



**A FLASH OF SILVER  
AMONG  
THE CORRODED  
GHOSTS**

**AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN**



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# **A FLASH OF SILVER AMONG THE CORRODED GHOSTS**

**Aaron Dembski-Bowden**

Before it burned, the world was called Palis II, being the second world of the Palis System: an insignificant planet orbiting an insignificant white pinprick of a star. After it burned, when the precious metals within its crust were rendered worthless by planetary slagging, when its defenders were naught but dust, it was likely called nothing at all. Certainly, the Imperial warning beacons that ringed its fallout-choked skies had made no mention of a name.

I walked its rocky surface, disturbing five hundred years of dust. The air was gritty with particulate, abrading my armour with an incessant chorus of clattering gravel. The atmosphere should have settled by now, but the cyclonic torpedoes had awakened a worldwide network of erupting geysers and volcanoes, and these lengthened the legacy of the warheads that had killed this world. It had not just died in the Horus Heresy - it was still dying, reliving that death every day since.

The heavens above were darkened by the same dirt, a longstanding aftermath of atomic winter. The temperature gauge at the edge of my retinal display gave unwelcome readings. I could survive without my armour here, but for no longer than two or three days before succumbed to exposure and my lungs could filter the war-poisoned air no more.

An unarmoured human would freeze within an hour. Without a rebreather, that death would come within two minutes.

I walked alone for several kilometres, kept company only by the irregular

rhythm of my boots falling upon pulverised rock. I had terminated the vox-tether to my vessel in orbit, cherishing the rare chance for silence. After the repetitive rage and thunder of the First Crusade's battlefields, this mission was dangerously close to succour. Silence, true silence, is both meditative and restorative.

I looked up to the sky, bare of sun and stars, bare even of day and night. A world of grey beneath a sky of the same shade. It rendered the idea of a horizon laughable. Somewhere up there waited my warship, the *Incarinate*. She had become my flagship for much of the First Black Crusade, during those campaigns where I waged war far from the *Vengeful Spirit*, and she would remain so for mil-lennia to follow.

A slain world is an accusing presence in the void. Its lifeless face begs questions to all who bear witness: why was it murdered? Why did its earth have to be scorched, denying any value to friend and foe alike? Why slaughter it past use even for future generations?

I dwelled upon these questions as I walked, that day. There was a peace to such thoughts; the same strange contemplative serenity one feels walking through a graveyard.

I had not fought here, back when here was a place worth fighting for. Nevertheless, there was a sense of familiarity - I had reviewed grainy orbital feeds of cyclonic torpedoes doing their destructive work, and I had listened to scratchy fragments of sound from the vox-web of the warriors that had died with the planet.

And a great many had died here. The barrage that rendered Palis' second world a useless husk had been unleashed out of spite more than any tactical necessity - an Imperial general or Space Marine commander had either grown frustrated with their inability to win the ground war, or were tasked with redeploying elsewhere and could no longer devote the time and effort to fighting a dragging battle. They had made attempts to evacuate their forces before letting the final hammer fall, but they ended the battle in the most absolute terms, removing any notion of victory and vanquished, eradicating even the premise of what so many had already died for.

Spite was a virtue on both sides of our war. Imperials and Traitors alike shared it in abundance.

It took five long, lonely hours to reach the outskirts of the capital city. Five hours of silence but for the crunch of my boots and the whispers of the wind.

I enjoyed those five hours immensely.

Nagual was waiting for me. The Prosperine lynx was unharmed by the

atmosphere and the lethal temperatures. He lived by different physical laws, insofar as he lived at all. White eyes glared at me, more with feral intensity than intelligence, yet a touch of the beast's thoughts grazed the edge of my own.

*Master.*

*My lynx.*

The daemon had been prowling through the broken streets of what had once been a refinery-city and starport. Half of the city had been buried by the slow accumulation of grit and dust. It was like looking upon a settlement that had slid part way into the earth at the whim of a mad and playful god.

*Tysak*, I thought.

The great cat lifted his head. *Master?*

'The city,' I said aloud. The words cut the silence like a bolt-round. There was every chance my voice was the first heard here since the world had died. 'The city was called Tysak.'

The daemon growled in dismissal. Such human matters were beyond his ken and care.

*No life*, the beast sent. *No souls. Empty human-hive. Hollow.*

'Then all is well. This world was scarcely worth fighting over the first time. I would not like to be part of a second attempt.'

We entered the city, walking along the wind-eaten, decaying conveyor mono-track. Nagual kept pace with me, his head swinging this way and that, tracking for signs of movement with methodical precision.

The mono-track terminated in a conveyor car station that was partially buried under the collapsed weight of its own domed roof. Dust and dirt caked the ground and the walls. The entire scene was an uneven geography of dunes formed out of atomic winter particulate.

We climbed the dunes and saw the city proper. A blasted, lifeless vista met my gaze. Erosion had made a swift meal out of what few buildings remained intact after the orbital bombardment.

'It is so quiet here.'

The lynx shared none of my charmed serenity. This was not a place of peace to Nagual, it was a place where starvation threatened. There were no souls to hunt, no lives to devour. If daemon-kind could envision a purgatory, it was doubtless reminiscent of this dead city.

On we walked, through the dust-blighted streets and between the tumbledown buildings.

It took several hours to locate the first legionary's corpse. There were dead

humans everywhere, of course, but we were not looking for those.

Nagual saw the body first. I confess I was distracted, letting the silence soothe my senses after the last three months of protracted siege warfare alongside the War God's Maw. I could hear the crashing chatter of heavy bolters in my sleep. When I closed my eyes, I saw the flicker of muzzle flashes.

The body was mostly buried in the rubble of a fallen warehouse. Its armour was white with dust, and worn away by the incessant wind erosion that had reduced the thousands of human corpses to worn-down scatterings of bone. A power pack and one rounded pauldron showed amidst the wreckage. Whatever colour the ceramite had been was nothing but a memory now.

I nudged the back-mounted power pack with my boot. It stayed silent and dead. Nagual watched me with disinterested eyes.

*Dead*, he confirmed, snuffing at the dead Thousand Sons legionary.

'Dead,' I agreed.

*I am Khayon*, I told the corpse.

It said nothing at all.

'They died in the Horus Heresy,' said Lheor, when I had told him of the journey I intended to make.

'Do not call it that. It was *the rebellion*.'

He shrugged, which disrupted the efforts of his armoury slaves. We were speaking in his arming chambers aboard his warship, the *Voidghoul*. Lheor's long-suffering thralls were machining his repaired armour into place, ready for him to lead the assault on the Praxeum Palace, seat of Imperial governance on the world below. Drills whined as they locked the connection feeds of Lheor's right gauntlet into his wrist.

'Whatever you want to call it,' he agreed with a flash of metal teeth. 'My point is that they were already corpses long before Ahriman worked his magic—'

'The Rubric was a sorcerous unleashing, not *magic*.'

'—so what are you expecting? Hundreds of dead Thousand Sons just lying there in their graves, waiting to be awoken as Rubricae?'

I regarded him with some irritation. I lacked the patience to debate the metaphysical properties of Ahriman's Rubric with Lheor, of all my brothers.

'I do not know what I will find. The mystery is the reason I have to go.'

He shook his head. 'I can't spare you, brother. I need you here.'

'I am not asking your permission, Lheor. I am telling you: I am going. You do not need a single assassin at your side to win this war.'

He barked a laugh. 'I need the several thousand Rubricae that answer to you, though.'

My bionic arm purred as I gestured to the two Rubricae behind me. Old warriors - brothers that had once served under Ashur-Kai and myself in life, long before we wore the black of our new Legion. 'I will leave my ashen dead with you. They will obey their subcommanders.'

He was almost placated, though with no grace at all. 'And you'll be taking the *Incarinate*?'

'Of course.'

He weighed his reply, knowing that the *Incarinate* was one of our finest vessels, but equally knowing he had no way of preventing me from leaving. He rolled his shoulders, the strength-enhancing pauldrons practically revving as he did so.

'All of this for a Thousand Sons distress beacon?'

'A Thousand Sons distress beacon originating from a dead world, within the graveyard of a battle lost five hundred years ago. A beacon that, somehow, only just activated.'

He narrowed his eyes. 'You could ignore it.'

'I could,' I agreed, 'but I will not.'

'And if it's a trap?'

'I sincerely hope it is,' I said, perfectly seriously, 'because if it is not, it opens up troubling questions regarding the metaphysics and temporal conjugation of the Rubric.'

'I see,' he said in a tone that implied otherwise, and suggested he did not care either way. 'Just go, Khayon.'

The beacon's source was the core of its mystery. It was psy-mechanical in nature, a blend of mechanical signal and psychic emanation. This was not as rare as Imperial minds might suspect - most Thousand Sons Legion vessels, outposts and strongholds during the Great Crusade had been capable of lighting such unified beacons in times of dire need.

Yet when the *Incarinate* approached Palis II, we beheld no dead ships in orbit beaming out their final messages, and no network of orbitals pulsing a distress beacon into the night. The void was as silent as the world below should have been, but for the fact the indistinct signal was somehow coming from Palis' capital city.

Yet none of the buildings held even the last gasps of power. The city's generatoria were all reduced to absolute ruination.

I followed Nagual through the dead city, occasionally hurling debris and wrecked vehicles aside with distracted clutches of telekinesis. We excavated several dozen bodies of my former Legion brethren, their remains lost in true and final death, not the ashy Immortality of Ahriman's Rubric.

Although the beacon was far too powerful to originate from any lone warrior's suit of armour, I had hoped to reactivate their internal systems to find some way of tracking the route back to a crashed warship or downed orbital relay. This proved futile. The city was dead. The warriors were dead. Their armour was dead. The *Incarnate's* scans had shown no plausible source for the beacon, and my own planetside investigations were proving just as fruitless.

As I walked, I let my senses drift, slipping between reality and unreality. I watched the insubstantial figures of ghostly warriors fighting beneath the ethereal images of buildings that no longer stood proud. I watched the dead living out their final moments, doing so with the detached eyes of one who had seen the theatre of the grave any number of times over the course of his life.

Nagual stalked onwards, unable to see these false ghosts, caring nothing for their corpses.

*Nothing here, he sent to me. Nothing, and nothing, and nothing, and nothing. All is dead, all is dust, all is ash.*

He was right, and yet the beacon was originating from the dead city. It hung in the air like the particulate matter, a faint whisper against my senses - wordless but desperate, conveying naught but a fevered weariness. I watched the echoes of warriors five centuries in their graves, fighting over the rotted remains of powerless armour.

The ambush, when it came, began with a flash of silver among the corroded ghosts.

All these years later, to be the target of such a trap would insult me beyond measure. But this was only the fourth year of the First Black Crusade, and my enemies in the Ordo Hereticus did not yet know me. What was I to them but another Traitor Legion officer with powerful but undefined psychic abilities? Just another daemon-binder. Just another slave to the Pantheon.

They believed five warriors of their order would be sufficient.

They let fall the psychic barrier that had prevented me from seeing and sensing them. Their manifestation heralded two truths in the same moment: the first being that the distress call was of Imperial manufacture and doubtless had its genesis aboard their psychically cloaked vessel; and the second being that they

were not individually powerful - their psychic might came from a gestalt aura created by their merging auras.

They surrounded me, the air still rank with the stinking bang of teleportation. Warp-lightning serpented down the focus-vanes of their backpacks, each snake's final crackles dispersing angrily in hissing snaps. Their ceramite armour was silver. Their faces were hidden by their stylised knightly helmets. They each carried weapons that bristled with psychic force.

How enthusiastic they were, these silver children. How eager, with the energy pent up in their weaponry, and the harmonic hum of their unified souls.

'Greetings,' I said to them. Nagual roared, baring his sabre-fangs. That was unnecessary, but there was something to be said for his loyalty.

'In the name of the Emperor upon His Golden Throne, we do judge thee *diabolus traitoris*.' This, from the coven's leader, a figure with rune-marked cream robes over his silver ceramite, carrying a crackling force staff. His next words were no surprise at all. 'The sentence is death.'

I raised my bionic hand, with my palm facing them. The torrent of explosive shells that would have annihilated me entirely burst against a telekinetic shield. I held my position, and the barrier, in case they tried that again.

I drew Sacramentum with deliberate slowness, letting her sing her rasping song as she came free.

'I trust the beacon was a falsehood for which you are responsible?'

They advanced on me, weapons raised. Nagual cringed back, the smoke of his fur thinning, the strength of his presence fading.

The closer they came, the more decrepit he appeared, second by second.

*Interesting.*

'That is close enough,' I warned.

They did not listen, so I killed one of them. One moment he advanced with two blades in his hands, the next he was a writhing, jerking pillar of flesh and bending, battered ceramite, grunting and bleeding as his armour deformed against - and into - his body.

He died swiftly, because the ceramite that had been protecting him had bent its way into his chest cavity, rupturing his internal organs. A node of scarlet pain appeared within the invisible aura shared by the squad of silver warriors. They were diminished without him, feeling the wisps of his agony.

In the moment of the warrior's death, I had ransacked the carnival of misfiring synapses that passed for his final thoughts. He had been a stoic creature, mourning an unfinished duty rather than panicking over a life lost. Ideas and

images played out behind my eyes; memories that were not my own, of moments I had never experienced. I suppressed the disorientation, keeping my focus on the four surviving warriors.

'Grey Knights.' I spoke the name I had ripped from their brother's dying mind. 'What do you—?'

They floored me. They gathered their damaged union in a single breath and hurled me to the ground with a telekinetic tide. My black armour scraped across the earth for almost thirty metres, shedding sparks as I skidded across the dust. Had I not been shielded, their blow would have torn me limb from limb.

They moved against Nagual, but the daemon was too cunning to face them alone. He dissolved into shadow before their blades could come close. As I was hauling myself back to my feet, I sensed him nearby, preparing to reshape himself and join me once more.

*No, I warned him. I will deal with them.*

He remained disincorporated, but I sensed the conflict between his predatory caution before the holy warriors, and his naked, bestial loyalty to me. I reassured him with a wordless pulse that he was not breaking his pact to me by remaining unseen for now. These were dangerous foes, their presence anathema to daemon-kind. It was my fight.

We advanced upon each other, I against the four of them. Sacramentum leapt from the dirty ground where she had fallen, slamming back into my palm.

'This city makes for a fitting grave,' their leader called. 'Is that not right, Iskandar Khayon of the Thousand Sons?'

'From shadow and shame recast,' I replied. 'In black and gold reborn.'

Their unity was not absolute. One of them broke into a sprint ahead of his brethren, his twin swords whining in the gritty air.

'I am the point of His sword,' the warrior cried, 'I am the bane of—'

What he was, was a fool. I took him in three blows - four if you count disembowelling him when I dragged Sacramentum out of his guts, five if you count beheading him on the backswing.

I kicked the corpse aside, and met the other three as one.

Afterwards, I sat in the dust and catalogued my pains. My augmetic arm lay dead at my side, the engraved metal limb unpowered and refusing to answer me, the fingers now stilled extensions of a shattered palm. The Kheltaran crest of my helm, unchanged since the Rubric of Ahriman, was broken upon the ground. The blow that had cracked it apart had cleaved my helmet open and traced a line of

psychic fire from my forehead to my collarbone, peeling away a fair section of my face with it. The toxic air sank its way into my lungs, and the foul grit abraded the wet, bare bone of my skull.

Nagual shimmered back into being and proceeded to lick the blood from my face.

*You are not helping, daemon.*

Chastened, he moved away. One of the Grey Knights was not dead. I rose with a grunt, suspecting from the way my innards shifted that the reinforced shell of my ribcage was broken in several places. Something in my chest *slipped* lower, with a resulting sense of queasiness. That was new.

I crossed to the Grey Knight, who lay sprawled in the dust, missing both legs, and sucking in air through what remained of his punctured lungs. Sacramentum had made an incredible scarring map across the warrior's chestplate, and my warpflame had blackened his armour; what wasn't half melted to sludge was a cracked and flaking ruin.

I was amazed he still lived. Even considering a Space Marine's legendary endurance, the thing at my feet was barely recognisable as human anymore.

He had been the one to rip open my helm.

It was only when I tried to speak that I realised my jaw was broken. I leaned over, letting the blood trickle from my open mouth, then scooped up a handful of the red muck where my blood mixed with the dust. I forced the paste into my mouth and held my teeth together, biting into the red sludge, letting it fuse my jaw closed to prevent more damage.

*How many of you are there?* I sent to the dying warrior. *How many Grey Knights exist in this new Imperium?*

*May you burn. In the abyss. From which you crawled. Heretic.*

Lheor would have liked that. Lheor used to appreciate a foe with a talent for decent insults. I was merely impressed the warrior possessed the will to not only insult me, but also thrust at me with a weak shove of telekinesis. Had he been unified with his brothers, and had he not been on death's very edge, I likely would not have been able to resist it in my wounded state.

I reached down with my human hand, the one still working, and rested my fingertips upon what remained of his face. What followed was easy enough, and I did not so much steal his thoughts as siphon and swallow them. His Chapter. His brethren. His powers. His weapons. Names of worlds and litanies of oaths and the sun sharp pain of sacred prayers all sank into the meat of my mind.

Once It was done, I rose to my feet again. It was time to return to the *Incarinate*.

*Farewell*, I bid the dying Grey Knight, my consciousness fattened and slowed by his teeming thoughts, there was much to digest there. I thanked him for surviving long enough for me to leech his secrets, sparing me the need to eat his brain.

His reply was predictably based on noble vows and sentiments of holy vengeance. I ignored him, reaching my senses skywards to contact the *Incarnate* in orbit.

I left him there to die, of course. I had all I needed from him.

And that is how I met Abel Sarthas, who would rise to become Grand Master of the Grey Knights' Third Brotherhood, and would plague me with fury and fire centuries later.

Let this be a lesson in the carrion-bird habit of killing all survivors on the battlefield. Some things cannot be trusted to fate and faith because, as I have told you, the Gods hate us.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Aaron Dembski-Bowden** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Master of Mankind*, *Betrayer* and *The First Heretic*, as well as the novella *Aurelian* and the audio drama *Butcher's Nails*, for the same series. He has also written the popular Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach*, the novels *The Talon of Horus* and *Black Legion*, the Grey Knights novel *The Emperor's Gift* and numerous short stories. He lives and works in Northern Ireland.

Returning after his long self-imposed exile, Abaddon offers the disparate Chaos Space Marine warbands within the Eye of Terror a simple choice – join him or die.



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