

THE HORUS HERESY<sup>®</sup>

# THE LONG NIGHT

*Aaron Dembski-Bowden*

Even when held captive by the Dark Angels,  
Sevatar still seeks to punish the guilty



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# THE LONG NIGHT

**Aaron Dembski-Bowden**

‘Jago.’ the girl’s voice breaks the silence. ‘Are you still alive?’

Sevatar sits with his back to the crackling force barrier, ignoring its incessant caress. Around him, only darkness. Not the darkness of a sunless night, but a blackness so absolute that even his eyes cannot pierce its veil. They keep him in this lightless cage, deactivating the barriers and awakening the illumination globes for fifteen minutes each day cycle. That’s when he’s permitted to eat. They bring him nutrient-rich gruel that tastes of bland chemicals and sticks to his tongue like wet sawdust. He grins at his captors every time, telling them it’s the finest thing he’s ever eaten, and that each meal is better than the last.

There’s comfort here in the darkness of his prison cell. Like silk against his bare skin, the blackness soothes his aching eyes. Unfortunately it does nothing for the pounding throb straining its way through his skull. Since his capture, only her voice has relieved the pain. Just one voice among many – the voices of the slain, dredged from his subconscious.

Sevatar has dreamed of the dead a hundred times and more. In those first heartbeats after waking, he sees their staring eyes in the darkness of his cell, and hears the echo of their cries inside his skull.

None of it is real. He knows that.

In the long watches of the night, boredom is his only true companion. The dead lie in their graves, silent and rotting, righteously punished. When he hears

them in his restless sleep, it is nothing but the misfiring throb of his own imprisoned dreams.

‘Jago? Are you still alive?’

But not her. Her voice is the only one that lingers when he wakes. Stronger than any other echo. It has been a long, long time since he spoke with a ghost, and he wonders if she died in this very cell, with her shade now lingering within its walls. Perhaps she was killed nearby, and she comes to him now because her spirit smells his curse. She clings to him, the echoing voice of a strange and curious child, whispering to a murderer in the dark. He doubts she even realises she’s dead.

‘Jago?’

‘I am here,’ he says to the cold air. There is blood running from his nose, hot and thick and slow. He wipes it away with the back of his hand. ‘I am here, Altani.’

‘Is it the pain again?’

It takes effort to speak past the pressure grinding down on his brain meat, but he forces the lie past his lips. ‘It has been worse.’

‘It feels like you’re dying.’

He chuckles at that, but doesn’t deny it. ‘I am still here for now. What do you want?’

‘Just to talk. I’m lonely.’

‘I am sorry to hear that, little one.’ He hesitates, already uncomfortable yet wishing to keep her near for a while longer. Is this the fourth time she has come to him? The fifth? The pressure in his head defies his attempts to focus on even mundane tasks like tracking the passing of time. ‘Yours is the only voice I welcome. Did you know that?’

‘I don’t understand. You hear other voices? Even when you are awake? I thought they came only in your dreams.’

‘Yes, and no.’ He shrugs in the darkness, a futile gesture if ever there was one. As a child, he had always heard voices. The sounds of desire and anger inside other people’s skulls. The murmuring emotions that boiled behind their eyes. The raucous songs of the city’s crows as they fought over food.

Worse than any of them was the whispering of the dead. The burning flashes of someone else’s memories when he glanced into the eyes of a body in the gutter. The pleas of unseen voices, begging for him to avenge them. The strangling red torment he would feel in his throat when he passed beneath one

of the Night Hunter's victims hanging in public, disembowelled and crucified. Sometimes they would speak with him, in that nameless place between slumber and consciousness.

Telepathy. Necromancy. Psychometry. A thousand cultures had a thousand words for such psychic gifts, but the words themselves didn't matter. All of the music of sentient thought had been his to hear, until the Legion sealed it away, leaving him in blessed silence.

No longer did he overhear others' thoughts.

No more did he hear the beckoning offers of the slain.

Yet now the dead begin to whisper once again. The seals around his mind are breaking.

'Jago? Do you hear the other voices when you're awake?'

'I have a gift. One I do not want. One I tried very hard to lose, long ago.'

'That isn't what I asked, Jago. I know you have the talent. How else do you think we are speaking like this?'

His skin crawls at her knowing tone. 'What child has the right to sound so knowledgeable about such things?'

'I watch,' she says, as calmly and peaceably as ever. 'I listen. No wonder you're in so much pain. Did you truly seek to banish your talent?'

'I tried. And for a time, I succeeded.'

'It cannot be banished. To try damages the brain, the heart and the soul.'

'I was willing to risk it, Altani.'

'But why?'

'Those with a sixth sense among my brethren are hollow and bitter beings, always wretched with melancholic blood. They do not lead the Night Lords Legion. They *cannot* lead it – their misery leaves them too mournful and unreliable. So I buried this gift rather than allow it to grow. My father and his viziers helped me to seal it away. I hoped it would decay in disuse.'

'I see. And instead, it is killing you.'

'There are worse deaths than this,' he says aloud.

*You should know*, he thinks, refusing to voice the thought. The dead do not like to be reminded they are dead.

'You sound... different tonight, Jago. Is the pain worse than before?'

'Yes,' he admits freely, 'but your voice eases it. What is it that you wished to speak of?'

'I have questions. Who is the Prince of Crows?'

Sevatar takes a breath, letting her voice wash against his mind the way the darkness brushes over his flesh. Her words quench the crushing fire raking through his thoughts. None of the dead voices in his dreams do that. None of the others bring relief.

‘Did you pluck that name from my head, little one?’

‘No. You spoke it last time, when the pain was fierce. You moaned it out loud. Who is the Prince of Crows?’

‘I am. It is what my brothers call me.’

‘What is a crow?’

‘You ask the strangest things.’ He closes his eyes and thumbs their sore lids with bloody fingertips. ‘A crow is... Nnh. On what world were you born?’

‘Terra. But I was taken by the First Legion when I was very young.’

‘Ah, one of the Earthborn. I’m honoured. If you are from Terra, I assume you know what a bird is.’

‘Yes. I’ve seen them in books. Is a crow a type of bird?’

‘Black of feather and dark of eye. It feeds on the bodies of the dead, and sings in a raw, croaking caw.’

‘Why are you a prince of birds?’

Another chuckle leaves his parched throat. Sevatar leans his head back against the force field, feeling its angry hum vibrating through the back of his skull.

‘It’s a title. A joke between my brothers and I. Crows feed on corpses... and I make a lot of corpses.’

The dead girl is silent for a time. He can feel her in the back of his mind sometimes, even when she says nothing. Her presence is like the sweep of invisible searchlights. He knows when he waits beneath the ghost’s unseen gaze.

‘Are you lying to me, Jago?’

‘No, little one. It is true, but it is not the whole truth.’ Sevatar licks his cracked lips, tasting the blood upon them. ‘It is, however, enough truth for now.’

She falls silent again, though her presence doesn’t recede from his mind. He feels her watching from the room’s unbroken blackness.

‘Altani?’ he asks after several minutes have passed.

‘Where is your home world?’

The breath he draws into his lungs is spiced by the scent of his own sour

sweat. What he wouldn't give to be able to bathe.

'Gone. Dead. Destroyed years ago.'

'What was it called?'

'Nostramo. A lawless and sunless place. It burned not because it was guilty, but because we failed to keep it innocent. Our laws failed the moment we sailed away to the stars, and in desperate embarrassment our father incinerated the evidence of his failure.'

'Your father killed his whole world?'

'He wasn't alone. Every one of our ships fired on our home world. I watched him give the order aboard the *Nightfall*. We rained death down upon the city of my birth. Have you ever seen a world die, Altani?'

'No. Never.'

He's almost breathless now, lost in the heat of memory. 'It's beautiful. Truly, honestly, beautiful. I've never seen anything that stirred me the same way as the night I watched my home world burn. It is de-creation incarnate. You unmake the very threads of the universe, pulling apart a body of rock and fire and life that the galaxy itself conspired to create. You see the world's burning blood through the cracks in the breaking tectonic plates.'

Silence answers his heresy. He is a traitor among traitors, his confession given at last.

Finally, the dead girl speaks, her own voice much softer now.

'Jago,' she says, 'I don't understand you.'

'That is because I am the only simple man in a complicated galaxy. Now the Imperium burns and trillions die in the trenches of Horus' ambition and the fires of the Emperor's hypocrisy. Hnnh. To the abyss with them. I spit on them both. The Lords of the Night, they call us. The nobility in the darkness. That is where we were born to be. I am not a soldier, beholden to a master. I am justice. I am judgement. I am punishment.'

'That isn't what you are, it's what you wish you were. What you should have been.'

'I am not on trial here.'

'But who do you judge now? Who do you punish?'

Before he can reply, she adds one last sting - a judgement of her own.

'Jago, whose side are you on?'

Sevatar presses his pounding forehead to the cool stone floor, ignoring the blood that runs from his mouth. 'I am not on anyone's side.'

Once more, there is a long silence.

‘You used to try to escape. I think I know why you stopped.’

His grin is knifelike. ‘Do you now?’

‘You think you deserve to be here. This is justice, for all the things you’ve done. So you sit alone in the dark, while your brain rots inside your skull. Accepting it as your execution.’

He swallows, unable to speak for a moment. ‘As I said, I am a simple man—’

‘Someone’s coming,’ she interrupts him, and with a flicker that sends spikes through his skull, she’s gone. Blood starts running from his ear, a trickle as slow and thick as the one from his nose.

A mechanical voice comes from above. ‘*Illumination.*’

He knows to close his eyes as the lumen globes flash into stark life. Even his gene-forged sight is blinded by bright light. The last time he refused to close them for this daily ritual, he spent the hours afterwards seeing smears of scarlet pain written across his retinas.

The power field dissipates with a waspish crack and the drone of a de-cycling engine. Sevatar lifts his head to sit in patient composure, eyes closed, as the cell door grinds open on squealing tracks.

They must not see his weakness. They must not witness how he suffers.

‘Feeding time already?’ He greets his captors with a smile as unlovely as a rusted blade. ‘Such wondrous hospitality.’

His captors have long since ceased replying to him. In silence they stand by the door, their active battle armour thrumming, mechanical joints and machine-nerves snarling with each movement they make. Even without opening his eyes, he knows that two of them are standing there with their bolters levelled at his head, while the third – standing between them – is about to leave the gruel bucket on the cell floor. He can smell the oils they use to clean their weapons, and the charcoal stink of the incense they use in their knightly reverences.

‘Please convey my compliments to the chef,’ he says to them. ‘The last bucket was the finest yet.’

He hears the twin crunches of bolters braced against shoulder guards and can’t resist a smile even as his blood runs cold. ‘Well, this is new. Is there a reason you’re taking aim at me?’

‘We heard you speaking before we entered. Has madness come so swiftly to the great torturer now that he languishes in captivity?’

‘So it would seem.’

‘Who were you speaking to, Sevatar?’

‘The ghosts that share my cell. When you’re left alone for such a long time, you tend to conjure your own company.’

‘Are you aware that you are bleeding again?’

‘Am I? My thanks for your concern, cousin.’

‘It wasn’t concern.’

‘I know. I was imagining you were from a Legion where your primarch gifted you with manners. Can I have my nutrient slime now, noble knight? I’m ever so hungry.’

He manages to open his eyes, just enough to let in a sliver of vile light. Three blurred figures stand before him, just as he’d expected. Three Dark Angels, clad in their Legion’s black war-plate. His generous, caring captors.

But he has to close his eyes again. The light is acid against them.

‘I’ve not seen you before,’ he says to the first of his wardens. ‘I recognise the others, but not you. What brings you to my chambers, cousin?’

‘Do you find yourself amusing, traitor?’

‘You keep calling me that. Show some respect, Angel. I outrank you, you know.’

The warrior gives a disgusted grunt. ‘We are watching you, Sevatar.’

‘Seeing as I’m caged like a prized pet, I can’t imagine that makes for interesting viewing. Shouldn’t you be out there, fighting your little war?’

They don’t rise to his bait, as he knew they wouldn’t. The Dark Angels leave his container of protein paste on the floor, before retreating back through the door. Sevatar waits for the charged hum of the power field to crackle back into life. Only then does he move, eating as a beast would eat, feeding from the gruel in his cupped palm.

For a time he’s alone once more, shovelling the nutrient gruel into his mouth. There’s nothing to relish in its cold, chemical un-taste.

‘Jago,’ comes her voice again. The relief of her gentle tones is immediate and absolute, ice water poured onto a burning wound.

‘Dinner is served,’ he tells her. ‘Are you hungry, little one?’ He holds out his dripping hand, offering the protein slime to the darkness. ‘If you wish, you can share this glorious repast.’

‘No, Jago. Please listen to me. The knights of the First aren’t blind. They fear something is wrong with your mind.’

‘I am told there are many things wrong with my mind.’ He bares his gruel-wet

teeth in a vile grin. ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to be specific.’

‘Because of the blood and the pain, they suspect your secret. One of them had the talent. He knows you’re hiding something.’

Calm and suddenly cold, he licks the bland, grey taste of the protein paste from his lips.

‘One of them was a psyker? How... how could you know that?’

‘I could feel him in here, with us. He reached out for you with his mind, just as I am.’

So, the I Legion are using their Librarians to watch over him now. That is an unforeseen threat he will have to deal with. But it isn’t the Dark Angels that leave his blood running cold.

‘Altani,’ he says cautiously, as close as he’s come to fear since he was taken and reshaped by the VIII Legion. ‘Tell me something, little ghost. How did you die?’

‘What?’ Shock colours her tones. ‘I’m not dead, Jago.’

His blood is cold, like the frost that scales over powerless shipwrecks drifting in the deep void, far from the light of any sun. He breathes through clenched teeth, his hands trembling in helpless, weaponless unease. She’s in his head. This girl, this *creature*, has forced herself into his head.

‘Who. Are. You.’

‘Altani. Altani Shedu, Second Voice of the Choir.’

The choir. Realisation grips him in talons of black ice. She isn’t some wraith lingering on the wrong side of the grave. She isn’t the spirit of a girl that died aboard the Dark Angels flagship. She is—

‘An astropath. You are an *astropath*.’

‘I thought you knew. How else would I reach you, if I didn’t possess the talent?’

He finds himself laughing for the first time in this torturous ordeal, laughing through the diminished pain at the games that fate seems so keen to play.

‘You thought I was dead?’ she asks. She is faceless in his imagination but he can almost picture her innocent, open-mouthed surprise. ‘One of the dead voices that you dream?’

‘It doesn’t matter, Altani. None of it matters. Will you not be punished for this contact?’

‘Yes, if they discover it. But I am the Second Voice, and the strongest of the choir. I would be the First Voice, were I older.’

For a child to be raised to the rank of Second Voice, her psychic strength must be almost beyond measure. That makes her precious to her masters, without a doubt, but Sevatar wonders just how safe she really is, speaking so intimately with the imprisoned enemy.

‘Why, girl, do you risk your life speaking with me?’

‘I saw your dreams. All of us have felt them intruding into our work – your dreams are destroying the rhythm of our choir’s astropathic song. The others turned away, guarding against the pain of your mind. I alone did not.’

‘Why?’

‘Because of what I saw in the redness of your nightmares. I knew I could ease your pain. I cannot teach you to master the talent, but I can keep it from killing you.’

His reply is a blade cast out into the dark, made vicious by his anger. ‘Is this a game you play with the First Legion’s prisoners?’ He feels the words flash from his tongue like throwing knives, hurting her – wherever she is – but anger steals what little guilt he is capable of feeling. ‘Is this some pathetic attempt to breed gratitude towards an ally of my captors? Some scheme to break me with kindness rather than privation?’

‘No. Not for that. Not for any of those reasons.’

‘Then *why*? Why would you do this?’

She doesn’t break in the face of his fury. ‘Listen to yourself, Jago. Unable to feel gratitude without suspicion. Unable to even understand why someone would help another soul in pain. Your home world has poisoned you.’

‘That is no answer at all.’

‘Not to you, no. You’re a broken soul, Jago – always thinking of yourself, always judging yourself. You’ve lost the right to judge anyone else.’

Her words hit him with the force of a blow to the head. He stares blindly into the darkness as if he might see her there, but she recedes from his mind. This time, for the first time, he chases her, reaching out with the untrained, instinctive sense he swore to never use.

But she is gone, and his invisible grip does nothing but dredge the empty silence.

Days pass in isolation. The pain is harsh enough to leave him drooling, murmuring words of madness as spit runs from his mouth in slow strings. Dazed and nauseous from the pressure in his skull, Sevatar lies in the centre of

his cell, the fingers of his left hand quivering in the onset of another muscle spasm.

The pain transcends feeling – it's fierce enough to hear, hot and wet against the inside of his skull, dragging and squealing like fingernails on porcelain.

All he can see is red. All he can taste is blood.

Sometimes, in his agony-stained dreams, he hears the girl screaming. She never answers when he calls for her.

The doors open and close, open and close. He can't tell how many times. He doesn't smirk at his captors, nor does he reach for the buckets of gruel that they leave.

'Jago. Are you still alive?'

He doesn't rise. He has the strength, but any movement stirs the sick heat in his head. The reply slithers from his lips.

'Still alive,' he says, 'though I've seen better days.'

The pain begins to fade. He doesn't know if she does it consciously or if it's merely the effect of her voice in his mind. Right now, he doesn't care.

'Thank you,' he says. It is the first time he has said those words and *meant* them in many years. 'I wasn't sure you would return.'

'He caught me, Jago.'

Sevatar hears it then, some new tension in her voice that was never present before. Some new discomfort. It focuses him, drawing his wandering thoughts together in a blade of concentration. Despite the queasiness, he sits up in a slow, smooth motion.

'Who caught you?'

'My overseer. The Master of the Choir, and First Voice. He sensed our contact. I thought I was careful enough...'

'Hush, now,' he says softly. The sluggishness leaves his words. His tone grows as cold as his concentration. 'They punished you, didn't they?'

'Yes. And not for the first time. But it's over now.'

'Tell me. Tell me everything.'

'There's no time. They're coming for you. They're taking you and your surviving brothers to a prison transport.'

'No.'

Sevatar is on his feet without realising that he intended to rise. Strong hands, a killer's hands, curl into claws. He misses his spear, but he's killed plenty of men and women without it.

‘No. *I* am not leaving this ship until you tell me what they did to you, Altani.’

‘There’s no time! They’re coming!’

His voice filters into something savage and predatory, as hungry as the eyeless white sharks of Nostramo’s blackest depths. As he speaks the words and reaches for her mind – a gesture that feels no different from breathing in a scent or recalling a memory – he uses the connection to plunge his thoughts into her distant consciousness.

+*Tell me*,+ he commands her.

He feels her flesh, elsewhere, as a husk of battered meat and broken bone.

In that moment he knows what they did to her.

*He feels the utterly human panic of being beaten while helpless and blind, unable to raise a hand against the incoming blows. He feels the lashes of a whip crackling with electrical discharge across his unarmoured body. He feels something give in his spine, a crunching snap of dislocation, and the numbness that follows...*

He knows everything. They scourged her for seven days and seven nights. She can no longer walk, but even paralysed she is still of use – an astropath needs no legs to sing her warp-borne song. Sevatar feels his lips peel back at the punishment; it is an ugly sentence fit for the madmen of the Martian Mechanicum, who are known to do such things to their disobedient thralls.

He releases her mind and faces the door. He hears them now. Their boots echo on the iron deck, sending minute shivers through the floor.

‘Let them come.’

‘You can’t fight them all.’

‘I have no intention of fighting them. You said it yourself, girl. I earned this punishment.’ There’s no self-pity in his words. No melancholy, no torment. Only vindication.

‘*Illumination*,’ declares a familiar mechanical voice. Sevatar closes his eyes against the coming razor-kiss of the light. The power field expires with a de-powering crack. A moment later, the bulkhead opens on its grinding tracks once more.

He keeps his eyes closed. Bootsteps enter his cell. He smells the metallic tang of the flexible machinery in power-armoured joints. He tastes the scent of battle-worn ceramite upon his tongue.

‘Cousins,’ he greets them.

‘Come with us, Captain Sevatar.’

‘Of course. May I ask where we are going?’

‘The prison transport ship *Remnant of Brotherhood*.’

‘What a dramatic and wholly appropriate name.’

‘Can you see, or do you need to be dragged?’

Sevatar smiles, opening his eyes to slits, bracing against the pain piling against his retinas. Ten of them. No, twelve. All armed with blades and bolters.

‘My eyes will adjust in a few moments. Have patience, cousin.’

They allow him the courtesy of letting his vision adjust. The pain diminishes but doesn’t vanish. It’s enough for him to walk unaided without the indignity of being carried.

‘Move, prisoner.’

The *Invincible Reason* is a Gloriana-class battleship, a city in space, and they spend almost an hour traversing its hallways. Through tunnels and corridors, they walk on in silence but for the thud of armoured boots. Sevatar never sees any of his brothers being similarly escorted. It seems that the Dark Angels are taking precautions.

Slaves, serfs, thralls and servants all ignore him, never sparing him a glance, never even looking up from their hooded robes. He has to admit, the I Legion has its minions trained very well indeed, though it’s a wonder they can go about their duties with their gazes forever cast at the floor in a peasants’ sign of respect.

After a time, he feels the child-astropath drawing near once more. Watching him, as she always has. Watching him... and more.

‘Jago,’ says the Dark Angel closest to him.

All twelve warriors stop in the same moment, standing motionless in the red-lit reaches of a tributary corridor. He stops in their midst, looking at each of them in turn.

‘You’ll die if they take you onto the prison ship,’ says one of the other legionaries. ‘I can help you...’

‘...but I cannot hold them like this for long,’ says yet another.

‘How are you *doing* this?’ Sevatar murmurs in astonishment. ‘How strong are you, child?’

‘One of them is a Librarian. He fights me every moment, and his strength is immense.’

Sevatar looks to the head of the column. The lead warrior's black armour plating is etched with elegant Calibanite runic script, and he stands unhelmed, his features shadowed beneath a hood of ivory cloth.

As the Night Lords captain draws near, he sees the warrior's face drawn in a rictus of effort. Narrowed eyes quiver with the strain of fighting an unseen battle, and sweat forms diamonds on the Dark Angel's brow.

'Hello, cousin,' Sevatar breathes softly. 'Don't struggle. This will only take a moment.'

The Librarian's eyes roll with exquisite, trembling slowness to gaze upon the other warrior.

'No... You are—'

Sevatar snatches the pistol holstered at the Dark Angel's hip, and puts a bolt between his eyes. The headless corpse remains standing, but he feels Altani's sigh of relief in his mind as he throws the pistol to the deck.

'You didn't have to kill him, Jago,' one of the other Dark Angels says.

'No, but it suited me to do so.'

Yet another warrior turns to him. 'You're almost at the ancillary hangar deck. I can help you steal away on a cargo hauler or a tug moving between the vessels at anchor over Macragge. You can hide on board one of the warships making ready to—'

'Little one, enough. There is only one thing I need to know.' Even as he speaks, he's reaching for the chainsword sheathed on the closest Dark Angel's back.

'What is it?' the warrior asks, turning to face him.

Sevatar's fingers tighten around the handle of the legionary's war-scarred blade. He knows that a long and confined journey through the ship's maintenance ducts lies in his immediate future.

And she will have to help him, as best she can. But it will be worth it.

Justice. Judgement. Punishment.

'Just tell me where you are, Altani. I want to hear your choir sing.'

The astropathic choir is in session. Its twenty members commune in absolute harmony beneath a great, reinforced dome that offers a breathtaking view of the star-scattered heavens.

Usually, all is peaceful here. And inside the twenty locked, ritually etched gnosis pods, all is still at peace. They are hermetically sealed against outside

air and the raving wail of siren alarms now washing the deck with shades of warning red. The astropaths sleep on, their minds linked in communion, ready to do as their overlords desire – to reach out into the boiling storm and spend their energies in another futile attempt to send word to distant Terra.

Only one of the slumbering forms stirs, though she doesn't awaken. Her consciousness stays on the edge of the choir's perfect psychic orchestra, and she lets their voices wash over her, as she adds her own harmony back into their shared song.

Outside the wall-mounted pods, an intruder roams the halls of the choir chambers.

Dozens of adepts labour frantically beneath the screaming sirens. They work the chamber's arcane machinery, preparing to ease the pain of their charges when the choir's song can safely be brought to an abrupt end.

And they work to seal the inner sanctum. One of them shrieks into a vox-console, crying out for warriors of the I Legion to come at once, to cut their way through the doors if they must. In the halls where no Space Marine is permitted to tread, their presence is demanded for the first time in living memory.

Sevatar moves amongst the fleeing slaves and thralls in a muscled sprint, sparing them from the fall of his blade. They are insects to him, so irrelevant that they may as well not exist.

He pauses at *her* pod.

He knows that he has only seconds at best, and each heartbeat spent with her is a heartbeat wasted, but still he finds himself compelled to remain.

She sleeps inside: a girl-child of bruised skin, strapped foetal in the cushioned gnosis pod. Bio-data wires, muscle needles, and sustenance cables puncture her temples, spine, and limbs in too many places to count with such a brief glance. The fall of her ragged hair hides her empty eye sockets.

Though she is almost motionless in the atmosphere-controlled life cradle, Sevatar lingers just long enough to see her fingertips twitch. Soft, smooth fingers that will never know the grip of a weapon.

He almost presses his hand to the glass of the pod, but a traitor's bloody palm print would only incriminate her further.

+So that's what you look like,+ she says in his mind. Within the gnosis coffin, the girl sleeps on even as she projects the words into his mind. She doesn't speak of the hundreds of scars lining his pale flesh, or the unnatural blackness

of his eyes. +You look tired, Jago.+

His only reply is a bloodstained grin.

Then he's gone. Duty calls.

As the chainsword bites into the choir's primary gnosis pod, it vents oxygen as pressurised gas and coolant as a spillage of clear, fizzing liquid. The occupant, a wizened and grey-haired revenant of a man by the name of Mnemoc, is thirty Terran-standard years old. He looks fifty, and has the health of a man of seventy.

Astrotelepathy is an unkind vocation. The brighter a mind burns, the more voraciously it eats through the body's resources.

This ruined man screams in blind panic as he's pulled from his cushioned cradle. Far greater than the shock of being unhooked from the muscle needles and bio-feeds is the devastating shriek as he falls out of the choir's harmonic song. Fire rakes across the surface of his mind, moving into the veins of his brain like a flood of burning oil.

But even weakened by disorientation and stunned by pain, instinct doesn't desert him entirely. As he is hauled into the air by impossibly strong hands, he reaches for the lash at his hip... only to find that it isn't there.

Unlike most astropaths, the overseer's eye sockets aren't empty. Crude bionics whirr and click as they seek to refocus, offering him the distorted image of a towering man he doesn't know, staring into his face with black eyes that he doesn't recognise, whispering in a voice he's never heard before.

'I have come for you.'

Overseer Mnemoc's first word after awakening is a single syllable. He asks what many men in his position might well ask. 'Why?'

His first word is also his last. Sevatar collars him with his own lash, garrotting the helpless man with the same weapon Mnemoc used to beat the youngest member of his choir until her spine gave out.

Jago Sevatarion is an experienced murderer, well familiar with the force required to kill a man in any way the mortal mind can imagine. He strangles the master of astropaths slowly, lovingly, his gene-enhanced muscles barely straining, using just enough strength to drag out the execution without breaking the psyker's neck.

The overseer's psychic sense is a maddened, feral thing, pathetically flapping against the Night Lord's mind as uselessly as his thin fingers claw at Sevatar's

unyielding flesh.

His eyes bulge. The flesh of his face darkens from red to purple and finally to blue. His struggles weaken, become twitches, and finally cease.

Sevatar doesn't let go. Not yet.

For all his flaws, he's a thorough soul when it comes to duty.

Huge ornate doors, sealed against intrusion, finally open to admit a phalanx of knights in black armour. The Dark Angels surround him, ordering him to the deck, raising their bolters to take aim.

'I am justice,' Sevatar calls out to them. With a last wrenching twist, he breaks the corpse's neck and casts it onto the deck by his bare feet. 'I am judgement. I am punishment. And I surrender.'

He sits alone in the blackened stillness, listening to the slow rhythm of his breathing. A sense of serenity cloaks him, and a feeling of cold, cold focus that has eluded him for decades.

When he dreams now it is not of the dead, but of the endless night between worlds. The deepest void, where a thousand threats drift, away from the light of loyal suns. The domains of aliens and monsters forced into exile by the Great Crusade, still crying out to be extinguished once and for all. The true threats to mankind.

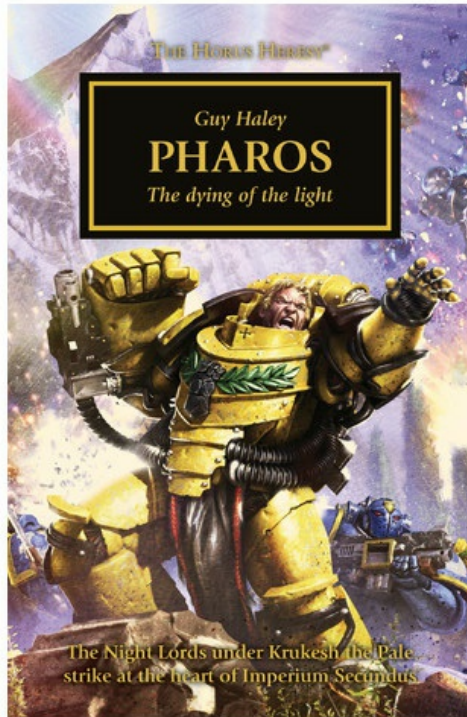
'Jago,' the girl's voice comes to him again at last. 'Are you still alive?'

And in the darkness of his cell, Sevatar smiles.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Aaron Dembski-Bowden** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Betrayer* and *The First Heretic*, as well as the novella *Aurelian* and the audio drama *Butcher's Nails*, for the same series. He also wrote the popular Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach*, the Abaddon novel *The Talon of Horus*, the Grey Knights novel *The Emperor's Gift* and numerous short stories. He lives and works in Northern Ireland.

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