

The image is a book cover for 'Warhammer 40,000: Bellathonis and the Shadow King' by Andy Chambers. The background is a dark, atmospheric scene featuring a large, ornate, metallic helmet with a purple and green color scheme. The helmet has a prominent 'V' shape on its forehead and a cross-like symbol on its face. To the right, a sword with a green and gold hilt and a blade with intricate patterns is visible. The overall lighting is dramatic, with highlights on the metallic surfaces and deep shadows in the background.

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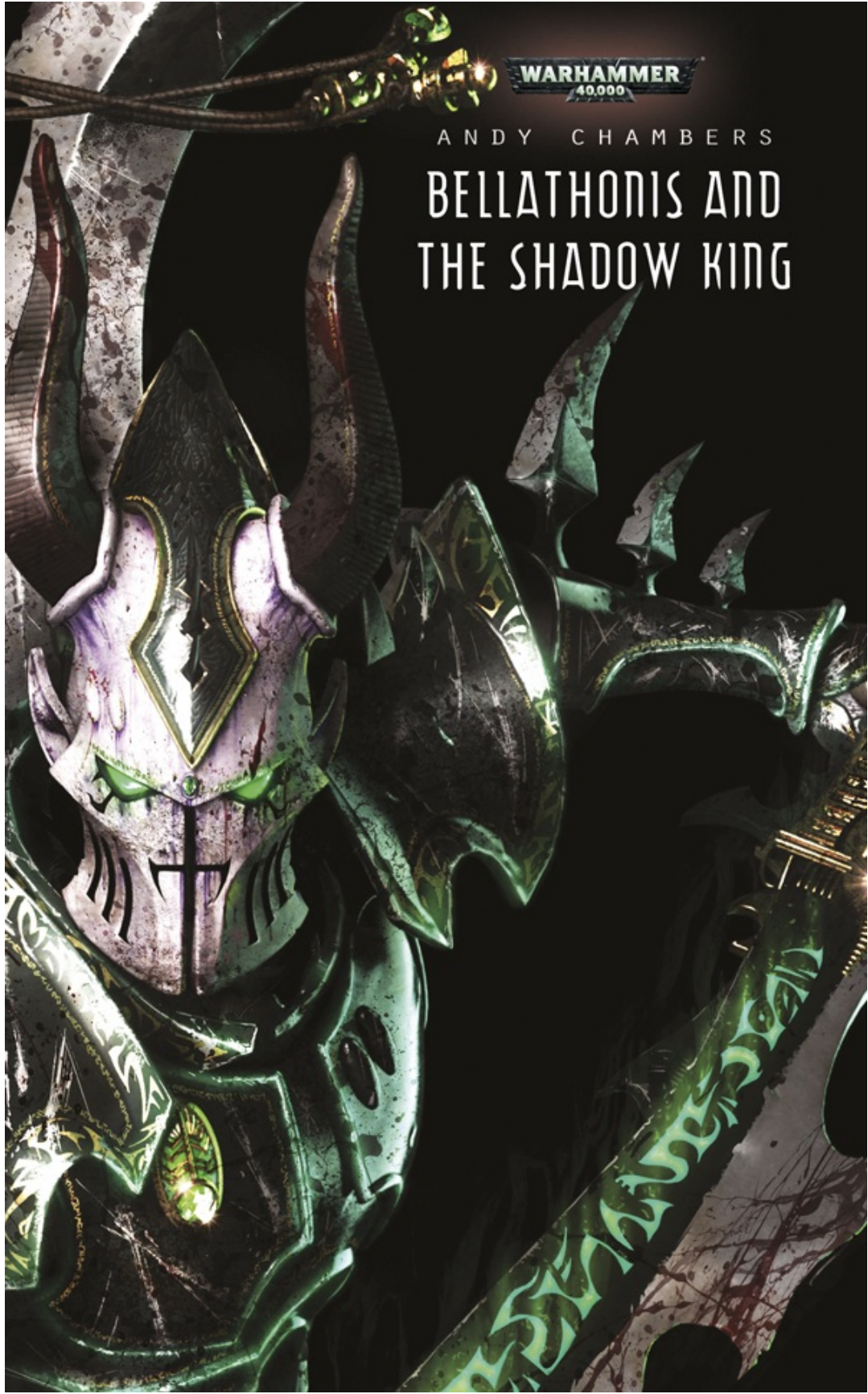
BELLATHONIS AND THE SHADOW KING

The logo for Warhammer 40,000, featuring the word "WARHAMMER" in a stylized font above the number "40,000".

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Andy Chambers

Even among the jaded citizenry of Commorragh, the Aviaries of Archon Malixian, whom some unkind souls call ‘Malixian the Mad,’ are a place of dark wonder. In the Aviaries sculpted parklands of exquisitely-cut topiary and soft green sward extend between steep-walled structures of a thousand different designs. At first glance there appears to be a host of strangely-wrought cathedrals, tenements, domes and towers rising from the sumptuous gardens, a city reproduced in miniature within the greater city of Commorragh. Closer inspection reveals that every tower and dome is a cage, and that their inhuman inhabitants are all captives of Archon Malixian’s singular obsession.

The cages of the Aviaries range from simple pagoda-like cages of gilded bars to immense wire spheres, leaded glass cubes and cones of interwoven bone. Their numbers beggar belief, each one a skyscraper-sized habitat for a unique winged life form plucked from some far-off world. Above it all lies Malixian’s eyrie, a single spike of silver thrust up to scrape the heavens. The spike is tipped with a silver sphere a hundred paces across. It is a structure more of empty space than metal yet it has landing points and unrailed walkways for the convenience of those that must stride upon two legs. Here Archon Malixian holds his court.

It was to the Court of Malixian that the Master Haemonculus Bellathonis fled when he was driven out of Lower Metzuh. On this day, not long after his arrival, Bellathonis and a pair of his wrack servants emerged from the modest tower Malixian had graciously granted him as a place of sanctuary. It was the first time Bellathonis had taken his servants into the parklands between the cages and the wracks seemed nervous, weighed down as they were with hooked poles and grapnel chains.

To enter the Aviaries was to enter an alien world where the air was filled with the competing squawks, songs, trills and cries from a billion different species of avian. Within the gigantic cages wings flapped and fluttered endlessly, the polished beaks and beady eyes of creatures from a million different worlds

flashing in the light. Archon Malixian's greatest passion was the flying predator in all its forms, from slow-flying arcotheurs to lithe stingwings, from majestic white ruhks to darting shaderavens. He had dedicated his long life to amassing his collection from all corners of the galaxy and even in Commorragh it remained worthy of the term 'exotic.'

The master haemonculus found what he was looking for just a few hundred paces away from his new quarters. Near the base of a golden-barred tower filled with crimson pteraclaws he directed his wracks to pry up an ornate grating set into the turf. An impressively foul stench emanated from the shaft that was revealed; so impressive that Bellathonis had to inflict some sharp physical punishments to induce his wracks to climb down it.

The master haemonculus stood and waited, passing the time by watching the pteraclaws cavort on leathery pinions hundreds of metres above him. The reptilian predators seemed particularly agitated for some reason. They kept forming into cawing spirals, only to break up and reform moments later. Bellathonis only understood the import of all the activity when none other than Archon Malixian himself came strolling around the corner of the pteraclaws' cage and directly towards him.

The archon was tall and long-legged. He wore an iridescent cloak of feathers and walked with a curiously stiff-legged gait that gave him the undeniable aspect of a great raptor stalking forward. A group of heavily-armed warriors followed Archon Malixian at a respectful distance, their heads constantly swivelling as they searched for potential threats. Bellathonis was acutely conscious of the open grating on the ground behind him. It was a mute accusation that Malixian's newest guest was already poking his nose into places he probably shouldn't.

'Greetings, Bellathonis. I trust you are settling into your new demesne satisfactorily?' Archon Malixian said breezily enough as he came closer.

'I am, although I still lack certain materials to begin my work for you,' Bellathonis replied cautiously. 'I must confess I find myself surprised to see you afoot in the parks, my archon. Certain doubtless wild and unfounded rumours purported you had foresworn the touch of doleful earth once and for all.'

Malixian's eyes twinkled merrily. 'Oh it was so for a few centuries – I thought that to truly appreciate my magnificent collection that I must become more like them by endlessly sailing the upper airs and spurning the ground.'

'May I ask what changed?' Bellathonis said promptly. He was pleased to be able to so easily divert Malixian's attention away from the accusatory grate behind him.

‘I came to understand that many gifted with wings also touch upon the ground often. Xhaloic butchers fly only when they move from one ambush spot to another. Myvigian death runners certainly glide aloft to locate their prey they but choose to land to chase it down. So you see, the true airborne predator does not spurn the earth but uses it at his convenience – as do I.’

‘And what is it that brings you forth into your beautiful gardens this day, my archon?’ Bellathonis asked.

Malixian’s smiling face clouded suddenly at his words.

‘Your questions are becoming tiresome, Bellathonis. I am master here and I will pass to and fro as I see fit without recourse to your inquisitions,’ Malixian said icily. A moment later the archon was all smiles again and Bellathonis experienced a curious roiling sensation as he saw how quickly the transformations of Malixian’s mood came and went. The archon truly was insane.

‘I came looking for you, you silly haemonculus,’ Malixian continued. ‘Just what do you think you’re doing?’

Bellathonis glanced at the open grate as if only just remembering its existence. ‘The materials I mentioned as lacking – my wracks are below searching for them. I needed basic clay to work with, bio-mass if you will, and had none readily available.’

Malixian’s head cocked to one side in a mannerism that could only have been copied from the avians he loved so much. Bellathonis realised the archon was waiting for a better explanation.

‘Corpse-fishing,’ the Haemonculus said with some relish. ‘My wracks are below in the waste-tubes dredging them for any usable flesh and bone that may float by.’

Malixian grinned widely and then began laughing in an uproarious hooting that his attendant bodyguards dutifully joined. Bellathonis smiled thinly as he waited to find out the joke being played at his expense. Malixian eventually wiped his eyes and calmed himself to mere chuckling.

‘Hoo, I’m sorry Bellathonis, your servants won’t find anything of the sort down there. Dead flesh doesn’t get thrown out in the waste here at my aviaries.’

Malixian turned to gesture up at the crimson pteraclaws. As he did so, the reptilian creatures whirled upwards into another tight spiral inside their golden cage. The whipping and snapping of their blood-coloured wings was deafening.

‘Everything gets fed to something in here,’ Malixian said over the noise. ‘Bone and sinew, grist and offal – it’s all a delicacy to something in my collection. In

fact some of my charges will only eat what's been excreted by other ones.'

'Then I ask that you forgive my trespass, my archon,' Bellathonis said humbly. 'My unforgiveable ignorance led me to believe I would be performing a useful service for you by unblocking the pipes while at the same time gaining what I needed to begin my work for you. I was mistaken.'

Malixian waved away the master haemonculus's contrition carelessly. Bellathonis was fascinated to see how the pteraclaws swirled back and forth in response to the gesture. The creatures definitely recognized the mad archon; doubtless they expected to be fed when he was present.

'I'll have some slaves sent to you later,' the archon said. 'But that isn't why I sought you out. Come and walk with me, Bellathonis.'

They wandered among immaculately cut hedges and across lawns as soft as a newborn's blanket while Malixian told Bellathonis what he wanted of him. By the time the mad archon was finished Bellathonis had begun to wish he had stayed in Lower Metzuh.

As the supreme genetic manipulators, drug distillers and flesh sculptors to be found in the dark city, the skills of individual haemonculi are always in great demand among the Commorrite kabals. To avoid excessive coercion or outright assassination, like-minded haemonculi traditionally band together into covens for mutual benefit and protection. The rivalry between some of these covens extends back for millennia although it must be said disputes between haemonculi tend toward wicked, slowly-maturing schemes rather than paroxysms of outright conflict. The covens demand absolute fealty from their members and always mask their activities with utmost secrecy.

For centuries the haemonculi covens have had their own territories in the razor-edged pits beneath the Core of Commorragh and in those benighted realms even death itself offers no escape. Oubliettes and torture cells exist in the pits that can defer the point of termination indefinitely. There are also haemonculi who live to exercise their arts with surgical precision in pursuit of finding the perfect scream. It is an unlucky soul that finds itself in the pits of the haemonculi, and woe to any that should stray into them without the protection of a coven.

It was into these pits that Bellathonis was forced to come at Malixian's behest. The master haemonculus crept along narrow walkways over black gulfs and through twisting corridors piled high with detritus as he wormed down into the guts of the dark city. As he progressed he looked for signs of a spiral symbol on

the corrosion-stained walls. In some places he found it in faded paint, in others fresh chalk, at other times grim fetishes of twisted bone and sinew in the familiar spiral led him onwards. The symbols led him ever deeper towards the territories of the coven known as the Black Descent.

The covens guarded their territories according to their individual credos: To wander into the pits claimed by the Prophets of Flesh would have been to court mutilation by the most brutal grotesques and vicious chainghoul. Violating the outer seals of the realm of The Hex would have brought a swift doom from mutant pathogens so potent that they lasted only seconds outside those rarified halls. The Black Descent guarded itself with an eternally revolving labyrinth filled with traps of fiendish complexity and diabolic variety.

Each coven had its own method for granting safe passage to its members: The Hex gave precise instructions of the necessary body modifications necessary to survive the attentions of their microscopic pets. The Prophets of Flesh used command phrases to temporarily pacify their ravening golems. In the case of the Black Descent, the coven's secrets came in the form of the mnemonic directions necessary to pass unscathed through their tortuous labyrinth to reach preset 'interstices' at particular locations. Progression (descent, to be most specific) through the coven's ranks included further instruction on navigating the deeper and more inaccessible paths of the Black Descent's demesne.

Bellathonis had gained a reputation as a renegade while he was in Lower Metzuh, a master haemonculus unaffiliated with either coven or kabal who was open to hire by all. In reality he was a member of one of the oldest and most powerful covens in Commorragh. At least he was in theory, anyway, although that was a matter of some dispute in Bellathonis's own mind. Nevertheless, technically Bellathonis was still a member of the Black Descent and Malixian had managed to discover the fact. The mad archon's demand was doomed to rejection in Bellathonis's opinion, but he had scarcely been in a position to refuse to carry it to his supposed superiors in the coven.

Bellathonis had achieved the rank of master haemonculus in the Black Descent, and so he knew a handful of safe routes through the maze to a few specified interstices. These were mere meeting points where he could possibly find and consult with others of the coven. Only his superiors – those positioned 'lower' than himself within the Black Descent – knew the paths to the most important vaults and laboratories, the personal quarters of the Coven leaders and the innermost sanctums. Thus, when Bellathonis entered the labyrinth on this occasion he began to perform the five hundred and twenty-seven steps required

to reach the ninth interstices, the Chamber of Attenuation.

The master haemonculus concentrated carefully as he moved through a complex pattern: forward, back and side to side. He passed through innocent-seeming corridors of rough stone and areas which were pitch dark even to his altered eyesight. A single misstep in the labyrinth was liable to plunge him into the guts of a gravity trap or straight through an almost invisible monofilament web. The variety and lethality of the labyrinth's traps was dizzying. Blood wasp nests and mutagenic acid sprays were behind the walls, agoniser wings lurked overhead and semi-sentient venom clouds lay in wait, spread a molecule thick over the walls.

Unaccustomed sweat beaded Bellathonis's pallid face as he counted his way through convolutions as complicated as dance-steps. Deep down, he just knew that he had passed within a few paces of the ninth interstices a dozen times by now, but that his rank precluded him knowing the most direct routes. He finally emerged from the circuitous routes he had followed into an oblong chamber with an arched ceiling. Along each wall, pillars of glossy metal separated darkened archways identical to the one from which he had just entered. The chamber was bare except for a large silver gong and striker hanging in its center. Bellathonis stepped over to the gong and lifted the striker to ring it three times. Then he waited.

By being obedient and diligent, Bellathonis could eventually expect to descend to the rank of secret master, and then hidden master. Within a century or two more of faithful service, and making the correct friends, Bellathonis might eventually progress to the rank of intimate secretary and be placed in a position to directly serve someone with real power in the coven. In another millennia he might become worthy of consideration as a master elect of nine and wield just a little of that power for himself. In a lifetime, in fact probably over several lifetimes, it might be possible to descend as far as patriarch noctis, an office so far down in the Black Descent that it was ruled in turn by ranks that were completely unknown to a mere master like Bellathonis.

After several minutes a figure wearing viridian robes of an intimate secretary appeared through an archway on the far side of the chamber. The secretary grimaced at the sight of Bellathonis, contempt etching his sharp features.

'You over-indulge yourself,' the intimate secretary spat. 'Three strikes are only made for matters of import.'

'I have a matter of great import to discuss; in fact, one that exceeds your authority,' Bellathonis replied evenly. 'So run along and fetch the master elect

like a good secretary.’

The intimate secretary shot Bellathonis a look that was pure poison before he turned and retreated through a different archway. As soon as the secretary had gone, Bellathonis discreetly slipped a small vial into his palm and loosened its stopper between his thumb and forefinger. The results made the master haemonculus blink rapidly in response as he hid away the vial again. He was struck by a sudden fear that the master elect would come upon him so evidently discomfited and did all he could to ignore his smarting eyes until the effect subsided a few minutes later. He needn't have worried as the better part of an hour dragged by with no sign of the master elect. Bellathonis began to fear that the secretary would return with only a flat refusal if he troubled to return at all.

‘Matters of import,’ a new voice said without preamble. It was horrible voice, one with a tenor akin to the screech of bonesaws and shriek of drills as it dissected each word. Bellathonis knew it to be the voice of the master elect of nine. He looked about and noticed a deeper darkness that had appeared in another of the archways – a shadowy occlusion field that was hiding the master elect from even Bellathonis’s altered vision.

‘Master elect,’ Bellathonis bowed smoothly to the formless shadow. ‘I have come to the coven bearing word from the august Archon Malixian on a matter of import.’ The master haemonculus stepped back a little as he bowed as though in deference to the master elect’s authority. In fact, he needed the master elect to enter the chamber fully.

The shadow remained where it was. ‘Malixian, mad archon of the Aviaries and now your patron also,’ the dreadful voice grated. ‘Unfortunate for you to be driven into his arms by disputes in the Lower Courts.’

‘“Unfortunate” is a term barely sufficient,’ Bellathonis snapped. ‘I was assiduous about supporting all of the petty archons equally and without favour. Some of the fools still took it upon themselves to burn my workshop and kill my servants.’

‘Yet you only return to the Black Descent after finding patronage in the satellite realms without reference to the coven’s desires. This could be seen as a disrespectful act.’

‘Or an independent one,’ Bellathonis replied petulantly. ‘I’ve told you before that I need no help from the coven to find patronage for my art.’

The shadow swept forward a pace. ‘And yet here you return for new purpose. So speak it.’

Bellathonis squirmed internally. The master elect was absolutely correct that

he had only returned because he needed something from the coven. This was the point of decision, he had to persuade the master elect to do what was necessary or else return to Malixian empty-handed. At best that would mean Bellathonis being evicted from his new home. Other possibilities included ending his life in the gizzard of some exotic predatory avian.

‘It has come to Archon Malixian’s attention that the Patriarch Noctis Zykleiades has come into possession of an extremely rare and unusual flying creature. As Malixian’s passions are well known, it should come as no surprise that he wishes to add this creature to his collection.’ Bellathonis paused, his mouth dry. The roiling shadow that obscured the master elect remained silent.

‘And so Malixian has asked me to present his offer directly to the patriarch noctis so that a price may be arranged.’

‘Impossible,’ the master elect grated, ‘the patriarch will not see you. He will not haggle like a slave over his possessions. Least of all will he surrender a prize so difficult to find as the one to which you are alluding. Return to Malixian and inform him of this.’

Bellathonis sighed, his hopes dashed. ‘Then I fear my patronage from Malixian will be at an end. The archon was most insistent that I must at least gain Zykleiades’s ear and ensure the offer was presented to him. I will lose my new facilities in the Aviaries and be left wandering the streets of Metzuh.’

‘A presence in the Aviaries has some small value to the coven,’ the master elect ruminated after a long pause. ‘You may tell Malixian that his offer will be conveyed to the patriarch noctis. There is still no doubt that it will be rejected.’

‘My gratitude, master elect, for that small mercy. I will return and let Archon Malixian know what has transpired.’ Bellathonis started backing away towards the arch he had used to enter the chamber.

‘One matter remains,’ the master elect said, his words stopping Bellathonis in his tracks. ‘You will be assigned a secret master to join you in the Aviaries and oversee your work. You have been granted an excessive amount of latitude for too long.’

‘As you command, master elect.’ Bellathonis bowed, but the master elect was already gone.

Bellathonis waited for a dozen heartbeats before crossing the chamber to the archway the master elect had used. After pausing for a moment longer, the master haemonculus took a deep breath and plunged through it.

Bellathonis felt a thrilling mix of fear and excitement as he entered part of the

labyrinth he had never been into before. Unsurprisingly, the walls, the flagstones and the feel of oppressive darkness were virtually identical. A simple, straight corridor led away into shadows, but Bellathonis had no doubt that it held devices every bit as deadly as those he had already passed. The master haemonculus examined the scene minutely while he allowed his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Before him, a faint luminescence began to resolve itself, a wispy trail hanging in the air that zigged and zagged its way down the corridor. The master haemonculus smiled triumphantly and began to follow the trail that had been unwittingly left behind by the master elect.

The trail was being created by some very special microbes Bellathonis had released into the Chamber of Attenuation. He had modified the tiny creatures to excrete light of a very specific wavelength whenever they were moved, specifically light of a wavelength that was invisible to the naked eye but visible to his own altered sight. Bellathonis's initial dispersal of the microbes in the chamber had almost blinded him at first. Once the master elect had entered the chamber he became contaminated by tiny traitors that revealed his every move – but only if you knew how to look for it.

The threads of light drew Bellathonis deeper into the labyrinth. It was an insanely risky plan. The master elect might not go straight to the patriarch noctis; Bellathonis could lose the trail and become stranded in the trap-filled darkness; he might encounter another member of the Black Descent who was well aware that Bellathonis had no right to be so far into the labyrinth. Even if the master elect went directly to the patriarch noctis, there was no guarantee Bellathonis would find the creature Malixian wanted in the same location, nor that he could secure it if he did.

A reckless smile played around the master haemonculus's thin lips as he continued following the trail. He had decided that the labyrinthine nature of the Black Descent's territory was entirely symptomatic of the coven as a whole. The coven was so obsessed with secrecy and obfuscation that its members spent all their time traversing mazes of their own creation. Preservation of the status quo appeared to be the only real goal. All the secretive ranks and rituals were merely methods to turn the coven's membership into pliant servants.

The Black Descent had proved too stratified, too oblique and too conservative for Bellathonis's tastes. He had long craved to break away from the coven completely and Archon Malixian had unwittingly supplied exactly the impetus that Bellathonis had needed. A theft from a patriarch noctis's collection deep inside the coven's supposedly impenetrable labyrinth would be a fitting final

gesture.

The light trail crossed five corridor junctions before it abruptly came to an end. Bellathonis froze as a sense of dread gripped him. The master elect could have discovered the contamination on his person or some invisible barrier might have registered the tiny creatures as invaders and destroyed them automatically. Whatever had occurred, the trail was broken from this point forward and it would be suicide to proceed. He would have to turn back.

As Bellathonis gazed dolefully at the area where the trail ceased he noticed something unusual. A few wan smears of luminescence clung to the wall at shoulder height. On instinct, Bellathonis reached out and placed his fingertips against the dimly glowing patches. The corridor wall split open beneath his touch.

The stone peeled back smoothly and silently to reveal a short corridor beyond. Bellathonis's pulse quickened when he saw that this corridor was both broader and lower than the ones he was accustomed to seeing throughout the rest of the labyrinth. The hazy trail of light was visible again now moving arrow-straight along the corridor and through an archway at the end of it. From beyond the arch Bellathonis caught the grating tones of the master elect's voice moving further away. He smirked to hear the deferential undertone in the master elect's usual cacophony; the patriarch noctis must be with him.

The voice of the master elect dwindled away and vanished entirely. Bellathonis stalked forward noiselessly on the balls of his feet to the archway. He hid behind it and peeped cautiously through into the area beyond. The way led into a series of wide, low rooms interconnected with another via more archways and short flights of steps. Rich furnishings were apparent throughout the chambers: there were spindly-looking chairs and tables of metal and carved bone, hide-bound books and alchemical apparatus gleamed on shelves, mosaics of dark gems glittered from the walls, rich furs and exotic skins covered the floors.

The master elect's trail led away to the left, but Bellathonis broke from following it to investigate the rooms further. He was sure that he had now entered the hidden chambers of the patriarch noctis, presumably his reception rooms or audience chambers. No guards or slaves were to be seen anywhere. No doubt the patriarch regarded them as unnecessary inside his inviolable sanctum and an undesirable security risk. Bellathonis chuckled at the thought. He mounted some steps and stopped dead at what he saw.

The room was octagonal with entryways on three other sides. The remaining four walls were decorated with displays of crude-looking weapons and armour that had the look of artefacts made by the slave races. Bellathonis's attention was instantly drawn to what lay in the centre of the room. A hip-high plinth supported a cage that was roughly the size and shape of a torso. Inside the cage and completely restrained by its close-set bars was a bird-like creature of a type the master haemonculus had never seen before.

The creature had golden feathers that seemed to glow with an inner light. Wicked claws, as white as alabaster, gripped the perch beneath it. Most intriguingly of all, it had two raptor-like heads that were each blinded in one eye. The remaining black, beady eye in both heads regarded him with fierce intelligence. Even Bellathonis, psychically blunted as he was, could feel the faint fever-heat of psychic power radiating from it.

'Well, you must be the one that Malixian spoke of,' Bellathonis gloated. 'An inquisitor's gene-eagle, no less. He said that barely once in a lifetime does one get separated from its master and captured alive.'

The gene-eagle only hissed in response. When Bellathonis reached out to pick up the cage it snapped its beaks viciously at his fingers. The master haemonculus chuckled again as he plucked up the cage by the ring on its top.

'Now don't be like that,' he admonished. 'I promise you'll like Malixian. He's certainly most anxious to meet you'

As Bellathonis turned to leave, he heard a faint cry, barely more than a whisper, coming from an adjacent room. The master haemonculus became instantly wary and drew a slender, spiral-barrelled pistol from his sleeve. The cry sounded again and Bellathonis's curiosity got the best of him. He moved to look through the arch to where the sound was emanating from.

The adjacent room was almost identical in layout. Instead of slave-made power hammers and force axes on the walls this room displayed sickles, hooks and saw-edged knives that appeared to be carved from metal-laced bone. The plinth in the centre of the room held an upright circle of light within which was splayed the crucified silhouette of a humanoid. It was from this that the faint cries came.

The humanoid's flesh was ink-black and seemed to absorb rather than reflect the light. Its features shifted like oil beneath lank, dangling hair as pale as bone. Manacles at wrist and ankle held the prisoner against glowing tubes that made the circle of light. Where the limbs were closest to the light they were smoking slightly as though the light itself was burning them.

‘Free me... or kill me,’ it whispered.

Bellathonis considered for a moment. ‘Why should I do either when it’s quite delectable just to see you suffer?’ the master haemonculus said. ‘I know what you are, mandrake; you’re one of the shadow blood, a scion of Aelindrach. You’re just the kind of slippery semi-corporeal assassin I’m always warning the younglings about.’

The mandrake’s head came up to turn its shifting features toward the sound of Bellathonis’s voice, needle-sharp teeth glittering for a moment. ‘You are an enemy of Zykliades,’ it whispered. ‘You come as a thief to steal from him. I would kill him for you.’

‘Tempting,’ Bellathonis agreed, ‘but messy. I find that vendettas generate a unique form of energy in the universe, one that is self-sustaining and consumes everything it touches.’

‘I am powerful among my bloodline, a king in the dance of shadows. Where I lead, others will follow. We would end your vendetta before it began.’

Bellathonis shook his head. ‘No, no. Zykliades being dead would only create a new patriarch noctis. I’ve defeated this one already. I’d rather not see him replaced by an unknown and potentially more competent individual.’

‘Then kill me or I will reveal to your enemy all that I have seen and heard about you,’ the shifting, coal-dark face whispered before it sank down again.

‘I haven’t decided anything yet,’ Bellathonis said, ‘but I really should be moving along soon. Before I do, answer me one question. How did you come to be captured and put on display like this?’

‘I was betrayed by my own brother and lured into a trap of Zykliades’s making. Now my brother sits upon my throne of skulls in Aelindrach and Zykliades keeps me alive in order to control him with the threat of my release. Free me, and I will avenge myself on both of the fools!’

‘Here’s a different proposition for you to consider. I free you. You follow me out, ensure I escape the labyrinth successfully and get back to Malixian in one piece to deliver his new pet. After that you do whatever you want – chop off Zykliades’s head if you want, or your brother’s; whatever makes you feel fulfilled. From time to time in the future I might call upon your help if, it proves agreeable to you to give it for a reasonable price. How does that sound?’

‘May Kheradruakh take my head if I ever fail you,’ the mandrake whispered, his voice thick with emotion. ‘Break the light and set me free!’

Bellathonis smiled thinly as he set down the gene-eagle’s cage and made an adjustment to the slender pistol in his other hand. A single high-velocity splinter

from the weapon shattered the circle of light into a shower of tinkling crystal fragments. The moment the light was gone the mandrake seemed to vanish from sight and an icy chill fell across the room. The master haemonculus glanced around, shrugged his narrow shoulders and picked up the eagle cage.

‘I am still here, haemonculus,’ the mandrake’s voice whispered from the shadows, a cold breath against the nape of Bellathonis’s neck. ‘I walk in your footsteps. Leave this place and fear nothing, my blade-soul is hungry. What should I call you, enemy of Zykleiades?’

‘I told you he’s not my enemy, just someone unworthy to be my master, and you can call me Bellathonis. What should I call you, king of shadows?’

‘Xhakoruakh. You should be warned that any master you consider unworthy will become your enemy over time.’

‘All the better reason to be your own master whenever you can.’

Malixian’s eyrie stretched Bellathonis’s normal equanimity where heights were concerned. Tenuous clouds were floating by far below the narrow walkway he was on, the highest cages of the Aviaries thrusting up through them like mountain peaks. The master haemonculus concentrated on keeping his balance against the shifting weight of the eagle’s cage as he walked along the ledge. He had resolutely fought off attempts by minions and flunkies to take the cage from him. Malixian was going to receive the eagle from his own hands and no others.

The eagle had become agitated since entering the Aviaries, hissing and flexing its wings as much as it could within the close confines of the cage. There were times when it seemed to be purposefully trying to throw Bellathonis off the ledge. The haemonculus ignored the attempts and finally made his way to the open balcony where Archon Malixian was amusing himself with some newly hatched Razorwings. At the sight of Bellathonis carrying the cage, Archon Malixian dropped the hatchlings and almost trampled over them in his haste to meet him.

‘Magnificent, magnificent,’ Malixian cooed appreciatively as the eagle tried its best to snap his fingers off.

‘No easy task, my archon,’ Bellathonis said with evident relief to be rid of the thing. ‘I fear I may have made some enemies in my old coven, but my appreciation of your patronage knows no bounds.’

Malixian glanced up from the cage with a look of pure joy on his face. ‘Your old coven can go hang themselves – you know they told me they wanted to send someone here to keep an eye on you? Unreliable they said – well they can stick

this in their gizzard and swallow it.'

Bellathonis smiled wanly. Malixian definitely had his plusses as a patron; the usual Commorrite secrecy and backstabbing seemed totally uninteresting to him. His obsession made him ridiculously easy to manipulate. Staying at the Aviaries might prove truly profitable after all.

'Where will you keep your gene-eagle, my archon?' Bellathonis inquired politely. 'It seems rather small for your capacious accommodations.'

'Keep it?' Malixian said as he lifted the cage up and fumbled with the latch. Bellathonis had a dreadful premonition as the mad archon pulled open the cage door. In a flash the eagle was out of the cage and plummeting away on golden wings that burned like the sun. The glowing speck dwindled rapidly as it dived from Malixian's eyrie towards the Aviaries below. Bellathonis fought back the urge to pummel Malixian about the head.

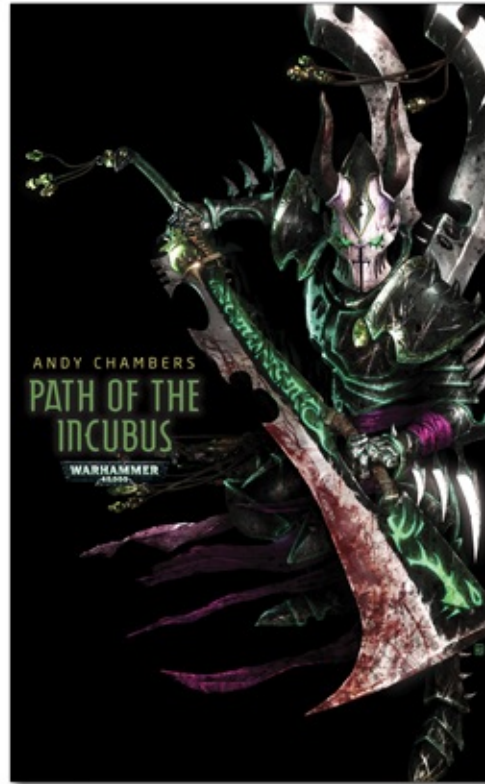
Three white shapes flashed past the balcony in pursuit of the eagle, their wings folded back in perfect v-shapes. The eagle had been fast; these were faster. In a moment they were gone.

'White ruhks,' Malixian said with relish. 'Incredibly hard to find things that are a challenge for them to hunt. That eagle could last them an hour or more. Magnificent.'

Speechless, Bellathonis could only look at the mad archon. Something told him that this was a defining moment in their relationship. The thought of that made Malixian's patronage a considerably less reassuring prospect than it had been a moment ago. Sometimes familiar devils really are the best, Bellathonis reminded himself, and life's lessons come at too high a price.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of the dark eldar series, along with the novel *Survival Instinct* and a host of short stories, ANDY CHAMBERS has more than twenty years' experience creating worlds dominated by war machines, spaceships and dangerous aliens. Andy worked at Games Workshop as lead designer of the Warhammer 40,000 miniatures game for three editions before moving to the PC gaming market. He now lives and works in Nottingham.



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Originally published in the Black Library Live Chapbook 2012.

This edition published in 2013 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK

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ISBN 978-0-85787-945-5

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