

THE SHARDS OF EREBUS

Guy Haley

The chanting of Erebus's lesser, human priests reached its height as he unwrapped the anathame blade from its blessed shrouding. Reverently the Dark Apostle lifted the weapon – one hand upon the hilt, the other beneath the blade with an open palm so that his flesh would not touch its deadly edge.

Crafted from neither metal nor stone, it had characteristics of both, and was warm to the touch as though alive. This was the weapon that he had stolen from the interex, the blade that had wounded the Warmaster and turned him to the true way. It was a holy artefact, and key to a plot that spanned tens of thousands of years.

And now he must violate it.

He presented the sword to the statues of the four powers that dominated the sacellum space of the *Destiny's Hand*. He called out prayers and incantations, saluting the dread lords of the warp, each in turn. A row of eight cult priests bearing censers and icons followed his every move, adding a chorus of their own voices to his supplications. They fell behind Erebus in procession as he walked solemnly to the high altar of the Octed that dominated the nave. The Dark Apostle had little time for common mortals, but these priests were among his most trusted servants.

What he was doing here was to remain secret until the allotted time. The doors were barred. His bodyguards stood watch outside.

Before the great brass and iron star had been set an anvil, specially cast and sanctified for the sole purpose of this ritual. Cowled artisans stood in readiness at either side – Guldire, chief among the Dark Apostle's Warpsmiths, shadowed by his foremost apprentice. They would aid him in this task, directing his blows and channelling away the fell energies that might yet be unleashed.

The Warpsmiths did not flinch as Erebus pointed the terrible blade at them. He took the hilt in both hands, and raised the anathame, point upwards, to his forehead. With his eyes closed and hushed prayers upon his quick lips, he placed the weapon upon the anvil – the holy weapon that had brought Horus Lupercal into the light.

The priests downed their icons and doused their torches. They brought out their athames from their sleeves. Their

chanting grew deeper.

Erebus took up a rune-inscribed hammer from the apprentice Warpsmith. The head came to a brutal point, like that of a pick, and it crackled with the subdued energy of a disruption field.

The Dark Apostle gazed down at the blade for the longest moment. It seemed a sacrilege what he must do, but the weapon had served its purpose.

In this form, at least.

He pinned the blade down firmly. Muttering outlawed spells torn from the minds of dead kinebrach metallurgists, he raised the hammer above his head, and brought it down hard. The hammer's head flared with light as it connected with the anathame's arcane alloys. There was a mighty bang, and a terrific scream as though the weapon itself cried out in pain, and the priests sank their ritual athames into their own hearts.

They did this willingly. What Erebus had asked of them was a great honour, the first anointing of a new weapon against the False Emperor. Their blood flowed onto the stone flags as they fell, their souls running joyously into the warp as their hymnal ceased in choking death rattles. He prayed that their weak spirits would prove sufficient offering.

The sword writhed in his hand; although his eyes did not see it move, he felt it shiver and squirm, as muscular and deadly as a snake.

He called out in the black speech of the kinebrach, and felt the air shift under the fell burden of the sounds. He brought the hammer down again, and again.

A crack like thunder. A flash of greenish light.

Erebus reeled back, the hammer spinning from his hand to land in the pooling blood upon the deck. He nearly went down himself, pushed away by the portion of the weapon's holy might that he had released. His muscled arm was numb to the shoulder, his hand sparkling with electric agony.

He approached the anvil again cautiously. The sword rang with a fading note. Next to it lay a finger-length sliver of the blade's weird alloys. The anathame shimmered with heat haze; it was diminished, yet whole. Erebus felt awe at this god-slayer, this tool of the end times.

He smiled with satisfaction and looked to his Warpsmiths.

'Take the shard. Place it in the medium.'

Guldire bowed his hooded head, and deftly plucked the sliver

from the anvil with a pair of black iron tongs. It hissed and spat in the chill air. He produced a small jar of blood-grown ruby, filled with a liquid of an even darker red, and in the shard of metal went. The Warpsmith screwed down the vessel's lid, sealing it with black wax and pressed symbols.

Erebus rubbed at his shoulder. He ignored his pain. Pain was the least of what would test him in the months and years to come. He picked up the hammer, grasped the hilt of the anathame, and spoke once more the spells of making and unmaking.

The hammer fell.

Seven more times did Erebus break the dark blade; seven more slivers he commended to his Warpsmiths, until finally he was done. The sword's anguish faded.

The sacellum was silent at last. His ears rang. He lifted his head with effort. Sweat dripped from his face; he was febrile, his arms leaden.

'*It is done*,' he said weakly, though there was much yet to do. The air was tainted – the sacellum practically thrummed with outrage, its animus offended by Erebus's sacrilege. The universe itself knew that what he had done was an affront to the natural order, and that he had done it for his own gain.

He revelled in reality's discomfiture. He was a Dark Apostle, First Chaplain and bearer of the true faith. His was a higher purpose – the will of the gods themselves guided his hand.

Give me strength now, he thought, to embrace my destiny. Already events were in motion, and the days of the XIII Legion were numbered. He had seen the need to embroider his own goals into Lorgar's plans. The fracturing of the anathame was but the first step down a longer path.

His gaze came to rest upon the diminished blade. He would dispose of it, conveying it on as he had originally been instructed.

'Take the shards to the forge,' he ordered the Warpsmiths. 'Send for me when they are ready.'

Within his sanctuary, Quor Vondar, Chief Librarian-sorcerer of the Word Bearers, let his psychic senses unfurl. The crude matter of realspace dropped away, and he gloried in the revealed majesty of the warp.

Had there been anyone else with him in the small chamber, they would have seen a slow smile spread across his face.

Here was power, the very realm of the gods. Its tides caressed him, the warmth of its living energies invigorating his body and mind. Fearsome entities stalked the depths, but he paid them no heed; he was the anointed of the Legion, and his faith in the revealed powers of the universe was his shield. These fleshless daemons that swam the sea of souls were lesser servants – they had no souls of their own. They were not so mighty as he.

Chosen of the gods .

The weakest among the warp's denizens bowed to him and sought his favour. They whispered their fealty, they promised great power and insight if only he would set them free. *Open your mind!* they sang. *Let us in! Let us in!*

Quor Vondar did not open his mind. His was not the way of possession, for he was above such crude displays of devotion. Let the Gal Vorbak court the bottom-feeders – he could wield the energies of the warp directly. He could lay waste to his enemies with but a thought. He could channel the might of the gods into a glorious blast of ruin. No, he had no need of what the daemons promised, and he dismissed them with contempt. Their minds slunk back, whimpering, into the undifferentiated roil of the empyrean.

Oh, how wrong the Emperor was to deny this to his servants. How very, very wrong. The so-called Master of Mankind was a liar, a false prophet, keeping the true nature of power hidden. A paper god, not worthy of the Word Bearers' worship. He had denied their veneration, Quor Vondar suspected, simply to make them crave his blessing more, forcing the faithful to kneel in the dust of Monarchia. Now the XVII Legion understood, and the power the Emperor sought to keep for himself was theirs instead.

Fool. He would die. So sure of his sons' mewling obedience, he was likely still ignorant of the war, gathering apace after Horus's masterful victories in the Isstvan system. He was blissfully ignorant, but soon he would pay for his selfishness.

Something disturbed Quor Vondar's meditation. He sensed no unusual movement in the empyrean, and no warnings were cried by his bound sentinels, but there was... something.

Muttering cantrips of warding to guard his exit from the warp, he slipped his mind from its unholy communion and opened his eyes.

He was alone in the sanctuary. The uncanny beings that

stood watch over his meditating form remained quiet.

An unexpected draft caused the candles upon his prayer shrine to flicker. He stood, his brocaded robes whispering, and... there, again. He turned in a circle as he followed the movement, a wave of yellow flames guttering atop those black waxen pillars. Twice it went about his chamber, light glittering insolently off the statuary as if daring him to guess its cause. Still his guardians raised no alarm.

Now Quor Vondar's courage shrivelled. He suppressed the urge to cry out, turning the unborn words to a snarl of anger. He crept through the shadowy space, pausing to genuflect before the great Octed. That seemed to calm the disturbance. The movement ceased.

What could this betoken? Perhaps it was a message, a test from the gods. He liked to think himself so important. Still, perplexed, he turned back to the centre of the room.

He gasped, his hand catching on his robes as it sought the handle of his dagger.

In the centre of the room was a knife, plunged into the centre of his warding circle – the very spot where he had been seated until moments ago.

Quor Vondar hesitated as he approached it. An aura of malice spilled from its black blade. The knife appeared to be of a dark metal, knapped like flint, and yet it had been plunged into the plasteel plates of the deck without breaking. Dark red ribbons inscribed with holy texts trailed from its leather-bound handle.

Pinned to the floor by its point was a message, handwritten upon rich parchment.

Quor Vondar recognised the penmanship. It was that of the Dark Apostle Erebus, adviser of Horus, absent from the Word Bearers fleet these past months. Where he had gone, none knew.

Quor Vondar mastered his unease, grasped the hilt of the knife and drew it easily from the deck. The weapon seemed to tingle in his hand. He plucked the message from the blade and began to read.

He frowned, and crushed the parchment into a ball.

'Let him summon me,' the Librarian-sorcerer muttered. 'We shall see who is the master.'

Phael Rabor started from his slumber, coming to full

wakefulness in less than a heartbeat. Something was amiss. He leapt up from his pallet. He stood unclothed, senses straining, muscles tense and ready for combat.

His cell was dark. The ship's engines vibrated almost imperceptibly through the metal beneath his bare feet as it pushed its way through the warp. The drone of machinery within the hull troubled the edges of his augmented hearing, and the scent of unwashed bodies – both legionary and mortal serf – lingered in the corridor outside.

There was no one there now, yet his feeling of disquiet persisted, a sense of reality off kilter. Rabor made for the switch by his pallet to activate the single ceiling mounted lumen-strip, but something gave him pause and he went to the one by the doorway instead.

Light filled the chamber, and he found his eye drawn to the other switch.

Where his hand would have passed, a knife was embedded in the wall. Pushed up the blade, near to the hilt, was a message.

He snarled.

'Erebus ...'

Davin was as the First Chaplain remembered it, with wide plains running into the red deserts beyond. The Thunderhawk startled great herds of ungulates into stampede as it swept over the savannah.

'Keep low,' he ordered the pilots. 'I do not wish to announce my presence.'

'As you wish, Lord Erebus.'

They were far from the civilisation sheltering in the mountain valleys. Out here on the plains were only the herds and the nomads that hunted them.

He chose a hollow in the grasslands for their landing site and had them put the gunship down, before gathering his belongings and making for the lower deck. The five warriors of his bodyguard bowed before him as he descended.

The ship settled into its landing gear and the forward ramp cranked open, letting in rays of dazzling sunlight. Erebus wore no battle-plate, only the rough robes of a mendicant priest. He was an apostle of the truth, and the truth demanded humility, as much as that might chafe at his usual sense of grandeur. Upon his back was a small pack of supplies, enough for a few

days – this too was of simple manufacture, rough hessian stitched into the gaps where use and time had frayed it. An athame gleamed at his waist, utilitarian and unadorned. The only item of ostentation about him was the roll of rich velvet he had slung over his shoulder, but this was hidden, covered in grubby sackcloth tied with a cord.

‘You are to return to the *Destiny’s Hand*,’ he informed his men. ‘Shipmaster Voregar has orders to rejoin the fleet. Wait for me there.’

‘How will you return, lord?’ asked Undil. ‘Will you contact the garrison? We are far from—’

‘Do not concern yourself with that, brother-sergeant. I will return before we reach Ultramar.’

The sergeant paused, uncertain. He bowed again. ‘As you say, my lord.’

Erebus stepped out onto the dry grass of the savannah. He trudged to a safe distance as the engines of the gunship whined up to full power. The wash of exhaust set fires in the grass.

He watched as the Thunderhawk banked, aimed its blunt prow at the heavens and rapidly ascended. The echoes of its passage rolled off across the plains, and he was alone. The sough of the wind, the crackle of burning grass and the lowing of panicked animals in the distance took its place.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. The air was hot, redolent of parched soil and animals under the smell of smoke. Here, in the Davin system, his greatest plan had been set in motion by the turning of Horus. His return was a homecoming of sorts.

The flames were spreading in the dry grass, fanned by the wind. Erebus shifted his burden upon his back, and began to walk.

The chamber was large enough to accommodate more than a hundred legionaries, and yet it struggled to contain the collected egos of the five Word Bearers who now occupied it. They were the greatest of the Legion’s ranks, clad in all their regalia as if for war. Their stares spoke of open distrust; some were as close as blood-kin, but in recent times they had vied hard with one another as the face of the XVII Legion changed, and brotherhood crumbled quickly before ambition’s onslaught.

Kor Phaeron, with all his grand titles, certainly considered

himself to be the head of such a gathering. His arrogance was palpable to the rest; Morpal Cxir, Phael Rabor, Foedral Fell and Hol Beloth all chafed beneath his conceit. He bestowed a smile upon them that was perilously close to a sneer as they gathered around the innermost of the room's eight concentric tables, each taking their place at a point of the Chaos star set into the granite surface.

But Kor Phaeron's expression lost all pretence of benevolence as Quor Vondar strode into the room. His dark eyes glittered.

Vondar approached the table. 'My brothers,' he said, though the acknowledgment was brusque to the point of insolence. He stood by one of the three empty chairs, but did not sit. His entrance had ended what little conversation there had been.

Kor Phaeron stared at him hard. 'Sorcerer, your power extends deep into the warp, but we expect a little more civility. You will address us correctly.'

'I give such civility as is warranted.'

Vondar cast a black-bladed knife onto the table. The weapon skittered across the surface inscriptions, and came to a spinning halt in front of the Dark Cardinal himself. 'What is the meaning of this?' he demanded.

Kor Phaeron looked slowly from the blade to Vondar as though he were a teacher who would coax the realisation of an obvious fact from a slow pupil.

'This is none of my doing, Master Vondar. This is the work of the Dark Apostle.'

'Erebus does nothing without your knowledge and your collusion!' the sorcerer snapped. 'I am not some lowly menial to be—'

'*We are not savages!*' Kor Phaeron snarled, and smashed an armour-clad fist into the table, cracking the surface. 'Address me correctly, sorcerer. Do me the proper courtesy, or I will do far worse to you.'

Vondar's mouth opened. Whatever he was going to say went unsaid. 'My lord. First Captain. Dark Cardinal. Master of the Faith, I apologise,' he said, though the words carried little sincerity.

Kor Phaeron nodded. 'Now, *brother*,' he breathed, 'I advise you to sit. Sit!'

'My lord.' Vondar took his place. His comrades muttered, and eyed him as warily as they did one another.

Reclining in his chair, Kor Phaeron waved a hand

dismissively. 'Besides, you speak of older times, Chief Librarian,' he said. 'Now Erebus is a law unto himself. I am not his keeper. I am ignorant of the purpose of these blades, as you are. He would not tell me what he intends.'

'My lord – you have seen him, then?' said Hol Beloth. 'Where has he been these last months?'

Before Kor Phaeron could answer, Vondar spoke again.

'Blades? You speak of *many* blades?'

'We all carry them, lord,' said Phael Rabor. 'Observe.' He pulled out his own knife and set it upon the table with a click. One after another, the others did the same.

Foedral Fell regarded each in turn. 'I thank my lords for allaying my fears,' he said. 'I too had believed that I had somehow been singled out.' Fell gave a wry grin, and rested his gauntleted hands upon the table. 'To feel noticed by Lord Erebus is to feel as a fly noticed by the spider.'

They shared a grim laugh.

'Well then, esteemed brothers,' said Morpal Cxir. 'It is all of us – all of us who were chosen to lead the assault on the XIII Legion.' He toyed with his own blade, fascinated by it.

Rabor frowned. 'All of us?'

Cxir nodded. 'Such a gift. I expect it is meant as a great honour.' His voice was level, though his gaze did not leave the edge of the knife. 'Have you not felt the power of them? These are no mere ritual athames, but true tools of the Gods.'

'How came each of you by yours, then?' Vondar demanded. He stared at the other blades suspiciously.

Kor Phaeron scoffed. 'You still fear some unknown conspiracy?' His aged, gene-forged face moved unnaturally, the skin too tight – a result of his imperfect elevation to the ranks of the Legiones Astartes. 'My brother's distrust does not befit one of his rank.'

Vondar glared. 'You ask me to honour you among this company, and then offer me nothing but disrespect in return. What of courtesy now, eh? Do not speak to me so, *my lord*.'

'I will speak to you howsoever I choose, Master Vondar.'

The Librarian gritted his teeth, and rose sharply from his seat. 'What gives you the right? You, who are not truly one of us, and can never be. You are no son of Lorgar! Not as we are, nor any other brother legionary, down to even the most lowly novitiate.'

Kor Phaeron stood, and the shadows around him seemed to

deepen. 'No, you are correct in that. I cannot claim to be your brother as this... *rabble* can.' His voice echoed with the thunder of eternity, and his eyes flashed with spectral warp-light. 'I am not Lorgar's son. *I am his father*. You would do well not to forget it.'

Quor Vondar sank back into his seat, though the Dark Cardinal's gaze did not waver. The scent of brimstone hung in the air.

Slowly, the tension faded.

Cxir cleared his throat. 'My lords, please. I will answer Master Vondar's question, for it is one that we have all no doubt considered.'

He looked to the others before continuing.

'Mine came from nowhere. I was at table, preparing to feast with my chosen veterans. We bowed our heads to give thanks to the lifegiver Nurgle. When we raised them, there it was.'

'Aye,' said Fell, raising his own blade. 'As if from the very air.'

'But how can this be?' asked Rabor. 'I am not so gifted in the dark arts as many of you, but I confess that I did not believe Erebus either to be capable of such magick.'

Morpall Cxir shook his head. 'All that which stems from the Dark Apostle must be approached with caution. He sees things which many do not, and his ways are not always those of the Seventeenth.'

'The writing was his. The summons are his,' said Vondar. 'I will not be a pawn in some unrevealed scheme.'

'You saw him enter your chambers then?' said Kor Phaeron slyly.

Vondar shook his head.

'Sensed him, at the least, oh great Chief of Librarians? You regale us so often with tales of your arcane might.'

Cxir raised a calming hand. He did not mock as Kor Phaeron did. 'And your might is not to be denied, Master Vondar. But how did he gain entrance to your sanctuary without attracting your attention?'

Vondar's face wrinkled. He was shamed, but could not say so immediately.

'Come now, sorcerer – it is a vital part of the puzzle,' said Kor Phaeron.

'My lords, I am forced to admit that I saw and felt nothing. Only a draft of air at the blade's passing. My senses and my

guardians failed me.'

Kor Phaeron slapped the table and laughed. It was an unpleasant sound.

Vondar's face flushed with anger. 'How then, *if I may ask*, did the great Lord Kor Phaeron come by his gift, then?'

'Why, Lord Erebus himself walked in through the door and presented it to me, and together we planned this merry little gathering. I am, after all, the primarch's chosen commander of our next campaign.'

The First Captain's implication that the rest of them were beneath Erebus's respect was plain, and intended to be so. Quor Vondar's fury was writ equally plainly upon his face.

'Then what are they for?' muttered Hol Beloth. 'Surely you, my lord – as first among us – must know.'

'He would not tell me for what purpose these athames are intended,' admitted Kor Phaeron, waving away his obvious annoyance at the fact. 'Only which worthy brethren were intended to receive them. Who am I to deny the Dark Apostle his theatrics?'

Cxir again raised his hand. 'Let us not bicker, then, but compare them. Perhaps there is some relevance to their differences?'

'Aye,' said Beloth, his voice resonating with equal parts enthusiasm and wariness.

They placed the daggers points facing inwards. Although they were all similar – hilts bound in black leather or wire, marked with golden runes and tied with devotional ribbons – the blades were all markedly different. Crooked, or straighter. One forked. Another with waved edges. All were, however, of the same flinty black metal that pained the eyes.

'Six daggers,' said Fell. 'If these are truly tools of Chaos, then there might at least be eight.'

'Lord Erebus will surely carry the seventh,' said Hol Beloth.

'That still leaves one, captain,' pointed out Rabor.

Quor Vondar frowned. 'All of the Legion who have been chosen to command the coming assault are present, barring the Dark Apostle himself.'

'Indeed!' said Erebus as he strode into the chamber. The sudden sound of his voice caused Fell and Cxir to rise from their seats. 'And it is this noble legionary who will carry the eighth.'

Another warrior walked behind him: Sergeant Kolos Undil,

leader of Erebus's cadre of bodyguards.

'A mere sergeant?' said Rabor angrily. 'You disrespect us, Lord Erebus.'

Hol Beloth frowned. 'I – unlike my brothers, it seems – do wholly appreciate the honour of these fine athame blades, Lord Erebus. But it seems to lessen the gift, to put a mere sergeant on a footing with a captain...'

Erebus took a seat at the table. 'Gifting the faithful with such a weapon, even though he be a *mere sergeant*, does nothing to diminish the potency of the rest, nor the honour in carrying one.' He gestured to the last empty space, bidding Undil sit. The sergeant took his chair with unhurried grace, and looked into the eyes of his superiors without fear. 'Undil is as faithful as any of you,' Erebus added, taking care to nod respectfully to Kor Phaeron as he did so.

The others were guarded. Undil was a renowned warrior, as devout as his master and almost as devious.

'I do not like this, Dark Apostle,' said Fell, finally.

'Nor I,' said Cxir. 'There is ambition enough in this room as it is. Do you seek to set us all upon one other in open combat or honour duels?'

Undil inclined his head.

Erebus laughed.

'You are all already worthy of this honour, my lords, as is Undil.' Erebus smiled enigmatically, the scar across his throat a pale pink mirror of it. 'And now, my lord Kor Phaeron, shall we begin? I believe now is the time to review our strategies for the assault on Calth.'

Beloth raised his hands, exasperated. 'Come now – we all know the plan, Dark Apostle, and our parts in it.'

'There is more I have yet to add,' said Erebus archly.

'Then add it.'

'He will, he will,' said Kor Phaeron. 'It is not in the nature of our First Chaplain to employ such drama with no final revelation.'

Then he turned to Erebus, and his manner became more firm.

'He assured me that he would explain himself, and so *he will*.'

Akshub's face betrayed only a flicker of apprehension when Erebus walked into the nomad camp. To her credit, she alone

stood her ground as the tribesmen backed away from him, the giant who came out of the night.

The locals were wiry, repulsive creatures – devolved dregs of humanity that appeared more beast than man. Erebus despised them, even though they had proven their worth in the past.

The priestess eyed him as he approached.

‘You have found me quickly,’ she muttered. Her widely spaced, dark eyes were unreadable, the reflected flames of the campfires dancing in them.

Erebus halted. ‘You knew I had survived?’

The scar on his throat itched as he spoke. He had been waiting for this moment for a long time. He would relish it.

However, her reply robbed him of any satisfaction.

‘I foresaw your return. I have been waiting for you.’

He reined in his rising anger. Now was not the time for revenge, but he could not resist the urge to dominate her. He loomed over her in the fiery twilight. ‘*You tried to kill me.*’

She tilted her head and pursed her lips. Bone beads clicked in her hair. Her appearance was more barbaric than when Erebus had last seen her – in the depths of the Delphos, where she had slit his throat.

‘And yet I did not, noble warrior,’ she said. ‘I had to spill your blood for the spell to succeed. This should have been clear to you – the last act of faith.’ She took a step towards him. ‘The war has begun, as you and your masters desired.’

‘It has.’

She shrugged. ‘Then all is well. It is as I told you. Your death was necessary.’

‘It was... an unwelcome surprise. You meant to slay me.’

She was wary, but her pride masked her fear. ‘And now you seek vengeance? All I did was what was asked of me. You should take care when asking favours of the greater powers, warrior.’

‘Then I shall be more precise with my words in future, seeress,’ Erebus said. He slipped his pack from his back and set it down in the dust at his feet. ‘I am weary, for I have walked a long way to find you. Can you not offer me some refreshment? Some water, perhaps?’

‘You are not here to kill me, then?’

Erebus folded his arms. ‘If you can see the future, then you know the answer to that.’

She smiled enigmatically, an ugly expression on so debased a

face. 'What do you know of what I see, my lord? I will tell you what I see. I see that you have grown powerful. You have done well. But know this, *hand-of-destiny* – there will always be matters of which you will remain ignorant, no matter how great you become.'

Erebus nodded contritely.

'You are correct, Akshub, and though it pains me to say so, it does not make it less true. That is why I have come – to learn from you. Your power humbled me in that moment, and so in you I recognise a greater knowledge than my own.'

He sank to his knees and bowed his head.

'Allow me to become your acolyte.'

He reached for the roll of sackcloth, and untied the cord about it. Reverently, he spread out the black velvet within, and adjusted the contents as it lay on the ground.

Glinting in the firelight were eight knives: athames of exquisite, brutal craftsmanship.

Now that surprised her. His satisfaction returned.

'*This is – was – the anathame ?*' she whispered.

'Shards knapped from the blade by my own hand, in accordance with the old rituals.' He spread his arms wide, his palms upwards. 'I grew them in the blood of the Neverborn, and fashioned them into these fine implements – each alike, but no two the same.'

She looked up, her expression guarded. 'How did you learn this?'

'The forging was simple, because the gods demanded it should be so. You of all people, mighty Akshub, should know that their will cannot be defied.'

She wrinkled her nose.

'Their will? Your will, I think. And now you want me to reward you for this sacrilege?' The bones in her hair rattled as she shook her head. 'No. Never.'

'The gods willed it, seeress.'

She stared at him, and let out a long sigh. She scratched at her scalp with a ragged fingernail, and sat down with much grumbling. Her limbs had stiffened since their last meeting. 'Maybe, maybe,' she muttered. 'What would you have from me?'

He prostrated himself before her once more. 'Help me. Help me to win the war and bring the light of Chaos to every corner of the galaxy. Mighty Akshub, I beseech you, teach me

the way to the paths between worlds.'

Even as the words left his lips, he smiled into the dirt beneath his face.

Akshub spent the night in communion with her patron spirits. Her tent she heated to almost unbearable levels, piling the fire high with dung cake. She sealed the space tightly – door and window flaps, and the opening at the peak that would normally let out the smoke. The place was filled with a choking reek long before she began casting her herbs and powders into the flames and inhaling the thick vapours.

Erebus watched the old witch perform her magic, his eyes streaming. He strove to stay vigilant, to learn what he could, but her chanting invaded every corner of his mind and led him to places he could not later recall.

He did not sleep. Of that he was sure.

Suddenly, it was light and the fire was out. Erebus blinked. The door flap had been opened behind him. Outside, the dirt was scuffed, with various belongings strewn about. The tribesmen had fled, although how long ago was impossible to tell.

Akshub jabbed him hard in the shoulder with her finger.

'Very well, noble warrior. We go. I will teach you what you desire. The gods will it.' She glanced at the velvet roll containing the eight athames, before ducking out of the tent.

She burned down the remains of the camp, then led Erebus across the savannah for eight days and nights. During the hours of darkness, when the great, sickly moon of Davin hung heavy in the sky, she told him more of the gods' own realms. She took him into trances, guiding his mind into the fringes of the empyrean, showing him the secret ways by which a mind might pass beyond.

'We are servants of the gods, and so we go more easily,' she said. 'But they are capricious, and there are many dark things of lower consequence that dwell within that ocean and hunger for our soul-fire. You must be wary at all times. Trust nothing, think nothing. Feel nothing. All you can imagine can destroy you.'

'Then what protects us?' he asked. 'Why was I not devoured when you sent me that way before?'

She looked away, into the mauve darkness of Davin's night sky.

‘You think perhaps your pretty inks? Your special words? Or do you think yourself favoured, “*hand-of-destiny*”?’ She turned back to him, almost angry. ‘No, none of these things, Lord Erebus. Not one will protect you. We are protected because we do the work of the gods, and because of our devotion. Our ambition, our will, our determination. These things are pleasing to them. That is why you passed freely before.’

‘Will I be able to do so again?’

She did not speak, but prodded idly at the dirt with a stiff stalk of grass. She glanced again at the roll containing the knives.

‘I know what you and the golden one intend to do. I have foreseen that you will attempt to call down the Ruinstorm upon the galaxy and stir the oceans of time into a tempest. This is why you are here – not only to pass the veil that divides. You will gather your ships about you and sail unhindered whilst others founder. That is what you seek to learn.’ She sniffed, and muttered to herself. ‘Mighty sorcery indeed.’

He did not deny it. ‘Will I succeed?’

Her grass stalk scratched the dust, writing things only she could see.

‘We shall see,’ she said abruptly. ‘We shall see.’

By day they walked, heading for a range of black mountains in the distance. They saw no other living soul as they went. Erebus thought back to the last time he had set foot upon the planet’s surface.

‘The plains and settlements are almost empty,’ he observed. ‘But of course – the exodus has already begun, has it not?’ With a smug grin, he directed his words at the priestess’s back as she walked. ‘Tell me, why did you not join them? Why did you not take your tribe into the stars, like so many of the other priests?’

Akshub did not respond.

The eight legionaries talked at length of the plans for the coming battle: the ambush of Guilliman’s hated Ultramarines that would open wide the way to Terra. Their defeat would be a blow to the morale of the so-called loyalists – the realm of Ultramar that Guilliman ruled was a model of what the Emperor said he had always intended for the Imperium.

Lies, all of it, thought Erebus. The Emperor sought only his

own aggrandisement, and would abandon mankind to rot. Had he not hidden himself away for millennia? Mankind would fall as the eldar had fallen, its potential unrealised, all because of the Emperor's desire for apotheosis. This had been revealed to him long, long ago.

Talk of ambush, of scrapcode, of deceit and murder washed over him. They all knew the strategy back to front. It had been almost a year since Lorgar had first tasked him and the others with the destruction of the XIII Legion, and Kor Phaeron's plans had been long in the making. He let the Dark Cardinal talk, as he so liked to do. So sure of himself, this half-man – so sure of his adopted son's affection for him. He was prideful at his command of the attack.

But Erebus knew that a thorn of irritation dug at him too: his own refusal, until now, to reveal the purpose of these particular athames. This pleased the Dark Apostle. He and Kor Phaeron, once close conspirators, were more often at loggerheads of late.

He watched the others. Quor Vondar, swollen with confidence. The embittered Foedral Fell, angered by duties he deemed unbecoming of his station. Hol Beloth, thirsting for power. Murderous Rabor, cautious Cxir. All were wrapped up in their own concerns in some way, but only Morpal Cxir looked genuinely troubled. The attack was essential to the winning of the greatest war, but it would be costly, no matter that surprise and fear would be on their side.

As Erebus looked around the circle of Space Marines, arguing and manoeuvring for whatever small glories were to be had, he wondered – and not for the first time – if Lorgar had meant leadership in this battle to be an honour. This campaign was crucial, but it would also prove bloody. Not all of them would survive. Perhaps Cxir, always glancing at his blade, was also beginning to see the truth of it.

No matter. Erebus would complete his part in the ritual. The great spell had been prepared, and the rest of the Legion was already on its way across Ultramar. He had the place for the summoning marked. His acolytes were gathered, and the myriad names of the daemons he would call forth were committed to his memory.

All was ready.

Cxir looked up at him, wordlessly. Erebus nodded.

In the ruins of an old temple in the foothills tended by grim-faced sentinels, Akshub began to teach him the way to open the skin of reality.

Erebus's first attempts were clumsy and humiliating. He would pass Akshub's knife through the air as instructed, only rarely causing the tear he required, and then it would be too small or too short-lived. Many temple slaves were violated and sacrificed before he had mastered even this first part of the ritual.

'To move one's mind into the empyrean is one thing, warrior, but to go bodily into that place is another.' She rapped the back of his head for effect. 'You must concentrate. Learn! Watch!'

She took back her knife. She muttered her words, and slid it along an angle that earthly dimensions could not describe. A crack of light split the air.

With a feral smile, Akshub disappeared.

Erebus noted again that *she* needed no sacrifice to open the way and, for a moment, his resolve wavered.

Patience, he told himself.

She returned as she always did, bringing with her yet another entranced victim for Erebus to bleed for the glory of the gods, and then he would try again.

At night Akshub kept him awake, forcing him to meditate to clear his mind and safeguard his soul. She armoured his spirit with incantations, but the lack of sleep began to take its toll, the genetic gifts of the Legionones Astartes notwithstanding.

The pile of glassy-eyed slave heads that she was making on the far side of the temple – the mark for his re-entry into the material realm – grew steadily.

Then, on the sixty-fourth day, he succeeded.

He made the pass with the knife, weary beyond telling. He was drained by the endless repetition of the spell, annoyed to breaking point by Akshub's imprecations and insults. He felt dull inside, the words tumbling from his lips without conscious thought.

'Yes! Yes!' the priestess screeched. 'The way, it is open! Now go. Go. Shield your mind. Remember all I have told you.'

He lifted his eyes and stepped through without hesitation.

What did he feel? Tumbling. *Things* plucking at him. Great, unwavering power. To see into the warp with one's mind was

one thing, but to be physically *in* it...

He could never have put it into words. Few could, for to enter that realm was death to any soul. And yet...

He felt where he should exit with senses that he did not know he possessed. He tumbled to the ground only a couple of metres short of the pile of mouldering heads.

Akshub sat down beside him as he lay, heaving. She looked him up and down, then stretched out her hand and closed her eyes. She spoke a spell of divination under her breath. Her mind probed at his, before her inhuman eyes snapped open again.

'It is you. Nothing rides your body.'

Erebus pulled himself from the floor, exhausted.

'Now rest,' Akshub said, with the slightest hint of pride in her voice. 'Tomorrow you shall do it again.'

His trips grew longer. First outside the ruins, then onto the plains, then later into the settlements further away. Erebus stalked the dusty streets by night. He was not out of place in the largest settlements, for the Word Bearers had a presence here, although when he caught sight of his legionary brothers he would duck quickly out of view. He struggled to maintain his composure; such was his sense of triumph that he would gladly shout it to the heavens.

He started to bring his own victims back to their lair. The place became foetid, buzzing with blowflies and rank with the stench of old blood. For the shorter trips, however, he no longer needed to kill.

He plotted longer and longer journeys – at first only in short steps, until he could circle the whole planet in a single night.

Akshub's short-lived pride in her teaching grew into wariness as his competency increased. She kept her distance, and became almost entirely passive. She barely spoke to him, spending long periods seemingly in a trance, but did nothing to disrupt his learning.

Then he dared the moon. He stood in its daylit swamps, gazing up in amazement at Davin's night side where he had been only seconds before.

No matter how far he went, the time he felt within the warp varied little. The same sensations of power and fear. The struggle to keep his mind blank of all but his destination. The tumble from one realm to the other. He lacked Akshub's

elegance, but he knew that he could go farther than she. He had grown more powerful than her, and they both knew it.

She ceased to guide him at all. She stopped eating. Erebus guessed that she was preparing herself for the end. He was angered by that, but still she did not leave the temple.

He set himself one final test.

He emerged into his quarters aboard the *Destiny's Hand* with a clatter, spat from the warp with force. He slammed into his iron lectern, scattering books, manuscripts and data-slates onto the floor.

Laughing, he fell back into them. Surrounded by a jumble of arcane knowledge, he laughed long and loud.

He had pinpointed a ship, moving through the warp at speed, without any beacon or homing signal. He had arrived within his locked and barred sanctum, and no one had detected him in any way.

'I truly am the Hand of Destiny,' he murmured to himself.

He left again before he was discovered, back to the ruined temple on the other side of Ultima Segmentum.

Now it was time for that old witch to die.

'So sure have you become, Lord Kor Phaeron, that you think yourself worthy of the very secrets of the gods themselves?' said Erebus.

'I am *foremost* among the servants of the gods!' insisted Kor Phaeron. 'I followed them of old. I demand to know their purpose. They do not deny me, Apostle, and yet you do. You promised to reveal the purpose of these athames. Do so. I command it.'

Erebus scowled. The old man disappointed him.

'So be it, my lord. Like the warp-flasks, they are gifts of the gods. They possess the power to shield the wielder from harm, or to aid him in the working of great sorceries. Know, however, that these things are dependent on the ability of he who carries them.'

'That is worse than cryptic, my lord,' offered Undil with a knowing grin.

Foedral Fell laughed.

Erebus shrugged. 'I speak words of truth to the deaf, then. These athames are not merely ritual tokens, but tools of enlightenment. A wound from them can turn the mightiest hero to our cause, opening his eyes to the majesty of Chaos, and

the perfidy of the Emperor.'

'I sense no such power beyond the gift of death,' muttered Quor Vondar, holding his blade close to his closed eyes. 'Though there is an echo of *something ...*' A frown creased his brow, as though he were straining to listen.

'As I said, Master Vondar,' said Erebus coldly, 'it would depend upon the abilities of those that carry them. One might use it for whatever purpose they set their mind to.'

Kor Phaeron seemed to regard his blade in a new light. 'You say that they are tools of enlightenment?' he said, his eyes gleaming. 'Enlightenment, or corruption?'

'Of *conversion* , my lord. Amongst other things.'

'And doubtless you will not tell us what those things are?' said Cxir.

'The gods will not spoon-feed you power, my lords, and nor will I. It must be learned and seized. Learn as I have, or fall by the wayside in the months and years to come. The choice is yours – I have simply given you a focus for your future endeavours, in the hope that you might...' His words trailed away, and he cast his eyes downwards. 'Well, there you have it. I see a touch of greatness in each of you.'

'Of course,' said Fell. 'But why? Tell us, or we will not take your blades, no matter what wonders you promise. You surely do not expect us to follow your whispers so blindly?'

'No, of course not.'

'Then for what reason do you hand us these athames?'

Erebus smiled widely. He restrained himself for a moment, savouring the pent-up irritation of the others.

Rabor slammed his blade down flatly upon the table, and stood.

'*Destiny* ,' Erebus said eventually, and a delicious shiver passed up his spine at the sound of it.



Kor Phaeron, Dark Cardinal of the Word Bearers

Akshub was waiting for him when he returned. She watched him as he approached.

‘I have learned all I can from you, priestess,’ Erebus said, casting off his rough robe.

‘That is so.’

‘Only one more task remains to me, here.’

‘I have foreseen it,’ she agreed.

She did not resist as he knelt and pinned her to the floor in the centre of the temple with seven of the athames, their unnatural blades sinking into the stone as hot knives might sink into ice. She cried out as he repeated the ritual that he had seen her perform upon the Davinite priest the day she had sent Erebus to meet the Warmaster.

She did not plead with him, not even as he peeled back her withered skin, though she gasped as he sank the last of the blades into the exposed muscles of her chest.

She was still conscious as he cut out her heart and bit into it. Her eyes fluttered as her blood ran down his chin. ‘*It is ...*’ she hissed, ‘*the will... of the gods ...*’

Curiously, she died with a smile upon her face.

As Erebus chewed and swallowed, his transhuman physiology took over. The memories and thoughts of the priestess came to him in fits and flashes. Her wisdom was his, and he revelled in—

His chewing slowed. There was a recent recollection there that he had not expected.

A shadowed face. A furtive meeting.

He swallowed again, and took another bite, his teeth worrying at the tough muscle.

No matter how hard he focused, he could not bring that face into the light. Whoever the stranger was, though, they had told Akshub something that had gladdened her greatly.

Erebus knew then that he had been cheated of his revenge. She had waited for him to slay her. As much as she had wanted to live, Akshub had died in service of the gods, perhaps party to something greater that he would now never know.

He cast the remains of the heart aside with a cry of frustration. He rocked back on his heels next to the ruin of the priestess’s body.

Patience.

He had learned what he needed to learn, but he was not content. Akshub had won.

The knife in his hand began to hum a harsh, troubling note at the edge of his perception. One by one, the others picked up their own discordant tone. It was a terrible, raucous sound, until the eighth knife sang out, and the cacophony became a thing of riotous beauty. Just as the primarch had written,

Erebus heard for the first time the eightfold song of Chaos, and the future opened up to him.

Then the notes slowly died.

Erebus plucked the blades from the priestess's body. The final act of consecration was complete, and his shards were ready.

They tingled in his grasp as he gathered them. With an easy flourish he drew one – the one he had selected as his own – across the skin of reality, and stepped back to the *Destiny's Hand* .

Erebus left the chamber first, followed closely by Sergeant Undil. Kor Phaeron had an evil look about him, and the Dark Apostle did not have the patience for any more of his posturing.

Many of the others were angry at his obtuseness. What did he care? They were also more than a little afraid of him now, and that gave him a hold over all. His goals were close to fulfilment. The shards would be present as he needed them to be, and the blood they would shed could only hasten the future that he had foreseen, even if nothing else.

If Lorgar did intend to rid himself of Erebus, then he would be disappointed. That the eight Shards of Erebus now also offered his fellow commanders the opportunity of escape from Calth was unimportant to him. Whether or not they would learn how to effect flight through the immaterium should they need it, well...

That was something he would leave to the will of the gods.

**+++DATA-INLOAD SUSPENDED. PURGE ROUTINE
INITIATED+++
+++FATAL ERROR: CANNOT FIND VARIABLE "ushkul
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+++ERR- we are the dawn of sanctity. what lives in the
eighth shall not die. those that cast down shall sit upon
thrones. what changes is eternal. that which writhes in the
grave's womb will be reborn. they who live without shackles
shall be freed. we are the footsteps of the new sun. we are
the pyre's children -OR+++
+++ERROR+++
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+++ERROR+++
++WE RISE++
+IT BEGINS+**