancient Terra, aeons past, the primitive peoples of that dim and distant time had believed the scarab god renewed the sun every day, rolling it above the horizon and continuing to carry it through the underworld after sunset, only to renew it again the following dawn. And so it continued day in day out, season after season, year after year, for all eternity.

It was no coincidence that the beetle had been claimed by the Cult of Time's Sect of the Crimson Scarab. The magisters of that faction treated time as if it were a tapestry, to be unravelled and resewn as they saw fit, striding through the warp to unpick the past and reorder it in a manner that would echo down through the centuries and aid them in their conquests in the future. To an exalted sorcerer-magister of the Crimson Scarab, past, present and future were mutable and interchangeable, if circumstances so required.

Behind the three magi the immaterial vortex contracted and closed. The echoes of the concussive boom of displaced air that followed the sealing of the rent rippled across the surface of the comet world like laughter, while a shock wave of ethereal spectra swept across the underside of the flickering green force field that stretched from one horizon to the other.

Arch-Magister Tritos of the Heralds of Destiny regarded the angular pyramid before him with a disdainful eye. As he did so, the dragon-head exhaust ports which rose from the power pack that energised his armoured suit turned to regard it too, with unblinking golden eyes.

The processional avenue leading to the edifice was a grand affair, precisely incised geometric channels running on either side, pulsing with the same intense emerald light that writhed in a sickly aurora above the artificial Godstar.

Without a word being spoken, the three sorcerers set off down the stone throat of the avenue. The arch-magister astride his disc led the way, the daemonic entity leaving a trail of iridescent ether stuff in its wake, while gold-embroidered sigils adorning the hem of Tritos' rippling robes performed a strange, esoteric dance all of their own.

As tall as a Battle Titan, the pyramid's entrance was constructed of a smooth onyx broken only by a series of circles and lines that formed the demarcation glyph of the impossibly ancient dynasty that had constructed the comet. It was a symbol Tritos had seen again and again, from Kovarian

IV to Port Stormshield, etched upon the wraithbone ruins of the aeldari in the Shifting Deserts of Osiris Primus, and inscribed in blood throughout the myriad volumes of the writings of the mad prophet Mortsafe in the dusty libraries of Kelock on the dead world of Narthax. And in its form he now understood its meaning, although that had not been the case the first time he had beheld it in the mirrored waters of his scrying pool.

Consisting of three overlapping circles, superimposed upon one another in green-black stone and near-white light, as well as other emanating rays and discs, it was the symbol of the Nephrekh Dynasty of the aeons-old necrontyr.

The thin light of the Halo Stars struggled to penetrate the flickering gauss defences that surrounded the necron-constructed comet craft. The verdigris glow of the sky shield bathed the sorcerers' gold and turquoise armour, the light reflecting from their polished battleplate casting rippling reflections on the onyx walls of the processional avenue, making it appear as if they were moving through the pelagic depths of some ocean world rather than across the surface of a deep space fastness.

None, beyond the immortal phaerons of the necron race themselves, knew how many such celestial engines and timeless artefacts there were adrift within the vastness of the galaxy. The name 'World Engine' was still spoken of in hushed tones in star systems across a hundred sectors, from the Reefs of Melanoptera to the tribal territories of the T'au Empire offshoot septs in the Damocles Gulf. But it hadn't been the only such manifestation of the necrons' world-shaping mega-technology.

The Godstar was another such ancient artefact, unknown to the myriad intelligent species that populated the galaxy. Indeed, it was unknown to all outside the necron race, other than for these three sons of the Crimson King, these three who had discerned its location by studying the cuneiform script pressed into baked clay tablets on arid Za'handra. These three who had scoured the mind of a t'au ethereal having boarded the xenos' Gal'leath-class explorer vessel seeking more information, and left it to the mercy of void-devourers when they departed. These three who had journeyed across countless battlefields and warzones, across great gulfs of time and space, to reach this place, in what, for the time being at least, they would consider to be 'now'.

‘The way ahead is closed,’ said Prototokos, regarding the entrance and its Titan-tall warding glyph, as the three magi halted before the cyclopean doorway at the end of the descending defile.

‘Indeed,’ agreed Opados, scouring its surface with his eyes, even as his psychic senses probed its defences, searching for a means of ingress, ‘but there is always—’

‘Another way,’ finished Tritos.

The arch-magister’s hands began to twist and dance in the air before him, manifesting esoteric gestures of serpentine sorcery as he sought to fold time and space with what appeared to be no more than a snap of his fingers.

To look upon the cerulean flesh of his left hand was to look upon the armoured skin of his gauntlet, the warping effects of millennia having merged flesh and bone and ceramite into one, to form a new and unique warp-made amalgam.

As he began to unknit the fabric of reality, the air before them seemed to jerk and twist and extrude itself in obeisance to his flexing fingers, while glowing warp runes became visible, crawling up and down the vambrace of the arch-magister’s left arm. The threads that made up the matter of the universe were loosed into thin strands of pink and blue warp-stuff, which clung to his dancing digits like sticky cobwebs.

What started as a few loose strands soon became a gaping hole. And through that hole, superimposed upon the sealed gateway, could be seen a dusty darkness that was spared the attentions of the flickering aurora of the sky shield.

Taking hold of the edges of the hole, Tritos pulled and stretched the limits of the portal until it was large enough to admit even Opados, cocooned within his Terminator armour.

‘This way,’ Tritos said, pointing. ‘This is our other way.’

‘Will it take us straight to the heart of this place, and the prize we seek?’ asked Opados.

‘No,’ admitted the arch-magister. ‘The deeper levels of this sphere harbour warding technology that prevents it.’

‘But this is enough,’ stated Prototokos. ‘Where our powers of sorcery will not suffice, we will turn once again to bolter and blade to clear a path to the prize.’

In one stride, the warp-mage made the translation from the surface of the artefact-comet to the tomb's silent interior. He was followed by Sorcerer-Magister Opados, with Arch-Magister Tritos passing through the portal last, carried on the back of his warp steed.

The hole healed itself again and the tomb was briefly illuminated by a flash of witch-light. As the boom of the portal's closing faded fast, lost among echoing sepulchral halls, the rows of golden warriors were for a moment made visible, before fading back into the shadows, and the all-pervading hush returned.

Not that the sorcerers needed any light to make out the serried ranks of the tomb's occupants. The optical enhancements of their helms enabled them to pick out every detail of the motionless figures.

They were almost skeletal, not unlike mortal men in form and size, but with limbs made of metal, their bodies encased in gold.

But where the souls of mortal beings would have burned with fierce fire to the witch-sight of the sorcerers, these endless ranks of necron warriors were dull and dead, the brightest thing about them their tarnished armoured body-shells.

They looked like they would not have appeared out of place standing upon plinths within the statue-lined galleries of the twisted silver towers of Tizca.

'Are they dead or merely dormant?' Prototokos asked, as if addressing the darkness.

'Does it matter?' grunted Opados, his voice distorted by his helm into a daemonic growl.

'We are here to release the prisoner, nothing more,' said Tritos. 'Which way does the vault lie?'

Prototokos scanned the gloom, slowly turning his head from left to right and back again, like a near-blind old man seeking the glow of a lumen-globe. He stopped abruptly, facing what was not so much an archway as a gap in the far wall of the tomb-chamber that ran from floor to ceiling, fully tall enough to admit a Battle Titan god engine.

'This way,' he said.

'Then lead on,' said Tritos. 'Our prize awaits.'

The three magi advanced, passing through hall after hall, and gallery after

gallery, built around the dimensions of gods rather than mere mortals.

In each one it was the same: sterile, lifeless, with barely even any dust on the floor to be stirred by the sorcerers' passing; rank upon rank of motionless warrior-constructs clad in tarnished golden armour, packed into crypt-like vaults in their thousands; looming walls adorned with the broken glyphs of the Nephrekh aristocracy, from lords and overlords to the obscure sigils of individual phalanx groups. The only sounds that accompanied the Thousand Sons' advance through the tomb was the ringing of their armoured feet on the echoing stone floors, and the incoherent whispering of the arch-magister's disc.

Every time they left one chamber and entered another, they descended a flight of ancient steps, cut from something akin to black basalt, which led them ever deeper into the Godstar's interior.

Descending a much longer and steeper staircase into another vaulted space, Prototokos saw that where the other galleries had held the sleeping soldiers of the revenant race, this chamber – bluntly cruciform in shape – was no more than a parting of the ways within the labyrinth. And where the other halls had been dead and free of moisture, an oily mist covered the floor of this intersection, shot through with motes of twinkling green light, like an inverted star field.

As Prototokos and Opados reached the bottom of the staircase, their boots sinking into the soupy green fog, they stopped to take in the dimensions of the space. While the warp-mage replayed the visions he had witnessed in the waters of his scrying pool, so as to determine how they might best continue their journey, the trio waited in silence. And that was when the echoing clatter of automaton claws and the hum of gravitic engines reached their ears.

They were not alone.

'There!' Arch-Magister Tritos said, gesturing with the golden cobra-head of his force stave at a black shape emerging from the square hole of a maintenance conduit.

The thing bore the characteristic armour plating, and green-glowing sensor arrays and power coils, of a necron automaton, but in every other way it resembled a multi-limbed arachnid.

Tritos regarded the ancient robot with the intense scrutiny of one who sought to know everything there was to know about the entity. For if he

understood it, he would then know how best to destroy it.

Unlike their necron masters, ancient robotic constructs such as this one never slept, tirelessly tending to the tomb, servicing its stasis systems and maintaining the fabric of the Godstar's structure, down through the centuries, aeon after aeon.

The spyder scrutinised Tritos in turn, drawing level with the sorcerer's elevated position and subjecting him to a barrage of sensor sweeps, broad beams of muted jade light playing over his robed and armoured form.

The disc shuddered under him.

'And so it begins,' he said. 'There is no hiding our presence here now.'

The hum of the spyder's motive systems abruptly increased in pitch and the construct assumed a more threatening posture, its pincer-limbs raised to strike.

With barely a thought, Tritos lashed out with a lance of psychic power at the automaton, sending it hurtling across the intersection to smash into one of the black stone walls with catastrophic force. There was a sharp crack, followed by a dull boom, and the spyder was consumed by the ball of green fire that emanated from within its carapace, its power core having suffered terminal damage and vaporising the guardian drone in an instant.

'Brothers,' Tritos said, his tone having acquired an urgent edge, 'we must move. Now!'

'This way,' said Prototokos, leading the trinity along the left-hand spur of the intersection and down another precipitous stair, the sound of more clacking mechanical manipulators carrying to them through the stillness of the tomb.

As they descended, the mist tumbling over the steps in a slow cascade of condensing cryo-vapour, the black shaft of the stairway fanned outwards to become the walls of a vast hall. Columns like elongated obsidian geodes rose fully one hundred and sixty feet from floor to ceiling, their glassy black faces reflecting the strobing, molten green light-pulses that coursed up and down them, loudly sparking arcs of emerald lightning crackling between the columns in irregular discharges.

It was the echoing tapping and scraping of metallic claws on the pulsing pillars that alerted the sorcerers to the arrival of more of the tomb's guardians, since their witch-sight was blind to the approach of the soulless alien techno-entities.

They were multi-legged spyder-forms as well. Such constructs didn't only act as repair-servitors and watch over their sleeping masters. They could also be formidable foes, if called upon to defend the tomb from anything they caught trespassing within the sepulchral complex.

Unlike the first drone the Thousand Sons had encountered, which had only approached them with wary interest – at least at first – this cluster was ready to defend the tomb and its slumbering occupants from the invaders, fabrication arrays snapping open and closed, like the pincers of hungry crustaceans, while particle beamers energised.

Prototokos could only surmise that the first spyder had scanned them and passed on what it had found – and experienced in its final moments – and so the rest of the tomb's guardians were now on a war footing, expecting an invasion and ready to resist it.

But of course Tritos had anticipated this. 'Obliterate the arachno-forms!' commanded the arch-magister.

Before the robots could open fire, the favoured of Tzeentch lashed out with magicks and raw psychic power, accompanied by intermittent yet devastatingly accurate shots from Prototokos' Inferno-pattern bolt pistol, and withering salvos of fire from Opados' combi-bolter.

With a furnace roar, like one of the Changer of the Ways' fire-spewing servants, Tritos' own ornamented weapon hosed a trio of drones with rippling warpflame, sending them plummeting to the floor of the hypostyle hall, trailing snaking tendrils of fire.

The trajectory of one of the downed spyders sent it hurtling towards Tritos. The arch-magister didn't even blink as the construct came within arm's reach of his position.

The sorcerer's steed rose sharply. Intercepting the spyder's plummeting dive, with lightning-flash reactions, the disc snatched it from the air and set about rapidly dismantling the automaton's body with its semi-organic golden blades.

One wave of spyders fell, then another, and another, but all the while other things congregated in the pulse-shot shadows, the occasional flash of an energy discharge briefly illuminating glassy eye-lenses, oily exoskeletons and scythe-sharp reaping blades.

'We have to keep moving. We cannot fall back,' stated Tritos with grim finality, even as constructs with exposed spines and tails of articulated

metal appeared, clinging to the pulsing pillars or descending from the vaulted roof space of the colossal chamber.

Prototokos looked. The way ahead was choked with hordes of robotic entities, some of them giving birth to other, smaller swarming metallic things. The beetle-like constructs scuttled across the floor of the chamber in their thousands, each following a simple set of subroutines, avoiding each other and all obstacles in accordance with a preprogrammed set of rigid algorithms, but moving as one undulating carpet of iridescent alien alloys.

‘Virus-riddled vermin,’ hissed Opados in irritation.

‘Fear not, brother,’ replied Prototokos. ‘I know how to deal with vermin like these.’

Taking a bejewelled cylinder from a hook on his belt, Prototokos twisted the enamelled crimson scarab cap and hurled the object into the seething mass of robotic beetles rapidly closing the gap between them.

A new sun burned away the sepulchral darkness, hurling the disintegrating cinders of shattered scarabs in all directions. But as the glare of the plasma blast faded, it became clear that Prototokos’ assault had barely decimated the robotic ranks.

The three advanced, Prototokos making continued use of psi-targeted grenades – his witch-sight helping him predict where the bombs should land, moments into the future, to cause the most devastation – while Opados and Tritos helped clear a path through the metal tide with judicious flashes of focused psychic energy, channelled through their shining force staves.

And all the while they suffered the assaults of a whickering hail of emerald energy pulses, as the necrons’ slave-machines continued to resist their advance. Most of the automatons’ beam-blasts were repelled by the wards of protection with which the sorcerers had girded themselves, dissipating in ripples of unctuous magenta light against the surface of the invisible sphere that surrounded the Thousand Sons. But still the occasional pulse of focused light found a way through, only to spang from the ceramite of their sigil-wrought armour.

The reservoir of warp energy they had drawn to themselves was in ever-greater danger of running dry, the more the magi were called upon to bolster their psi-shields and cast their conjurations of devastation.

The tide of scarabs and thrumming spyders parted as rank upon rank of golden warriors, marching in lockstep, advanced from the far end of the vast hall.

‘The sleepers wake,’ said Opados grimly.

Where the gold trim of the Thousand Sons’ suits blazed sun-bright in the light of the necron weapon discharges, the gilt body-shells of the advancing warriors were discoloured and dulled by the endless aeons, just as the minds of their mad masters had been degraded by the remorseless millennia, and who, in their insanity, had taken prisoner the one the magi intended to free from captivity.

Slicing beams of light cut through the gloom of the chamber. The warriors were among the lowliest of the necrons but the weapons they brought to bear, to repel the tomb’s raiders, were potent artefacts born of another age, when star gods had warred across the heavens.

‘The Bringers of the Dawn seek only to send us into the darkness,’ Tritos announced. ‘But we shall enlighten them and teach them that their time is over. Do not falter, brothers, and we shall teach the fearless to be fearful!’

Prototokos lobbed another of his red scarab plasma grenades over the heads of the advancing warriors. It landed in the midst of them, launching two dozen necrons into the air as it detonated. Opados doused the humanoid machines with fire from his combi-bolter, the magical energies bound to the inferno weapon imbuing its shells with the power to melt their soulless robotic bodies. Still more were hurled between the geode pillars as Tritos smote the horde with potent psychic shock waves.

Riding over the heads of the implacable phalanx, the arch-magister focused his sorcerous power through the glittering ruby eyes of his force stave’s hooded cobra’s head. Where his focused magicks struck, warrior after warrior was reduced to its component parts, as metal and crystalline matrices were unmade, time was reversed, and the necrons were turned back into the base elements from which they had originally been formed.

But even those necrons smashed to smithereens by the other magi’s attacks were not out of the fight for long. All along the trail of destruction left in the wake of the sorcerers’ advance, dismembered limbs clawed towards shattered torsos, while eyes of disembodied steel skulls crackled with green fire, as if willing their headless bodies to recover and reattach them. Broken forms that appeared to the magi to be beyond repair were

tended to by spyders, the arachnoid robots' fabrication claws reconstructing motive units and articulated joints damaged during the Thousand Sons' assault.

The sorcerers' progress felt slow to Prototokos now. A journey that had taken them across the stars, covering unimaginable, incalculable distances, had almost ground to a halt here in the tomb, within striking distance of where the prisoner was held captive, its furious, star-bright spirit straining to be free.

Prototokos focused his gaze on the far end of the hall, still a third of a mile away – if his measuring reticule was to be trusted in this dead space – and saw something huge move within the shadows there. It looked like one of the ancient statues of Tizca come to life, taking form from the suffocating darkness. The warp-mage could feel the thud of its ponderous footfalls, heavier than a Helbrute's, through the boots of his own heavy, armoured suit.

As one, without a word of warning from the warp-mage, the Terminator-sorcerer and arch-magister saw it too.

A beam of light, like a blade of green flame, shot the length of the hypostyle hall, focused on Tritos, exploding the sphere of magical protection around him. The daemon-disc gave a high-pitched shriek of pain as its warp-formed flesh and bone-metal blades were unmade by the lethal gauss cannon salvo.

'Magister!' Prototokos cried out in cold shock. But he and the Terminator-sorcerer Opados could do nothing but watch, in appalled horror, as a second disassembling beam followed the first to its target, this time hitting the arch-magister himself.

And as they watched, the lower portion of his right arm disintegrated. At first it was only the gauntlet and vambrace that crumbled into nothingness. But then the skin and flesh and bone beneath were shredded at a molecular level too. Gauss beams ate at Tritos' corporeal form, stripping it away, layer by layer, mitochondrial strand by mitochondrial strand, unmaking him, even as his transhuman constitution and warp-wards battled to reconstruct the fractally fragmented flesh.

'You must be gone from here and finish our mission!' the arch-magister commanded, even as he shaped what Prototokos sensed could be his final spell.

Tritos stretched out his left arm, cerulean fingers splayed wide, and in that instant it was as if the very air about him froze – not with ice but in time. The inbound disintegrating beams of the necrons halted a mere moment from making contact with the sorcerer’s armoured form.

But the time-freezing spell did not stop there. It spread outwards from the arch-magister’s position in a crackling sphere of cyan energy.

Anything the expanding bubble touched froze where it was. Spyderys hung suspended in mid-air. Necrons became immobilised mid-stride. Searing pulses of gauss energy became glowing green icicles, transfixed to the muzzles of the warriors’ weapons.

And still the spell-sphere swelled and grew.

Flashing beams of gauss-light striking the coruscating barrier suffered the same effect, becoming trapped in time, like fish frozen in a pond in winter.

‘Run!’ Opados commanded Prototokos, and the two sorcerers sprinted for the elongated archway that marked the exit from the vast chamber.

‘He would sacrifice himself for us?’ Prototokos gasped.

‘Is that not what you would do in his situation?’ Opados challenged him.

And then the necron colossus was before them. A titan of metal and lethal intent, it turned synaptic obliterated towards the sorcerers, intending to blast them with a concentrated burst of subatomic particles. Such an assault could tear apart the molecular bonds within the very cells of the intruders’ metahuman bodies.

But Opados had already intoned the incantation that would save them. Out of the corner of his visor-feed, Prototokos saw the red-veined alabaster scarab that clung to the front of Opados’ armour twitch and shake itself, wing cases opening, revealing a fluttering of bejewelled plumage beneath as the sorcerer-magister’s bond familiar awoke at the behest of its master.

The vulture-form of Opados’ pet Tzeentchian spirit freed itself from the esoteric workings of his arcane armour and shook itself, ruffling its feathers and opening its beak in a screeching yawn. Taking wing, it flew straight towards the construct. The daemon-thing’s iridescent down shimmered, as if alive with dancing flames, and then in the next moment it was consumed, phoenix-like, by the hungry azure blaze.

As the familiar was destroyed by the flames, it confounded the colossus’

targeting arrays and alighted on the construct's insectile cranial command unit.

A hurricane of psychic fire exploded from the daemon-spirit's immaterial body, consuming the giant necron's head. As the firestorm raged, still chased by the time-freezing conjuration, Prototokos and Opados passed between the colossus' multijointed legs and crossed the threshold of the exit archway.

The warp-mage heard the buzz of a force field activating behind them, and a shimmering gauss field filled the portal. But it was too little too late as far as the necrons were concerned.

Turning momentarily, Prototokos saw the cyan shock wave of Tritos' chronomancy strike the warding shield and there stop. Everything inside the hall had become subject to his time-lock spell, including the archmagister himself, and all were now as flies imprisoned within amber.

Beyond the hypostyle hall, Prototokos and Opados passed through a now empty vault and from there descended yet another staircase, which led them, eventually, to a bridge of onyx stone. The structure spanned a chasm between two towering walls of exposed circuitry and more of the black metal architecture of the tomb's interior.

They stood together at the edge of the abyss. The walls of the chasm rose above them as far as Prototokos, or his suit's optical sensors, could measure, and dropped away below them beyond the range of sight as well. The bridge had no handrails or enclosing cage, such considerations of safety or damage prevention being irrelevant to the unsleeping servitor machines that made use of the causeway during their scurrying maintenance of the tomb.

Halfway across the unnatural canyon stood a lone pillar, twenty yards in diameter, its insides carved out where the maintenance accessway penetrated it, and Prototokos could see a pulsing crystalline power node contained within. The causeway passed through the other side of the impossibly high pillar and ended at an angular platform jutting out from the wall on the opposite side of the chasm, in front of a sealed security hatch.

'The vault!' Prototokos exclaimed. 'It is as I saw it in my vision.'

'I know,' said Opados with something like exhilaration colouring his

words. ‘We are close to completing our mission at last.’

Without another word, the warp-mage and the Terminator-clad sorcerer-magister set off across the bridge, the door to the vault now in their sights.

It was quiet here at the heart of the Godstar, eerily so after the clamour of the battle in the hall.

Prototokos took in the ominous structures of the deep tomb. The smooth black walls were adorned with more of the geometric glyph patterns of the necrontyr that also brought a certain level of dim illumination to the unplumbed depths of the comet construct. But the closer he looked the more he began to pick out signs of decay – inconstantly flickering icons, the strange metal-stone surface of the pillar they were approaching pitted with corrosion – while oily substances oozed from a hidden network of rusting pipes.

They entered the power node chamber within the pillar, and felt the air thrum with the machine-heart pulse emanating from the crystal.

Exiting the chamber containing the relay, as the two of them set out across the bridge once more, Prototokos became aware of movement at the far end of the causeway. Batteries of gauss flayers, mounted within alcoves in the archway – and that had, prior to their arrival, been pointing at the entrance to the vault itself – responded to their presence now by rotating to target them. And due to the fact that neither of them was transmitting the correct override protocols, the weapons opened fire.

Forced back by the dread power of the gauss batteries, Prototokos and Opados rapidly retreated to the sanctuary of the power node chamber.

The gauss batteries ceased firing, but remained on alert, trained on the bridge and ready to resume their barrage of beams, should the Thousand Sons return.

From opposite sides of the exit archway the two magi regarded one another.

‘Rest easy,’ Opados said, as if reading Prototokos’ anxious thoughts. ‘There is always—’

‘Another way?’ offered the warp-mage.

‘Indeed.’

The Terminator-sorcerer took a moment to observe the relay and assess how it connected to the circuits of nearby systems.

‘Destroy the node and we take out the gate’s defences,’ he said at last.

‘And how do we do that?’ Prototokos asked.

‘How else? Using the same means that have helped us penetrate this far into the tomb. Through indomitable strength and with an implacable will.’

Spreading his armour-plated arms wide, Opados seized the pulsating crystal with both hands, the faceted faces of it fracturing under the crushing pressure of his gauntlet-guarded fingers, and heaved.

With a groan of suit-servos and the tortured rending of metal, the node began to tilt forwards as Opados pulled it towards him. There was a sudden snap and the crystal jerked forwards again, as some vital connector buckled.

Sparks fountained from the disrupted coupling with a crackling buzz, like a swarm of electrified mosquitoes, strewing the floor with pieces of fried alloy.

Opados heaved again and with a shearing crash the crystal broke free of its mountings altogether. Without pausing, the sorcerer cast it to the floor, where it exploded into fist-sized quartz-like chunks.

Arcs of energy erupted from the shattered power node, subjecting the chamber’s other systems to what was, to all intents and purposes, a self-contained lightning storm that wroathed everything in corposant, including the two sorcerers.

Prototokos luxuriated in the energising thrill of it. Even though his arcane armour insulated him from the worst effects of the high-voltage discharge, he could still feel it dancing over his skin as his battleplate burned crimson for a moment.

And then the energy discharge died, the sensation passed, and the chamber was claimed by the preternatural darkness of the tomb.

The warp-mage tore his eyes from the ruptured power node and turned his attention back to the entrance to the vault, on the other side of the chasm. The illuminated barrels of the gauss flayers blinked off and drooped in their gun pods.

‘What did I tell you, brother?’ exulted Opados. ‘With indomitable strength and an implacable will, anything can be achieved!’

‘I will remember that,’ Prototokos replied.

Suddenly sensing the presence of another nearby, the warp-mage tracked something flitting through the pools of oily darkness that lay beyond the suffused glow of the gigantic dynastic glyphs.

Perhaps it had been a subliminal awareness of its gravitic suspensors, or a subtle shift in the air currents of the tomb that had alerted him. It certainly hadn't been his psychic senses; in this deathless place his witch-sight was as blind as a Prosperine cave salamander. The interloper was yet another of the necrons' soulless servants.

It moved like an apparition, sometimes there and sometimes not, as it phased in and out of three-dimensional space. It was composed of a mechanical insectile head, crablike claws and a snake-like spine of a body that ended in a cruelly spiked tip.

As Prototokos took aim with his inferno bolt pistol, Opados brought his bewitched combi-bolter to bear, the runes on its artisan-worked casing pulsating as if alive, as he opened fire.

But the sons of Magnus were shocked when, a split second later, they observed their shots pass straight through the phasing entity.

'It is a wraith,' Opados said, 'primarily a probe mechanoid, but a dimensional destabilisation matrix enables it to phase-shift in and out of reality. It can even modulate its matrix so as to keep different parts of its body in different states simultaneously, although this drains its energy reserves more rapidly.'

Prototokos fired his gun again and stared as the robot's carapace became as immaterial as a warp ghost, his enchanted bolter shell blowing a chunk out of the pillar behind it, rather than harming the construct creature itself.

'I encountered them during the enacting of the Great Undoing rite at the height of the Scythe Stars campaign.'

'And did you defeat them then?'

'Yes.'

'Then how do we kill it now?' Prototokos demanded, as he continued to fire on the flickering entity.

Whatever wisdom the sorcerer had been about to impart, his advice was abruptly choked into silence as the spectral form of a second wraith materialised around the Terminator. The invisible assassin already had Opados in its clutches. As it took corporeal form, so too did the cluster of writhing wormlike silver tendrils and gleaming claws that had, in their phased state, penetrated the sorcerer-magister's vital organs. Now that they shifted back again they were destroying Opados' genhanced body from within, and blood poured from the grille of his helm.

As Prototokos watched, the image of the Terminator-sorcerer that was being relayed to him through his visor's sensor array flickered like a corrupted pict-feed. And then he could see the details of the far chasm wall behind Opados as the sorcerer blurred and became as transparent as a warp ghost.

As immaterial now as the wraith had been when it first laid claws on him, Opados simply took a step backwards, freeing himself from the tomb keeper's clutches with that one simple action. In response the wraith phased out of reality again and the two began a dance in and out of space and time, their motions leaving a trail of phantom images behind them as they blinked in and out of existence.

As the ethereal Terminator and the unreal wraith grappled with each other in the spaces between dimensions, Opados sent the near-hypnotised Prototokos a final command, making his intentions plain to the warp-mage with a burst of psychic projection.

+Finish it. Free the prisoner.+

At the same time, the first wraith materialised and flung itself from the pillar, angling its gliding flight towards Prototokos. But as it passed the wrestling wraith and Terminator-sorcerer, Opados stepped back through the veil of reality. Wholly real once more, he reached out a hand, grabbed the necron's lashing tail, and hung on.

The wraith recoiled, writhing and twisting as it fought to be free, but the remorseless Terminator maintained his hold, both his hands bursting into flame, the canoptek creation catching fire within his grasp.

And then the wraith phase-shifted, as did Opados, and the three combatants continued their dance of death through the dimensions.

Opados had bought Prototokos the time he needed.

Continuing across the bridge, the warp-mage did not stop running until he reached the great black door of the vault. The gauss guns hung limply within their recessed alcoves, giving Prototokos ready access to the lock panel.

After centuries of meticulous planning, the culmination of his quest was now within reach. But there was still one last obstacle to overcome before the prisoner could be freed.

Placing his left hand against the black metal-stone of the arch, Prototokos focused his thoughts on the locking panel. Opening the well of his soul,

tracing the skeins of time back into the past, in his mind's eye he saw beyond the alien alloy composite of the portal's surround to the arcane mechanisms buried within. He saw the pattern the moving parts had formed the last time the vault had been opened, decoded the path the electrical impulses had followed through the near-neural network of the arcane circuitry and, transforming his thoughts into telekinetic actions, forced them to assume those positions again now, in what passed for the present.

With a hiss of cryogenic gases, the vault door ground upwards into the wall.

At first, all Prototokos could see were the clouds of roiling stasis mist that filled the chamber. As his helmet's esoteric systems penetrated the obscuring fog, they registered the presence of a series of plinths within the chamber. But it was what he saw with his witch-sight – utilising senses that were neither natural nor artificial – that caused hope to flare within his twin hearts once more, that he might yet complete the mission that he and the others had set out upon, so many years before... Or had that time yet to come?

Taking his hand from the door frame, the hidden locking mechanisms realigned once more and the door began to descend again as Prototokos crossed the threshold.

The vault closed with a dull boom. A moment later a sound like a roar of pain or fury, or both, reached him from the far end of the chamber in which he now found himself. Prototokos hesitated as the enormity of what he was about to do settled about his shoulders like a mantle. The echoes of the roar died to be replaced by a bestial grunting, and the sound of something enchained struggling against its shackles.

The stasis mist had settled on the floor of the tesseract chamber, oozing around the bases of the black stone plinths, upon each a prize, frozen within a beam of flickering green light that Prototokos knew was more than just a source of illumination.

The treasures kept safe within the vault had been wrested from the younger races of the galaxy. He took them in as he passed: the fractured helm of a witch-seer of the aeldari; the blunt, thick skull of an ork warboss, a crude optical implant still embedded within one eye socket; a recon drone that was clearly t'au in origin; a power sword bearing the

heraldry and honour ribbons of the Adepta Sororitas; even a tyranid spore mine, frozen at the moment of detonation.

This place was as much a museum as a prison. A mausoleum archive of treasures collected by the eccentric archivists of the Nephrekh Dynasty.

But his steps carried him ever onwards. For in the darkness of the catacomb a soul burned brightly, revealed to his witch-sight now, the blistering flare of the enraged caged spirit imprisoned within the vault. The archivists' ultimate prize. And his.

His footsteps rang from the onyx floor of the chamber as he neared the prisoner, with something approaching reverence.

The architecture of the vault, with its metal ribs and black stonework between, had something of a skeletal aspect about it, so that Prototokos felt he was walking through the fossilised remains of some long-dead star beast, reconfigured by the passage of time and the esoteric technologies of the necrontyr.

At the far end of the vault, beyond the endless rows of plinths bearing the alien artefacts and lost treasures of a thousand empires harvested from a million worlds, atop a platform raised from a series of gauss-quarried, concentric circular stones, and smothered by a haze of cryo gas, Prototokos could see a hulking shape. The vapour cleared, as his approach disturbed the air of the vault, and he saw the prisoner with his own eyes for the first time.

Locked within a wheel of living metal adorned with more of the necrons' glyph circuitry, and held within a sphere of crackling sea-green light, was the Godstar's prisoner, the one Prototokos had travelled so far, and for so long, throughout so many lifetimes, to find. To find and to free.

Doubtless alert to danger, upon hearing the sorcerer's footsteps suddenly stop, the prisoner gave voice to another bellow of rage and pain.

Three times taller than the warp-mage and more than ten times as heavy, the bulk of its body barely contained by its metal hide, the thing was a monster in the truest sense of the word – a grotesque amalgam of flesh and armour.

The distended ceramite of its body-shell had the same turquoise lustre as Prototokos' war-suit, edged with gold, while a carved scarab of red alabaster clung to its chestplate.

Above that same chestplate, visible within a metal maw of silver steel

teeth, and framed by arching golden horns, was the furious face of the prisoner. The legionary's gold and turquoise skull visage looked not unlike the mechanical face of one of the Godstar's woken warriors.

But Prototokos also knew that the sculpted likeness was only a death mask, and not a true representation of the son of Magnus entombed alive within the enormous machine body. The physical form of the captive was now no more than a pulped mass of organs, bones and nerve ganglia, the body of the sacrificial offering having been flensed of its skin and subjected to the mutagenic effects of unsullied warpflame, before being placed inside an amniotic sac. This in turn had been inserted into the coffin-like maw of the Helbrute where, once inside, it became the motive force of the warped Dreadnought armour, the unendurable torments of the damned soul imprisoned within fusing with the Helbrute's motivators and driving the war colossus into battle.

But that had not been the end of the wretch's flesh-life, for within the mechanical frame of the Helbrute, that flesh had found new forms, bubbling forth, swelling to fill every empty conduit and claim every motive system of the monstrous mechanical creation for its own. Pulsing, veiny muscle had grown with cancerous enthusiasm to cover the manoeuvring joints of its massive piston legs and encase the armoured vambrace of the huge claw fist that formed the Helbrute's right arm.

On the left side of its body the thing had no arm, but instead a writhing nest of tentacles, that were as much mechanical prosthetics as they were fleshy appendages of mauve meat.

And yet both the Helbrute's fist and its scourging whips were held fast within great metal clamps that formed part of the framing ring to which it was bound, as were the hooves of its massive metal feet. Despite being fuelled by the never-ending rage induced by the agony of its continued existence, and an unquenchable hatred for those who had been the architects of its fate, the psychotic organism was unable to free itself.

A walking engine of war, what worse fate could there be for one such as the Helbrute than to be kept caged here, denied the opportunity to fight when it felt the ache of the siren call of combat within every iota of its being?

Resuming his march towards the platform, with a mere gesture the warp-mage deactivated the last of the security systems, the sphere of sea-green

light melting away.

Sensing the change in its environment, the Thousand Sons Helbrute began to shake at its bonds with renewed vigour, grunting like a bull grox as it did so.

‘Calm yourself,’ Prototokos said, keeping his voice low, ‘for I understand your pain.’

The beast-machine continued to jerk and pull at the restraining clasps, the sorcerer’s words merely seeming to aggravate it.

‘I know you. You are the End of All Things. You are the Death of Souls, and the fate foretold. And I name you Thanatos.’

The Helbrute suddenly became still, the only sound it made the snorting of its bullish breath.

Prototokos hesitated. He was so close to the beast now that he could pluck the memories from its damaged mind, and remind it of who it had once been. In his mind’s eye he watched those recollections jerk and dance, as if viewing a degraded pict-feed.

He let out a shuddering breath as, in that moment, he experienced what Thanatos had experienced – the pain, the rage, the betrayal.

‘I see it now!’ Prototokos gasped. ‘I see how you were deceived by Sutek of the Brotherhood of Dust, and how at Bav’ilim you fell before the Mosac Gate, only to be dug from the ruins by the Bringers of Dawn, the necrons of the Nephrekh Dynasty, a hundred years later and brought to this place.’

The Helbrute remained still, its actions, or rather lack of them, convincing Prototokos that it was taking in the words that issued from his mouth like a mantra. A cluster of eyes, protruding on short stalks from beneath its chestplate, watched him approach the dais with keen interest, blinking in a random, staccato pattern.

He felt his body tense at the prospect of doing what fate had prescribed he must.

‘And you know me too,’ Prototokos said. ‘You have heard my voice in your stasis slumber. You have heard me calling to you down through the aeons, across the gulf of space and time. For I am Prototokos the All-Seeing, the first, and I am here to free you.’

The hulking monster remained still as the sorcerer began to climb the steps of the dais. Taking in the clamps bolted tight around the brute’s fist and scourge, he hefted his star-matter blade in both hands, as snakes of

psychic power began to wrap themselves around the keen cutting edges of the curse-bound weapon.

With a force of will, Prototokos leapt high into the air, his crimson cloak streaming out behind him, sorcerous telekinetic manipulation carrying him higher than the Helbrute was tall. As he descended, he rammed the tip of the force sword down between the silver fangs of the maw-like opening in the front of the daemonic Dreadnought.

The energised blade screamed as it sliced through ceramite substructures, severing power cables and artificial fibre-bundle muscles. And then Prototokos felt the resistance lessen as the sword's diamond-sharp tip penetrated the amniotic sac containing the mortal remains of the wretch bound to the weaponised prison-machine.

The Helbrute's scream reverberated around the vault as the imprisoned son of Magnus felt the dark oblivion of death begin to seep into its own organic components.

Oily blood and viscous matter welled up around the life-ending blade, as they flooded from the wound Prototokos had dealt the Helbrute, while the one known as Thanatos bucked and twisted within its bonds, railing against the all-consuming darkness and an end that had been predestined ten thousand years before.

'Do not fight it,' Prototokos told the beast in a soothing tone. He hung on to the blade, his feet planted firmly on the Helbrute's chestplate. 'I bring you merciful release. I came here to free you, and freed you I have.'

The Helbrute roared again, determined not to give in to anything so easily, ever. Prototokos was aware of a sharp crack, as something within the ancient shackle-wheel, degraded at the atomic level, gave way.

'I understand, brother,' the warp-mage said, trying to maintain the same calm tone as he clung to the pommel of the blade that acted as a conduit for the furious force of his blazing psychic fire. 'Within what is left of your madness-ravaged mind you are wondering why? Why is this happening to me? I know this because it is happening to me as well. And in the hope that it might relieve your tortured psyche, I will do my best to explain.'

The Helbrute continued to lurch within the binding ring and with a metallic groan of protest, something else came free, allowing Thanatos a greater range of movement.

‘I understand because we are the same, you and I.’

But the brute wasn’t listening now; it had been taken over by its wracking death throes. And yet Prototokos persevered regardless, for his own sake if nothing else.

‘Three of us set out upon our quest and penetrated the defences of this necron tombworld construct, this so-called Godstar. Only three. But that was still enough, to do what had to be done.

‘It was I who first discovered our doom-laden destiny, whilst conducting a scrying ritual, although I doubt you remember any of this now. But I had not the power to act and avoid such a future. And so I planned to seek the power, perform the required rituals and achieve the mastery of magic over time that I might intervene and save my future self – you, Thanatos – from such a hellish fate.

‘But it was not until my future self became an exalted brother of our Legion, and achieved the necessary mastery of warp magic, taking the name Tritos in honour of his accomplishments, that he was able to manipulate time and bring together his younger selves, those sorcerers that I had yet to become, that we might begin our journey and free you from your torment. Although, as I perceived it, he appeared to me only a matter of months after I made my discovery and set myself upon this path of fighting fate.

‘But you do not remember any of this, of course, which is why I must release you from your tortured existence. The others have bought me the time I needed to complete my task. For as long as I endure, they can be saved. *We* can be saved.

‘I have sifted through the remnants of what passes for your mind, and have discovered from the few memories that remain how you fell into this state, how you were tricked by Sutek the Deceiver and entombed within this accursed armour-form. And so I will no longer walk that doomed path. I will not share your fate.

‘And now, Thanatos, the End of all Things, it is the end for you.’

With a screech of rending metal, the Helbrute tore its mighty fist free of its restraining clamp at last. With the crackling energy sphere deactivated, the Helbrute’s bonds were no longer strong enough to hold him by themselves.

In one swift movement, the monster seized Prototokos with its crushing

claw. The sorcerer cried out as his battleplate crumpled in the Helbrute's grip. Flanged plates of turquoise and gold cut into the very flesh they were supposed to protect, rupturing veins and arteries and puncturing myriad enhanced organs. Auto-muscles and servo-motors shorted out, and the resulting jolts of electrical discharge pulsed through Prototokos' cardiovascular system, setting up an arrhythmic ventricular fibrillation within his dual hearts.

'Thanatos, stop!' Prototokos spluttered through blood that bubbled up from his lungs and into his throat. 'You will unmake us both!'

But Thanatos of the Thousand Sons – nothing more than a brute beast now – was no longer listening, or no longer cared.

In that moment of crystallised time, Prototokos realised that his quest to free himself from his ultimate fate had been a fool's errand all along. One way or another, it was his destiny to be slain by the madness that beset his soul upon being imprisoned within the Helbrute armour.

Its power scourge alive with energy again, now that the dampening shield was down, Thanatos flexed its mechadendrites and tore them free of their restraints.

The snaking metal and muscle tentacles whipped around the warp-mage's neck and began to tighten their grip.

'Stop!' Prototokos the All-Seeing protested. 'You know not what you do!' And then he could say no more as the gorget of his armour fractured and the tentacles began to constrict both his spinal column and his windpipe.

With one final squeeze of its huge hand, the Helbrute crushed the sorcerer's suit of armour as if it were no more than an empty ration tin.

At the moment of his death, denied his physical voice, Prototokos' death rattle was reborn as a psychic scream of agony and frustration, the raw, untamed energy of it finding an outlet through the star-matter sword. White fire blazed the length of the black blade into the amniotic sac of fluid and genhanced flesh, boiling what little remained within of the once mighty sorcerer of the Crimson Scarab sect.

The Helbrute's dying screams echoed from the walls of the necron vault, while the sorcerer hung lifeless within its huge fist, the vital spark of his life having already been snuffed out and passed on in silence.

Bathed in the unreal rainbows of coruscating warpflame, the Helbrute's body began to unmake itself. Flakes of turquoise lacquer and thin slivers

of gold leaf drifted away from it, like burning pieces of parchment rising from a funeral pyre. At the same time the crimson scarab adorning its chestplate crumbled, turning to glassy dust, while the warped flesh that covered much of its lumpen limbs began to dissolve and mingle with the stasis-gas still clouding the containment chamber, before evaporating altogether.

With Prototokos' life cut short, he would no longer become the Terminator armour-clad Opados of the Nine Kings thrallband who, in turn, could now never ascend to the rank of exalted arch-magister of the Cult of Time. With the tapestry of his life unravelled, the future became malleable again, mutable, unwritten.

The unmaking accelerated, as first the near-impenetrable shell of the Helbrute's armour and then, as they were exposed, sinews and power conduits, nubs of bone and auto-reactive servo-motors, exhaust stacks, twitching nerve ganglia, coolant feeds, metastasising lumps of gristle, mechanical claws, fibrous connective tissue and carbon-fibre muscle-bundles, all dissolved into threads of potentiality and were carried away on the unseen warp winds of unformed futures.

And as the Helbrute was expunged from reality, its body dissipating into a state of non-being – having never existed at all – there was now no reason for the magi having made their journey to this time-cursed place at all. And so, alone now, the body of the warp-mage began to unravel as well.

The Godstar tumbled through the silent night as it had done for countless aeons, the light cast by dying suns penetrating the chthonic-green corona that surrounded it, picking out the monolithic structures covering its surface. Before one obsidian-smooth pyramid, space-time warped and buckled, and a portal opened.

First to step through it, onto the ice-frosted void-black stones, was Prototokos the All-Seeing, warp-mage of the Thousand Sons Legion, arrayed in his turquoise battleplate. Second – and more impressive still, clad in an elaborately ornamented suit of Terminator armour – came Sorcerer-Magister Opados. Last through the portal, riding upon the back of a warp beast formed of blue flesh and gold-chased steel, came Arch-Magister Tritos of the Heralds of Destiny, master manipulator of the warp

and weft of the fabric of time itself.

As the three moved towards the pyramid, following the sloping path of a grand processional avenue, behind the three magi the immaterial vortex closed again, the echoes of the concussive boom of displaced air rippling across the surface of the comet-world, like laughter.

The Beginning.