

THE HORUS HERESY®

WOLF MOTHER

Graham McNeill

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A cruel smile played over Xisan's purple-stained lips as the woman stumbled. She looked up with terrified eyes.

'Please, my daughter, she—'

Xisan backhanded his fist across her face.

'You don't get to speak.'

She spat blood and looked up from the deck with hate.

Xisan laughed. He'd discovered her in a darkened sub-transit of *Molech's Enlightenment*, calling the girl's name and frantic with dread.

Too good an opportunity to ignore.

She'd run to him, eyes wet with tears. Hoping for help.

Xisan had been tasked with finding children, but with the warship overburdened with refugees fleeing the Warmaster's victory on Molech, finding anyone alone was a gift.

He'd clubbed her to the ground and bound her wrists with baling twine before administering a hypo loaded with soporific venom. Not enough to put her out completely, just enough to render her compliant.

She begged in slurred fragments, not for her own life, but that of her daughter. Perhaps she knew, with the psychic womb-tether of mothers, that he'd been the one who'd taken her.

Her fear energised Xisan. It *empowered* him.

He remembered the girl. Vivyen, she'd called herself.

The Serpent Gods favoured innocence in those offered unto them, but in such times of tribulation all offers of flesh were welcome.

Shargali-Shi would be pleased to have a mother and daughter to offer the

Serpent Gods. Those linked by blood were a greater prize than strangers.

He ignored the woman's slurred protests as he dragged her through the hidden pathways of the ship. Down into the darkness below the waterline. Down to where Shargali-Shi awaited.

The Ophiolater heard the sibilant voices of the Serpent Gods in his venom-fugues and spread their wisdom among the *Vril-yaal*. Only a very few of the chosen people had escaped aboard *Molech's Enlightenment*, and they used the darkness to rebuild, to renew their faith.

House Devine had fallen on Molech, but enough of the Vril-yaal remained to carry their faith to the stars. Such times of trial were necessary, claimed Shargali-Shi, for only through such testing would true strength emerge.

The woman's fear increased the deeper they delved into the creaking, lightless bilges of *Molech's Enlightenment*. Rusted ductwork gurgled and moaned, exhaling reeking steam and sweating foetid liquids; the bowels of the vessel in all senses of the word.

Some of the Vril-yaal claimed to hear this darkness mutter or that inhuman shadows moved in the silences between breaths. Xisan once thought he'd caught a glimpse of a giant in grey with frost-blue eyes. He never knew if that had been something real or the result of the many ergots he'd ingested.

The woman suddenly stopped, eyes wide, brow furrowed.

'No,' she said. 'Don't you dare.'

'You don't get to speak,' said Xisan again.

Something slammed into the deck plates behind him. Something with mass and density to buckle sheet metal.

He spun around in time to see a vast shape filling the transit. Faint slivers of light reflected from burnished plate emitting a sub-aural buzz that set his teeth on edge. Xisan smelled caustic lapping powders and oily sweat.

He heard bellows breath like that of hormone-bulked livestock.

'And you don't get to live,' growled the giant.

A glittering blade rammed into Xisan's gut, punching out through his spine. The giant twisted the sword and hooked out Xisan's bowels. His intestines followed, splattering the deck like mortuary slops.

He dropped to his knees, aghast at the life-ending quantities of blood leaving him. The woman stood over him, all traces of fear gone. Inexplicably, she now held a gun pointed at his head, a weapon of chromed steel with the inlaid form of a white snake coiled around the barrel.

'Don't you die on me, damn you,' she said, all traces of the slurred pleading

tones erased from her voice. Her eyes were clear, honed like razors.

She held his dying body upright, the warm anodized steel of the cannon's barrel pressed hard into his neck.

'Where's Vivyen?' demanded the woman. 'Where's my daughter? Tell me and I'll end you quickly.'

Xisan grinned through a mouthful of blood.

Alivia Sureka kicked the corpse to the deck and turned her weapon on the armoured Space Marine who'd disembowelled him. She thumbed back the hammer as he took a step forward. He made no sound, surely an impossibility for one of his kind.

'Why the hell did you have to kill him?' she said, keeping the sights centred on his bare head. Space Marine or not, one bullet would carve a canyon through his skull.

'You're welcome,' he said.

'I needed him alive.'

He grinned. 'You mean you *weren't* his helpless prisoner?'

Alivia sighed and waggled the gun barrel. 'Hardly.'

'Looked like you were.'

'That's what I needed him to think.'

'And why was that?'

'He took my daughter,' said Alivia, her voice almost cracking at the thought of this bottom-feeding predator's coven holding Vivyen. 'He was taking me to his lair.'

'Ah, so you let yourself be captured.'

'You catch on quick,' said Alivia as the warrior bent to clean his blade on the dead man's tunic. A golden-hilted gladius, fashioned for transhuman hands, and yet it seemed a small weapon for one so powerful. Alivia had seen plenty of Space Marines in the course of her existence, but the sheer inhuman scale of them never failed to disgust her.

Of all His creations, she disliked them the most.

This one was bearded with a scalp of close-cropped auburn hair. His worn-leather skin was heavily scarred from recent combat. Dark tattoos of curved blades and blood drops painted his cheeks. Gang markings, serpentine around his eyes and brow. Indistinct in the shadow, but chillingly familiar.

An ash-dulled bolt pistol was mag-locked to his thigh, and strapped to the opposite hip was a serrated combat blade and a grenade harness. Alivia saw

three explosive canisters buckled in the loops.

‘That’s an interesting weapon you have,’ he said, rising to his full height and ramming the gladius into a cobalt-blue sheath at his belt.

‘I could say the same thing,’ countered Alivia, sensing the power unwittingly bound to the blade. ‘That’s no ordinary line weapon. It’s shed some potent blood.’

‘And that’s no ordinary gun.’

‘It’s a Ferlach serpenta,’ said Alivia.

The Space Marine nodded. ‘Nice.’

‘Crafted by the lady herself to my exact specifications.’

‘Unlikely.’

‘How so?’ asked Alivia.

‘Theresia Ferlach died in the Burning of Carinthia.’

‘And you know that how?’

‘I set the fire that burned her weapon forges.’

Alivia applied fractionally more pressure to the trigger.

‘Who are you?’ she asked. ‘And how does a Space Marine come to be aboard this ship?’

‘I’m Severian,’ he said with a feral grin, the tattooed blades twisting on his gnarled skin. And Alivia finally remembered where she’d seen his gang markings before – the last time she had truly feared for her life.

‘Cthonia...’ she said. ‘You’re a Son of Horus.’

Alivia pulled the trigger.

The room was cold and moisture dripped from the rusty hooks hanging from the ceiling. Moisture and corrosion slathered its walls in blooms of clotted yellow and mould green.

Vivien had thought her family’s spot beneath the air vent on the starboard radial was unpleasant, but this place was *really* horrible. She sat against the wall across from the barred door with her knees drawn up tight. Shivering, frightened breath misted on her blue lips.

Including herself, seven bewildered children were being held in the room, ranging from Ivalee and Oskar, who were eleven, to Uriah, who said he was seventeen. Vivien thought he was probably only fourteen, but he seemed to like being the oldest, so she didn’t argue with him.

A while ago there had been ten of them, but then two women, one with burned out eyes and another with purple-stained lips, came and took them away. Vivien

wondered what they wanted the children for, but they never came back. She could only guess, but all those guesses made her want to close her eyes and cry.

The twins, Challis and Vesper, had been crying and reciting prayers to the God-Emperor since they got here. Uriah paced back and forth, flapping his arms to keep warm. He muttered under his breath, but Vivyen couldn't hear what he was saying. Something angry probably. Like the missionary he'd been named after, Uriah was always angry.

Vivyen missed her daddy and Miska. She missed Alivia. And even though they weren't family, she missed Noama and Kjell. They'd kept them alive on the road from Larsa to Lupercalia, and according to Alivia, that made them better than a lot of real families.

When the orbital shuttle left Molech without Alivia, Vivyen had cried herself dry, so when her mother – in all but biology – came back to them it was the happiest she could remember being. Alivia had said things would be okay, and for a time they were.

Until the man with the purple lips had taken Vivyen.

Oskar huddled in close beside her, his eyes twitching beneath their lids. Vivyen held his hand. Oskar was younger than her, which made him practically a baby to her worldly twelve years.

'He having another nightmare?' asked Lalique, her head resting on Vivyen's other shoulder.

'Yes, I think so,' said Vivyen.

Lalique's breath was pleasantly warm on her neck. It was Vivyen's turn to be in the middle and she hated how glad she was that Oskar was still asleep. As soon as he woke it would be Lalique's turn to enjoy the meagre warmth between them.

'I hope he wakes soon,' said Lalique. 'I'm cold.'

Vivyen sighed, wishing she had Miska's talent for putting her own comfort first. 'Don't worry, I know how to get up without waking someone who's asleep.'

'You can do that?'

'My sister's always falling asleep on me,' explained Vivyen, easing away from Oskar and using her free hand to hold him upright. Lalique slid gratefully into the middle as they swapped places.

'You're the best, Vivyen,' said Lalique with a brittle smile. Her friend, if she could call someone she'd just met in a meat-locker cell a friend, was the daughter of a glass-blower who once crafted fantastical, spun-sugar confections

for Molech's noble houses. She said that several of his creations had pride of place in the House Devine's towers.

Judging by her clothes, her father had been wealthy, but Vivyen guessed it had been used up to buy them passage on *Molech's Enlightenment*. Whatever she'd been before, Lalique was now alone and frightened, just like the rest of them.

'I wish they'd shut up,' said Lalique, casting a venomous glance towards the praying twins. 'I grew out of those kinds of prayers by the time I was seven.'

Vivyen shrugged. 'I like them,' she said. 'They're about the only comfort any of us has left.'

'What about that book I saw you looking at?' said Lalique. 'If it's a chapbook, maybe you could read us a story?'

Vivyen felt a stab of protectiveness towards the book tucked inside her dress. Alivia had given it to her and said it was a very special book. It wasn't new or even valuable, but it was *hers*. The stories were written in a dead language, but that didn't matter. Vivyen knew them all off by heart and could recite any one of them at will.

The idea of sharing it seemed dangerous until she realised that she *wanted* to read a story. Or was it that they wanted to *be* read? Stories had always helped her feel less scared and if sharing one with the others would make them feel better, then that's what she'd do.

'Does anyone want to hear a story?' she asked.

Uriah glowered at her. 'Don't you think we've got enough to worry about without hearing your baby stories?'

'Shut up, Uriah,' said Lalique. 'What else have we got to do?'

'Look for a way out,' said the boy through bared teeth.

Lalique pointed to the door. 'There's the way out. Don't see you getting through it any time soon, though.'

'I'd like to hear one,' said Ivalee with a shy smile.

'Me too,' mumbled Oskar, clearly not as asleep as he'd appeared.

'Fine,' said Uriah. 'Tell your bloody story.'

They gathered around her. Lalique was still in the middle and Oskar on the other side of her. Challis and Vesper were in front with Ivalee between them.

Vivyen reached inside her dress and pulled out the book. More crumpled than it had been before, its pages were yellowed and textured with age. She had no idea how old the book was, and Alivia had just winked when she'd asked.

'What's the story called?' asked Challis.

'Yes, what's the story?' echoed her twin.

‘I don’t know,’ said Vivyen, thumbing the pages. ‘I never pick a story, I just look for one that wants to be read.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ said Uriah. ‘Stories don’t *want* to be read. They’re just words on a page.’

‘Of course they want to be read,’ said Vivyen. ‘What’s the point of being a story if no one reads to you?’

Uriah didn’t answer and kept pacing with his arms wrapped across his chest, but Vivyen saw he was waiting for her to start. She scanned the swift-turning pages until the book fell open at a picture of a fat-bellied man in a parade. He had no clothes on and everyone was laughing at him.

‘This is a good one,’ said Vivyen, and she told them all the tale of a foolish emperor, who was convinced by two swindlers that they had fashioned a magical garment, one that only those of keen intellect could see. The hopelessly stupid and unimaginative would be unable to appreciate its – and by association the emperor’s – majesty. Of course all the emperor’s courtiers, not wishing to be thought stupid, claimed their master’s new clothes were magnificent beyond imagining.

And so the emperor paraded before his subjects to show off his new clothes. The people, who by now had heard the swindlers’ claims, also cheered the naked emperor and told him how grand he looked.

All was well until one little boy, courageous enough to speak out, cried that the emperor wasn’t wearing anything at all. And the spell, for such it was, was broken and the crowds howled with laughter as the emperor fled to his castle, red-faced in shame.

Vivyen finished the story, her eyes refocusing as she lifted them from the page. It felt like the words were rearranging themselves on the page. Sometimes they did that.

The faces around her were smiling, stronger now, and Vivyen smiled back at them, pleased she’d given them hope and fresh courage. Even Uriah looked less angry, more defiant.

‘Another!’ said Vesper, clapping her hands.

‘Yes, read one more,’ added Challis.

‘Okay,’ said Vivyen.

‘What’s “okay”?’ asked Lalique.

‘It’s an old word Alivia used to say to me,’ said Vivyen. ‘It sort of means yes, but sometimes it can mean that things aren’t bad either or that they’ll get better.’

Oskar rose to his feet as the door opened, fists gathered at his side. Vivyen’s

heart leapt, imagining that Alivia would be standing there with her silver gun with the white snake etched into the metal. Smoke would be curling from it and she'd cock a hip and say something that would tell Vivyen that, yes, things *were* going to be okay.

But it wasn't Alivia, it was a man in a long white tunic. Like the women before him, he had been mutilated. His skin was scarred, one eye burned out, and his lips were an unhealthy purple. He carried a dirty knife that dripped with something yellowish.

The children screamed and scrambled into the corner of the room. They whimpered and cried as the man swept his one good eye over them, like a buyer at a meat market. Even Uriah's anger vanished in the face of naked terror.

'You,' he said, pointing at Vivyen. 'Come now.'

Vivyen shook her head, too frightened to answer.

'Now.'

'No,' said Vivyen, remembering the courage of the little boy in the story she'd just read.

'I will hurt you,' he promised, lifting the knife.

'I'll hurt you back,' said Vivyen. 'You'll cut me with that knife, I know that, but not before my nails scratch out that last eye of yours.'

The man considered her words, then grinned.

'I expect you would,' he said.

Vivyen wanted to let all the air in her lungs out in one explosive breath. Relief turned to horror when she saw the man wasn't admitting defeat, he was just going to take someone else. He took three powerful strides and grabbed Challis's scrawny arm, wrenching her from the huddled group of children.

'No!' screamed Uriah. 'Don't!'

The boy threw himself at the man. Uriah was big for his age, but was still just a child against a full-grown man. The knife bit flesh and Uriah fell with a howl of pain.

Blood squirted from his shoulder and the children screamed at the sight.

'You don't want to go? Fine, I'll take this one instead,' said the man.

He dragged Challis from the room and slammed the door behind him, leaving the six remaining children to their misery. Vesper fell to the floor, weeping and shrieking at the loss of her twin. Oskar and Lalique knelt with Uriah, their faces wet with tears. Ivalee stood silent and uncomprehending.

Vivyen felt as though the man's knife had stabbed her in the gut. She looked at Vesper's curled, sobbing form and guilt settled upon her like a lead weight.

She looked down the book, but the words were meaningless.

They had no comfort to offer her, not now.

‘Please, Alivia,’ sobbed Vivyen. ‘Please help us.’

Alivia’s feet dangled a metre off the deck. The Space Marine gripped her neck in one fist, the wrist of her gun hand in the other. He could break both in an instant.

‘That hurt,’ he said, bleeding from the side of his skull where her bullet had creased him.

‘It was meant to kill you,’ gasped Alivia.

‘You’re fast, I’ll grant you that, but Yasu’s the only mortal I’d credit with a chance of seeing my blood. Even Loken didn’t get a shot.’

‘Who?’

‘Another son of Cthonia.’

‘Another traitor.’

Severian sighed as though disappointed.

‘In another life, I’d already have killed you and been half a kilometre away,’ he said. ‘But I fight on the side of the angels now, and behaviour that was as natural to me as breathing is... frowned upon.’

Severian fractionally tightened his grip. ‘So tell me, who are you? Who are you *really*?’

Alivia’s eyes bulged at the pressure.

‘Alivia,’ she said between snatched gasps. ‘Alivia Sureka, I’m looking for my daughter.’

She felt his disbelief, as palpable as cold or pain. Just as she felt truth and fresh purpose in his bones, their fit still new and chafing against old instincts.

Severian leaned in, his bearded, tattooed face millimetres from hers, and sniffed her like an animal. He shook his head and his cold eyes flicked down to her flat belly.

‘You’re no mother,’ he said. ‘That womb is as barren as Cthonia’s surface.’

Alivia blinked in surprise, now seeing what lay beyond the savagery his murder-gang tattoos suggested: an agile mind, predator’s patience and a hardwired hunter’s instinct. Alloyed to a psychic presence entirely unlike the blunt, sledgehammer minds possessed by some among the Legions.

‘My adopted daughter,’ she said, resisting the urge to give her words a psychic push. The inside of Severian’s mind was a steel trap of jagged edges, just waiting to snap shut.

‘That’s better,’ said Severian.

She eased the serpenta's hammer down and relaxed her grip, letting the gun hang by the trigger guard from her forefinger.

'Good girl,' said Severian, lowering her to the deck and plucking the weapon from her hand.

'I want that back,' said Alivia, massaging her bruised neck.

'So you can shoot me again?'

'I'm not going to shoot you, Severian,' she said.

'You're damn right you're not.'

'I won't shoot you because you're going to help me.'

Severian laughed.

'Something tells me you're not the kind of person who normally needs help.'

'True, but I want you to help me now.'

'Why?'

'Because we both answer to the same master.'

Severian's eyes narrowed and she sensed his frank reappraisal. His instincts were telling him there was more to her than met the eye. That she was dangerous. He'd thought she was simply fast, but now he knew better. He didn't know what she was – how could he? – but he was curious.

And for someone like Severian, that was enough.

'So we're going to find your daughter?' he said.

Alivia nodded.

'How do you know she isn't just lost?'

'Because *he* told me,' said Alivia. 'He took her last night and I don't think she was his first. And unless I find where these monsters are hiding, more children will be taken.'

She knelt over the corpse and spat in its face. 'He'd have led me right to them if you hadn't killed him.'

Severian shrugged and took a knee beside her. He turned the dead man's head in his hand. The slack features were no longer curled in a rictus grin of mockery. Blood still dribbled over his purple lips.

'What is it?' said Alivia. 'Some form of chronic hypoxia?'

'Maybe, but I doubt it,' said Severian, bending over the man, as though about to give him the kiss of life. Alivia grimaced as the tip of his tongue flicked over the dead man's lips. The legionary swirled the taste around his mouth before spitting the tainted saliva onto the wall. It smoked as it slid down the steel panel.

'What is it?' asked Alivia. 'A narcotic?'

'Yes, and a powerful one too. A blend of some kind of ergot and distilled

serpent venom,' said Severian.

'Will that help you track where he came from?'

'It might,' said Severian. 'There's a quicker way, but you won't like it.'

'If it helps find Vivyen, then I'll like it.'

'Fair enough, but I warn you it's not pretty.'

Severian's fist stabbed downwards, fingers extended like a blade. He struck the side of the dead man's head, splitting the bone with precise force. Severian spread his fingers, levering open the vault of the skull and exposing the pink-grey ooze within. He tossed away the hair-covered bone and dug his fingertips into the wet, pliable meat of the brain.

Alivia knew what was coming; a barbaric custom from millennia ago, resurrected by science and made to work as ancient warriors believed it worked. That had always been His gift, grafting fresh purpose to martial customs and bending them to his will.

She forced herself not to look away as Severian scooped out a handful of jelly-like brain matter. He sniffed it and balked at the smell and texture.

'What?' he said, seeing her surprise. 'It's something we can do, but do you really think we *enjoy* it? The things we see, they never go away. Ever.'

'Please,' said Alivia. 'If there was any other way...'

Severian sighed and closed his eyes, pushing the brain meat into his mouth. He chewed for an entire minute before finally swallowing it.

His eyes snapped open, but they were glassy and unfocused, like an opiate-fiend or false prophet in a fugue state. His mouth hung slack and Alivia felt her gorge rise at the sight of bloody morsels stuck in his teeth.

'Severian?'

He doubled over and puked onto the deck. Alivia covered her mouth and nose at the ammoniac reek as Severian spat and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Did you see where they are?' she asked.

Severian nodded and gripped his golden-hilted gladius. Alivia saw its ivory pommel was worked with a cobalt-blue company number enclosed by a wreath. A blade of the XIII Legion.

'I saw them.'

A lump formed in Alivia's throat. 'Is Vivyen alive?'

'Yes.'

Relief flooded her, swiftly followed by more anguish at the terseness of Severian's reply.

‘Are they hurting her? Is it bad?’

‘It’s worse than you know,’ said Severian. ‘It’s the warp.’

Until the revelation of the White Naga, Shargali-Shi had always viewed suffering as something to be visited upon others. He had shunned pain, taking ever more exotic compounds to dull his senses to its fiery balm.

The Serpent Gods’ revelations had changed him in ways too numerous to believe, but chief among them was a craving for ever more extreme sensation. No debasement could be too degrading, no pain too sublime, and no violation so grossly beyond the mores of civilisation for him to forego. He had transcended all limitations of mortal flesh, blending the Sacristans technology with the flesh-alchemy of serpents.

Secretly wise, serpents held the keys to immortality.

What other species could shed its skin and yet live?

Their venoms were sacred fluids, opening the mind to realms of perception only madmen knew, every toxic droplet imparting knowledge wrung from each brush with death’s kingdom.

His beloved Lyx had known that.

Her treacheries had crippled her first husband, a man whose hate-filled blood wrought venoms of terrifying lethality and beauty. Her lusts had brought him her last husband, a host of battle Knights and the resources of an entire planet.

But Lyx was dead and the Warmaster now claimed Molech as his prize. He had cursed Horus Lupercal until *Molech’s Enlightenment* plunged into the empyrean and the designs of the Serpent Gods became clear.

Shargali-Shi was to be their prophet of doom, the blade carrying venomous seed to Terra and poisoning the well at the Imperium’s heart.

Hot and humid as a rainforest, moisture filled the arched chamber in which he had established his Serpent House. It dripped from the reticulated girders overhead and glistened on corroded pillars. It sweated from the hundreds of writhing bodies laid before him, their limbs intertwined.

Watching over the debauched flesh-revels were half a dozen Thallaxii: armoured cybernetics with featureless, brushed-steel heads enclosing agonised scraps of excised nervous systems. Once bound to House Devine, they now served the will of the Serpent Gods, and emerald corposant played across the fangs of their lightning guns. If he listened hard enough, he could hear the lunatic screaming of the Thallaxii within their armoured prisons.

Shargali-Shi hung suspended above all, his skeletal limbs splayed like an

ancient crucified god. His flesh was the hue of mouldered vellum, clinging to wasted limbs and bones reduced to viscous sludge. Borne aloft like a grotesque marionette, he hung upon wires attached to clattering pulleys and barbed hooks that stretched his pallid skin taut in tattered flaps. A translucent womb-sac extruded from his bloated abdomen, its contents twitching with undulant life.

His face was an ovoid dome with distended jaws and crooked teeth that drooled venom. Blinded by milky cataracts, his prodigious mind saw all and sustained him when every law of nature sought to claim his tormented flesh.

He knew agony with every hissing breath, but he accepted the pain, transformed it into an act of devotion to the powers that dwelled in the night. The White Naga had taught him how to use that pain, to turn it inwards and reach beyond the veil to the realm where the Serpent Gods dwelled.

Smuggled aboard the warship in the last days of the battle for Molech by men of influence in thrall to his cult, Shargali-Shi had drawn ever closer to his gods. As the vessel ploughed the furrows of the immaterial ocean, he heard their hissing secrets in every sigh of submission, every scream of bliss, every blood-choked death rattle.

An auspicious time was approaching. The movement in the taut womb-sac grew frantic as the life within sensed the imminence of its birth.

‘Yes, my child,’ hissed Shargali-Shi. ‘The Chosen Six will be yours, and the White Naga will claim their envenomed flesh. It shall sculpt their forms anew that they might bear the radiance of its divine form.’

Severian led them deeper into the nightmare, into the bowels of the warship, as he followed splintered memories plucked from a dead man’s skull. An inexact map, they took many wrong turns, and doubled back frequently. Alivia tried not to let her frustration show, knowing what it had cost him to eat the flesh of a corrupted soul.

Below the waterline was a place to be feared, even on a ship as illustrious as *Molech’s Enlightenment*.

Here, scum sank to the bottom.

Scav-tech gangs of bilge rats shadowed their every step, but their fear of Severian kept even the most desperate from attacking.

For that alone Alivia was glad of his presence.

Deeper and deeper they went, silently crossing decks where the broken servitors prowled, mindlessly enacting ritualised functions they could no longer perform. They bypassed sealed vaults where lethal radiation was slowly wearing

away protective wards. They covered their ears as they traversed abandoned machine-temples where corrupt code burred heresies of Old Night.

Alivia kept hold of the Ferlach serpenta, her finger curled around the trigger and the safety off.

‘Did Theresia Ferlach really make that gun?’ asked Severian.

‘She did,’ said Alivia, deciding to intercept what she knew was coming. ‘And yes, that was a hundred and eighty-seven years ago.’

Severian took this in his stride. ‘So that makes you over two hundred years old.’

‘It does,’ replied Alivia.

‘But I’m guessing that’s not even close to the truth.’

‘It’s not, but do you really want to know?’

‘No, keep your secrets,’ said Severian. ‘The galaxy’s more interesting that way.’

Despite the strangeness of the situation, Alivia felt herself warming to Severian.

‘So how does one of the Warmaster’s sons end up, what was it you said, on the side of the angels? And in unmarked armour?’

Severian didn’t answer, and Alivia thought he wasn’t going to until he said, ‘There was an Ecclesiarch of Old Earth who once said “treason is just a matter of dates”.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘When the Luna Wolves needed to decide something, it was customary for us to draw lots,’ said Severian. ‘For command of a speartip, the composition of an honour guard and suchlike. When it came time for Horus Lupercal to send a warrior to join the Crusader Host, it was my name that was drawn.’

‘You didn’t want to go?’

‘What do you think?’ said Severian. ‘To leave the Crusade? To sit out the greatest war-making the human race has ever waged in some gilded palace on Terra? Of course I didn’t want to go, but what choice did I have? My primarch had given me an order, I *had* to obey.’

Alivia felt a creeping dread settle upon her as the relevance of the long-dead Ecclesiarch’s quote became clear.

‘Tell me,’ said Severian. ‘Have you ever seen Horus Lupercal?’

Alivia nodded stiffly. ‘I met him once,’ she said, a shuddering breath escaping her at the memory.

The Warmaster’s cursed blades shearing her spine and shattering her ribs.

Her blood flowing out onto the black gate. His last words to her...

You shouldn't put your faith in saints...

'Then you'll know that it's next to impossible to refuse him,' continued Severian. 'Little Horus Aximand once said the only way he ever remembered what he was about to say was to look at Lupercal's feet. Catch his eye, and your mind would go utterly blank.'

Severian paused before continuing, as though weighing the cost of where the path of his life had taken him.

'I wasn't there when my brothers of the Sixteenth turned, but I'd always thought that if I *had* been...'

'What?' asked Alivia, when he didn't go on. 'That you'd still be with them?'

'No, that I maybe I could have stopped it,' said Severian. 'Then I look at Loken and think it's probably just as well I wasn't.'

Severian grunted, a sound that was part anguish, part amusement at the cosmic joke the universe had played upon him.

'You ask how I came to be on the side of the angels. Luck.'

'That's not true, Severian,' said Alivia with insight that came not from her abilities, but from the pain in Severian's words. 'And you know it. You came to Molech to stop the Warmaster, didn't you?'

'I never set foot on Molech,' replied Severian.

'Then why are you here?'

The Luna Wolf shook his head. 'Like I said, the galaxy is a more interesting place with a few secrets left to it.'

They huddled in the corner of the meat locker farthest from the door, six frightened children clinging to the last shreds of courage Vivyen's story had given them.

Vivyen thought Uriah was still alive, but she didn't know for sure. She'd seen his eyelids flutter not long ago, though she had heard dead people sometimes twitched and burped after they'd died, so maybe that didn't mean very much.

Oskar and Lalique had tied some cloth around the boy's shoulder. It was soaked with blood and his skin was white, like a ghost.

'Why are they doing this?' said Ivalee for the hundredth time. 'What did we do wrong?'

'Nothing,' said Lalique. 'We didn't do anything.'

'Then why are they hurting us? We must have done *something*.'

Lalique had no answer for the youngster and Vivyen hated these men who'd

taken them more than ever. Even if they somehow managed to escape this cell, the damage had already been done. Ivalee's innocence had been stripped away and replaced with a twisted sense that she was to blame for what was happening.

'This isn't your fault,' said Vivyen, trying to copy the same tone Alivia used whenever she *really* wanted to make herself clear. 'It's not *any* of our faults. Mama told me that some people are broken inside, and that makes them like doing bad things. It's like a sickness or something. When bad people do hurtful things to us, it's *them* we need to blame. Even if they didn't start out bad, what they're doing to us is wrong, so I want you to remember that none of this is our fault.'

'Then why are they doing this?' said Vesper, her face puffy with tears. 'Why did they take my sister? They're hurting her now, I can feel it.'

'I don't know,' said Vivyen, slipping the book from her dress. 'There's a story in here about an evil mirror that gets broken into tiny fragments, and when someone gets a bit of its glass in their eye or their heart they can only see bad things and feel bad things.'

'Do you think these men have glass in their hearts and eyes?'

Vivyen felt tears prick her eyes.

'I think they must have.'

Lalique chewed her bottom lip and said, 'Any stories in there about bad people getting what's coming to them?'

'It's not really that kind of book,' said Vivyen, turning its crumpled pages.

'What's that one?' asked Oskar. 'She looks pretty fierce.'

Vivyen looked down at the book, her eyes widening at the ink-etched woodcut picture. She read the name beneath the picture, and her brows furrowed in amazement. 'I haven't seen that one before, but it looks like—'

Before she could say any more, the cell door burst open and six figures robed in white entered. One for every child. Like the one who'd taken Challis, their skin was burned and their lips were stained purple.

Vesper and Ivalee shouted at them. Oskar put his arms around Uriah as Lalique stood up with her fists balled at her side. Vivyen cried out as the first man into the meat locker quickly hoisted Lalique onto his shoulders with the ease of a man used to hefting dead weight. A second man grabbed Oskar, who howled and punched like a dervish. A third dragged Uriah's wounded body as a woman with darting, bloodshot eyes took Ivalee's hand. The girl didn't make a sound as she was led away.

Vesper was lifted screaming onto a man's shoulders, while the one who had

taken Challis advanced on Vivyen.

She backed into the corner of the room, holding her book across her chest. She'd been afraid of this man before, but not any more. She hated him, but her fear was gone, displaced by faith in someone she knew would risk anything to save her.

'Going to try and hurt me, girl?' he asked. Spittle gathered at the corners of his mouth and his eyes were veined with pink threads.

'No,' said Vivyen. 'I'm not, but I know who will.'

'Oh?' said the man. 'Who's that?'

'She will,' said Vivyen, holding out her book and letting him see the picture of the woman and her enormous pistol with the white serpents curling around the barrel.

'*Madame Ghost Snake?*' said the man, reading the name.

'My mama,' said Vivyen.

This deep in the ship, the air had a thick, chemical texture, heavy with the scent of unwashed bodies, unclean oils and hot metal. Alivia gagged at the stench but Severian seemed unaffected.

The temperature had been dropping markedly for the last thirty minutes or so.

'We're close to ventral hull plating damaged in the void war over Molech,' said Severian, as though plucking the surface thoughts from her mind. He was a latent, so perhaps he was.

'A good place to hide,' said Alivia.

'Not good enough,' said Severian.

'We're close?'

'Better than close,' said Severian, putting a finger to his lips. 'We're here.'

He pushed her back against the wall, into an alcove she hadn't even seen was there, and stood in front of her. Two men approached through the shadows, each with the perforated steel barrel of a stubber held loosely across his chest.

Crude, grubby, solid-slug weapons, but simple and noisy.

As much a means of warning as a weapon. Like the man Severian had killed earlier, their lips were stained purple, and Alivia caught the astringent reek of potent narcotics.

The men drew level. One turned towards the Luna Wolf, looking straight at him, but somehow not seeing him.

'Right here,' whispered Severian.

The man's mouth dropped open in shock.

Severian's blade pistoned through it. He twisted the blade up and churned his victim's brain to gruel. With this man hooked like a fish, he stepped from the shadows and wrapped his fingers around the other man's neck.

A crushing squeeze and a crunch of bone. Head and body parted company. The second man dropped in a gushing heap as Severian used the embedded blade to lift his first kill from the corridor, letting it drop out of sight.

'Hide that one,' said Severian, nodding towards the parts of the second man he'd killed.

'Seriously?' said Alivia. 'There's blood everywhere. I don't think it much matters whether we hide him or not.'

Severian looked up from cleaning his blade on the dead man's robes. Arcing blood spray painted the walls of the corridor and dripped from the curved ceiling.

'Force of habit not to leave easily discovered corpses in my wake,' he said, standing and sheathing his blade. 'It won't matter in a few minutes anyway.'

'How could he not see you?' asked Alivia, following Severian along the corridor's numerous twists and turns. Near the end of their journey, his dead man's map was growing more precise.

'Severian?' she said. 'How could he not see you?'

He shrugged, and she sensed his unwillingness to elaborate.

'It's a talent I have,' he said, pausing at the foot of an access stairwell partially blocked with debris and twisted steelwork. 'Probably the only reason Malcador was able to keep Dorn from having me killed.'

'Dorn? *Rogal* Dorn?'

'Do you know anyone else named Dorn?'

'No.'

'There you go then,' said Severian, climbing the stairwell with preternatural agility. Warm mist spilled from above, moist and laden with a strange perfume that made Alivia want to gag. Like syrup and honey, but over-sweetened to the point of sickly.

Severian was three times her bulk, yet climbed the web of rebars and broken glass with an ease that utterly eluded Alivia. His oblique answers simply spawned a hundred more questions, but this wasn't the time to ask them. Instead, she followed the Luna Wolf, trying to step where he stepped, move how he moved. She lifted a hooked length of rebar, testing its weight as a club. Light enough to swing, heavy enough to kill anything she hit.

The stairwell brought them out onto a wide mezzanine walkway filled with

broken packing crates and flapping sheets of cloth. From the scale of structural steel overhead, this was clearly a chamber of some size. Hissing pipework threaded giant girders overhead, interleaving like jungle creepers. Warm rain drizzled from every surface, and Alivia spat a mouthful of brackish, iron-flavoured water.

Moisture-sheened columns soared like towering tree trunks, bracing walls that angled inwards to form the underside of a stepped dome. Alivia was no shipwright and had no idea what purpose such a space might serve.

‘It’s a vent chamber for the plasma coolant system,’ said Severian.

‘Stop doing that,’ snapped Alivia.

‘Doing what?’

‘Lifting thoughts from my mind.’

‘It’s hard not to,’ he said.

Alivia took a breath of warm, metallic air, trying to calm herself. Her fear for Vivyen was flaring from her like a beacon. No wonder Severian was hearing her thoughts.

Panels of corrugated sheet metal lashed to the mezzanine railings kept the chamber below from sight. Sibilant voices drifted on the air, a seductive mantra that concealed a corruption offering one of the easiest route to damnation.

‘You were right,’ she whispered. ‘It’s the warp.’

They crawled towards the railings, and Alivia pressed her face to the plates of warm, wet steel. Through a gap in the corrugated metal, she saw a chamber that more than justified the first word that leapt to mind.

Temple.

Several hundred people filled the space below, some in white robes, some naked. Fires burned in wide bowls held aloft on chains and the smoke made serpentine patterns in the air. A raised area opposite the mezzanine had been cleared, and a hexagonal platform of metallic crates that looked too much like an altar for Alivia’s liking was set at its centre.

She swept the crowd, looking for any sign of Vivyen.

‘Do you see her?’ asked Severian.

She shook her head. ‘I don’t know if that’s good or not.’

‘Only one way to find out.’

‘Go down there?’

He nodded.

‘There’s hundreds of people down there,’ said Alivia.

‘Nothing I can’t handle.’

‘What about them?’ said Alivia, pointing to the cybernetics lurking at the edge of the chamber. As tall as Severian, each was armed with serious firepower and plated in bonded steel.

‘Thallaxii,’ said Severian. ‘Why did it have to be Thallaxii?’

Alivia switched her gaze from the chanting supplicants and cybernetic killers as she saw movement at the end of the chamber. Alivia’s breath caught in her throat and she stifled a cry as she saw six figures in white emerge from the darkness, each one bearing a struggling child.

‘Vivyen,’ she said.

‘Which one?’

‘The girl at the back.’

‘One of them’s hurt,’ said Severian.

A boy, no more than fourteen, with a soaking bandage tied around his shoulder. Alivia wished she had more bullets. Every man and woman in this chamber deserved to die for what they were doing here.

The children were crying as their captors lifted them onto the crates and secured them with chains around the neck. Vivyen wasn’t struggling, and Alivia saw defiance in her posture, a strength she hadn’t even begun to suspect the girl of possessing.

‘What the hell is that?’ asked Severian, narrowing his eyes as something suspended on a hideous arrangement of wires and chains jerked through the air.

‘Throne!’ hissed the Luna Wolf as the skeletal figure emerged into the light to rapturous awe. Like a famine victim experimented upon by a madman, the naked body twitched like the marionette of a palsied puppet-master. Its suspended body was emaciated and ravaged by toxins, the skull an almost fleshless dome. Unseeing eyes were cataract-blind and its stretched, too-wide grin of a mouth was smeared purple like some nightmarish theatrical clown.

The children screamed at the sight of it, pulling frantically at the chains binding them to the altar.

Despite the atrophied ruin of the figure’s form, it was clearly a man, and Alivia’s flesh crawled at the sight of the writhing womb-sac extending from his abdomen. A translucent flesh-pouch that squirmed with some unborn abomination. It detached itself from its skeletal host and landed in the centre of the altar to horrified screams from the children.

Alivia tightened her grip on her gun and rebar club.

Severian’s fingers flexed on the hilt of his empowered gladius as he picked up on her fear. He turned to look her straight in the eye.

‘Don’t say it,’ she said. ‘Don’t you dare say it.’

‘If this is what you think it is,’ he said, making no apology for lifting the thought from her. ‘We can’t let it happen.’

‘I know,’ said Alivia with a strangled sob. ‘But...’

‘But nothing. If we can’t save her, we kill her. *We* do it, not them.’

Alivia met Severian’s gaze and the ice in his eyes was the mirror of her own.

‘We’re going down there to rescue those children,’ said Alivia. ‘And if you so much as harm one hair on my daughter’s head, I’ll kill you.’

‘She’s not your child,’ said Severian. ‘She never was.’

‘Yes she is,’ said Alivia. ‘They all are. Don’t you understand? They’re *all* my children.’

Vivyen’s anger had kept the worst of her fear at bay, but the sight of the monster above destroyed the last shreds of her bravery. The skin-bag had dropped, squirmed and heaved at the centre of the stacked crates, a squalling animal in a dripping caul.

Ivalee shrieked and pulled at her chain, bloodying her neck against the chain’s rough edges. Oskar knelt over Uriah, his hands clasped before him and repeating the same phrase over and over: ‘The Emperor protects! The Emperor protects!’

Lalique lay curled in a weeping ball. Vesper simply stared at the heaving, screeching thing with a look of resignation.

It twitched and jumped and spasmed, eager to rip its way into the world. The hanging corpse of flesh looked down at them with dead white eyes and a leering, purple-smeared mouth.

A pair of needle-like fangs pierced the caul, tearing down.

‘Please, mama!’ cried Vivyen. ‘Please help us!’

Finally the sac split open as the thing inside cut its way out. And in a gush of bloody amniotic fluids its squirming contents disgorged into their midst.

Severian’s first shots blasted the head from one of the Thallaxii. Two shells, right through the joint of neck and head. A three-round burst through the hip joint of another and put a second on the ground.

Alivia hadn’t trust enough in her skill with the serpenta to risk wasting a bullet from this range. She vaulted over the railings and dropped into the suddenly panicked crowd of onlookers.

She landed hard and rolled, hitting legs and bringing bodies down on top of her. She kicked and elbowed her way to her feet, hammering the metallated length

of her serpent-etched pistol into unprotected faces and the rebar into the soft bone above the ear.

Alivia heard the thundering, flat bangs of Severian's bolt pistol. The impact of mass-reactives on armour. Screeching binaric voices and the whipcrack flashes of lightning guns.

She had no attention to spare for Severian.

Robed lunatics came at her, but she didn't waste her bullets on them. She swung the length of rebar she'd taken from the stairwell, pulping skulls and splintering arms and legs with every swing.

She left a trail of howling bodies behind her. With her gun extended in front of her and the rebar held high at her shoulder, people fought to get out of her way instead of trying to stop her.

She saw the altar and the bloody, new-birthed mess upon it.

'Throne, no...' she said.

Severian had no qualms about using human shields. These people had forfeited their right to live by being part of this, so whether they died by his hands or the forking blasts of lighting from the Thallaxii was utterly irrelevant.

He waded through the crowd, slaughtering anyone stupid enough not to get out of his way. Some men attacked him, as if they believed they could actually hurt him. He was doing the universe a favour by killing them before their stupidity got anyone else killed.

Proximo Tarchon's glitter-sheened gladius had an edge like a photonic weapon, keener than that honed by any living armourer he'd met.

Too bad he'd have to give it back.

Severian's claim that the hundreds of people were no threat to him wasn't a boast. Encased in powered battleplate and wrought by the Emperor's genewrights to be an apex killer, it was simply a fact.

Blood slicked him to the waist.

He lost count of how many he'd killed. Dozens. Scores probably. Not enough.

He scooped up three men and hurled them at the nearest Thallax. They broke against its sheet-steel armour, but he'd expected nothing else. A crack of lightning scorched their bodies to ash and flame.

Severian dropped and skidded low, slamming into the cybernetic. An armoured transhuman was more than enough to put it on its back. The machine-flesh hybrid crashed to the ground, but a Thallax wasn't a robot, or a sluggish series of commands and doctrina wafers. It had a living mind at its heart, living

reflexes bound to its fibre-bundle muscles.

It rolled swiftly onto one knee, bringing its weapon to bear. Severian hacked the gladius through the crackling breech and jammed his pistol between the interlocked rings of its gorget.

Three shots exploded within its armoured carapace in quick succession. The scrap of life within died a moment later. He swung himself around its body as a blizzing storm of jade light exploded where he'd been standing.

The Thallax toppled onto its side and Severian instantly saw the three remaining cybernetics.

Closing in. Too far apart to engage together.

'You are smarter than you look,' said Severian.

The Thallaxii bludgeoned through the panicked crowd, and those too slow to get out of their way were crushed underfoot.

'But not smart enough.'

The three grenades he'd planted in his wake exploded.

Vivyen screamed as the coiled, slippery mess erupted in their midst. Red with blood and sticky mucus, it hissed and thrashed with the pain of its birth. A rugose snake with iridescent scales and an elongated skull that was a vile blend of vulpine and reptilian anatomy.

Its head split wide in four wedged segments, each filled with long, crooked fangs that glistened with venom. Its eyes were weeping sores, veined with red and yellow.

Vivyen and the others scrambled away from it as far as their fetters would allow. They screamed and pulled at their chains, scraping their palms raw on the metal. The serpent's head flashed down and fastened on Uriah's wounded shoulder. Leathery glands at its neck swelled and the half-dead boy convulsed as venoms pumped into his flesh. Purple stains spread like ink in water across his skin, and frothed matter erupted from his mouth in a torrent of stinking bile. Whipping around, the serpent's fangs snapped shut on Oskar's leg and the child howled in agony as its bite poisoned him.

A series of deafening bangs sounded and people screamed.

The serpent ignored the commotion and released Oskar, turning its quartered skull towards Vesper. It lunged forwards and bit down twice, once on her arm and once on her neck.

Lalique died next, trying to shield Ivalee from the monster's attack. She howled as the venoms took her, and the serpent beast descended upon Ivalee.

Vivyen closed her eyes, but heard the girl's pitiful shrieks of pain over the screams coming from the crowd...

Vivyen's eyes snapped open.

Those were screams as terrified as her own.

People were running and crackling bolts of lightning exploded throughout the chamber, arcing from its giant columns and girders. She caught a glimpse of a grey giant in scorched armour as he threw himself at a tall robot with only one arm. She lost sight of him as the lethal serpent reared up in front of her, its bloody gullet open wide.

'Please, no!' she cried as it whipped forward.

A hand flashed out and caught the serpent around its neck, its fangs snapping shut a hair's breadth away.

Furious, it twisted and bit Vivyen's saviour's forearm.

Alivia slammed its head down on the packing crate altar.

The monster thrashed, its tail lashing like a bullwhip.

Alivia jammed the barrel of the Ferlach serpenta against its pinned skull and pulled the trigger.

Its head exploded in a welter of blood and bone.

'You don't get to hurt my daughter,' she said.

The pain was incredible, like nothing Alivia had felt in all her long life. It coursed around her body like a white-hot electric charge, burning as it went. Her inhuman metabolism, numinous and all but immortal, fought the serpent's kiss, a venom born in cosmic fire.

The sounds of screaming and gunfire faded out.

Her vision greyed and the muscles in her legs spasmed as her synapses fired crazily. She held onto the crates, purpled bile retching up from her gut.

'Mama!' cried a voice next to her.

She looked up, but could only see a blurred shadow. She knew the voice, but couldn't place it.

'Rebekah? Is that you?' she gasped, her throat feeling like it was closing up. 'Milcah?'

'It's me, mama. It's Vivyen.'

Alivia nodded and a gush of purple-black vomit erupted from her. Her chest heaved like a bellows-press and yet more nightmarish venom was expelled, a squirting flood that spilled over the crates.

Alivia blinked tears from her eyes as she heard sickening cracks and the wet

meat sound of flesh detaching from bone. She heaved a breath, one rancid with necrosis and raw newness. She was weaker than she could ever remember, barely able to keep a grip on the serpenta.

Alivia wrapped an arm around Vivyen, her poisoned flesh a bloated mottled mass of purple and yellow. She kept her daughter pulled tight to her breast, keeping her back to the horror unfolding upon the altar.

The envenomed children were changing.

Remade by an invisible sculptor.

Transforming.

Swollen with immaterial toxins, their bodies split and cracked, jerking with unnatural vigour to an unseen design. The empyrean imparted renewed ambition to their flesh, meat running molten from the bone and melding in unholy union.

A second coming, an immaculate birth of nightmare.

It grew swiftly, sculpting the offering of dead flesh into a form both wondrous and repulsive; gracile limbs bearing supple flesh of ivory and mauve. Glossy and smooth, clawed and feline of eye, it was horned, yet beautiful. Its wet tongue promised heights of pleasure and undreamed torments in equal measure, a succubus nurtured in the womb of a dying race and fathered by forbidden desires.

A daemon.

And yet it was unfinished, a work in progress, its metamorphosis incomplete. It limped towards Alivia, one leg too slender, its remade flesh and bone only half-formed. It reached for her with chitinous claws of purpled ebon.

Alivia lifted the serpenta and pulled the trigger.

Her bullets tore through the newborn daemon, carving lambent furrows through its body. It shrieked, in pleasure and pain both. Phosphor-bright ichor spilled from its wounds, yet it kept coming, moving in stuttering, unfinished pain.

Its black eyes promised an ecstatic death.

‘Your flesh is promised,’ it said. *‘Give it to me.’*

The serpenta’s hammer snapped down on an empty chamber.

‘You want it?’ said Alivia. ‘Take it. It’s yours.’

Severian twisted the burning arm of the Thallax around its segmented plastron. Fire crackled along the weapon’s length. The thing inside was fighting hard and even with only one arm, it wasn’t giving up.

It rammed a shoulder into him and he went with the blow, dropping and

rolling, pulling it with him. The Thallax toppled, and Severian wrenched its arm back. Metal buckled and tore. The arm came loose.

Severian rose to one knee and jammed the flaring end of the barrel into its helmet. A blazing plume of light engulfed its conical headpiece. It ran like heated wax, and boiling amniotic fluids gushed out in a stinking rush.

Beneath the cracked visor, a fleshless skull screamed.

Encased in a bronze headpiece of melting wires and invasive neural spikes drilled through the bone, the Thallax spasmed as its life finally ended.

Severian sprang away, revolted by the sight.

His threat awareness told him there was nothing left alive that could hurt him. The Thallax were down, as were the few mortals who'd been stupid enough to face him.

Severian turned to where Alivia had gone.

And saw he was wrong.

There *was* something that could still hurt him.

The daemon had claimed Alivia.

Its claws dug deep, and she felt its warp-stuff bleed into her, taking the final piece of what the living cadaver had promised it.

Their union was one of pain, but also one of promise.

The powers of those possessed were myriad, and the temptation to wield them burned hot in Alivia's breast. For all the cunning wrought into her kind's making, they were none of them above such bargains, nor above mortal ambition or physical desires.

They were, after all was said and done, still human.

But Alivia had become so much more than that.

She was a mother.

Alivia let the daemon in, let its essence consume her.

Then slammed the door behind it.

'No way out,' she said.

Severian walked slowly towards the makeshift altar, a blade in each hand. Alivia floated alongside the wretched architect of this slaughter, but where chains supported his paste-white form, Alivia needed nothing so prosaic to remain aloft.

Her outline wavered in the air, like identical picter negatives placed fractionally out of sync and trying to realign. Two beings struggling to occupy one body.

Like the corpse of Serghar Targost aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*, Alivia Sureka was now host to a warp beast.

But she was fighting it.

He saw pleading behind her eyes, a restlessness beneath her numinous skin that threatened to erupt at any moment.

‘Get. Her. Away.’

The words were forced out from behind clenched teeth.

And in that instant, Severian understood the truth of what he was seeing. The battle within Alivia wasn’t her fighting to hold on to her humanity.

It was the thing inside struggling to get out.

She saw his understanding and nodded.

Severian bent his back and made a quarter turn.

His right arm snapped forward and Proximo Tarchon’s gladius spun through the air. It buried itself in Alivia’s heart.

The young girl they’d come to save screamed, calling her name as if that might somehow bring her back.

Alivia fell to the altar as a body of dark smoke calved from her flesh. Its connection to the warp severed, the scraps of the daemon claimed the nearest living soul to bear its form.

But that rotten soul was singularly unable to host it.

Shargali-Shi’s body bloated as the daemon dug deeper and ever deeper into him, trawling his flesh for the strength to match its need.

All it found was a hollow shell, empty and useless.

He felt its terror as reality prepared to expel it.

Shargali-Shi could only wail his despair as he convulsed on his chains, jerking like a thing made entirely from broken bones. The daemon’s dying geometries were pulling him in a hundred directions at once.

His skin was drum-tight, stretched to the limits of its tolerance; his mouth became a distended void as cartilage tore and sinew snapped.

Then he broke, his body exploding as it released its captive, and his wasted fragments were incinerated by the empyreal fire his death had unleashed.

Alivia opened her eyes, staring up at a number of gently swinging chains hanging from the high domed ceiling. Motes of fading light clung to them, drifting slowly downwards like the embers of a dying fire.

She groaned in pain. Her chest hurt.

Her whole *body* hurt.

Vivyen's head was buried in the hollow of her collarbone and Alivia felt hot tears wetting her skin. Vivyen was alive.

And that made all the pain in the world worthwhile.

'Vivyen?' asked Alivia.

'Mama,' was Vivyen's only reply. 'I knew you'd come. The book told me, but I knew anyway.'

'The book?'

'Madame Ghost Snake,' said Vivyen.

'Who?'

'As good a name as any for someone who ought to be dead,' said Severian. Alivia forced herself up onto one elbow.

The Luna Wolf sat on the edge of the crates, wiping her blood from the gladius he'd thrown. Alivia winced as she relived the pain of it shearing through her breastbone to her heart. She looked over her shoulder. Other than the three of them, the chamber was empty.

'That was a good throw,' she said.

'Why aren't you dead?' asked Severian. 'That serpent bit you and I *know* I split your heart.'

'I thought you said the world was more interesting with some secrets left in it,' said Alivia.

Severian grinned and offered her a hand up. 'True enough. Very well, Alivia Sureka, keep your secrets for now, but Malcador is going to want to hear them.'

Alivia took Severian's hand, not wishing to sour the moment with how little she cared for the Sigillite's wants. She levered herself into a sitting position. Her body had been traumatised on every level, physically, mentally and spiritually, abused beyond anything she'd imagined possible to survive.

Her hand slid over her chest, feeling the clean cut in the fabric where Severian's gladius had penetrated. There was a scar there, of course there was, but it was meaningless next to the scars on her psyche. She would wake screaming for years, perhaps forever, but she kept that horror at bay for now. Vivyen needed her to be strong.

Nightmares could wait.

'I told you that weapon had shed potent blood,' she said.

'So you did.'

Alivia swept her gaze around the chamber.

'Are they all dead?'

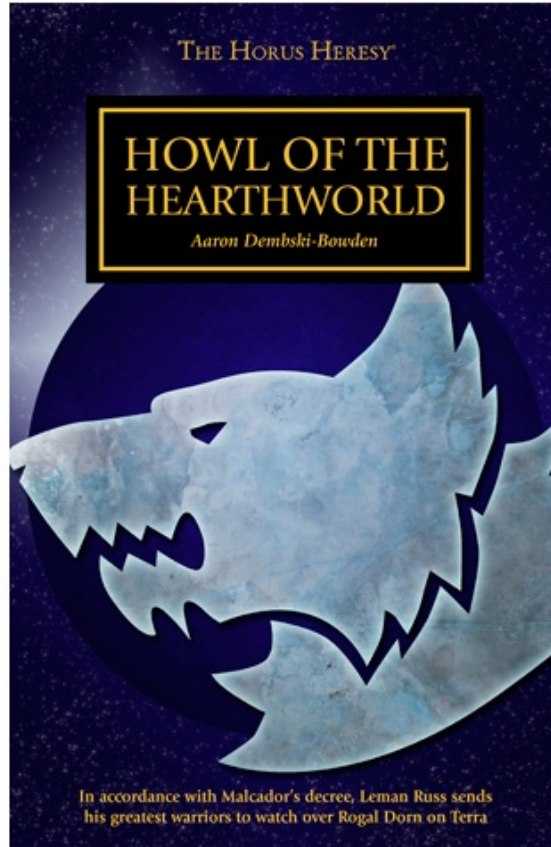
‘They will be,’ promised Severian.

‘Then let’s go home, Vivyen,’ said Alivia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham McNeill has written more Horus Heresy novels than any other Black Library author! His canon of work includes *Vengeful Spirit* and his *New York Times* bestsellers *A Thousand Sons* and the novella *The Reflection Crack'd*, which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written a Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus. For Warhammer, he has written the Time of Legends trilogy *The Legend of Sigmar*, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award, and the anthology *Elves*. Originally hailing from Scotland, Graham now lives and works in Nottingham.

[A Space Wolves pack rails at being sent back to Terra to watch over Rogal Dorn.](#)



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