

THE HORUS HERESY®

BLACKSHIELD

Chris Wraight



As Mortarion's soul darkens, his sons begin
to turn against one another



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BLACKSHIELD

Chris Wraight

He had taken back his name.

That was a victory, of sorts – a measure of defiance. Now he bore it openly again, and they called him by it, and he listened to the scrape and rasp of Barbaran tongues reminding him where he had been birthed, and made, and turned.

Kho – rak. Two syllables, pronounced with the rattle of toxin-hardened throats.

Despite all else that had taken place, it felt good to have it spoken again.

Now Khorak looked out over the bridge of the *Ghogolla*, his ship, heavy and rust-spidered, fitted out for close-range actions. The menials worked below him, their faces hidden behind smeary, gas-filled facemasks. The recycled air tasted faintly brackish.

One of them approached – a mortal, Narag, the ship's master, clad in XIV Legion grey, white and green, eyes lowered, fists balled in deference.

'And?' Khorak asked, pushing the pivoted command throne around on its creaking axis.

'Commander,' Narag said. 'We cannot outrun it.'

Khorak considered that. The *Ghogolla* was old, and tired. Its plasma drives creaked like stretched leather. Sooner or later they were bound to meet something faster, something that had properly weathered the storm and which could end them.

'Then we fight it,' Khorak told him.

Narag looked uncertain.

'What other option remains?' Khorak asked.

'Perhaps, on firm ground...'

Ah yes, that was still possible. They had headed to Agarvian for a reason, playing to their Legion's strengths. It might be better yet to cleave to that, cheating destruction one more time, rather than face a tilted contest in the void.

‘Can we reach it, though?’ Khorak mused idly, glancing at the grease-specked monitors showing forward augur scans. ‘What manner of hunters are they?’

Narag did not know. It had become hard to detect the enemy from range, what with overlapped ident-markers, false flags and hidden colours. The galaxy was now a patchwork of broken allegiances, and you could only tell truly who your opponent fought for when you looked him in the eye and watched for the twitch.

The intentions of these opponents were clear enough, though.

They were coming to kill.

Khorak spun his throne around again, pushing lazily with a scuffed boot-tip. ‘No matter. Make for Agarvian, but prepare for void-action. It will be tight, to reach sanctuary.’

‘Aye, commander,’ Narag replied with a bow. Before withdrawing, he hesitated. ‘But I will get you there,’ he added, his voice a mix of pride and resignation.

Khorak nodded. That was probably correct, though it would likely be the shipmaster’s last feat of void-craft. They were handsomely out-gunned and out-powered, and it seemed somehow fitting that the tortuous fate spawned on Isstvan had caught up with them at last.

‘I believe you,’ Khorak said. ‘Now get to work.’

They ran hard. The *Ghogolla* seemed aware of its impending demise and, as if from wounded pride, dragged some vestige of its old thunderous power up from a clanking engine room. As they were now too far from a Mandeville point to make the warp, Narag took the ship deep under the solar plane of the Leops system, shadowed all the while by their pursuer. They passed within ten thousand kilometres of the silky mass of the methane giant Hereb before breaking for the system’s heart on full burn and in towards Agarvian.

Khorak saw none of this. He trudged down to the principal hangar lodged against the leeward hull-edge, where his remaining sworn brothers waited for him in their full panoply of war – old XIV Legion plate, worn unbroken from the slaying fields of Isstvan through the years of variegated slaughter thereafter.

Out on the apron, his lieutenant, Hesch, saluted him silently, raising a stained chainsword across his shell-pocked chest. The three others took their places on the panels – Urgain, with his carbon-black volkite serpenta,

Turgalla hauling a rad-launcher in both gauntlets, Lyphas loosely twisting paired chainaxes from the wrist. Khorak himself was heavier and grander than them all, weighed down by the age-pitted ceramite of Terminator armour, the edges as pale as bleached bone and scuffed with the mottle of a hundred worlds. He hefted a manreaper power scythe before him just as the first hit came in, making the chamber shake.

‘Do not gainsay this,’ Khorak warned, looking past Hesch, out to the bulk of his lone operational Stormbird *Skarvor*, already prepped on the steaming deck plates. The open void beyond was as black as a scab.

‘We could fight from here,’ said Hesch anyway, sceptical, though still respectful.

The deck shook again, then again. The enemy were finding their range, and soon the power-deprived void shields would start to fail.

Khorak gazed grimly around the cracked hangar vaults. ‘This old hull no longer gives us any advantage. Better to fight with our feet on the earth, as the Death Lord taught us.’

That brought a snort of amusement from Lyphas. Beyond them, *Skarvor*’s ramp hissed down, exposing the crew bay within. The whine of turbofans started up, making the atmosphere-bubble of the hangar flex.

‘Come, then,’ ordered Khorak, striding out towards the Stormbird. ‘As we planned it.’

But they had not planned it, not like this. The *Ghogolla* was to have been their watcher in low orbit once they reached Agarvian. For all its decrepitude, it still had manufactoria and powerplants, and once it was destroyed they would be stranded on the world below – alive, but unimaginably far from help.

Still, *alive* was the key. While their hearts still beat there was always a chance of something more.

More strikes impacted, syncopating closer, smashing through the tortured voidship’s reeling exterior. The hangar began to tilt over, its grav-generators knocked out of kilter, and arm-wide cracks snaked across the ceiling.

Skarvor lifted off, juddering badly as its old Warhawk-pattern engines worked to compensate for the rapidly changing environment. It blasted ahead, making the switch from atmospheric thrusters to void-drives even before the hangar entrance had been breached.

Around them, the *Ghogolla* slewed across the transverse, skidding through space as though kicked. Clouds of angry static burst out ahead of them, showering from the hangar's crumbling doors as the fields clashed.

Khorak fed the last of the available power to the Stormbird, and it boosted on pure plasma, skating over the bucking rockcrete and leaving plumes of sparks where the metal grated. Something deep in the *Ghogolla* ignited, and flames surged up from the breaking deck-level, liquid and roiling.

But then they were out, bursting clear of the disintegrating shell of their home vessel and out into the vacuum beyond, spreading a smear of fire across the deep well of space. Khorak sent the gunship swinging hard over to port, down and down towards the looming gravity tug of the planet Agarvian. As they accelerated out of the exploding remnants of the *Ghogolla*, debris clanged and scraped across their ship's spine.

For a few moments, the chained explosions masked their presence. On any pursuing augur the *Skarvor* would be just one more piece of racing debris, a buttress or a deck-brace flying clear of the *Ghogolla*'s demise. That was the precious window they needed to get clear, to race ahead, to put themselves beyond the range of the enemy's guns for long enough to reach the approaching troposphere.

Khorak nudged the control column, bringing the Stormbird's trim higher, now finding the optimum line of atmospheric entry. They had seconds, no more, before the Legion gunners who had already destroyed their ship zeroed down on the new target.

Khorak found himself wondering which Legion they were from. The Raven Guard, perhaps – the pursuit had been stealthy enough. Or maybe some mingled bastard amalgam of the broken Legions, such as infested the dregs of the universe like a stubborn infection. They refused to die quietly, those ones, even though their hopes were long gone. That might have been admirable, or it might have merely been irritating. Given his own situation, Khorak no longer knew which.

The console before him chimed a warning, and the Stormbird's tracking system pulled the gunship into a swirling dive.

'They've locked on,' observed Hesch, coldly.

'Not quickly enough,' said Khorak, gauging the distances and seeing that Narag had been right – he had delivered them to sanctuary.

Las-beams lanced down, sizzling through the thickening void, none finding its mark. The planet's outer layers started to curdle ahead of them, thickening like churned slurry and making the forward viewers race with static. Agarvian was a small world, little more than a planetoid, swathed in gaseous curtains that swayed and trembled, but still it fought their approach.

The Stormbird shook as Khorak piloted it down, its nose soon aflame, its turbofans kicking in again and sucking the gas-rich air in hungrily. More las-beams twisted and spat, following them down, nearly taking the tail off with a direct hit.

But the voidship couldn't follow them down, and soon the *Skarvor* had levelled into a surging parallel run across Agarvian's land-mass below – a seamy swampland of olive-green and grey, boiling with gas. They raced across it, weaving through heavy columns of condensation.

'Just like home,' observed Turgalla, wryly.

'If we're lucky,' said Khorak, looking for somewhere to land.

That should have been an end to it, at least for many hours.

Agarvian's atmosphere was a soup of methane and sulphur, laden with floating poisons that clogged, choked and spewed. The terrain was boggy, spore-pocked, a mass of floating weed-clumps atop steaming pools.

Skarvor put down deep inside the northern swamp-zone, the gunship's landing gear sinking deep into yielding turf. As the ramps came down the air swept inside, foul and rotting even through helm-filters. The sun was low in the sky, setting fast, and across the darkening miasma above faint trails of fire could be seen – the debris of the *Ghogolla*, streaking into nothingness far above them.

Khorak was first out, clanking down from the portals and across the mire. His boots squelched in deep with every step, sucking as the heels pulled free. Hesch followed him, sword already gunning. Ahead of them, the land rose gradually in folds of dense, glistening vegetation, screened by a filmy haze as the world's edge arced away.

'Now what?' Hesch asked.

Khorak had little enough of an answer to give him. 'We move.'

Hesch stayed where he was. Behind him, Turgalla lumbered out into the open, drawing deep draughts of filth-heavy air through his corroded vox-grille.

'What of the gunship?' Hesch asked again, insistent.

‘We cannot hide it,’ said Khorak, looking up at the eastern horizon, where a line of blurred peaks marched under the lowering sky.

‘Nor can we abandon it.’

Khorak was about to reply, when he felt the loose earth tremble. That was no natural tremor. ‘Urgain,’ he voxed. ‘Leave the cockpit. Now.’

The rest of the squad felt it next, ramping up fast, swelling out of the clouds and making them shiver. Seconds later, the billows of white vapour split apart, torn into strips by the thunder of turbos on maximum whine. Three Thunderhawks in charcoal-black livery boomed into visual range, travelling low and fast.

Urgain didn’t hear or didn’t listen. *Skarvor* lifted off again, churning the swampwater into torrents as it turned on its axis to face the threat. Its linked heavy bolters opened up first, hurling shells into the oncoming formation. The lead Thunderhawk took hits across its muzzle, and dived hard amid a shower of deflected sparks.

That did nothing to deter the remaining two, which closed in fast. Even as *Skarvor* gained full loft, their own weapons opened up, spearing fire from adapted turbo-laser mounts. From their vantage they were able to strike true, and a ragged hole was punched clean through *Skarvor*’s starboard wing, sending it reeling.

Turgalla dropped to one knee, angled his missile launcher, and fired. A rad-missile streaked up into the sky and impacted hard under the racing undercarriage of the closest Thunderhawk. A green-tinged explosion ignited, rattling along the gunship’s chassis and tearing up its ablative plate. Secondary explosions kicked off, all fizzing with burgeoning radioactivity, and the gunship pulled clear of the *Skarvor*, engines smoking.

It wasn’t enough, though. The two remaining attackers swung round for another pass, raking the larger Stormbird across its back and smashing the armourglass viewports. Urgain attempted to force the issue, using his craft’s greater bulk to ram the closest Thunderhawk out of the sky, but they were too fast, too agile. A lattice of las-fire spun and burned between them, tight and concentrated. Hesch and Lyphas opened up with bolters, but their peppering fire did little but chip paint from the gunships’ hulls.

A direct hit struck the Stormbird on the maw of its starboard intake, and a boom of detonation rang out.

‘Move,’ ordered Khorak, seeing where this was going. He grabbed Turgalla by the shoulder and hauled him away, then reached for Lyphas.

Urgain was still fighting. Secondary blasts ripped the casing from his gunship’s flank, but he somehow spun it round to gain a solution on the lead Thunderhawk. He opened up with all he had left – a vicious fusillade that blew his enemy’s cockpit into pieces and knocked it muzzle-over-chassis in a crazed, whirling tumble.

‘Move!’ Khorak ordered again, shoving Lyphas ahead. Hesch was still firing, roaring out his pointless anger into the skies, emptying magazines that should have been preserved. Khorak grabbed him last, wrenching him around, pushing him to make for the cover that yet might save them.

He resisted for just a moment, furious, ready to stand and fight, ludicrously, in the open. He would never have done that before, not when the Legion had been whole and the command structure was as rigid as iron bars, but now all was corroded and once-clear minds had been turned to fury.

Skarvor took a final hit, smashing through its fore plating and rupturing the main fuel lines. Blue-edged flames swelled out, searing down the outer hull and blowing out the turbofans. With a scream of ripping metal, it swung away, burning like a brand.

By then Khorak was marching, driving the others, heading into the thick foliage ahead. He focused as he had been trained to – on survival – barely hearing the crash of *Skarvor*’s final descent. He lashed out with his scythe, clearing a path through metal-dark creepers, and then plunged into the mass of them, shoving and barging through.

The secondary explosions kept on coming, one after the other, a sickening tally of destruction. It was their last void-worthy ship, and it had been with them since before Isstvan. There had been victories since then, many, but the avenue of fate had closed down around them, a vice that had been tightening since the decisions made on that distant day. They were alone now, planet-bound, just as it had been on Barbarus before the coming of the Emperor.

That soul-damned *god*.

The cause of it all. The architect of ruin.

‘One gunship left,’ hissed Hesch, hard on his heels, his helm-lenses coldly glowing in the gathering murk. The implication was clear: stay and fight, bring it down, salvage what remained.

Khorak kept going. He remembered Narag's words, which had become a mantra to him during planetfall.

On firm ground.

It had been too long since he had fought with his boots planted squarely on a world. Better to die that way than within a machine, out of contact with your enemy, bloodless and remote.

'More are coming,' he said, swinging the scythe to clear the way ahead. They pushed on, deeper and darker, and fronds of twisted bark closed in above their helms. 'We stay alive, we stay in the hunt. Then we turn.' He had to give Hesch something. 'We choose our battleground, then we draw their blood.'

Hesch grunted. Lyphas and Turgalla crowded close, their pale battleplate semi-luminescent in the cobwebbed gloaming. Above them, the juddering growl of Thunderhawk engines still prowled, but they were now deep in cover and the haze would blunt the augurs.

All around him, Khorak felt destiny narrowing further. The end was coming. He could almost sense the sclerotic gaze of his gene-father – red-rimmed, scrutinising, disappointed.

He dismissed the image. He kept going, just as he always had, even while nameless; one foot after the other, the heel of his manreaper sinking deep into the foul earth.

They evaded the gunships for the entire night. They heard them overhead every hour or so, three or four by the engine-echoes, sweeping the forested zone. One came very close, forcing them to remain motionless, armour powered down, barely breathing, but it passed on into the dark again, its searchlights moving steadily.

They heard rolling booms during the journey from far off, the tell-tale signs of troop landings. They had long since lost sight of the sky under the tangled mat of vegetation, but Khorak knew that the pursuing vessel was still up there, a new star in Agarvian's heavens, cycling in low orbit and running scan-series to find them.

The going was tough, and he revelled in it. Wading through the bogs made his genhanced muscles ache, and he relished the pain. The air wheezed through his helm's filters, and that gave him pleasure. These creations of distant Terra – armour, machinery – were weak in the face of true poison. Only his Barbaran self remained inviolate, pushing back against the filth, converting it, draining the toxicity from it. This is what

they had done since the beginning, and none could do it better. The Raven Guard could dance in the shadows, the Fists could build like gods, but they could not suffer *this* – the slow grind of a world that hated all mortal purity.

Hesch remained close to him, like the nagging memory of a lie. He had taken a hit sometime during the firefight, and limped badly. Even he, though, could see the strategy here: withdraw to a place where none but the sons of Mortarion could fight unimpeded. For the time being, that had stifled the scepticism in his questions, and now he was like the rest of them, head lowered, shoulders rolling, striding knee-deep in oily slime as the muck rolled from his armour. Lyphas and Turgalla brought up the rear, dogged and silent.

Four hours later, dawn broke. A grimy blush of white against the horizon, barely detectable under the thick layers of vegetation, unravelling a world of drabness and steaming fronds. The land began to rise, at first slowly, then ever more steeply, until they were tramping through winding, boggy defiles choked with spines and arm-length weeds.

Another two hours, and Khorak at last ordered a halt. Towers of glistening rock stood on either side of them, streaked with hanging green creepers. They had reached the neck of a tight-turned gorge, a narrow cleft between tracts of nigh-impassable jungle, screened from above by a rearing cliff and on either side by the rocky towers. Only the way they had come was open, and once they turned their guns would overlook the twisting route below.

‘We stand here,’ Khorak announced, planting his scythe.

The others immediately saw the potential. Turgalla took up position on the left flank, facing down into the bowl of swamp below. Lyphas hunkered down a little further down, half buried in loops of slime. Hesch and Khorak took their places at the narrowest point of the neck, their backs against the rock.

Then they waited, falling perfectly silent, perfectly still. Their armour’s power units cycled down to minimum draw. They rested their weapon barrels on the moist hussocks before them, then made no further move. Condensation ran down their pauldrons, hot and sparkling. Their vox-filters strained softly, in, out, the breathing of the endlessly patient. The world hissed and boiled around them, unquiet in its contagion.

Khorak waited. He drew the metallic air in deeply, feeling its hot scratch against the inside of his lungs. He had not felt that since leaving the home world, and it brought a pang of remembrance.

‘Now let them come,’ he breathed, settling for the wait.

It took the hunters four days to find them. During that time the skies wheeled four times, the world’s weak light slicking over the jungle cover. Khorak’s squad did not so much as lift a trigger finger all the while. Their eyes never left their weapons’ sights; their helms never dropped out of vigilance.

The first detected movement was clumsy, crashing through the foliage a hundred metres deeper down. Khorak watched the hunters come – black-armoured Legion warriors, half-baffled by the smog and poison, their arms heavy with grabbing tendrils. Their movements gave away trace fatigue. They must have been slogging through the mires since the Thunderhawks had dropped them on that first day, and it showed.

‘Wait,’ he voxed softly, letting more of them come into the open.

His own squad was near-invisible by then, covered in the drifting filth of the world, dug-down and semi-buried. His enemy allowed themselves to become exposed, and he studied them. They wore no marker, just black battleplate with all livery blotted. Some marched differently from the others, as if their training or physique were dulled. The formation was loose, their tactics standard. Soon there were twelve of them, climbing ever closer, still advancing in ignorance.

Khorak allowed himself a parched smile.

‘Now,’ he ordered.

Turgalla let fly, sending a rad-missile into the foremost cluster of legionaries. Even before it had hit, Lyphas and Hesch had laid down a supporting wave of bolterfire, blasting through the trunks of hunched trees and sending the creepers snapping like whips. The deluge smashed the foliage apart, driving a corridor of destruction down from the gorge vantage, briefly opening up the defile’s floor to the grey skies.

The black-armoured warriors scattered, some caught in the fusillade and downed before they could return fire, others scrambling for cover. Khorak noted the kill-counter clicking over on his helm-display – eight, nine, ten – and felt a hot flush of vindication. He joined in the slaughter, firing his bolt pistol to add to the carnage, watching as a sprinting legionary’s helm exploded in a puff of crimson.

It was glorious, a loosed riot of slaying to avenge the damage that the hunters had already wrought. More of the enemy, drawn by the clap and ring of mass reactives detonating, surged up from the scabrous mire, making heavy work of the ascent and succumbing to the fate of their brothers. Another brace of them fell, choking in the noxious air as their helm-cables were severed and their faceplates shattered.

So they paid. They paid heavily. But they were yet sons of some primarch, immune to fear and tempered by a lifetime of war. The attackers gauged the cover, gauged the numbers, began to fire back to pin Khorak's squad down. Flamers opened up, clearing swathes of the jungle and burning back the shroud of foliage that hid their prey. Frag grenades spun out of the firestorm, splintering overhead and raining down incendiary murder. However many warriors were dropped, more emerged, first in twos, then sixes, then nines and tens, forging a bloody path up the defile, marching across the corpses of their downed comrades to get into firing positions.

Turgalla was the first to die, his location obliterated by a combined plasma and lascannon strike that scorched the boggy terrain down to naked stone. Then Lyphas was exposed, taken out by pinpoint bolterfire as he tried to withdraw higher up the defile's neck. Hesch and Khorak halted the attack for a few moments longer, using their elevation to sow havoc among the advancing legionaries, but then the foremost enemy warriors broke ahead and into blade range.

Hesch swung out his chainsword, launching himself at the first attacker. The two of them traded blows before Hesch was thrown into the air by ranged fire angling up from below, his breastplate torn open before his opponent's eyes. Striding over, Khorak whipped his crackling scythe blade across, severing the black-plated legionary at the waist and slicing clean through his body. The warrior, cloven in two, collapsed in a fizzing mess of armour-electrics and boiling blood.

Then Khorak, alone now, turned to face the advancing formation, his scythe swimming in disruptor energies, poised to sweep through plate and flesh again. He moved out against the approaching dozens, expecting to feel the first stabs of bolt-impacts across his Terminator armour, anticipating that cleansing pain.

And yet all he faced were shuddering echoes of old discharges.

Twenty metres shy, his pursuers fell back, their weapons trained on him, none opening fire. They slowly formed up in a loose semicircle below him, thin grey vapours curdling around their nightshade armour.

‘What now, brothers?’ Khorak called out in accented Low Gothic, just as he had done in the days when he had had a voice of his own, when the Legions had fought alongside one another rather than as foes. ‘None of you has the stomach to face my blade?’

At that, one of the black-plated warriors moved to the forefront. Like the others, he carried no insignia, but his power armour was heavily modified. Cables snaked around it, bunching thickly where the nodes to the carapace protruded. Glimmers of bare metal gave away the complex outlines of augmetics everywhere – his greaves, cannons, torso.

It looked as if almost all of the matter below his neckline were cybernetic.

Khorak watched him advance until they were barely ten metres apart. The newcomer seemed to be studying him. Khorak held his scythe ready, judging just how far he could punish such presumption.

‘Impossible,’ the legionary said, almost to himself. His voice was a thick cluster of machine-vox timbres, barely human, as deep as a Dreadnought’s rumble. ‘What are you?’

Still Khorak waited. ‘Declare yourself, *blackshield*,’ he said dryly. ‘I would have your name before I kill you.’

The warrior ignored his demand. ‘You wear the armour and you carry the scythe. Has your master given you leave to have a mind of your own, then?’

Khorak listened carefully. The warrior spoke with a strange inflection, but there was something else. The dour snag of Barbaran rhythms, perhaps? This one evidently knew *what* Khorak was, and why it was unthinkable that he should be on Agarvian alone.

‘I always had a mind,’ he replied, ‘but not always a tongue. I took it back, and it has served me well. I ask again, and will not do so a third time – give me your name.’

The warrior reached up and, awkwardly, grabbed his gorget seal and twisted the helm free. The hiss of escaping atmosphere was tinged with green, and boiled away like steam. When it cleared, the face revealed was a mess of scabs and scars, knitted together with metal pins that threaded through hollow cheeks.

He could breathe. He could process the sickened air and still stand steady. So surely he was Death Guard under all that ebon plate, one of the old Legion yet?

‘I am named Crysos Morturg,’ the warrior announced, without pride. Free of the vox-grille’s distortion his accent was neither of Terra nor Barbarus. ‘I once led Destroyers to war under the Fourteenth Legion’s banner. Perhaps you saw me do so on Isstvan Three. Or perhaps you turned your face away on that day, unable to bear the shame.’

So that was it. These hunters were not led by one of the loyal Legions at all, but the disloyal dregs of a disloyal muster, the unworthy and the backward-looking, all of whom should have been long-since culled.

‘You were there,’ said Khorak, a little wonderingly. He had seen the orbital barrages, the waves of landings, and found it hard to countenance the idea that anyone could have lived through that, not even the most doggedly stubborn. ‘How did you survive?’

‘Do not be foolish. No one survived.’

Khorak hesitated, then snorted a dry laugh. ‘Yet here you are, hunting us down for revenge. It eases your pain, this, does it?’

But Morturg made no move. ‘I have slain a hundred of my former brothers already,’ he growled. ‘Every time I felt their blood on my gauntlets, my strength grew. And yet you are different. Why are you here, Deathshroud? How *can* you be here?’

As he listened, a faint, terrible hope kindled in Khorak’s mind. They were battle-brothers of a kind still, the two of them, sundered only by time and temperament. Perhaps that hope was unworthy, a last strand of weakness, but it would not quite die within him.

‘What I was, I no longer am,’ Khorak said. ‘I watched the killing plains of Isstvan, and I never turned my face away, for all who perished there deserved to die, at least as I thought then. And so I remained under the shadow of our master, as his guardian elect, and I followed him into the void, and we began to burn the Imperium from within.’

He paused, thinking back to his second treachery. That had been the harder of the two.

‘But then came Molech. You know of Molech? Maybe even you will have heard of it. The things I saw there... The dead raised and the living slain. My own brotherhood, sacrificed in a ritual of blasphemy to raise an abomination. And on that day I saw that all our master had ever taught us,

all the screeds against the witch and the magicks of Old Night, were as nothing. And if his vows had come to naught, what use were mine?' He raised one gauntlet to his chest in salute, just as he had done from the earliest days of his fealty. 'So I took my name back. I found my voice once more. Now I have no master, and all swords are turned against me.'

Morturg looked sceptical. 'You still wear the colours.'

'Mortarion changed, I did not. I am still of Barbarus.'

Slowly, as if comprehending a subtle truth, Morturg nodded. 'And you would kill our father, were you to see him again?'

'In a heartbeat.'

'And that is your intention, to find a way?'

'It is all I live for.'

There was no use for lies now, all knew that. Khorak spoke not to preserve his life, but to state the truth, and this Crysos Morturg could see it. Even so, the hope nagged at him, a fragile skein of possibility, barely more than gossamer-thin.

We want the same thing.

Still Morturg did not move. His warriors kept their bolters trained tight, tracking for the merest hint of treachery. The blackshield's brow knitted in concentration, a snarl of ruined flesh over steel. He was considering where all this might lead.

Then a sharp clank of ceramite broke the silence. A metre away, Hesch half-rose from the mire, his gun-arm dripping, his helm snaking with electric slivers. He crawled forward, the mouth of his gun smoking, deranged by pain and only seeing enemies. He fired a single time before the chorus of bolter-fire ended him truly, his last shot aimed true, a strike at Morturg's helm.

Khorak whirled around, trying to interpose his scythe blade between the racing shell and its target, but that was beyond even his skill. Hesch's shot punched deep into Morturg's forehead, where it burrowed into the flesh and splintered the bone apart.

Except that it didn't. That was what it *ought* to have done.

The bolt crackled into nothing, forced back from the warrior's skin like a bubble under water, thrown aside, the casing sent flying. Morturg staggered, wincing, and the stink of ozone flowed from his armour. A coil of smoke twisted up across the battered black ceramite, pungent like temple incense.

Khorak knew it instinctively, smelling it, *tasting* it, remembering the awful betrayal on Molech and all that it had brought. ‘Witchery!’ he hissed.

He whirled, scanning, looking for an external source.

But there was no external source.

Morturg regained his footing, his exposed flesh crawling with pulsing light. Under the weak sun, it seemed as though his outline flickered, momentarily caught between worlds.

‘Make no judgement,’ he warned, snapping back to solidity with a single step towards Khorak. ‘I have no choice in this.’

Khorak withdrew, clutching his scythe defensively. ‘*Sorcerer,*’ he hissed.

‘Mortarion is gone,’ urged Morturg, keeping his weapon lowered. ‘The old sanctions are gone. Where did they get us?’

But Khorak was no longer listening. He stared at his battle-brother’s scarred face, watching tumours of unnatural light swell beneath it.

How did you survive?

No one survived.

‘You were slain that day,’ Khorak said – an accusation. ‘All were slain.’

Morturg held his gaze, urgent. ‘And I endure still.’

‘Better to die,’ spat Khorak, rekindling his scythe’s blade, ‘than embrace that.’

‘It was only *he* who taught us such things.’

Khorak laughed, tensing for the first strike. ‘And when he faltered, I forswore him. I retain this, though all else is cast aside – *belief*. If it is enough to defy the one who made me, why do you think I would suffer the unclean touch in you?’

‘Brother, do not do this.’

But it was too late. His eyes alive with zeal, Khorak raised the scythe and hurled himself towards the psyker before him. It looked for a moment as if Morturg were trying to hold his troops back, to ward off their protective assault, but in the frenzy of movement such gestures were useless. There were over twenty of his warriors present, and they had never let their guard lapse.

Khorak felt the bolter strikes slice through him, shattering his ancient armour into spiralling dagger-edges, burrowing deep into old flesh that had seen the dawn on a hundred worlds. He missed his footing upon the

marshy earth, but the bolts kept coming, tearing into him. Morturg cried out, futilely, his armour-edges still licked with the flames of sorcery.

Khorak's scythe slipped from his fingers just a hand's width short of the blackshield's breastplate. He fell to the ground, the filmy waters slapping across his broken armour, mingling with the blood that now pumped heavily from wounds that could never heal.

He choked. He spat clots of black bile, and writhed with the tsunami of pain. He rolled, snake-like in spite of his heavy armour, only to see Morturg towering over him. His ruined face was etched with remorse – a sentinel to watch over the passage into infinity.

'It should... never have been...' Khorak gasped, his last breath coming in bloody gouts. 'You are naught now but... a ghost.'

'As are you, brother,' murmured Morturg, bowing his head. 'As are we all.'

When all was done, when all that could be retrieved – progenoids, restorable weapons, fuel cells from the downed gunships – had been hauled up on lifters, Crysos Morturg's warband gathered again in high orbit. The strike-cruiser *Malice* keyed up its engines, ready for the long haul to the warp-stages. Deep within the armouries, his troops – some Death Guard still loyal to the Throne, some from the Shattered Legions, others with no clear allegiance at all – repaired their armour and honed their blades.

Morturg himself, in foul humour since the events on Agarvian, remained locked in his tactical chamber, alone save for the hololith that danced before him on the command column. The display showed a set of too-many mechanical limbs emerging from spectral robes – an adept of the Mechanicum, far away, maintaining contact via the signal relay boosters.

'*I had expected to find you in better spirits,*' came the corpse-thin voice of Calleb Decima, the one who had taken the psychically-sustained Morturg from the site of his bodily death and given him the shell of iron he now wore. What existed now was a fused entity, a melded amalgam of unholy tech and biomancy, anathema both to their former masters of Barbarus and Mars. In the years since, Morturg and Decima had worked together in the void, hunting down isolated elements of the XIV Legion wherever they could be found.

‘He was a traitor himself, to all sides,’ said Morturg, moodily. ‘He would have cut the Death Lord’s throat before me, given the chance. What purpose was there in killing such hatred, such conviction? Better to let him live and sow some greater poison, or turn him to our own cause.’

Decima’s mechadendrites scampered over the feed, making the image shiver. *‘You are overcomplicating the matter. His death can only aid the Throne.’*

‘Really?’ Morturg adjusted position, wincing as his augmetics bit deep into what remained of his flesh. ‘Now even the old loyalties are gone? Loyalist, traitor – what was he? Both, and neither. We are fracturing out here. He was more blackshield than I, though he never erased his colours.’

If such a thing were possible, Decima looked amused. *‘You have been analysing this for some time, have you not? Tell me what your purpose is.’*

Morturg flexed an augmetic hand, one that bound the last scraps of flesh to adamantium with the forbidden cantrips of sorcery. He was all things now: man, machine, witch. An unholy broth fermented in the cauldron of heresy.

‘I thought that bringing pain to my old brothers would be enough,’ Morturg said. ‘I thought that killing them would give some purpose to this shadow-life we made for ourselves. So did he. Look where that got him.’ He let his hand fall, the micro-pistons of his fingers sliding closed. ‘I weary of it. I need more.’

‘Then you know what must be done.’

Morturg nodded. ‘I do.’

Survival. Endurance. Finding a way to outlast the racing fires.

‘I will set the course, then.’

‘It will not be easy.’

‘Nothing ever is.’

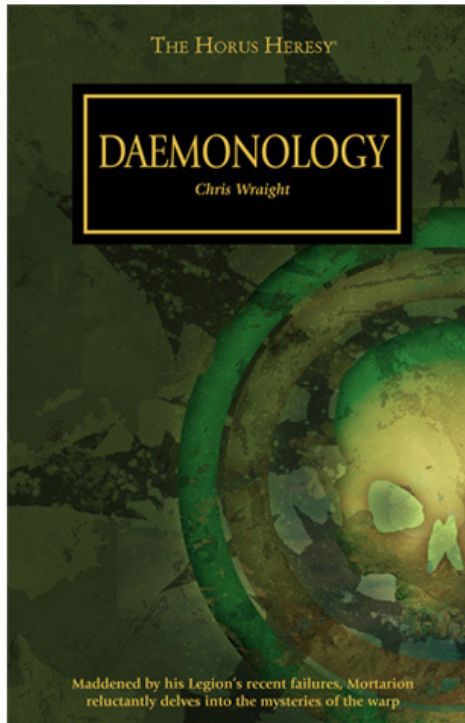
‘And what will you tell your crew?’

‘The truth,’ Morturg replied. ‘I have been fighting for the Throne for long enough. It is time I met its master.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the novella *Brotherhood of the Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

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