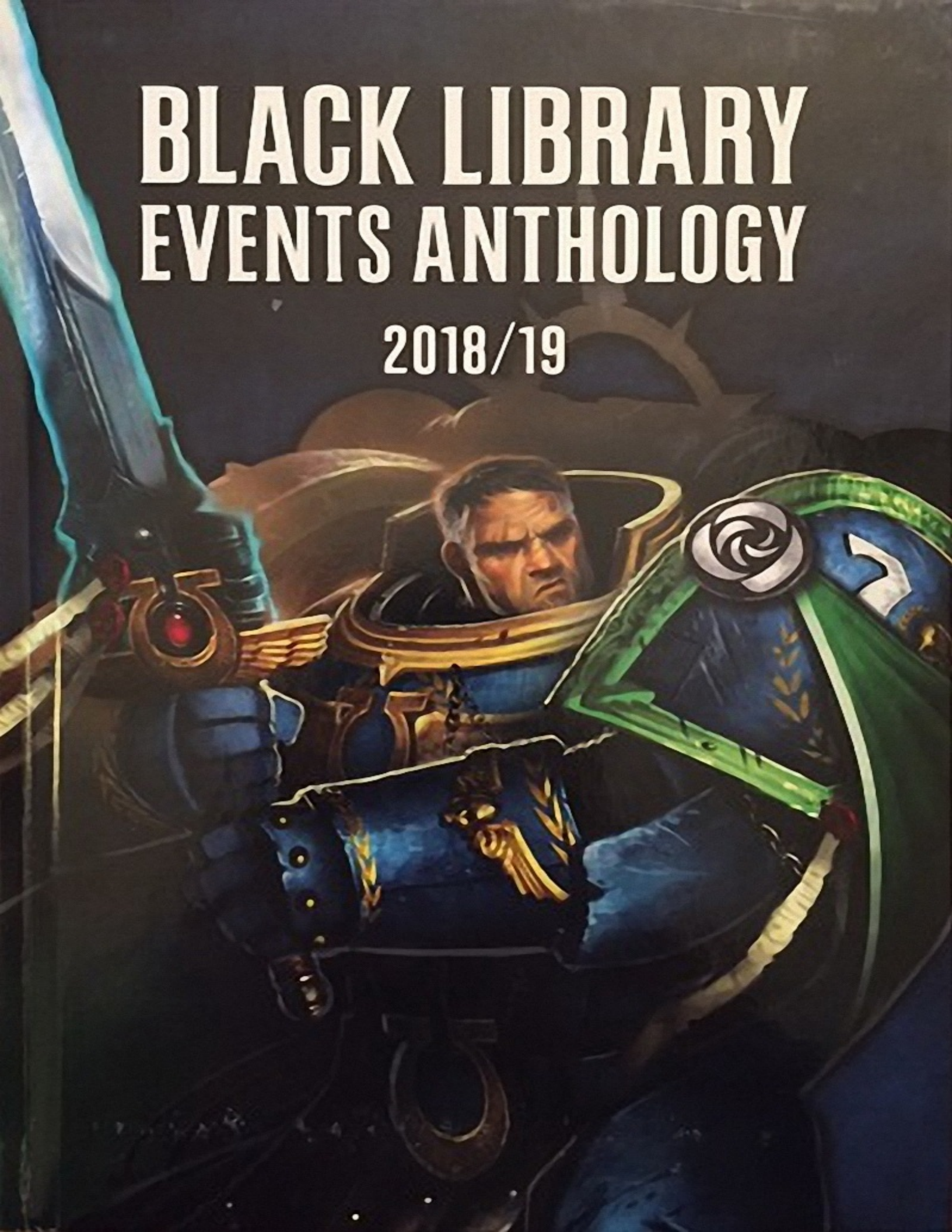


# BLACK LIBRARY EVENTS ANTHOLOGY

2018/19



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# **BLACK LIBRARY EVENTS ANTHOLOGY**

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# **THE NEVERSPIKE**

**DARIUS HINKS**

I glare at the ember-shot tide, listening to the hiss of the waves and the tick of my cooling armour. Escaping death is always so much harder than finding it. Returning from the underworlds has been like another Reforging, another flaying of my soul. My mind is as fractured and distorted as my armour, but slowly my memory pieces itself back together. Every one of my retinue has fallen. My anger flares. They faltered. They failed. They paid the price. 'We fight. We Kill.' My voice cracks with rage. 'We win.'

I am standing on a shoulder of the Slain Peak, three hundred feet above the Ardent Sea, drenched in blood and caked in soot. I look like one of the ruins that litter the foothills below. The Realmgate spat me into the shallows and my warhammers are still smouldering where the god-wrought metal punched through the heat of the Ardent.

I whisper the names of the fallen, in accusation rather than benediction, then turn inland, spilling ash from my blue-green armour. From this height I can see the length of the valley. At the far end is a stormkeep, silhouetted before the hammered-gold sky. Ipsala. Pride of the Zullan coast. Home to five glorious retinues of Celestial Vindicators, all of them veterans of the Realmgate Wars; the guardians of the Southern Wards. Two days' march. Then I will stand before warriors worthy of the name Stormcast Eternal. My own, vengeful kin. They will understand why I have returned. They would never fail me as the Hammers of Sigmar have done.

As I clamber down the slope, tongues of steam rush up through the blackened rocks, hissing and sighing.

*'The Hammers of Sigmar did not fail you, Trachos. It was the other way around. You failed them.'*

The accusation halts me in my tracks and my mind falls back to Shyish. My pulse drums as I recall pale, emaciated bodies, still smouldering in the ruins. Thin, broken limbs, grasping at smoke-filled air.

'I failed no one. The Hammers lacked steel.'

*'You murdered those people.'*

'I was relentless. As I must be. Those wretched souls *all* worshipped the Betrayer God. They bore the sigils of Nagash. None of them deserved mercy. The Hammers of Sigmar were blinded by pity. The fault was theirs.'

*'What of their souls, Trachos? This is why you were made. You cannot simply abandon them.'*

I limp down the slope, shaking my head, trying to rid myself of the wretched voice. I'd hoped to leave it in Nagash's underworlds. There's something unnatural about it. It's not simply my mind questioning itself - it's a distinct voice, ringing through my skull, accusing me.

*'If you hadn't spent so long torching those huts, the Hammers of Sigmar would still be alive. You lost yourself in violence. You forgot what you were doing. The kill-fever took you.'*

I clang my gauntleted fist against my helmet.

*'What do you think they'll say when you reach the stormkeep? When you tell them how many men you've lost? What will you say when they ask you how it happened? How will you explain so many deaths? They will know, Trachos. They will know what's happening to you. Why would they send you back to Azyr? Your work is unfinished. They will send you back into the darkness.'*

I can't go back. Not yet. Not until I can be sure of myself. I struggle to keep my voice level.

'The Hammers of Sigmar are to blame for what happened. They should have burned the place down before I ever reached it. The gheists were already leaving their roosts. We had to go before—'

*'You're afraid to go back. You're a coward.'*

'Who are you?' I cry. 'Get out of my—'

A howl rips through the air, silencing me, echoing across steam-shrouded peaks.

I crouch, a hammer in each hand. It was the cry of a beast, a large one by the sound of it.

Something moves on the next outcrop, a monstrous shape, coiling through the clouds.

Someone bellows a war cry, deep and savage, almost as bestial as the howl that preceded it. There's a flash of light and clang of metal hitting stone.

I look at Zyganium Keep. As soon as I reach it I can make my report and be gone. The voice in my head lies, but its presence troubles me. The gaps in my memory trouble me. I need to get home. I need to see the spires of Azyr and bathe in their holy light. I need to consult with the Lord-Celestant.

*'You're afraid.'*

'Never,' I mutter, but I know something is wrong. The voice is too clear. Too alien. Who is speaking to me?

There's another deafening howl and an answering battle cry, followed by the sound of smashing rocks. I peer into the steam clouds. There's something big fighting in there. The peaks are juddering like they're in the grip of an avalanche. I look up at the jagged slopes. Perhaps there *will* be an avalanche.

*'Run home, Trachos. Hide. Before you lose what's left of your mind.'*

I curse and turn away from the valley and the stormkeep, striding across the rocks towards the opposite crag, my boots pounding through the heat haze as I drop down into a crevasse and haul myself up the opposite side, climbing towards the sound of the fighting. Perhaps some of the Hammers of Sigmar made it back and are trying to reach Zyganium Keep? If there was a survivor, what might he say? My memories of Shyish are a shroud of screams and blood. What exactly *did* I do down there? *Could* some of the Hammers of Sigmar have survived? I did not see them all die. Sigmar's light fell from the clouds, slashing the gloom of Shyish, hauling some of their souls back to Azyr, but I could not count the blasts.

I look around. Slain Peak is a famously treacherous place. Skin-roasting geysers erupt constantly from brazier-pits, and landslides are common, but the wildlife is the real threat. If one of my men is here, I'm duty-bound to help him, whatever he might have seen in Shyish.

The sound of fighting grows more frantic as I crest the ridge and rush through the clouds, hammers glinting.

I break through the clouds and stagger to a halt in shock.

I've reached a broad, bowl-shaped hollow, a few hundred feet in circumference and ringed with tusks of rock. There are three figures at its centre and none of them are Stormcast Eternals. The first is inhumanly slender and pale, an aelf, dressed in black, clutching daggers and weaving back and forth, nimble and quick, looking for a chance to lunge. At her side is something peculiar. For a moment I struggle to name him. He's shorter than a man, but clad in so much scarred, chiselled muscle that he looks like a piece of the mountain. He's a duardin, I decide, with the fiery mohawk and beard of a fyreslayer, but he's big - much bigger than any fyreslayer I've seen before. He's as broad as an ox and his biceps are like tree trunks. I would have placed him as a great king or lord if he didn't look so deranged. He's wearing a patch over one eye and there's a single metal rune embedded in his chest, burning with the ferocity of a fallen star. The

rune is the source of the light I saw through the clouds. Even without using one of my implements, I can tell that it's unlike the runes worn by other fyreslayers. There's so much aetheric power radiating from it that the devices hung from my belt are crackling and humming in response.

The duardin is naked apart from a loincloth and, as his slab-like fists tighten, rune-light floods his frame, shimmering across his muscles and igniting a brazier at the head of his battleaxe. His gaze is wild and unfocused and there's sweat pouring down his filthy, tattooed limbs. There's such a thick animal stink coming from him that I can smell it a dozen feet away. He lets out another war cry and pounds across the rocks towards his foe.

When I see what he's about to attack, I can't help but laugh. It's a drake. One of the stone-clad behemoths that thrive in the brutal heat of the Slain Peak. It's as tall as a watchtower and its spreading wings block out the sky, throwing us all into shadow.

The duardin must be insane. Even I would balk at tackling such a colossus.

The drake opens its long, sabre-crowded jaws and spews a landslide, hurling rock and scree across the hollow.

I shake my head and turn to leave. The duardin is doomed. There's nothing I could do to help even if I wished it.

The duardin keeps roaring as the rocks smash into him.

I hesitate, looking back.

Dust and flying debris fill the hollow and, for a moment, I'm blinded. When the clouds fade, I laugh again.

The duardin is still standing. There are mounds of rock and gravel heaped around him and he's shrouded in dust but the drake has failed to injure him.

I shake my head. That blast could have levelled a fortress.

The aelf is hunched next to him and she seems unharmed too, protected by his bulk.

The drake hesitates, confused, as the duardin shrugs off the rubble and rushes forwards, rune-light sparking in his beard and pulsing through his veins.

The drake recovers from its surprise and screams. Then it rears on its haunches and spews more rock.

Again, the hollow fills with noise and dust. Again, when it clears, the duardin is unharmed, chin raised defiantly, infernal light burning in his eye.

The drake leaps forwards, landing with such force that the rocks beneath my feet slide away and I stumble down into the hollow.

It swings a tail the size of an oak, bringing it down towards the duardin's head.

There's a seismic boom as the duardin smashes the tail away, parrying it as easily as a sword-strike.

The drake stumbles, claws scrambling on the rocks, vast wings kicking up dust clouds.

As the drake struggles to right itself, the duardin runs across the hollow, bounds off a rock and leaps through the air, axe gripped in both fists and raised over his head.

The drake spews more rock, but the duardin is too fast, slamming his axe into its chest like he's attacking a cliff face.

The drake is about to launch itself into the air when the aelf sprints through the dust clouds and plunges her daggers into its leg. The blades are clearly no ordinary weapons. They cut through the drake's stone hide and the aelf has to dive away as black, steaming blood hisses from the wound.

As the aelf rolls clear, the duardin climbs higher, slamming his axe into the drake's jaw, knocking its head back.

I race for cover as the creature staggers towards me, ripping rock from the walls and thrashing its wings.

The aelf flips onto her feet and plants her blades in the drake's other leg and, as the monster falls, the duardin slams his axe into its skull.

There's another resounding boom as the drake hits the rubble-strewn ground.

When the dust clears, I find myself face to face with the duardin.

He's standing on the stone carcass, glaring at me with his single, infernal eye, axe raised and beard sparking, his whole body trembling with violence.

'Maybe we should gut this one too?' His voice is a low snarl. He glances from me back to the aelf.

I raise my warhammers and face him side-on.

'Wait!' cries the aelf, rushing forwards and grabbing the duardin's arm. 'He's one of us.'

The duardin grips his axe tighter. 'One of *you*, maybe.'

'He serves Sigmar.' She steps in front of him.

The duardin looks unimpressed, but allows her to speak.

'I'm Maleneth,' she says, still gripping her daggers as she approaches me. 'I belong to the Order of Sigmar.'

She's a Khainite. I've dealt with the Murder Cults before. Her blades are most likely edged with poison. I keep my hammers raised.

I nod to the duardin. 'And this?'

She gives me a strange look. I can't tell if it's a warning or a plea. Despite

fighting beside him, she does not look comfortable in his presence. 'Gotrek.'

This close, he cuts an even stranger figure. The light is fading from the rune in his chest, but it's still fierce enough to give his face a hellish aspect. I notice that one side of his head is oddly weathered, as though scorched by acid. His only concession to armour is a metal pauldron on his left shoulder, but that's clearly borrowed, its design too crude to be of duardin manufacture.

'Show your face, manling,' he growls, narrowing his eye. His beard bristles as he barges past the aelf and squares up to me. He slams into my armour and I stagger. His head barely reaches my chest but I feel like a cart has thudded into me.

I remove my helmet and glare back at him.

He holds my stare, then, just as I think he's about to attack, he shrugs and turns away. 'Another prancing knight.' He mutters something in his own language as he heads back over to the fallen drake.

I look at the aelf. 'Does *he* serve Sigmar?'

'I serve no one!' yells the dwarf, without looking back at me. 'Least of all gods.'

I give the aelf a questioning look, but she holds up a hand, indicating that I should wait until he is out of earshot.

'What is that rune in his chest?' I ask when the duardin has reached the fallen monster.

She speaks in an urgent whisper. 'I need to explain,' she begins, but then I cut her off.

'What's he doing?'

The duardin has clambered up onto the fallen drake and begun hacking at the carcass, filling the air with sparks and noise. Incredibly, his axe cuts through the stone scales, severing chunks of hide and spilling torrents of black gore. Blood hisses as it splashes across the ground.

'We're going to perform a rite,' she says, sounding weary. 'He's going to fish out the innards and then I'll inspect them. Hopefully it will work this time.'

'This time?'

'Someone told him that only drake entrails can point us in the right direction, but we've tried five times so far and I've found nothing but half-digested herdsmen.'

I can't hide my shock. 'This is the *sixth* drake you've killed?'

She nods. 'If you only count the winged ones.'

I stare at the duardin. 'What is he?'

'Gotrek, son of Gurni. Apparently he was born in somewhere called the

Everpeak and, if you believe what he says, he belongs to an earlier age than this - and another world, for that matter.'

I raise an eyebrow.

She still has that warning look in her eye. 'He's unlike any duardin I've ever met. He calls himself a Slayer; but he hates fyreslayers as much as anything else we've encountered. They said he's one of their gods, sent to help them, but that made him even angrier.' She looks over at him. 'He's not keen on gods.'

She scowls at me. 'Look, I want nothing more than to be rid of him, but that's the Master Rune of Blackhammer he's got jammed in his ribs. It's more powerful than you realise. I'm sworn to return it to Azyr.'

'To Azyr?' My pulse quickens. An idea starts to form.

She nods. 'But Gotrek has other ideas.'

'Then kill him. If the rune is needed in Azyr, why have you left it in the possession of a lunatic?'

'Did you see what he did to that drake?'

'I know your kind, assassin. Brute strength is no protection against you. You could scratch him in his sleep and he'd never wake.'

'He never sleeps,' she snaps, but she looks away, suddenly unwilling to meet my gaze. There's more to their relationship than she will admit.

'You like him.'

Her face darkens and she tightens her grip on her knives. 'He's a fool.'

'But?'

She glares at me, her eyes full of vitriol. I can't tell if she's angry with me or herself. 'It's not just the rune. There's something strange about him.'

I keep looking at her.

She spits, her rage palpable. 'I can't explain it. He says there's a doom hanging over him and, after spending all this time with him, I'm starting to understand what he means. He's unstoppable. Something wants him to succeed. Or someone.'

I nod. I've seen such things before. Primitive savages, sure of their destiny, oblivious to the facts, tumbling headlong through life, gathering doe-eyed disciples until they finally crash, taking everyone else with them. The aelf is beguiled by him. She mistakes his wild momentum for destiny. She's in thrall to his fearlessness, not seeing that it's only born of stupidity.

Gotrek laughs as he snaps the drake's shoulder bones apart, filling the air with a black fountain.

'You said you're killing these beasts because you're trying to find somewhere.'

She nods. 'The Neverspike.'

The name gives me pause. I've heard it before, but can't place it for a moment. 'Why?'

'Because of some drunk in Axantis. He told Gotrek that there's an immortal there - someone who has been bound to the rocks by Nagash. The drunk called him the Amethyst Prince. And now Gotrek's got in his head that, if this prince is an immortal, he must be from the same world he's from.'

My blood cools. 'I've heard of the Neverspike. Your drunk friend was right about the prince but the Neverspike is dangerous. It's a fragment of the underworld.'

She raises an eyebrow. 'Gotrek doesn't go anywhere unless it's dangerous.'

There's a thunderous slap as Gotrek rips the drake's stomach open and spills innards across the rocks.

'Aelf!' he cries, backing away from the wound, his arms drenched in blood and triumph flashing in his eye. 'What do you see?'

She hesitates. Still looking at me. Weighing me up. She wants me to leave. She's worried about what I might do to the Slayer. She's protective of him for some reason. It's the rune, I realise. She's worried I'll snatch the rune from under her nose. Then she'd have endured this boorish duardin for nothing. I smile as I follow her over to the mound of innards, my idea crystallising in my head. If the aelf can't take the rune to Azyr, I'll do it for her. No one could question my logic. What more important reason could I have for returning home? And then, in Azyr, I will rid myself of all these troubling memories and doubts. I will be renewed.

'You're doing it wrong,' I say after a few minutes of watching her poke at the sloppy mess, drawing bloody sigils and whispering pointless curses.

'What?' She looks up, her eyes flashing.

I take an aetherlabe from my belt and tighten the brass coil at its centre. Slender hoops whiz and click, orbiting its crystal dome until the gemstone inside starts to glow. I hold the device over the steaming intestines. Flies are already starting to gather but the mechanism is unaffected, picking up the aethionic currents with ease whirring and clicking as its cogs fall into place. The aelf's eyes widen. 'You're an ordinator.'

I ignore her, adjusting the device, closing in on the current. Even the Slayer is intrigued. Some of the savagery fades from his face and I see a cunning I had not previously noticed. 'You're an engineer?' he says.

I say nothing.

He looks at me closely, then studies the various measuring instruments attached to my armour. There is a look of recognition in his eye and he mouths a few crude engineering terms.

I use my boot to move some of the intestines as the aetherlabe's teeth click into place.

I nod to a narrow ravine that leads from the hollow. 'The Neverspike is that way. You're only two days away.'

Gotrek laughs and slaps me on the shoulder, causing me to stagger. 'Finally! Someone with at least half a brain. What did I tell you, witch? We're almost there.'

He storms down the gulley, humming cheerfully to himself. His mood has changed in a moment from dour and fractious to eager and happy.

Maleneth is still kneeling in the drake's stomach, covered in blood. She looks at me in disbelief, then shakes her head and hurries after Gotrek, wiping the gore from her face.

\* \* \*

'And this one?' says Gotrek, prodding another of my instruments with a stubby, spade-like finger.

We're hunkered in the lee of a scorched tree skeleton. Gotrek was keen to march through the night, but the aelf insisted we stop. The Slain Peak is even more dangerous in the dark than in daylight and the Slayer grudgingly agreed, still buoyed by the news we were close to the Neverspike.

'It looks like a connecting rod on a turbine,' he says.

He seems oddly knowledgeable about engineering. All his guesses are wrong, because he understands nothing about aetheric transference, but they are still *educated* guesses, based on a sound understanding of mechanics. I have never seen a savage so well-versed in science.

'It's an adylusscope,' I explain. 'A kind of orrery. It tracks the cycles of the realms and all the other heavenly bodies.' I would not usually be so open with a stranger, but the duardin will be dead in a few hours, so I allow myself a little pride, describing the power of my cosmolabes and other surveying equipment.

'And this?' His eye narrows as he looks at the inverussphere.

'It reverses aetheric polarity,' I explain, knowing he won't have any idea what I'm talking about. I baffle him with descriptions of all my instruments, going through them one by one, amused by the disdain on his face. He tuts and shakes his head, muttering something about shoddy work, even though he could never

conceive of the machines' complexity.

The Slayer has a sack filled with skins of ale and we've been drinking for over an hour.

'Not bad for a manling,' he grunts as I empty another skin.

'You've no idea who or what I am,' I say. 'I could drink this for days and still be ready to fight. My flesh was forged in the Anvil of the Apotheosis, not prised from the womb of—'

I hesitate, struggling to imagine what he was prised from.

The rune in his chest glimmers slightly, flashing in his eye, turning it crimson. Then he laughs and throws another skin at me.

'Let's see,' he says, grabbing another skin for himself and poking at part of my armour. 'What does this do?'

The aelf is somewhere back down the gulley, taking her turn to watch for drakes, so I allow myself to relax. Since I started drinking, the voice in my mind has fallen quiet and I'm feeling a little more at ease. Once the duardin is dead, I can dig the rune from his remains and be on my way. My return to Azyr will be far more glorious than I had expected if the aelf is even half right about the power of the rune - and by the way my instruments are behaving, she is. The witch is a fool to have let the Slayer live so long. He openly derides Sigmar, along with every other god he knows the name of. He's an enemy of the God-King. And he's an animal. Just like the drake he left steaming in the hollow. All he cares about is which of us can hold the most ale.

After another hour of drinking, I begin to feel odd. Gotrek's face shifts in the half-light swelling and leering like a gargoyle. 'What *is* this?' I say, frowning at the skin I was drinking from.

'The first decent ale I've found in this sweaty armpit you call a realm.' He wipes froth from his beard with a forearm that looks like a thigh. Beer glistens on his scarred skin.

I have the disconcerting feeling that I'm drunk.

Gotrek lets out a deep, rattling belch.

'I need to rest,' I mutter, falling back against the tree stump, feeling as though the mountain is swaying beneath me.

Gotrek grins, revealing a jumble of broken teeth, then slumps back against a rock, reaching for another skin, ignorant of everything beyond the satisfaction of out-drinking me.

*'So now you're murdering duardin?'*

I wince as I walk. My head is already pounding from the ale I drank last night and the voice in my mind feels like fingernails scraping across the inside of my skull.

I'm not murdering anyone. He wants to reach the Neverspike and I'm taking him there.

*'You know what will happen to him if he approaches the Amethyst Prince. Nagash put him there as punishment for defying him. He's there as an example. As soon as Gotrek touches him he'll be ripped apart by death magic.'*

If he dies, it's because he's a fool. A dangerous fool. And a blasphemer to boot. He talks of killing the gods. Who would blame me for letting someone so stupid destroy themselves?

*'The witch.'*

I look around. She's clambering up the slope behind us, her eyes locked on me. She has spent all this time in service to an impious lunatic and she has done nothing to take the rune. When the duardin is dead, I'll deal with her. My fingers brush against one of my hammers. I already have a good idea how.

'Manling!' bellows Gotrek from further up the slope. 'You've earned your beer!'

I pick up my pace, clambering quickly over the rocks to reach the Slayer's side. We're perched on a ledge looking out over another drop and the sight that greets me is horribly familiar. Another world has been smashed into this one: Shyish. The Neverspike is an icy, iridescent spear of rock that juts from the mountain, completely alien from the sun-bleached crags that surround it. The rock is shimmering and rimy, edged with patches of ice. It has no place in the Realm of Fire and the air knows it, billowing around the shard in flickering, static-charged spirals. If we had approached from any other direction, the Neverspike would have remained hidden from view. It is clearly the work of a divine intelligence. Even in Shyish, the shard would not have been a natural formation - it is a single curved talon of rock, and at its summit there is a tall alcove that looks like a shrine. There is a fire burning in the alcove, purple and blue, death magic, engulfing the figure within. It's impossible to see the prince clearly from here, so I take out one of my looking glasses and turn the shaft until the prince comes into focus.

I grimace. He's rigid with pain, but still alive after all these long centuries. The flames are burning him, causing his skin to blister and peel, but he cannot die. His eyes are gone, melted into blackened sockets and his flesh looks like living ash, crumbling and flickering in the blaze, but his agony is eternal - a warning to all who would challenge the so-called God of Death.

I hand the looking glass to Gotrek and he mutters something in the duardin tongue, shaking his head as he sees the prince.

The Slayer is minutes away from death. Nagash's magic will not preserve Gotrek as it has done the prince; it will simply immolate him. It fascinates me that he can walk so blindly to his death.

'Why do you seek him?' I ask. 'What do you want?'

'Vengeance,' he snarls, taking the looking glass from his eye and handing it back to me. 'The gods lied to me, manling. They promised me a worthy doom, then stole it from me. They brought me to your wretched realms with no explanation. So I'm going to make them bloody pay.'

I am about to explain to Gotrek that the Amethyst Prince is not divine; and never was, when I realise the absurdity of arguing with someone who thinks he can kill gods. The Slayer is insane. I knew it the first moment I laid eyes on him. I look at the rune in his chest. The ur-gold is forged to resemble the face of a deranged, psychotic Slayer. It looks almost identical to Gotrek.

I nod and gesture to a narrow bridge. It leads across a sheer drop to the Neverspike. It's a single, slender arch of stone, soaring across the chasm like a hurled rope, suspended by some unseen artifice.

The aelf joins us as we make the final approach, grimacing as the air seems to attack us, lashing and hissing around our faces as we cross the bridge.

We are only halfway across when shapes assemble on the far side.

'Aye,' laughs the Slayer. 'Show us what you've got.'

As we get nearer, I see that the figures are corpses - the remains of men and women, lurching from the rocks that surround the spike. They are charred beyond recognition but they move with silent purpose, gripping swords and axes as they shuffle onto the bridge. I mutter a curse as I see that the whole spike is spawning similar figures. There are hundreds of them struggling to their feet.

Gotrek roars in delight and thunders across the bridge, his axe flashing as he raises it over his head.

Maleneth hisses a curse and barges past me, drawing her knives as she sprints after him.

I take my time, slowly drawing my hammers as Gotrek crashes into the blackened husks.

He burns brighter than the prince, hacking and roaring through the crush. Blackened bodies fly in every direction, tumbling into the crevasse. Gotrek barely breaks his stride, carving a path through the undead husks with Maleneth keeping pace, lunging and stabbing.

By the time I reach the end of the bridge, dozens of the revenants have been hacked to pieces, but there are plenty left to attack me. I stride out onto the Neverspike, hammering corpses aside, smashing the sorcery from their lifeless flesh.

We fight towards the burning prince, and the battle is bathed in the violet light of his pyre. Gotrek grows even more excited, hacking through the throng with even more ferocity. 'Hurry, manling!' he cries, waving me on.

I oblige, picking up my pace. When Gotrek dies, I need to be close. The aelf is not a worthy guardian of the rune. I must be on hand to pluck it from his ashes.

As we approach the alcove holding the Amethyst Prince, it becomes hard to see. The death magic is dazzling, bleeding from the tormented prince and flashing through rows of shuffling corpses, scattering light like strands of purple lightning.

I have to shield my eyes as I battle the final few feet.

I'm so dazzled that it takes me a moment to realise Gotrek has turned to face me. He's silhouetted by the unholy blaze, but I sense that his mood has changed.

'What—?' I manage to say before he pounds the haft of his axe into my stomach.

I'm so surprised I do not prepare myself for the blow. Breath explodes from my lungs. I double over in pain. It's like being hit by a felled tree.

Before I can straighten up he hits me again, pummelling the side of my helmet and sending me sprawling across the rocks. My hammers slip from my grip and clang down the slope towards the bridge.

When I manage to sit up, my vision is blurry from the blow, but I see that Gotrek is holding my inverussphere. Fury jolts through me. It's an incredibly sacred device, capable of reversing the polarity of aether currents.

'Thought you'd kill me?' There's a grim smile on his face. He hacks down another revenant but keeps his eye locked on me.

I throw an accusing look at the aelf, then remember I didn't share my plans with her.

The Slayer laughs. 'Drunks always talk in their sleep. Especially pompous manling drunks who can't hold their ale.'

'What?' I gasp.

He turns and fights his way up to the blazing prince, ignoring the fury of the flames as he cuts through the rows of undead.

'I'm not interested in princes,' he cries, adjusting the inverussphere with surprising skill.

I curse as I stagger to my feet, fending off revenants with my fists. Gotrek wasn't drunk when I told him how my devices work; he was listening carefully to every word.

He looks at the sky. 'My quarrel is with the *gods!*'

He turns a cog on the inverussphere and punches it into the prince's twitching body.

The light flares, blinding me, then vanishes, plunging the Neverspike into darkness.

Magic rips through the undead, tearing them from their feet and hurling them towards the alcove, lashing across the rocks with such ferocity that I fall again, tumbling across the stones towards the prince, caught like a leaf in a tempest.

Cords of aetheric lightning smash against the Neverspike, ripping the air with a deafening howl, rushing towards the alcove from the surrounding peaks.

Gotrek manages to stay on his feet, staggering but upright as the alcove becomes a vortex of shadows, smoke and body parts.

The Amethyst Prince howls in delight, finally freed from his torment, then disintegrates, obliterated like the rest of the undead, his ashes snatched by the whirlwind.

'Nagash!' howls Gotrek. 'The Slayer comes for *you!*'

He steps into the vortex, following the dead prince, bellowing a war cry as he vanishes from sight.

I try to crawl away, but the storm is too violent. I'm dragged, inexorably, towards the peak of the Neverspike.

There's a series of explosions as the Neverspike shatters, spraying amethyst lances into the darkness.

With a final, desperate lunge, I grab hold of the bridge, hanging on to a slender arch as rocks whistle past my head.

Then my fingers slip and I'm thrown forwards, my armour clashing against the rocks.

I hurl towards the vortex, surrounded by a storm of blackened corpses. Then the darkness takes me.

I howl as I feel the morbid chill of Shyish, soaking through my armour and eating into my arms. My memories clear, revealing in horrible clarity all the things I was trying to escape. But there is no escape from death.

As I fall, I hear Gotrek, laughing and singing as he dives into the abyss.

# **CHAMPION OF OATHS**

**JOHN FRENCH**

*'A sword takes the edge it is given.'*

- Aphorism of the Gobinal Blade Clans, Terra (age unknown)

'Are you ready?'

Sigismund raised his eyes. Archamus looked back. The Master of Huscarls' gaze was steady.

Sigismund let his breath relax through him; let the rising adrenaline drain from his thoughts; let his fingers hang, empty and still. Above him, the black walls of the Temple of Oaths rose to its vaulted ceiling. The names of the Legion looked down at him, marked in gold, etched in stone. Fires burned in bronze bowls that hung from iron chains. In the shadows, his brothers waited - two hundred warriors, armoured in black and yellow, draped with white-and-black tabards, weapons resting in their hands. The Templars. The guardians of the oaths of the VII Legion. This was the place where every warrior of the Imperial Fists made his oath to brother, primarch and Emperor, and the Templars protected it with their swords and with their lives.

Archamus was still looking at Sigismund, waiting. The Master of Huscarls had assumed his rank only a year before; but there was a weight to his presence even before he became Rogal Dorn's chief bodyguard. Archamus was one of the First, those warriors raised to the Legion after the Emperor found Rogal Dorn. That alone would have been enough to make Archamus deserving of respect. He was there as the proxy of Rogal Dorn to see that all was done correctly. If Sigismund failed, the primarch would not be there to see his weakness. Sigismund gave a single nod.

'Very well,' said Archamus, and held out the sword he had brought from the *Phalanx's* armoury. Another sword hung at his back, sheathed in black leather and silver; the oath blade of the Temple, the sword that would be Sigismund's to carry if he passed through the trial to come.

Sigismund gripped the hilt of the proffered blade and felt the weight of the

weapon sink into his arm as Archamus let go. The servos in his armour purred as he turned to face the circle of his brothers.

'Begin,' called Archamus, and the first of the two hundred Templars came at Sigismund in a blur of steel.

*Night fell over the Ionus Plateau. The drift camps covering the land were new, a consequence of Unification, and the wars that had been fought for it. Those that could flee the wars between old tyrants and new had come here and sheltered in the ruins of forgotten empires. They had made a labyrinth of metal and fabric that spread for two hundred kilometres and bled out into the rad zones to the south. It was tainted land. Not tainted in the way that the toxin-laden wastes of the Gobi were, but tainted by the stories that clung to the place. That was why it had been empty when the refugees came.*

*The old monarchs and despots who had carved their palaces into the faces of the mountains, and whose tombs dotted the plains beneath, had been enchanters and spirit speakers. They had vanished into the oblivion of Old Night, leaving their kingdoms to decay and half-memories of fear in the lands that bordered them. The refugees had put aside those fears, the need for sanctuary overcoming the ghosts of old stories. Still, though, few would look up at the ruins or touch the tombs.*

*Except the young. To them the dead past was there to be picked up and worn like a discarded cloak. The packs of youths that gathered and roamed the drift had taken the old stories and made them their own. When they went on rampages, it was in horned masks of jagged metal daubed in white, and crowns of polished scrap. Their gang names spoke to the tales of the land: Blood Spectres, Corpse Kings, the Queens of Hades. They came at night, and killed, or inflicted cruelty on those who could not defend themselves. Most of all, they preyed on the thousands of orphans that lived in the cracks of life in drift camps. Some said the gangs took those they could and made them their own, replenishing their ranks by kidnapping.*

*Sigismund put his eye to the boards pulled over the door into the deserted cistern. It had not rained in days, and a metallic shiver of static hung in the air with the smell of dust and the smoke of cooking fires. The drift camps extended in every direction, a sea of flotsam and tattered fabric. Ropes of scrap bells chimed in the hot breeze. Electro kites hung in the air, tethered to empty charge reservoirs, waiting for the lightning to fall. To the west, the crags of the Aflonia mesa rose to scrape the bruised sky. The bones and skulls of old fortresses shone*

*orange and gold on its cliff faces as the last of the sun's light cut across the land.*

*'I can't hear them,' said Nestro, pulling his legs closer under himself and turning to look at Sigismund and Thera. 'Maybe they won't come...'*

*'They will come,' said Thera softly, her voice somehow calm. 'Just stay back when they do.'*

*'What are you going to do?' asked Sigismund, his voice not hiding the fear that was rising in him.*

*Thera looked at him. Her eyes were dark, slashed by the cooling light falling through the gaps in the boards covering the door. One of the other children huddling in the dark, further into the old cistern, whimpered.*

*'It will be all right,' said Thera.*

*He heard it then, the rustle of footsteps outside.*

*Thera closed her eyes and rested her forehead on the metal of the iron bar in her hands. She had wound strips of leather around one end, making it a grip.*

*'Why do you do that?' he heard himself ask.*

*She did not reply. Above them, the footsteps outside stopped. Shadows blocked the slivers of fading light coming through the boarded-up door, firelight replaced the dusty warmth of the fading sun.*

*Sigismund could feel the hammer of his heart in his chest. They would not survive this. This would be it, the end of the life that seemed to have begun with a city burning and him running and running out into the night.*

*Something sharp rattled across the boards to the door, and a hissing laugh trembled through the air. More rose to join it until it was a rasping chorus of mockery. The light of flame torches rippled through the gaps in the entrance.*

*'Come down to the kingdom, little ones...' called a high voice. 'Come and see the dead...'*

*A blow shook the board door.*

*Thera opened her eyes. Sigismund saw a momentary tremor in her hands, and then they went still. She began to rise to her feet. Sigismund saw a flash of pain on her face. She shifted, trying to keep weight off her left leg. Some of the smaller children moaned. Thera turned towards the door. Sigismund reached out and caught her arm. She looked back at him, the bruises and half-healed scabs merged into the shadows filling the hollows of her face. She shook her head once.*

*'This needs to happen,' she said. 'Otherwise they won't stop, not now. I hurt them too much, but not enough.'*

*He held on for a second returning her look, blood ringing in his ears.*

*'There will be too many this time,' he said. She shook her head, he could not tell whether in agreement or denial, and pulled open the door.*

Anaxsus came first. Anaxsus the Grey, oldest of the Temple brothers, raised to the sword in the Northern Hives of Terra, a warrior of mark before the VII Legion even had a name to carry to the stars, and now he was first to come at Sigismund. A blow with his mace from above, two-handed, strength flowing into stone and steel. Sigismund met the blow, let it slam his sword down, let the blade pivot with the momentum of the impact, and slashed the edge into Anaxsus' face-plate. Ceramite cracked, and Sigismund was already striking again, twice more, low and high, and Anaxsus was pivoting to drag his mace up to attack. Sigismund's kick cracked the ceramite at the back of Anaxsus' knee, and his sword swept around as the warrior stumbled.

'I yield!' growled Anaxsus. The edge of Sigismund's sword was touching his neck. Sigismund moved the sword away.

Behind him, Ecturo was already in the circle, shortsword and dagger drawn, unhelmed, face grim as he lunged. Sigismund met the lunge and cut at Ecturo's neck. The blow did not land. Ecturo ducked under the cut, blocked Sigismund's sword with his own, and stabbed up into Sigismund's ribs. The strike was fast and fluid, almost beautiful.

Ecturo had come from Arcanisis and brought the play of sword and knife with him from that world of swamps and iron. Induction into the Legion and his years in the 85th Assault Battalion had blended the skills of his birth world with post-human strength and agility. He was lethal in every way that a Space Marine and a warrior of the Temple should be.

Sigismund let the knife point almost touch him and then slammed his weight forwards, sword pressing and tangling Ecturo's legs. The young warrior tried to move back, but he was half falling, his advantage stolen in an eyeblink. Sigismund caught Ecturo's left arm, pivoted and threw him with a snap of force. Ecturo hit the floor, began to rise, but Sigismund's sword edge touched the back of his neck.

'I yield!'

But the next warrior was already in the circle, already cutting, and the dance of blades and killing strokes flowed on without cease. Two hundred blades wielded by the finest of the Legion, two hundred blades turned on him one after another until he failed or until he reached the end. There could be no other way, not for the Templars, not for the Legion. To be the First of Templars, leader of the

Champions of Oaths, he had to face them all, one after another. On the battlefield, they stood together; they were brothers, made one by blood and oaths, but here he had to stand alone.

His sword met another blow and the clamour of steel echoed beneath the oath-marked walls.

*Quiet. Echoing quiet and the ripple of light from flame torches spilling through the door to the world outside. No breath, no cries, nothing to undo the crack of metal on skull, and the rustle of a body folding to the floor.*

*Sigismund did not move.*

*'Thera?' came a small voice from further back in the cistern cave. Sigismund looked around. Nestro looked back at him, eyes wide above his knees. Nestro... Quick Nestro, not the smallest, but the one who had clung to Thera like a shadow. Nestro who had somehow come alone from Cypra after it had burned. Nestro who shook at the sight of naked flame. The boy was shivering now. 'Thera?' he asked again, the edge of panic and fear breaking through. 'Where is Thera?'*

*'Your kings are here,' came the high hissing voice from outside. 'Come out into the dark...'*

*Sigismund closed his eyes for a second. He drew a breath, held it and felt the blood beat through him.*

*He did not want to do this. He did not want to die in the dust, bones broken, bleeding while his killers cheered like jackals. He did not want this to have to be him. He was not a fighter. He was not even the eldest after Thera. He was quick, but not strong; always the one who had survived but never the one who had won. But he was here, and if he did not move, did not step out beyond the door, then he would be surrendering for them all.*

*Sigismund opened his eyes. He stood, feeling himself shake as he stepped to the door. He saw them, figures in the firelight, taller than him, thin limbs under grey rags, masks made from battered metal, crowns of sharp edges, knives and chains in their hands.*

*He did not look down at Thera lying in front of the door. The ground was damp under his feet as he walked forward, sticky and clotted.*

*The crowd of masks shifted, chains clinked.*

*'You here to kneel or to join her?' asked a high voice from one of the masks.*

*Sigismund could hear the breath sawing in and out of his lungs. His bare foot touched the metal of the iron bar resting in Thera's unmoving fingers. He bent*

*down, but kept his eyes steady on the crowd of masks. The leather wound grip of the bar was sticky with blood as he lifted it.*

*Laughter began behind one of the masks and ran through the crowd.*

*'Another for the bone pits...'*

*The bar felt heavy in his hand. He had fought before - all the lost of the drifts had - but he had no idea what he was going to do. He felt his arms begin to shake.*

*He saw Thera in his memory, saw her raise the iron bar and rest it on her forehead, heard himself ask the question she had not answered.*

*'Why do you do that?'*

*The breath slowed in his lungs. The tremble in his limbs stilled. The circle of watching masks froze in the unfinished second, poised on the edge of the rush that would surge forward in a blur of blows.*

*Slowly, carefully, he touched the cold iron to his forehead.*

Blood. There was blood on Sigismund's face and in his mouth. A blow had shattered his jaw on the left-hand side. His vision was a smeared blur. Tatters of broken ceramite shook from his frame as he lunged forwards. The servos on his right leg had gone so he was dragging the dead weight of his armour with muscle alone. Clotting blood ran from the joins in his armour where blade edges had found an opening.

Sigismund's lunge slid past Calivar's stave and struck him in the chest. The force of the blow cannoned the banner bearer off his feet. With its power field lit, the sword would have passed clean through Calivar's torso. Sigismund was already above the other warrior, spinning his sword and ramming the point down, stopping so that the killing blow hovered about Calivar's face.

'I yield,' gasped Calivar.

Sigismund straightened, turning to meet the first blow of the next opponent. The blow did not come. His eyes flicked over the circle of armoured figures, familiar eyes watching him from bloodied faces and broken helms. Was it over? Had he faced them all?

His hearts slowed, his thoughts cleared. The blurs of combat defined themselves, settling in his mind.

No, he had not faced them all. It was not yet over.

'Are you ready, lad?' The voice was low, and crackled with static. He closed his eyes for a second as he heard the clatter and hiss of gear-driven steps.

He turned.

A mountain of black iron and yellow armour plates stood across the circle from him. It was not a Space Marine any more, not truly. Just as genecraft had pushed Sigismund and his brothers into being something beyond human, so the craft of the forge masters had pushed the warrior facing him beyond post-human.

There were lines in the figure's shape that echoed Adeptus Astartes power armour, and the heraldry gave no doubt as to its alliance and heritage: black cross on white, clenched fist on yellow. But it stood almost twice Sigismund's height. A green slot sat high on the headless torso. Sigismund could see eyes in the glowing annion behind the armourglass. Its limbs were metal, its muscles pistons. A hammer hung in the grip of the left arm, a shield of pitted metal in the right. Both were massive, beyond what even a Space Marine in full armour could lift. But this was not a Space Marine. It was one of the dead who had chained himself to life and war. Dreadnought - that was what they called them all now, all those brothers of the twenty Legions who slept the iron sleep and woke to fight the war that had killed them.

But this was not any Dreadnought. This was a warrior who had received the laurels of victory from the Emperor's hand at Mesora while Terra was still divided, who had fought at the siege of Luna and fought at the side of great Horus when he alone stood as the Emperor's son. Appius, the first to refuse the gates of death and take the iron sleep - Father of Dreadnoughts.

'Master,' said Sigismund, bowing his head for a moment but not lowering his gaze.

Fibre cables bunched under armour plates, pistons flexed in Appius' arms.

'Begin,' boomed the Dreadnought and exploded forwards in a thunder roll of iron and steel.

*Sigismund fell. The stone floor slammed into his back. He rolled, coming to his feet in an eyeblink. A blow struck his shoulder. Pain exploded through his flesh, he staggered, brought his sword up to cut, but another blow hit his arm. The force was light, precise, but it still almost shattered his forearm. He staggered again, snapped forward, and cold iron slammed into his forehead. He fell again and rolled again, but as he rose it was to see the old warrior already walking out of the training circle.*

*Sigismund made to kneel and await instruction, but Appius flicked a glance at him and that was enough to hold Sigismund where he was. The weapon master was cleaning the unpowered mace he had been wielding. His beard and hair were the grey of the cinders covering the practice floor. He wore a quilted tunic*

*over a black body glove. The flesh of his hands gleamed as they cleaned the weapon, the scar tissue of old wars glossy under the stab lights. A tattoo of a raptor head and lightning bolts sat on his left cheek.*

*'What was your mistake?' asked Appius.*

*'I was too slow to recover,' said Sigismund without hesitation.*

*The old warrior raised an eyebrow. 'You are certain?'*

*'You were in a position to strike me as I moved. I was not quick enough to disrupt your timing.'*

*The old warrior held his eye on Sigismund for a long moment and then turned away, hefting the mace and carrying it to one of a series of weapon racks bolted to the floor. Sigismund waited.*

*The training chamber was empty apart from the two of them, the air still, the deck and walls silent to the vibration of engines that shook them when the Phalanx was under power. The fortress ship of the Imperial Fists was at anchor, swallowing munitions and supplies from the void stations of Uranus before passing through the Elysian gate and out to the edge of the crusade. It was a rare moment of quiet in a space-born city of war. For Sigismund, it had brought him back to the training deck and Appius' lessons. It was as much a test as it was a lesson, of course.*

*He was amongst the youngest to be nominated to take the Temple Oath. Twelve years separated him from the drift camps of Ionus and the boy the Legion had taken to make a warrior. Those years had given him a purpose that he had never known existed. Always advancing, never flinching, never taking a step back, he had fought battles and faced the enemies of the Imperium, seen triumph and defeat and learned the lessons they taught: that both could undo you if you let them. He had never tried to rise in rank or position. He had simply faced what was before him.*

*Appius selected a sword. In size and shape it was the twin of the blade that lay on the ground in front of Sigismund. Appius rolled his wrist, letting the blade hiss through the air. The motion looked unconscious, relaxed, but Sigismund could read the variation in every cut. In the days since the weapon master had begun his training, Sigismund had realised that nothing Appius did was by accident - every movement and gesture had purpose.*

*'Stand,' said Appius. Sigismund stood, raising the sword with him. Appius walked into the circle of cinders, his own blade held loose at his side. 'Come at me,' he said.*

*Sigismund sprang forwards, blade rising for a first cut that would split Appius'*

face from eyes to chin.

The flat of Appius' sword slammed into Sigismund's head. Light exploded behind his eyes, but he was already moving turning his failed cut into a back-handed slash that would arc under Appius' guard. A white-hot line slid across his shoulder. Blood poured down his arm. Another cut, and another, more blood scattering onto the floor. His sword was rising but the point of Appius' blade was at his throat. His eyes met Sigismund's down the length of polished steel.

Appius withdrew the blade, flicked it to clean the thin stem of Sigismund's blood already clotting on its edge. He half turned and walked to the edge of the circle while Sigismund felt the flow of blood from the wound slow.

'You are a good warrior,' said Appius, after a moment, 'maybe already even a great one.' The weapon master gave a weary smile. 'Better than me, without a doubt.'

Sigismund felt the need to dispute that last claim begin to move his tongue. He held his mouth shut.

'You shall be a Templar, of that there is no question...!' Appius paused, and Sigismund felt that for once the weapon master was not certain what to say next. 'Of that there is no question. The question is, what more you will be.'

He turned to look at Sigismund, amber eyes steady.

Sigismund shook his head once.

'I am holding nothing back, master.'

'No, you are not - always going forwards, always pressing, always the conqueror; nothing held back. But that is not what I am saying or why you have yet to lay a blade edge on me.'

'You are a great duellist...' began Sigismund.

'I am old,' said Appius. 'Live with war as long as I have, lad, and it will teach you all I know and more. You are young and trained and ready to fight in the circle of swords, to be a Templar, and that should be enough for you to do more than let an old dog of war give you duelling scars.'

Sigismund did not move. The silence and stillness went on. 'What is at your back?' said Appius at last. 'You go forwards, we all advance - it is our way of war as ordained by the Emperor and the primarch, but what is behind you? What means that you will not turn, that you go forwards like a man trying to outrun the storm?'

'Because if we... If I do not go forwards, then no one will. Because if we do not go forwards, then we lose everything.'

'We? It seems likely to me, lad, that you and I are going to die bloody with

*swords in our hands no matter what. So who is the we that loses everything?'*

The light of the setting sun fell through the open door in his memory. Beyond, he could see the shapes of figures dressed as dead kings with blood on their blades... *'Everyone that is not as strong as we are,' said Sigismund. Appius was still for a moment and then nodded.*

*'Again,' he said, and stepped back into the circle, blade rising.*

The Dreadnought's blow was a blur. Pistons snapped out. Sigismund spun aside as the hammer's head crashed into the temple floor. Stone splinters showered up. He sliced his blade out one-handed, the edge aimed at the cable on Appius' weapon arm, but even halfway to death, the old warrior was fast and a master of his craft. The pistons snapped the hammer back and the Dreadnought twisted, torso pivoting fully around with machine-driven speed.

Sigismund's blow struck the metal of Appius' shield. Force juddered up his arm. Pistons behind the shield rammed it forwards. Sigismund turned to deflect the impact, but a fraction too late. He cannoned backwards, falling and the Dreadnought's hammer was descending. All of it so fast. He struck the floor, and pushed himself aside an instant before the hammer splintered the place he had been. He was up, but the shield pistoned into him, and he was staggering backwards.

He saw an opening then, two armour plates parting for an instant to expose wires and tubes beneath. He cut, knowing that the blow would not land, knowing that Appius had shown him the possibility. The Dreadnought twisted as the point of Sigismund's sword sliced into the exposed cables. Piston fluid and oil gushed out. The arm holding the Dreadnought's shield froze and locked. But even as the thrust drove home, the pivoting force of Appius' turn snapped the armour plates back together on Sigismund's sword. The blade broke.

Sigismund jerked back just in time as the Dreadnought's hammer drove into the space he had been occupying. Appius came forwards, striking again and again, and Sigismund was going backwards, the haft of his broken sword in his hand. He was going to—

The hammer caught him on the left shoulder. Armour cracked. Bones broke. He was falling. Now, at the end of this path, he would fail. He would not become the Master of the Templars. That honour would go to another. And down in the slow unfolding slices of his thought, he realised that it did not matter. Honour and rank were not prizes that had pulled him on. It was just a consequence of standing, of fighting of facing fate. It was not a matter of pride. If he was not

strong enough to stand, to lead, to be a champion of his brother's oaths, then he should fail.

*But who if not you?* The thought sounded in the slowed time of his fall, and its voice might have been his own, or Appius', or Thera's. *Who will stand if you will not? Who will you let die in your place?*

He hit the floor. The Dreadnought was above him, hammer poised to strike down, and Sigismund could feel the haft of the broken sword in his hand. He came to his feet, broken armour grinding, his muscles driving him forwards in a blur. Within was stillness, the beats of his hearts caught between rising and falling. He struck, slicing the broken blade between armour plates, cutting and cutting oil scattering as joints froze.

He stopped, standing before Appius, the shattered tip of his sword almost touching the glowing slot in the Dreadnought's sarcophagus. Appius' machine body creaked but did not move, its bulk now a statue of armour.

'I yield,' came Appius' voice from the Dreadnought's speaker grilles.

Sigismund lowered his sword.

'The oaths of our Legion have their champion.' The voice was low but it rolled through the temple. Every legionary knelt instantly. Sigismund felt his blood pattering on the broken stone floor as he fell to his knee. Only Archamus remained standing as Rogal Dorn, primarch of the Imperial Fists, walked through the circle of kneeling warriors. He stopped within a pace of Sigismund.

'Rise, my son,' said Dorn. Sigismund stood. Silence radiated from the primarch like the hush that came before a storm. Sigismund looked up and met his grandfather's eyes. They held each other's gaze for a long moment, and then Dorn gestured. 'Archamus, the sword.'

Archamus stepped forward and held up a sheathed sword to Dorn, who grasped and drew it in a single movement. The light of the fire bowls flowed down the blade's edge and the words etched into the fuller: 'Imperator Rex,' they read. Dorn reversed the blade and then held it out pommel first. Sigismund waited a heartbeat and then took it. He knelt again, resting the sword point down, hands gripping the haft above the cross guard. The rest of the warriors in the temple rose to their feet.

'Do you give yourself to the guarding of this place of oaths?' asked Rogal Dorn.

'I give myself to that duty,' replied Sigismund. Inside, in the place of calm he had known in battle, he felt his thoughts tumble over and over through the steps of the past, carrying him forwards into a future of war and sacrifice.

'Do you give your life and your sword to those that have passed through here,

and those that will come?'

'I give myself to the brotherhood of the Legion.'

'Do you make your vow again, in sight of all who share it?'

'I am the oaths sworn and they are my bond and blood.' A pause, silence in the flame-lit shadow.

'The sword and oath are yours,' said Rogal Dorn. Sigismund raised his head. The light from the torches and fire bowls fell across the faces of his brothers, and in his mind he thought for a second he could taste the dust on the wind as it blew across the Ionus plateau.

Slowly, he closed his eyes and rested his forehead on the metal of the sword in his hands.

**SAVAGE**

**GUY HALEY**

Gollph lay still, resolutely trying to wring the maximum amount of sleep out of his limited rest period. There were two factors working against his efforts. The lesser was the deep, rasping snore of First Gunner Meggen, who occupied the camp cot on the other side of the tent. The greater was the blue, pervasive light of the Omdurman predawn already warming the planet to an uncomfortable broil. Gollph was from a hot land, but even he had his limits.

He grabbed his thin pillow and clamped it to his face. It shut out most of the light, but not Meggen's infernal snoring.

There was no way he was getting more sleep. He groaned and sat up carefully so as not to upset his flimsy bed. The tent canvas flapped listlessly in the damp wind. The days and nights were so short, nine hours apiece. No time to acclimatise to light or dark before it was over.

'Better get up,' he sighed. 'Make the most of the cool.' He tugged his boots over holed socks and went to lift the tent flap.

Heat dropped on him with the weight of a blanket soaked in boiling water. His physiology was more suited to the conditions than that of the other men who made up the majority of the force, and he coped better than most, but even so, sweat sprang up on his pink skin. There were a lot of listless men in camp, and a lot of officers too listless themselves to force them to work. The sun, yet to crest the horizon, reflected from the orange sky. Gollph stood with the flap open a moment, spitefully hoping the brightening morning and the heat would wake Meggen, but nothing stirred the big man.

'Snore like a Throne-damned grox,' he muttered. After several years of service, little trace of Gollph's feral world accent remained; he sounded more Paragonian than Bosovar now. He let the flap drop, and stepped out into the camp.

It was not long after dawn, the coolest part of the day, but already the temperature was up at thirty grades and climbing.

Omdurman's tropics were dominated by a roll of plains wrinkled by small hills and scarps, dotted with lakes fringed by lush miniature forests. There was a scarcity of flat ground in the area, and all there was available was occupied by

the taskforce landing field, forcing the army to camp on whatever scraps of level ground it could find. The Seventh Paragonian Super-Heavy Tank Company were stationed on one such scrap, alone.

Gollph headed to the hill to the west overlooking the Seventh's camp. The planet had a reverse spin, and the sun would be climbing the far side. If he hurried, he could catch the sunrise.

In the shadow of the hill, Gollph walked between the company's four tanks. *Ostrakhan's Rebirth*, the command Hellhammer, sat out front. Behind the Hellhammer in a loose laager were the Shadowsword *Lux Imperator* and the Baneblades *Artemen Ultrus* and *Cortein's Honour*, the last two huddled together like herd animals.

*Cortein's Honour* was Gollph's posting, and he could think of it in no other way than *his* tank. He didn't command it - even the thought was a ridiculous presumption - but his position as senior loader made him feel proprietary towards it. Honoured Captain Bannick said he had a clear run at a gunnery position. Gollph wasn't sure he had the ability for the role, and suspected Bannick was making a point about the skill of the Bosovar. That would be like him.

*Artemen Ultrus* was four hundred years older than *Cortein's Honour*. Gollph's Baneblade was barely a decade old. But even so young a tank was drenched in history. It was named for an officer who died before Gollph had been drafted from his primitive home world. Its decks were bloodied by the lives lost serving aboard. Its metal interior hid terrible secrets, some of which he shared, and all the guilt that went with it.

On impulse, he reached up and stroked the metal, still warm from yesterday, soon to be heated to untouchable temperature again by the Omdurman sun. Camouflage of dull yellow, green and dark orange had been applied months ago, but the lack of action they'd seen on Omdurman and the regular washes the tanks received from the region's torrential downpours meant it looked factory fresh. From a few feet away, the armoured panels looked smooth, identical, but up close you could see that the armour was rough with old paint, corrosion and bad casting. At that distance, the tanks' individuality was obvious, each one as different to the next as one human being to another.

He let his hand drop. Currently, the Seventh didn't seem like much. The company crews had abandoned their house-sized vehicles to the heat. Their weapons were covered over with protective tarpaulins. Hatches were dogged closed. Engine panels had been removed to prevent heat damage and shielded

with mesh to keep out Omdurman's multiplicity of insects. Access ladders and grab handles provided anchor points for awnings to shade the ground where men lolled. The tank park looked dishevelled, arranged as it was according to the uneven terrain. The super-heavies were drawn up as level as possible so as not to stress their suspension sets while resting. If he'd seen the tanks like this when he was a hunter on Bosovar, and still ignorant of the real world, he'd have thought them strange, but harmless. Back then he had no conception of the sheer destructive power of technology.

He smiled. He remembered that first moment when he'd seen the tanks fight, their engines roaring, guns booming, spear-straight rods of lightning belting from their lascannons. Gollph was far from a coward, but in that second he was terrified. He was also entranced, and elated.

Now the tanks were so quiet they wouldn't scare a bovid. He felt sorry for them.

Behind the tanks were stacks of Munitorum containers, and past those, maintenance vehicles. All that part of the camp was untidy - a fact that had been commented on by more than one officer in the taskforce. Each time it was brought up, Honoured Captain Bannick had to call out his tech-priest to explain the necessity of their arrangement. If they stayed there much longer, earth-moving equipment would be brought in to resculpt the ground. The Astra Militarum could tolerate untidiness only for so long.

'There we go,' Gollph said, patting *Cortein's Honour*. The Paragonians, Atraxians and the rest - all these strange men of the stars - said that their machines had their own souls.

Gollph couldn't quite believe it. He had once worshipped an oddly shaped rock, so felt he had something of a unique perspective. Having his own world view blown apart by reality, and roundly ridiculed to boot, made everyone else's cherished beliefs seem equally improbable.

Even so, he walked quietly away so as not to wake their sleeping spirits, just in case.

In the maintenance yard, men were working in the cool of the morning. Machine tools whined as they bit into metal plating. That was another thing that had frightened him when he'd been drafted. Any kind of machine had filled him with fear. The spacecraft that came to collect him, the troop transport, the ablutorials in the ship - the doors, even.

Some of the other Bosovar never got over their culture shock. Several of those incapacitated by terror had been shot as examples, but the executions could not shake the rest of the afflicted out of their catatonia. Never knowingly wasteful,

the Departamento Munitorum found other uses for those Bosovar that could not adjust. Gollph still saw their cyborgised remains mindlessly trudging around, from time to time.

A shower of sparks curved off an angle grinder. More spat from an arc welder at the opposite corner of the yard. The tech-adepts attached to the Seventh had requisitioned the largest flat stretch of the terrain there for themselves. An area of beaten earth stained by oil made up the centre. This space, where they serviced the tanks, was empty, and had been for a long time.

Gollph sauntered across the yard towards the slope. In the shadow of the hill it was pleasantly cool, and dew dampened his boots.

'Hey! Hey, Gollph!' The quiet hiss of the arc torch cut out.

Gollph stopped and turned to face the welder, a Paragonian man.

'Morning, Fulken,' Gollph said.

'Morning, yourself, little savage.' Fulken meant that affectionately; many men didn't. He stood with one hand on his visor, ready to flip it back down. 'Shoam's looking for you.'

'At this hour?'

Fulken grinned. 'You know that Savlar, never sleeps. Where you headed?'

'For a walk,' said Gollph. 'If Shoam needs me, he'll find me.'

'Fair enough. See you around.'

Gollph waved and headed on.

A few minutes later, he slipped past the picket patrols. He still had his hunter's skill. Nobody saw him.

As he mounted the slope, the cares of the world slipped from him. He allowed himself to be, just for a while, and put the soldier the Imperium had made him out of his mind. Halfway up the hill, he looked back at the camp. There was such a small amount of activity there. A few shouts and reveille calls sounded, thinned by distance; as insubstantial as the blue wood smoke that threaded the sky over the galley tents. Nobody else was about on the hill.

Quickly, he leant down, unlaced his boots and took off his socks. A slow smile of contentment spread across his face as his feet sank into the damp grass.

'This is the way man should walk and run,' he murmured to himself in his own language. He rarely got to speak Bosovar these days. The regiments he had been recruited alongside had been sent elsewhere, so there were only a few of his countrymen left in the taskforce. Those that were on Omdurman were either oddities like himself, fulfilling roles no one expected feral worlders could, or more usually they worked as servants to the higher officers.

With his boots off, Gollph moved fast. He resisted the desire to remove his shirt. There was only so much savagery the commissariat would tolerate.

In no time at all, he broke the line of shadow on the hill's ridge, and was into the first of the true daylight. The sun was heading rapidly up from the horizon, and its heat hit him hard. He slowed, panting lightly, and laughed.

Even after years and years away from home, they called him a savage still. He worked their machines, he knew their languages, he understood their customs; it didn't stop them looking down on him. When they saw him, they saw a spear-waving child-man in woven grass clothes. Let them underestimate me, he thought, glorying in the view. They miss so much, these civilised, off-world men.

Trilling his tongue in the old day-greeting of his people, he went to a boulder he favoured, and sat upon it to watch the swift sunrise.

'Basdack oil, wrong Throne-cursed formulation!' Meggen tilted the massive battle cannon shell around on its base, rolling it about to inspect it from all angles. 'For the love of the Emperor!' he swore, throwing the shell down.

Gollph winced. He had another one of the shells between his legs, a synthetic fibre brush in his hand, and a bucket of soapy, oily water to his left. A pallet of more shells stood outside the edge of the awning shading Meggen and Gollph. The shell's brass casings hid large charges of fyceline and a compact rocket motor, and the copper-jacketed projectiles nosed arrogantly skyward, each as tall as Gollph's waist. Yellow plastek snap-tags threaded the bright red fuses of their tips. They were potent munitions, capable of blasting apart a battle tank, or slaying a unit of men in a single shot. Meggen was treating his as if it were as inert as a stone.

'Careful, Meggen!' he said. 'We don't want the bloody thing to go off.'

Meggen made a frustrated noise around his cheroot, ran his hands over his face and through his hair, pulling his forage cap off in the process. His torso was stripped to his vest, the arms of his tanker's jumpsuit tied about his waist

He manoeuvred his cigar to the side of his mouth and chewed it. 'This oil is the wrong kind for this environment. Goes all sticky in the heat. It doesn't matter how many times I tell them, they don't listen.' He toed the brass casing, which was now stuck all over with grains of soil. 'It's not those basdack pen-pushers who have to clean the things, is it?

'No,' said Gollph, scrubbing pointedly at his shell. 'But if we don't get it done...'

'It won't get done,' said Meggen, joining Gollph in mimicking Humigen, *Lux*

*Imperator's* commander. 'I've had it I'm going to speak to Brasslock.'

'You know what he'll say.'

'Yes, I know what he'll say,' grumbled Meggen. 'I'm still going to speak to him.' Meggen pulled his forage cap on. He untied the sleeves of his jumpsuit, shoved his arms into them, and did up the zip on the front with a scowl. 'Why is it so hot on this planet all the damn time?' He set off grumbling and continued until he was out of earshot.

'Hot, hot, hot,' Gollph said. 'Better hot than being shot at. Nobody ever says that.'

'I do,' a voice hissed at his side.

'For the love of the Emperor of Terra and the sainted nine primarchs!' Gollph shouted, jumping sideways. His upset bucket hadn't even hit the floor before he had his knife out and at the throat of the speaker, Karlock Shoam, the driver of *Cortein's Honour*.

'Look what you've done!' Gollph shook his head, sheathed his knife and bent down to pick up his bucket before all the water was gone. He was too late, the last of it was being sucked away by the thirsty soil. 'They'll take that out of my rations.'

'Did I scare you, little warrior?' chuckled Karlock Shoam. 'You are a quick one. Never want to fight you.' Despite the heat of noon, Shoam kept his filthy greatcoat on, though even he'd removed the shirt beneath. 'Only old Shoam can spook you, eh?'

'You must have been to the cleansing block, or I'd have smelled you coming.'

'Downwind, my friend.'

Gollph wrinkled his nose as Shoam came around his front. 'Throne, you're right. You stink. Get a wash.'

Shoam upended the bucket and sat upon it. His respirator mask swung from its straps at one side of his neck. He was never without the mask or the small tank on his back that fed it, although from the clear look in his eyes and the relatively good condition of his skin, he'd not been partaking of the nitrochem it delivered for a while.

'Can't offend me.'

'Yeah, well you're offending my nose.'

Shoam chuckled. It was hard to upset the Savlar, which was good, as he had a habit of shanking people that managed to.

'Too hot, eh? Sweaty pinky, sticky oil, grumpy Meggen.' Shoam shook his head. 'You think this is hot? You not been on Savlar in summertime. That'd fry your

bones.'

'I'm sure it would.'

'Been looking for you.'

'Yeah?' Gollph went back to scrubbing the oil-streaked shell.

'Yeah,' said Shoam, leaning in. 'Old Shoam hears some whispers, so he follows the whispers and hears some rumours. Rumours become little hints. Little hints lead to big orders.' He sat back. 'We're leaving,' he said, with great gravity.

Gollph looked up at him. 'Seriously?'

Shoam nodded.

'Six months in the heat, no action, we're really moving on?'

'Yes. Am I not clear?'

'You're clear.' Gollph stopped scrubbing. 'I don't know how I feel about this. I'm bored as hell, but being bored beats being dead.'

'What you feel don't matter,' said Shoam. 'You're a Guardsman. Do as you're told. Go where you're told. But not right now. Right now, you got something else to do.'

Gollph looked at him quizzically a moment. Realisation lit up his face with dismay.

'Oh, no, no, no, no. You're going to hold me to that, are you?'

'Foolproof plan, little man, it's got to be now, before they break the camp, before the logisters come in and count up all the nuts and the bolts and the ammopacks. Easy to lose things, breaking camp. Things go missing all the time. We want to do it, we do it now.'

'Right, right,' said Gollph. 'But do we have to do it *that* way?'

Shoam grinned a rotten-toothed smile and nodded slowly. 'Only way there is.'

Meggen came strolling back. He was looking over the instructive text printed on a can of oil, and did not see their visitor at first. 'Hey, Gollph, Brasslock finally coughed up some of the better lubricant, the stuff they burn in the votive bowls, I told him the machine—' He stopped. 'Hello, hello. Karlock? Why are you lurking back there?'

'It's time,' said Shoam.

'It is?' said Meggen. He dropped the can of lubricant and sighed in relief. 'You mean we're finally getting off this steam-bath planet?'

Shoam nodded. 'You know what else that means?'

'Oh, yeah!' A gleam came into Meggen's eyes that matched Shoam's in wickedness. He looked at Gollph.

'Not you as well! I'm not doing it!' said Gollph. He set to scrubbing his shell

furiously.

'Yes, you are,' said Meggen. 'You agreed months ago. You said you would. You promised. As soon as we were moving out - that's what he said, isn't it, Karlock?'

'That's what he said,' said the Savlar.

'I was drunk!' moaned Gollph.

'It still counts,' said Meggen. 'Think of all the things he's done for us. There are worse commanding officers. A lot worse. He deserves it.'

Gollph hunched over and scrubbed at the shell harder. 'You're so going to owe me for this.'

At his elbow, Karlock Shoam sniggered. It wasn't a pretty sound.

Omdurman continued its rapid spin. The day turned to night as if someone had doused a light. A horde of insects burst from hiding the moment the sun was gone, with a keen interest in human blood. Gollph swatted at them in irritation as he, Meggen and Shoam hid in a thicket and watched the galley store.

'Look at this.' Gollph lifted up the breastplate of hollow reedstalks hanging over his chest.

'Where did you find it?'

'I made it,' said Meggen.

'I can tell. No Bosovar wears anything like this!' The rest of his costume matched the breastplate in ridiculousness.

'They don't know that,' said Meggen, watching the guards on the store. 'Big tent,' he said, lowering his magnoculars from his face.

'This will be easy,' said Shoam.

'You sound disappointed,' said Meggen.

Shoam shrugged.

'This is stupid,' said Gollph. 'I've had enough of pinky this and pinky that. Why are you making me do this? This will make things worse!'

Meggen looked over his shoulder. 'People say Shoam's a criminal, and they don't trust him, just because he's from Savlar. You try being him, that'd stop your whining about people treating you badly,' he said sagely.

'But he is a criminal!' Gollph whispered back.

'I believe that's discriminatory, Gollph,' said Meggen with mock severity.

'He's from Savlar, they're known for it!'

'Is that so?' said Meggen, lifting his magnoculars back up to his face. 'Aren't Bosovar known for being a bit slow on the uptake?'

'That's different! They think we're fools only because we don't know any better.'

'There you go. It's a misunderstanding. You can't write a whole planet off because of your prejudices, Gollph. Karlock here is an honest operator.'

Shoam chuckled throatily behind them.

'I'm hardly doing my bit to dispel misconceptions about my people with this act!' said Gollph.

'Never mind that, we need what's in there. Here's the requisition chit.' Meggen pushed a crumpled sheet of paper at Gollph.

Gollph read it. 'This is nonsense,' said Gollph.

'It's supposed to look bad. The more they think some idiot pinkskin has it all wrong, the further they'll be off our trail. I had to get Apranian soused to sign that. Cost me a good bottle of gleece,' said Meggen.

'I'm not happy about this,' said Gollph darkly. 'Apranian's got five Bosovar on his personal staff. They could hang one of them.'

'No hanging, brave warrior,' whispered Shoam, which wasn't at all unusual - he barely ever spoke above a sinister hiss. 'Too many of them. These Atraxians and others, they can't tell your kind apart. They won't kill for this.'

'Could we stop it with the "all Bosovar are stupid and look the same",' said Gollph. He sniffed and pulled a face, and looked down. 'Throne! I think someone's been using this bush as an ablutorial.' He swore in his native, clicking tongue 'It's all over my Throne-damned feet!'

'Shut up, or we'll be heard,' said Meggen. 'Shh!' Two guards had come to the tent to relieve the others. Meggen leaned forwards and peered at them. 'Yeah, yeah!' he said eagerly. 'There we are, that's Kollopian. He's the one we're waiting for. He's dim as they come. Right then, off you go.'

'I really don't want to do this,' said Gollph.

'Needs must,' said Meggen. He shoved Gollph forwards. 'Get to it, little savage, you know what to do. Keep them occupied. If you think about it, we're doing the hard work.'

'All right! I know.' Gollph walked a few steps, then stopped and shot them a dirty look.

'And don't kill anyone!' whispered Meggen.

'I'll try not to,' said Gollph.

'Go on now, shoo shoo!' said Shoam flapping his hands.

'This is so undignified,' muttered Gollph as he headed down to the storage tent.

Gollph didn't try to stay hidden, but it took a moment for the guards to notice him once he'd stepped into the wide, yellow pool of light around the galley store

entrance. 'Halt, who goes there!' shouted the guard who wasn't Kollopian, levelling his lasrifle bayonet as stiffly as a conscript on the first day of drill.

Kollopian slapped the weapon aside. He was a tall, mean, ugly-looking man. Rangy, but only dangerous to those smaller than himself, no real threat to a proper fighter. Gollph had his measure in half a second. Kollopian was a bully.

'Put up your spear, stupid. It's just a pinkhide, creeping about. What do you want, pinky?' Kollopian's challenge was heavy with glee. He sensed sport ahead. 'Lone little man like you out in the night - not safe! Savvy?'

Gollph affected an expression of cringing subservience and approached. Outside the circle of light, Shoam and Meggen ran silently past, heading for the rear of the store. It was vital the guards paid total attention to Gollph.

'Please! Help! Have here me order from Captain Apranian, Paragon four-seven foot. Need now, very quick. Please!' He waved the form under Kollopian's nose upside down. Kollopian snatched it. His face darkened.

'What? What by Terra is this?'

Gollph blinked at him in a sham of incomprehension. Inside, he seethed.

'Good form, yes?'

'No, *bad* form,' said Kollopian slowly and loudly. 'Wrong form, savvy? No read-y read? Get it?'

'What?' said the other man.

'Idiot's got his officer to sign the wrong form, hasn't he?' said Kollopian over his shoulder. 'This one's for resupply, not special requisition.' He shook his head at the childlike writing on the list of required supplies. 'None of these little basdacks can read or write. What's the point of them? They're cowards, child-minded fools. Waste of rations.' Kollopian handed his gun back to his fellow and crumpled the requisition form slowly in front of Gollph's face.

'Go away.'

'Need flour ration, now?' Gollph said quietly.

'Throne they can't even speak properly,' said Kollopian. He dropped the screwed up form onto the ground. 'Get out of here.'

Gollph looked at the form, then looked at Kollopian. 'No get?' He acted fearful. 'No get, pinky get the whip!'

Kollopian smiled nastily. 'Yeah, wouldn't that be a shame.' He bent low, so his black-toothed mouth leered right in Gollph's face. 'If it were up to me, you'd all be whipped, every day, make you work harder and stop you running away, good-for-nothing little savages.' He prodded Gollph hard in the chest Gollph whimpered, while simultaneously calculating how to break every bone in

Kollopian's fist.

'Get out of here, now.'

Gollph forced himself not to look over the guard's shoulder at the tent. How long did the others need to get the stuff? Another minute? Two?

'Please! Please, good sir,' wailed Gollph at the top of his voice. 'Must need have flour and foods for lieutenant! Is an order. Need now, please!'

'For the Emperor's sake, keep it down!' Kollopian said. 'Need now!'

Gollph saw Kollopian's blow coming a mile away. His jaw set before his muscles in his arms tensed. He set his feet badly. Gollph could have had him on the ground with a dislocated shoulder before Kollopian could blink. He forced himself to take the blow.

'Why good sir do that?' said Gollph. His jaw stung. Kollopian was a lousy boxer, but that hurt.

'Get out of here!' Kollopian hollered. He punched Gollph again. He was smiling, enjoying himself. Gollph took a few more hits, blinking with studied incomprehension.

'You pinkies really are stupid.' He shoved Gollph hard, knocking him to the ground.

Gollph curled up. Kollopian laughed as he kicked him.

'Hey! Hey! What's going on here?'

Kollopian ceased kicking him and stood sloppily to attention. 'A pinky sir, wrong orders, trying to get into the tent!'

Meggen sauntered over to the prone Bosovar and helped him to his feet. Gollph stood woozily. He didn't need to act that. Kollopian's comrade stood staring open-mouthed at Meggen, scared by which way the scenario might go.

'Look at the state of you,' said Meggen to Kollopian. 'Bloody infantry, stuffed full of lackwits. Tidy yourself up!' he said, slapping at Kollopian's dishevelled uniform. 'Where's your weapon?'

Meggen's rank of First Gunner was equal to that of an infantry sergeant, and Kollopian had no choice but to take the criticism. Gollph was right in his assessment; Kollopian didn't have the guts to stand up to Meggen.

'Sorry, sir. I'll sort it out, sir!'

'Get back on guard. Can't a man go out for a quiet smoke? You're a disgrace.' Meggen warmed to his role, berating the infantryman with great gusto, to the point that Gollph thought he was overdoing it.

Over behind Kollopian and his comrade, Gollph saw a shadow carrying a heavy knapsack vanish into the dark. He tapped Meggen's foot with his own gently.

Meggen took the hint.

'See this kind of thing doesn't happen again, and you, you little pink savage, make sure you get the right damn form next time!'

'Yes, good sir,' said Gollph, bowing and cringing.

'Come with me,' Meggen said, and took Gollph by the arm. Once they were away from the tent, he grinned.

'That went excellently,' he said.

Gollph threw off Meggen's arm. 'You're a Throne-damned basdack, you know that?'

'Indeed I do,' said Meggen happily. 'Indeed I do.'

'Every time, redeployment is sprung on us at the last moment. You would think that the Departamento could give us, of all people, a little more warning,' said Colaron Bannick to his cousin, Jonas, as they walked through the files of tents back to Bannick's quarters. 'You can't pack up and move a superheavy company overnight. It's ridiculous. They must have known about this for days, if not weeks. We're out of an active warzone, there's no risk of espionage. We don't even know where we're going. It's needless!'

Jonas, who was a calmer character than his cousin, shrugged. 'That's the Guard for you, Col.'

'This whole posting's been a disaster, Jonas. No enemy, no rebellion, barely any population to fend for and them all happy as can be with the Imperium. Half a year wasted on bad intelligence.'

'I disagree there,' said Jonas. 'I wouldn't say wasted, not at all. You have to make the best of cock-ups like this. Personally, I've enjoyed our little holiday.'

Activity was picking up in the camp as the first stages of packing commenced. The larger installations were the first to be dismantled, and the roads between the tents were busy with light haulers towing steel crates towards the landing fields.

'Have you, now?' Colaron said.

'I have. As should you, Honoured Captain,' said Jonas. 'We're both still alive. We aren't all as wedded to duty as you, cousin,' said Jonas.

Colaron scowled.

They reached the Seventh's mess tent. Despite the heat, it was laced up tight.

'Why are all the sides let down? Who did this?' said Colaron, tugging loose the fastening of the flap. He strode within, his irritation building to outright anger, then stopped in his tracks.

In the muggy dark of the tent, his company were assembled around a single

table laid with a white cloth, and illuminated by candles. Upon it was a meagre feast that nevertheless bettered anything Bannick had seen for some time: Patagonian cakes, fresh fruit and even a modest joint of meat.

'What?' he said.

'Happy name day, sir,' said Meggen.

'What?' said Colaron Bannick again. One of the crewmen took his coat. Another, posing as waiter, led him to the head of the table. A good, thick gleece awaited him. A rather bruised-looking Gollph showed him the bottle, rested it on a white cloth draped over his forearm and poured.

'It was my name day weeks ago,' Bannick said. 'And I've not celebrated it for years.'

'We thought it was about time,' said Meggen, 'on account of the fact that of all the commanding officers we've known around here, you're probably the least bad.'

'Where'd you get all this?'

'Need-to-know basis only,' whispered Shoam, who'd gone so far as to take a bath for the occasion. 'Sorry for the delay, chief man, breaking camp is the best time to organise such affairs.'

'Jonas? Humigen? Marteken?' Bannick looked to the other officers in the tent who were grinning like drunkards. 'You know anything about this?'

'I didn't,' said Jonas. 'But I'll not knock a holiday or a party either. Do you mind?' He picked up a glass, which was quickly filled. He raised it cheerfully. 'Your health, cousin.'

The timbre of the camp's noise changed as the army prepared to move on. Machines squealed about on their treads. Ships grumbled up and down from orbit on gushing plumes of exhaust. Klaxons blared out every hour, and orders issued from a dozen voxmitters, amplifying the voices of harassed officers to harsh barks. And yet, for all the noise the army made as it broke camp, all those tens of thousands of men moving and sweating and shouting, they barely made an impact on the vast silences of the savannah. If Gollph turned away from the camp, it was still possible to pretend it wasn't there, and ignore it as a momentary blot on this peaceful, unspoiled world.

That morning, he looked back at the camp.

In one corner of the tent city, three punishment posts had been set up in a marshalling yard. Three figures were manacled to them. They were far too far away for Gollph to make out their individual features, but their lightly pink skin

was clear enough. Three Bosovar, the servants of Apranian. He watched them being whipped, a humiliation he had suffered once himself. He supposed they were lucky; if the Militarum Arbitrators had decided that one was guilty of the theft from the tent, he would have been hanged.

All so the Seventh could honour their leader. Gollph watched the silent scene impassively. His was a world of bovid raids and honour killings, where the weak were murdered by the strong. He had killed his own kind for far less than a bottle of good liquor and a spread of food. However, his actions in this case felt dishonest. Though he thought little of the theft from the galley, it was achieved through humiliating deception, and the injustice of the punishment falling on other men bothered him.

The tiny figures jerked as they took their lashes.

Dying at the hand of a man who came against you openly was honourable. There was no honour in whipping, less in being judged by men who would never fight you.

They called him a savage. He knew who the real savages were.

Gollph looked away to distant horizons, imagining he was a free hunter again for this final dawn, before they took him up to the prisons of the voidships in orbit, and on to yet another war.

# **THE CLAW OF MEMORY**

**DAVID ANNANDALE**

'You are doomed to repeat history,' said Neferata, 'because you are doomed to forget it.'

She looked out upon the conclave, watching the effect as her words sank in, waiting for the first scholar to disagree. She wondered if the objection would be shaped by reason or by fear.

The conclave was taking place in the Ossuary of Rigour. The chamber was a domed semi-circle. Neferata presided over the gathering from a raised throne a few yards forward of the back wall. Inlaid in the dome were the interlaced bones of thousands of past Neferatian scholars. To be interred here was to be granted a singular honour, though Neferata did not bestow the gift without exacting a cost. There was no peace in the dome, no rest. Pain and a consciousness like the dreams of fevered sleep rippled through the bones. Even when it was empty, the Ossuary was not silent. From the dome came the susurrus of half-formed thoughts, of unfinished arguments, of the bitterness of fragmentary controversies. The last breath had been taken, but the last word never spoken. Sometimes, the writhing of the souls was so strong that the ceiling seemed to pulse. Now and then, the extremity of intellectual anguish reached such a peak that bone moved. Perhaps a finger twitched, or a jaw parted slightly. The motion was never great, but it was enough to make stone crack.

When the Ossuary was in use, its imprisoned souls were distracted from the agony of their discontent. The dead, confused and broken as they were, listened to the debates, and were compelled to echo them. The back wall of the Ossuary was a single slab of perfectly smooth, polished obsidian. As the discussions ebbed and flowed, so did phantasmal writing. The dark mirror of the stone glowed with the etchings of ghosts, the dying sighs of ideas. Neferata had little need to look back at the wall. She retained everything that was said, but the mortals before her could always see, at a glance, where the current of the debate had taken them, and what ideas were inspiring the strongest reaction.

In the silence that followed her latest words, she saw worried frowns, and knew that the wall had, for the moment, gone blank. Her declaration had cut deeply

into the dead as well as the living. Coming from a mortal, the idea could potentially be refuted as easily as any other. But coming from her, the words had much greater weight, because they were backed by much greater knowledge, and much longer memory.

Even so, she was genuinely curious to see what counterargument, if any, would be offered. Her purpose had been twofold in summoning the conclave. There was a prize she sought, but whether she achieved it or not was independent of the actual debates. The other reason was scholarly. She had told these mortals, gathered from across Neferatia, that she wished to discuss the implications of the great loss of history that had occurred as a result of the wars of the Ruinous Powers. This was nothing less than the truth.

There were only mortals in this gathering. Sometimes Neferata wished to discuss with vampires only. Sometimes she mixed the living with the undead. On this occasion, she needed the view of mortals. They and the undead experienced time very differently. The passing of a year for those whose years were numbered was not the same as it was for those who could watch the centuries go by as indifferently as they did a minute, and with little change to themselves. It was not that vampires did not forget too, that they did not lose history too, and through her voluminous writing, she took measures against that danger in her own case. But the loss of history for mortals produced a pain whose acuteness led to particular flavour and vintage of thought Neferata valued that uniqueness. Her hunger for knowledge, and the power it gave, was as strong as her thirst for blood.

'You present us with an unresolvable paradox,' said white-haired Geya Balanar. 'If what you say is true, then we will have no memory. And because we have forgotten, we cannot experience the truth.'

'I disagree,' said Alrecht Verdurin. He had not journeyed as far as some of the others. He lived in Enthymia, a small, ancient settlement under the protection of Nulahmia. 'Forgetting is not a wave. It is not a uniform condition.'

'Isn't that what the Ruinous Powers have been? A great wave upon our cultures, extinguishing them?'

'But not entirely,' Starin Javeign chimed in, cutting Alrecht off. 'The forgetting is not total. For tragic errors to repeat - and if repetition troubles us, it is because the repetition is tragic - it requires only that a certain number forget. Those who remember will be too few to prevent the tragedy, but they will witness the recurrence.'

'That is an added cruelty to the doom, then,' said Geya, 'if there is always

enough memory to recognise the doom but never enough to prevent it.'

'We are not just talking about history that is to be feared and avoided,' said Mela Turvaga. She was even older than Geya. 'I think our queen's statement is true not only in the specific, but in the broader sense. We *are* doomed to forget. Even without the destruction of our cities, our libraries and our places of learning, and the murder of our sages, we would still forget. What the forces of the Ruinous Powers have done is to greatly worsen what was already happening and is inevitable.'

'But there are still memories,' Alrecht insisted. 'History is not lost altogether.'

'That is a truth so partial as to be almost meaningless,' said Neferata. 'If I find a broken tiller washed up on the shore, can I then declare that the ship has not sunk? Your memories and your histories are lost day by day. Consider even your family's history. Is your line unbroken? Then you may pass down traditions and memories from one generation to the next. But you pass them down imperfectly. Details are forgotten, meanings are misinterpreted. With every ancestor who dies, there is someone else whose knowledge can no longer be consulted. And so little by little, what is passed down becomes distorted, vague, and a lie.'

'But you remember,' said Alrecht.

'Vampires forget too.'

'But *you*. my queen, *you* do not.'

'Don't I?' Neferata smiled, to show she was not denying what he had said.

'I do not believe that you *ever* forget,' said Alrecht

'If this is so, what flows from that?'

'Then no history is truly lost. What we think we have lost can be recovered, through your generosity.'

Neferata laughed. 'Alrecht Verdurin, you are transparent. I have respect for your work as a sage, but not for your work as a politician. But even if I were as you would invite me to be, your reasoning is still flawed. History is more than a simple act of recall. History is interpretation. What I perceive to be the meaning of an event on one day may be very different from what I believe the next day, and different again the next year, and the next century. Where is your history now? Which of my interpretations would you wish me to give you? But your faith is touching. I wonder how you think I preserve and keep order in infinite memory.'

Alrecht worried he had said too much. He did not want to attract the wrong kind of attention from Neferata. But if he were silent during the conclave, that would

draw her suspicions even more certainly. He had meant what he said. His best disguise, he thought, would be to participate as fully and honestly as he could in the discussions. Neferata's smile after the last exchange worried him, though. It felt too pointed. So he contributed less as the night wore on.

This was the second night of the conclave. The debates had been running without pause since it had begun. Neferata did not tire and had been present throughout. The mortal sages needed to rest. There were more than two hundred of them altogether, and though the Ossuary was always crowded, there was also a steady trickle of participants making their way in and out of the chamber. Scholars rose discretely from the rows of stone benches to leave in search of food and drink, or to sleep for a few hours in one of the cells in the halls leading to the Ossuary.

Alrecht waited a few more hours before he withdrew. The conclave would be ending before long. This was his moment. He could not leave the Palace of Seven Vultures until Neferata had dismissed her sages. Neither could he imagine returning to the Ossuary, and feeling her gaze, after he had done what he planned. He had to act while he knew where she would be, and then leave the palace right away.

He rose, timing his departure so that he was just a few steps behind another scholar, and he made his way out of the Ossuary. He turned left and walked down the hall, glancing in each of the cells as if he were looking for someone. He put more and more distance between himself and the other sages. When he reached the far end of the hall, he was alone. Without looking back, without speeding up, walking as if he knew where he was going and had every right to go there, he turned into the branching corridor.

There was no one here. He moved faster now, as quickly as he could while keeping silent. At every intersection, he clung to the shadows and peered around the corners, watching for guards. The further he went, the more confident he became that he would not be seen. He was seeking the way to Neferata's private library, and there would be no guards there, because that tower of the palace was hidden by the Mortarch's arcane arts. The grand library of the Palace of Seven Vultures was renowned across Neferatia and beyond. The private one, though, was a profound secret. As far as Alrecht knew, no one but Neferata was aware that it existed.

No one except the Verdurins.

Neferata was right about the decay of family history. Alrecht did not know how many generations back it was that his ancestor Karlet found the way into the

library. He did not even know if the discovery had been the result of a search or lucky chance. It had been, Alrecht thought, so long ago that the defences of the library must have changed greatly. No other Verdurin had been able to find the way in since, yet every few generations, one of them tried. The family was a small one, its means modest. The Verdurins were not nobles. They were small merchants and scholars, and their most revered ancestor had committed a single act of theft. Karlet had seen wonders in the library. What those wonders were grew with every retelling of his legend. Alrecht doubted everything about the stories except for two things. He believed that the library contained limitless knowledge, and he believed that it was true that Karlet had been inside. He believed the first thing because he had to. His family's entire history was shaped by the belief in the power that knowledge would grant. He believed the second thing because he had proof. Karlet had stolen a single sheet of parchment from the library.

The writing on the parchment was in no language Alrecht could read. The runes, perfectly and elegantly shaped, had never been deciphered, though the Verdurins had tried for centuries to solve their puzzle. It was this effort that had gradually pushed the family closer and closer to poverty, as all pursuits except the scholarly fell away. Alrecht would be satisfied if all he took away from the Palace of Seven Vultures was a key, even just a hint, that would unlock the secrets of the parchment. In order to do that, though, he had to find the library, and he had to get in. All of Karlet's other descendants had failed. Most had simply returned home in disappointment, their souls eaten away by the doubt, that Karlet had ever succeeded. Some vanished, and their disappearances kept the faith in Karlet alive, as did the parchment, the greatest of heirlooms, passed down from parent to child along with all the confusing, contradictory, frustratingly incomplete family lore.

Alrecht thought he would succeed. Things would be different for him because of the risk he was taking. He had the parchment with him. It was hidden inside the lining of his robe, nestled against his chest. No one had ever taken the parchment from the vault in which it was kept. Nothing could ever be allowed to happen to the Verdurins roost precious treasure. The idea of bringing the parchment to the palace had first come to Alrecht ten years ago. He had weighed the decision every day since then. Finally knowing that if he failed, he would only be remembered as a traitor to the family, he decided the risk was worth taking. What use was the parchment without a key? None. What had it ever done for the Verdurins other than being the source of obsession? Nothing.

Everyone had failed but Karlet and what was different about Karlet? The presence of the parchment. Alrecht knew the logic made no sense. Karlet did not have the parchment *before* finding the library. It was the fact that the relic was present in Karlet's story that was enough for Alrecht. He had no sound reasons to think he was right. But he was convinced he was.

Within minutes of leaving the Ossuary of Rigour, he *knew* he was right.

There was no way to know where the library was. Karlet's legend said it was hidden in a tower. If that was so, there was nothing in the exterior of the palace that would suggest which one. The other inheritance of the Verdurins, accumulated over the generations of failed searches, was a map of much of the interior. That was as useless a heritage as having the parchment sealed in the vault. They were hardly alone in knowing their way around the palace. Having a sense of where he was would be essential when he wished to leave, but it did nothing to help him find the library.

The parchment was helping him, though. He felt it begin to pull once he left the Ossuary behind. He followed where it wanted to go, and the pull became stronger. Now it was so powerful, he thought the parchment might tear through his robe and fly down the halls on its own. It was behaving like a dowsing rod. It wanted to return to the library, and it was using Alrecht as its tool to get there. He was happy to submit to its will.

He was almost giddy as he ran from shadow to shadow, down one corridor after another. His footing was sure, though it was growing hard to see. Wall sconces were becoming rare. The halls were thick with darkness. This was not a region of the palace anyone but the queen would have reason to enter. He stopped to catch his breath at one intersection. He squinted, looking back and forth. The damp stones of the walls were phantoms to him now. The gloom pressed against his eyes, clammy and smothering.

Alrecht didn't know where he was. He was too deep in the maze of the palace. His knowledge of Neferata's home, he now realised, was hopelessly superficial, a trap in itself. He wondered if he should turn around.

He looked back the way he had come. It was as dark as the path forward. Even if he made it as far as the previous intersection, he didn't know where to go from there. He was lost.

He would have panicked, but the tugging of the parchment was so strong, it submerged his fear. *I'll find my way out*, he told himself. *Karlet took the parchment, and he found the way*. The logic was as flimsy as his reason for bringing the parchment. No matter. He had been right to do that. He would be

right again. He was close to finding the library. Conviction and obsession held the fear at bay.

Alrecht moved on through pitch darkness. The stone under his palm felt uncomfortably like the rough flesh of some reptilian beast. The air was musty and dank, as if he were heading into a region of the palace that was never used, and was mouldering in neglect. *This is another defence*, he thought Alrecht wondered why there had been no barriers to him. He had not stumbled over any wards. If the floor dropped away ahead of him, he would have no warning. The simplest trap would kill him.

He kept moving. The floor was solid. There were no traps. He turned yet another corner, and the darkness lifted. There was a door ahead of him, tall, iron, outlined by a thin glow the colour of angry blood. Alrecht approached it. There were shapes in the iron, but the light was too dim for him to make out details. There was a suggestion of wings, of dark movement arrested in metal. He felt a gaze upon him. He swallowed hard, and pushed the door open.

The chamber beyond was suffused with the dim red glow. Tens of thousands of books lined the curved walls of the tower, and a staircase spiralled up the wall to the full, dizzying height. Alrecht stumbled into the library, craning his head back. There was too much to take in. The tower of books seemed to extend to infinity. He approached the shelves nearest to the door. The bindings looked odd, yet horribly familiar. He reached out and touched a spine, then recoiled from the feel of a corpse. The bindings were human flesh. He shuddered, swallowing bile.

The revulsion faded quickly. Knowledge and power drew him on.

He did not know where to begin. The runes on the spines of the volumes were the same incomprehensible markings as on the parchment. Where should he look to find a key?

*What if there isn't one?*

He mustn't let himself believe that. He mustn't give up on centuries of his family's singular hope.

Alrecht reached out for a book at random. At the last moment, he jerked his hand away as if burned. The thoughts contained between the covers seemed to be leeching out of the binding. The air was charged with a dark storm waiting to strike. The knowledge here was that powerful.

*Who do you think you are?* he thought. *Leave this place. You cannot hope to master what is here. We have been lying to ourselves for every generation since Karlet.*

He stared at the books, raising his head again to follow the spiral of power. He

noticed now that the markings on the spines were clearly made by the same hand. Neferata had written everything he saw in this chamber. The wealth of thought before him was overwhelming.

*Leave,* he thought again.

He did not. He refused to give up on the family's dream. He refused to be the one to kill it. Somewhere in here was the key to the parchment.

Alrecht turned away from the wall. In the centre of the library stood a lectern. The stand was one of Neferata's victims, mummified and held in a position of eternal agony. An open book rested on the lectern, an invitation to the curious. Alrecht wondered if this was how Karlet had stolen the parchment so long ago. Tingling with anticipation, he approached the lectern and bent over the book. The page it was open to was blank except for a single sentence This, Alrecht could read without a key.

*RETURN WHAT IS MINE.*

Alrecht gasped. He wanted to flee but was frozen in place

'You seem disappointed,' said Neferata.

Alrecht looked up. The Mortarch of Blood was walking down the staircase, her movements unhurried and graceful. She wore the same black robes as she had at the conclave, but in the crimson light of the library, runes glowed on them, identical to the ones on the parchment, whipping Alrecht with silent mockery.

A monster glided down the stairs just ahead of Neferata. A dark, heavy shroud covered a body of bones and ghostly essence. A horse's skull protruded from the cloth, its empty eye sockets fixed on Alrecht. It clutched a long glaive, its notched blade carved with sigils. An unfelt wind stirred the tattered edges of the shroud. The jaws of the skull parted slightly, as if it would speak to Alrecht and promise him terrors.

'You are the first of your family since Karlet Verdurin to have entered the Claw of Memory,' said Neferata. 'You would be right to think that means you are also only the second mortal to set foot here. For Karlet's crime, I cursed your family. You have laboured in futility ever since. But none of Karlet's descendants brought the stolen page within my reach until you. So I must shape your fate differently. I hope you will not be disappointed.' She gestured at the horror that accompanied her. 'This is the first part of your reward. For this glaivewraith stalker, there is no one in this realm as important as you.' Her teeth gleamed.

Alrecht staggered back from the lectern. His robe caught on a spike protruding from beneath the book. The tortured face of the mummy screamed mutely at him. He tried to pull free, and it was as if the tome were holding him fast.

Alrecht reached inside his robe as he struggled and pulled out the parchment. He threw the page at Neferata. It fluttered in the air and fell only a few feet from the lectern.

Alrecht wrenched himself free, tearing his robe, leaving a long strip of cloth hanging from the lectern. He ran for the door to the Claw of Memory. It had opened easily for him. Now it remained stubbornly closed. Sobbing, he yanked at it, too terrified to look back and see what was coming for him. His neck prickled in anticipation of the touch of a blade.

Then the door ground open. As Alrecht slipped through, he did look back. He saw Neferata holding up the cloth to the stalker. Then he was running.

The glow from the Claw of Memory followed him, lighting his way. He ran without thought or plan. He thought he had been lost before. Now, he truly was. Everything was lost to him.

He did not know how he got out of the palace. His flight was a blur of dark corridors and the distant laughter of Neferata ringing in his ears. But he was out, and in the streets of Nulahmia. He could think again, though that only increased his terror, because he knew why Neferata had not killed him in the Claw of Memory. She had chosen to toy with him. It would have been a mercy to die in the library. Instead, that *thing* was going to come for him. He would live with the torment of dread until then. He could feel the spectre's approach, picture its unhurried, relentless glide towards its appointment with him. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

But maybe he could end the curse. Perhaps he could redeem the centuries of futility, his family's unending expiation for Karlet's theft. Alrecht had failed his ancestors, and they had failed too. He swore he would not foil his son. Alrecht would give Lorrion and his descendants the legacy of a true history, one they must never forget.

Nulahmia surrounded him with shadow. Every darkened alley and every gaping threshold of every house and every vault threatened to reveal the stalker. He moved as quickly as he could, running when he had the breath. He stuck to the great boulevards, hiding himself in the crowds. He tried to measure his progress against his memory of the hunter's unhurried movement. From stables at the western wall of the city, he paid for a horse and rode the beast to exhaustion. The wind in his ears was the keen of air through the skull of the glaivewraith stalker, and if he listened more closely than he dared, he would still hear Neferata's laughter.

Alrecht reached his house in Enthymia the following night. At the door, he looked around for the gliding, shrouded form. It was not upon him yet. 'Let there be time,' he muttered. 'Please, let there be time.' He did not know to whom he was pleading.

He slammed the door and barred it, though he knew the gesture was useless, and ran past his startled wife to his study.

Hallaya followed him. 'What is it?' she asked. 'Did you succeed?'

'Lies,' he told her. 'All lies.' He sat at his desk and snatched up a quill and a handful of vellum sheets. 'Where is Lorrone?'

'In bed. Asleep.'

'Lock his door, and this one.' He grasped Hallaya's hand. 'I'm sorry,' he said, tears coursing down his cheeks. 'I'm so sorry. My time has come. This is the last thing I can do for you and Lorrone. I love you both so much, and that is why I must do this.'

Hallaya ran from the room, and Alrecht turned to his task. He wrote frenziedly. There was too much he had to say, too much to explain, in order to bring this to an end. His hand shook, and his writing was a barely legible scrawl. Words came out in a jumble. He had no time to shape a careful argument. Each moment might be his last. When the door opened again, he yelped and dropped the quill.

It was Hallaya, come back to lock the door on this side.

'No!' Alrecht said. 'You have to leave me! You mustn't be here when it comes!'

'When what comes? I don't understand.' She came and threw her arms around him.

*I don't understand.* That was his fear. That was the terror that surpassed even that of his coming end - that she would not understand, that Lorrone would not understand, that no one would understand. His life had been in vain. His death might be too.

Alrecht pulled free of Hallaya's embrace. 'I have to write this,' he said. 'I have to finish.'

The door flew off its hinges. The glaivewraith stalker floated into the room, its blade pointed at Alrecht's heart, its eye sockets empty yet filled with dreadful purpose.

Neferata entered the boy's bedroom. Lorrone Verdurin couldn't have been more than eight years old. He was sitting up in bed, holding the rough woollen blanket up to his chin. His eyes were wide with fear, but when he saw Neferata, wonder suffused his face too.

Neferata smiled and shut the door, muffling the screams and the sound of ripping coming from Alrecht's study. She walked over to Lorrion, sat on the side of his bed and stroked his hair. 'Don't be afraid,' she said. 'You are safe.'

'Who are you?' the boy croaked. 'Are you a queen?'

'I am. I am *your* queen. And I have come with a gift for you. And a secret.'

The screams stopped. The glaivewraith stalker had completed its task. Now there were only Hallaya's sobs.

'Do you want to know the secret?' Neferata asked Lorrion, distracting him from the sounds of his mother's distress.

'What is it?' he asked.

'Tomorrow, your mother will tell you things about your father, and she will be wrong. She will try to understand, and try to help you understand, some things your father has written. She will not be able to, because they cannot be understood. I am sorry to tell you this, but it is the truth.' She soothed and mesmerised as she spoke. The child stared and nodded. 'So that is the secret. No matter what people say, remember that there is nothing to understand in your father's writings. You must turn all of your thoughts to my gift... Would you like to see it?'

Lorrion nodded again.

Neferata opened a scroll tube and removed the parchment inside. She gave it to Lorrion. 'This,' she said, 'is one of my most precious treasures. When you are wise enough, you will come to know what it means.'

She had to fight back laughter as she told the great lie. The second purpose of the conclave was fulfilled. She had lured Alrecht Verdurin to the palace, and he, at long last, had been the member of his clan to bring the stolen page with him. The archives of the Claw of Memory were complete once more. But the punishment of the Verdurins would not end. They had paid for Karlet's theft with generations of futile effort. Now they would have a new page to drive them to madness, one she had written for them. The runes on the parchment had no meaning, but they seemed to. They gestured towards a great revelation that did not exist. And Lorrion's childhood memory of this night and his encounter with her would grow and poison all his descendants to come.

She leaned forwards and kissed the boy's cheek. 'Study and grow wise,' she whispered, 'until the day comes when you can read your gift.'

# **THE DARKLING HOURS**

**RACHEL HARRISON**

The city of Termina never stops singing.

Commissar Severina Raine knows that the sound is just the wind cutting through the city's many mineshafts and tunnels. It can be heard all over Termina, from the refineries on the surface to the processing plants far below, where Raine and her regiment, the Eleventh Antari Rifles, are billeted. There is no escaping the city's singing, but in the old overseer's watch room where Raine now sits and waits it is at least a little quieter. The hanging lumens overhead turn in that same wind as it finds its way through cracks in the poorly plastered walls. Light glances off the casing of Raine's timepiece as she watches the hands tick around towards the crack in the top of the face. Her body aches from the previous day of fighting and her eyes are dry and gritty. She should be taking the time she has been given to sleep, but she finds that she cannot. Not while the fight goes on above her.

And certainly not with the city singing.

'It sounds like something living, don't you think?'

Raine clicks her timepiece closed and puts it back in the chest pocket of her coat. Andren Fel takes a seat on the opposite side of the overseer's table and hands her a tin cup with a loop of thorns scored into the rim. It is warm to the touch from the windfall tea inside it. 'I think it sounds like singing,' Raine says.

'Or howling,' Fel says. 'Either way, it is sorrowful.'

The storm trooper captain is unarmoured, clad in black fatigues that are sewn with the red bars that mark his rank. Fel's dark hair has got nearly to the length where it can tangle, and his face is cut and bruised. His densely tattooed hands are split badly across the knuckles. He is also meant to be taking the two hours they have been given to rest, but Raine knows that is as difficult for him as it is for her. That is why they often spend these hours talking.

'Shouldn't howling be a comfort for a Duskhound?' Raine asks.

Fel laughs at that, a low chuckle. 'True enough,' he says.

A tremor runs through the undercroft that makes the overhead lumens flicker and hum. Dust falls in fine columns from the ceiling and scatters on the wooden

surface of the table.

'I saw Devri on the way up,' Fel says. 'He had to pull Blue Company out of the docks. The Sighted sank the lot to keep them from pushing up to the drilling fields.'

Raine nods and drinks from her tin cup. The windfall tea is bitter and spiced. It only grows on Antar, and only in the Northwolds, where Fel was raised before he was taken for the Schola Antari.

'Whatever the Sighted intend to take from Termina, it is in the mines,' Raine says. 'They have either abandoned or destroyed key locations all across the city, but they refuse to surrender the pits.'

'Seems a lot of blood to spend for the sake of promethium,' Fel says.

Raine nods. 'If they just wanted promethium they wouldn't have fled the refineries. It must be something else. Something they can twist and use.'

'Something buried deep,' Fel says.

A second, larger tremor shakes the room. More dust falls from the ceiling, and the lumens fail altogether for a moment. In the brief instant of absolute darkness Raine can't help thinking of the battle before this one, on Gholl, where she was captured by the Sighted and taken into the crystal caverns under the surface.

Buried, deep.

Raine pushes the memory - and the unease that comes with it - aside. She drinks from her tin cup again, nearly draining it. When she puts it down, the leaves cling to the enamel inside.

'You read the leaves before every fight, don't you?' she asks Fel.

He looks down at his own cup and nods. 'I do.'

'Would you show me how it's done?'

'I thought you didn't believe in omens or fates,' he says.

Raine shakes her head. 'I don't, but you do.'

Fel smiles. 'All right,' he says. 'I'll show you.'

Raine holds out her cup to hand it to him, but he shakes his head.

'It has to be you that sets the leaves, so that our fates don't get crossed.' He shows her using his own cup. 'Turn the tea three times, and then tip out what's left.'

Raine does as he says, and tips the remains of her windfall tea out onto the floor before putting her cup back on table between them.

'Where did you learn this?' Raine asks.

'My mother taught me,' Fel says simply.

Raine understands then why the ritual means so much, because it must remind

him of home, and of the family he lost. Raine feels the timepiece ticking in her pocket like a second heartbeat.

Fel picks up the cup in his tattooed hand and frowns. Raine cannot help it. She leans forward, just slightly. 'What do you see?' she asks.

'Hunting birds,' he says, turning the cup so that she can see. 'For a chase that ends in blood.'

Raine catches herself smiling.

'Not so surprising,' she says. 'And the rest?'

He turns the cup as if to look at it another way, still frowning. 'The duskhound,' he says, after a moment.

'The story that your squad is named for,' Raine says.

Fel nods.

'What does it mean?' Raine asks, though she can guess, because he's told her the old story.

Fel puts the cup down on the table.

'It means death, following close by.'

The overhead lumens stutter again.

'Isn't it always?' Raine asks.

The vox-bead Raine wears crackles in her ear before Fel can answer her. It is the Antari general, Juna Keene. From the way Fel reacts, Raine can tell he is receiving the same message.

*'The timetable has moved up. Tactical briefing in ten minutes in the main control hub.'*

'Acknowledged,' Raine says, into her vox-link. She hears Fel do the same.

'Back to duty, then, captain,' she says.

Fel nods and picks up the tin cups.

'Aye, commissar,' he says.

In the quiet that follows his words, Raine listens to the sound echoing from Termina's tunnels and hollows, and realises that she was wrong, and Fel was right.

It really does sound like howling.

The tactical briefing takes place in the old refinery control hub around a hololith projector that's been mounted on the main console. The other lights in the large, rust-stained chamber are switched off to allow the projection to show clearly, leaving most of the hub in shadows.

Andren Fel stands in those shadows and watches the hololith turn, memorising

the details by habit. Distances and depth. The number of menial crew. Ingress points and exit options. It is how he always prepares for an operation, but today it is more than that. It is a welcome distraction from the shape he saw in the leaves. In Raine's fate.

The duskhound.

Death.

Raine stands on the opposite side of the hololith from him now, her angular face cast in hard shadows. The green light from the projection catches the edges of her commissariat uniform, turning the golden braiding to jade and finding the edges of every dent and gouge in the silvered chest-plate she wears. Fel meets Raine's eyes for a moment. They are dark, even in daylight, but in these shadows they could as well be the space between stars.

'What you're looking at is mine-pit designate Iota. It is the deepest mine in Termina, and the oldest.'

The words belong to Juna Keene. The general is sitting at ease on the edge of one of the secondary consoles. Her uniform is that of the regulars, green-and-grey splinter, with wear-worn pale leather gloves and boots. Only the white cuffs on her rolled-back sleeves mark her rank. That, and the easy authority in her voice.

'The pit-mouth is twelve-hundred metres across, side to side,' Keene says. 'Last recorded operating depth was around three thousand metres.'

Keene depresses a heavy key in the hololith's base. It resets to a different view, from above. Mine-pit Iota is a wide-open void in the face of the city, like a set of jaws for the world. Grooves made for lifters and transitways run around the edge of it, carved into the walls, down into the depths.

'The Sighted have held the pit since the outset of the war,' she says. 'They have abandoned a dozen other key locations, but they refuse to leave Iota. There is something that they want down there. Something we cannot afford for them to find.'

'Iota is located in the western reaches,' Raine says. 'Which makes Karin Sun's Gold Company the closest for capture. Am I to assume that they have failed?'

'They tried,' Keene says. 'But the regulars cannot get close. The Sighted have a witch prowling Iota, and a powerful one at that. Sun chose to fall back, rather than lose his company to madness.'

Fel can't help but feel unease at the word *witch*. It's an old disquiet from home. One he is trained to act in spite of, that can never truly be erased.

'If the regulars cannot move in, the war in the western reaches will grind to a

halt. We cannot let that happen.'

'Hunt-to-kill, then, general,' Fel says.

Keene nods. 'And you'll need to make it quick. According to Captain Sun, the witch's power grows stronger with proximity and exposure. It had Sun's troops all dreaming, running, or temporarily mad. Our witches,' Keene pauses, and frowns. 'Our *sanctioned psykers* fared twice as badly. Apparently Pharo clawed his own eyes out rather than get any closer.'

Fel shakes his head. Witch or not, he would never wish Pharo harm.

'If the witch's power grows with proximity, then that's how we'll hunt it,' he says. 'Go straight for the source of the fear.'

The general nods her head. 'Your Valkyrie is on standby. Once your boots hit the scaffolds, you will have six hours. If you miss your extraction, we will count you as lost. Is that clear?'

'As a springtime sky, general,' Fel says. 'Consider it done.'

Keene looks to Raine then.

'You will accompany them, commissar,' she says.

'Yes, general,' Raine says.

Keene doesn't say why, and Fel doesn't have to ask. There is only one reason to send a commissar along for a hunt-to-kill like this one. It will be Raine's duty to make sure that the Duskhounds don't lose themselves in dreams, like Sun's regulars did, and to deal with them if they do, with that pistol she carries or her sword's keen edge.

Fel catches Raine's dark eyes once more through the hololith. The two of them have fought together countless times since her assignment to the regiment, and Fel has come to know her well, through stories shared and scars earned. He trusts Raine, even if his kinfolk don't, but he has no illusions. Just as Fel is made for the hunt and the kill, Raine is made for judgement, and for the hard choices. If it is necessary, she will not hesitate to pull the trigger. To do anything else would be to break faith.

And that is something that Fel knows Severina Raine will never do.

For the first time in days, Severina Raine cannot hear the sound of the city, because Jova's Valkyrie gunship is howling even more loudly than Termina can.

Raine keeps a steady grip on the handhold built into the Valkyrie's airframe as the pilot banks over the city on the approach to Iota. Cold wind rushes through the troop compartment from the open side doors, carrying with it the smell of fyceline and smoke. The wind stings Raine's eyes and catches at the collar of her

buckled short-coat. She is wearing her funerary blacks and heavy, weatherproof gloves. Her silver chest-plate is deliberately dulled to keep it from catching the light. She has strapped extra armour plates over her boots for the drop. The drop for which she needs the jump-mask slung around her neck, and the bulky grav-chute harness on her back.

'It will be quick,' Fel says. 'Straight down into Iota, and onto the eastward landing pad. It is only halfway down, but it's as far as we can go before there's too much strike risk from the scaffolding.'

Fel is standing beside her, with one hand on the airframe and his hellgun slung. He is fully kitted for the fight to come, with grenades and charges locked to his belt and the heavy-bladed knife he carries sheathed at his waist. Like Raine, he is wearing a grav-chute, though his is modified to be worn with storm trooper carapace. The tactical display built into Fel's vambrace shows the schematic of Iota rendered in green, and the landing pad as a bright white circle.

'The display in your jump-mask will keep the platform flagged,' he says. 'Once we hit the platform, we will shed the grav-chutes and move down towards Iota's heart. Clear?'

Raine nods. She has completed perhaps a tenth of the combat drops the Duskhounds have, but Raine has enough experience to know how to make it to the landing zone in one piece. The principles for use of a grav-chute are simple. Fire the thrusters as a method of aerobrake in adequate time before literally hitting the landing zone. Do not thrash your limbs. Do not panic. It is a matter of control and discipline under pressure, like many things.

'Completely,' she says. 'Just give the word, captain.'

Fel smiles at that 'Aye, commissar,' he says.

The Valkyrie's internal vox crackles.

*'We are close to Iota,' Jova says. 'I'll maintain at five hundred metres above the pit-mouth, but you'll want to make it quick.'*

'Understood,' Fel replies.

He pulls on his Duskhounds mask and locks it in place, the eye-lenses glowing red in the dim combat lighting of the troop compartment. Like the rest of his squad, Fel's mask is painted with a snarling hound's face to represent the creature of Antari folklore that gave the squad their name. Seeing it now, Raine can't help but think of the shape he saw in the leaves, back in the overseer's watch room.

Three loud thumps split the air, then, and the gunship's airframe shudders, rattling all of the way down Raine's arm.

*'Well, now. There's no need for that,' Jova says, over the internal vox.*

The pilot cuts speed and drops the Valkyrie into a curving dive. Inertia pulls at Raine's bones, and the airframe shakes and groans, but then the turbojets fire and Jova levels out again. Rol, Fel's second-in-command, whoops. The Dusk hound is braced against the frame of one of the Valkyrie's open side doors with his hellgun raised. Rol has his mask in place too, but Raine can guess that he is grinning. 'Honestly, it's as if you wish for death,' Tyl says.

The Duskhounds' sharpshooter is braced in the other door; her rifle pointed out into the clouds and darkness. Tyl's rifle is modified for distance kills, with a variable scope and a longer, accurised barrel that she has scored with kill markings. Her tone is patient and good-natured. Tyl and Rol could be taken for true family. They are both lean and strong, with the same lilting accents. In a fight they are inseparable, each a spare shadow for the other.

'Glory, maybe,' Rol says, with a smile in his voice 'The After can wait.'

Tyl laughs.

'I wish you wouldn't make light of it like that,' Jeth says. 'Death is no cause for laughter.'

Jeth is the only Duskhound built stronger than Fel is. His matt-black carapace is scored with words from hymnals written in the old Antari script, and he wears a loop of luckstones at his belt.

'You know I didn't mean it like that,' Rol says. 'Tell him, Myre.'

'Jeth is right,' Myre says, in her solemn voice. 'Mocking death will only bring it quicker.'

Myre is the youngest of Fel's Duskhounds, but you would not know it from her voice. It always sounds as though she has seen a sector's worth of sadness. Myre sits in one of the Valkyrie's restraint thrones, checking her gear briskly and locking it to her belt and thigh-plates. Raine sees heat-charges and blind grenades, and a loop of krak grenades that Myre passes straight to Jeth without needing to be asked. The Valkyrie thrums and shakes as more detonations light the clouds through the open side doors, and Raine sees the wide, dark mouth of Iota far below through the ashes and smoke.

'Do you all feel that?' Jeth asks. 'It's like knives running over my bones. I think we just crossed into the witch's circle.'

Raine realises then that she does feel it, the very edge of a creeping unease. She tightens her grip on the handhold above her head and takes a breath, pushing the feeling aside.

'We must deny it,' she says, over the roar of the Valkyrie's turbojets. 'It is the only way to defeat a psyker who intends to twist your own mind against you.'

Raine thinks back to Gholl. To the crystal caverns, and how her own mind was twisted against her. How she managed to deny it.

'There is a way to know the falsehoods from reality,' she says. 'There are always details amiss, even when the psyker is powerful. Hold to what you know to be true. Trust your instincts. It is much more difficult to fool the heart than it is the eyes.'

Fel looks to his Duskhounds.

'Listen well to the commissar's words,' he says. 'We hunt, we kill and we get out. All of us. Is that clear?'

'Aye, captain,' the Duskhounds say, as one.

Inertia pulls at Raine again as the Valkyrie cuts speed and holds position above the pit, its vectored engines roaring. Rol and Tyl slam their side doors closed and take position by the ramp with Myre and Jeth.

*'You are good to go,'* Jova says over the internal vox. *'I'll hold until you are clear.'*

'Understood,' Fel says.

Raine pulls her jump-mask on and secures it. It closes tight to her face. Her own breathing becomes very loud, contained by the mask. The air supply through the breather apparatus is stale and dry. Her visor lights with the simple guidance data that will guide her to the lifter platform and a drop distance counter flickers in the corner of the display. *Distance to target: 2134 metres.*

'Ready?' Fel asks.

'Aye, captain,' the Duskhounds reply, and this time, Raine joins them in their response.

'Let's go make some fates,' Fel says, and he hits the release for the Valkyrie's rear ramp.

The ramp yawns open to reveal Termina's thunderous sky, underlit by the fires of war and the refineries that are still burning. Tyl and Rol go first, straight over into the dark. Then Myre and Jeth. The wind buffets Raine as she steps to the edge alongside Fel. She blinks. Breathes. Glances once more at the drop distance counter in her visor's display.

And then she jumps out into the war-torn sky.

As Raine falls through Termina's sky, towards the open void of Iota, she focuses on what she was taught.

Breathe. Don't stop breathing.

Arms and legs outstretched and stable.

Don't thrash. Don't blink.

Remain calm.

The sky lights with anti-aircraft fire and lightning flashes. The ground grows larger. Darker. Iota yawns wider. The wind tears at Raine's uniform and tugs on her limbs. Her fingers are cold and numb, despite the gloves. The drop distance counter tracks down quickly.

*Distance to target: 1711 metres.*

Breathe.

Don't stop breathing.

The landing zone in Raine's visor display is a bright white circle. Below, Iota grows wider and wider until there is no ground to see, and then she is below the line of the pit-mouth and falling into the darkness of Iota itself. Scaffolding and lifters blur past, and the counter tracks down. Raine cannot see the others, but then the pit is so dark and the wind is so strong. Her visor beads with water that runs in streaks to the edges.

*Distance to target: 1226 metres.*

The longer the freefall, the less likely it is you'll be seen. But the longer the freefall, the less control you have. The more likely it is you will hit something.

Don't blink.

Just breathe.

Her eyes sting and ache and Raine thinks for a moment of the shape in the leaves. She glimpses it again in the streaks of water beading on her visor. The Duskhound. Death. Her heart is racing.

'Breathe,' she says to herself.

Raine knows that it is the psyker's influence pushing at the edges of her mind, making her see those things. Making her heart race even more than the fall does. She also knows that to panic is to die, so she keeps breathing deeply from the stale air of her mask and forces her limbs to stay locked as the counter keeps tracking down.

*Distance to target: 914 metres.*

But then there is a loud crack and Raine is dizzied. Her limbs go slack for an instant before she recovers her senses and realises that something struck her visor. An enemy round, or some kind of debris. She is falling fast, uncontrolled. Iota blurs around her. The wind is deafening. She can't catch her breath. She can't see. Can't stop spinning.

Just.

*Breathe.*

With the tactical display crazing in front of her eyes and the vox pickup hissing loudly in her ears, Raine fights the wind and the vertigo and the dizziness to right herself, and slow the fall before it kills her. She gets herself level, but she cannot tell if she is off-course. She cannot clearly see the white circle that marks the landing zone. In the corner of the display, the distance to target flickers and splinters.

It looks as though it says *Distance to target: 94 metres.*

Or is that *34 metres.*

'Throne,' Raine says, through her teeth.

She fires the grav-chute's jets. Inertia pulls hard on her limbs and jolts her spine. Raine's vision dizzies again for a moment, and when it clears she can see the landing zone below. Close. Coming up fast, despite the jets. What she was taught rushes through her mind. Use the fall. Don't lock your limbs. Roll with the speed of it.

Don't close your eyes.

Raine kills the grav-chute jets a moment before she hits the deck of the landing platform and rolls. She doesn't lock her limbs, or close her eyes, which is how she sees that she hit at a poor angle, right by the edge of the platform.

And that she's about to go over it.

Raine twists as her body slides over the platform lip and manages to snag hold of the grating of the floor, though it nearly pulls her arm from its socket and she can't help but cry out. She hits the release for the grav-chute and lets it fall away into the pit below as two figures clad in black carapace drop to their knees and help to drag her back up onto the platform. Fel and Myre.

'Hells,' Fel says. 'That was close.'

Raine gets to her feet and pulls the jump-mask off. Iota's howling is even louder without it. The crystalflex of the jump-mask is crazed with cracks that burst outwards from a hole the size of a trade-coin. Raine becomes aware of her face stinging where she has been cut, and of warm lines of blood painting their way down her cheek. For a moment, she almost sees a shape in the damage to the visor. Teeth and eyes.

Raine shakes her head to clear it and drops the damaged jump-mask on the deck. Fel meets her eyes for a moment.

'Ready?' he asks her.

Raine nods and draws her bolt pistol from the mag-secured holster at her belt. The cold weight of Penance is comforting.

'Let's go,' she says.

Andren Fel was taught many things at the Schola Antari. He was taught how to lead others. How to memorise and strategise. He was taught how to survive with very little, and how to fight and kill with even less, but Fel's scholam training also granted him another skill.

Something that the masters would call *resilience*.

Those days are distant now, but Fel remembers them as clearly as any other. He remembers being bound and blindfolded. He remembers shocks and lashes, knives and blood, and the masters asking him the same question over and over again and expecting him to break.

*Do you want it to stop?*

Every cadet finds a different way to endure the resilience trials, and to keep themselves from answering *yes* to that question. The method is always secret, and personal, so that it cannot be broken. Fel's is a simple thing. An old evensong that his mother used to sing when he was a child.

*Beware the darkling hours, my son,*

*For that is when the duskhounds come.*

*Keep within the light as the fire burns,*

*Until the morning sun returns.*

Andren Fel thinks of those words again now as he follows the wide, rocky slope down into Iota. Down into the darkness. The words help to keep the witch's work at bay. The unease, as if he is being followed. The shadows, coiling and twisting and making shapes at the edges of his sight.

The glint of watchful eyes in the darkness.

The path down into Iota is wide and set with scuffed steel rails for excavation trains. Line of sight is fouled by large piles of rubble and the still, silent drilling machines that creak in the ceaseless wind. Iota's howling is louder the deeper they go. More than loud enough to cover any sound Fel might make as he gets shadow-close to the two Sighted scouts patrolling the path ahead. The two of them are wearing fully enclosed reflective helmets and dull blue flak armour marked with that sigil they all wear. The spiral, with the eye at the centre.

Not unlike the spiral of Iota, seen from above.

The shards of mirrored glass hanging from cords on the Sighted's flak armour knock together as Fel grabs hold of the scout and breaks his neck with a twist of his hands. Beside him, Rol quiets the other with the edge of his combat blade, then the two of them drag the bodies to where they will be hidden by the darkness and debris, before moving further down the slope.

Fel drops into the shadow of a mining machine, and Rol does the same. Ahead,

the slope leads down onto a rubble-strewn plateau that is lit by oil lanterns strung between poles driven into the stone. The dim lights dance like faerie fires in the wind, painting long, restless shadows on the ground. A tunnel yawns in Iota's wall that wasn't on Keene's schematics. It has been cut jagged, leaving shards of rock pointing inwards. Outside it, an excavation trolley sits empty on the tracks. Iota's howling is much louder here. Twinned, almost.

'Well, that looks the sort of place you might hide a witch. Don't you think, captain?' Rol's voice is without a smile, for once.

'I'd say so,' Fel says.

It's not just the look of the tunnel. Fel can see his Duskhounds' vitals in the corner of his display. Their heart rates are all reading as elevated, the price of resisting the witch. Fel feels it just as much as they do, unease welling up inside him like blood from a bad wound.

*Beware the darkling hours, my son,* says his mother's voice.

Fel shakes his head, hard. It's getting worse, which is proof that they are on the right track.

He sends a burst of vox, and the rest of his Duskhounds approach with Raine. She drops into cover beside him with her sabre drawn. Raine has dulled Evenfall's blade to stop it catching the light. In the darkness, the blood drying on her face looks black.

'We've got movement, captain,' Rol says.

Fel looks back around the cover to see a group of Sighted come up and out of the tunnel. A dozen of them, wearing those reflective masks, just like the others. Fel marks the leader by the mirrored cloak he wears, and the finely made sword at his hip. Eight of the Sighted are working together to carry a heavy, sealed casket over to the excavation trolley, where they set it down with a dull thud.

'We cannot let whatever that is reach the surface,' Raine says.

Fel shakes his head.

'Pattern?' Rol asks.

Fel watches as two of the Sighted stay behind to guard the trolley, and the rest turn back for the tunnel. 'Hangman's noose,' he says.

The first Antari story that Andren Fel ever told Raine was that of the duskhounds. The story goes that the hounds come to take the souls of those fated to die and drag them to the After for judgement. He told her that duskhounds can appear in the slimmest of shadows, even that of those they are sent to take.

In the moment that the hangman's noose closes, Raine believes every word of

the old Antari story.

Raine is moving from cover to cover across the plateau with Fel when Myre and Jeth resolve from the shadows around the Sighted guarding the trolley. The Duskhounds grab hold of the two scouts and drag them from their feet into the darkness before reappearing moments later, without a sound. Myre drops to one knee and sets to work attaching her burn-charges to the trolley. The rest of the Sighted do not turn back. They just keep moving towards the tunnel mouth, as good as deafened by Iota's howling.

Fel sends a single burst of vox, then. The signal that means *close the noose*.

Near-silent flashes of hellgun fire lance from the darkness as Raine breaks cover alongside Fel. Three of the Sighted fell in rapid succession, masks shattered and coiling smoke from Cassia Tyl's pin-accurate kill shots. The rest of the Sighted turn and shout and scatter and raise their own weapons to fire back, only to find that death is already much too close.

Raine draws her blade through the first of them. Evenfell sings, cutting through the Sighted's blue-grey flak armour with ease. Black blood mists Raine's face as the woman spills over backwards without a sound. Raine lets her momentum carry her forward as the Duskhounds engage around her. Rol shoots one of the Sighted, centre-mass, before burying his combat blade in another. The Sighted staggers backwards but refuses to die. He raises his shotgun to fire on Rol, point-blank. Before he can pull the trigger, another whisper of hellgun fire cuts the space between the two of them and sends the Sighted spinning to the ground.

'Good eyes, Cass,' Rol says, over the vox.

'It's like you said,' she replies, from her sharpshooter's position. '*The After can wait.*'

Raine sees one of the Sighted go for Fel with a jagged, hooked blade. He lets his rifle swing by the strap so that he can catch the Sighted's arm and break it. Fel twists the scout off his feet, before taking up his hellgun again for the kill shot in one swift movement.

'You will see.'

The words come from the Sighted's leader, as he charges Raine with his sword raised. Her reflection grows larger in his mirrored mask. The Sighted is quick, the shards of glass on his cloak catching the lumen light as he ducks and parries and swings for her. Raine catches the Sighted's blade on her own and turns it aside before plunging Evenfall into his chest.

'You will see the truth,' the Sighted rasps, from behind his mask. '*All of your fears.*'

'Fear means nothing when you have faith,' Raine snarls, pulling her sabre free. The Sighted falls to his knees.

'You will see,' he gurgles. 'You are beheld.'

Then the Sighted collapses and dies, black blood spreading around him on the stone like outstretched wings. With the remaining Sighted dead, Myre and Jeth approach and the Duskhounds gather around Raine, their armour scored and gouged by blades.

'Beheld,' Rol says. 'That cannot be good.'

And then another sound overtakes even Iota's ceaseless howling.

Laughter.

The sound echoes from every surface, mad and cruel and almost songlike. The Duskhounds point their rifles into the darkness and Raine raises her sabre; but there is nothing to fight. Nothing to kill. The laughter grows louder and the shadows seem to draw closer, spilling over the stone like oil. Jeth mutters the Antari word for *ghosts* with horror in his voice and Raine catches a glimpse of a figure amongst the shadows. Her ghost is clad in commissariat black with her arm outstretched, as if to take Raine's hand. The timepiece in Raine's pocket thunders like a second heart.

*Severina*, says the ghost.

Raine shakes her head.

*Breathe*, she thinks, just as she did during the fall, *just keep breathing*.

'We have to move,' she says, through her teeth.

'I hear you,' Fel says. 'Myre, burn their prize.'

Myre nods and keys the bracer on her wrist. The Sighted's casket lights with heat-charges, silently burning. The laughter becomes strangled and angry and the ghosts turn away. 'Everyone into the tunnel.' Fel says. 'Now.'

The tunnel is cut steeply and jaggedly, as if it was made by claws, or frantic hands. Oil lanterns hang from ropes overhead and a thick, iridescent fog drifts along the tunnel, coiling around Andren Fel's feet as he follows the path. Contact risk down here is high. Field of fire is restricted, and line of sight is limited by the steep grade and the curve of the tunnel as it loops downwards. Hollows have been blasted and cut into the walls all around Fel and new tunnels splinter off left and right. Eyes burn in the shadows, only to vanish when Fel draws sight on them. Claws click against the stone. *You are beheld*.

'Watch careful,' Fel says. 'Don't stray, or separate.'

His Duskhounds vox affirmatives as they move swiftly at a ragged spread, their

targeting lasers glancing off the fog. Raine keeps pace with Fel easily, her pistol drawn in steady hands. Her breathing mists the air. Fel checks the readout on his monition's display. The ambient temperature in the tunnel reads as near-freezing.

'It shouldn't be this cold down here,' he says. 'Not so far underground.'

Raine shakes her head. 'It is the psyker's doing,' she says. 'We must be getting close.'

Fel nods. Iota's howling sounds almost joyful now, and much closer. He catches the smell of coalfires.

'Captain, we've got Sighted dead.'

The voice is Tyl's. She is a short distance ahead with Rol, crouching down in the fog. She straightens up as Fel approaches and shakes her head.

'Looks as though they kept digging until they died,' she says with disgust.

The Sighted at their feet is lying curled on his side. He wears one of their masks, but no armour, just worker's coveralls painted with their spiral mark. The Sighted's bare arms are cut with fate-marks in jagged whorls. As the fog stirs with Jeth and Myre approaching, Fel sees that the Sighted's hand is closed tightly around something that glitters, blood-red and iridescent like the fog. Fel has seen the like before, given to the Sighted's witches and commanders in place of their eyes.

'They are digging for crystals,' Fel says. 'For seeing stones.' Jeth snarls a curse and takes a step back from the Sighted's body.

'That's what we burned,' Myre says softly. 'Seeing stones.'

Raine nods. The look in her dark eyes is midwinter cold. 'That must be how the psyker can reach so far and hurt so many,' she says. 'The crystals are acting as a psychic amplifier.'

+Such clever puppets.+

The voice echoes from every wall of the tunnel, and inside of Fel's head, too. It makes his vision run at the edges. He tastes blood.

'Go,' he says to his squad and to Raine.

The witch starts to laugh again as they move down the steep tunnel at pace. The walls seem to billow and swell like sails, studded with jagged chunks of that same crystal, burning red.

'The psyker will try to turn your senses against you. To trick and unnerve you with falsehoods and fears, but you must deny it,' Raine says, her voice ringing clear, even with the laughter and all of Iota's howling. 'Hold to what you know to be true.'

Fel does as she says. He takes a slow breath and holds to his truths. To the

words of the evensong, and the cold weight of his hellgun, braced against his shoulder. The swift, quiet tread of his Duskhounds all around him.

And to Severina Raine, and the depths of her dark eyes. Fel keeps his footing despite the scree and the steepness and the psyker's laughing, and rounds a sharp turn in the tunnel with the others beside him, stepping into a vaulted cavern filled with crates and barrels. Fuel, for the lanterns. A single figure stands in the middle of it, clad in a mirrored mask and holding something in an outstretched hand. A flare.

'You are beheld,' the Sighted says with glee. 'You will burn.'

Fel fires his hellgun, hitting the Sighted's mask dead centre and shattering it, but it is too late.

The flare is already lit.

'*Shit,*' Jeth says as the flare drops and the cavern lights, and everything is lost to fire and smoke.

Fel is staggered by it. Momentarily blinded. Even with his respirator kit he finds he can't breathe. Over the roar of the flames, Raine's voice echoes in his head.

*Hold to what you know to be true.*

Fel realises that there is smoke and fire, but no heat. No pain. The fire isn't real. He squeezes his eyes closed and takes another slow breath. When he opens his eyes again the cavern is empty. There are no barrels. No crates. Just a shadowed space where jagged crystals jut from every surface.

'Are you with me, captain?'

Fel looks at Raine. She is breathing hard, and blood is running from her nose, but her dark eyes are clear.

'I'm with you,' Fel says, with the taste of blood in his mouth.

Around him, his Duskhounds are reeling. Fel helps Tyl pull Rol back to his feet. He is murmuring something about fire.

+Such well-made puppets.+

Fel snaps his rifle up and trains it on the source of the voice. He doesn't know how he couldn't see it before. The nest of shattered crystal on the far side of the cavern, arranged in a glittering spiral, and the Sighted witch, sitting in the centre of it. It is a pale thing, clad in blood-spattered silks, with crimson seeing stone eyes.

Fel fires on the witch in a heartbeat and his Duskhounds do the same Raine's bolt pistol bellows. Crystal dust and smoke fouls the air, but when it clears, the witch is nowhere to be seen.

+Fierce too,+ the witch says. +Much more so than your kin who came before.+

The voice comes from everywhere now. Fel can't find the source of it. He backs into formation with his Duskhounds on instinct as the witch's laughter echoes from the seeing stones set into the walls. Fel loses the nest again, as if it has passed out of sight. All that he can see now is the witch, reflected in the facets of the crystals, distorted and fractured and grinning with blackened, blunted teeth.

+Such strong cords you were given to move your limbs,+ the witch says. +Your minds cut and shaped for killing.+ The reflections shift and change and a flock of identical ghosts take shape around them. The witch, repeated a hundred times over. He is as thin as springtime ice; with feathers threaded into his skin by the quills. Like the other Sighted, he has cut dozens of times and dates into his face and throat. Fate-marks. They bleed afresh as he smiles.

+Made never to question,+ the witch says. +Only to blindly obey.+

The shadows around the witch's reflections coil and unspool, lengthening and reaching for Fel and the others like hooked claws. The seeing stones in the walls burn even brighter. Fel's nose starts bleeding.

'The stones,' he manages to say. 'Break the stones.'

His Duskhounds fire, and the cavern fills with light and crystal dust and angry shadows. The witch hisses and snarls, like an animal.

+You might have been cut and shaped and strung with cord, but you are still mortal.+

Fel's vision smears.

+You are still human.+

The smell of coalfires is overwhelming, despite Fel's respirator kit.

+And just like the crystals,+ the witch hisses, +finding the fear in you is just a matter of digging.+

The shadows boil towards Severina Raine like an angry tide, nearly knocking her from her feet. A whole host of fears snag at her, aiming to find purchase in her soul. Fire roars, scorching her skin. The thunder of guns echoes in her ears. Raine smells the stink of the dead. She glimpses teeth and claws glinting in the half-dark. Tastes blood. Around her, the Duskhounds stagger.

'Deny it,' Raine manages to say. 'Hold to what you know to be true.'

+Fool.+

The word hits Raine hard, pinning her in place. The cavern and the crystals and the psyker's many images smear through her pistol's sights.

+Fear cannot be banished by the truth,+ the psyker says. +Fear is truth.+

Raine fires her pistol on the closest image of the psyker, but it just blows away like smoke. The others all smile.

'Fear means nothing when you have faith,' Raine says.

The psyker laughs and it sounds like breaking glass.

+We will see about that.+

The cavern falls completely dark. Fel's optics don't touch it. He can hear his Duskhounds shouting for him, but he can't see them.

'Hold your ground,' Fel says. 'Remember it isn't real.' Several sets of coalfire eyes bloom around Fel and he hears a snarl that sounds like logs breaking as they burn. Fel keeps his rifle braced as his mother's words echo around him, spoken in the witch's sing-song, mocking voice.

*Beware the darkling hours, my son,*

*For that is when the duskhoumbs come.*

'I am not afraid of death,' Andren Fel says, as the shadowed hounds circle closer, baring their teeth.

+Perhaps not your own,+ the witch says.

And the hounds lunge past him.

Fel tries to turn and draw sight on them, but something in the shadows snags him and holds him still. His rifle hisses and locks when he tries to fire it. His Duskhounds are shouting again. Cursing. Screaming. Fel catches sight of them by flashes of las-fire and the glow of coals.

Tyl is caught in the jaws of one of the hounds.

+Do you want it to stop?+

Rol is a ragged mess, trying to drag himself to help Tyl.

+Do you want it to stop?+

Myre is crawling, leaving a painted line of blood along the stone.

+Do you want it to stop?+

Jeth is lying still and silent, his carapace torn open.

+Do you want it to stop?+

Fel hears Raine cry out. The last of the hounds has her by the throat, worrying and tearing. There is so much blood. Fel tries to get to her, but the shadows refuse to let go, pulling him to his knees.

'Severina,' he says.

\* \* \*

Raine sees Andren Fel go to his knees with a crash of armour plates. Over the

howling of Iota, she hears him say her name, an agonised rasp. Raine blinks and tries to move towards him, but her limbs are frozen. She can do nothing but watch the Duskhounds suffer. Watch Fel suffer. The Sighted psyker laughs and his many reflections clap their hands together. It sounds like thunder rolling.

+See,+ he says. +Fear is truth.+

He smiles widely.

+But you already know that, don't you, Severina Raine? That is why you have locked away your fears, deep inside.+ Raine blinks, and on the backs of her eyelids, she sees a cell door, closed and bolted. A heavy quiet falls and Raine can no longer hear the Duskhounds suffering, or even the howling of Iota.

All that remains is the ticking of the timepiece in her pocket.

It grows louder as a figure steps from between the psyker's repeated images and approaches Raine. No, not a figure. A ghost. One clad in commissariat black with her hand outstretched. She is tawny-skinned and scarred, with eyes as dark as ocean stones. It is like looking into a mirror.

But then, it always was, when Raine looked at her sister.

Try as he might, Fel can't find the words of the evensong. He can't distance himself from the stink of blood and the screams. From his Duskhounds breathing their last, and Raine, bleeding out on the stone.

+Do you want it to stop?+

Fel fights and struggles but the shadows twist tighter and his heart is beating out of time. The words are a roar that surround him.

+Do you want it to stop?+

'You are not my sister,' Raine says. 'Lucia is dead.'

+She is, isn't she?+

A bloodstain blooms on Lucia's tunic, then, spreading slowly from her heart outwards. Lucia's dark eyes turn glassy and blank, but she still walks closer. Her footsteps sound like gunshots.

+And tell me Severina Raine why is that?+

Raine's heart burns. Blood trickles down the back of her throat. Lucia is almost close enough to touch her. Close enough for the barrel of Raine's pistol to press against her chest, right at the heart of that dark circle of blood.

+What was it that killed your sister?+

Fel can only watch Raine struggle in the hound's jaws and the pool of blood growing around her, black as a starless sky.

+Do you want it to stop?+

He takes a breath, and the word takes shape. The answer that will end the trial.

But then he catches Raine's eyes.

Fel knows the depths and darkness of those eyes. In these shadows, they should be like the spaces between stars.

'This isn't real,' Fel slurs.

The timepiece in Raine's pocket is deafening.

+Say it.+

Raine can't see anything, save for Lucia's face.

+SAY. IT.+

'My sister is dead because she failed,' Raine says.

+And that is what you fear the most, isn't it, Severina Raine? Failure. You are afraid of sharing your sister's fate.+ Raine's pistol shakes in her hands.

+But it is unavoidable,+ the psyker says. +You will fail, just as she did. Your faith will break. Your fate is written into your blood. That is the truth. Your truth.+

Raine's mind is alight. Her vision failing. There is blood in her mouth and a tremor on her limbs.

+You should end it,+ the psyker says. +For yourself and your puppet hounds. It would be a mercy.+

'End it,' Raine says, through chattering teeth. 'Yes, I will end it.' And her fingers curl tight around her pistol's trigger. Penance bucks in her hands. Blood hits her face. Lucia's blood, that might as well be her own. It is as cold as ocean spray. Her sister's image blows away like fog, and the psyker screams in rage, one hundred times over.

The shadows release Andren Fel, and he manages to get back to his feet. His Duskhounds are down, but alive. The witch's fractal reflections have become an angry storm, billowing around Raine like a flock of carrion birds.

'The nest,' Raine says, with effort.

Fel remembers the last words of the evensong.

*Keep within the light as the fire burns,*

*Until the morning sun returns.*

He has to make a fire. He has to burn it.

But he can't see it from where he is standing. Fel remembers the way it vanished, as if passing out of sight. Hidden, like the knotwood homes of the fae in the old stories. They said you could only find them if you knew how to look.

If you knew where to stand. With his vision dazzling, and blood running from his nose, Fel staggers forwards through the witch's shrieking reflections until he reaches the place where he was standing before; and the shape of the cavern seems to change, revealing the nest. A heap of crystals, slick with witch's blood. Fel takes a charge from his belt, primes it and throws it into the crystal nest. It detonates with a blazing red light and a scream. Fel is thrown against the cavern wall hard enough to crack his armour. The witch's reflections shatter like glass until only one remains. A pale thing, clad in blood-spattered silks. And then Raine's pistol bellows.

The Sighted psyker puts one pale, thin hand to the bloodstain spreading across his chest. Feathers fall to the ground, snapped at the quills.

+Fool,+ he says again, but weaker this time. +You will see. You will fail. Your faith will break.+

'No. I refuse your so-called truth. I will not fail.' Raine fires again, and the psyker staggers backwards and falls, landing in the dust that's left of his nest of crystals. 'My faith cannot be broken.'

+You will see,+ the psyker says, in a weak, blood-clotted voice. +A shadow grows, even in the firelight. You will not survive it. Death follows close by.+

'Not mine,' Raine says between breaths. 'Yours.'

And she fires the last round in her pistol's magazine.

Severina Raine stands on the landing platform, looking up, as Jova's Valkyrie descends through the darkness and the smoke. It casts a long shadow that grows to swallow them up. Only the Duskhounds' red eye-lenses light the gloom. The storm troopers are silent. There have been few words exchanged save for orders and answers since leaving the witch's cavern. The Valkyrie touches down on the landing platform, turbojets roaring and the ramp lowers to the deck with a sound like a tolling bell. Dust kicks into the air in spirals. It billows in the push and pull of the mine-pit's breathing and for a moment, Raine catches something like a shape in the dust.

Teeth, and eyes.

'Ready?'

She looks away from the falling dust at the sound of Fel's voice. He is standing at the foot of the Valkyrie's ramp, his black armour turned blood-red by the combat lighting.

'Let's go,' Raine says.

And she follows him up the ramp, with Iota's howling echoing after her.

# **CHILD OF CHAOS**

**CHRIS WRAIGHT**

So, what do you want from me?

Perhaps some kind of explanation? Some kind of great redemptive story, to explain the way events transpired? Perhaps there was a reason, a causal mote that made everything explicable, and in turn, when you understand that, you might loathe me a little less than you do at present.

But there isn't one. I never had time for redemption. I am, as you might say, *elemental*. Axiomatic. Somebody within this whole skein of false turns had to be.

As it turns out, I am compassed. I am what I am - that is my blessing, and it is, for symmetry's sake, my curse.

Now wait. I get ahead of myself. An explanation was desired, and so I should start on Colchis. You could make a case that everything - *everything* - started there. What a desperate, awful place to start.

Then the beginnings always are, I suppose.

\* \* \*

Gods, I hated Colchis. I hated the heat, I hated the dust and the thick sweat of it. Even before I knew that other worlds existed, I cursed the gods for making my home so unbearable. There's a reason why religions prosper in deserts - there's nothing else to do but ponder the misery.

I used to sit in the shadow of my father's house, squatting as the air shimmered, and wait for scorpions to scuttle out of the glare. I'd catch them in my bare fingers and hold them up, watching them wriggle. I'd pluck their limbs off, one by one. Sometimes I'd get stung, sometimes I wouldn't. It was a kind of game, though not a very good one. Once, a sting made me feverish for a month, leaving me boiling on my mat inside with visions and shaking. I might have died. I didn't care much, either way. Once I'd recovered, I was sitting right back out in the porch, waiting for the next one to scamper into range. Ever since then, I've played the same game: get close to the danger, see how long you can last before it bites you.

It doesn't matter which town that was. I can barely remember it myself. They were all the same - thick with filth and haze and the stink of perspiration and refuse. My parents were exasperated with me. They wanted me to learn a trade; get ahead, find something useful to do. I didn't want any of that. I wanted to be rich without trying. I wanted to have slaves and concubines. I wanted to play my scorpion game with people. For a long time, it wasn't clear how I would be able to achieve that, but fate had a way of leading me into opportunity.

I had noticed, being an observant sort, that the Covenant had become the kind of organisation I might do well in. It is fashionable now, among those who still pretend to keep records and tell histories, to think of the Covenant as some wellspring of piety - the precursor to the fundamental religion that came later. Perhaps it was, in some places. Maybe in Vharadesh they did things properly. Out in the provinces, though, the priests had begun to develop a reputation. They drank. They gambled. They were violent, and they used that violence to gather up riches. Even the devout knew that the tithes they paid didn't all end up embellishing temples. The whole edifice was like a spoiled aquifer, with a cold and oily heart locked away from the searching light of the sun.

So you can understand the attraction. I could see myself in those robes, with a palace of my own where a fountain would tinkle in the courtyard and a chamber full of young things would lounge around in silks and count my coins. Getting there was not straightforward, though - for all their decadence, the clerics held on to power with the rictus grip of a fresh corpse. Only the well-connected were sent to the seminaries and taught the rites and shown how to read the old texts. For street-trash like me, there was just penury to look forward to.

I didn't give up, though. The idea had entered my head, and it stuck there. I hung around the oratories and watched the aspirants come and go, waddling like fat dogs. I listened at the window when they chanted their songs, and began to learn the patterns of the words. As I got older, I got bolder. I crept into the old scriptoria when the doddering masters had dozed off, and I stole books. Bit by bit, I started to piece together the catechisms and the litanies. It didn't make any sense, of course - they were just words - but I memorised a lot of it. It all came naturally. Of course it did. These were the words I was born to preach, whether or not I believed them. I did believe, later, but back then they were just symbols, like codes on a lock.

There was a young man in my settlement, a pious one, who had inked some words of the holy books onto his face and shaven head. Every day before dawn he would apply more henna, re-writing the sacred glyphs with only the aid of a

polished silver bowl for reflection. For this, he was considered something of an inspiration in our fly-blown township. Even my own mother, a fat and lazy slattern if ever there was one, noticed his diligence.

'Why can't you be more like him?' she would complain, picking at her fingernails and watching me sitting idly in the porch. 'Why can't you be more like Erebus?'

Now, you see, thoughts like this have a terrible power. I took her words to heart. I pondered them. And I thought to myself: why *can't* I be more like Erebus?

I was thinking the same thing as I garrotted that young man. I might even have said the words out loud as I twisted the string and watched his eyes bulge and pop. That was the first time I killed a living soul, and gods, was it sweet. My heart was pumping and my face was glowing. The more his life ebbed away, the more I felt my own burgeoning. By the time I let his body drop into the alleyway, I was positively singing inside.

The sensation didn't last long. There was all the tedious business of disposing of the body, then rooting through his belongings to get what I needed, then turning my back on my birthplace and setting off into the great dust - I couldn't stay in a place where he and I were both known. I never once regretted it. I walked out under the southern gate with the stars rising and the heat of the day ebbing, wearing a dead man's robes and with a dead man's script inked neatly on my own shaven head.

Ah, there you go. There is the irony. The marks on my flesh, the ones that mark me out as *me*, were never really mine. I wore them after that to ensure my stolen name and persona were never questioned. In time, I half forgot their origins, and I began to care more about what I was writing. By the time I reached for the tattooist's needle, the words had changed and the act was more than one of disguise. Originally, though, it was all just lies.

So what was my original name? Just like the name of the place where I was born, that genuinely doesn't matter. I have become like a daemon, nurturing a secret moniker that only the empyrean echoes. I certainly will not tell *you*. Some things even the gods don't know.

I was lucky, or fated maybe, to be learning my craft at such a time I was just a boy, as all the seminary acolytes were. My stolen papers and my lies soon found me ensconced at another institution. I studied as little of the genuine theology as I could, but was assiduous in observing the more worldly paths of power. I saw

how the priests maintained discipline within the great cathedrals. I saw how fear and ecstasy could cow an entire population. I saw how a whispered word was more powerful than a shouted oration, at least a lot of the time.

These were the last days of the old faith. Already there were panicked rumours of an army sweeping across the desert, one commanded by a golden prophet who would overturn everything and bustle the Powers out of their assumed heaven. The hierarchs of the Covenant began to get scared. The sacrifices became more frequent, protestations of faith and penance for sins were made more heartily. I knew it wouldn't save them. The well was running dry, and in any case, they had already drawn too much water. I began to speculate on who this prophet was, and wondered if I could somehow align my cause to his. I was growing tired of my withered instructors, and wished to be in the shadow of something with a proper sting.

And then the strangest thing of all happened. I'd spent so much time with all those books, and all that chanting, and all those homilies on the old patterns of pain and redemption, that I somehow neglected to be cynical about them. I found myself saying things, and meaning them. I found myself studying, not to evade the instructor's scourge, but out of fascination. It was as if I'd been dipped into one of the inscribers' inkwells and come out stained. There was never an epiphany. I never moved from being an unbeliever to a believer, but I began to appreciate, gradually, how much I was aligned to a certain way of being. I was, you might say, a natural. I had been made for this.

I remember being in the vaults of that old mud-brick temple, tending to the tapers and tasting the aroma of hot blood on my lips. I remember looking into the tarnished glass of the altar-mirrors, and seeing not one reflection, but a fractured four. I felt a shiver run through me, despite the ever-present heat. I was a petty thief, a minor speck within the iris of eternity, but I knew I could do things for these presences. I felt they had always been there, hanging in my shadow, lingering over my minor cruelties. The Covenant was their plaything. Perhaps other institutions could be used in a similar way.

So when the prophet eventually made it to our city, and I saw his impeccable profile shine out across a weeping and grateful nation of newly enlightened slaves, I was neither elated nor despondent. All I had to do was wait.

I was still a child, then. I would not be one forever.

\* \* \*

And of course I met my prophet in the end, up close. I saw him pass through the

gates with his army of swivel-eyed faithful and recognised what it meant for me at once. He was a bigger scorpion, and I needed to get closer.

He was with Kor Phaeron. That raddled old sack of skin and esoteric drugs, he hung around like the stench of cut meat rotting in the sun. I remember that our eyes met, briefly, as the two of them made their triumphal procession through the taken city, although I suppose he won't recall it now. Back then, I was nothing, and he was everything. I was the grub in the dirt and he was the master of a world's zealous armies, standing at the side of the anointed and sucking up his sloughed-off incense.

It is commonly supposed that I must hate Kor Phaeron. We have become rivals, that's true, and within this grand coalition of blackguards and renegades that generally engenders bad blood, but he really doesn't make me angry. I find him amusing. He's worked so hard to keep up, to become one of us, and all he's done is made himself ridiculous. His flesh hangs within his armour like a strung-up corpse. He's kept around out of a maudlin kind of pity. I'd miss him, if he were somehow taken away from us now, for our Legion is not blessed with many jesters, and we can't afford to lose the few we have.

Once the prophet had come, though, that was the end for the Covenant, at least in the open. We went underground, those of us who understood what things were really about. We gathered what we needed, and stored it away, out of sight. And, such is the way of things, it all became stronger through secrecy. Old words were hissed through locked doors, and we would mouth the ossified canticles under the ostensibly ardent singing of the new ones. They were the best days, if I'm honest, full of promise and guile and silent murders in the dark.

We knew, of course, that He would come soon after that. The prophet kept telling us, and every augur and flesh-sacrifice screamed it out. I wanted to see this Master of Mankind so very much, since I knew more than most what it would mean for the universe. I wanted to witness the creature I was destined to bring low. I wanted to see Him dragged before me like a lowing ox before the sickle knife. I was never, ever taken in by Him, not like so many who afterwards claimed they had somehow been wronged or misled.

I knew, right from the start.

I knew, before He even set foot on my dry-as-bones home world.

I knew all this because I've never aspired to be anything other than what I am - an eavesdropper, a sneak, a fertile soakaway for lies and poison. Judge me if you will, and plenty do, but we all have our places within this far-from-ideal creation.

Here I stand. I can do no other.

First, we had to change. We had to become His warriors. We had to cast our old bodies aside and take on new ones, like caterpillars wriggling out of chrysalises. We went into all this knowing that we were donning blasphemous forms, and that our sacred human shapes would be mangled and pummelled by unbelievers. This was a real sacrifice, despite the gifts we knew we would inherit, and I remember the bitterness of it.

And we were all too old, in truth. Even though our mortal bodies were still on the cusp of hardening into adulthood, we were beyond the optimal age for the transition. As a result it hurt. It hurt like nothing I have felt before or since. Imagine someone plucking your organs out, twisting them inside out, stuffing them back in, filling your veins with acid and cracking your bones. Many of us died. Some of those who perished badly had been steeped in the ways of the Covenant and that was enough to give the rest of us pause - were we *really* being looked after?

But I made it. Like an unlucky talisman that keeps popping up, I pulled through and found myself, blinking hard and bleeding softly, on the other side. For the first time in my life, once fully recovered, I was strong. Horrifically so. Where I had previously slunk and slithered, now I could strut. I would stand before my collection of mirrors and marvel at this muscle-wrapped god-form. We learned to fight in new ways, and with new weapons. We learned to drill ourselves into that heavy armour and use it to make us faster than malice. There was a seduction there, one that could have been dangerous. I briefly saw the attraction of the entire Imperial project - a universe of purely material extravagance, bound by ancient science and divorced from the messy realm of the spiritual.

Only briefly, of course. For the most part, the spectacle appalled me. I began to take the scripts on my flesh more seriously, and the marks became longer-lasting. I selected passages from our various books that could be read in a number of different ways, pleasing all the various masters that, in those days, we had to please. Only later, when my primarch had taken up his own authorial career and things were becoming straightforward, did I make my facial etchings irreversible, and that was long after the need for ambiguity had dissipated.

There were a thousand subtleties to negotiate. Terrans made up the bulk of the Legion, and they were all drearily atheistic. Even the many Colchisians could not be relied upon, split as they were between the old faith and the new one as well as the jostling creeds of materialism. We were a body of mongrels, desert hermits flung out into a void populated by more variety than we could ever have

imagined possible. Those of us who cleaved to the single truth - the deep truth - had to tread with care, taking our time, working slowly into positions of authority and influence

I was in my element. I was not the most powerful warrior in this Legion, nor the most gifted commander, but I was never assailed by any kind of uncertainty. I knew the destination before we had even begun the journey. In a sense I *was* the destination. I was my treachery, and my treachery was me. There were no choices to make just time to wait out and traps to avoid.

Out in the emptiness of the abyss, all the truths I had encountered in abstract on Colchis were met in concrete. The first time I set foot on a starship, I could smell the empyrean evaporating from its decks. The first time we made for the warp, I almost laughed at the absurdity of the exercise - we were briefly, insubstantially, hurling ourselves through the realm of the Powers themselves, and no one batted an eyelid. The level of self-deception was colossal, and I couldn't see how it would be sustained for any length of time at all.

In this, as in other things, I was guilty of underestimating our opponents. The genius of the Crusade was its very audaciousness. The speed it was prosecuted at was mind-bending. Millions - no, trillions - of souls were being directed towards a single goal. While the entire galaxy was at war, it felt like we were all distracted, kept looking up into the glare of a noonday sun, our eyes watering so hard we never noticed the carrion vultures flying low under its glare. If we were not careful, these contradictions might survive examination long enough for His greater task to be completed - the final banishment of the old gods from the realm of the senses.

As I began to understand the implications of this, I reflected on my extraordinary luck on being gradually elevated into a position to do something about it. And, as I pondered that, I reflected that there was no such thing as luck in the universe, properly understood, and that in fact I had always been destined to be in this place, at this time, with my faculties elevated to this point. I was destiny itself. I was its servant. I was its hand.

But until the moment of crisis came, we were all dancing around one another in geometrical figures, like some great brass orrery - agents of two divergent futures, with all our pawns and our capital pieces on the board. I could feel that the underlying currents were accelerating, melding into one another and becoming stronger by association. The pantheon was uncommonly united, putting aside its essential antagonism in favour of one new and vital objective. I could not divine much more than that, for at that time, almost all my efforts were

bent on understanding and prospering in this new and unsettling world of system conquest, but I did understand that we were all teetering on a narrow fulcrum, apt to collapse one way or the other soon.

Another thing did become steadily apparent. The violence we were unleashing was a danger to our enemies even as it brought the known galaxy under the heel of Terra. The deaths were mounting, the pain increasing. Across such vast distances, that had an effect. I began to feel that the old Powers were closer to me than they had ever been, and that if I could simply reach out, extend an armoured finger ahead of me, I might somehow touch them.

I have never lost that feeling. The pantheon has remained close to me ever since, whatever lies you may have heard from my many enemies. I have never been their stated champion, not like Horus, but I have always been their servant, their counsellor to the mighty, their assassin, their adviser, their deliverer of souls.

Consistency. That is what they value. Perhaps because they are ever-changing, they will reward the mind that never wavers in its commitment.

Or maybe that is a lie, too. Most things are, when traced back to their beginning.

They defy understanding. They defy categorisation.

And for that, for that one indefinable truth, as I have often said, blessed be their many and malleable names.

So we come to Davin, and I was so sick with anticipation before the final warp-stage that I did not sleep for four nights.

It was, of course, another desert world. There must be something about them. Why do the gods not make themselves more obviously manifest in forests or factories or cities? When we came into orbit, all I could see was a second Colchis, parched and sharp, its ochre plains wrapped around a swollen equatorial zone and squeezing out all other terrain.

Once we'd made planetfall, it soon became apparent what the key difference was. The inhabitants were human, but only just. They were too strong, too strange, as if something had been working on them for a long time. I thought they were all terrifically ugly. My battle-brothers merely saw them as apt disciples for the faith.

This was, to be clear, faith in the Emperor. Let the irony of that sink in, for a moment. Our Legions landed on Davin for the first time, with the honest and thorough-going intent to turn its population into diligent atheists.

But I did not. I knew what we would find there, as surely as I knew what I would see in the mirrors that now lined my private chamber each time I glanced at them. All worlds have a harmonic - a resonance in the ether - and Davin was no exception. It was a thrum, a press of half-heard sound, like an endless mumbling that lingered on the very edge of intelligibility.

As I skidded across its heat-distorted landscape in my flyer, I could feel the hot pressure against my temples, a hubbub of murmurs guiding me to where I needed to be. Elsewhere, there was fighting. The savages of this world had yet to bow to the inevitable and were taking war to the Sons of Horus and Word Bearers. This resistance had shocked some of the mortal hangers-on within the fleet, who thought it suicidal and pointless, but they were blind to its true purpose. The fighting would be over soon, but it would keep all eyes away from the deep desert, where tombs lay deep and dormant under the baking sands.

I reached my destination, touched down and de-powered the engines. I emerged from my lander and breathed Davinite air for the first time. It tasted vaguely sweet, like overripe fruit. The dust dotted and stuck to everything - soon my armour's filters were working hard just to keep its airways clear.

Ahead of me rose a temple of some kind, though it had seen better days. Its mud brick and masonry walls were ruined, its towers collapsed. Old stains from old fires still marred the crumbling stonework, and its many doorways were open and gasping in the heat.

I glanced down and saw a ribbon serpent slithering around my ankle. Its black forked tongue flickered briefly, then it slipped away, making for the hard-edged lines of shadow ahead.

I walked up a long causeway, bounded on either side by broken human-sized statues. The further I went, the more I could see how the place must once have been magnificent, an octagonal city-temple of extraordinary size and complexity. We had larger cathedrals on Colchis, but nothing, perhaps, made with such a raw understanding of the relationships between the real and the unreal. I could see immediately that these long-dead architects had known what they were doing. They had known the sacred ratios and proportions. They had known where to site their watchtowers and campaniles so as to catch the red passage of Davin's ancient sun, casting shadows that looked, out of the corner of an eye, like teeth, or horns, or curved talons.

By then it was late in the day, and the air was seamy with tired heat. My surroundings were almost completely quiet only my breaths and my footfalls broke the stillness.

I found the priest squatting in the centre of a tumbledown courtyard. A fountain lay choked and gasping amid a heap of rubble, its water long gone. Gargoyles and stone dragons looked down on us from crumbling terraces, their gnarled expressions grotesque against the reddening sky.

The priest was as ugly as every Davinite was - a snaggle-toothed, greasy-haired wretch with dirty robes. He blinked as I approached him, then smiled broadly and obsequiously.

'You came,' he said, as if I were some delivery boy on an errand. I was comfortably twice his size, and could have broken his neck with a flick of my finger. He was clearly a fool, near the end of his strength and wits.

'I saw this place in my dreams,' I said. 'But not like this.'

'It's not what it used to be,' he agreed. He got up and limped across the courtyard. I followed him, having to check my stride to match his pace. We passed under the shade of the gargoyles and into chambers within, all adorned with cracked plaster and gap-tiled mosaics. As we went, I saw faded frescoes on the walls - angels fighting daemons, monsters writhing in combat with knights. I saw depictions of high walls crumbling, and flames leaping over falling towers. Repeated images of a gold-armoured warrior had been scratched out, his face replaced with crude images of a single eye.

Eventually we reached a larger chamber, one buried down in the heart of the city-temple. Its high domed roof was cracked like an eggshell, allowing red light to lance down on to the floor around us. A low stone altar stood in the centre of the space, surrounded by four ritual pillars. The surviving stonework was etched with lines of fine carving - tight-curved glyphs, repeated over and over, just like the screeds on my own flesh.

My skin tingled. I could feel the charge running through these foundations, apt to snap, like static charge, with my every movement. I was breathing faster, my primary heart pumping a little too hard.

'So this is where it will happen,' I breathed.

'It might,' said the priest. 'If you are indeed a true messenger.'

I was feeling heady at that point, intoxicated. It is one thing to witness visions, it is another to see the actual site, the actual stone, the actual bricks. I turned on him, catching him by his throat. He gagged, and I almost laughed out loud.

'Does this feel *true*, priest?' I asked, squeezing just a fraction harder.

He couldn't answer. It would take only the slightest movement to crush his windpipe. I very nearly did it. The nexus of death and power in this place was so complete and all-consuming.

But I halted, suddenly aware of someone watching me. I turned to see a little girl, barely more than a babe in arms, staring at me with dark, wide eyes. I couldn't interpret her expression. It wasn't fear. It might have been a kind of exhilaration, just like mine.

I let the priest go. 'Who is that?' I asked.

'Only Akshub,' he gasped, rubbing the weals on his neck ruefully. 'Do not hurt her, I beg you.'

I studied her, vaguely amused, and she stared back at me fearlessly. 'Why would I do that?' I asked. 'Is she dangerous?'

Then my gaze wandered off, roving across the faded frescoes. They were badly eroded, hard to make out even with my enhanced eyesight. In all of them, though, I saw the same image, over and over again, picked out in the desert colours of terracotta, ochre and sallow.

A knife. A blade. A flint shard, crudely fashioned, the length of a mortal man's spine. I knew without needing to ask that no such weapon had ever been fashioned on this world. These ancient artisans had been working from visions, casting their minds out on the ether's tides, knowing what had to come here to fulfil their lives' purpose.

'Where will I find it?' I asked.

The priest looked up at me, fear and resentment marring his old face. 'I think that is your task to discover, messenger,' he said.

I smiled dryly under my helm, feeling my new tattoos flex across my skin. It was a good irony, to leave this dried-out old husk to meet me here, the desperate last cough of a half-dead people. If I had waited another decade, there might have been no one left at all, just the stones and the dust and the serpents in the sand.

'Rebuild it,' I said coldly, looking up at the state of the walls and the roof. 'A governor will be appointed when the fight is over - he'll ensure you have what you need. Rebuild it all, just as it was.'

The priest grinned pathetically. 'There are so few of us left. Can you not send us... help?'

I knew what he wanted. Slaves culled from our many conquests, the kind he had dreamed of owning ever since he had learned the words of the old curses.

I didn't bother giving him an answer. He glanced back over at the girl, who hadn't moved. She squatted in the darkness, watching, saying nothing.

'I'll see you again,' I said, sealing the deal.

And for all of this, I am hated.

For being there at the outset, for laying the foundations that others would willingly build on. I think they wish to find something in this story that explains things - some moment of decision, some choice that could later be regretted or accounted for. But it's just as I said - none exists. I have always been on this road, never turning never deviating.

A long time ago, aware of my limitations, I formulated an expression to capture my condition: *blessed is the mind too small to doubt*. I am very attached to this maxim, and propagate it wherever I can. I hope it will be taken up with enthusiasm once our task is completed and the False Emperor is expunged from eternity.

For now, though, I am content. I am loathed by those I betrayed, and loathed by those I guided into betrayal. I have brought a Warmaster to the Truth, and cracked the galaxy's vaults to speed his armies. I have burned worlds, and been burned by them, and who thanks me for this? This rebellion does not even bear my name - it bears the title of the scorpion I stayed closest to, the most dangerous of the breed who will ever live.

Now I observe my disgrace. I consider the wounds I have suffered, and the pain that will dog me forever. I consider those that inflicted such ignominy upon me, and how they started their stories so nobly and will end them in the gutter.

They hate me not because of what I am, but because of what they were. They hate me because they turned, and I did not. The records of our enemies call us all turncoats, but I changed no allegiance. I was always here just as I am now, aware of myself and the universe that made me. I lied with every breath I ever took, except to myself. That is purity, of a kind, and something that no other soul in this grand armada of renegades can boast.

I look on Terra now from my void-cold vantage and see its huddled lights glimmer in the fragile dark. Soon the order to attack will come and the final act will be entered. The monsters I created will burst from their fetters, giving no thought to what long labours brought them here.

Horus mutilated me, my own primarch discarded me. That could be a cause for self-doubt, here on the edge of Terra's fall. That could make a lesser soul slink away, gnawing on his failure even as humanity's bastion collapses at last. But that's never been my way. I've been stung before and I always come back for more poison. I'm still the boy in the shadows of Colchis, pulling on the garrote-string and feeling my blood pump.

The old games never really ceased, in truth. Only the players changed.

Nothing remains to be explained. I can whisper these truths to my own screed-inscribed face, if I wish, that I can now hold up in front of my own eyes as my only audience. The ragged flesh is dry and cracking now, and will fall apart soon, but I keep it, just as I used to keep my mirrors for the same purpose.

I took this face from another man, once, to become what I wanted to be. Now it is my reminder, that all despots are fragile, and that the hand of destiny will always be despised.

Such is my power, now, I could fashion a new skin in moments. I choose not to. My face still weeps blood under my helm, glistening on flayed muscles. It hurts, and that too is a reminder.

I was there at the start. I was there before we even had names for all the things we're doing now. I have no congregation any more, but I will again. The faithful will come back, thirsty for accounts of how this feat was achieved, and I will have stories waiting for them. Such stories. Stories that will make their ears bleed and their hearts burst.

So it's not done yet, Erebus. Not yet. Just watch.

Just watch.

# **THE DEATH OF URIEL VENTRIS**

**GRAHAM MCNEILL**

*'Each man is a spark in the darkness.  
Would that we all burn as bright.'*

*He had been wrought to bring death.*

*All his kind had been birthed with ancient gene-craft and knowledge culled from bygone ages with singular purpose.*

*To kill.*

*From the depths of Pavonis to the Spear of Espandor he had brought ruination down upon the heads of rebels, xenos and heretics.*

*With blade and bolter, he had been an instrument of the Emperor's will. He had served captains, Chapter Masters and - latterly - a primarch.*

*He was not perfect. He had made mistakes.*

*Hubris had led him along dark paths, but each time he had found his way back to the light. He had watched battle-brothers die, seen friends betrayed, and fought beside those he would once have called foe.*

*But in all things, he had served with courage and honour. Now that was at an end.*

*The wavering skull-visage hovering over him promised as much. Burning eyes smouldered red as its rasping voice spoke of the agony he was to suffer, describing in detail the torments of the damned soon to be worked upon every inch of his flesh.*

*He would be split from crown to heel.*

*He would be cut, burned and broken.*

*'Pain can be endured,' he told the skull. 'I have known pain before.'*

*'Not like this,' the skull assured him.*

*Searing brightness filled his vision, hot and piercing.*

*The skull disappeared as the light entered him, accompanied by the smell of smoke.*

*It burned his throat; spicy, earthy and woody.*

*Sweetgrass, like the gold-green fields of Calth's deepest arcologies, growing wild and far from the lethal radiation of his home world's blue sun.*

*Words spilled over him, but he did not know them.*

*Glittering blades descended, wielded by porcelain-masked surgeons. The skull-visaged speaker had spoken truthfully.*

*This pain was like nothing he had ever known.*

*For over two hundred years he had brought violent death to the enemies of the Emperor.*

*But now it was over.*

*His name was Uriel Ventris.*

*And this was his death.*

But first, *life...*

Uriel opened his eyes, sitting bolt upright with a cry of shock on his lips. His vision adjusted to the low light in a heartbeat.

Rock surrounded him, the natural stone walls of a cave.

Shadows and light danced upon walls of gold-veined marble. The back of the cave was shrouded in darkness. Even with his enhanced sight, he couldn't see what lay there.

His instincts told him it was nothing good.

Uriel coiled his legs beneath his body and rose to his feet in one smooth motion. His limbs were stiff, the muscles in his legs and shoulders burning, as if he'd come off a hard, months-long combat rotation.

He had no memory of battle, save the long years fighting the plague-hosts of the Archenemy throughout Ultramar. A quick check of his body revealed he bore no wounds. He was unarmoured, clad only in a simple training *chiton* of pale blue, like the ones he'd worn at Agiselus as a boy.

The entrance shimmered with light, and Uriel slowly walked towards it, wondering what he would find beyond the darkness of the cave.

Fronds of cliff-climbing plants hung like a curtain over the entrance, and as he pushed them aside, a sigh of warm air washed over him. Moist and freighted with the smell of loamy earth, fresh-turned and rich with nutrients.

Uriel took another breath.

His neuroglottis sifted a potent mix of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium.

*Agri world?*

No, not an agri world.

Uriel stepped from the cave, high on a cliff overlooking a sweeping vista of

natural wonder like a great work of art come to life.

His heart soared at the sight of snow-mantled peaks rearing above him, their cloud-tipped summits shawled with evergreen highland firs. Silver domes built on grassy plateaux dotted the mountainsides, and darting flyers left pale contrails against the aching blue of the sky.

A city glittered on the horizon, a wonder of gleaming glass arches, palaces of white marble and fluttering azure flags. Transit lines snaked across the landscape in harmony with its contours, and sunlight glittered on tall towers.

Something tugged at Uriel's memory, but he couldn't place it. A feeling he'd seen this city before. In his many years of service to the Golden Throne, Uriel had fought on hundreds of different planets, but this was not one of them.

At least not *this* version of it.

And then he knew where he'd seen this city before. Upon his every return to Macragge, Uriel would walk the circuit of frescoes encircling the Temple of Correction - an act of devotion to his primarch and a way to remember the world he once knew.

He would always stop at a heartbreaking work entitled *Dawn on the Last Day of Numinous City*.

The artist had rendered the sun over the city with such beauty and skill that some said it was possible to feel the last rays of its light before it had been poisoned into toxic lethality.

'Calth looks different with sky overhead, doesn't it?'

Uriel spun around, fists bunched and ready to fight.

A man sat on a raised boulder behind him, soaking in the view and the warm afternoon, his skin ruddy from the light of a hundred different stars. He, too, wore a training chiton, and had the bulk of a Space Marine. His grizzled face was lined and his shaven skull was pierced with four golden service studs. His grey eyes were deep pools of experience, but still shone with a youthful sparkle.

They were eyes Uriel knew.

'Idaeus?' he said, and a surge of grief damped his heart for the warrior who had shaped him in so many ways; the warrior who had died on Thracia so very long ago.

Captain Idaeus dropped from the boulder, held out his hand and said, 'Hello, Uriel. Welcome to Calth-that-was.'

Uriel remembered the pain of watching his former captain die on Thracia, obliterated in the explosion that destroyed a vital bridge to save the flank of an

Imperial assault.

He tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come.

Uriel studied Idaeus face, following the grooves of age, the scars of war and the pitted burn mark on the side of his neck where a rad-burst from a breached engine core had almost killed him.

Idaeus was just as Uriel remembered him.

Was that what this was - a memory given form?

Had his mind retreated into fantasy to spare him from...

*From what?*

*A skull-faced monster looming over him.*

*Wicked blades and blood.*

The image faded, and he felt himself take Idaeus' hand, feeling the calluses on his captain's palm, the ridge line of a scar where a greenskin grenade fragment almost cost him three of his fingers.

*None of this is real.*

Uriel knew that with deep certainty, but the emotions clogging his throat and constricting his chest felt *very* real.

'Am I dead?' asked Uriel, finally able to speak.

'I don't think so,' said Idaeus. 'At least, not yet.'

'So what is this?'

Idaeus strolled to the edge of the cliff.

'I told you, this is Calth-that-was.'

'The Archenemy murdered Calth thousands of years ago,' said Uriel. 'They poisoned the sun and burned all life from the surface.'

'That they did.'

'So how is this possible?'

Idaeus turned and spread his hands wide 'I don't know, Uriel. Perhaps you are dreaming? Perhaps you *are* dying, and this is a last gift of beauty from the universe? All I know is that I am happy to see you, my boy. You've come a long way since Thracia.'

Uriel smiled, happy - despite the strangeness of this meeting - to see Idaeus.

'A great deal has happened since...'

'My death?' finished Idaeus. 'I know. I died in service of the Emperor, so there is nothing to regret. Did we win on Thracia?'

Uriel nodded. 'We did. The rebels were routed and the *Pax Imperialis* restored.'

Idaeus grinned and slapped a palm on Uriel's shoulder.

'Most impressive,' he said. 'And then? I presume you took the captaincy?'

'I did, though your legacy shaped everything I did.'

'Then I trained you well, Uriel. It's every leader's job to train their replacement.'

They stood together at the edge of the cliff, and Uriel saw a path heading down the mountain, a switchbacking route leading to the plains below. He hadn't noticed it *before*, but in this place, in this time... he should not be surprised at such things.

A white-walled structure lay at the foot of the cliff, a sprawling barracks, with training courtyards at each compass point and a punishingly brutal fighting ring at its heart.

'You remember that place?' asked Idaeus.

'I do,' said Uriel. 'Vividly. But the Agiselus Barracks are on Macragge, not Calth.'

Idaeus shrugged. 'This is not the real world, Uriel. Here we are not constrained by logic or planetary geography.'

Uriel's eyes narrowed at Idaeus' words. 'That sounds like you know more than you are telling me.'

'There's some truth in that my boy, but shall we venture downhill? I'll wager there are some familiar faces who'll be pleased to see you.'

'My memories of Agiselus beg to differ.'

The route down from the cave was treacherous and filled with heart-stopping moments where Uriel felt sure he would slip and fall from the cliff. Sharp stones scored his bare soles, and loose shale cascaded downhill in mini avalanches.

'If this is not real, can we not simply... *appear* at the bottom of the cliff?' asked Uriel.

'Maybe,' laughed Idaeus, relishing the challenge of their descent. 'But where's the fun in that? The nature of the risk defines the reward.'

Uriel was about to answer when he heard crunching footsteps behind them. He turned to see a group of boys running over the ridgeline above them. Twelve of them ran as if a host of genestealers were hot on their heels, legs burning and arms pistoning hard as they sought to win the race.

At the head of the pack was a powerful, strong-limbed boy with close-cropped hair and the hard-edged features of someone who had never known second place.

'Learchus,' said Uriel.

At the sound of his voice, the boys turned and raced downhill, following the path he and Idaeus had taken. They leapt and tumbled towards them,

determination making their features older than their years.

Uriel saw the stocky form of Cleander, a bully who had made his life a misery at Agiselus. Cleander was inseparable from Learchus, but he had become a heroic warrior of the Ultramarines, finally meeting his end honourably on Pavonis.

Behind him, Uriel saw a dark-haired youth with a serious face he barely recognised. Gulfs of time and experience separated them, but he could not fail to know his own youthful Calthian features.

Behind his younger self came the lumbering form of Pasanus. Even at this young age, his body was already enormous. Upon his elevation to the line ranks of the Adeptus Astartes, the Chapter's Techmarines had been forced to fashion his armour from Tactical Dreadnought plates.

'Hard to believe you were ever that young,' said Idaeus.

'I can barely believe it myself,' agreed Uriel as the boys raced towards them, apparently oblivious to their presence. 'If I could tell him the things I know now...'

'What would you tell him?'

Uriel thought for a moment, watching the flinty eyes of his younger reflection focus on Learchus' back.

'I would tell him to remember the teachings of the Codex Astartes, to trust that doing the right thing will always be doing the honourable thing.'

'Don't you think he knows that already?'

'He knows the words, but not the cost.'

The boys were almost upon them, and Uriel looked for safe ground to stand aside and let the boys past. The path was narrow, and there was nowhere to step with confidence.

He looked back in time to see the young Uriel pick up the pace to overtake Learchus. Learchus looked over his shoulder, cocking his arm back. Uriel knew what was coming next. Learchus slashed back with his elbow.

And blinding light burst before him as pain exploded in Uriel's face. He stumbled, hands flying to his face in surprise as fiery agony seared through him.

He staggered, the pain swimming his vision with red.

Too great for so insignificant a blow.

It felt as though his skull had been cracked open, as if rusted nails were scraping the interior of his skull.

Uriel blinked away the pain and turned away.

White light filled his vision, but when it cleared, he saw they were no longer on

the mountainside. The running boys, too, had vanished.

Instead, the gates of Agiselus loomed before him; dark steel and banded adamantium.

'I remember approaching these gates many times,' he said, looking down at his hands to see the skin of his knuckles was split and bloodied. 'Each time, the gates were closed.'

'Do you remember why?' said Idaeus.

Uriel saw his former captain was also bloodied. The scar on his neck had expanded to his face. The left side of it was ridged and dark, one eye milky and white.

'No matter what hardships we'd suffered, we had to work together and push them open.'

Idaeus placed his hands flat on the gate 'Shall we?'

Uriel joined him, pushing hard on the black metal. It felt hot to the touch, like placing his palms on the blade of a sword fresh from the forge. He felt it burning, but kept up the pressure.

Heat spread up his arms, as though molten fire was pumping through his veins and burning them from the inside out.

The heat coiled around his bones, fusing them and turning the marrow to magma.

He gritted his teeth and pushed harder, fighting through the pain. His fingers blackened, the flesh peeling back as the awful, intolerable heat filled him.

Uriel screamed and gave one last surge of anger-fuelled strength. The fight to get back into Agiselus every night had never been this painful, never this desirable. Finally, a vertical sliver of torchlight grew between the halves of the gate. The sight gave Uriel strength, and he pushed through the pain, drawing it inwards and using it.

The gates swung open, and Uriel fell forwards onto his knees.

He looked down at his hands, the skin rough and textured from decades of war, but unburned and whole. He exhaled deeply and looked up as Idaeus offered him a hand up.

He took it, and Idaeus hauled him to his feet. The captain's face was worse than before.

His chiton was almost entirely gone, the fabric burned and ashen. The cataracted eye was now molten and glutinous, its fluid dribbling down a burn-scarred cheek.

'What is happening?'

Idaeus' mouth was gummed with scars, and it took him a moment to respond. When his words came out, they were wet and bubbling, forced up through a throat thick with blood.

'No decision is without consequence, Uriel,' said Idaeus. 'Remember that.'

'What decision?'

'This one,' said Idaeus, tapping a blackened finger against Uriel's chest. 'The one you're making right now.'

For a moment, it felt as though Idaeus' finger pressed beyond the barrier of flesh and muscle, through the ossified bone shield protecting the myriad super-organs beneath.

The moment passed, and Idaeus turned away, limping through the open gateway.

Uriel felt a mix of emotions surge through him as he followed Idaeus within, gripped by a strange sense of events spiralling beyond his control.

Inside the courtyard, the day transformed into night.

The pale blue sky darkened instantly to sable-black. Torches flickered in iron sconces, and a full moon bathed the hardpacked earth in silver.

Arrayed in uniform ranks were a hundred Space Marines, each armoured in the cobalt blue of the Ultramarines, their shoulder guards edged in the vivid green of the Fourth Company.

Uriel held himself taller at the sight of these titans in gleaming war-plate. He was so proud of these warriors, and loved every one of them, though he had the sudden, sinking sensation that this might be the last time he would see them.

Suffocating grief touched Uriel, threatening to overwhelm him. His eyes misted with a sudden swell of emotion.

The image of his warriors wavered, and it seemed to Uriel as if decades were passing with every breath. The ranked-up Space Marines remained unmoving and unflinching as creeping stains of rust spread across cracked and aged surfaces of once-inviolable war-plate.

Uriel blinked, and his warriors were once again as he remembered them.

He forced down his emotions.

This was not a time for grief.

*What is it then?*

He didn't know, but as the familiar smell of lapping powder and the tang of sacred oils caught in his throat, the memories they evoked returned with physical force.

Physical and mental exhaustion, pride and - above all else - a ferocious

determination to win a place within the hallowed ranks of the Ultramarines.

Hard times, to be sure; but entirely worthwhile.

All the pain and suffering Uriel endured had forged the steel in his soul, moulded the fire of his youth and tempered him into a weapon to serve the God-Emperor.

Movement drew his eye, and Uriel saw shafts of moonlight catching the woven metal of the clenched gauntlet upon the company standard. Ancient Peleus held the mailed fist banner aloft, and Uriel's heart filled with deserved pride at all his warriors had accomplished.

'The Swords of Calth,' said Uriel.

His command squad stood with Peleus, heads held high and their numerous honour markings and purity seals bright in the moonlight.

Brutus Cyprian, a warrior so powerful he had once ripped open a t'au battlesuit with his bare hands.

Petronius Nero, the company champion and slayer of the legendary blade-dancer, Xiomagra.

Livius Hadrianus, with his battered, heat-patterned meltagun held across his chest.

Apothecary Selenus, who had saved the life of every man in the company more than once, and preserved the legacy of the fallen.

These heroes had come together during the t'au invasion of Pavonis, a war that now seemed a lifetime ago. Uriel knew each man's heart as well as his own, and he could have picked no finer brothers to fight at his side.

A warrior stepped from the ranks, his bearing noble and his power unmistakable. His helm was the muted crimson of a sergeant, but as Uriel watched, the colour bled out of it becoming the same blue as his armour. A golden wreath appeared at his brow and captain's insignia faded in on his shoulder guard between his squad markings.

'Learchus?' said Uriel.

The warrior turned towards him, the red lenses of his visor accusing him with their steely gaze. In their youth, Uriel and Learchus Abantes had been rivals, enemies even, but years of battle had wrought a bond of brotherhood between them. 'You left us,' he said, his tones clipped and precise.

It took Uriel a moment to understand Learchus' meaning. 'The Death Oath...' he said.

'Death Oath?' said Idaeus. 'You went on a Death Oath?'

Uriel nodded. 'A long time ago. I took your teachings a little too literally and

believed I knew better than the Codex Astartes how to act.'

'You left us,' said Learchus. 'You are leaving us right now.'

'What? No,' said Uriel, stepping in front of Learchus and gripping his shoulder guards. The gold of the wreath at his brow reflected the moonlight. 'I am your captain, Learchus, and I will be until the Emperor takes me to His side.'

Learchus shook his head.

'You left us,' he repeated. 'We are left behind.'

With that, Learchus snapped hard to attention and spun on his heel until his back was to Uriel.

As Learchus completed his about-face, the rest of the company followed suit. A hundred heels slammed down in unison as the Fourth Company turned their backs on Uriel.

'Learchus, what are you doing?' cried Uriel.

He turned to Idaeus. 'I endured this once before, walking in exile from the Fortress of Hera to an uncertain future. I have no wish to relive that moment. Why does my mind conjure a vision of my greatest shame?'

'I don't know, Uriel,' said Idaeus. 'Everything here has meaning, but it is for you to understand its significance.'

In desperation, Uriel turned back to Learchus and put a hand on his shoulder guard.

No sooner had he touched his comrade's armour than Learchus crumbled to dust, his form disintegrating in the blink of an eye. The wind that blew the company standard carried the ashen remains away, and Uriel watched in open-mouthed horror as a wave of dissolution blew through the company.

As if formed of mist, every warrior of the company blew away until only one remained.

He, too, wore the colours of a sergeant but one of his arms was the gleaming metal of a cybernetic replacement. His armour was colossal, crafted from the remains of damaged suits of Terminator armour.

'Pasanius! Emperor's mercy, it's good to see you.'

'Mercy? The Emperor *has* no mercy,' said Pasanius. 'His sons learned that. The warriors of the storm, they knew it, and soon we'll have to accept it. A new era is upon us. Upon *you*. Isn't that why you came here?'

'I don't know why I'm here,' said Uriel. 'Is this a dream? A vision of the warp? I don't know.'

'It's *you*,' said Pasanius. 'This. It's all *you*. What's past is prologue, and what awaits at the end is up to *you*.'

'I don't understand.'

'I know you don't, but you will,' said Pasanus, and he placed his augmented hand at the centre of Uriel's chest. Uriel felt the heat of his old friend's hand through the thin material of the chiton.

'The Noctis Aeterna has fallen, Uriel, and only the strongest will survive the coming war. You have to be *strong*. You have to *endure*. Remember that.'

Burning heat flowed from Pasanus' palm, and Uriel dropped to his knees. Pasanus came down with him, keeping his hand pressed tightly to Uriel's chest.

The pain was indescribable. Uriel's primary heart pulsed like a newborn star within his flesh, and furnace heat spread from the treacherous organ, surging along his limbs like liquid metal in a mould.

'Pasanus? What are you doing?' gasped Uriel between breaths that felt like drawing shards of glass into his lungs. 'What's happening to me?'

'What happens to all living things that seek to survive,' said Pasanus. 'Change.'

'Please, make it stop!'

Pasanus shook his head and lifted his other arm to the night sky.

'Time to go,' he said, and an awful sensation of dread settled upon Uriel as Pasanus vanished, and he saw the hues of moon and sky reverse.

A creeping shadow slid over the surface of the silver moon, as a bleached, lifeless white bled into the sky.

The walls of Agiselus peeled away, pristine marble flaking like cinders lifting from charred timber. Veins of rust spread through the white walls as the stonework crumbled to reveal its bones of corroded iron mesh.

With the disintegration of the walls, Uriel saw the lush landscape around the barracks wither. The forested mountains blackened to become vast slag heaps of industrial debris as the city on the horizon reassembled itself into a series of skull-mouthed manufactoria, belching toxic fumes and poisonous waste from soaring flare-stacks.

What had once been a landscape of natural beauty was now a smog-wreathed hellscape, a devastated wasteland threaded by sluggish, rainbow-sheened rivers of petrochemicals.

'No,' said Uriel, recognising the dead sky and the hateful black sun presiding over this nightmarish landscape 'By the Emperor's mercy, no!'

'Weren't you listening?' said Idaeus, except the voice was no longer that of Idaeus. 'The Emperor *has* no mercy. He's a monster and a madman. I told you that before, but you didn't listen then either.'

Uriel had not heard that voice for decades, but its mocking cadence and bitter

tones were forever etched in his mind. He knew it as well as his own.

Idaeus looked up, but the burned face of his former captain was gone.

In its place was the face of a warrior in burnished war-plate, steel-dust grey and chevroned with yellow and black. One arm was ebon black and cursed, the other held a monstrous axe.

His scalp was shaven and scarred, one eye a burning red cybernetic replacement. Uriel remembered firing the shot that cost him that eye.

'Honsou...' said Uriel.

'Tell me,' said the Iron Warrior, 'did you ever think you'd return to the Eye of Terror?'

Uriel could not be on Medrengard.

This was not Honsou.

*It could not be.*

But now the searing fire in Uriel's heart had a focus.

The litany of Honsou's crimes was a legacy of slaughter; planets razed, entire populations murdered, and bloodshed so prodigious it seemed inconceivable a single individual could have orchestrated it all.

Honsou's death was long overdue, but he had managed to escape the depths of Calth and flee Ultramar on the corpse-hauler *Shendao*. Astrogators and warp-divinators surmised he had taken the captured ship to the Eye of Terror.

But what had become of him after that was a mystery.

Most likely he was dead, dust and bones upon one of the hundreds of battlefields around the Cicatrix Maledictum.

No, this could not be Honsou.

*And yet...*

Uriel roared and charged the Iron Warrior.

The figure that had once been Idaeus rose to its feet and awaited his attack. The Iron Warrior dropped the black-bladed axe and spread his arms in a gesture of empty challenge.

Uriel's fist smashed into Honsou's cheek, snapping his head back with ferocious impact. Honsou took the blow stoically, reeling from a second thunderous punch.

Blood coated the Iron Warrior's face in a grotesque mask, but he wasn't fighting back.

Uriel bore Honsou to the ground, pummeling him as they fell. His fists slammed down again and again. Uriel reached for a weapon, something to finish his foe once and for all.

His fingers closed on cold steel, and he pushed himself upright. His breathing rasped hard in his chest and he looked down to see he had picked up Honsou's black-bladed axe.

Its weight was perfectly balanced, the grip textured for his hands. Uriel felt the power within the blade, a power so great it could slay gods.

He swung the weapon wide, arcing it up to bring down in executioner's stroke. The blade growled in pleasure, the bloodthirst at its heart eager for the kill.

Uriel roared and hurled the weapon away.

Honsou laughed and spat a wad of blood.

'You never could kill me,' said Honsou.

'There's nothing of you here to kill.'

'So sure of that, are you?'

'Yes,' said Uriel. 'Your face'

'What about it? I grant you it's not as handsome as it once was, but I've seen worse. Trust me, a lot worse.'

'You were once a Space Marine but even a Space Marine's skull should have been pulped by the beating I just gave you.'

Honsou retrieved his axe, but made no move to attack Uriel.

They circled one another wanly beneath the light of the black sun. The blasted hinterlands stretching out in every direction were bleached of all life by the deathly sun, bereft of colour and signs of habitation.

Nothing could live here; nothing natural, anyway.

Scattered across Medrengard, conclaves of muttering heretic tech-priests laboured within bloodied forge-temples, and technovirus-infused monsters of flesh and steel roamed its junkyard forest of rust and debris.

Carrion-scrappers circled over ancient battlefields while the bones of the dead drifted on the sands of pale deserts.

In the distance; Uriel saw an ironclad mountain rise from the wasteland and climb to the sky with the ratcheting boom of impossibly deep world-gears. Squatting at the base of the mountain was a damned city of blighted strongholds, protected from attack behind layered defences of basalt walls and forests of razorwire, and overlooked by cliffs of artillery batteries.

Dark thoughts crowded Uriel's mind at the sight of this nightmarish world, recollections of gut-wrenching confessions made to Chaplain Clausel in the candlelit gloom of the Reclusiam aboard the *Vae Victus*.

*Enclosed in the dark folds of blood-rich flesh...*

*The essence of his soul grafted to another...*

*Unfleshed...*

'Memories of this place haunted me for years after Pasanus and I returned to Macragge,' said Uriel.

'I'm amazed they didn't just shoot the pair of you down as soon as you appeared at the gates,' said Honsou.

'A Grey Knight by the name of Leodegarius tested our faith and flesh on Salinas,' said Uriel. 'He declared us free of taint, and the word of such a captain carries great weight.'

'Still...' said Honsou. 'Can they ever *really* know? Can you? The Savage Morticians opened you up, worked their dark arts in the core of your being. How can you be sure they didn't plant some little piece of Chaos to bring back with you? The ways of the Archenemy are insidious, you know.'

Uriel shook his head, amused by Honsou's transparency. 'Now I *know* you're not him,' said Uriel. 'Honsou would never be so blatant. He would probe for weakness, test my defences and flank me when I least expected it. You're not him. I know that for a fact, but I cannot look at you without the same hatred I felt all those years ago.'

'Hatred is an underrated emotion,' said Honsou. 'It was all that sustained me when I was at the bottom of the wheel's turn. It gave me focus when everyone wanted to crush me.'

'There are better emotions than hate for that.'

'None as pure.'

Uriel knew he could never reason with such a monster. Some souls had fallen too far into darkness ever to return to the Emperor's light. Too blinded by their own evil or ignorance, they were lost in a swamp of their own making.

Honsou had become a figure of evil legend in Ultramar, his deeds still spoken of in hushed whispers for fear that the mere utterance of his name might reach him in some far-flung daemon world and draw him back.

His Bloodborn invasion of Ultramar had been repulsed, but only at the cost of millions of lives and almost a third of the Chapter's warriors.

But seeing him here now - wherever *here* was - Uriel saw the truth of his once-nemesis.

'I used to fear you,' said Uriel.

'I *am* fearsome,' agreed Honsou.

'Not that way. I mean in the sense that you were a dark mirror of my potential, the final destination of the path I was on. You say hate sustained you? Discipline sustained me. The rules I broke, the edicts of the Codex Astartes I flouted?'

Ignoring them was the quick and easy choice. The *hard* choice was doing the right thing, doing what needed to be done no matter how difficult. That's what you could never grasp, because you served only one master. Yourself. And that's why I no longer fear what you represent. I am a servant of the Golden Throne, and I am stronger for that.'

'You're still a *servant*, though,' said Honsou. 'And servant's just another word for slave.'

'You never did understand me, did you?' said Uriel. 'Even with everything you learned from the Newborn, you never understood. You had the genetics, the armour and the weapons, but you were never *really* a Space Marine. You were not trained among equals, never took strength from bonds of brotherhood, and you never learned how much stronger those bonds make us.'

'Then illuminate me, O wise one.'

'To be truly free, you need discipline'

'That doesn't make any sense.'

'For every freedom you desire, there is a constant discipline you must implement until it becomes so ingrained a habit that it is as natural as breathing,' said Uriel, seeing a rolling cloud of dust appear over each horizon.

*Approaching vehicles, a lot of them.*

His words grew stronger as he spoke, the truth of them armouring him in certainty.

'From the physical to the emotional to the strategic and the tactical, the Codex Astartes taught me how to apply that universal formula to every aspect of my life.'

The cloud on the horizon was breaking up now, and between blustering squalls of ferrous dust, Uriel saw snatches of an armoured host of unstoppable force converging on him, like a noose around the neck of a condemned heretic.

'So how does any of that help you now?' asked Honsou, looking past Uriel to the approaching iron tide. 'All the discipline in the world won't save you from what's coming.'

Uriel looked straight into the black sun, stark against the sky like a cyclopean eye staring down at him. It blinked, and the edges rippled with a smoky umbra. The whiteness of the sky around it gleamed oddly, like spots of light reflecting on ivory plates of ceramite.

'Of course it will,' he said.

'How?'

'By not giving in. That's it, isn't it? You are my weakness given voice. You want

me to give in, to abandon my principles in the face of pain and adversity, but I will not. Whatever this place is, whatever is approaching, I will endure it. You think I will break here? I will not. You think I will succumb to you? That will never happen.'

Honsou shrugged and backed away from him as the horde of diabolical war-machines roared out of the dust towards Uriel.

They came as hulking, spike-hulled tanks and biomechanical constructs of brass and bone, bearing banners of flayed skin and leering, blood-stained mutants that clung to their hulls like psychotic parasites.

Uriel could not hope to fight such numbers and win, but that he *would* fight was what truly mattered.

'You're going to die here, Ventris.'

Uriel looked back to the host of snarling daemon-vehicles surrounding him. He knew the faces of the men clinging to them; they were the faces of every foe he had ever killed, and the faces of enemies he had *yet* to kill.

Whatever this was, whatever nightmare he had fallen into, he knew it had not broken him. In the face of pain, dark memories and temptations to weakness, he remained true to himself.

The words of the Codex Astartes returned to Uriel, as they always did in times of hardship.

'The warrior who acts out of honour cannot fail. His duty is honour itself. Even his death - if it is honourable - is a reward and can be no failure, for it has come through duty. Seek honour as you act, therefore, and *you will know no fear.*'

'Fine words,' said Honsou with a grin as the guns of every one of the clanking monstrosities lowered to aim right at Uriel's heart. 'But just remember one thing.'

'What's that?'

'You *chose* this. All of it.'

Uriel's world exploded in pain and fire.

But, mercifully, it was short.

The chamber echoed with the last of his screams.

Gore coated the gleaming ceramic tiles of its walls. It dribbled in thick ropes from the slab upon which the gene-wrought form of Uriel Ventris lay.

Whirring autoclaves vented superheated steam, and the blades of auto-chirurgeons were bright red and sticky with congealed, hyper-oxygenated blood.

Hissing censers billowed with scented fumes, and choirs of chanting acolytes stood in shadowed alcoves around the chamber's perimeter.

Red-robed figures in blood-stiffened aprons retreated from the slab, their chimeric features hidden within their shadowed hoods.

Two others descended from the glass-fronted gallery above, their steps leaden and their hearts filled with foreboding.

They approached the slab, the body upon it already cooling as its vital functions stilled.

Auto-lungs wheezed one last time and then ceased their rhythmic rise and fall. Bio-monitors flatlined and the jagged sine-waves of brain activity plateaued.

'Did it work?' asked the first figure, a skull-faced giant in black armour.

His companion, plated in ivory and cobalt, consulted the chattering machinery, inloading data streams to his gauntlet.

'He is dead,' he said at last. 'So, yes, it worked.'

'Now what do we do?'

'Now we wait,' said Apothecary Selenus. 'And we pray he crosses the Rubicon.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Darius Hinks'** first novel, *Warrior Priest*, won the David Gemmell Morningstar Award for best newcomer. Since then he has ventured into the Warhammer 40,000 universe with the novels *Blackstone Fortress*, *Mephiston: Blood of Sanguinius*, *Mephiston: Revenant Crusade* and the Space Marine Battles novella *Sanctus*, and has carved a bloody swathe through the Warhammer world with *Island of Blood*, *Sigvald*, *Razumov's Tomb* and the Orion trilogy. He has recently made his first foray into the Age of Sigmar with the novella *Warqueen*.

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