



THE HORUS HERESY
WEEKENDER

Saturday 18th and Sunday 19th May 2013
Nottingham, England



Serpent

John French

'And a serpent came even to that, paradise.'

- from The Fall of Heaven,

compiled from various ancient sources

Work proscribed 413.M30

The magus stared at Thoros. Her arms were red to the elbows, and the white silk of her robe hung heavy with dried blood and fresh sweat. The man at her feet was still alive, twitching in the remains of his skin. Blood ran down the edge of the silver dagger in the magus's hand - a thick drop formed at its tip, glittering red-black in the burning coal light. Around them the magus's throng of followers waited, wide eyed and unsure of what exactly they were seeing or how exactly they should react.

They had done this many times and thought themselves hidden, but Thoros and his priests had simply walked into the centre of the ritual as though they were expected.

Looking into the magus's eyes, Thoros wondered what she saw when she looked back at him. A messenger of the gods? A monster? A revelation? He had shed the dark cloaks that had hidden his form during his journey here, and he stood now as he had upon Davin: a spindle-limbed figure in rough-spun robes. Gold torques circled his neck and wrists, each worked in the image of a snake with red jewelled eyes. Five of his priests stood behind him, swathed in pale robes, staffs clutched in scaled fingers. Their red, slitted eyes looked out on the world, unblinking.

The cavern around them was iron, a hollow space beneath the great furnaces above. Heat shimmered from the glowing mouths of kiln vents in the high roof. The cultists had been using it for years, and the spilt blood and muttered prayers itched at the edge of Thoros's senses.

He did not like this place. He did not like its iron smell, or the dull stink of the minds that infested its forges. He had come here only because it was the will of the gods that this world would become theirs, and that it should fall before the war came. It was to be reborn - a high blessing for an unworthy planet. The throng of the magus's followers that filled the cavern were the beginning. But they had yet to see the true face of those they served.

Thoros tilted his head, letting the magus tremble under his gaze. She was afraid; he could taste it, an edge of fear spicing the human stink in the cavern's air. And why should she not be? She was used to power, to having others obey

her commands. Now an emissary of her gods had come to her, and she no longer liked the face of the powers she had knelt to. He knew this was true; he could see it in the mirror of her eyes.

+It is coming, exalted one.+

The ghost voice of his priests whispered in Thoros's mind. He smiled.

+Yes, my kin,+ he responded. +The moment is close. The gods will show us the way.+

On the floor, the skinned man shuddered, vomited blood and then went still. The magus did not look at him, his sacrifice already forgotten. The rest of the kneeling cultists still did not move. The fear coming from them was a raw perfume to Thoros's senses.

Cattle. Cattle led by their spite and jealousy. Cattle that nursed their small hatreds, and dreamed of taking power from those that ruled them. It was to be expected; such desires bound mortals to the gods, but they were still little more than beasts waiting for the herdsman's lash. They called themselves the Eightfold Door. They were weak, and they were desperate - in their hearts they had never truly believed that their prayers would be answered.

'By the blood,' the magus intoned, her voice shaking as she raised the dagger to point at Thoros. 'By the seven silver ways and five chalices of night, I bind and command you...'

Thoros shook his head slowly, never taking his eyes from hers.

'Small things,' he hissed, taking a step forwards. 'Petty things.'

Around him whispers and shadows gathered, brushing his skin, filling the cavern. The gods had blessed him - nay, made him for this. From the moment his mother had brought him to the Serpent Lodge, a twisted child with the red eyes of the chosen, to the time he had seen beyond the doors of sleep and glimpsed the gods beyond - all of it had been preparation. Out beyond the walls of this cavern was a world, and in the sky of that world hung stars, around which other

worlds circled in an eternal dance. All sleeping, all waiting for a new age that they could not know was coming. That was why the gods had seen him safely across the sea of souls to stand here at this moment: to ready the sleeping Imperium to awaken.

The magus was truly shaking now. Thoros heard the seed of speech in her mind and spoke before she could, his voice a rattling whisper.

'Quietnessss.'

The magus did not move or reply though at his back Thoros sensed his attendant priests shifting. Slowly he reached across his waist and pulled a blade from the fold of his robes. The handle settled into his fingers.

'You are called by the high servants of the gods.' He took another step forward. The gazes of a thousand eyes brushed his skin. 'This world will belong to them.' He paused, lips cracking over pointed teeth. 'But you - you are mine, now.'

The stillness snapped. The magus leapt at Thoros, a dagger in her hand.

The gathered cultists rose to their feet in a roar. Thoros felt their cries echo through his soul in that endless instant, their rage as hot as a furnace. Across the cavern other knives were slipping free of sheaths. He could feel it all: each ritually sharpened edge, each uncoiling muscle, each heart surging with fear and hatred. The murder lust bathed him, filled him and remade him.

He slid past the magus's thrust, and his knife came up and opened her stomach. She fell, blood sheeting down the white silk, mouth gasping for air, mind pleading for mercy as her soul rushed to meet her gods. He felt the shadows whisper in glee as she screamed.

Thoros's ghost voice rose into the gathering darkness.

+The gods speak!+

+They speak,+ his priests echoed as one.

A pillar of jagged light stabbed up from amongst them, splitting the gloom with green fire. The five priests rose into the air, lightning winding around them in endless coils. Frost spread across the cavern ceiling, strangling the heat from the kiln vents. Where the fire touched the circle of cultists, it burned them to ash.

Thoros turned from the collapsing magus, his hand rising to become a black serpent of smoke. The serpent uncoiled down his arm, winding around his body his skin burning and freezing at the nether-creature's touch. The remaining cultists surged at him, knives raised, eyes wide with fear. He felt the serpent encircle his throat; he opened his mouth to swallow it.

A cultist broke from the throng. He was huge, bare chested and slicked with sweat. Silver rings clattered from folds of skin as he charged. Thoros felt the man's dagger punch between his ribs, felt its point burst his heart, blood pouring into the cavity of his chest.

Fire and ice pulsed through him. He looked down at the fat cultist; the man pulled back to stab at him again, black droplets scattering from the knife as it ripped free.

Thoros opened his mouth, feeling his jaws dislocate wider and wider. Shadows spilled from his throat, boiling through the air, coiling around the cultist before his second blow could fall. The black cloud flowed on, twisting through the charging throng. They fell, their eyes blinded by nightmares, sweat turning to frost across their bare skin.

Every mind within the cavern screamed.

They see it now, thought Thoros as shrieks ripped from a thousand mouths. They see the primordial truth.