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40,000



# MANIFOLD DESTINY

DAVID ANNANDALE



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# MANIFOLD DESTINY

**David Annandale**

And when the war was done, and the losses were counted, she had time to think. There was no kindness in that luxury, and no mercy. The iron self-discipline of the Pallidus Mor served Princeps Senioris Ferantha Krezoc well. She was sitting in her office on the transport *Nuntius Mortis*, facing the time of aftermath, and she did not brood. Yet the memories were there, lying in wait. She accepted their inevitability. They were almost a century old. She had not thought of them in decades.

They came back to her now, though. She let them. She ran a finger along the edge of the iron desk and remembered the first time she had stood in this room. The ribs of its stone vault were iron and fashioned in the shape of pistons. The walls were the black, while the dome was bone-white. To be in this space was to be surrounded by the livery of the Pallidus Mor. Krezoc had been on the other side of the desk, that day. She had been years from becoming princeps. And it would be even longer before the officer whose summons she had answered became marshal.

The memory of his youth was disconcerting. His head was not yet enclosed in a brace. His eyes were not bionic. It was as if, without his injuries and most extensive augmentations, he was unformed, incomplete. But then, so was she.

\* \* \*

Krezoc was not called until the *Nuntius Mortis* was only a few ships cycles away from translating into the Ahenum System. Most of the other new graduates from the Collegia Titanica had already been given their postings. When she entered the office and stood before Princeps Eras Balzhan, she wondered if she should read an omen into the delay. She would have dismissed the idea, but Balzhan was reading a data-slate and frowning. Displeasure in a senior officer *definitely* did not bode well. She prepared herself. She was Pallidus Mor, and that meant expecting the worst and then overcoming it when it arrived.

Balzhan looked up from the data-slate and put it aside. 'Tell me, Trainee Krezoc, do you know the difference between tradition and stagnation?'

'I believe I do, princeps.'

'How would you articulate it?'

She thought for a moment. 'The traditions of the Pallidus Mor are the refrains of our identity. Stagnation is repetition without meaning.'

Balzhan nodded. He looked pleased. 'Well said.' He stabbed a finger at the data-slate. 'I have just been dealing with stagnation. I do not appreciate interference in my tactical decisions. I would like you to answer another question. What is the guiding principle of our Legio's conduct of war?'

'The recognition of the necessities of the battlefield, no matter what sacrifice they might demand.'

'Precisely.' He appeared to change the subject abruptly. 'You are here to receive your moderati posting.'

'Yes, princeps.'

'What are your expectations?'

Krezoc blinked, surprised by the question. She had no expectations in the sense of hopes. She knew what the norm was. 'I expect to begin my service in a Warhound,' she said. She did not understand what he was asking.

Balzhan said, 'Of course. That is exactly what is *expected*.' He spat the word and glared at the data-slate again. 'As I have been so very helpfully informed.' He drummed his fingers on the desk. 'I assume you know about my recent elevation.'

'I do.' Balzhans posting as princeps of the Warlord *Ferrum Salvator* was common knowledge. Admitting she had heard it made Krezoc uncomfortable, as if she were confessing to petty gossip. The fact remained that Balzhan receiving the command of *Salvator* was an event of note. He had risen through the ranks with uncommon speed, and was one of the youngest princeps of the Pallidus Mor in several centuries to pilot a Warlord. This despite his impatience with

bureaucracy, an impatience he expressed clearly and with enough frequency to have made more than a few political enemies.

'Good,' said Balzhan. 'I'm assuming my decisions concerning my moderati are no secret either.'

'They are not.'

To say the least. Balzhans predecessor in *Ferrum Salvator*, Ganethon Lenkal, had died in action against the tau in the Lysades subsector. His moderati, however, had survived. Balzhan had replaced them all.

'The machine-spirit of *Ferrum Salvator* was wounded by the loss of Princeps Lenkal,' Balzhan said. 'It is healing, but the process of acclimatising it to my presence and my will is not a simple matter. Familiar moderati would be a reminder of the loss. *Salvator* must be made new. I will have it fight for me as if I were its first princeps.'

'I see.'

'You agree with my approach?'

'In this instance, I do.'

Balzhan's grin was thin, but genuine. 'Why in this instance?'

'I see the necessity created by the circumstances.'

'Are we then purely reactive?'

'No. We must look ahead, too. Anticipated necessity is as important as a present one.'

'Very well. To the matter of your assignment, then. You will be moderati minoris, posted to the plasma blastgun on *Ferrum Salvator*.' Krezoc managed to keep her jaw from sagging open.

'I am honoured, princeps.' The words were almost insultingly inadequate. They were also the only ones she could summon.

'Let us be clear. This is a training exercise.'

'Yes, princeps.'

'There is no presumption of permanence here.'

'I understand.'

'Nor,' he said quietly, 'is the provisional nature of the assignment to be assumed.'

Again, she wrestled to keep surprise from her face. She cleared her throat, but there was nothing she could think of to say that would not sound in her ears like hubris. She kept quiet.

Balzhan looked amused. 'You have questions, I think?'

*So will others*, she thought. And they would all be asking the same one. 'Why

me?' Krezoc said.

Balzhan snorted. 'I'm growing tired of answering that one.' He glanced again at the data-slate. 'You, at least, deserve a response. The answer is a simple one, Moderati Krezoc.' He spoke her new title for the first time, and pride burned away some of her shock. 'Your performance at the Collegia was exemplary. The metrics on file, however, are suggestive of a larger picture. All the trainees on this vessel have excelled. That is a given. However, what I see in your records is the suggestion of an unusual talent. I would be acting against the best interests of myself, my crew, and *Ferrum Salvator* if I did not take advantage of this.' Krezoc thought through her response carefully, forcing aside both pride and false modesty.

'I am grateful,' she said, 'and I will do all in my power to prove you correct. I have to wonder, princeps, why you have this faith in me? I have never been linked to a manifold. My experience is entirely simulated.'

'My judgement is based on multiple factors. I have looked at your complete records, and the nature of your accomplishments, taken as a collective, point in a specific direction. I also trust my instincts. As, I think, you trust yours.'

She did, and though Balzhan clearly was not interested in giving her any more details, his belief in her acted as a kind of confirmation of her instincts. No, that was wrong. What she felt was more fundamental than an instinct, and more profound than a belief. Even before her induction, as a young orphan, into the Collegia Titanica, she had been tied to the Titans. Her earliest memories were of worshipping the distant silhouettes of god-machines. She could not remember where she had been. The impression of the Titans was so strong that it had obliterated every other aspect of the memories. The drive of her existence had been a quest to complete an absence. Her being was incomplete, and its nature was shaped by the inescapable gravitation of the absence.

Now, at last, she felt herself on the threshold of closing the gap, of finding the completion barred to her until now.

'I will serve you and *Ferrum Salvator* well,' she said. 'So I swear in the name of the Ommissiah.'

The maglev car transported the trainees from their quarters in the stern of the *Nuntius Mortis* to the bays where the Titans waited. The ship had translated at the Ahenum Systems Mandeville point a few hours earlier. The *Mortis* would be at anchor over Ahenum IV soon.

The car could hold thirty passengers. There was more than enough space for all

the trainee moderati. They had grouped themselves on the metal seats according to their assigned Titans. The organisation had come naturally, even though more than a few were meeting each other for the first time. Krezoc eyed her new comrades. They looked back at her, openly appraising, their gazes varying from the cool to the cold. Bersen Havrak and Ran Nevenic were the moderati majoris. They would fuse neuro-electrically with Balzhan and *Salvator* to operate the Warlords Bellicosa volcano cannon and Mori quake cannon. They had faces of marble, their neutrality stopping just short of outright hostility. Merys Drahn, in the seat across the aisle from Krezoc, was the other moderati minoris. Her responsibility was the Apocalypse missile launcher, on the other shoulder of the carapace. She seemed to find Krezoc more of a curiosity than a possible threat. All three had considerably more experience than Krezoc. This was not their first training run. They had been serving with Balzhan since he had been given command of *Salvator*.

There were eyes in the train that regarded Krezoc with real anger. The moderati sat with the group destined for the Reaver *Nox Terrorem*. He had not spoken to his comrades since boarding except to respond with brief grunts. He had watched Krezoc for the entire trip. Krezoc looked back, held his stare, then, indifferent, faced forwards again.

'You've made a fast friend,' Drahn said, her voice low.

'I don't even know who he is.'

'You should. His name is Makthal. You displaced him.'

'I what?'

'He was the minoris for the plasma blastgun. Until now.' Drahn raised an eyebrow. 'You must be very good.'

'You had better be,' Havrak said.

Krezoc felt she saw the others more clearly now. They were proud, not threatened. They were waiting for her to prove herself.

'You'll be judging me based on your many many years in the battlefield, will you?' she said, her voice a dry rasp. A sharp reminder that they were, like her, trainees. Her grin was tight, almost feral. Giving him the opening to laugh, and letting him know that she was not interested in fighting him, though she would if necessary.

Havrak chose to laugh. Briefly, and still watchful. But he conceded the point.

Krezoc took advantage of the slight thaw. 'Was Princeps Balzhan displeased with him?' She jerked her head slightly in Makthal's direction.

Drahn shrugged. 'Not that we know of. He decided he likes you better, for some

reason.'

They rode in silence for the rest of the journey. The maglev car arrived at the loading bay. Doors in the centre of its hull slid open with a grind.

The moderati disembarked. As Krezoc approached the exit, her way was blocked. The man was wide-shouldered. His arms were as thick as his neck. He was a full head shorter than Krezoc. He was older than anyone else she had seen on the train. He looked up and she bent forwards.

'Is there a problem?' she asked.

'Some of us have earned our place here,' he said.

'I'm sure you have.'

Behind her, Nevenic sighed. 'Let her pass, Werreth,' he said. 'We don't have time for this.'

*Werreth.* Krezoc placed the name. One of the exalted among their number. He had served as moderati in the field. He was a princeps in training. He would be piloting the Warhound *Canis Falcatos*.

'Congratulations on your new command,' said Krezoc. She kept her tone icily neutral. 'Now if you'll excuse me—'

'You didn't hear me,' Werreth said.

'I did,' said Krezoc. 'I'm pleased for you.'

'Why are you here?'

'To follow my orders. To do my duty.'

On the platform behind Werreth, the other groups lingered to watch. Krezoc looked at her fellow moderati. Nevenic looked irritated but was willing to let the scene play out. Havrak leaned against a seat, his arms folded. Drahn parted her hands, amused. *Your move*, her body language said.

'I know your kind,' said Werreth. 'You think you're the Omnissiah's chosen. You're not.'

'I see,' said Krezoc. 'And are you going to put me in my place now or later? If now, could you get on with it? I have an oath to fulfil. I imagine you do, too.'

Werreth glared. Krezoc stared back, shifting her stance slightly and grounding herself, ready to counter his blow when it came. It didn't. After a minute, Werreth decided his point had been made. He turned and stalked off.

'He'll go far,' Krezoc muttered as she stepped onto the platform.

'You have confidence in your judgement, I'll give you that,' Drahn said.

'Do you disagree?' Krezoc asked her. 'Does he strike you as a leader? Would you follow him into combat?'

Drahn said nothing.

Ahead, the immense cavern of the loading bay rang with the disciplined chaos of mobilisation. The space took up the height of many decks, its ceiling two hundred feet above the floor. On this training voyage it held one maniple. *Ferrum Salvator*, *Nox Terrorem* and the three Warhounds *Canis Falcatos*, *Canis Immitis* and *Canis Glaciem* stood in the echoing vastness, giants at attention, waiting to burn the enemies of the Imperium. The winged eclipse banners of the Pallidus Mor hung at regular intervals down the centre of the loading bay. They moved back and forth with heavy majesty in the wind of the massive ventilation system.

Krezoc walked across hundreds of yards of deck to where *Ferrum Salvator* stood. Monumental clamps held the god-machine in place. They seemed barely able to contain the power of the Warlord. Its head reached almost to the ceiling of the bay, many decks in height above Krezoc. *Salvator's* majesty transcended its surroundings. The *Nuntius Mortis* seemed smaller than the weapon it transported. The god-machine was a legend. It had survived millennia, and was shrouded by the ghosts of history. The ghosts were summoned and held by the death-black and death-white colours of the Pallidus Mor. The Titan was shadow turned adamantine. It was bone, the very skeleton, the core, of war itself. To draw near to the god-machine was to dare to touch the centuries of battle, to declare a willingness and presumption to become part of them.

*Do I dare?* she asked herself. The question was ritualistic. Her entire life up to this moment had been the answer. She asked the question to mark the moment.

When she stopped at the feet of *Ferrum Salvator*, the Warlord filled her consciousness. The din of the loading bay and the presence of the other moderati dropped away. There was only the Titan. There was only the colossal form of her destiny.

She had been inside Warhounds. She had studied hololithic plans of Warlords. She had never crossed the threshold of one before. When an enginarium serf opened the door in the heel of *Salvator's* right foot and the moderati entered, a jolt ran down her spine. It was fate, coming into being. The journey up the grav lifts through the leg and torso was a blur. Impressions of massiveness in grey, of immense cables and the meshing of monolithic constructions, surrounded her and followed her to her position in the plasma blastgun carapace pod. Her station was cramped. There was just enough space for her to enter and sit in the moderati throne. A hemisphere of armourglass showed her the line of the blastguns barrel and the view beyond. What she could see, she could destroy.

She sat forwards in the throne. The mechadendrites in its back hung down,

inert, awaiting power and the signal to link up to her. She waited, watching the activity in the bay. The sound was muted by the shielding. She was looking down with the perspective of *Salvator* now. With the eyes of a god. The ship's crew and the servitors were minute figures. They scurried before the Titans, their actions insignificant, their individuality gone. They were a collective whose movements and shape were determined by currents and eddies.

Krezoc pictured viewing a battlefield in the same manner. Seeing the full picture, the broad movements and tactics of the enemy. And striking to destroy not an individual, but an army.

Balzhan had boarded the Warlord before his moderati. Now his voice came over the vox unit in Krezoc's pod. 'Prepare for the drop to Ahenum IV. Moderati, execute links.'

Years of training, decades of obsession, of hearing a call she could not answer until now, every facet of her life and being - they had taken her to this moment. The unreachable thing that created the absence at the centre of her existence was beyond her grasp no longer. It waited on the other side of the next few heartbeats.

Krezoc sat back in the throne. The mechadendrites came to life. They reached through the slits in the back of her uniform to the ports running from the base of her spine to the top of her skull. They linked her to *Ferrum Salvator*.

There was no transition. She was sitting in the blastgun pod, and then she was plunged into the neurosphere of the manifold. As her consciousness entered the realm of the machine-spirit, her body jerked. Her eyes widened, though in the first moments of the connection they no longer saw the physical world. A sigh escaped her lips. For the first time in her life, she knew completion. The training simulations had taught her the skills she would need to negotiate the manifold. They could not prepare her for the reality of the machine-spirit.

*Ferrum Salvator* was a predator beyond measure. It roiled, it stormed, it hunted for an enemy. Balzhan's presence in the manifold was an iron grip on the reins, wrestling the machine-spirit into compliance. Its orders were absolute. Krezoc's will conformed itself to them. Balzhan's orders were her own. The other moderati were there too. They were recognisable, but they were also the cells of a single gigantic organism. All wills were one, and each will had its own identity. Krezoc's design was Balzhan's as it concerned the operation of the blastgun. She was herself, and she was the collective, and they were all part of *Ferrum Salvator*. Her flesh was a distant afterthought. Her true body was the Warlords, even though she was a small portion of it. She was the idea of a limb.

The machine-spirit was disturbed. It pulled against Balzhan's control. It was suspicious of him, uncertain about the other minds he brought with him. Krezoc swam deeper into the fusion with *Salvator*. The totality of her self was open to the god-machine. It saw the triumph of her being made whole. The triumph was part of her, and so it became part of the Warlord. She reached beyond the plasma blastgun into the greater being of *Salvator*. The effort was as instinctive and unthought as the flow of blood. She spread her grip, held tight, and pushed the machine-spirit towards Balzhan.

She sensed the princeps' hold on the Warlord strengthen. The machine-spirit's resistance dropped. It sought prey through his direction.

Balzhan's satisfaction coursed through the manifold. So did the surprise of the other moderati.

As she had been trained, Krezoc split her awareness into two conjoined halves. She existed in the manifold and in the pod. She saw the world again. She was Krezoc and she was *Ferrum Salvator*. She was, at last, the thing she had been destined to become since birth. The centre of her existence had form, and she had claimed it. And she gave praise to the Ommissiah.

Moments after she began to see once more, the view outside the blastgun pod disappeared. The monumental walls of the Warlord's drop coffin closed around it, sealing it in an iron night, from which it would emerge to hunt.

Ahenum IV was a death world. Twice the size of Terra, it had never been colonised. Its gravity was crushing, and its atmosphere was a toxic stew. Its land masses crawled with life, however. Dense jungles of leathery, carnivorous flora covered the lower slopes of the chains of active volcanoes. The fauna that thrived in the cauldron of the jungles was as savage as the vegetation. Animals and plants were locked in an endless war of predation. The evolutionary arms race of life on Ahenum IV had created a planet of monsters.

It was the ideal training ground. The Titan crews would never lack for prey, and the prey fought back well. Many of its forms had become gigantic in the struggle to reach the top of the food chain.

Balzhan's maniple moved from the drop site on a designated line curved around the base of a volcano and then arrowed straight to the coast. The journey to the sea and back would take three days. The first day was a bloody run over the land through torrential rain. The jungle reacted to the incursion of the Titans with fury. Fern-like growths fifty feet tall bent their trunks with the violence of reeds in a hurricane. They slashed at the god-machines. Their fronds could cut

plasteel, and they exuded a viscous, adhesive acid. They could have torn a regiment of the Astra Militarum apart in a matter of hours. The Titans snapped and flattened the trunks. Void shields flickered under the assault of thousands of razored tips. The march left a wake of crushed, burned jungle.

The beasts of Ahenum IV hurled themselves at the invaders. Feathered serpents a hundred feet long wrapped themselves around the god-machines. There were horned quadrupeds, their scaled hide sprouting long tufts of ropey hair. They were large enough to have swallowed grox whole, and they charged through the seething jungle to hurl their masses of hundreds of tonnes at the Titans. The impact could overturn a Warhound.

The Pallidus Mor burned the jungle with weapons fire. Turrets rotated to track and destroy the constant attacks. Missile flights cratered the land ahead, incinerating scores of monsters with every blast. There was no surcease. The beasts and plants of Ahenum IV did not come in waves. They were a constant tide. And the Titans turned them to ash.

The rhythm of kills came to Krezoc like breathing. She saw the approaching threats through her eyes and through the auspex signals in the manifold. Balzhan's orders, his will, and her combat decisions entwined to become a single, composite strand of action. *Ferrum Salvator* was too large to be threatened by Ahenum IV's monstrous life, and so it marched at the back of the maniple, exterminating at long range, clearing the way for the three Warhounds and the Reaver, blasting the threats that the other crews missed.

She noticed the irregularity of the course of *Canis Falcatos* just before Balzhan voxed Werreth. The Warhound was loping further and further ahead of the formation. War-hunger came with the command of the small, ferocious Titans. Their missions were reconnaissance and harassing attacks. They were meant to be aggressive. But *Falcatos* was ranging out of sight not just of the maniple, but of its fellow Warhounds.

'*Princeps Werreth,*' Balzhan said. '*Re-join the formation at once.*'

There was no answer.

'*Princeps Werreth, if you do not comply immediately, you will be guilty of insubordination.*'

'*Princeps Balzhan,*' Werreth's voice came back, excited, '*there has been a recent subsidence east of the maniple's trajectory. We have detected signs of a structure. We are—*'

Balzhan cut him off. '*Note the coordinates and relay them. Return now.*'

There was no pause in *Salvator's* assault as Balzhan spoke to Werreth. The

Warlord took another earth-shaking step in the heavy gravity. The fused agency of Titan and Balzhan and Krezoc vaporised the midsection of a serpent with a plasma salvo. The monster fell into halves that jerked so violently they uprooted giant palms, then stilled. Its jaws dropped from the barrel of *Nox Terrorem's* gatling blaster.

There was a pause, though, before Werreth's answer. Krezoc read the silence and the position change of *Canis Falcatos'* transponder. The Warhound had edged further east. Werreth's silence before answering was long enough for a few more steps. He was fighting for time, pushing to the very limit of obedience. He smelled glory, she thought. He had found the way to give greater meaning to the mission. Training was not enough for him.

'*Relaying data,*' Werreth said. Coordinates streamed into the manifold, along with preliminary readings on the structure. It was not a natural formation. It was not human, either.

Werreth did not say he was turning back. He was clearly hoping Balzhan would alter his commands based on the new information.

Krezoc would never tolerate so undisciplined an officer in her maniple. The impulse was hers, not fed to her by Balzhan's anger. Though she heard his rage in his next words.

'*Trainee,*' he shouted, adding the sting of humiliation to his command. '*Reverse course or—*'

He never completed the threat. From the direction *Canis Falcatos* had gone, north east and just over the horizon, light flashed.

Killing light. The light of plasma beams, and then the light of nuclear death. The signature of *Falcatos* vanished from the manifold. The shock-wave flattened the jungle. It raced over the horizon and slammed into the maniple. It killed the monsters of Ahenum IV for miles around.

'*Tighten formation,*' Balzhan ordered. '*Warhounds, identify the enemy, but remain within range of covering fire. We march to war.*'

*Ferrum Salvator* increased its speed, heading towards the sky-burning fireball.

*Canis Immitis* and *Canis Glaciem* advanced with more caution. The enemy came faster. The shout of '*Eldar!*' that came from *Immitis* was too late to serve as a warning.

The xenos Titan was almost as tall as *Salvator*, but it was much slighter in build. It was a thing of long lines and slashing speed. Its armour was verdant green and pearl white. It appeared to dance through the jungle, defying the crushing gravity. It moved more like a living thing than a construct.

*Designation: Phantom*, Krezoc thought. The Collegia's instruction in xenos machines rushed to the forefront of her mind at the same moment as the auspex readings and analysis uploaded into the manifold. She knew its presumed capabilities. The presumptions were vague. There was too much speculation, not enough that was concrete.

The Phantom flickered in Krezoc's sight. Its auspex signal was smeared. There was an insubstantial quality to the Titan, as if it truly were a ghost. Its attacks were real enough. Its carapace weapons sent missiles and plasma beams at *Nox Terrorem*. The long, tapering barrels of its arm cannons turned on *Salvator*. The eldar fired while moving at full speed, strafing Reaver and Warlord with crystalline precision. Two beams hit *Salvator* full in the centre of its torso. One was plasma shot, faster, purer and more intense than anything in the Imperial arsenal. The blinding light was transcendent; a thing of unspeakable beauty burned through the Warlord's void shields and into its armour. The other beam tore the materium open. The warp lashed out through the rent, ignoring shields, and peeled back the Warlord's hull with the corrosive touch of the unreal.

*Ferrum Salvator's* weapons blazed in answer. Volcano gun and quake cannon fired salvos that should have turned the Phantom into a melted ruin. Apocalypse rockets and blastgun plasma shots converged on the same spot. The Warhounds and the Reaver joined in the barrage. The bombardment passed through the Phantom, leaving it untouched, and levelled square miles of jungle behind it.

'*Appearances are lies*,' Balzhan warned the maniple. '*Widen the field of fire*.'

The Phantom seemed to anticipate the move. It jerked back and forth erratically but always with the same venomous grace. The lie of its image lured the Imperial barrage, which destroyed nothing but more jungle. Its presence solidified for a moment, hundreds of yards from where it had seemed to be, in the interval when *Salvator's* heavy weapons charged and reloaded. The Phantom swept the maniple with its beam weapons. The light sliced through the armour of *Canis Glaciem* like a blade through flesh and decapitated the Warhound.

Krezoc rotated the turret and aimed the blastgun at the Phantom, but already the figure that had been motionless for a moment had become an illusion. The auspex readings suggested the target was to the left of its apparent location.

It wasn't.

Krezoc pulled herself away from the neuro-data commands of the manifold. She looked not at the Phantom, but at the battlefield. She considered the relative positions of the Pallidus Mor Titans, and how they would have to be attacked most effectively for a single opponent to destroy them all. And in her mind's eye,

she saw where the Phantom *had* to be.

Balzhan had given her targeting discretion while he and the moderati majoris concentrated on blanketing the region with the cataclysm of the heavy weapons. Krezoc turned the blastgun away from the image of the Phantom, working against instinct, following reason instead.

*You need to be here*, she thought, and fired.

The air rippled and burned. Explosions rocked an absence, and for a moment there were two Phantoms.

*Ferrum Salvator's* machine-spirit roared triumphantly in Krezoc's soul. Balzhan reacted instantly. The volcano gun fired. A blast of overwhelming las brutality melted its way through the elongated skull of the eldar machine. The Phantoms' movements froze. The centre of the head exploded, and its shards fell, burning, to the ground. The Titan, a masterwork of embodied art and mourning, stood for a few moments more, its own sepulchre, before the Pallidus Mor reduced it to slag.

Krezoc looked across the dim light of her quarters. It would be easy to put the memories aside there. The triumph in the battlefield. The confirmation of her destiny.

But there was something else. There always was. It had not troubled her at the time. Now, with the passage of decades and the loss of so many comrades, it was the moment she kept revisiting.

When the Phantom was destroyed, the maniple moved on to see what Werreth had found. To see why the Phantom had been there.

The eldar shrine had been exposed by chance tectonic action. It had survived the furies of Ahenum IV for millennia. The tripartite arch vanished in seconds under Imperial fire. The moment of its destruction was preserved for Krezoc in the amber of memory. She did not question the necessity of the purge. No xenos trace could be permitted to exist on an Imperial world. And yet.

And yet.

The shrine had been a memory too. How many thousands of years had it kept alive, for the eldar, the thought of what had been lost?

What, then, of the Pallidus Mor losses? What was there to mark the passing of its warriors and the destruction of its ancient god-machines? Nothing but craters and blackened earth.

She and the living portion of the legio would have to be the testament. For as long as they could be.

*Is that enough?* she wondered.  
*It will have to be.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David Annandale** is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos* and the Primarchs novel *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar*.

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This eBook edition published in 2017 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Cover illustration by Akim Kaliberda.

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