

THE HORUS HERESY®

PROLOGUE TO NIKAEA

David Annandale



During the Great Crusade, Malcador the Sigillite suppresses a rebellion on the recently compliant world of Thawra.

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PROLOGUE TO NIKAEA

David Annandale

The swirl of unreality pulled at him, its unlimited, terrifying promise seeking to pry his grip free from the materium. Malcador held fast, retaining a peripheral awareness of himself and his surroundings. He knew who he was. He had a sense of his body, though from a distance, as if his consciousness existed just to the side of that pale, angular, robed and hooded thing. He had, at the very edges of his perception, a sense of the chamber he was in, of its eight rune-covered walls. The warp wanted him to let go of all of that. He saw the dangers, but he did not look away. The task was too important, the questions too great, and the possibilities too immense for him to do otherwise.

The Vortex Chamber was deep in the roots of the Imperial Palace's Corona Spire. It was not the first space Malcador had constructed for his explorations of the immaterium. There had been an earlier one in the peak of the spire, but even with all the windows bricked up, Malcador had been too conscious of the exterior world. The air and sky and openness of the materium had been too close, the mere thickness of a wall away. They had been a distraction from the absolute discipline he needed to fathom and resist the warp. Deep underground, things were different. Rock enclosed the chamber, the chamber enclosed his body, his body enclosed his mind, and in this fully material prison, all the shackles on meditation fell away.

The chamber was an octagon. The shape, he had found, opened up the vistas of the warp more readily. The hexagrammic engravings on the wall were a work in progress. Malcador had already learned many that facilitated his psychic journey,

and others that bolstered his strength to return from it. But he was still scratching the surface of possible configurations.

Malcador sat on a throne of basalt, threaded with gold and iron and brass. The inlay was also a developing project, gradually shaping the throne into the best tool for the task. The stone seat itself, though, was ancient. It was a relic from the deepest antiquity of the Age of Terra, a gift from the Emperor to aid Malcador in his work. When he placed himself within the hard embrace of the throne, Malcador felt the currents of the warp thrum through the being of the seat. Though it was carved from a massive block of the materium, in its nature it strained towards the threshold between the dimensions.

There were no other furnishings in the chamber. The throne sat on a dais close to the north wall. A confusion of runes twisted across the floor of the Vortex Chamber, but they were invisible to Malcador in the depths of his contemplation. Instead, he saw only the warp. It appeared to him as a churning tunnel, an endless drop into the realm of madness and potential. Whether the floor truly vanished, or whether his journeys were entirely psychic, Malcador was not sure. The Vortex Chamber's existence became liminal when he was at work, belonging neither to the materium nor the immaterium, but beholden to both.

Malcador's consciousness moved through the upheavals of the warp, searching and testing and wondering. The possibilities enticed him, and the storms made him wary. Everything he had experienced and learned since he had begun his study of the immaterium reinforced his contradictory impulses. There was so much power here, power that could be harnessed for the benefit of mankind and for the Emperor's dream of the Imperium. There was danger, too, as he had always known. The question he wrestled with was whether the possibilities outweighed the risks. He still had no answer. The deeper he went, the more he brushed against immensities, and the further a definitive judgement seemed to race from his grasp.

His mind flew through the clashing waves of unreality. The raging currents made him soar with exhilaration, while the shadows that stopped just short of taking on definite shape threatened with dark portent. Like a ship plunging through the atmosphere of a gas giant, he streaked through contortions of dreams.

Though the concept of space was meaningless, there were correlations between nodules in the warp and specific points in the materium. When he pressed his mind close to these intersections of reality and Chaos, it seemed to him that if he pushed just a little harder, he would pierce through the veil once more and his

consciousness would emerge from the empyrean in a different part of the galaxy.

He never pushed. He did not want to discover what would happen if he split his mind and body so definitively in the materium. He had to learn whether the powers of the warp could be harnessed, and he had to know the limits of what could be risked. Some limits were clearly not to be crossed.

Something called to him. At first it was distant, undefined, but his mind reacted to the disturbance as something important, that needed to be known. He turned towards it. Soon thunder, unheard but felt, resonated throughout his being. A storm formed before him, one dense with the fusion of nonexistent colours. It crackled with possibility. Creation and destruction warred, and the storm grew larger. It stared at him, a whirling eye. It raged at him, a gaping maw. There was something important here, something huge and building up. Though he could not read its nature, he knew he must not ignore it.

Malcador let the outer streams of the tempest draw him in closer. As he approached, the intensity of the vortex pained him. He could barely contemplate it. The currents hurled in a violent orbit. Meaning edged near him, but at the last moment he sensed the jaws opening to devour him and he pulled back.

Do not ask what this is, he told himself, the effort of forming a coherent thought drawing him away from the ravenous centre of the storm. *Seek where it is*.

That he could do with less risk. He could look for the touch of the materium, the link that connected the convulsion in the warp to its correlative in the real.

He closed in again, skirting the edges of the cyclone of dreams. He did not face it directly. He tried to sense beyond it. He looked closer and farther. The tempest was gigantic. It roared with the potential of unrivalled cataclysm. Dense with secrets on the verge of being unveiled, it reached for him, invited him. It wanted him to be part of the dance. There were wonders here. He should see them. He should know them. He should be of them. Because soon *everything* would be swept up into revelation.

Malcador did not know the nature of the truth that called to him, but he saw the monstrosity of its strength, and so he resisted. He struggled with all his psychic might to stay above the storm at the same time as he tried to perceive what lay beyond its centre. Somewhere, in an almost forgotten corner of reality, his body arced in the agony of the strain. The thread that tied him to himself, that kept his identity whole, stretched thinner, grew taut, thrummed. Malcador looked for a secret, and he looked away from secrets. The paradox grew teeth. It took on its own form in the warp. It grasped him, and surrounded him. In another heartbeat it would pull him in two and hurl his broken self into the maelstrom.

But then what he needed was before him, a tiny glimpse beyond the storm, a fragment of a secret. He snatched at it, and with a cry he pulled away from the warp. What began as a psychic howl ended as a drawn-out groan from his body.

Weak, on the edge of collapse, Malcador pushed himself up from the throne. The hexagrammic runes glowed an angry red, then faded like dying embers as the touch of the warp ebbed away. Malcador staggered from the Vortex Chamber, away from temptation and the dreams that lingered against the walls.

He had what he needed. He had a name: Thawra.

‘There has been battle here,’ said Collatinus. The stern, patrician features of the Legio Custodes shield-captain were impassive, but Malcador saw the faint narrowing of his eyes as he took in the state of the orbital regions around Thawra. They were standing on the bridge of the cruiser *Sol Tenebris*, watching the planet grow larger in the main viewport. The closer the ship approached, the clearer the extent of the damage became. The defence platforms were blackened ruins. Scores of merchant vessels were gutted and smashed, and floated by each other, tombstones scorched by fire.

Malcador thought of the extent of the warp storm he had witnessed, and wondered if his voyage might be in vain. The tempest’s impact on the materium, either directly or indirectly, had been massive.

But the auspex officers reported a normal degree of vox activity on the surface of Thawra. That was cause for optimism.

‘Open command channels,’ Collatinus ordered. The officers complied, and he hailed the government, if there still was one, of the world below. ‘Attention, citizens of Thawra, this is Shield-Captain Collatinus of the Legio Custodes, commanding the *Sol Tenebris*, escorting Malcador the Sigillite, First Lord of Terra. Greetings in the name of the Emperor. Acknowledge.’

The hail was returned almost immediately. ‘*Acknowledged, Sol Tenebris. This is the governor’s palace. Please stand by. Acting Governor Arkanasia is on her way.*’

‘Acting governor,’ Collatinus muttered under his breath.

‘That does not bode well for Governor Vavra,’ said Malcador. He turned to the scribe standing a respectful three steps behind him. ‘Who is Arkanasia?’ he asked.

The scribe tapped at a data-slate, then said, ‘She is chief councillor.’ He read for another moment. ‘She has served in this position since Governor Vavra was installed.’

‘So the continuity of government has been preserved,’ said Collatinus. ‘That is a hopeful sign.’

Malcador took the data-slate from the scribe and scrolled through the notes. ‘It seems Arkanasia was an early and energetic advocate of compliance on Thawra.’ That, too, was hopeful.

A few moments later, the acting governor was on the vox. ‘*First Lord Malcador,*’ she said. ‘*Thawra is honoured by your visit. I only regret that you find us in difficult circumstances.*’

‘It is those circumstances that bring me here,’ said Malcador. ‘And what has become of Governor Vasra?’

‘She is dead, first lord. She died nobly, fighting for Thawra and its loyalty to the Emperor.’

‘What is the nature of the uprising?’ Collatinus asked.

Arkanasia hesitated. ‘*What happened is no simple matter,*’ she said. ‘*I will try to explain when I see you.*’

‘The governor’s palace is secure?’

‘*It is, shield-captain. The worst of our troubles are over.*’

Collatinus turned to Malcador, visibly reluctant to bring the Sigillite into a warzone.

‘I must know what has happened, shield-captain,’ Malcador said. ‘This is not a matter of choice.’

Collatinus nodded. ‘Very well,’ he replied to Arkanasia. ‘Prepare for our arrival at the palace.’ He ended the vox-mission. ‘At the least, she sounds confident in her evaluation,’ he said to Malcador.

‘Let us hope her confidence is not misplaced.’

‘The uprising was a surprise,’ Arkanasia admitted a few hours later. She was a tall woman and very thin, the tendons standing out on her neck, suggestive of a lifetime of being held taut. A narrow brush of black hair ran down the centre of her scalp. Her eyes were guarded, but burned deeply. She was a psyker, the aura of her power as clear to Malcador as a violet sunrise.

They were in the map hall of the palace. Each wall was given over to a single hemisphere of the planet, and covered by a relief chart six metres high and thirty metres long. Tactical maps took up long tables in the centre of the hall, with hololithic projectors marking troop dispositions and territory held. Only one region, about a hundred and sixty kilometres south of the capital, Statheros, was still red.

‘It spread very quickly,’ Arkanasia said, ‘and with considerable force.’

‘So we saw from the *Sol Tenebris*,’ Malcador said.

Arkanasia nodded. ‘The rebels planned well. The uprising began in orbit, so we lost most of our communications in the first few hours.’

‘A well-armed and well-organised force, then,’ said Collatinus. ‘How was it possible a threat of this magnitude developed without being noticed?’

‘It should have been noticed,’ Arkanasia admitted. ‘And I believe that if anything similar happens again, it *will* be seen. We have learned from our mistakes, and from our victory, shield-captain. But it was the nature of the uprising that helped keep it hidden.’

‘You are being cryptic,’ said Malcador.

‘I crave your pardon, first lord. That was not my intent.’ She drew a breath. ‘The rebels are psykers,’ she said.

‘*All* of them?’ Malcador asked. So high a number could explain the warp storm, but only to a point. The tempest had been heavy with the possibility of events more massive than had already taken place.

‘Perhaps not all, but a high proportion, as best as we can determine.’

Malcador looked at the troop movements outlined on the maps, and at the summaries of the cost of the war thus far displayed by a cluster of pict screens mounted above the far end of the table. ‘For them to have had the strength to cause an actual war, their numbers must have been high.’

‘They were. This has always been so on Thawra. The proportion of psykers in our population is much greater than the norm.’

This is why I needed to come here, Malcador thought. *This is the crux of so many matters.* He did not know if the vortex he had seen in the warp was caused by the psykers of Thawra, or if it was the reason for their multitude. He suspected it was possible both circumstances were true. *The cause is not the issue. It is our response that matters.* He thought again of all the possibilities, temptations and dangers he encountered in the warp. *There is so much we could do,* he thought. *But if this is the price...*

Collatinus was still studying the record of troop movements. ‘It seems that once you managed to turn the tide against the rebels, you ended the worst of the crisis quickly.’

‘Thank you, shield-captain,’ Arkanasia was nodding vigorously, ‘but we could have ended things completely, and much sooner, too.’

‘Explain yourself,’ said Malcador. There was an undercurrent of barely contained excitement in the acting governor’s voice. He could read the passion

erupting at the surface of her mind. What he wanted was for her to articulate that excitement, to give it explicit form and reveal what loomed behind it.

‘I mean no disrespect to the memory of Governor Vasra. Thawra has flourished under her leadership, and I would have followed her to my own death. But we disagreed on the prosecution of the war. I had the means to end it quickly, and she was reluctant to use them. I understand her reluctance, but I think it was wrong.’ She pointed to the map, where the arrows indicating the advances of loyalist forces suddenly became longer. ‘And I believe I have been proven correct. These advances began after her death.’

‘When you had a free hand,’ Collatinus said, his tone flat, unreadable.

‘Yes,’ said Arkanasia. She spoke to Malcador instead of the shield-captain. ‘I do not wish to sound vainglorious, but yes, that is correct.’ She was doing her best to maintain a solemn tone. The effort was only partly successful. Her eyes were growing brighter. She had more than an innovative strategy to disclose to him. She was bursting with a great truth. A revelation.

‘Tell me what you did,’ Malcador ordered, drawing out the shape created by her beliefs and actions.

‘We fought treachery with loyalty, and fire with fire. Psyker against psyker.’

‘That would require very rapid organisation,’ said Collatinus. ‘To find psykers, to train them, to coordinate the response. Unless there already was such a corps in existence...’ He trailed off when Arkanasia started nodding again.

‘You have created this corps?’ Malcador asked.

‘I have.’

‘In secret?’

‘No!’ Arkanasia sounded affronted. ‘It was done in consultation with Vasra and a select few of the other councillors.’

‘Ones who were psykers?’

‘Yes.’ Her gaze was defiant, ready to challenge anyone who doubted the psykers’ loyalty. Wondering how readily she would admit the truth, he bluntly put the question forward.

‘Are you one?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was Vasra?’

‘No,’ said Arkanasia. ‘And it was important that she knew. Not just because she was governor. This corps must not be a secret organisation of psykers. The rebels are that. I think it may have been why they went wrong. I know there are risks, first lord. No one who has ever touched the warp can think there is no danger.’

‘One would hope not,’ Malcador said dryly.

‘But with care, first lord,’ Arkanasia went on, ‘with training, with discipline, think what such a force could do in the service of the Emperor. And we have proved this, here on Thawra.’ The light in her eyes was more than a reflection. Micro-lightning flickered around her pupils. ‘We live and die for the Emperor. This rebellion was a test. Perhaps He knew it would happen. All things are known to the Emperor. He—’

Malcador interrupted her. He did not like the path down which her rhetoric was heading. It was enough, for the moment, that she had revealed her fanaticism and the form it had taken. ‘Who trained the psykers?’ he said.

‘I did, and the officers I selected.’

‘And who trained you?’

‘Governor Vasra watched over me.’

‘Yet Vasra did not want to use the psyker corps against the rebels.’

‘On that point, she was wrong. I will not pretend we have found a perfect model for the corps. But we have shown what can be done. First lord, I believe this is what *must* be done. It is what the Emperor wills.’

Malcador stared back into her ecstatic gaze. ‘He has spoken to you, has He?’

Even now, directly challenged, Arkanasia did not retreat. ‘No. But we are made in His image. Our powers are His.’

Malcador held her stare for a few moments longer. She had already revealed enough to warrant censure, at the very least. He would not take action yet, though. Not until he knew the full extent of what was happening on Thawra. He pointed to the red circle on the map and changed the subject. ‘The war is not over,’ he said.

‘No,’ Arkanasia admitted. She frowned, and the light in her eyes dimmed. ‘I am not sure why that is. We had the rebels on the run. They were broken.’

‘They have a stronghold at this location?’ Collatinus asked.

‘Of a kind. There are no settlements in that region. There are some natural caves, and the rebels are using them.’

‘How extensive is the network?’

‘There isn’t one, as far as we know. The caves are not much more than recesses in the cliff faces. Even conventional forces should have finished them by now, and my entire force of psykers is engaged in the fight.’

My force of psykers, Malcador noted.

‘What are you hearing from the front?’

‘Nothing. The warp energy released by the fighting is too strong. It has

disrupted our communications.’

Malcador turned to Collatinus. ‘We know where we must go.’

‘Yes!’ Arkanasia cried, ecstatic again when Collatinus nodded. ‘Then you will see. You must bear witness, first lord, to what we have accomplished here. And you will know what must be done.’

I hope you are right, Malcador thought. He said nothing to Arkanasia. She was caught in the grip of her vision. Words would serve no purpose now. And she was right. He had to see what she had done for himself.

The storm was familiar. Eight hundred metres away from its edge, from the top of a slope leading down to the dead end of a gorge, Malcador stared at the vortex of exploding warp energy and recognised the convulsion that had summoned him to Thawra. He had not thought there were features in the storm to memorise. During his meditation in the Vortex Chamber, he had registered only the danger, not the details of the tempest’s face. Or so he had thought. But here it was again, and he knew it. It seemed to him that it welcomed his recognition, that the destruction it wreaked was for his benefit, to mock him above all others. The storm had been in the non-space of the immaterium. Now it was here, at a very particular point in the materium, waiting for him. It was not huge. It was no more than a kilometre wide at most. Yet its reach was vast. It was a destroyer of hopes, a clarion of menace, a promise of madness for a galaxy. The tempest was not yet a full breach in the real, but that disaster would not be long in coming.

‘No,’ Arkanasia said when she saw the battlefield. ‘This isn’t... I can’t believe that...’ She could not finish her denials. The betrayal of her hopes was too great.

The gorge dipped sharply from the point where Collatinus had ordered the shield company to halt. The cliffs were three hundred metres high, and had been drawing closer together. For the last few hundred metres there had been no room for the Custodians to march more than four abreast. Now the canyon widened again, before ending at another three-hundred-metres-high sheer wall.

The maelstrom raged at the base of the cliffs, concealing the bottom third of them. If there were caves there in which the rebels had taken refuge, they were invisible, and Malcador doubted if they still existed.

The storm churned in one direction, then another. Coiling arms of power collided, sending monstrous, coronal arcs skyward. The confusion drew the eye and savaged the mind. It was made of warring nightmare and maddened thought. It was not physical, yet it sundered air and stone. There were no colours, yet it was a blinding darkness. Malcador glanced at the storm, looked away, then

glanced again, trying to gain the measure of its force.

You will know what must be done. Arkanasia's proclamation echoed in his thoughts, a bitter, curdled refrain.

You must know, he told himself. *Find the way forward, and stop the losses here.*

The terrain at the edges of the tempest was littered with ruined bodies and weapons. Lasrifles had fused with arms. Heads had elongated until they resembled pale serpents. Three Chimeras had become one, sprouting disjointed legs. The front of the lead vehicle had become a gaping maw, and the monster had tried to devour its hindquarters.

Inside the storm, more monsters were being born. For all its fury, the vortex itself was silent, though the screams and roars of the combatants inside were perfectly audible. Some of the voices were still mostly human, consumed by a frenzy of madness and hate. Others were changed, their tones all wrong, as if the beings who cried out had teeth in their throats or mouths on their tongues. Together they created a choir of psychic war, one where the purpose of battle had been lost, and all that remained was the need to destroy.

Arkanasia staggered a few steps down the slope. Her eyes were fixed on the maelstrom. 'If I voxed them,' she began. 'Maybe from here...'

'There is no one who can hear you in there,' Malcador told her. 'Look away, acting governor.'

She did not listen, and kept walking with slow, dragging steps.

'There is nothing to be salvaged here,' said Collatinus.

'Agreed.' Malcador grimaced. Arkanasia's project had failed. There might not even be anything to learn from the failure. 'Begin your assault, shield-captain. We must leave nothing alive.'

Collatinus issued commands, and the Custodian Guard formed a single line. They moved past Arkanasia, their guardian spears pointed towards the tempest. The composite weapons unleashed a stream of bolter fire into the storm. The Custodians were firing blind, but they aimed low, and each warrior swept his bolter-equipped spear back and forth on a narrow arc. The field of fire from the shield company was comprehensive. The barrage would be devastating for anyone caught in its path.

If the Custodian Guard had been firing into a material storm, the battle would have ended in a few short minutes. Malcador did hear new screams as the bolt shells tore into the convulsing, searing shadow. But this was only an opening attack. Space inside the tempest would be erratic, untrustworthy. The shells themselves could easily be transforming. The true attack fell to Malcador.

He edged forward, staying level with the Legio Custodes, gathering his strength. First he had to know his enemy, and to do that, his defences would need to be strong.

Less than ninety metres from the fringes of the storm, he felt he was ready. 'Hold our position here, shield-captain,' he said to Collatinus, and he moved to a boulder a few paces away. He climbed on top and, looking past the line of the Custodian Guard, he focused his sight on the storm to the exclusion of all else.

The materium receded to the edge of Malcador's perception. He reached out for the storm, and the storm reached for him, eager to share its secrets, eager for him to join in its revel. He raised the walls of his will higher, bracing them against the battering of Chaotic waves. He observed from the ramparts of his defences, ready for war, reading the enemy and preparing his counter-attack. There was promise and power in the warp, and he drew on that power, but in the storm, he knew there was no promise. That knowledge reinforced his psychic armour.

There is nothing here for you. There is only destruction, and it must be destroyed in turn.

The barrage from the shield company gave him a way in. The bolt shells brought a violent reality into the nightmare, causing enough damage to create fractures in the storm. Malcador's consciousness perceived the cracks, and he followed them, holding on to the points of weakness in the tempest, seeking how to pry them open further. The tempest came at him with secrets and whispers. He closed his mind to the whispers, and he chose only the secrets that he needed to fight back.

It reached past him, too, attacking Arkanasia. Malcador was aware of her psychic light and agony as searing blisters at the edge of his focus. She was fighting, but her despair was a crack in her armour. He had to defeat the storm before she became a second threat.

Malcador began to see the contours of the maelstrom. The shape of its psychic winds contained the trace of its history. As cyclones of fury buffeted him, he sought their base, and found the tormented psyche of a human every time. He saw how the storm had come to be. The struggle between the rebels and the loyalists had spiralled out of control. Too many psykers, too close together, had attacked each other with too little thought to discipline and the forces they were unleashing. Order had disintegrated, and identities had begun to flow and merge with the untamed warp. The beliefs that had driven both sides of the conflict no longer existed. What remained were only the impulses that fuelled war for its own sake. Anger, desperation and fear had taken the combatants. The storm fed

on their raging psyches, and it amplified their powers. Malcador saw little in the vortex that was remotely human, but there were still presences, cores of things that *had* been human, and were chained to bodies. The flesh was changing as the immaterium strengthened its grip, but the anchor was there, and gave Malcador his opportunity.

Malcador could bring the fight to what remained of the minds who had created the storm. So he did. The tempest roared around his defences, psychic winds and waves hurling themselves against the isolated promontory of a human who dared project himself into their midst. He held on even more tightly to his walls, because it was in attacking that the great risk would come. The storm would try to make him abandon himself to battle, and so sweep him away.

The materium became the weakest, greyest of frames for the struggle. With an effort, Malcador split his focus precisely in two, between defence and attack, keeping both in balance, strengthening each other. And from his ramparts, he unleashed his own storm, a blast of forked warp lightning, striking multiple targets at once. Mortal nodes of the storm erupted in psychic fire, body and mind burning alike, destruction taking them on one plane and then spreading to the other. Malcador lashed out again, and then again. He was disciplined ferocity. He took the inchoate and gave it form, and his purpose was unshakeable. The things that had been rebels and loyalists died. He took two armies down, a lord of lightning. The vertigo of power came close to catching him, but his defences held fast, and he refused the false promise.

Malcador held fast to purpose and duty, and the storm began to weaken before his assault. Deprived of human fuel, the cyclones evaporated. The broader maelstrom contracted, and the currents became less violent as Malcador destroyed the nodes. Energy flashed, lost coherence and evaporated.

As the tempest retreated, Malcador fought back the new temptations of victory and speed. His discipline and his defences were more important than ever, and he held by them. Even so, he saw the end of the struggle come into view.

Then two things happened. One was real. The other he would doubt for years to come.

Through his gossamer-thin connection to the materium, Malcador saw Arkanasia break into a run. She was shouting something he could not hear. She scrambled past the end of the Custodians' line, skirted the edge of the barrage and pelted down the slope towards the storm. Psychic charges surrounded her, growing stronger.

Inside the tempest, something moved. Malcador had no clear sense of what it

was. It stirred the currents of the storm, and it reached out from deeper in the warp. It acted with purpose. It was a dark sentience, a thing whose existence Malcador wished he could deny, yet knew he must face.

Answering the command of a being that pressed against the thinning veil of the materium, raging that it could not yet manifest itself, the remaining human nodes in the storm suddenly redirected all their force. Focused energy blasted out of the storm and into Arkanasia. Her aura exploded with brilliance. It grew, turning her into a colossus of monstrous, coruscating light. The stone around her burst into flame.

She stopped running. She turned around.

Malcador saw the attack to come. He pulled back from the storm, rushing back to protect his body. The tempest dragged at him and he was slow, too slow. Collatinus saw the danger too, and the Custodians trained their bolter fire on Arkanasia. The shells exploded at the edge of her aura. The storm withered further, its remaining fury turning her into a nova of power.

She looked back up at Malcador. Her face was contorted in pain and strength and madness. She stretched her arms towards him, and he knew he could not withstand what was coming.

The moment stretched out, and Arkanasia did not attack. She shrieked a single word, '*EMPEROR!*' and she looked up. A volcanic eruption of warp flame launched upward from her, directed at nothing, draining her aura.

The shells broke through the thinning energy, and she fell.

Free of the warp, Malcador prepared a retaliatory blast of his own, but when he saw the glow around her fade to nothing, he held back.

'Cease fire,' Collatinus said. He joined Malcador as the Sigillite walked slowly down to where Arkanasia had fallen.

The storm was gone. On the land it had concealed, carbonised bodies lay, contorted in the pain that had destroyed them. Their deformities were extreme. One was almost six metres long, another had five arms, and a third had a cluster of skulls sprouting out of each other. There was always just enough of the human form left to show what the dead thing had once been.

Arkanasia's flesh had burned from an internal fire. Though the bolter shells had hit her, the last of her psychic barrier had been enough to diminish their force – enough that they had not shredded her body on impact. She was, to Malcador's surprise, still alive, though barely.

Arkanasia's eyes were blank, boiled white, yet they turned in Malcador's direction when he knelt beside her. 'I didn't want this,' she whispered.

‘I know.’

A clawed, blackened hand clutched at his robe. ‘I didn’t dream well enough,’ she said. ‘Please, first lord, make a better dream.’

‘Something will be done,’ he told her.

There was no response. Her hand was limp, and her eyes were still.

Malcador stood. He turned around slowly, gazing at the bodies, at the aftermath of the psychic storm. ‘Something *must* be done,’ he said, this time to Collatinus.

‘Could she have been right?’ Collatinus asked. ‘Would better training have made the difference?’

Or intensified the danger? Malcador thought. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. He was worried, too, about the fact that it wasn’t discipline that had stopped Arkanasia from attacking. It was religious belief. The very thing he would have had to condemn in Arkanasia had kept her faithful. That was not reassuring. The Emperor was right to command an end to faith. It had too many dangers. *What if another kind of faith drove the rebels?* he wondered. ‘The decision will not be mine to make,’ he said.

‘It will have to be made soon,’ said Collatinus.

‘So I will urge. I think it will be.’

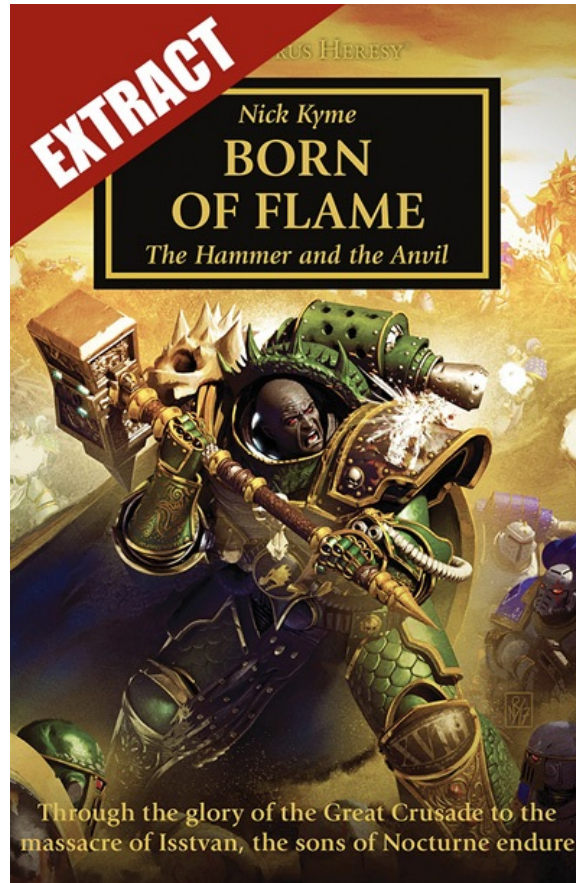
Collatinus nodded, satisfied.

Malcador looked back at Arkanasia. With the end of the storm, the sun was beating hard down into the gorge, yet all he could feel was shadow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Ruinstorm* and *The Damnation of Pythos*, and the Primarchs novels *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar* and *Vulkan: Lord of Drakes*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Warlord: Fury of the God-Machine*, the Yarrick series, several stories involving the Grey Knights, including *Warden of the Blade* and *Castellan*, as well as titles for The Beast Arises and the Space Marine Battles series. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written *Neferata: Mortarch of Blood*. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

An extract from *Born of Flame*.



No one saw him die. The jungle just came alive and took him. Soundlessly, the trooper was simply gone. His slayer moved as a blur, blending with the shadows until it was lost in the heat haze. Scant light penetrated the dense leaf canopy above. Men, shouting and panicking in a tightly packed column, went for their lamp packs. It was stifling in the heady gloom. Heat thickened the air, but the troopers' bodies cooled with growing fear. Stabbing light beams sent night-beetles scurrying for dark hollows. Vine serpents hung inert in mimicry of their namesakes in hope of being overlooked. If only the men could play dead like that and the predator would pass... Flat leaves, that were not really leaves at all, heaved and pulsed, but there was no sign of the monster. Cries of panic subsided, usurped by a quiet tension as the jungle swallowed voices and stole the soldiers' resolve. The discipline-master of the 888th Phaerian Imperial Army held up a clenched fist.

Still. Stay still... and listen. If we listen, we will live.

His brocade and jacket seemed incongruous amongst his bare- and barrel-chested charges. Phaerian death-worlders were brutish, slab-muscled men used to deltas and trackless swamps. Skulls jangled on their bandoliers, the rictus mouths clacking as if in amusement. Camo tattoos striped their pugnacious faces but couldn't hide their fear. This was supposed to be their element.

Hearts beating in two thousand chests made a louder clamour than the entire jungle in that moment. The forest held its breath.

Lifting his puniter-stave, the discipline-master was about to order the advance when the cyber-hawk perched on his shoulder shrilled. The warning was too late. As if exhaling again, the jungle opened its maw and the discipline-master disappeared. One moment he was there, the next he was gone. Just like the trooper. They were being picked off.

Snap fire from a dozen rifles chased the hole left by the discipline-master but

the trail was cold before the soldiers had time to realise they were aiming at nothing. Order went with him, Army overseers powerless to prevent the two thousand-strong infantry group from unleashing carnage with their auto-carbines and scatter-locks. Hot las and solid shot spat out in all directions as the men vented their fear until their mags ran dry. Sections of Rapier and Tarantula gunners added heavier firepower to the barrage. The thick jungle in the immediate vicinity became a mulched flatland in under a minute. Electro-goats and vox-amplified orders bellowed at ear-bleeding volume eventually brought the madness under control.

A dumb quietude fell, undercut by heavy breathing and nervous whispers.

The cessation was brief.

Out of the darkness came monsters. Vast beasts, their ululating cries louder than any augmented overseer, crashed into the column of men, killing Phaerians by the score. On one flank, the line bent and broke as hulking, scaled things with horned snouts armoured by bony carapace drove into it. The first Phaerians to die were ground to paste, whilst those that came next were thrown into the air or gored to death. Other beasts, smaller but still many times larger than a man, bullied in alongside the hulks. Saurian like their larger cousins, but avian in nature and aspect, they cantered and sprang amongst the shattered platoons, rending with dewclaws. With their coherency so brutally broken, the scattered Phaerians were easy meat. Hooded riders snapped off shots with long, alien rifles, their conical helms gleaming pearlescent white.

From above, a shriek split the air and a second later, the leaf canopy was broken by a flock of winged lizards. A lucky burst of Rapier fired chewed up the membranous wings of one, sending rider and beast into a fatal dive, but the rest of its kindred reduced the jubilant Army gunners to a visceral mist.

The air was thick with blood and screaming as the tattered regiment consolidated into the clearing they'd made. Not so much a column now, the slowly diminishing circle of bodies offered feeble resistance to the aliens and their scaled beasts. It was no place for a last stand, and soon the Imperial Army was running again, back through the darkness. Branch tendrils came alive snagging wrists and ankles, sucking bogs opened up to swallow men whole. Insect hordes rallied, filling mouths and ears as the entire jungle animated to repel the interlopers.

'Forward for Terra!' an overseer began, before his throat was speared by an alien lance. Its bearer shucked his body free with a desultory jerk before rearing over a band of wounded Phaerians on its saurian steed. The meaning in the

alien's glowering gaze was clear.

Death to intruders.

It charged. A reverberant war cry shot through the jungle like lighting, calling its rider kindred, and in moments the Phaerians were engulfed by a stampede. The crack of scatterlocks and auto-carbines was brief and ineffectual. Rear rankers, far enough from the fighting to not yet be skewered, crushed or shredded, just ran. These men, these death-worlder brutes, wailed as they scrambled through the heat and the mire. Winged beasts, let loose in the rein, dived on prey at leisure, picking off morsels wherever they appeared, all to the grim satisfaction of their eldritch masters.

It was a massacre, the humans were a flesh feast for the cold-blooded saurian monsters.

High above, the forest was an ocean of fire. Leaves of red and ochre filled the swollen canopy like veins of blood rippling on water. Hunting pterosaurs were visible darting through the unseen fissures in the solid orange sea.

A voice echoed in the darkness of a ship's belly.

'They have engaged the Army vanguard, my lord.'

A large figure near the back of the hold breathed in the scent of ash and cinder. Somewhere behind him, the last embers of a ritual fire were slowly fading. Brazier-flame lit his eyes as he looked up. In the gloom, he appeared as scaled and saurian as the monsters in the jungle below.

Abyssal deep, his reply was emphatic.

'Send in the Legion.'

A heavy engine throb forced its way into the jungle. Below, where the chaos played out and the reaping of human life went unabated, a few surviving Phaerians looked up. As if by some unseen hand, the canopy parted to reveal the slab-sided base of a gunship. Its boarding ramp was down and the darkness within the Stormbird's belly lit up with a host of fire-red lenses as its occupants concluded their oaths of moment.

The first of the warriors hit the ground with a thunderous boom. Chain-blade whirring, the giant in forest-green levelled his bolt pistol.

'Rally! For the freedom of humanity and the glory of Terra!'

Like thunderbolts striking the earth, he was joined by others, armour-clad crusaders bearing the symbol of the snarling drake on their shoulder guards.

We are fire-born.

They roared as one.

‘Vulkan!’

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