



WARHAMMER
40,000

DUST

GRAHAM McNEILL

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DUST

by Graham McNeill

I do not want to do this, but Hegazha leaves me no choice. He thought he had concealed his change from me, but there is little that can now be hidden from the sight of Ahzek Ahriman. Too few of us are left for secrets, but I must keep mine if I am to follow this dangerous path to its logical conclusion.

He upends a desk wrought from pure will, and it crashes into me with the force of a Land Raider. The impact is ferocious and slams me hard against the wall of his sumptuous tower. Without my armour I would have been broken into pieces. Instead I am merely stunned. I had known he would refuse my offer, and needed no prescience of the Corvidae to know that, like all living things, he would fight for even the tiniest scrap of life.

Yet knowing the attack was coming was not enough to prevent it.

I extend my arm as a searing bolt of multi-coloured light slashes towards my head. Hegazha is Pavoni and can never resist a flourish of exuberance in his sorceries. The light bends around me, and the walls of the tower blow out in an explosive rain of ethereal blocks that dissolve into nothingness as they fall.

Hegazha is a beautiful man, a warrior whose countenance was one of the very few Hathor Maat ever permitted to approach his own in radiance. Statues of his likeness lined the avenues approaching Oculum Square, and more than one mortal woman of Prospero took her life because she could not have him.

He is not beautiful now.

His face is twisted with the desire to kill me.

It is fractured with anger, but beneath that anger is fear.

Awful, dreadful and completely understandable fear.

I lift myself from the disintegrating wreckage of his desk as he comes for me with his gloved hands outstretched. My heqa staff slams down and the air between us buckles with force. The top of Hegazha's tower lifts off with a booming scream and a mushrooming burst of lightning. It staggers him and he rages at the destruction visited upon his fabulously wrought lair, a psychic construct of incredible beauty and artistic genius. It is an affront to destroy so perfect a creation, but I have no time to indulge vanity.

Such pyrotechnics will not go unnoticed, but such is the volume of aether that charges the very air of this place with power that it will pass unremarked. Others will know what has happened here, but Magnus, brooding in the flame-lit majesty of the Obsidian Tower, will not even lift his eye from the great book that lies unopened before him.

The lives of those who once devoted themselves to him hold no meaning to the primarch now. I would weep to see us fallen so low, but there is too much to be done if we are ever to restore ourselves and prove that *we* were right and the Wolves were wrong.

'You will not take me for your Great Work,' promises Hegazha.

'I will,' I tell him.

'Don't you understand, Ahzek?' he says, tearing the silk gloves from his hands. 'The Flesh Change is not to be feared, but embraced! I have been blessed, not cursed.'

His hands are black and scaled with serpentine skin, with vestigial feathers of variegated hue protruding from the transformed flesh. It sickens me to see him so proud of his malformed body and I cannot keep the revulsion from my face. I sweep my staff around, catching him on the side of his head. He reels, shimmering blood misting from the split skin as the air greedily devours its potential.

Blood has power here.

The most primitive religions of Old Earth knew the power blood possessed, the primal force that carried that spark of vitalism around the body. The followers of Mithras and Cybele knew it, the cult of the crucified one knew it, and the madmen who fed upon their victims in the belief that it would render them immortal knew something of its power.

Even travelling in a subtle body, blood is the anchor that draws a soul back to its cage of flesh. Without it, there can be no life. Without blood and a strong heart to pump it, there is nothing but the dust of the grave, the terror of non-existence.

The beauty of Hegazha's blood almost costs me my life.

He leaps towards me, hands tearing at my battle plate. Though Hegazha has long eschewed the use of power armour, there is great strength there. Unnatural strength, like that of the cursed wulfen beasts that drove us to this nightmarish world. His barrelling charge slams into me and we topple from the tower, two beings of might and magic locked together in a deathly embrace, like pairing birds in a mating dive.

'My Great Work will save us,' I tell him, wrestling to keep the razor-clawed hands from tearing out my throat.

'I do not need saving!' roars Hegazha, as aetheric winds howl around us.

It is thousands of metres to the jagged black stone of this world, but I am not afraid. I already know I will survive this fall. I punch Hegazha in the face, and more of his radiant blood flies, falling corposant that wreaths our descent like pearlescent droplets of fire. The crux of this moment has great potential; the currents of the aether and the unseen dwellers that exist between the cracks of the universe gather in anticipation of its release.

They sense the liberation of energy that Hegazha's death will bring.

But they are to be disappointed, for I do not yet wish to kill him.

The ground rushes towards us, but before we are dashed to destruction, a crushing force envelops us and cushions our fall. Not entirely, though, and the impact still drives the wind from my chest. I climb to my feet, ready to continue the fight, but there is no need for further violence. Hegazha is unmoving, frozen in the act of leaping to his feet with his claws outstretched. Behind him, his tower begins to unravel, the warp and weft of psychic energy employed in its creation falling to dissolution now that its creator no longer maintains it.

'You need to work on rising to the correct Enumeration for kine work,' I say. 'I will bear the repercussions of that fall for some time.'

Hathor Maat emerges from the spires of black rock that ring Hegazha's dissolving tower.

He shrugs and says, 'Phosis T'kar was always the best at kine work.'

Hathor Maat's face is perfectly symmetrical, flawless and wondrous. He wishes it to remain so, and thus was the easiest to convince to join my cabal.

'He didn't come willingly then?' he says.

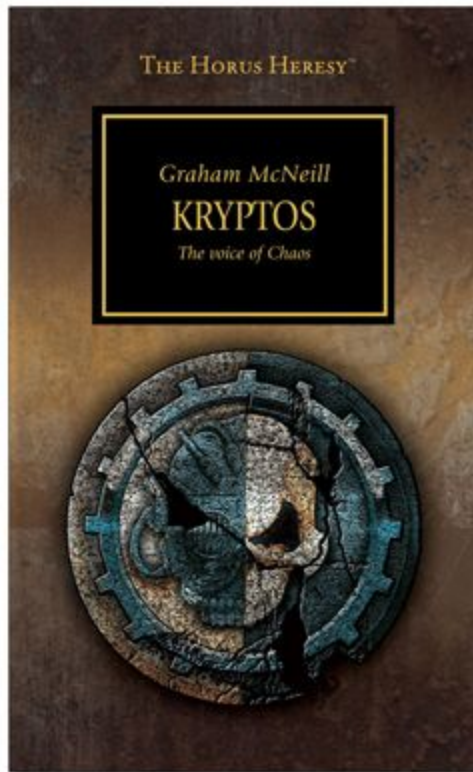
'No, he did not,' I agree. 'But he is touched by the power of the warp, and I will learn much from him before he dies. Bring him to my tower and put him with the others, there is little time and not enough of us left to risk wasting it.'

'You really think you can stop this?' asks Hathor Maat, and the pleading desperation in his voice sickens me. If he is representative of what will be left of our Legion when I am successful, then I weep for what the future holds.

'The rubric will work,' I tell him. 'It must.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GRAHAM MCNEILL has written more than twenty novels for Black Library. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award. Originally hailing from Scotland, Graham now lives and works in Nottingham.



After surviving the horrors of the Dropsite Massacre, two loyalist veterans infiltrate a Dark Mechanicum complex in search of an invaluable asset – the mysterious 'Kryptos'...

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