

THE HORUS HERESY®

# BLADES OF THE TRAITOR

*Heed the Warmaster's call*



Featuring John French, Guy Haley, Nick Kyme,  
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# DAEMONOLOGY

*Chris Wright*

Maddened by his Legion's recent failures, Mortarion  
reluctantly delves into the mysteries of the warp

# DAEMONOLOGY

**Chris Wraight**

The world was called Terathalion, named for the species of jewel found in its equatorial belt under mountains of copper and iron. Even during the long interstellar silence before the Ipsissimus had made himself known, those swirled green-orange jewels had been mined and cut and polished, adorning the chief treasures of the planet – these were always books.

For Terathalion was a world of words where documents stored in a thousand human tongues were collated, analysed, annotated and catalogued.

A *library-world*, they had called it later. A place where knowledge coalesced, all under the benign guidance of distant masters on Prospero. For a hundred years after its incorporation into the Imperium, ruby-armoured magisters had been welcome and frequent visitors, prompted by curiosity or sent on assignment by their venerated primarch in search of myriad fragments of learning. Those visits had slowly dried up as the demands of the Great Crusade had drawn more of the XV Legion away from the loose-thrown Prosperine empire until, one day, they had ceased altogether.

During this new isolation, the world's temporal masters did not worry unduly, nor did they seek especial clarification. The galaxy had been made safe for study, and so Terathalion's patient work continued unabated. They knew that the Legions would return in time, for it was widely understood that Space Marines left no task unfinished.

In that, the temporal masters were of course entirely correct, except the ships that eventually emerged from the Mandeville point in the Imperial year 007.M31 and spread out through the local system were not the sleek and gloriously decorated system-runners of the XV Legion, but corpse-grey, vast-hulled leviathans.

Moreover, it was no mere squadron that had arrived, but an entire battle group. And as the warships took up position above Terathalion's risibly meagre orbital defences, even the most trusting of the planet's overseers felt a sense of unease.

They sent messages to the lead battleship, a colossal Gloriana-class monster with the tactical ident *Endurance*, but no response was received. Orders were frantically transmitted to the defence grid to mobilise, but by then even that gesture was made far too late.

The placid people of Terathalion had never witnessed the full firepower of a Legion fleet before, and so they could hardly be blamed for not knowing what to expect. They were still looking up into the skies when the bombardment began, turning the skies white as the clouds boiled away. Mass drivers annihilated the outer ring of defences before pinpoint lance strikes destroyed every command-and-control node across the northern hemisphere. A rain of incendiaries ripped through the urban centres, falling for hour upon hour in an unrelenting barrage that left barely one stone standing atop the next. Sheets of promethium flame swept through what little remained, scorching it black.

The books burned. Millennial tomes that had been secured in vacuum chambers were ripped apart as the armourglass casings shattered. Archives became white-hot tunnels, atomising irreplaceable volumes in puffs of burning dust.

When the bombardment finally relented, the few survivors crept slowly from whatever refuges they had been able to find, their ears ringing and their eyes streaming. For a moment it seemed to them like some awful error had been committed, and that the worst was over, and that – satisfied with the apocalyptic destruction they had wrought, for reasons that were still entirely mysterious – the attackers would now move on to their next target.

But then dirty contrails of drop pods split the smoke-barred skies. All across Terathalion's newly tortured surface, clusters of adamantium teardrops crashed to earth, disgorging squads of pale-grey Space Marines from the impact-rubble. More and more landed, until whole battalions of warriors stalked through the rapidly toxifying atmosphere, their faces hidden behind slope-grilled helms. With horrifying efficiency, they ground their way from one ravaged hab-section to the next.

They asked no questions and made no demands. As aftershock thunderheads boiled across the rubbled cityscapes and heavily acidic rain began to drum from still-hot metal, the survivors of ruined Terathalion were hunted down like vermin.

In Geryiadha, once the world's fifth most populous city and home to satintree groves and fountain-gardens, the concentration was more intense than anywhere else. In the main boulevard – now a pitted trench of smoking rockcrete debris – the air itself shimmered and broke open, leaking arcs of neon. Dust swirled and whipped into serpents, and masonry blocks rolled clear. A sphere of silver suddenly flashed into life, laced with writhing black energies. A sharp snap rang out, shattering the orb's fragile skin and sending shards bouncing away across the detritus.

At the centre stood eight massive figures. Seven of them strode out immediately, hefting long scythes in heavy gauntlets. Their thick battleplate was gouged and charred, as though they had just come from some furious battle against sterner foes than anything a library-world might reliably muster.

The eighth towered over even those leviathans. His archaic armour, lined with rust and marked with what looked like deep blade-cuts, steamed with warp-frost. Yellowed eyes glinted from beneath a shroud-white cowl, set in a gaunt face ringed by rebreather tubes and feeder-vials. His expression was haunted, even though there was nothing on the planet that could possibly harm him, and his fingers twitched as he hauled his own great scythe into position.

The crackle of flames rumbled on in the distance, punctuated by the muffled crack of bolter fire. Forge-hot winds tore across the disintegrating urban vista, fuelled by the infernos raging in the hollow hab-spires.

The primarch Mortarion drew in his first rattling breath of Terathalion's smog-choked atmosphere, and swept his gaze across the boulevard.

'Find it,' he rasped.

*Seventy years earlier, and half a galaxy away, Malcador the Sigillite had been occupied when the alert came through. The First Lord of Terra was always occupied, for the civil affairs of the expanding Imperium were more than one man could possibly handle.*

*In a sense, of course, he was far more than one man. He was an aberration, just as all the powerful of the galaxy were aberrations – a random fluctuation in the psychic tides, an anomaly amidst the quadrillions that made up the burgeoning mass of humanity.*

*Still, that did not enable him to escape from the burden of all empires. Whenever one executive order was signed off, another nine would take its place. With every compliance came more demands for iterators, cultural assimilators, remembrancers, terraformers, trader treaties. He looked down at the long list of*

*incoming diplomatic communiqués, and his ancient heart sank.*

*When the alert flickered across his display feed, then, it was welcome.*

*‘My lord,’ came the voice from the comm-bead in his collar, the one reserved for urgent transmissions. ‘My lord – he is here, and he will not be dissuaded.’*

*Malcador rose from the antique writing desk and reached for his aquila-topped staff. ‘Understood. I will be with you shortly.’*

*He walked quickly through his private chambers, then out into the corridors of the Imperial Palace. The courtiers and political delegates shuffled out of his way; either they had no idea who he was and had no interest in meeting his gaze, or they knew exactly who he was, in which case they did not dare to. He passed through the image-lined colonnades, garden chambers and libraries, padding softly on soft-soled shoes.*

*Gradually the ranks of unaugmented courtiers fell away, to be replaced by the red and gold of the Mechanicum and the Legio Custodes. None barred his passage – down in the subterranean levels, all knew his name and what his simple aquila staff represented.*

*He reached the excavation stratum, and the functionary who had called him hurried over, an apologetic look on his face.*

*‘I am sorry, my lord,’ he said.*

*‘That is all right, Sefel,’ Malcador replied. ‘Where is he?’*

*‘In the outer portal.’*

*‘Then you should have summoned me sooner.’*

*He went more quickly then, ignoring the towering vaults around him, and the low rumble of the creation engines and flashes of light from arc-welders. The air became hotter. Soon he was walking across bare rock, still scored from the drills that had delved into it, and had to step over the bronze-lined cables that lay like serpents across his path.*

*Malcador found him just inside the first gate, with the sound of macrohammers ringing through those dark arches. He was standing, staring up at the unfinished portal, his grey face lost in thought.*

*Following his gaze, Malcador drew up alongside him. It was an octagonal gateway, three hundred metres across, reinforced with an adamantium collar and ringed with the runes of Old Earth.*

*A Titan could have walked through that gate. Perhaps, in time, one would.*

*‘What is it for?’ the watcher asked.*

*The question felt premature. The portal would not be finished for decades yet. Its immense frame opened up onto nothing but bare rock – it was a door to*

*nowhere, fashioned at enormous expense and in conditions of the utmost secrecy.*

*'Why are you here, Mortarion?' Malcador asked, as gently as he could.*

*'What is it for?' the primarch repeated.*

*Malcador placed a withered hand upon Mortarion's back, making to usher him away but not being so foolish as to actually push. 'Come with me. We should talk.'*

*The primarch glared down at him, his toxin-scarred features etched with contempt. 'One day, old man,' he said, curling his gauntlet into a fist, 'one of us will leave you gasping in the dust. Perhaps it will be me.'*

*'No doubt you are right. Now, please, come away from the gate.'*

*'Why? Is it dangerous?'*

*Malcador didn't look up at it. He never liked to look at it.*

*'Not yet,' he said.*

Lermenta didn't run immediately. She'd known that it was the end as soon as she had seen the first augur-pinpricks confirmed. As one of the higher-ranking syndics of Geryiadha's administrative archival cadre, she was privy to things that others weren't, although on that day she found that she couldn't take any particular pleasure in that.

She had made her way quickly down from the main collation spire and jogged through the rows and rows of bookshelves, allowing herself a momentary twinge of sorrow as the titles passed by in the gloom. By the time the warning sirens were sounding, she had made it out of the core and into open air. She'd looked up, as if she might catch a glimpse of the ships that she knew were falling into position above her. The sky had been a pale, pure green, just as it was every morning during the tithe-season. Like most things on Terathalion, it had always had a sparse beauty to it.

Now that was all gone, stirred up into fire-edged storms that shed acid rain-like tears. Everything stank of cordite, mingled with the hot-metal aroma of plasma-discharge. She crouched under the shadow of a shattered medicae unit, feeling numb even amidst the burning. Her scholar's smock clung to her, driven by the racing fire-wind.

She'd seen whole kill-squads of Space Marines moving through the city zones, cutting down survivors with chilling expertise. They had never made a sound, save for the crunch of boots on bone and the coarse bark of their outsized bolters.

They didn't scare her, but it drove the others mad with fear. Those that could

still run sprinted for the city limits, no doubt hoping that if they could just get clear of the drop zone then they might have a chance.

Lermenta watched them from her inadequate shelter. They were doing what every instinct told them to do, though it made them terrifyingly easy to kill. She could only watch as men, women and children were gunned down at range, cut apart up close or crushed beneath the treads of tanks brought down by bulk landers. Terathalion had been home to a population in the billions, and it took a while for even the Legiones Astartes to track them all down.

When she had to move, she kept her body low and hugged the remnants of whatever buildings still stood. The rockcrete was hot to the touch, burning through the soles of her regulation sandals. She didn't have a plan. There was precious little to plan *for* when the entire planet was clearly being torn apart, and all that remained was a dumb, animalistic sense of wanting to stay intact for just a little bit longer.

She went south, towards the old rivercourse where industrial hoppers for the jewel-trade stood. Those were made of plasteel and adamantium, enough to withstand the smelters, so some of them might still be standing. As she flitted between hollow wall sections, she felt her heart thudding in her chest, tight and rapid.

She was so wrapped up in picking a route that she heard the boot-falls too late. Cursing under her breath, she did what all the others did and broke into a sprint. She did not look back.

Perhaps they hadn't seen her, in which case she might still race through the shadows and get away.

*Perhaps they hadn't seen her.*

The absurdity of the thought was amusing, in spite of what it portended. These were *Space Marines*. They heard *everything*, they saw *everything*. Still, she ran on, gasping in the ash-thick air, weaving through what remained of an old manufactory depot. She veered hard around a corner, skidding on the rain-washed stone.

Ahead of her, a long alley stretched away, lined with the empty corpses of drive-housings.

At the far end, she saw him waiting.

He was massive, far bigger in the flesh than she had ever conceived he might be, radiating an aura of such astonishing psychic authority that it made her want to gasp out loud. The elements themselves seemed to sheer away from him, though his scythe's energised blade ran with boiling rainwater. She wanted to

look away but the yellowed eyes held her fast. He walked slowly towards her, looming through twisting palls of smog, cracking the road surface under his heavy tread.

For a moment, as she stared up at the approaching face, she was only struck by one thing in particular.

*Pain.* The primarch's grey visage was twisted into what looked like a permanent wince, half-hidden behind a hissing rebreather intake.

'What do you want here?' she managed to blurt out, hearing the arrival of more Death Guard coming up behind her.

Mortarion shot her a withering look, as if to say, *Don't try that with me.* He grabbed her chin and held it up, pinching it between the plates of his elaborate gauntlet and held her gaze for a little while longer. It felt like knives being shoved into her lungs. Then, mercifully, he released her. He gestured to his entourage, and Lermenta felt two hands grip her by the shoulders.

'We have it,' Mortarion announced, though not to her, and in a voice that sounded like a flail being dragged across rusted iron. 'I will return to the ship. You may destroy what remains.'

*Malcador took Mortarion back up to his personal chambers, high up on the slopes overlooking the vast sprawl of the palace's grand halls and spires. The Sigillite had spent more than a mortal lifetime making it a place of beauty and sanctuary, but Mortarion seemed barely to notice what had been placed there. The primarch simply stood on the polished marble, exuding vapours, his breathing a coarse scrape.*

*'I would see my father now.'*

*'The Emperor is not available,' Malcador replied.*

*'Where is he?'*

*'I do not know.'*

*Mortarion snorted. 'You know his every movement. You know his every thought.'*

*'No. No man knows those things.'*

*Mortarion started pacing, kicking aside priceless pieces of antique furniture as he went. 'He cannot keep me here for much longer. He tries my patience.'*

*'Your Legion awaits you, and the last preparations are being made. You will join them soon enough.'*

*Mortarion turned on him, his eyes flashing with frustrated anger. 'Then why imprison me here? Did he do this to any of my brothers?'*

*Malcador noticed the edge of unreason in his guest's face, and wondered if it was getting worse. All the gene-progeny of the Great Project had been damaged by the scattering, but Mortarion's wounds ran deeper than most. Angron had been physically damaged, and Curze's mind had sunken into darkness, but Mortarion seemed to have been inherited something of both afflictions. The Emperor's desire to keep him a while on Terra prior to joining the Crusade had been motivated from the highest intentions, just as all the decisions they had jointly made had been. That did not mean that it was the right decision, nor that the poisons could all be extracted...*

*'You were all given different gifts,' explained Malcador patiently. 'You have all had different trials.'*

*'None had more than I,' muttered Mortarion.*

*'I know you believe that.'*

*Mortarion turned back to the view, wrinkling his grey skin against the glare. 'You have done nothing but preach at me since I was brought here. You talk of the Imperial Truth, and yet you are neck-deep in witchery.' He grimaced beneath his rebreather, making the skin around his temples wrinkle. 'I can smell it on you. As soon as I leave your presence, you will be back at your spellbook.'*

*Malcador suppressed a sigh. This again.*

*'There are no spells, Mortarion. You know that.'*

*'What is the gate you are building down there?'*

*'I did not say it was a gate.'*

*'It has eight sides. It is surrounded by numerological symbols. I could smell the incense.'*

*'Your father has many projects.'*

*The primarch nodded. 'He does. He starts many things, and discards them when they no longer keep His interest. There are times when I think He may have started too many, and that they will come back to haunt Him.'*

*'There is a purpose,' Malcador replied. 'A design. Some things He is able to explain now, and some He will explain later. All we ask – all we have ever asked – is for a little trust.'*

*When Mortarion made his move, it was surprisingly quick.*

*He whirled, his gauntlet flashing out, catching the frail lord by the neck and gripping tight. Malcador struggled for breath, looking up into the mask of sudden hatred now looming over him. The primarch still bore the stench of Barbarus upon his armour.*

*'Trust?' Mortarion hissed. 'I see your foulness before me, as plain as the sun.'*

*You are a sorcerer, old man, and the stink of it makes me wish to vomit.'*

*For once, Malcador struggled for the right words. He could have used his art to defend himself, but that would only enrage the primarch further. There was so much subtlety at stake – the nature of the psyker, the proper use of the human mind – but such arguments were hard to formulate with a gene-forged fist around one's throat.*

*Then Mortarion let go as suddenly as he had grasped him and snorted contemptuously as Malcador only barely found his feet.*

*'You must think me stupid,' he snarled. 'A peasant of Barbarus, not fit to walk the same paths as my illustrious brothers. But I see through you, old man. I see what you are, and I tell you this – I will never serve in your Crusade while there are witches among us.'*

*Mortarion's toxin-spoiled voice shook with fervour, but Malcador composed himself. At one time or another, all of the primarchs had exerted their strength in his presence. They seemed to enjoy demonstrating their physical prowess over him, as if perpetually resentful of his privileged place at their father's side. He had gotten used to letting the slights pass.*

*'Do you... really mean... that?' Malcador managed to ask, and Mortarion's glower was all the confirmation he needed. 'Very well. I had hoped to show you this later... when matters were at a greater stage of readiness... but perhaps now will serve.'*

*He brushed down his robes, trying not to show just how much Mortarion's choking grip had pained him, and gestured towards a pair of mahogany doors that led to a chamber normally off-limits to all but himself and the Emperor.*

*'After you. I think you will find this... interesting.'*

The primarch's chamber aboard the *Endurance* was cluttered and claustrophobic. Lermenta let her eyes run across it, taking in the piles of old equipment scattered across the black pressed-metal floor. Perhaps once it had been a finely appointed space, decked with fine items more in keeping with a private retreat of an Emperor's son, though now it looked more like the domain of a mind teetering on the edge of insanity. Rolls of crumpled parchment spilled across collections of ephemera from a thousand worlds – stuffed xenos heads, astrolabes, divination boards made of rosewood and iron, leather-bound manuals on numerology, or knapped-flint knives of all sizes tied with lengths of twine.

The floor had been etched with concentric circles, each marked with a different rune. Iron lozenges, also marked with sigils, hung on chains from the

arched ceiling, twisting gently under the dim light of flickering torches. The air was close and as hot as blood.

Lermenta was shackled tightly by her wrists, neck and ankles, bound to an iron frame that stood at the far end of the ramshackle chamber, facing in towards the circles.

She had to twist her head to catch a glimpse of Mortarion. An eye-shaped viewportal stood over to her left, taking up nearly the entire height of the outward-facing chamber wall. Terathalion could be seen through the armourglass, still glowing brightly in the void and betraying little of its ongoing pain. Mortarion stood before the portal, breathing deeply, watching the planet die. Every so often he would twitch, or his gauntlets would clench, or his rebreather would emit a faint choke of expelled air. He had been standing there for over an hour. Since the Legion menials had pinned her to the frame and left the two of them alone in the chamber, he had said nothing.

‘So, you did that all just to find me?’ asked Lermenta, growing tired of the enforced silence.

Mortarion turned upon her slowly. His every movement was deliberate, as though weighed down by a terrible weariness. Up close, Lermenta could see barely-healed wounds beneath the shadow of his cowl.

*What could wound him? What could even scratch him?*

‘Not all of it,’ he rasped throatily, his rebreather clicking as it filtered his words. ‘It is good to destroy a world. It purifies the soul.’

Lermenta raised an eyebrow. The primarch’s voice sounded strangely febrile.

He limped past her, coming to rest at the epicentre of the rune-circles. He folded his arms and regarded her. ‘For a long time,’ he said, ‘I believed what my new father told me. I told myself that you were a myth.’

‘Well, you can see that’s not true.’

‘I *see* a mortal woman.’ Mortarion said. ‘I could snap your neck with my fingertips.’

‘Such a charmer.’

Mortarion advanced towards her, his tortured face looking oddly distracted. He stared at her like a man might stare at a newly discovered tumour.

‘How long were you down there with them?’

‘Twenty-five years,’ she replied.

‘And the mortal you consumed?’

‘I forget. I can’t ask her anymore – she quickly lost her mind.’

‘Why were you sent?’

‘I was not *sent*,’ Lermenta snapped. ‘I chose it. There were priceless things down there and now you have destroyed them all. Your brother Magnus will be angry, when he returns.’

‘Do not speak to me of my brothers. Any of them.’

Mortarion was studying her intently. Close up, Lermenta could smell the chemical tang of his armour-systems, the ripe edge to his extruded breath. She could see the minuscule darts of his pupils, and the faint hidden spasms around his mouth.

‘You are *foul* to me,’ he pronounced at last.

Lermenta bowed as much as her bonds would let her. ‘Yet you are nothing less than astonishing to me. I am full of admiration. Truthfully, I did not expect to endure long enough to see you at such... quarters.’

The flattery made no impact – Mortarion’s psyche was so inured to disdain that he could no longer see anything other than veiled contempt. Lermenta could almost hear that paranoia echoing in his mind, pursuing him, dragging at his mighty, wounded soul.

‘My brothers are already using your kind,’ Mortarion told her. ‘They tell me Lorgar willingly infects his warriors. And there is Fulgrim.’ Mortarion shuddered. ‘I wonder at it. The hypocrisy.’

‘You should not. They have seen the order of nature and accepted it.’

Mortarion smiled joylessly behind the rebreather. He turned, gesturing to the collection of esoterica in his chambers. ‘These are wards,’ he said. ‘Protections against the dark. Sorcery is a cancer. We must guard against it. Push it *back*.’ He shuffled over to one of the scrolls and idly traced a finger over the text. ‘The ancient Terrans believed in one god. Infinite. Omnipotent. That gave them a conundrum – how to describe perfection? What words could possibly suffice?’

Mortarion crumpled the parchment in his fist. His fingers were almost trembling.

‘All they allowed themselves was the *via negativa* – to speak of what their god was *not* like. And when they had exhausted all the things that were not true, what remained in the blind spot was his nature.’ He looked back at her, and the evident loathing returned. ‘I surround myself with all that is *not* the warp, for it is hateful to me. Whatever remains is corruption. I seek it out. I destroy it.’

‘And yet,’ said Lermenta, ‘of all that world’s souls, you chose to preserve me.’ Mortarion’s right eyelid twitched. ‘For now.’

‘Why?’

He drew close again, and it was all Lermenta could do not to shrink back in

her bonds. 'I am surrounded by the damned,' he said. 'Jaghatai was right – I am on my own with them. The aether stains everything. But I *will* understand it. And I will *overcome* it.'

'Oh, for pity. Nothing can overcome it.'

The primarch loomed over her, and his shadowed face boiled with an old, old resentment. 'All things can be overcome,' he hissed. 'Your final task, *daemon*, is to show me how.'

*Malcador ushered Mortarion into a narrow chamber. The only furniture was a long, low table draped in black silk. When the doors were closed behind them, the room sank into a velvety darkness.*

*Malcador gestured with his index finger and a hololith emerged over the table, tiny points of light glinting like diamonds in the air. It was a tri-map of the galactic sector.*

*'It took us a long time to find a suitable location,' Malcador said, as the display gradually zoomed in. 'A very long time.'*

*He watched as Mortarion's shrewd, suspicious eyes took in every detail – the inbound ship trajectory markers and the manifest logs that flickered in scrolling lists.*

*'Then there were the negotiations with Mars. I thought they'd be pleased to help, but there are always difficulties to unravel. But the work, I am happy to say, is now advanced.'*

*The hololith continued to cycle in closer. A planet swam into focus, its surface wracked by tectonic faultlines.*

*'Where is this place?' asked Mortarion.*

*'You tell me you will refuse to serve if psychic potential remains in the Legions,' said Malcador, watching the view continue to expand. 'I believe you. It has been at the forefront of the Emperor's mind for many generations. There are complexities to overcome, but much of His labour has been expended on that very question. This is a part of it.'*

*Mortarion gazed at the planetscape before them. There were rainy images of vast Mechanicum void-engines hanging in low orbit, and terraforming crawlers being lifted down through a volatile atmosphere. Other projections shimmered into life – a huge complex, rising out of a desolate landscape of volcanic ash, radiating out from a massive central arena.*

*'Imagine it,' said Malcador. 'If a way could be found to remove the warp from the arteries of the Imperium. If the armies of humanity could travel without use*

*of the Navigator gene. If the psykers could be withdrawn from the Legions, steadily and with caution. We have already begun to prepare for this day. It will not be easy, for there are powerful forces ranged against us, both within and without.’ Malcador arrested the zoom, hovering over the half-built arena. It was a colossal space, a palace in its own right, carved out of the volcanic wound of another world.*

*‘This is Nikaea, Mortarion. It is a world with a destiny, and you will have a part to play there.’*

*Mortarion appeared to be caught between emotions – the perennial distrust, leavened by an undoubted curiosity.*

*‘What are you telling me?’ he asked, grudgingly.*

*‘That you are valued, Mortarion. You will be mighty, as strong as the bones of the earth, and a pillar of your Father’s vision.’ Malcador dared reach out to him, to rest a hand on the primarch’s colossal wrist. ‘Remain true to us, and He will give you this. You will speak there, to make your case before the eyes of the entire Imperium, to unburden yourself of the things that you now carry unaided. For now, we must perforce build an empire with forbidden tools. But a day will come when all these things are no longer necessary.’*

*Mortarion’s eyes remained fixed upon the arena. It was as if he were already imagining himself standing there.*

*For a long time, he said nothing. Then, slowly, his demeanour changed.*

*‘Tell me more,’ he said.*

‘You are a fool,’ said Lermonta, interested to see how far she could push the primarch. She guessed that it would not be very far – he was already teetering on the precipice. She had heard of what had been done to him on Barbarus, and did not wonder at the monster that had been produced. In some ways, it was a miracle that he still had any sanity left at all.

‘I have learned many things,’ wheezed Mortarion, gesturing to the arcane objects strewn across the floor. ‘Your kind can be warded against. You can be bound. You can be used, like blades, and then sent back to the hells that spawned you.’

Lermonta felt like laughing in his face. She had heard the same screeds from a thousand other mortals over the aeons, each one convinced that he alone had found a way to negotiate with the gods for no price at all.

‘Let me tell you of the empyrean,’ she said. ‘There are many great forces in the aether, and one of them has your name etched over his rusting throne. He is

waiting, though not for very much longer. It matters not how many trinkets you rattle or wave – he will not be denied. He has *claimed* you.’

‘None have claimed me!’ snarled Mortarion. ‘Even my Father could not claim me! Me, who was guilty of patricide long before the seeds of treachery were sown in the Warmaster’s heart. I have seen them all off – the tyrants, the witches, the xenos filth. Only *I* remain – pure of it all, free of corruption.’

‘You do not look pure to me.’

The primarch glowered. ‘I can compel you, daemon. I know the words, the numerical constants that bind you, dragging you from one form to another. I have studied these things. It is not witchery, but scientific reason.’

Lermenta felt real contempt then. The damaged figure before her had no true knowledge, just false hopes and gleanings. Her own master’s favourite, Magnus – ah, now there was one who *really* understood the mysteries of the empyrean, and even he had been deceived.

‘You wish to know the truth?’ she asked.

Mortarion came closer. ‘I *will* know the truth,’ he hissed.

‘I can show it to you.’

‘I destroyed a world to find you. Give me the knowledge.’

Lermenta smiled sweetly. ‘Very well.’

Exerting her power was trivially easy. Most of the wards and cantrips Mortarion had assembled to keep her in place were embarrassingly weak, and only one thing in the chamber had the power to really hurt her.

‘*This* is the truth.’

Her bonds shattered. Her human shell peeled away, sloughing from her like a bloody cloak and revealing a glossy, insectoid true-form. She launched herself at the primarch, her jaws gaping obscenely wide, her claws raking.

She took him by surprise. It was her only advantage and she pressed it, gouging at his grease-streaked armour and trying to gnaw at the flesh within.

He hammered a heavy fist down, trying to take her head off, but she evaded him with ease. She punched a claw into his midriff, biting deep, eliciting a roar of pain.

By the gods, she was *enjoying* this.

His physical strength was enormous, but that would not help him, for she was a creature of anti-physics, shackled only by laws that he feared to invoke. She wounded him again, goading him like some huge taurodon, driving his anger deeper towards mania.

‘Banish!’ he roared as she laughed at him. ‘Go back!’

His fists were flailing now, trying to latch on to her, to drag her down. She slipped through his fingers like an eel, bloodletting as she went, adding freshly scored lines to his already battered war-plate. The two of them rocked back towards the circle, and she felt the power of the wards overlap in the air, tearing at her flesh even as she ripped through them.

***'Do it!'*** she taunted, slapping him across the face. ***'Do what you came to do!'***

He resisted, trying to tear her apart with his hands, still relying on the immeasurable strength in his post-human musculature.

Lermenta spat at him, and the acidic spittle clogged in his eye.

That did it.

***'Barbaroi!'*** he roared, and the runes etched around the chamber flared into life. A hot wind suddenly howled from the centre of the circles, snatching at her revealed trueform and harrowing it. ***'Gharáz! Baghammon'echzhaza!'***

She couldn't help but scream, though the pain was mingled with a cold satisfaction at what she had provoked.

Mortarion kept up the chant, and now his fist-strikes, spiralling with warp-lightning, caused real damage. He smashed her back against the iron frame that had held her, and the blows drove into her carapaced stomach.

***'So it comes for you at last,'*** she hissed through bloodied fangs, grinning.

***'You could not resist.'***

The glorious stink of learned sorcery and hedge-magick was now pungent and inescapable. It *was* within him, and he was *using* it, in spite of every protestation.

'Never mock me,' Mortarion growled, spraying spittle from the vents of his rebreather. ***'Heijammeka! Never goad me!'***

Lermenta sagged back against the wall, feeling her soul pulled back into the empyrean. The primarch was crunching her to pieces now, hammering furiously with his fists, pouring out all of his fury onto her broken physical shell. It was hard not to be awed by it – she was the first to see a fragment of what he would eventually become.

Here, above the burning remains of Terathalion, was the *future* of the Death Lord being born.

And so as she died, and her quintessential matter sucked itself back into the maw of the aether, she managed a mock salute. ***'Hail, Master of the Plague!'*** she cried through the ruin of her jaws. ***'By the gods, you learn fast.'***

Then the mortal universe ripped away, and the warp came rushing over her like a tide.

Mortarion stood over Lermenta's crushed form, breathing heavily. He could smell the ichor upon his gauntlets. It wasn't blood, however it stained just as richly.

His hearts were beating as one, though the combat had sickened him. He wanted to vomit, to expel the curdling sickness that hung heavily in his stomach.

But here was something else there, too. He remembered Malcador's promises; the smooth words spoken, so it seemed, an age ago.

*A day will come when all these things are no longer necessary.*

The Sigillite had been wrong about that, either lying or mistaken. That day would never come now, and there was no point pretending otherwise. Perhaps all the old certainties would have to be overturned now, even the oldest, forged in the gas-clouds of the foundling world he had both loved and hated.

He remembered, too, the words that he had spoken.

*I will never serve in your Crusade while there are witches among us.*

For too long, he had been used by all sides – Nikaea had been and gone, and the promises made for it had all been hollow. The void now *seethed* with witchery, more virulent than ever, and he could feel its tendrils grasping for him.

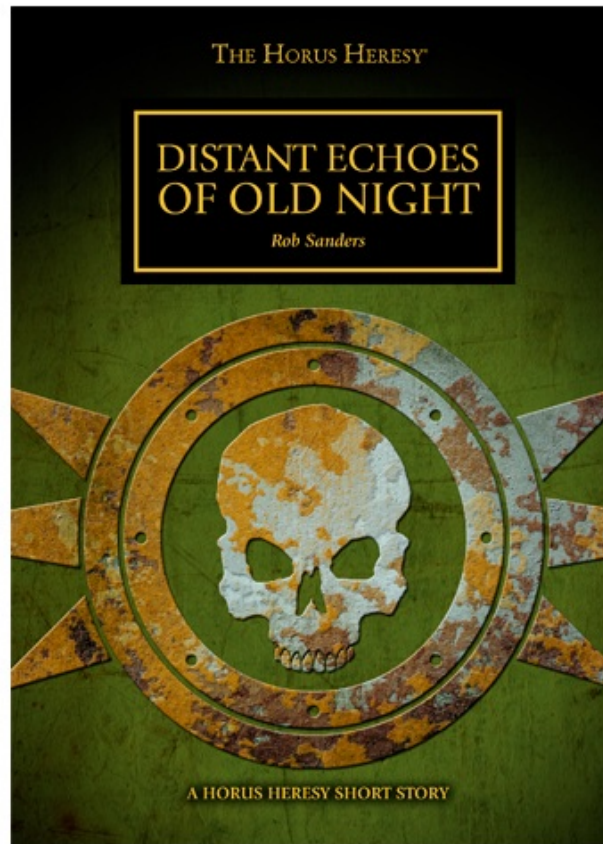
He looked down at the etched floor, at the wards and the symbols and the runes. He would have to learn more. He would have to master all the paths of ruin. He would, as perhaps he had known for a long time now, have to become the very thing that he had always hated.

'So be it,' he growled, retreating back to the centre of the arcane circle. 'It starts here.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Chris Wraight** is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Scars*, 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.

[Sent to wipe out the last survivors of a downed Imperial Fists vessel, Death Guard Chaplain Murnau unleashes one of his Legion's most deadly weapons – the Destroyers.](#)



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THE HORUS HERESY®

# BLACK OCULUS

*John French*

The corrupting darkness of the warp gifts  
the blessed few with a new sight

# BLACK OCULUS

**John French**

*'Beyond the edge of the sky there is always another horizon,  
Always a step further to take, always a new sun to see.'*

– from *Verses of the High Age of the Great Crusade* (Canto XIX)  
by Calus Quintus

I know you are there. I see you in the dark of your sleep. We have not met, and we will not meet yet. You cannot even hear me, but that does not matter. You don't need to hear to listen to the truth. So I am going to explain this to you. I am going to explain it because I can't show you. And you must understand, because if you don't then I will be alone with this gift. And that I cannot bear.

It began with three words spoken by the primarch.

*'We go in.'*

We.

Go.

In.

*'This is my order. Carry it out. Now.'*

I have to obey. It is my function. It is my life. I am the ship and its course. I go where I am ordered. The metal of the navigation throne was warm against my skin as I took my place. Sweat was running from my pores, pink with blood.

I was not alone. My cousins took their thrones beside me. They were slick and clammy to look at, like fish growing skins of slime under the sun. It took three of us, you see, three of us to pilot the *Iron Blood* as it threaded the warp's needle – one to watch, and the others to watch what the first could not watch. I was the

first. I was the Navigator Prime, and in the warp that great ship belonged to me as much as it did the Lord of Iron. So, as much as it was he that spoke the command, it was I who gave the ship to the black star.

I sat in my throne, and the shutters pulled back from the viewing portal.

I saw the sun.

*White sheet.*

*The sound. Glass edges ringing against each other.*

*Disc of night.*

I was shrinking in my throne, and the black sun was swelling. I could feel sound buzzing up my throat. The edges of my mundane eyes stung. Acid tears were upon my cheeks.

*We go in.*

I open my true sight.

The un-light of the sun touches the black of my third eye.

And I see.

We were made to see. I am a navigator of the House of Thal, and our house is but one of many. We are not human, though we may seem human. We are an offshoot, a creation – a deliberate reaction to necessity, if you like. Navigators can look into the warp and read its currents, and so guide ships over distances that would take millennia to cross while keeping to the laws of time and space. For this we are set apart, our genes protected, and our houses given privilege. The third eye in my skull is a portal between the madness of the warp, and human thought. My mind can look upon the impossible and not break.

I have looked upon horrors, and worse, and remained alive. I have remained myself.

That was, until my service to the IV Legion Astartes led me to the black star at the heart of a wound left by the birth of a god.

Yes, I say ‘god’.

What else should I call them? There is a limit to our consciousness, a limit to our understanding, a limit to our words. So I say ‘god’ knowing that it exists, that *they* exist, and still I know that the word cannot fully encompass what they are. They are the truth beyond the veil. They are the pattern in the warp that I could never see. They are what waits beyond the gateways.

And I saw them. I saw the heart of all.

The black star took us.

The *Iron Blood* slid into the throat of the darkness. Existence stretched, became a line drawn upon a black sheet. I heard the silence, and the silence

screamed. Light became solid. The solid became sculptures of light and reflection. Numbers and dimensions, tumbling down from reality into the pit. A single instant, thinner than thought and longer than time, stretching on, and on, and on, until it became a sound that had always been there but that no one could hear.

Until it became laughter. An eternity of laughter.

And then it ended, and I was screaming in my throne of steel, and a world of sick sensation and cruel edges tumbled over and over and over. There were alarms sounding, and the walls were bleeding red. The crew were running. The ship was spinning – *thoughts, stars* – without direction. The medicae's eyes shouted – *shouted in fear* – as they rushed me and held me down and I heard words – *say 'alchemical formulae'* – and the words were puffs of red vapour in my sight. And then I felt the first needle in my flesh.

*Red light. Machine screaming. Needles...*

...and then silence.

I dream now. I dream beneath the waves of sedatives in a pit at the bottom of a murdered world called Tallarn. The sons of Perturabo keep me here. They keep us all here, all those who went into the black star with their eyes open. They wake us to see for them, to guide them to the end of the circle they wish to complete.

They think they understand.

They cannot, and do not, and never will understand.

To understand you have to *see*.

I see the shadows beneath the world. I spent my whole life as a creature moving through an unreal realm with the eyes of a mortal. Now I am a creature moving through the mortal realm with the eyes of a god.

And I always *see*.

I see now. Even as I hang here, silent and asleep, I see. I see you, son of iron, hiding in the distant dark beyond layers of earth and stone. I see you and I tell you secrets that you will never hear. And this last secret is my gift to you, a gift from the heart of a black star burning at the point where the mundane and the eternal meet.

Seen from here – from the other side of the skin-thin membrane of reality – you are not strong or weak, noble or cruel.

You are not heroes.

You are blind.

And the universe sees you.

And it laughs.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**John French** has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile* and *Ahriman: Sorcerer*, plus short stories including 'The Dead Oracle' and 'Hand of Dust'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella 'Fateweaver', plus a number of short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

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THE HORUS HERESY®

# CHIRURGEON

*Nick Kyme*

Apothecary Fabius buries the disturbing truth  
of the III Legion's genetic taint

# CHIRURGEON

Nick Kyme

The air is cold and reeks of counterseptic. Very little light penetrates the dingy apothecarion, because I have set the lumens low to keep my subjects quiescent as I conduct my research. The gloom focuses what light I allow to permeate, and hones it surgically like a scalpel.

I have many blades, many drills and shears, hooks, saws and syringes. Each instrument is a vital tool in my surgeon's arsenal. Every limb of the armature I carry is as essential as my actual physical appendages. Not only do my tools cut flesh, they explore *truth*. Secrets reside in the flesh, secrets I mean to excise and then study. Only here in this apothecarion can I become who I truly am.

Within these cloistered rooms, I am detached from emotion and do not see the corpses that end up on my slab as anything except bodies. Allies, adversaries, they are the same when rendered down to their constituent parts by blades and chemicals. I *become* the armature. Its cuts are my cuts; its vials and philtres are a constituent part of my own physiology. As I conduct my work, I am not the transhuman being my brothers have come to know me as, I am apart – I *am* the surgeon.

Several of my patients reach me as corpses. Broken bodies, even dead and inert ones, can yield knowledge though. Others carry injuries from which there is no recovery, or at least, if it suits my purpose, I ensure they make no recovery. Fewer still I can actually save, and this flesh matter interests me the least.

Apothecary is my vocation, but it is not my passion.

My interest lies in what comprises the essence of a subject, for within the genetic code of each is the means to unlock godhood or some power akin to it: creation and amalgamation, expressed in patchwork renditions of man, reaching for the apogee of scientific achievement, the quest for the universal panacea of

life. Nothing less than perfection. I do not think of it as hubris, nor do I consider that I overreach. I know who I am and what I do.

I am Fabius, and I am a herald of evolution.

My most recent subject lies upon the medi-slab, alive but numbed from the neck down. The surgery I have planned is both invasive and extreme. I confess to a tremor of excitement at the prospect of it. A contagion riddles this bodily form lying beneath my surgeon's blades, and I mean to find it and cut it out.

'Begin audio log: A461/03:16.'

My voice is a dry-throated rasp as the analogue recorder begins to spool with dull half-clicks, and makes me realise how long it has been since I have spoken to another living soul.

That would be my father, when he was snared by his own game, enslaved... by what? Guilt? Perhaps.

I have left him with his brother, or the thing that looks very much like him, albeit with head now attached. It is diverting, but not fulfilling, and it does not answer the question which the body on my slab poses.

Is there a cure?

As yet, I have no answer and this vexes me. Left alone by Fulgrim, I can at least continue my research in relative peace.

The labororium is a separate annex from the apothecarion, one known only to me. It is a refuge for my mind as much as it is for my instruments and samples. Most precious are the amniotic caskets and the imperfect spawn within. I keep every failed experiment, knowing that I shall learn from the previous iteration and adapt. Every scrap of flesh has its uses. Nothing is ever wasted in striving for the perfect expression of mankind.

I lose time in this place, buried in research, obsessively experimenting. I know I have been down here for hours, possibly days already, but my preparation is exacting and comprehensive. I cannot stint, for this particular work is too important.

I begin cataloguing, as I always do.

Height, mass and any remarkable visual data are recorded. This is largely perfunctory and not crucial to my examination. It begins in earnest as I cut.

'I am beginning with a Y-shaped incision first medial to lateral and then along the midsagittal plane, anterior, proximal to jugular and lower abdomen.'

The surgeon reacts instantly. As the other metal limbs loiter with arachnid poise above the subject's gelid flesh, a single barbed appendage descends to make the first cut. It goes deep, all the way to the black carapace that resides

beneath the epidermis and dermis, and buried within the subcutaneous tissue. The blade describes the Y-shaped incision as directed, drawing little blood. As the first arm reacts, two more descend, each terminating in a pair of forceps that gently peel back the skin and flesh to expose the interface.

A glossy black membrane is revealed, fitted with circular transfusion points and neural sensors.

Extraction is difficult but not impossible.

As a section of black carapace is removed, a pict-screen situated above the medi-slab relates further data concerning the blood-slick rib-plate beneath it.

‘Visual examination of blood toxicity suggests a worsening of condition since previous examination. Access record V460/04:18.’

A brief interlude of static obscures the image as the recording cogitator searches for the requested file. A muted image capture is relayed that confirms my initial analysis.

I blink-click further instructions and my surgeon’s limbs do the rest, inserting a cannula into the pale flesh of the subject’s shoulder to extract a sample for more detailed examination later. As the recording of the current procedure resumes, I see that the fluid excised into the glass receptacle of the cannula is thin and distorted by minute, waxy deposits.

The hot, metallic reek of blood wars with the odour of counterseptic and I reduce the temperature further to maintain optimal environmental conditions.

‘Addendum to cursory visual examination: ossified growths infect rib-plate, suggesting entire skeletal structure is at risk from bone deformation. Potential ossmodula corruption.’

The mutations are small but visible without the need of microscopic examination. I am reminded of hooks or tiny claws jutting from the ribs.

A bone saw burrs noisily. I catch sight of it descending in my peripheral vision, the light refracting from its rapidly turning blade. Monomolecular steel shaves transhuman bone mass easily, the slivers captured by a trough and deposited in a lozenge-shaped canister for later analysis.

‘Initiating invasive exploration into bone strata with single sagittal cut across sternum.’

I employ clamps to hold the envelope of skin in place, before using a sternal saw to shear the central rib bone in half. It takes several minutes. Transhuman bone mass is tough and thick. I watch silently and patiently until it is done. A rancid, burning smell assails my nostrils. Wisps of powdered bone drift through the shafts of stark light illuminating the medi-slab like dust motes.

‘Secondary medial to lateral, anterior cuts to release bone plate from housing in order to expose organs and begin more detailed biological analysis.’

I document with my eyes, and my voice.

After breaking through the sternum, the saw continues and starts to cut two perfectly identical squares of bone from the subject’s rib-plate. Unlike human autopsy or invasive surgery, a rib-spreader is of little to no use in the case of transhuman anatomy. The ossified carapace is too hard and unyielding. An aperture must be opened in the solid cage of bone that encases a legionary’s vulnerable organs. The entire bone plate itself must be severed from the ribs that arc around to the spine and lifted off like a grisly hatch. I am all too familiar with this procedure and conduct it almost without conscious thought.

This takes time, and, as the whine of razor-edged teeth sundering bone fades to white noise, I decide to return to a much earlier analysis I conducted when first accepting the symbolic helix of my order.

‘Halt recording. Access archive.’

I blink-click the appropriate file from a screed of data relayed on a second pict-screen.

A few seconds lapse as the cogitator finds and plays the requested audio log.

I recognise my voice, and sneer at the youth and ignorance of it.

‘*Personal log. Fabius, III Legion, Apothecarion Cadre.*

‘*A terrible calamity has befallen us. We who, in our hubris, believed ourselves perfect have come undone by an imperfect system...*’

The words spur my mind towards the past and are soon usurped by memory.

*I cleansed the blade of my gladius on the scrap of cloak still hanging from my shoulder guards.*

*Another battle, another compliance. A society lies smashed beneath the booted heel of the Crusade. For Terra, for the Emperor and the promulgation of the Imperial Truth.*

*The bloodshed, the killing, faded slowly. Stalking through dust-choked ruins, ears ringing with the percussive bellow of bolters... Some of my kinsmen wanted nothing more than to relive this day over and over. I longed for something more.*

‘*A war well won, Fabius,*’ uttered a familiar voice behind me.

*I was standing on a ridge where a city once was, the shattered remains of a great statue of its potentate under my booted feet and serving as little more than a vantage point now.*

*From it, I saw tanks and the numerous geno-cohorts of the Imperial Army. I*

*saw discipline masters shouting orders, but their words were swallowed up by the death throes of a city breaking apart.*

*‘Aye, Lycaeon. Perhaps.’*

*As I cast my eye over the aftermath, I saw smoke enough to blot out the midday suns and fire sufficient to burn a world. In essence, that was precisely what we had done.*

*‘So melancholic, brother,’ said Lycaeon, jovial as he rapped my arm with a gauntleted fist.*

*He saved my life today. Again. Few wielded a sword as well as my vassal brother.*

*I sheathed my gladius, as Lycaeon raised his, trying to catch a ray of sun against its gilded blade.*

*He managed it through a brief break in the smoke cloud, and basked, as he always did, in glory.*

*‘You would think a warrior’s mood would lighten at the apex of victory.’*

*He turned to face me, slipping sword back into scabbard, and I met his gaze.*

*Lycaeon was a seventh generation Loculus, descended from the old houses of Terra before they were forced into supplication. Like me, his eyes were violet and his hair was a golden yellow like the sun he had strived so hard to capture upon the plasteel of his sword.*

*As warriors of the III Legion, known by some as His heralds, we wore power armour emblazoned with the thunderbolt and rayed sun.*

*Unlike me, Lycaeon had a yearning for command and displayed all the traits of the militaristic aristocracy to which he traced his lineage.*

*‘My demeanour would improve if our numbers could be swelled. Ever since Proxima—’*

*Lycaeon hissed, turning aside so I saw him only in profile.*

*‘Be still, Fabius. Exult in triumph, as I do.’ He gestured out beyond the ruins to the battlefield below us, where the geno-cohorts still cheered. ‘As they do.’*

*Lesser mortals, military levies and Terran hosts of ‘men’ bayed and hollered in the artificial basin we had made with our preliminary bombardment. I did not have the heart to tell Lycaeon the reason there were so many was because our ranks had thinned egregiously since the Selenite plot. The cultists hated the Emperor and his warriors. They saw tyranny, not unity, in the assimilation of the techno-barbarian tribes of Old Earth.*

*‘Remember Proxima,’ said Lycaeon, puffing up his chest with pride at the memory of fighting alongside the Emperor. ‘Such glories... We shall see their*

*like again, brother.'*

*'I do not see the glory in this, Lycaeon. I see only further attrition.'*

*Lycaeon scowled. 'You see Selenites at every turn. There are vaults on Terra that would see us renewed. By the Throne of Earth, we are proof of it.'*

*It was true. Several of the Legion were here only by dint of those reserves. Rapid implantation and deployment. It had felt hurried and desperate, though.*

*Lycaeon could clearly see I remained unconvinced. 'Speak to Legion Master Thrallas,' he said. 'Have him reassure you as he has me. More will come. Our ranks will be restored.'*

*He saluted, his right fist striking the left pectoral of his armour.*

*'I hope you are right,' I said, returning his salute, before descending into the ruins to scavenge from the dead.*

The teeth of the bone saw, shrieking hungrily, return me to my senses. As the whirring blade retreats, I am afforded a view of what lies beneath the subject's rib-plate. Hearts, lungs, kidney, liver, intestine, stomach, all is relayed on the pict-screen. A mild arrhythmia in the primary heart is disconcerting, as is the faint distemper manifest in the lungs. As I commit my observations eidetically, the audio continues. By now, I cannot distinguish recording from the voices of memory and the two begin to blend together.

*'...perversely, our glory is diminished by the war and the Legion's stark inability to weather attrition. In only a single solar year after Proxima, we have become an endangered species.*

*All efforts, including my own, to arrest the rapid entropy of the Legion have thus far been futile. My only meaningful deed is to continue compiling the lexicon of the infected. It is small consolation, and I confess that I now fear for the vaunted sons of Europa.'*

*I ended the recording at the same time as I saw a figure standing in silhouette at the entrance to my apothecarion.*

*It was a grand name for it. 'Field tent' would be more appropriate, but it was sufficient for my needs and, most importantly, allowed me to collect genetic material directly from the battlefield. I was a carrion crow, extracting what I needed from the dead. Precious gene-seed. For now, it was our only means of reinforcement.*

*'Enter then, if you're going to,' I said, by way of invitation.*

*Lycaeon stepped into the glow of a sodium lamp hanging overhead. I was not*

*surprised. It had been several months since we last saw one another, since my new posting.*

*He tapped the sodium lamp with the tip of his finger.*

*'You need more sun, brother,' he said, smiling in that way of his that suggested he was politely mocking you. 'Sallow-faced, gaunt... Doesn't suit you, Fabius.'*

*'It entirely suits me, as I know you agree. Though, perhaps you should be the Apothecary,' I muttered, returning to my research.*

*'Brother...' he said.*

*My eyes remained on my work.*

*'Fabius!'*

*I looked up then, and saw the hurt in his eyes.*

*He had one hand on the pommel of his gladius, whilst he held his helmet in the crook of the opposite arm. My old comrade frowned. It would be the last time I ever felt regret.*

*Falling to silence for a moment, Lycaeon wandered around in the shadows as if trying to find something to fix his attention upon.*

*After a short while, I put down my files.*

*'You need something?'*

*'A little courtesy from an old friend.' He gave the slight without looking at me. I bowed my head, apologised and walked around my desk to embrace him.*

*'I am a slave to my work, Lycaeon. I scarcely recognise my brothers anymore. They are names which I catalogue, bio-matter than must be processed. I confess, it has dehumanised me.'*

*Lycaeon clapped me on the shoulder, his smile warm but his eyes holding an unspoken question. He saw the corpses still regaled in their armour at the back of the tent and went over to them.*

*'Were you able to extract their gene-seed?'*

*Even Lycaeon, the blind optimist, now showed concern about our plight.*

*'Not intact,' I answered, and joined him by the supine bodies. 'Except for one.'*

*His mood lightened, I saw it in the glance he afforded me out of the corner of his eye, until I slowly shook my head.*

*'The blight?'*

*'The blight.'*

*This is why he had come. Lycaeon cared for our friendship, but he cared more for his continued existence.*

*Standing next to him, I saw how battered his armour was. I already knew how wearing the ongoing campaign had been for our Legion. Fewer and fewer*

*warriors of the III were taking to the field in each subsequent engagement. As a result, the impact of every casualty sustained was magnified.*

*'No one knows where it came from, nor how many of us are affected. Thus far, the majority of afflicted gene-seed comes from the immature reserve that had been held on Terra, but there have been other instances.'*

*Both he and I could have come from those reserve stocks, the tainted gene-seed. Records had been mysteriously lost.*

*Lycaeon's voice came out little louder than a whisper.*

*'What are its effects, Fabius?'*

*'Degenerative. Some strain of the viral contagion has found its way into III Legion gene-stocks. There is no telling how pervasive it is.'*

*He gestured to the files on my desk.*

*'A record of the infected?'*

*'Yes. I am close to finding a way to test for it.'*

*His mood brightened again. 'A cure?'*

*For the second time, I shook my head, and for the second time I felt the pain of disappointing my brother.*

*'Not yet.'*

*'But there is hope?'*

*'Barring the miraculous, our Legion's demise not only seems inexorable, it is also inevitable. Any other conclusion is unlikely, any hope remote at this point.'*

The remembered words of my former self are hardly more encouraging than the sight of the deteriorated organs I now catalogue.

*'Several lesions and tumors are present throughout all major organs. Primary heart, secondary heart, multi-lung, oolitic kidney are all affected to varying degrees. Extracting samples for biopsy from each...'*

A curette abrades a small matter sample from each organ, harvesting enough for later analysis, and, triggered by the continuing audio, I descend back into memory.

*'In an attempt to purge the Legion of the blight, as it has come to be known, all infected gene-seed is to be destroyed with immediate effect. This purging edict extends to all sworn brothers of the Legion who show any evidence of base level genetic malformation or taint.'*

*There were three subjects before me, all living, all denuded of their armour.*

*They were also shackled and guarded by armour-clad legionaries lurking at*

*the tent mouth.*

*I already knew their fate, but had decided on the courtesy of telling them to their faces.*

*'Gaius, Etiad, Vortexese,' I said, my voice distorted by the rebreather. 'You are impure. You have the blight.'*

*Etiad tried to rise, but swift gauntleted hands held him down. I closed my eyes as they were taken, my ears deaf to Etiad's tirade.*

*'I will need their bodies after you are finished with them,' I said to the guards, inscribing each of the blighted's names into the lexicon.*

*None answered me as they marched the condemned outside, but I knew I had been heard.*

*My instructions had been exact. No bolters, only blades. A mass-reactive pulps organs and shreds tissue. I needed their flesh intact if I was to fabricate a cure. A heart thrust, destroying the primary organ would suffice. Death was near-silent for these warriors, but on their knees like traitors.*

*The thought was an unpleasant one.*

*As keeper of the lexicon, I had effectively become an executioner. By scientific method, I determined whether or not a taint was present. I might not have wielded the gladius that had killed Gaius, Etiad and Vortexese, but I had effectively sanctioned their executions all the same.*

*I believed further study was necessary to understand the nature of the taint. As such, I sequestered several euthanised battle-brothers for testing and experimentation. I reasoned that if I could somehow unlock the gene-taint that brought about the blight, I might yet be able to reverse its effects. Of course, with the gene-stocks currently undergoing total purgation, any discovery at this point might be moot, but I was content to settle for a correct diagnosis and effective theoretical treatment.*

*The booted footfalls of the returning guards announce another intake of flesh-matter.*

*I did not look up as they brought the first of the bodies.*

*'Leave it there,' I said, gesturing to the empty slabs.*

*I only raised my eyes after the warriors had left. One hawked and spat as he did so. I ignored it.*

*I looked into the eyes of Etiad instead, but could find no compassion or guilt as his dead man's glare. Instead, I set down my auto-quill and went to a bank of instruments secured in a rack by the bodies.*

*Cutters, saws, drills, I had an extensive array of tools at my disposal but it was*

*a device of my own design that caught my eye.*

*An armature, it had four mechanical, multi-jointed limbs that extended from its power battery. I wore it like a carapace shell upon my back, the arms extended over my shoulders and slaved to auto-mnemonic responses much like my armour.*

*It was heavy, but tolerable against my transhuman frame. The burden was worth the effort, for my efficacy as a surgeon increased exponentially with its usage.*

*'Let us see then,' I uttered to the corpse of Etiad, the limbs clicking and chirruping as if sentient, 'what lies under your flesh.'*

I flit between past and present as the audio dredges memory but allows resurface between the conclusion of each session and the segue into the next.

For now, I am back aboard the ship's apothecarion, a partially exposed system of organs awaiting my attention.

Delving deeper into the subject's body, I extract sample material from the biscopea, haemastamen, larraman's organ and preomnor. Minor growths and abnormalities are present in each. A tremor of consternation wrinkles my sweating brow. I had hoped for better results.

In the present circumstances, I cannot analyse omophagea, oculobe, lyman's ear, sus-an membrane, catalepsean node, neuroglottis or betcher's gland.

I *am* able to review the potential nexus of this taint, however, the fully matured progenoid embedded within the subject's chest cavity.

It too bears signs of mutation, a slow degrading of tissue and form, one I am sadly all too familiar with. The audio log almost rolls over me now as I try to appreciate the magnitude of what is before me on the medi-slab.

This is not a fallen warrior that I minister to, it is a diseased one, a remnant that should have died centuries ago but endured through science and ingenuity. It is, by far, my most important subject.

*'Tissue samples from a random cross section of legionaries have revealed an end to the taint, though our numbers are so few as to be regarded as almost extinct. In order for genetic cataloging to be considered comprehensive, I have added my own samples to the data. Initial analysis is not reassuring. Further study is needed. If I am to maintain my research, I must obfuscate my personal results to avoid purgation.'*

I remember well what I did, the bonds of brotherhood I broke on account of my desire and cold, analytical mind.

*Lycaeon sat before me. He was stripped of his armour, his glare murderous. I was trying to ignore the bond I was about to break, my hand upon the lexicon where his name was already written.*

*'What is your verdict then, brother?' he asked, and I saw our friendship die in his eyes.*

*Soon it wouldn't matter. In any case, friendship had become an outmoded concept when levied against the value of my research.*

*The chirurgeon clicked and whirred behind me. I seldom removed it anymore and increasingly sought ways in which I could bond more inextricably with the device.*

*'Lycaeon,' I said, 'you are impure. You have—'*

*Lycaeon stood, giving me the old Legion salute. I did not return the gesture, recognising the scorn in it, but no longer the meaning or purpose. He then about-faced to his executioners without another word.*

*I watched him leave, a slight nerve tremor below my right eye, before returning to my research.*

*As an afterthought, I called to the departing guards.*

*'I will need his body. Return it once you are done.'*

The chirurgeon excises the last tissue samples for biopsy and my analysis is complete. Without needing to see the results, I estimate the prognosis to be bleak. Degeneration of biological matter in every organ. Projected life expectancy less than a solar year.

The arachnid limbs hover, awaiting further instruction.

I give it bitterly.

'Stitch me up.'

Via a series of cables, I have linked the armature to my neural implants. It affords me total control, whilst remaining inured to the pain of the operation through strong anaesthetic.

That said, the surgery has been long and I can feel the smallest pinpricks of sensation flaring across my body.

Fortunately, the armature works quickly. I smell fusing bone and then the bio-adhesive used to reassemble my black carapace. Both will heal in time, or they would if I had any time left or if my regenerative capabilities were not

compromised.

It takes several hours, and by the time it is done, I am clenching my teeth and near-screaming in agony.

‘All for naught,’ I rasp, rising to a sitting position.

As I swing my legs over the edge of the medi-slab, I hear the last few seconds of the audio log play to a conclusion.

*‘The Crusade has brought us to Chemos and a reunion with our genetic forebear, Fulgrim. Within our primarch resides the means for renewed synthesis of III Legion gene-seed. On Chemos, there are hardy subjects worthy of implantation. Salvation now seems likely, but my own plight, whilst successfully hidden and at the stage of minor degeneration is, based on all empirical evidence, unlikely to be averted. I continue to—’*

I shut it down, tiring of it and the memories the sound of my younger self unearthed.

Slipping down off the medi-slab, I feel the pain of my self-inflicted surgeries anew and grimace as I pad along the cold apothecarion floor to the mirror.

I use it for full length visual examination. The surface is a dull slab until activated, like a blank slate of grey wall. As I blink-click, it reflects my naked form back at me.

Heavy stitching crosshatches my skin, which is thin and sallow. My face looks worst, skeletal and drawn like the corpses I dissect. My eyes have become pinched, surrounded by chasms of dark skin. Weary, I lean hard against the mirror’s frame and run a trembling hand through my hair. A clump comes back, threaded around my fingers.

An elixir stands ready. It will restore a measure of my vitality, and keep my condition hidden from others.

‘Lycaeon,’ I utter to the darkness, ‘your sacrifice shall not be for nothing.’

No answer returns, save for the echo of my own enfeebled voice.

I have to find another way, I determine. I consider the plight of my father and the thing that shares his body.

Where science has failed, I must turn to the arcane for answers.

I reach for the elixir, a distilled concoction of restorative enzymes and proteins rendered from transhuman donors. Their deaths serve a purpose. My need is greater, my work more important.

As I inject the draught into my bloodstream, I revel in its sudden potency.

Every nerve ending screams with dagger-edged pain, synapses ignite like solar flares in my brain. I stagger, the effects almost overwhelming. It soon subsides, leaving me vital, renewed. Cognition, physical strength, endurance, stamina and haptic acuity are all enhanced. It is a falsehood, though. A balm for an untreatable illness that will outstrip the measures of retardation I have employed.

Knowing the elixir will not last and soon not work at all, I decide that I must speak to the daemon. That will also mean confessing to my father. I will not do so like this, however.

‘My armour,’ I utter to the shadows.

A shuffling form responds, slow, yet still animate and dutiful.

A purple greave is proffered that matches the colour of the automaton’s eyes. My retainer is another secret from the Legion. His armour is older by comparison, the thunder bolt iconography worn and faded. A blade slit around the heart still lingers in the battleplate, a wound that cannot heal. The stitching around his neck and face is the mirror of my own. So too is his physiognomy.

His salutes, right fist striking left pectoral. It is awkward, but still dutiful.

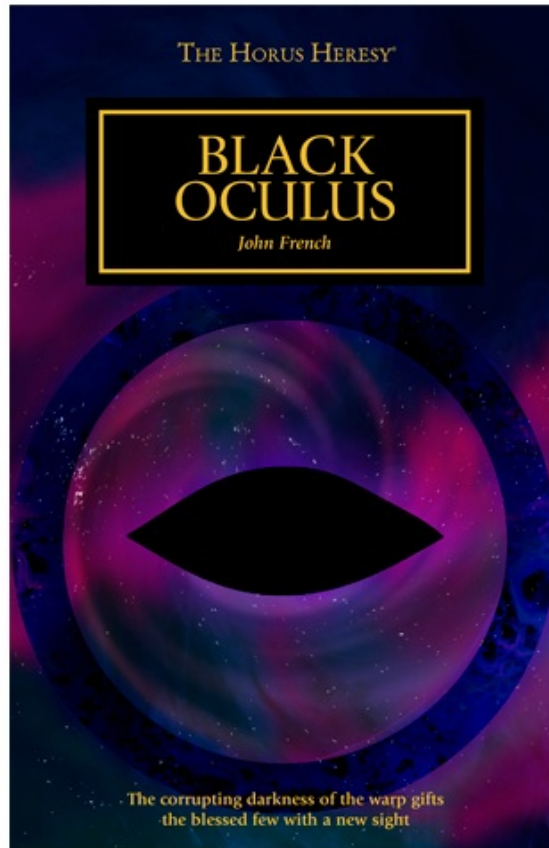
I do not reciprocate.

‘Thank you, Lycaeon,’ I say to my vassal brother, feeling better already.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nick Kyme** is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Vulkan Lives*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio drama *Censure*. His novella 'Feat of Iron' was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. For the Warhammer 40,000 universe, Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damn*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel *The Great Betrayal* for the War of Vengeance series. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

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THE HORUS HERESY®

# TWISTED

*Guy Haley*

Maloghurst, equerry to the Warmaster, uncovers a  
dark conspiracy on board the *Vengeful Spirit*

# TWISTED

Guy Haley

The *Vengeful Spirit* had changed. Horus had changed. But the tedious intricacies of running a warfleet had not. Warfare was warfare, whether conducted at the behest of the Council of Terra or the urging of howling gods. It always came down to the numbers.

The fifty-eighth petitioner to the Warmaster that day was a short logistician, principally composed of fat and fear. He blinked and mumbled his way through his request, eyes sliding every second – if not more often – to the pair of Justaerin Terminators flanking the basalt throne at the heart of Lupercal's Court.

No one sat upon the throne. It was the throne of the primarch, and none but he might occupy it.

Horus was absent. The Warmaster had no time for petty concerns.

Maloghurst, the equerry of the Warmaster, sat in judgment in his stead on a stool by the throne's dais. Were it not for his own great personal presence, he might have looked ridiculous. The throne was sized for a demigod, the dais tall, the court that surrounded it dizzyingly high and ornate. Battle honours stirred in ventilation draughts. Stars glared mercilessly from the void through armourglass ports. Blue shadows jealously guarded the statues and weapons set into the walls.

Horus was not there, but his presence steeped the court.

Maloghurst was insignificant in comparison – worse, he was far from the most perfect of Horus's sons. His back was perpetually slanted, a cane forever close to hand – he was a fallen angel whose imperfections were made all the more glaring in his master's shadow.

His back was broken, but his intellect was not. Twisted in mind as well as body. Maloghurst's name had become a byword for fear.

The fat man's lips stumbled to a stop.

'In three days' time, we are due to engage in the assault on Lamrys,' said Maloghurst, 'and you choose *now* to bring this trivial matter to my attention?' His voice growled threateningly from behind his respirator. He wore his armour and his mouthpiece constantly, more or less. His battleplate had become a crutch.

Still, the logistician blanched.

'I am sorry, my lord, but the correct scheduling of fuel distribution prior to the attack is of great importance. It must be performed before we approach the mid-system line. I cannot fulfil my role if—'

Maloghurst cut him off by rapping his cane hard against the marble floor. The crack echoed and multiplied from the walls.

'All of us are burdened. Do you choose to consider your burden to be greater than that of the Warmaster?'

'No, my lord!'

'This is Lupercal's Court.' Maloghurst pointed to a wide arch. 'Through there the Warmaster has his staterooms. I am the Warmaster's equerry. Here you are but one step from the ear of our Lord Horus himself. You should be mindful of what you choose to speak into it.'

'My lord, forgive me. I will make greater efforts. I require only a little aid.' The fat man gulped. His attention had latched itself fully upon the Justaerin.

Maloghurst grasped the skull atop his cane. 'Do not look to them. I could kill you myself without difficulty.'

He pushed his weight down upon the slender stick of ebony and heaved himself to his feet, and limped from his seat to the logistician. The fat man threw himself down on his hands and knees, but Maloghurst bent low. Grabbing a loose handful of hair and augmetic interface tendrils, he hauled the adept into the air, transhuman muscles bearing the weight easily, although his bones protested at the load. The logistician gaped, his mouth opening and closing moistly as he desperately tried not to scream. Tears welled from screwed-tight eyes to bead his cheeks.

Maloghurst stared him full in the face. 'What would the Warmaster do, should he find himself in such a situation?'

The man smelled sour. Rank sweat and desperation mingled unwholesomely. Maloghurst suspected he would not answer for fear that the wrong response would end his life. He was correct in that assumption.

But the logistician was more clever than he seemed.

'The Warmaster, in any situation, would find a way of achieving his desired

result,' he gasped.

Maloghurst admired the man's calmness in the face of death. That, more than his answer, saved his life.

'Yes! Whether that be toppling the lying Emperor or delivering the right amount of supplies to four insignificant cruiser squadrons!' He released the man. 'Get out. Do your duty without complaint. If I see you here again, I will tear your heart from your chest.'

Maloghurst turned and went back to the stool by the throne. Sparks of pain tickled his fused spine and pelvis. He gritted his teeth as he retook his seat.

Pain had been one of two constants in Maloghurst's life for some time. The other was responsibility.

An unwelcome third had recently made itself known to him.

*Vulnerability.*

He was vulnerable, more so with each passing day. He had always been respected, but he had never been well liked. There was a feral mood upon the Legion of late. Old practices long suppressed now resurfaced – the savage face of Cthonia revealed as the facade of calm imposed by the Emperor was abraded by war. Rivalries had become more pronounced, more violent.

His closeness to Horus provoked jealousy. In a society of warriors, his attention to more cerebral matters marked him out for derision.

And so the distance between himself and his brothers yawned wider on the one hand. No great matter, were it not that on the other the gulf between Horus and himself also grew. No human or transhuman could ever hope to knowingly inveigle themselves with a primarch, but for two hundred years their friendship had at least bridged the fundamental gap between them.

Recently, Horus had grown far beyond mortal concerns. Ever since Molech.

None would challenge Horus's authority, but they would dare to challenge Maloghurst for the primarch's favour and the chance to influence the Warmaster. There was a sense of exposure growing in him that he had never felt before. Maloghurst had become a target.

But danger would not keep him from his duty.

'Next,' he said, with a heavy breath.

There were no announcements. No pomp. Another mortal was sent in from the antechamber where the petitioners waited without ceremony.

Rakshel, envoy for the Davinites, had taken up residence aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*. He padded softly along the aisle leading to the throne, bowing deeply ten metres from Maloghurst.

The equerry's expression stiffened. The Davinites' star was long fallen.

Before the half-man could begin his usual long, obsequious litany of praise, Maloghurst spoke.

'I will save us some time. If your request is the same as the last four occasions you have come before me, Rakshel, then the answer is still no.'

Rakshel affected a look of understanding. On his furred, broad face it was comical. Once, Maloghurst had felt disdain for the Davinites' degenerate forms. But since Horus declared his independence, he had seen far grosser deviations, and had learned that behind the ugly mask was often hidden power.

Now, he despised the Davinites mainly for their weakness. They were craven, scheming, always whispering to those stronger than themselves, and on the lookout for some advantage. In Erebus they had found a kindred soul.

'That is to be expected,' Rakshel slurred. 'I am bound to tell you once again of the priesthood's sense of sorrowful rejection.'

'Your people tutored the wretch Erebus,' said Maloghurst coolly. 'You are lucky to be alive.'

'We healed the Warmaster. We guided him to the truth that the false Emperor hid from all of you. Do not dismiss us. You will appreciate the import I attach to this issue, that I come here almost certain to be greeted with rejection. There are powers we are aware of – powers we taught to Erebus. We can share them with the Warmaster. We have great influence with the lords of creation.'

Maloghurst replied tersely. 'Powers? Influence?' He scoffed. 'The Warmaster is far beyond your petty sorceries.'

'Powers, yes. Influence, yes. Some powers are malignant. Some influences can be bent to ill ends. The warp dances in agitation. Great forces are moving.'

'None is greater than mighty Lupercal.'

'No matter how mighty one is, there is always someone mightier,' countered Rakshel. 'Let us help guard our master against these powers. Allow us our audience with Horus. Neither you nor he will regret it.'

Maloghurst leaned forward, lacing the fingers of both hands over the head of his cane. 'Is that a threat, Rakshel? So many groups outside the Legion jockey for the primarch's attention. Do not become an irritant to the Warmaster. Do not become a problem for me. Go away.'

Rakshel obeyed without demur. He bowed. 'You do your duty, I do mine. I am sorry that we remain at an impasse.'

'Leave.'

The Davinite bowed again and departed.

‘Seal the doors,’ said Maloghurst to the Justaerin. ‘That is enough for today. Tell the rest to consider their petitions carefully before they come back tomorrow. Perhaps a few executions will encourage them to keep their pathetic problems to themselves.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ growled the Justaerin. The warrior did nothing to hide his disdain. Maloghurst was powerful, but not in a way that Falkus Kibre’s men appreciated.

The equerry was no longer a fighter, and the newest recruits of the Legion did not even remember the days when he had been. The Sons of Horus had little respect for politics. They had only a little more for commanders who could not take to the field.

Maloghurst headed for the doors that led to the command deck, avoiding the petitioners in the antechamber. Away from his stool, no light but that of the stars illuminated him. Scraped clean of Erebus’s influence, the court appeared a more wholesome place, more fitting to a leader of Horus’s stature.

The impression was a misleading one. The shadows of the *Vengeful Spirit* harboured hidden things. The animus of the place was anything but clean. The whispers were at their worst in the quiet spaces. Ever since Davin they had been there, hiding, out of the way. Now they plagued the whole ship. Recently, Maloghurst had heard them even in Horus’s sanctum. Despite his growing mastery of the primal mysteries, Maloghurst hurried through the court, impatiently awaiting the opening of doors to the hubbub of the bridge.

*Maloghurst... Twisted...*

He could not stop himself from looking over his shoulder. There was nothing he could see, of course, but he sensed something. He was quite sure of that. An emotion took his hearts.

Not fear – never that – but unease, certainly.

He muttered a cantrip he had torn from a dying sorcerer. The sense of presence diminished slightly in response.

Light and noise dispelled the whispering entirely. Maloghurst stepped through, and walked gladly among the command crew. The tapping of his skull-topped cane heralded his presence. Officers, thralls and legionaries alike stood to attention as he passed their stations.

He welcomed the vox-chatter, the orders, the endless rounds of reports, the mindless drone of servitors. Human bodies warmed the air. It smelled of people, of sweat and soap and the dusty heat vented by machines. The machine-mind of the *Vengeful Spirit* belonged still to the mundane realm, even if its soul did not.

*Maloghurst...*

He gritted his teeth behind his breathing mask. The voice had come to him six weeks ago. Always just behind his left shoulder. He fixed his face into an imperious glare. Let none know of his disquiet. A display of weakness could doom him.

Nevertheless, he walked more quickly.

The next day, Maloghurst took the Avenue of Glory and Lament from his quarters in the command spires. His bodyguard thumped after him, towering over the serfs that swarmed the way. Corridor-trains whirred past, taking personnel from one end of the massive vessel to the other. The avenue exhibited little sign of the changes brought on by the war. All was bustle and hurried efficiency, as it always had been.

The distance between the spires and the door he sought was short, but already the walk troubled him, his mis-set bones grinding against one another. He locked his pain in a grimace hidden behind his respirator, keeping it from his eyes.

Most people got quickly out of his way, whether they were Space Marines or thralls. His disability meant that he passed slowly along the great avenue of the ship, but he did so unimpeded.

Irritation gnawed at him. Dealing with the day to day management of the fleet was tedious. He longed for the next battle. More and more Horus favoured directing the war from the front line, leaving Maloghurst in command of the flagship. But the battles were always disappointingly brief. A week, maybe two, and another world burned.

No. He was honoured, he chided himself. Who else could the Warmaster trust? Imperial sympathisers were still to be found within the ranks of the old 63rd Expedition. There were none so astute as he. Anyone else given his role would fail to spot those who were less than loyal. He appraised those who passed him. Few were bold enough to look him in the eye – most hurried by, intent on their own business. A handful were less afraid. Ranking officers and his legionary brothers saluted him with varying enthusiasm.

*Brothers.* How little that word meant to him now. Save for Horus, he was alone.

Better that way, perhaps. A lone predator, aware of its surroundings, makes fewer errors.

He heard the whispers underneath the clamour of the avenue. Psychic overspill, the imprints of the dead and betrayed, and increasingly the honeyed

words of the denizens of the warp. Their endless temptations terrified the menials and the serfs. The fervour of many for their new creed was wavering. When a menial succumbed to the whispered promises and turned upon his comrades, it was invariably to the sound of wicked laughter.

They were always there. At the edge of hearing, accompanied often by a smell like warm blood and spoiled milk so strong that it coated the back of the throat.

He had a flash of himself raging.

*Isn't it glorious?*

He saw himself stripped to the waist, his hands covered in the blood of others.

*Isn't it sublime?*

He saw himself pull his bolt pistol and place it against the eye lens of the Justaerin flanking him.

*Welcome me in, Twisted One. Be as Tormaggedon. Known true power. You made him. You see the power of the Luperci like none other. Take it for yourself.*

Maloghurst pushed the unwelcome image away. He found himself staring a gunnery rating in the face. Over his high, armoured collar, his face was an unhealthy pallor. The whites of his eyes were a watery pink with black rings under them. The holy octed tattooed upon his cheek had become livid, raised like a scar.

Change was all about them, fuelled by the dark majesty of Horus.

*Why should you not change too?* asked the voice.

Not yet, thought Maloghurst. Not yet.

If he said that he had not considered taking the path of the Luperci himself, it would be a lie. So much power there, in that twining of souls. But the costs were too high for him to contemplate paying.

He was a puppeteer, not a puppet.

They descended a wide spiral stair languishing under a hellish heat and a crushing sense of claustrophobia. A hollow shaft at the centre stretched away to black infinity up and down, the steps wrapped round it as tightly as a coil of steely DNA. Mechanical sighs wheezed from the depths on hot winds, disembodied machine sounds pushed before them. The faint strains of songs of devotion were split by a scream.

*And the voices...* Every sound here carried a parasitic whisper.

Silence fell.

In the deep, faint and running footsteps pattered. They stopped. A door seal hissed. Then nothing. The whispers died. The sighing of the ship alone

remained. Maloghurst was left with the sound of his breath wheezing into his respirator, his own unsteady steps, the whine of power armour grumbling at his unnatural gait, the steady clang of the Justaerin's feet following behind him.

They reached their destination. A metallic groan fled up the shaft as Maloghurst unlocked the door with his key wand.

A round room, the centre occupied by pipes as profuse as those of a devotional organ. Twenty individual cell-beds were set into the wall. A door to one side led off to crude facilities: a mess and latrine block.

Those who lived there were expecting them. They were gathered before the door, their pale grey uniforms grubby and torn. For some time the Sons of Horus had added fetishes to their armour, and Maloghurst saw them displayed by the thralls more and more in imitation. A medicine pouch, a crude octed scratched into a piece of scrap and worn as a medallion. Symbols painted in dark fluids on dirty cloth. Once the *Vengeful Spirit* had been a clean ship. They had lost some things in choosing the path that had always been inevitable.

Power always had a cost. Maloghurst was wise to that.

The thralls were couriers. They were among the very lowest, but their function was vital. In the tumult of battle, vox-systems failed. Data squirts might not carry, the cogitator units burned out by electromagnetic surges. A runner with a message was slower, but more reliable. A valuable back-up. A few carried data-sockets so that they might inload their messages to surgically isolated parts of their brains. They knew without knowing.

This issue Maloghurst had chosen to deal with himself. It would be useful edification for others. They were lowly, yes, but the men who carried the Warmaster's word must know that his eye was always upon them. Maloghurst must remind them how close they were to Lupercal. They would grovel when they remembered the honour it did them.

One of their number was in chains, on his knees and heavily bruised. His fellows and captors knelt beside him as the legionaries entered their cramped world. But there was a man at the fore of the group who did not kneel. His eyes were bright and hard in sockets purpled by lack of sleep.

He must be the ringleader, the accuser. Maloghurst wondered what calculation he had made to call directly upon the ship's lords. Attracting the attention of the Legion could have gone badly for him. It still might. The hard-eyed man dropped his eyes and pointed to his captive wordlessly.

'You defy the Warmaster,' Maloghurst said to the man in chains.

The captive would not look at him, but he did speak. 'Not defiance, a request.

We do not have enough water. We are dying.’ Upon the man’s shoulders were rank stripes. A subordinary indentured officer. This must be his command.

Maloghurst knew the story. The fleet pushed on and on with little pause, Terra firmly in its sights. There was no time for resupply, no time for repair. Many parts of the ship were left without basic requirements. The couriers’ leader intended to alleviate their suffering; perhaps he had been there, waiting outside Lupercal’s Court yesterday when Maloghurst had declared the audiences at an end. His men, panicked, had thrown themselves upon the Legion’s mercy. They would rather risk the slow death of thirst than anger their masters. Too bad for him.

Behind his respirator, Maloghurst smiled. True power was invested by fear. Here it was, as plain as the Emperor’s lies. Had the man come to him, it might have been different. But the couriers had acted, and Maloghurst was in no mood for mercy.

Maloghurst pulled out his sacred dagger and swept it across the man’s throat. Let it feed – it had not been blooded for some while. Bright blood spread a crimson fan across the decking.

‘Your concern is heard. There is one less of you. The rest may drink more deeply.’

A sinuous laugh twisted on the air. Maloghurst turned swiftly to its source. A great shape stood at the farthest left of the couriers, a column composed of dark smoke and a palpable malevolence.

***Maloghurst***, it said. ***Become. Open the way.***

The shape had no visible sensory organs, but it surely stared back at Maloghurst, for he could feel it scrying his very soul. A hand formed momentarily in the smoke. A long finger traced the jaw of a nearby courier. He shuddered, but the man’s dread of the legionaries stopped him from looking up.

A hand touched his elbow. Maloghurst twitched.

‘My lord?’

His gaze fell to the deck. The blood had gone, as though greedily absorbed by the ship itself.

The subordinary courier’s men kept their eyes fixed upon the decking. Maloghurst searched the limits of the chamber, but the shadow was nowhere to be found.

‘My *lord*,’ said the Justaerin. Criticism of Maloghurst’s lack of control was implicit in his tone.

‘We are done here,’ he muttered. His blade slid back into its sheath with a

click, and he pointed to the hard-eyed man. ‘You. You are now in charge of this group.’

‘Aye, my lord,’ the man whispered.

He left the couriers to dispose of their erstwhile commander. The urge to look over his shoulder as he left was almost impossible to defy, but defy it he did.

A Space Marine was not intended to dream in the manner of mortals. The dreams of normal men were a clumsy way of managing memories and learning. A legionary had no need to manage his memory, for his was as ordered as a well-kept library. His dreams therefore lacked the allegorical nature of mortal dreams, tending to the quotidian: the mastering of new skills, sped up by carefully designed hypnotic shaping.

But that night, Maloghurst dreamed as mortals dream.

*He was in the abode of fire, and it burned him. The Warmaster stood in impossible company. A sorcerer in an azure parody of the Crimson King’s garb stood to one side. Fulgrim was behind his brother, unchanged from his original form, while sundry other degenerates and warp-beasts clamoured all around. Erebus had returned to them, though his face was now a mask of grim spite. A holographic orb of Terra hung in the air in front of Horus.*

*Maloghurst was there, too. He saw himself from outside, as if he viewed the scene through another’s eyes. How old and broken he looked, his ruined face hidden behind his ever-present respirator. The eyes gleamed with a touch of madness. This other Maloghurst wore a patchwork tabard of flayed human skin over his armour.*

*Everything was wrong. And the fire, burning hot, pressed around on all sides. Only he, the observing Maloghurst, appeared aware of it. His doppelganger – or was it the true Maloghurst, and he was some other? – appeared entirely ignorant of the heat.*

*The others continued their debate unconcerned. Horus laid out his plans for the conquest of Terra. His subordinates, aides and adjutants gave their opinions. Their words were short and to the point. Their comments were elaborations, details. None would gainsay the Warmaster’s flawless strategy. None could.*

*Horus looked directly at Maloghurst-the-observer. His face was majestic, alive with fierce intelligence and the grand power of the warp.*

*‘Maloghurst! You have joined us.’ He addressed him as though it were perfectly normal that there were two embodiments of his equerry in attendance.*

*‘My lord...’ said Maloghurst. Confusion muddled his thoughts. A dream. He*

*clung to the certainty of that as hard as he could. 'I am sorry.'*

*His double chattered an idiot chant in a forgotten language. His bloodshot eyes rolled back into his head. Black liquid ran from the edges of his respirator.*

*Over Horus's shoulder, the presence loomed.*

*This was no pillar of smoke, but Maloghurst knew it for the thing he had seen in the couriers' barracks. Long, multiple-jointed fingers stroked the fur of Horus's cloak. It crooned a song fit for the cradles of dead infants. Maloghurst stepped back.*

*The Warmaster fixed his full attention on him. The weight of it was unbearable.*

*'Is there something wrong, Mal?'*

*'My lord, I...'*

*The creature stared at him. The form of it was oily black, a liquid born of congealed smoke. A hundred eyes looked at him unblinkingly from a long, equine face. Arms that hinted at the nightmares of insects slid over each other in countless profusion.*

*Horus laid his hand upon Maloghurst's shoulder. 'This is not befitting of my equerry.'*

*'No, lord.'*

*'This war taxes us all, Mal.' Horus's face was neutral, the blaze of otherworldly power that possessed him burning behind unreadable eyes. He looked at Maloghurst's cane. 'Perhaps you should rest.'*

*'I am fine, my lord,' said Maloghurst. He stood taller in defiance of his injuries. His gaze kept sliding from Horus's face to the warp-horror standing behind him. Why did Lupercal not see it? An image of the fat logistician was projected into his mind, glancing fearfully at the Justaerin. He gasped at the invasion.*

*'And I say you are not fine. Stand down, equerry. Go to the Apothecaries, and have yourself examined. Then return to your quarters. Rest.'*

*'My lord, I am fit for my duties,' Maloghurst protested. 'When have I ever failed you?'*

*Horus squeezed Maloghurst's shoulder, the claws of his talon lightly scraping against the equerry's war-plate.*

*'Never, my friend. But then nothing fails, until the time that it does. Your time approaches.'*

*'My lord—'*

*'Do as I command!' said Horus. The change in his expression afforded*

*Maloghurst a glimpse of what lurked behind his eyes. He took a faltering step backwards.*

*The daemon laughed silkily. It ran long, black arms around Horus's neck in a loving embrace.*

*Maloghurst looked from face to face around the gathering. Indifference, or hatred in places, greeted him. He retreated before it.*

*He ran, the only gait his body would allow him was a ridiculous gallop. The whine of his power amour as it attempted to match and amplify this movement sounded like mocking laughter.*

*He found himself in a corridor that he could not possibly reach from Lupercal's Court. Screaming faces formed in metal that had become as fluid as boiling water. The corridor convulsed, warping out of shape entirely. Maloghurst's crippled legs gave way under him and he fell. There was no floor to halt him. He plummeted into a hell of unnatural colours. A swirl of dark threads gathered into an oily scum atop the shifting ocean.*

*From this, the daemon rose, sucking the blackness into itself. The oil was fed by a thousand dark veins threading the warp, and so reduced only slowly.*

*By the time the daemon had absorbed all of the darkness, it was as big as a Battle Titan. By some trick it was suddenly below Maloghurst.*

***Come to me, Maloghurst! Be mine... Let us be one...***

*Maloghurst plummeted helplessly into its yawning maw.*

He sat bolt upright on his pallet, forgetting the ruin of his body for a moment. The motion sent a jag of pain up his nerves that emerged from his mouth as a harsh grunt. Sweat poured off his skin. His muscles and scars were picked out by curves of dim light issued by the door lock lumen. He looked at his arm, and saw it as the daemon's oily limb. He recoiled, blinked, and then saw only his hand.

Of the thousands of articles blindly collected as war trophies aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*, few had proven to be artefacts of the true faith. Among them were certain objects of power. Maloghurst reached for one of these now.

Cold, greasy metal met his touch. His hand closed around it, and brought it to his face. A small gargoyle taken from a degenerate human world. The savage inhabitants had not possessed the technology to manufacture even this ugly thing of lead, and so its provenance was unknown. Whatever its true origins, he had found it to be an effective daemon ward. He slid back the hinged lids that covered the coloured glass of its eyes.

They glowed a warning red.

'Neverborn,' hissed Maloghurst.

A foul smell filled the room. He choked, saliva spilling from his wry lips. He gulped air flavoured by nothing more than recycling systems and warm metal.

Rakshel's lair was deep inside the ship, not far from the grand transit canyon that ran the length of the ship's keel. These were thrall spaces, and many were long abandoned. Maloghurst passed empty dormitories, refectories full of spilled tin plates caked in decayed organic matter. Spaces where crew serfs no longer lived, their halls emptied by war. The mortal personnel manifest of the *Vengeful Spirit* ran into the tens of thousands. They swarmed the endless arterial corridors of its interior, as numerous as blood cells. And like blood cells they bled freely into the void whenever the flagship's hull was breached.

The whispers were stronger this far below the command deck. Things flickered in the corner of one's eye. It was better to steer clear of the dark places, even for one as strong as Maloghurst.

But today he had no choice.

Strange smells wafted on ventilation draughts – sweet and feculent, too strong to be real and too real to be dismissed. Damage suffered in the *Vengeful Spirit's* endless battles was evident all about him. Whole sections were sealed away, bulkhead doors welded shut. Deck plating was buckled. Wrinkled walls spilled congealed waves of sealant foam like lava from volcanic cracks. There were areas where the gravity or lighting was inconstant.

Maloghurst came to a cavity hollowed from the side of the ship by a nova blast. Sheets of plain metal the size of fortress doors sealed the breach. A swaying catwalk hung from wires anchored to the mess of broken pipes and void-ice above. The tug of artificial gravity there was capricious, coming first from one direction, then another. Maloghurst grabbed the walkway's guide rail for support and dragged himself across. The cavity glimmered with warning lights. Beneath his feet, huge servitors hauled off tons of tangled, fused debris. Arc-lightning from welding torches played, sparks showering down in yellow rains. Without a sojourn in drydock, damage like this could never be repaired, only contained. There were many such wounds along the *Vengeful Spirit's* flanks.

He left the ragged chamber, exiting through a door into a corridor that perversely bore little sign of damage. A repair crew passed him on the way to their worksite. They were armed, armoured and in great number. A triad of Mechanicum priests led them, red augmented eyes winking under black cowls.

The rearmost of their number led a Thallax unit by warding chains upon whose links glowed runes of containment. Corposant glittered in the machine's exhaust. A growl grumbled from the smooth faceplate at Maloghurst as he went past. The thing's organic components were not of mundane origins.

With this Dark Mechanicum monster in their midst, still the repair team looked about warily. The armsmen that escorted them peered fearfully from behind their glass visors.

Their fear was not for him. They watched the shadows.

Among the broken decks and exhausted magazines dwelt the Davinites. Maloghurst smelled their reek a hundred metres before he came to their domain. A musty, animal scent carried on sighing breezes of the ship's air. The odour of urine, cooking, smoke and faeces associated with any one of humanity's rough camps pitched since the dawn of time.

The Davinites cleaved to their roots, moving periodically about the ship. Their current abode was a store emptied of all supplies – one of many. Voided of their original contents by the demands of war, they drew in new occupants, rarely benign.

The broad blast doors were open. Maloghurst went within. Davinites squatted around open fires burning directly on the deck. Their shelters were of cloth or scavenged steel plating. There had been cities on Davin of well-ordered adobe houses, but the Primordial Truth had come from the plains tribes, and Maloghurst found himself amongst a nomad band encamped in a metal cave.

His enhanced eyes adjusted quickly to the gloom. There were thirty-one of them, the remainder of the group that had come aboard at Erebus's invitation. With their patron banished, there were fewer than there had been, but those that remained appeared unchanged by the slow alteration of the *Vengeful Spirit*. They showed little sign of the deprivation exhibited by the menials, and they behaved as though the ship were altering itself to suit them.

The Davinites ignored him. They gazed into their fires as silently as stone-age hunters of Old Earth abroad on a monster-haunted night. He made for the largest tent, expecting to find Rakshel inside. He was not disappointed.

The ambassador was sleeping, a flat-dugged Davinite female nestled into him atop a pile of ragged bedding. The ambassador had always looked ill-kempt but in comparison to his abode, his appearances in Lupercal's Court were princely.

Maloghurst jabbed at the makeshift bed with his cane. Rakshel opened one eye then the other. In the dim light, his pupils were even larger than normal.

‘You came,’ he said.

‘You were expecting me?’ asked Maloghurst. He displayed no surprise. The last few years had inured him to surprises.

‘The least of us here could smell the warp-taint upon you. Yes, I expected you.’

Rakshel sat. The woman awoke and smiled at Rakshel – he nodded to the legionary by the bed. Her drowsiness rapidly left her and she leapt up, wrapping herself in a filthy blanket as she ran.

Maloghurst watched her go. ‘A fine home you have made yourself, here.’

Rakshel shrugged, the gesture turned into an extravagant stretch and yawn. ‘I have known hardship and this is as comfortable a place as any. Conditions here are better than for many of your servants, Twisted One. The gods provide their bounty easily to us true followers.’

Maloghurst laughed. His respirator made it a bark. ‘A fine bounty.’

Rakshel rested his hairy arms on his knees. ‘You are the one hounded by the Neverborn, not I. I am safe. You are not.’

‘I could deny it,’ said Maloghurst. ‘But you are right. I see it in my dreams. I hear its voice when I am awake. A daemon of oil and smoke.’

‘It is close then. Best make your peace with it – your torment in the next life might be less.’

‘That is not satisfactory.’

‘No?’ Rakshel was enjoying himself, and made no attempt to conceal it.

‘You tell me often of your mastery of the warp. Now is the time for your bragging to cease. I need deeds. You will rid me of the Neverborn.’

Rakshel pursed his lips in thought. ‘Very well,’ he said. ‘You shall have deeds, though not mine.’

Maloghurst leaned on his cane questioningly.

‘You will need someone mightier than myself. I will take you to Tsepha. He was an acolyte of Akshub, and is the greatest of us still alive.’

Rakshel climbed from his bed, unashamed by his nakedness. He held up the flap of his tent and pointed to a fire set some way from the others.

‘You will find him there.’

‘You will not accompany me?’

Rakshel gave Maloghurst a wide smile, shook his head, and let the tent flap drop between them.

Maloghurst picked his way around piles of rubbish and crates repurposed as furniture. The rest of the Davinites ignored him, intent on whatever it was they

saw in the dance of the flames.

There was a lone figure by the furthest fire. A filthy, near-naked standard human boy. He was covered from head to foot in arcane marks carved into his flesh. His hair had come away in clumps.

Blood-red eyes and a raspy voice gave away the boy's true nature. 'The Twisted One comes looking for help. I am honoured.'

'Tsepha? Acolyte of Akshub?'

'I am he,' said the boy.

'You are not Davinite.'

'Davinite, Terran, Cthonian... What does that matter? All souls are the same in the eyes of the gods. I accepted their truth, and I am undying – I went away, now I return. Before I was Davinite, and now I am Cthonian. How do you like my vessel?' He held up arms covered in sores. When he smiled, bloody gums showed.

'You were brought back?'

'If you wish to call it that.' The possessed boy resumed, looking into the fire. He poked at it with a human thighbone. Blue flame licked around the bulb of the femoral head. Shapes moved under his skin, mimicking the play of the flames. 'You think of your summonings. I am not the same as your Luperci. I am myself alone.'

Around the other fires silent figures squatted. Maloghurst searched them. 'Where is your mistress?'

'Gone.'

'Bring her back. I want to speak with her.'

'You cannot. She is no more. She was consumed. Erebus destroyed her. If you want help, you must ask it of me.'

'I am haunted.'

'The Neverborn attach themselves to those who show promise. You are talented, but untutored. Your master gives you more power than you can safely wield. By creating the Luperci you have opened yourself to risk. The being that dogs you senses a way in through your mind. It will happen, and it will destroy you.'

'You will help me,' said Maloghurst. It was not a question.

The boy looked up sharply, his neck twisted at an unnatural angle. 'I will? And what will the great Maloghurst do for me? You are the servant of the chosen one, but even you do not get to make demands of Tsepha.'

Maloghurst glowered down at the boy. 'Your life will be forfeit if you do not.'

The boy chuckled wetly. ‘And if it is, so what? Did you not hear my previous words, noble warrior? You cannot kill me.’

Maloghurst’s gauntlet dug into his cane. His other hand hovered over his dagger.

The boy glanced at it. ‘A holy knife. You have learned much, but not enough.’

‘You will help me,’ rasped Maloghurst, ‘or I will put your undying nature to the test.’

‘Then you will have no help, and I will not die. Such a sad way to end a life, so full of promise, with a failed experiment. A waste of everyone’s time.’

‘There is a price, then?’

The boy discarded the thighbone and poked at the fire with his unprotected hand. Fatty smoke curled off blackening flesh. He showed only fascination, and no discomfort.

‘We will have what we have been asking for these last months. Access to the Warmaster.’

‘Why should you have it?’

‘Because you will die if we do not.’

‘I am expendable,’ said Maloghurst. ‘A pawn in the game. I need a more compelling reason than my own fate.’

‘Damnation, then. You know that is what awaits you. Is that compelling enough? You argue disingenuously. Why are you here if you do not care for your own fate?’

‘I did not say that I do not care. Answer me.’

The boy got to his feet and tilted his bloody eyes upwards. Maloghurst had no knack for telling the ages of the unenhanced. Tsepha’s host was pre-adolescent, though probably not by much. Younger than the boys recruited into the Legion, perhaps? His head came as high as Maloghurst’s belt.

‘We are the people of the one true faith,’ said Tsepha. ‘It was we who opened the eyes of the Warmaster to the lies of the Emperor. How foolish you must feel, now that you also see. The lies were obvious, and the truth in plain sight. All around you was the evidence of his falsehood, and you ignored it, clinging to a creed every bit as dogmatic as those you denounced. How many times were you confronted by it? And now you are converts, with the zeal of those whose eyes are uncovered. But we are servants of the gods of old. We could teach you so much more.’

‘I have heard this offer before, not least from the serpent Erebus. You seek influence. You seek power through access to Horus Lupercal. That I cannot

allow. This war is not being waged for the advantage of the cults of Davin.'

The boy shrugged. 'Then you will die and burn forever, and we will have it anyway.'

Tsepha's blackened hand blurred, and became pallid and unharmed again but for the weeping ritual cuts incised into the skin. Tsepha held it up and gave a bloody grin.

Maloghurst remained silent. The muttering of Davinites was curiously peaceful in the dark. There, in that metal cave, it was easy for a moment to forget exactly where he was. The whispers were absent. The presence of the millions of tonnes of the *Vengeful Spirit* all around him receded.

'What must I do?' he said eventually.

The boy smiled in quiet triumph. 'Fulfil your promise. There is a ritual that can be performed. It will armour your soul against the Neverborn. Your own power will be increased. A fair bargain, I think.'

'When?'

'Soon. Or you will be lost. Today?'

Maloghurst grunted. 'So be it.'

'Then at ship's midnight. There is a place we can use.'

The location entered into Maloghurst's mind. *An embarkation cavity, a docking point for supply lighters a few hundred metres from their current position.*

'I will be there.'

'I know you will,' said the boy.

In a circle marked carefully in blood and bone dust, Maloghurst concluded his ritual. He bowed eight times before the holy octed large upon the wall. In his hand he held a bolt shell casing on a chain. It was stoppered with black wax, sealing his own blood inside. He muttered the words that Horus himself had passed to him. The shell emitted a strange radiation not native to the material realm – when he opened his eyes, he could no longer see it. His ruined face essayed as much of a smile as it was able.

In the circle it was completely silent. Neither the noises of the ship or the whispers of the daemon-kin troubled him within its circuit. The faint tremor of the deck plates was the only reminder that he was aboard a starship at all.

The opening of the door broke his concentration. The flames on the black candles wavered.

'Aximand,' he said. 'Who let you in?'

‘I am of the Mournival, Mal. I can go where I wish. Where have you been? Lupercal wants to see you.’

‘I cannot. I have matters to attend to, as you can see.’

Aximand’s eyebrows rose on his face unevenly. His features were lopsided, and somewhat grotesque under certain conditions. Once the living image of his gene-father, his mutilation should have destroyed the likeness. Somehow, it had made him look even *more* like Horus. He was a caricature of a demigod.

Both of them were twisted now, in their own way.

‘You are refusing a summons from Horus? You are bold,’ Aximand said. ‘Or is there something else going on in that labyrinthine mind of yours?’

Maloghurst rounded on him. ‘What makes you say that?’

Aximand made a face of mild surprise. ‘Perhaps not. I hear you mumbling to the gods. You are becoming as unhinged as Lorgar’s Seventeenth.’

‘You have witnessed the power that is mine to command.’

‘I have. The Luperci are impressive, Mal. But to do so much...’ Aximand looked at the trappings of Maloghurst’s ritual with a complete lack of interest. ‘We are warriors, not priests.’

‘I am no priest, Little Horus. The Luperci are a weapon. This is another.’ He held up the bolt shell on its chain.

Aximand frowned. ‘There is nothing there.’

‘There is. I cannot see it either, but I know that it is there. The power of the warp acts more effectively than any cloaking device. You too could wield such power, if you were not so narrow-minded.’

‘Narrow-minded I may be, Mal, but I’m not *stupid* enough to disobey a direct summons from Horus.’

Maloghurst gripped his cane. ‘Tell him I will attend him later.’

‘I will not. Tell him yourself.’

‘I am occupied, Aximand. Lupercal will understand.’

‘Isn’t that a little presumptuous, even for you?’

‘Our lord is party to everything that goes on aboard this ship, Little Horus. He will understand.’ Maloghurst took up a message tube and slipped the bolt shell into the tightly rolled parchment secreted within. He twisted on the end cap, activated the gene-seal, and held it out to Aximand. ‘Give these orders to Sergeant Gryben of the 43rd.’

‘I’m not your errand boy.’

‘You will do as I order, captain,’ Maloghurst said. ‘It is not a request. Tell him to open it carefully, to tip out the chain within and wear it around his neck.’

‘I did not see anything,’ said Aximand.

‘That is the point. And he will not be able to see it either. You should urge him not to lose it...’

Aximand held out his hand and took the message. ‘What did you put in here?’ he rolled the tube over. There were no marks upon it.

‘A guarantee of sorts. Do not concern yourself with it. Deliver it, and do it now. Tell no one.’

‘What are you up to, Mal?’ Aximand muttered. His curiosity was piqued.

‘You will see. Or maybe you will not. It is of no consequence. All that matters is that I will succeed.’

Maloghurst stepped out of his circle. The ceaseless growl of the *Vengeful Spirit* rumbled in his ears, and the whispers began anew.

Down in the lower decks, the whispers were not whispers at all, anymore. There were many wicked voices on the air, their words disconcertingly clear. The one that Maloghurst strained to hear was not among them. Knowing where your enemy is was far better than *not* knowing. Every voice gave him pause.

A handful of thralls and serf menials went about their business. They looked at him sidelong, wondering why a legionary would be about in such a place so often. It was becoming easier to tell the faithful from potential traitors, for they wore their marks of devotion to the old gods, and there were more than a few whose manner betrayed their fear at the whispers. The truly faithful were perturbed, but also delighted. Only the servitors seemed unaffected, stomping about on careless feet much as they always had done.

Little matter if they were true to the Warmaster’s cause or not. As long as they worked. Menials were materiel. No one cared for the opinions of a round of ammunition.

Maloghurst turned onto an access way that was only lightly used. A number of the lumens set in the ceiling had blown out, others flickered at a frequency that bothered the eye. Here, the voices blended seamlessly with the rumbles and clatters of a living starship. The *Vengeful Spirit* had found its voice.

A hatch hissed upwards in front of him. Colder air awaited. A sequence of seven small shuttle docks chained together by short lengths of corridor lay ahead. The rear walls of the hangars could be retracted, opening up the way to large loading doors that sealed supply routes heading deeper into the *Vengeful Spirit*. All were closed. There were galleries around the bays, maintenance runnels for the cranes that ran around the rooms on rails. Otherwise the hangars

were featureless and utilitarian.

Maloghurst passed through four bays on the way to his destination. Each was deserted, all but one empty of craft. The long launch tubes on two showed signs of damage. Sheets of plastek, tattered from heavy use and marred with dust, wafted in ventilation breezes.

The door to the fifth bay opened, revealing chanting and rough music. The hangar wall was down and the bay was full of Davinites. Nearly their full complement, Maloghurst thought. Good. The coarse hair that furred their bodies was thick with symbols painted in blood. They stopped mid-motion, freezing whatever dance they had been performing into an eerie tableau vivant. All eyes turned to the Space Marine.

Rakshel came to him. Maloghurst's enhanced olfactory sense detected the sweet chemical signifiers of narcotics in his breath and sweat.

'You came, noble warrior.'

'Why would I not?'

Rakshel shrugged. 'You are wearing your armour.'

'I always wear it. I cannot move well without it.'

'No matter,' said Rakshel. 'We shall remove it.'

A rough octed had been set against one wall. Beaten brass, platinum etched with writhing, patterned green copper and dull iron made up the arrows of its wheel. Stout chains and manacles hung from it.

'Chaining me is not necessary,' said Maloghurst.

'Oh, but it is necessary,' Rakshel replied.

'I will not allow you to chain me.'

'Your kind know no fear. Why are you frightened? Either you are chained, or you leave.'

Maloghurst made a noise deep in his chest. 'Very well.'

Rakshel gestured to his fellows. They came forward with disarming tools, and clumsily stripped Maloghurst of his battleplate. The legionary drew in a ragged, hissing gasp as his respirator was removed. His breathing became laboured without it.

The Davinites supported his enormous bulk and guided him to the octed.

***Maloghurst. Come to me.***

All in the room heard the words. The Davinites looked up at their speaking.

'We must work quickly,' said Rakshel. 'The Neverborn is here!'

The manacles were snapped shut hurriedly. When the Davinites were satisfied that Maloghurst was restrained, they stepped back and leered at him. Maloghurst

tugged at the links uneasily.

Warning klaxons blared. The rotating light above the left-hand loading door spun round and the door opened, its hazard striped plasteel giving way to darkness beyond.

The born-again shaman Tsepha stepped through, the body of the boy he wore gleaming with white lime. The bloody marks of the cuts and his inhuman eyes showed through, bright crimson. He wore only a loincloth. In his hand, he bore a glassy black blade that weeped tendrils of black smoke.

‘You have come. You are a fool,’ gloated Tsepha. ‘Twisted, the Sons of Horus name you. Twisted by their measure, but not by mine. A race of giants, bred for war. You are no subtle blade.’

The boy stepped in front of Maloghurst. With a quick slash, he opened a cut across the Space Marine’s scarred torso. Maloghurst bit back a shout. The wound burned like the cold of the void.

‘Horus has become a god. Every eye of the empyrean is turned upon his progress. The blood of one so valued by the Warmaster is a worthy sacrifice.’

‘He will kill you all!’ snarled Maloghurst. He tugged at his chains with sudden, impotent anger.

From behind Tsepha, Rakshel smiled.

‘He will not. You are a pawn, you said. We all are. For the pawn, all power demands payment. Erebus knew this. But you would not listen. Now you will pay for your petty spells and your Luperci. Your time has come. Horus requires a steady hand to guide him. We will provide it.’

With a bloody grin, Tsepha began a low, guttural chant. The temperature plummeted. Behind him the Davinites began their vile dance again. A slow drumbeat set their rhythm, growing faster by steady increments.

Tsepha passed the knife before Maloghurst, jabbing downwards with it in time to his chant. Maloghurst arched his back and roared with pain at each insult. A network of cold spread across his skin, deep into his bones, a disgusting squirming accompanying it.

**‘MALOGHURST! I COME!’** shouted the voice. And it was insubstantial no longer. This voice troubled the air, not only the soul.

A dark shape appeared at Tsepha’s shoulder.

‘Take this worthy sacrifice, oh Qwiltzuk-Ikar! Part the veil of the world and step through. Assume the form and flesh of Maloghurst the Twisted!’

The dark shape solidified, becoming a column of writhing smoke, then a vortex of shining black liquid. Suggestions of limbs appeared within, only to be

snatched away by the endless rotation. Long pseudopods reached for Maloghurst's face.

The chained legionary began to laugh. Rakshel was amazed. Tsepha faltered.

'My turn now,' said Maloghurst. 'I thank you for the daemon's name.' He began to chant, under his breath at first, then louder and louder. A fresh incantation that blended with the Davinites' pounding drums and Tsepha's own summoning, threatening to undo it from within. The language was hard and old.

'He knows the speech of the Neverborn!' hissed Tsepha. The boy fought back, shouting louder, before gritting his teeth. Blood ran from his eyes.

'Qwiltzuk-Ikar! Qwiltzuk-Ikar! Qwiltzuk-Ikar!' shouted Maloghurst. Ancient words raced from him, driving back the questing feelers of the manifesting daemon.

Qwiltzuk-Ikar turned its attention upon Tsepha. The shaman waved his knife about threateningly, howling and barking words that should issue from no human throat.

'Gag him!' screamed Rakshel, pointing at Maloghurst.

The Davinites rushed forward. Two clamped their hands about Maloghurst's head, but he bucked and shook them off ferociously. A third carried a spiked muzzle.

Maloghurst paused in his incantation, his jaw worked and he spat full into the cultist's face. The Davinite shrieked and fell back, hands clapped to his eyes. Vinegary smoke streamed from his burning face as he fell to the floor. Another approached, but Maloghurst stopped him with a glare.

'No!' screamed Rakshel.

The last syllables of Maloghurst's incantation slipped free of his twisted mouth.

Tsepha fell backwards as if struck. He cowered on the deck before the column of oil.

'Take him,' ordered Maloghurst.

'Yes,' said the daemon.

The liquid flew at Tsepha, forcing its way into his eyes, mouth, ears and nose. The possessed boy convulsed so hard that his head struck the deck and left a bloody print upon it.

Then the stolen body exploded. Wet meat, steaming in the chill of the docking bay, slapped into the walls.

Something took his place. *Neverborn.*

Qwiltzuk-Ikar unfolded itself, a gangling monstrosity twice the height of a

Space Marine. Multiple arms unfolded. Fingers tipped with blade claws flexed. It shook itself free of blood like a dog coming out of a river.

*'Free. I am free,'* it hissed. *'And you are not my master.'*

'What have you done?' screamed Rakshel. 'It is without control!'

'I did not intend it to be controlled,' said Maloghurst. He yanked hard on his restraints, parting the links of the chains with contemptuous ease. He stepped free from the octed. The daemon growled, lunging forwards with half a dozen arms. Maloghurst spoke the creature's name, spat five syllables that pained him to speak, and held up his hands.

Qwilltzuk-Ikar stopped dead, roaring furiously.

The Davinites gibbered with terror, scrabbling at doors that would not open.

Rakshel backed away. Still holding out one hand to restrain the daemon, Maloghurst caught the ambassador about the neck and hauled him off his feet.

'You were a fool to underestimate me, Davinite,' he growled. 'Squad Gryben! Reveal yourselves.'

All around the gallery, reality warped. Fifteen Sons of Horus stood with their bolters trained upon the daemon and the panicking cultists.

'How could you think this ridiculous scheme would work, Rakshel?' said Maloghurst. 'Summoning a daemon to trouble me day and night, then intending to have it claim me on the pretext of your aid? How could a degenerate mortal like you outwit a Son of Horus? Your scheme depends upon fear, Rakshel.'

Maloghurst pulled the ambassador in closer. 'And we know *no* fear.'

Rakshel drew in a rattling breath, unable to respond.

'A cripple I might be among my kind, but I exceed you in every regard,' said Maloghurst.

Qwilltzuk-Ikar screamed, chattering dire threats in every language ever spoken. Maloghurst clawed his right hand and squeezed the air, and the daemon squealed in agony. He returned his attention to Rakshel.

'I deny your request for an audience with the Warmaster one final time. With your death.'

Slowly, Maloghurst squeezed Rakshel's throat shut. The Davinite thrashed madly at the arm holding him, windmilling legs kicking pathetically at his tormentor's side. Maloghurst grimaced with pleasure as Rakshel's last breath turned into a death rattle.

'Gryben, open fire!' he shouted.

All sound was obliterated beneath the thunder of fifteen bolters firing simultaneously.

Davinites exploded. Their limbs slithered across the frost-coated metal. Gore splashed, drenching Maloghurst and Rakshel. The daemon screeched, furious to be denied its part in the slaughter.

Gryben's squad turned their weapons upon Qwiltzuk-Ikar. It writhed as round after round disappeared into it. Explosions sent bursts of black ichor slashing out to mix with the red. It whipped back and forth. Its limbs were parted from its body, landing on the floor where they sublimated into noisome vapour.

The barrage was too much, and it fell. Qwiltzuk-Ikar's warp-formed body snapped and writhed upon deck plating slick with frozen blood. Half of Gryben's squad had descended from the maintenance gallery and were advancing upon it, pumping it full of mass-reactive rounds, pausing only to change their empty magazines.

It attempted to get up, the unnatural vitality of the warp pulling its broken body back together, but its reforming limbs were shot out from under it again and again. It collapsed and did not rise.

Maloghurst threw down Rakshel's corpse. 'Enough!' he shouted.

The din of bolter fire ceased. The reverberations took an age to die. There was not a living thing left in the room that was not a legionary. He limped over to the daemon, and pinned its neck in place with his foot. Eyes swam beneath the surface of night-black skin, opening at random across its long face. Shadowy tendrils waved out over every wound, seeking their fellows to grasp and pull, knitting the hurts together. They were growing feebler and feebler.

'I do not account myself a great sorcerer, Neverborn. But I am fortunate to have a master who is willing to share a portion of his knowledge.' Maloghurst held out his hand. A bolt pistol was pressed into it. 'In several of the very diverse sources I have read, it is written that whenever a fiend is dispatched from the material realm, it spends one hundred years and a day in torment before it might come forth again.'

Maloghurst racked a bolt into the pistol's chamber. A cold amusement entered his eyes as he aimed the gun at the creature. Qwiltzuk-Ikar was diminishing, shrinking in size and potency, its body streaming away in smoke. It was once the size of a man, now only a child. Only the head remained undiminished, large and freakish upon the nub of its body.

***'We will bargain!'*** hissed the fiend. ***'You shall have powers undreamed. You shall no longer be known as the Twisted, but the Mighty! I can heal you. I can make you whole.'***

'Don't you see?' said Maloghurst. 'I value the sobriquet and the state of my

body equally. Why would I wish to enslave you in exchange for more? You would be close to Horus, which was your aim. I am not like these simpletons, to believe the promises of daemonkind. Spend the next one hundred years and a day considering this – you wish to master us, but it is we who shall master you.’

A round from Maloghurst’s gun pulped its head, and black ooze spread around it. The stench of mud dragged from noisome waters enveloped them all, and then it was gone.

The Davinite corpses were stuck with combat blades, and turned over by careless, crushing boots.

‘They are all dead, my lord,’ said Gryben.

Maloghurst nodded his approval. He haltingly retrieved his cane and then, better supported, headed swiftly for the loading gates. He chose the same one through which Tsepha had entered. It was fitting. There was power in even the smallest gesture.

‘Send this thing back to warp,’ he ordered.

A legionary with a flamer stepped forward and the others fell back, carrying the pieces of Maloghurst’s stripped battleplate. The warrior waited for his fellows to leave, then filled the room with fire. He retreated out of the bay and Maloghurst thumbed the door shut.

After letting it burn for a full minute, he opened the launch tube’s doors and vented the hangar into space.

Maloghurst threw a cloth bundle upon the table. It came unwrapped, scattering a score of daggers across the surface. No two were alike: knapped stone, sharpened scrap and finely-forged antiques were all among their number. Each one glistened with forbidden power.

‘The blades of the traitors, sire.’

‘It is done?’

‘It is done.’

Horus stared at them. Always awesome, the power that the Warmaster held surrounded him with an aura of godly might. He was made to be an exemplar of humanity, but he had transcended the state of man completely. He would exceed the ambitions of the Emperor a thousand times over. For one long moment, Maloghurst was gripped by the unshakeable certainty that should the two meet again, father and son, then the Emperor would bend his knee to Horus and beg for forgiveness.

The sensation lasted as long as Maloghurst could endure to look upon the face

of his primarch. Since Horus's following of the Fulgurine Road, that was not long. For decades Maloghurst had been one of the few who could treat with Lupercal on something approaching equal terms. Those days were past.

'What was its name?' asked Horus.

'The Davinite called it Qwiltzuk-Ikar. In all probability this was one of its *nomina major*, possibly a name of essence. Enough, once I had it, to bend it to my will. It was a petty thing, its plans to influence you far beyond its ability.'

'Threats from the Neverborn must be dealt with as surely as those posed by mortals, insignificant or not.' Horus picked up a short knife in his hand and turned it over. 'You employed a ritual of concealment.'

'Good against mortal and immortal alike, sire.'

'You are a swift study.'

'My ability is nothing compared to yours, sire.'

'Of course not, Mal,' said Horus. He smiled. 'But it is sufficient. Have the name recorded. Let all who truck with the warp in our service know of it, and be forbidden from treating with Qwiltzuk-Ikar.'

'The denizens of the empyrean will learn to respect you.'

'The White Scars. The Sigillite. Garviel Loken... and now this. The attempts made upon my life by my father's lackeys are tiresome enough. I will not have the Neverborn acting against me also. I am my own master.'

'Yes, sire.'

Horus set the knife down, and picked up another. He made a dismissive noise at its quality. 'I am sorry for the humiliation you had to endure, Mal.'

Maloghurst's words stuck in his throat. Two more attempts were required before he could voice them. The resplendence of Horus unmanned him.

'There is no humiliation. Never in serving you.'

'That is what I expect you to say, Mal, but it does no harm for me to let you know that your service is valued.'

Maloghurst leaned upon his cane and bowed slightly. The pride at his master's words was almost enough to overcome his sorrow at the distance growing between them.

But not quite.

'Thank you, sire.'

Horus's attention drifted from the blade in his hand. 'Is there something wrong, Mal?'

'No, my lord. With your permission, I will return to my duties.'

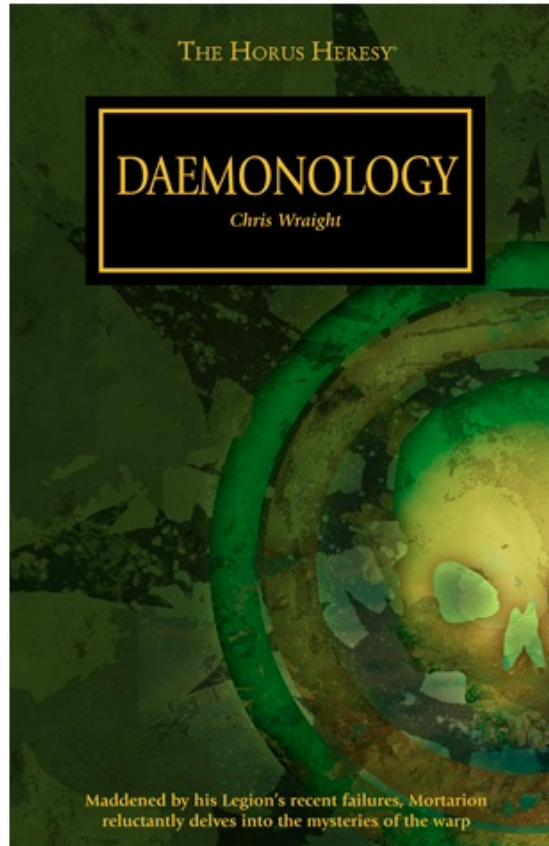
'You have it, as always.'

Maloghurst turned painfully and departed the stateroom, the rap of his cane on the stone echoing away down the corridor.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Guy Haley** is the author of *Space Marine Battles: Death of Integrity*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Valedor* and *Baneblade*, and the novellas *The Eternal Crusader*, *The Last Days of Ector* and 'Broken Sword', for *Damocles*. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

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THE HORUS HERESY®

# WOLF MOTHER

*Graham McNeill*

After the Battle of Molech, Alivia Sureka and Severian  
infiltrate what remains of the vile serpent cult

# WOLF MOTHER

Graham McNeill

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

'Please, my daughter, she—'

Xisan backhanded his fist across her face.

'You don't get to speak.'

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

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

Too good an opportunity to ignore.

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

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

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

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

Her fear energised Xisan. It *empowered* him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The woman suddenly stopped, eyes wide, brow furrowed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Xisan grinned through a mouthful of blood.

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

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

'You're welcome,' he said.

'I needed him alive.'

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

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

'Looked like you were.'

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

'And why was that?'

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

'Ah, so you let yourself be captured.'

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

Of all His creations, she disliked them the most.

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

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

three explosive canisters buckled in the loops.

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

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

‘And that’s no ordinary gun.’

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

The Space Marine nodded. ‘Nice.’

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

‘Unlikely.’

‘How so?’ asked Alivia.

‘Theresia Ferlach died in the Burning of Carinthia.’

‘And you know that how?’

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

Alivia applied fractionally more pressure to the trigger.

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

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

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

Alivia pulled the trigger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Until the man with the purple lips had taken Vivyen.

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

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

'Yes, I think so,' said Vivyen.

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

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

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

'You can do that?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Another!’ said Vesper, clapping her hands.

‘Yes, read one more,’ added Challis.

‘Okay,’ said Vivyen.

‘What’s “okay”?’ asked Lalique.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vivyen shook her head, too frightened to answer.

'Now.'

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

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

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

The man considered her words, then grinned.

'I expect you would,' he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They had no comfort to offer her, not now.

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

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

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

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

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

‘Who?’

‘Another son of Cthonia.’

‘Another traitor.’

Severian sighed as though disappointed.

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

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

Alivia’s eyes bulged at the pressure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘That’s better,’ said Severian.

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

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

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

'So you can shoot me again?'

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

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

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

Severian laughed.

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

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

'Why?'

'Because we both answer to the same master.'

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

And for someone like Severian, that was enough.

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

Alivia nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

serpent venom,' said Severian.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Severian?'

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

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

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

'I saw them.'

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

'Yes.'

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

‘Are they hurting her? Is it bad?’

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

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

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

Secretly wise, serpents held the keys to immortality.

What other species could shed its skin and yet live?

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

His beloved Lyx had known that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here, scum sank to the bottom.

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

For that alone Alivia was glad of his presence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘It does,’ replied Alivia.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘What does that mean?’

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

‘You didn’t want to go?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Then why are you here?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vivyen felt tears prick her eyes.

'I think they must have.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

taken Challis advanced on Vivyen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'My mama,' said Vivyen.

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

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

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

'A good place to hide,' said Alivia.

'Not good enough,' said Severian.

'We're close?'

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

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

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

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

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

'Right here,' whispered Severian.

The man's mouth dropped open in shock.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He shrugged, and she sensed his unwillingness to elaborate.

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

'Dorn? *Rogal* Dorn?'

'Do you know anyone else named Dorn?'

'No.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Stop doing that,’ snapped Alivia.

‘Doing what?’

‘Lifting thoughts from my mind.’

‘It’s hard not to,’ he said.

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

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

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

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

*Temple.*

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

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

‘Do you see her?’ asked Severian.

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

‘Only one way to find out.’

‘Go down there?’

He nodded.

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

‘Nothing I can’t handle.’

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

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

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

‘Vivyen,’ she said.

‘Which one?’

‘The girl at the back.’

‘One of them’s hurt,’ said Severian.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alivia tightened her grip on her gun and rebar club.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She had no attention to spare for Severian.

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

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

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

'Throne, no...' she said.

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

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

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

Too bad he'd have to give it back.

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

Blood slicked him to the waist.

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

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

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

reflexes bound to its fibre-bundle muscles.

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

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

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

Closing in. Too far apart to engage together.

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

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

'But not smart enough.'

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

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

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

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

A series of deafening bangs sounded and people screamed.

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

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

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

Vivyen's eyes snapped open.

Those were screams as terrified as her own.

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

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

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

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

Alivia slammed its head down on the packing crate altar.

The monster thrashed, its tail lashing like a bullwhip.

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

Its head exploded in a welter of blood and bone.

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

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

The sounds of screaming and gunfire faded out.

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

'Mama!' cried a voice next to her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The envenomed children were changing.

Remade by an invisible sculptor.

*Transforming.*

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

A second coming, an immaculate birth of nightmare.

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

*A daemon.*

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

Alivia lifted the serpenta and pulled the trigger.

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

Its black eyes promised an ecstatic death.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beneath the cracked visor, a fleshless skull screamed.

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

Severian sprang away, revolted by the sight.

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

Severian turned to where Alivia had gone.

And saw he was wrong.

There *was* something that could still hurt him.

The daemon had claimed Alivia.

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

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

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

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

But Alivia had become so much more than that.

She was a mother.

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

Then slammed the door behind it.

'No way out,' she said.

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

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

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

But she was fighting it.

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

‘Get. Her. Away.’

The words were forced out from behind clenched teeth.

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

It was the thing inside struggling to get out.

She saw his understanding and nodded.

Severian bent his back and made a quarter turn.

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

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

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

But that rotten soul was singularly unable to host it.

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

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

He felt its terror as reality prepared to expel it.

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

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

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

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

She groaned in pain. Her chest hurt.

Her whole *body* hurt.

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

And that made all the pain in the world worthwhile.

'Vivyen?' asked Alivia.

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

'The book?'

'Madame Ghost Snake,' said Vivyen.

'Who?'

'As good a name as any for someone who ought to be dead,' said Severian.

Alivia forced herself up onto one elbow.

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

'That was a good throw,' she said.

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

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

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

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

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

Vivyen needed her to be strong.

Nightmares could wait.

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

'So you did.'

Alivia swept her gaze around the chamber.

'Are they all dead?'

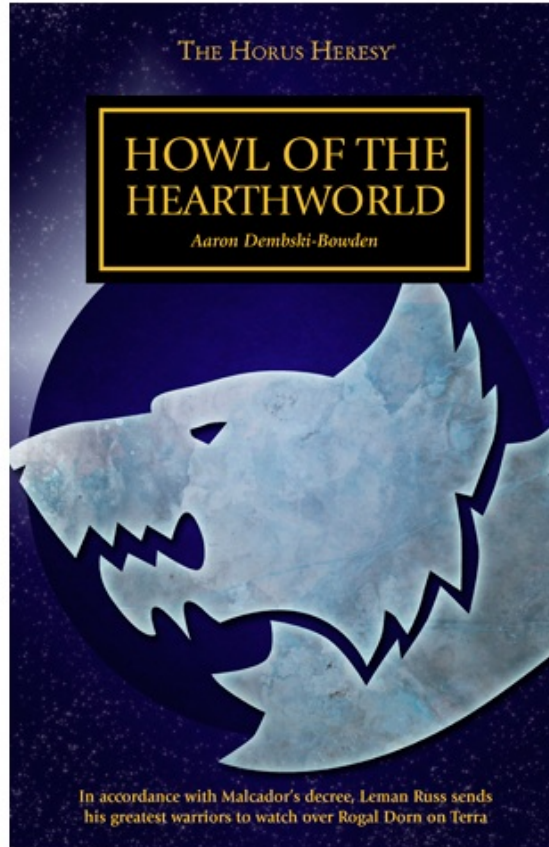
‘They will be,’ promised Severian.

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

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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



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