

THE HORUS HERESY®

THE LAST SON  
OF PROSPERO

*Chris Wraight*

Only the Sigillite can save Revuel Arvida's body,  
and only his primarch can save his soul

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# THE LAST SON OF PROSPERO

**Chris Wraight**

*'It has taken me a long time to find you,' said Kalliston.*

*Brother-sergeant Revuel Arvida looked up. The sun was hot, baking the mesa, making the sky shake. Rock formations in pale pink and sienna-brown marched out towards an empty horizon, flecked with broken bars of scrub.*

*'I do not understand why,' said Arvida, getting to his feet. 'I told you where I would be.'*

*'The desert is a big place.'*

*Both legionaries were coated in a fine layer of dust. Menes Kalliston, the taller, wore full battleplate save for the crested helm that hung at his belt on a bronze linked chain. Arvida wore fatigues, loose-fitting, white against the glare. His skin glistened with sweat. Away on the horizon, a line of gold-cranes flapped lazily into the noon haze.*

*'What did you learn?' asked Kalliston.*

*Arvida looked away from him, upwards, out into sunlight-blurred air. Something gauzy hung there, intermittently visible, caught like a reflection on the edge of vision. Look at it directly and it was gone – only in the half-glance could you see it, and then just for a moment.*

*'The sight is failing,' Arvida said. 'Falling out of the world. I see stone and sky, nothing beyond.'*

*Kalliston smiled. 'It will return. The Great Ocean has its tides.'*

*'Or it may dry up.'*

*'Does your tutelary give you no guidance?'*

*'When I am blinded, Ianus is blinded. When I see, he sees.'*

*Kalliston nodded. He reached up to wipe sweat from his brow. 'I wish I could give you more time, but orders have come – we are to make for the void.'*

*'Now?'*

*'So it seems.'*

*'Whose orders?'*

*'The primarch's.'*

*Arvida resisted a little longer. He had worked hard to control it, the need to probe, the tendency that had prevented his ascension through the Legion hierarchy, despite the power that even Ahriman had told him he possessed. The Thousand Sons were a deferential Legion. A respectful Legion. A Legion within which loyalty counted for more than in most.*

*'I do not understand it,' he said, despite himself. 'The Ocean is in turbulence – the few visions we still have are all of murder. The guard on Prospero must be maintained, now more than ever. Even you, brother-captain, have counselled the same.'*

*'So I have.'*

*'And so why—'*

*'What would you have me do?' Kalliston's severe face creased into another smile, but there was something under it – a weariness, perhaps, or possibly self-reproach. 'We make for the void. The skimmer is already on its way.'*

*Arvida looked away. The faint gauze flexed in the air above him, sparkling like sunlight reflected from water. Far out over the hard-beaten earth, the wind whipped dust into tiny vortices, suspended for a heartbeat or two before scattering into nothingness. The deserts of Prospero were changing, turning green as irrigation schemes spread out from the nexus at Tizca. One day the barren lands would be as lush as gardens.*

*'Why now?' Arvida asked.*

*'He will have his reasons.'*

*'Then he could share them.'*

*'Will he live?'*

*Arvida looked up. 'What?'*

*'Can he overcome the change?'*

*'I do not understand you.'*

*And then Kalliston was gone. Prospero was gone.*

*Only Ianus remained, hovering like a memory over the deeps, still sparkling in the doused sunlight.*

*'Why did we trust?' Arvida murmured, not expecting an answer, because he had asked that many times before, and had never yet had a good one.*

'Will he live?' asked Khalid Hassan.

The chamber was pooled with darkness, so far underground that no sunlight had ever scraped across the wet stone. It should have been cold, but the flags underfoot were blood-warm and had been ever since the first wards had been broken. There were noises below, terrible noises, things that had not been heard since the oldest nights of the species' unguarded ignorance. Never ceasing, they clawed at the frail edge of sanity itself.

'Can he overcome the change?' Hassan pressed.

He felt the weight of responsibility. He had been the one to retrieve the subject from the V Legion warship *Lance of Heaven*. He had placed him in the stasis pod and arranged the warding patrols that had kept the Wolves of Fenris from detecting the transport. He had promised the weather-shamans of the White Scars that this warrior would be looked after, that he would remain intact long enough for rites of healing to be undertaken.

The vow had been honoured insofar as the Thousand Sons legionary had been taken into the care of the Sigillite, but whether it was fair to describe him as 'intact' remained moot.

The old armour had gone, peeled away during a surgery lasting six hours. The flesh within was bloated almost into obesity, mottled with burst blood vessels and discoloured into coralline outgrowths. What had once been thick muscle overlaid on a heavy bone-structure was now flabby, gilled, pulsing, slick with fats and sweats.

Many hands worked in that chamber. Orderlies brought in blood-cyclers and hypodermics, their faces swaddled in masks and their movements reminiscent of reverent monks. Robed adepts tended hissing respirator columns, their cowled faces never leaving gas-lenses running with esoteric data. Columns of incense rose up from strategically placed bronze bowls, making the chamber stink sweetly in a melange of blood and drained pus. Other figures, dark-robed, thin as whips, prowled the edges, reciting protective words in a language that had been dead long before the false dawn of Unification.

'Will you not give me an answer?' Hassan ventured, pressing the issue. The guilt hemmed him in, made his presence superfluous.

For a while longer he received none. The only one who could have responded was bent low with labour, just as he had been since the body had been brought

in. His heavy cloak was damp with sweat. He looked old, that man, older than any living soul had any right to be. His spine was curved, his breath rattled, and yet the aura of power still curled out from beneath the frayed exterior, as if someone had tried to conceal the heart of a star within a scatter of rags.

Eventually, the robed man stood, unravelling, stretching out, until he seemed to stand taller even than Hassan. He turned deep-sunk eyes from the mire of blood. Malcador, called the Sigillite, steadied himself on the edge of the medicae slab, and drew in a thin breath.

‘His soul wanders on the edge,’ he said.

‘Of life?’ asked Hassan.

‘Of damnation.’ Malcador reached for a goblet and took a long swig, the clear contents tracing a thin line down his chin. ‘It never could be cured from the outside. Not truly. That was the curse of it.’

He limped clear of the slab, feeling his way towards the far wall. In his absence the masked menials continued to tend the body, mopping it down with unguents and drawing arcane symbols on the heaving palls of flesh. Huge piped machines towered over them all, whirring, whispering, building up power and feeding it to crackling aether-traps.

Hassan followed his master. In the years since becoming one of the Chosen he had witnessed many testing things. He had traced paths across the deep void, snatching objects of value from under the bow-wave of the oncoming traitor advance, and that had brought him into contact with some measure of the terror that Horus had unleashed upon humanity. Of all of it, though, seeing the Sigillite’s gradual erosion under the crippling burden of command was perhaps the hardest to accept. The Regent of Terra was burning up, burning out, breaking himself on the anvil of the Imperium’s slow collapse.

‘We knew his Legion suffered,’ Malcador said, his breathing still shallow, his face sallow. ‘Even before we discovered Prospero, we knew they were susceptible. We tried to aid them. We thought it was some error in the gene encoding. I myself thought that for many years, and we expended much labour to isolate it.’ He took another draught. ‘It was not the gene encoding. It was something deeper in them, something that went to their core. In the end, only *he* could do what was necessary. We all believed that Magnus had cured them. His Father believed it. Why should we have doubted it? The Legions always needed their gene-sires – they had been designed to go together, and Magnus was the subtlest of them all.’

Hassan listened. Insights into the earliest days of the Great Crusade were given

out rarely, and there were still secrets now shared only between the Sigillite and the Master of Mankind.

‘But Magnus fell,’ Hassan said.

‘He dared too much. He was too proud. But still, even now, he is the only one who ever prevailed over the flesh-change. He cured his sons, once.’

‘With sorcery.’

Malcador shot him a withering glance. ‘Of course with sorcery. He was birthed from sorcery. This whole place was *built* upon sorcery. Give it whatever name you will, but the time is past for pretence.’ He drank again, and the shaking in his hands receded a little. ‘I will not apologise. There was no other path to tread. Even now, even *now*, fate has not quite run beyond us. He is here, and he still draws breath. His soul is not yet lost.’

‘But... can anything... within *that*...’

‘He lives, Khalid. Even now. We still have time.’

*The ship was empty. Its holds echoed; its corridors flickered with broken lumens. The Geometric had come out of the warp too soon, too close, and now the shields were breaking, the engines were beating, and something, something, was trying to get in.*

*Arvida ran down the longitudinal spinal corridor, feeling the deck flex under his boots. His breathing rasped in his helm, his hearts thudded a tight rhythm. He had been asleep, taking a single hour of true rest before duty called again. The warning klaxons had woken him, ripping him out of a dream where all the worlds of the Imperium were as ashes, wreathed in unbroken clouds, their continents turned to broken glass.*

*He felt sick. Something was wrong. Reality had flexed and strained. The corridor’s edges blurred and stretched out even as he ran down them.*

*Ianius was at his side, a diaphanous presence, calming him just by being there. He had forgotten if there had ever been a time when the tutelary had not been beside him. For a long time they had ceased to think of themselves as wholly separate entities. Ahriman had counselled that the companions were benign consequences of a greater understanding of the aether. But had they always been there, ready for discovery? Or had they been created somehow? Where did one soul end and the other begin?*

*Ianius did not like that speculation. It shimmered, shaking amid the sway and dance of emergency lights. Arvida found himself apologising even as he ran, requesting that it remain close, though he knew well enough that a tutelary never*

*responded to reason.*

*A cacophony rang out from all around him – a hammering, a drumbeat of fists against the hull. He reached the bridge, and burst into its cavernous emptiness. Every servitor station was deserted. The command thrones turned slowly on their central columns. Out of the forward viewers he caught sight of a single world, lost in the blackness of the void, steadily burning.*

*Arvida approached the great crystalflex portal. Everything felt wrong. Everything felt false.*

*'I never saw it burn,' he murmured. 'We were not in time.'*

*He whirled around, running his blurred gaze across the bridge. Screens fizzed with static noise. Augur-relays gave no information.*

*The hammering was growing stronger. Above him, the observation dome blister cracked. A heavy interior panel bulged inwards, impelled by some enormous impact.*

*Arvida drew his blade, and black flame ran along the edge. Ianus twittered in panic, rippling under the flashing combat-lumens. More impacts banged in – throom, throom, throom – and the jabber of nameless voices began to filter through the damaged hull.*

**'He is my ward!' came a roar, suffused with the stuff of the warp. 'I have him under my countenance!'**

*Arvida looked up, around, his blade drawn but with no enemy to slay. 'Where is Kalliston?' he asked, and instantly knew there would be no answer to that, for Brother-Captain Kalliston had never existed here either. The burning world on the scopes darkened, and the flames turned the dark red of old blood.*

*The hammering reached a crescendo. The ship was breaking.*

*Arvida felt himself dropping as the deck plates twisted, and he let the sword slip from his hands. Ianus ripped away, its silken haze blown apart by the rush of exploding atmosphere.*

*He tried to grip on to something, anything, but the universe was pulling itself apart.*

*The world burned, boiling the blood away into darkness.*

*'We were too late,' Arvida said, falling. 'We never saw it burn.'*

Malcador had moved away from the door even as it cracked. Hassan drew his laspistol and backed up. There were shouts from the other side, panicked shots, the heavy clang of impacts on the portal's blast-shields.

'Behind me,' Hassan implored, moving to shield the Sigillite.

But Malcador did not move any further. ‘Do not be foolish. There is not much that either of us could do to dissuade this one.’

The door cracked down its centre, smashed apart, its panels rammed back on their hinges. A warrior burst inside – a giant of a man, clad in ornate ivory armour, his eyes flashing with anger and untied black hair flying around his face.

‘He is my ward!’ roared the intruder, pointing accusingly at the Sigillite. ‘I have him under my countenance!’

Malcador bowed. ‘My lord Jaghatai,’ he said. ‘Try to calm yourself.’

The primarch swept towards him, as tall and gaunt as a hunting bird. His severe face was drawn with fury. ‘I gave you leave to find a cure,’ the Khan said. ‘I did not give you leave to bring him *here*.’

‘There was no alternative.’

‘Look at him!’ roared the Khan, swinging his heavy fist towards the quivering flesh-heap on the slab. ‘See what he has become.’

Malcador remained patient. The expression on his ancient face, drawn tight over the bones, was as cruel as it was perceptive, and did not waver. He reached for his staff, leaning on it like an old man would, shuffling across to the slab and regarding the body on top of it with something close to pity.

‘I cannot save him,’ said Malcador. ‘No one can, not now. He can still serve, though, in a manner of speaking. There is more at stake here than the life of a single warrior.’

The Khan shadowed Malcador, looking ready to tear the old man apart. ‘I have a blood-debt to him. My Legion has a blood-debt to him. We would never have left the void were it not for his sacrifice. And I *will not* see him lost.’

Malcador paused, inclining his head a little. The noises – scrabbling and rending – continued under the floor, locked beneath the fragile barrier of the earth and stone below them. ‘You told me of Dark Glass,’ the Sigillite said. ‘You know of the Thrones, and you guess the location of the greatest of them. There are walls in the Palace that have been breached and must be sealed. Your brother Magnus bears the shame of destroying wards that would have kept us secure, which is an irony, for it was he who was destined to guard those gates.’

‘Magnus is dead.’

‘No, Jaghatai, he is not. You know he is not. You met him yourself, on Prospero.’

‘I met a shade.’

‘One of many. The Crimson King has been broken, shattered like a mirror thrown in anger. It began when he breached the wards on Terra, and it was ended

by the Wolf's wrath. No, Jaghatai, he is not dead. He has become *legion*.'

At that, the Khan drew back from Malcador, warily. 'What have you done here?'

'What needed to be done. Just as ever.' Malcador placed himself between the Khan and Arvida, defiant, both his clawed hands on his staff. 'The son of Magnus is here, brought to Terra by your hand. His sire was already here. Do not try to prevent this – the rites have already been completed, the protections set. It may fail, but it must be ventured.'

'This is an abomination.'

'I care not for the means,' said the Sigillite grimly. 'The gate must be guarded.'

*Arvida stared into darkness. At first there was nothing to grip on to, just a blank void, hot and close. He could hear noises coming from far away, horrible noises, like screams pulled out too long until all the humanity had been wrung from them.*

*He felt his way forwards, and his hands pressed into crumbling earth. Up ahead was a glow, like muffled torchlight cupped within a sheltering palm. He was crawling, locked deep underground, progressing on his knees under some forgotten crypt. The air smelt foul and strange, and it was unfamiliar. He had never been on this world before, and had no idea how he had arrived there.*

*The closer he got, the more the glow of the light grew, until he could make out a narrow chamber hewn from the living rock. In it squatted something grotesque and enormous, man-shaped and yet far more than man-sized, hunched over a flickering red candle-flame. A mane of matted hair hung down its back, and caked soil blackened its exposed flesh.*

*Ianius was not there. His absence was an ache, but the presence of the giant made it seem somehow inconsequential. When Arvida saw the face – the lone eye, the thought-ploughed brow – a spark of fierce joy made him want to cry out.*

*'My lord!' he said, on his knees in the dirt.*

*The giant looked at him absently. The candle-flame burned in his palm, hovering in the air, a finger of fire in the deepest dark.*

*'Who are you?' he asked.*

*'Revuel Arvida, Fourth Fellowship of the Legion, my lord. Your Legion.'*

*'My Legion are all dead.'*

*'No, lord! No, they are not. I have seen them. And I saw you with them. I am sure of it.'* Arvida paused, confusion slowing his thoughts. *'But then... How are you here? Where is this place?'*

*The earth shook briefly, disturbed by a tremor in the veins of rock below. Something like laughter rippled around the chamber.*

*'I do not remember you,' the giant said. 'Nor do I remember my name.'*

*'You are Magnus, the Crimson King. My liege, I have suffered much to see you again.'*

*The giant took that in slowly. In the flickering light of the single flame, he seemed translucent, like a shadow in winter. His great shoulders were hunched, his armour tarnished. The sigils upon his golden battleplate were all burned out, as if someone had taken a torch to them.*

*'That was one of my names,' the giant admitted at length. 'It no longer fits me.'*

*'The others are alive,' Arvida insisted. 'They can be found. Where are we? I have travelled through the empyrean, and I have seen the new Prospero forged in the abyss. There must be a path to it.'*

*The giant made no movement. Torpor dragged on his limbs. He looked into the heart of the flame moodily.*

*'Not for me,' he said. 'I ordered them all away. I left the gates open.'*

*Arvida remembered that. He remembered Kalliston telling him the command to leave had been given, but it was so long ago, lost in a world that had been destroyed and remade.*

*'Why, lord?' he asked, curiosity burning within him despite everything. He edged closer to his gene-sire, still on his knees. 'Why did you do it? If we had all been there, the whole Legion, then even the Wolves—'*

*'It was just.' The giant looked tormented, confused, as if recalling things from a dream that had already faded from memory. 'What they did to us, it was just. They were the punishment.'*

*'For what crime?'*

*'Oh, there were crimes.' The giant leaned forward, closer, keeping the flame cupped tight. 'I tried to cure you. I reached out, and I was answered. And then I had to warn my Father...' His lone eye suddenly lit up, and the flame flickered into greater life. 'But that broke me. I am not what you think.'*

*'You are the Crimson King.'*

*'No. He is gone. All that remain are... aspects.'*

*Arvida remembered something then – a warrior in gold and ivory, long ago, who had told him something similar, but it was so hard to remember, for the noises kept making the earth shake and he could hardly see and his head was full of the laughter of the things that were trying to burrow through the rock and get to him...*

*'We are on Terra,' said the giant, lifting his chin. 'That is where I came, to warn my Father. The rest of me went back, but I remained.'*

*'Then I can help you,' said Arvida, urgently. 'I can help to restore you. I can show you the way they went.'*

*The giant smiled sadly. 'But you are not really here. Do you not see it, Corvidae? This is your death-dream.'*

*Arvida hesitated. He looked down at his hands. They looked solid enough. He could feel his hearts beating under his ribs, and could taste the loamy air of what must have been Terra's bedrock, the catacombs beneath the Imperial Palace.*

*'Where is your tutelary?' the giant asked him, now wryly amused.*

*'We are never apart,' said Arvida, cautiously.*

*'You are often apart. Until now you were apart for so long that you almost forgot his name.' The giant smiled again, but this time it was crooked. 'Such a conceit, those intelligences that whispered to us for so long. He's close behind you now, and I can hear him getting closer. He's pawing at the threshold. Do you see the danger?'*

*Arvida shrank back. 'He was my guide.'*

*'Or you were his. Come, you know how the Ocean is. Who leads whom? When all this is done, will it be that he was your tutelary, or were you his?'*

*Arvida began to feel cold. The clawing from under the earth was growing more intense. The soil began to tremble beneath his fingers, shifting like water.*

*'I am not dead yet,' he murmured.*

*'The moment comes,' said the giant.*

*The rock began to crack. Dust fell on both of them, and the roots of the world trembled. Arvida reached out, trying to grasp on to something solid. Ianius was gone. The flame guttered out, plunging him into utter blackness.*

*'I found you!' he cried, knowing how much it had cost, suddenly desperate not to lose it.*

*'You did,' said the voice in the dark, now growing in authority despite the collapse of all around them. 'So worry not – where you are going now, I can follow.'*

The Khan drew his tulwar, and the green light of the machines glittered on the curved edge of the blade.

*'Get away from him,' he ordered.*

But Malcador looked up, out at the arcane columns that towered over the slab,

at the coils and the sigil-daubed ritual plates. The runes were glowing now, racing out of control. Aether-traps blew, showering the floor of the chamber with smashed crystal.

‘Too late,’ the Sigillite said, an edge of awe in his cracked voice, and he started to back away. ‘He *comes*.’

The Khan pushed the Sigillite aside and reached out for the medicae slab.

He never made it. The aegis broke with a scream of torn atmosphere, hurling menials to the floor and cracking the stone flags. The chamber’s interior erupted into eye-burning light, and the machines blew apart in unison. Hassan was thrown hard into the far wall, and Malcador was bent double. The Khan barely kept his feet, leaning steeply against the hurricane of raw energy.

Arvida’s body was swamped in a nova of numinous light-spores, his outline lost behind a howl and a shriek of warp-rage. A chorus of screaming tore out – the roars of a tortured legionary, the bellows of a far deeper pain, and something else again, all overlapped, jumbled into a fractured mess of agony.

Malcador gained his feet, bracing his staff against the maelstrom and squinting into the inferno. ‘The shard is here,’ he breathed.

The dazzle of aether-brilliance blew itself out, revealing the husks of destroyed medicae stations at its epicentre – a broken slab, and a lone creature, man-shaped, staggering amidst the wreckage. It burned like the sun, a white hole in the world’s fabric, writhing and shimmering, its shifting outline thundering like the planet’s winds unleashed. It was screaming still, its back arched in the pain of its reanimation, its limbs jerking, its eyes streaming with strands of curling plasma.

The Khan strode towards it, fighting as if against a gale. ‘Sorcerer!’ he cried, holding out his empty hand. ‘Come back to us!’

Malcador placed his staff-heel on to the chamber’s floor, setting it against the tearing winds. ‘No,’ he muttered, signalling discreetly to the cowled figures recovering their positions all across the chamber. ‘He must not fight it.’

At the sound of those words, the creature that had been Arvida suddenly turned. Its blazing eyes locked onto the Sigillite. It seemed to swell, to grow, sucking energy towards itself until it was nigh as huge as the Khan himself. It roared in pain and fury, threw its lightning-crowned fists out wide and sent a wall of kinetic force crashing into Malcador, hurling him across the buckling chamber floor.

The Sigillite struggled to get back to his knees, his face streaked with blood, his robes billowing. The unholy creation poured its soul out in a maelstrom of

misery and anguish, stripping the runes from the metalwork, blistering the bronzed casings of the cracked warp-machines. The fires raged, and its empty eyes sprayed raw starlight, bleaching the stone as white as phosphor.

Malcador gasped against the cold power of it, but his disappointment was tinged with fear. 'Enough. His body cannot contain it.'

At some unseen psychic command, the ruined devices roared back to life. The coils crackled with plasma, the aether-traps started rattling again. Great runes embedded on the chamber walls flared into life, and the surviving menials screamed out a broken chorus of banishment and protection. A shudder rippled through the air, and tendrils of black-edged force crackled out from iron vanes embedded in the chamber's roof.

Stasis enveloped the abomination, crushing it back on its heels, stripping the air from its lungs and boiling it away. Malcador rose to his full height, and his staff now swam with overlapping layers of distortion. More hammered-iron runes surged into visibility, flaming in their stone-carved channels, their occult resonance drowning the furnace at the chamber's heart.

The onslaught abated. The waves of shriving force lessened; the figure at their heart reeled. A rapid flurry of changes swept across its diaphanous outer shell, cavalcades of faces, one after the other. Its limbs flexed and swelled and retreated, boiling like magma. Its mouth opened in a rictus of despair, and gouts of boiling flesh-matter slipped from its churning shoulders.

'It was worth the attempt,' the Sigillite said darkly, moving towards it, preparing the death-strike that would condemn them both. 'But it ends now.'

*The sky was alive with souls. The dark rocks reflected them in glassy facets; the air shook from their elemental anger. Lightning as thick as tree boles, neon-silver, crashed among the soulstorm, fusing them, melding them, churning the sea of sentience into the raw stuff of Chaos. The stars wheeled overhead, faster than imagination, but they were no stars ever glimpsed by mortals.*

*Arvida held his blade, backing away, his heel slipping on the blood-slick rock. The spectre came after him, vast and shimmering, a glowing, fractured thing of pure psychic projection.*

*'Why resist?' it asked, its single eye burning with cold fire. It carried a flame-wreathed sword that cleaved the air around it. 'You know who I am, now.'*

*Arvida retreated further. On the far horizon was a dark tower, its sheer flanks riven by storms, its summit lost in the torment of the warp.*

*'I know only what you told me,' said Arvida, warily, trying to clear his head,*

trying to make sense of the torment, the whirl of energy pulsing through his veins. He felt as if he might split apart, dissipated into flying atoms, and yet his armour was still intact; his blade still hummed with a nimbus of luminous force. 'And you are not what you were.'

The spectre came after him, towering into the storm-racked skies, its rippling crown snagging at the pull of burning souls.

**'I am potential. Just as you are, my son.'**

'I am no one's son,' said Arvida, and the words sent shards of ice into his heart. 'I spurned those who would have taken me, and I never sought those I lost. Not hard enough, at least.' His head was thick, his veins hot. It felt like he was on fire, being consumed from within, gnawed away by ancient magicks, and yet he could still stand, he could still hold a blade, he could still defy.

**'You have been in pain for too long,'** the spectre said, sweeping higher, closer. **'Let it end.'**

He remembered more. He remembered the long, long nights in shattered Tizca. He remembered the coming of the sons of Chogoris, and the dragon-helmed one who severed the dark. He remembered the long war of loss, the tarot deck that he took from its master and gave to his friend.

And he remembered the path into hell that had taken that friend's life, snuffing out a great and noble soul on the altar of survival. Through it all, the pain, the pain, constant and unwavering, never letting him rest, never letting him grow. His only mantra had been to keep going, to keep fighting, never to trust, never to find sanctuary.

There had been his friend's words. I hope you can stop running now, brother.

Arvida felt the rocks shift under his weight. He half-turned to see a crevasse opening up at his back, wide and yawning, falling away into darkness. The storm crashed overhead. The souls screamed. The stars wheeled faster.

He held his ground on the edge, watching doom catch up with him.

**'You have nowhere else to go. I told you – this is your death-dream.'** The spectre's profile sheared, sliding, flickering.

'I did not fight on Prospero,' Arvida said, feeling the shame of it all over again. 'I had to live long enough to reach Terra.'

**'You are on Terra.'**

'And it is not enough.'

The spectre's sword was lifted now, its long curved blade like the one borne by the dragon-warrior, and for a moment Arvida thought he heard the Khan's voice amid the storm, crying out in rage just as he had done when Yesugei had

*sacrificed himself.*

**‘You have tried to preserve it,’** *the spectre said.* **‘You kept your armour, but the others who survived will leave that behind. You were the last son of Prospero, but it means nothing now. Prospero is no more, and all must change.’**

*‘Except you,’ said Arvida. ‘They wish to preserve you.’*

**‘It cannot be done.’**

*‘Then all is for naught.’*

**‘Nothing I did was for naught.’** *The spectre’s blade disintegrated then, sliding out of existence like a sigh, and the ghost extended its empty hand.* **‘Where is your tutelary, my son?’**

*Arvida whirled around, suddenly feeling the lack again, but the black skies only screamed back at him. ‘I never asked him what he was,’ he said, bewildered. ‘We asked them so many questions, but never that.’*

*He was tired now. The exhaustion of years seeped into him. The spectre came closer, reaching out for him, and the strange stars turned wildly above it.*

**‘You know the answer, though.’**

*The spectre slid over him, draining his agony, excising it all in a slough of blessed annihilation.*

**‘You are Corvidae. You have always known the answer.’**

*Even then, he could have resisted.*

*‘What remains, then?’ he asked, his consciousness finally slipping away, caught between the grief and the anguish of it. ‘After this, what remains?’*

**‘Rebirth,’** *said the broken shard of Magnus the Red.*

The Khan leapt forwards, throwing himself at the rows of warp-machines and crystal columns, smashing them, ripping out cables and demolishing the aether-traps.

Malcador lurched after him. ‘It failed!’ he cried, trying to restrain him even as the choristers scattered before the rampaging primarch. ‘It cannot be allowed—’

‘He was my *ward!*’ roared the Khan, shaking the Sigillite off and toppling a rune-scored column. He spun around, powered blade in hand, obliterating the rows of bubbling philtre vials. ‘He was under my countenance!’ The glowing sigils blew out into smoking lumps of metal, the lightning-vanes cracked. ‘And he will have his chance!’

The Sigillite moved to intervene, his staff making the air ripple, only to face the Khan’s crackling tulwar.

‘One more step,’ the primarch warned, his voice as cold as the void, ‘and your head will crown a spike on the roads to Khum Karta.’

Startled, Malcador pulled back, then snapped his gaze over to the reeling abomination.

‘Jaghatai, what have you done?’ he asked, his voice low.

The Khan turned to look at it. Hassan, dragging himself to his feet, gazed at it. Held in check by the primarch’s promise of violence, the remaining menials cowered in fear, silent and staring.

Freed of the suppression fields and null-wards, the agonised amalgam was moving again. The thing’s features morphed, running into one another in a fluidity of pain. Tremendous energy pulsed within it, spilling out of its mouth, its eyes, its outstretched fingers, but there was no control. It was a riot of purples, blues and other colours that had no name.

‘You know me, brother, sorcerer,’ the Khan said, coming closer yet, weathering the fires that spat and splintered. ‘You crossed the realm of the gods. You are *not* ended here.’

The creature shrank back, clutching at invisible nightmares, and the fires began to gutter. The kaleidoscope of faces slowed, until there were only two left – a bloated flesh-changed horror and a one-eyed ghost, melding into one another and back again with bewildering speed.

Malcador limped closer, a mix of foreboding and curiosity on his withered face, but made no further move to interfere.

The creature began to change again, blotching and erupting. Its skin blackened, burning with psionic fire, sucking inwards then blowing out in smaller eruptions of blood and bone. Its screaming became truly pitiable then, a mewl of existential terror. Its shell flexed obscenely, as if trying to accommodate something too great for mortal bounds. Flesh melded, sinews knitted, bone cracked and re-formed, all forged under the white-hot burn of the undiluted empyrean.

Slowly, though, the overspill of energy furlled back, solidifying into hard knots of matter. The creature crouched low, lost in its own world of destruction and creation, sporadic flames still running down its spine.

Jerkily, haltingly, it stood again, pulling itself to its full height, casting off the slough of suffocating warpfire, and revealed itself, at the end, to be a man.

He was whole. He was living. He had a stocky, vigorous frame, bull-necked, with an angular jaw, taut flesh over heavy bones. The sores were gone, the lesions healed. He was naked, all his tattered robes burned away, and his body

was the slab-muscled hulk of a legionary. One eye was swollen, little more than a slit amid puffed scar tissue, while the other was hale. Power crackled across his new-made skin, a play of potency that hurt to look upon. The air trembled around him, shimmering like the heat-distortion of Prospero's old deserts.

When he looked up, the agony had gone.

Malcador said nothing. The last debris from the aether-traps clattered to the stone. The blood-cyclers ticked to a halt. The devotional flames wavered in their bowls.

The Khan looked hard at the figure before him. The face was at once Arvida's and not Arvida's, at once Magnus' and not Magnus'. There was no primarch there, but also no mortal man. They faced one another for the space of many heartbeats, neither moving, neither speaking.

Curls of energy circled around the new creation, dancing like corposant. Slowly, it flexed its hands, one then the other, looking at itself in a kind of mute wonder. Every physical gesture was halting, accompanied by the extrasensory tang of the warp.

Malcador kept his staff held two-handed, ready to use. The build-up of power in the chamber made the air fizz, primed to ignite.

Slowly, the Khan lowered his blade. His eyes narrowed, as if he were scrutinising a falcon for the hunt. This was no shadow-primarch in a host shell, nor was it a flesh-changed aberration. It was something else. Something new.

'You are not Arvida,' the Khan said at last.

The figure looked at him. 'Not entirely.'

'The sickness?'

'Gone.'

Malcador remained defensive. 'Do not approach him,' he warned.

'I am not what you intended, Sigillite,' the flawed creation said. 'I know what that means for you, and I am sorry. Believe me.'

Malcador looked briefly surprised, then gave a wry, defeated smile. 'The subtlest of them all,' he murmured.

The Khan sheathed his blade, unsure whether he faced a comrade, a brother, or both. 'What shall I call you?'

The creation looked up at the primarch and there was recognition there, a recognition that recalled the glory of the Great Crusade, a recognition that sprung from the ashes of lost Tizca. Some memories had evidently survived the process, while others were little more than half-remembered dreams.

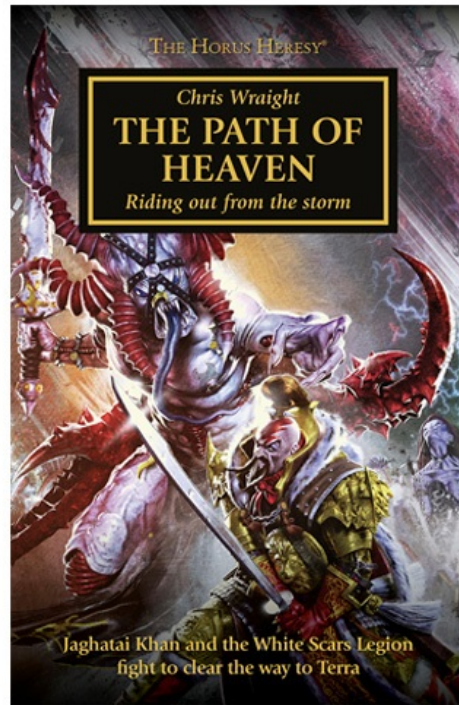
For the first time in a long time, though, there was clearly no pain, and that

changed things. When he spoke, his voice was soft, assured, bipartite.  
'Know me by the name I always had,' he said. 'Call me Ianius.'

## 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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